

NSW/ACT Promoting Excellence Network

Final Report 2013

Lead institution: University of New South Wales

Collaborating institutions: Australian Catholic University, Australian National University, University of Canberra, Charles Sturt University, Macquarie University, University of New England, University of Newcastle, University of Notre Dame, University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, University of Western Sydney, University of Wollongong

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Network summary

The NSW/ACT PEN organised its activities for 2011-13 around the following objectives:

1. Further develop the existing network through wider institutional participation
2. Further develop the leadership capabilities of network members
3. Maintain a variety of fora in which network members can collaborate and learn
4. Enhance awareness of OLT resources and processes, and state-based engagement
5. Develop resources to support the recognition and reward of quality teaching
6. Establish a number of key SoTL/research projects

The primary focus of the project has been on **network development** (objectives 1, 3, 4). The addition of the University of Notre Dame in February 2012 marked the achievement of full coverage of NSW and ACT universities within the network, enhancing the scope and credibility of the PEN as a representative state body. Regular network meetings have helped to build a community characterised by rapport, respect, trust, and friendship. The network has also hosted several events which have functioned partly as professional development opportunities and partly as a means of disseminating OLT information and current thinking to NSW and ACT universities. This phase of the network has also seen an increase in collaboration with other state networks, notably in discussions about dissemination, and in opportunities for Q-PEN members to attend NSW/ACT events and vice versa.

The leadership role played by network members within their own institutions has been cultivated most directly by participation in the network **benchmarking project** (objectives 2, 5). Using self and peer assessment, network members benchmarked their institutional teaching award processes against those of partner institutions; the project outcomes are now fuelling the review and revision of existing protocols and the establishment of new strategies and practices relating to support of teaching awards in member universities. A collection of best practice exemplars for teaching award processes captures the findings of the benchmarking exercise for learning and teaching support staff beyond the network.

A number of **research projects** (objective 6) are ongoing. Network members have identified a need in the area of teaching award support for an analysis of the key features of successful award applications; the groundwork for this investigation has been laid in 2012-13 and the research itself will be carried out in 2014-15. The network also anticipates producing articles on benchmarking and on evaluation of networks based on network experiences thus far.

Most project deliverables can be found on a dedicated page of UNSW's Teaching Gateway (<<http://teaching.unsw.edu.au/nswact-promoting-excellence-network>>). These include various background documents to the benchmarking process (for example, a teaching awards literature review and templates for use in self and peer assessment of teaching award processes) and the best practice exemplars (currently available as a PDF, to be disseminated in more permanent form during the next phase of the network). Additional deliverables include a poster presented at the 2012 HERDSA Conference; a report to CADAD on the network's application of their benchmarking domain, to be presented to CADAD in November 2013; and an article on the benchmarking process for the December 2013 issue of the HERDSA News.

Contribution to learning and teaching

The most substantial contribution the NSW/ACT Promoting Excellence Network has made to learning and teaching during this funding period has been through the network project, 'Benchmarking institutional teaching award processes across NSW/ACT universities for quality enhancement through collaborative learning for self-improvement'.

This project systematically compared institutional teaching award processes across the NSW/ACT PEN institutions in order to furnish learning and teaching staff involved in the network, as well as the wider higher education sector, with best practice standards against which institutional processes can be measured and improved. Network members carried out an institutional self-assessment of teaching award processes currently in place at their universities using CADAD's benchmarking template for grants and awards, and then benchmarked their processes against partner institutions in smaller, region-based groups. Out of this process, each group developed a number of proposed best practice exemplars that might be implemented by other institutions within the network where appropriate, and which could contribute to a joint resource ('Teaching award support: Best practice exemplars from the NSW/ACT Promoting Excellence Network') that would capture the outcomes of the benchmarking exercise for institutions outside the network.

