
Student Success

ISSN: 2205-0795

Volume 7, Issue 2, pp. 1-9

July 2016



Invited Feature

The decline and demise of the Commonwealth's strategic investment in quality learning and teaching.

Sally Kift, President, Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows

Abstract

In May 2016, the Australian Government announced that the funding to be saved from closing the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), a branch of the federal Department of Education and Training, would not be redirected to a new National Institute for Learning and Teaching (Milbourne, 2015) as had been promised by (then) Education Minister Christopher Pyne in 2015. This decision has significant ramifications, not only for the quality and competitiveness of Australian higher education, but also for the inevitable long-term impact that withdrawal of strategic investment for systemic change and innovation will have on the nation's third largest export earner (Universities Australia, 2016). This Invited Feature republishes a statement from Professor Sally Kift, President of the Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows (ALTF) and one of the Editors of Student Success, and is representative of the national reaction to the closure of the Office. It highlights the significant role the OLT and its predecessor bodies (the Carrick Institute and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council [ALTC]) have played, both symbolically and financially, in enabling collaboration and developing and disseminating sector-wide innovation and good practice in tertiary learning and teaching.

Please cite this article as:

Kift, S. (2016). The decline and demise of the Commonwealth's strategic investment in quality learning and teaching. *Student Success*, 7(2), 1-9. doi: 10.5204/ssj.v7i2.336

Student Success: A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. ISSN: 2205-0795

Introduction

Internationally, tertiary education is facing a multitude of challenges. Transformative effects of widening participation, emerging technologies and disaggregated learning environments, are combining with rapid changes in both the world of future work and educational modalities to produce a perfect disruptive storm. In the face of such endemic change, what remains constant is that at the heart of a world class education system is excellence in learning and teaching and relentless national innovation to keep pace with the shifting demands of contemporary relevance. Ultimately, the success of the sector is measured by graduate success and preparedness for the economic and social challenges of 21st century careers.

As Universities Australia (2016) has made clear, "Staying at the forefront of modern teaching and learning practices requires proper financial support" (p. 15). Australian universities have benefited from almost two decades of national support and funding for innovation and excellence in learning and teaching via the national Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) and its predecessors, the Carrick Institute and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). Professor Carol Nicoll, previously CEO of the ALTC, reminded us earlier this year that:

Reforms by Brendan Nelson in 2003 included funding for a new entity that would be independent from the federal Education Department and administer enough funding to act as a real incentive for universities to focus on teaching and learning. No one would dispute that funding drives behaviour. Yet research has had the only financial incentives. The goal was for the money for this new entity to contribute to a shift in that balance and encourage universities to see the importance of their primary mission to students. (Nicoll, 2016, p. 32)

Support for sector-wide innovation in learning and teaching is crucial to sustaining and enhancing higher education's capacity to

transform lives and enable national economic growth, productivity, social wellbeing and social mobility. Even more importantly, such innovation empowers Australian higher education to respond to the needs of diverse generations of new students who enter university with differing levels of preparedness and expectations; it enables the sector "to improve student retention and attainment, and to impart the knowledge and skills to enhance employability in a competitive, global context" (Murray, 2015, para. 5)

Context

In the 2016-2017 Federal Budget, the Australian Government broke its promise to fund a new National Institute for Learning and Teaching to replace the OLT, which it had announced a year earlier would close in June 2016. The OLT was "a small but vital statement of our national priorities, of the importance we placed on innovation and excellence in university education. Its value far exceeded its price" (Gardner, 2016, para. 24). That critical enabler of sector-wide collaboration and change for systemic innovation in learning and teaching is now lost.

For historic purposes it should be recorded that the primary responsibilities of the OLT included the following which are summarised below but have since been removed from the current OLT website:

- The provision of grants to academics and professional staff to explore, develop and implement innovations in learning and teaching and to develop leadership capabilities.
- To commission work on issues of strategic significance to the higher education sector to inform policy development and practice in relation to learning and teaching.
- To manage a suite of awards to celebrate, recognise and value teaching excellence and programs that enhance student learning.

