

## **Double Strength, Maximum Gain:** *optimising student learning via collaborative partnerships@ QUT*

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### **Introduction**

QUT is a large metropolitan university with over 30,000 students. It comprises nine faculties across three Brisbane based campuses, with a fourth joint use facility commencing in 2002 north of Brisbane. A history as an Institute of Technology underpins a strong commitment to professional education and high graduate employment. Courses and course planning are focused on the industries and professions linked to the university. Face to face practical and applied teaching and learning approaches are valued. QUT's strong teaching tradition is supported by a large annual budget for teaching improvement grants that are linked explicitly to agreed teaching and learning directions and strategy. Over time, the Teaching and Learning Grant Scheme has become an important lever in effecting coordination and change. It is the principal institutional enabling factor allowing an overview of faculty initiatives and the possibility of developing an all-of-university coordinated strategy for the use of educational technology.

In order to retain organizational simplicity and support an integrated approach to supporting teaching and learning the Library, Information Technology Services (ITS) and the Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS) are incorporated within the one Division.

### **Capability Development**

Graduate attributes are the qualities, skills and understandings that QUT aims to develop in all students over their course of study. These attributes include, but go beyond, the technical knowledge and disciplinary expertise that are traditionally associated with university learning. The attributes that go beyond technical knowledge and disciplinary expertise are known as generic capabilities. Generic capabilities are valued firstly, because they support the notion that a university education involves more than just disciplinary expertise. An expert teacher who was unable to work effectively with others in a team situation would fail the test of being well educated from this perspective. Secondly, students are being prepared for a future that is changing and difficult to predict. Throughout their careers they are likely to be employed in activities that are removed from their specific discipline. Finally, employers argue that disciplinary skills must be

complemented with a wider set of work-related skills - communication ability, problem solving skills, capacity to work with others and the ability to manage oneself – if graduates are to make a successful transition to the workplace. QUT graduates will be clearly advantaged in the market place if they can provide documented evidence of the development and achievement of generic capabilities (Bowden et al, 2000).

Generic capabilities are most effectively developed within a disciplinary context but their development and assessment is not normally confined within a unit of study or even within a course. The development and refinement of generic capabilities is a lifelong learning task. It includes learning within and beyond the curriculum. It can only be tracked in a meaningful and authentic way from the perspective of an individual student. Graduate capability describes the ability of a professional to take effective and appropriate action in changing and unfamiliar situations. To develop the requisite confidence and ability for professional practice students need to have a wide variety of learning experiences plus the opportunity to reflect on this variety (Marten and Bowden, 1998). The input of peers and teachers to this reflective process is invaluable.

QUT has recently revised its policy related to generic attributes to develop a set of graduate capabilities that describes the set of attributes, skills and knowledge that it aspires to develop in students through its educational programs (see Appendix 1). As well as producing competent professionals in a range of discipline areas, QUT hopes to produce graduates who can contribute effectively as citizens and leaders in the wider community. One of the generic capabilities – the capacity for life-long learning, including: searching and critically evaluating information from a variety of sources using effective strategies and appropriate technologies – is viewed as an ‘enabling capability’ in the sense that these skills are critical to the development of other capabilities. It is this ‘enabling capability’ that is the focus of Divisional support to students and staff.

### **Framework of Integration**

In the past, student orientation and on-going skills development have been developed and delivered by the Library (information literacy) and TALSS (academic and technology literacy). This approach resulted in three separate programs concentrated in orientation week with information and academic literacy skills reinforced in further sessions throughout the semester. Feedback from students indicated that they experienced too much information too soon. The information was not contextualised in terms of their overall University experience. As well, students reported a lack of clarity in the session aims and duplication of content between sessions. In response to this feedback staff from TALSS and the Library have made efforts to coordinate program delivery.

*A coordinated support service* would ensure that student had access to a well-planned and readily accessible program of learning that avoided duplication of content. Nevertheless, it would remain the responsibility of the individual student to conceptually link the content from three different sessions into a coherent study skills framework and then further make sense of this information within a specific discipline context. It is acknowledged that an

integrated program is required to more effectively meet the needs of students. Ideally, this learning would be embedded within the discipline specific curriculum.

