

# **Report of the External Review Committee on the Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology at the University of British Columbia**

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## **Introduction**

We are pleased to have had the opportunity to participate in the review of the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) at the University of British Columbia. We were impressed with the quality of the documentation, the number of face-to-face participants, and the commitment of university administration and the CTLT staff. We enjoyed our time on campus and the opportunity it provided for a deeper understanding of the program.

The report is based upon review of the documents and data provided by UBC, as well as interviews conducted with a wide range of individuals and groups on the UBC Vancouver and Okanagan campuses, November 28-29, 2016. (A detailed agenda and list of participants is available from CTLT.) The external review committee was charged by Associate Provost, Academic Innovation, Hugh Brock. The report is organized around the questions provided by the Office of the Provost.

We feel that CTLT provides a significant service to UBC in supporting quality teaching and learning. Over the past few years the Centre has made positive changes in its service delivery such as through its “embedded strategy,” e.g., moving staff into the faculties. It is known for being highly responsive and flexible. Both the individual support provided by CTLT as well as the networking and professional development opportunities are highly valued by most faculties. CTLT plays a significant role in supporting the university’s goal of outstanding teaching through its framing of educational leadership and the innovations fostered through the TLEF funds.

We believe the current program is very strong--and we have great optimism that CTLT can do more. Specifically, the new president’s agenda presents additional opportunities for leadership from CTLT, particularly if it can foster culture change as well as deploy its skills and tools to catalyze a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on student engagement. If CTLT is allowed to expand its role, we believe it can add even more value to UBC.

## Terms of Reference

The next seven questions comprised the terms of reference for the CTLT external review. We have added two additional items to address issues we felt merited discussion.

1. **Review the mission and role of the CTLT in supporting UBC’s teaching and learning mandate.** Is the current mandate being fulfilled and is this appropriate for current institutional priorities?
  - We believe that CTLT supports UBC’s teaching and learning mandate. Beyond the diverse array of services it provides (e.g., workshops, consultations, application development), its strong “customer” orientation is exemplary. It has pioneered “embedding” staff in faculties to ensure resources are available at the point of need, and allow CTLT staff the flexibility to adapt their focus based on faculty and departmental priorities. This structure respects UBC’s spirit of faculty autonomy and avoids the temptation of a “one-size fits all” approach that might be easier for staff to manage yet ultimately less valuable for a diverse research institution. In the words of one faculty member, “They will teach you to fish or give you a fish.”
  - Those we interviewed spoke often of the responsiveness of the CTLT staff. It is unusual to hear so many compliments. Most service units are better known for saying “no” than for providing support. In addition, CTLT does more than respond—they tailor the response for the faculty member’s needs, readiness and risk profile.
  - We believe that UBC’s establishment of the role of Professor of Teaching is very positive. It is notable that an outstanding research institution has taken multiple steps to encourage outstanding teaching, e.g., the Wieman Initiative, the Professor of Teaching, the TLEF grants, etc. Many interviewees spoke about how CTLT supports these initiatives. The framework for teaching and educational leadership demonstrates the kind of thought leadership that CTLT provides.
  - It appears that TLEF is a major driver of interaction with CTLT. TLEF is clearly catalyzing many conversations that lead to deeper engagement in teaching and learning and the adoption of technology. We note some suggestions for TLEF in section 8.
  - The ultimate objective of outstanding teaching, learning and technology is to improve student learning and the student experience. CTLT does not have direct student involvement, based on its current mandate. The lack of direct student contact (other than student workers) may limit their effectiveness. As the university, led by the new president, moves towards a new focus on the student experience, we suggest this part of the mission be reconsidered. Due to CTLT’s involvement with educational leadership and faculty engagement, it has the potential to more actively promote a culture of student engagement throughout the institution.
  - For CTLT to fully support the institution, they must be involved in institution-wide initiatives, such as strategic planning. Their expertise in adult learning may benefit institutional units beyond the faculty (e.g., the academic leadership and development program), as well.
  - We believe that CTLT should update its current vision, mission and values to become more outcome-oriented. Metrics aligned with an updated vision and mission could go beyond numbers (e.g., numbers of faculty visiting the LT-Hub) to measure the learning impact of faculty who have implemented more active pedagogies and supporting technologies. While the focus of the Centre is

