

# **How Do We Actually Achieve Our Goals?: Strategies and Techniques to Realise our Ambitions**

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## **Introduction**

The School of Law at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Brisbane, teaches a Bachelor of Laws as a 'stand alone' undergraduate degree; as part of nine undergraduate double degree courses; and as a 'stand alone' graduate entry program.

In 2007-2008, the Law School undertook a review of the undergraduate law curriculum. A starting point for the review was to identify the intrinsic nature of our Bachelor of Laws. It was agreed that the key defining characteristic of the course is its 'real-world' applied nature which seeks to meet the needs of the profession, government, business and industry. The focus of the course on graduate capabilities and skills development, and its innovative teaching and learning approaches were all considered important characteristics of our degree.

As a result of the review, revisions are being made to the degree during 2009-2010 and are designed to build on existing curriculum and pedagogical strengths, with a greater focus on the student experience; and to both consolidate and make more explicit the degree's 'real-world' nature. This is to be achieved through clarification of the relevance of the course as a whole and of its individual component subjects to potential career destinations; and through augmenting opportunities for work-integrated learning.

In terms of our goals and objectives in educating law students, the following issues highlighted for Plenary Session I resonate with some of the discussions underpinning our Bachelor of Laws: producing technically competent and ethical lawyers; preparation for a broad range of careers in the public and private sectors in addition to professional practice; and internationalisation of the curriculum. Additional themes have been the importance of embedding indigenous perspectives and a scaffolded approach to teaching legal research.

As far as the Law School's objectives beyond that of educating students are concerned, the following aspects of Plenary Session II are particularly relevant to the QUT context: increasing research that advances legal knowledge (including in a multi-disciplinary context); 'outreach' or community engagement through faculty members who serve on professional committees, law reform bodies, other government or community bodies; and who present and publish their research in order to educate the legal profession as well as others.

## **How are we achieving our goals?**

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The broad goals referred to in Plenary Session I and II reflect the importance that QUT, as a university, places not only on teaching and learning but also on research and community engagement. Its overall vision is in:

- Teaching: to provide outstanding learning environments and programs that lead to excellent outcomes for graduates, enabling them to work in and guide a world characterised by increasing change;
- Research: to undertake high-impact research and development in selected areas, at the highest international standards, reinforcing its applied emphasis and securing significant commercial and practical outcomes; and
- Community Engagement: to strengthen and extend strategic partnerships with professional and broader communities to reflect both the university's academic ambitions and its civic responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

This necessarily places competing demands on the Law School – its people, systems and other resources. Following is a brief description of some strategies and techniques being adopted to realise the University's and Law School's ambitions – not only in educating students but also more broadly.

A key component to this realisation is that all Law School staff are actively involved in the curriculum review with a number specifically appointed as leaders of various aspects – in order to broaden engagement and to bring a range of experiences and expertise to bear. Structures and systems have also been put in place to support academics to achieve the multi-faceted goals of educating students and engaging in research and with the community.

### **Educational Goals and the Curriculum**

Educational goals are encapsulated not only in curriculum design but also in teaching delivery, including assessment. While a threshold issue in the design of the undergraduate law degree have been the academic requirements of the jurisdiction's admitting authorities, it has been recognised that a university law degree also provides a vehicle for a 'broad liberal education'.<sup>3</sup> Thus our new 'stand alone' degree structure provides for contextual law subjects, such as 'Law, Society and Justice'; as well as complementary non-law subjects, for example taught by our companion School of Justice. Discussions are also being held with Faculties that offer the 'other' degree in double degree courses to identify potential non-law subjects and recommended elective law subjects that will enrich a student's multi-disciplinary experience through studying issues that intersect the two disciplines being studied.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.qut.edu.au/about/university/vision.jsp>

<sup>3</sup> A liberal education is about 'allowing to unfold characteristics of reason and independence which lie naturally within the individual': Ron Barnett 1990. For some years, Australian law schools have accepted that their dual mission was to provide (or contribute to, in the case of combined degrees) a broad liberal education, as well as to provide a basic grounding for those entering the profession. (See D Pearce et al *Australian law schools: A discipline assessment for the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission* AGPS Canberra 1987.)

