Reform, Quality Agendas and Professional Development: Reflections on Engaging Academics in Technology and Change

Catherine Pocknee
Swinburne Professional Learning
Swinburne University of Technology

Julie Mulvany
Faculty of Life and Social Sciences
Swinburne University of Technology

Mark Schier
Faculty of Life and Social Sciences
Swinburne University of Technology

Major policy reforms within Australian Higher Education coupled with important advances in e-learning technologies have created a highly stressful environment for teaching academics. Faculty learning and teaching leaders responsible for the delivery of professional development face demanding new challenges. The authors outline the relative success of strategies they have trialed, including those using new technologies, to assist staff with their learning and teaching practice. Although the use of new technologies to assist staff has resulted in some success, problems associated with the initiatives are identified. The assumption that the uncritical use of new technologies will necessarily provide the solution to the current dilemmas faced by teaching academics is questioned. The paper concludes with a discussion of new ways of thinking about professional development where a strong focus is placed on the prudent use of new technologies and where staff are given greater responsibility for their learning and teaching development.

Keywords: quality enhancement, quality assurance, reform, innovation, technology, change

Introduction

Reform in Australian higher education has been protracted, intense and unprecedented (Ball, Dworkin, & Vryonides, 2011; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, Putnam & Gill, 2011). Reforms have resulted in a range of contradictory pressures including pressures to meet industry and student

demand, strong government pressure for greater accountability coupled with a decrease in public funding, accreditation pressures to meet professional standards, academic pressures to maintain international status in research and teaching and technological pressures to move online and provide more flexible delivery. Recently the Government has announced that by 2025, 40% of Australians between the ages of 25-34 will have a qualification at bachelor level or above and from 2012 universities will be funded on the basis of student demand. A national regulatory and quality agency for higher education is to be established. This body will be responsible for the audit of standards and performance, quality assurance of international education, and for maintaining national consistency through regulatory arrangements (DEEWR, 2009). In response to these reforms universities are beginning to look once again to technology, particularly online delivery, as a tool for dealing with the expected rapid growth in undergraduate student numbers.

Pressure has increased on faculty based, learning and teaching leaders and developers to engage academics in the technological and educational professional development (PD) required to meet these changes. The requirements to ensure both 'Quality Assurance' and 'Quality Enhancement' in learning and teaching in face to face and online delivery environments have caused considerable tensions. Of particular concern is the engagement of academics in the professional development required to fully participate in the change process; academics are becoming change weary. This paper looks at how three faculty based learning and teaching leaders are working to identify strategies that engage academics in the key professional development themes of 'quality', 'innovation' and 'technology' while still meeting university accountability measures.

The Balance between Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

As the higher education sector in Australia has become more 'commodified, technologised and internationalised, these pressures have converged to focus on quality issues in teaching and research as a marker of distinction' (Blackmore, 2009 p.857). A further distinction can be made between Quality Assurance (QA) and Quality Enhancement (QE) (Lomas, 2005). QA relates to the system and structure that manages the educational system. It can include standardizing curricula, setting benchmarks and evaluating the fitness of purpose of programs. The accountability of institutions to government can lead to QA being seen as more important than the practice of teaching and learning, and often having a negative connotation in the view of academics (Wright, 2003). At the authors' university and probably at most others, the main academic QA issues are related to providing routine information about unit outlines, reaccreditation, assessment and results. QE, on the other hand, refers to the student learning experience and focuses on improving existing teaching and learning practices (Lomas, 2005). Enhancement activities related to good curriculum design and learning and teaching practice are usually long term and require academics to commit considerable time to reflection on complex issues. Enhancement projects are often research or scholarship driven. Increasingly they involve the use of innovative teaching and learning technologies requiring sophisticated PD support mechanisms.

