

The University of Wollongong Experience

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Abstract

Research shows that Australian students attend classes but often leave the campus without getting involved in co-curricular activities. The University of Wollongong (UoW) shares the challenge of other metropolitan institutions in motivating students to get involved and take engage these opportunities. Guided by a sophisticated culture of institutional planning and feedback systems, the UoW has transformed campus culture to support “the Wollongong Experience” for students. Rated as one of the top-quality Australian universities, UoW uses community service as a core strategy in its approach to student development. Now, the University hopes to embed service learning in the curriculum.

During any journey, it is important to stop, take a breath, and examine the path you have taken so that you can see where you have been, assess your progress toward your final destination, and, above all, to make any navigational changes necessary to enhance your journey and ensure your arrival. This brief paper outlines the progress of a regional Australian university’s journey towards instituting a service learning culture.

The modern university’s pursuit of common goals, with the obligatory vision and mission statements, corporate value declarations, and graduate attributes lists, are clear evidence of the influence of the increasingly corporate management practices being employed. These measures now underpin much of what takes place in our universities in the teaching, research, support, and administrative services. There is also a clear premise emerging within universities, that to continue to be deemed relevant and truly successful, a university must know its stakeholders and client groups, and understand what they really need.

In response to the rapid changes in the Australian educational sector and emerging global opportunities of the early 1990s, the University of Wollongong began to build a sustainable institutional planning culture. Through a series of exercises that included a mix of Quality Assurance and Client Service elements, the University began the identification of its key stakeholders and clients, and their perceptions of the University’s performance. Over time, a relatively sophisticated feedback system was developed to monitor the perceptions of these groups, through the use of regular structured interviews, written surveys, and focus groups.

Designing “The Wollongong Experience”

The results from these feedback sources were utilised to raise awareness of areas within the University’s operations that required attention, and ultimately began the transformation of the Wollongong culture. These results also confirmed that Wollongong University was enjoying an impressive upward spiral in reputation within Australia and overseas. The University continued to work hard through the 1990s to develop a competitive edge based on the “Wollongong Experience,” which offered stakeholders and client groups a broad range of courses, good teaching staff, research capability and prospects, a great beachside lifestyle, an affordable cost of living, good graduate employment prospects, a great study environment, and excellent student services and amenities. In all the Wollongong Experience was arguably the best all round package deal in the country. This view was reinforced by excellent reviews in Australia’s *Good Universities Guide* for the four years prior to winning the prestigious “Australia’s University of the Year Award” for two years running (1999–2000, 2000–2001). The university also gained many outstanding results in the Australian Commonwealth Government’s University Quality Reviews.

In selecting and shaping what went into the Wollongong Experience mix, the University performed a series of detailed surveys of local communities, national and international businesses, and employers, eliciting thousands of responses over a period of a decade. The objective of these assessments was to determine what stakeholders valued most in their people, and what they were looking for in new graduates. These results guided the development of the “Attributes of a Wollongong Graduate,” which now feature prominently in all Wollongong University planning documents. Having determined the attributes that were expected of graduates, the challenge became communicating them to the University community and having them integrated into the cultural fabric of the Wollongong Experience.

Though the historical planning culture at Wollongong created a rough path towards holistic student development, the realization and delivery required a much more focused approach which led to the creation of the Centre for Student Development (CSD). The role of the CSD is to practically apply the theoretical framework of the Graduate Attributes by facilitating a range of challenging, relevant, meaningful, and enjoyable experiences that prepare students to positively and competently engage the world during their time at and after university. This strategic decision to establish CSD was a crucial step in the educational revolution of the University, as it began to provide an active learning atmosphere where the interests and latent abilities of students were explored and supported through a developmental agenda.

A Whole Campus Approach to Student Development

The “whole campus approach” is being achieved through a series of cascading consultative committees that allow people at all levels of the university to voice their opinions and concerns. At the first tier—the academic level—a University Student Development Committee has been established with representation from each of the campus service providers as well as a sub-dean from every faculty. The focus of this committee is to articulate and safeguard the vision for student development across the institution, as well as to coordinate and integrate many of the isolated programmes that occur around the university.

The second tier committee is the UniCentre’s Student Development Committee. This group is made up of student representatives who govern at the campus in their own right and include the Student Representative Council President, the Wollongong University Postgraduates Association President, the Golden Key Society President, the Illawarra Committee for International Students President, and members of the Student Union Board.

The final tier of university consultation takes place in the student groups associated with the second tier leaders. Each of the second tier representatives facilitates discussions with the student groups they represent. This allows ground-level students to directly influence the direction and movement of campus developmental activities. These three groups have identified seven key areas of student development that they wish to see implemented into the Wollongong Experience: Work Experience, Adventure Leadership, Community Service, Entertainment, Training Workshops, Cultural Activities and a Campus Volunteers Scheme.

In response to the feedback from the consultative committees, CSD launched the 2003 agenda into student development beginning with the Employment Experience Programme (EEP). The rationale for this initiative was to give near graduate students insight into their employment futures through practical work experience in the business world. Around 50 local employers provided specific projects involving webpage design, market research, accounting, engineering tasks, business management, database production, administration, biotechnology, graphic design, and telemarketing.

