

Taking a bold step – Embedding a university-wide LLN strategy across sectors at Victoria University

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Abstract

Victoria University is piloting a whole of university language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) strategy in six faculties across Higher Education and TAFE. Underpinned by sociolinguistic theory, this developmental model will integrate contextualised LLN skills with discipline content. The strategy uses the Australian Core Skills Framework¹ (ACSF) to develop profiles of students' core skills at commencement and throughout their first year. The long term goals are progress in retention and success, as well as social inclusion and economic participation. This paper reports on the initial stages of the pilot and discusses the implementation of an embedded LLN model for the tertiary sectors.

Background and context

A successful first year experience is critical for students contemplating whether to continue university study (Coates, 2005). Providing a successful first year experience is a challenge for any university, but VU as a multi-sector university has an added layer of complexity, with respect to cross-institutional integration, coordination and coherence (Kuh, 2007). With more than 20% of VU students from low SES backgrounds and one in two students from language backgrounds other than English, the challenge to provide a positive first year experience across the sectors is formidable. In an attempt to ensure that first year students return, specialised support catering for diverse student cohorts have been offered for around 30 years now. But in today's social inclusion environment where expanding participation goals are shaping the mid-to-long term future, many intervention strategies are put forward in the name of student experience and academic achievement. And while spontaneous interventions appear to be responding to student need, when delivered in isolation of effective teaching and learning pedagogy, they risk materialising as practices which become improvised, ad hoc or indiscriminate.

When first year initiatives vary indiscriminately across the institution, they cannot be sustainable. Practices which are not underpinned by a pedagogy that captures all variables needed to ensure successful learning for students, and, equally important, rewarding teaching and learning outcomes for staff, are not viable for VU. Compare this approach with a university-wide strategy underpinned by sound theory, sustainable pedagogy and supported by university policy. "We have now reached the stage where universities must recognise the need for institution-wide approaches to enhancing the first year experience. Responsiveness

¹ This is a national framework which offers a means of describing and measuring performance in reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy and learning in different contexts against common benchmarks. In other contexts, the ACSF has been found to provide common concepts and a shared language around LLN (Wyse and Brewer 2008).

to the needs of demographic and cultural subgroups demands that student support staff, academics and administrators work together to integrate their efforts and initiatives for the benefit of all students” (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005, p. 99).

Intervention strategies stand to enhance the first year experience when they are based on ongoing professional development, for example, reflective practice by discipline, language learning staff and educational developers, together with collaborative models of learning and teaching for program evaluation and curriculum revitalisation. Transition pedagogy (Kift, Nelson and Clarke, 2010) is directly relevant and VU’s whole of institution transformation is built on this model, one which is an appropriate response to the LLN challenges that our diversity presents. VU students from all backgrounds and faculties stand to benefit from an embedded language, literacy and numeracy approach to LLN. Bridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs (McInnis, 2003), is particularly significant, especially when it comes to communicating the VU’s whole of institution strategy in building a more sustainable approach to LLN.

The Pilot

Two major challenges are the cross sectoral nature of the strategy and suitability of the ACSF² as an assessment framework in Vocational and Higher Education. The 2011 pilot aims to validate protocols and tools to successfully roll-out the strategy on a wider scale in 2012. The ACSF “represents one critical element in a comprehensive LLN strategy” (Jones, 2010, p. 6). Expanding the pilot into six sites, the ACSF will evaluate the five elements, and the outcomes will contribute towards a plan towards the whole-of-university LLN strategy. The pilot will examine whether the ACSF provides nuanced understanding of LLN growth within specific course areas. Trialling the ACSF in the VE sector will be undertaken in order to find out if it is adequate in its current form. The Strategy is designed around five elements as follows:

Development of PELLNA tools and protocols to assess the base-line core skill levels of commencing students

The Post Entry Language, Literacy and/or Numeracy Assessment (PELLNA) is the first key plank of the strategy; its purpose is to provide a snapshot of the discipline-specific language, literacy, and numeracy needs of commencing students. The PELLNA is situated within a developmental model of LLN skills’ development. The PELLNA is not an isolated assessment but rather an integrated aspect of the core curriculum. As a regular contextualised piece of assessment within the specific unit, the discipline teacher assesses the task against the subject criteria, and at the same time the educational developer maps both the task and the student responses against the ACSF indicators of performance. The process allows both the discipline teacher and the educational developer to get a more nuanced picture of the LLN

² The key principles and concepts underpinning the ACSF provide a solid foundation for discussion about, and the contextual nature of much of the learning within a discipline, the importance of prior knowledge and experience and what constitutes complexity. These principles have general application to teaching and learning, as well as to core skills, and the ACSF support, context, task, text grid captures the concepts in a way that makes them immediately accessible and applicable in different contexts (Jones, 2010, p. 14).

skills and capabilities of all students in the cohort, and the ways in which these skills and capabilities intersect, or fail to intersect, with the requirements of the discipline. This snapshot is not focused on identifying specific students for remedial support, but rather on building a picture of the discipline-specific skills of all students in the cohort, in order to influence curriculum and assessment design and methodology, provide individualised and group support and gather data to monitor individual and cohort data over time (Perkins, 2011).

