Carrick initiatives gain momentum

Professor Richard Johnstone outlines future plans

Welcome to our first edition of Carrick Communiqué for 2008. The year ahead promises to be most rewarding with many of our initiatives gaining momentum and producing practical outcomes following dedicated work by a considerable number of people both within the Carrick Institute and the higher education sector more broadly.

I am pleased to announce that the next step in broadening engagement with the Carrick Exchange will take place in just a few weeks with plans to provide uptake to Carrick Fellows and those working in funded projects. Testing since late last year has revealed the enormous potential of the Exchange to support communication and collaboration in teaching and learning. The Carrick Exchange is an exciting project that could lead to significant changes in academic practice through the use of a set of online services that combines a repository function with social networking. This platform will allow people to collaborate, exchange ideas and share content around teaching and learning in higher education. Further information about the Exchange is available by emailing info@carrickexchange.edu.au.

The Carrick Exchange has been one of our leading projects since 2006 and I thank everyone who has worked to bring this distinctive resource to fruition, particularly former Program Director Janice Orrell who was instrumental in guiding its progress.

The Exchange is overseen by Carrick’s newly created Learning Networks Standing Committee which also includes support for discipline networks. Early on the Carrick Board recognised that a key element in the success of the Institute was the connections between people. Feedback from the sector generally reveals that Carrick has already been highly successful in facilitating discipline interactions and this is an aspect many want to see extended.

Consultation on the Discipline-Based Initiative Development Stage 2 elicited a varied response about how to continue and the principle of working within and across the disciplines to propel improvements in teaching practice but further work is needed to define the best way to do so.

Carrick Institute Executive Director, Professor Richard Johnstone said he is delighted at the way the sector has responded to calls for feedback on the Discipline-Based Initiative (DBI) Development Stage 2 Plan released last October.

The submissions indicate a high level of interest in the work of the Institute and a strong desire to work with us to ensure that we arrive at a model that best supports institutions, the disciplines and academics in providing an optimal learning experience for students, he said.

“One of the most striking things that emerged from the consultation process is the recognition that the role of disciplines, and people’s allegiances to disciplines, in enhancing learning and teaching is extremely complex,” according to Professor Johnstone.

While there is support for the Institute continuing to emphasise the role of the disciplines, there is considerable divergence of opinion on whether the proposed discipline networks are the appropriate means for this to be achieved.”

Key stakeholders provided feedback including vice-chancellors, deputy vice-chancellors and pro vice-chancellors (academic), chairs of the councils of deans and leaders of projects funded under the DBI Scheme. Open feedback was also welcomed with the proposal available on Carrick’s website.

Responses revealed widespread support for continuing to focus on national sector-wide learning and teaching matters as well as encouraging a cross-disciplinary approach.

A report on the outcomes of the consultation process will be discussed at the first Learning Network Standing Committee this year. This committee will govern a new portfolio encompassing the Discipline Networks and the Carrick Exchange. For more details about the feedback go to the Carrick Institute website.

Sector responds to discipline initiative

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In a competitive global market where innovation is the key to Australia’s future growth and prosperity, science, technology, engineering and mathematics are important ingredients in the development of our knowledge-based economy.

Globalisation and advances in technology have created a wider variety of roles for science and mathematics graduates requiring varying depths of technical and conceptual knowledge.

Science educators are now challenged with strengthening and modernising learning and teaching in science to keep pace with the knowledge needs of an advanced technological society.

The Carrick Institute has funded 18 science initiatives that are tackling identified areas of need head on.

A Carrick project, involving all three South Australian universities, is looking specifically at how to raise the profile of science teaching to improve the quality of teaching and learning across Australian higher education.

The project aims to change the culture of science teaching through improved leadership capabilities in the field and professional development, initially in the biological sciences. In particular, it proposes to shift some of the focus on scientific research on to learning and teaching by modelling leading scientists to encourage science academics to teach well.