The 50 students who participated in this initial programme received workplace training, valuable business mentoring, and, most importantly, gained priceless industry network contacts for future reference. One employer, a local trade commissioner, commented about the venture, “EEP is a great example of how the university can provide a tangible link between fulfilling the needs of local businesses whilst assisting students to become more personally aware of how to apply their skills in a commercial environment.” One student commented about her work placement, “it has been a real eye opening experience for me to be part of a team in an IT company. I learned first hand project management skills that will really help me in the future.” Without a

doubt this programme gives students greater self-confidence and a solid platform to step into the world of employment after completing their studies.

Project Challenge, another CSD initiative, is all about giving students the opportunity to learn about themselves, others, the environment, and indigenous cultures, whilst travelling to remote locations for adventure and challenge. The premise of this programme is that positive change will take place within individuals and groups from direct, purposeful exposure to challenges, opportunities, and new growth experiences. The domestic programme involves 24 students undertaking a three-week adventure expedition to the Kakadu region in the Northern Territory of Australia. During this time students will be canoeing 120 kilometers down the crocodile infested Katherine River, participant in four-wheel driving across the rugged “Top End,” observe wildlife while living on house boats, learn about Aboriginal culture, and undertake a community service project. The service learning component of the programme involves assisting with projects like the eradication and monitoring of noxious flora and fauna. In 2004 an International Project Challenge will be introduced with a group of students heading to South America for a trekking expedition in Brazil, as well as undertaking a community service project in Argentina. The adventure expeditions provide an intense personal growth experience not normally associated with traditional academic programmes, and empower students far beyond their own imaginings.

Other CSD programmes include the campus student volunteer’s scheme—UniCrew, as well as training and development workshops; but the jewel in the crown for this year has definitely been the “Green Team.” CSD entered into a strategic partnership with an external environmental volunteer agency called Conservation Volunteers Australia. After some consultation and negotiation a dedicated service learning programme was developed, with students working on a number of environmental conservation projects throughout the local community. Project sites included state recreation areas, coastal reserves, community bushcare sites, and national parks. Students committed to five days of volunteer work spread over the semester. Typical work involved native flora mapping, noxious weed and fire hazard reduction, track building, native fauna and bird life monitoring, coastal dune stabilisation, wetlands management, and native flora regeneration.

Around 50 domestic and international students volunteered their time for the first round of projects offered under the Green Team programme. It has exceeded all expectations to the point where students are being turned away because current project opportunities are full; this bodes well for second semester, with students already registering their interest in projects at new sites. The Green Team programme exposed students to environmental issues associated with human habitation, rarely seen wilderness areas, fostered a positive and working relationship between domestic and international students, provided opportunities for civic engagement, and encouraged learned theoretical ideas to be put to good practical use. All this built a sense of identity amongst Green Team members, with students building their co-curricular portfolio.

The Challenge of Transforming the Learning Culture

While it is true that CSD's programmes have proved popular so far, and it is expected that most will continue to do so, the University of Wollongong shares the challenge of other metropolitan institutions in motivating students to get involved and engage in these opportunities. Research shows that Australian students attend classes but often leave the campus without getting involved in co-curricular activities. One reason for such behaviour is that 90 percent of students work part- or full-time jobs to pay for their studies. When the spare time of students is divided between socialising, sport, and entertainment, there seems little room left for personal development. Lack of involvement for some students may be the result of them seeing little value in what is on offer, "why would we want to learn about teamwork or leadership?" For many, it is not until their final semester of study and they are close to entering the employment world that they realise the need for real life skills and supplemental education. Only when students think ahead to that vital job interview do they see the benefits of having a reference to service learning activities and leadership on their resume. Another contributing factor to low student involvement may lie in the "Australian experience." Typically in the Australian University system students are not given an opportunity to get credit for anything outside of their specific academic programme. So while it makes sense for students to concentrate on those things that give them the best academic results, the challenge faced is to transform the learning culture of the student and engage them.

We are now at the crossroads in our journey of developing the Wollongong Experience. We have seen the need to offer a sustainable student support and development initiative, and while CSD's current menu of programmes will be evaluated and expanded, an evolution of thinking is now required. Our new proposals need to not only have a positive student development influence at the campus, but must also make a significant difference to the Wollongong community. This aspiration is about making service learning an integral and indispensable part of the Wollongong Experience, and introducing and embedding it into the mainstream curriculum. Our courses must be constructed and assessed in ways that allow students from any academic programme to undertake a service learning subject and receive credit. This will not only help encourage students to see the value of community service, but will also reward them with a suitable citation on their academic transcripts. The path of curriculum change is an arduous one at best, but a possible route may be for singular assessable items to be developed in areas like the geosciences.

Another new directional change will see the selection of a cohort of students to embark on a structured programme, beginning in the first year of their study and continuing right through until their graduation. Initially this programme will begin with a cross-section of scholarship recipients including faculty, academic, equity and merit, and internships. This scheme will see a multi-day, off-campus connection programme, faculty and peer mentoring support, adventure expeditions, social

functions, leadership training and application, service learning initiatives, business and industry leaders functions, internship placements, and an awards system spread across the students entire academic programme. We believe this holistic learning experience will help change the attitude towards development programmes, as students see the obvious benefits of being involved in this unique opportunity.

While the debate continues to rage about the measurable outcomes of university teaching, the learning environment, and how best to achieve them, Wollongong will continue to gather feedback from our stakeholders and client groups, use it in our planning processes, and make adjustments as we go. It is true that we have made a good start to cultural change but we need to further enhance the Wollongong Experience and convince a lot of people of the benefits along the way.

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