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Considerations in the planning of academic staff development activities: Client views

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Abstract: *An online survey seeking responses from academic staff and postgraduate students in all five faculties of the University of Adelaide was conducted in February 2004. The survey sought perceptions from teaching staff on the use of feedback from student evaluations and its relationship to staff development activity. Majority of survey respondents found student feedback reports were useful in their teaching or course development and agreed that student feedback information should be a key factor in the planning of staff development activities. The majority also indicated that Head of School/Department should be using the student feedback information to determine staff development activities but did not consider that senior managers, such as Deans or Deputy Vice-Chancellors, should be engaged in determining academic staff development activities.*

Keywords: *Program evaluations; staff development; student feedback.*

Introduction

Academic development (including professional development and educational design) activities and student evaluation of teaching data collection are common practices in Australian universities, like universities elsewhere. Recognising that academic staff may need assistance in reaching their full potential as teachers and in the development of courses and degree programs, most universities have set up central support units. There is also the recognition that students can provide valuable information on teaching and courses, and thus the existence of student feedback systems. While it may seem appropriate to include student feedback as part of the information for developing learning and teaching activities in a university, and for planning academic staff development programs, investigation of staff views on student evaluation of teaching or their views of staff development activities appear to be mostly anecdotal, ad hoc or small scale. This situation gives rise to a number of questions. For instance, how do central units in universities responsible for providing or supporting academic development programs plan their activities in order to cater to the needs of their clientele? Is there a relationship between the results of student evaluation of teaching and the efficacy of staff development activities? For that matter, should staff development units, or university managers, use feedback from thousands of students in a university regarding teaching practices and general course/degree program organisation in the planning of academic staff development programs?

Background

Academic development programs exist in one form or another in most (if not all) higher education institutions in Australia, North America and the UK. However, quantitative evidence on the effectiveness of such programs is rather scant. Analysing programs that focussed on instructional, faculty (academic staff) and/or organisational development, Gaff (1975) concluded that the “most critical [need] to the future of instructional improvement is the matter of evaluation and impact” (p. 181). Three decades later, the situation appears to have changed little (Kreber & Brook, 2001). The prediction that “unless we evaluate our programs and demonstrate that they produce results ...we will all be out of business” (Gaff, as cited in Kreber & Brook, 2001) seems to have materialised in a few institutions. Perhaps the quality movement in recent years and economic rationalisation has contributed to the demise of academic development units instead of boosting their roles in institutions. Newton (2002) observed that “one of the main legacies of the 1990s is that quality has become a central concern in higher education globally” (p. 185) and that “quality becomes preoccupied with accountability” (p. 208). In addition, “over the last 20 years, there has been a great increase in the number of external quality agencies for higher education” (Woodhouse, 2003, p. 135). In the current climate of accountability in Australasia and elsewhere, it is all the more pertinent to look into how academic development programs are planned, executed and evaluated, and perhaps to seek quantitative and qualitative indicators for their effectiveness.

In order to address the lack of systematic program evaluation, Kreber and Brook (2001) developed a model of impact evaluation based on recommendations from a range of fields, including the literature on student ratings and human resources. In their model, the typical data collection of program participants’ views immediately after the program completion is an initial stage of a more comprehensive evaluation. Other factors of the model are the assessment of program impact on: participants’ beliefs and performance, students’ perceptions and learning, and the institutional culture. Although Kreber and Brook (2001) argue that perceptions of both staff and student are important, their model does not consider the possible influence of student feedback on teaching/course development. The interaction between student feedback and educational development is expected in institutions and is considered as a relevant part of teaching practice. An indication of the expected interaction is the criteria for academic promotion in a number of Australian universities, e.g. to include not only evidence of teaching evaluation but also to discuss how teaching/learning evaluation information was used in teaching development. Changing the academic promotion criteria to reflect the importance of scholarship in teaching appears to have influenced the beliefs and behaviours of academic staff in a traditional university with a strong research focus (Asmar, 2002). Therefore we believe that in a review of staff development program, it is necessary to ask staff the sources of information they would consider as relevant for designing staff development activities and whether student feedback should be part of the information.

Qualitative investigations of academic staff views suggest that a change in teaching practice can be best achieved if the change process takes place within the disciplinary area and in a collaborative way (Ferman, 2002; Kight & Trowler, 2000; Quinlan, 2000). This is to be expected given that authentic tasks and social interaction are considered as conditions that promote deeper level learning, and that lecturers must *learn* to improve their teaching practices (Ramsden, 1992). What is ideal may not be feasible, given the shrinking pool of funds and ever increasing fund seekers in most institutions. There is a need for the identification of the types of activities that can be done locally (within a department, school or discipline area) and those that can be achieved by a central unit in the institution.