on faculty and teaching, learning and technology, we believe a reconceptualization around outcomes (e.g., student outcomes) rather than inputs would result in a refinement of the services as well as an improvement in the overall value of CTLT. Our sense is that CTLT is constrained by a somewhat narrow focus, which may be a historic artifact. They have capabilities that could be further leveraged to the institution's advantage, building on the goodwill they have created in recent years.

- We believe there is significant upside potential if CTLT can update its mission, structure and services to one that encourages student engagement. Their success in supporting teaching, learning and technology excellence positions them well to take the next step to focus on student engagement, learning outcomes, and educational leadership.

**2. Review the structure, organization, leadership and operations of the CTLT.** Does the current structure and operation meet the needs of those who access our services, and if not, where can improvements be made?

The committee was impressed by the strong collaborative approach of CTLT personnel. This appears to be successful within CTLT, despite the large size of the unit. For example, CTLT personnel engage in internal, cross-team collaborations, and several members have dual reporting structures within CTLT. These activities appear to promote information flow and positive interactions.

Nevertheless, internal communication in a unit of CTLT's size is an inherent challenge. The structure and organization of the teams within CTLT does not seem to impede communication, but additional focus on how to keep relevant team members informed of Centre activities is still warranted.

A key question in terms of CTLT's structure and operations involves how to balance a capacity-building approach (where CTLT staff educate and support faculty regarding new teaching or technology strategies) vs. a concierge approach (where CTLT staff perform various design or production tasks for faculty members). The review committee found that CTLT is addressing this challenge by recognizing that either approach can be most appropriate, *depending on the specific case or particular faculty member*. In particular, it seems that faculty members appreciate CTLT's flexibility in adapting to their needs rather than offering a one-size-fits-all approach.

**3. Review and evaluate the strength and balance of services, support and programs offered by the CTLT.** What services and programs are valued and what additionally need to be created, modified or strengthened? What, if anything, should we stop doing?

The committee was impressed by the overall high degree of satisfaction with services offered by the CTLT: what they do, they do well. However, it is difficult to assess if the focus on activities is where it should be as there are limited measures of the impact of activities. The CTLT seems limited in its potential impact on the student experience by the focus on the instructor as client rather than a

consideration of the impact of actions on the student experience. For example, in the technology sphere, the focus is on what tool the instructor wants to use rather than what the impact of multiple tools is on the student experience.

The technical support provided is clearly competent and timely; however, the pedagogical support is less clear. The technology/pedagogy balance appears to be skewed to the technology side; comments such as, “It’s tough to find space for discussions around pedagogy when technology is not involved,” indicate that it is important to insure that the technology tail doesn’t wag the pedagogy dog. There are some services, notably hosting of institutional tools such as WordPress, that do not seem to belong in a teaching support unit. While it is easy to understand historically how the organization evolved to its current state, it seems an appropriate time to get mainstream IT infrastructure activities back to IT. Following a guideline such as “CTLT creates and IT scales and implements” would help clarify roles and responsibilities.

CTLT is focused on teaching undergraduate students; however, as a research university with large numbers of graduate students, UBC should remember that a critical aspect of graduate education is the supervision of graduate students. CTLT has expertise that might allow it to support the improvement of graduate education, both in the classroom but also in small group and individual settings.

CTLT has great influence in its role as provider of funding through TLEF. Since TLEF is an institutional initiative, the criteria for selection of TLEF recipients must reflect institutional priorities. Even so, we believe CTLT should have strong input as an advocate for pedagogical principles that support a global vision of teaching and learning at UBC. There is a lack of transparency around the adjudication criteria that means the significant funds allocated to and disbursed through CTLT over the years do not support a coherent vision of teaching and learning.

