The Learning Paradigm

This paper focuses on the Learning Paradigm enunciated in the Strategic Plan. It identifies: (a) relevant statements made in the Plan; and (b) relevant statements by the Faculties which will be mainly responsible for transmission of the Paradigm. It further aims to be instructive by identifying the similarities and differences between the Strategic Plan and Faculty statements. The paper’s concluding remarks hopefully will facilitate constructive dialogue about coherent and appropriate implementation of the Learning Paradigm across the University.

1. Rationale

Embedded in the Strategic Plan is a particular philosophical understanding of the role of the University. The role encompasses a commitment to nurturing the best of the Catholic intellectual and faith traditions and complements this with a determination to ensure that the University’s

Graduates will be highly competent in their chosen fields, ethical in their behaviour, with a developed critical habit of mind, an appreciation of the sacred in life, and a commitment to serving the common good.

(Mission Statement, Australian Catholic University)

To attain this objective and in fulfilment of its Mission, the University has taken the deliberate choice to adopt a particular Learning Paradigm.

A major criterion of the success of the University’s strategic position by 2008 must be the extent to which it has implemented the Learning Paradigm enunciated in the current Strategic Plan. The Learning Paradigm applies to all aspects of the University’s endeavours, administrative as well as academic. As a consequence, all staff and others committed to the University need to concur with its direction and implications and enact its various implications.

What value the Learning Paradigm adds to the style and substance of this University’s existence is central to its raison d’être. The University should provide the right kind of learning experiences, be they academic, spiritual, ethical or other; and the University fundamentally should be at the service of its students as it attempts to assist each of them, “its entire diversified and dispersed student body”, as part of their “personal, spiritual and moral development” so that they will become “valued in employment and in the life of the community at large”. The Learning Paradigm reflects this self-understanding of the role and purpose of the University as it aims to discern methods and approaches that best suit the needs of the students.

Many of the practices and policies currently used in the University already reflect the Learning Paradigm. Specifically, the Strategic Plan will embed them and others. Overall, future developments should diminish the significance of an instruction-only approach and such a reduction should flow and be visible from the improvements in approaches to student learning that the University will set in place over the next decade.
2. The Strategic Plan (some extracts, modified)

2.1 General Statements Relating to the Mission (General Aims)

• Encourage critical thinking, innovation and scholarly learning, to supply graduates with education and training that are widely valued in employment and the life of the community at large
• Develop generic skills, facilitate higher-level understanding of a wide range of disciplinary areas
• Faculties seek to encourage students to be critical thinkers and lifelong learners, to be aware of broader social issues and complexities in local, national, or global contexts, and to establish a common interest across disciplines to introduce student learning in a broad range of contemporary issues.
• Infuse a deep concern for morality and ethics in all students
• A major focus is the education of persons able to exercise moral and personal autonomy in a pluralistic society
• The University’s Catholic nature is to be visible … and present itself as a liberating, strengthening and dynamic force … its ethical perspective must be critically relevant
• Skills must contribute to students’ personal, spiritual and moral development through training in analysis, evaluation, interpretation, objective appraisal of arguments, and the identification of salient justice issues
• Develop and nourish inquiring minds and facilitate a critical capacity … in a context that is associated integrally with human and spiritual values
• Train students to be sensitive to justice and injustice
• Graduates: sensitised to the values and principles of justice
• Degree courses offering professional training will have a sharp ethical and social justice focus
• Development of spiritual and personal values
• The education of persons able to exercise moral and professional autonomy in a pluralistic society
• Inculcate a spirit of service in graduates
• Prepare graduates for a full and meaningful working life

2.2 Statements Relevant to Criteria for the Learning Paradigm

• The University must focus on learning rather than just teaching and provide an environment in which students learn rather than are instructed
• The quality of learning is more the issue than the quality of instruction
• Commitment to a learning model over an instructional model
• ACU’s future will depend critically on quality learning outcomes and less on educational inputs
• The commitment to a learning model is to apply to all academic and general staff
• An intellectual culture that is dedicated to a love of learning, respect for scholarship, and engagement in research and inquiry
• Increase learning standards and capacities
• Research-based learning is to be the standard of the University
• Attractive courses based upon innovative research at the frontiers of disciplines
• Removal of the barriers to interdisciplinary learning
• Innovative use of information technology
• Policy of flexible delivery
• Enable students to reflect upon and form their values and ideals
• Support a culture of learning that accepts the need for constant change and improvement
• Identify specific programs and activities for possible reduction or discontinuation if they do not fit the preceding criteria