Concern about the number of students choosing to study science has eased recently with growing interest in engineering and related areas largely driven by the resources boom. An Associate Fellowship project seeks to enable students to study science by addressing the issues that contribute to low enrolments and high attrition rates in some areas of science.

“how to address the language needs of the diverse student body”

Modern life sciences are becoming more dependent on mathematics and the physical sciences as the boundaries between science disciplines become less defined. Here at the interface between disciplines in innovative areas like bioinformatics and computational science some of the greatest scientific and technological discoveries of this century will be made.

Associate Fellows Professor Phil Poronnik and Professor Peter Adams, from the University of Queensland aim to ensure that first year life sciences students possess the necessary mathematical and quantitative skills to study science. Three different projects are concentrating on the demonstrated need to build the language and communication skills of science students and graduates, an identified area of challenge.

An Associate Fellowship is engaging with the perception that “science students can’t write”. Dr Roger Moni, from the University of Queensland, is examining ways to embed the teaching and assessment of professional writing across a new BSc degree program. In particular the project will focus on writing to communicate technical science to generalist audiences, a skill graduates will require as they move from universities into professional learning communities.

A partnership between the University of Sydney and the University of NSW will use an online learning environment to provide support, resources and activities to enable students to develop their report writing skills. It will target science and engineering students across the sector.

The University of Canberra, in collaboration with four other universities, Newcastle, Sydney, Tasmania and UTS, is investigating the emerging issue of how to address the language needs of the diverse student body caused by the changing nature and diversity of students in science. The project will apply methods and strategies used in foreign language learning, to the teaching of scientific language to improve student learning.

An investigative project led by the Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) is exploring future directions for science education in higher education. The aim is to develop a broad collaborative national framework and reform agenda to facilitate a sustainable approach to pedagogical change.

The full report, ‘What's happening in science,’ outlining these and other Carrick funded projects is available to download from the Carrick website.
A passion for teaching and learning

New role for Carrick Director

As Denise Chalmers leaves the Carrick Institute to take up a new role at the University of Western Australia she reflects on her time as an advocate for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.

Denise Chalmers (pictured right) has been the driving force behind the Carrick Institute’s Awards and Fellowships programs since 2006, when she built on past experience to help create new opportunities for the recognition of quality in teaching and practice.

As Director of those programs and the leader of Carrick’s teaching quality indicators project she has interacted with many hundreds of people throughout the Australian higher education sector with the goal of developing a deeper understanding of what it means to teach well and to ensure the best learning experience for students.

Next month Denise will take up a strategic role at the University of Western Australia (UWA) where she has been appointed a Professorial Fellow and Director of the institution’s Centre for the Advancement for Teaching and Learning. Importantly, she will continue to lead the teaching quality indicators project. (See story page 4 for further information about the project.)

While the Awards and Fellowships programs recognise and reward quality teaching, she explains that the teaching quality indicators project can lead to a significant broadening of understanding of the way in which teaching and learning is recognised and rewarded in universities throughout the sector.

“The teaching indicators project takes the concept of the Awards and Fellowships much further particularly in the way in which we understand the evidence we can use to support and enhance quality teaching and learning and that is really what I’m very passionate about,” she says.

Since the beginning of her career in higher education at Murdoch University, Denise has been involved in teaching, development, and enhancement at Edith Cowan University and later at the University of Queensland where she led the Teaching and Educational Development Institute.

The first stage of the teaching quality indicators project is substantially completed and its major outcome, the development of a framework, will be trialed in eight universities during the next phase which will come to fruition at the end of this year.

As UWA is one of the pilot universities involved in the indicators project, Denise believes that being based there will enhance her ability to work on implementation of the framework. “It enables the strategic input into a university that has a very high reputation for its quality of teaching at a time when a curriculum review is being carried out. UWA, particularly under the Vice-Chancellor Professor Alan Robson, has really been very much focused on, and taken seriously, the quality of teaching and learning.”

At the conclusion of stage two of the project, an overall report as well as reports from each of the pilot universities will be produced and circulated to the sector. A report on the project to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) group within Universities Australia is also part of the reporting and dissemination mechanism.

