



MAKING CONNECTIONS: THE CHANGING IDENTITY OF LEARNING SUPPORT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA


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As universities move into the 21st century they are experiencing many changes including globalisation, corporatisation, internationalisation, the introduction of new technologies and increased accountability. This has led to a more diverse student population, an increase in technology facilitated delivery, more corporate styles of institutional management, higher staff/student ratios and closer links to industry-based needs. These changes have had an impact on all university staff and students and have required staff who work in learning support and professional development units to reconfigure their work in ways which are more strategic.




In response to these changes, the student support area at the University of South Australia underwent a significant change at the beginning of 2000. This not only involved a renaming of the centres but a change in the practices of all professional staff within this group (learning advisers, counsellors, careers staff, international student advisers and professional developers). This paper will outline the reasons that led to this move and how Senge's notion of the 'learning organisation' has been used as a theoretical framework to develop the change. A description of the changes that have taken place will be given and in particular the work of learning advisers will be highlighted.

Keywords: *learning centres, learning advisers, changes in higher education*

Introduction

As universities move into the 21st century they are facing rapid changes and significant challenges. It is well documented that globalisation, corporatisation, internationalism, the introduction of new technologies, increased accountability and an emphasis on quality are having an impact on every aspect of university life (Marginson, 1996; Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999). The diversity of the student population has also increased, not only in age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background but also in values, attitudes and expectations (McInnes, James and Hartley, 2000). Universities are facing major challenges on a number of fronts including the increase in technology facilitated delivery, more corporate styles of management, higher staff/student ratios and closer links with industry. Changes are being instigated at the managerial and policy level and are having an effect on all staff and students in universities (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1999).

Over the last couple of decades the student population has changed significantly and expanded under the mass higher education system. Universities are now teaching a diverse range of students with different language and socio-economic backgrounds and academic preparedness (McInnes, 1998). As teaching practices move to more



student centred pedagogies there are increasing demands on both students and staff.

One of the most significant challenges that all universities are experiencing is the impact of the new information and communication technologies in teaching and learning. These changes are pervasive and ongoing, affecting every aspect of university life for all staff including those involved in learning support and professional development.

In May 2000 the student support area at the University of South Australia underwent a significant identity change in response to the new directions of the University. *Learning Connection* was launched on each metropolitan campus. This has brought together activities and resources both physical and virtual to complement learning for all students of the University within a strategic framework. This paper outlines the development of Learning Connection and the reasons for these changes. The changes have been conceptualised in terms of Senge's framework of organisational learning and different models of student learning support. Although the changes affect all professional groups in the student services area a particular focus of this paper is on learning advisers and the changes they have undertaken to meet these challenges.

Context of University of South Australia

The University of South Australia is a multi-campus post-Dawkins institution and is the result of the 1991 amalgamation of a number of campuses from the former South Australian Institute of Technology and the South Australian College of Advanced Education. There are currently five metropolitan campuses and one rural campus with approximately 27,000 students enrolled (this includes 4,000 external students and 5,700 offshore students). The University has a particular brief in its founding act for the education of Indigenous people and frames all of its activity within a more general commitment to equity. Most of the educational programs offered are applied with a strong focus on the education of professionals.

In its teaching and learning framework (see Diagram 1 below), the University has three interlinked key concepts which shape the teaching and learning environment:

student centred learning, graduate qualities and flexible delivery. The first two are organising concepts. Student-centred learning signals the intention to provide students with greater access to learning opportunities and more control over their learning. The graduate qualities focus the teaching and learning activity on the achievement of seven kinds of student outcomes. The third concept, flexible delivery, is seen as the enabler of the first two through the application of technologies in teaching and learning. This has some manifestation in the provision of courses through traditional forms of distance education, but is increasingly focused on online forms of delivery for all students of the University. Each year the University articulates five to six teaching and learning priorities which encompass these concepts.