2.3 Process Statements (for progressing the above criteria forward)

• Synthesize teaching, research and scholarship
• Create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make them genuine members of “communities of learning”, and to make them co-sharers with staff and fellow students in the act of discovery and solution of problems
• Place more responsibility on learners, encourage independence and co-participation, and provide a sense of personal control
• A practical commitment to interdisciplinary conversation at all levels and to the development to a research capacity
• Multi-disciplinary approaches in teaching and research should be enhanced
• Faculties continue to encourage, develop and enhance student education through a multi-disciplinary approach
• Dialogue between disciplines
• Values-oriented learning
• All disciplines highlight the relevance of moral concerns
• Expose all students to the valuable perspectives of the core disciplines of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Education
• Foster a culture of inquiry in which staff and students may reflect critically on academic studies in a context of religious ideas and practice
• Explore and foster the intrinsic relationship between academic and religious elements
• International perspectives and experiences should be emphasised
• Students are to learn how to solve problems and to think critically
• Active engagement by students in the process of their own learning
• Assessment policies, and processes emphasise key learning attributes and communication skills
  Training in analysis, evaluation, interpretation, objective appraisal of arguments, and the identification of salient justice issues
• Students and staff will become involved in meaningful community service work as part of their commitment to the University’s ethos
• Maximise student choice in areas desired by the marketplace
• Courses will be packaged to meet student needs where students are studying, and for students who at times must both work and study
• Sustained, caring interactions between staff and students
• Cultivate a genuine sense of community
2.4 Infrastructure Statements (for supplying the necessary fabric)

- Information technology resources should be expanded and improved to better facilitate the teaching, research … components
- Technology will be harnessed to provide the best ways of promoting student learning
- Re-examine the curriculum and variations to University structures and processes
- Need to examine continually what are the best structures that provide evidence of learning
- What is measured is integrally related to the quality of student learning
- Examine how best to have performance evaluated in learning rather than in teaching terms
- Faculties need to identify the bottom line in their endeavours, below which they cannot go if quality is to be protected

3. Faculty Statements relating to the Strategic Plan (some extracts, modified)

3.1 General Statements Relating to the Mission (General Aims)

- The fundamental aim is to ensure that each student is an independent learner by the completion of their degree course
- Graduates have attained the knowledge, skills and values of their profession, and have acquired and are concerned to develop a continuing interest in the pursuit of knowledge and learning
- Graduates who have higher order skills of thinking, analysis, interpretation, synthesis, research, evaluation and an orientation to critical enquiry and learning how to learn
- Develop in students a thirst for knowledge, critical enquiry and lifelong learning
- Promote Gospel values and enhance the dignity of each person through the provision of learning opportunities which facilitate personal, spiritual and intellectual growth, develop a sense of social and civic responsibility
- Education occurs as a manifestation of total human formation, involving not only the intellectual development of students but their moral, social, cultural, physical and spiritual growth
- Support the mission of the Catholic Church in adherence to Gospel values and a commitment to social justice
- Provide courses and engage in research that is based on and develops the moral principles and values of social justice, empowerment, citizenship and service
- Students and staff reflectively engage with Catholic teachings, beliefs, values and traditions

Comment:

There is considerable concordance between the statements of the University Strategic Plan and those of the Faculty Implementation Plans. Each focuses on intellectual capacities, employment, civic and social life, and the concern with values, the moral and ethical dimensions of the graduates’ lives and service. Even if the wording differs slightly, the essential aims of each remain similar. If anything, and understandably, the Strategic Plan takes a broader approach than do the Faculty Implementation Plans. The Faculty statements focus more on the graduates’ professional lives and civic responsibilities than does the Strategic Plan which takes a focus more on their employment and
community life. The Strategic Plan adopts a more general approach to intellectual skills than do the Faculty Plans; the former refers to cross-disciplinary and generic skills, the latter to specific higher order skills.