While quality in teaching and learning and research is admirable, the increased focus on quality has heightened the tensions in the debate between QA and QE. There is an underlying assumption in national and institutional policy that greater QA will enhance learning and teaching. Anecdotal evidence, at the authors' university, indicates that this is not necessarily the case. While QA and enhancement are not mutually exclusive, academics are often navigating a rocky path between the enhancement (often more personally rewarding), and the managerial requirements of the assurance aspects (often administrative, compulsory and time consuming). In reality the strong institutional focus on QA frequently means that academics have less time to focus on teaching and learning improvement, particularly innovations using new learning technologies. Pressures on academic

workloads in response to recent reforms has meant time, effort, and workload responsibilities have skewed learning and teaching practice towards the performance side of the quality debate rather than to innovation and enhancement. In this environment many staff appear most concerned about meeting immediate teaching delivery demands and improving their research output. Experimenting with innovative learning and teaching technologies is a not a high priority in such an environment.

Professional Development, resistance and change

Effective PD has become even more crucial in this rapidly changing environment (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Emphasis on curriculum renewal and the development of technology and flexible delivery resources is typified by a move away from behaviourist approaches towards constructivist learning models. This has triggered a need for formalized teaching qualifications and more integrated and advanced PD (Berge & Muilenburg, 2002). Over the last 10 years there has been an expediential increase in the use of technology such as Learning Management Systems (e.g. Blackboard upgrade features), administration tools, video conferencing, audio recordings, blogs, wikis, YouTube, SMS and various other Web 2 technologies particularly in response to facilitated learning in fully online degree programs. Significant PD is required to provide academics with the skills to use these technology tools, and once technically mastered further PD in appropriate pedagogical usage is often required (Anderson, 2008; Dykman & Davis, 2008). PD of this nature can not be addressed simply by running a few workshops; more sophisticated and integrated models are required.

There are major hurdles to be overcome if more appropriate PD models are to be adopted. Academics appear to be overwhelmed by the PD demands associated with university QA processes and university wide 'innovation' projects. Increasingly PD is being associated with the performative measures imposed by QA compliance (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010; Lomas, 2005; Vidovich, 2002, 2009) and 'technological innovation' with strategies for dealing with large cohorts of students. Curriculum design is often more closely associated with documentation and accreditation than classroom practice. Given academics are time-poor and change-weary, many are adopting a range of resistance practices ranging from outright refusal, to avoidance, or at best qualified compliance (Anderson, 2008; Palloff & Pratt, 2011). Disengagement is becoming a critical issue in the successful implementation of strategic educational change. A key challenge is not just engaging academics in PD but re-engaging them with meaningful and sustainable change where they feel they have a significant role to play.

The authors of this paper hold learning and teaching leadership positions and are responsible for the planning and implementation of strategic educational change, both from a QA and QE perspective. Hence we too tread a fine line between encouraging academics to improve their teaching practice through innovative use of new learning and teaching technologies while also assisting them to meet their compliance reporting responsibilities. Learning and teaching support staff face major pressures as they attempt to identify and acquire the complex range of skills required to manage both the performance requirements of policy dictates and the enhancement of learning and teaching practice in a period of rapid technological change. New models of PD need to be identified which take in to account a variety of complex learning environments (university, workplace and online), integrated technologies (beyond the LMS), and the multiple delivery methodologies academics are likely to require in the next few years (Blin & Munro, 2008). Change will be rapid and ongoing, and PD will need to be built into everyday practice if sustainability is to be achieved.

First attempts

In response to these challenges the learning and teaching leadership team within the Faculty has begun to modify its PD activities to align them closely with a 'curriculum design approach' to academic development. QA with QE are addressed more holistically and technological innovation is seen as a key element of the curriculum renewal process. Rather than conducting a series of 'one off' PD workshops staff are being encouraged to engage with a wider range of professional development opportunities focused around the use of good practice examples, technological innovation, curriculum design and applied research through funded, self directed work based projects.

