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# Preparing academics for teaching in Australian universities

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***Abstract:** This paper details the results of a study for the Australian federal Department of Education, Science and Training in 2002, on the professional development of Australian academics for their teaching role. It outlines survey results of the programmes and approaches used by academic development units in the 32 Australian universities that had central sections dedicated or partly dedicated to academic staff development. The results reported here indicate that while the large majority of universities offered induction programmes to staff new to teaching, these are relatively poorly attended, and do not cater for part-time sessional staff in any systematic way. Most universities offered formal award programmes to their staff, but these too, generally have low enrolments. The results form an important reference point for professional associations and staff development units concerned to promote teaching excellence and the professionalisation of the teaching role in universities.*

***Keywords:** university teaching, academic staff development, induction to teaching*

## **The study**

The last ten years have seen an increasing concern with the standard of teaching in Australian higher education, consequent on the need to provide quality assurance in an increasingly competitive and international environment. Although a number of institutions have instituted formal preparation programmes for new teaching staff, and others offer non-credit seminars for enhancing teaching, and/or Graduate Certificate award programmes in higher education, anecdotal evidence suggests that participation in such programmes is small. This reflects both the existing recognition and reward systems for teaching in universities as well as the lack of accepted ways of demonstrating professional competence in teaching. While initiatives like the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) have enhanced the status of university

teaching, and have showcased the accomplishments of some individuals, there is no systemic approach to the professionalisation of teaching in higher education. That is to say, no agency has emerged to determine standards of professional practice, to validate the quality of professional development and support provided to teaching staff, or to establish a way of recognising the attainment of professional competence.

The professionalisation of teaching in higher education has been the topic of a number of inquiries into the sector and has been under consideration by the peak Australian professional association for teaching development in higher education, HERDSA, for a number of years. It has been the subject of specific recommendations of a large and widely referenced Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) project (Ramsden *et al.* 1995), the West Report *Learning for life: The review of higher education financing and policy* (Review Committee on Higher Education Financing and Policy, 1997), and more recently the second Discussion paper in the Crossroads series, *Striving for Quality* (2002). Thus far, no organisation has assumed the role of progressing the recommendations emanating from these reports and implementing this agenda.

In late 2001, the authors were commissioned by the Department of Science, Education and Training (DEST) to undertake a study of the preparation and further professional development of Australian university academics for their teaching role. The study was considered timely because of the forthcoming introduction of the Australian University Quality Agency reviews of teaching quality, because professionalisation of the university teaching role had been debated for some years with little effect, and because teaching quality was to be the subject of a major discussion paper in the proposed Crossroads Review of Higher Education (2002). No recent data were available on the nature of university activities in teaching development.

The authors chose to use survey and interview techniques to gather quantitative and qualitative data. This approach was used to gather data that would at the very least allow the authors to develop descriptions of the current central provision of teaching development in universities, and stakeholder perceptions of that provision, as well as potentially generate grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Stakeholder perceptions are reported in a separate paper (Fraser, Ryan & Dearn, forthcoming). Here, the reported activities of staff development units are detailed.

At the commencement of the project, 34 of the 38 Australian universities were believed to have central teaching development units. Directors/senior managers of those units were sent the survey instrument and asked to provide information on the central provision of teaching development opportunities in their university. A total of 32 responses were received, sometimes after a follow-up telephone call.

Management commitment to the various functions within universities is generally made 'visible' through central facilities. Therefore the focus of this project was on the provision of teaching development by **central** university units. In the authors' experience, what is provided at the faculty/school/department levels in terms of teaching development is variable and generally very minimal. This study therefore did not attempt to capture teaching development provided at the faculty, school or departmental level, or the undoubtedly rich professional learning that occurs in any workplace as a result of informal mentoring and 'work talk'.

