

When one size policy does not fit all. Safe-guarding the well-being of online teaching staff

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Safe for Whom. For the past five years, the Legal Studies team at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology (formerly The Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, New Zealand) has engaged in delivering programmes in an online environment. Whilst the team has made a considered effort to evolve programmes and methods of delivery to address the well-being of off-site online students, no such considered effort has ensued to address the well-being of off-site and on-site online staff.

From 2014 the Legal Studies APERs (Annual Programme Evaluation Report) for online programmes began noting staff concerns around issues of well-being: anxiety, stress and vulnerability; workload, timeframe and support service inequity; advanced specialist skill requirements. Many of these issues were due in part to unsuitable institute-wide policies being applied to staff and programmes using online delivery models.

At the end of 2016, an action plan to address these concerns was still not in place.

Tired of waiting, in 2017 the Legal Studies team initiated their own plan - research into online teaching well-being so as to generate a business case for the acceptance of 'unseen' differences between online and face-to-face staff and programme needs. The intention is that once accepted, implementation and/or adaption of applicable institute policies can occur making them suitable for application in an online environment in order to safe-guard the well-being of online teaching staff.

This presentation will cover a short history of programme evolution leading to staff well-being issues, the challenges in explaining and advocating these issues to management and other stakeholders unfamiliar with the online environment, and the initial steps being taken to garner acceptance that online delivery is different and highlight policy challenges that require addressing in order to safe-guard staff well-being.

Keywords: Policy, Staff well-being, online teaching

Programme Evolution

This paper has initially focused on the Legal Studies team at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology; the third largest institute of technology in New Zealand. The intention is for the research to expand to staff in other groups who use online or blended teaching methods to deliver programmes to students.

The Legal Studies group consists of staff teaching across the Graduate Diploma in New Zealand Immigration Advice, the New Zealand Diploma in Legal Executive Studies, the Diploma in Conveyancing and the New Zealand Certificate in Real Estate (salesperson). Whilst the New Zealand Diploma of Executive Studies and the New Zealand Certificate in

Real Estate (salesperson) offer face-to-face delivery options, all programmes are delivered online with these being the largest cohorts of students.

When the online delivery of Legal Studies programmes began, the initial use of Moodle was reasonably asynchronous. Staff interacted with students by posting to Moodle News Forums for teaching purposes, and sending emails to individuals for pastoral and administrative purposes. Only the weekly tutorials were interactive using a synchronous chat facility and all students were located in New Zealand. The maximum number of students in a cohort was 24, which made two 12 person tutorials and tutors were able to facilitate three or four courses at a time.

Now the online environment is quite different. Whilst the programmes are still delivered online using Moodle, AdobeConnect Meeting software facilitates live interactive tutorials and tutor drop-in sessions, course cohorts reach 80 students, tutors are often involved in only one programme course, and staff and students are located throughout New Zealand and overseas. In semester 1 2017, one programme coordinated 63 individual online examinations, invigilated by staff, in nine time zones, over two days.

The evolution of the programmes and technology created unforeseen issues, not addressed in institute wide policy.

Challenges

The fast pace in which online technology and capabilities evolved was to be expected. However, a plan for managing the speed of this evolution and flow-on effects to staff, students, programmes, resourcing and budgets was not adequately in place.

From 2014 a trend began developing within the Legal Studies group Annual Programme Evaluation Reports in relation to online teaching. Staff were raising concerns about their well-being, highlighting increased anxiety, stress and vulnerability, unseen workloads, deadline and support service inequity; and the necessity to have advanced specialist technical skills outside their content level of expertise .

Staff noted that the potential benefit of work place flexibility offered by online teaching was not being as readily undertaken, as staff could not adequately work from home as support systems were not in place.

Anecdotes

The following anecdotes are samples of those shared by staff in the Legal Studies group. The anecdotes are the initial base for generating research questions:

1. Offensive, aggressive or inappropriate student forum postings, emails to tutors and classmates. Written postings and emails needed to be saved for evidential reasons, however removing posts from public forums is necessary to reduce harm to other students and staff. [student regulations silent on process and procedures for exclusion for online learning space, removal of students work/posts, off-site students, and determining level of harm]

2. Inbox overload; 78 – 631 notifications within inbox. Setting specific tutor office hours an inappropriate solution as students located in different time zones so issues need to be addressed or the student can be prevented from continuing with their learning [workload policy calculated on face-to-face time (classes) with students. Silent on time/loading spent teaching/interacting with students required in an online environment outside of the allocated AdobeConnect tutorial].
3. AdobeConnect tutorial night session. Building security stood over a tutor stating they must leave the building as it was closing time but the tutor was delivering a planned, timetabled tutorial. [hours of work employment contracts and policy were not aligned with physical building open hours]
4. Institute support services. Student services offered to face-to-face students inaccessible to online students. E.g nurse, counselling services, library, learner facilitators. Staff and student services only accessible on-site and within standard set business hours e.g Moodle help unavailable outside of business hours – no assistance for tutors during evening classes, nor students in different time zones. [Employment, service inequity]
5. Student enrolment. Institute student enrolment department ignoring maximum numbers set for tutorial groups in an online programme as the institute directive is to over fill by 20%. The online AdobeConnect sessions are compromised once the optimum number is met. [institute wide policy for enrolment, not meeting individual requirement of programmes]
6. Private or Public Space. Students engaged in AdobeConnect tutorial dressed in pyjamas, eating and drinking, getting dressed, talking to others, playing with animals and children, using private chat pod to talk to classmates. [Is this something policy can determine? The student is located in their own home or office, whilst the tutor at their workspace].
7. Legal Currency. Some Legislative changes requires immediate incorporation into courses. E.g Changes to Immigration New Zealand Operational Instructions have been made public on a Friday for implementation the Monday two days following. [Employment, Job Descriptions, Workload Policies]

The Initial steps

To date, solutions to cope with the challenges have been discussed and implemented at group level by tutors and Programme Coordinators. However, a change in group leadership has been a catalyst to engage in wider institute discussion with evidenced based research, in order to provide insight, and gain support for the issues facing the well-being of online staff in the expanding e-learning and teaching environment.

Presenting at the 2017 ANZELA Conference in Sydney, is a positive endorsement that the safety and well-being of staff is an integral part of educational success, and a part worth ensuring is maintained across all delivery models.

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