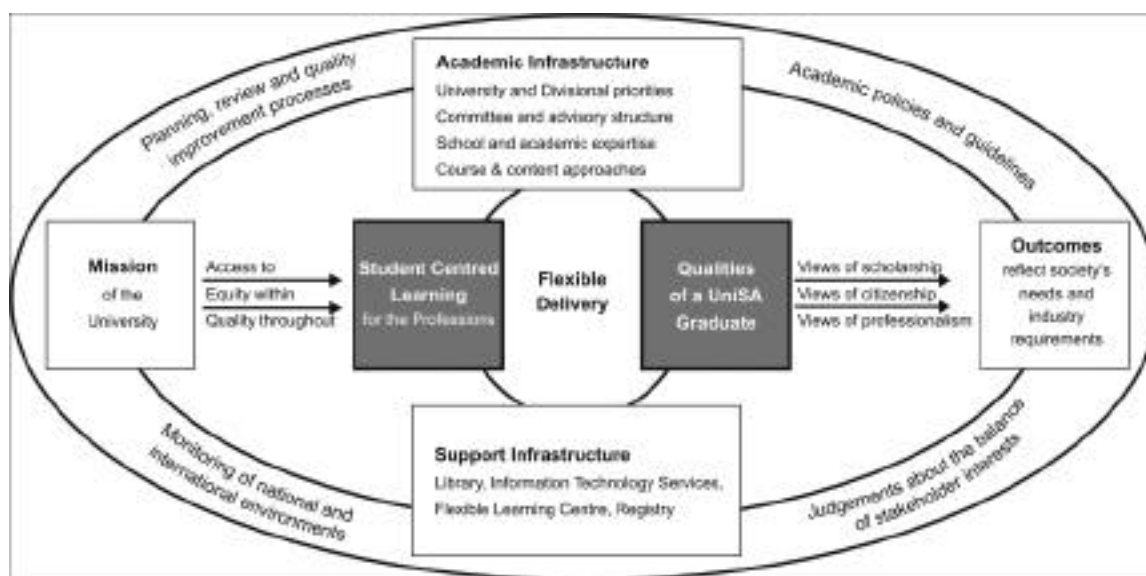


Diagram 1: Teaching and Learning Framework, University of South Australia, 2001

This broad framework is the basis of all teaching and learning activity of the University, including the practices of support services such as student services. Further, these services are not seen as peripheral to teaching and learning activities but as complementary and integrated components of a total learning environment. Learning services are central to the way that all professional practices are shaped and they have a significant influence on teaching and learning arrangements.




Learning Connection

Prior to 2000, student support services at the University of South Australia consisted of counselling, study skills, welfare support, international student support and careers, located in Student Support Centres on all campuses. Services were delivered through individual consultations and face-to-face workshops. Students from the designated equity groups were the predominant users of these services (non-English speaking background students, students with disabilities, mature-age students). Of the professional areas located in Student Support Centres, learning advisers were the first group of staff to change these practices and this had been evolving over the last five years. They were working much closer with teaching staff and were integrating services for students into the curriculum.

Towards the end of 1999, as part of an evaluation of student services, focus groups were organised throughout the University of South Australia's community. Extremely useful feedback was gained from these groups. The three most common responses that were received included a lack of understanding (and confusion) about services offered, a deficit view of services (both by staff and students), and problems with access to the services (students often had to wait two to three weeks to get an appointment with a professional staff member).

As a result of these consultations several recommendations were made including the following:

- there would be a name change for the centres (taking out the word support and emphasising the developmental nature of these services)
- a strategy would be developed to promote services and resources for all students and staff
- more resources and services would be available online to increase access for all students and staff
- increased access to all professional areas would be provided through the introduction of 'dropins' - one hour per day was made available to see students (by each professional staff member), and through a central number that could be dialled on any campus.



In May 2000, Learning Connection was officially launched and separate events on each of the metropolitan campuses were held for staff and students. Bright, distinctive posters were circulated throughout the University, and information about Learning Connection was widely distributed using a range of mediums – for example an email message was sent to all students and a screen saver with the new name was put on all computers in the University's computing pools. All promotional material has been distinctively branded using a particular look and colours so that there is ready visual identification.

