The changing nature of learning and teaching at Massey University (2008-2011): setting the context

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[2012]
The changing nature of learning and teaching at Massey University (2008-2011): setting the context

Massey University is New Zealand’s only national university with campuses in Albany, Manawatu and Wellington. The Manawatu Campus, located in the lower North Island regional city of Palmerston North (population 85,000), is the original ‘home’ of Massey and remains the official head office. Most of the University’s senior leadership team, including the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and six Assistant Vice-Chancellors, are based in University House on the Manawatu Campus.

As a dual mode university, Massey has a longstanding history of offering distance education for over 50 years and in December 2010 supported 16,299 (Head Count) distance learners. An additional 18,566 (HC) students were spread across its three other campuses. The Albany Campus was established as a new development on the North Shore of Auckland, New Zealand’s largest city, almost 20 years ago. Massey’s Wellington Campus located in the heart of the Central Business District was established over a decade ago with the merger of the Wellington Polytechnic. It is home of the College of Creative Arts, located in the iconic old National Museum of New Zealand building, which was acquired shortly after the merger. The Palmerston North campus was established in 1923 and with the addition of the Wellington-based Design School, Massey has a history of over 125 years.

Currently all five of Massey’s academic colleges—Business, Creative Arts, Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Sciences—offer degree programs on more than one campus and the only College not involved in providing distance education is Creative Arts. Massey’s has the nation’s only Veterinary School and its official signature platforms include Agriculture and Life Sciences, Art and Humanities, Communication, Design and Fine Arts, Education, Engineering and Food Technology, Finance and Economics, Health, Entrepreneurial Management, Land, Water and Environment, Maori Knowledge and Indigenous Development, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences.

Internationalization is a strong feature of the Massey culture with almost 4000 international students spread across its three main campuses. Massey also has a small satellite campus in Singapore offering undergraduate degrees in Food Technology and Aviation Management, and a growing development in Brunei in the area of Defence and Strategic Studies. Most of these offshore initiatives involve a mix of face-to-face teaching combined with online and distance delivery. Each year over 1000 New Zealand citizens living overseas enrol through Massey’s distance education provision and in 2010 the University changed its academic regulations to increase opportunities for international students to study by distance. A recent multi-million dollar initiative funded by the World Bank is flexible and distance delivered Master of Public
Health and Master of Veterinary Science funded by the World Bank to health professionals living in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Nepal. Other strategically important distance education initiatives targeting international students living overseas include postgraduate programs in Disaster Management, Education and English Language.

Massey’s international ambitions are strongly influenced by the goal to build on its reputation for high quality research grounded in real-world issues and the big problems of the 21st century. In this regard, Massey aims to lift its current ranking in international comparisons by offering programs that address “… sustainable resource use, citizenship in a digital world, community resilience in times of natural and induced environmental challenges, global economic issues, health and wellbeing, and food security, to name a few (Massey University, 2012a, p. 1).

Another contributing factor to Massey’s renewed focus on building stronger international connections is the Government’s recent introduction of a capped funding model, which limits the potential for growth in the domestic market.

The above ambitions and initiatives are clearly articulated within Massey’s vision: ‘To be New Zealand’s defining university and a world leader in higher education and scholarship’. More specifically, in the words of the Vice-Chancellor, Hon Steve Maharey, “What drives us is capacity to define the future of our nation and our commitment to take what is special about New Zealand to the world” (Massey University, 2010, p. 28). The mission of carving out a new future and taking the best of New Zealand to the world is encapsulated in Massey University’s by-line of being the ‘Engine of the new New Zealand’.

Against this backdrop of this mission coupled with Massey’s long history as a dual mode provider, the University has made a large investment in new digital media to support new models of online, flexible and distance learning. In 2009 Massey initiated a NZ $4.5 million three-year project to establish the Stream online platform, which at its core involved the replacement of WebCT with the implementation of Moodle as the University’s new Learning Management System (LMS). The name of the new online platform was adopted after considering a number of options and is described to students in the following way:

“Stream is a metaphor for knowledge. Always flowing and moving, the stream runs at different speeds, directions and strengths. The stream feeds the surrounding and provides life to everyone, as does life-long learning and connects knowledge, creating a rich and vibrant environment. The three bytes of the Stream logo represent the traditional Maori view of the three baskets of knowledge. The baskets (kete) encompass the experience of our senses (te kete aronui), the understanding of what lies behind those experiences (te kete tuauri) and the experience we have, particularly in ritual (te kete tuatea). The byte also represents the stepping-stones to encourage people to take bold new steps, follow the paths down the stream, and access the knowledge and expertise Massey has to offer” (Massey University, 2012b).
Stream is more than just Moodle and includes a range of ‘core and custom’ online tools including Adobe Connect, Adobe Presenter, Lightwork, Mahara, MediaSite, SBL-Interactive, Turnitin, and so on. The original business case for the Stream Project identified three strategic drivers:

- To respond to the challenge of the so-called Google Generation;
- To enhance the quality of teaching and thereby maintain Massey’s University pre-eminent status as a flexible learning and distance education provider;
- To introduce a new blended model of teaching that increases the level of student engagement and provides learning experiences relevant to the requirements of today’s Knowledge Society (Brown, Paewai & Suddaby, 2010).

Importantly, the Stream Project was aligned with and occurred in parallel to the development of a new University strategic plan known as The Road to 2020. This Strategy was a major university-wide undertaking initiated in 2009 by Massey’s new Vice-Chancellor and includes six Big Goals. The Big Goal for Teaching and Learning is a commitment to ensuring “an exceptional and distinctive learning experience at Massey for all students” (Massey University, 2012a, p. 5). A key sub goal and defining feature of the Massey learning experience is an explicit commitment to exploiting the potential of new digital media on a program-wide basis.

Since the introduction of Stream the University has continued to invest in the digitalisation of teaching and learning, as evidenced by the development of new policies and practices for the design and delivery of study resources, which attempt to embed new digital media in the fabric of the Massey experience. Digital learning is one of six defining elements (Applied, Research-led, Comprehensive, Digital, International and Distance and Life-long Learning) identified in the Massey model of teaching and learning. This model is described in the University’s Teaching and Learning Framework, launched in 2011 after the culmination of two years work, which aims to engender a strong culture of creativity, innovation and connectedness throughout students, staff and the curriculum.

Finally, Massey University also established in 2011 the Distance Education and Learning Futures Alliance (DELFA) which aims to supports new models and emerging approaches to tertiary education for today's digitally wired, globally connected and rapidly changing higher education landscape. DELFA brings together a unique mix of leading scholars and tertiary practitioners to create a powerful community of practice to support new innovations in teaching and learning. Its mission is to be a driving force and world leader in defining and transforming the nature of online, blended and distance education for today's modern digital-era university.
References