As often happens in a highly decentralized institution, there can be a lack of clarity in the roles of local units, where they exist, and the centrally-supported services. The relationship between the centralized support provided by CTLT, including the LT Hub and embedded staff, and local support units which exist in some, but not all, Faculties, is not clear, and leads to inconsistent services and experiences for individual instructors both within and between Faculties. If those roles were clarified—when to call local unit versus when to call central—then there could be more efficient use of resources as well as more even experiences for faculty and students. For example, the relationship between the LT Hub and local units is not clear. The LT Rovers program results in uneven experiences--CTLT appears to be a conduit for funding rather than a champion of a shared vision of teaching and learning at UBC. Another example of uneven experiences is the TA training. As the TA training program is cost-recovery, it leads to very uneven student experience depending on the Faculty.

We have noted the positive focus on the new Professor of Teaching stream. We must also observe that as the Professors of Teaching will always be a limited percentage of the overall professoriate, it is very important that research faculty, who will continue to do significant teaching, receive support tailored to their needs.

The relationship with UBC-O is very positive, and it is important to be attentive to this relationship going forward to insure that both campuses experience benefits and collaborate appropriately.

Another potential area of collaboration which would need to be explored is the role that CTLT may play in providing support to other units on campus doing adult learning such as the academic leadership development program, equity and inclusion programs, etc.

Overall, the balance seems focused on individual instructors and their use of technology in teaching undergraduate students; there would be a real benefit to expanding the focus to include broader pedagogical conversations, graduate students, and an increased role in strategic planning to create a more consistently supportive environment for teaching and learning.

**4. Review the ways in which the CTLT partners with Faculties, Departments and other service units across UBC.** Are partnerships valued, appropriate and effective in supporting teaching and learning across diverse contexts at UBC?

CTLT's collaborative and integrative approach is particularly notable in outreach to other UBC units, most notably IT and the Faculties. The review committee appreciated the novel approach taken over the past few years to "embed" CTLT personnel in the Faculties (e.g., Faculty Liaisons) and to create the LT-Hub as a virtual and physical space for CTLT and IT personnel to jointly support educational technology needs. It is particularly noteworthy that these different "embedding" strategies are not "one size fits all." For example, the review committee was glad to hear that Faculty Liaisons with different departments served rather different functions – *according to the needs of that unit*.

A positive effect of this embedding approach and CTLT's larger outreach activities is that CTLT is fostering a network for UBC community members interested in teaching and learning. Connecting with colleagues on education-related topics is often difficult, especially in smaller departments and faculties, so CTLT is filling a need in this regard.

In addition, CTLT activities and collaborations with UBC-Okanagan appear to be very successful. In fact, their relationship might provide a positive example other groups could emulate.

**5. Assess the standing and impact of the work of the CTLT, provincially, nationally and internationally.** How is our work viewed and what has been its impact outside of UBC?

As the self-study indicates, staff of the CTLT are very active in sharing their work nationally and internationally. This has a dual role as it provides significant professional development opportunities for staff which are critical in helping individuals engage in ongoing growth. It also brings new ideas into CTLT.

The SoTL projects encourage instructors to share their findings in scholarly ways. However, there is always a tension for service units such as the CTLT in reconciling the needs of their stakeholders with the important resources required to analyze and disseminate reports and experiences. Given the lack of clear metrics for the centre, it is difficult to assess if the programs, strategies, and approaches would be useful as guide for other centres at research-intensive universities.

**6. Advise on the optimal approach to support online learning.** In an expanding range of contexts spanning undergraduate credit courses, continuing and professional education and open online offerings, what is the most effective way to support online learning?

The review committee believes that the CTLT has been for the most part highly successful in its partnering with academic units and in its approach to “meet faculty where they are” in support of faculty online course development and teaching, especially at the undergraduate level.

In the meantime, the campus leadership recognizes that online learning is becoming increasingly important at all levels of the educational experience and in a wider range of contexts, including undergraduate and graduate level, professional and continuing education, and open access courses. If UBC is to retain its current high standards in terms of access and academic excellence the review committee recommends the development of an overarching campus strategy for online learning, including a revenue generation strategy, that enables and supports online learning innovation.

