

Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework project

SP12-2335

External evaluation report

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January 2014

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Acknowledgements

Appreciation is expressed to the project team leaders and team members for their willingness to share their experiences, understandings, insights, expertise and time in contributing to the evaluation.

1.0 Introduction

This report outlines details and findings of an external evaluation of the project entitled *Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework*, undertaken by a team with members from each of the five universities in Western Australia (Murdoch University, University of Western Australia, Curtin University, Edith Cowan University and University of Notre Dame), led by Professor Rick Cummings and Professor Denise Chalmers. The project was funded by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) under its Strategic Priority Projects Program and the external evaluation was conducted by Dr Paul Chesterton, an independent evaluation consultant.

The following sections outline the intentions of the project, the functions, approach and procedures of the evaluation, key evaluation findings and overall conclusions.

2.0 Intentions of the project

The intentions of the project were outlined in the project proposal as follows.

There is a clear need for a common definition of quality teaching and an agreed set of principles to operationalise this definition. This project will develop principles and a set of clear definitions on what constitutes quality teaching in the current and future university context. ... The principles, definitions and evidence will form the basis of a framework for sourcing examples of quality teaching practice for each principle and statements of performance and evidence The framework will be constructed to be applicable to all levels of academic positions, with a particular focus on teaching intensive and sessional teaching staff positions in Australian universities.

The framework of quality teaching practice will form the basis for guidelines for determining teaching criteria for promotion at each level, advice on position descriptions and suggested standards for heads of departments/deans of schools relating to organisational practices and systems for promoting high quality teaching, and exemplars of institutional policies and practices related to promoting quality teaching including training for promotion committee members, academic staff development and performance review.

The intended outcomes for the project comprised –

- a trialled and functional framework of good practice principles and evidence-based measures of performance for use in Australian universities, applicable at three levels: the individual teacher, department/school and institutional level.
- availability of the framework and accompanying materials on a professionally designed multimedia website.

3.0 Functions of the evaluation

The evaluation was designed to –

- i. provide formative feedback to the project team on the implementation, outputs and outcomes of the project;
- ii. review drafts of the quality teaching framework developed as a part of the project; and
- iii. provide a summative evaluation of the project’s processes and outcomes.

4.0 Evaluation approach and procedures

4.1 Approach

A responsive evaluation approach, incorporating both process and outcome dimensions, was adopted for the evaluation. In this approach, processes and outcomes were identified, documented, analysed and evaluated, taking into account perspectives of key stakeholders. The evaluator acted as a critical friend for the project, having access to project team deliberations and outputs, monitoring progress, raising questions and providing regular feedback.

The evaluation was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the intended processes, outputs and outcomes for the project?
2. How is the project being implemented?
3. What outputs and outcomes is the project producing?
4. To what extent is the project effectively using the WAND and selected national networks in an integrated and highly engaged manner?
5. To what extent are the project’s outputs and outcomes meeting the needs and interests of the audiences for which they are intended?
6. In what ways, if any, can the project processes and outputs be enhanced to promote the appropriateness and effectiveness of its outcomes for its intended audiences?

4.2 Procedures

A range of information sources and information gathering techniques was used to address the evaluation questions, as outlined in the table below.

Evaluation question	Sources of information	Information gathering techniques
1. What are the intended processes, outputs and outcomes for the project?	a. Project proposal b. Project team	a. Review of project proposal b. Discussions with project team
2. How is the project being implemented?	a. Minutes of project team and reference group meetings/project reports b. Material on project website c. Project team members	a. Review of documentation b. Review of website material c. Discussions with /interviews of team members
3. What outputs and outcomes is the project producing?	a. Project documents, e.g. definitions, principles, case studies b. Project reports c. Conference and forum presentations	Review of documents, reports and presentation papers
4. To what extent is the project effectively using the WAND and selected national networks in an integrated and highly engaged manner?	a. Minutes of project team and reference group meetings/project reports b. Project team members	a. Review of documentation b. Discussions with /interviews of team members
5. To what extent are the project's outputs and outcomes meeting the needs and interests of the audiences for which they are intended?	a. Senior personnel in the five participating universities b. Stakeholders in the wider higher education sector	a. Interviews or review of feedback from senior personnel in the participating universities b. Review of feedback from conference and forum presentations and the project reference group
6. In what ways, if any, can the project processes and outputs be enhanced to promote the appropriateness and effectiveness of its outcomes for its intended audiences?	a. Findings in relation to the preceding evaluation questions b. Project team members	a. Analysis of findings for evaluation questions 1 to 5 b. Discussions with /interviews of team members