- To fund fellowships and secondments for leading educators to address significant national educational issues.
- To disseminate resources on innovations in learning and teaching (inclusive of encouraging collaboration, networking and professional development and embedding good practice in learning and teaching in Australian higher education)

(OLT, 2016 <http://www.olt.gov.au/about-olt> para. 2)

News of OLT's closure, with no successor in sight, initiated a widespread negative reaction from across the Australian higher education sector, generating an online petition and campaign, social media posts (#OLTphoenix and #OLTconf2016 on Twitter), media articles and letters of support. One such letter was sent to the Australian Education Minister Simon Birmingham, on behalf of the one hundred plus Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows (ALTF) asking him to reconsider. The ALTF subsequently collected much of this advocacy together on its website and prefaced it with the statement by Sally Kift that is now reproduced with permission (pp. 4-5). A selection of quotes (pp. 5-7) following the statement are representative of the education sector's reaction to the closure.



Figure 1: Twitter reacts to OLT closure

The decline and demise of the Commonwealth's strategic investment in quality Learning and Teaching.

When the Gillard Labor Government announced, in response to the 2012 Queensland floods, that the *Australian Learning and Teaching Council* (ALTC) was to be abolished to save \$88m over the forward estimates, many in the [sector rallied against](#) the withdrawal of, what was even then, a small investment in necessary R&D for Australian higher education to innovate (0.1 per cent of gross revenues).

Fortunately in 2012, Independent Tasmanian MP Andrew Wilkie was persuaded by colleagues at UTAS to intervene. A deal that he brokered saw \$54m saved out of the ALTC's execution and the *Office for Learning and Teaching* (OLT) was born.

Now the Abbott/ Turnbull government has decreed that the OLT shall close its doors from 30 June 2016 and that even the meagre \$28m that was promised to establish a new National Institute, as recommended by its own commissioned expert report ([the Milbourne Report](#)), is not worth investing.

\$88m to \$54m to \$28m to \$0. That is what strategic investment in educational innovation for a world class education system, that is incidentally Australia's largest service export, is worth to our federal government.

At a time when the government is investing \$1.1billion in its *National Innovation and Science Agenda* (NISA), as [Gavin Moodie](#) has observed, this move "reinforces the view that while teaching and learning is universities' most important role, in national policy, it is very much a second priority to research."

The sector has again rallied in 2016. But this time, it is not just the usual suspects.

Embarrassingly for the government, its core NISA constituency – the [Deans of Science](#), the [Deans of IT](#), the [Deans of Engineering](#), two [Nobel Laureates](#) and the Chief Scientist who spoke at the recent OLT Conference in April 2016 – has also called on the government to continue its critical, system-wide investment in the quality of student learning and higher education innovation. They make a simple point: the massive cultural change that is implied by NISA needs to be matched by assured and continual change and innovation in L&T.

Unlike research grant funding, where the [top eight universities receive around 70%](#) of competitive funding, Professor Margaret Gardner points to the extraordinarily broad range of institutions that have [received L&T innovation and excellence funding \(2006-2014\)](#) and [OLT grants and fellowships funding \(2012-2015\)](#). Unlike research grant funding, every single ALTC/OLT grant and fellowship is evaluated for efficacy and is publically available for creative commons re-use.

This is funding that goes to the heart of the wicked problems that vex our sector's international pursuit of educational quality and maintenance of national standards: For example

- Students' development of English language proficiency;
- Academic integrity;
- Use of big data and analytics to improve learning;

- Student learning, success and retention of and for diverse cohorts;
- Improving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander HE outcomes;
- Enhancing graduate employability and the quality of work integrated learning.

[#OLTphoenix](#) and the diverse contributions collected below [listed below this statement at <http://www.altf.org/index.php/advocacy>] condemn the government's "complete abdication of federal involvement in providing the 'carrot' for improving learning and teaching in universities...[which is] set in sharp relief to the rhetoric of successive Governments that rant about the importance and centrality of graduate outcomes and quality" ([Professor Carol Nicoll](#)). And in sharp relief to research incentivisation.

Take the foot off the pedal in this globally competitive sector and Australia will fall behind all too quickly. Our bygone reputation for educational excellence will count for little in the face of aggressive investment internationally and constant sector and technological disruption.

This is no passing fancy. A national innovation and ideas strategy is unsustainable without parallel investment in innovative education. We will continue to call on successive governments to invest in Australia's students, its future graduate workforce and the associated economic productivity uplift.

