

'Telling Stories of Excellence in University Teaching: developing a framework for exceptional teaching performance/practice.' (0013)

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Higher Education in both the UK and Australia is extending an important conversation about the name and nature of what might be considered to be a 'University'; the role and value of learning and teaching as an important endeavour in a university; the ways in which the quality of learning and teaching might be best developed, promoted and assured; and, how learning and teaching quality measurement can be used as a discriminator to enable differentiation in course pricing to occur. Within the UK this conversation has been facilitated via the Government White Paper: 'Successes in a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice'; whilst the Australian Government has published its own options paper: 'Driving innovation, fairness and excellence in Australian education'.

Reflecting upon these challenges and progressing the design, development and implementation of its own teaching standards framework, ACU was aware that there were already such sets of standards in existence. Primary among these was an 'Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework' (OLT, 2015). This *Framework* had been developed and trialed by five universities in Western Australia under an Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) grant. In addition, there was a further set provided by the UK's Higher Education Academy – the UK Professional Standards Framework - UKPSF (HEA, n.d.). The UKPSF was one of the source documents used in the creation of the Australian *Framework*.

The appeal of the Australian standards for ACU was twofold. They were free and freely available and, they could also be customised as necessary to support the particular ACU context – ACU is the largest publicly-funded Catholic University in Australia and one of the largest in the English speaking world. It should be noted here that, in fact, little customisation was actually undertaken as the Australian standards were considered to be largely sufficient to suit the ACU purpose and, it was thought sensible to maintain, as far as possible, the integrity of the original research. The particular appeal of the Australian standards was, however, that they provided an assured Australian perspective.

The project was established at the whole of University enterprise level from the outset. This was to ensure that any set of endorsed standards could serve as more than just guidelines but, moreover, would provide a clear statement of institutional expectation in the delivery of learning and teaching. In this way the *Framework* would contribute to the overall continuing development of the University's culture of excellence in learning and teaching – in accordance with its Strategic Plan. To these ends, the Human Resources Department was engaged from the beginning of the project, to ensure consistency with the existing annual professional review and promotions processes. In addition, both the Office of the Provost, as Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and the Chair of Academic

Board were included as members of the Reference and Advisory Group that was established to oversee this process.

The approach taken was designed to be highly consultative and collegial. The *Framework*, was simultaneously customised and socialised by extensive workshopping throughout the ACU academic community. The *Framework* was presented at the campus level as well as taken through a range of the Faculty-based Learning and Teaching Committees for feedback and discussion. All comments and feedback were received and considered within the Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC) and all amendments that supported the overall intention of the *Framework* were made. Those that represented more of a faculty or discipline perspective were equally considered and discussed and communicated back to those respective areas for further consideration once the *Framework* had been endorsed.

In adopting this approach the LTC was mindful of the values and culture of the University. Specifically, the LTC sought to join with, extend and model principles of Catholic Social Teaching (Massaro, 2010), thereby giving voice to the Catholic Mission of the institution (ACU, 2016b). Importantly for all readers of this paper, these principles have a generic utility and appeal, and are not therefore unique to Catholic institutions. For example, the approach described above related well to principles of: promoting the dignity of the human person; promoting the common good; solidarity; and also, subsidiarity and participation. ‘Subsidiarity and participation’ warrants further explanation. These principles contend that the role of people in positions of power is to look after the good of all through their equal participation.

The consultation, development and socialisation processes were therefore conducted with respect and caution by the LTC. It was considered that the introduction of the *Framework* could have been perceived as an imposition on staff if they did not participate in a genuinely collaborative process. It is acknowledged that jointly building the *Framework* for ACU staff by ACU staff was certainly more time consuming, and caused some frustrations, but overall it was considered important to ensure that the *Framework* be seen as an academic community-endorsed tool to drive improvement in practice and not a ‘top-down’ managed approach. The ACU *Framework* was endorsed by Academic Board in December, 2015.

The key success factors for implementation of the *Framework* were:

1. The lack of any existing similar framework
2. A University understanding of the value of excellent teaching
3. The importance of ensuring that the learning experience and outcomes of ACU’s students is excellent.
4. Adopting an approach that was consistent with the values of the institution – particularly subsidiarity and participation (principles with generic relevance and utility).

5. The evolution of the *Framework* as a tool to a broader network or matrix at the policy level which aligns with the staff's stories about their own excellence in teaching.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of the *Framework* has begun. A series of generic and school-based workshops throughout the university is being used as a means to gather data about the ways in which the *Framework* is understood and used by staff. This is a precursor to focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews that will be undertaken throughout the year.

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