5.0 Evaluation results and findings

The external function of the evaluation, as noted in section 3.0, was to provide a summative evaluation of the project's processes and outcomes. The following results and findings are accordingly presented in order to -

- i. ascertain progress towards achievement of the project's intended outcomes;
- ii. identify any additional outcomes; and
- iii. outline the nature and effects of the processes adopted for the project.

5.1 Achievement of intended outcomes

5.1.1 A trialled and functional framework

The groundwork for development of a framework was undertaken in the early stages of the project. It began with a review of the literature on quality teaching. This led to the development of a draft definition of quality teaching, two draft models and an initial list of 27 principles underpinning quality teaching. These were presented at the 2013 Teaching and Learning forum, an annual event conducted for Western Australian and other universities by the West Australian Network for Dissemination (WAND). Feedback from forum participants was generally positive, with some suggestions of a fine tuning nature. A presentation was also made to a Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD) meeting for feedback. The definition and models were in turn discussed by the project Reference Group, again receiving general endorsement along with some suggestions for refinement. The project team subsequently confirmed the definition and one of the two models, with minor revisions, and organised the principles into a smaller list of 10.

A draft framework was then produced, based on the definition and principles of quality teaching. The project team recognised that "the key challenge for the development of the framework is that it must 'work' on two distinct levels: on one level it must provide a conceptual framework for quality teaching; and, on another, it must serve as an operational guide to the development of quality teaching practices within institutions." (Project Team meeting notes 20 February 2013).

The framework was structured around seven teaching criteria that reflected the definition and principles, as well as being informed by reference to the UK Higher Education Authority (HEA) professional standards framework and a review of Australian, New Zealand and selected US teaching criteria. Indicative standards of achievement were progressively added for each of the 5 academic promotional levels, together with examples of indicative evidence that could be used to demonstrate achievement.

Initial trialling of the framework involved each of the team members interrogating criterion 5, mapping it against existing criteria in their own university to check the relevance and applicability of the framework text. The framework was also circulated among DVC(A)s and PVC(A)s as well as other senior academic staff in Australian universities for comment.

Further opportunities for gathering feedback were provided via presentations at various learning and teaching conferences and events during 2013, including, for example, the Teaching and Learning Week Colloquium (UWA), a Round Table seminar (University of Melbourne), the HERDSA Conference in Auckland and the OLT Showcase of Commissioned Projects in Canberra.

The trialling and presentations elicited a range of generally positive feedback. In particular, responses pointed to the significance and timeliness of development of indicative teaching standards for the sector, and the flexibility and adaptability of the framework.

The intent of the project was to produce a framework for use in Australian universities, a widely diverse group of institutions. For the framework to be capable of use across such diversity, it needs in the first instance to be perceived as authentic and credible in its underlying principles and elements. Grounding the principles and elements in the literature and current practice and then using them as the focus for the initial trialling, presentation and development activities have enabled this to happen. Secondly, the framework needs to have considerable flexibility and adaptability to enable different universities and units within universities to tailor it to meet their own needs and contexts. These aspects became the focus for the later trialling and feedback processes, providing rich sources of feedback from a variety of audiences to enable its development as a transferable modifiable resource. The notion of adaptability is emphasised by use of terms such as 'indicative standards' and 'indicative evidence' in the framework. In the words of a team member, 'the focus is on standards, not standardisation'.