The benchmarking project has equipped member institutions to improve their practice in the area of teaching award support, and its findings have been made accessible to learning and teaching staff and institutions beyond the network through the best practice exemplars. In addition, the network has enriched the learning and teaching dialogue within NSW and the ACT through a series of workshops and seminars open to network members, other learning and teaching staff from their institutions, and faculty staff as appropriate. The network has hosted sessions with OLT speakers in order to provide potential award and grant applicants with helpful information or to better equip learning and teaching staff to

support applicants, and opened up institution-based events to other PEN members in order to maximise the benefit of visiting international speakers to the learning and teaching or the broader academic communities. These events have served as professional development opportunities for network representatives, enhanced communication between the OLT and member institutions and developed understanding within the sector of OLT processes, and provided a channel for expertise in a range of areas to be distributed more widely to NSW and ACT universities.

Factors contributing to productive networking

Inclusiveness and diversity

The broad coverage of the group, representing every NSW and ACT university, and its mix of professional and academic staff from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and career levels, help to optimise the usefulness of participation for all involved. This diversity affords members opportunities to mentor or be mentored, to gain a wider perspective on their own institutional responsibilities and practices, to benefit from the experience of others, and to receive support and encouragement from like-minded colleagues. The rapport and trust that have been cultivated among network members are partly a natural result of the friendships that have formed within the group, but also owes much of its strength to decisions the network has made, such as maximising the face-to-face component of network meetings (by using the videoconference option sparingly and committing network funds rather to travel expenses for regional members), and adopting guidelines for working together that permit openness by protecting the confidentiality of individual institutions.

Impetus of a shared project, with clear delegation of roles

The cohesiveness of the group derives also from the collective experience of undertaking an extended benchmarking project in which smaller, region-based groups of universities within the network met to carry out peer assessment of institutional teaching award processes, and then reported their findings to the larger group and proposed a number of best practice exemplars culled from the self- and peer-assessment processes. This focus on concrete activities and goals helped to maintain the momentum of the network, promoted trust and a willingness to share institutional practices and processes with other network members, and equipped network representatives to implement changes and bring about improvement in this area in their own institutions.

Development and implementation of a clear evaluation plan

The network's evaluation plan, which employs a discursive method in order to capture the less measurable aspects of the network's activities and outcomes alongside traditional sources of information, not only enabled network members to gauge the extent to which the network has achieved its objectives, but also offered network members a space in which to reflect on the state of the network, recognise its benefits and difficulties, and envisage new possibilities for its development. The collection of 'stories' at regular intervals from network members on what the network meant to them and to their institution has served both to track the progress of the network and to encourage network members to take more personal ownership of network activities.

Lessons that could be fruitfully applied to the networking experience of others, then, include holding regular meetings, face-to-face wherever possible; developing shared goals and activities that require the group to work together in a variety of forms; and establishing creative, discursive methods for capturing network member experiences and leveraging them to enhance members' personal and professional investment in the network.

See Figure 1, below, for a diagrammatical representation of the dynamics of a sustained and sustainable network, derived from a collective analysis of network members' individual 'stories'

