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Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

TEQSA

# Students, Quality, Success

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# Foreword

Welcome to the Conference Proceedings for the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA) second annual conference. In only its second year, our 2017 conference produced a number of important milestones for the Agency. Conference attendance doubled, with 800 Australian and international delegates gathering in Melbourne to explore our theme *Students, Quality, Success*. Perhaps most impressively, more than 70 of those delegates were students from Australian higher education providers drawn from across the sector. This strong student participation is a clear sign that the student voice plays an active role in TEQSA's regulatory and quality assurance work, and most importantly, in the quality assurance of Australian higher education providers.

The attendance of so many from across the higher education sector – students, academics, policy makers and professional staff more generally and representatives from government and professional agencies – is a strong indication of the recognition of the importance of high quality education and student success to higher education providers across the country.

The quality of papers we received for inclusion in the 2017 conference program was, as reflected in the span of delegates, exemplary. The fact that more than 80 academics and higher education professionals took the time to produce and submit their work and ideas is a sign of the importance that the issues discussed at our conference are of significance to the sector.

The large number of submissions did, however, place a heavy burden on the Review Panel. I extend my gratitude to Panel Chair, Professor Prem Ramburuth from the UNSW and to the Panel members, Professor Dominic Szambowski, the International School of Management, Sydney and Maxine Courtier from Holmesglen Institute. I also thank Professor Jeanette Baird, Dr Karen Treloar and Jacqui Elson-Green. They had the difficult task of choosing the more than 50 presentations that we included in the conference program and I thank them for their tireless work.

I would also like to reiterate my congratulations to the winners of best papers across the conference themes: For *Students*, Assistant Professor Gesa Ruge and Adjunct Professor Coralie McCormack from the University of Canberra whose paper was titled *Understanding how students develop their skills for employability* for Students; Dr Sara Booth, University of

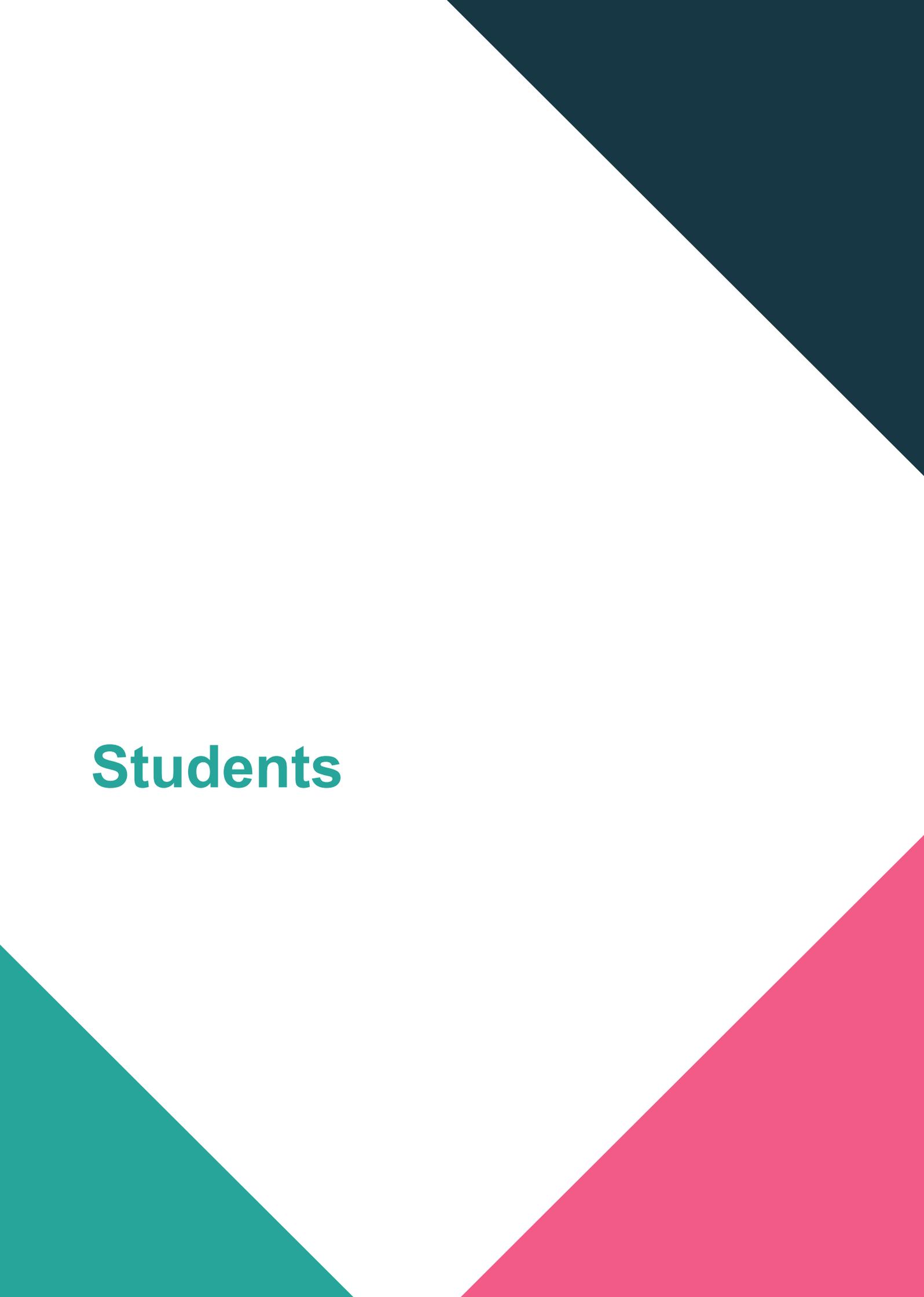
Tasmania, *A cost-effective solution for external referencing of accredited courses of study* for the *Quality* stream; and Maria Spies and Dr Margot McNeill, Navitas, *Holistic curriculum transformation: A scalable model for student success* for the *Success* stream.

The papers included in our Conference Proceedings explore a broad range of issues relating to *Students, Quality and Success*. All authors whose submissions were accepted for presentation at our conference were invited to provide full papers for publication in the Conference Proceedings. I am certain that you will find these papers thought-provoking and, I hope, will stimulate discussion in your institution.

I look forward to seeing you at the 2018 TEQSA Conference in November.

Anthony McClaran

CEO, Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency



**Students**

# Over 100 years old - Barriers to implementing student-centred learning

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## Abstract

Student-centred learning is not a new concept, but there has been limited progress made towards the adoption of student-centred approaches in the higher education sector. Universities are under increasing pressure to adopt more student-centred approaches to better meet the increasingly diverse needs of students. Today, the lecture continues to reign supreme as the pervasive method of instruction within universities.

This paper reviews the scholarly literature on student-centred learning to establish what is currently known about student-centred approaches in higher education contexts. It defines student-centred learning, explores barriers to adoption, and highlights areas where further research is needed.

The outcomes indicate that student-centred approaches are predominantly piecemeal, occurring in isolated pockets within universities. There is a need for research to be conducted on how to implement student-centred learning at a programmatic and university level if it is to gain traction in our universities.

This review will be useful to academic staff and academic developers to highlight the barriers to the adoption of student-centred learning and importantly to present some suggestions on how these barriers can be ameliorated.

**Key Words:** *student-centred learning, learner-centred, higher education, challenges, barriers.*

## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a time of unprecedented change as we transform from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy, where a nation's innovation, entrepreneurial and research capabilities will be the drivers of economic success (Bradley, 2008). Never before in our history has the ability to “know what to do when you don't know what to do” (Claxton, 2001) been so important. No longer are the three R's (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) adequate for preparing students for life and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There has been a significant shift towards the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills such as creativity, critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, information, media and ICT literacy, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, productivity and accountability, and leadership and responsibility (Partnership for 21st century learning, 2007).

Around the world, higher education reforms are responding to this shift by calling for the adoption of student-centred approaches (McCabe & O'Connor, 2013; Pham Thi Hong, 2011; Sweetman, 2017; Yusoff, Abdul Karim, Othman, Mohin, & Abdull Rahman, 2013). The passive, unidirectional 20<sup>th</sup> century teacher-centred pedagogies that have served previous generations well are not adequate to facilitate the development of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills (Guneyli & Zeki, 2014). There has been a clear paradigm shift in universities from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Consequently, universities are under increasing pressure across the globe to adopt more student-centred approaches to better meet the needs of their heterogeneous student body and to remain relevant within the society they serve.

## Global Drivers

In the 1990s and early 2000s we have experienced rapid and dramatic changes driven by advances in technology, resulting in the transition from an industrial to a knowledge economy. Across the globe, education policy makers began to look at 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills needed by their citizens to remain productive. In response, higher education reforms in many countries are attempting to drive top-down pedagogical innovations by mandating the adoption of student-centred learning across all educational sectors.

In 1990, the American Psychological Association developed “The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles”, which provides a blueprint for learner-centred learning in the United States (Phungphol, 2005). Across Asia, policies such as Malaysia's “Vision 2020” (released in 1991), Singapore's “Thinking Nation” (released in 1997) and Thailand's National Education Act reforms (released in 1999) all seek to support more learner-centred teaching strategies rather than focus on information retention (Pham Thi Hong, 2011). The European higher education sector, through the Bologna Process established in 2009 and now with 48 member countries, sets out to establish comparability and compatibility of standards and quality of higher education across Europe and to modernise education and training systems. Although student-centred learning was not directly mentioned in the original Communiqué, the subsequent Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009) makes specific reference of the need for universities to move toward student-centred learning.

However, despite these widespread education reforms, there has been limited progress towards the adoption of student-centred approaches in the higher education sector. The traditional, didactic, teacher-centred lecture continues to reign supreme as the dominant method of instruction at universities. Clearly there is quite a difference between the rhetoric of policy makers and the reality of what happens in university classrooms. The question remains, why is it taking so long to implement student-centred learning in higher education?

The literature indicates that one reason for this is the considerable confusion and ambiguity over the term “student-centred learning” and what it means in practice (Lea, Stephenson, & Troy, 2003; O’Neill, 2005; Severiens, Meeuwisse, & Born, 2014; Tangney, 2014). Unlike terms such as flipped learning, authentic learning, problem-based learning and project-based learning, which all have very specific, distinct and clearly defined meanings, student-centred learning does not have one clear, single definition.

An analysis of seven different definitions of student-centred learning reported in the literature has highlighted several common beliefs that underpin student-centred learning (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. Analysis of themes from student-centred learning definitions

(Barr & Tagg, 1995; Brandes & Ginnis, 1986; Cannon & Newble, 2000; Gibbs, 1995; Lea et al., 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Weimer, 2013)

These beliefs form the basis of a consolidated definition of student-centred learning as an approach that is grounded in a constructivist epistemology and emphasises the critical importance of students constructing their own meaning from experiences. As such, it requires:

- a shift from a focus on what the teacher does to a focus on how the student learns;
- student responsibility;
- active learning;
- deep rather than surface learning;
- teacher as a facilitator of learning;
- power sharing between teacher and student;
- content used as a tool; and

- assessment used to promote learning.

(Barr & Tagg, 1995; Brandes & Ginnis, 1986; Cannon & Newble, 2000; Gibbs, 1981; Lea et al., 2003; McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Weimer, 2013)

For the most part, student-centred learning is viewed in the literature as being the antithesis of teacher-centred learning (Kember, 1997; O'Neill, 2005; Tangney, 2014). For both teachers and students, student-centred learning can represent quite a radical view of learning requiring significant change. Several researchers indicate that either end of the continuum is undesirable (Elen, Clarebout, Léonard, & Lowyck, 2007; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013; Sweetman, 2017).



**Teacher-centred learning**

Low level student choice

Student passive

Power is primarily with teacher

**Student-centred learning**

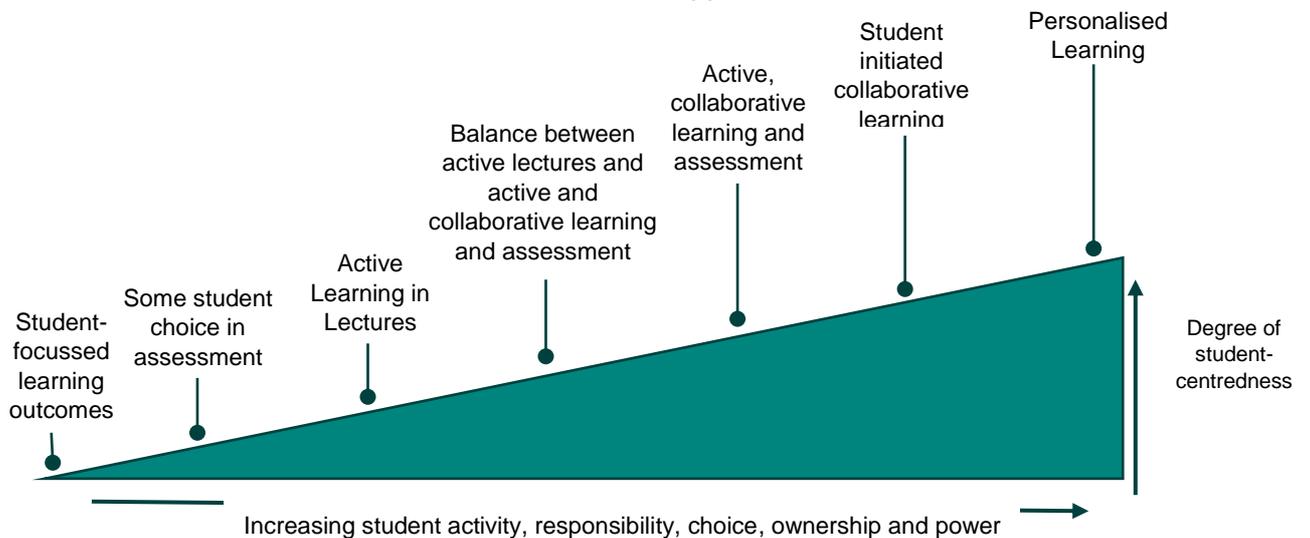
High level of student choice

Student active

Power is primarily with the student

*Figure 2. Teacher-centred and student-centred continuum (O'Neill, 2005)*

An approach that may be helpful is to develop a Continuum of Student-Centredness (Figure 3) tailored to each university context that provides a roadmap to assist teachers, students and institutions to transition to a more student-centred approach.



*Figure 3. Continuum of student-centredness*

## Methodology

This literature review takes the form of a scoping review using Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) Scoping Review Methodological Framework. A scoping review is defined as "*a form of knowledge synthesis that addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting, and synthesizing existing knowledge*" (Colquhoun et al., 2014).

As this research is exploratory, a scoping review is an appropriate methodology and the framework ensures that the research is systematic, disciplined and reliable. The research question being investigated is:

**RQ:** What are the barriers that have slowed the progress of implementing student-centred learning in higher education settings?

Aligned to the specific intention of a scoping review methodology, the research question is designed to take a very broad view of the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) to gain an understanding of the body of work that has been produced in relation to barriers to the adoption of student-centred learning in the higher education sector and to enable the identification of key themes.

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was devised to establish some boundaries around this piece of research (See Table 1). To reflect current thinking and contemporary evidence, this research has been limited to peer reviewed journal articles reporting on primary research studies and literature reviews published between January 1997 and June 2017. In 1997, a seminal piece of research on the conceptions of teaching was conducted by Kember and it seemed that an examination of studies over a 20-year period would be appropriate. The review sought to include international perspectives and as such used ERIC and Education Source databases.

Table 1

*Inclusion and Exclusion criteria*

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	<b>Exclusion criteria</b>
Time period	1997 – 2017	Studies earlier than 1997
Language	English	Non-English
Countries	Any	None
Type of article	Original research and literature reviews, published in peer reviewed journal	Articles that were not peer reviewed, conference papers, opinion pieces, editorials and grey literature
Study focus	Higher education or university where student-centred approaches were used	Primary, secondary, vocational education, college
Literature focus	Articles that were predominantly about student-centred learning or a specific aspect of student-centred learning including student perceptions, teacher perceptions, challenges, barriers.	Articles that did not relate to student-centred learning and specific teaching approaches such as Flipped Learning or PBL.
Academic discipline	Any	None
Databases	ERIC, Education Source	Other databases

The key search terms were quite broad and included both the English and American spelling of the word “centred”. Boolean operators were used to widen, narrow and exclude studies that appeared in the search results.

## Table 2

### *Key search terms*

---

“student-centred” OR “student-centered”

“learner-centred” OR “learner-centered”

AND “higher education” OR university

barriers OR obstacles OR challenges

NOT school OR “K-12”

---

Due to time constraints, only 2200 titles and abstracts were scanned, which resulted in the 47 most relevant articles being selected and read, after duplicates were removed. Following an initial reading of the articles, this was reduced to 30 articles being selected for this study. A further five studies referenced in the reviewed articles were also included.

## Limitations

This paper is reporting on preliminary findings. Due to time constraints, it was necessary to limit the search to only two databases. This may have resulted in other important studies being missed. However, it was felt that this was sufficient to give a broad coverage of the topic.

## Discussion

The identified studies represented a cross-section of countries and typically focussed on a single group of students and/or teachers from one university, a comparison between two universities, or a comparison between countries. The review of the literature reveals that the barriers to the implementation of student-centred learning in universities fall into four main themes:

1. Teachers
2. Students
3. Culture
4. Assessment

The discussion that follows will examine the four themes identified in the literature and proposes strategies for ameliorating these barriers.

### **1. Teachers**

The literature on teacher barriers is divided into two broad categories: institutional barriers, i.e. those barriers that are outside the control of the individual teacher, and personal barriers

that are within the individual and prevent or make it more difficult for them to implement student-centred approaches.

### ***Class sizes***

Several studies have identified that teachers perceive large class sizes as a barrier to the implementation of student-centred learning (Aksit, Niemi, & Nevgi, 2016; Borda et al., 2017; Connell, Donovan, & Chambers, 2016; Guneyli & Zeki, 2014; Jordan et al., 2014; Sweetman, 2017; Tawalbeh & AlAsmari, 2015). Large classes limit student participation, the types of learning activities, and the ability of the teacher to meet the individual needs of students (Hockings, 2005). Supporting this perception, Mulryan-Kyne (2010) reports that smaller classes are more effective for developing higher order skills, which are the types of thinking skills we are trying to develop in student-centred environments. A study by Borda et al. (2017), who increased the size of a student-centred chemistry class from 24 to 96 students, found that students in the larger class did not perform as well as students in the smaller class. In contrast, Mulryan-Kyne (2010) states that there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that teacher expertise has a greater impact on student learning than class size.

With the increasing costs of higher education and decreasing government funding, it is unlikely that class sizes at universities will be decreased. There is a need for more research about student-centred learning and the development of higher order skills within large classes, that moves beyond simple engagement tools such as audience response systems, think-pair-shares and one-minute papers. If, as suggested, teacher effectiveness has greater impact on student learning than the size of the class, then clearly an investment in teacher development and further research is needed, particularly in relation to the facilitation of student-centred learning with large classes.

### ***Space***

The inflexibility of teaching spaces with immovable furniture is reported to be a barrier for the adoption of student-centred learning (Aksit et al., 2016; Guneyli & Zeki, 2014; Hernandez, Ravn, & Forero-Shelton, 2014; Hockings, 2005; Tawalbeh & AlAsmari, 2015). An environment with fixed, forward-facing immovable furniture is simply not conducive to collaborative group work. Furthermore, spaces with immovable furniture restrict the ability of teachers and tutors to easily move around a room, resulting in some groups not receiving the same level of support as other groups (Hernandez et al., 2014).

Although universities are increasingly building collaborative learning spaces for teachers, these spaces are taking too long to be made available, or the spaces are typically being created only for small class sizes. It is unlikely that classes will be smaller, therefore universities need to invest in flexible spaces that can be scaled up for larger classes and scaled down for smaller classes, to support the adoption of student-centred approaches.

The timetabling of spaces is also an issue, where efficiency is typically prioritised over pedagogy in the allocation of teaching spaces (Hockings, 2005). Administrators responsible for timetabling need to think differently and creatively about how to allocate the available spaces and prioritise pedagogical needs of the class over what is easy or efficient.

## ***Time***

A lack of time is identified in the literature as a major barrier to student-centred learning. Some teachers have cited the lack of time to teach using student-centred approaches due to an overcrowded curriculum (Aksit et al., 2016; Tawalbeh & AlAsmari, 2015). According to Connell et al. (2016), reducing the breadth of what is taught is an essential part of the process of adopting student-centred approaches. This is further supported by Luckie, et. al. (2012) cited in Connell et al. (2016) who also highlighted significant learning gains made by reducing the breadth of materials covered. There needs to be a shift from covering the syllabus to a focus on how students learn and the depth of their learning (Blackie, Case, & Jawitz, 2010; Connell et al., 2016). Active, deep learning that encourages students to construct their own meaning will always take more time than lecturing. We need to consider the purpose of education: is it for students to binge and purge knowledge to pass a test (Lea et al., 2003) or to develop life-long, 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills and a deep understanding of the disciplines we teach? Student-centred learning requires teachers to focus on the student and outcomes; this will result in the need for teachers to rationalise the content that is “covered” in courses.

The increased time required to design and prepare for student-centred classes was also raised as a barrier to student-centred learning (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010; Sweetman, 2017). There is considerable work, at least initially, in translating an existing traditional “content-focussed” course to a student-centred course (McCabe & O'Connor, 2013). Universities’ prioritisation of research over teaching results in academics being under pressure to publish or perish (Lea et al., 2003). This, combined with other institutional demands and larger heterogeneous student cohorts, makes it difficult for learning and teaching innovation to be allocated sufficient time. Clearly, if student-centred learning is to be implemented in higher education, teaching needs to be prioritised and recognition of the additional time required for preparing student-centred classes needs to be considered in teacher workloads.

## ***Conceptions of Teaching***

Teachers within universities are in a powerful position to bring about change in the way students learn. In western universities, they may be guided by a broad curriculum document, but typically exert enormous power over what happens in the classroom (Weimer, 2013). They determine the content to be taught, student learning experiences, assessment and grading. The willingness of teachers to concede some of their power to students by adopting more student-centred approaches is dependent on teachers’ beliefs about the role of the teacher (Blumberg, 2016; Jordan et al., 2014; Pham, 2016; Pham Thi Hong, 2011).

In a seminal work by Kember (1997) it was found that teachers’ conception of teaching falls into one of two broad orientations: teacher centred/content orientated or student-centred/learning orientated. This orientation not only has a direct impact on their approach to teaching but also directly impacts the students’ approach to learning.

Teachers who adopt a teacher centred/content orientation tend to view their role as one of sharing their knowledge with students. As such, they tend to adopt didactic and surface approaches to teaching and assessment, resulting in students mirroring the same approach to their learning. Teachers who adopt a student-centred/learning orientation view their role as assisting students to construct their own meaning to understand the content, use student-centred approaches and encourage deep learning. Essentially, they attempt to change students’ conceptions of learning (Baeten, Kyndt, Struyven, & Dochy, 2010; Sadler, 2012). There is, however, some debate within the literature regarding the causality of teacher

conceptions of teaching and the impact on student learning, particularly as studies that advocate this causality are reporting on teachers' espoused beliefs rather than observation of actual teaching practice (Devlin, 2006). This would indicate that further research that observes actual teaching practices in the classroom would strengthen or refute these claims.

A study on the challenges for new academics in adopting student-centred approaches found that new academics often have student-centred/learning orientated conceptions of teaching, but struggle to put them into practice (McLean and Bullard, 2000 cited in Sadler, 2012, p. 743). This may be in part due to the self-survival stage of university teaching, where beginning teachers are initially inwardly focussed on themselves and their role as a teacher before moving to the skills stage, where they develop their teaching skills, and then to the outcomes stage, where their focus finally switches to students and student learning (Nyquist and Wulff, 1996 as cited in Devlin, 2006). Contradicting this, a Saudi Arabian study found no significant difference in university teachers' perceptions of learner-centred approaches based on their qualifications or experience (Tawalbeh & AlAsmari, 2015).

It has been suggested that targeted professional development may increase the adoption of student-centred learning by university teachers (Blackie et al., 2010; Jordan et al., 2014; Kember, 2009; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013). Teacher development is complex - simply delivering a didactic presentation of new teaching approaches is inadequate, it must aim to be truly transformational (Blackie et al., 2010). As such, emphasis should be placed on both developing teachers' conceptions of teaching and at the same time introducing new teaching approaches (Degago & Kaino, 2015) through experiential professional development.

### ***Lack of confidence and different skill set***

It has been recognised in the literature as far back as the late 1960s that teachers typically teach the way they were taught (Osman, Jamaludin, & Iranmanesh, 2015). Teaching in student-centred learning environments conflicts with the traditional image of the teacher being responsible for the transmission of knowledge. This represents a challenge to the identity of teachers, particularly in non-western countries (Aksit et al., 2016). Beginning teachers frequently receive reinforcement to continue didactic teaching practice, even though they may have experienced the benefits of student-centred learning in their university courses (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2010). Teachers who are not confident in their discipline knowledge tend to use didactic approaches to control the learning environment and avoid having to cope with the unpredictable nature of student-centred classes (Sadler, 2012). Student-centred teaching also requires the teacher to give up some control over their class and this requires significant professional confidence (McCabe & O'Connor, 2013).

Teaching in student-centred learning environments requires teachers to have a different and expanded skill set that includes the ability to facilitate and manage groups, guide rather than direct student learning, and use student-centred pedagogies. However, most teachers will not have directly learned these facilitation skills. If new learning and teaching approaches are to be embraced, there must be a willingness to fail, be vulnerable, take risks and engage in uncertainty (Blackie et al., 2010).

## **2. Student Perceptions**

In a similar way to teachers, students arrive at the student-centred learning environment with their own preconceptions about teaching and learning (Lee & Branch, 2017). For the most part, students in both western and non-western countries have, through their schooling, been conditioned to be a passive recipient of teachers' wisdom (Aksit et al., 2016; Connell et

al., 2016; Kember, 2009; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013; McFarlane & Berg, 2008; Pham Thi Hong, 2011; Sweetman, 2017; Tawalbeh & AlAsmari, 2015). Students can find it quite a challenge to be confronted with a student-centred learning environment where they are expected to be an active participant in their learning (McCabe & O'Connor, 2013; McFarlane & Berg, 2008), particularly those from cultures where there is a high power-distance relationship between teacher and student (McFarlane & Berg, 2008; Pham Thi Hong, 2011).

It must be acknowledged and understood that student-centred learning represents a significant change for students that cannot be ignored or underestimated. For many students, student-centred learning environments are not what they expect of higher education (Lea et al., 2003). They do not expect to be active participants, and be responsible for their own learning. Wright (2011) reported on a study by Tyma in 2009 that in a small class of five media students who were asked to be involved in the design of the course, two students had left by the end of week 2. Similarly, a study by McFarlane and Berg (2008) involving Taiwanese university students found that new approaches such as group work could not be sustained, with students reverting back to their familiar traditional approaches to learning.

A study by Lea (2003) found that some students had a cynical view of student-centred learning. Instead of seeing it as a genuine commitment to improving learning, they saw it as being about academic pressures to publish.

Unexpectedly, student acceptance and valuing of the student-centred learning environment can be quite mixed, and students are polarised based on their preference for teaching methods (Stuyven, 2008 cited in Severiens et al., 2014). In a study by Tawalbeh and AlAsmari (2015), 77.1% of teachers indicated that student attitude towards student-centred learning was a barrier.

To address these perceptions of student-centred learning environments, teachers need to ensure that students are properly inducted into the environment and appreciate the unique learning and assessment opportunities that a student-centred approach offers (Lee & Branch, 2017; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013; McFarlane & Berg, 2008).

### ***Self-efficacy***

Student self-efficacy is a key factor in how well students adapt to a student-centred learning environment. In a study by Lee & Branch (2017), it was established that students with low prior knowledge found the student-centred learning environment confusing and frustrating, whereas the opposite was true for those students with a high self-efficacy. Similarly, in a study by Hockings (2009) of 200 Business Operations second year students, low student self-efficacy was found to be a key factor in explaining why some students were not successful in a student-centred learning environment. In contrast, students in a study by Aksit et al. (2016) reported that active learning in a student-centred learning environment raised their self-esteem due to the supportive and democratic learning environment.

Growth in student confidence of their own capabilities to effectively learn in a student-centred environment requires teacher guidance and regular peer and teacher feedback (Lee & Branch, 2017; McCabe & O'Connor, 2013). Additionally, it requires careful scaffolding of student learning and avoidance of an "empty centre" (Gleeland as cited in Lea et al., 2003) so students do not feel unsupported or abandoned. In a similar way to teachers, perhaps the gradual implementation of student-centred approaches is well suited to students (Baeten, Struyven, & Dochy, 2013).

### **Academic success**

In the assessment-driven culture within universities, student-centred learning can only gain traction and be valued by students if it can be demonstrated that student outcomes are improved. Connell et al. (2016) found that students in both small and large student-centred classes showed significantly improved results when compared to traditional classes. However, several researchers indicate that there are mixed results on the effectiveness of student-centred learning in improving student outcomes (Hockings, 2009; Lea et al., 2003; O'Neill, 2005; Severiens et al., 2014). This could be attributed to the lack of a clear student-centred learning definition (Severiens et al., 2014) or a mismatch between the student-centered learning environment and assessment tasks.

Student-centred learning environments have been shown to develop higher order thinking skills and deep/permanent learning, and to provide students with the opportunity to learn how to learn (Guneyli & Zeki, 2014). However, in a study of Applied Science students, Dear (2017) found that when surface learning was assessed, there was no significant difference in student results between student-centred and teacher-centred learning environments. Interestingly, this same study showed that when students' deep learning was assessed, they achieved significantly higher results in a teacher-centred environment. This supports earlier findings of Baeten et al. (2010) who found contradictions in the evidence supporting the view that student-centred learning environments foster the development of deep rather than surface learning. It has been found that encouraging students to adopt deep approaches to learning is complex and influenced by the learning context, students' perceptions of the context and students' characteristics (Baeten et al., 2010). This same study indicated that soft disciplines such as humanities foster deep learning, whereas hard disciplines such as science, engineering and economics foster surface learning. It also highlighted the teacher as being important in influencing students' approaches to learning (Baeten et al., 2010).

A study by Severiens et al. (2014) of 475 first year students in student-centred environments found a direct connection between students "feeling at home" in a learning environment and academic success. It found that students being comfortable in the learning environment and establishing connections with other students increased their effort and engagement, which increased the time spent studying and therefore increased student results.

### **3. Culture**

Several of the reviewed articles, particularly those from non-western countries, highlighted that student-centred learning is a western practice that is being implanted into non-western education systems without due consideration of local culture and traditions (Jordan et al., 2014; Pham Thi Hong, 2011; Yusoff et al., 2013). Frequently, western approaches are diametrically opposed to the culture of non-western countries. A research study undertaken at a Vietnam university by Pham (2016) found that it was only when the unit coordinator modified and contextualised the student-centred approach to the culture of a Vietnamese higher education classroom did the student acceptance and improved academic performance of students occur. As such, there needs to be recognition that our personal culture, the culture of our students, the culture of subject disciplines and the culture of our universities is unique. To move student-centred learning forward, it may be that each university needs to determine what student-centred learning means in their unique context. Importantly, the adoption of innovation is strongly linked to the culture of an organisation, and this requires strong organisational leadership (Zhu & Engels, 2014). As such, a

supportive and innovative culture, where trying new approaches is encouraged and rewarded, is needed to support the adoption of student-centred learning approaches.

#### **4. Assessment Practices**

University students tend to take an assessment focus to their learning by prioritising assessed tasks over non-assessed tasks (Hockings, 2005, 2009; Sweetman, 2017). They adopt a strategic approach and only devote time to tasks that contribute to their final grade, due to competing demands on their time (Brown & Race, 2013). This has an impact on how we assess in student-centred learning environments.

A theme that emerges from the studies is that assessment in student-centred environments must match and support student-centred learning. In their study of 316 student teachers at a Turkish university, Aksit et al. (2016) found that despite the positive experience and impact on their learning, there was a mismatch between active learning strategies and a traditional standardised exam-based assessment culture that encourages rote learning. Similarly, Pham Thi Hong (2011) found that assessment practices need to change from traditional individualistic exam-based approaches to collaborative student-centred approaches, if students are to see the value in this form of learning.

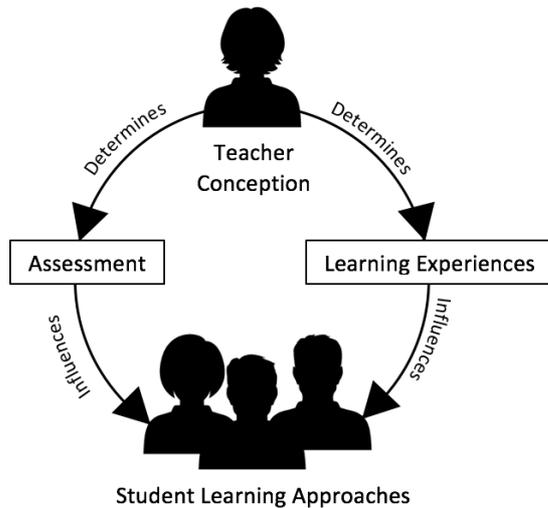
The encouragement of deep learning is a key component of a student-centred approach. (Baeten et al., 2010) found a causal link between the assessment and the learning approach adopted by students. If assessments require a surface level approach, students would adopt a surface approach to learning. In contrast to this, students are encouraged to develop a deeper approach to their learning if the assessment required a deep approach. The design of the assessment is a critical component for facilitating student-centred approaches.

The use of authentic assessment has also been found to encourage deep approaches to learning, as students are able to see a strong link between assessment and its application to their future professional practice (Baeten et al., 2010). “Assessment can be an important driver that determines how students learn” (Pham Thi Hong, 2011, p. 524).

The research would indicate that there needs to be what Biggs (1999) refers to as constructive alignment between learning outcomes, assessment and learning activities. This alignment would allow students to see the value in student-centred approaches and encourage them to engage in deep learning. The use of authentic assessment may be a mechanism to make this happen.

### **The link between teachers, student learning and assessment**

The literature indicates a strong link between teachers’ conceptions of teaching, student learning and assessment. Teachers’ conceptions of teaching influences the learning experiences of students, it also influences the way students are assessed. The type of learning experience and assessment requirements both influence students’ approaches to learning (Figure 4).



*Figure 4. The relationship between teacher conceptions of teaching and student learning approaches.*

## Use of Quality Review Process as a catalyst for change

For student-centred learning to move beyond being adopted in a piecemeal way within universities, a programmatic approach towards the implementation of student-centred approaches is needed. Program re-accreditation and quality review cycles are an opportune time to make significant progress towards embedding student-centred approaches at a programmatic level. This is because attention is focussed on reviewing the curriculum, assessment and learning and teaching approaches. Given the current top-down approach from policy makers and the bottom-up approach by individual academics, it would appear that the re-accreditation and quality review cycles could be a catalyst for accelerating significant change.

“Curriculum reform alone is not always sufficient to alter or modify the teachers’ significant practices, and what was needed were changes in the beliefs, habits, roles and power structures of teaching as well as developments in pedagogy.” (Kimonen and Nevalainen, 2005 as cited in Aksit et al., 2016).

Teachers are the frontline change agents within universities. Their beliefs and actions directly impact student learning. A greater understanding of the process of teacher change is critical for those charged with encouraging teachers to adopt student-centred approaches. Teacher changes to their classroom practice are incremental and tend to be minor adjustments rather than wholesale changes. Over time, these incremental changes become significant (Knight 2001 as cited in Altena, 2007).

The Model of Teacher Change (Guskey, 2002) suggests that when implementing a new practice, it is the change in student outcomes that changes teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about teaching practice. Tailored professional development complementing the Quality Review Process may also go some way towards building teacher capacity and removing some of barriers (Blackie et al., 2010; Jordan et al., 2014; Kember, 2009; McCabe & O’Connor, 2013).

## Implications for further research

The research indicates that the adoption of student-centred learning in higher education is piecemeal and happening within small pockets of universities. If we are to move beyond the rhetoric of universities being student-centred, then significantly more research needs to be undertaken on how we implement student-centred learning at a national, university, school/department and program level. More research involving the actual observation of student-centred classrooms would also significantly help to inform future practice.

## Conclusion

Student-centred learning is complex and ill-defined. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Institutions need to define student-centred learning to fit within the culture and specific context of the university. It may be helpful at an institutional level for those charged with implementing curriculum change to design a continuum of student-centredness to assist teachers to understand how they can transition to more student-centred approaches.

Teachers are the key to the successful implementation of student-centred learning. It has been found in the research that the conceptions of teachers change only when teachers can see evidence of a positive impact on student outcomes. For both students and teachers, implementation does not need to be at an extreme end of the continuum. Indeed, for success and sustainability, there should be a scaffolded, gradual transition to a student-centred approach.

Top-down curriculum reforms are not sufficient to bring about change and current bottom-up initiatives are failing to have significant impact. Programmatic-level re-accreditation as part of the quality process is an opportune time to advance whole-of-program student-centred learning approaches. This should be supported by targeted and ongoing professional development. There is a need for further research to investigate how this could be achieved.

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## **About the Author**

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Sharon Altena is a passionate, innovative and enthusiastic educator from Queensland University of Technology. She has vast experience acquired over the past 30 years as a teacher and learning designer across secondary schools, vocational education and the university sectors. She holds a Master of Learning Innovation from Queensland University of Technology along with several other undergraduate and post graduate degrees, Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas. Next year, she is planning to commence Doctoral studies.

Sharon has extensive skills and experience in curriculum design, pedagogy, eLearning and learning technologies. In recent years, she has been involved in two high profile whole-of-program curriculum development projects at both post-graduate and undergraduate levels. She has also played a key role in several innovation projects at QUT, including the Transform and Graduate and Professional Education projects that were exploring new approaches to university learning and teaching.

Sharon's key focus is on how we tailor and scaffold learning to best meet the needs of students and to develop and encourage academic staff to adopt active and student-centred learning approaches.

Sharon has recently been recognised for her work in education by being admitted as a Senior Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy.

# First-in-family learners and higher education participation: Exploring ways to support, engage and retain students who are the first in their families to come to university

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## Abstract

Both nationally and internationally, those students who are the first in their family to come to university are characterised by substantially poorer educational outcomes (ABS, 2013; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2014; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). This is a substantial cohort, estimated to comprise over half of the Australian university population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013) yet has a higher risk of attrition (Coates & Ransom, 2011) and may take longer to complete university (Greenwald, 2012). This article draws on various research studies conducted over the last five years to 'unpack' the concept of the first-in-family learner and explore approaches to engaging and retaining this cohort. Using in-depth narrative biographical interviews, the presentation will focus on the ways in which these learners navigated their higher education journey and enacted success within this environment. Key themes to be explored include a) ways of understanding or 'knowing' the first in family cohort, b) the role of family and community within the HE educational context and c) suggested approaches to supporting these students that account for their specific learning contexts.

**Key Words:** University retention, University persistence, first-in-family learners

## Introduction

When the literature on first in family (FiF) student participation in higher education (HE) is considered collectively, this group is singled out as a potential 'group at risk' (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p. 329). Drawing on a global review of studies conducted in the last two decades, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) conclude that FiF students generally have difficulty 'mastering the college role' (p. 330) resulting in little sense of belonging within the university landscape. Within the UK, Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) echo this sentiment and suggest that limited exposure to HE within the family may result in an absence of 'transgenerational family scripts' (p. 57) around university participation. Arguably, moving into the university environment with no family history of attendance, translates into new knowledge acquisition for both students and their families (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017).

Importantly, the FiF category encompasses a diversity of students and not all will experience the same level of educational disadvantage. There are also multiple definitions of what constitutes this status but in most countries this is demarcated by parental education levels. Again, this is not a universally applied definition with differences in the levels and types of education considered. For example in America, those students whose parents have completed college level courses are still considered as being first in their family (or first generation) and in some cases, parental education levels are combined with other factors such as income level and class affiliations (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). The research outlined in this presentation refers to FiF students as being those who have no one in their immediate family including parents, partners, siblings or children who have previously attended a university. This research sought to explore the FiF experience from a range of perspectives drawing on both surveys and interview methodologies conducted with the learners and their significant others. The intent is to avoid presenting this cohort in terms of deficit or lack and instead, by deeply exploring the narratives of learners and those closest to them, unpack the nuances of this higher education journey.

## Context

The last decade has seen enrolments in Australian universities grow at an unprecedented level. In 2017, the total number of students attending university was estimated at just over 1.3 million, with just over 1 million of these being Australian nationals. Enrolment figures have grown consistently in preceding years, with a greater diversity of people now accessing this educational system. One of the more significant of these groups are those from low socio-economic (LSES) backgrounds. The most recent report from Universities Australia, the peak HE body, indicated that in the last decade the numbers of LSES students enrolled in university has increased by a staggering 50% (Universities Australia, 2017).

There is little doubt that the Australian higher education sector has been very successful at attracting students from a greater diversity of backgrounds but there is still work to be done in terms of retention and completion (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). For those who depart early from university there are multiple repercussions including financial, emotional and social impacts for both learners and families (Pitman, 2013). This is particularly the case for those who are the first in their family to come to university; these educational pioneers may have an audience that spans the generations and are often potential role models that open up the educational futures of others in the community (O'Shea, 2016b).

While this category encapsulates a significant proportion of the global student population, retention rates are lower than their second or third generation peers. Rates of high departure are particularly noted in countries such as the United States (Chen, 2005) and Canada (Lehmann, 2009), where statistics on this student cohort are collected in a systematic fashion. Within Australia, collecting national data on this cohort is hampered by the fact that first in family status is only reported institutionally and often based solely on self-reporting of parental educational levels. This group also currently falls outside Australian equity definitions, so these students may unwittingly slip through possible 'cracks in the system'. Previous research in this field has indicated how one cohort of FiF students described 'feeling isolated and lonely, feelings [...] exacerbated by uncertainty related to university language, expectations and protocols of behaviour' (O'Shea, 2016a, p. 62).

## Students who are 'first' to attend university: Considerations and Issues

The literature points to a number of issues that those students who are the first in their families to attend university may encounter both prior to and after enrolment. Importantly, much of the research has identified the intersectionality of this cohort, for example in Canada and the UK, FiF status is often linked to working class backgrounds (Lehmann, 2009). Similarly, FiF students in recent Australian research have reported varying levels of economic stress, rurality, Indigeneity as well as disability issues during interviews and also in surveys (O'Shea, 2017; O'Shea et al., 2017). While this is not to suggest that all FiF students are similarly traversed by a myriad of equity considerations but rather this intersectionality does point to the validity of focusing attention on this cohort in order to examine the specificities of their university experience.

Based on a review of 70 studies conducted across the USA, Germany, UK and Canada, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) argue that this cohort has a higher probability of departing university early and provide a number of reasons for their at-risk categorisation. Primarily, this student cohort is 'more likely to be from lower income and lower status-occupational homes; they tend to be older and they are more likely to belong to an ethnic minority...' (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p. 321). Such demographics can in turn lead to a limited sense of belonging articulated in relation to the university setting, resulting in a more complex transition to this environment and for some, difficulty in 'mastering the college role' (p. 330).

This sense of dislocation is echoed in Thomas and Quinn's study (2007) where FiF students reported a deep sense of isolation within the university environment. This sentiment articulated in terms of feeling like a 'nameless' face in the crowd, having limited knowledge about who could provide support and perceptions that institutional support services were not appropriate for people like themselves (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). These insights ultimately leading the authors to conclude that for this cohort creating 'a level of social "fit" proved to be problematic' (p. 92). Similarly, Dumais and Ward explain:

...first generation students do not have the same sense of entitlement or belonging as non-first generation students. Without having a "feel for the game," these students are at a disadvantage relative to their non-first-generation peers.... (2010, p. 250)

Such issues do not only emerge upon attending university but may also impact upon decisions made in relation to educational choices and trajectories. For example, FiF student

may be more likely to restrict their choices around educational institutions and degree programs, which may include choosing institutions that are closer geographically or socially to the student rather than seeking out the more high-status institutions (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Indeed, Reay (2016) argues that the HE system in England remains both deeply 'stratified' and 'hierarchical' for certain student cohorts (p.1). For Reay (2016) both the process of getting into university and the experiences of different student groups within the sector remain 'powerfully classed' (p.4). Within Australia, it is difficult to measure exactly which universities FiF students favour but certainly those institutions located in regional areas anecdotally report higher proportions of this cohort.

Research also suggests that the parents and caregivers may be less involved in these students' educational choices (Reay, 2016). This is perhaps not surprising if we consider that those closest to FiF learners generally have little or no experience of HE. This reduced exposure to the sector can result in limited possession within the family of the 'skills, habits, and knowledge needed to effectively assist' learners (Tramonte & Willms, 2009, p. 201). A sense of disempowerment for both learners and those closest to them can ensue, attending university then exacting an emotional return that is described as being 'most pronounced amongst students with no previous familial experience of higher education, where there is no reservoir of knowledge to draw upon' (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008, p.569).

## Research Design

This paper draws on data derived from a number of Australian studies (O'Shea, 2013, 2014, 2015-2016; O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2015; O'Shea, 2017-2019) that have been conducted across various institutions and also with students who are studying in both on-campus and online modes. Cumulatively, this research has sought to advance understanding of how those students who are the first in their families to attend university enact success and persistence within the tertiary sector, navigate transition into this environment, manage competing identities and negotiate aspirations for self and others. Projects span the last five years and have been supported by a range of institutional and national competitive grants (including the Australian Research Council and the Australian Government Department of Education (formerly Office for Learning & Teaching)). Overall, this work has been applied in nature with a range of resources and online materials produced that have been implemented within the HE outreach and equity space as well as within the broader Australian educational sector (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2015).