The language of each is interesting. They each contain mental (sensitise, reflectively engage) and material (develop, provide, encourage) processes. Equally interesting is that some aim statements are written from the University’s perspective, what the University will do rather than from the attributes the graduates will have as a result of their University education.

3.2 Statements Relevant to Criteria for the Learning paradigm

- Emphasis on learning rather than instruction encourages staff and students to redefine their roles and responsibilities
- The central focus in the shift to a student-centred approach emphasises the quality of student learning
- The shift involves considerable cultural change for students
- The change to student-centred learning sees students as autonomous learners, recognises their situations and that different modes of learning suit different people
- Academic programs are informed by the most recent research and scholarship

Comment:
There is commonality between the Strategic Plan and the Faculty Implementation Plans. Each identifies the importance of learning over teaching and instruction and neither group of statements presents learning and teaching/instruction as binary opposites. The focus is one of emphasis rather than an either-or choice, and both sets of statements also emphasise the quality of learning.

The Strategic Plan emphasises the importance of the whole staff being engaged in the Learning Paradigm, whereas the Faculty Plans emphasise the effects of changing to the Paradigm on both academic staff and students. The Strategic Plan also gives attention to the environment in which the learning will take place and notes possible consequences of not attending to the changed emphasis within the University, namely the reduction or elimination of courses. The Strategic Plan also highlights the importance of interdisciplinary learning and the innovative use of Information Technology if the Learning Paradigm is to be effective.

The Faculties raise the important matter of the changes that will impact on both staff and students, and take note of the fact that catering for individuals requires a variety of learning modes. Details of the modes are developed in the following section of this paper.

3.3 Process Statements (for progressing the above criteria forward)

- Students are recognized as “adult learners” who have responsibility for their own learning
- Students need to be assisted to become adult learners, capable of problem solving
- Students need to be provided with the tools for and information on learning
- Develop approaches to learning which place greater emphasis and more responsibility on learners, encouraging independence and a sense of personal direction and autonomy
• Students need to be involved in articulating how they learn best and to become involved in questioning what they are actually doing in seeking to understand course and unit material
• Quality student learning experiences through learning that is inquiry-based, learner-focused, and student-centred
• Students have or are in the process of developing skills to negotiate their own learning
• The model becomes teaching how to learn and lifelong learning
• The primary focus is a quality learning environment encouraging quality independent learning
• The Learning Paradigm requires more interactions between student and academic that may not always be face-to-face
• The Learning Paradigm is about exciting students to learn, recognising different “spaces” for and of learning, uses the Web as a channel for learning, and uses chat lines
• Programs use alternative modes of delivery, modern multi-media modes of information and communication technology
• Provide opportunities for community service, service-learning, cross-cultural awareness and international experience
• Ensure that the teaching, research and community service are informed by Catholic beliefs, values and traditions
• Review all unit outlines to ensure they conform to the implications of the Learning Paradigm
• Monitor unit outlines and teaching to ensure that the Learning Paradigm is implemented
• Value research and scholarship by staff and students

Comment:

There is considerable commonality between the Strategic Plan and the Faculty Implementation Plans in outlining ways that the Learning Paradigm will be progressed within the University. Each indicates the importance of:

• linking Teaching and Research,
• international or cross-cultural perspectives,
• community service,
• learning environments in which learners will develop higher order scholarship skills, take responsibility for their learning, become more independent and at the same time learn to work cooperatively with staff and fellow students.

Both sets of statements recognise that the University needs to consider learners’ needs in terms of what how and when they want to learn.

The differences between the sets of statements are more at the level of detail than of principle. The Strategic Plan urges the importance of courses integrating religious, moral and values issues; the Faculties acknowledge this and mention it in relation to community service. The Plan also notes the importance of assessment policies that will need to reflect the changes in the Learning Paradigm.