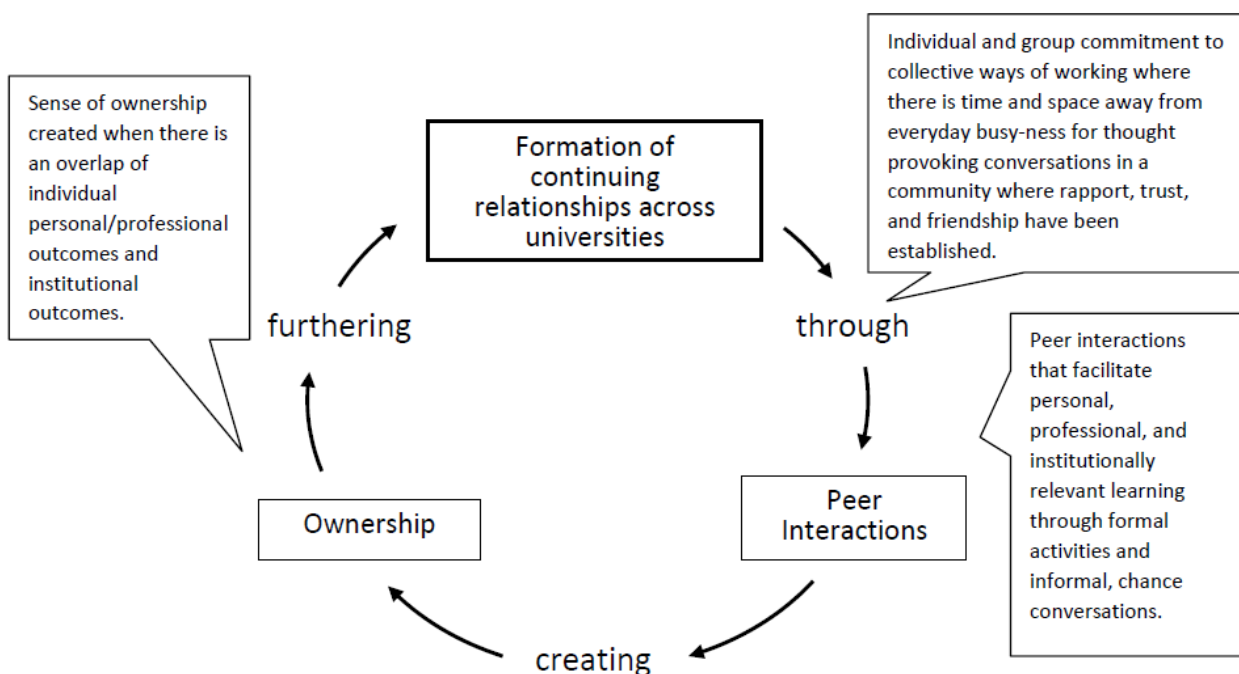


Fig 1. Elements creating a sustainable and sustained Network: Appendix to network's collective narrative, derived from network members' 'stories'. The diagram's iterative cycle shows how the formation of cross-institutional relationships occurs through peer interactions, creating ownership of the network, which in turn furthers the formation of continuing relationships, and so on.

Barriers to productive networking

Logistical challenges: distance and institutional change

Perhaps the most obvious barrier to the success of a network such as this one is that of distance. Given the effectiveness for network cohesion of holding regular face-to-face meetings, network members judged it worthwhile to devote a substantial amount of network funding to travel expenses to enable regional members to attend meetings in Sydney, and also to combine network meetings with other events – such as OLT workshops – that would make their time away from their institutions more beneficial, especially for those travelling some distance to attend. Frequent changes of staff and their responsibilities within participating institutions, particularly in the early part of the project, made it difficult to establish continuity and to build familiarity and trust within the network, but the need to overcome this instability also helped to bond network members together, and several of the newer institutional representatives spoke in their evaluative ‘stories’ of the welcome they received from the group and the rapidity with which they felt they were integrated into the network. NSW/ACT Promoting Excellence Network 6

Dissemination

The question of how to disseminate outcomes and resources, in particular from the network’s benchmarking project, became especially salient for the network following the decision to shut down the NSW/ACT PEN website in early 2013. The decision was carefully considered, the group having found that the site had not proved a natural channel for communication among network members (instead the Dropbox application came to serve this purpose), and rejecting the idea of maintaining a website for its own sake when existing online spaces might offer simpler, more established, and already popular means for project deliverables to be made available. The network, then, has elected to distribute its resources via individually appropriate channels: the CADAD report to be delivered to CADAD at their joint meeting with ACODE in November 2013; the best practice exemplars, literature review, and other relevant network documents to appear on a dedicated page within the UNSW Teaching Gateway; and key network documents to form part of the PENs page to be established by the OLT in the near future.