Methodologically, the projects were all deeply qualitative in approach and since 2013, have involved over 200 in-depth interviews conducted with university students from across Australia who identify as being the first in their family or community to attend university. Participants were studying in a range of modes (online, blended and face-to-face) and also were at various stages of their studies including some who were doing pre-entry enabling programs. These interviews have been complemented by online surveys with students (n= 487), family members (n= 93) and surveys from equity stakeholders in the field (n= 218). This large body of data has informed peer reviewed journal publications, books and practitioner pieces (May, Delahunty, Stone & O'Shea, 2016; O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty & May, 2016; Stone, O'Shea et al., 2016, O'Shea et al., 2017). The publications have been further complemented by practical end user resources ([www.firstinfamily.com.au](http://www.firstinfamily.com.au)) and student support initiatives.

Drawing on the findings of these studies, this paper is specifically focussed on the following three themes:

- ways of defining or 'knowing' the first in family cohort,
- the role of family and community within the HE educational context for FiF students
- recommendations for supporting these students that account for their specific learning contexts.

Drawing on some of the many FiF student narratives derived from these studies, this paper seeks to highlight the various ways that students and their families regarded university. This includes reflection on how HE attendance reverberated within the household, the responses this attendance received, as well as recommendations for institutional approaches to transition and retention.

## Ways of 'knowing'

While the literature points to how FiF learners are often assumed to be somewhat deficit in their skills and knowledges, it is important to recognise that the limited apriori knowledge of university should not overshadow the fact that these individuals may well be the 'high-fliers' or academic achievers within their family or social setting. For example, the students in this research pointed to the important role they played in encouraging and supporting others in the family and community to consider higher education. For example, one student interviewed in O'Shea (2013) reflected how:

My mother now uses me as an example for my little brother and so it's that extra tool in the house to get him to do something and even with my older brother – because we've seen the positive impact it's [university] had on my life and they know the ins and outs – I tell them everything so they can see that it's not the scary, unknown thing anymore, it's known and it's not scary, it's wonderful. It's really changed the dynamics of the household. (Nigel, 26, single)

Rather than focus on the deficits or the knowledge that individuals might lack, it is important to continually foreground the existing strengths or cultural capitals of learners. For example, in these studies older FiF learners frequently reflected upon how skills and knowledges they had acquired in previous work or life roles assisted them within the university environment. Drawing on the work of Yosso (2005), O'Shea (2016) argues that there are a diversity of capitals that older FiF students utilise but often these remain 'somewhat invisible and uncelebrated' (O'Shea, 2018 in-press) within the university environment. For example, a number of these older learners described skills in maintaining their aspirations for education in the face of perceived barriers to access. Similarly their ability to draw upon a 'resistance capital' (Yosso, 2005) provided impetus to keep going despite difficulties, a personal strength largely attributed to previous life experiences or skills that had required persistence:

Tenacity, stubbornness and thinking I'm not going to let this beat me. This is ridiculous. This is just stupid. This is just a little blip. I'm not going to let it beat me. That's probably what's got me through. (Adele, 62, Single, 2 adult children)

when I was younger, a lot of people said “No, you’ll never go to uni” – it was their perception of that...it was a little bit of fear in a way, sort of not going but no, it was just like last year, as I said, my son turned 18, my eldest one, he’s 19 this year and I was like “No, I’m going. That’s it”. (Lena, 43, Sole Parent, 2 children)

(Quotes are derived from O’Shea, 2014)

Given the increasing diversity of the university population in Australia, it important to identify student populations in terms of strengths rather than deficits or weaknesses. In other words, changing policy and discourse to implicitly recognise that those students who are older, those who have taken a non-linear pathway to university (rather than coming straight from school) or who have multiple responsibilities in their lives are also those students who, given the right encouragement and supports, may have the necessary resilience and motivation to continue in their studies (O’Shea, et al., 2017). However, importantly institutions need to deliberately foreground the importance of these attributes to learners in a celebratory manner as this may have benefits to their retention, persistence and success.

## Family roles

Within the research and literature on educational aspirations and achievement there are clear links made between parents’ attitudes and experiences of education and the educational trajectories and success of their child dependents (Gorard, Rees, Fevre & Welland, 2001). These previous studies have proposed that levels of parental education are key influences on children’s academic success (Feinstein, Duckworth & Sabates, 2004) with these levels similarly related to the educational choices and persistence patterns of FiF learners during post compulsory schooling (Knighton, 2002; OECD, 2016). Yet there remains an assumed negative correlation between parental educational levels and university attendance patterns (McMillan, 2005) with lower educational qualifications of parents equated to poorer educational outcomes for dependents (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Thayer, 2000; Tramonte & Willms, 2009; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). Importantly, such negative correlations should not overshadow the very key roles that parents and family members can play in educational trajectories. For example, Wilks and Wilson (2012) argue that educational aspirations are based upon:

the influence of parents and siblings (cultural capital) and the local environment (social capital) especially in the last two years of primary and the first two years of secondary school. (Wilks & Wilson, 2012, p. 83)

In the various studies referred to in this paper, students repeatedly reflected upon this familial influence; frequently it was parents and grandparents that were cited as being a fundamental source of encouragement for learners’ educational undertakings (O’Shea et al, 2017). Indeed when it came to a close examination of students’ narratives, there seemed to be a degree of reciprocity that occurred when someone in the family returned to education. The research indicated how these learners could both act as ‘cultural change agents’, generating new capitals for parents, siblings and other family members (O’Shea, 2014b) but equally family members could be the catalyst that enabled this educational journey to be imagined (O’Shea et al., 2017). For the older students such encouragement was often articulated in relation to dependent children, as Rose explained:

I've got my family and that's what's pushed me in the direction I'm going. It's made me see I guess – opened up whole other options like I would never have considered being a teacher before I had my two boys; I think it's just helped me to go, "This is what I want. (Rose, 28, B.Arts, Married, Two Children)

(Quote derived from O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2015)

Whilst for the younger students interviewed, the voices and words of others indicated how family members had 'a very personal investment in their university success' (O'Shea, Stone, May & Delahunty, 2016, p. 8). One example is Lachlan, who at 24 and in the final year of his Law degree, sums up how his own university experience is rooted within his father's personal and vocational history:

Dad always tells me the story, back in his day you didn't get to choose, you did what you were told. He never wanted to be an apprentice mechanic; he wanted to be a pilot but only rich people could become pilots and he wasn't rich. He was just an ordinary kid from the suburbs ... So, the way he thinks about it, I think, and from his point of view, university is a good opportunity, it can open a lot of doors and for that reason alone if you're good enough to go to university you should. Desires and that kind of thing go out the window. (Lachlan, 24, B. Law, 4th Year)

(Quote derived from O'Shea, Stone, May & Delahunty, 2016)

Lachlan's narrative thread was not unique and similarly echoed by other students (O'Shea et al, 2016) many of whom referred to the generational expectations surrounding their university activities; collectively these learners were often living out the dreams, ambitions and desires of family members.

Overall the data from these projects (O'Shea, 2013, 2014; O'Shea, et al., 2015; O'Shea, 2017) suggested that both 'family' and 'community' are embedded within the HE journey of these FiF students. This is not to say that this influence was always positive in nature but rather to acknowledge its influence and presence within students' narratives (O'Shea, 2015; O'Shea et al, 2017). Interestingly, family resistance to educational plans, when described, was often constructed as providing a necessary impetus or resource for some learners to keep going, often a rich foundation for persistence behaviours. In their study with working class FiF students in the UK, Thomas and Quinn (2007) have similarly identified how parents were rarely only passive 'bystanders' (p. 86) instead many of the students reflected on how their parents and families actively 'shaped' their educational choices. Yet, in the HE sector we tend to focus on the 'individual' student rather than the learner as a contextualised entity that is intersected by a variety of biographical and social factors. Repeatedly in interviews and surveys, participants reflected how this attendance at university initiated new forms of capital within the home place, new discourses of knowledge and importantly intergenerational impacts that had possible benefits for all.

With these points in mind, the concluding section of this paper will explore the implications for supporting FiF students in order to assist them in achieving their educational goals.

## Supporting FiF Students

Overall, the research referred to within this paper points to how the cultural baggage that first in family students arrive with is not necessarily a deficit but also an asset. However, often institutions and policy focuses on the learner and by individualising deficit or lack, the responsibility of rectifying this situation lies with the person rather than the overarching structures and factors that may serve to restrict and curtail educational undertakings. In the case of university settings, if students are perceived as lacking then solutions are frequently framed as remedial and require the student to be acted upon (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Such a situation arguably leads to further losses as: 'The potential contribution of these people to higher education is ignored and instead they are assumed to require 'fixing' or normalizing.' (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p. 102).

With this in mind, the following recommendations are proposed that seek to support learners in all their diversity, while specifically derived from studies with FiF students, arguably the following five recommendations are applicable to broader student populations, particularly given the varied nature of Australian university cohorts:

1. Bring significant others on the journey with these students – avoid engaging solely with the individual and instead acknowledge that learners are deeply embedded within social and family networks. Involving these networks in meaningful ways can assist students to persist in their university journey rather than depart.
2. Create networks that recognise learners as being complex entities that come to university with a diversity of informal learning experiences. Initiate productive ways to capitalise on these apriori experiences through opportunities for students to legitimately engage in university life. One approach to this is to introduce meaningful 'students as partners' ventures that are underpinned by a recognition that the *'students not only identify areas for enhancement, but ways to carry out that enhancement, as well as helping to facilitate implementation where possible'* (Williamson & Jones, 2014, p.6).
3. Foreground the FiF student experience by utilising FiF alumni and their narratives to expose the multiple pathways that students can take into and through the HE sector. Draw upon these experiences to assist FiF students to progress their lives/careers post-degree as well. This exposure to FiF student success stories does not have to be limited to alumni, current FiF students (and staff) can also provide insight into the intricacies of higher education participation and provide advice about how to best navigate this terrain.
4. Avoid assuming that FiF learners are deficit or lacking in knowledges and instead provide outreach and support that builds upon existing strengths and skills. For example, rather than commit to 'raising aspirations' of students from disadvantaged backgrounds it is more productive to value existing aspirations and recognise these as fluid concepts that evolve and change over the life course. Indeed a more

'nuanced' understanding of this concept could productively distinguish between raising 'aspirations' and simply keeping existing aspirations 'on-track' (Cumming et al, 2012, p. 77).

5. For FiF students in particular, the need for formalised and in-depth careers education is essential, as there may be few opportunities to obtain this knowledge elsewhere. The most recent Australian Government Discussion Paper on Student Retention and Progression (HESP, 2017) identifies poor transition practices between high school and university as a key risk factor in attrition. Providing targeted careers and course advice for at-risk cohorts both prior to enrollment and also, as they proceed through their degree programs would assist in better degree choices and importantly, highlight how relevant work and volunteer experience is foundational to enriched graduate opportunities.

## Conclusion

There is no question that universities in Australia have succeeded in attracting students from all walks of life, providing access to rich learning experiences across the sector. However, we need to remain vigilant that this 'open door' is not simply a 'revolving door' (Blythman & Orr, 2001-2002, p232), particularly with the most recent student attrition figures indicating that student departure consistently remains a significant 15% of the total university population (HESP, 2017). I would argue that this vigilance is particularly needed for those students who are the first in their families to come to university. For this cohort, the decision to attend university is both deeply embodied at a personal level and also, evokes heavy investment from those around the learners. As the research in this paper has indicated, these learners are often being 'watched on the sidelines' and as a result the intergenerational implications of deciding to leave can have long-term impacts not only for the individual but also for those closest to them. It is vital then that universities proactively ensure that the educational futures of not only existing students but also future cohorts are not prematurely foreclosed; ultimately ensuring that being 'the first' to attend university becomes the exception in our higher education system rather than an enduring norm.

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Associate Professor Sarah O'Shea leads the Adult, Vocational and Higher Education discipline in the School of Education, at University of Wollongong. Sarah has over 20 years experience teaching in universities and has published widely on issues related to educational access and equity. Since 2011, Sarah has obtained over \$1 million dollars in research funding, all of which explores educational equity in the HE environment. In 2016, Sarah was awarded an [ARC Discovery project](#) exploring the persistence and retention of students who are the first in their families to come to university. This national study builds upon an [Australian Government Teaching and Learning Fellowship](#) (2015-2016) and consolidates a decade of work in the student retention field, which has focussed on students from a diversity of backgrounds.

During her career, Sarah has also received numerous awards for teaching excellence including a national Australian Award for University Teaching Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning in 2012.

# Innovations in Student Learning in the Creative and Performing Arts

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## Abstract

Student learning in the creative and performing arts holds a unique place in arts-based education in the Higher Education sector. This paper highlights a model that captures changing trends in arts-based education, and shares approaches to delivery at a leading performing arts institution in Australia. It demonstrates an institutional shift from a training model that focused on professional skills development in the creative and performing arts, to one that incorporates an academic and Higher education focus with research informed practice, theoretical foundations of learning, and academic outcomes and credentials. The integrated approach sets a new trajectory for students, and offers greater opportunities for learning and engagement in the sector. The approach highlights unique measures for assessing experiential learning, the 'lived experience', and collaborative engagement across multiple disciplines that culminate in a collective dramatic performance. It incorporates the development of an institutional quality assurance system, mapped to national Higher Education standards and benchmarked internationally, and integrates strategies for external engagement in the arts to facilitate professional learning. The paper seeks to demonstrate innovations in arts-based education, identify challenges encountered, and showcase aspects of the uniquely integrated model as implemented at a leading creative and performing arts institution in Australia.

**Key Words:** creative and performing-arts, practice-oriented research, innovation in student learning, quality assurance

## Introduction

Learning and teaching in the creative and performing arts holds a unique place in arts-based education in the Higher Education sector. As the sector responds to challenges in the Higher Education environment, innovates and continuously evolves, so too must the distinct area of the creative and performing arts. It needs to ensure that the approaches to teaching and learning, the knowledge acquisition, the professional skills development and the collaboratively attained unique 'lived experiences' are continuously enhanced to provide a quality learning experience for all students. This is a tall ask in a field that demands not only professional performance skills of the highest order, but also academic capabilities, as well as interdisciplinary and interpersonal skills including emotional intelligence, communication, and resilience. As Rosie Perkins (2013) asserts, "learning (in the arts) is a constructed phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between people and their world" (p.199).

This paper provides insights into a model that captures changing trends in arts-based education, and a proven framework for delivery at a leading creative and performing arts institution in Australia. It demonstrates a dynamic institutional shift from a training model that focused mainly on appropriate professional skills development in the creative and performing arts to one that incorporates an academic and higher education focus with research informed practice, theoretical foundations of learning, and associated academic outcomes. The research focused approach requires higher levels of learning, critical thinking, knowledge discovery and knowledge creation, as well as knowledge application. The newly devised integrated approach sets a 'new trajectory' for students and 'new credentials' that create academic pathways to higher performance levels and leadership in the arts (e.g. at the Masters and Doctoral levels or AQF levels 8 and 9), and potentially greater opportunities for engagement in the creative and performing arts domain.

The model presented also highlights an important element of student learning in the performing arts, one which requires being acutely aware of and in touch with the broader context of the world in which we live, to be able to understand, synthesise and convincingly reflect the elements of life in creative activities and performances. It further highlights the interconnectedness and the collaborative nature of arts based learning and education, where productions, whether viewed from the perspective of being written, directed, designed, staged, acted, choreographed or illuminated by technicians - make every learning experience a real life and unique one. As Tudor (2005) asserts: 'By conscientiously focusing on the shared nature of the lived experience, and attending to the issue of embodiment for both teacher and learner, it is possible to better appreciate how creativity operates holistically in the day-to-day conduct of human life and learning' (p.4).

The paper draws attention to key aspects of arts-based education, culture and experiential learning theory that underpin the model, including Dewey's (1934) philosophies of practical activity, Schon's (1983) reflective practice and learning by doing, and Heidegger's (1962) emotional and creative 'being-in-the-world' (p.195) experience. It also reflects O'Loughlin's (1997) notion of 'creatural existence' which better situates people in their environment and facilitates learning through the senses; the influential work of Kolb (2015) in extending the principles and practices of experiential learning; and the work of cognitive psychologists such as Stevens and Leach (2015), who provide authority for becoming, belonging, doing and experiencing.

In addition to highlighting the opportunities for student learning, the paper draws attention to some of the challenges in addressing the intersection of learning outcomes in arts based

education, and assessment in the newly devised integrated approach to academic and professional learning. It highlights, in particular, unique measures for assessing experiential learning, the 'lived experience' (Kolb 2015), and collaborative engagement across multiple disciplines that culminate in a collective dramatic performance. This includes a focus on the 'diagnostic' approach to assessment (Crisp, 2012), its targeted intervention strategies, revised learning structures and encouragement of appropriate student support for learners in the creative and performing arts.

Finally, the paper showcases the parallel development and embedding of a rigorous institutional quality assurance system underpinning the model, mapped to national higher education standards (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) which regulates the Australian Higher Education sector through the Higher Education Standards Framework 2015 (HESF15), industry based disciplinary expectations, and international benchmarking. The latter enables student mobility in search of global experience and exposure to further learning in the creative and performing arts. To this end, and to strengthen broader community links, the model incorporates external engagement with leading artists and performers, guest lecturers, creative thought leaders, renowned academics and researchers. It also incorporates student internships, institutional visits and industry placements – experiences that contribute to enhancing student learning.

## Background

Arts based education has a special place in the Higher Education sector in Australia and is provided by highly specialised institutions with expertise across many creative arts disciplines. In New South Wales, the five major institutions include the National Art School, Sydney College of the Arts, UNSW Art and Design, East Sydney Technical College and University of Technology Sydney. Also facilitating student learning in the creative and performing arts are the (federally funded) ARTS8 organisations which include: in music, the Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO) and Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM); in dance the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association and the Australian Ballet School (ABS); in circus, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus (FFFC) and National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA); and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS) and National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in the creative, performing and screen arts (Department of Communication and the Arts 2017). These institutions, like all other Higher Education institutions, have had to re-think, reposition, and revitalize their courses and curricula to address a changing education environment, as well as changing expectations from a range of stakeholders including students, parents, employers, government, industry and accreditation agencies. This paper focuses on the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA), and demonstrates its transition from an essentially professional training institution to one with a merged and evolving model that brings together professional and academic learning, research informed practice, industry training, and the 'lived experience' (Kolb 2015).

## Learning in the Creative and Performing Arts: Case Study of NIDA

NIDA's continuum of educational opportunity began in 1959, when Robert Quentin, founding director of NIDA held his first class, and the first production was staged in the Physics and Science lecture theatres of UNSW. By 1962, NIDA moved to the White House and the Old

Tote Theatre Company was born. 1978 saw the commissioning of the Old Tin Sheds and a move to Anzac Parade Kensington. This was the beginning of an expansion of both physical scale and educational breadth in the creative and performing arts, culminating in the opening of the NIDA Graduate School in 2015. In line with its genesis, NIDA's traditional curriculum was one that had focused on elite training, discipline skills and expertise, and was steeped in industry practice for actors, reflecting a professional training regime. Training in acting focused on performance skills, music, dance, movement and voice for professional work on the main stage. To enhance student learning and career opportunities required a shift of focus from a professionally positioned learning and teaching model, to one which actively engaged with broader academic knowledge and rigor, research and scholarship of practice, quality assured course offerings, and acknowledgement and understanding of the greater complexity of the learning process these developments entailed. It also required compliance with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF 2015). It has been a process of change accompanied by both challenges and advancement, with the current status of NIDA's education initiatives demonstrating the successes.

## Advancement in Academic Course Directions

NIDA has successfully negotiated changes in attitude, curricula offerings and approaches to learning and teaching in its transition to the Higher Education sector, despite the challenges. A major indication of the level of advancement is the shift to formally accredited course offerings at the Undergraduate, Graduate and Vocational Education levels as indicated in Figure 1 below

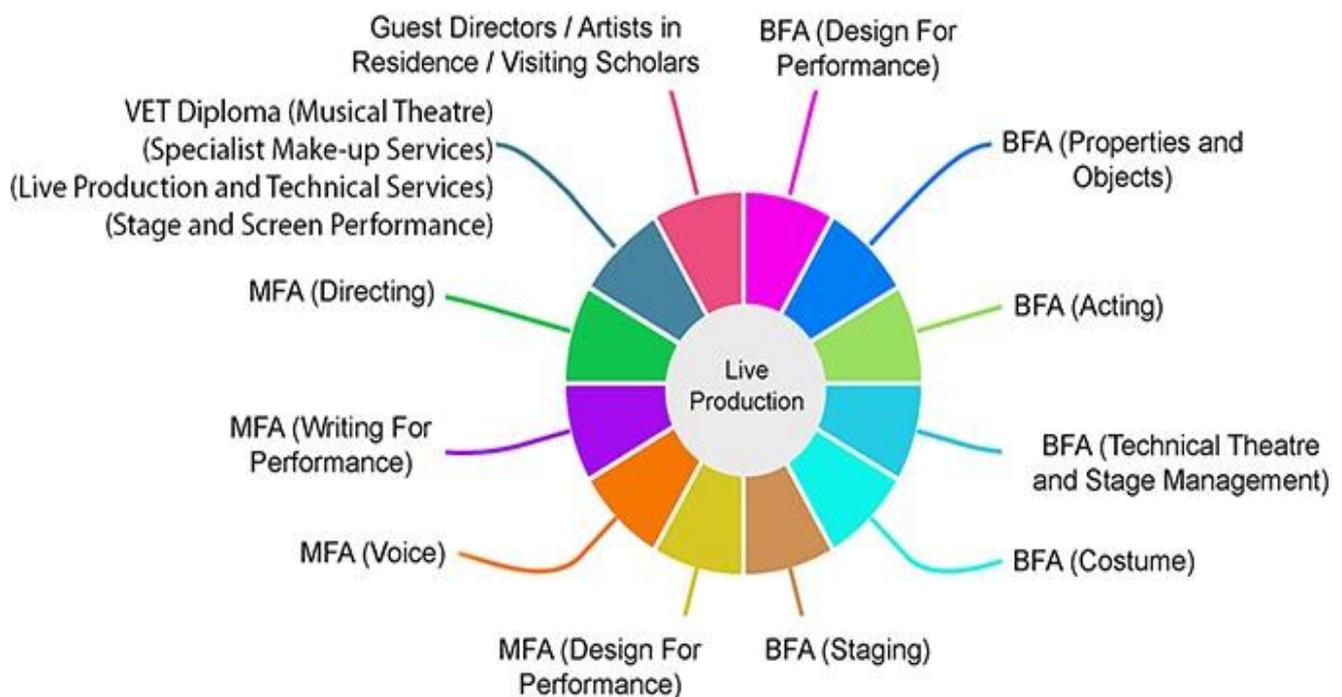


Figure 1. Course Offerings and Collective Live Production Model. NIDA 2017 Source: Adapted from Ramburuth and Laird (2018). In Chemi and Du (due 2018).

Figure 1 also provides an overview of the collective inputs now delivered by NIDA where Undergraduate (BFA), Graduate (MFA) and Vocational Education (VET) staff and students work collaboratively on newly devised learning pathways that will facilitate greater learning breadth and opportunities. It reflects also the inclusion of professional artists, guest lecturers, scholars in residence and thought leaders who bring their expertise to strengthen the student learning experience. These collective inputs outline changes to course offerings and curriculum in line with contemporary requirements for a sustainable and dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century conservatoire approach to learning.

NIDA's first Bachelor of Dramatic Arts awards were launched in 2000. Its innovative approach to the creative and performing arts was further championed by the introduction of the Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2014, with specialisations in Acting, Design for Performance, Costume, Properties and Objects, Technical Theatre and Stage Management and Staging, as indicated in Figure 1. These developments reflect NIDA's growing commitment to broadening its discipline offerings and extending opportunities for its undergraduate students. The new approach has created an interesting and dynamic blend of performance and practice (its primary remit), and requisite academic knowledge of discipline theory for the creative and performing arts. Theoretical foundations include areas such as design and cultural theory, anthropology, cognitive biology, technical innovation and material culture etc., reflecting the strength of the restructure.

To provide learning and training for leadership in the creative and performing arts, NIDA has recently developed a suite of Master of Fine Arts courses, which have the potential to strengthen the arts-landscape in the future. These include the MFA (Directing), MFA (Writing for Performance), MFA (Voice), MFA (Design for Performance) and MFA (Cultural Leadership). The MFA (Creative Producing) is yet to be launched. The student experience in these courses extends to the leadership and advocacy level in the sector.

In addition, Vocational Diploma courses were offered for the first time at NIDA from 2014, providing further access to students interested in pursuing training in the creative and performing arts. Diplomas of Musical Theatre, Specialist Make-up Services, Live Production and Technical Services, and Stage and Screen Performance are currently being offered. In further innovations, cross fertilization of practice and collaborations (in well managed artistic activities) have seen the development of NIDA-wide creative networks, and 'de-siloed' practice (Courage, 2017) between cohorts, with positive effect on learners. Below is an example of Diploma of Musical Theatre students performing in their showcase of talent across several disciplines.



*Figure 2. Diploma of Musical Theatre Showcase. NIDA 2017*

NIDA, like most institutes transitioning to Higher Education, initially (and appropriately) leaned on pedagogical models akin to the universities (lecture / tutorial models). As it has matured, NIDA is redefining its own institutional identity based in the 'practice' for which it is known, strongly focused on collaboration and studio work, improvisation and the power of imaginative play for authentic and generative embodied learning.

## Newly Devised Model for Delivery

Flowing from the changes in the NIDA curriculum, course offerings and professional training, as outlined above, a new model for delivery has been devised as presented in Figure 3 below. It reflects the blending of the key dimensions of the NIDA education agenda including academic learning and knowledge acquisition, research and knowledge creation, extended professional development and training, and learning through external engagement, all in a quality assured institutional context. Central to the model is student learning.

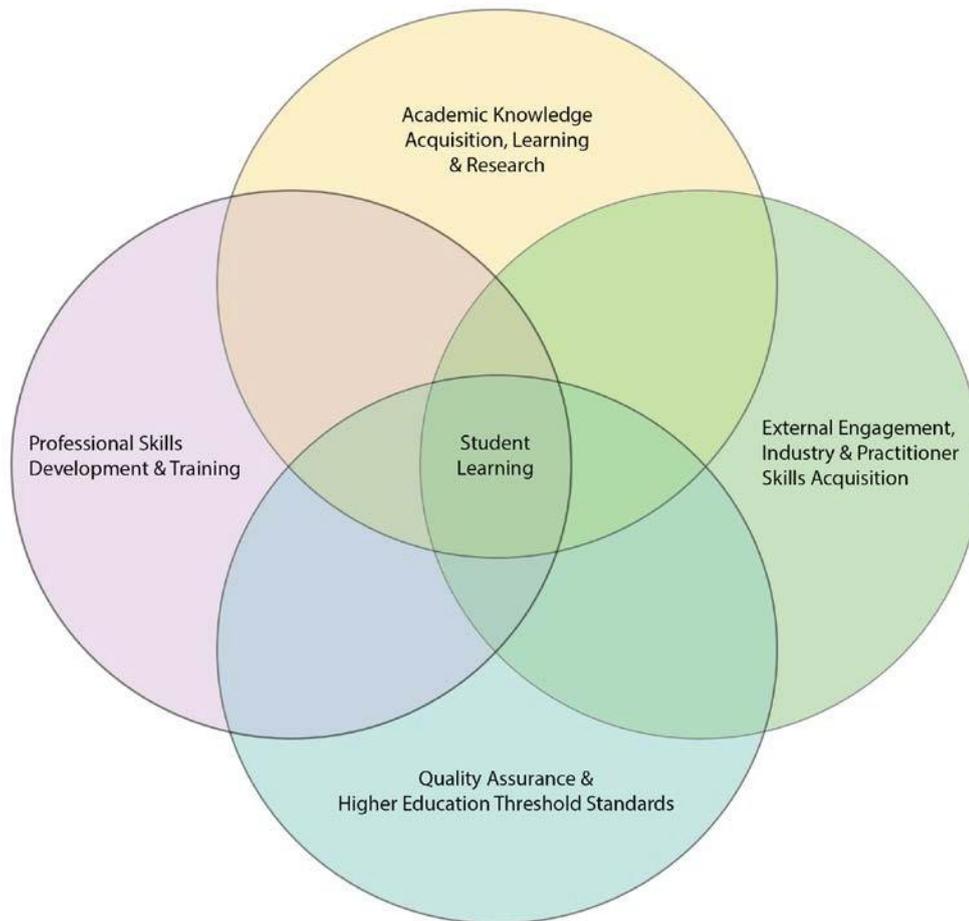


Figure 3. NIDA Creative and Performing Arts Learning Model. NIDA 2017

Source: Adapted from Ramburuth, and Laird. 2017. In Chemi and Du (due 2018).

In this model, and at the intersection of professional skills development, academic knowledge acquisition and knowledge creation, and external industry and community experiences, are the opportunities for practice across the disciplines and new learning pathways. There are also the opportunities for enhanced industry experience and improved career prospects. The NIDA 2017 *Creative and Performing Arts Student Learning Model* is a work in progress and will continue to improve with the intent of enriching the student experience. Key aspects relating to implementation of the model are discussed below.

## Conservatoire-style learning in the creative and performing arts

A significant feature of the learning context at NIDA for all its course offerings (Undergraduate, Graduate, Diploma), is the conservatoire approach. The conservatoire approach to learning delivery situates practice at the fore, where students engage with a re-imagined 'master-apprentice' relationship of practice informing skills development (Carey 2010, p.1). Conservatoires UK (CUK), representing the voice of conservatoire education in the UK (<http://www.conservatoiresuk.ac.uk/>), stresses the strength of offering a

personal education in the arts, an approach which offers “every student the education and training that is right for their needs”. A vital part of the conservatoire approach is the close

working relationship between teachers and learners who often work on a one to one basis or in extremely small groups. In this approach, students not only learn from the academic, artistic and technological knowledge of the teaching staff but also from each other.

Small specialist groups facilitate a range of learning interactions in a safe space in this model, a space in which students are encouraged to think nimbly and flexibly through their own creative practice whilst being guided by discipline expert practitioner-academics. Students are able to frame their learning through whole of body experience. The conservatoire approach at NIDA encourages students to become creative risk- makers, risk-takers and problem-solvers, who can function in highly socialised and non-traditional learning environments. It also is a safe space and learning environment in which students explore interpersonal relationships, work in close physical and intellectual proximity – a specialist aspect of learning in the creative and performing arts. Figure 4 provides an indication of the artistic proximity (and creative context) in which students at NIDA learn, work and perform, and indicates the interpersonal skills necessary for actors in live productions.



*Figure 4. 'Eurydike and Orpheus'. Live Production. NIDA 2017*

The creative and performing arts industries require a complex range of 'soft' knowledge and skill sets to be attained by students, to sustain their performance in the sector. Curiosity, emotional intelligence, empathy, resilience, self-confidence, bravery, leadership, the capacity to develop professional networks and relationships are capabilities which contribute significantly to a student's success at NIDA. Students are guided towards reflective practice, and are mentored and work toward self-awareness. Peer-to-peer learning in the conservatoire model contributes to these 'learnings'. Measures of impact and success (in addition to measures of assessment in the academic components of courses undertaken at NIDA), include the ability to attain work in the disciplines and in the creative and performing arts industry.

## Experiential learning and the lived experience

In addition to formal learning in academic courses, NIDA students undertake small-scale experimentations in safe learning environments as foundations for complex projects in which improvisation and experimentation are core. Through their 'lived experience' and learning in studios, workshops and theatres, in which they replicate life experiences, students activate their senses and responses to stimulus in unique ways. David Kolb (2015) describes this practice of 'experiential' learning as ... "The learner being (is) directly in touch with the reality being studied" ... and "the emphasis is often on direct sense experience" (p.xviii).

In their learning, NIDA students explore and develop resourcefulness in areas beyond traditional learning paradigms when engaged in the performing arts. The capacity to act and react creatively, to challenge and be challenged and to change, are essential. In addition, to developing critical, analytical and reasoning skills within the context of the traditional academic curriculum, students learn to question and respond in the creative and performing contexts of their disciplines. Tudor (2005) emphasises this in his comment that "Creative modes of learning deal not so much with 'what is' but with 'what-might-be' using rhetorical questions such as 'What if?' and 'Why not?'" (p.9). Critical and flexible thinking supports the creative practice through which students elicit a range of propositions and responses to stimuli, perspectives which Ramburuth and Laird (in Chemi and Du, due 2018) highlight:

Iterative processes, experimentation, using new and unexpected materials in unfamiliar ways, and research undertaken as practice are methodologies that prompt critical thinking suitable for life-long learning... Conceptualising, testing, critically evaluating and reiterating outcomes draw on design thinking, with its inherent iterative framework, as a powerful pedagogical model that underpins practice-oriented education (p.92).

It should be noted that 'failure' is embraced in these learning contexts (Edmondson, 2011), and opportunities for iterative thinking helps students critically evaluate and re-evaluate their independent decision-making; and shared judgments are negotiated by developing trust and mutual respect within the cohorts. Rosie Perkins (2012) cites Pierre Bourdieu: "Practice... draws together the individuals with the social spaces in which they are positioned... "learning (is) viewed not only as a process of skill acquisition but also a process of 'doing' and 'becoming' through participation in social life" (p.198).

## Collaboration as a key to learning in the performing arts

Foundational to the new model are the core principles of collaboration and communication which are embedded in all learning at NIDA. As noted previously, a complex set of relationships is developed through this blended and collaborative model, scaffolded for BFA to MFA students, from theory to practice, from productions to exhibitions. Ramburuth and Laird (due 2018) assert that productive engagements and collaborations evolve in a number of ways, and note that "Relationships within collaborative teams are developed through the production research phase, through conceptual discussions, production meetings, rehearsals in studios and theatres, and finally through the live production itself" (p. 93).

In relation to communication and learning, Zanner and Stabb (in Rumiantsev et al. 2016) note that "sharing, exchanging and communicating are important assets when choosing to be a performer" (p.3). This complex set of relationships that develops, and needs to be developed, is based on empathy and productive communication through the use of 'shared languages' for creative and performing arts practices. The authors also note that there is yet

another relationship that is developed (for which students must be trained), that of a relationship with the audience during live performances. This is deemed to be a complex relationship, which at times could be predictable and at other times quite unpredictable.

Collaborations *within* the courses and cohorts at NIDA provide for rich academic and professional learning experiences for students. Collaborations *across* the disciplines provide for working towards cumulative performances that require inputs from multiple disciplinary areas in the arts domain as indicated in the *Collective Live Production Model* in Figure 1. Rumiantsevi et al. (2016 p.2) identify collaboration as a “fundamental skill for contemporary practitioners in the arts”. Other researchers such as Gregory (2010) note that collaborative learning and practice strengthens students’ ability to bridge cultures, take ownership of their own learning, and develop professional industry-based behaviors. “Instilling a sense of ownership and responsibility in the both the process and in the final product” notes Gregory (2010), can be shown to positively impact on students’ critical and flexible thinking skills, as they negotiate and problem- solve for a shared purpose (p.388).

Engaging with a range of discipline skills in unique communities of creative-arts practice, students develop new knowledge, curiosity and empathy through the work of others in the NIDA learning context. Furthermore, characteristics of trust and mutual respect are fostered which are essential for creative and strategic work-oriented relationships. Peter Renshaw’s ‘Postlude’ on collaborative learning in higher music education stresses that “for a collaboration to ‘work’ in practice and to be a catalyst for development, it is essential to create conditions based on shared trust” (2013 p.237). The new model provides ample opportunity for such collaborative learning and practice in the academic and professional contexts.

An excellent example of external collaborations is a performance between NIDA and NICA (National Institute of Circus Arts) students, namely, ‘Eurydike and Orpheus’ staged at NIDA’s Parade Theatre in June 2017. This production saw professional relationships develop between circus artists, physical theatre stream actors, technical and multi-disciplinary experts from both organisations. Peer learning gained in the live performance model brought greater learning opportunities for NIDA students, as they worked with NICA performers to reshape and redefine their shared practice and perform in a cross-disciplinary context.



*Figure 5. 'Eurydike and Orpheus'. NIDA–NICA collaboration. Live Production. NIDA 2017*

## Research informed practice and performance

An important development in the new model and NIDA's transition to the academic rigour of higher education is its embracing of research and the scholarship of practice. Practice-led research is championed in the context of its courses, with focus on participant-observation methodologies. Research may be undertaken through an examination of use; through photography, text, image, performance, drawings; or noting change through iterative activity. Participant-observation has become a narrative discourse incorporating the writing of object biographies for material culture research; writing through practice by verbalising the visual; reporting of 'felt' artisanal craftsmanship and performance through the senses; interweaving of text and (moving and non-moving) image; and the embodiment of findings reconciled as performance, text and image, exhibition, and other peer-reviewed modes (Laird 2013).

NIDA students' learning journey is therefore informed by foundations of research and research informed practice, in addition to the foundations of experiential learning, exploratory practice and self-discovery. Often undertaking multiple roles as creative practitioners, philosophers, theorists, historians, disrupters and analysts, students assume authority for learning through embodied responses. They can now extend these roles to include that of creators of new knowledge in the creative and performing arts domain, especially at the graduate level. Cheryl Stock (2013) provides further insight, in that "Researching from the inside may well provide insights not available by other modes of research"... but she also cautions that it is "a privileged position that can easily slip into self-referentiality..." (p.306).

## Artists in Residence, Visiting Scholars and Mentors and their Impact

Mention needs to be made of the important role that visiting scholars, artists in residence, guest directors and industry experts play in enriching the student experience at NIDA and enhancing *specific* skills sets for students. The authors acknowledge that such ‘influencers’ would have played an important role in the previous education and training portfolio at NIDA. What may be different is the nature and background of the guests and external experts, including visiting directors and teams from a diverse range of countries and cultures (e.g. from Asia including China), Indigenous leaders and directors, experts from newer areas of teaching and curriculum development at NIDA (e.g. film), current and upcoming writers, designers and other representatives from the independent sector. They bring dynamism, currency and relevance to the learning, and help to ensure comparative international standards and equivalence. Best practice in the disciplines, in the academic and professional contexts and appropriate research areas, are brought into NIDA theatres, workshops, rehearsal rooms, laboratories and breakout spaces as students work shoulder-to-shoulder in creative enterprise with their community leaders. Residing at the intersection of academic and professional learning, are unique opportunities for student learning. Eve Harwood (2007) notes that the “role of visiting artists as models for professional behaviour become singularly important for art curricula” (p.320).

## Assessing Student Learning in the Creative and Performing Arts

The shift to the new model (inclusive of both academic and professional learning), requires that assessment in the NIDA courses share the same rigorous measurement of knowledge, skills and learning outcomes as in the broader Higher Education sector. *Formative* methods (which informs) and *summative* methods (which summate) are undertaken in real-time in the theatres and workshops, as well as through more traditional modes. Given its unique teaching and learning remit and curricula, specialised approaches are also required for certain assessment tasks. Needless to say, this area has had its challenges in the period of transition, but, with experience, assessment policies and practices (NIDA 2017) have been redesigned and adjusted to meet new requirements and the work of experts at other such institutions have been drawn on.

One such example is the work of Geoffrey Crisp (2012). His *integrative approach* (which integrates past activity with future activity) focuses on critical reflection and projection, providing “future-oriented” assessment, “whose primary purpose is to influence students’ approaches to future learning” (p.39). Furthermore, he advocates *Diagnostic* assessment as a method of determining early intervention strategies based on student needs, whilst Cheryl Stock (2013) notes the complexity of analysing and assessing material forms “...where the nature of the practice itself is live, ephemeral and constantly changing” (p.298). Stock (2013) also contends that “to complicate matters, the performing arts are necessarily collaborative, relying not only on technical mastery and creative-interpretive processes, but on social and artistic relationships which collectively make up the (performance) ‘artefact’” (p.299).

At NIDA, learning and assessment is undertaken as a measure of students’ individual discipline expertise, and through the collaborative live production model, the aggregated collective knowledge of the professions. The quality of student learning in arts based education, like all good educational practice, needs to be underpinned by adherence to the

highest academic standards in the Higher Education sector, to ensure the delivery of quality education to students in the creative and performing arts.

One of the complexities in the area of assessment is supporting students to manage or consider their own (often traditional) expectations in relation to 'successes'. Thinking nimbly and elastically with the capacity to 're-imagine' established discourse is pivotal to learning in the studios. Also pivotal are the abilities to challenge existing prejudices, test and create new theories, challenge norms and embrace new developments in a fast paced changing environment, requiring the added qualities of resilience in order to advance in their learning and performance! These aspects are characterized by unpredictable outcomes. Student 'success' in the studio may simply be the creative use of a new tool, use of a new material, engagement in a process, examination of an idea or attitude. But these are also areas that need to be assessed and measured in terms of student performance and achievements and create challenges. Consequently, assessment as learning is regularly discussed by academic and professional teaching staff, and at NIDA's Academic Board.

## Academic Governance Underpinning the NIDA Learning Model

With its shift to the Higher Education sector, academic course offerings and credentialing (BFA and MFA), and its shift to the Vocational Education sector, vocational course offerings and credentialing (Diplomas), NIDA became a dual-sector provider. As a result, NIDA subscribes to a dual set of Quality Assurance regulators, namely, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), which regulates the Australian Higher Education sector, and the Australian Skills Quality Agency (ASQA), which regulates the Vocational Education sector. Furthermore, NIDA achieved self-accrediting authority in July 2015, making it one of the very few arts-based institutions to have achieved this status. Self-accrediting authority permits NIDA to accredit courses within a band of AQF levels 7, 8 and 9 in consultation with its Academic Board. The self-accrediting status brought with it independence in course management, as well as added responsibilities in course design, determining course content, implementing course reviews, and ensuring compliance on a range on academic matters. Initially, this may have been challenging for some teaching staff who may have had limited experience in these areas. But ongoing work, information sessions and training have helped in overcoming earlier concerns. Repositioning the Board of Studies as a stronger Academic Board with wider representation and a wider remit for overseeing academic governance at NIDA has ensured sound quality assured practices and structures.

'Good' academic governance practice at NIDA is synonymous with critical reflection and continual improvement processes, which are mapped to a range of criteria provided in the Higher Education Framework Standards 2015. The NIDA Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) articulates risk and opportunities at an institutional level, through robust and sustainable evidentiary-based processes. Evidence is provided from a range of inputs including Learner Experience Surveys, Director's Reports and minutes of committees and meetings. Student creative outcomes are potent and informative elements through which to demonstrate compliance with the standards. At the heart of NIDA's 'unique' education in the creative and performing arts lies a strengthened and novel Quality Assurance system that, it is hoped, will provide a model for the merged governance of academic and professional education at arts based institutions.

## Conclusion

This paper seeks to demonstrate NIDA's transition from an institute focused on traditional training for the commercial theatre, to a dual sector organisation with diverse course offerings for students interested in pursuing careers in the creative and performing arts at Higher Education and Vocational Education levels.

The NIDA learning model presented depicts student learning at the intersection of academic knowledge acquisition, research and research informed practice, discipline expertise and professional skills development, external engagement and exposure to industry expertise. The paper also provides a brief insight into the quality assured educational practices and processes that underpin the model. It demonstrates the impact of the 'lived experience' and of collaboration as learning frameworks that enhance students' potential in professional learning and engagements; and highlights aspects of emotional intelligence, empathy and shared languages as powerful communications tools for creative work and learning. It also highlights some of the unique challenges associated with learning and assessment in arts-based specialisations, and signals approaches to managing the challenges. It also indicates NIDA's commitment to ongoing enhancement of student learning, to an evolving curriculum, to practice oriented learning and teaching, and to research and scholarship in the creative arts disciplines. The paper alludes to ways in which NIDA, through its curricula, promotes students as disruptors, change-makers and risk takers, who can make meaning in a variety of ways. It also alludes to NIDA's promotion of its graduates as cultural leaders, advocates and strategists in the creative arts, who have the potential to shape Australia's changing cultural landscape.

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# Understanding how students develop their skills for employability

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## Abstract

The international debate on student skills development for employability has advanced institutional initiatives for teaching and learning, but to date lacks detailed research studies mapping disciplinary implementation linked to student learning feedback.

This paper reports on a five year higher education research study from Australia framed by a reflective practice-based methodology. Students in the undergraduate discipline of building and construction management monitored the development of their academic attributes and skills for employability. This paper contributes new knowledge on constructive alignment and implementation of assessment for learning and early professional skills development. Research findings indicate that student skills for employability are facilitated through:

1. Discipline-based curriculum design linking university and industry skills expectations;
2. Clear interweaving of learning contexts and assessments for students to experience and identify academic and professional learning dimensions (metacognition);
3. Constructive alignment for skills development through scaffolded assessment learning;
4. A 'constructive, explicit and reflective' teaching approach engaging students in their own generic and professional skills development.

**Keywords:** Graduate employability, constructive alignment, assessment for learning, graduate skills, authentic learning.

Reference to the full study published by Taylor & Francis online

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## Introduction

Higher education students and their families, institutions, employers and professional associations expect that “a degree will deliver a career pathway as well as an education” (Oliver, 2015). In the context of economic globalisation, student skills development for employability is now of national and international relevance across higher education, government and industry sectors (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell, & Watts, 2000; Bridgstock, 2009; Jackson, 2009; Kreber, 2006). However, the literature points to an increasing research gap on ‘how’ teaching can demonstrate and provide assurance of students’ engagement in their own skills development for employability (Cumming, 2010; Turner, 2014; Tymon, 2013; Tymon & Batistic, 2016). Recent research by Ferns (2012) suggests that while “...there has been abundant investigation into the assurance of graduate outcomes...there is a lack of research into how these attributes are developed and assessed” (p. 10). This research addresses this gap in higher education teaching and learning and provides the first longer term student learning research study in Australia from the increasingly important higher education discipline of building and construction management. This research was conducted at the University of Canberra in Australia within the degree program of Bachelor of Building and Construction Management between 2011 and 2015.

