Macquarie University 'Smart' Partnership Program

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Abstract

This paper outlines the Macquarie University Partnership Program, which describes how on-going professional learning for teaching staff can be achieved when tied to collaborative development of teaching and learning projects. The aim of the Partnership Program is to promote sustainable curriculum change through the development of staff capabilities. Using curriculum design projects as the catalyst, the Partnership Program integrates faculty and centrally based approaches to design solutions to authentic teaching and learning concerns. Projects are strategically prioritised and worked on by small teams of academic and professional staff who jointly develop solutions. The collaborative nature of the program encourages both scholarly and pedagogical dialogues between academic and professional support staff enabling increased output in scholarship and better understanding of learning and teaching practice.

This paper is an update of a paper presented at the ascilite2013 conference (Carter and Huber, 2013), incorporating further data, discussion and review improvements.

Keywords: professional learning, Partnership Program, authentic practice, curriculum design

Introduction

Traditionally the design of learning and teaching in higher education has been the domain of solitary academics who determine the content and pedagogy that is appropriate to their subject area and student cohort. In this context, the effectiveness of learning and teaching approaches are dependent on and limited to the capabilities and creativity of an individual academic. Additionally, professional development for teaching staff is often designed around the development of technical skills, teaching theory and processes, and is often delivered through formal or semi-formal training programs. These activities are not always effective in transferring skills, particularly given the complexity and number of tasks that a university teacher is expected to engage in (Mcinnis 2000, Ramsden 2003). Furthermore, programs are often delivered out of context and timing with the academics' teaching requirements.

At Macquarie University, where the Partnership Program has been implemented, there are four[1] faculties encompassing 32 departments and each is supported in their learning and teaching endeavours by a central support unit, the Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC). The LTC consists of different groups each able to contribute skills and expertise of importance to learning and teaching in higher education: the Educational Design and Development group (EDD); the Learning Systems and Services group; and Academic Development group.

Prior to the introduction of the Partnership Program in 2012, central educational development support by the LTC for faculties was largely ad hoc. Curriculum design and (re)design projects were undertaken on a first-come, first-served basis, with no consistent project management framework to ensure project outcomes were scoped or delivered in a timely fashion. This also meant projects were not necessarily strategically aligned to faculty goals, as their initiation tended to spring from fortuitous personal contacts between individual faculty members and LTC staff. Projects were mostly instrumental in nature, emphasising the building of teaching artefacts rather than knowledge transfer or professional learning for the teaching staff involved. The Partnership Program was introduced by the LTC as a way of working with the faculties to support their identified strategic learning and teaching priorities.