Maintaining momentum

As with any long-term project, the network faced the challenge of sustaining its activities consistently over the life of the project. One member ‘story’ described a period of ‘doldrums’ during which the network seemed somewhat aimless and group members bogged down with institutional responsibilities. It goes on

to report that this experience of being ‘becalmed’ was overcome when the ‘breeze’ of the benchmarking project ‘blew up’: the re-establishment of clear goals and a more structured timeline for the remainder of the project restored a sense of purpose and momentum to the network. In addition to careful planning, the appointment of a research/administrative assistant for key periods of the project helped to keep things moving and freed network members up from the logistics of managing the network in order to focus on project outcomes and deliverables.

What the network offers

As the NSW/ACT Promoting Excellence Network discursive evaluation processes have shown, the value of the network to its members lies, first and foremost, simply in its existence. Institutional representatives have described the benefits of their membership of the network in terms of personal, professional, and institutional gains. Along with the friendship, collegiality, opportunities for mentoring, encouragement, and reduced sense of isolation the network offers, members have benefitted from the pool of expertise represented by the group and the communication channels established as a result of network activities.

Emerging both from the analysis of network member ‘stories’ (collected at intervals throughout the project) and from network event feedback is a vision of the network as a forum for professional support and development, in which members gain a better grasp of their role within their organisation and the sector, and are equipped to do their jobs more effectively as a result of the advice, support, and shared practices available within the NSW/ACT Promoting Excellence Network 7 group. Network members value the professional relationships and connections they make through the network, using these contacts as a conduit for sharing or soliciting information – such as advertising workshops and seminars, seeking advice on a keynote speaker for an institutional event, or pooling resources and ideas in order to solve common problems or meet OLT requirements or deadlines. The existence of the network mitigates the sense of professional isolation frequently experienced by learning and teaching staff as a result of the physical distance between campuses and of institutional resistance to sharing practices and resources, and also provides the OLT with an established and efficient framework for disseminating information. ‘Great to know a supporting group of people who are in the same boat’, wrote one participant in an OLT workshop hosted by the network. Other attendees at a seminar on teaching award support affirmed this outcome: ‘The collegial conversation was really useful in affirming ideas and practices’; ‘the value of sharing experience of others is invaluable, much better than working in isolation’.

The usefulness of the network to members, then, can be seen as much in the ‘incidentals’ – the chance conversation that spawns a new idea or practice to take home to one’s institution, the state-wide contact

list and collective expertise at one's fingertips when a problem or opportunity arises – as in the formal activities undertaken by the network. One network representative articulated the function and serviceability of the network in terms of its mediating function between theory and practice:

... the real power of the network is its capacity to build a bridge between the valuable knowledge generated through 'grassroots' practice with the more generic standards, research and policy imperatives designed to promote and enable the measurement of student learning.

One of the most meaningful roles the network has come to perform for its members revolves around shared experiences of change and transition. A majority of network members have experienced the stress and uncertainty of institutional restructures or realignments, or shifts in executive management and objectives for learning and teaching, and within this context the network has served both as a source of support and understanding from those similarly affected and as a mechanism for preserving the knowledge and experience that can so easily be lost in the course of such changes. Network representatives have indicated that shared stories of struggle and survival have unified the group, and that the continuity and stability of the network has proved an invaluable counterweight to upheaval within their institutions and the sector as a whole.

Finally, the network brings together a range of academic and professional staff whose areas of expertise and institutional contexts overlap and complement each other in productive ways, as evidenced by the collaborative benchmarking project carried out in 2012-13. Although research and publication are not central to the identity or function of the network, the constitution and strengths of the group – the coverage of institutions within the network, the strong research background and publication record of some members, others' long-standing contacts within the sector to such groups as HERDSA, the OLT, and CADAD, and the first-hand knowledge of problems and challenges in the field afforded by members' experience at their various 'coalfaces' – positions them to investigate particular areas of learning and teaching more effectively than conventional research groups or collaborations.