One of the most appealing aspects of working at the Carrick Institute has been the privilege of working with people who are really committed and passionate about teaching and learning, Denise says.

“Working in the teaching awards and fellowships and taking part in the forums, people are just so involved and committed – it’s truly been wonderful.” Another rewarding aspect has been meeting with Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice-Chancellors and senior academics who are keen to be more strategic and systematic about teaching and learning. The fact that the ceremonies and other events attract such high level attendance is highly significant, according to Denise as the presence of senior members of the university supporting staff sends a strong signal about the importance of teaching and learning as well as being a tangible expression of an ongoing commitment.

Denise has no doubt that the quality of teaching in universities has improved across the board and while she is pragmatic that there will always be “the shining example” of what not to do, people are no longer promoted unless they are at least competent in teaching. “The expectations of teachers have gradually improved just as Award applications have from when they were introduced. There’s now a huge difference in quality, the quality of evidence and the way it’s understood is significantly different. What would have got them a promotion 10 years ago wouldn’t now. It’s not that they’re not still good teachers, but it’s about the standard that’s required, the level and the quality of evidence has just significantly ramped up.”

When the teaching awards were introduced, predating the Carrick Institute, just a few institutions had in place similar award programs. Not only has that changed but many universities now also provide institutional program awards that recognise the contribution of projects and programs in engendering systematic change.

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Framework helps universities define goals

Next stage of indicators project launched

The Carrick Institute’s teaching quality indicators project is a response to the need for an agreed approach to recognising and rewarding quality teaching and teachers in higher education.

Launched in early 2007, the project gives the sector an opportunity to proactively engage with this key issue, including helping define and develop indicators and outcomes of quality teaching.

The eight universities taking part in the project are: Macquarie, Deakin, Griffith, RMIT, the University of Queensland (UQ), the University of Western Australia (UWA), University of South Australia and the University of Tasmania.

Stage one, now nearing completion, involved examining how quality teaching is recognised at the individual and institutional levels as well as nationally and internationally.

Extensive research into national and international teaching and learning research, theory and practice has been conducted to provide a comprehensive overview of the landscape to ascertain what is recognised as quality teaching at each of the four levels.

Reports stemming from this exercise were used to inform the development of a framework. The framework has been widely discussed with the pilot institutions, Universities Australia Deputy Vice-Chancellor/Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) group, representatives from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and the Australian Universities Quality Agency.

Stage two of the project involves implementing the framework which is designed to assist universities define their goals and objectives.

The aim is to provide tools that support universities to achieve their teaching and learning ambitions based on the use of sound evidence and measurement. Each of the four dimensions of the framework represent key indicators of quality teaching and learning practice.

The dimensions are to be used as lenses through which each university can interrogate its institutional mission and practices. The dimensions are:

- Institutional climate and systems;
- Diversity and inclusivity practice;
- Assessment; and
- Engagement and learning community.

Macquarie’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Provost, Professor Judyth Sachs is leading the pilot universities in implementing and evaluating the framework. This involves examining and revising relevant policies and practices that affect the quality of teaching and learning; establishing the necessary infrastructure and systems to gather and interpret the data; and implementing strategies to build a culture that values, recognises and rewards teaching quality.

The project in each of the pilot institutions is led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and project officers have been employed to support implementation of the framework.

The project reference group is chaired by Carrick Board member and Vice-Chancellor of RMIT University, Professor Margaret Gardner.

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“An individual who does a wonderful job has a particular impact and deserves recognition,” Denise says but she believes strongly that a program is frequently more systemic and embedded so can truly effect long-term change. “Similarly, a team is often about a culture that’s in place and new members can join as others leave, but it has a momentum that’s ongoing.” For these reasons she would like to see greater support for Carrick’s program awards and more recognition of their lasting impact.