## The results

In relation to the first two questions (numbers and location of staff whose primary responsibility was teaching development), there was no consistent pattern of resource commitment to teaching development across the sector, or among types of universities. Fifty percent of universities (16) had a central unit responsible for teaching development, compared to nine in 1972 (Moses, 1988), and 12 universities had a model which combined central and faculty-based units, although these tended to be clustered 'in the richer faculties' such as medicine and economics/business, where problem-based learning projects were being phased in. Only one university had a completely devolved system. Two universities reported that they had no staff dedicated to the professional development of teaching. However, the strength of commitment of universities to teaching development in terms of staff allocation varied markedly. Staff numbers ranged from 1 to 17, with four institutions at the upper end in terms of dedicated staff spread between Group of Eight (Go8) universities, Australian Technology Network (ATN) and 'new' universities. The vast majority of universities clustered at between four to six staff, mostly academic in classification, together with several administrative support staff. Smaller staff units (one to three persons) were scattered among university 'types', although they tended to characterise regional or outer metropolitan universities.

Another suite of questions related largely to programme models used within various universities. Three standard models predominate in Australia: induction programmes for staff new to the institution or to teaching; postgraduate formal programmes in tertiary teaching; and workshop programmes.

### ***Induction programmes and workshop programmes***

Induction to teaching programmes are primarily but not exclusively provided to staff who are new to teaching in the sector. All but 4 of the 32 responding universities provide a central programme to introduce academics to their teaching role. However, given that another six universities did not have central units, and therefore were not likely to provide a central introduction to university teaching, it is likely that 10 of the 38 Australian Universities (26%) did not provide even an introduction to the elements of university teaching.

This is particularly concerning as it is clear that many academics who are new to the university sector have little or no teaching experience and they do not have a teaching qualification. Moreover, such induction programmes appear to be particularly useful for staff; the AUTC-validated evaluation of the *Flinders Foundations to University Teaching* programme (1998-2001) reported real benefits for staff and the institution (Orrell, 2002).

Seminar and workshop programmes were provided for both experienced and inexperienced academics in 29 universities, leaving three responding universities without substantive central provision and another six universities apparently without central provision. University-wide provision of workshops targeted towards specific teaching issues such as formative assessment, providing constructive criticism in research supervision etc. was available to academics to assist in their ongoing professional development. While the efficacy of 'one-off' workshops has been questioned (Weimer & Lenze, 1997, quoted in Gibbs & Coffey, 2000), there is increasing evidence that longer-term teaching development programmes have a positive impact on some aspects of teaching (Coffey & Gibbs, 2000).

### **Graduate Certificates**

Formal programmes about teaching in higher education are often argued (as reported in Gibbs & Coffey, 2000) to act as a disseminating mechanism through which enthusiastic and skilled teachers will permeate a departmental ethos in regard to quality teaching. There is no documented evidence of this occurring, although anecdotally, the present authors note the predominance of graduates amongst associate deans (T&L) in their own institutions, or winners of Teaching Excellence awards. However, this correlation is as likely to indicate a pre-existing enthusiasm for teaching leading to enrolment in the graduate certificate, rather than 'conversion' to teaching evangelism as a result of the programme. To the authors' knowledge, only one university has now instituted a tracking process of their graduates, but it is internal only (i.e., it does not pursue careers beyond the university), and insufficient data has been gathered to generalise.

Twenty-one Australian universities either provided a graduate certificate in university teaching/higher education for staff or were in the process of developing one. While some universities reported that those enrolling in their graduate certificates were primarily new to teaching, most reported a mix of inexperienced and experienced academic enrolments. The majority of graduate certificates currently in operation were developed during or shortly after the 'quality rounds' of the mid 1990s. Unlike the situation in the UK, where many university graduate certificates are compulsory for new inexperienced academics (anecdotal evidence), in only two Australian universities was it compulsory for new, inexperienced academics to take these programmes.

Question 7 asked a range of questions about 'introduction to teaching' programmes. While there might be seen to be some overlap between these programmes and the more general induction programmes for academic staff where they are introduced to university policies and practices regarding teaching and assessment etc., 28 of the 32 responding universities reported that they ran centrally coordinated non-award introduction to teaching programmes for their academic staff. A brief summary of these programmes is as follows.