Let's call it an independent *National Academy for Graduate Success*. Who wouldn't want one of those?

Sally Kift

President, Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows

22 May 2016

Thousands of NTEU members have won OLT grants and awards and contributed to the output of the OLT in improving the quality of higher education.

In an environment of extreme levels of casualised teaching and crowded workloads of other academics and professional staff due to chronic underfunding, the opportunities provided by OLT to focus and fund innovation in higher education pedagogy and programs is critical to the ongoing success of our higher education system and the outcomes for our students

Jeannie Rea, National Tertiary Education Unit President (2016, para. 1)

The Australian Council of Deans of ICT is very concerned about the proposal to terminate the OLT, with no alternative in train to continue its programs. The OLT and its predecessor, ALTC, have been crucial in generating initiative and support for higher education across the STEM disciplines, including the ICT disciplines, and across the whole sector. The ALTC and OLT have had impact far greater than what might have been anticipated, considering their size and level of funding. The ALTC initiatives encouraged the formation of councils of deans in many areas and, consequently, led to the creation of forums for teaching and learning that have improved the quality of education in every university.

Letter of support, Professor Iwona Miliszewska, Australian Council of Deans of Information and Communications Technology (ACDICT) (Miliszewska, 2016)

Universities Australia's Chief Executive Belinda Robinson said the decision to abolish the OLT would dismay many in the sector...

"one of the hallmarks of the program was its support of collaboration across the sector to raise the profile of teaching and learning and to develop innovative approaches to better engage students. It is critical to continue to have a national focus on the importance of teaching and learning and finding the most innovative ways to refine and improve our high quality education system..."

Media statement, Universities Australia (2016, para. 2)

Without such a body, there will be no vitally important nationally competitive measures of teaching innovation and excellence, that since the early-mid 2000's have acted to legitimate as well as recognise L&T and Higher Ed research and scholarship as is the accepted practice for discipline-based research and innovation ... the lack of any OLT-like body will have serious detrimental impacts on learning and teaching quality; the careers of our best HE teachers and researchers will be stymied and our capacity for large scale sector-wide innovation, collaboration and dissemination will be entirely eroded.

Professor Karen Nelson, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) University of the Sunshine Coast (2016, para. 1)

Australian higher education is known internationally for its quality learning and teaching. One of the reasons for this is that the OLT and its predecessors have created a culture of collaboration and engagement. The funding was widely distributed and it encouraged collaboration across multiple institutions. This made sure that the benefits of the projects were felt across many institutions.

Dr Tim Pitman and Professor Dawn Bennett, The Conversation (2016, para. 9)

Government support and recognition for quality university teaching, currently through the Office of Learning and Teaching and potentially through a new entity in the future, is vital to promote student success at regional universities.

Dr Caroline Perkins Executive Director, Regional Universities Network (2016, para. 5)

Acknowledgements

Professor Sally Kift kindly agreed to republish her statement as an Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow in *Student Success* on request from members of the Editorial team and we are pleased to present it here as an *Invited Feature* in the 2016 STARS Conference issue (Volume 7, Issue 2). The Australian Learning and Teaching Fellows' network (ALTF) was established in 2011 with support from the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The ALTF represents 108 scholars from 29 Australian institutions and diverse discipline communities. Each of the Fellows is a leading educator who has undertaken strategic, high-profile activities in areas of importance to the higher education sector, participating in a national [Fellowships Program](#) that aims to advance learning and teaching (<http://www.altf.org/>).

The webpage containing Professor Kift's statement and the multitude of media articles, statements and letters of support generated in relation to the demise of the OLT can be found at <http://www.altf.org/index.php/advocacy>