The Partnership Program

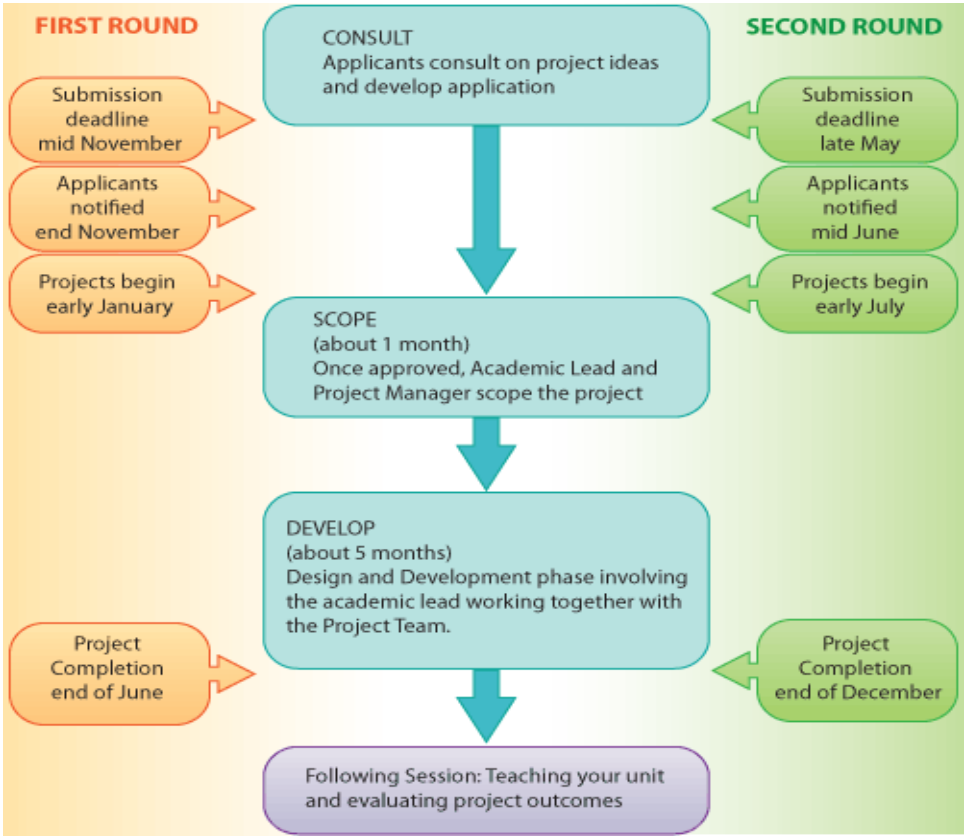
Higher education is faced with the multi-faceted challenge (or problem) of providing a quality learning experience for students, and up-skilling academics so that they can build innovative, flexible and sustainable learning environments that support this experience. The specific nature of these learning environments should be determined by the strategic direction and principles of the institution and the individual faculties. There is often a gap, however, between the faculties' strategic policies and the direction of a specific program or unit's curriculum design and development. This is due to the academic staff working in isolation and possibly lacking the curriculum design skills to integrate the faculty's learning and teaching priorities into their specific program.

[1] An additional Faculty of Medicine was established at the end of 2014 but has not yet been involved in the Partnership Program

The Partnership Program is able to offer creative and practical solutions to these challenges because it takes a team-based approach to curriculum design and professional development, promoting sustainable curriculum change by building staff capabilities. The coordinated, yet flexible model for supporting curriculum design and development is ideally suited to the demands of the higher education sector. Academic staff receive pedagogical and technological support according to their individual needs and the broader strategic direction and priorities of each faculty and the University at large.

The Partnership Program draws on the expertise of the central LTC staff in a way that optimises use of central resources, and aligns with faculty aims in learning and teaching. Submissions are invited twice a year (refer to Figure 1.) from teaching staff who will be convening a unit in the session following the expected delivery of project outcomes. All project submissions are ranked and approved for submission by Faculty Executive and are submitted to the LTC for possible resourcing. Based on an established set of principles underpinning this transformative, authentic learning program (Carter 2003, 2005; Cram & Kennedy 2009; Carter & Huber 2013) submissions are assessed against criteria that include the need for projects to: address in some way a strategic initiative or faculty priority; develop or improve the learning design of activities and/or resources in at least one teaching unit; have outcomes with the potential for wider use in other units; and consider the principles of universal design for learning.