The USEM theoretical model developed by Knight and Yorke outlines the key pillars for skills development as Understanding, Skills, Efficacy Beliefs (self-theories) and Metacognition (Knight & Yorke, 2003). Pool and Sewell propose a career development learning model which includes Experience (Work & Life), Degree Subject Knowledge, Understanding & Skills, Generic Skills and Emotional Intelligence and is coined Career EDGE (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). The common basis across this discourse is the recognition of the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of students developing their learning capabilities and skills competencies in conjunction with the careful alignment of teaching and assessment of students’ learning (Biggs, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2011; D. Boud & Falchikov, 2006). These dimensions reach across disciplinary and technical knowledge, the university and industry generic skills expectations for graduates, as well as the student’s personal and early professional capacity and engagement in skills development for employment (Rigby et al., 2010). The pedagogical teaching and learning approach of ‘constructive alignment’ which is applied to this study is explained by John Biggs (2003) as:

‘Constructive alignment’ has two aspects. The ‘constructive’ aspect refers to the idea that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities. That is, meaning is not something imparted or transmitted from teacher to learner, but is something learners have to create for themselves. Teaching is simply a catalyst for learning... The ‘alignment’ aspect refers to what the teacher does, which is to set up a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes. The key is that the components in the

teaching system, especially the teaching methods used and the assessment tasks, are aligned with the learning activities assumed in the intended outcomes. (p. 2)

To advance knowledge on building and construction students' skills development for employability, this research investigates undergraduate student feedback on their own skills development supported by constructively aligned and stakeholder informed assessments for learning. In the professionally focused discipline of building and construction management, which is relatively new to the field of higher education, few academics have shared their experiences of assessment design for graduate employability. The implementation and findings of this student-centered learning approach identifies new knowledge of how students actively develop and construct their academic attributes and skills for employability.

## **Industry context**

In Australia, the employability skills debate for undergraduate degree programs has an added dimension for industry specific professions (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2002; Bowman, 2010; Department of Education and Training, 2014; Hattingh, Thompson, Williams, & Morton, 2015). As one of the largest industry and employment sectors in Australia, the construction industry is currently undergoing a transformation due to globalisation and digitisation of products and processes, which in turn affects organizational and cultural adaptation of industry management practices. The Australian construction sector is today the third largest industry, with 1.29 million people employed. It also supports the largest number of businesses, over 345,000 operating in June 2015 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2016; Australian Parliamentary Library. Parliament of Australia, 2015-16). This has led to an increasing demand for work-ready graduates (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013; Department of Industry, 2015). Employability characteristics sought by employers include in particular technical, communication and team management skills, professional and ethical behavior, as well as design and construction skills with decision-making abilities across design processes, work health and safety, building information management and legal contract administration (Ferns, 2012; Lowe, 2006; Senaratne & Hapuarachchi, 2009; Wu, Feng, Pienaar, & Zhong, 2015).

In this sector Oliver's (2015) definition of employability, building on that of Yorke (Yorke, 2006), fits closely with the expectations of building and construction management industry and academic stakeholders:

Employability means that students and graduates can discern, acquire, adapt and continually enhance the skills, understandings and personal attributes that make them more likely to find and create meaningful paid and unpaid work that benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy. (p. 59)

With the exception of the study undertaken by (Williams, Sher, Simmons, Dosen, & Pitt, 2009) there appears to be little research on approaches to learning, teaching and assessment for graduate employability in building and construction courses in Australia. This is supported in Orrell's review of completed Australian Learning and Teaching work-integrated learning projects and fellowships (Orrell, 2011). In this national report Orrell recorded only two research projects under the heading of Architecture and Building, neither of which related to the discipline of building and construction management.

Further, she specifically notes a disciplinary imbalance in the educational research coverage which was “weighted towards the fields of health, social welfare and engineering” (p. 14).

## **Teaching and learning context**

Research by Barrie and Elen et al. (Barrie, 2004, 2007; Elen, Clarebout, Léonard, & Lowyck, 2007), provides a constructive lens through which to view approaches to teaching and learning and assessment in disciplinary contexts. Informal inquiries by the researchers suggest that the building and construction educators’ approaches to teaching and learning predominantly fall into Barrie’s (2007) teacher-focused content delivery approach. Here the focus is on a traditional transfer of ‘what students should know’, by passing on current technical knowledge in relation to a specific unit content area. Students confirm the knowledge transfer by reiteration and application through assessment items. Generic skills are mostly supplementary to the curriculum or part of a separate off-campus work experience or work integrated learning units.

In contrast, the educational philosophy for the units of study in this research applied Barrie’s learner-focused approach to guide and make the skills development and learning engagement explicit to students. This also recognises the important findings by Holmes and by Wood who investigated an architectural course, where students through their learning and assessment sought to position themselves and their emerging identity in the higher education and future career contexts (Holmes, 2001; Wood, 2006). This shift from the ‘what’ of learning content to the ‘how’ of learning context, includes transformative and reflective learning experiences for students through classwork, on and off-campus learning activities, groupwork and authentic assessment.

## **Linking discipline specific learning to graduate skills outcomes**

Development of teaching and learning for graduate skills development and employability is closely linked to a university’s strategic and educational plan, which in most cases outlines graduate generic skills and attributes expected to be developed by all students during their studies. The degree is reviewed and accredited by the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and by two external industry bodies, the Australian Institute of Building (AIB) ([www.aib.org.au](http://www.aib.org.au)) and the Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (AIQS) ([www.aiqs.com.au](http://www.aiqs.com.au)) who verify that national education and industry knowledge benchmarks, as well as professional skills and standards are upheld. Fourteen higher education degrees in building and construction were AIB-accredited across six Australian states at July 2015 (AIB, 2015).

In this research context, university generic skills and attributes were mapped across each unit (subject or module) of the degree. In addition, the industry accrediting bodies in this study, the Australian Institute of Building (AIB) and the Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (AIQS), also set out additional graduate skills and attributes which were incorporated into the course curriculum.

These generic skills and attributes (Figure 1 below) include the technical knowledge and academic skills of analysis, inquiry and communication, as well as the skillset and abilities sought after by industry employers, such as working together with others, professional and personal responsibility and developed personal attributes. This provides a measure of assurance that all generic skills and attributes the university expects students to develop during their course of study are linked to each course and

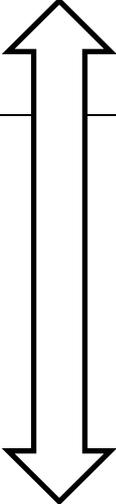
unit of study at the institution. Discipline focused higher education programs in architecture, engineering as well as building and construction are facing the increasing complexity of linking the benchmark learning outcomes stipulated by the University for course and unit levels with those of industry course accrediting bodies. These generic skills and attributes also informed the assessment skills mapping shown in Figure 2.

The university generic skills and attributes to be acquired by each student	The Australian Institute of Building (AIB) graduate attributes	The Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors (AIQS) graduate attributes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. communication</li> <li>2. analysis &amp; inquiry</li> <li>3. problem solving</li> <li>4. working independently &amp; with others</li> <li>5. professional &amp; social responsibility</li> <li>6. personal attributes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. knowledge</li> <li>2. self-development</li> <li>3. communication</li> <li>4. judgement</li> <li>5. innovation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. qualification/measurement</li> <li>2. communication</li> <li>3. personal &amp; interpersonal skills</li> <li>4. business and management skills</li> <li>5. professional practice</li> <li>6. computer &amp; information technology</li> <li>7. construction</li> <li>8. construction law and regulation</li> </ol>



Figure 1. Graduate Attributes Desired by University and External Course Accrediting Bodies

<p><b>Unit of Study :</b> <b>Building and Construction Studies (Level 2)</b></p>	<p><b>Generic and early professional skills and attribute expectations of unit of study, university course and industry accreditation bodies</b></p>  <p><b>'Horizontal' skills development engages students to advance through learning and continued professional development</b></p>
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<b>Assessment items</b>		<b>Unit Learning Outcomes</b>	<b>University Generic Skills</b>	<b>Australian Institute of Building Attributes</b>	<b>Australian Institute of Quantity Surveyors Attributes</b>
<p><b>Assignment 1:</b> <b>Site set out and measurements in groups with professional surveyor</b></p>		<p><b>1,2,3,4,7,8</b></p>	<p><b>1 to 6</b></p>	<p><b>1,2,3</b></p>	<p><b>1,2,3,5,7,8</b></p>
<p><b>Assignment 2:</b> <b>Construction technology, research and application for</b></p>		<p><b>1 to 7</b></p>	<p><b>1,2,3,4,6</b></p>	<p><b>1,3,4,5</b></p>	<p><b>1,2,3,7,8,</b></p>

national / international project with industry context					
Assignment 3: Students design and construction detailing of own project with client management scope and responsibility		1 to 9	1 to 6	1 to 5	1 to 8
<p><b>‘Vertical’ knowledge and skills development made explicit through assessment items of increasing complexity in task, content, roles and responsibilities. Student engage and comment on own skills development.</b></p>					

**Key:**

**Unit learning outcomes:** 1=understand traditional construction; 2=appraise & analyse; 3=critically review; 4=understand application; 5=appreciate a broad range of building material; 6=understand building services; 7=appreciate building operation; 8=calculate levels of stout; 9=Understand principles of sustainable design. **University generic skills:** 1=communication; 2=analysis & inquiry; 3=problem solving; 4=working independently and with others; 5=professional & social responsibility; 6=personal attributes. **AIB graduate attributes:** 1=knowledge; 2=self-development; 3=communication; 4=judgement; 5=innovation. **AIQS graduate attributes:** 1=qualification/measurement; 2=communication; 3=personal & interpersonal skills; 4=business and management skills; 5=professional practice; 6=computer & information technology; 7=construction; 8=construction law and regulation.

*Figure 2. Alignment of Institutional, Industry Professional and Personal Skills through Assessment in Building and Construction Studies 2 (BCS 2)*

The mapping approach for constructive learning alignment of unit assessments for this research study is shown in Figure 2 above. The vertical dimension scaffolds the unit assessments through increasing complexity and interweaving of learning tasks, contexts, roles and responsibilities. This provides key linkages for students’ engagement, reflection and iterative learning cycles for their generic and employability skills development (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2002; Webster-Wright, 2009; Wiggins, 1990). The horizontal dimension is equally important in that each assessment item clearly relates to specific unit learning outcomes, as well as university and industry relevant skills and attributes. These are also made explicit and relevant to the students’ learning experience and thereby

stimulating the students' awareness of their own knowledge and skills development as they progress through units and year level learning towards graduation. This metacognition and self-positioning by the learner, as highlighted by Knight and Yorke (Knight & Yorke, 2003) was applied by actively engaging students with both dimensions of 'vertical' skills development of managing increasing complexities of content, contexts and tasks and how this links to their own longer term 'horizontal' dimensions of broadening their personal attributes and skills for continuing professional development in employment. For this research the alignment of skills and attributes is made explicit to students through formative assessment as well as formal and informal feedback processes (Gibbs, Simpson, Gravestock, & Hills, 2005; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Yorke, 2003). Making these dimensions and their connections to assessments for learning and skills development explicit, allows students to position themselves as active learners (Billett, 2015; Holmes, 2001; Macht & Ball, 2016).

## Assessment for learning

In higher education, nationally and internationally, it is now recognized that through its timing, tasks, scope and feedback, assessment encourages the academic, early professional and personal knowledge and skills development necessary to ensure work-ready graduates (D. Boud, 1995; D. Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Gibbs et al., 2005; Wiggins, 1990; Yorke, 2003). Students are focused on assessment and therefore keenly aware of clear alignment between instruction, learning, assessment and resulting professional skills (Billett, 2015; Macht & Ball, 2016).

This paper combines research on assessment and its linkage to graduate skills and employability focusing on the student's learning experiences (Ruge & McCormack, 2017). It describes and evaluates a constructively aligned and stakeholder-informed assessment design from a student perspective. Specifically, the central questions this research poses are: What key characteristics of assessment for learning engage undergraduate BCM students in the development of their generic and early career professional skills? How do students understand and connect with their own skills development through assessment for learning?

In discipline-focused undergraduate programs, assessment is one of the key measures for student generic skills and employability in curriculum design and delivery. It is also the link across students', university and industry accrediting bodies' expectations for the attainment of skills and attributes for employability (Bloxham, Hudson, den Outer, & Price, 2015; D. Boud, and Associates, 2010; Gibbs et al., 2005; Newton, 2007; Wiggins, 1990). Assessments for the two units examined in this research study, draws on the concepts of constructive alignment and authentic assessment for learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011; D. Boud, and Associates, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane- Dick, 2006). Assessments interweave authentic workplace experiences with interactive lectures, facilitated class groupwork, as well as on and off campus industry linked activities.

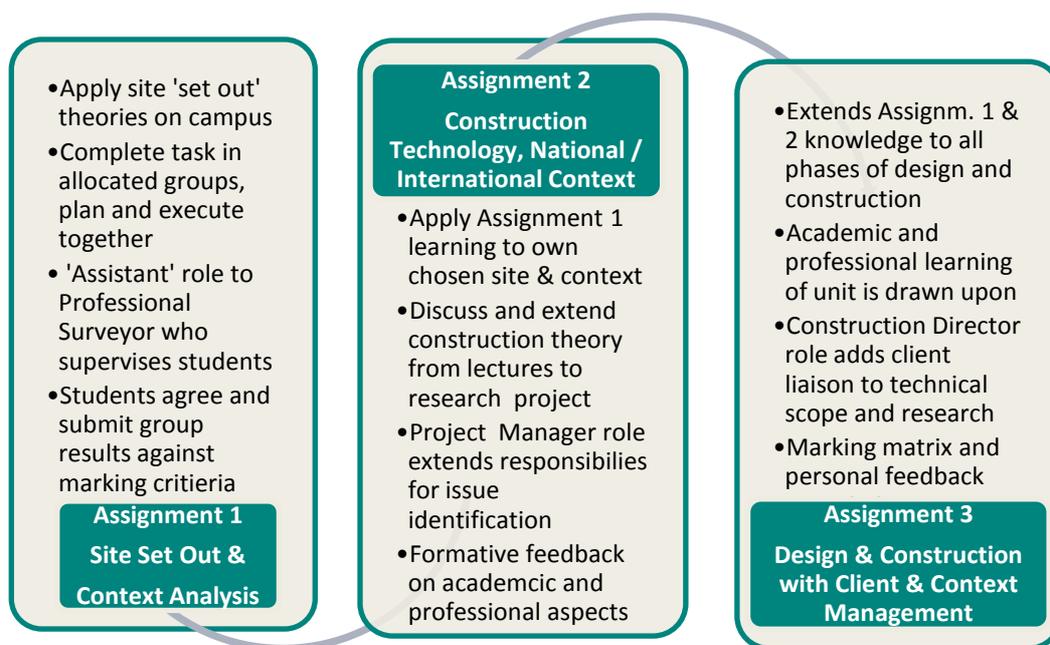
### Assessment design principles

The assessment design utilises a deliberate discipline-based design process that helps students recognize and engage in their own skills development relevant to unit, university and industry generic skills and attributes. This process was guided by the following five educational design principles drawn from research promoting student learning through

authentic assessment (Barrie, 2007; D. Boud, and Associates, 2010; Herrington et al., 2002; McCabe & O'Connor, 2014; Nicol & Macfarlane- Dick, 2006; Yorke, 2003):

1. Embed assessment for employability in the discipline specific curriculum with clear linkages, across the degree and across units within the degree.
2. Make explicit to students and industry how assessment and unit learning activities align university generic skills and industry professional attributes.
3. Foster active student learning engagement through assessment for unit and year level skills development towards graduate employability.
4. Individual assessment parameters offer challenging real life contexts, research content, professional tasks and roles which provide authentic learning experiences.
5. Personalized, formative and summative, informal and formal feedback throughout the semester informs students along the learning journey and provides scaffolding for long term personal and professional development.

Assessment tasks developed for the second year unit, Building and Construction Studies 2 (BCS 2) (Figure 3), illustrate the application of the above design principles in one core unit, whilst building skills across the vertical and horizontal learning dimensions outlined in Figure 2 above.



*Figure 3. Scaffolding of Professional Skills, Tasks and Roles for Assessment Learning Content and Context*

## Research methodology and data collection

This research was framed by an action research-based methodology with iterative reflective cycles of development between 2011 and 2015 (Adams, Turns, & Atman, 2003; Biggs, 2001; Kane, Sandretto, & Heath, 2004; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loughran, 2002; Schön, 1987). In terms of teaching and learning development for this research study, a number of formal and informal cycles of review, reflection, revision and improvement took place throughout the research period (Figure 4). The underlying 'reflection-in-practice' and 'reflection-on-

practice' approach (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Schön, 1987) and its cycles of continuing improvement was made explicit to students as teaching and learning experiences. It was also related to students as experiencing their own continuing personal and professional development and enhanced awareness to adopt a 'reflection-on-practice' attitude in complex contexts (D. Boud & Walker, 1998).

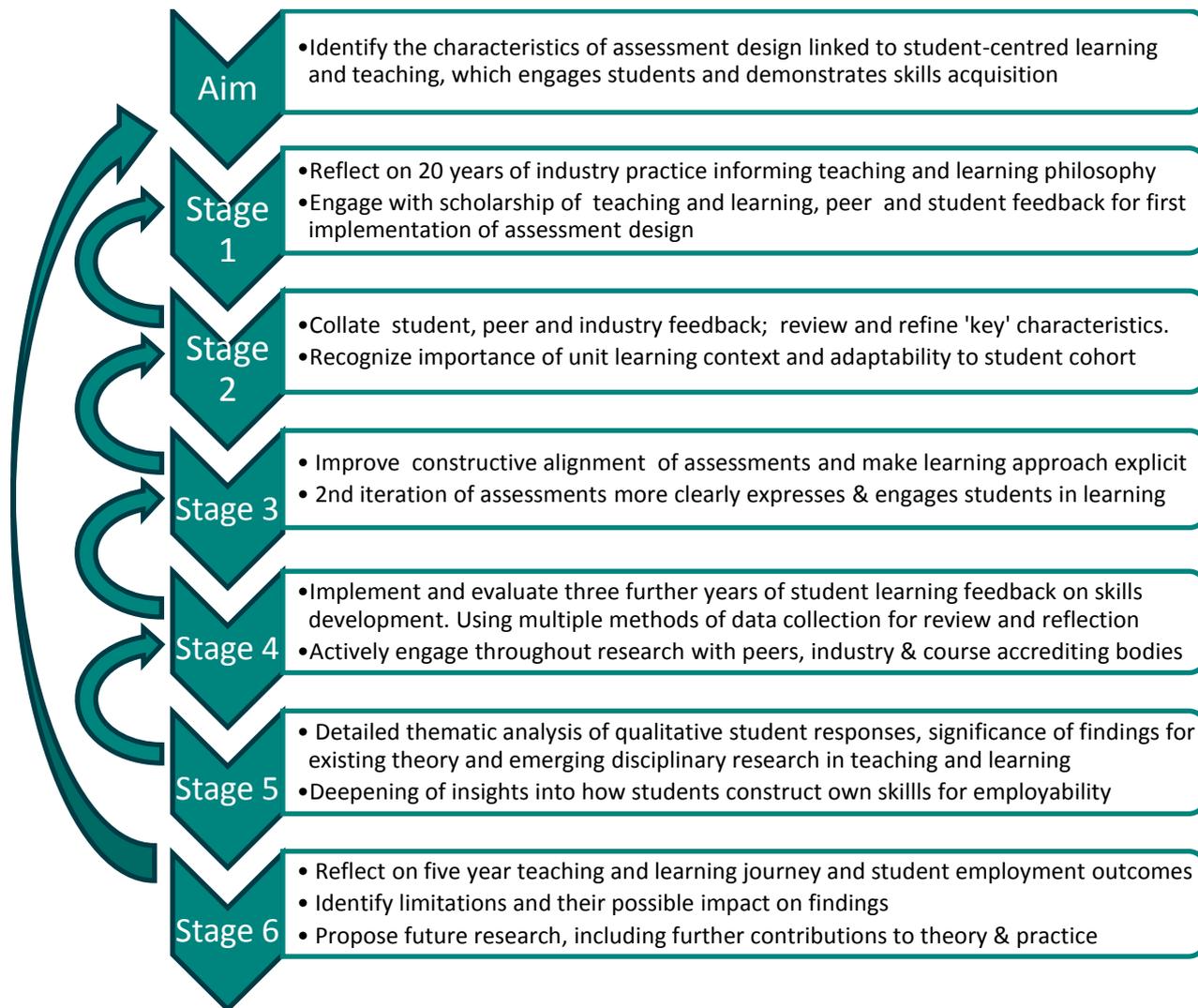


Figure 4. Stages of the Reflective Practice-based Methodology

Over the five year research period data was collated from 202 students enrolled in the second year and third year undergraduate core units Building and Construction Studies 2 (BCS 2) and Sustainable Built Technologies (SBT) Bachelor of Building and Construction Studies at the University of Canberra in Australia. Class sizes varied between 50 and 70 students and were of diverse cultural, age and skills backgrounds. To inform and verify the analysis of the nature and extent of students' professional skill acquisition both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered using multiple methods and multiple sources (Bryman, 2015; Seale, 1999; Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). The different data sources allowed deeper insights as well as differentiation between students, institutional and industry stakeholder views. Key sounding boards across the reflective cycles for this study were students

themselves, as well as regular meetings with academic peers and industry bodies, as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Quantitative and Qualitative Data Gathered Using Multiple Methods and Sources*

<b>Students</b>	<b>Academic Peers</b>
<p>University student satisfaction survey (USS)</p> <p>In class student surveys during semester</p> <p>Individual in-class real-time learning moments with students</p> <p>Informal feedback from students on their experiences</p>	<p>Regular meetings with community of practice colleagues to share reflections on the 'why and how' of teaching strategies</p> <p>Monthly HERDSA TATAL (talking about teaching and learning) reflective meetings provide feedback on teaching and learning stories between 2012 and 2015</p> <p>Peer feedback via local faculty and national conference presentations during each stage of the research study</p>
<b>Industry &amp; Government</b>	<b>Personal Reflections</b>
<p>Meetings with industry advisory course committee</p> <p>Active engagement with industry accreditation bodies</p> <p>University representative on industry and government boards and committees contributing to education policies and legislation</p>	<p>Personal reflection before, during and after each semester's research cycle and adaptation for the follow year</p> <p>Writing of teaching stories led to preparation of Teaching and Learning portfolio and award of HERDSA Fellowship in late 2015</p> <p>Regular reflective discussions with mentors and colleagues from other institutions</p>

## **Student feedback**

Students' overall perception and satisfaction with their individual unit of study is captured through the University Student Satisfaction (USS) survey. This is an anonymous electronic survey which asks students about their learning and teaching experience including perceptions of generic skill acquisition through the Graduate Skills Scale (GSS) after completion of an individual unit of study. The USS survey provides an important first level of feedback and data. The USS survey is conducted in the last three weeks of each semester. Students answer the same questions in each unit surveyed. The USS questions are based on a Likert scale response calculated across a number of questions. Whilst the USS scales tend to fluctuate, they do provide an indication of student satisfaction levels for a specific cohort. Collated over a number of years for individual units and courses, USS data is also an indicator of unit improvement in comparison to other units and courses.

In addition to the above quantitative data collection by the university, qualitative data collection about students' learning and skills development occurred through in-class surveys at the end of the semester for each unit in this study. The in-class survey asked each student how the teaching and learning activities in BCS 2 or SBT, respectively, supported their individual skills development. Against each of the core university generic skills (Figure 1 and 2), the students were invited to provide a written comment related to their personal learning experience. Over the study period, 202 in-class surveys were completed, 105 from students in Building and Construction Studies 2 (BCS 2) and 97 surveys from students participating in Sustainable Buildings and Technology (SBT).

## **Academic peer feedback**

Learning from collaborative peer reflection informed this research study. Regular monthly meetings with academic colleagues in a TATAL (Talking about Teaching and Learning) community of practice provided opportunities to share reflections on the 'why and how' of teaching and learning strategies. TATAL communities of practice are coordinated across Australian higher education institutions by members of HERDSA (Higher Education Research and Development Society Australasia) (Kennelly & McCormack, 2015; McCormack & Kennelly, 2011) and complement the faculty or university teaching and learning support systems.

In TATAL communities of practice a cyclic process supports community members to reflect on their teaching through stories (McCormack et al., 2017; Schonell et al., 2016). The process begins with each person writing a teaching story prior to the community meeting. At the meeting the story writer tells this story to community members. It typically includes a short description, issues and outcomes achieved, personal reflections and thoughts on future developments. The TATAL members listen to the story and respond by asking questions of clarification and identifying points of tension or opportunity in the story. This conversation concludes with the story writer reflecting on what they have learnt from the cyclic process. Between meetings, the community member rewrites their story to reflect their new learning and this in turn informs potential teaching and learning initiatives and improvements. Another cycle of story writing, storytelling, and collaborative reflection occurs at the next meeting. Over a period from 2012 to 2015, the rigour of this cyclic process supported the researcher to clarify and distill aims and directions for further development and continued improvement in teaching and learning for students' skills development.

## Findings

For the units BCS 2 and SBT, between 2011 and 2015, this section reports the key findings that emerged from analysis of student's responses to the university unit satisfaction survey (USS) and from anonymous in-class surveys about their skills specific learning experiences. Quantitative measures developed to assess early career progression of graduates are also discussed.

### Quantitative measures of student learning satisfaction and acquisition of generic skills

Results across the university unit satisfaction scales, for both units involved in this research, reported students' notable improvements in learning satisfaction over time (Table 2 and 3). As outlined above, during the five year research period, the two units for this research study were continually improved in alignment of teaching and learning through a reflective and practice-based methodology, increasing discipline and industry linkages, incorporating student, peer and industry feedback and making the connections between degree and unit learning and assessment for personal skills development more explicit. Between 2011 and 2015 the Generic Skills Scale (GSS) for the unit SBT increased from 58% to 100% based on student unit satisfaction survey results collected by the university. The GSS for the BCS 2 unit increased across the same period also to 100 %, though a decline was experienced in 2014, when staffing changes in BCS 1 and BCS 3, made additional demands on BCS 2 delivery.

Table 2

*Student Unit Satisfaction Survey (USS) data 2011 to 2015 for unit SBT (Sustainable Buildings and Technology)*

Unit	Year	USS	GTS	GSS	OSS	SES
SBT	2011	75 %	58 %	58 %	85 %	69 %
SBT	2012	92 %	100 %	92 %	100 %	92 %
SBT	2013	100 %	85 %	85 %	85 %	85 %
SBT	2014	90 %	80 %	100 %	100 %	90 %
SBT	2015	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3

*Student Unit Satisfaction Survey (USS) data 2011 to 2015 for unit BCS 2 (Building and Construction Studies 2)*

Unit	Year	USS	GTS	GSS	OSS	SES
BCS 2	2011	80 %	70 %	60 %	60 %	70 %
BCS 2	2012	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %	100 %
BCS 2	2013	88 %	81 %	94 %	81 %	81 %
BCS 2	2014	77 %	85 %	69 %	85 %	85 %
BCS 2	2015	100%	100%	100%	100%	83%

**Key:** USS= Unit Satisfaction Scale; GTS = Good Teaching Scale, GSS = Generic Skills Scale; OSS= Overall Satisfaction Scale; SES= Student Experience Scale.

### **Student comments about their perception of learning and skills development**

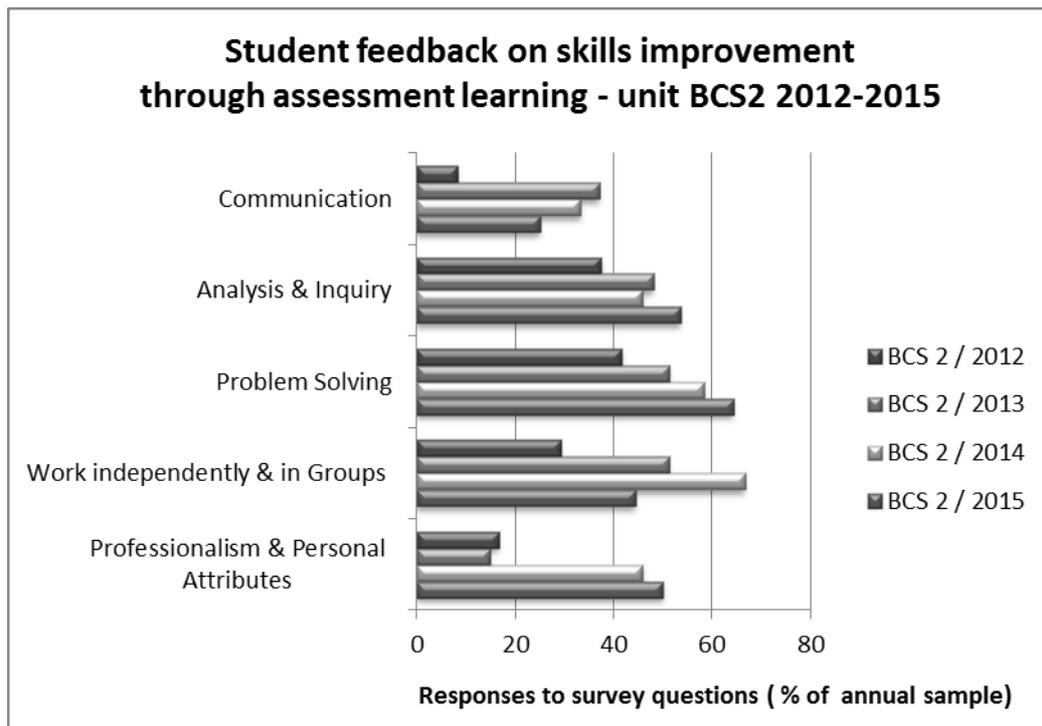
In addition to the quantitative university USS data, anonymous in-class surveys, developed by the principal researcher with peer feedback, asked students to identify which generic skills they improved through assessment learning. Students could note one or more skills and were then asked to describe how the learning activity such as assessments supported a particular skill development such as communication or professionalism. Both quantitative and qualitative data emerged from the analysis of their responses.

Firstly, as a quantitative measure, from the 202 surveys collated, the assessment related feedback comments against specific skills were counted and then adjusted as a percentage of the sample size of the unit response rate, which then allowed comparison across the improved generic skills as well as between the responses for subsequent years.

This data (Figures 5 and 6 below) identified the following findings:

- Students have consciously experienced an improvement across all generic skill parameters in both units across the years for which the research was conducted.

- Skills development through assessment enhanced in particular the university generic and early professional industry skills related to analysis and inquiry, problem solving and working independently and with others.
- Communication, professionalism and personal attributes were also improved and valued by 15% to 20% of students as most improved through assessment learning activities. These skills also featured strongly against other learning activities such as working with industry professionals, off-campus activities and industry guest lecturers.
- Over the research period an overall increase in responses from students who believed that assessment learning improved their generic skills was noted.



*Figure 5. Student Feedback on Skills Improvement through Assessment Learning - Unit BCS 2, 2012-2015*

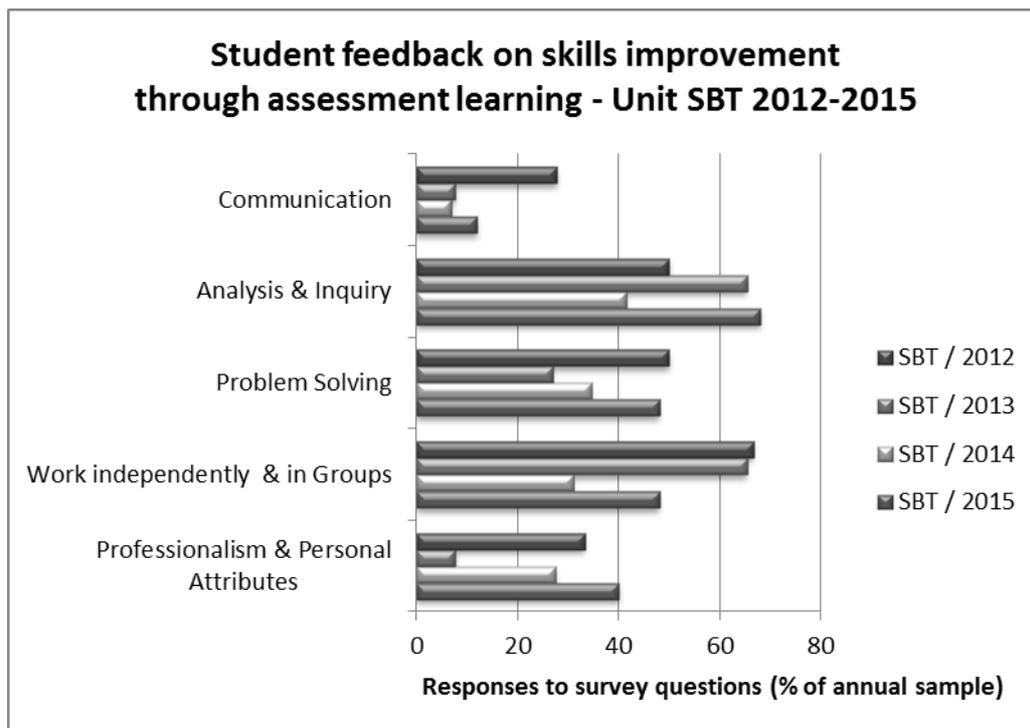


Figure 6. Students Feedback on Skills Improvement through Assessment Learning – Unit SBT, 2012-2015

### Qualitative measures of student learning satisfaction and acquisition of generic skills

Secondly, qualitative data emerged from students' detailed written comments to the in-class survey questions. In their responses, students described 'how' the range of teaching and learning experiences, including assessment items, related to their generic and professional skills development.

Through a detailed text and content analysis of the student responses in relation to unit assessment and skills development, several themes emerged. The key findings identified four skills in particular which students identified as improved through the assessment learning: communication, personal and interpersonal skills, business and management skills, and 'being professional'. These findings are summarised in Table 4 below. These comments selected as representative from the 202 surveys suggest that from a student learning perspective the university, as well as industry attributes and skills, (Figure 1 and Figure 2 above), have been successfully scaffolded into the assessment and that students appear to be aware and actively engaged in the development of their personal skills and attributes.

Table 4

*Student Survey Feedback on Improvement of Personal Skills and Attributes Through Scaffolded Assessment for Learning*

<b>Communication skills</b>
<i>The unit helped to build jobskills... it mirrors real world workplaces. (BCS 2, 2015)</i>
<i>The major assignment has improved my report writing skills. (SBT, 2015)</i>
<i>Improved communication skills through this unit and I am more confident approaching people in the construction field. (BCS 2, 2014)</i>
<i>Developed communication skills through...group discussions and self-introduction (part of in-class assessment learning activity).(BCS2, 2013)</i>
<i>Public speaking improvement due to groupwork where we answered our (assessment) topic in front of the class. (SBT, 2013)</i>
<b>Personal and inter-personal skills</b>
<i>Improved working independently and with others through the groupwork assignments. (BCS 2, 2015)</i>
<i>Improved working independently and with others. It (the unit) gave me a feel for what it may be like having to deal with other people and different ideas. (BCS 2, 2014)</i>
<i>Developed generic skills of working independently and with others through...all assessments. (BCS 2, 2013)</i>
<i>Assignments were a great opportunity to discuss with peers, then go away and research independently. (SBT, 2012)</i>
<i>Improved my personal attributes through ability to approach assignment with a positive aspects. The assignments made me engage in a lot more research and this contributed well to my learning.(BCS 2, 2012)</i>
<b>Business and management skills</b>
<i>I can now clearly make decisions on good sustainability approaches for a construction project using some better management skills and more expertise</i>

<i>knowledge. (SBT, 2015)</i>
<i>The assignment requirements and structure enabled improvement of analysis and inquiry generic skills. (BCS 2, 2015)</i>
<i>The assessment has really helped me solve problems by research. (SBT, 2014)</i>
<i>Problem analysis and inquiry skills improved through...using different perspectives of analysis for assignment 2. (BCS 2, 2013)</i>
<i>Applied what we learnt in class to assignments. My self-analysing and problem solving skills improved. (SBT, 2012)</i>
<b>Being a professional</b>
<i>The class assignments and class work were all challenging and helped to build the capacity to research and make better judgements. (SBT, 2015)</i>
<i>...builds skills related to the industry, unlike other units. It assisted in being professional and understand the industry better. (BCS 2, 2015)</i>
<i>Assignments helped improve how to think and write professionally. (BCS 2, 2014)</i>
<i>Generic skill 'Professionalism and social responsibility' ....was improved through learning about cultural diversity and multiculturalism and environmental components. (BCS 2 2013)</i>
<i>Improved professionalism by... becoming more aware of industry professionals and learning that different cultures function differently. (BCS 2, 2012)</i>

## Measures of the early career progression of BCM graduates

A further indication of positive longer term outcomes is the early career progression of these Building and Construction Management graduates. Of the over 200 students who participated in this research study, career information was available for 85 who had graduated in the period 2011 to 2016. As at March 2017, all of these graduates were employed in the building and construction industry. 16.5% occupied senior management roles (Project Director, Senior Project Manager or Senior Site Engineer), 43.5% held mid-level management roles (Project Manager, Project Coordinator or Site Engineer), 27% held junior professional roles (Contract Administrator, Site Administrator). In addition 13% were working in related industry or specialist roles, for example Quantity Surveyor, Property Asset Manager, Town Planner, Development Manager and Government Infrastructure Analyst.

## Discussion of findings

The research findings from this study confirm the literature on higher education graduate skills development, which argues for a multi-dimensional teaching and learning approach that supports students' understanding, technical skills, personal attributes and metacognition (D. Boud, and Associates, 2010; Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Knight & Yorke, 2002, 2003).

This research argued for the discipline and industry specific context as a valuable connecting element for student skill development in order to adapt to the globalised and changing career environments (Jackson, 2009; Oliver, 2015; Rigby et al., 2010). In particular identifying, mapping, aligning and making the discipline specific learning context for university degree and industry employment explicit in the teaching and learning approach and assessments was shown to enhance the learning contexts for students' generic and industry skills development. Findings have shown (Figure 5, 6 and Table 4) that students recognize their generic skills development through assessment learning. This is across all generic skills set by the University, with analysing, problem solving and working independently featured strongest followed by communication and professionalism. In addition, the qualitative text analysis of students' written feedback confirmed this further and identified four areas of skills development which students identified as improved through assessment learning: communication, personal and inter-personal skills, business and management skills as well as being professional.

The findings from this research supports the literature that constructively aligned assessment designed to activate student-led learning is able to facilitate generic and early professional skills development (Biggs & Tang, 2011; D. Boud, 1995; Henderson & McWilliams, 2008; Knight & Yorke, 2003; Oliver, 2013). Students described the teaching and learning experience in a number of ways, such as 'holistic teaching style with practical learning experience', 'Excellent class, I have learnt a lot through the teaching methods used and have enjoyed the ways I learnt'(SBT, 2013). 'I have enjoyed the assessment contents and the knowledge that I have gained. This can only assist me in the future' (SBT 2015). Students experienced increased learning engagement. This is reflected in feedback such as 'Good assignments. I liked the broad coverage. Lots more student engagement than any other unit I've done at Uni' (BCS 2, 2013). Another student found that the teaching and learning of this unit was 'very effective and helpful, especially discussions in class and interactivensess of learning' (BCS 2, 2012).

The learning experiences of students responding to the in-class survey further suggest that students are seeking to actively construct their own skills through their individual learning experiences (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Ramsden & Martin, 1996; Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin, & Prosser, 2000; Yorke & Knight, 2006). The technique of 'interweaving' of skills into assessment learning was proposed and applied. Based on the positive feedback and perceptions by students in this study, it is found that this approach engages students in the progression and advancement of their skills from individual assignments within a unit, across the course and beyond into employment after graduation. Learning feedback such as 'I learnt a lot of professional knowledge that helped me in getting a job' (BCS 2, 2015). Equally important to students was the 'hands on practicality of assignments' (BCS 2, 2014). A number of students identified the importance of groupwork to develop their skills for employability, as 'a level of professionalism similar to working with a client' (SBT, 2013). This was also stated by other students as 'the unit helped to build job skills because of the groupwork, which mirrors real world workplaces' (BCS 2, 2015) and 'having the

responsibility of a group who relies on each other will then allow professionalism to grow' (SBT, 2015).

As the students progressed through constructively aligned learning and assessments, they became increasingly conscious of how the assessments are not only an academic task to progress their studies, but support and motivate them to construct and shape their own skills development for their chosen professional discipline and future career. As suggested by (Entwistle, 2005; Healey, 2000; Jervis & Jervis, 2005) it is about reaching the teaching and learning dimensions that ignite and engage the student in their discipline specific learning development. This is captured in student reflections such as 'the assignments made me engage in a lot more research and this contributed well to my learning' (BCS 2,2012). 'I obtained a job towards the end of this unit' and that the assessment learning 'builds skills related to the industry, unlike other units. It assisted in being professional and understand the industry better' (BCS 2, 2015).

## Limitations and further research

While this research provides an in-depth investigation of over 200 student learning experiences, it is limited to one second year and one third year undergraduate unit in the Building and Construction Management degree at the University of Canberra, Australia. However, because the research was undertaken over an extended time period of five years (2011-2015), the data and findings provide a strong base for:

- Further research into discipline focused approaches to assessment for learning utilising constructive alignment for student skills development and employability.
- Encouraging broader and deeper investigations to increase understanding of curriculum development needs and continued adaptation of teaching and learning practice in industry orientated higher education programs.
- Application of findings from this research to the current theoretical debate on teaching and learning models for skills development and employability. This research demonstrated the impact of interweaving and scaffolding discipline and unit specific learning experiences.
- Broader distribution of the research findings, across building and construction, architecture and engineering academic and professional communities internationally. For example, best practice examples could be gathered, analysed and thereafter disseminated as suggested by Williams et al., (2009).

## Conclusion

This paper contributes new knowledge on constructive alignment and implementation of assessment for learning and early professional skills development. The constructively aligned and stakeholder informed assessment for learning supported students' generic and professional skills development in the discipline specific context of a building and construction management degree.

The research contributes four particular insights from the student learning perspective at this important juncture, where not only institutional roles and capabilities of universities are changing, but also where degree programs are adopting professionalized and internationalized content and delivery modes to achieve targeted graduate skills outcomes:

- Constructive alignment for skills development improves linkages between assessment and students' professional skills development outcomes.
- Clear 'interweaving' of academic and early professional skills development through teaching and learning activities allows students to clearly identify personal learning benefits.
- A 'constructive, explicit and reflective' learning approach increased students' awareness and ability to advance their individual generic and professional skills.
- Assessment for employability was enhanced through a deliberate discipline-based design process.

Academics, students, employers and professional associations now have a clearer picture of students' learning and skills attainment journey. The importance of the connection and explicit alignment of the teaching and learning approach to authentic assessment for learning and student's own skills development has been demonstrated. This investigation encourages further research into discipline specific degree programs supporting students' learning and development of academic attributes and skills for future employability.

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# University Students' Intentions to Undertake Online Learning on Completing a Blended Course

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present research is to investigate the relationship between university students' willingness to undertake online learning and a number of factors, such as their self-regulation in learning, attitudes toward online learning, and perception of their experience in online interaction in a blended learning environment. Ninety-four second-year undergraduate students, who undertook a blended course in a university in Australia, participated in a questionnaire survey with multiple-choice and open-ended questions. It was found that the participants' intentions to undertake future online learning were significantly influenced by their online learning attitudes, goal orientation, perceived importance of online interaction with their teachers and other peers. The impact of the participants' goal orientation on their intentions to learn online was mediated through perceived importance of online interaction with their teachers and other peers and online learning attitudes. This paper also investigated the participants' responses to the open-ended questions about the reasons for their intentions to undertake future online learning, the subject areas they considered more or less suitable for online learning, and their expectations of online course delivery.

**Key Words:** willingness to learn online, online learning attitudes, online interaction, self-regulation

## Introduction

Online learning has been widely adopted in Australian higher education as it provides flexibility and increases students' access to higher education courses. Increasing enrolment in online learning is a trend in higher education globally, as this mode of delivery better accommodates diverse needs of the learners who are geographically dispersed or have conflicting schedules or multiple family and employment commitments.

The 2015 Survey of Online Learning conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group, Pearson, and Quahog Research Group (2016) revealed that twenty-eight per cent of the students in the United States took at least one distance education course and that enrolments in online courses were increasing. In Australia, most universities provide education supported by online learning technologies, such as learning management systems, virtual classrooms, and synchronous and asynchronous communication. The "Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2016 Student data" (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016) showed that there were fourteen per cent of students undertaking external modes of learning and another eight per cent were involved in multiple-models of learning in 2016, with an increase of 6.8 per cent and 21.4 per cent respectively, compared with the 2015 statistics.

It has been found that university students' intentions to undertake online learning can be significantly influenced by their self-efficacy, perceived usefulness, ease of use, enjoyment, and anxiety in online learning, and the quality of online learning system (Compeau & Higgins, 1995; Chen, Lin, Yeh, & Lou, 2013; Lee, Cheung, & Chen, 2005; Lin & Wang, 2011; Roca, Chiu, & Martinez, 2006; Tarhini, Hone, & Liu, 2015; Taylor & Todd, 1995). However, given the fact that online learning technology can be integrated into various aspects of learning process (e.g., students' interactions with course content, course interface (i.e., learning management system), teachers, and other students), it is valuable to further investigate how the above-mentioned factors can influence students' intentions to undertake future online learning and whether there will be mediation between these factors.

## University students' intentions to learn online

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Davis, 1989) has established that people's intentions to use technology can be significantly affected by their perception of how easy and useful to use technology (i.e., perceived ease of use and usefulness of technology). According to the TAM, students' perceived ease of use and usefulness of technology were theorised as determinants of their behaviour intentions and actual usage (Rodriguez & Lozano, 2011; Tarhini, Hone, & Liu, 2013; Teo & Noyes, 2011). The TAM has also been widely used to investigate and explore the determinants of students' behavioural intentions to learn in an online environment (Lin & Wang, 2011; Park, 2009; Sánchez & Hueros, 2010; Tan, Ooi, Leong, & Lin, 2014; Teo, 2009, 2011; Zhang, Zhao, & Tan, 2008).

