



An evaluation framework for identifying the effectiveness and impact of academic teacher development programmes



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ABSTRACT

University teacher development programmes have been part of the higher education landscape for over 40 years. There is now general agreement that university teacher development programmes have a positive impact on teachers and students, yet the extent and longevity of their impact on the teachers, and the teaching and learning culture of the institutions are less well researched and evidenced. Research that has been carried out on the effectiveness of teacher development programmes has tended to be on specific initiatives and involve limited numbers of participants. Teaching and learning development centres have typically not carried out systematic and extended evaluation of the impact of their programmes. The focus of this paper is to describe the process and outcomes of a national project which resulted in the development of the Academic Professional Development Effectiveness Framework, designed as evaluation tool to facilitate the systematic collection and analysis of data related to the intended outcomes of the teacher development programmes. It is argued that teacher development programmes should be designed to build an evidence base from the initial planning stage and be continued over an extended period in order to enable practitioners, researchers and institutions to ask more complex questions on whom the programmes have an impact, and where and why they have impact.

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Introduction

Professional development programmes and activities designed to enhance teaching and learning have been a common feature of higher education institutions for more than 40 years. Over this time, there has been limited evidence of their effectiveness in improving the quality of teaching and learning (Devlin, 2008). In a context of increasing economic constraint, and the recognition that students of the 21st century rightly expect high quality educational experiences, higher education institutions are focusing on ways in which the quality of teaching and the student learning experience can be enhanced (Hanbury, Prosser, & Rickinson, 2008; Knapper, 2003). A typical response has been a proliferation of teacher development programmes offered to academics, with some countries such as Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom and Sri Lanka requiring all university teachers to engage in extended pedagogical training as one step towards meeting these challenges

as well as for quality assurance (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). While the implicit or stated goals of these programmes and activities are to develop and enhance teaching quality and student learning 'questions of whether or not various teacher development interventions actually work and, if so, in what ways such interventions influence skills, practices, and foci, and/or ultimately lead to improved learning, remain largely unanswered in higher education' (Devlin, 2008, p. 15).

While it might seem to be a relatively straightforward matter to evaluate programmes, there has been ongoing debate about whether it is possible to determine the impact of teacher development programmes and a general reluctance to confront the challenge of determining indicators of effectiveness, identifying what aspects to measure, how to measure them and how to interpret and respond to the results. The research literature highlights the complexity of linking teacher development programmes and activities to tangible outcomes such as changes in the quality of teacher practices and even more contentious – the quality of student learning. These complexities appear to have inhibited evaluation initiatives.

This issue has long been recognised. For example, Gaff (1975) lamented the lack of evaluation of academic development programmes, arguing for the need to evaluate programmes and

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demonstrate that they produce results in terms of better courses or better educated students, more knowledgeable, sensitive, effective, or satisfied faculty members, or more effectively managed organisations (p. 4). Kreber and Brook (2001) continued to argue that serious evaluation of development programmes was long overdue, while recognising the difficulty of developing a framework when most academic development outcomes were part of the process of becoming teachers, rather than being end points in themselves (p. 54). More recently, Sword (2011) agreed that evaluation is a challenge because changes which might occur as a result of participation in teacher development programmes are designed to unfold slowly over time rather than be observable at a point in time.

The complexity of evaluation is further exacerbated by the diversity of teacher development programmes and activities (Ako Aotearoa, 2010; Gosling, 2008; Lewis, 1996; Ling, 2009). These studies, emanating from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia and United States, provide an overview of the diversity in status, participants, purpose, resourcing and breadth of programmes. Each has emphasised the need for programmes to be underpinned by research, scholarship and evidence-based practice, and for academic developers 'to engage in forms of evaluation which will indicate the impact of their activities' (Ling, 2009, p. 62).

The challenge for academic developers is to go beyond the typical collection of participant numbers and satisfaction and to interrogate if the intended outcomes of their teacher development programmes have been achieved. This requires clarity in identifying the focus and outcomes, consideration of whether these outcomes can be achieved in the short or long term, the selection of relevant and varied data sources and the systematic collection of evidence over time. Fundamental to such a systematic approach is an agreed evaluation framework. Unless academic developers and centres of teaching and learning are prepared to engage with the challenge of gathering qualitative *and* quantitative data over the short *and* long term to evidence the impact of their teacher development programmes they will have, at best, a snapshot of the delivery of their programmes rather than evidence of their impact.