Figure 1. Partnership Program Overview

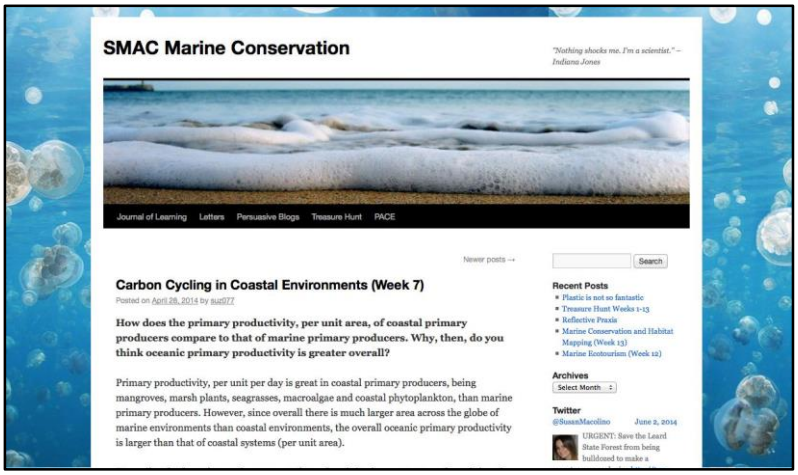


Each project is assigned a dedicated, multi-skilled team of academics and professionals who work collaboratively to find innovative and practical design solutions, whilst building each others' professional skills. Many Partnership Program projects involve integrating technology and the multi-skilled, team-based approach is underpinned by the concept that "the dynamic, transactional relationship between content, pedagogy and technology" supports "good teaching with technology" (Angeli and Valanides, 2009). Teaching academics are appointed to their positions based on their expertise in a particular subject matter area and may not be experts on pedagogical and technological best practice. In contrast the Partnership Program project teams are able to draw on expertise in three key areas – pedagogical design, technology integration and technical implementation. This not only leads to the development of creative, evidence-based and educationally sound approaches but also facilitates the academics' development of new capabilities in relation to their teaching.

Each Partnership Program project has a team that is uniquely tailored to the curriculum challenges that the project will address. Typically a team will include an Academic Lead, additional teaching or tutoring staff, an Educational Developer and an Educational Designer. Academic staff provide subject matter expertise and are able to explain the goals of the curriculum design. They are also able to report on the specific issues that have arisen in previous deliveries of the unit or program by accessing student evaluations and teaching staff reflections. The Educational Developer, with expertise and experience in pedagogically sound curriculum design and development, acts as Project Manager. The Educational Designers are experienced with integrating technology into learning and teaching practice. They can advise on appropriate technological solutions, design and build learning resources and activities, and provide training for the academic staff so that the technological innovation can be sustained beyond the life of the project team. Additionally, specialist staff such as a Media Producer may be required to provide particular media advice and training; and production and post-production expertise which would otherwise be expensive and beyond the normal skill set of the academic.

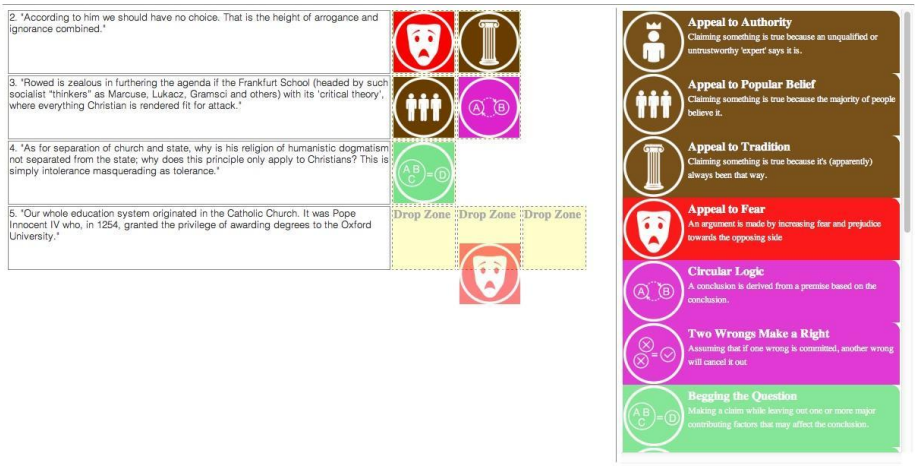
In each Partnership Program cycle of six months, there are approximately 15-20 different projects being managed by the LTC. A central Partnership Program Coordinator ensures that there is communication between the project teams and that there is a collaborative and informed approach to issues that may be common to the projects. This also encourages sharing of expertise and knowledge between the LTC staff across all teams within the Partnership Program. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show snippets from three projects that have been completed under the Partnership Program.

Figure 2. Example Partnership Program project: Engaging Marine Science Students - Flipped Classroom Model



The Marine Biology unit has incorporated blogging in order to facilitate students developing their understanding of the course content, producing their own contributions to the course content and reflecting on their learning processes.

Figure 3. Example Partnership Program project: Gamification in Philosophy - Rhetorical Fallacies



Mastermind tasks students with identifying fallacies in a series of connected statements using a drag-and-drop interface. Students use deductive reasoning to approach the correct answer e.g. a response may result in feedback of correct position but incorrect class, rather than an absolute correct/incorrect response.