An *integrated support service* would clearly demonstrate the interdependence of information, technology and academic literacy. While it demands that Divisional staff develop a broader, cross-Departmental perspective on literacy education and student learning support, it falls within Divisional control to design, implement and evaluate such a program. It is challenging but immediately feasible. An *embedded discipline based learning* experience requires Divisional staff working closely with academic staff to review and develop learning experiences that seamlessly embed the three literacies in the curriculum in a discipline context. Some of the most effective learning resources and opportunities will cater for individual student differences and facilitate by the integration of learning and abilities acquired outside the University setting.

The following continuum and matrix provide a framework for the move from coordinated support services to integrated support services and finally to an embedded discipline – based learning. It represents a paradigm shift from a service provider perspective to a student learning perspective. It demands different teaching and learning approaches, a willingness to work across organizational boundaries and the ability to incorporate diverse expertise within a coherent learning experience.

Figure 1: Integration Continuum



Table 1: Examples of QUT policies and strategies, programs and resources

<i>Integration Matrix</i>	<b>Coordinated Support Services</b>	<b>Integrated Support Services</b>	<b>Embedded Discipline-based Learning</b>
<b>Policies/Strategies</b>	Divisional Orientation Committee	Divisional Student Literacies Working Group	Learning for Life: the Information Literacy Framework and Syllabus
<b>Programs</b>	Full Day Learning Program	Survival 4 QUT	Science T&L Grant
<b>Resources</b>	PILOT: your information navigator and/or Lit Kit	Lit Kit and/ PILOT: your information navigator	Student Capability Profile

## *Policies and Strategies*

The *Divisional Orientation Committee* was established to ensure a more coordinated program of support to new full time, part time and external students to QUT. It includes representatives from the Library and TALSS.

A small team of key Library and TALSS staff has formed the *Student Literacies Working Party* to plan a more effective integration of Divisional support services. Throughout 2002 the challenge will be to integrate the content to ensure a more student-centered delivery with particular emphasis on contextualising skills development for students. It is anticipated that this integration and revised delivery strategies will also enable the effective use of Divisional staff in providing accessible supplemental services for all students. A further consideration in the process will be the linking of newly developed programs to faculty-based strategies designed to develop the wider range of generic capabilities for students.

In February 2001, QUT's Teaching and Learning Committee endorsed *Learning for Life: the information literacy framework & syllabus*. The document is designed to facilitate comprehensive and consistent information literacy and curriculum development. It is flexible enough to ensure ongoing relevance in a changing educational environment and to specific contexts and disciplines.

## *Programs*

The *Full Day Learning Programs* include academic learning skills seminars, computing workshops, Library tours and information skills seminars. The program, offered during orientation week for full-time, part-time and external students, is an example of coordinated support service sponsored jointly by TALSS and the Library.

*Survival 4 QUT* is a short pre-orientation program designed to give students a positive start to learning at QUT. Participants have the opportunity to meet fellow students and become familiar with the QUT learning environment. Survival takes the stress out of the first weeks at University by offering a step-by-step guide to the essential information students need about passwords, student cards, computer labs, libraries and learning support. Survival provides an excellent overview of the critical support services available throughout the semester.

In 2002 a QUT *Teaching and Learning Large Grant* was awarded to the Faculty of Science working in conjunction with staff from TALSS and the Library. This project aims to significantly enhance the development of literacy skills in science graduates by adopting the approach detailed in the University's Information Literacy Framework & Syllabus.

## *Resources*

In 1999 QUT Library developed a comprehensive online tutorial entitled *PILOT: your information navigator*. The tutorial consists of a series of web-based modules to develop the basic information literacy knowledge and skills of undergraduate students. The tutorial was subsequently adopted by many faculties as a compulsory component of core units, and by individual academics as compulsory assessment for specific units.

Funding through the QUT Teaching and Learning Grant Scheme funded two projects focusing on generic capabilities – *Lit Kit* and the on-line *Student Capability Profile*. A multidisciplinary team undertook a project to produce a set of templates (*Lit Kit*) that could be integrated within a variety of discipline contexts. The templates were designed to develop technology literacy skills through learning activities and assessment tasks that could be adapted to a variety of contexts. Individual lecturers within the contexts of their disciplines and the objectives of their units were therefore able to build the development of technology literacy into their subjects.