Embedded LLN skill development in curriculum and course delivery

The developmental model of LLN skills development is underpinned by the following assumptions: each discipline has its own contextualised LLN requirements and expectations; all students will benefit from assistance to learn how to put these into practice; discipline-based LLN skills are best developed in the context in which they are used, as an integral, or embedded aspect of mainstream teaching and learning (Perkins, 2011, p. 6). Following the PELLNA and periodic LLN assessments, a suitable approach to embed and contextualise LLN support within the curriculum will be facilitated. This will be the role of the education developers in collaboration with language and learning, as well as discipline teachers and lecturers in the pilot sites. The type and nature of embedded LLN will be informed by 7 models of collaborative student learning development already developed by VU staff over an extensive period, mapped and collated by VU College in 2010 (Newell, 2010).

Periodic and integrated LLN assessment to measure attainment and identify support requirements

Tracking student LLN skills development is made up of the core skills assessment findings, and early identification and response in the form of LLN skills developmental support. This involves trialling procedures and instruments specifically designed for the integrated, periodic LLN assessment within courses. The aim of this stage is to generate a body of evidence on how students develop LLN core skills when they are following embedded or integrated interventions. The strategy will work across the VET and HE sectors to create a supported cross-sector pathways model which identifies and responds to demonstrated student need via layered LLN interventions and initiatives. One of the key components of periodic assessment will be raised awareness and capacity among Faculty staff to integrate LLN assessments into core content areas. Central to this integrated approach is the building of strong relationships and teams so necessary for collaboration and consultation among discipline and LLN staff.

LLN Professional development for teachers and academic staff

Formal professional development will include the delivery of units from the Graduate Diploma in LLN or Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education. Also the Teacher Development Unit has identified nationally accredited VET units and qualifications that can be used as stand-alone professional development or as electives within VU teacher development. Informal professional development will take the form of workshops, team teaching, mentoring and working collaboratively on curriculum development. ACSF training

will also be offered to teachers and academic staff in order to develop, as a first aim, shared concepts and a language, thereby providing a common discourse for all stakeholders. The second aim concerns improving accessibility for students. The ACSF may have the potential to become a key component of a broader LLN strategy instrument for comparing LLN levels of students with those of curriculum materials. Above all, professional development aims to raise awareness of LLN in the discipline areas and in engaging teachers and academic staff in reflective practice. Defining LLN and the interventions students require in order to succeed in their discipline involves a process in which the implicit is made explicit so that teachers and academic staff begin to embed LLN skill development in course design and delivery.

Program and intervention evaluations, with research, benchmarking and reporting based on comprehensive data collection and analysis

The VU LLN strategy will be evaluated and linked to research and scholarship initiatives. Evaluation will focus both on the effectiveness of the overall strategy, including the adoption of the ACSF as a common framework, as well as examining the impact of discrete LLN initiatives on language, literacy and numeracy growth. Evaluation will be conducted by researchers in HE and VE/FE research centres within VU, while internal evaluation of the strategy and its component parts will be carried out by the existing language and learning support within VU. The HE Engineering pilot and other interventions with various schools across VE and HE identified a range of insights, issues and ideas that have helped shape Stage 2 of the project (Perkins2011, p. 5).

Session Plan - Presenters (15 mins): Outline of VU LLN Strategy & early findings

Paired discussion (5 mins). Participants consider one or more of the following:

- 1) Meeting the varied needs of first year students in a multi-sector environment, a whole of institution LLN strategy needs a wide range of teaching and learning contexts.
- 2) Different approaches are being developed to address the need for post entry LLN assessment within tertiary institutions in Australia.
- 3) Moving from remedial to embedded developmental model of LLN at the tertiary level presents organizational challenges.

Presenters & Whole group discussion (10 mins): Draw together ideas from participants – in what ways are the issues and findings different from local experience? What aspects of the VU LLN Strategy Pilot offer potential benefits to the first year experience in those tertiary institutions represented in the group?

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