

Developing a flexible postgraduate program in the Faculty of Veterinary Science

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Introduction

In order to address stringent market requirements and animal disease threats, Australian livestock industries require specialist veterinary assistance. Currently there is a lack of veterinary expertise in livestock medicine and production, and training options for veterinarians are limited to research programs at Australian universities or coursework programs overseas. In response to this urgent need for more highly skilled veterinarians to service the livestock industries, the Faculty of Veterinary Science at The University of Sydney is developing a new postgraduate coursework

program in Veterinary Public Health. This program will be a flexible, largely distance education program to accommodate the potential student base of busy professionals located at regional and rural centers throughout Australia.

New initiative – New approach

This flexible program combining online delivery and short residential programs is a first for the faculty. A mixed mode program requires a new approach to course development that presents a real challenge to standard faculty procedures. Some new elements include higher development costs, requirement for a technology platform, more detailed market assessment, training of academics in online education and a team-based and more rigorous pedagogical approach to the course development.

Given the large component of online delivery, sustainability requires students and teachers familiar with the technology and a reliable technology platform. Consequently, initial planning included a market survey of potential student access to computer facilities and level of computer skills, and negotiations about use of university technology facilities. In addition, long-term viability requires the program to attract a range of potential participants. Based on market feedback, it is therefore also planned that various units of study (and partial units of study – *learning modules*) will be offered as non-award professional development modules. This delivery option is being built into the design of the learning resources.

Program planning began with an academic and industry workshop in February 2002 at which it was decided that Session 1 2003 was an achievable start date. Given that the program will be delivered primarily online and will begin with a residential in February 2003, all the course planning and resources need to be complete by January 2003. At this stage (October 2002) we have completed the broad program design, had the course proposal approved by the Academic Board, attracted academics interested in developing units for the program and potential students interested in 2003 enrolment, and begun development of three units of study. Due to heavy workloads, this is not as far down the development track as we had hoped to be. As Anne Forster from iTEV said in her Synergy discussion paper, "At this stage most innovation is an add-on rather than a replacement of existing workload."

New initiative – New lessons

As well as providing guidance on how best to go about planning such a program, iTEV has been able to provide valuable support to the Faculty in project management and instructional design. The aim is that this start-up support will assist the Faculty to recognise the skills and expertise needed to successfully produce such a program and to either develop these skills within the Faculty or realistically finance such projects in order to buy in the required expertise. At present the program has attracted support and funding from the Meat and Livestock Association and the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation that has allowed us to employ a program coordinator and to meet marketing and other administrative costs.

Academics involved in developing this program are on a steep learning curve. Not only do they have to learn to use the technology (in this case, WebCT), but they are coming to grips with the demands of a rigorous and systematic planning process for the teaching and learning that will comprise the program. With the instructional designer they are working through questions that will define the design of the unique learning experience that will characterise this program. These questions include:

- Our students will be mature, professional, working people. What features does our learning program have to incorporate to meet their specific needs? What mode of study will suit them?
- What are the knowledge and skills they will be seeking?
- What are the learning outcomes for each unit of study?
- How can the Faculty, and the students themselves, best assess achievement of these outcomes?
- What range of learning strategies will best help the students achieve these outcomes?

- How can we give our students choice and flexibility in what and how they learn?

Through addressing these questions to create a flexible program, academics are building skills that will enhance their teaching across all of the Faculty's programs.

Conclusion

While there is sound justification for this faculty to provide a flexible program for busy veterinarians wanting postgraduate training, we commenced this initiative with a limited understanding of the requirements of such a program. With university support from Innovations and Technology in Education Ventures (iTEV) and the Institute of Teaching and Learning (ITL), and external funding from industry and community bodies, we are tackling the challenge. We encourage other sectors of the university to take up the same challenge but to learn from our example and to plan ahead for its unique requirements, by introducing a longer planning and development phase, additional resources and expertise, and on-going staff development.

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