The Provost and Vice Provost’s interest in revenue-generation is understandable given the current trends and funding challenges for public higher education today. Given the existing remit for CTLT, and the focus and skillset of the staff, the review committee does not believe that revenue generation is necessarily a good fit within CTLT’s current model. However, CTLT would play a critically important role providing guidance to faculty in teaching, learning, and use of educational technology. To highlight and support revenue generating projects, the review committee recommends the creation of a separate team that is business-minded and entrepreneurial that would work in coordination with academic and administrative departments across the campus. There are several potential models for such a team depending on funding streams, existing skillsets, department culture, etc. Possible models include: 1) creating a separate team within CTLT, 2) creating a separate team within an existing revenue-generating unit such as Continuing Studies 3) creating a new unit within the Provost’s office, and 4) encouraging academic departments to create their own teams (not recommended as this approach does not lead to economies of scale).

As a first step, one suggestion is to create a high-level, campus-wide Steering or Executive Committee that is charged with overseeing UBC’s efforts in online learning and accelerating implementation in this area. The responsibilities of the group will be to provide overall direction to campus, make recommendations concerning strategic priorities and allocate additional resources to help realize these priorities. If revenue generation is a strategic priority, the Steering Committee would charge the new

“Team/Unit” to develop a business/financial model for online learning content that reflects the goals, priorities, and guiding principles as defined by campus leadership/the Steering Committee. Examples of guiding principles based on what the review committee heard could include:

- a commitment to improving the student experience
- a commitment to advancing UBC’s global academic reputation
- a focus on improving pedagogy and the quality of teaching
- a focus on the opportunity to generate revenue and other types of return on investment (with the understanding that revenue-generating models and priorities related to revenue may be quite different from one department to another and each model may require different types and levels of support)
- a commitment to learning through experimentation

The “Team/Unit” would also be charged with interacting with the schools/unit to develop detailed implementation plans for specific projects. Charged with a revenue-generating focus, the “Team/Unit” could be asked to develop a detailed strategic framework for the campus, oversee the development of shared resources, disseminate best practices, and create an administrative infrastructure that provides business expertise.

The UBC approach to online learning would adhere to characteristics that define the institution and has served it well. For example, the UBC approach might be characterized by:

- A “federated and jointly-enabled” model that places design and implementation responsibility with Schools and Colleges. A decentralized approach would be in keeping with the UBC culture.
- A focus on a range of contexts for online learning including undergraduate credit courses, continuing and professional education, and open online offerings.
- A commitment to maintain high standards for student admission into degree programs, quality of instruction, academic content, and student outcomes.
- A commitment to campus-level support and guidance for faculty and graduate students for developing online courses.
- Integration. UBC’s emphasis on flexible learning has helped to integrate online education into the core fabric of UBC over time. Perhaps now is the time to systematically align the administrative and support functions to meet the changing needs of online and traditional programs, including student support.
- Shared learning and shared tools/technology solutions/resources. It may or may not be possible at UBC to have a single, common platform for all campus online efforts. However, there will be many opportunities to share resources and tools and to respond to common “pain points” that Schools and Colleges will inevitably encounter when developing online programs.

In summary, the review committee makes the following recommendations to support online learning at UBC and the Provost’s goal of revenue generation:

1. Form a Steering or Executive Committee to guide and support the overarching campus strategy,

2. Form and empower a separate and distinct team or unit -- and strong leader -- to develop and execute the business plan for UBC's online learning products
3. That the new team/unit work in coordination, cooperation and close collaboration with colleagues within their own unit and in units across campus (CTLT, IT, Library, academic departments including Continuing Studies, Admissions, Advising, etc.), to leverage their expertise and
4. Do the above in alignment with UBC's pre-defined guiding principles/values and approach.