In addition to the perceived ease of use and usefulness of online learning systems, the factors influencing students' online learning intentions were found to include their enjoyment (Taylor & Gitsaki, 2004; Venkatesh, 1999), self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2013; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1992; Tarhini et al., 2015), and course satisfaction during online learning (Chen

et al., 2013; Lee, Yoon, & Lee, 2009; Lin & Wang, 2011; Roca et al., 2006). Self-efficacy, defined as students' confidence in their ability to perform certain learning tasks in an online learning environment, was found to significantly influence students' behavioural intentions (Compeau & Higgins, 1995; Taylor & Todd, 1995). For example, Tarhini et al. (2015) applied the TAM and examined the intentions of using online learning systems among the university students in Lebanon and England. The research findings indicated that computer self-efficacy, perceived usefulness of technology, and perceived ease of use were significant determinants of the students' intentions to undertake online learning.

Course satisfaction was generally indexed by students' perception of their experience of using an online learning system. Students' experience of online learning can be described as their online interaction with course content, interface (online learning systems), teachers, and other peers (e.g., Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994; Moore, 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 2011). The existing research has identified the relationship between students' intentions to learn online and their online interaction experience. For example, Chen et al. (2013) constructed a structural model assessed by PLS-Graph and found that university students' intentions to use an online learning system were significantly predicted by their perceived enjoyment, perceived usefulness and ease of use, levels of anxiety and self-efficacy, and characters of the online learning system. In Lee et al.'s (2009) research in Korea, it was found that instructor characteristics, teaching materials, the design of learning content, perceived ease of use, perceived usefulness, and playfulness (students' enjoyment in online learning) were positively related to university students' intentions to use online learning systems.

Furthermore, the mediation of the above factors in relation to their impact on students' intentions to undertake online learning has been identified. Roca et al. (2006) found that people's continuance intentions to learn online were determined by their course satisfaction, which was jointly determined by their perceived usefulness and ease of use of online learning mode, information quality, service quality, system quality, and cognitive absorption. In Tan et al.'s (2014) research about the relationship between students' intentions to use mobile learning and their perceived usefulness and ease of use of the mobile learning mode, the researchers found that the influence of the students' perceived ease of use on their intentions was mediated through perceived usefulness. Venkatesh (1999) found that people's intentions to take an online training program were affected by their perceived enjoyment during online training and the relationship was mediated through their perceived ease to use of the online learning system.

In fact, the concept of perceived ease of use and usefulness of online learning systems reflects students' judgement on online learning, which constitutes affective components in their attitudes toward online learning. Attitudes are assumed to have three components — affective, behavioural, and cognitive components (Rajecki, 1990; Triandis, 1971). The affective component is essentially an evaluative element. Attitude holders judge an object to be positive or negative based on evaluative and emotional elements. The behavioural component is regarded as a predisposition to action and represents an intentional element in attitudes. The cognitive component refers to any information, fact, or knowledge relevant to the attitudinal object and is used to indicate the functions, implications, or consequences of the object. It is assumed that attitudes are stable to some extent and can predict people's behaviour (Maio & Haddock, 2009). This assumption was validated by Abdel-Wahab (2008) who found that, among a group of Egyptian university students, the participants' attitudes toward online learning, pressure to use online learning and the availability of online learning resources were the significant predictors for their intentions to adopt online learning. In the

present research, students' attitudes toward online learning were measured to incorporate their perception of ease of use and usefulness of online learning systems.

Some researchers have also investigated the effect of self-regulation on students' attitudes toward online learning. Self-regulated learning refers to students' motivational orientations and the learning strategies that they employ to reach their desired learning goals (Zimmerman 1989). Self-regulated learning process involves students' application of metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies which are driven by their motivation to learn (McCombs, 1986; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990a, 1990b; Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992). Several researchers (e.g., Artino, 2008; Lee et al., 2005; Moon & Kim, 2001; Mullen & Tallent-Runnels, 2006; Xie, Debacker, & Ferguson, 2006) found that students' application of self-regulated learning strategies was related to their attitudes toward learning in an online environment. However, there are few studies further exploring how self-regulation will impact on students' intentions to learn online.

With the globalisation of online learning in higher education, it has become imperative for educators to understand students' intentions to undertake online learning (Liaw & Huang, 2011). Although it has been well established that students' perceptions of online learning and their online learning experience may significantly influence their intentions, it remains unclear as to how these determinants will correlate with each other and affect students' intentions to continue learning online. In an online learning environment, it is critical for adult learners to be self-initiative and maintain positive, with a high level of course engagement. Therefore, the influence of self-regulation on students' intentions to undertake online learning needs to be taken into account. The present study aims to examine whether university students' intentions to undertake future online learning will be influenced by their attitudes toward online learning, self-regulation, and perception of online interaction.

## Research methodology

### Participants

A questionnaire survey was administered to 94 second-year pre-service teaching students who undertook a blended course offered by a university in Australia. This course had 12-week duration and aimed to provide students with theories, research, and practices on using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in learning and teaching. The course blended face-to-face instruction (a one-hour lecture and a two-hour tutorial every week on campus) and online learning (an access to course content and weekly forum activities on Moodle, communication through email, and use of the Internet technologies to complete course assessments). The students were required to attend the lecture and tutorial every week and complete assignments (i.e., written essays, group presentations during tutorials, and contributions to weekly online forums) to pass the course.

### Procedure

After obtaining an ethics approval from the university to conduct the research project, the students were approached with information sheets about the research and consent forms. Once the participants' consent was secured, the access (URL) to an online questionnaire was provided to them close to the end of the semester. It took the participants approximately 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire survey.

## **Instruments**

The questionnaire instruments gauged the participants' capability of self-regulated learning, attitudes toward online learning, perceptions of online interactions in the course (i.e., the participants' interactions with course content, interface, teachers, and other peers), and intentions to undertake future online learning. The validity and reliability of the constructs of the participants' online learning attitudes, self-regulation, and perceptions of online interactions were approved with Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Cronbach's Alpha values.

The measurement of the participants' self-regulated learning in the present study was developed on the basis of the scales used by Barnard, Paton, and Lan (2008), Lan, Bremer, Stevens, and Mullen (2004), Pintrich et al. (1991, 1993), and Pintrich and De Groot (1990a). A pool of 49 items was generated and all items concerned the ways in which students related to their university studies. For each item, the participants were asked to respond to a self-referring statement on a scale ranging from "1 = Not like me at all" to "5 = Very much like me".

The questions about the participants' attitudes toward online learning in the present study were adopted from several existing scales developed by Knowles and Kerkman (2007), Robinson and Doverspike (2006), and Yudko, Hirokawa, and Chi (2008). The instruments addressed the participants' affective perception (including enjoyment, interest, comfort, usefulness, confidence, anxiety, and perceived difficulty level) and judgments about and beliefs in online learning. A four-point Likert Scale was used to indicate the participants' statements from "1=Disagree strongly" to "4=Agree strongly".

The participants' perceptions of their online learning experience were measured by 29 items that reflected the importance of various online interactions with course content, interface, teachers and other students. A five-point Likert Scale (from "1=Not important at all" to "5=Extremely important") was applied to indicate their perceived importance of each type of online interaction.

Finally, the participants were asked to answer a number of open-ended questions about a) reasons for their intentions to undertake future online learning; b) the subject areas they considered to be more or less suitable to be taught online, and c) suggestions for online course delivery.

## **Data analysis**

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used in the present study. The quantitative analyses of the data about the participants' self-regulation, attitudinal factors, perceptions of online interactions in the course, and intentions for future online learning were performed on SPSS and Smart PLS. Factor analyses were conducted to test the internal consistency of these factors. The Alpha level was set at 0.05 for the purpose of the significance level in the present study.

The themes of the participants' answers to the open-ended questions were generated and described by coding the text data, developing a description, and defining the main themes from the data. The themes generated from the answers were indicated by frequency tables.

## Research findings

The participants' responses to the questions about online learning attitudes, self-regulation, and perceptions of online interactions were subjected to a factor analysis to ensure their validity and reliability. Only the items with strong factor loadings higher than 0.5 were used for analysis purposes. In relation to self-regulation, a four-factor solution with 21 items was identified. These factors were labelled as: a) self-management (time and learning environment); b) metacognitive awareness (i.e., use of various learning strategies); c) intrinsic orientation (i.e., desire for intrinsic understanding); and d) performance orientation (i.e., desire to perform well). A single-factor solution with 12 items was developed to determine the construct of online learning attitudes. Similarly, a single-factor solution was determined for the participants' perception of each type of online interaction (Table 1).

Table 1

### *Factor analysis*

		Cronbach's Alpha	AVE
Online learning attitudes (12 items)		.94	.59
Self-regulation	Intrinsic orientation (6 items)	.81	.52
	Performance orientation (5 items)	.82	.54
	Self-management (5 items)	.78	.52
	Metacognitive awareness (5 items)	.75	.50
Perception of online interactions	Course content (7 items)	.95	.76
	Course interface (10 items)	.93	.63
	Teacher-student interaction (8 items)	.94	.69
	Peer interaction (4 items)	.92	.80

Among the 94 participants, 18 per cent of them would study any subject online, 29 per cent would study familiar subjects online, 38 per cent were not sure about learning online in future, and 15 per cent would not study any course online. There were 87 per cent among the participants who scored higher than the mid-point of online learning attitudes to display a positive attitude toward online learning. Regarding the participants' perceived importance levels of online interactions with course content, online learning system, teachers, and other students, there were respectively 67 per cent, 71 per cent, 70 per cent, and 48 per cent of them considering the above online interactions to be important for their learning.

The research findings showed that the participants' intentions to learn online were directly predicted by their attitudes toward online learning at a significant level ( $R^2 = .18, p < .05$ ). The influence of goal orientation (i.e., intrinsic and performance orientation) on the participants' intentions was mediated through their perception of online interactions with their teachers and other peers and online learning attitudes. The other two factors of self-regulation (i.e., self-management and metacognitive awareness) and their perception of online interactions with course content and interface were not found to have any significant impact on the participants' intentions to undertake online learning (Figure 1).

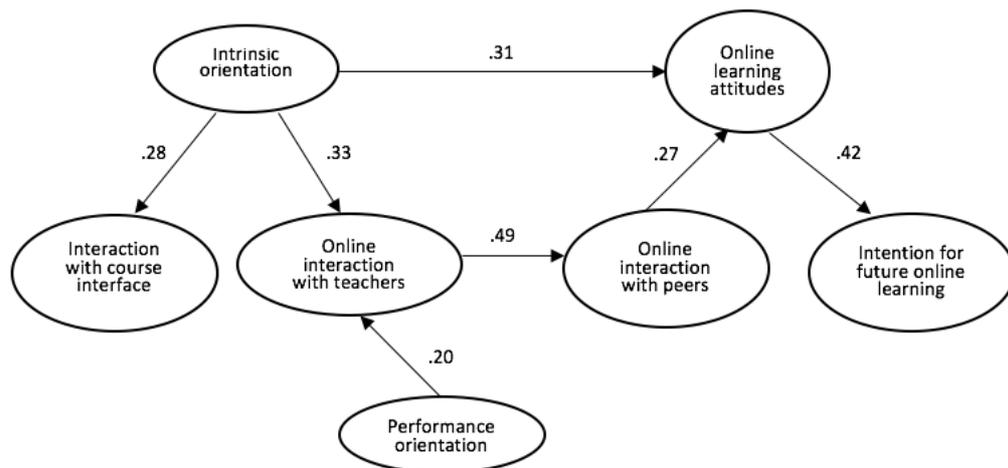


Figure 1. The final model of the relationship between intentions for future online learning and motivation, perceived online interactions, and online learning attitudes

The reasons for the participants' different choices for future online learning were reported as their preference for online or face-to-face interaction, convenience and flexibility of online learning, subject area characters, and personal factors and commitments (Table 2). The participants chose online learning largely due to the convenience and flexibility offered by online courses, their prior positive experiences of online learning, and liking of ICT use. Some participants would only choose online delivery for the subjects they were familiar with. Furthermore, their familiarity with a subject and the difficulty level of the subject were reported as the main reasons for their preference. The remaining participants, who were either not sure or would not take any online courses, attributed their choices to the preference for face-to-face interactions, familiarity with subject areas, and personal factors and commitments.

Table 2  
*Frequency of Reasons for Participants' Intentions for Future Online Learning*

<b>Frequency of the reasons for "I will not study any course online."</b>	
Reasons	Instances
Prefer to have face-to-face interaction	14
Less motivated in online learning	3
Prefer hands-on practice	3
<b>Frequency of the reasons for "Not sure"</b>	
Reasons	Instances
Prefer face-to-face interaction	22
Depend on the subject area	11
Depend on personal factors and commitments	11
Issues relating to availability of help or support in online learning (e.g., lack of prompt reply or detailed explanation)	9
More engagement in classroom learning	8
Dislike relying on ICTs because of technical issues	4
Prefer blended learning	3
<b>Frequency of the reasons for "I will study online only in the subject area with which I am familiar."</b>	
Reasons	Instances
Depend on my familiarity with the subject area and its difficulty level	27
Convenience and flexibility of online learning	14
Liking face-to-face interaction	7
<b>Frequency of the reasons for "Yes, I will study online in any subject areas."</b>	
Reasons	Instances
Convenience and flexibility in online learning	13
Having positive prior online learning experiences	5
Liking using ICTs	3
Easiness of communicating with others	2
Following a trend	2

*Note.* Instances = frequency of the reasons mentioned by the individuals, who claimed different intentions for online learning.

Furthermore, the participants also nominated the subject areas they considered to be more or less suitable for online delivery (Table 3 and 4). The subject areas that would be relevant to using ICTs in education and do not require frequent hands-on practice with a low level of workload and difficulty were noted as suitable for online delivery. In contrast, the participants considered that the subjects requiring demonstration and instruction of complex theories and hands-on practice were suitable to be delivered through face-to-face instruction.

Table 3

*The Participants' Nomination: The Subject Areas Suitable to be Taught Online*

	Instances
The subject areas about using ICTs in education	36
The subject areas without much hands-on learning	10
The subject areas with a low level of difficulty or workload	7
The subject areas with which I am familiar or of which I have background knowledge or prior experiences	5

*Note.* (a)  $n = 94$ , (b) Instances = frequency of the subject areas mentioned by the participants.

Table 4

*The Participants' Nomination: The Subject Areas Less Suitable to be Taught Online*

	Instances
The subject areas of mathematics	33
The subject areas of literacy and language studies (e.g., English)	30
The subject areas with hands-on learning	25
The subject areas with heavy theories	15
The subject areas of science	8
The subject areas of physical education	6
The subject areas of technology design	5
The subject areas of teaching experience practicum	5

*Note.* (a)  $n = 94$ , (b) Instances = frequency of the subject areas mentioned by the participants

In relation to the participants' suggestions for future online courses, the sufficiency, accuracy, and clarity of course information, incorporating face-to-face contact with

teachers, recorded lectures, well-designed course interface, and smooth online communications with teachers were recorded as the most frequently stated recommendations (Table 5).

Table 5

*The Participants' Suggestions for Future Online Course Delivery*

	Instances
Sufficient, precise, clear, and well-structured course content and information	21
There should be a blended mode for online learning.	18
Providing podcast lectures	8
Well-designed course website with easy access all the time	5
Frequent communication and timely replies from teachers	4
Relevance of online discussion to the lecture content	3
Reasonable course load	3
Relevance of course content to students' future profession	2
Providing physical course materials	1
Effective and proper usage of ICT tools in the course	1
Addressing students' differences in learning	1
Mobile learning (an easy access from mobile phones)	1

*Note.* (a)  $n = 94$ , (b) Instances = frequency of the suggestions mentioned by the participants

## Discussion and implications

It was found that the participants' attitudes toward online learning had a direct and significant impact on their intentions to undertake future online learning. This finding is consistent with the existing research by Bhattacharjee and Sanford (2006), Lin, Chen, and Fang (2010), Shih (2004), and Stoel and Lee (2003). In the more recent research by Adewole-Odeshi (2014), it was reported that there was a significant relationship between students' attitudes and the intentions to use an online learning system. Additionally, the research by Lin (2011) demonstrated a significant impact of a group of university students' attitudes toward online learning on their intentions to continue online learning. The result revealed that negative critical incidents (e.g. difficulty in using a website or a slow response from teachers) and

attitudes were the main determinants of the users' intentions to continue using online learning systems, irrespective of their previous online learning experience. This study highlighted the importance of investigating negative critical incidents during online learning, as they may be the key antecedents of students' intentions to continue to persevere with the use of an online learning system (Lin et al., 2010). Further research ought to be conducted to determine the factors influencing students' attitudes toward online learning, which may in turn affect their continuance intentions to learn online.

Furthermore, in the present study, when the participants' online interactions and attitudes toward online learning were included in the analysis, goal orientation (intrinsic and extrinsic orientation) showed no direct influence on their intentions to undertake future online learning. The impact of goal orientation was mediated through the participants' perception of online interaction with their teachers and other students and online learning attitudes. The participants with a higher level of goal orientation not only reported a higher level of perceived importance of the online interaction with their teachers and peers but also showed a more positive attitude toward online learning than those with a lower level of goal orientation. The importance of students' motivation to be engaged in online learning has been addressed by Swan (2001) and Rodriguez, Ooms, and Montañez, (2008). Swan found that the students, who were active to interact with their teachers and classmates online, showed a more positive attitude toward online learning. Rodriguez et al. identified a significant relationship between university students' motivation to be engaged in online interactions and their attitudes toward with technology use.

In the present study, 18 per cent of the variance of the participants' intentions was predicted by the factors of goal orientation, perception of teacher-student and peer online interactions, and attitudes toward online learning. There is a need to further investigate the impact of more factors on students' course satisfaction (Levy 2007; Moore, Bartkovich, Fetzner, & Ison, 2003; Müller 2008) as well as their perceived usefulness and ease of online learning (Al-Adwan, Al-Adwan, & Smedley, 2013; Holder, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Osborn, 2001), which may in turn have more predictive effect on students' intentions for future online learning.

In addition, the participants' interactions with the course content and interface was not found to be related with their online learning attitudes in the present study. Further research may need to incorporate the measurement of both quantity and quality of students' interactions with course content and interface, which may indicate whether students apply effective learning strategies (e.g., higher-order thinking skills), rather than navigating through the course webpages without actually acquiring and applying the course knowledge.

Although, in the present study, the other two self-regulatory factors (i.e., self-management and cognitive awareness) were not found to have a significant impact on the participants' intentions to undertake future online learning, some existing research has demonstrated that students' time and effort management skills and their ability to balance multiple commitments and keep persistent and resilience are important factors to attribute to minimising dropout rates in online courses (Castles, 2004; Holder, 2007; Kemp, 2002; Müller, 2008; Osborn, 2001; Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos, & Vergidis, 2004; Shin & Kim, 1999; Xenos, Pierrakeas, & Pintelas, 2002). Further investigation is needed to examine to which extent self-management and cognitive awareness will play in shaping students' perceptions of their online learning experiences (e.g., perceived knowledge acquisition and skill development) and determining their intentions to persevere with online learning. Finally, it would also be worthwhile exploring which learning strategies could help students learn better online through effectively applying various cognitive strategies and

developing high-order thinking skills, which may result in successful course achievement and in turn contribute to students' intentions to continue online learning.

The reasons provided by the participants for their intentions to undertake more online courses reflected their positive and negative feedbacks on their online learning experience. Convenience and flexibility are still the main reasons for them to choose online learning. However, for the participants who chose not to take any online courses in future, face-to-face instruction is their preferred course delivery mode. Meanwhile, the participants were found to be concerned about the difficulty level of the course, which may influence their choices of future online learning.

The participants' nomination of subject areas to be more or less suitable for online learning indicated how comfortable they would feel learning these subject areas online. Meanwhile, their suggestions for online course delivery also reflect their expectation of future online learning from learners' aspects. When an online course is delivered, the complexity of the course materials should be taken into account. Because of a lack of face-to-face contact and explanation and demonstration, there will be a need for more online support provided to students. This is also true for the subject matter that requires intensive hands-on practice. Online course designers and teachers ought to consider how technology can be used effectively to help online students achieve the learning outcomes similar to those who undertake the course delivered through face-to-face instruction.

Finally, the participants' main expectations included adequate course information, user-friendly course interface design, and timely support from teachers and their preference for blended mode of learning. This finding is in accordance with the research by DeBourgh (1999), Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez (2011), Liu, Chen, Sun, Wible, and Kou (2010), Nguyen and Zhang (2011), and Paechter et al. (2010). Future research may extend the measurement of students' online learning experience to gauge their actual course engagement and positive and adverse feedbacks about their course experiences. This may provide more comprehensive understanding of students' online learning experiences, in order to support learner-centred and personalized learning in higher education.

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**Quality**

# The Role of the Academic Board in For-Profit HEPS: assuring quality

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## Abstract

The Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA) has responsibility for ensuring the quality and viability of the higher education sector. TEQSA categorises the 166 higher education providers (HEPs) in Australia's diverse higher education sector into various 'market' groupings. The two major groups are universities and non-university higher education providers (NUHEPS). The latter consists of a number of sub-types (TAFE, faith-based not-for-profit, other not-for-profit, for-profit and pathway organisations). TEQSA issued new Threshold Standards which came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2017. A distinguishing feature is the emphasis on governance and, particularly, governance of the Academic Board. However, the operation of Academic Boards in for-profit entities has attracted little research. The purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by discussing the issues for an Academic Board in for-profit institutions and illustrating this with a case study from Southern Cross Education Institute of Higher Education.

**Key Words:** private higher education providers, academic board, assurance

# Introduction

The education sector in Australia has undergone substantial changes in recent decades in response to the globalisation of education services, the move from elite to mass systems of higher education, and the growth in private higher education providers (HEPs).

The Tertiary Education Sector is the third largest industry in the Australian economy. In addition to its contribution to innovation and scholarship, its economic significance makes the governance, operations and quality of the sector important to the future of the country.

Total Revenue in 2015 was \$35.3B. Employment of 59,965 staff in the tertiary sector services 1.4 million students of whom 73% are domestic and 23% are international. The international students contribute 27% of the total revenue and 42% of the revenue of for-profit institutions. There are approximately 1.2 million students studying at public universities and 120,000 students studying at private HEPs. The value of private sector HEPs' investment has increased by more than \$2 billion over the past decade (TEQSA 2017).

In 2015, there were 43 universities and 53 not-for-profit institutions in operation in Australia; 63 institutions (5.3%) are classified by TEQSA as for-profit and 36 of these are dual sector institutions. For-profit providers experienced the fastest revenue growth of any provider group from 2014 to 2016 (44.4%). Revenue sources are diversified across international higher education students, domestic students and non-higher education activities, but revenue generated from international is the largest source of revenue for the for-profit providers.

The value of private sector HEPs' investment has increased by more than \$2 billion over the past decade – funding to meet students' needs that have not needed to come from the Australian taxpayer. For public institutions, approximately half of the funding is provided by the Government, with the remainder being contributed by the students, upfront or via HECS-HELP loans (Higher Education Contribution Scheme - Higher Education Loan Program). At Private HEPs, the student pays full tuition fees. There is no government subsidy. However, the Government makes a loan scheme available called FEE-HELP (Higher Education Loan Program). Undergraduate students paying through FEE-HELP pay an additional 25% administration fee to the Government. However, there is no such fee on HECS-HELP (COPHE 2016).

The delivery of Higher Education in Australia has traditionally been the province of public universities. Forces that acted as drivers for change in universities were widespread economic and reform in government, and, especially, adoption of the concepts of competition and contestability (Harman, 2000). The Australian Governments are anxious to divest themselves of responsibilities for funding service delivery (the move to Gable's "steering" rather than "rowing") (Armstrong 1997). To this end, while the gross amount of real grant funding has been increasing, expenditure per student has been declining. Deregulation of fees has been discussed but not implemented. However, as the Federal government has gradually decreased the portion of the full course fees it contributes, the student contribution has been forced to rise. When HECS was introduced in 1990 the standard student contribution was around \$2,500.00 per year, now it is typically around \$6,000.00 per year.

A number of full fee paying student places are now available to Australian residents as well as to international students. In seeking to cut costs as a reaction to government funding cuts, an unintended impact of this [in universities] was a decline in the career paths and influence of academic teaching staff, and an increase in the appointments of short term, part time, and casual teaching staff.

Government continued to offer incentives designed to ensure universities developed policies and practices that tied them more closely to the priorities of government. Competition was to be the driver for greater strategic management, and self-funding by institutions, mainly through international enrolments, was also intended to provide some relief to the pressures on government funding. The changes designed to make universities more competitive in the world education market opened the home market to more competition in the delivery of higher education from TAFEs and private providers of higher education. At the same time, the expansion of the sector to accommodate the huge growth in student numbers required new governance and management structures to ensure maintenance of quality and standards in the expanded market.

## Governance In Higher Education Institutions

In Australia, the first significant review of university governance and management, the *Higher Education Management Review* by David Hoare, was conducted in 1995. In 2000, the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes were endorsed by the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MYCEETYA) to ensure consistent quality assurance criteria and standards across Australia. These were monitored by an independent body, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). West (1998) further emphasised that the role of the governing bodies of universities should parallel the role of corporate boards due to the size of the cash flows and the expanding activities of universities.

The Australian Government announced the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes in 2000, preceding the Governance Protocols for higher education, as outlined in *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* (Nelson, 2003). The package of reforms to the higher education sector which were part of the 2003-04 budgets were introduced in 2007 (Lewis 2007). These reforms included significant changes to the governance arrangements of universities: board size, board structure, roles and responsibilities of the board members and the separation of CEO and Chair of the governing board. The reform protocols restricted the size of the governing boards to 22 members, with at least two of them having financial expertise and one having commercial expertise and the majority being external independent members (Nelson 2003; Vidovich and Currie 2011). Vice-Chancellors were appointed, and referred to as, chief executives and almost every university's enabling legislation provided power for the governing body to exercise overall control and management of the university (Nelson, 2003; Duckett, 2004; Swansson et al., 2005; Vidovich and Currie).

Subsequently, the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley Review 2008) recommended that an independent national regulatory body be responsible for regulating all types of tertiary education. The review team reasoned that a national approach would provide for a more effective, streamlined and integrated sector, achieving a sustainable and responsible higher education system in the larger, more diverse and [soon to be] demand-driven environment. In 2011, AUQA was superseded by The Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA) (Heath and Armstrong 2017).

## TEQSA

In the 2010-11 Budget, the Australian Government established TEQSA as the new national body for higher education regulation and quality assurance. With a dual focus on ensuring that higher education providers meet minimum standards, as well as promoting best practice and improving the quality of the higher education sector as a whole, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011 (TEQSA Act) established the agency and the new national regulatory and quality assurance environment for Australian higher education.

TEQSA administers two pieces of legislation:

- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011 (TEQSA Act)
- Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (ESOS Act)

TEQSA issued its first set of standards in 2011 when the Commonwealth Minister for Education and Training confirmed new national standards for higher education in Australia in the legislation *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2011*. After a Review (Department of Education 2015), TEQSA issued revised Threshold Standards which came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2017.

From this date, all registered providers of higher education in or from Australia must meet and continue to meet the requirements of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015. They are termed *Threshold Standards* indicating that they represent the minimum required to meet registration and accreditation requirements for providers of higher education courses in Australia.

The Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Authority (TEQSA) has responsibility for ensuring the quality and viability of the education sector. TEQSA categorises the 166 higher education providers (HEPs) in Australia's diverse higher education sector into various 'market' groupings. The two major groups are universities and non-university higher education providers (NUHEPS). The latter consists of a number of provider types (TAFE, faith-based not-for-profit, other not-for-profit, for-profit and pathway organisations).

A Higher Education Provider:

1. meets the Higher Education Standards Framework and offers at least one accredited course of study;
2. has a clearly articulated higher education purpose that includes a commitment to and support for free intellectual inquiry in its academic endeavours;
3. delivers teaching and learning that engage with advanced knowledge and inquiry;
4. academic staff are active in scholarship that informs their teaching, and are active in research when engaged in research student supervision.

A major difference between publicly and the privately funded institutions is their legal structure. Most Australian universities are established by an Act of Parliament by the government in the State in which they are located. Private higher education institutions are registered as companies, which brings them under the jurisdiction of the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC), which administers the Australian Companies Law. Directors of companies and councillors in universities are bound by

similar duties of honesty, care and diligence. Listed companies are also expected to comply with the governance standards issued by the Australian Securities Exchange.

All higher education institutions must comply with the registrations and course accreditation requirements of TEQSA. The registration of HEPs serves the purpose of ensuring high academic standards. One of the differences between universities and other HEPs is the matter of whether they are authorised to self-accredit their higher education courses. Eleven NUHEPs are approved to do so; the remaining 112 must apply to TEQSA under the TEQSA Threshold Standards for the accreditation of each course to be offered.

## The Governance Standards

Governance consists of the complete system through which the policies, processes, definitions of roles, relationships, systems, strategies and resources that ensure academic standards and continuous improvement in academic activities are initially approved, referred to the corporate governing body and subsequently monitored. It is concerned with all matters relating to the integrity and quality of the core higher education activities of teaching and learning, scholarship and (where relevant) research and should have a substantial role in ensuring the protection and promotion of academic freedom, even though ultimate responsibility for it rests with the corporate governing body. TESQA requires 'a clear and discernible separation between corporate and academic governance' (2014. p.3).

The Governance Standards are divided into part A and Part B. Part B refers to the classification of providers and the criteria to obtain the right of providers to self-accredit their courses.

Part A presents seven categories of standards which seek to ensure the quality of the institution. They are:

1. Student participation and Attainment.
2. Learning Environment
3. Teaching
4. Research and Research Training
5. Institutional Quality Assurance
6. Governance and Accountability
7. Representation, Information and Information Management

A distinguishing feature of the Standards is the emphasis on Standard 6. Governance and Accountability. Threshold Standard 6 consists of three sections: 6.1 Corporate Governance, 6.2 Corporate Monitoring and Accountability and 6.3 Academic Governance (Table1.)

Table 1

*Threshold Standards: 6.3 Academic Governance*

<b>Table 1. Threshold Standards: 6.3 Academic Governance</b>
<p><b>1. Processes and structures are established and responsibilities are assigned that collectively:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. achieve effective academic oversight of the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training</li> <li>b. set and monitor institutional benchmarks for academic quality and outcomes</li> <li>c. establish and maintain academic leadership at an institutional level, consistent with the types and levels of higher education offered, and</li> <li>d. provide competent advice to the corporate governing body and management on academic matters, including advice on academic outcomes, policies and practices.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Academic oversight assures the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training effectively, including by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. developing, monitoring and reviewing academic policies and their effectiveness</li> <li>b. confirming that delegations of academic authority are implemented</li> <li>c. critically scrutinising, approving and, if authority to self-accredit is held, accrediting or advising on approving and accrediting, courses of study and their associated qualifications</li> <li>d. maintaining oversight of academic and research integrity, including monitoring of potential risks</li> <li>e. monitoring and initiating action to improve performance against institutional benchmarks for academic quality and outcomes</li> <li>f. critically evaluating the quality and effectiveness of educational innovations or proposals for innovations</li> <li>g. evaluating the effectiveness of institutional monitoring, review and improvement of academic activities, and</li> <li>h. monitoring and reporting to the corporate governing body on the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training.</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Students have opportunities to participate in academic governance</b></p>

## Academic Governance

Academic governance consists of the complete system through which the policies, processes, roles and systems ensure academic standards and continuous improvement. It is concerned with maintaining the quality of all matters relating to the integrity and quality of the core higher education activities of teaching and learning, scholarship, research (where appropriate), oversight and review of teaching, learning and student outcomes, and ensuring the protection and promotion of academic freedom, even though

ultimate responsibility rests with the corporate governing body. The body responsible for achieving this is the Academic Board.

An organisation's capacity to maintain effective academic oversight of its higher education activities is critical to preserving TEQSA's confidence in the provider. To assure that governance standards have been met, TEQSA requires evidence of (a) the adoption of a high level of academic oversight as part of the provider's normal business reports and analyses, and (b) that these have been presented to the governing body. Effective academic governance (TEQSA 2014) refers to the core roles and responsibilities of the three principal bodies responsible for institutional governance:

Corporate governing body – responsible for setting overall strategic direction and the policies and processes necessary to achieve institutional objectives. It is ultimately responsible (to shareholders and/or stakeholders) for both corporate and academic outcomes. A separate TEQSA Guidance Note has been prepared in regard to corporate governance.

1. Academic governing body – responsible for setting and overseeing the policies and processes necessary to achieve intended academic outcomes (quality and integrity) consistent with the provider's overall strategic directions. It is responsible for setting and maintaining academic standards and monitoring academic outcomes. Its ultimate responsibility and accountability is to the corporate governing body for academic outcomes.
2. Executive management (consisting of vice-chancellor/chief executive officer and other senior executives and managers, including executive deans/deans/academic directors and heads of schools/departments) – responsible for implementing policies, programs and processes, including through decisions on staffing, budgets, infrastructure, etc. Its ultimate responsibility and accountability is to the corporate governing body.

While the approval of courses in self-funding institutions requires compliance with education and content standards, the governance standards raise different issues for registration of private and for-profit institutions. In particular, the role of the academic board in these is a major issue. The objective of this paper is to:

- discuss issues raised in the academic governance of private entities, and
- illustrate the appropriate responses in a case study describing these in a for-profit private provider.

## The SCEI Case Study

The following case study describes the experience of Southern Cross Education Institute - Higher Education (SCEI-HE). SCEI-HE is applying for registration as a higher education provider and the accreditation of Bachelor level courses. Southern Cross Education Institute Pty Ltd is the holding company for a school and a VET establishment and is the owner of the new subsidiary company.

Some of the differences between universities and private HEPs can be illustrated with reference to the experience of establishing SCEI-HE.

## The Governing Body: The Corporate Board

The governing body of every institution is responsible for the exercise of authority or control over its institution. In particular, it approves the mission, values and strategic direction of the institution and holds the chief executive to account. In universities, Councils and Councillors form the governing body which is chaired by the Chancellor. Vice-Chancellors are the 'President' or Chief Executive Officer, whose duties are to do with the management of the university and are subject to the direction of the Council.

In private HEPS, the governing body is usually a Board of Directors chaired by an independent Chair of the Board. Instead of a Vice-Chancellor, there is likely to be a Managing Director or a Chief Executive Officer (CEO). A Managing Director may be a representative of a shareholder or the owner of the business. If the CEO is also a major shareholder, this may raise questions in regard to the independence of the Board of Directors and their role in monitoring the performance of the CEO.

It is customary for governments to advertise for members of university councils and appoint a selection panel to make the appointments. Staff and student representatives may be elected by their university. The practicalities of establishing a board for an entity which is not yet in existence, prior to registration as a HEP and accreditation of a course, means that in a new private enterprise, a Board of Directors is usually already established by the entrepreneur and/or sponsors of the entity. The entrepreneur may seek help from consultants but the decision of who is appointed rests with them.

This was the sequence of appointment(s) actioned on behalf of the newly created SCEI-HE. The provider, guided by the Threshold Standards (2011), appointed Board members whose expertise and experience addressed the legal and financial requirements of the fledgling entity, knowledge of the higher education sector and, specifically, knowledge of the transition of VET institutes into non-university higher education providers. SCEI-HE's governance policies and practices dictated that, following the initial appointment of the Board Chair by the entrepreneur, the Board itself would thereafter appoint a selection/nomination committee for such purpose of general appointments. Appointments were to be made on the basis of the required member competencies for the composition of a Board, as identified by the Threshold Standards.

One of the first duties of SCEI-HE's newly formed Corporate Board was to appoint an Academic Board.

## Appointment Of The Academic Board

The first step was the approval by the Corporate Board of the Terms of Reference for the Academic Board. These defined and established the board appointment procedures, board size, its structure, the appointment of the Chair and its role and function,

The Academic Board has three (sub) Committees: Academic Programs, Teaching and Learning and Nominations Committees. Each Committee has a Chair and three members elected from the Academic Board. Three external appointments were made with the purpose of accessing discipline specific expertise in the courses under design.

A key concern was in the separation of the powers of the two SCEI-HE bodies, Corporate Board and Academic Board.

## Independence Of The Academic Board

The Chair and initial Academic Board membership appointments were approved by the Corporate Board. Subsequent appointments were made by the Academic Board itself. Academic independence was an important consideration in the process and selection of members. The Terms of Reference state that the membership of the Academic Board will not include the CEO or senior executive (management) staff. It further excludes the right of the CEO to have any responsibility in the appointment of the Academic Board Chair, or members of the Board and its committees. The terms of Reference for the Board's Nominations Committee identify it as the gateway for new appointments. Appointment of the Chair of this committee is a responsibility of the Academic Board.

## Balancing The Authority Of The Governing Body And The Academic Board

The balance between the powers of a council or a board of directors and their academic boards has varied from over time. The Acts applicable to the establishing of universities make it clear that the Council is the governing authority (Storey and Armstrong 2004). This means that while the legislature regards academic boards as responsible for academic matters, they are also responsible to their councils, and the councils have the final say on these matters. Should certain advice received from an Academic Board not be congruent with the direction that the council has decided that a university should take, the council may have to reject the advice. It cannot escape its responsibility by uncritically accepting whatever advice it is given.

Academic independence was a prime consideration in the establishment of governance structures in the newly formed SCEI-HE. The Terms of Reference are authored to state that the membership of the Academic Board will not include the CEO or senior executive (management) staff. In such an entity, the CEO does not have responsibility for appointing the Academic Board Chair or board members. As noted above, appointment of the members is a responsibility of the Nominations Committee. Appointment of the Chair is a responsibility of the Board itself.

The Academic Board Report is a standing item on the Corporate Board Agenda. Receiving this report, and monitoring and questioning the Academic Board's performance, are all important responsibilities of the Corporate Board.

## The Relationship Between Management And The Academic Board

Management is responsible for implementing the actions and directions issued by the Corporate and Academic Boards. While a major focus of the Academic Board can be said to be the quality of the processes and courses, a key focus of Management is balancing the budget (Demediuk, 2014). The danger is if a conflict in priorities arises.

While the main responsibility for managing SCEI-HE falls to the CEO/Managing Director, in practice, the directions given by the Academic Board are performed by the Academic Director who reports in a standing item to the Academic Board at all meetings. The CEO/Managing Director does not sit on the Academic Board but reports to the Academic Board as required. His report is a standing item on the Corporate Board.

## Managing Risk

The collapse of several private providers, particularly in the TAFE sector, have been reported in the newspapers. The causes of the failures are varied but are reported to include poor management, doubtful teaching practices and suggestions of fraud, all of which impact on the students involved and reflect badly on the sector. All private providers in higher education are required to carry insurance and make arrangements for placement of their students should it be necessary.

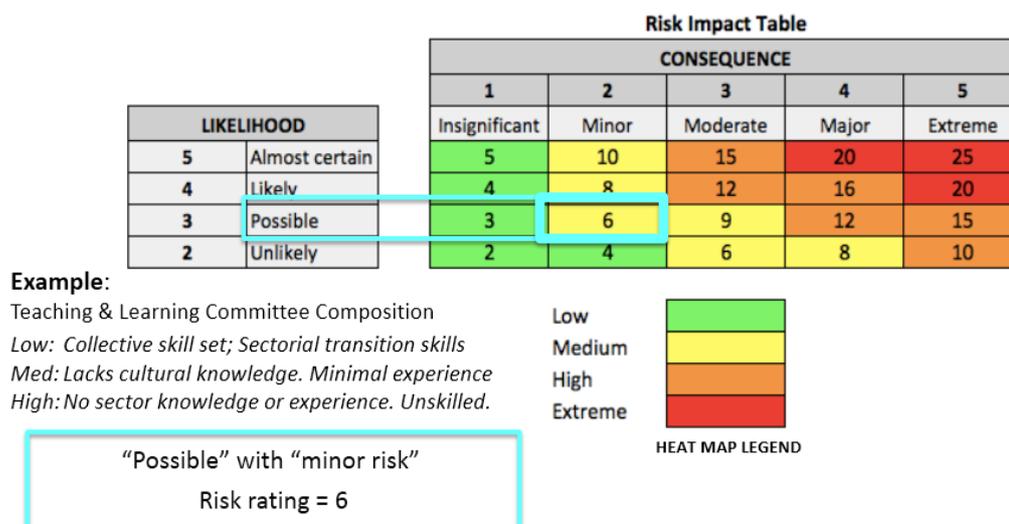
The Academic Board at SCEI-HE takes the analysis of risk to academic standards very seriously, rating the operations and composition of the Board and its committees against multiple risk factors, including perceived or potential Management influence in academic decision making. From its inception, the Academic Board and its respective sub committees have been on a learning curve in regard to the functional separation of management from academic priorities in a 'for profit' provider. At its most recent meeting, the Board concluded a critical analysis of its effectiveness as an independent arbiter of academic standards and governance and noted areas in which it had both markedly improved and could further improve into the new year.

Figure 1 illustrates part of the broader assessment of a potential risk to academic standards in a private HEP risk assessment summary.

## Consequences of Assessment

### a) Risk Impact

The Risk Impact Table shows how the risk will be ranked having assessed a risk's **likelihood** and **consequence** (and shown in the Heat Map)



ACADEMIC BOARD 2017

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Higher Education

Figure 1. Example of a risk analysis finding

## Closing The Gap Between Start-Up And Establishment

At the time that TEQSA conducted an examination of the proposed higher education premises and facilities, a PhD qualified Academic Director with higher education management and accreditation experience had been appointed to lead the nascent programs. When the submission went to TEQSA for registration as a higher education provider there were sixteen people engaged in the governance of the entity – although there were as yet no students.

Corporate Board: 7 Members; 2 in attendance

Academic Board: 8 Members; 2 in attendance

3 Academic Board Committees: 9 AB members (plus 3 external to the AB)

There are significant governance and management differences between public and private educational institutions (Table 2).

Table 2

*Differences in governance between public and private institutions*

<b>Governance</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Private HEP</b>
Governing Body	Council	Corporate Board
Head	Chancellor	Chair of the Board
Members	Councillors	Directors
Senior executive	Vice-Chancellor	MD/CEO Chief Executive Officer
Ownership	Government	Shareholders
Legal structure	Statutory body	Company
Duties	Care and Diligence, honesty	Care and Diligence, honesty
Listing	None	May be listed
Board Priority	Non-profit	Profit
Course accreditation	Self-accrediting	Not self-accrediting (most)
Quality and standards	Academic Board	Academic board
Compliance	TEQSA Attorney General	TEQSA ASIC ASX (if listed)
Associations	Universities Australia Group of 8 Australian Technology Network Innovative Research Universities National Tertiary Education Union	Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) Council of Private Higher Education

## Differences In Governance Between Public And Private Institutions

Despite their shift towards an independent corporate model of management, and because of their statutory legal structure, universities have government support and are not subject to the financial imperatives to the same degree as are private sector providers. Unlike a corporate entity board, the university council members have neither financial nor vested specific interests in the performance of the organisation (although the state government is represented in each university council, representing the state government legislative role in the system). While Universities are non-profit institutions, private providers have a duty to their shareholders.

As education providers, private companies are subject to regulation by TEQSA and also as private companies they are subject to the regulation of the company law by ASIC and, if they are listed, by the Australian Stock Exchange. Despite these differences, it is essential, if the quality of our courses and institutional arrangements are to be continuously improved, for all the participating institutions to meet the academic governance expectations of the Threshold Standards.

## Conclusion

The values and academic priorities of higher education may be deemed to be at risk in a corporate environment in which financial interests and responsibility to shareholders is of primary consideration. Under such circumstances, evidence of the authority and independence of a properly constituted Academic Board must be substantial in the private higher education entity.

Processes and powers critical to the functioning of an independent Academic Board in a non-university higher education provider must be formalised in an Institute's quality management and governance policies, such as which specify Schedules of Delegation, Terms of Reference for Corporate and Academic Boards and the Roles and Responsibilities (and authority) of key Management roles and entities.

A properly constituted and independent Academic Board in a NUHEP assures the higher education teaching loads, values, goals and scholarship expectations of higher education teaching academics are identified and supported. Additionally, an Academic Board gives the student body a voice via student representation on that Board.

Academic Boards seek to ensure that decisions in regard to these higher education values, goals and priorities are independent of, but not wholly incompatible with, those held by the Management of the Institute.

An effective Academic Board in a non-university HEP, then, not only assures the integrity and quality of teaching and learning and cohort progress and completions, but should also function as an advocate for the goals, values and scholarship opportunities of the organisation's higher education teaching staff. It seeks to intercede on behalf of the enrolled student body in regard to the standards, protocols and expectations given voice by the TEQSA Threshold Standards.

The advantages of the corporate model of governance are encompassed in the principles of strategic management and its focus on economic growth and financial security. Clear accountability mechanisms ensure that financial responsibilities and the need for internal scrutiny are addressed through an administrative structure which is facilitated by clear reporting lines, clarity of functions and transparency of action.

Nevertheless, there are limitations on the application of the managerial model. There is a need to ensure that the academic quality of courses and teaching are not sacrificed in the search for economic security. This indeed, is the role of the Academic board and nowhere is this more problematic or important than in the private HEP.

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# A cost-effective solution for external referencing of accredited courses of study

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## Abstract

Higher education (HE) quality assurance (QA) and regulatory agencies across the globe are communicating the importance of external assessment of student learning outcomes when comparing degree standards. This global focus is about securing public confidence in the value of higher education to students and their families by providing them with choices on what to study and where to study so that they can secure employment outcomes. The onus is on HE institutions demonstrating an evidence-based approach to course quality, through external referencing and peer review (AQA, 2013; QAA, 2016; TEQSA, 2015). Regular external referencing activity raises an important sector challenge about sustainability, cost effectiveness, efficiency, and security. This paper will focus on the assessment of student learning outcomes through external peer review of accredited courses of study, with an overview of activities in the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand and Australia. One Australian study (ERoS, 2016) found that it would cost between \$1100-\$1400 for each academic to undergo an external peer review through email. This paper will provide an overview of how one review manager at the University of Tasmania in 2017 undertook external referencing activity with over 50 HE institutions managing 80 review projects using the Peer Review Portal.