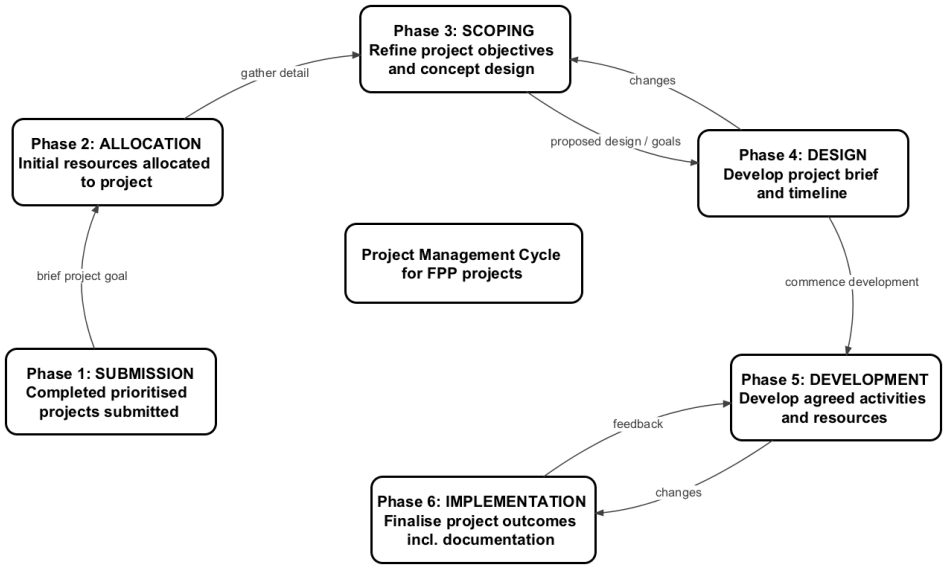
Figure 4. Example Partnership Program project: Masters of International Business - Program Design

One of the aims of this project was to develop a consistent look and feel across the program to give students a sense of belonging and coherence to their study.

Project Management

Each Partnership Program project within each six-month cycle (see Figure 5.) passes through a number of project management phases before reaching the implementation phase. Reporting takes place after the scoping phase and midway through the design and development phase, to ensure that the aims of the project are reviewed and agreed objectives are on target.

Figure 5. Project Management Phases for a Partnership Program project



Strategic Alignment

The design of the Partnership Program ensures it is aligned to the University's strategic direction in learning and teaching and the strategic priorities of each Faculty. Applications from Academic staff for the Program need to include a description of how the project will support the Faculty's learning and teaching aims and how the outcomes of the project will impact on building the capacity of other staff and programs offered by the Faculty. All projects are negotiated between the Faculty Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching, Educational Developers and the academic staff themselves. This establishes the projects as being fundamentally based on supporting and enhancing the core objectives of the Faculty. To date projects have been completed from over 25 different disciplines, including Media, Music, Communication and Cultural Studies; Modern History; Accounting and Corporate Governance; Actuarial Studies; Business and Economics; Marketing and Management; Cognitive Sciences; Physiotherapy; Medicine; Computer Sciences; Biological Sciences; Philosophy; Chinese Languages; Ancient History; Applied Finance; Education; Psychology; Early Childhood; Linguistics; Statistics; Marine Science; International Studies; Law; Environment and Geography; and Applied Finance.

The Partnership Program model offers the flexibility to respond to changes in priority at both the faculty and organisational level. For example, in the most recent iteration, there was a clear increase in projects focussing on program level curriculum design, reflecting a shift in the University's orientation away from unit or course level design. In line with the University's current strategic direction, there is also a strong focus on 'flipping the classroom' (Bishop & Verleger, 2013) in order to facilitate more active and student-centred learning in the on-campus classes. The Partnership Program projects provide tangible models of best practice that can stimulate discussion and act as examples, which can be adapted to different programs and units throughout the faculty and the University at large.

Outcomes of the Partnership Program Model

The Partnership Program model pairs curriculum development projects with an underlying professional learning focus for academic teachers. In his schema for considering alternative models for the successful delivery of academic development, Hicks (1999) identifies four key areas: Access to development; Resourcing and ownership; Impact on student learning; and Generic versus discipline-based scholarship. The Partnership Program model ably addresses these as the following outlines.