While diversity of institutions is apparent in terms of factors such as history, mission, fields of study, student clientele, resource endowment and current priorities, the project re-affirmed the relative commonality of the nature of teaching and of the elements that underpin its quality across the sector. This was reflected in the similarity of quality teaching criteria revealed by the project's cross institutional scanning of documents and framework trialling. The framework in this sense has the potential to be of use throughout the sector. Ultimately however, the extent and nature of its uptake would seem to depend largely on decisions by senior personnel in universities in the light of the policy, resource and priority constraints and opportunities within which they operate. The positive feedback received from DVC(A)s, PVC(A)s and other senior academic staff during the trialling process provides an encouraging early indicator of the framework's potential for adoption.

An associated intent for the framework was that it be applicable at three levels: the individual teacher, department/school and institutional level. At this stage of development, the framework has been largely crafted for use at two of these levels, the individual teacher and the institutional. Including the department/school level proved to be somewhat unrealistic in the available timeframe. Some further work is needed on applicability of the framework at this level. The fundamentals are there within the existing framework and its development processes for this to proceed. This may well however be more appropriately

carried out within individual universities as part of their flexible tailoring of the framework and its implementation to meet their own needs and contexts.

An ongoing challenge to the framework's adoption lies in maintaining interest and momentum once the project finishes in order to promote longer term impact. This ideally would involve continuing dissemination, monitoring application in different contexts, making further adjustments to meet emerging needs, and possibly providing support for institutions seeking to adopt and embed the framework.

5.1.2 Availability of the framework and materials on a professionally designed multimedia website

In the first instance, details of the project were made publicly available via a website on the teaching and learning page of the Murdoch University website. The website provided an outline of the project's intentions, a list of team members and a summary of progress in the first stage of the project.

The next stage of web development came with the appointment of a project researcher whose responsibilities included sourcing indicative evidence, good practice guides and other artefacts for the framework and preparing website text. The researcher also produced a draft story board for consideration by the team. A domain name was obtained, with a professional web designer subsequently engaged to construct the web pages. The project website address (www.uniteachingcriteria.edu.au) has been publicized, and was highlighted in the project brochure provided to participants in the November 2013 OLT Showcase of Commissioned Projects in Canberra.

At the time of writing this report, the website was a work in progress, with indications of it being close to completion. A statement on its home page signaled its intended scope as follows -

This website is currently under construction while we revise and incorporate feedback into the final iteration of the framework. Once fully constructed the website's primary purpose will be to enable dissemination of the outcomes of the project, the framework and documents that support its use. The framework itself provides indicative criteria and performance standards that can be adapted by different institutions to suit their own teaching criteria and standards.

The website further indicates that the documents that support use of the framework will include 'instructions on the intended use of the framework, explanation of the principles of quality teaching that underpin the framework, useful guides and resources, tips and strategies for career planning and collecting evidence, as well as external resources and project information'.

It was noted at a meeting of the Reference Group that it is planned to host the website for three years at this stage. Attention will be needed to securing resources for ongoing maintenance and development of the website beyond that initial period to promote its continuing availability and relevance to the higher education sector. This will be a critical element in the process of promoting longer term impact, as outlined in section 5.1.1.

5.2 Additional outcomes

The comprehensive and strategically planned dissemination processes for the project meant that it reached academic staff at a range of levels across the sector. The dissemination in turn led to a considerable amount of detailed feedback enabling ongoing refinement of the framework and its underpinnings. Essentially the project may be seen to have broadened and deepened the conversation around teaching in the sector, making a significant contribution to scholarly discussion around standards and evidence-based performance measures. The timing was right, with the project occurring as the sector was increasingly asking and being asked questions about the quality of teaching in a period of change. The ideas, approaches and possibilities provided by the project, and the engaging and empowering nature of their dissemination, appear to have provided a significant response and impetus as the sector seeks to address these questions.

5.3 Nature and effects of processes

The second function of the evaluation was to identify the nature and effects of the processes adopted for the project. The project processes have been outlined in the account of progress towards achievement of the project's intended outcomes Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 above. Their effects may be seen through an analysis of associated factors that helped and challenged the project's operation and progress. Findings from this analysis are outlined below.