Themes underpinning curriculum design that affect both core and elective subjects in the new degree are the embedding of ethics and international and indigenous content and perspectives. This is being led by faculty members who have been appointed as project leaders to work over an extended period with their colleagues, identifying and often leading staff development and meeting with subject coordinators to discuss how the relevant perspective is being or may be incorporated across the degree. An organising construct for this aspect of the curriculum design is the mapping of how the graduate capabilities are taught, practised and assessed across the degree. An ongoing dimension from an earlier curriculum review is the teaching and assessing of skills across the degree.

The new structure permits students to undertake a greater number of electives – and greater guidance is being given to students in their choice by grouping electives together in career and research streams. The career streams reflect a range of graduate destinations, in legal practice as well as the public and private sectors. The research streams reflect areas of research strength and expertise, for example in human rights, broadly defined; property and environmental law; and commercial and consumer law.

A comprehensive, whole-of-degree approach is also being applied to teaching delivery and assessment – initially through a small group(s) of staff working on the issues, with educational designer advice and associated policy re-development and a review of resourcing infrastructure (including the academic workload allocation guidelines).

However educational goals are not only achieved through the curriculum and delivery design and what academics do, but also through co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Examples of the ‘co-curriculum’, loosely defined as university-led activities that support the curriculum goals, are the mooted program; library workshops and a peer mentor scheme.

Extra-curricular activities that enrich the students’ experience are provided by QUOTALS, the QUT law students association.<sup>4</sup> This association is actively engaged with the School in giving students a wide variety of opportunities for career mentoring and growth, in publishing career guides for students and in disseminating important information around the school. Its members run competitions in mooted, client interviewing and negotiation and sponsor well-attended social functions.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.quotals.com> The QUT Association of Law and Justice Students is a member of the Australian Law Students Association. Members of the Commonwealth Legal Education Association are also exploring the potential for a Commonwealth Law Students Association.

## **Broader Goals and the Law School**

A key aspect to achieving the Law School's objectives beyond that of educating students is the profile of the faculty members. Academics are normally appointed to teaching and research positions and so are expected not only to teach but also to engage in research. This encompasses publishing academic articles and scholarly texts; presenting at academic and professional conference; and undertaking externally funded research projects.

Community engagement is also expected of faculty members. This may be through service to the university community (e.g. leadership and committee roles) as well as to the broader community. The latter includes service on professional committees, law reform bodies, other government or community bodies (such as tribunals; community legal services).

In order for the School to achieve these goals, it is critical to appoint a sufficient number and variety of staff who can contribute to the broad range of activities in which the School is engaged. The subject teams comprise not only tenured and contract 'career academics' but also sessional teaching staff, many of whom have legal practice and public sector legal experience. Guest lecturers may also be brought in to assist with specialised or current issues, as well as external co-investigators to work on research projects. The guidelines for allocating staff workloads are being reviewed, in essence to consider the extent to which they support the School's objectives. Finally where student:staff ratios are higher than preferred, alternative approaches to improving, for example, staff availability for teaching innovations; research or community engagement, are being considered - such as careful planning of the range and frequency of subject offerings at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

In all three areas of teaching, research and community engagement, Deputy-Vice-Chancellors and Assistant Deans have been appointed and resourced to lead these portfolios. Within the Faculty for example, the Assistant Dean (Research) leads a Research Centre that provides structures that allow more collaboration and support for high quality research and encourage linking of research interest groups within an expanded Faculty research profile.

## **Conclusion**

This is but a brief survey of some of the QUT Law School's strategies and techniques to realising our ambitions and achieving our goals in educating our students and in broader contributions by faculty members to research and community engagement. While Law Schools and their leaders may be operating in a changing world, some things are unchanging – notably, the importance of our staff in achieving our aspirational goals as lawyers and educators.