Learning Connection offices are located on each metropolitan campus of the University of South Australia. Learning Connection staff provide services for all students and staff within the University. For students this covers learning advice, personal counselling, careers counselling, disability support, and services for International students. For staff, professional development and services related to online delivery are provided.

The teaching and learning framework (Diagram 1) provides an overarching conceptual framework for all of the activities in Learning Connection. The specific services provided by staff in Learning Connection are now more directly focussed on the strategic directions of the University and on achieving the key performance indicators as expressed in the University's corporate plan. This has been a significant change for staff in Learning Connection and is one of the main differences between our practices and other universities. For each professional area there has been a range of service changes and these continue to develop as staff work through the implications of the emerging corporate directions. In order to specify the particular services offered by each professional group, a document (a Portfolio of Services document available at:

http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/servcon/LCportfolio2_1.doc) outlining the specific services for staff and students was developed.

The following table summarises some of the changes that have taken place and the shifts in practice that have occurred to support them.

From	⇒	To
mainly equity based client group	⇒	universal student population
few (NESB) International students	⇒	significant NESB numbers, particularly on some campuses
face to face delivery	⇒	technology facilitated delivery
working directly with students to address individual responses to learning	⇒	working in systemic ways with both staff and students within subjects and courses
student services structure a free-standing entity within the University	⇒	student services delivered from a group whose activities are directed by the strategic directions of the Divisions/University
service based in individual professional performance (range of services, standards)	⇒	service based in performance of multidisciplinary teams against services and standards directed by Divisions/university
relatively low staff/student ratios	⇒	relatively high staff/student ratios
academic professional development indirectly related to student learning	⇒	academic professional development directly related to student learning

Table 1: Shifts in Practices (George and Hicks, 2000)

The above changes are concerned with the University's capacity to meet the rapid social and economic changes. The literature of learning organisations (Senge 1990; Field and Ford, 1995) has been used to frame the changes that have taken place. Senge has identified five disciplines which must work in an interrelated way to contribute to the development of a learning organisation. These include systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision and team learning. In relation to the changes which occurred at the University of South Australia, the first, third and fifth disciplines have the most focus. A detailed analysis of the changes within Learning Connection and how they relate to Senge's five disciplines has been dealt with in another paper (George and Hicks, 2000).



Learning Advisers – changes


Within Australian universities, student support has been conceptualised in a variety of ways over time. Originally it developed out of counselling models which involved individual consultations. In more recent times there have been moves to provide a more integrated approach by working in the primary delivery of particular courses (Hicks and George, 1998; Skillen, Merten, Trivett and Percy, 1998).

At the University of South Australia this integrated model has been taken one step further. It focuses on the whole curriculum, and learning support staff work with academic staff to embed tertiary literacy skills into the curriculum. In this approach a team of staff, which could include one or more of the following – professional developers, learning advisers, counsellors, librarians, work closely with the academic teaching staff to ensure that the skills and support that are necessary for students to successfully complete the courses that they are enrolled in are embedded within the curriculum. For this to occur quite a detailed curriculum development process is undertaken (Hicks and George, 1998; George and O'Regan, 1998).

In early 1999 it was decided to reconceptualise the role of learning advisers to accommodate the changes which were occurring in the University. Learning adviser positions were reframed and re-advertised based on the approach to learning support that was developing in this University. A generic position description was written and each learning adviser has an area of specialisation which is developed for leadership and research purposes (online learning, NESB and International students; equity groups, research and postgraduate education). It was also expected that all learning advisers would be involved in the development of online resources. Learning advisers began working on some of these changed practices early in 2000. These changes included the way that resources were written and delivered, and the nature of face-to-face services to students

Resources

In order to ensure that services could be accessed by all and to respond to the increasing use of technology in teaching, web based resources were identified as a



major form of delivery. Two main forms have been introduced: learning guides and online workshops. These can be accessed at:


<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/learnres/index.htm>

Learning Guides

Currently learning advisers and other University staff have written 25 learning guides and 18 guides that relate to the University of South Australia's online teaching and learning environment. Each learning guide is a short word document (2-6 pages) about topics that relate specifically to learning at University. Some examples include getting the most from your academic reading; writing article reviews and making use of feedback on assessment. Many of the guides have been written collaboratively and all have gone through a rigorous internal peer review process (O'Regan, 2001). These guides are downloadable documents that students can either read online or print. Teaching staff can hyper-link to a guide within their teaching materials - or cut and paste relevant material into their own resources. It is intended that they be used as flexibly and as seamlessly as possible. These guides have been very successful with positive responses from both staff and students.

Online Workshops

Face-to-face workshops on assessment tasks and learning issues have always been popular activities for students. In order to make these services available to all students, learning advisers have developed online resources which replicate the learning processes explored in face-to-face workshops. These online workshops were developed for both generic topics and specific courses. They allow students access anytime and anywhere and in addition these workshops have made available the dynamic use of links to other resources and the interactivity of online discussions. Teaching staff can make reference and direct links to the workshops in teaching materials that they have produced (Hicks, Reid and George, 1999). Once again these have been received very positively. A workshop that was developed for a law course (Introduction to Law: Writing the Problem-based exercise: <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/06454exercise/>) in the School of International Business has received 4595 hits over 2 semesters. While this is only an indicative figure (measuring hits and not the number of students), use of this workshop by



students has been high.

Face-to-face services

Several face-to-face services are still offered to students to complement the resources that are available online. These included dropin sessions, individual appointments and workshops. One of the concerns from the focus groups held at the end of 1999, was that students had to often wait a long time to access an individual appointment. In order to decrease the time, a one hour dropin time per day for each professional staff member in Learning Connection was introduced. These times are advertised widely. Generally, students can see a staff member within 24 hours of making an inquiry and either have a short query answered, be referred to appropriate resources, workshops or to another person or be given a longer appointment. To a significant extent the dropins depend on the availability of suitable resources and the learning guides and online workshops have been used in this way. Individual contacts (both dropins and appointments) have informed the need and development of many of these resources.

Working with teaching staff

The mechanism for implementing all services provided by Learning Connection for staff is through an annual service agreement with each Division (there are four main Divisions at the University of South Australia – Business and Enterprise; Education, Arts and Social Sciences; Health Sciences; and Information Technology and the Environment). These provide blueprints for work between the different service areas of Learning Connection and Divisional staff, ensuring the strategic value of services provided in terms of the University's direction. For example, a School may identify the development of a particular online resource for one of their offshore teaching programs. A professional development staff member, a learning adviser and an online adviser will work with the nominated staff from the school to develop this resource so that it is student friendly and meets the needs of the students. All work outlined in the service agreement is reported on a regular basis and formal reports to the Divisions are made at the end of each year.

Multiple services for students

As noted by McInnes et al (2000) there are increasing demands to provide flexible forms of delivery because of the increase in the number of hours that students are employed. At Learning Connection a range of services as outlined above has been developed to ensure that students have access, choice and flexibility within their learning environment. As an example the following table illustrates the different services and resources that are available to support a first year assignment.

Access • Choice • Flexibility			
A sample of Learning Connection services and resources for one aspect of teaching and learning			
Services to integrate student support in the course—curriculum design	LC professional development staff work with a course team to develop understanding of the policy frameworks that govern assessment and what these mean in practice	LC Teaching guide developed and made available on LC website to support workshops or as a stand alone resource	LC learning advisers work with staff to put in place resources to assist students to understand expectations regarding assessment tasks
for students—in person High touch—when interaction with staff and with peers is essential, or to build confidence for students to seek out own resources	Student attends a LC learning advisers face to face workshop on writing essays—students use LC online facility to book in online and print off a record of attendance	Example —Learning Connection resources supporting a first major undergraduate assignment	Student attends an after hours drop in session to discuss with LC disability officer the possibility of modification to assessment requirements
for students—resource based/online High tech—asynchronous, independent of campus, can be revisited again and again as needed	Student undertakes a LC online course-specific workshop about the particular piece of assessment or a generic one on the form of the assignment	Student prints off learning guides on how to approach essay writing, on referencing, and on avoiding plagiarism	Student prints off a computer user guide to researching using Netscape