The review committee recognizes that there may be concerns expressed by various campus stakeholders around such an approach. A Steering Committee composed of academic and non-academic representatives from across the campus may help to alleviate some concerns. Second, there may be internal competition for housing the potentially high-profile unit. One possibility is to ask interested parties to submit proposals laying out their vision and their business models for the Steering Committee to consider. The Steering Committee could then make a recommendation to the Provost's Office and the Provost's Office would make a decision.

**7. Advise on opportunities for future development and enhancement.** What should we prioritize? What are our strengths? Are we sufficiently innovative? Where are there opportunities for enhancement?

The review committee found CTLT very strong in its service orientation to faculties and in its collaboration with other service units. The committee also appreciated the Center's evidence-based approach to their practice and their focus on academic support. Within UBC's highly decentralized environment, the CTLT is doing excellent work in supporting the initiatives of individual faculty and departments in flexible learning. We encourage UBC to continue its focus on flexible learning since pedagogical approaches and technologies continue to change. The continued focus may lead to a stronger shared understanding of what "flexible learning" means at UBC.

In order to even better support UBC's overall direction in online learning, the review committee recommends that CTLT develops plans to do the following:

- **Shift from a piecemeal to systems approach in support of institutional strategies.** The review committee was given the impression that CTLT's current approach is faculty-centered and that if resources were not an issue, the ideal would be to provide more 1:1 consultation with faculty to support their individual efforts. To complement and supplement this approach, the committee recommends that CTLT develop a more holistic, systems approach to providing its services. Currently, several faculty (even the most supportive ones) expressed some confusion about who to reach out to within CTLT and how to access CTLT's various services.
- **Develop learning analytics plan to engage stakeholders.** The review committee noted that a multi-year learning analytics project is underway. However, it is unclear if CTLT is taking the lead. Also, although the components of the project ("rapid research pilots," establishing an ethical framework,



development of technical infrastructure) have been identified, the review committee recommends that CTLT work to define and develop a learning analytics plan for UBC that fully engages its stakeholders, especially faculty, in how learning analytics will target and focus on improving the student experience.

- **Develop robust structure and process for discovery, innovation, production, and retirement of initiatives.** Due to the decentralized nature of UBC and CTLT's accommodation of the decentralized model, it may be challenging to create a central framework and central process to track and support the lifecycle of projects. However, if at least some faculty projects support institutional priorities, there would be major benefits to creating a robust structure that can be generally applicable to most if not all faculty projects, helping them to scale and become revenue-generating if appropriate, as well as to phase out as necessary. The review committee recommends that CTLT lead the development of a model or template that can be used to guide decision-making and clarify handoffs. Such a framework could be customized by departments and faculty depending on the goals and priorities of a project, and be used to track milestones.

## 8. TLEF

The Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) is a notable driver of educational innovation and change. With a long history at the institution and current spending levels at approximately \$2.5 million per year, this program clearly has the university's commitment as well as many stakeholders' attention. The TLEF was mentioned many times – across multiple sessions – during the review committee's visit.

It appears that the TLEF has been used creatively to support various projects that might otherwise have been difficult to fund, e.g., online course development projects, instructor-stream faculty projects, and technology pilots. Faculty members who have received TLEF awards appreciated the infusion of funds and other support. However, given the substantial investment in TLEF – both money and time – the review committee identified several recommendations aimed at increasing the educational return on that investment:

- **Improve communication and transparency around the selection process.** Various stakeholders expressed a lack of clarity around how awardees were chosen. The general perception is that the selection process is unpredictable – even in cases where a Faculty conducts and share an internal, preliminary ranking of proposals. There does not appear to be a set of shared priorities or evaluation criteria driving these decisions, so articulating, communicating, *and applying* such criteria would help address this issue.
- **Integrate TLEF funding with strategic directions and curricular needs of the Faculties.** Even though TLEF awards may be well aligned with University-level strategic directions, these projects are implemented within particular Faculties where they can have counter-productive consequences (e.g., a new course that works against a recent curricular change) or opportunity costs (e.g., supporting courses or areas that are already well positioned, while others remain under-served).

