UTSOnline Renovation Project

# Reflections Document

**Context Statement**

The Teaching Technologies, Innovation and Support Unit (TTISU) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), is tasked with providing academic support in three key areas; Programs and Curriculum, Work Integrated Learning, and Teaching and Learning Technologies.

As part of this work, TTISU have and continue to provide support on request - as well as run training sessions, working groups, and conferences - in order to support academic staff in the various aspects related to Learning Management Systems tools, resources, and subject site best practice and design. The aim of which is to ensure that not only are staff supported and empowered in the delivery of their subjects, but also supporting the methods by which students can receive a consistent experience from subject site to subject site.

Although TTISU was a relatively new unit within the university with only two years being in place at the time, it became quickly apparent to the team that running workshops and fielding requests were demonstrating a common pattern; the numbers of academic staff registering and attending such events were low, and that it was commonly attended by the same academic staff of which were typically those who were more engaged with university activities and more experienced with technology.

It was becoming clear that we weren’t necessarily reaching those who could benefit from the support the most.

In addition to this emerging pattern, UTS were keen to invest in projects which would support it’s Learning Futures initiative which, in a very general sense, looked to revitalize teaching and learning with innovative technologically supported approaches and methods. This combined set of circumstances allowed TTISU to start thinking about different ways that could be used to support academic staff that weren’t receiving support already.

**Project Definition**

With the above in mind, and in consultation with the Associate Dean Teaching & Learning, TTISU developed the UTSOnline Renovation Project. This project would aim to employ new strategies in providing support to academic staff, how best to engage those who aren’t typically engaged, and attempt to work on every subject site within the university’s LMS. The following methods were employed;

1. A proactive engagement approach with academic staff
   1. Rather than wait for an academic staff member to ask for help, reach out to academic staff one by one and ask what we can help with
2. A data driven priority model and ‘plan of attack’
   1. Using data analytics and algorithms, define who might need to be contacted first in order to get the maximum benefit of the project time and budget constraints
3. A research informed and sector benchmark set of standards for comparison
   1. In close collaboration with the schools and academic staff, and with analysis of research available, agree on what a minimum standard of subject site design, navigation and base resources would look like
4. Casual academic staff employed as Learning and Teaching Adjuncts to enact and provide the support
   1. Providing a ‘familiar face’ for academic staff, a common understanding of challenges, a good knowledge of subject site pain points and university policies and procedures. As well as developmental opportunities for the LTA staff by being a part of the project
5. An opportunity for broad upskill of academic staff
   1. By engaging with academics on their time and in their location, and by working with the academic in person or via distance, academic staff could gain new understanding of how to use their subject sites for the best outcomes of students
6. A flexible approach to subject site development
   1. An opt-in approach. Allowing academic staff to agree to small work to be done, or large work. As well as a flexible method in which the work is to be done – face to face and working with the academic, or fully divorced from the process and the LTA completes work offsite. Only agreed upon work would be done

**Project Objectives**

With the above approach, the UTSOnline Renovation Project defined the following objectives;

1. Define a set of standards for subject sites within FASS
2. Define a list of all subject sites within FASS, and prioritise those which need the most support
3. Employ casual academic staff as LTAs to carry out the work
4. Benchmark all subject sites against the standards defined in point 1
5. Project schedule and budget allowing, work on as many subject sites as possible as defined in point 2
6. Benchmark subject sites that are worked on before and after to ensure data exists for scrutiny and reporting purposes afterward
7. Raise the standard of subject sites across the faculty in these key areas;
   1. Design – Look and feel (faculty template where possible), and welcome pages
   2. Navigation – A consistent navigation experience for students, reducing confusion as they go from site to site
   3. Base resources and information – Provide base resources such as policies and procedures relevant to students, and provide base information such as staff contact information
8. Plan for and allow for further phases of the project, as / if more funds are made available to continue the work beyond the first phase
9. Where possible, encourage face to face support to help academic uplift in technological skills in using UTSOnline

**Project Outcomes**

*Project Objective 1 - Define a set of standards for subject sites within FASS*

In order to develop a set of standards and or expectations of what a subject site should look like and how it should function within the faculty, a document needed to be produced that could gain acceptance and approval from all schools. The document that was developed went through a number of iterations and titles, but concluded as the FASS Threshold Standards for Online Learning Environments V1 Final (attached appendix). This document went through a number of committees, meetings, and other communication mediums, and via a number stakeholders and representatives for each of the schools. These stakeholders include (but not limited to);

* School Administration Managers
* Teaching and Learning Coordinators
* Heads of Discipline
* Heads of School

With the eventual approval of the document, there was now a minimum expectation of subject site standards guidelines, but not a mandated set of standards.