However, she is encouraged that institutions are looking more strategically at these areas and as they set up projects and programs suggest that staff think about applying for a Carrick award in future. Pointing out that collection of evidence from an early stage is therefore paramount, Denise emphasises how essential it is to begin documentation as soon as possible, tracking projects, looking for evidence and using it as a rationale to extend work further. “It’s helping institutions and also people with initiatives to see that this works and the reason that it does – it’s not just about having a good idea that everyone feels good about – it’s about recognising there is evidence to support this view.”

That evidence could be that students are retained longer, or that student learning is improved in some measurable way. “It’s about working at a number of levels and extending the evidence base. It also means that universities are increasingly asking for an evidence base and saying that if people are seeking funding for a particular project they must demonstrate that it works.” Once evidence is documented it can be beneficial for promoting programs and even if those programs don’t win awards, there is still a flow-on effect in terms of the way that people use that information to support students, Denise contends.

“A lot of this work has happened before but previously it wasn’t recorded. Now people realise how important it is to tell people and to tell students. The evidence provides a frame by which institutions can say ‘this is our distinguishing feature,’ a dimension that Denise notes is becoming increasingly important as the drive to differentiate between institutions intensifies.

She believes the teaching awards have helped increase understanding across the sector of what evidence of quality teaching requires, with successful applications providing that substantiation. “People have come to a more common agreement about the criteria of good teaching and also that evidence must be collected and presented – and of course the awards are peer reviewed, another important factor.”

This has flowed on to institutions that now require a more sophisticated level of evidence for people to substantiate their claims for teaching. “It’s not that evidence wasn’t important before,” Denise says noting that some universities have had teaching portfolios and required evidence for some time. “It is now more consistent and that has led to a shared understanding that this is an appropriate way to go. As I’ve been going around the country and talking to people about collecting evidence, and what constitutes good evidence, where it comes from and how you get it from a range of sources for different purposes, it’s been interesting to see that this is something that has been progressively built into university requirements, policies and documents.”

During her time at Carrick, Denise has visited many universities and met with many people and organisations committed to quality teaching and learning. In her new position at UWA Denise will continue to promote the importance of use of evidence to recognise and reward quality teaching and enhance the student learning experience.
Champion of human potential recognised in honours' list

Sir John awarded Australia's highest civic accolade

Sir John Leslie Carrick's lifelong contribution to education was recognised in this year’s Australia Day Honours when he was awarded one of the nation’s most prestigious accolades. Sir John (left) was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia, the highest civic honour conferred in the awards system which recognises individuals who have made an extraordinary contribution to Australian society.

Sir John’s award recognises his distinguished service in the area of educational reform in Australia, particularly through the advancement of early childhood education and the development and support of new initiatives in the tertiary sector.

The Carrick Institute, established in 2005, was named in honour of Sir John who was Commonwealth Education Minister from 1975 to 1979.

During that time he established the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission responsible for higher education policy development in the 1970s and 1980s. The Commission played an important role in starting the process of coordinating the higher education sector throughout Australia and at arm’s length from Government. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Sir John oversaw a significant review of NSW schools.

Since leaving Parliament Sir John’s great love and knowledge of education, especially early childhood education, has led him to chair the Institute of Early Childhood Foundation at Macquarie University.

The Australia Day honour is the most recent in a list of prominent honours and awards including a knighthood in 1982 for services to the Australian Parliament, and the Centenary Medal for outstanding leadership and service to the Australian community, especially through education.

Collaborating to foster diversity

Small courses report released

Insights into how universities will benefit from collaborating to offer small courses is provided in a recent Carrick Institute report that brings together examples of the ways that institutions across the country are working together.

Collaborating to Offer Small Courses/Subjects Forum provides a synopsis of presentations shared at a Carrick-funded forum held at the University of New England last year.

The forum provided a platform for sharing and examining models of collaboration for short courses and gave participants the opportunity to examine issues that need resolving in supporting subjects with small enrolments. The event led to discussion about courses and discipline areas where collaborations are being explored.

Presenters also shared ideas about how to create networks and programs of practical benefit to universities. Presentations at the two-day forum covered a range of topics from Writing Networks to Mining Engineering and involved universities from across Australia.