Articles in the *International Journal of Academic Development* and the *Higher Education Research and Development* publications attest to the discussions on, and investigations into, the roles of academic development units. For instance, models and activities of academic development units, and conceptions of academic development profession have been reported (Fraser, 2001; Gosling, 2001; Johnston, 1997; Land, 2001). This paper aims to contribute to the discussion by providing input from those the units were set up to assist, i.e. the client perspective. It explores the possibility of combining knowledge gained through different means so that a more informed program of academic development can be designed.

Method

The Learning and Teaching Development Unit (LTDU) at the University of Adelaide is responsible for providing professional and academic development programs, as well as programs to assist student learning. One of the services available at LTDU is analysis of data collected through Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) system, which is the most widely used method to collect student feedback on teaching and courses in the University. Courses, workshops and seminars conducted by LTDU are typically evaluated through data collection immediately after the event through a paper-based questionnaire. There has been no formal investigation of the impact the program may have had on staff or students. Excepting a formal review of LTDU services, feedback on SELT service is usually anecdotal. Although the SELT system (and its previous version) has been in use for many years, a wide-scale investigation of how student feedback was perceived and used by academics has not been carried out.

An online survey form was developed in 2003 to collect anonymous feedback from teaching staff in four schools representing different discipline areas. Information on the purpose of the survey and the means to participate in it was sent to a contact person in the school/department through email. The contact person was requested to circulate the message among the teaching staff in their area. Thirty responses were received in that survey. Based on the experiences and outcomes of the pilot project, a modified survey form was developed and an email message containing information on the survey was sent directly to academic staff and postgraduate students in all five faculties of the University in February 2004. Both quantitative and qualitative data from 93 valid responses were analysed to obtain frequencies and identify common themes.

Results

The majority of the survey respondents indicated having full-time and permanent or tenure type of employment (Table 1). The number of respondents at Senior Lecturer or a higher level was equal to that at Lecturer or Associate Lecturer levels (Table 2). Since the number of respondents in many faculty sub-groupings was less than 5, further analysis with respect to differences between faculties was not carried out.

The low number of responses from the Tutor/Demonstrator category may be due to the time the survey was carried out, which was before the start of the teaching period. Since the number of tutors, demonstrators or equivalent positions depends on student enrolment for a course, postgraduate students who form the typical pool for such employment would not have been advised. As expected, a comparison of the type of employment and the level of academic position indicated a close association between the variables (Tables 3a & 3b). Most of those in senior and middle academic positions had full-time and permanent employment.

Table 1: Respondents' background - Types of employment

		Type of employment					Total (N)
		FT_P	PT_P	FT_C	PT_C	Other	
Faculty	Fac_A	10	1	3	2	0	16
	Fac_B	7	2	1	1	1	12
	Fac_C	17	0	2	0	1	20
	Fac_D	13	2	0	3	1	19
	Fac_E	15	3	2	5	1	26
Total (N)		62	8	8	11	4	93

Note: Categories in the type of employment are FT – full time, PT – part time, P – Permanent/Continuing/Tenured, and C – Contract or fixed-term

Table 2: Respondents' background - Academic positions

		Academic Levels				Total (N)
		P/AP/SL	L/AL	T/D	Other	
Faculty	Fac_A	8	6	1	1	16
	Fac_B	5	6	1	0	12
	Fac_C	9	9	1	1	20
	Fac_D	7	9	2	1	19
	Fac_E	13	12	0	1	26
Total (N)		42	42	5	4	93

Note: Categories in the academic levels are P/AP/SL – Professor/Associate Professor/Senior Lecturer (or equivalent); L/AL – Lecturer/Associate Lecturer (or equivalent); T/D – Tutor/Demonstrator (or equivalent).