The on-line *Student Capability Profile* provides a mechanism for recording and monitoring the development of the full range of generic capabilities. It assists students to document the development and level of achievement of generic capabilities over a course of study, linking learning within the university with other life experiences. It supports the adoption of a student-centered (rather than content-driven or teacher centered) approach to learning and the curriculum process. It is envisioned that the student capability profile will become a core component of a student's learning experience at QUT, and comprise a stage in a larger electronic portfolio reflecting the individual full range of experiences with and in the University.

### **Summary and future initiatives**

The Division is moving from a coordinated approach to literacy support and development towards a more student centered integrated and ultimately embedded approach. In this stage of transition there are policies and strategies, programs and resources that represent the continuum of integration. The on-line student capability profile is an example of a resource that facilitates an embedded student centred approach to capability development. It was designed through the collaborative efforts of Divisional and academic staff with financial assistance from the Teaching and Learning Grants Scheme.

The on-line *student capability profile* is currently being trialled in three faculties but it will be made available to all students in the future. In 2001 a series of focus groups was conducted with students to better understand the student experience of learning related to generic capabilities. The findings from the focus groups clarified that students recognized and appreciated the potential of the student capability profile to track and record learning within and beyond their University experience. They believed that the tool would assist them to develop a more systematic approach to capability development. They also agreed that it would be useful for proving achievements, building self-esteem and improving employment opportunities. It provides a truly embedded response in the sense that it can

be individualized to accommodate the unique learning experience of each individual student. It simultaneously develops and monitors the development of information and technology literacy skills.

To further support a more integrated and collaborative working culture across the Division, the three Directors, of the Library, ITS and TALSS are engaged in a one-month 'role exchange'. It is anticipated that this experience will provide an opportunity for directors to engage in an action-learning program aimed at:

- Broadening understanding of divisional issues;
- Identifying areas of future collaboration ; and
- Developing relationships/partnerships across the Division.

The exchange will signal management commitment to the development of an organizational culture that supports working together across the Division for the benefit of students and academic staff. It constitutes an unusual experiment in QUT's senior staff development management program.

In addition, selected senior managers within the Division are currently undertaking a trial of 'service learning' in order to better understand the challenges facing students and academic staff. Jacoby (1996) defines service-learning as a form of experiential education that simultaneously addresses human and community needs with structured opportunities for professional development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. The project seeks to create opportunities for appropriately qualified/experienced Divisional staff to contribute to the teaching of award courses at QUT as an innovative approach to professional development and liaison. Such a strategy, combined with continuing collaborative Divisional initiatives and activities, will ensure that QUT can significantly respond to the needs of all students by providing quality learning experiences in a cohesive, contextualised manner.

## References

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## Appendix 1: QUT's Graduate Capabilities

### The Graduate Capabilities

Every QUT course aims to develop graduates who are able to demonstrate:

- **Knowledge and skills pertinent to a particular discipline or professional area**

encompassing:

- ◆ coherent theoretical and practical knowledge in at least one discipline area at the level of entry to a profession
- ◆ technological skills appropriate to the discipline

- **critical, creative and analytical thinking, and effective problem-solving**

including:

- ◆ the ability to critique current paradigms and contribute to intellectual inquiry
- ◆ the capacity to exhibit creative as well as analytical ways of thinking about questions in at least one discipline
- ◆ the ability to identify, define and solve problems in at least one discipline area

- **effective communication in a variety of contexts and modes**

including:

- ◆ effective written and oral communication with discipline specialists and non-specialists

- **the capacity for life-long learning**

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including:

- ◆ searching and critically evaluating information from a variety of sources using effective strategies and appropriate technologies

- **the ability to work independently and collaboratively**

including:

- ◆ managing time and prioritising activities to achieve goals
- ◆ demonstrating the capacity for self-assessment of learning needs and achievements
- ◆ being a cooperative and productive team member or leader

- **social and ethical responsibility and an understanding of indigenous and international perspectives**

encompassing:

- ◆ active contribution to intellectual, social and cultural activities
- ◆ understanding and appreciation of indigenous perspectives
- ◆ recognition and appreciation of gender, culture and customs in personal and community relations
- ◆ valuing and promoting truth, accuracy, honesty, accountability and the code of practice relevant to the disciplines or professional area

- **characteristics of self-reliance and leadership**

including:

- ◆ the ability to take the initiative, to embrace innovation, and to manage change productively