Further efforts have been made to ensure technological innovation is rewarded and showcased within the Faculty. A series of lunch time 'teaching tasters' have been held where staff can discuss innovative approaches to learning and teaching and how they can incorporate technology effectively into their teaching practice. Topics discussed include the use of wikis and blogs, the 'pros' and 'cons' of using 'clickers' to promote student engagement, the use of audio recordings to assist science students verbal communication skills and the use of virtual galleries. The faculty has also established a number of learning and teaching awards (including one for sessionals) that are specifically designed to encourage staff to participate in the ALTC awards program and showcase innovation. More traditional PD activities have continued and where possible external speakers, selected for their relevance to key, strategic faculty themes and initiatives have presented to staff via interactive workshops. Speakers have been asked to relate their work to national agendas or imperatives and focus on strategies for working within these agenda issues. Where possible these presentations have been recorded and repackaged as online resources available via the Faculty Learning and Teaching web site. Sessional staff have been asked to identify key themes for PD and have also been funded to attend a university wide 'Foundations in Learning and Teaching' program which focuses on good teaching practice for both face to face and online delivery. An annual learning and teaching innovations week has been initiated within the Faculty and workshops are targeted towards relevant topics and the specific interests of academics; all sessionals are funded to attend. A faculty based learning and teaching web site has been established as a key element of the rewarding and showcasing of innovative practice within the Faculty.

Progress

To date the strategy has had partial success. The keynote speakers and the establishment of a learning and teaching innovation week have slowly been gaining academic support. A new L&T initiative where sessional staff have the option of attending informal learning and teaching support sessions on a fortnightly basis has also proved to be successful. However, accessing ongoing staff continues to be difficult with most PD sessions still being attended by the same small group of academics. The reasons for non-attendance generally include insufficient time due to teaching, administration and research commitments. Disengagement is still a major issue. The most successful activities have been those that target specific individuals or small groups of staff engaged in curriculum design associated with the reaccreditation of specific programs. More recently a series of faculty funded ($5,000) targeted learning and teaching projects have been well subscribed. It is hoped that these projects will provide a platform for sustained and supported strategic educational change providing academics with the opportunity to direct their own PD. Innovative technology has been a key theme in these academic led

projects with funding being allocated to projects which include an investigation into how students make use of Lectopia and the possible relationships between usage and student learning outcomes; the production of DVDs to support the development of students' counselling skills; and the investigation into the extent to which student use of iPads improves their engagement in active learning. Selection criteria and reporting requirements for these projects have emphasised the need for quality design, technological innovation, scholarship, dissemination and flexible delivery. All projects are practice led and specialised educational support is provided to successful applicants. Challenges continue to surround issues such as access to specialist technological support which will also impact on the major revamp of the Faculty web site.

Future directions

The ongoing challenge for the team is to identify ways of further helping staff to balance the demands of QA and QE and to engage them more fully in all forms of PD. As part of our review of PD within the Faculty we are administering a survey to all teaching staff to identify what they see as the challenges they face in their day to day teaching and what kinds of supports or assistance they believe they require. A series of follow up focus groups will be conducted with a representative sample of faculty staff. We hope to gain insight into the barriers for participation in past programs and to learn more about academics' perceptions of the supports they require to improve their learning and teaching practice, with particular regard to their use of e-learning technologies. Preliminary findings from our research suggest that we need to continue to develop a more flexible PD model and provide multiple opportunities for academic participation. We need to continue to draw on the good practices of staff and focus on a 'bottom up' approach where staff take greater ownership of their personal PD. We need to showcase and share the work being done by staff, particularly in the successful use of technologies such as ePortfolios, Lectopia, iPads and pod casts. We plan to place less emphasis on a 'one size fits all' approach and to place greater emphasis on embedding PD within specific programs and/or disciplines areas. Paid support for sessional participation in PD will continue and new ways of recognising PD activities in the Faculty workload model will be addressed.

A key technological initiative is to overhaul the Faculty Learning and Teaching web site. The team plans to develop a site which clearly explains, pictorially and in plain English, how quality learning and teaching is viewed within the Faculty. It will address the key components of: curriculum design, learning and teaching theory, assessment and feedback, reporting and standards, scholarship and classroom practice, resource development, technology enhancement as they relate to the programs offered within the faculty. Of key importance is the notion that all these components are inter-dependent. Embedded within the site will be downloadable resources supporting core academic activities such as writing learning objectives, moving content online, curriculum renewal, and how staff can access support and PD (both formal and informal). Learning and teaching projects, award winners and success stories will be showcased. Future learning and teaching projects planned for the Faculty will be benchmarked against this site to demonstrate their educational relevance. It is hoped the site will raise the profile of learning and teaching as a scholarly activity. Ways of making this site interactive, by using Twitter and Chat websites, are also being investigated.