The Faculties stress adult learning as a generic descriptor for independent, active involvement of the learners in their learning. The Faculties also provide detail of ways that they will ensure that the Learning Paradigm will become the standard within the University.
3.4. Infrastructure Statements (for supplying the necessary fabric)

- Quality indicates continuous improvement and a focus on each section of the University developing quality assurance mechanisms
- The Learning Paradigm may be resource intensive
- Staff development is needed
- Quality learning needs to be approached systematically and not left to individual academics to provide quality learning environments
- Evaluation may see the use of external moderators, surveys of graduands and employer feedback
- Not all quality learning outcomes can be measured
- Student learning will be affected by the quality of the student at intake, large classes, students' prior models of learning, assessment methods, requirements of professions and technology
- Target and direct resources to "developing flexible and multi-media modes of course delivery which in turn can develop autonomous learning opportunities
- Ensure that flexible/alternate delivery modes are incorporated for at least one additional unit in each year of each course
- Consider ways the course delivery costs may be reduced while maintaining quality
- Expand opportunities for students to undertake community service and service learning

Comment:

There appears to be less commonality between the Strategic Plan and the Faculties when considering infrastructure. The Strategic Plan indicates a need to consider the best University structures and processes so as to facilitate the Learning Paradigm, a matter not taken up by the Faculties.

The Strategic Plan’s mention of technology corresponds to the Faculties’ awareness of just how resource-intensive the Learning Paradigm might become. The latter attend to the details of changes that might accompany the change to the Learning Paradigm: staff development, systematic attention to learning, and the need for a holistic approach to Learning (starting with the students at the point of entry to the University). Both note the significance of assessment, with the Faculties indicating audiences external to the University that might well become involved.

4. Conclusion

This paper is presented in a context staff engage with the concepts and implications of the Learning Paradigm as it has been outlined in the Strategic Plan. There is evidence that aspects of the Paradigm are already being implemented in a variety of ways in the University. The challenge now is to coordinate the efforts, build upon them and Faculty-based CUTSD proposals, and systematically implement them throughout the University.

The Learning Paradigm itself represents an evolving model and many relevant issues are at stake. The Strategic Plan and Faculty Implementation Plans mention many of the implications. It seems, for example, that the Paradigm achieves best results when learners are intrinsically motivated. The central need always should be student learning and technology should be viewed always as a means to a definable end.
The Strategic Plan and Faculty Implementation Plans both recognise that any implementation of the Learning Paradigm will involve significant changes within the University. The Faculties need to articulate ways that they will be able to identify what added value their courses can provide; discussion is needed also of the implications of different learning arrangements. Other possible ways that the Learning Paradigm might impact directly on Faculties, and not noted in detail in their existing Implementation Plans, are:

- assessment of learning;
- identification of what we offer as flexible learning (not just flexible instruction);
- continued maintenance of the sustained and caring staff-student relationships which currently characterise our interactions; and
- change in Faculty structures that could be required if interdisciplinary learning is to be widely practised.

Introduction and implementation of the Learning Paradigm will affect the University structures. Currently responsibility for components of the Paradigm rest with three Pro-Vice-Chancellors: Academic Affairs, Research, and Quality and Outreach. All four components—academic changes, research-based learning, quality and flexible arrangements for learning—are all intimately connected. The University needs to determine whether the implementation of the Paradigm is best left with a single locus, and one person’s responsibility. This may well enhance integration, or diminish it if the impact of change comes to be weakened at the local level. The question needs to be asked whether a decentralised administration model would enable the Learning Paradigm to be more easily managed, and put in place, or a centralised model is needed to effect those changes that are necessary. Student Administration will need to be involved more closely in any discussion of the Paradigm because it implies, amongst other things, possibly different record keeping, grading systems, and regulations.

Overall, the University needs to ensure that there is a coordination of effort and of activity in order to enhance integration but also to avoid duplication and contradictory effort. There could be advantage in identifying a staging-in of the Learning Paradigm across administrative and academic structures. Time would also allow for the emergence of a role that the Professional Development Unit might play in the implementation of the changes being planned.

The commonality between the Strategic Plan and the Faculty Implementation Plans is a sound starting point for the University. Detailed discussion of this Paper might reveal further agreement and ways of meeting the demands of the Learning Paradigm.

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