Professor Richard Johnstone, Carrick Institute Executive Director, said it was important for institutions to look at ways of managing diversity across the system and ensure that students have access to the widest range of choices possible.

“There are numerous examples of innovative arrangements between universities that ensure high quality programs can continue to be offered even when the enrollments in a single institution fall below the critical level,” Professor Johnstone said.

A range of examples developed by the various universities were presented at the forum in Armidale.

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The project officers have carried out an audit at their universities. Following this process, each institutional steering group determined the dimension on which they would focus and are now engaged in the process of implementing the framework. So far this has included setting up steering committees and focus groups, introducing policy templates and guidelines, developing surveys and information databases and facilitating the active engagement of university staff with teaching and learning.

Following the pilot stage, the tools and matrices, cases studies and guidelines for implementing the framework will be made widely available and promoted to the sector.

Project officers at the institutions are: Deakin Jennifer Brockett; Griffith Lynda Davies; Macquarie Bronwyn Kosman; RMIT Dr Josephine Lang; UQ Dr Anne Gilmore; UWA Jacqueline Flowers; South Australia Ric Bierbaum; and Tasmania Steven Heron.

For further information about this project contact Carrick’s teaching quality indicators project officer Kate Thomson at kate.thomson@carrickinstitute.edu.au

New ICT peak body

The Carrick Institute has been the impetus for a new peak body representing the broad ICT spectrum. The Australian Council of Deans and Heads of School of ICT was formed earlier this month with University of Wollongong Dean of Informatics, Professor Joe Chicharo, elected interim president. More details in next month’s Communiqué.
Spotlight on E-portfolio practice
Providing strategic and practical guidance

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) together with the University of Melbourne, University of New England and the University of Wollongong hosted a symposium in early February for the Australian ePortfolio Practice Project (AeP).

The symposium, which was held in Brisbane, attracted more than 200 people from 39 Australasian universities.

Preliminary findings from the project’s research activities were discussed, potential frameworks for measuring the level of maturity in ePortfolio practice were introduced and case studies that provide examples of best practice were explored.

Funded by the Carrick Institute, the project seeks to investigate ePortfolio practice in universities to provide strategic and practical guidance for further use.

An ePortfolio is a collection of works purposely chosen by the author to provide evidence of a certain nature, and in the case of ePortfolios, are digital.

Project Leader, Associate Professor Gillian Hallam, said that while ePortfolios are being used by students at a subject level they are rarely used across faculties and universities.

“It appears that ePortfolios are utilised most often at the individual academic subject level, with a movement towards a whole-course model, but only rarely in the faculty-wide or university-wide contexts often in a sporadic, piecemeal and under-funded basis.”

Representatives from the four participating universities presented at the symposium including QUT Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) Professor David Gardiner, and Professor Sandra Willis, Director of Wollongong’s Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources. Mr Rob Ward, Director of the Centre for Recording Achievement, gave a United Kingdom perspective on ePortfolio in universities.

Associate Professor Hallam said the international collaborators brought a significant amount of knowledge to the project but also “strong connections with the national eLearning policy contexts in the United Kingdom and the European Union”.

It was felt that the discussions successfully ‘unpacked’ ePortfolios breaking them into a series of component tools, uses and applications thereby building a clearer understanding of the concept.

For further information on the project go to the ePortfolio Project website.

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19-20 FEBRUARY 2008
Grants Scheme Project Management Workshops, Sydney
11-12 MARCH 2008
Carrick Fellows Forum, Sydney
25-28 MARCH 2008
Engineering Education Futures Forum, Maroochydore
27 MARCH 2008
Applications close for the 2008 Competitive Grants Program
10 APRIL 2008
Applications close for the 2008 Leadership for Excellence Program
23 APRIL 2008
Applications close for the 2008 Priority Projects Program
22-23 MAY 2008
Promoting Excellence Initiative Colloquium, Sydney
(rescheduled from February)