Table 3a: Respondents' background – Employment type vs. academic level

Employment type	Academic Level			Total (N)
	Tutor/ Demonstrator	Lecturer/ Associate Lecturer	Professor/ Associate Professor/ Senior Lecturer	
PT_C	3	7	0	10
PT_P	0	7	1	8
FT_C	0	2	5	7
FT_P	0	26	36	62
Total (N)	3	42	42	87

Note: Categories in the type of employment are FT – full time, PT – part time, P – Permanent/Continuing/Tenured, and C – Contract or fixed-term

Table 3b: Symmetric measures

Ordinal by Ordinal	Value	Asymp. Std. Error(a)	Approx. T(b)	Approx. Sig.
Kendall's tau-c	.288	.076	3.810	.000
N of Valid Cases	87			

a Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

Some of the questions in the survey were related to the use of student feedback in the planning of staff development activities. Survey participants were asked whether:

- SELT responses should be considered as a key factor in planning staff development activities;
- they had received any SELT report in the last two years;
- SELT reports were useful in teaching and/or course development;
- they had received any non-SELT feedback on teaching or course in the last two years.

The responses to the questions listed above are summarised in Table 4. The majority of respondents answered “Yes” to the four questions.

Table 4: Responses to questions related to student feedback on teaching/courses

Survey questions	Responses (%)		Total (N)
	“Yes”	“No”	
SELT reports should be considered in staff development	74.2	25.8	93
Received SELT reports in the last two years	87.0	13.0	92
SELT reports were useful in teaching/course development	91.1	8.9	79*
Received non-SELT feedback in the last two years	68.9	31.1	90

* Only those who answered “Yes” to receiving SELT report in the last two years were asked to respond to this question.

Chi-square tests were used to test a series of null-hypotheses that the differences between observed and expected numbers of responses to two of the above questions (first and second questions, first and third questions, first and fourth questions, etc.) were due to chance alone. The only test for which the *P* value was less than 0.05 was for the null hypothesis that there was no difference between the responses to the first and third questions (Tables 5a & 5b). The linear association was significant between those who found SELT reports to be useful in their teaching or course development and those who agreed that SELT information should be a key factor in the planning staff development activities.

Table 5a: SELT report should be a key factor in staff development planning vs. SELT report was useful in teaching/courses development

SELT report should be a key factor in staff development planning	SELT report was useful		Total (N)
	Yes	No	
Yes	57	1	58
No	15	6	21
Total (N)	72	7	79

Table 5b: Chi-square other test results

	Value	df	<i>P</i> value (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.761(a)	1	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	13.587	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	79		

a One cell (25.0%) has expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.86.

Among the comments made by survey participants regarding how they used information from SELT reports, the common views were that the information was used in:

- identifying or reviewing strengths/weaknesses in teaching/courses;
- making changes to presentation;
- making changes to course content, assessment and other aspects of courses.

Some participants said that SELT surveys were a useful means to obtain student views, but there was no mention of how they used the information.

Respondents who indicated that SELT report(s) should be a key factor to be considered in the planning of staff development activities were asked who should use the information to determine the activities. They were to select any of the five options that applied in their view. A summary of their responses is given in Table 6. Most of the respondents thought that the staff whose teaching/course was evaluated and the Head of School/Department should be using the SELT information to determine staff development activities.

Table 6: Views on who should use SELT information to determine staff development activities

Who should use SELT responses to determine learning and teaching staff development activities?	Responses		Cases* (%)
	N	(%)	
Staff member whose teaching/course was evaluated	62	37.1	91.2
Head of School/Department (or equivalent)	50	29.9	73.5
Learning and Teaching Development Unit Director	30	18	44.1
Dean of Faculty	14	8.4	20.6
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education)	11	6.6	16.2
Total	167	100	

* 68 valid cases (each case represents a respondent); 1 missing case

Apart from SELT information, the relevant types of data for determining staff development activities were (popular views in descending order):

- staff feedback/views/requests, either individually or through committees;
- non-SELT feedback from students (quantitative and qualitative);
- course enrolment, student progression rates, grade distribution, honours retention and other assessment or student performance indicators;
- peer assessment/review;
- course reviews and other data about courses;
- recent developments in university teaching and learning approaches, current best practices, research outcomes, etc.

The general consensus was that the senior managers of the University should not be using SELT information to determine staff development activities. Comments made by some survey participants showed that in their views the senior managers should not be involved in determining any staff development activity.

Some of the organisers or providers of learning and teaching development programs are shown in Table 7. Of the 76 respondents who indicated they had participated in staff development programs since joining the University of Adelaide, 66 (86.8%) identified the Learning and Teaching Development Unit as a program organiser.