Table 2: A sample of Learning Connection services and resources for one aspect of teaching and learning (developed by H McCausland for the University of South Australia nomination for the 2001 Australian Awards for University Teaching).



Current directions

Over the last 18 months all of the learning advisers and other Learning Connection staff have been involved in the development of these resources and we currently have 43 learning guides and 37 online workshops (generic and course specific) on the web. Many more are at various stages of development. Now that a base of resources has been developed we are concentrating on more course specific requests and resources for targeted groups of students.

Currently the developments that are being worked on include:

- improved service for NESB students - both through individual appointments and web resources
- targeted services for Research students
- expansion of our services for issues concerning referencing and plagiarism
- learning services for students who are learning online
- learning development for offshore International students.

Student and staff satisfaction with the service

An evaluation framework for the multiple services offered through Learning Connection has been developed. Different components of practices are evaluated in different ways and this is being mapped and reviewed continually. At the end of 2000 two specific evaluations were conducted. The first focussed on the awareness of the new services in Learning Connection. Five hundred students across the five metropolitan campuses were interviewed at random to ascertain whether they were aware of Learning Connection and its services. The following table summarises the main responses to these questions (these responses were made six months after the launch).

Question	Indicative response (n=500)	
	Yes	No
Are you aware of Learning Connection services?	68.1%	30.3%
If yes – which services	Out of 500 responses	
Counselling	50%	
Learning advising	57%	
Careers	37%	
International student services	29%	
Disability services	28%	
Would you recommend services to other students?	70.9%	8.2%

Table 3: Awareness of Learning Connection services (November, 2000)

For the month of November 2000, all students who attended a dropin or short appointment at Learning Connection were asked about the effectiveness of these services. The main responses have been summarised below:

Question (students attending a drop in session only)	Indicative response
The information I received was very helpful.	96% of the 164 students responding agreed or strongly agreed
Overall I was satisfied with the service I received.	93% of the 164 students responding agreed or strongly agreed
Would you recommend Learning Connection to other students?	163 of the 164 students responded yes
Question (students attending a drop in or appointment in relation to overall Learning Connection services)	Indicative response (not all students responded to all questions)
The information/assistance I received was very helpful.	92% of the 249 students responding agreed or strongly agreed
Overall I was satisfied with the service I received.	94% of the 340 students responding agreed or strongly agreed
Would you recommend Learning Connection to other students?	282 of the 284 students responded yes

Table 4: Satisfaction with individual contacts (dropins and appointments) November 2000

An evaluation of University staff is planned at the end of this year. While we have no formal feedback from staff on the services, anecdotal responses have all been positive. Demands for course specific online workshops by teaching staff are increasing each semester and is another indicator of the success of this type of resource.



Conclusion


Staff of the University of South Australia have taken a unique approach to learning services in the development of Learning Connection. The nature of services and the professional practices of staff have shifted significantly. Services now are:

- linked explicitly to the strategic directions of the University
- provide a coherent and systematic service for the various student client groups
- transparent to all staff and students
- available electronically and face-to-face, and access has been increased
- initiated by individual staff and students within the Divisions and at the wider University level and developed collaboratively
- group based and specific to courses and disciplines
- focussed on achieving student outcomes for all students (George and Hicks, 2000)

The University of South Australia has a blueprint for 2005. Some of the predicted changes include a significant increase in the number of International students offshore and expansion of the online environment. While these changes will present new challenges for staff in Learning Connection we believe we are well placed to meet these challenges.

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