- The length of time these programmes have been in existence varies from 2 years through to 34 years with an average of 9.8 years, though clearly these data relate in part to the age of the institution.
- Of the 28 universities offering 'introduction to teaching' programmes, 25 provided data on the number of academic staff participating in 2001. Across all institutions there was a total of 1,148 individuals with an average participation number of 45.9 staff per institution, though institutional size was clearly a major factor in participant numbers.
- The length of the programmes varied as did the number of times per year they were offered. Of the 28 universities offering programmes, 26 provided data on contact hours. This varied from 3 to 49 hours with an average of 23.3 hours.
- Only 3 (12%) of the 26 institutions reported that they offered their programme in a fully online mode in addition to face-to-face mode. Of the other 23 institutions, 10 offered programmes in primarily face-to-face mode while 13 reported that they supplemented face-to-face with online learning.
- Seventeen institutions provided data on when their programmes were offered to staff. Seven of the institutions offered the programme prior to the start of teaching while 10

reported that the programme was undertaken by staff at the same time as they were engaged in teaching.

- Most institutions offered programmes more than once over the year. Of the 20 institutions reporting on the frequency with which they offered programmes, one offered its programme four times per year, two offered it three times, eight offered it twice and nine offered it once a year.
- Not surprisingly for non-award programmes, only a few of the programmes incorporated formal assessment. Of the 26 institutions providing data on assessment, only 4 (15%) required the performance of staff participants to be assessed.
- It is of interest that only 9 (35%) of 26 institutions incorporated observation of classroom practice in their programme.
- The curriculum of nearly all programmes was stated to be general, covering the major issues of teaching, learning and assessment. However, three institutions said they put a particular emphasis on online teaching and flexible delivery.
- Nearly all institutions said the curriculum was flexible. Eleven stated the curriculum was determined in part by the interests of individual participants, five said both individuals' interests and the university's current strategic needs played a role. Only one institution specifically mentioned responding to outside influences in the higher education sector more generally as a factor in determining the curriculum.

Approximately 300 individual staff (i.e., about 75 EFTSU) were enrolled in 2001 in a graduate certificate, representing less than 0.5 per cent of the total of Full-Time Equivalence (FTE) of 82,233 academic staff in all Australian universities (*Staff 2000: Selected Higher Education Statistics*). Almost one-third of these were enrolled at the one institution which formally required enrolment of all new staff. When one considers that actual academic staff numbers are much higher, as the DEST data acknowledges, particularly with the increasing numbers of sessional staff, it is apparent that formal award programmes attract a miniscule proportion of academic staff. While the number of academic staff engaged in formal study in teaching in higher education may be more than 300 (through enrolment in higher degrees), the numbers are clearly very small when compared with the number of academics teaching in the sector and the number of inexperienced teaching staff entering the sector every year. No data are collected at system or institutional level on numbers of staff who possess formal qualifications in university teaching. It is acknowledged that enrolments in any single year do not necessarily reflect numbers of staff who may already have a qualification in higher education.

Award programmes in individual universities enrolled between 2 and 40 staff in 2001. It must be noted that not all staff enrolling in a graduate certificate finish the programme (Ryan, 1996). Anecdotally it is also recognised in the sector that while initial enrolments in programmes are often good, if the programme is not compulsory, enrolment tends to decline dramatically three to six years after its inception. Anecdotally, attrition rates of 35% appear to be common, even in 'compulsory' programmes.

Another concern raised by the data is variation in what constitutes a graduate certificate in teaching in the sector. Programmes required anywhere between 200 and 660 hours of work

with staff taking between two and four subjects over one or two years. Clearly the sector has yet to develop consensus on what constitutes a graduate certificate in terms of workload, structure and concordance within the Australian Qualifications Framework.

The nomenclature of award programmes in higher education also merits attention. Graduate Certificates (or Graduate Diplomas) were given 11 different names: Graduate Certificate of:

- Education (Tertiary Education);
- Education (Higher Education);
- Education (Tertiary Teaching);
- Higher Education;
- Tertiary Education;
- Tertiary Teaching;
- University Teaching & Learning;
- University Learning & Teaching;
- Professional Education and Training (HE);
- Higher Education Teaching & Learning; and
- Tertiary Teaching & Learning.

The Graduate Certificates were primarily provided by mixed mode with some courses having an emphasis on the face-to-face mode (e.g., 35 days over four subjects over two years). Assessment was a mixture of theory-based and practice-based, with some universities emphasising that they are integrated, and one university reporting that it had no assessment (but later in the survey the respondent said that people submit a teaching portfolio and a research project).