Access to development

Reasons for lack of participation in professional development opportunities, includes *"a lack of time, a lack of expectations that they should, and the lack of infrastructure to support the training"* (Johnson, Adams and Cummins, 2012, p.19). By situating development activities in the academic's context, the Partnership Program projects provide an authentic setting for learning to take place. There are no barriers, either physical or conceptual, to participation, which can sometimes be the case in more formal, centrally provided development programs. The Partnership Program offers an opportunity for central support teams of educational design and development experts to collaborate with local discipline experts. This opens the way forward for professional development and learning to take place that is discipline specific but also strategically driven, providing sustainable outcomes that can be of use across the institution and not only in the local context. Any academic staff member may apply for inclusion in the program, while the Faculty Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching (ADs) prioritise the resourcing of projects in line with Faculty strategic goals.

The design capacity of the Academic Leads is shown to benefit significantly from the experience of participating in the Partnership Program, in particular from the skills and expertise of the professional staff who make up the project team. At the completion of the project, Academic Leads are invited to rate their confidence and skills in educational design and development. On average over the first three rounds, 50% of the respondents (n = 27) agreed that they were 'quite' confident in this area and 48.5% agreed they were 'quite' skilled in this area after participating in the Program.

Resourcing and ownership

The first iteration of the program planned to open applications to all teaching staff with applications for each faculty to be prioritised by the Faculty Executive. In practice, the ADs tended to nominate projects depending on their faculty's priority. Whilst this met their needs, it was not ideal. As the Academic Leads had not made the applications themselves they did not feel ownership of the project and were also unfamiliar with the program's processes, particularly the short time scale for project completion. Consequently this resulted in a longer scoping phase, with less time available for design and development. In addition, two of the thirteen Academic Leads in the first round were unavailable during the initial scoping phase,

which meant projects were extended into a seventh month. In subsequent rounds, this limited availability at initiation has been managed in two ways. A pre-scoping meeting is held where possible, such that the team is correctly resourced and set up ready for project scoping. Then at the project scoping phase, the deliverables are carefully limited to ensure they can be achieved within the required timeframe with no spill-over into the next round.

Feedback on the identified limitations of the 'nomination' model of selecting projects was provided to the faculties. As a result, in the second round of the program one of the four faculties opened up applications to all their staff rather than pre-selecting, increasing to three of four by the third round. While successful, the more genuinely open approach to applications is not without its own issues. The Partnership Program offers in-kind support but no monetary incentives, which may not encourage to staff to apply. Time pressures for academics can often be alleviated by the possibility of hiring tutors for teaching or marking activities thus allowing more time to work on a project. Without this financial support, academics may be reluctant to commit to such projects. This appeared to be the case when there were no new applicants from one faculty despite the opening up of applications to all staff. Those who did come forward however had been involved in the first round of projects and saw value in the expertise and resources provided by the program and felt ownership of the outcomes. In fact, formative feedback has shown this to be the case in all of the projects initiated by an Academic (Lead) as compared to those initiated by ADs. A strategy to publicise the benefits of the program along with some concrete examples of previous projects has now been used to encourage this ownership in alignment with faculty priorities. One faculty has assumed greater ownership of the Partnership Program itself by integrating it with a faculty-based Teaching Fellowship which provides academics with funding and additional support.

Impact on learning

Learning through the Partnership Program continues to take place across a number of dimensions, with beneficial effects on student learning through the design of more engaging and aligned activities (Dimitriadis and Goodyear, 2013). It is often difficult to measure impact of centralised development programs on student learning, as teaching success can be attributed to a range of interventions, not to mention the teacher's and the students' individual characteristics (Hicks, 1999). In the Partnership Program model, preliminary feedback from the Academic Leads has demonstrated an improvement in their skills and confidence in educational design and development. As can be seen from Table 1. below, the number of tasks and therefore range of experiences and activities in the Partnership Program is greater than the number of individual projects.