References

- Dawson, S. [shaned07]. (2016, May 4). Appalling decision http://olt.gov.au/olt_future "From July 2016 there will be no new grants or fellowships" Poor investment in Aus HE #OLTphoenix [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/shaned07/status/727728743003860992>
- Gardner, M. (2016, May 16). Innovation in learning and teaching is too important to cut. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/innovation-in-learning-and-teaching-is-too-important-to-cut-58629>
- Ilic, D. [DraganIlic99]. (2016, May 16). Cuts to OLT funding ironic given the government's pitch on the innovation & ideas boom <https://theconversation.com/innovation-in-learning-and-teaching-is-too-important-to-cut-58629> ... #oltphoenix Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/DraganIlic99/status/732199217238663170>
- Kift, S. [KiftSally]. (2016, May 3). Confirmed: No #OLTphoenix. No grants & fellowships post 30/06/16. \$\$\$ redirected to QILT & TEQSA. Teaching Awards still to be funded. Shame [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/KiftSally/status/727432912358924293>
- Kift, S. [KiftSally]. (2016, May 3). #Budget cuts \$152 million from #HEPPP. No #OLTPhoenix. Disadvantaged students & commitment to teaching quality lose again @altfellows [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/KiftSally/status/727450078365913089>
- Lodge, J. [jasonmlodge]. (2016 May 8). Milbourne report on #OLT - Deloitte: L&T in #HigherEd contributes \$140b to Aus GDP. Not worth a few \$mil investment in #OLTPhoenix Illogical [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/jasonmlodge/status/729539112328257536>
- Milbourne, R. (2015). *A New National Institute for Learning and Teaching Report*. Retrieved from Australian Government Department of Education and Training website <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/new-national-institute-learning-and-teaching-report>
- Miliszewska, I. (2016). An open letter to Higher Education Reform and Support, Department of Education and Training. Retrieved from <http://www.altf.org/images/pdfs/ACDICTLetterInSupport.pdf>
- Nelson, K. (2016, April 22). We need an independent publicly-funded national higher education learning and teaching body [LinkedIn page]. Retrieved July 15, 2016 from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/we-need-independent-publicly-funded-national-higher-education-nelson>
- Murray, D. (2015, June 3). Why closing the Office of Learning and Teaching is wrong. *The Australian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/opinion/why-closing-the-office-of-learning-and-teaching-is-wrong/news-story/ef0f4f020cbd715a3f7a0197dc8aafd9>
- Nicoll, C. (2016, April 27). Canberra hasn't learned its lesson. *The Australian*. Retrieved from [http://www.altf.org/images/pdfs/The%20Australian-27-04-2016 Main Australian p32 carolnicoll.pdf](http://www.altf.org/images/pdfs/The%20Australian-27-04-2016%20Main%20Australian%20p32%20carolnicoll.pdf)
- Office for Learning and Teaching. (2016). *About. Office for Learning and Teaching*. Retrieved June 26 from <http://www.olt.gov.au/about-olt>
- O'Sullivan, S. [sandyosullivan]. (2016, May 18). @KiftSally @altfellows A ridiculous blow! I'm worried about what happens to the Indigenous-focused higher education material #oltphoenix [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/sandyosullivan/status/733151409298759680>

- Perkins, C. (2016). *Government support needed for regional and low SES university students* [Press Release]. Retrieved from http://www.run.edu.au/cb_pages/news/government_funding.php#VxGvp81aVcM.twitter
- Pitman, T., & Bennett, D. (2016, May 23). Explainer: what is the Office for Learning and Teaching – and why does it matter? *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/explainer-what-is-the-office-for-learning-and-teaching-and-why-does-it-matter-59079>
- Rea, J. (2016). *NTEU statement in support of saving the Office for Learning and Teaching*. Retrieved from <http://www.nteu.org.au/article/NTEU-statement-in-support-of-saving-the-Office-for-Learning-and-Teaching-18532>
- Readman, K. [kylireadman]. (2016, May 16). Innovation in learning and teaching is too important to cut <https://theconversation.com/innovation-in-learning-and-teaching-is-too-important-to-cut-58629> ... via @ConversationEDU #oltphoenix [Tweet]. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/kylireadman/status/732071792269922304>
- Universities Australia. (2015). *Keep it Clever Policy Statement 2016*. Retrieved from <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/news/policy-papers/Keep-it-Clever--Policy-Statement-2016#.V5ApDri7hBc>
- Universities Australia. (2016). *Abolition of Office for Learning and Teaching a loss* [Press Release]. Retrieved from https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/Media-and-Events/media-releases/Abolition-of-Office-for-Learning-and-Teaching-a-loss#.V5Ab_7i7hBf