Factors identified as helping the project's operation and progress are identified as –

- The timing of the project, given the growing level of interest in the sector in quality teaching standards in a changing teaching context, involving for example, increasing casualization of the workforce, larger tutorial sizes and mixed ability student cohorts.
- The extensive experience, rich knowledge of the field and range of skills brought by the team leaders to the project's operation. This enabled clearly focused and engaging leadership of the project, with a strong commitment to keep it on track and flexibility to react to changing circumstances.
- Having a collegial and cooperative team, with members drawn from an existing teaching and learning network in Western Australia and having similar roles in their respective universities.
- Regular and productive team meetings, scheduled at the beginning of the project and often based on an intensive small group workshops followed by team meetings

to consider the workshop products. This was supported by detailed recording and communication of processes, outputs and decisions.

- Bringing specialist personnel into the team – the project managers and project researcher. Their skills and commitment engendered highly professional results in respect of project management, evidence gathering and website text development, critical elements in seeking to achieve the intended outcomes. The outsourcing of construction of the web pages to a professional web designer appears to be of similar benefit.
- Extensive and focused dissemination of the framework which in turn generated considerable interest and detailed feedback to inform its ongoing development.
- Advice and confirmation provided by the Reference Group.
- Support and understanding of OLT personnel.
- Being able to tap into CADAD and HERDSA networks.

An initial challenge for the project's operation and progress lay in the bringing together members of five quite different institutions to produce an agreed product over an extended time period in a politically challenging field. The commitment and goodwill of the team, supported by positive and wise leadership, proved to be effective in dealing with this challenge. Indeed the diversity of sources of membership proved to be a strength for the project's operation. The members were drawn from five different types of universities in the Australian higher education sector – the Group of Eight (Go8), the Australian Technology Network (ATN), the Innovative Research Universities (IRU), multi-campus unaligned, and private. This provided a sound basis for developing a framework that could be of use across the sector, as well the opportunity to conduct initial trials in the diverse institutional contexts from which the members came.

Trying to fit an external project into heavy and at times unpredictable individual workloads provided an ongoing challenge. Attempts to deal with this included preparing a schedule of meetings at the beginning of the project, and the team accepting that the nature and extent of each member's participation would need to vary to meet different and changing circumstances.

6.0 Conclusions

The key intended outcome for this project was a trialled and functional framework of good practice principles and evidence-based measures of performance for use in Australian universities. The project team has produced such a framework, its authenticity and credibility established by grounding its principles and elements in both the literature and current practice and confirmed by extensive trialing and testing in its development stages. Its potential for use in diverse institutional contexts lies in its focus on universal elements of quality teaching and in the flexibility and adaptability that its format and presentation

provide. The comprehensive and strategically planned dissemination processes for the project have yielded detailed feedback from across the sector that has helped both to inform and confirm its potential usefulness. At this stage, the framework focuses on use at the individual teacher and institutional levels. Further work will extend its applicability at the department/school level.

It is intended that the framework and accompanying materials be publicly available via a professionally designed multimedia website. At the time of writing this report, the website was close to completion. The groundwork for a high quality site has been laid with the appointment of skilled specialist personnel to gather detailed indicative evidence, good practice guides and other artefacts, prepare website text, and construct the web pages. The project website address has been widely publicized.

An additional outcome of the project's operation has been noted as broadening and deepening the conversation around teaching in the sector, making a significant contribution to scholarly discussion around standards and evidence-based performance measures. This, along with the framework and materials, may be seen as a critical element in promoting longer term fundamental impact in the sector in the form of changes in perspectives, approaches and practice.

Promoting such impact is an ongoing challenge. As noted earlier, continuing dissemination of the framework and materials, monitoring their application in different contexts, making further adjustments to meet emerging needs, maintenance and development of the website, and possibly providing support for institutions seeking to adopt and embed the framework should assist in maintaining the momentum that has been initiated.

In summary, the project team has made a valuable contribution to the development of quality teaching standards and evidence-based performance measures in the Australian higher education sector. This in no small part has been due to the skills and commitment of the team, its highly effective leadership, its engagement of specialist personnel, and the deployment of focused and strategic dissemination, consultation and feedback activities. The immediate outcomes, in the form of the framework, accompanying materials and contributions to scholarly discussion, have been timely and well received. These in turn provide a sound and positive basis for further development, with appropriate support as indicated.