**Key Words:** Peer review, assessment, calibration, academic standards, learning outcomes

## Introduction

Higher education (HE) quality assurance and regulatory agencies across the globe are communicating the importance of external assessment of student learning outcomes when comparing degree standards. This global focus is essentially about securing public confidence in the value of higher education to students and their families by providing them with choices *on what* and *where they want to study* so that they can secure employment outcomes. There are basically two approaches to the external assessment of student learning outcomes: 1) through testing students in their final year of study, such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) in the United States and; 2) through external peer review of learning outcomes and assessment. The second approach involves an external peer review of course and unit level learning outcomes, course mapping, grading, assessment tasks and de-identified student work samples. An Assessment of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education (AHELO) feasibility study, supported by the OECD, was conducted (Jan 2010- Dec 2012) to test the feasibility of assessing what HE students knew in their final year of study. The main objectives of AHELO (2017) were to: 1) allow governments to evaluate the quality of their programs against international standards; 2) enable HE institutions to compare and benchmark student learning outcomes to improve the quality of teaching and learning; and 3) empower students to make better informed decisions of their learned skills against other HE institutions. The American Council on Education and Universities Canada (2015) expressed reservations on the rescoping of the feasibility study and about using AHELO as a global assessment instrument, citing that 'it is important for institutions to articulate and assess learning outcomes, based on evidence' (OECD, 2017). The AHELO project is a long-term work in progress, with the development of further instruments and participating countries, including Australia.

As well as AHELO, there has been widespread interest in developing comparative measures of learning outcomes in response to a range of HE trends, challenges and paradigm shifts. A classic example in comparing degree standards and learning outcomes, occurred in 2009 when United Kingdom (UK) MPs on a cross-party Innovation, Universities and Skills select Committee asked whether a 2:1 in history at Oxford University was worth a 2:1 in history from Oxford Brookes University. Both vice-chancellors from these HE institutions were unable to provide the Committee with evidence of how they met the same standard, other than the vice-chancellor from Oxford saying that they used external examiners and they took their assessments 'very, very seriously' (Shepherd, 2009). The key challenges, for supporting the external comparison of degree standards at national and international levels, have been about efficiency, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness. This paper will focus on the external peer review process in comparing degree standards which have been implemented across the UK, New Zealand, and Australia [AQA, 2013; QAA, 2016; TEQSA, 2015] and how the recent University of Tasmania-led development of the Peer Review Portal has provided a sustainable, cost-effective, efficient, and secure way for undertaking external peer review of degree standards and student learning outcomes.

## External Review of Assessment and Accreditation in the UK, New Zealand and Australia

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has peer review and external referencing activity in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2016), under subject benchmark statements for setting and maintaining academic standards (Chapter A) and external examining (Chapter B7) (QAA., 2012). In 2015, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to conduct a national review of external examining arrangements in the UK. The review findings provided clear evidence of inconsistency and unreliability of HE assessors as well as a general lack of a shared knowledge of academic standards due to external examiners working individually rather than collectively to assess a programme. The recommendations included retaining the external examiner system but in a more enhanced form; adding calibration events through disciplinary communities to provide professional development for external examiners and providing more systematic training on the external examiner role, standards, assessment literacy and professional judgement (HEFCE, 2015, p.12). The HEFCE Report (2016, p.9) also took on board participants' feedback on the impact of changing technology, recognising 'that advances in technology could make the examiner role easier and broader (for example, by facilitating access to all student work online)'. The Report also noted other global HE systems that used online software to manage the student work across institutions and to enable (blind) peer review.

A key outcome of the HEA's review of external examining arrangements has been the establishment of a Degree Standards Project [2016-2021] which is a sector-owned development process across the UK focusing on professional development for external examiners. The Project is split into two parts: 1) working with a range of higher education providers to design and pilot generic professional development for external examiners; and 2) exploring different forms of calibration exercises with subject associations and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs). Work has begun to design a generic professional development course for external examiners which was piloted with three HE providers: The University of Liverpool, Oxford Brookes University, and the Royal Northern College of Music. The professional development course involves 2-3 hours of preparatory work (online) and a group based face-to-face activity, with work also commencing on the development of an online version of the course. A calibration workshop has been successfully piloted with subject associations and professional bodies (such as The Royal Geographical Society, the English Association, The Veterinary Schools Education Group, and The Health and Care Professions Council), which have focused on external examiners coming together to develop a shared understanding of academic standards in their discipline.

Only recently, with the implementation of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK, a discussion on the responsibility of academic standards has been reported in the national media. Universities Minister Jo Johnson highlighted the challenge of maintaining public confidence in the value of a university education to students and raised the issue of grade inflation. Of note, the Minister highlighted 'the increasing volume of 1st and 2.1s as a potential risk to the public's confidence in academic standards' and he challenged the sector to develop shared definitions of degree classification boundaries

(Hammonds, 2017). This challenge is directly related to the assessment of student attainment against subject criteria which merits a considerable degree of attention, particularly the work of the external examiners and the importance of ongoing professional development on the calibration of academic standards (Rust, 2017).

In New Zealand, the Academic Quality Agency [AQA] has the following principles of quality assurance for New Zealand universities, including 1) developed by universities; 2) evidence-based; 3) enhancement-led; 4) founded on self-review; 5) assured by peer review; 6) collective and collegial; 7) individually binding; 8) internationally benchmarked and endorsed; 9) independently operated and 10) publicly accountable (Matear, 2017). Under New Zealand (NZ) legislation, the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) undertakes programme approval, moderation, and accreditation across all eight NZ universities. The CUAP process is an external, collaborative approach towards programme review, assessment, and the discussion of academic standards. In 2017, the AQA led an external review of CUAP recognising CUAP's commitment and expertise in developing effective and staff national approval and accreditation processes for NZ universities. The review also recommended a review of the relevant codes of practice for expert reviewers and adopt an appropriate set of guidelines for reviews of New Zealand university programmes.

Furthermore in 2017, the AQA Board confirmed the new components for Cycle 6 Academic Audits which includes 'maintaining an internationally referenced, cyclical, peer-review model of external quality assurance' which incorporates a thematic enhancement topic agreed by all universities that will address an issue both a strategic priority for universities and of national importance [AQA News, 2017]. The New Zealand model is closely aligned to QAA Scotland's focus on enhancement themes, which has as its next theme 'evidence-based enhancements'.

In Australia, with the 2017 implementation of the revised Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) (2015), the regulatory focus has shifted the onus onto HE providers to demonstrate academic quality through an evidence-based approach using external referencing and external peer review. The HESF (2015) standards that relate to external review include: learning outcomes; assessment and results/grading; research training; course approval/accreditation; progression, completion, success; monitoring, review, and improvement activities; academic and corporate governance; and setting institutional quality benchmarks (Siddle, 2014). The standards in the HESF (2015) which are primarily concerned with external referencing at the course of study level are: monitoring, review, and improvement as part of institutional quality assurance (Standards 5.3.1, 5.3.4 and 5.3.7); and the specification of learning outcomes (Standards 1.4.1, 1.4.3 and 1.4.4). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2016, p.1) defines external referencing as 'a process through which a higher education provider compares an aspect of its operations with an external comparator(s)'. The purposes of external referencing are varied but can include: 1) evidence of the quality and standing of a provider's operations; 2) external evidence base for the development of internal improvements, especially student learning outcomes; and 3) establishing or fostering collaborative improvement across providers (TEQSA, 2016).

Developing an evidence-based approach at the course of study level requires a careful examination of how course level learning outcomes are developed, the various reference points used and the sources of evidence that needs to be collected, validated, and calibrated (Scott, 2016a, 2016b). Emeritus Prof Geoff Scott (2016a, 2016b) has strongly endorsed a peer confirmation process when reviewing a course of study. He identified six

keys to 'flipping the curriculum' through peer confirmation which included the 'right' program level outcomes; 'right' mapping; 'right' assessment; 'right' grading; 'right' calibration; and 'right' methods and resources (Scott, 2016b). Peer confirmation also places the onus on HE institutions to provide professional learning opportunities for peer reviewers to undertake training in peer review for consistent outcomes in quality assurance, not unlike peer review of research (Scott, 2016a).

This paper defines external peer review of assessment as 'the practice of colleagues providing and receiving feedback on one another's unit/subject outlines, assessment tasks and marking criteria to ensure that assessment is aligned to intended learning outcomes and includes a calibration process to ensure comparability of achievement standards and an opportunity for professional learning' (Booth et al., 2015).

Regular external referencing activity and external peer review of assessment, however, raises an important national as well as global challenge in ensuring external review activity is *sustainable, cost effective, efficient, and secure*.

Recently, two national reviews on higher education accreditation (Ewan, 2016 cited in Veil et al 2017; Woods, 2017) pointed to significant costs in accreditation and reviews of courses of study, including duplication of effort in review activity. Like the UK and NZ findings on external reviewers, the draft Woods Review (2017, pp.8-9) highlighted the need for standardised terminology, consistent processes and data and a register of experts and training to improve efficiency in the health professions. The review also recognised the overlap and duplication across the HE sector and suggested that there were opportunities for streamlining processes that could reduce duplication, costs, and administrative burden. The Woods Review (2017, p.62) noted that 'some accreditation authorities were moving to online systems for data reporting which had the potential to reduce the administrative and cumbersome national of paper-based systems'. Interestingly, the Report made the following observation: 'Whilst integration and collaboration with other authorities towards the development of a single portal would be beneficial, wider use of electronic reporting opens the possibility of a more holistic and unified approach to accreditation reporting' (Woods, 2017, p.62).

The external peer moderation of assessment standards [Standard 5.3.4 in the HESF (2015)] has been identified as an area of strategic focus, as part of Universities Australia: An Agenda for Australian Higher Education (2013), under Theme Four on efficiency, investment, and regulation. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor's Academic, a Universities Australia network group, identified that external peer moderation of assessment standards as a significant resource challenge for the sector and discussed the issue of scalability across institutions. There are different models of peer moderation of assessment standards in Australia as well as key national networks to support peer review (Booth et al., 2015), these include:

- *Quality Verification System (QVS)* is a peer review model developed and run by the Group of Eight (Go8) universities which sets out to assess and confirm the appropriateness of the standards of learning outcomes and grades awarded across disciplines in the Go8. It involves peer reviewers Level D or higher review two core final year units, with 1-5 samples of student work across all grades, agreeing or disagreeing with the grade. Feedback to the home university is provided on unit content, assessment design and criteria.
- *Academic Calibration Process (ACP)* which has been adapted by the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) in which the home university selects a final year

capstone course or unit for peer review and is selected at institutional level from the IRU peer database, which involves academic peers at Level C or above, reviewing the unit content, course and unit learning outcomes, assessment pan for the course and marking guidelines, as 12 samples of student work.

- *Achievement Matters Project*, supported by the Office for Learning and Teaching and the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), is a model of peer review which enables the benchmarking of learning outcomes against national thresholds for accounting graduates across multiple institutions. A key feature of this process is a two-step calibration process which is undertaken around the assessment task and student work and benchmarked against agreed disciplinary standards. This process involves a face-to-face workshop in which peers discussed pieces of work in groups of 4-5 peers with a focus on the judgement and justification of the reviews until a consensus is reached within the group. Calibration workshops not only include academics but key industry bodies and other professional volunteers.
- *Interuniversity Moderation of Coursework* was another OLT- supported project (Krause et al. 2014) is model of review that is performed 'blind' by two randomly assigned reviewers from two partner institutions. Reviewers are provided with the unit outline, the outcomes being assessed, the assessment tasks, rubrics and selected samples of student work in four grade bands. The home university provides feedback on the quality and relevance of the inputs along with the grades allocated to the selected assessment items by the colleague reviewers.
- *External Referencing of Standards (ERoS) Project* is a model of peer review developed and tested by four universities [RMIT University, The University of Wollongong, Queensland University of Technology, and Curtin University] to verify student attainment standards. This model used the other models as a basis to develop the EROS methodology and process and they did not use the double 'blind' review but favoured a transparent and open process of collaboration.

From 2014-2016, the Australian HE sector, in preparation for the implementation of the newly revised HESF (2015) in 2017, had been grappling with different models of peer review of assessment as well as seriously considering which strategic networks they needed to be connected to for external peer review, particularly those universities and private providers which did not have any 'institutional groupings'. Professor Beverley Oliver, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Deakin University, called these HE institutions, the 'Group of Ones' at a Universities Australia Satellite Event (3<sup>rd</sup> March 2017).

In response to the implementation to the up-and- coming HESF standards in 2017, an OLT-supported Project sought to establish a National Peer Review of Assessment Network (Booth et al., 2015) to support the sector in external peer review of learning outcomes and assessment across the sector. The aims of the OLT Peer Review of Assessment Project (Booth et al., 2015) were to: 1) Provide a forum for sharing and disseminating good practice in external peer review of assessment across different HE contexts; 2) Identify key academics experienced in external peer review of assessment; 3) Provide professional learning opportunities for academics and professional staff; and 4) Identify key checkpoints for effective networking for external peer review.

Recommendations from the OLT-Peer Review of Assessment Network Project (Booth et al., 2015) included: 1) The development of an External Reference Group on Peer Review of Assessment; 2) A forum for sharing and disseminating good practice in assessment and review and providing professional learning opportunities for academics and benchmarking partners; 3) Establish a 'College of Peers' process with disciplinary networks; and 4) Liaise with Higher Ed Services to establish professional learning opportunities in calibration, assessment and review.

In terms of sustainability and cost effectiveness at the course of study level, Krause et al. (2014) highlighted that for peer review and external moderation to be successful it needed to be scalable, sustainable, and cost-effective. To address the issue of sustainability and cost-effectiveness, three Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) projects recommended access to online tools that were cost effective, efficient, and secure for external referencing activity (Booth, et al., 2015; Freeman & Ewan, 2015; Scott, 2016a). Freeman and Ewan's (2015) *Good Practice Report: Assuring Learning Outcomes*, noted that the assurance of learning outcomes and improved assessment practice in Australia was significantly due to the OLT- supported threshold learning outcomes projects and the establishment of discipline scholar networks. They found three noticeable gaps: 1) the absence of non-self-accrediting and private providers in these academic quality projects; 2) the lack of an evidence base for quality assurance; and 3) the lack of external referencing. They also recommended that 'considerable effort needs to be expended in improving accessibility, currency and technical sophistication of many useful [online] tools' (Freeman & Ewan, 2015). The EROS Final Report (2016) stressed the importance of automated systems and data to support external referencing activity and to consider embedding the Peer Review Portal as part of comprehensive course review/reaccreditation process (EROS Project, 2016).

In addition to these reports, Emeritus Professor Geoff Scott (2016a, p.8) in his Final Report on his National OLT Teaching Fellowship, 'Assuring the quality of achievement standards and their valid assessment in Australian higher education', recommended that, 'the proposed peer review of assessment web tool be finalised and linked to the Fellowship's *FLIPCurric* guide'. The Online Peer Review Tool (OPRT) was developed in 2015 to mid-2016 by Education Services Australia (ESA), a not-for-profit organisation owned by the Education Ministers of Australia, in collaboration with the University of Tasmania, which was tested by 22 universities and 14 private providers. However, after 14 months the Peer Review Tool did not work and an alternative IT provider was sought to develop an accessible and affordable online system for the sector. CyberDesign, a small IT company in Sydney has from late-2016 conceptually led the development of the online Peer Review Portal and it is owned by a private company, Online Peer Solutions Pty Ltd.

The Peer Review Portal has a national external reference group with key stakeholders from the HE sector, including the CEO of TEQSA and there is also a Super User Group [10 universities]. The Portal has several project types available and in development: peer review of assessment (inputs and outputs); project review and benchmarking. A key part of the development process has been obtaining feedback from the sector. The costs for a project review is \$420 +GST for 5-unit reviews for one year, which is approximately \$90 per unit. The EROS Project (2016) reported that academic costs alone for the review of one unit of study undertaken through email would cost between \$1100 and \$1400. This unit cost did not include the costs of the administration or the reporting of reviews. The range of online tools, including the Peer Review Portal, that have been developed for the external peer review of assessment and course accreditation in Australia are outlined in Table 1 below.

Table 1

*Online resources to support peer networks*

PDF Extension and current search for an appropriate online tool	Group of Eight (Go8) are currently sourcing an appropriate online tool for their network (Quester, 2017)
Calibrate	Innovative Research Universities (IRU): The IRU have a centralised calibration App called Calibrate which has a central coordinator dashboard which includes a calibration register for their institutional network (Lasen, Niekerk, McMahan & Naylor, 2017).
Online Mapping Resource	Chemistry Discipline Network (ChemNET)
Spark-Plus Self and Peer Assessment Toolkit	Accounting Deans Network and Achievement Matters Project
Peer Review Portal	144 registered HE institutions and over 470 users [ as of 4/10/17]. Ten universities are in the process of using the Portal across their faculties to support peer review of assessment, course review and professional accreditation. 43 HE providers are using the Peer Review Portal for external referencing activity, including benchmarking and peer review of assessment.

## Methodology

The methodological approach for this paper is underpinned by the OLT project (Booth, et al. 2015) *Peer review of assessment networks: Sector wide options for calibrating and assuring achievement standards within and across disciplines and other networks*. The 'proof of concept' project was implemented from May-April 2015 and involved the following three phases: Establishment; Consultation and Dissemination. The project team engaged with a wide range of stakeholders including the Australian Deans Councils; University Networks [Go8; IRU, Regional Universities Network, and the Universities Australia Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic) Network Group, Australian Council of Private Education and Training (ACPET) and the Council of Private Higher Education (COPHE)]. There were 7 State-based workshops; a Peer Review of Assessment Forum and a Universities Australia Satellite Event. Feedback was collected through workshop presentations and evaluations.

The *Establishment Phase* (May-June, 2014) focused on establishing: 1) *an external reference group* (with diagonal representation such as an OLT representative, Discipline Scholar, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Private provider, Director standards/quality and academics experienced in peer review of assessment); 2) Project Team experienced in different methodologies of peer review of assessment to assist in the coordination of the workshop; 3) website and; 4) ethics approval (H0014306) for the collection of

participant responses. Next, the *Consultation Phase* (May 2014-April 2015) involved presentations and interviews with 101 different HE representatives. The *Dissemination Phase* was a culmination of the extensive feedback during the consultation phase. The Project Leader worked closely with Higher Ed Services (HES), a not-for-profit organisation, owned by Universities Australia to establish an annual Peer Review of Assessment Network Forum which involved 133 participants from 36 universities, 22 private providers, 2 international universities and representation from TEQSA and OLT. Further dissemination of the project was undertaken at a Universities Australia Satellite Event (13 March 2015).

Since the completion of the OLT Project (Booth, et al., 2015), HES and the University of Tasmania have continued to collaborate to deliver professional development workshops on peer review of assessment across Australia (10 workshops with 831 participants from 2016-2017). HES hosted the inaugural, *Assessment and Review Summit* from 19-20 September, with a focus on industry and professional bodies working with HE institutions on accreditation and review, with 150 participants. Further dissemination on the Peer Review Portal and the findings from the OLT Project have since been presented at the following 20 national and international events over 2016-2018 [See Appendix A].

## Research Findings

Participants feedback was analysed for key themes from open-ended questionnaire responses through a process of progressive categorisation and data coding designed to identify and refine data themes.

An analysis of participant feedback (117 completed evaluations= total 134 participants) from the National Peer Review of Assessment Forum (12 November 2014) indicated that most participants (63%) were satisfied with the workshop, with a further 29% reporting a high level of satisfaction. Best aspects included the interactive group discussions; opportunity to share ideas and experiences and network; understanding peer review of assessment at the national and international levels and learning different models of peer review. Areas for further development, included more information on online moderation tool; different models of peer review; and strategies for identifying peer review partners.

An analysis of participant feedback from the 10 national workshops on Peer Review of Assessment (2016-2017) (Total = 831 participants) identified 7 key themes: 1) sector readiness for Peer Review Portal and numerous templates; 2) sector readiness for professional development on peer review and professional accreditation; 3) sector support for certificates of participation; 4) more details on costs for collaboration for HE institutions undertaking review; 5) ability to contact numerous reviewers; 6) online network for searching for reviewers; and 7) online discussion forums, video or SMS for peer confirmation/validation discussions.

An analysis of participant feedback from the Assessment and Review Summit (19-20 Sept 2017) (Total=150 participants) found the following key themes to be of value: assessment and calibration, professional learning, course development reviews, practical approaches to contract cheating, peer review portal, TEQSA, academic integrity, accreditation; benchmarking; employability and speciality training.

Table 2 [ in Appendix B] provides an overview of the Peer Review Portal development and key features to date. Feedback has also been provided by the Super User Group [

Curtin, USC, SCU, JCU, UOW, Griffith, QUT, WSU, USQ and Swinburne] who have compiled an Issues and Recommendations Register for CyberDesign, the developers of the Peer Review Portal. Lastly, feedback was sought from the University of Tasmania, which currently has 80 peer review projects on the Portal in different stages of development across all faculties. A Review Manager at the University of Tasmania has been able to implement 80 review projects with over 50 HE institutions nationally and internationally through using the Peer Review Portal.

Findings from the OLT Peer Review of Assessment Network Project (Booth et al., 2015) identified different points of tension across four dimensions (sector, HE institution, discipline, individual) when implementing external referencing activity. At the sector level, HE institutions were concerned about collaborating with competitors, particularly private providers. Another point of tension was that external peer review of assessment was viewed by many academics as either a purely compliance exercise or a quality enhancement process. At the institutional level, there was a tension to implement a light touch, consistent process versus HE institutions managing workload expectations and scaling the peer review process upwards. A key tension at the discipline level was professional development of academics in their discipline versus costs for professional development and at the individual level, the main tension was workload versus recognition and reward. Table 3 below provides an overview of the points of tension identified in the OLT Peer Review of Assessment Network Project (2015).

Table 3

*Points of Tension (Booth et al., 2015)*

Dimensions	Points of Tension
Sector	Collaboration vs competition Compliance vs quality enhancement/best practice
HE Institution	Light touch, consistent process vs workload and scalability Resourcing vs significant budget cuts
Discipline	Enhancement and value of disciplinary communities vs aligning discipline to institutional priorities Professional development vs cost implications
Individual	Recognition and support for course/program and/or discipline coordinator vs workload and performance management

## Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of external referencing activities in the UK, New Zealand and Australia which has highlighted the need for sustainable, cost-effective, efficient, and secure online mechanisms to support the review of learning outcomes and external referencing. Some key themes to emerge for external referencing activity to be made sustainable at the sector level include: 1) It has to be supported by national professional development programmes, opportunities and resources, such as the FlipCurric website and the UK professional development workshops for external examiners; 2) The importance of calibrating and sharing judgements across disciplinary communities to build a ‘colleges of peers’ process; 3) The importance of online support mechanisms for external referencing which are accessible, efficient, cost-effective and

build on a community of practice, *within institutions and across institutions, within and across disciplinary communities including industry and other networks* (Booth et al., 2015). The Peer Review Portal is one example of a cost-effective online solution which can support the sector in assuring learning outcomes and review based on a growing online professional learning community. There will always be points of tension between HE institutions competing for student places and prestige, but there is also an opportunity and a place to build a community of practice in quality to address key challenges as a sector.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Higher Ed Services (HES) for their significant sector leadership in building a national support mechanism in peer review of assessment and review. As a not-for-profit organisation, it has filled a critical gap with the demise of the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), in providing professional development opportunities for the Australian HE sector.

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## Appendix A

Table 3.

*Presentations on Peer Review of Assessment and Peer Review Portal*

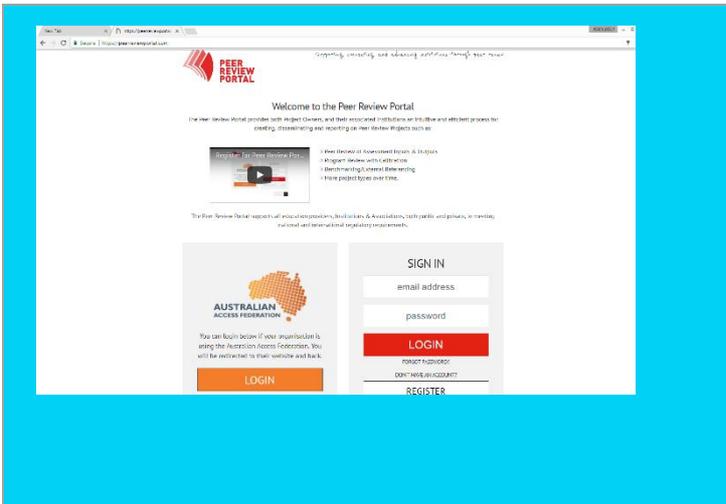
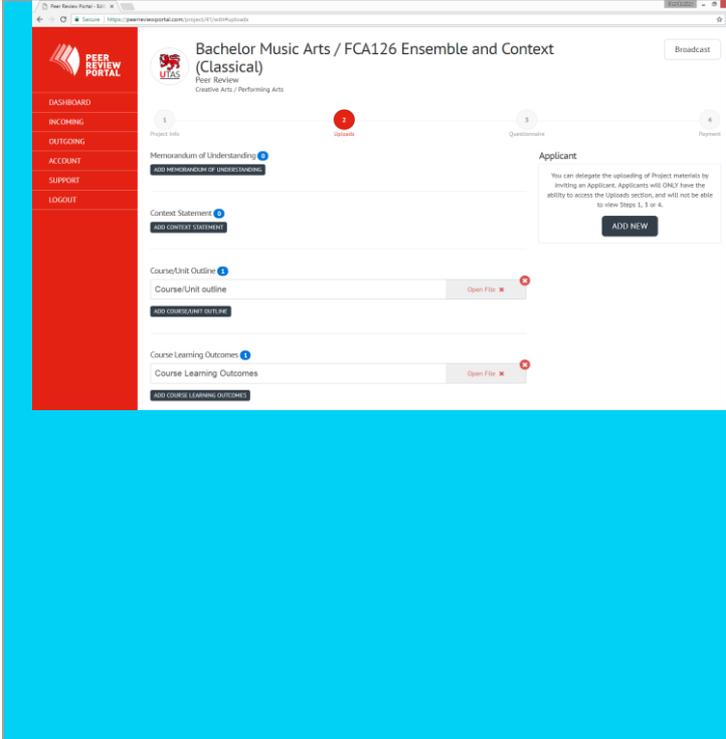
<b>Number</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Presentation</b>
1.	22 April, 2016	Australian Council of Engineering Deans (ACED)
2.	25 May, 2016	Keynote presentation at the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)
3.	14 Sept, 2016	Charles Darwin University (CDU)
4.	13 Oct, 2016	Keynote presentation at the AQA Conference: New Zealand Support for Quality Conference
5.	18 Oct, 2016	Best paper presentation at the Assessment Institute
6.	3 Mar, 2017	Plenary presentation at the UA Satellite Event on Quality
7.	22 Mar, 2017	Presentation to TEQSA staff
8.	24 Mar, 2017	Presentation to the Council of Nursing and Midwifery (CDNM)
9.	6 April, 2017	Presentation to the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD)
10.	16 May, 2017	Presentation to International College of Management, Sydney (ICMS)
11.	26 May, 2017	Presentation to the University of Divinity
12.	2 June, 2017	Presentation at ACPET Workshop
13.	29 June, 2017	Presentation at COPHE Workshop
14.	25 July, 2017	Presentation to Southern Cross University (SCU)

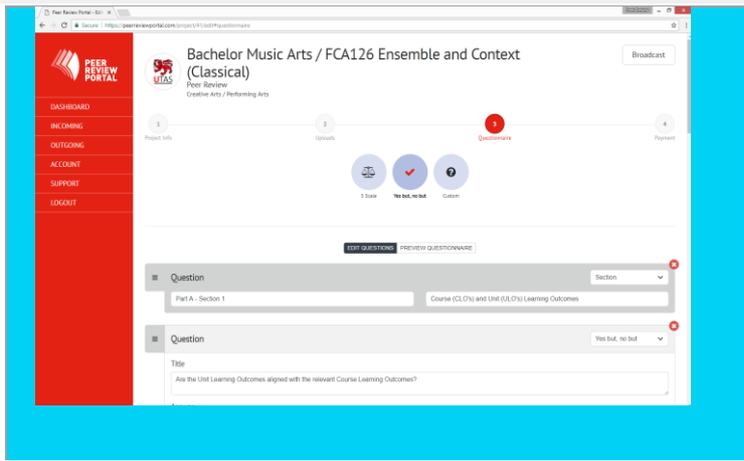
15.	24 Aug, 2017	Plenary presentation at ACPET Conference
16.	19 Sept, 2017	Plenary presentation at the Assessment and Review Summit
17.	11 Oct, 2017	Presentation at Massey University, New Zealand
18.	6 Nov, 2017	Presentation at Ako Aotearoa Pacific Peer Review Workshop
19.	1 Dec, 2017	Presentation at the TEQSA Conference
20.	January, 2018	Keynote Presentation at INQAAHE Conference in Chile

## Appendix B

Table 3

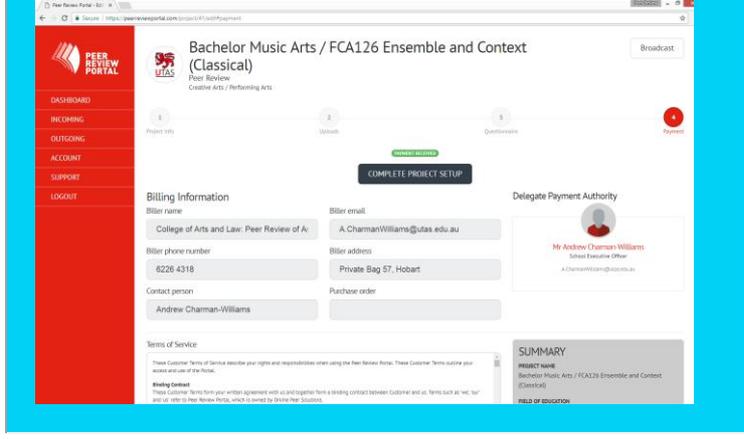
### Preview of Peer Review Portal Development

	<p>The <b>Peer Review Portal</b> can be accessed at <a href="https://www.peerreviewportal.com">https://www.peerreviewportal.com</a></p> <p>Australian universities can sign in using their university username and password through the Australian Access Federation and other institutions can sign in on the right-hand side. Access and registration is free for individuals and institutions</p>
	<p><b>Setting up a Review Project</b></p> <p>It is a four-step process to set up a review project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Project Info</li><li>2) Uploads</li><li>3) Questionnaire</li><li>4) Payment</li></ol> <p><b>Uploading Self-Review Material</b></p> <p>To support the uploading of self-review material, project owners can send an applicant an invitation to upload self-review material. Ability to upload multiple files for each document type. Ability to save changes</p>



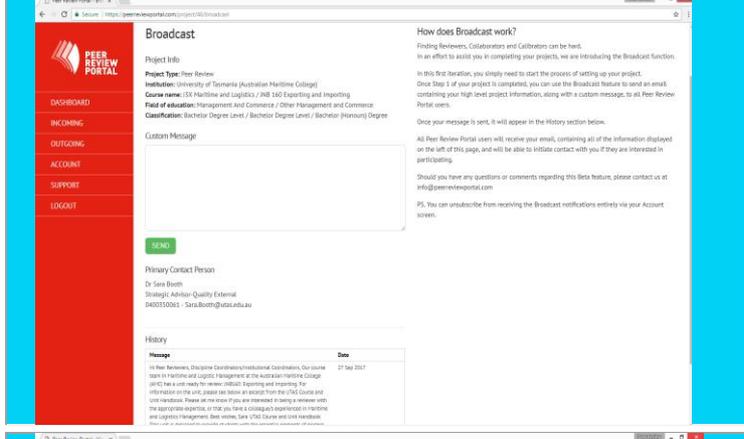
**Select self-review questionnaire and measure**

When selecting a questionnaire, there are numerous templates with a variety of measures. Questions can be edited and viewed in editing mode or reviewer mode. Questions can be dragged and dropped when in the

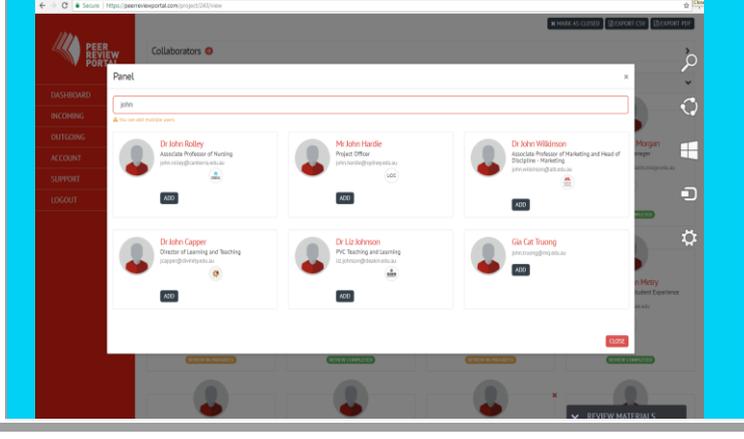


**Delegate payment authority**

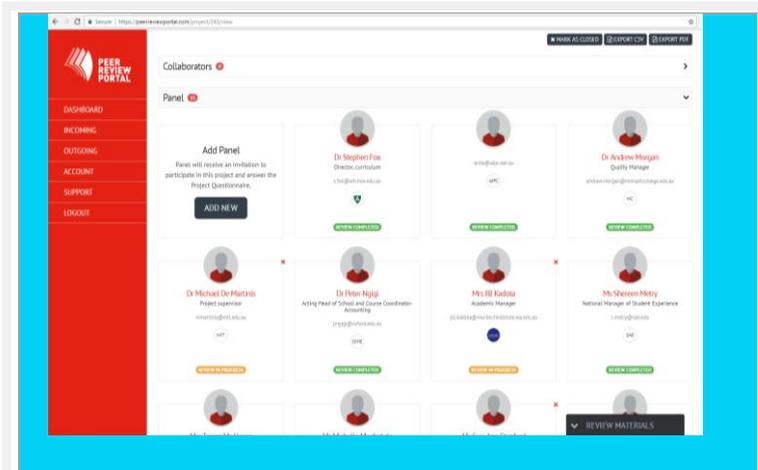
Payment can be paid by a nominated payment authority to another user with billing information and invoice.



A **broadcast** feature provides project owners with the capacity to broadcast the review project across the Peer Review Portal Network searching for collaborators and reviewers.

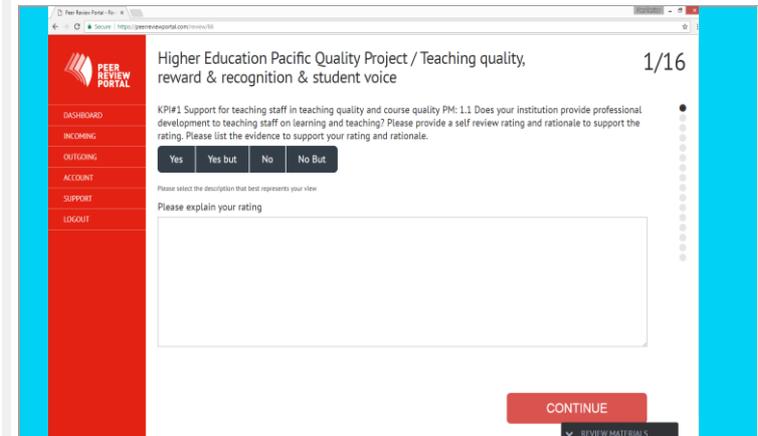


**Online search engine** for reviewers, panel members and collaborators who can be added to review projects.

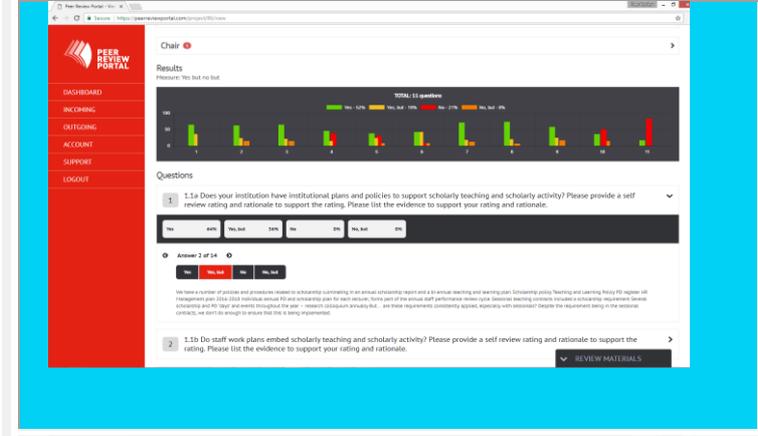


### Review Panel and Collaborators

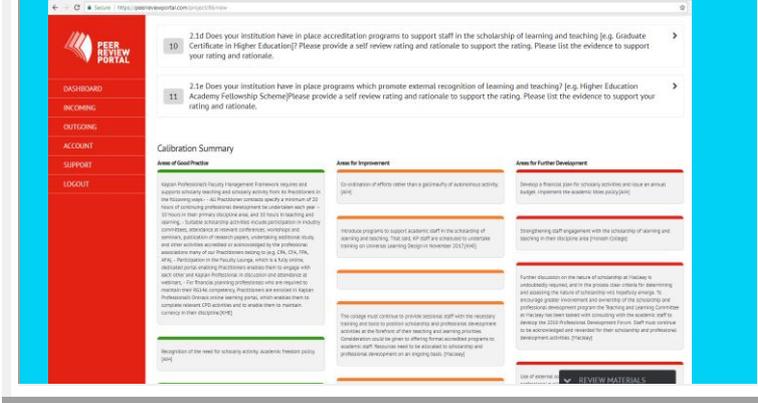
Ability to choose a Chair, Collaborator/s and Panel as well as monitor self-review progress across all participants. Collaborators can be added for reporting purposes.



Peer Reviewers are invited to undertake the review project with a downloadable self-review material tab and with secure online access.



Reporting includes PDF and Excel formats which collate the results quantitatively as well as qualitatively.



Calibration involves the Chair and Panel stacking areas of good practice, areas for improvement and areas for further development, either automatically or manually.

## **About the Author**

### **Dr Sara Booth**

*Strategic Advisor-Quality External, Curriculum and Quality, Academic Division  
University of Tasmania*

Dr Sara Booth led over 17 national and international benchmarking projects which included engaging with over 120 HE institutions. In 2015, in recognition of her strategic external relationships and partnerships, she was appointed Strategic Advisor-Quality External at the University of Tasmania as well as undertaking external consultancies. An important part of her role encompasses building a national support mechanism in peer review of assessment with Higher Ed Services, a not-for-profit organisation which includes a Peer Review Portal and national professional development workshops. She has led the development of a national online Peer Review Portal in 2016. Sara was awarded Principal Fellow with the Higher Education Academy in 2016 in recognition of her institutional, national and international work.

# Principles and Guidelines for Australian higher education libraries: capturing value

**Sue Owen**

*Monash University*

**Jennifer Peasley**

*La Trobe University*

**Barbara Paton**

*University of New England*

## Abstract

Reflecting on their time at university through an affinity survey, many alumni from Monash University reported affinity with their university library. Their Library! What makes that connection so strong?

Aligning with institutional priorities and higher education standards, academic librarians have long partnered with faculties and divisions, conferred with research centres and liaised with student groups to augment university outcomes. However, tools for crystallising Library value are less advanced.

In this paper, a new framework, *Principles and Guidelines for Australian higher education libraries (2016)*, is introduced. Its purpose is to describe and assess the contribution of libraries to academic and research endeavour. It articulates Library value through major strategic priorities, each with high-level value statements or Principles and a suite of associated Guidelines. The framework marks a new generation of Library value and impact tools. Coupling the framework with associated performance indicators, library directors and stakeholders can be better informed of library value.

**Key Words:** academic libraries, quality framework, value and impact

## Introduction

Australia's academic libraries continually evolve and transform within dynamic university environments, driven by profound disruption to education and research (Ernst & Young, 2012); innovations in scholarly communications (Kramer & Bosman, 2016) and online learning (Davies, Mullan, & Feldman, 2017); changing entry capabilities of students (Beetham, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2009) and the imperative to build graduate employability skills (Towlson & Rush, 2013). In times of such rapid progress in libraries, the profession's core business of making information accessible is realised in new ways, with discovery platforms and learning programs to improve students' navigation and use of information, extending to include students' ability to create and disseminate information in today's digital environments.

Unlimited demands on the limited resources of libraries make evidence-based decision making critical.

To focus strategic visioning, improve operational efficiency and consolidate contributions to the goals of their organisation, libraries are shifting their approach to quality, away from gathering discrete activity and facilities data to evidencing their wider performance. They are investigating statistical associations and building metrics clusters to convey the value they contribute to the University and their impact on education, research, student engagement and satisfaction.

Libraries working in isolation on this challenging transition is unproductive. The Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL), keen to respond via its core mission - to enhance the value and capacity of Australian university libraries - undertook to develop a useful performance framework appropriate to the Australian context. This paper introduces CAUL's *Principles and Guidelines for Australian higher education libraries (2016)*, a key element of the Council's response.

## Quality – The Status Quo:

Libraries' traditional approach to quality has been to benchmark with peers on a national level – comparing like with like; making comparisons across a variety of library services, library information skills programs and key resource budgets. These datasets serve to pinpoint the individual ranking of libraries in relation to their benchmark partners - libraries located in institutions with similar demographics. Comparisons across datasets note key gaps or deficiencies which then become the focus for directing a Library's development priorities.

This traditional approach to continuous improvement through benchmarking has been underpinned since 1969 by a centralised service of annual data collation and dissemination by CAUL in partnership with the Council of New Zealand University Librarians (CONZUL). Referred to as the CAUL/CONZUL Statistics, this longitudinal dataset has proved an invaluable business tool for library directors as they transformed libraries from primarily centres for collecting, curating and accessing information, into

providers of high-demand learning environments, expert skill-development programs, research data management platforms and invaluable scholarly and special collections.

Since the inception of the profession, library directors' proactive approach to change has been achieved through leveraging a culture of professional collaboration (Nfila, R.B. & Darko-Ampem, K., (2002). Such initiatives include: collaborative cataloguing (centralisation reducing duplicated effort); cooperative lending schemes (sharing the purchase of worldwide knowledge); consortial purchasing (negotiating license deals and access conditions); and collective capability building of staff (posting free, open learning programs online for the profession and the community to access and learn, way before MOOCs and SPOCs)

The most recent collaboration is a major initiative – building understanding and competence in new library analytics and creating a suitable framework for outlining and evaluating the role of contemporary libraries in Australian universities.

### **Qualipedia – a corpus of quality sources used by Australian academic libraries:**

A wide range of tools are currently being utilised by academic libraries to drive quality improvement, strategic planning, benchmarking and value analysis. These include:

- *Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT)* – in particular the results of the Student Experience Survey and the Graduate Satisfaction Survey. Some Libraries are partnering with university planning and statistics to further interrogate data, such as the relationships between student success and library experience
- *Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU)* – unit-specific student feedback on key aspects including a question relating to learning resources
- *Library Client Survey* (administered by Insync Surveys Pty Ltd) – provides students with a voice to express their level of satisfaction with Australian university library services, spaces, technologies and staff. Results are ranked, Australia-wide and longitudinal and cohort analyses are available. Questions in the survey are maturing as library value becomes prominent and new value relationships are being identified.
- *Staff Experience Survey* – analysis of staff engagement with their university, segmented by Faculty/Division
- *CAUL/CONZUL Statistics* <http://www.caul.edu.au/caul-programs/caul-statistics>
- *International Organization for Standardization (ISO) Standards* relating to academic library performance and impact.

International library associations, including The American Library Association's higher education division, the Association of College & Research Libraries [ACRL], (2011) and the Society of College, National and University Libraries [SCONUL], (2017) representing all the UK and Ireland's university libraries, have developed quality standards and statements of library value appropriate to their context. These tools have varied levels of applicability and are not commonly used for quality activities in Australian higher education libraries.

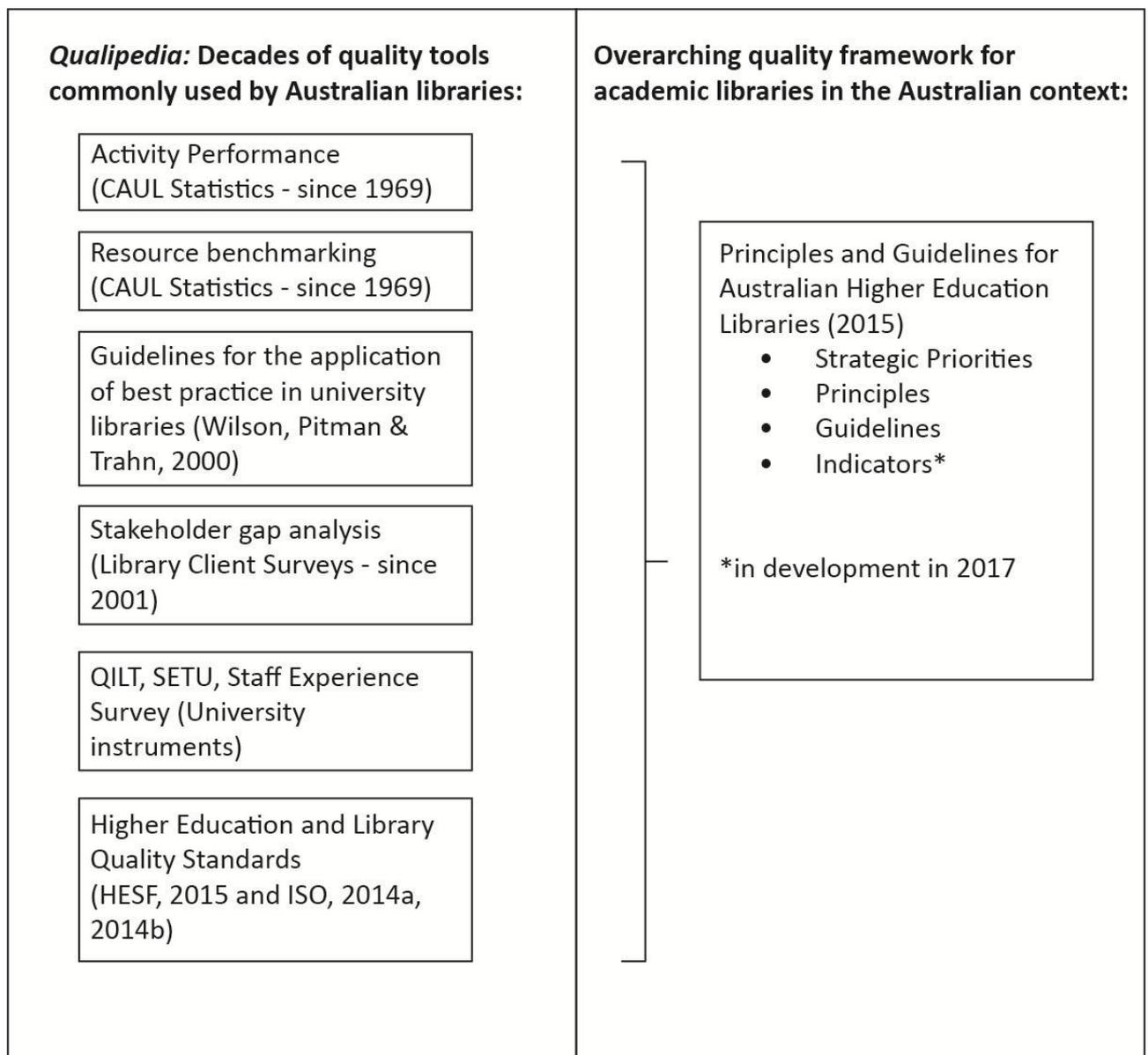
The tool that's missing for Australia and New Zealand is an umbrella framework that 'paints a picture' of academic libraries, mirroring the work they currently undertake. This tool needs to use the lexicon that resonates with Australian and New Zealand universities embracing the 21st Century, a lexicon that aptly describes education and research goals,

as students and scholars aim for success in the unknown Professions of the Future (Salt, 2017).