Table 7: Organisers of learning and teaching staff development activities

Learning and Teaching Staff Development Program Organisers	Responses		Cases* (%)
	N	%	
School/Department	37	26.2	48.7
Faculty	12	8.5	15.8
Learning and Teaching Development Unit	66	46.8	86.8
Other sections of the University	14	9.9	18.4

External providers	12	8.5	15.8
Total responses	141	100	

* 76 valid cases (each case represents a respondent)

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to obtain feedback from past and potential clients of a typical academic development unit in order to evaluate past activities of the unit and to plan more strategically future activities. The key characteristics that were investigated included: backgrounds of clients to identify possible client specific needs, staff use of student feedback in teaching and course development, sources of appropriate data to use in staff development activities related to learning and teaching, and the main providers of staff development activities in the University. Despite the limitations of a relatively small sample size, valuable information was collected as part of a more comprehensive evaluation of programs offered by the Learning and Teaching Development Unit (LTDU) at the University of Adelaide.

The staff who participated in this study were mostly full-time and tenure-track employees. Their views are valuable to the LTDU (and to similar units) for the major recipients of academic and professional development services have that background. However, other investigations have shown that sessional or part-time staff numbers are growing in most Australian universities (University of Queensland & Queensland University of Technology, 2003). In order to map appropriately the numerous inputs on the student learning and teaching environment, there is a need to collect the views of more part-time and fixed-term employees at the University; the views will enable identification of staff development needs that are specific to that group. A follow-up survey, specifically directed at sessional teaching staff, will be conducted during term time in 2004.

If the views expressed by the participants of this study are indicative of the wider academic community, then it is reassuring to know that the majority of the community considers student feedback to be useful in developing both teaching strategies and various aspects of courses. The common myth that student ratings are biased and unreliable (Theall & Franklin, 2001) was evidenced in the comments made by only a small proportion of survey participants. Perhaps this small group is more vociferous than the quiet majority and create the impression that their view is more widespread than in the actual case, hence the 'common myth'. It is also possible that the voluntary, and online, nature of the survey tool may have influenced the outcomes; those who do not feel comfortable with online surveys or who do not consider student feedback to be useful may have decided that it is a waste of their time to offer their opinion. Most participants of this study not only use student feedback (both qualitative and quantitative data) by themselves, but also think that it is appropriate for the head of their department or school to consider student feedback in the planning of staff development activities. This finding is consistent with the outcome of another study that showed staff do not resist the use of student ratings for formative and summative purposes (Schmelkin, Spencer & Gellman, 1997). Given the attitude of most participants in this study, it would be appropriate to use student feedback together with other data to plan academic development activities, particularly within schools or departments. Perhaps an adaptation of the project at the Queensland University of Technology in which selected groups of staff and students identified areas that need developing (Ballantyne, Borthwick & Packer, 2000) could be carried out.

Some of the information that the study participants considered as being relevant for planning development activities is relatively public knowledge. For example, a number of universities are already making available aggregated data from their most commonly used student feedback systems. The Graduate Careers Council of Australia publishes outcomes of *Course Experience Questionnaire* surveys and *Graduate Destination Surveys*. What is not known is how such information is being used in academic development activities. Is it the responsibility of an academic development unit to pool information from a wide field in order to provide comprehensive services? Who should be ultimately responsible for looking after such issues? A sensible response might be the most senior person in a university who is responsible for all learning and teaching related activities (or those directed by that person). That person at the University of Adelaide is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (DVC); the Director of LTDU reports to the DVC. Yet, very few participants of this study indicated that the DVC should be engaged in determining academic development (including staff development) activities. Some were even emphatic in saying that the senior managers (DVC and Deans) should not be involved or would be of little help. Given that academic development has many stakeholders, their views and interests may be conflicting. The dilemma for an academic development unit like LTDU is how to heed the wishes of senior management while catering to the clientele. An area that needs further investigation is matching the views expressed by the recipients of learning and teaching development activities with the learning and teaching plan of the University.

While some of the issues discussed in this paper require further investigations, the outcomes of this study can be used, and should be considered, in the planning of academic development activities. The areas for possible future investigations into staff development based on this study include: comparison of sessional staff views and non-sessional staff views in order to determine if different types of staff development opportunities should be made available and by what means, comparison of disciplinary views to identify discipline specific needs, and how best to match institutional prerogatives with those of staff needs when they are divergent. Reviewing information from diverse sources to enhance the learning and teaching process is ideally performed at *all* levels of an institution, for according to Ramsden (1998), “evaluation ... an analytic and synthetic process designed to understand the effectiveness of the processes we use to help transform presage factors into academic outcomes ... is at the heart of the business of academic leadership” (p. 227).

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