This paper reports on the outcomes of a project designed to address the highly complex and contentious matter of evaluating the effectiveness of teacher development programmes. The National Strategic Initiatives project was funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and led by a team of leaders of academic development. The key research question which underpinned the project was: how can academic developers evidence the effectiveness of their teacher development programmes? The key finding of the project was that academic developers require a relevant, rigorous, yet flexible framework, to guide their collection and analysis of data which can be used to demonstrate effectiveness and inform future practice. Such a framework needs to be informed by current practice and evidence from the relevant literature, appropriate to a diverse range of teacher development activities, modes of delivery and contexts so that it does not privilege one particular type of teacher development activity nor presume the purpose and impact of various types of programmes.

The first section of this paper provides an overview of the theoretical and empirical basis for the Academic Professional Development Effectiveness Framework. This is followed by an explanation of the structure of the Framework, the trial of the Framework and finally the findings of the trial and conclusion.

Theoretical and empirical basis of the Academic Professional Development Effectiveness Framework

The key aims of the project were: to provide a tool to be used by academic developers to evaluate and benchmark their teacher development programmes; to understand the factors influencing

the effectiveness of such programmes, including institutional culture; and to encourage an understanding within the higher education sector of the different purposes and effects of different types of academic teacher development programmes. An action research methodology was identified as the most appropriate for the achievement of these aims.

Action research is characterised as being concerned with practical problem solving, expanding knowledge, enhancing the competencies of participants and delivering findings able to be applied in the real world immediately. It is typically collaborative and undertaken in situ, and through its processes, seeks to understand and facilitate the processes of change (Clarke, 2005; Hult & Lennung, 1980; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; McKernan, 1991).

The action research cycle of Observe, Plan, Act and Reflect (Crane & Richardson, 2000) was embedded within the project. The initial Observe stage sought to identify what academic development activities existed in institutions of higher education, what relationship, if any existed between these and the institutional culture supporting teaching and learning, and what attempts were made to evaluate the effectiveness of the programmes in terms of impact on teachers, teaching and student approaches to learning. For the purposes of the project, the term impact was defined as a change appropriate to the situation (Moon, 2004). During the Plan stage, the data collected in the Observe stage was synthesised and used as the basis for preparation of a draft evaluation framework for discussion and dissemination throughout the academic development community. The Act stage engaged and supported institutions in the trial of the framework to develop action plans for the implementation of the draft evaluation framework and encouraged the exchange of informal feedback. In the final Reflect stage, trial teams shared their experiences of using the framework and presented reports which were used to inform the final revision of the Academic Professional Development Effectiveness Framework. Throughout these stages reflexivity was managed by synthesising findings with the participants to mitigate against investigator bias. These stages are further elaborated in following sections of this paper.

Context of the project: quality teaching

The government in Australia, in common with other countries, has pursued an agenda of quality, value for money and enhanced participation for higher education, resulting in persistent attention on quality assurance of higher education for over two decades (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008; Chalmers, 2007, 2008; Ramsden, 2003). While much of the attention has been on policy and practice at the sector and institutional level, there has also been a focus on teaching practices, the gulf between research and teaching quality in universities and the changing background and expectations of students (Clark et al., 2002; Norton et al., 2013). In striving for a threshold level for quality assurance, many Australian universities now require academic staff new to teaching to undertake an initial teacher preparation programme in the first years of their appointment and encourage academics to regularly participate in professional development related to teaching throughout their careers. More comprehensively, universities in countries such as Sweden, Norway, United Kingdom, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, have made pedagogical training of university teachers compulsory as one step towards assuring the quality of teaching (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Parsons, Hill, Holland, & Willis, 2012; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2008). With greater attention being paid to the quality of teaching in universities more broadly, and in individual performance reviews and promotion more specifically, there are clear expectations that teaching staff will increasingly be required to provide evidence of the quality of their teaching and of ongoing

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