The nexus between the CAUL Principles and Guidelines framework and the various elements of the *Qualipedia* are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

*Evolution of library quality programs, from activity and satisfaction datasets and standards to a strategic Australian framework of quality priorities.*



A number of the longstanding quality tools will continue to be sources of evidence, providing measures of impact and value for the Indicators in the Principles and Guidelines framework.

## Developing The Framework

With CAUL's endorsement, a project was established to identify the key strategic priorities for Australian academic libraries along with a set of widely-held principles and associated guidelines. Together, these three elements can articulate a Library's value and impact on the learning, teaching and research endeavours of the University.

Individual interviews were conducted with key leaders in affiliated library and higher education organisations, university librarians, and senior university staff. These were drawn from institutions Australia-wide. In addition, an extensive literature search was undertaken and involved in-depth consideration of contemporary frameworks and standards. This search investigated:

- Commonwealth of Australia *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015*
- Canadian Library Association *Guidelines of practice for school library learning commons*
- Association of College and Research Libraries [ACRL] *Standards for libraries in higher education 2011*
- ACRL *Assessment in Action Program 2012*
- International Organization for Standardization [ISO] 2014
  - ISO 11620:2014: *Information and documentation: Library performance indicators*
  - ISO 16439:2014: *Information and documentation: Methods and procedures for assessing the impact of libraries*

## Delivering The Framework

In constructing the quality framework, it was important to create a self-explanatory tool which libraries could use independently. The three critical elements were joined by a fourth – Indicators – with the four elements defined as follows:

- **STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:** Isolating and describing key **strategic priorities** shared by academic libraries in Australia and New Zealand and relevant to parent organisations  
e.g. *Strategic Priority 3: Growing a dynamic, sustainable and accountable organisation*
- **PRINCIPLES:** For each strategic priority, identifying core **principles** or high level value statements which are fundamental to that priority and define its essential essence  
e.g. *Principle 3.1: The library is effective, sustainable and accountable, engaged with and responding to the university's needs*

- **GUIDELINES:** For each principle, drawing out **guidelines** which articulate different dimensions of a principle and serve as suggested parameters or recommended requirements  
e.g. *Guideline 3.1.2: The Library's policies practices and processes are designed to accommodate stakeholder diversity*
- **INDICATORS:** For each guideline, a diverse bank of **indicators** which evidence the attainment of the associated guideline, contributed by participating libraries. A diversity of indicators reflects the strategic initiatives driving different universities; align with the culture, organisational context and capacity of the library.

The resulting framework consists of a contemporary set of good practice Principles and associated Guidelines against core Strategic Priorities which fully align with key university priorities: learning, teaching and research outcomes; the creation of new knowledge; and sustainable, effective university asset management.

The Principles and Guidelines framework also maps to the appropriate Higher Education Standards Framework (2015). Principle 3.1 and Guideline 3.1.2 map to HESF Standard 3.1 *Learning Resources and Educational Support*.

Table 2

*Alignment between the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) (2015) and Principles and Guidelines for Australian higher education libraries (2016)*

Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) (2015)		Principles and Guidelines for Australian higher education libraries (2016)	
3.3.4	<p><b>Learning Resources and Educational Support</b></p> <p>Students have access to learning support services that are consistent with the requirements of their course of study, their mode of study and the learning needs of student cohorts, including arrangements for supporting and maintaining contact with students who are off campus</p>	1.3.2	All students have access to library learning programs and activities consistent with the requirements of their course of study, their mode of study and the learning needs
	<p><b>Staffing</b></p> <p>Teaching staff are accessible to students seeking individual assistance with their studies, at a level consistent with the learning needs of the student</p>		Library staff are accessible to

3.2.5	cohort	1.3.6	students seeking individual assistance with their studies
2.1.3	<p><b>Facilities and Infrastructure</b></p> <p>The learning environment, whether physical, virtual or blended, and associated learning activities support academic interactions among students outside of formal teaching.</p>	1.4.2	The library's learning environment, whether physical or virtual, and associated learning activities support academic interactions among students outside of formal teaching
4.1.3	<p><b>Research</b></p> <p>A system for accurate and up-to-date recording of the research outputs of staff and research students is maintained.</p>	2.3.2	The library has and maintains a system for accurate and up-to-date recording of the research outputs of staff and research students
2.2.1	<p><b>Diversity and Equity</b></p> <p>Institutional policies, practices and approaches to teaching and learning are designed to accommodate student diversity, including the under-representation and/or disadvantage experienced by identified groups, and create equivalent opportunities for academic success regardless of students' backgrounds.</p>	3.1.2	The library's policies, practices and processes are designed to accommodate stakeholder diversity

## Implementation: Rolling Out The Framework

Adopting the Principles and Guidelines across Australian and New Zealand libraries is a strategic choice for each library – there's no mandatory requirement, no keeping a tally of adopters. This approach recognises the challenges in gaining members' full consensus on how best to convey value to our organisations and what value means in the context of different universities.

As adoption is voluntary and the terrain is complex, libraries need to independently articulate their achievement of the Principles and Guidelines. Work has commenced in a few libraries and these indicators are being shared with the sector as a bank of sample

Indicators. The indicators will be fluid and flexible, recognising that each university has a unique culture. Strategic priorities vary and tactics for achieving key goals are often institution-specific. Faculty relationships with library staff vary, influencing a library's potential to contribute to education, research, student engagement and satisfaction outcomes. Library levels of resourcing, staff expertise, library building investment and technological innovation also impact the promises that they can realistically deliver.

The longer term aim is to develop maturity indicators for the key Guidelines, where a library's potential value and impact can transition through a number of stages, described by three levels of library development: Emerging: Evolving: Leading.

Table 3 provides an example of three-stage maturity indicators for Guideline 1.1.3 - *Stakeholder feedback and evidence inform planning, and help to shape library strategy*.

Table 3

*Sample maturity indicators: Emerging, Evolving and Leading.*

**STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1: Strengthening learning, teaching and research outcomes**

PRINCIPLE	GUIDELINES	SAMPLE INDICATORS		
		EMERGING	EVOLVING	LEADING
<p><b>Principle 1.1</b> The library understands, anticipates and responds to the university's diverse stakeholders and their information needs</p>	<p><b>Guideline 1.1.3</b> Stakeholder feedback and evidence inform planning, and help to shape library strategy</p>	<p>Stakeholder feedback and evidence is collected</p>	<p>Stakeholder feedback and evidence is collected, collated, analysed and emerging issues identified</p>	<p>Emerging issues data from stakeholder feedback is used to shape action plans that address the issues identified.</p> <p>Feedback on action plans is provided to stakeholders</p>

Source: Council of Australian University Librarians (2016, 6)

A longer-term goal is to nurture a culture of evidence-based thinking and communication across Australia and New Zealand, with library staff being active contributors to evidence-based decision making with peers and cross-University colleagues. Furthermore, growing Library staff capability in identifying performance and satisfaction indicators aligned with university measures will focus Library strategic priorities on organisational concerns. Our best outcomes will derive from swiftly-evolving and innovative Library contributions to the University's initiatives in meeting the challenges of our turbulent world.

## Conclusion

Two significant challenges accompany the launch of the Principles and Guidelines framework:

- The development of performance indicators, including rigorous 3-stage maturity indicators, is an ongoing task. A call for crowd-sourced Indicators has not been sufficiently effective so far. A recently formed Value and Impact Community of Practice, initiated by CAUL's Quality and Assessment Advisory Committee, holds promise. In the early forming and norming stage of the new Community of Practice, members are actively contributing to a shared understanding of library value and are actively discussing solutions to wide-ranging issues raised by members. The Community members recently committed to drafting a suite of Indicators, one Principle and Guideline at a time. They will adopt the approach outlined by Oakleaf (2010, p. 12) who encourages academic libraries to align outcomes with institutional outcomes that relate to "student enrollment (sic), student retention and graduation rates, student success, student achievement, student learning, student engagement, faculty research productivity, faculty teaching, service, and overarching institutional quality".
- Library staff capability building is required in a number of quality areas. As libraries focus on competently conveying their value, library staff development programs are required in business analytics and storytelling - in particular, capabilities relating to understanding data, visualising and analysing data and communicating impact. (ISO, 2014-b)

New opportunities are also available:

- Some Australian academic libraries are working closely with university statistics experts to take a deeper dive into institutionally collected data, particularly elements within Quality in Learning and Teaching (QILT) – Student Experience and Graduate Satisfaction. This investigation will explore potential relationships between a selection of student/graduate outcomes and students' and graduates' experience in relation to their academic library.

Our centre of attention are the graduates of tomorrow: we constantly question our approaches and the impact we have on students' education and academics' research and teaching; ensuring library experiences exceed expectations and making certain the library's contribution is rated the highest possible value.

Our secret goal is keeping *the Library* at the very top of our Alumni's Affinity List!

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## **About the Authors**

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*Director Excellence and Engagement*

*Monash University Library*

Sue Owen leads Monash University Library's strategic planning and development, executive communications, community engagement and library corporate services: finance, human resources and administration, facilities management, external relations and alumni. Sue joined Monash University Library in 2016, following extensive academic library experience at Deakin University, the University of New South Wales and the University of Tasmania. Sue has also held various roles in government, non-government and corporate research libraries and undertaken library and training consultancies. She has held office in the Australian Library and Information Association, the Council of Australian University Librarians and has won several information sector awards.

### **Ms Jennifer Peasley**

*University Librarian*

*La Trobe University*

Jennifer Peasley is University Librarian at La Trobe University Library, responsible for leading and managing library services and partnerships across the University's five campuses. Prior to joining La Trobe University in January 2013, Jennifer was Deputy University Librarian at Macquarie University Library where her role encompassed quality and planning, corporate services and IT. Jennifer is Chair of the Council of Australian University Librarians' Quality and Assessment Advisory Committee and has a strong interest in quality assurance, evaluation, and organisational design and development.

### **Ms Barbara Paton**

*University Librarian*

*University of New England*

Barbara Paton is the University Librarian at the University of New England. Barbara also has responsibility for the University's Archives and Heritage Centre, and in 2011 she managed the Teaching and Learning Centre. Before taking up her current position in 2009, Barbara was Deputy University Librarian at La Trobe University, and held senior appointments in the management of reference and information services at both La Trobe University and the University of Queensland.

Barbara has been a leader of professional activities and library groups in Australia. She is a member of the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) and the CAUL Quality and Assessment Advisory Committee. She has also been Director of the Australian Academic and Research Libraries Network, the Convenor of the Librarians Group of the Regional Universities Network and the Queensland Libraries Office of Cooperation.

# A standards framework for academic activity and academic promotion

**Professor Sandra Wills**

*Charles Sturt University*

## Abstract

The profession of “academic” is not an easy one to enter, not least because the role lacks the explicit standards and definitions developed by other professions. However, a decade of work in Australia and UK on defining the teaching-related aspects of an academic’s role sheds new light on the role holistically. Building on the research on teaching-related roles, Charles Sturt University, as part of its review of academic promotions policy and procedures, has developed *The CSU Academic*, a framework to describe all academic activity.

Academic work at CSU is now framed in three domains (Promoting learning; Influencing university, profession, community; Creating Knowledge). The three domains are scoped using six dimensions (Personal and professional development; Student engagement and learning; Application and integration of scholarship; Design and development; Discovery and extension of new knowledge; Leadership and collaboration).

The framework is the basis for *A Guide to Evidence in Promotion* in which evidence for the three domains and dimensions are laid out by academic progression, Levels A to E, for the first time making standards explicit.

Since implementation, success rates for promotion have improved, especially for the Promoting Learning domain and Influencing domain which academics previously perceived as not adequately recognised in promotion.

**Keywords:** academic profession, academic promotion, standards, policy

## Introduction

The profession of academic is not an easy one to enter, not least because the role lacks the standards, definitions and explicitly shared understandings developed by other professions such as engineering, medicine, accountancy (Debowski, 2012). However, a decade of work in Australia and the UK on defining the teaching-related aspects of an academic's role sheds new light on the role holistically. Three research projects (Cashmore & Ramsden, 2009; Wills et al, 2013a; Chalmers et al 2014) focussed on parity of esteem for teaching, reward and recognition for university teaching and improving outcomes for teaching-related activity in academic promotion through improved policy and procedures. These three national and international projects uncovered the multiplicity of roles hidden within that simple word "teaching".

A clear theme emerged: the perceived difficulty in evidencing teaching achievement whether it be for promotions, career development interviews or award applications. The project team identified that the sector in general lacks a shared language for discussing university teaching. Therefore, the team engaged in work to better define teaching as a multi-faceted complex activity in order that it can be more clearly evidenced across a range of dimensions... There is a widespread misconception apparent in consultations, that teaching is simply what happens in the classroom. It is important, especially in promotion, that teaching is not seen solely as direct interactions with students. The team has termed this element of teaching activity as 'student engagement' to signal that work with students happens as much outside a classroom as inside it. The team has attempted to broaden the definition of teaching to reflect the changes to the academic role in the 21st century brought about in part by the marketisation of higher education, the diversity of student cohorts and the professionalization of teaching (Wills et al., 2013a, p.22).

## Fresh perspectives from previous projects on academics' teaching roles

Figures 1 to 3 are from *Making Evidence Count* (Wills et al. 2013b) which was one resource in a package, *Promoting Teaching*, distributed to all Australian and UK universities by the UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2013. Figure 1 is a perspective on "teaching" that illustrates teaching-related activities and covers at least five dimensions. Figure 1 also proposes that often activity in one dimension (like Student Engagement) might decrease over time whilst another will increase (for example, Leadership or Scholarship), especially for those who, as successful researchers, use research grants to buy themselves out of teaching tasks. Since academics have relied so heavily on student survey data to evidence teaching when applying for promotion, the decrease in student engagement at higher levels of promotion contributes to the ongoing misconception that academics cannot get promoted to professor based on teaching.

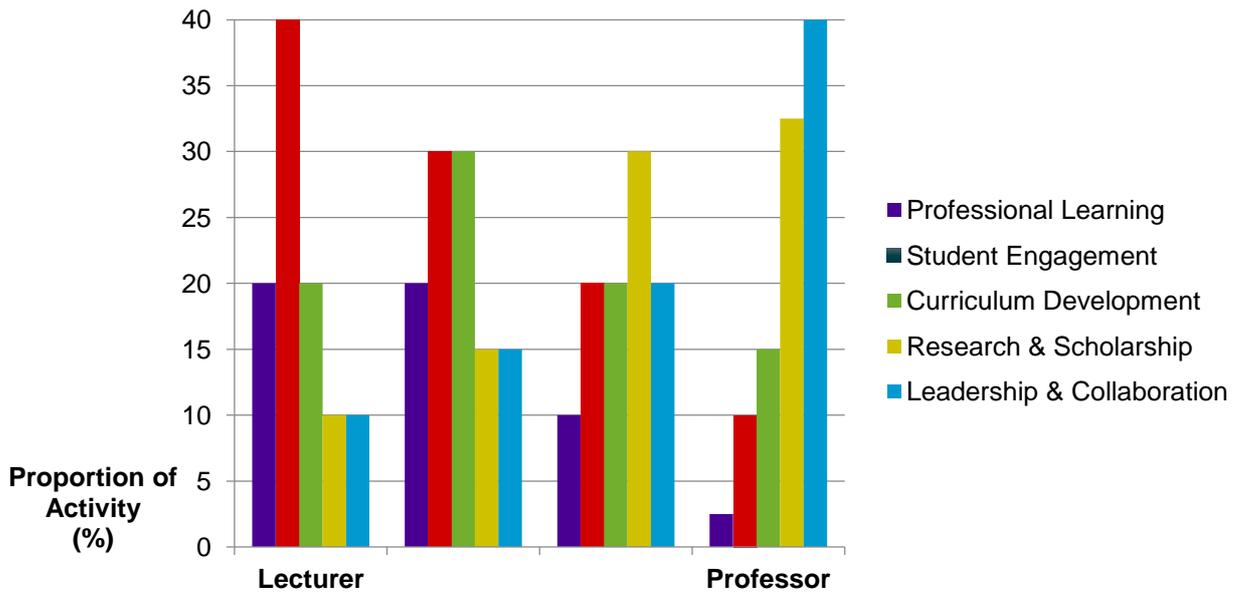


Figure 1. Scope of teaching-related academic activity and hypothetical variance across academic progression (Wills et al., 2013b).

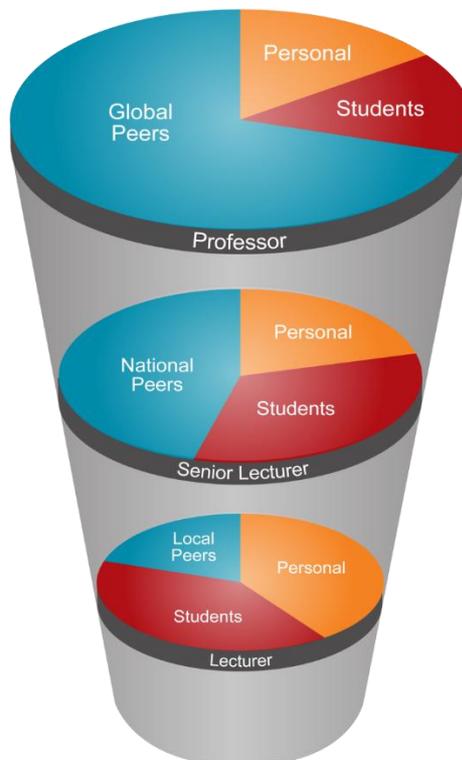


Figure 2. Sources of evidence for teaching in academic progression (Wills et al, 2013b).

Figure 2 illustrates sources of evidence changing over levels of academic progression, in particular the importance of peer review as evidence. Both Crisp et al. (2009) and Wills et al. (2013b) highlight how peer review underpins evidencing teaching as much as it underpins evidencing research, especially as at higher levels of academic promotion.

...the project foregrounds, more strongly than before, for promotion for teaching just as much as research, the importance of peer review. Furthermore, the project broadens the notion of peers in teaching beyond the classroom to recognition by colleagues at national or international level. In so doing it is laying claim to the idea that peer review can have similar importance for evidencing achievement in teaching as is the case for research. (Wills et al., 2013a, p.24)



*Figure 3. Sphere of influence in evidencing impact of teaching-relating activities (Wills et al, 2013b).*

Figure 3 provides a third perspective on teaching,

..emphasizing that 21st century teaching involves strong collaboration with communities beyond the institution, for example external accreditation of programmes with professional organisations, alignment with the workforce needs of industry and

government policy, continual enhancement of knowledge through work with international discipline bodies. This means that university teachers can draw on evidence of impact in spheres of influence well beyond the classroom. These sources of evidence, in the eyes of promotion committees, often carry more prestige than student surveys (and contribute to enhancing the prestige of teaching itself). The evidence for this statement comes from the reviews of promotions criteria in the four institutions and from the self-review processes. In addition, a growing proportion of 'early career' academics arrive in academia with many years' experience in industry, private practice or government and are influential nationally and internationally. Our consultations and reviews indicated dissatisfaction with existing promotion processes for this category of academic."(ibid, p.24)

These three new perspectives are combined to underpin the Promoting Teaching Evidence Framework which illustrates how to evidence all aspects of university teaching in academic promotion  
([http://www.promoteteaching.com/uploads/1/5/4/4/15442782/making\\_evidence\\_count\\_poster.pdf](http://www.promoteteaching.com/uploads/1/5/4/4/15442782/making_evidence_count_poster.pdf)).

The HEA Promoting Teaching Evidence Framework was developed as an outcome of an international benchmarking project. Promotion policies and procedures were compared as well as promotion data and responses from a survey of academics at the four partner universities; University of Wollongong, University of Tasmania, University of Newcastle (UK), University of Leicester.

The key finding across all four universities was that currently staff perceive research activities as having a greater impact on promotion prospects, particularly at the two UK universities. Not surprisingly, the majority at each institution indicated that there should be parity in the regard for teaching and research activities in the promotion process. (Wills et al., 2013a, p.16)

In analysing comments from the international HEA Promoting Teaching survey the team wrote:

For this to happen, academics said that universities need to ensure all staff are aware of the promotional pathways available to them and that the processes to be undertaken are clear. The feedback from all the universities suggests this is not always the case and there is some confusion about the opportunities for promotion available to them via a teaching route. UK academics commented that the promotional documentation was still biased towards research, which added to their confusion. Australian academics also commented on the excessive amount of documentation the process requires, which is time consuming to complete. Furthermore, many found measuring excellence in teaching very challenging due to the lack of clear performance metrics, whereas others were simply unaware of the pathways available to them. (Wills et al. 2013a, p.16)

## Standards and expectation for academic teaching

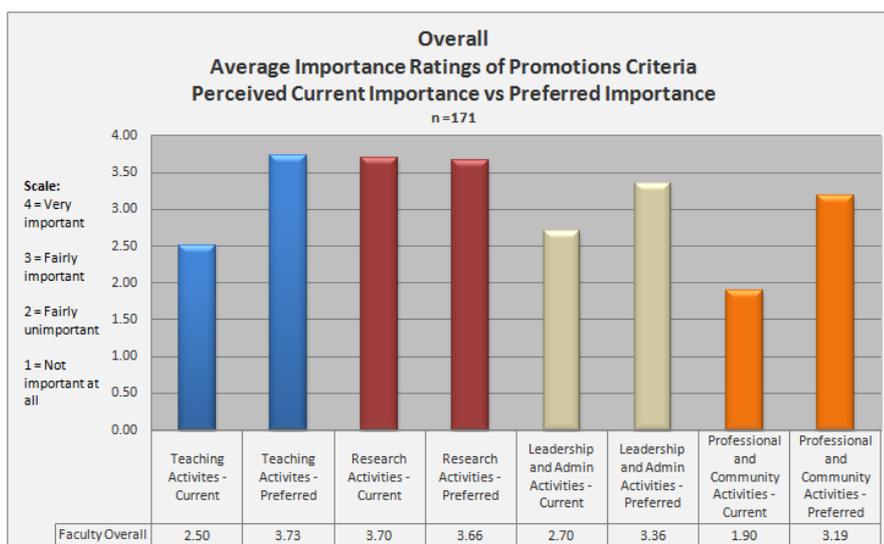
The lack of performance metrics or clear standards is supported by the project's literature review. The literature since 2017 calls for

...clarity and guidance on the changing expectations to evidence excellence at different career phases, and particularly with regard to the leadership of teaching (Shephard et al., 2010: cited in Gunn, 2013). Gibbs' (2012) review of teaching... also notes an over-reliance on module (or unit) and course (or program) evaluation by students (such as the National Student Survey). He challenges the sector to refocus enhancement strategies on the whole degree programme and the development of recognition for the teaching team rather than the individual tutor. The emphasis for the last two decades on "training and accrediting individual teachers" (p.10) illustrates a marked lack of emphasis on "developing leadership of teaching and curriculum design and assessment at programme level" (p.10). He calls for a change of emphasis to reward leadership of teaching. Kreber (2002) notes the need for greater recognition of creativity and innovation, and theory building, within policy and criteria for teaching excellence. Kreber distinguishes between "excellence" and "expertise" in teaching and suggests that "excellence in teaching", as it is often celebrated in institutional teaching awards, is associated with high levels of craft knowledge and personal charisma. "Teaching expertise", on the other hand, evidences deep knowledge of teaching and learning processes in universities, acquired through engagement with the literature, reflection and research in a highly individual developmental process. (Wills et al. 2013a, p.16-17)

Based on the literature review and survey, the HEA Promoting Teaching Evidence Framework highlighted team work, leadership, curriculum design, assessment design, innovation, educational theory, scholarship and institutional influence, broadening evidence beyond student surveys. The framework provides, for the first time, clarity, transparency and guidance about expectations and standards for university teaching.

## Academic promotion at CSU

Charles Sturt University, reviewed its academic promotions policy and procedures in 2013/2014. Using protocols from the HEA Promoting Teaching project, data on success rates at promotion by level and gender was collated. In addition, academics' perceptions of existing promotion outcomes were surveyed. Figure 4 demonstrated clearly that academics perceived research was the main activity rewarded in promotion.



*Figure 4. CSU survey of academic staff perceptions of promotion, 2013.*

The CSU survey reiterates findings of the HEA Promoting Teaching project which surveyed academics at two Australian and two UK universities.

Approximately 92% of survey respondents stated that research activities are regarded as somewhat, or very, important for promotion. In contrast, an average of 46% of respondents across the institutions stated that teaching activities, including the scholarship of teaching and curriculum engagement, are regarded as somewhat, or very, important. (Wills et al. 2103a, p.17)

The key finding across all four universities was that currently staff perceive research activities as having a greater impact on promotion prospects, particularly at the two UK universities. Not surprisingly, the majority at each institution indicated that there should be parity in the regard for teaching and research activities in the promotion process. (Wills et al., 2013a, p.16)

Like the HEA, the CSU survey indicated that academics would prefer teaching, leadership and professional/community activities be also valued, especially teaching.

Data also revealed that CSU's main blockage in academic progression was promotion to Senior Lecturer level. This is consistent with national data: universities in Australia participate in an annual Australia-wide HR benchmarking exercise, which has been running since 2006 (MacAulay et al., 2011).

2011 data shows that success rates are high for Academic B (Lecturer) level but they decline at each level from there on... This is consistent with observations at the University of Wollongong and the University of Tasmania and several other Australian universities involved in a 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) project on promotion (Crisp et al., 2009)... Research... undertaken for the UK HEA by Cashmore and Ramsden in 2009 and 2013, indicates that universities in the UK operate in a context where success rate for promotion is low. (Wills et al., 2013a, p. 18)

## The CSU Academic

Building on the three new perspectives in the HEA Promoting Teaching work on teaching-related academic roles, CSU developed *The CSU Academic*, a framework to describe ALL academic activity, not just teaching (CSU, 2014b). Experience in the HEA project showed that improving clarity in one area is not sufficient. Clarity in one area merely serves to highlight the blurriness of other areas. Improving recognition of teaching is best done by reviewing all domains of academic activity.

Academic work at CSU is now framed in three domains showing clearly that teaching and administration/service are valued equally with research (Attachment 1).

- Promoting learning
- Influencing the university, profession and/or community
- Creating Knowledge

The three domains contain examples of academic activity, in six dimensions, which have as their basis elements drawn from the Promoting Teaching framework and are adapted from Boyer's classification of research activity in order to reinforce the concept that both teaching and administration/community engagement can be conceptualised with as much intellectual rigour as we conceptualise research. The dimensions are:

- Personal and professional development
- Student engagement and learning
- Application and integration of scholarship
- Design and development
- Discovery and extension of new knowledge
- Leadership and collaboration.
- 

The CSU Academic framework is the basis for *A Guide to Evidence in Promotion*. In the guide, evidence for each of the three domains is laid out by academic progression, Levels A to E, for the first time making standards explicit and detailed. See Attachment 2 for the "Promoting Learning" domain and Attachment 3 for the "Influencing University, Profession and/or Community" domain, the domains that CSU academics previously perceived were not as valued as research in promotion.

In keeping with two areas of good practice identified in the HE Promoting Teaching project (Guidelines for evidencing academic promotion and Training, induction and mentoring using the guidelines Wills et al., 2013a, p.20), information sessions for applicants, supervisors and promotions panels is compulsory. The CSU Academic constitutes a significant part of the sessions as a means of providing clarity about standards and expectations of academic activity and guidance about evidencing achievement and excellence.

## Outcomes

Since implementation of *The CSU Academic* in 2015 as part of the review of academic promotion, the number of applications has increased and success rates for promotion is improving (Table 1).

It is difficult when dealing with small numbers to make significant claims about trends from year to year in success rates, however, when analysing the data by level of promotion, it does seem that promotion to Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor may now be unblocked. Improving the success rate is important because previous surveys of academic perceptions reveal that academics feel it is easier to apply for a job elsewhere than apply for promotion in their own institution. It is in universities' best interest to retain their best staff rather than recruiting new staff.

Table 1

### *CSU academic promotion statistics 2014-2017*

<b>Year</b>	<b># applications</b>	<b>% promoted</b>	<b>Main improvement</b>
<b>2014</b> before standards	26	62	
<b>2015</b> with standards	41	66	Level C success rate increased 19%
<b>2016</b> with standards	49	69	Level C improved success rate maintained  Level D applications doubled  Level D success rate increased 16%
<b>2017</b> with standards	52	81%	All levels improved success rate  Improved success rates for Promoting Learning and Influencing

Perversely, some people view improved success rate as a slippage of quality. However, this view can be countered when promotion panels are operating with a transparent framework like *The CSU Academic*. Improved success rates provide academics with confidence in the system which then contributes to higher number of applications. If success rates improve even with higher number of applications then this is an indicator that quality standards have been maintained.

By way of comparison, the two Australian universities in the HEA Promoting Teaching project had success rates of 95% for promotion to Senior Lecturer.

The four partners benchmarked their 2010 and 2011 promotions data. Direct comparison was slightly difficult due to differences in academic levels such as use of Reader as a level in the UK. Despite the validity of generalising from small numbers of applications, the HEA project determined that success rates for promotion to Senior Lecturer in the UK were about half that of success rates in Australian universities which was about 95%. Promotion to Associate Professor and Professor (combined) in the UK partner universities was about the same as for Senior Lecturer i.e. 49%. Promotion at this level for the Australian partner universities was slightly lower than the UK and represents a real barrier compared to the high success rates at Senior Lecturer (Wills et al., 2013a, p. 19). Crisp et al. (2009) had previously noted that the problem for Australian universities starts at promotion to Associate Professor level.

At CSU, success rates have improved for the domains that academics in the 2014 survey perceived previously as not adequately recognised in promotion. At the lower levels of academic promotion, half the applications are weighting the “Promoting Learning” domain highest but at the higher levels of academic promotion, a majority of applications still weight “Creating Knowledge” highest. Therefore, more work is needed to help applicants understand and have confidence in evidencing their teaching for Associate Professor and Professor. However, at these higher levels, there are increasing numbers of applications ranking “Influencing university, profession, community” as their highest weighted domain. This is a reassuring trend as CSU strives to provide recognition for academics who take on leadership roles in the institution and with the professions into which our students graduate.

It should be noted that the two Australian benchmarking partners did already have standards and expectations frameworks at the time of the HEA benchmarking project therefore CSU can be hopeful that now it has introduced a similar framework, the high success rates of those two universities might be matched in future.

Meanwhile, CSU continues to collect data from promotion rounds. A dashboard has been developed to support analysis, drilling success rates further by faculty, school, discipline, gender, level, campus, EEO consideration, domain weighting. Collecting and publishing promotion statistics was another good practice highlighted by the HEA project (Wills et al., 2013a, pp.20-21). The HEA project also pointed to issues around equity in promotion for international academic staff in Australia and the UK (ibid, p.21), data that CSU is now closely monitoring.

## Conclusions

The work of TEQSA and the Higher Education Standards Framework ensures increasing accountability for universities, and in turn, academics, to demonstrate evidence of academic standards, through external peer review. This paper demonstrates that academic promotion is an area of academic activity that can be subject to standards and that can be validated through external peer review, for both the applicant and the institution.

The HEA project's reviews of promotion policies across Australia and the UK, revealed huge differences between institutions: no two institutions are the same in their approach to academic promotion (Wills et al., 2013a, pp.48-49). With the academic workforce being increasingly mobile within countries and between countries, there is an argument for more consistency in framing academic work with standards and evidence of quality.

Frameworks such as these, if routinely updated and monitored using appropriate analytics, should also place universities in a good position to navigate the complexities of the changing academic role as predicted in the recent AHEIA report (2016), changes that herald more teaching focussed roles and more specialisation of roles overall.

Frameworks are not intended as one-size-fits-all models. Framing the domains and dimensions of academic work at different career stages and in differing institutional contexts should instead facilitate a more flexible understanding of the individual academic.

## Acknowledgements

*The CSU Academic* team comprised Professor Sandra Wills (Project Lead), Emeritus Professor Kevin Robards (Promotions Review Lead), Professor Tim Wess (Executive Dean of Science), Karen Lenihan (Human Resources). The team workshopped and consulted widely with CSU leadership and CSU academics to refine the framework and the examples of evidence that demonstrate achievement and impact.

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Prof Sandra Wills has worked in Australian universities for 30 years, currently as PVC (Learning and Teaching at Charles Sturt University and previously Executive Director, Learning & Teaching at University of Wollongong.

As a pioneer of multimedia, distance education and e-learning, Sandra's initiatives have been recognised through national and international awards including: ALTC Citation for strategic leadership in global e-learning; Fellow of Australian Computer Society and Australian Council for Computers in Education; IFIP Silver Core; Open Learning Network Fellow at the UK Open University.

She is an international researcher and author in educational innovation and has delivered over 120 invited and keynote addresses in 22 countries. Her book, *The power of role-based e-learning*, caps more than ten years of research on learning designs and online role play. Recent grants are: OLT - a roadmap for Open Education in Australia; UK HEA - international benchmarking on recognising teaching in academic promotion. As an active member of university and faculty promotion panels at a number of universities for over 20 years, Sandra has been well positioned to research and develop innovation in promotion policy, standards and procedures.

# Quality Academic Governance: Student Success

**Emeritus Professor Hilary Winchester**

*Hilary Winchester Pty Ltd*

## Abstract

Academic Governance, the system which provides oversight to an institution's higher education activities, forms a key element of the Higher Education Standards Framework. Many providers have reviewed their academic governance in preparation for re-registration, which has revealed some common strengths and areas for improvement, and has direct and indirect bearing on student success.

Areas of strength include effective academic oversight, program approval processes, and policy development. In many institutions, program approval/review processes have become highly sophisticated with online templates and automated workflows ensuring appropriate consultation and benchmarking. Strong policy and program approval processes benefit students through clear documentation, procedures, and appeals. Academic integrity and student participation are areas which have shown marked improvement.

Areas for further improvement include understanding of academic leadership, and considerations of academic risk and delegations. Frequently risk and delegations are part of corporate rather than academic governance, and leadership is undefined. Deep understanding of academic risk benefits students through risk identification, management and monitoring of issues ranging from contract cheating to international partnerships.

Students benefit through increased participation in governance, which enhances understanding of the higher education system, and increases student input to be effectively seen as partners rather than customers in the higher education enterprise.

**Key Words:** Academic governance, student participation, Higher Education Standards Framework, quality assurance.

## Introduction

Academic Governance is a pillar of quality assurance for Australian Higher Education Providers (HEPs). It constitutes a key element of academic oversight for the operations of the provider related to learning and teaching, scholarship, research and research training, their policies, processes, outcomes and reporting. The aim of the paper is to examine the ways in which HEPs are coping with the Australian requirements for academic governance, identifying the areas in which they excel, and those areas which they find problematic. The observations are based on reviews of six Australian HEPs from late 2016 to late 2017.

This paper is structured to examine the role and significance of academic governance generally, and then more specifically within the requirements of the Australian regulatory framework, the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015 (HESF). The scope and methodology is considered and the common areas of strength, areas which are showing improvement and areas of difficulty are identified and discussed. The impact of governance mechanisms on student outcomes and participation is a theme which runs through the paper. The paper concludes with some considerations for future iterations of the HESF.

## The Role and Significance of Academic Governance

Academic Governance is a key element of quality assurance for Higher Education Providers. It is defined by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) in its Guidance Note (2016) as the 'framework of policies, structures, relationships, systems and processes that collectively provide leadership to and oversight of a higher education provider's academic activities (teaching, learning and scholarship, and research and research training if applicable) at an institutional level' (TEQSA, 2016, p.1). It is separate and independent from operations and is a third element of institutional leadership which is interdependent with corporate governance and executive management.

There are several important characteristics of academic governance which make it somewhat intangible and quite hard to grasp. These characteristics are that it is a system or framework rather than an entity, therefore consisting of many related parts which will vary according to the size, scale and focus of the provider; it provides institutional leadership and oversight, which again can be defined in various ways and may be contested; and it is one of three elements of interdependent leadership of the institution, acting as a significant check, balance and advisory body to the corporate and executive arms.

Academic governance has received less academic attention than corporate governance, but was a considerable focus for the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) in the previous decade. Baird (2007) pointed to the lack of external reference points for academic governance as compared to corporate governance, and Dooley (2007, p.7) noted the tensions between 'due academic process' on the one hand and 'senior management' on the other in the running 'of what is effectively a substantial corporation'.

## HESF 2015 Requirements for Academic Governance

The HESF requirements for academic governance, enforceable from 1 January 2017, removed the prescriptive requirement for an academic board to be the locus of academic governance, and correspondingly removed the requirements for the membership of that board, leaving the structure and composition of the oversight body to be much more tailored to the size and scale of the institution's operation, instead simply requiring that 'processes and structures are established' to achieve the purposes of academic oversight.

The key requirements are laid out in Standard 6.3 (Academic governance), although other standards are also relevant, notably Standards 5.1-5.4 (Institutional quality assurance), Standards 7.2 and 7.3.3 (Information dissemination and management) and Standards 4.1-4.2 (Research and research training). Standard 6.3.1 focuses on structures, processes and responsibilities which enable 'effective academic oversight', the setting and monitoring of institutional benchmarks, the establishment and maintenance of academic leadership and competent advice to the governing body on academic matters.

Standard 6.3.2 specifies eight ways in which an institution can demonstrate its academic oversight and quality assurance of teaching, learning, research and research training which include such fundamental matters as academic policy, course approval and review, and academic and research integrity. They also include monitoring, review and reporting of academic outcomes, evaluating the effectiveness of educational innovations, and considerations of academic risk and delegations. Standard 6.3.3 has a specific focus on students, and requires the institution to provide students with 'opportunities to participate in academic governance', which, in line with the student focus of the HESF generally, imposes a requirement to involve students as agents and partners in key matters that affect their student experience. The full requirements of Standard 6.3 (Academic governance) of the HESF are included as Appendix.

## Scope and Methodology

This paper considers the results of six reviews of academic governance undertaken against HESF 2015 over a twelve-month period from approximately October 2016 to September 2017. It consists of an analysis of areas of strength, areas which are improving and areas for further development, and concludes with some suggestions for the next iteration of the HESF. The institutions reviewed were predominantly, but not exclusively, universities. All have given written permission for the findings of their reviews to be incorporated into this paper, although on condition of anonymity. Accordingly, the results have been generalised and no individual institution is identified.

In this paper, the term 'Board' is used to represent the Academic Board or other overarching body responsible for academic oversight and quality assurance, and the term 'Council' for the Governing Body.

## Areas of Strength

Several areas of strength were identified as common to almost all Boards. These include the traditional long-established areas within the remit of Boards, which have also been the focus of quality assurance efforts even before the establishment of AUQA. They consist principally of course approval and review; development, monitoring and approval of academic policy; and general academic oversight, monitoring and reporting to Council.

### **Course Approval and Review**

Most Boards have delegated responsibility from their Councils for some or all elements of academic governance and this is generally the case for the approval and re-approval of academic courses, although some might require a final approval (e.g. from the Vice-Chancellor) before going to Council. Most institutions have well-developed course approval and review policies, with associated procedures and forms which are usually considered in detail at a sub-committee such as a Course Approval Committee, Learning and Teaching Committee or Program Committee.

The structures are well-established with course approval sub-committees undertaking much of the 'heavy lifting' for the Board. Their terms of reference are clear and the reporting regular. These processes work well, especially when the path is smoothed by automated workflow and approvals, although all such committees struggle with the massive amount of documentation to process. The generally strong course approval processes benefit students through clear documentation, procedures and appeals.

### **Policy Development, Monitoring and Review**

Most institutions have an extensive academic policy suite to meet legislative requirements of both the HESF and ESOS and the National Code. Institutions generally have comprehensive and well-monitored academic policies. In some institutions, there exist a plethora of academic policies covering all aspects of the student life-cycle from admission to alumni. In these cases, the policy suite appears overblown with complexity and redundancy having developed through years of policy accretion, which results in a backlog of policies in need of review. While most institutions operate a three-year review cycle, on occasions this is found to be slipping, partly because some review processes are very time-intensive requiring intensive and extensive consultation, and some could benefit from a light-touch approach especially in circumstances where the review requires little more than updating of titles. Policies affecting postgraduate research students were those most commonly found to be lagging, but in general, these posed little risk to students. However, clear policy accompanied by procedures and forms, is of great benefit for students, enabling consistency of treatment, and providing important safeguards of the student experience.

Most institutions show evidence of good practice in having a searchable policy directory online, clear version controls showing the history of the policy, the officers or areas responsible and scheduled review dates. The monitoring of policy is often also demonstrated through reports e.g. of attrition, progression and success, or of complaints and appeals, or student evaluations, usually broken down by faculty, campus and course, and sometimes presented on an exception basis to focus on areas of higher risk.

## Academic Oversight and Reporting to Council

The monitoring of policy is linked to the requirement for academic oversight, which is a key role for Boards, along with assurance of quality and standards. There is a general understanding of this role, although with a marked focus on learning and teaching rather than on research and research training. Academic oversight is seen at the course level, at the level of school or faculty, and in Boards' consideration of institutional outcomes, student satisfaction and measures of student experience. While oversight is being exercised, providers had more difficulty in addressing the nuances of Standard 6.3.2g in 'evaluating the effectiveness of institutional monitoring, review and improvement of academic activities', for example by identifying gaps or reports or by being able to show an improvement cycle consequent on review.

There is some variation in the amount and detail of reporting to Council. In all the institutions reviewed, the Chair of the Board is a member of Council and reports to the Council on the Board's activities, particularly academic outcomes, but also matters of broader interest such as academic integrity, transparency of admissions and student surveys. On occasions, the Council may request reports on matters of institutional concern or public interest, such as English language proficiency or cohort tracking for students admitted from particular pathways.

The Board Chair generally provides a written report, supplemented by an oral report. In some cases, this work is accorded high priority, but more often the academic business of the Council is low in the agenda, and may be discussed on an infrequent basis. The focus accorded to the Board's reports is a requirement of Standard 6.1.3a where the Council should obtain and use 'academic advice, as is necessary for informed and competent decision making and direction setting', and is usually under the control of the Chair of the Council, rather than the Chair of the Board. Nonetheless, the reporting from Board to Council is generally regular, although it may be at a high level and neither frequent or deep.

## Improving Areas

A further three areas were observed to be ones which have undergone substantial improvement since AUQA audits, which are respectively academic integrity, student participation and setting and monitoring institutional benchmarks.

### Academic Integrity

Numerous institutions and their Academic Boards have paid a great deal of attention to academic integrity in the last two or three years, because of concerns within the sector which go well beyond plagiarism to contract cheating and falsification of data. There has been a recognition both that academic policy has often been insufficient to deal with the more sophisticated type of academic integrity issues that have been revealed in the sector, and that more proactive measures have been required, such as the appointment of academic integrity officers and clearly staged procedures with associated penalties. The ethics of the use of Turnitin or similarity detection software has sometimes been the subject of considerable discussion.

This focus on academic integrity has been less evident in the research arena, which is already well protected by national codes. There has been an upswing in regular reporting and many institutions have noted that increases in apparent occurrence are not necessarily due to an increased prevalence of cheating, but to improved detection processes. The focus on academic and research integrity protects the quality of Australian qualifications, and the imposition of penalties on offending students is welcomed by all those who are making genuine efforts to achieve good grades.

## **Student Participation**

TEQSA's focus on student experience has resulted in greater student participation in Academic Boards, and committees more generally. Student participation has often been problematic, especially as many students are juggling family life, part-time work and part-time study. Some institutions have made great strides in ensuring student participation, by increasing the number of student representatives (so they feel they have more support from a cohort of their peers and so are less intimidated in formal settings), by extending their terms of office to two years or making them renewable, by providing briefings from the Chair to explain matters before each meeting and by using powers of the Chair to include additional members or observers to include under-represented groups such as Indigenous or international students. These innovations were unseen just a few years ago and constitute best practice. Some elements of student participation which are more problematic are the issues of paid student representation, and the mode of selection/election of student representatives. One mechanism which seems to work well in avoiding the 'career student politicians' is to invite expressions of interest in participation in Boards and committees, where students give reasons for their interest and are selected on this basis.

Best practice as outlined above contrasts sharply with those institutions which are resistant to include students in areas that they consider do not concern them or which may have confidential information in relation e.g. to the progress of individual research students. These providers are moving only slowly to meet the requirements of enhanced student participation. Some smaller institutions focused on adult online learners where part-time study is the norm have been unable to match best practice, but in some cases, have made effective use of alumni, who are recent graduates rather than students. In one case, such representation has been particularly useful as the alumni can contrast their experience as face-to-face students with new online developments and can offer insightful perspectives from a consumer viewpoint. While this does not satisfy the letter of the Standard, it comes close to meeting the spirit and intent of Standard 6.3.3.