The review committee recommends coordinating TLEF decisions with Faculty-level priorities. This could be enacted in a variety of ways, e.g., a preliminary stage in which the Faculties promote selected proposals for further consideration. While such a recommendation is being considered, it would be useful for the Faculties to receive feedback on their proposals and to clarify whether they have the opportunity to submit a revised proposal. It could also be achieved by focusing TLEF funding on more broad-based strategic initiatives, i.e., shifting away from a project-by-project approach.

- **Rigorously assess the impact of TLEF projects.** It is unclear what impacts TLEF projects have had on key desired outcomes of the program, e.g., enhanced student learning/engagement and sustainability of change. The review committee strongly recommends building into the program a rigorous assessment process that includes collecting quantitative and qualitative measures of student learning and engagement. In addition, tracking how long and across how many courses/sections TLEF innovations are maintained would help to evaluate the sustainability and scope of impact. One way to implement this recommendation would involve reducing the monitoring/reporting aspects of TLEF projects and leveraging the CTLT's expertise in assessment and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. In any case, improving the understanding of TLEF projects' impacts seems crucial for maximizing the potential of this powerful program.
- **Deliberately disseminate results.** One mechanism for transferring and extending the impact of TLEF projects is to deliberately share information on what the project involved and how it worked so that other faculty members can benefit from the lessons learned. However, most faculty members have limited time (or patience) to read through long reports or to identify transferrable elements of an innovation (i.e., that cut across disciplinary specifics). The review committee thus recommends creating highly consumable "highlights" from TLEF projects that are designed to foster the dissemination of innovation. The CTLT's expertise in translating teaching and learning issues across disciplinary specifics will be especially valuable here. As CTLT already has many touch points with faculty, we encourage the integration of these highlights in many venues, e.g., newsletters, workshops, etc.

## 9. Futures

CTLT is designed around a course-based teaching, learning and technology model, with faculty being the primary customer. We hope UBC and CTLT will expand on their current success to grow into a future-oriented model. The new president's agenda focused on research, the student experience, innovation, and community engagement suggests that CTLT might shift its services to meet emerging needs. While the review did not explore the future as much as the current state, we want to highlight a few changes in the external environment that may impact UBC and CTLT.

- **Student experience.** The student experience of UBC is a holistic one—formal and informal learning, personal and professional development, experiences on-campus, as well as off. Student experiences are both online and face-to-face—one does not replace the other. CTLT might play a key role in helping UBC continue to combine the strengths of the campus with digital capabilities, whether through analytics, visualization, social media, or interaction, to more deeply engage their

stakeholders. We believe CTLT could play a role in shaping and supporting UBC's digital student experience.

- **Student success and career success.** In North America, Europe and Australia, student success has become a top institutional priority. There are many elements to student success (e.g., high quality learning environments, student support, clear pathways, etc.). UBC is exploring the use of learning analytics to support student success, for example. Yet it is important to emphasize that student success is neither a one-time event nor a one-size fits all proposition, something we believe UBC understands. A less often discussed element of student success is the timeline: student success does not end at graduation. Today's expectation is of life and career success—expectations that extend well beyond graduation. UBC has the opportunity to use a focus on career success to expand service to learners of all ages, through traditional means as well as through competency-based education, credentialing programs, boot camps or perhaps badging. CTLT has expertise to lend to such explorations.
- **Credentialing.** While the diploma has been the “gold standard” for college credentials for decades, new forms of credentialing are being developed (e.g., competencies, badges). UBC, like all of higher education, may need to explore how today's credentialing paradigm might adapt to a digital ecosystem. Experiential transcripts, for example, augment the academic transcript to provide a more complete picture of the student experience, particularly co-curricular elements. Large talent management platforms, such as LinkedIn, are becoming the “operating system” for professional credentialing as well as a rankings and outcomes database for colleges and universities. CTLT might play many roles in exploring the new credentialing paradigm, from catalyzing innovation, to supporting faculty experimentation, to leveraging new platforms.

These are only three examples of how higher education may shift in the future. Just as UBC has innovated with emerging platforms and learning modalities, we hope CTLT will continue to catalyze and support future explorations.