Conclusion

Managing change in educational organizations is one of the most complex tasks demanded of educational leaders. Change is not just about the creation of new policies and procedures to implement external mandates. It is also about developing strategies by which individuals can respond to the impact of cultural as well as structural change, about personal change as well as organizational change, about the place of beliefs and values in framing organizational form and culture. The limitations we face in our attempts to change the PD approach within our institution suggest that a new paradigm of PD is required; one that is forged in response to the constantly changing higher education environment. We should be identifying ways of using the ever increasing technological tools at our disposal as well as acknowledging that staff must be directly engaged in formulating their development. If we are to engage staff meaningfully in the ongoing process of QA and QE of learning and teaching we need to actively embrace new ways of conceptualising the development of professional potential, rather than continuing to tinker with traditional outmoded models of academic PD.

References

Altbach, P. G., Reisberg, L., & Rumbley, L. E. (2009). *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution*. Fontenoy, Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

Anderson, G. (2008). Mapping academic resistance in the manergerial university. *Organization, 15*(2), 251-270.

Ball, S. J., Dworkin, A. G., & Vryonides, M. (2011). Globalization and Education: Introduction. *Current Sociology, 58*(4), 523-529

Berge, Z. L., & Muilenburg, V. (2002). Obstacles faced at various stages of capability regarding distance education in institutes of higher education: Survey results.   Retrieved April, 5, 2005, from http://www.emoderators.com/barriers/hghred_stgs.shtml

Blackmore, J. (2009). Academic pedagogies, quality logics and performative universities: Evaluating teaching and what students want. *Studies in Higher Education, 34*(8), 857-872.

Blackmore, J., & Sachs, J. (2007). *Performing and reforming leaders: Gender, educational restructuring, and organisational change*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Blin, F., & Munro, M. (2008) Why hasn't technology disrupted academics' teaching practices? Understanding resistance to change through the lens of activity theory. *Computers & Education 50,* 475-490.
Buczynski, S., & Hansen, C. B. (2010). Impact of professional development on teacher practice: Uncovering connections. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 26*(3), 599-607.

DEEWR. (2009). Review of Australian Higher Education: An Overview.   Retrieved June 2010, 2010, from http://www.deewr.gov.au/highereducation/review/Pages/default.aspx

Dykman, C. A., & Davis, C. K. (2008). The Shift Toward Online Education. *Journal of Information Systems Education, 19*(1),

Lomas, C. (2005). 7 things you should know about Social Bookmarking. *Learning Initiative*. Retrieved from http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7001.pdf

Marginson, S. (2007). Higher education reform in Australia - an evaluation. In H. Eggins (Ed.), *Globalisation and reform in higher education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Marginson, S., & van der Wende, M. (2007). *Globalisation and Higher Education*. Paris, France: OECD

Directorate for Education.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2011). *The Excellent Online Instructor: Strategies for professional development* San Franscisco: Jossy Bass.

Putnam, T., & Gill, J. (2011). The Bradley Challenge: A sea change for Australian universities. *Issues in Educational Research, 21*(2), 176-191.

Vidovich, L. (2002). Quality Assurance in Australian Higher Education: Globalisation and 'steering at a distance". *Higher Education, 43*, 391-408.

Vidovich, L. (2009). 'You don't fatten the pig by weighing it'. In M. Simons, M. Olssen & M. Peters (Eds.), *Re-Reading Education Policies* (Vol. 32). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Author contact details:
Catherine Pocknee cpocknee@swin.edu.au
Julie Mulvany jmulvany@swin.edu.au
Mark Schier mschier@swin.edu.au

Please cite as: Pocknee, C., Mulvany, J. & Schier, M. (2011). Reform, quality agendas and professional development: Reflections on engaging academics in technology and change. In G. Williams, P. Statham, N. Brown & B. Cleland (Eds.), *Changing Demands, Changing Directions. Proceedings ascilite Hobart 2011*. (pp.1008-1014).

http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/hobart11/procs/Pocknee-concise.pdf