## **Setting and Monitoring Institutional Benchmarks**

An area of some progress has been in the setting and monitoring of institutional benchmarks. This is an issue which is easier for universities rather than private providers, as most universities have their benchmark groups (e.g. ATN, IRU, RUN, Go8), whereas private providers operating on a more strictly commercial basis find it more difficult to benchmark with like providers who are also competitors. Benchmark indicators were routinely provided with Institutional Performance Portfolios before they were relinquished by the Commonwealth Government, but benchmark data is still available through QILT and student satisfaction surveys.

There are some significant examples of benchmarking using national schemes such as peer review of assessment, although many institutions find this both time-consuming and labour-intensive. However, for most institutions, benchmarking still effectively means comparisons or rankings, and there is only a limited amount of benchmarking for improvement and process benchmarking. Nonetheless, some institutions manage to collect, report and benchmark an impressive suite of KPIs, constituting best practice in this area.

## Areas of Difficulty

At the improvement end of the scale, there are four aspects of Standard 6.3 with which providers are finding difficulty, all of which are relatively new to the required Standards. These are academic leadership, educational innovation, and academic delegations and academic risk (these latter considered together here).

### Academic Leadership

Most institutions grappled with what was meant, required or expected by Standard 6.3.1c, to 'establish and maintain academic leadership at an institutional level'. There is some clarification provided in the Academic Guidance Note which states 'TEQSA will look for evidence of relevant and sufficient collective academic capability to provide effective leadership and competent scrutiny and advice', and gives examples of academic leadership as demonstrated by 'setting benchmarks, policy frameworks, scrutinising and approving courses of study, ensuring the meaningfulness of academic grades, determining admission requirements' (TEQSA, 2016). For well-established institutions this is a normal feature of their Boards. Almost all established institutions have academic leaders as members of their Academic Board, including the Vice-Chancellor, most of the senior executive and management, as well as senior elected members of staff who are not in management positions. Private providers often make use of the experience and expertise of (usually) recently-retired senior academics from the university sector to guide their processes and decision-making.

### Educational Innovation

As with academic leadership, Educational Innovation is generally considered incidentally rather than as a specific category for debate. Most institutions do consider their educational innovations, their impact and effectiveness, but often they are not labelled as such. For example, a Board discussing the development of MOOCs, online provision for the first time, or new courses containing innovative pedagogies, credit/RPL arrangements or curriculum content, making decisions on their suitability, and then monitoring and reviewing the uptake and progress of these developments, is fulfilling this requirement. A good example is one Board which debated intensively over several meetings the adoption of similarity detection software, its ethics and effectiveness, and for another institution, the shift from face-to-face to online delivery; in both these cases the discussion about education innovation was also about strategy and about the student experience, and was debated at both Board and Council level. For educational innovation, as with academic leadership, well-functioning Boards are fulfilling this requirement almost instinctively, and most understood this, once it was pointed out to them.

## Academic Delegations and Academic Risk

The consideration and confirmation of academic delegations and monitoring of academic risk are relatively new areas for academic governance bodies and have been met with limited engagement and understanding. In many institutions, considerations of delegations and risk form part of institution-wide processes overseen at Council level, usually by a sub-committee of Council, named as an Audit and Risk Committee or similar title. Furthermore, the confirmation of academic delegations and their appropriate use occurs systematically through automated work processes, for example in course approvals and through the designation of specific responsibilities associated with academic positions and contained within their position descriptions.

Academic delegations are often considered and reviewed at a whole-of-institution level through Delegations Registers which usually include financial and other delegations as well as academic. This has been the case in most of the institutions reviewed. In these instances, academic delegations are considered through a corporate rather than an academic governance process, but this is nonetheless a governance process, overseen by people without direct management responsibility or operational involvement.

Consideration of academic risks tends to occur on an incidental and case-by-case basis, for example when third-party provision is being discussed or academic integrity. It is relatively unusual in the sector for Boards to undertake specific consideration of academic risks as a discrete agenda item, for example in reviewing a risk register. As with academic delegations, academic risks normally form part of an institution-wide Risk Register considered through a corporate governance process. Even in established institutions, there appeared to be little general understanding of academic risks, or of their potential impact. At one institution when various members of staff and the Board were asked to highlight the biggest academic risk faced by the institution, there were more answers than respondents, which ranged from plagiarism and placements, to English language capability and over-reliance on specialised international markets. An enhanced focus on risk helps identify areas for attention.

While there are similarities in the current understanding of academic delegations and academic risk, it is the opinion of the author that they should be treated differently. In most institutions, there are existing safeguards on academic delegations because of automated flows of approvals through student systems, and effective HR processes with clear responsibilities associated with roles and position descriptions. This may not, however, be the case in newer providers, who are less likely to have such expensive systems in place. However, a more widespread understanding of academic risk would benefit all providers, and it could be anticipated that in a decade's time, it would become as standard practice as course approval and review has become over the previous decade. Importantly, a nuanced understanding of academic risk will also help protect students and improve their experience. None of the institutions reviewed had systems for identifying and monitoring academic risk which could be termed best practice, and for most, the Board was not even consulted in the development of the risk register, although the senior executives usually were. Academic risk is an area that would benefit from better governance processes which in turn will benefit the student experience.

These observations about six institutions' compliance with and understanding of the Academic Governance Standard 6.3 are summarised in the table below with a 'traffic light' system of colours indicating levels of compliance.

## Compliance with Academic Governance Standard 6.3

6.3.1	Processes and structures are established and responsibilities are assigned that collectively:	
a	achieve effective academic oversight of the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training	Green
b	set and monitor institutional benchmarks for academic quality and outcomes	Yellow
c	establish and maintain academic leadership at an institutional level, consistent with the types and levels of higher education offered, and	Red
d	provide competent advice to the corporate governing body and management on academic matters, including advice on academic outcomes, policies and practices.	Green
6.3.2	Academic oversight assures the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training effectively, including by:	
a	developing, monitoring and reviewing academic policies and their effectiveness	Green
b	confirming that delegations of academic authority are implemented	Red
c	critically scrutinising, approving and, if authority to self-accredit is held, accrediting or advising on approving and accrediting, courses of study and their associated qualifications	Green
d	maintaining oversight of academic and research integrity, including monitoring of potential risks	Yellow Red
e	monitoring and initiating action to improve performance against institutional benchmarks for academic quality and outcomes	Yellow
f	critically evaluating the quality and effectiveness of educational innovations or proposals for innovations	Red
g	evaluating the effectiveness of institutional monitoring, review and improvement of academic activities, and	Yellow
h	monitoring and reporting to the corporate governing body on the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training.	Green
6.3.3	Students have opportunities to participate in academic governance.	Yellow

## Conclusion and Considerations for the Next Iteration of the HESF

The reviews of six Higher Education institutions' academic governance against the requirements of the HESF, found that several areas were very well done, namely course approval and review; development, monitoring and approval of academic policy; and general academic oversight, monitoring and reporting to Council. Some areas had also shown significant improvement, especially academic integrity, student participation and setting and monitoring institutional benchmarks. Other aspects of Standard 6.3 caused more difficulty for providers, particularly academic leadership, educational innovation, and academic delegations and academic risk. In the case of academic leadership and educational innovation, most Boards were in fact unconsciously compliant, so the red tag

in Figure 1 for these may be considered to be harsh. The findings above, partial as they are, inevitably lead to some suggestions for improvements for the next iteration of the HESF.

After a year of operation, there is some evidence to suggest that Standard 6.3 could be made more coherent, logical and less repetitive. The standard is not logically ordered and is particularly difficult to remember, even after six reviews. A more logical and memorable order is achieved in some Terms of Reference of Academic Boards which use a framework of requirements under the headings of academic oversight, approvals, monitoring, academic leadership and advice, and reporting, with dot points under each.

There is repetition of the term 'academic oversight' in 6.3.1a and 6.3.2, and apparent overlap between 6.3.1d 'providing competent advice' and 6.3.2h 'monitoring and reporting to' the Council, which in practice were considered together, along with 6.3.2g 'evaluating the effectiveness' of institutional monitoring. On the basis that reviewers find it difficult to audit these separately, there is a prima facie case for looking at these elements again and seeing if they can be streamlined. On the other hand, the linking of 'academic and research integrity' with 'monitoring of potential risks' in 6.3.2d implies that Boards should be concerned mainly with a very specific type of academic risk, and it is suggested that the two elements of integrity and risk should be separated out.

It is further suggested that Standard 6.3.2b (Delegations) could be omitted as it is covered by other processes and standards (particularly Standard 6.1.3b related to corporate governance) and that 6.3.2.f (Educational innovations) could be incorporated into other elements of Standard 6.3.

It has also become evident from these reviews that good academic governance contributes significantly to better experiences for students through clear policy, quality assured courses and a stronger focus on academic integrity. Students benefit too through increased participation in governance, which enhances their understanding of the higher education system, and increases their input, so that students can become more effective as partners and agents rather than merely customers and passive recipients in the higher education enterprise.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix

### Extract from the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015: Standard 6.3 Academic Governance

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#### 6.3 Academic Governance

1. Processes and structures are established and responsibilities are assigned that collectively:
    - a. achieve effective academic oversight of the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training
    - b. set and monitor institutional benchmarks for academic quality and outcomes
    - c. establish and maintain academic leadership at an institutional level, consistent with the types and levels of higher education offered, and
    - d. provide competent advice to the corporate governing body and management on academic matters, including advice on academic outcomes, policies and practices.
  
  2. Academic oversight assures the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training effectively, including by:
    - a. developing, monitoring and reviewing academic policies and their effectiveness
    - b. confirming that delegations of academic authority are implemented
    - c. critically scrutinising, approving and, if authority to self-accredit is held, accrediting or advising on approving and accrediting, courses of study and their associated qualifications
    - d. maintaining oversight of academic and research integrity, including monitoring of potential risks
    - e. monitoring and initiating action to improve performance against institutional benchmarks for academic quality and outcomes
    - f. critically evaluating the quality and effectiveness of educational innovations or proposals for innovations
    - g. evaluating the effectiveness of institutional monitoring, review and improvement of academic activities, and
    - h. monitoring and reporting to the corporate governing body on the quality of teaching, learning, research and research training.
  
  3. Students have opportunities to participate in academic governance.
-

## About the Author

### **Emeritus Professor Hilary Winchester**

*Director and Principal*

*Hilary Winchester Pty Ltd, Specialist in Higher Education Quality Assurance*

Emeritus Professor Hilary Winchester is Director and Principal of Hilary Winchester Pty Ltd, specialising in Higher Education Quality Assurance, audits, reviews and compliance assessment. Hilary was Provost at CQUniversity from 2012-2016, including a period as Interim Vice-Chancellor July-October 2016. Hilary's previous senior appointments include Pro Vice Chancellor: Strategy & Planning at the University of South Australia, Pro Vice Chancellor (Academic) at Flinders University, and President of Academic Senate at the University of Newcastle. She was an AUQA auditor for 10 years and is a member of TEQSA's Register of Experts. She is also an international auditor for quality agencies in New Zealand, Hong Kong, and the Middle East, and in recognition of her work in quality standards, regulation and governance Hilary was the recipient of the 2011 Australian Higher Education Quality Award. Prof Winchester was a finalist in the Telstra Business Women's Awards 2016 (Queensland).



**Success**

# Academic Success and Student Success: A Correlating Framework

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## Abstract

Many research papers and government reports have drawn a direct association between student success and teaching quality. In turn, effective academic development has been shown to improve teacher ability, and hence teaching quality. However, academic development and support is not routinely provided by universities and, when it is, it tends not to be systematically integrated into a comprehensive framework [Fraser, 2016; Chalmers et al., 2003]. This paper develops a coherent framework for enabling academic success by adapting Kift and Nelson et al.'s [2010] framework for student success to the context of academic work. Its central pillars include providing engaging curriculum, ensuring access to support, and fostering a sense of belonging. A fourth dimension is added: recognising and sharing good teaching practice.

The resulting Academic Success Framework (ASF) can be applied to multiple contexts of academic staff capability building, however it is illustrated here in the form of a holistic program for sessional teachers: the Sessional Success Program (SSP) at an Australian university: Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Tracing the iterative extension and refinement of program elements, as they cohere around the ASF, the paper illustrates how a multifaceted and holistic program can be incrementally developed over time. Then, by drawing on immediate and longitudinal evaluations and other sources of institutional data, it presents evidence of the impact on participants' ability to engage students in learning, foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment, facilitate student success, and enable retention. The paper concludes with a discussion on the return on investment and strategic benefits for universities in programmatically implementing the ASF. This includes gains in teaching quality; improved student satisfaction, success, and retention; and enhanced organisational culture and capital.

**Key words:** student success, academic development, distributed leadership, sessional academics

## Introduction: Student success, teaching quality, and teacher ability

Many factors contribute to student success and retention in higher education. As Vincent Tinto has argued, while personal factors undoubtedly play a part, the likelihood of students persisting and succeeding in their studies is largely contingent upon what universities do [Tinto, 2009]. He writes,

“students are more likely to persist when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their learning, provide needed academic and social support, and frequent feedback about their performance, and actively involve them with other students and faculty in learning.” [p.4]

Focusing on the first year in higher education (FYHE), Kift, Nelson et al. [2010] extended Tinto’s work into an integrated ‘transitions pedagogy’, with the central tenets of ensuring engagement in learning, timely access to support, and a sense of belonging. However, a range of research papers and government reports, including the recent Australian Government Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) Discussion Paper, *Improving retention, completion, and success in higher education* [2017], have gone further. They draw a direct association between student success and retention and ‘teaching quality’. In turn, they argue, this depends on ‘the teaching ability of lecturers’ [p.13]. Casting this wider causal net should perhaps not be unsurprising, given that it is teachers who are responsible for designing curriculum and the learning experiences of students, providing feedback and support, and fostering the learning communities that engender a sense of belonging.

Like student success, the success of academics in achieving teaching quality is largely contingent on what universities do. The HESP discussion paper goes on to align teacher ability with the provision of effective academic development [p.13]. In this it echoes a substantial body of scholarship and government papers that establish a through-line between academic development, teaching capabilities, and teaching quality. (See, for example, Southwell & Morgan, 2009; Parsons et al., 2012; Norton et al., 2013.) However, while academic development is clearly recognised as important in research and national priorities for higher education, it is not always provided by universities. As Kym Fraser recently noted, ‘In 2015 25 percent of 36 Australian universities did not provide more than a one day workshop inducting new staff into teaching and learning’ [Fraser, 2016: p.4]. Moreover, where professional development is offered, it tends not to be systematically integrated into a coherent and comprehensive framework [Chalmers et al., 2003].

A coherent strategic framework for optimising teaching ability needs to go beyond simply providing preparatory training. Like provisions for student success, it must also ensure support, feedback on performance, and purposeful connections to a community of peers. Indeed, we might adapt Tinto’s recommendations for student success into a guiding statement for developing a framework for academic success. That is: *academics* are more likely to succeed when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success, hold high expectations for their *impact on student learning*, provide needed academic and social support, frequent feedback on *and recognition of* their performance, and actively involve them with other *academics and faculty life*. (Italics denote my modifications of the Tinto quote above.)

In this paper, I develop a conceptual framework for academic success by adapting and extending Tinto's recommendations and Kift and Nelson et al's subsequent framework for student success. In presenting an Academic Success Framework (ASF), I will outline its overarching dimensions and strategic principles. I will then go on to illustrate its application in a holistic, multifaceted program. While the ASF is applicable to the capability building of all academics, here I will focus on its implementation in an exemplar program for sessional staff at a large metropolitan university (QUT) in Brisbane, Australia.

The reason for focusing on a sessional staff exemplar (rather than, say, a program for early career academics, which has also been developed at QUT) is because sessional staff capability building is increasingly important given the increasing casualisation of teaching, it is particularly complex, and it is under-represented in the literature as well as on the ground. When academic development and support to transition into new teaching contexts is provided by universities, the beneficiaries typically tend to be early career (contracted and ongoing) academics. Indeed, the recent government-triggered HESP paper [2017] limited discussion on capability building to the development of 'lecturers' through Graduate Certificates. What is not explored, in an otherwise comprehensive document, is the fact that, in line with a global phenomenon of academic casualisation, there has been a rapid increase in the delegation of face-to-face learning experiences to sessional academics over the past two decades in Australia, and sessional teachers now conduct a majority of them [Harvey, 2017]. Sessional teachers are therefore increasingly influential on student experience; especially in large, first year classes where the concentration of sessional teaching tends to be highest. As Kift and Nelson establish [2010], the first year is where attrition is highest and understanding transition pedagogies is most important.

Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) recently identified a high level of sessionalised teaching as a significant 'risk' to student learning [TEQSA, 2016]. This is not, they note, because casual staff are inherently less able to deliver quality teaching, but is a reflection on the inadequate provision of resourcing, support, and integration of sessional staff into academic and organisational culture [p.13]. Like other new university teachers, sessional academics seldom have prior teaching experience or training, yet aside from pockets of excellent practice in individual institutions and discipline areas (see Percy et al., 2008; BLASST, nd.; and Harvey, 2017 for examples), many universities offer little professional development or support for sessional staff [Fraser, 2016; Harvey, 2017]. Consequently, research continues to conclude that sessional staff feel unprepared, unsupported and isolated [Percy et al. 2008; May, 2013]. Therefore, while the capability building of early career academics is undoubtedly important, it is essential that institutions also focus on the pedagogical expertise, preparedness, support and integration of sessional teachers.

The paucity of professional development for sessional staff is often attributed to financial costs (and an associated argument that the employment of sessional staff is driven by cost savings). However, this is an overly simplistic explanation. How to provide effective capability building for sessional staff can seem perplexing for several reasons. Numbers are often overwhelming (with Australian universities employing, on average, around 1800 sessional staff each (a figure derived from dividing the number of casual academics in Australian (67,000) [May, 213] by the number of Australian universities). This is compounded by the relatively high turnover of sessional staff, due to precarious employment, which means that efforts must not only be wide-reaching but continuous. Furthermore, sessional academics are located across diverse discipline contexts—each with unique curricula, cultures, pedagogical practices, and delivery modes—which means

that sessional staff development needs are diverse, and the benefits of 'generic' development programs are limited; yet providing multiple programs adds to complexity. In addition, advance preparation in the form of induction programs cannot anticipate the messy, day-to-day challenges that unfold in teaching on the ground, and this makes continuous and ongoing support important. And finally, as Fraser and Ryan [2012] have noted, a raft of continuously changing sector, institutional, and discipline factors mean that budgets, and the staff that deliver development programs, may not be stable over time.

Together, these factors coalesce into what Rittel [1972] calls a 'wicked problem', which is difficult to solve because of incomplete knowledge, situational complexities, and continuously changing requirements. As Rittel concludes, wicked problems cannot be tackled through generic solutions; they require lateral, multifaceted, and adaptive strategies. Nonetheless, tackling this particular wicked problem is worthwhile. Put simply, given that student success, engagement, and retention is, in no small part, contingent upon the abilities, confidence and engagement of academic staff, in order to provide the best possible learning environments, experiences and outcomes for our students it is imperative that universities optimise academics' success through effective capacity building and support—including for sessional teachers. To do so, we must go beyond simply mitigating 'risk'. We must systematically ensure opportunities to build learning and teaching capabilities through broad, as well as local, ongoing professional development. We must support new academic staff to adapt to their new teaching contexts and roles and foster a sense of belonging in faculty and university life. And we must inspire academics to realise their potential by sharing, recognising and rewarding exemplary teaching practice. This is a multifaceted agenda, which requires a holistic enabling framework to afford a coherent institutional approach while being mindful of situational complexity. That is, such a framework needs to be multidimensional, adaptive, and distributed.

In developing a conceptual model to cohere a multidimensional approach to academic success, it is my hope that the resulting Academic Success Framework will be of value to others who are establishing or refining their institutional approaches to student success and academic success. By going on to illustrate how the ASF has been implemented in the form of a comprehensive program that has been incrementally built through the gradual addition of large and small elements around the cohering pillars of the ASF, I aim to show that such a program can grow and evolve over time, and this may make what can seem like an overwhelming task less daunting. In addition, I expect that the initiatives described here might provide exemplars that others can adapt in their own institutional contexts.

In line with the action learning research approach taken, I will first provide a contextual analysis including baseline data and a needs assessment. Then, through reference to systematic longitudinal evaluation data, I will evidence the impact of the ASF and SSP on academic success, teaching quality, institutional climate, and both staff and student success, engagement, and retention. I will conclude by discussing return on investment (including financial and other forms of value). In this, it is my hope that the paper assists others in making a persuasive case for institutional investment in developing and supporting teaching practice.

## Background to an Academic Success Framework

The foundation for developing an Academic Success Framework began a decade ago in 2007 during an institutional Learning and Teaching Fellowship, which involved reviewing practices associated with training and supporting sessional staff at my home university (QUT). Recent (and concurrent) sector-wide research [Chalmers et al., 2003; Barber, T., 2005; Kift, S., 2003; Percy et al., 2008] had identified a raft of concerns related to sessional staffing, which can be categorised thematically as:

Contextual employment issues:

- Recruitment and employment practices (employment stability, work conditions, and remuneration);
- Administrative and resource management;
- Inductions (on institutional processes and policies);

and learning and teaching issues:

- Professional development (face-to-face development opportunities and resources);
- Ongoing support by unit coordinators, faculties, universities;
- Fostering a sense of belonging within academic communities; and
- Valuing and recognising contributions made by sessional staff.

This sector-wide research also established that, while many universities produce policies on management, training and support of fulltime, continuing staff, a vacuum in relation to sessional teachers had resulted in an absence of systematic and sustainable practices [Chalmers et al., 2003; Percy et al., 2008, p.6].

My own research was institution specific, so it is important to establish differences from sector-wide insights. QUT brands itself as a 'University for the Real World' and, in line with this brand, the employment of industry professionals as sessional teachers has long been seen in terms of pedagogical benefits. For example, an internal document by Robinson et al. [2005], *A Study of the Costs and Benefits of Sessional Academic Employment at QUT*, noted that, 'QUT is fortunate to have access to a diversity of sessional academic staff who bring their expertise and knowledge of the real world to the class room' [p.4]. This primary driver differs from the financial cost savings pointed to in sector-wide research, and paid professional development for sessional staff has consistently been offered since 2003 (albeit as generic curriculum [Kift, 2003, p. 10]).

Another point of distinction must also be made in relation to my approach. While sector-wide research has largely involved analysis of university reports and interviews with academic developers, administrators and senior staff, my research focused on perspectives of sessional staff. University-wide surveys of cross-faculty sessionals (N=69) were then conducted to provide quantitative and qualitative data on the pragmatics of employment, training and resources, and the perceived benefits and challenges of sessional teaching, as well as support and development needs.

From this research, I drew the conclusion that sessional academics invest in their roles and derive genuine enjoyment from teaching and from their students' achievements. They aim to do a good job and appreciate robust, centrally delivered professional development to enable this. However, to achieve their professional potential, they perceive the need for multifaceted development, including local development and training by staff with academic experience.

To be effective in the face of on-the-ground challenges, they identified the need for ongoing support—by subject coordinators, peers, faculties, and the university. They seek deeper connections with their faculties and a sense of belonging within an academic community, and they hope to be recognised for their achievements in learning and teaching.

Recommendations included complementing central development with local development and providing opportunities for sessional staff to continue to deepen their teaching knowledge and skills, peer mentoring, and opportunities to be recognised for teaching capability and achievements. Developing a strategic framework to enable this, I argued, could bring benefits to all levels of the university, from students to academic managers [Hamilton, 2008]. An institution-wide ‘sessional staff climate survey’ [Voice Project, 2010], a TEQSA audit, and DVC(A) Sessional Staff Project then confirmed the need to expand the University’s offerings and the need to enable sessional staff to feel part of faculty life [Internal QUT documents, 2011]. For the action learning project at hand, the conclusions of my research combined with these institutional drivers to provide an impetus for change and a set of aims.

Developing a holistic framework for academic success was triggered by a presentation by Karen Nelson in 2012. In collaboration with Sally Kift she had recently developed a systematic framework and institution-wide strategy to reduce avoidable student attrition and optimise commencing students’ learning engagement. The resulting First Year Experience (FYE) Framework provided a ‘transitions pedagogy’, which recognised the special learning needs of first year students, due to their social and academic transition into the university environment. Of particular interest to me were the complementary aspects of the FYE Framework, that is:

“First year curriculum must *engage new learners in their learning* and mediate support for that learning. This is assisted by *awareness of and timely access to support services* and *creating a sense of belonging* through involvement, engagement and connectedness with their university experiences” [Kift, Nelson, et al. 2010, p.3] (emphasis added)

I realised that, to be successful, academic staff need very similar things. If we set aside obvious distinctions between learning and teaching *as practices* for a moment, we can identify many similarities between the needs of first year students and the needs of new teaching staff. After all, each are involved in a process of transition—while new academics may be familiar with universities as an institution from previous experiences as a student, they are entering it on very different terms. In the face of new roles and responsibilities, they must navigate unfamiliar terrain and expectations, and establish new relationships. They will encounter—and must adapt to—new ways of working and thinking, cultural norms and expectations, languages, and processes. Therefore, to ensure effective transition into their academic role, they too need opportunities to gain new knowledge and skills, to develop strategies to effectively apply these in new and authentic ways, to access timely support, to feel a sense of belonging, to be inspired by the good practices of others, and to be recognised for the gains they make in their emergent teaching practice.

## An Academic Success Framework

Drawing upon the precedent of the FYE Framework, I developed a first phase Academic Success Framework (ASF) which adapted and extended Kift and Nelson's factors of student success into factors for academic success. The focus on 'curriculum that engages students in learning' became *centrally offered and local professional development that engages academics in learning*; 'timely access to support' became *complementary local and centrally provided support*; and 'a sense of belonging through involvement, engagement and connectedness' became *a sense of belonging and connectedness in faculty life within a community of academic peers*. What also became clear, however (initially from feedback from my foundational research and then over and over again in undertaking activities with sessional staff), was the need for a fourth pillar, that is: *recognising and sharing good practices to inspire and promote excellence*. It might be argued that, for undergraduate students, recognition is inherent in conferral of grades; however, it is not an inherent part of academic work, and it can be helpfully added to motivate and promote achievement.

The ASF is therefore built around these four key pillars, which are represented in Diagram 1 below, with overlapping aspects including orientation (onboarding), fostering communities of practice, peer mentoring, and certification of achievement and advancement.

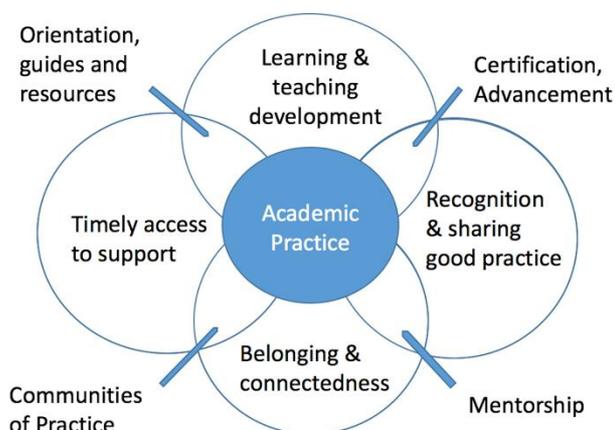


Diagram 1. Pillars of the Academic Success Framework

The incremental development of program initiatives should map across these pillars and be developed systematically across them in tandem. Ideally, each should encompass opportunities for progression from novice to expert. And each pillar should involve complementary university-wide and local aspects. For example, learning and teaching development might involve centrally provided workshops and resources on overarching teaching practice and pedagogy complemented by local development with insights into context-specific discipline practices (for example, demonstrating in a laboratory; leading creative peer critiques; role play moots in Law etc.). Recognition might involve university-wide certification, awards and good practice showcases, complemented by local acknowledgement and opportunities to present exemplary discipline practices. And

support may involve university-wide resources complemented by local mentoring programs.

The provision of a such a complementary approach requires strategic partnerships. Central leadership is needed to envision, cohere and coordinate the strategy, deliver central development, and support local innovation. At the same time, faculty partnerships are needed to ensure responsive, contextually sensitive, bespoke solutions on the ground. Such a partnership approach can perhaps best be enabled through a 'distributed leadership' approach. As described by Jones and Harvey [2017], distributed leadership in academic contexts recognises that leadership exists not just in formal leadership roles, but at all levels of an institution in the form of local innovators, informal advisors, and role models. It sets out to harness, and further build, this local leadership capacity. This involves more than simply capturing contextual insights or consultation; it involves a strengths-based approach in which local leaders are recognised as stakeholders, experts, *and* potential change agents. At one level, this might involve inviting those who have successfully applied what they have learnt through development programs to contribute back into the learning ecosystem by sharing good practices to inspire peers. This not only recognises the increased capacity of participants, but assists program sustainability by contributing to the ongoing expansion of program resources. Delving deeper into a distributed leadership model involves enabling experienced local practitioners and innovators, as 'situated experts', to develop their capacity to lead, and then to act alongside formally designated learning and teaching leadership to mentor others, and to capitalise on their local insights and academic acumen to design and implement new initiatives that develop the capabilities of their peers.

## An Academic Success Framework in practice: a Sessional Success Program

It must be acknowledged that developing a comprehensive strategy across all four pillars of the Academic Success Framework—for brand new through to highly experienced staff—and at both central and local levels may initially seem an overwhelming task. However, it is important to note that once these central tenants are in place as a cohering and purposeful driver of strategy, individual program elements can be incrementally added over time. Indeed, gradually building and piloting new elements is likely to increase overall success.

To demonstrate how a systematic program can be gradually built through continuous addition of constituent elements around the four pillars of the ASF, I will now provide an illustrative example. The Sessional Success Program (SSP) has been systematically developed since 2012 at QUT, a large metropolitan university in Brisbane, Australia with 48,000 students and around 2,500 sessional staff. Its elements provide sessional academics with sequenced opportunities to undertake professional academic development at central and faculty levels; access to institutional, as well as local, personalised support; a sense of belonging in discipline-based and university-wide communities of teaching practice; and opportunities to share, and be recognised for, their emergent capabilities and good practices. The incremental development of these program elements over the past five years can be mapped across the four pillars of the ASF as follows.

## Learning and teaching development (Curriculum that engages)

Commencing in 2012, an academic development module was designed to build the confidence and capacity of new sessional academics. Entitled *Foundations of Learning and Teaching*, it is comprised of four, three-hour workshops, which provide insights into pedagogical principles, theory, and effective strategies for university learning and teaching. It builds capabilities to analyse learning contexts and learner needs, apply strategies for enabling student success, and assess and support diverse learners. It also introduces the benefits and practices of scholarship, reflective practice, and fostering learning communities.

In 2015 a second module was added. Entitled *Effective Communication in Face-to-face and Blended Learning Environments*, it is also comprised of four, three-hour workshops. It spans purposeful and engaging approaches to communicating effectively with students and others, along with the pedagogies and practices of producing and publishing blended learning resources.

A third (capstone) module was developed in 2016 to enable sessional staff who have completed the first two modules to consolidate their learning. Entitled *Academic Success*, it is comprised of two, three-hour workshops in which participants develop a teaching philosophy, apply scholarship and reflective practice, develop evidence-based case studies of good teaching practice for an academic portfolio, and gain insights into opportunities for recognition and advancement. This module enables participants to deepen their teaching practice and to achieve recognition for their capabilities and professional standing.

In 2017 a targeted extension module was added for international sessional and early career academics. Entitled *Teaching in an Australian Context*, it introduces Australian pedagogical approaches, practices, and terms, and explains Australian students' expectations and ways of learning. Designed to enable the academic transition of a growing number of new international teachers (many of whom are postgraduate students), this program responds to student experience feedback (which identified the need) as well as university strategic priorities of fostering inclusivity and belonging and supporting diversity.

In 2015, the three core modules outlined above were aligned with the subject *Principles and Practices of University Learning and Teaching*—the first unit in QUT's Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (GCAP). Upon successfully completing all three modules and associated assessment, participants gain the unit of study on their academic record. In 2015 the unit was accredited as a taught pathway to Associate Fellowship of the (UK) Higher Education Academy (AFHEA), so those who successfully complete the unit also gain international recognition of their experience and expertise in teaching in higher education.

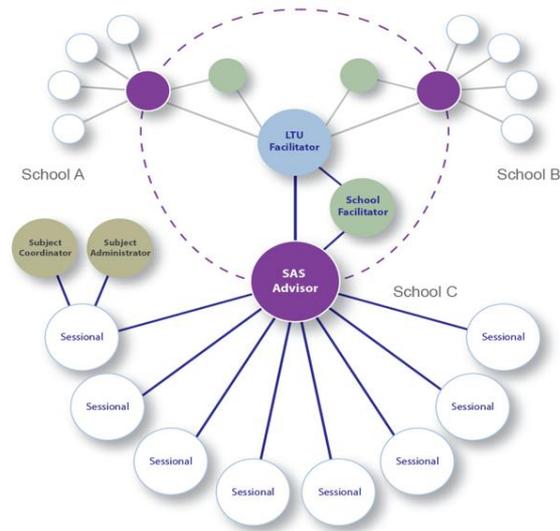
Sessional staff who complete *Principles and Practices of University Learning and Teaching* can go on to apply for a place in the university's Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice (alongside Level A and B academics and professional staff who support student learning). This (AQF Level 8) course builds capabilities across dimensions of academic work including learning experience design, curriculum design, discipline research, scholarship of learning and teaching, leadership, and career advancement. Completion builds academic capacity and professional standing through the award of a postgraduate qualification and HEA Fellowship.

These development opportunities are not only about the capability building of individuals. They are designed to enact the strategic plans of the institution. The university's strategic goals (for example, increasing blended learning, supporting diverse learners, embedding Indigenous Knowledges) are actively promoted through them, and institutional signature pedagogies and practices of student learning engagement are espoused and overtly modelled in delivery. For example, in line with the university's 'real world learning' vision, curriculum is outcomes-focused and constructively aligned to enable defined learning outcomes. A praxis-driven approach sees the integration of theory, scholarship, critical thinking, and active and experiential learning, while contextual problem solving and deep learning is afforded through the application of knowledge and skills in practice in the authentic real-world context of participants' (varied) academic roles. And evidence-based reflection on outcomes and their impact is developed into case studies of good practice (academic portfolio items), which are shared in presentations to afford opportunities to deepen experiential learning, gather peer feedback, and gain insights into the cross-faculty practices of peers.

### **Timely access to support and a sense of belonging**

Support for learning is provided in the curriculum described above through blended resources, formative feedback, and consultations. Co-curricular support is provided through written and blended resources, and face-to-face workshops called JITERs (Just In Time Expertise and Resources). And extra-curricular services (such as HR and Counselling) are signposted through the programs and university websites.

To complement and extend this centrally offered support, in 2012 I designed and piloted a Sessional Academic Success (SAS) initiative [Hamilton et al., 2013]. It has since expanded across schools, before being extended to include dedicated International SAS Advisors in 2016 and Indigenous SAS Advisors in 2017. The SAS initiative harnesses the strengths, experience, and tacit local knowledge of high-performing, experienced sessional staff and, through a distributed leadership strategy, enables these sessional leaders to design contextually sensitive local development; to provide timely, personalised support to less experienced peers; and to foster a sense of belonging in faculty life. Each year, around 20 experienced sessionals are recruited and employed (for three hours per week each) as SAS Advisors. They first receive leadership training and are inducted into the four pillars of the ASF, which provides a cohering strategy for their activities. They learn how to conduct local needs analyses; use a design thinking approach to design local programs; provide sensitive support, advice and refer others; build communities of teaching practice; and communicate their programs effectively. In an action learning research process, they first conduct an environmental scan and a local needs analysis (through surveys, interviews, and/or focus groups), then employ analytical, creative, and problem-solving skills to co-design bespoke initiatives for their local contexts. Upon implementation, they evaluate their initiatives and reflect on their impact for the purpose of iterative improvement. In this way, an evidenced-based approach ensures that local needs across the university are identified and prioritised and a range of bespoke, situated solutions are developed.



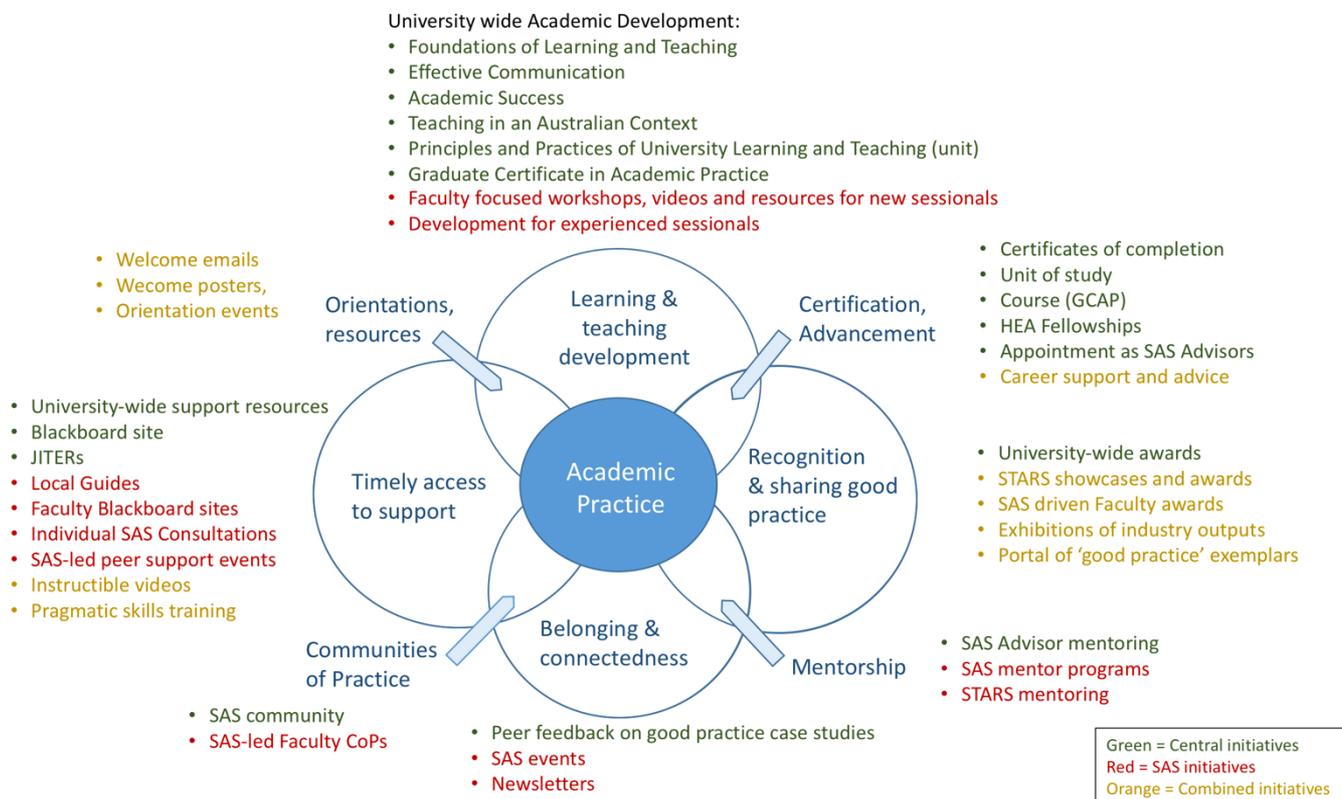
*Diagram 2. SAS initiative: network of support relationships*

While SAS Advisors lead the initiatives they propose and design, a partnership approach ensures that they benefit from a network of central Learning and Teaching Unit and faculty facilitators, who provide advice, connections and assistance, while cross-faculty SAS Advisors regularly come together to provide peer feedback and advice within a community of practice. This network of relationships is illustrated in Diagram 2.

SAS radically multiplies the footprint and reach of programs with the ASF. Examples of initiatives SAS Advisors have developed at local levels include:

- *Faculty and school orientations and welcomes*
- *Communications* (newsletters, Facebook groups, posters, staff profiles, digital signage)
- *Context-specific Academic Development* (eg. demonstrating in the labs, facilitating peer critique)
- *Resources* (eg. survival handbooks, Blackboard communities, instructibles, good practice videos)
- *Peer programs and mentors* (eg. buddy systems with experienced sessionals/industry mentors)
- *Community building events* (eg. morning teas, exhibitions, marking events, guest presentations)
- *Exhibitions of industry expertise, and presentations of good teaching practice* by sessional staff
- *Recognition and reward* (of sessional performance and good practices)
- *Career support* (eg. a database for employment opportunities, career advancement examples)

Diagram 3 below illustrates how centrally offered programs (in green) have been expanded through SAS initiated projects (in red), and joint initiatives (in yellow). It also illustrates the current balance of coverage across the four enabling pillars of the ASF.



*Diagram 3. Academic Success Framework mapped to the Sessional Success Program, showing central and SAS Advisor activities*

The SAS initiative provides multiple benefits. For experienced sessionals, it recognises and builds leadership capacity and skills, and it affords prominence within their school/faculty, which often leads to further opportunities, recognition, and awards. At the same time, new sessionals gain expanded, local development opportunities and access to 'just in time', safe, reliable advice and support from trusted peers. Moreover, by connecting sessionals of all levels of experience, the SAS initiative fosters a supportive academic community and helps sessional staff integrate into faculty life. It also builds connections between sessional staff and school leadership—who sponsor, attend and contribute to SAS events and communications.

### Recognition and sharing good practices

Recognition of achievement through professional development activities includes certificates of participation on completion of modules; the award of a unit of study and associated HEA Associate Fellowship; and a postgraduate qualification (Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice) with associated HEA Fellowship. Alongside taught pathways, sessional staff can apply for HEA recognition through a written case. QUT also has a category of Vice Chancellors' Performance and Excellence Awards for sessional

staff. And, of course, recognition of advanced knowledge, skills and experience is afforded through SAS Advisor appointments.

Beyond central opportunities for recognition, SAS Advisors have developed opportunities for the recognition of peers including local (School and Faculty) awards, based on student and peer submissions. They have also curated exhibitions of professional practice and showcases of good teaching practice to increase the status and standing of sessional staff. A prime example is an annual Sessional Teaching and Reflection Showcase (ST★RS), designed and implemented by a SAS Advisor in the Creative Industries Faculty, Michelle Fox, in 2013, which expanded to become a university-wide event in 2014 [Fox, 2015]. Following opportunities for skills development in abstract writing and presentations, ST★RS provides a context for sessional academics to share their good practices in learning and teaching through four-minute PechaKucha presentations to university audiences. With Certificates of Participation received by finalists, a 'Most Inspiring Practice' award is selected by senior staff, and 'People's Choice' Award is selected by the audience. Through such initiatives, sessional staff are recognised, while community-building is fostered, and good practice is shared.

## **Advancement**

The range of activities described above can be represented as a sequenced series of capability building opportunities, designed for commencing (novice) sessional teachers through to expert sessional staff as local learning and teaching leaders. Diagram 4 below plots this advancement across the dimensions of the Academic Success Framework through phases of capability building. Reciprocated learning, which takes the form of good practice presentations and video resources on pragmatic topics to assist peers, along with peer mentoring and leadership through the SAS initiative, flow back into this ecosystem. This two-way flow (where knowledge, skills, support, and recognition are acquired then contributed back into the ecosystem for the benefit of less experienced peers) is denoted at the top of the diagram. It is through this reciprocation of learning that scale has been gained, sustainability of the programs has been ensured, and a line of succession has been built. (For example, members of the Academic Development team advanced through the programs to become faculty-based SAS Advisors, then assume central development roles.)

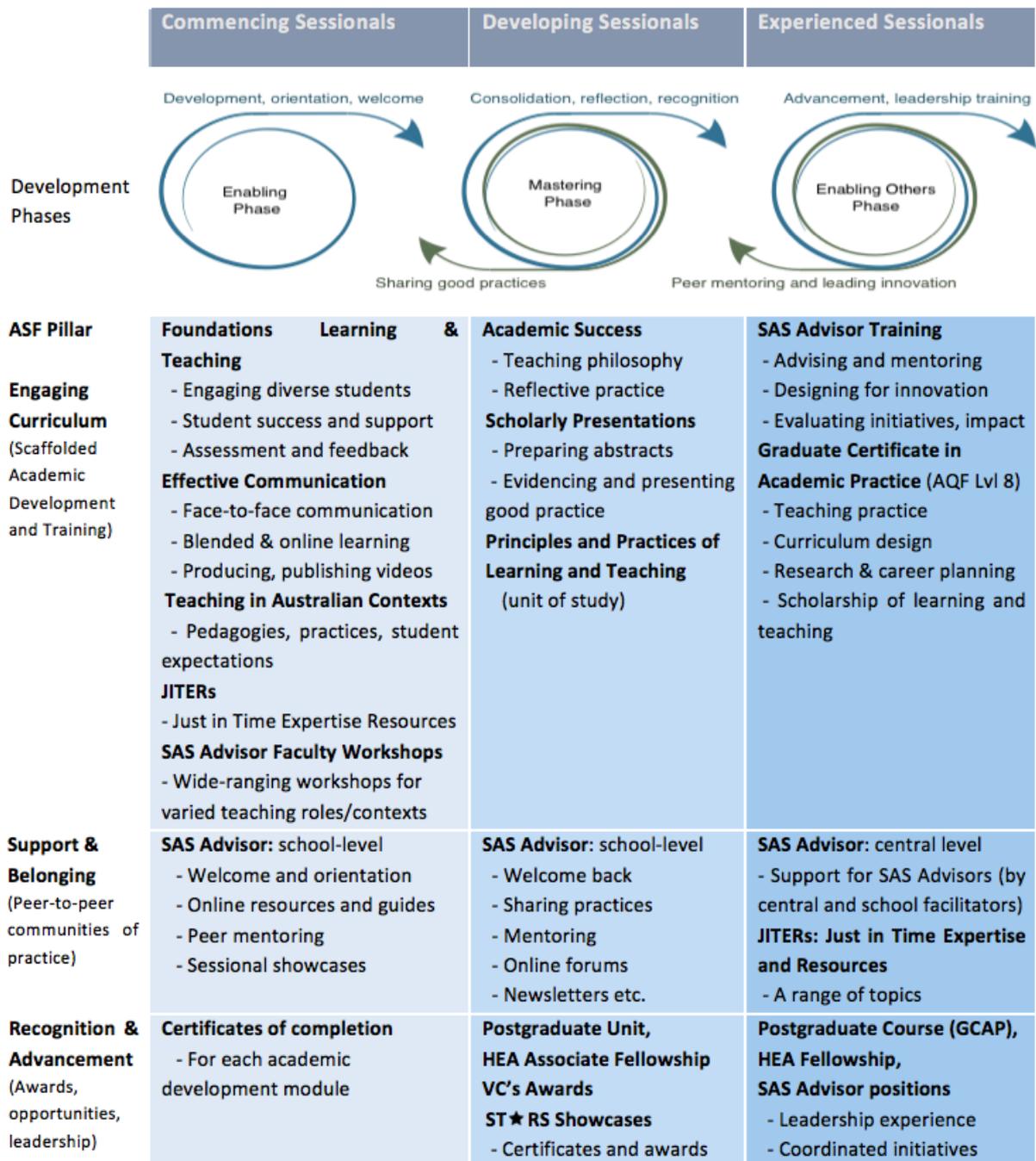


Diagram 4. The Academic Success Framework as a sequenced Sessional Success Program

## Implications: Breadth and Depth of Impact

While each of the strategies described above is distinctive, when considered together this collection of enabling activities can be described as an ‘ecology’ of support and professional learning initiatives [Derbyshire, 2016]. Cohering around the Academic Success Framework’s four pillars—academic development, support, belonging, and recognition and advancement—initiatives have been systematically developed over time

to build a comprehensive, multidimensional, adaptive and locally sensitive, enabling program that is optimised in terms of reach and impact.

