Featured School:

University of Technology, Sydney

UTS Business School

Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

www.business.uts.edu.au
Among the institutions that currently hold AACSB accreditation worldwide, the Business School at the University of Technology, Sydney is (perhaps appropriately) notable for the extent to which technological aids have been successfully used to streamline the assurance of learning (AoL) process, and to make the process as transparent as possible to the school’s stakeholders. According to Dr. Romy Lawson, who until recently was the Teaching and Learning Coordinator at UTS Business School, the development of the various interlocking technologies in use in the school’s AoL system has taken place slowly over a period of years, as different aspects, tools and techniques were developed and piloted.

Dr. Lawson says that there are three keys to the success of the assurance of learning system that UTS Business School has developed. First, both the assessment techniques and enabling technologies must be embedded in a whole of program approach within the everyday activities of faculty and staff. Having AoL as an add-on to what is already expected of them generates inefficiency and resentment, she says. Second, while developing the process that will ultimately be used, it is important to be inclusive of faculty (and where appropriate student) input, in order to ensure optimal implementation and results. Finally, the process that is created must be sustainable, and the best way to ensure this is to make certain that any assessment techniques and technological aids minimize effort for all concerned and prevent assurance of learning from being overly time- and resource-intensive.

Embedded

According to Dr. Lawson, the act of embedding the AoL process as part of the regular routine of UTS Business School operations has had just as profound an impact on the positive development of assurance of learning at the school as the technological tools used to streamline the process. The idea, she says, is to keep AoL tools and processes as simple as possible, so as not to unduly burden faculty with extra work.

To that end, several of the tools developed for UTS Business School’s current AoL process are actually very basic, technologically speaking. The first such tool to be developed was the SOS (Subject Overview Spreadsheet). This is a simple Excel file, designed in the faculty Teaching and Learning Centre, to allow faculty designated as subject coordinators to curriculum map by inputting and tracking information about their subject, including such things as learning goals and objectives, how particular assessment types (multiple choice, essays, case-studies, etc.) are weighted and distributed over each course, the timing of due dates and tutor feedback to students, and which learning objectives are included in each assessment task, which is then presented in a summary that allows the faculty to review the whole of program experience for their learners. The presentation of this information in the SOS helps to make clear any gaps (or overlaps) over the course of the program, Dr. Lawson says, and also makes it easy to work across courses within subjects, particularly when tracking amendments to the process.

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Another technologically simple but highly useful tool is the AoL Repository Dropbox. This is a Word document that uses hyperlinks to all the other technological features of the AoL system to create a central data hub for each program. It acts as a portal to the assurance of learning data for each course and subject area within the program, and also links to summary reports for each program. The AoL Repository Dropbox has had a significant impact on making data management more efficient, according to Dr. Lawson, allowing easy access to all aspects of the assurance of learning process from a single central clearinghouse. This is particularly useful for the program directors, she notes, so that they can have all the information they need at their fingertips when discussing issues that arise, different ways to "close the loop" on them, and even tracking the impact of previous actions.

Probably the most complex technological aid in UTS Business School’s AoL toolbox is the Web-based student marking system known as ReView.² This system permits the subject coordinators to work and communicate easily with faculty and tutors, and to view their marks and comments as they are entered. UTS Business School's assessment rubrics are incorporated into the marking system, allowing assessment data entry to be done entirely online. Dr. Lawson says ReView makes it very simple for faculty to collect and mine specific assurance of learning data. Assessment criteria are also color-coded to the school’s graduate attributes within ReView, allowing the system to store student marks and produce graphs of student data that can show either individual or aggregate performance for each program learning goal. Additionally, Dr. Lawson notes, having the rubrics and criteria embedded in ReView helps to ensure standardized assessment of learning objectives across programs, allowing for easier benchmarking. The system also has a self-assessment feature for the students themselves, which gives them continuous feedback on their performance in each of the graduate attributes as they progress throughout their degree program. Most see this as a valuable opportunity to engage with their own progress and to compare their own perceptions of it against staff assessments, she says.

**Inclusive**

Piloting the various assurance of learning practices and labor-saving technologies that make up UTS Business School’s current AoL process took approximately two years, Dr. Lawson says. Imposing change in a top-down fashion may take less time, but without the buy-in that comes from including the faculty who will be responsible for using the assessment techniques and technologies in their development, the end result is less than optimal. Extensive faculty consultation is critical to creating a sense of ownership of the assurance of learning process and its implementation among faculty, she says.
Additionally, the multiplicity of uses available through the technological tools can be a selling point for faculty in and of itself. The ReView system, for example, is not only a timesaver insofar as AoL data entry is concerned, but also makes it possible for faculty to work with the data themselves to create charts and do analyses that cut across different programs and levels. In addition to being the basis for decision-making and “closing the loop,” having the data garnered from the assurance of learning process available as a resource for the faculty in this way enhances the value of both the tools and the process, according to Dr. Lawson.

Dr. Lawson believes it is always helpful to encourage greater student involvement in the AoL process, and additional technological aids in use at UTS Business School make this possible. UTSOnline, for example, is a modified Blackboard™ virtual learning platform which students can use to map the school’s learning outcomes and how they are reaching them. The UTS Student Handbook (which is made available on UTSOnline) includes subject outlines that state the learning objectives for each subject and program. The outlines also show where and how the objectives align with graduate attributes for each assessment task. The UTSOnline platform is also the means by which students receive their marks and feedback from the ReView system.

Another tool currently being piloted at the undergraduate level is the E-Portfolio, which is designed to aid students with knowledge integration between the stages of their degree program. The E-Portfolio process is introduced in a new core course called Integrating Business Perspectives, and progresses throughout the core and major electives, to be completed in the capstone course for each major. The portfolio allows students to track their progress toward meeting program learning goals and demonstrating the specified graduate attributes, according to Dr. Lawson. She says that while the E-Portfolio process is still under development, initial feedback has been very positive. Students like the “unpacking” of the assessment terms in ways that help them understand what they are expected to achieve, she notes, and it also helps students to have the ability to reflect on what they have learned.

**Sustainable**

Dr. Lawson strongly believes that an inclusive AoL process, streamlined by technological tools and embedded in the everyday activities of stakeholders is the best way to ensure the sustainability of the process. She says that once assurance of learning becomes largely driven by the faculty themselves, it is essentially self-sustaining.

A 30 minute training session with essential faculty, teaching teams and subject coordinators was all that was necessary to go over the basics of the ReView system, she says. With the back-end work of
simplifying the enabling technologies now by-and-large accomplished, most faculty are able to pick up the tools and techniques intuitively, or with minimal support.

Support is nevertheless kept readily available, however. UTS Business School has created a faculty guide to assurance of learning for each individual degree entitled “The ABC of AOL: Assurance of Learning Process Guides.” Each faculty member responsible for teaching learning objectives is given a copy of the guide for the relevant degree. Additionally, the school maintains an online resource center of teaching, learning, and assessment information for faculty and staff.3

In addition to the work conducted at UTS Business School Dr. Lawson and Professor Tracy Taylor (Deputy Dean) have taken the lead on a project funded by a grant from the Office of Learning and Teaching,4 a branch of the Australian Government’s Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, also involving faculty from Bond University, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT University, and the University of Southern Queensland. Together they developed a number of techniques and best practices for mapping graduate attributes throughout degree programs and collecting assurance of learning data,5 some of which were informed by the current AoL process at UTS Business School (for further information on this project see assuringlearning.com).

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End Notes