*Project Objective 2 - Define a list of all subject sites within FASS, and prioritise those which need the most support*

Using a combination of centrally and locally produced reports, a collated list of all subject sites for FASS was produced. This list comprised 285 sites in total. In addition, a centrally produced report was requested of these 285 sites which would show ‘click data’ of each site, which essentially means how often a ‘user’ clicked on any part of the individual sites. This effectively created an ‘activity barometer’ or ‘heat map’. This data can be interpreted in a number of ways and indeed, a high click rate on a site could either mean there was what could be described as ‘good activity’ – that which has students highly engaged and using the content. Or conversely, ‘bad activity’ – there could be more clicks in a site because a student can’t find the information they are looking for. With this caveat accepted and clearly communicated and transparent, it was nonetheless understood to be a way to start the conversation of subject site usage, rather than a true reflection of what may or may not be occurring in the subject sites themselves. It also allowed the project to approach the relevant academic staff in a way that had no preconceptions of what was ‘wrong’ or ‘right’, rather that this is the way we have concluded we start.

To refine this approach a little further, an algorithm was applied to the data that would compare ‘clicks’ with number of students enrolled. This allowed the project to prioritise via subject sites with the least amount of ‘clicks’ and higher student enrollment and therefore, arguably targeting those subject sites that could benefit the most due to having the most impact on a greater number of students.

An assumption was made that if the project progressed in a way that reflected the assumptions on the data (low ‘clicks’ potentially equaling low engagement), then the time spent on each individual site would get quicker over time due to less work required further into the project. This assumption never eventuated as a reality however, but not for the reason of quality. Rather, that the majority of time spent in the project was receiving a response from relevant academic staff and agreeing on work to be completed. The work itself was quite quick regardless the original state of the subject site.

*Project Objective 3 - Employ casual academic staff as LTAs to carry out the project*

Initially two casual academic staff were employed for approx. 10 hours per week each, for 7 months for phase 1. With further budget being made available toward the end of phase 1, and realizing good outcomes from the project yet not having the time to benchmark all 285 sites, a further third casual academic was brought on board to focus specifically on finishing the benchmarking aspect of the project. For phase 2, only one casual academic staff member was retained and this is true for the third and final phase of the project also.

*Project Objective 4 - Benchmark all subject sites against the standards defined in point 1*

An important part of the project was to benchmark all 285 sites against the Threshold Standards document, in order to understand the current context of the faculties presence in UTSOnline, as well as to inform future phases of the project or other work that may result from the project. Toward the end of the initial timeline of the project, it became clear that not all sites were going to be benchmarked if the current approach (benchmark once gaining approval from academic staff, and then benchmark after the work is completed) was continued. Therefore a decision was made to hire another casual academic staff member who’s specific responsibility was benchmarking all remaining subject sites before any contact with academic staff, and before the closure of the initial project timeline. This proved valuable not only to complete this project objective, but also to the other LTA staff who used this to speed up the process of working on the sites themselves and communicating with academic staff.

*Project Objective 5 - Project schedule and budget allowing, work on as many subject sites as possible as defined in point 2*

With the project methodology employing an opt-in approach for academic staff, and wanting to bring staff along the journey rather than be directive. It became clear that the project timeline was not going to be met due to the highly collaborative process this entailed. For this reason - and whilst recognising the value and benefits the faculty were getting from the project outcomes - it was decided to scope additional phases of the project. This would mean that the project eventually spanned three phases until it was concluded, and all subject sites had either been worked on, or had come to an understanding of no work required / not wanted.