Table 1. Analysis of major Partnership Program tasks undertaken by session	**Round 1 S2, 2012**	**Round 2 S1, 2013**	**Round 3 S2, 2013**	**Round 4 S1, 2014**
Design - assessment events	5	1	3	3
Design - interactive learning activities	4	4	7	7

Design - media objects	4	4	7	7
Design - new course/unit	4	1	3	2
Design - new or existing process	0	2	4	3
Design – integration of a new or innovative technology[1]*	N/A	3	5	3
Total design tasks	17	15	29	25
Development – audiovisual media (incl. graphics)	7	2	8	6
Development – integration of a non-standard technologies[2]*	N/A	1	3	1
Development – learning activities/elements	7	4	6	6
Development – new unit guide	3	1	2	0
Development – template for online units	1	1	1	3
Total development tasks	18	8	20	16
Review – course/unit/curricula	5	1	2	2
Total review activity	5	1	2	2
Workshops – introduction to iLearn	2	1	1	3
Workshops – online learning design	2	1	2	0
Workshops – other	1	0	2	1
Total workshops run	5	2	5	6
[1] Category introduced in Round 2				
[2] Category introduced in Round 2 to describe integration of technologies outside of the standard learning environment				

Scholarship

Hicks (1999) suggests that high quality and relevant research can be produced when there is partnership between an educational researcher and a Faculty-based teacher. The Partnership model provides ample opportunities to test this claim, especially as it has attained human research ethics approval in order to communicate findings to the wider education community. The application to the University's ethics committee was complicated by the fact that approval was being sought for future projects that are not yet defined. All Partnership Program projects, however, have a common goal in terms of curriculum improvement and a bank of questions was approved for use in the evaluative inquiry process for all projects. There is no ‘one type fits all’ approach to evaluation (Mark, 2001; Torres & Preskill, 2001), however questions are grouped thematically and participants are able to be drawn from one or more of three groups: the teaching staff; the project team members, and the students who eventually experience the outcomes of the project first-hand. Data can therefore be collected ethically as evidence to be used in research for publication, furthering the success of the Partnership Program in terms of its reach.

Transferability

Transferability is a key priority of the Partnership Program, afforded through disseminating the design and development outcomes within specific departments and across the faculties. When applying to the Partnership Program, academics are asked to articulate how the project will benefit other staff, units or programs. All projects are required to have sustainable outcomes and have the potential for broader application.

The processes and outcomes of the projects are evaluated by the staff and also by the students through the university's Teacher Evaluation for Development Service. Projects that have been evaluated and validated are regarded as examples of good practice by other staff who are interested in implementing curriculum change. For example, the Partnership Program has resourced several projects relating to the exploration and trial of the 'flipped classroom' as a pedagogical approach. These projects serve as authentic demonstrations of flipping the classroom in different disciplines, involving various types of student cohorts and learning environments. Academic staff who are considering using this methodology in their own teaching can review the different projects, contact the project teams to ask questions, and implement those aspects which are most suited to their particular teaching context. A comment by an Academic Lead during one project exemplifies this:
"I am enjoying the FPP [project] despite the fact that it is requiring more work than I had hoped for because I can see that what we are doing is transferrable to other units and because the people I am working with are extremely helpful and user-friendly."

The Partnership Program project work is showcased formally and informally in various ways, including University Learning and Teaching Week Showcases and Workshops, Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee meetings, departmental meetings, professional development workshops, learning and teaching communities of practice, the University's learning and teaching blog, and on the University's website. In all of these contexts, the Partnership Program projects are used as examples of good practice in unit and program design, and staff are encouraged to adapt the ideas for use in their particular programs and units. Furthermore, research papers emerging from the projects can disseminate the project findings to a scholarly audience and the wider higher education sector. Another flow-on effect of the Partnership Program is that projects have also acted as 'seeding' projects for funded research or development projects, where innovations and ideas conceived in the short-term Partnership projects can be further explored and extended. One example of this is The Reading Game, an original web-based learning module that began as a partnership project with Macquarie University's Faculty of Science and has since won international awards (Carter, 2014).

Evaluation

The Partnership Program has adopted a developmental approach to review, reflect on and evaluate the overall Program (Wadsworth, 2011), utilising both formative and summative

strategies. This produces valuable empirical evidence to justify the Program's continuation and enhance the quality of the Program itself. As a consequence, now in its fifth round of operation since 2012, the Program has been refined through a number of small iterative improvements based on feedback from stakeholder groups.

