Weapons of mass-instruction

Dallas
Bastian

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A recent summit saw universities mark themselves on technology-enhanced learning to compare best practice techniques. By Dallas Bastian.

Higher education institutions from around the globe converged in Australia to share their strengths and weaknesses surrounding technology-enhanced learning (TEL) at a recent summit.

The Australasian Council on Open, Distance and e-Learning (ACODE) Inter-Institutional Benchmarking Summit, held at Macquarie University, aimed to give institutions the opportunity to measure their capacity in TEL based on the newly refreshed ACODE benchmarks.

Twenty-four institutions from five countries undertook a self-assessment against the benchmarks they wanted to be involved in to bring to the summit.

"This was done with the view to share practice and capacity, and learn from others who may be doing things a bit differently, or better," says associate professor Michael Sankey, director of learning environments and media at the University of Southern Queensland and ACODE executive member.

Each institution completed the self-assessments and got involved with less than three months' notice, which Sankey says represented an unprecedented level of commitment. The summit is planned as a regular event with the evolution of TEL, studying how the benchmarks are used and what they provide for students.

Helen Carter, president of ACODE, says the summit provided an opportunity to compare notes from institutions "as diverse as the Open University (UK) and the University of South Africa – with their hundreds of thousands of online and distance students – to small institutions such as Lincoln University in New Zealand, and those in between such as Flinders University and the University of Western Australia.

"What the summit showed was that regardless of the size or age of the institution, many of the issues we face are common and can be remedied by simply taking the time to self-assess and share current practice. It is by building relationships and stronger ties, rather than by competition, that provides institutions with the wherewithal to meet the unique challenges of building a strong digital future.

"To understand where we need to go, we first need to understand where we currently stand," she says. "This helps us to establish a solid foundation on which to build."

Sankey and five other ACODE representatives (from the Queensland University of Technology, Macquarie University, the University of Wollongong, the University of Western Sydney and Victoria University of Wellington), reviewed the existing benchmarks: "It was deemed appropriate to upgrade them, due to the fact that the whole TEL scene or universities had changed so radically over the last 3–4 years," Sankey explains.

"So many universities that had not been playing in this [area] are now starting to use technology-enhanced learning more and more as a way of supplementing their face-to-face offerings," he adds.

The purpose of the refresh was to increase the capacity of the benchmarks to help institutions plan for growth and

be more future oriented. Sankey says he helped to reframe the focus away from e-learning – involving exclusively online higher education experiences – to TEL, a more inclusive and blended approach to course delivery.

According to Carter "the refresh of the benchmarks saw the introduction of a much stronger alignment with: learning and teaching standards; a greater emphasis on emerging technologies and innovation – particularly in planning and budgeting; a new measure around open education practices and the sustainable use of resources; and a measure on how institutions are assuring a level of quality in their externally hosted services."

She says some of the benefits found from prior use of the ACODE benchmarks include:

• Identification of strengths and weaknesses – for planning and priority setting

• An improved understanding of strategic and operational requirements

• A framework for quality assurance purposes

• Recognition of areas of achievement

• Generation of ideas and a reinvigoration of practice, for example the development of strategies for improvement in areas of need

• Facilitation of collaboration to develop better understanding across areas within the institution and with partners

• Development of communities of practice to provide opportunities for staff professional development, project work, staff exchanges and secondments.

"Use of the benchmarks can provide a basis for research for improving practice, resulting in a better understanding of operational systems and processes, and contributing to accountability requirements," Carter says, adding they can also provide a tool for learning and may be helpful in breaking down beliefs that 'we are different', and instead promote that 'we are all in this together'.

Carter believes that benchmarking at an institutional level can establish what different parts of the organisation understand about TEL and the components that contribute to best practice in the area. "Universities are often quite large and complex entities and it is easy for different parts of the organisation to get out of step," she explains.

"However, taking this further by then benchmarking outside the organisation gives you an opportunity to share practice, recognise your own good practice and to identify new areas and ideas for improving technology enhanced learning."

She adds pockets of great practice can be found no matter the size of an institution.

Carter says that TEL "is an area that is now mission critical within all higher education institutions for the quality delivery of courses and programs."

Sankey adds this area will continue to evolve in the future in a number of ways. "As TEQSA [Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency] start bringing down what they require in relation to their standards in this space, universities will be looking for tools like this to provide cogent evidence that they are taking this seriously, and can provide evidence that they are actively looking to assure quality practice for their students," he says.

"As universities evolve to more service-based options for their online systems, they will be required to ensure what they are providing is still hitting the mark," he says, noting they are also moving more of their courses towards a blended mode of learning, which he believes is inevitable to save costs. "Assuring quality in this space will become even more important.

"In shifting the focus of the new benchmarks to the use of technology-enhanced learning, ACODE have also recognised that many of the hallmarks of what were seen in the first major wave of online learning have taken a shift, particularly with the advent of MOOCs and their various derivatives, open source softwares, open educational resources, app-based online interaction and the rise in cloud-based hosting of major institutional

systems.

"Similarly, no longer does an institution rely solely on a Learning Management System but now have developed complex mash-ups of internally and externally hosted environments to feed increasing business demands around flexibility and availability."

Romy Lawson, director of learning, teaching and curriculum at the University of Wollongong, says her institution has used the new benchmarks as a starting point for developing a new TEL strategy. "We've used them in various ways; the whole exercise is really useful to see how we lined up compared to other universities, both in Australia and internationally, so it's given us a good indication as to where we are," Lawson says.

She adds that sharing good practice with other institutions has given the team at UoW some good ideas around where they might move forward with their TEL strategy in the future. UoW will be looking at what they will be doing as a university in a big-picture sense, down to more fundamental aspects such as supporting staff and students in the TEL space as effectively as possible.

"Higher education must keep up to date with how technology is part of everyone's lives," Lawson says, adding it is not just about online learning but looking at how technology supports all students, including those who also have a campus experience through face-to-face teaching.

"As technology inevitably evolves, so will TEL – the important thing is that we as educators continually review how technology can enhance learning with awareness that it is the learning that drives the design and not the technology," Lawson says.

Model markers

The benchmarks cover eight key areas of institutional practice:

1. Institution policy and governance for technology supported learning and teaching.

2. Planning for and quality improvement of the integration of technologies for learning and teaching.

3. Information technology infrastructure to support learning and teaching.

4. Pedagogical application of information and communication technology.

5. Professional/staff development for the effective use of technologies for learning and teaching.

6. Staff support for the use of technologies for learning and teaching.

7. Student training for the effective use of technologies for learning.

8. Student support for the use of technologies for learning.