*Project Objective 6 - Benchmark subject sites that are worked on before and after to ensure data exists for scrutiny and reporting purposes afterward*

Over the course of the three phases of the project, all 285 sites (barring a few exceptions) were benchmarked before and after. This benchmarking, as well as the working sheet for LTAs and project manager, was done using Google Docs. This meant that it was very easy for all project members to work together on the data, as well as make the analysis of the data relatively easy to manipulate and report on. To date no reports on this data have yet been done but the data is available as the occasion demands.

*Project Objective 7 - Raise the standard of subject sites across the faculty in these key areas – Design, Navigation, Resources*

While analysis of the data after the completion of the project is yet to be fully investigated. It goes without saying that the standard of subject sites in FASS has been improved markedly. While some sites were not worked on at all due to academic staff requests, the rest were either significantly improved with welcome pages, templated designs, consistency of navigational structure, and base resources and information. Or, a selection of the above in a smaller way depending on what the academic staff member deemed appropriate. In particular, sites that scored quite poorly on initial benchmark assessment would have seen a dramatic improvement regardless how minor or major the work carried out.

*Project Objective 8 - Plan for and allow for further phases of the project, as / if more funds are made available to continue the work beyond the first phase*

Throughout the project, online collaboration and tracking tools were used comprehensively in order to ensure retained knowledge of what had been done, and what would be remaining at any given time. Specifically, Google Docs Apps were used such as Sheets, Docs, and Forms with cross referencing links in order to capture, store and share this information. This allowed the project an excellent understanding of schedules and activities, and afforded the effective planning of any future phases that could continue once any previous phase was closed. Using this data, it was very easy to demonstrate to budget approvers what would be required to continue if it was decided to do so.

*Project Objective 9 - Where possible, encourage face to face support to help academic uplift in technological skills in using UTSOnline*

While an opt-in and flexible support arrangement was the general underlying principle of the project, there was the desire to meet face to face with academic staff as much as would be allowable. The reason being that there would be additional value in guiding academic staff through not only the methods and thinking around why the standards have been developed and what benefits are realized by staff and students, but also sharing the knowledge of how to implement these themselves into their subject sites. Doing so would increase academic staff understanding of faculty priorities, project principles, and research informed sector trends in the LMS space. Additionally, it would also uplift the digital capability of academic staff in the use of LMS platforms, particularly UTSOnline. While no data was collected to measure the amount of face to face time spent during the project, nor the comparison between those met face to face or worked with remotely. However, conversations had with the LTA staff reveal that many academic staff met with LTAs to discuss the project principles and goals, as well as to agree upon the work to be carried out. Sitting with the academic and doing the work was not so common, with academic staff preferring to allow the LTA to do the work remotely whilst maintaining communication.

**Project Summary**

The project was initiated beginning of March 2017, and concluded end of August 2018. While there was never any agreement that all subject sites would be complete by end of 2017, it was initially thought that this would be achievable and so LTA staff were contracted as such. At the end of 2017 it became clear that not all subject sites were going to be completed, and there was obvious value in continuing the project into 2018. Therefore the project was extended twice more, concluding with phase 3 in August 2018. There was also a conclusion reached in phases 2 and 3 not to rush the project by hiring more LTA staff, and rather focus on a ‘tried and tested’ quality approach which would take longer but would see greater benefit. Hence a decision was made to continue with one LTA staff member for these later phases.

By the conclusion of the project, the following were some key takeaways;

* 285 subject sites benchmarked and / or worked on
* Using analytics to define the priority list was an approach that proved successful
* Allowing academic staff to opt-in, and to have individual engagement, had the side benefit of building a good level of trust between academic staff and the unit which has continued in the long term
* Academic staff were initially apprehensive of the project aims, but by the end the LTA staff were in demand and academic staff much more likely to agree to work without much consultation
* The project took longer than expected, as a result of the consultative and opt-in approach which was the largest consumer of time
* All subject coordinators of subject sites contacted (very few exceptions)
* All subject sites benchmarked (few exceptions)
* Professional development for LTA staff – one staff member employed in the university as a result. Another in demand for contract work
* A far greater consistency of navigation, resources, and visual style for FASS subject sites