Only three of the graduate certificate programmes had teaching observation and feedback as a compulsory part of their programme. Most programmes used participant survey feedback and approximately 50% reported using university review mechanisms. Approximately 50% of the programmes were structured to develop a specific teaching practice, for example flexible and online teaching (six), assessment of student learning (one), critical inquiry (one), postgraduate supervision (three), and internationalisation (two), (some universities reported more than one area). Sixteen universities indicated that they did have the flexibility to respond to new topics/emerging needs through such things as:

- individually negotiated tasks and assessment;
- in response to reviews;
- subject additions (e.g. electives);
- independent studies; and
- changing readings.

All but two universities having a graduate certificate reported that there was articulation to a higher degree. Those two universities said that in theory it could be done but it had not been formally organised. Five universities have Graduate Diplomas in Tertiary Teaching or Higher Education; three universities have Masters in Higher Education (or a similar name), many have Masters in Education but not Higher Education. One university reported the possibility of articulating with a PhD and a Masters. It is noteworthy that there was very little in the sector in the way of further diplomas or degrees that specifically target teaching in Higher Education. Further, in practice and anecdotally, articulating to a higher degree,

even within the same institution, but also to other institutions, is indeed difficult because of non-recognition of graduate certificate studies as adequate preparation for Masters and doctoral study.

### ***Mentoring***

Most respondents provided information on university-wide programmes. It must be recognised that the provision of mentoring in faculties is variable, and anecdotally it is recognised that such mentoring rarely specifically incorporates a focus on teaching development. Unfortunately some respondents, while filling in a survey about teaching development provision, reported on mentoring programmes that were specific to research development. It is possible that other respondents also made this error. In spite of this, the data does show that several universities utilise mentoring programmes as opportunities for staff to discuss their teaching.

### **Summary**

Some clear conclusions can be drawn from the survey data. First, the large majority of Australian universities demonstrate their commitment to the improvement of teaching practice through the employment of staff dedicated to academic development, primarily in teaching issues. Only 2 of the 32 respondent universities make no such provision.

Second, the most common model is a central unit, with a smaller number opting for a combined model of central and devolved units, with these devolved units clustered in the so-called 'richer faculties'. Commitment in terms of staff numbers engaged in teaching development varies markedly amongst institutions, with higher numbers characterising institutions which had a research interest in higher education as a discipline. There was no discernable pattern of resource commitment among the types of institutions that responded to the survey.

Third, one-quarter of all Australian universities do not conduct any induction or initial preparation programmes in teaching for their staff, even, in some cases, where the university has a central unit for staff development. In universities with such provision, on average approximately 50 staff in each institution attended such induction programmes in any year, although it was impossible to gauge what percentage of new staff this represented. Workshop/seminar programmes in teaching issues are more common, however, and are offered to all academic staff.

Fourth, a full three-quarters of the respondents to this survey offer a formal award, normally a graduate certificate/diploma, in higher education/tertiary teaching. What is telling in this data was that most of these awards were introduced after the government's 'quality round' recommendations in the mid-1990s, in response to concerns about teaching quality.

Fifth, the take-up of graduate certificates by staff is small, across the sector and in most institutions, with only two institutions mandating enrolment for academics new to the sector. In any one year, it would appear that enrolment in such programmes constitutes less than 0.5 per cent of FTE academic staff in Australia, and would be almost insignificant were **actual** teacher numbers calculable from the DEST data. Further, while staff qualifications are reported at the level of degree, there is no separate reporting of teaching qualifications that might operate as a proxy for quality in teaching.

Finally, the number of universities reporting any systematic training for sessional staff was very low. Some departments offer such training for tutors, but the sector's escalating use of sessional staff to assist flexibility in the staffing profile, and provide more practical and workplace experience to the curriculum, is not matched by its commitment to ensuring appropriate teaching skill levels amongst that staff cohort. This is largely a funding problem, since sessional staff are paid hourly for attendance at meetings and training.

In conclusion, the data here cannot be interpreted as a comment on the quality of teaching in Australian universities. What it suggests however, is that the sector's commitment to the teaching aspect of academic roles is uneven, and unsystematic. The data reveal a variable level of formal and informal professional development of teaching within institutions, and reluctance among the majority of university staff, especially sessional staff, to engage in the many formal and informal programmes available in the practice and theory of higher education.

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