## **Reach**

Since 2012, when the program design commenced, thousands of sessional staff have participated in aspects of the Sessional Success Program. Each year, more than 350 unique participants engage in the centrally offered academic development modules, including over 90% of new sessional staff, along with experienced sessionals who progress to advanced modules. In addition, hundreds of sessionals regularly engage with SAS Advisors at Faculty community events, training, support, online discussions and good practice presentations.

## **Impact on sessional academics**

Alongside reach, it is important to consider the effect of the program on sessional staff stakeholders and their students. Systematic program evaluations over the past five years (every event and initiative) have provided insights into perceptions of quality, and this feedback has enabled the iterative refinement and adaptation of modules to address changing participant and university needs. While results vary slightly between modules, aggregated evaluations across the sessional programs (N= >1000 per annum) average 4.7/5 (Likert scale of one to five, with 5 being highest) and teaching evaluations consistently average 4.85/5. To complement routine surveys of program and teaching quality, a longitudinal program survey in 2016 focused on the *value* of the programs to participants and their students, through quantitative and qualitative (open-ended) questions. A thematic analysis of the resulting data evidences increased gains in participants' understanding of how students learn, deepened confidence and capability, improved communication ability, increased capacity to innovate in the classroom, and enhanced ability to problem solve. (For the 67% of the sessional cohort who are postgraduate students, this also contributes to graduate capabilities.)

A thematic analysis of their annual reports, has revealed that SAS Advisors have gained further self-efficacy, enhanced professional identity, extended leadership capacity, and greater linkage in their schools. SAS Advisors also report enhanced visibility and opportunities, with a high proportion of SAS Advisors receiving faculty or university excellence awards, and around 80% going on to gain contracted academic positions and/or roles on Faculty or University Boards.

The effect of increased confidence, capacity, and support for both new and experienced sessional staff can be evidenced through comparison of QUT's five-yearly Sessional Staff Opinion Survey [Voice Project, 2010 and 2014]. Comparing data from 2010 (pre-Sessional Success Program) with data from the end of 2014 (three years into the program) [N=380], shows a significant (around 20%) increase in sessional staff perceptions of 'access to information resources', 'collegiate help and support' and 'feeling valued'. Moreover, similar substantial increases in indicators such as 'passion' and 'engagement' by sessional staff means that these indicators of 'engagement' have come to surpass those of full-time staff.

## **Impact on students**

The impact on students is somewhat harder to measure directly. As established in the introduction, many factors contribute to student experience—including the physical and

online learning environment, curriculum design, and support services (and it is important to note that advances have been made across all of these areas at QUT). However, it must also be acknowledged that a primary influence on student success is the ability of teachers to engage students and guide and support their learning. After all, as was also noted in the introduction, teachers design and facilitate learning, build learning communities, support and advise students, and inspire and motivate them to achieve their potential. The extent to which SSP participants have come to understand these aspects of student success, and their ability to foster them in the classroom, can be assessed. And, because the capabilities and expertise that sessional staff develop through the program are applied in practice within their classrooms, with the effect measured through teaching surveys and reflected upon for assessment, sessional respondents are well-placed to self-report on the impact.

A 2016 longitudinal survey of sessional staff, conducted between 1 to 3 years after program participation (18% response rate) primarily focused on the value of SSP to student learning. Questions were broadly clustered around the pillars of the FYE Framework (improved capacity to engage students; provide timely access to support; and foster students' sense of belonging). The resulting data shows that respondents recognise the connection between their teaching ability and student experience and outcomes, often citing it as a prime motivation for engaging in the programs. In terms of engaging students in learning, 96% agreed or strongly agreed that their students were more highly engaged since the respondent participated in the program. 91% agreed/strongly agreed that, as a result of the program, they better assist students to contribute to discussions and communicate what they know. And 85% agreed/strongly agreed that they are better able to foster curiosity and learning collaboration.

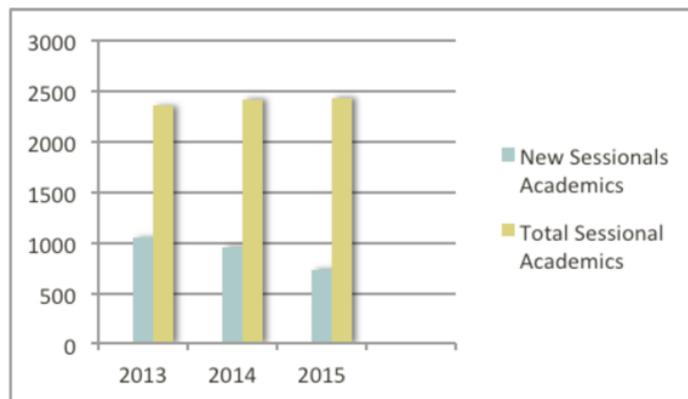
As noted in the introduction, sessional teachers often conduct large first year classes where attrition is most likely and for this reason, the Sessional Success Program emphasises the importance of supporting diverse learners and learning styles, providing timely support within the classroom and sensitive referral to university support services (Academic Skills Advisors, Equity, Careers, Counselling and so on). In terms of supporting students, 98% of sessional staff respondents reported that they are better able to help students continue at university (not attrit) as a result of SSP. And 87% of respondents reported being better able to foster connections so that their students feel part of the class, discipline and university community.

Importantly, these effects are not just reported by recent participants, they endure for those who completed the program three years earlier. That is, the effects of the program are not just on a single cohort of sessionals and their current students; the increased confidence, capacity and self-efficacy of sessional staff impacts on cohorts of students, year on year, as sessional staff continue to apply and deepen their learning.

## **Return on Investment**

The consideration of return on investment must take into account both costs and benefits. The cost of SSP includes staff costs (employment of a small team of core staff (around two FTE in total) and 20 SAS Advisors for three hours per week each), along with payments to sessional staff for program attendance (being one of payments of up to twelve hours for Foundations of Learning and Teaching plus three hours for Teaching in an Australian Context for eligible international staff). Set against these costs are an array of financial and cultural benefits derived from capability building, support, and engendering a sense of belonging.

I will first consider the cost savings associated with stemming attrition of sessional academics, as this provides perhaps the most direct association with financial value. Graph 1 charts sessional staff employment numbers over three years from the commencement of the program. While the overall number of sessional staff continued to rise year-on-year, the number of new sessionals (as both a raw number and as a proportion) declined substantially, indicating a significant, cumulative reduction in sessional staff attrition.



*Graph 1. Sessional staff employment at QUT showing overall and new appointments.*

While the cost of recruiting and orienting new sessional staff clearly adds to administrative time (a direct cost), it also tends to be ‘hidden’ in the workloads of subject coordinators in the form of training and supporting new staff. This ‘indirect cost’ is at the expense of other forms of productive labour (academic research activity, for example). To ascertain the overall cost of sessional staff attrition, we can draw on business literature, which calculates (direct and indirect) costs of replacing staff using formulas based on annual salary. Applying an averaged formula to calculate the cost of replacing a single casual tutor, then multiplying it by the hundreds of instances of staff who might otherwise not have been retained (Graph 1), arrives at a cost saving that on its own exceeds the university’s expenditure on the Sessional Success Program.

We might also look to student retention indicators, which have also steadily improved over the duration of the program—attrition decreased by 1% each year between 2013 and 2015 (the most recent data publicly available in QUT Annual Reports). Marrington, Nelson, et al. [2009] and Nelson [2014] have employed a systematic approach to calculating the return on investment on intervention programs for reducing student attrition. Using their calculation for a university the size of QUT, a 1% reduction in overall attrition saves over two million dollars in the annual bottom line. While recognising that many factors impact on student retention (and QUT has a very effective student success program), we need only attribute a very small fraction of overall improved retention (less than 10% of the 1% of students who would otherwise have attrited) to the Sessional Success Program to balance the cost of the program on the institutional ledger. Bearing in mind that 98% of the sessional respondents to the 2016 longitudinal survey reported being better able to help students continue (not attrit) as a result of the program, the

specific contribution of the program to these retention gains is likely to be much higher than this.

Overall, since the commencement of the Sessional Success Program in 2012, QUT's student experience data has also incrementally improved year-on-year, with substantial gains in the Good University Guide National Ratings from low ratings in 2011 to a 5 Star rating for 'overall experience', and 'learning resources', and very close (by 0.2%) to a 5 Star rating for 'teaching quality' in 2017 (with 5 being the highest). While it is important to recognise the contribution of a range of factors to 'overall experience', indicators for 'learning resources' and 'teaching quality' can be closely correlated to improved teaching ability, which is enabled by SSP.

Such rankings largely represent improvements in reputational value and, while they impact on demand, they are not currently associated with tangible financial value. However, should deregulation of student fees come to pass in Australia (as it has in the UK), or should the Australian Government's proposal to make 7.5% of the higher education Commonwealth Grants Scheme (CGS) funding contingent on performance indicators (such as attrition, participation, and workforce preparedness of graduates) be enacted as planned in 2020, these gains will translate into substantial actual financial value.

Other institutional benefits gained through the program relate to enriched cultural capital. As evidenced by survey data set out in 5.1 above, a culture of support and inclusion has significantly improved staff climate and morale. Further, distributed leadership has enabled the realisation of a raft of innovation at multiple levels of the university. And, through reciprocated learning—in events like ST★RS and good practice videos, many staff have been inspired by the initiatives of sessional staff. The university community has also been enriched by connecting staff through networks and partnerships within disciplines, and across all strata of the institution (from the DVC (Learning and Teaching) and Senior DVC who provide strategic advice and officiate events such as ST★RS, to Heads of Schools and Deans who support local events, award prizes, and contribute to communications, to SAS Advisors and new sessional academics). Fostering these diverse, multi-tiered relationships has realised co-contributions to the program beyond what we could have imagined.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have established a direct association between academic success and student success, and argued that investing in effective academic development and support for staff is crucial to optimising student learning engagement, experience and retention. I have gone on to argue that new staff have needs in common with new students, and have adapted and extended an established student success framework (FYE) into an Academic Success Framework (ASF). This framework coheres around an enduring purpose: to ensure that teachers in higher education—at every stage of their development—have the opportunity to realise their potential for teaching excellence through a combination of academic capability building; access to expert and peer support within an engaged community of teaching practice; and opportunities to share, be inspired by, and be recognised for evidence-based good practice. I have developed principles for the application of this framework, including incremental capability building to enable progression from teaching novice to expert learning and teaching leader. Other operational principles include reciprocal learning, through which participants contribute

back into the ecosystem by sharing good practices, peer mentoring, and supporting and leading others. I have emphasised the need for partnerships across all strata of the university to combine 'top down' strategy with 'bottom up' approaches and foster distributed leadership, which enables local experts to become change agents, innovators and advisors for the benefit of their peers. This ensures a networked and distributed model that helps ensure program sustainability.

While I have argued that the ASF framework is transferable and adaptable, I have gone on to illustrate it through the realisation of a Sessional Success Program. By showing how the operationalisation of the framework has occurred incrementally over time to become a coherent, yet comprehensive, adaptive and multifaceted suite of activities, and by detailing examples of constituent elements, my goal has been to promote positive change and to make such a change more easily achievable for others. And, by demonstrating the tangible gains for both staff and student stakeholders, as well as the financial and cultural return on investment for universities, it is my hope that the case for investment in capability building, support, and recognition for academic staff by universities is easier to make.

## Acknowledgements

Deep appreciation is extended to QUT's senior staff including outgoing Vice Chancellor Peter Coaldrake, Professor Suzi Derbyshire, DVC (Learning and Teaching), and Professor Carol Dickenson, Senior DVC, for their recognition of the important role that sessional academics play at QUT, their continued support, and their trust in what may have initially appeared to be quite lateral ideas. Particular thanks go to QUT's Academic Development team, Michelle Fox and Michael Willmet, for their contribution to the implementation of the Sessional Success Program, and to ensuring, promoting, and evidencing its success. I acknowledge the inspiration provided by Professor Karen Nelson, Victoria Menzies and Jennifer Tredinnick in relation to student success and peer programs (especially in relation to Diagram 4), and the encouragement and feedback of Associate Professor Marina Harvey, a champion of sessional staff issues. Appreciation also goes to our SAS Advisors, over the past five years at QUT, for their commitment to innovation and effective ways to support and engage their peers. In 2015, I presented a keynote paper at the Benchmarking Leadership in Sessional Standards and Teaching (BLASST) National Summit and this paper builds upon it. In 2016, the Sessional Success Program was recognised by an Australian Award for University Teaching (AAUT) for Programs that Enhance Learning. These opportunities provided the impetus for this paper and I thank the organising committee and QUT's Awards and Grants team for their support.

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# Holistic Curriculum Transformation: A Scalable Model for Student Success

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## Abstract

Technology is now fully integrated into many students' lives, however, there is still progress required to embed this level of ubiquity in their higher education experience.

While there are many great examples of individual innovations, transforming a whole organisation to integrate technology into the student experience both in and out of the classroom is much more challenging. There is often a gap between an institution's strategic goals around technology usage and the reality of the student experience.

Navitas is a global higher education provider with 130 colleges across 50 countries serving 80,000 students. In this diverse and geographically dispersed context, strategies for ensuring the quality of the student experience and enhancing the likelihood of success in their studies and subsequent careers must be scalable, flexible and adaptable to local contexts.

This paper describes a transformation model developed by Navitas' Learning and Teaching Services unit for sustainable transformation of curriculum and teaching practice with a particular emphasis on digital learning. Results from implementation in a range of colleges include improvements from pre-curriculum transformation project levels in student results and satisfaction rates; more consistent approaches to curriculum and delivery across units and programs and gains in teacher confidence and skills.

**Key Words:** Change; Curriculum; Holistic; Transformation; Technology

## The context of transformation in higher education

Like many other sectors, higher education is being affected by global trends that are re-shaping whole industries. Universities and private providers alike are under increasing pressure to remain relevant in the context of rapidly changing skills needs, funding constraints, consumer demands vis a vis learning experiences, flexibility and relevance, advances in technology, and an increasingly competitive, globalised education market.

While there is no doubt that the overall higher education sector is growing, with global university enrolments set to reach 262m by 2025 (Maslen, 2012), demand is unlikely to come from the traditional places or in a traditional form. Students of the future will be looking for personalised, relevant, flexible and engaging learning experiences that make the very best use of technologies and are designed to fit their changing work needs across a lifetime (World Economic Forum, 2016).

Technology is now fully integrated into students' lives however there is still progress required to embed this level of ubiquity in their higher education experience.

There are many great examples of individual innovations, however, transforming a whole organisation to integrate technology into the student experience both in and out of the classroom is much more challenging. There is often a gap between an institution's strategic goals around technology usage and the reality of the student experience.

The last 30 years has seen a vast shift in the notion of the traditional university student, and indeed the 'non-traditional' learner profile makes up an increasing proportion of university enrolments (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). Simply adding technology into the existing model is unlikely to be enough to service the needs of future learners who are demanding an education experience that provides truly flexible, personalised, relevant and 'right sized' content, which they can access as and when needed for ongoing career and skills development (G20, 2010). At the same time, alternative providers and models have emerged over the past ten years and are becoming increasingly recognised by employers and the market in general (ICEF Monitor, 2015).

University leaders are all too aware of the changes that are required in order for their institutions to thrive in the age of the fourth industrial revolution and meet the changing needs of today's (and tomorrow's) learners (World Economic Forum, 2016). The vast majority of university leaders agree that disruption of the 'traditional' university model is likely by 2030, and most if not all have digital transformation programs in place (Brothers & Spies, 2017).

A recent study identified that over two thirds of universities surveyed are digitising elements of their current model as well as creating new digital models (Brothers & Spies, 2017). Universities are partnering with bootcamp providers, for example, to deliver the 'best of both worlds' for students, as well as launching their own bootcamp models. Most universities have some sort of MOOC offering, either stand-alone or through a MOOC provider, and some are embedding these offerings into their traditional programs and giving credits for completion (Johnson, 2017).

Making changes to any system is a complex issue, requiring alignment between the components as they are adjusted (Biggs & Tang, 2011). This is especially true for organisations, systems or industries that have been stable and in place for an extended

period of time, whereby elements of the system are self-reinforcing. The university model is one of the oldest and most enduring of institutions (Kerr, 2001).

Transformational changes in education necessarily require modification to many interlinked elements of the student experience, including curriculum, teaching and learning. However, the broad definition of transformation itself has led to many components being the focus of activity in universities, depending on the objectives for change or the lens through which transformation is viewed. For example, some universities have used the concept of transformation to embed structural changes, such as The University of Leicester's standardisation of credit hours and the introduction of an orientation week. Others have used the concept of transformation as an organising concept to achieve specific objectives, such as the University of Pretoria's social justice initiative of '[Reimagining curriculum for a just University](#)' or the University of Washington's focus on curriculum transformation as vehicle for building [diversity and inclusivity](#). There are also examples of technology being used as a driver of transformational change, such as the JISC (2009) assertion that "Adapting systems and procedures to bring about transformative change is a significant challenge and requires an institution-wide approach" (JISC 2009, p.5). In the JISC model, responsibilities for driving and implementing the changes are distributed across different roles in the university.

At the other end of the scale from more holistic approaches to change, the literature includes many resources to guide practice of individual academics and in individual course units or classes. While this 'bottom-up' activity is important for building exemplars and local champions, a more holistic approach is required to embed a digital learning experience into the institutional structures and procedures and ensure sustainable change (Casey and Wilson, 2005).

## The sustainability imperative

Navitas is a global higher education provider with 130 colleges across 50 countries and over 80,000 students. In this diverse, geographically dispersed operational context, all enterprise-wide initiatives aimed at improving the student experience and outcomes must be designed for scalability, be flexible and adaptable to local contexts, and be sustainable such that the initiative will transition into 'business as usual' at each location, while still retaining consistency of quality and underlying principles.

In order to develop a strategic approach to optimizing student outcomes, Navitas' Learning and Teaching Services unit has been leading a series of major curriculum transformation initiatives over recent years in collaboration with academic leaders, business units and colleges. The experience of leading similar projects in a range of contexts has enabled the development of a 'curriculum transformation model', drawing on the experiences from and patterns observed from previous implementations. The model was developed to: enable rapid deployment across diverse contexts; establish a common language and shared approach; and, facilitate sustainability far beyond the initial projects. A balance was required between a consistent approach that allows for scaling, and a model that can be adapted by colleges to suit the diversity of their disciplines, learner profiles and their needs across a continuum of academic skills, confidence and digital usage. Casey and Wilson's (2005) notion of 'continuums' informed the model, enabling enough flexibility for colleges to reflect their contexts; some colleges sought wholesale reinvention while others had a more limited focus on building their digital learning experiences.

This paper describes the transformation model, which was developed over three years as a collaborative process informed by colleges, academic staff, student feedback and the wider literature. For the Navitas context, the model includes a particular emphasis on enhancing student outcomes through leveraging digital learning as a driver of change in curriculum and teaching practice.

## The model and its components

It can be challenging to make sense of the multidimensional and evolving nature of complex change. The central Learning and Teaching Service unit's history of working with the colleges in similar transformation projects enabled us to leverage our central perspective and pull the components of the projects into an overall model. Because there are many aspects to transformation projects making it difficult to identify priorities, sequence and interdependencies, we were able draw upon both the education literature and change management models to recognise and categorise patterns. For example, in planning the model, underpinning principles were drawn from the change management and educational technologies literature, where change needed to be:

- holistic rather than atomistic (Casey and Wilson, 2005);
- pedagogy-led rather than technology-led (Gibbs and Gosper, 2006), and above all
- focused on the student and their experience, which must be seamless both in and out of the classroom (Collis and Moonen, 2002; Siemens, 2005).

Sustainability and scalability were also key drivers in developing the Navitas curriculum transformation model, with a focus on embedding policies and procedures for continuation into 'business as usual'. In the Navitas context of private colleges, the transformation projects could encompass more dimensions than are usually possible in the highly devolved model of universities, for example where central administration services may be responsible for aspects of the student experience.

While there are certainly blurred boundaries and interdependencies, the elements can be organised into four broad quadrants. Figure 1 provides a visual of the four quadrants of the model, with descriptions of each along with the measures used to judge the success of interventions are presented in the sections below.

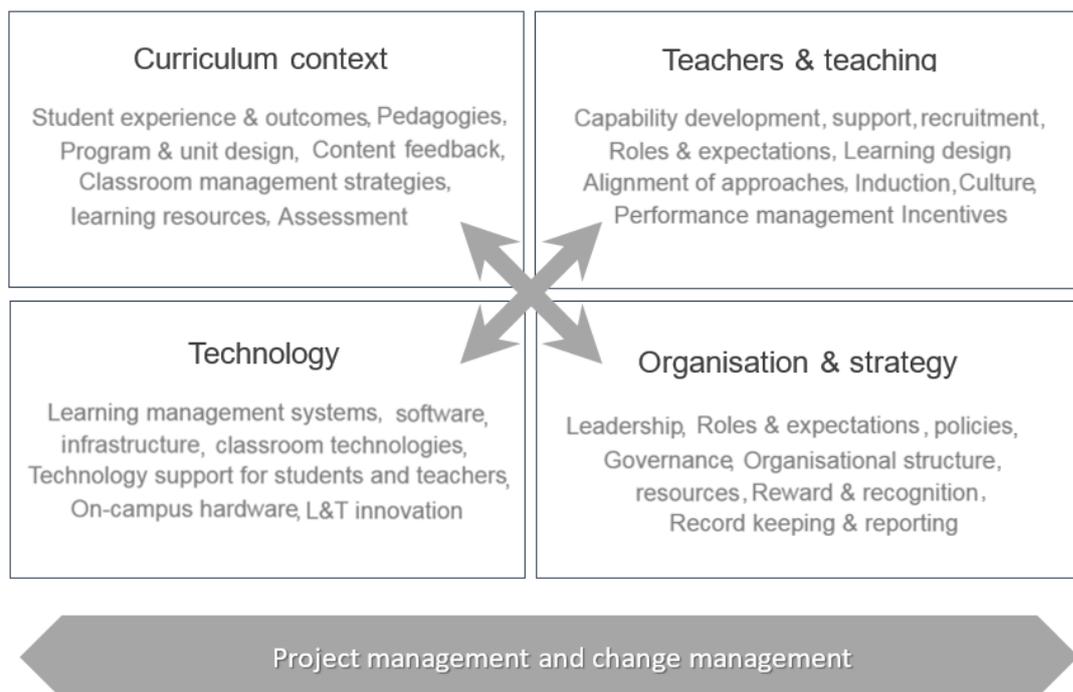


Figure 1. Curriculum Transformation Model Components

## Curriculum Context

Digital transformation requires clear thinking about the curriculum or ‘product’; the content, delivery, learning design and the principles that underpin approaches to teaching and learning. At Navitas we have taken a pedagogy-led approach to curriculum transformation, but have also focused on practical issues about, for example, student access and logins, whether the learning design will scale as cohort sizes increase or as additional time zones are included in the offerings. Given that it is challenging to ensure that digital transformations are sustainable, it’s important to ensure the overarching design will actually work when implemented and transition successfully into ‘business as usual’. The model includes a focus on the ‘documented curriculum’, which involves specific templates for unit outlines, the development of facilitator’s guides and checklists to guide practice. In our Navitas context, which includes pathway programs and enabling education, it is crucial to embed academic skills to build student confidence for their subsequent studies. While expert teachers know how to combine skills development with discipline content and teaching practice (Hunter and Tse, 2013) the mastery of teaching practice requires explicit focus on each of these elements and their interrelationship. To help make these techniques explicit, facilitator’s guides are used to capture learning designs and student activity for skill development. Facilitator’s guides clearly articulate the links between objectives, outcomes, activities and opportunities for feedback.

The indicators of success in this quadrant of ‘curriculum’ include the alignment of programs and units with new frameworks for design, along with the documented curriculum as evidenced by unit outlines, facilitator’s guides, rubrics and checklists for compliance, signed off by academic leads.

## Technology

In the move to a digital student experience, the **technology** itself is an important aspect and although our focus is pedagogy-led, technologies need to enable the transformation and support the new curriculum and delivery model. Learning Management Systems (LMS), software, classroom technology and campus infrastructure all need to be integrated, with a focus on student experiences and staff needs. In a diverse and distributed context such as Navitas, the move to a new central Learning Management System (Moodle), with common features and customisations for college instances provided new opportunities for sharing practice and examples of the changed curriculum as they emerged. Prior to this, it was challenging for any college to access other examples from across Navitas because different colleges used different versions of LMS. Integrations between systems can quickly become a barrier to adaptation, so part of each project was to streamline connections between 'core systems' such as the new LMS, student management system and other software for use across all colleges.

A focus on technology does include some risk, including over hyped expectations such as Gallagher and Garrett (2013) suggest and an 'upside-down' (Gibbs and Gosper, 2006, p. 47) approach, with the tools themselves rather than curriculum innovation being positioned to drive change. In our projects, one of the underlying principles is a pedagogy-led approach to technology to mitigate these risks. To take advantage of any technologies, academics need to understand their potential for enhanced learning and teaching (Mishra & Koehler 2006), moving toward more connected learning (Siemens 2005) and away from traditional transmission models (Bates 2011; Toohey 1999). A strong focus on academic professional development in the use of technology for specific pedagogical purposes is a key aspect of this model and an important part of each project. This professional development for teachers is addressed specifically in the next quadrant.

In order to judge the impact of the projects at each college, baselines were collected on Learning Management Systems usage reports. Perceptions of students and teachers through surveys, focus groups and interviews are also gathered as longitudinal data.

## Teachers and teaching

Teachers are the 'face' of Navitas for our students, so the third quadrant is 'teachers and teaching' as a distinct and specific component. In order to implement "large-scale, sustainable reform" (Fullan 2003, p. xi), bringing the teaching academics along on the journey toward curriculum change is essential. To enable this transformative change, academics' capability to review and redesign their own curriculum, and use online teaching and learning tools themselves, with less reliance on centralised unit development services is crucial to this component. A focus on teaching, and especially 'pedagogical content knowledge' (Beswick, Fraser and Crowley, 2016) has not typically been a priority in many higher education contexts, and part of the transformation projects is working with individuals and groups of teachers on making strategies explicit. Beetham (2004) observes that many academics don't possess the vocabulary for articulating and sharing their pedagogical strategies with others, especially beyond their discipline areas. For effective change management, teaching staff must be supported to articulate their ideas, make connections between their current practice and technology-enhanced approaches, and evaluate outcomes. The projects involved developing appropriate

frameworks and templates along with comprehensive professional development programs.

The indicators for measuring for success of initiatives in the 'teaching and teachers' quadrant include teacher perceptions & efficacy as gauged through surveys and interviews, management perspectives and scholarly outputs generated as a result of the projects. While the number of professional development hours undertaken cannot be used as a measure of impact, it is an indication of the effort involved in the change management initiatives so these are tallied as part of the project outcomes.

## Organisation and strategy

Finally, the organisational structures and context are the hinges that bring the other pieces together and this quadrant incorporates aspects such as business processes, policies, reward and recognition, staff roles and responsibilities. Efforts to lead change, as warned by Kotter (2007), have frequently been unsuccessful due to lack of attention to crucial leadership activities such as communicating the vision clearly, and embedding changes in the corporate policies, procedures and culture. Strategy needs management and policy to ensure sustainability and leading this change as a specific focus in the projects. For example, policies around professional development, teacher roles and expectations and the documented curriculum ensure that the transformation initiatives can continue into 'business as usual' especially with a highly sessionalised workforce.

Casey and Wilson (2005) pose three levels, around which project initiatives are designed:

- Institutional management to direct, which in our context involved College Directors being involved as sponsors and co-chairs of project steering committees;
- Operational management to organise resources and implement strategy, which was enacted by academic leads at the colleges; and
- Learning and teaching management, to implement strategy at the practical level. This level involved those with program and unit coordination responsibilities.

Measures of success in the 'organisational' quadrant include the introduction of quality frameworks, guidelines and templates to guide good practice and check compliance, along with the development of a suite of policies and procedures to guide the transition into 'business as usual'.

## Enablers

To drive effective transformation, great project management and change management are needed as enablers, along with local leadership to take ownership. We drew on the principles and common language of Navitas' Change model in these curriculum transformation projects. NaviChange is our institutional change management model, which draws on ADKAR (Hiatt 2006) to bring stakeholders along from initial awareness raising to desire, knowledge, ability and ultimately reinforcement into business as usual. This puts sound structures in place that are collaborative, consultative, communicative and maintain the central involvement and leadership of academic and business leaders throughout the whole process.

The interconnectedness of each of the components is an essential aspect of implementing the model. The 'learning and teaching principles' underpinning the transformation activities in each college need to be embedded at granular levels into the program and unit planning as well as policies, procedures and templates. As an example, a principle of 'active learning' requires components of the curriculum, the teaching, the technology and the organisational structure itself to be adapted to ensure alignment. A policy was required to quantify 'active learning' ratio of 30:70 to reduce teacher talk time; the curriculum needed to be redesigned to include more activities, the LMS was updated to enable more engaging activities to be delivered, tracked and analysed, and the 'roles and expectations of teachers' was updated to ensure these responsibilities were clear. Figure 2 is an illustration of this cascading set of interventions as implemented in one college. (The full description is attached appendix.)

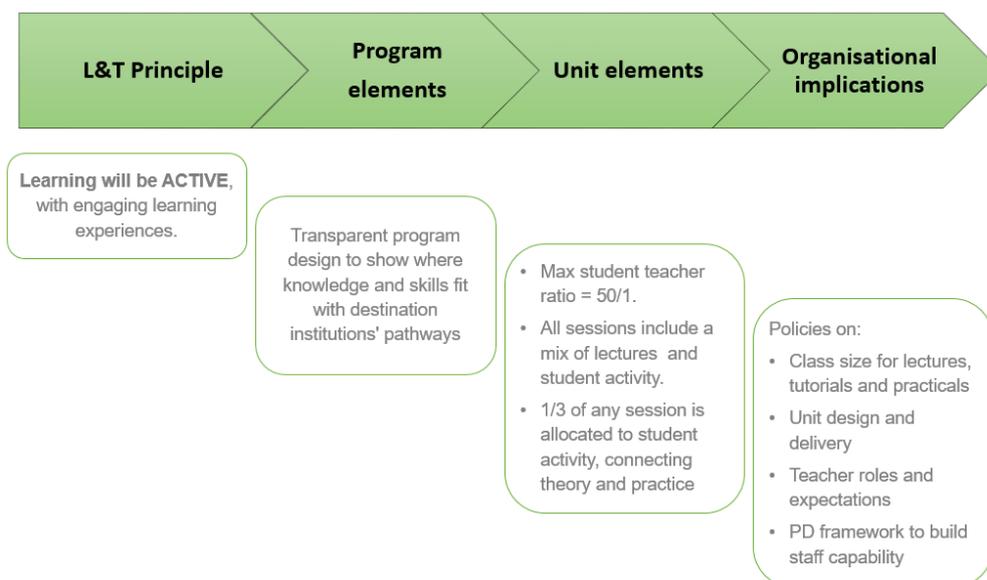
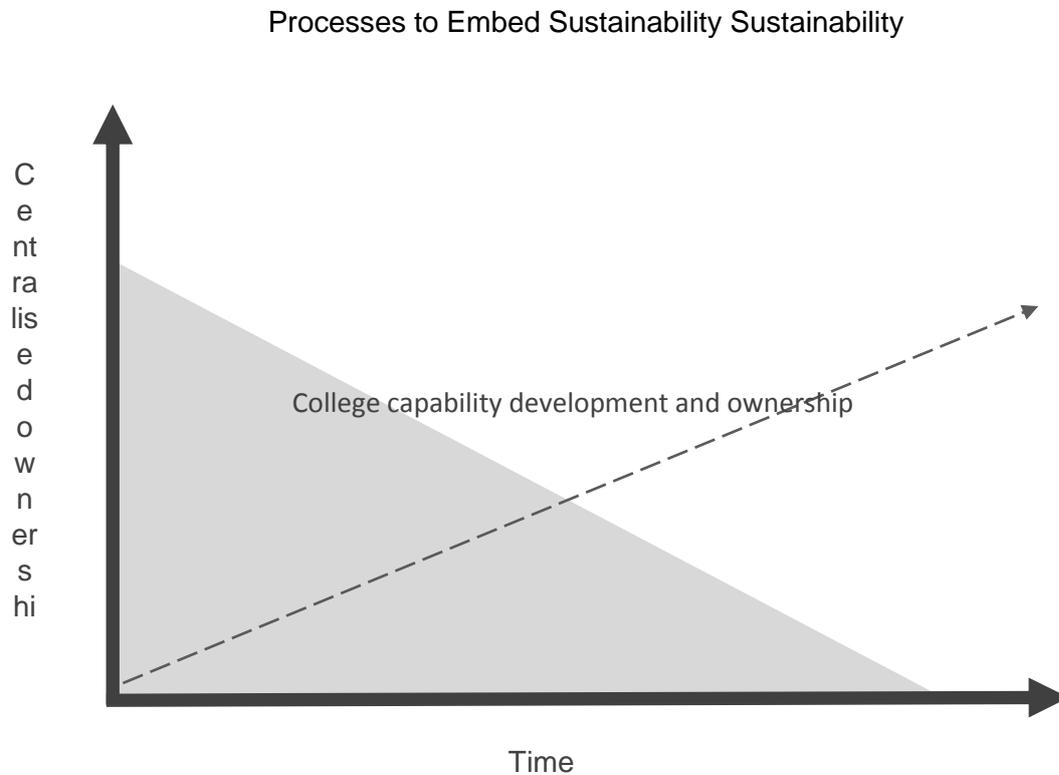


Figure 2. The Principles and Cascading Requirements

A critical aspect of the model's design is the focus on sustainability, to ensure it becomes self-sustaining over the life of the project at each college. For example, the projects are planned to include an incremental shift from central control of processes and planning toward ownership by the business units. The experiences over time during the implementation of a series of transformation projects have enabled us in Navitas Learning and Teaching Services to recognise patterns and devise plans to adjust the amount of 'scaffolding' to suit the college context and the development of the skills and confidence of the leadership (Vygotsky, 1987). At the outset of the projects, more direction is required, to make planning and activities explicit (Beswick et al, 2016), with a deliberate strategy of building local capability and control for sustainability into 'business as usual' after completion of the project.

Figure 3 illustrates this reduction of scaffolding over time as local capability is developed for sustainable change.



*Figure 3. Processes to Embed Sustainability*

In order to ensure this transition to local ownership, staffing choices are critical, with a focus on establishing project plans and governance at the outset of the projects, yet removing scaffolding as local academic leadership teams become more confident. A sustained message and communications reinforced regularly over time are essential to ensure success. Consistent leadership is important however in a dynamic environment there have been cases when college academic leads have changed during the life of a project. Communication and clear documentation were then used to induct the new staff members into the project processes. As an example, each college established teaching teams for each discipline area, with program convenors taking lead roles in driving and supporting the transformation. When a new convenor joined the project due to a staff change, documentation around templates, guidelines and checklists along with support from a local 'mentor' became critical to ensure consistency.

The development of the model is the result of an accumulation of experience and analysis over iterations over several years, and to date it has been implemented in three Navitas colleges in its current form. The evaluation processes used to gather insights into success are described in the next section.

## Evaluation methods

The action research cycle of 'plan, act, observe and reflect' was used to inform the project phases, monitor progress and evaluate outcomes at each college. A mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2003) has been adopted to measure the success of the model as it is implemented across the colleges.

- Qualitative data collected on perceptions and efficacy through interviews, end-of-semester meetings and focus groups with teachers and management
- Quantitative data gathered through student results and feedback surveys.

It is important to note that this curriculum transformation at Navitas colleges is an ongoing initiative, and so data collection continues. For example, tracer data on students' progress onto further study will be analysed as it becomes available. The three college contexts are described as case studies in the next section.

## Case studies

While evaluation is an ongoing process, some of the outcomes already achieved are described below.

**College A:** approx 1800 students and 60 largely sessional teaching staff. Between 2015 and 2016, L&T Services led a major initiative to redesign and develop 88 units, including Foundation Studies program to replace the discontinued Cert IV. In the implementation of the project over 2100 PD hours were undertaken by college teaching staff in L&T courses, consultation and bespoke workshops to build knowledge and skills for curriculum transformation. A new set of learning and teaching principles was introduced to underpin the curriculum review and inform plans such as capstone tasks to build student capability for holistic thinking and integrated skill development. A program to foster nine change champions was established to build capability and provide local support. A significant benefit of the project timescale of two years was the opportunity for the project team to work together and develop the policies and procedures to embed the transformation into business as usual. For example, policies were implemented to guide the introduction of 'Bring your own device' and teacher position descriptions were adapted to require a limit to 'teacher talk time' as well as keeping up with contemporary teaching practice.

## Impact so far

- An upgrade to a new Navitas LMS was implemented as a catalyst for change
- Pass rates up by av. 7% between 2014-2016 (Engineering up by 15%)
- Student satisfaction average score has improved by 6% from 2014
- One unit (MATH100) achieved a student satisfaction score of 100%

To gain insights into teacher perspectives about the use of technology after the transformation the results of a Navitas survey of teachers in 2016 was used to compare the College A staff with the global network of teachers. The survey gathered data about their attitudes toward and uses of technology [1804 respondents, from 104 colleges

globally]. Results from the survey indicate the success of the change management initiatives in that College A teachers are:

- 19% more likely to use online spaces to communicate with students
- 5% more likely to say they don't find multimedia challenging
- 7% more likely to be actively recommending technology ideas to other staff
- 11% more likely than av. to agree with the statement that 'Nothing stops me from using technology in teaching'

Across the region, 37% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'nothing stops them' using technologies in their teaching. Amongst the College A teachers who responded, 48% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

More qualitative outcomes include a notable improvement in the confidence and capability of the college leadership team. This is evidenced by their success in presenting at conferences and publishing journal articles on their experiences.

**College B:** approx 3000 students and 100 largely sessional teaching staff. Since April 2016, a comprehensive digital transformation project has been underway with 94 units targeted for transformation. A new learning and teaching framework was introduced to guide the transformation process across all programs. So far, teaching staff have been engaged in over **2450** hours of professional development and project activity, transforming their curriculum, teaching strategies, assessment and technology integration. The project has been conducted in close collaboration with the University partner which is undergoing a digital transformation project in parallel with the College. The University is represented on the project Steering Committee and Working Parties for 'Curriculum and Teaching' and 'Learning Technologies'.

To date, two of the three phases of curriculum transformation have been completed, with evaluation of the Phase One exemplar units underway and pilots of Phase Two units about to begin.

## Impact so far

- A new Foundation Studies program was delivered in 2016, with 16 units
- The overall pass rate for Trimester 3 2016 for the Foundation Studies program increased 4 % in Trimester 2 2016 (along with 97% increase in student numbers between T2 and T3 2016)
- There was a marked reduction in the number of student academic misconduct incidents, due to the deliberate assessment and feedback strategies embedded in the curriculum
- A new Navitas LMS was implemented at the College
- Nine exemplar units were re-developed and piloted in Trimester 2 2017 and 35 have been redeveloped for pilot in Trimester 2 2017
- New L&T principles and templates implemented, with minimum standards to drive future quality.

**College C:** approx 1600 students and 90 largely sessional teaching staff, with campuses in Sydney and Melbourne. Since November 2016, a 'whole of college' digital

transformation project has been underway with 99 units targeted for redevelopment. During the project so far, over **2690** hours have been undertaken by college teaching staff in Learning and Teaching Services courses and professional development workshops.

## Impact so far

- A new set of Learning and Teaching principles was developed
- Navitas Core Moodle was implemented to use across all units
- Nine exemplar units were redeveloped and piloted in Trimester 2 2017
- Thirty units have been redeveloped to be piloted in Trimester 3

While these results are positive so far, it is still early in the evaluation process and data is still being collated. Some longer term perspectives such as tracer data about student success later in their study will take several years to collate.

## Implications for other contexts

The transformation projects led by Learning and Teaching Services in a range of colleges enabled us to gather perspectives and determine patterns and also to use our experience to set up governance and project processes to gradually reduce the amount of central control as colleges became more capable of driving ongoing improvement. From this central role of leading a range of projects in diverse contexts, a model emerged to guide scalable rollout of similar projects.

The transformation projects described above are all ongoing and not all results have been gathered so far. For college A, data will be gathered on student results over coming semesters including the all-important tracer data on student success in their subsequent studies. For colleges B and C, data needs to be collected on the student results for project phases undertaken so far.

Aside from the obvious requirement to gather data on the impact of interventions, another 'lesson learned' is the importance of identifying the combination of skills required to ensure the projects are successful. For example, in choosing project participants, skills such as strategic planning, change management, analysis and influencing are more efficacious than those strengths traditionally recognised at universities, such as research. Diversity in skills in the project team is also an asset in order to gather a range of perspectives.

A holistic approach is essential, considering all components and ensuring alignment between them. The reward structures and policies need to support the changes. Senior sponsorship will lead success but management needs to be on board for operationalising decisions. Change management and communications are critical to success, so it is essential to plan and reiterate the message.

Lastly, it's not simple or straight forward, therefore a focus on the big picture, consideration of all contextual elements and an open mind to iterative approach are keys.

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# Appendix

## College A Learning and Teaching Principles

This diagram represents the College's principles to guide learning and teaching, along with the signature elements for program and unit design. The dotted right-hand column includes implications for the organization to consider.



L&T Principle	Program elements	Unit elements	Organisational implications
<p><b>1</b> Learning will be <b>ACTIVE</b>, with engaging learning experiences.</p>	<p>Transparent program design to demonstrate where knowledge and skills are introduced, practised and assessed.</p> <p>Efficient program design so students know how unit choices fit with destination institutions' pathways.</p>	<p>Max student teacher ratio = 50/1.</p> <p>All sessions include a mix of lectures and student activity.</p> <p>30% of any session is allocated to student activity, connecting theory and practice.</p>	<p>Policies on class size, lectures.</p> <p>Academic development framework to build staff capability.</p>
<p><b>2</b> Learning will be <b>PERSONALISED</b>, affirming and supporting learning</p>	<p>Planned progression from teacher -led to self-directed learning as autonomy develops.</p> <p>All programs have at least one 'holistic task' which is shared between two units.</p>	<p>All units have a minimum of two assessment types, beginning with low stakes formative task, then a lightly weighted summative task.</p> <p>All units have revision and extension activities available online.</p> <p>All units have option for students to 'track' their progress (Moodle feature).</p>	<p>Assessment Policy , program and unit design template to include prompts for introducing, practising and assessing knowledge.</p> <p>Moodle template includes progress tracking.</p>

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**3**

**Learning will be AUTHENTIC,** integrating discipline and industry expertise

Compulsory 'Academic English Skills' unit for all new students in their first trimester.

All programs include WIL as guest lectures, industry-based case studies or authentic projects.

'Final' units include major group projects, including 'self-directed time on task'.

Expected independent study hours are reduced by 30 mins for first trimester units, to accommodate AES.

All units identify where capabilities are introduced, practised or assessed.

Policies on AES, WIL, capabilities.

Analytics built into LMS.

Unit design template with prompts for WIL, capabilities.

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**4**

**Learning will be TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED,** blending on-campus and online

A shift from fully f2f in initial trimester to blend of 3 hours f2f and 2 hours online by T3.

Tablet-based learning in all programs.

All units have an LMS presence, with minimum expectations for info, assessment, admin, activity. A list of preferred apps is embedded in unit design and support processes.

Policy on tablet use, infrastructure to support mobile learning, technology-enabled campus.

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## **About the Authors**

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Maria Spies leads Learning and Teaching Services at Navitas, an enabling function that leads and supports educational innovation, including the integration of technology, contemporary learning design, and holistic approaches to the student experience. Maria also leads Digital Learning Futures for Navitas Ventures, with a focus on identifying and investing in emerging technologies and business models for tertiary education.

### **Margot McNeill**

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Margot McNeill is Head of Learning and Teaching Transformation within Navitas' Learning and Teaching Services. She has held senior positions and consultations in both higher education and vocational sectors, public and private, in Australia and New Zealand. Her research interests and project work explore 'technologies for learning and teaching', 'change management' and 'technologies as a driver of transformation and staff capability building'.