56 projects were completed during the first four rounds of the Partnership Program, engaging 76 academic staff members collaboratively with LTC project teams. In the first three rounds of the Program, the Academic Leads rated the effectiveness of support in achieving project goals after participating in a Partnership Program project very highly. In fact, 78 - 91% of academics found the support 'extremely' helpful or 'very' helpful, underscoring both the Program's adaptability to different types of educational projects and its value in combining pedagogical and technical advice with practical support. Comments from Academic Leads from different projects exemplify this:

"This was a fantastic project to be involved in. The educational designers on the project took my vision for the unit and helped me to make it a reality. Excellent advice was also given to help me address some of the issues with the unit design."

"We had a very positive experience. I think the project was a good mix of developing a really important resource but also providing training and resources so we can do this more independently in the future."

"It worked very well for me. I'm confident the S(ession) 3 offering will be well received and looking forward to undertaking an evaluation and incorporating many of the elements into S(ession)1 offering too."

"I received a lot of excellent advice on innovative teaching ideas. I also received a great deal of practical help in developing a new online offering. I'm very happy with the experience."

Partnership Program projects gather learner feedback during development and after development is ''finished'' to guide design decisions in ways that parallel recommendations by the most current evaluation theorists (for example Patton 2011). Educational designers and developers are increasingly using a design-based research approach to their work in the Program, identifying what works and what doesn't, and building on strengths during each cycle based on the skills and priorities of the Academic Leads. A design-based methodology, when applied well, has the advantage of, as Dimitriadis and Goodyear (2013, p.2) state, being *"robust and general enough to cope with face-to-face, online and blended contexts, with synchronous and asynchronous interactions, as well as situations where teachers' time, skills or attention are limited …"*.

Conclusion

The Macquarie University Partnership Program has matured significantly through its deployment across five implementation cycles. Through aligning the program with the identified priorities of the faculties to improve the learning experiences of students, it has become progressively more integrated within the working practices of the university. The University executive now recognise the Partnership Program as an established model for

curriculum design and development that engages and supports academic staff in active professional learning. The program is reported regularly in meetings of faculty and University-wide management and governance bodies.

At its inception, the deployment of the Partnership Program was limited to specific faculty projects, however, it has now evolved and extended to include University-wide partnerships with other offices. The Partnership Program has supported initiatives to improve students' experiences in the first year of study, and also to enhance the quality of programs developing students' academic and information literacy skills. The Partnership Program has also been deployed to develop online staff development programs for unit convenors and tutors in all disciplinary areas.

The Partnership Program has also consolidated its position within the faculties as an established means of supporting each faculty's learning and teaching priorities. In the Faculty of Human Sciences, the Partnership Program has been integrated into a Teaching Fellowship Program. Each year, academic teaching staff are invited to apply for a teaching fellowship which provides funding to support the academic participating in a Partnership Program project. This integration has enhanced the academic's experience in the Partnership Program because it has enabled them dedicate more time to the review and renewal of their curriculum. The Faculty of Business and Economics has also begun providing financial support and reduced teaching load to staff who are engaged in the Partnership Program. This indicates the progressive integration of the program into the working practices of the faculties as it matures to meet the needs of their specific learning and teaching contexts.

The outcome sought from the partnership model is to promote sustainable curriculum change through the development of staff capabilities. The Partnership Program provides a sustainable model of professional learning and enhancement of curriculum design as demonstrated by the alignment with Hicks' (1999) schema. The Partnership Program enables staff to engage in critical discourse about learning and teaching issues in an authentic context and through a community of practice. Such communities pave the way for professional learning and resonate with the words of Brown and Duguid (2000) that "practice is an effective teacher and the community of practice the ideal learning environment" (p.127).

Project outcomes are designed to be sustainable, have the potential for broader application and contribute to the applicant's professional development. The approval for the program to collect evaluative data opens the door for further research and scholarship in collaborative curriculum design.

By bringing together Faculty priorities and the needs of individual academics with centrally based expertise, a true partnership can be developed to produce meaningful and sustainable outcomes.

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