Case Study of an Anonymous University Teacher Preparation Program

Synopsis
This case study describes a UTPP program at an Australian university that is delivered fully online from a central unit within the institution. The program is a probation requirement for new staff, needing to be completed within the first three years of appointment. Although not a formal HECS-based unit, it is assessed and can be recognised for credit into the first unit of the Graduate Diploma in Adult and Tertiary Education taught through the Faculty of Education. Assessment is through contribution to online discussions, reflective writing and submission of a teaching portfolio.

The program is underpinned by the principles of constructive alignment and incorporates a substantial reflective component. It also seeks to develop a community of practice through online interactions, and to give participating teaching staff a hands-on opportunity to explore the learning management system from a student’s perspective. Importantly, it aims to be flexible enough to allow staff to participate regardless of their location and particular teaching timetables. Figure A7.1 provides a snapshot of the case study program.

Figure A7.1. Snapshot of program for case study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of model</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Summary comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>How is the program delivered?</td>
<td>Fully online</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does the program include independent learning?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the length of the program?</td>
<td>One semester</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does the program articulate with other programs?</td>
<td>Can be used as a one-unit credit into the Graduate Diploma of Adult and Tertiary teaching taught through the Faculty of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Is the program mandatory?</td>
<td>Yes – probation requirement for new staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there recognition in workload or time relief?</td>
<td>Varies from school to school</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Is the program open to PhD students/sessional staff?</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>What are the assessment requirements?</td>
<td>Contribution to online discussions, reflective writing piece and teaching portfolio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there a peer observation element?</td>
<td>Not formally included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What are the resources used?</td>
<td>Online tutorials, course readings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is there a role for disciplinary participants?</td>
<td>Not formally included</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does the program incorporate networking?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Context
This case study is drawn from a university of approximately 17,000 students, including 2000 overseas students from 90 countries. The university is sited on three campuses with significant geographical separation, and employs 1400 staff.

Although there are no offshore campuses, the university has partnerships with overseas institutions, and onshore staff travel to carry out teaching in these centres. The teaching of the UTPP sits within a central unit. Prior to 2009, this was an academic development unit; however, recent restructuring has seen the formation of an Organisational Capabilities Unit that has broader responsibility across the university. The unit’s role encompasses provision of professional development in teaching and learning, research and areas formerly undertaken by human resources. This change has been made to reflect and respond to changes in the higher education sector where boundaries between these areas of work are no longer clear, or desirable.

The foundations program is one of three staged programs that are tailored to beginning tertiary teachers. The first is an online induction program that can be revisited at any time. The second is a one-day face-to-face skills development program, backed up by an online module for those people who cannot attend. This day is targeted at tutors and casual staff and covers a basic introduction to tutoring.

Importantly, it is centrally funded so that casual staff are paid to attend, and printed resources are available for them. There are two further components of this skills development program for casual staff: the introduction of technology (such as the LMS, Lectopia) and laboratory teaching for demonstrators. This is currently outsourced to external providers and is proving to be quite popular.

Structure and delivery of the program
The semester-long program is delivered fully online through the university’s learning management system (LMS), two or three times each year in response to demand. The change to online was made three years ago to respond to a need for greater flexibility for staff completing the unit, as well as to reflect the broader university focus on student-centred learning and flexibility in delivery of courses. The unit is moderated by an academic staff developer, and includes online modules that require participants to engage with provided material or reflect on practice and contribute to a series of online discussions that function like tutorials. An added advantage of using the LMS is that it gives staff the opportunity to interact with the system, from the perspective of a student, therefore informing their own use of the system as teachers. It also requires staff to engage with this supporting technology, hence increasing their skills and confidence for using this in their own teaching.

The unit has three assessment tasks: contribution to online discussions, a piece of reflective writing and a teaching portfolio. Although the program is assessed, it is not an accredited, HECS-based unit. Therefore, the program is not bound by semesters and it is possible to be

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1 The term university teacher preparation program replaced foundations program as the preferred means of referring to tertiary teaching courses offered by universities. The program discussed in this case is known as the Tertiary Teaching program.
2 If demand warrants, a more intensive program over 6 weeks is sometimes offered over the winter.
somewhat flexible in terms of giving extensions to assessment tasks. However, as the online dialogue is very important in terms of developing the learning outcomes, discussion fora are open only for a restricted time to promote engagement with the material. In terms of articulation into accredited programs, successful completion of this course can be used as a one-unit credit into the Graduate Diploma of Adult and Tertiary Teaching taught through the Faculty of Education. There is an agreement in place with the faculty, and there is liaison in terms of assessment tasks required in the foundations program.

**Policy**

It is a probationary requirement for new academic staff to undertake the foundation program, and they can do so at any stage in the first three years of their appointment. The head of school is required to sign off on enrolment to acknowledge the program as a component of the academic’s workload; although it varies from school to school as to whether the academic may get time release in order to participate. The flexibility of the online course has overcome many of the issues around competing priorities that existed when the program was delivered in face-to-face mode.

There are no formal reporting requirements to the university, although records are kept. Successful participants are issued with a certificate of completion and they use this in their portfolio, or for performance management purposes.

The foundations course is only available to tenurable full-time and part-time staff with contracts of at least six months’ duration. Casual academic staff are not able to participate. This is due to the course being tailored to the needs of those staff responsible for curriculum development and designing assessment tasks. The skills development program (see above) has been developed to meet the needs of casual staff.

**Curriculum**

The concepts covered fall into three key areas: students and the learning environment, curriculum, and assessment for learning. These areas have been developed through a process of review, which has seen an overall reduction in topics in favour of a more holistic consideration of these three areas. The curriculum design incorporates principles of constructive alignment and integration with other areas of university policy, such as the systematic alignment of graduate attributes.

These curriculum design principles are modelled for staff participating in the course. In delivering the curriculum much emphasis is given to modelling the use of technology, in particular through the LMS. Participants in the program cannot avoid engaging with technology, and can hopefully see not only that it is easy, but also that it has a great many possibilities for use in teaching. Since the inception of the online course, the number of ideas emerging from participants in this regard has validated this approach. A further example of modelling practice is the placement of course readings onto e-Reserve linked from the LMS, with explicit consideration of copyright issues.

The program is developmental, allowing participating staff not only to consider their current practice but to look to what they may change in the future in light of what they are learning. In addition, there is a strong reflective component, with participants encouraged to collect and consider evidence of practice beyond a reliance on teaching evaluations. As such the assessment tasks require participation in online discussions around readings and practice, a piece of reflective writing and a scaffolded teaching portfolio.
Feedback from the students is that the teaching portfolio is the most useful component of the course. Although it is evaluated at the end of the program, support is given during the development phase through targeted readings, online tutorials and individual feedback. There is a focus on giving developmental advice that can be built upon in probation interviews, promotion applications and/or teaching awards and grants.

**Philosophical approach**

Two facets to the philosophical approach to the development of this program stand out. The first is very much one of systematic alignment with the university’s goals and priorities. The second is a commitment to the development of reflective teachers. The stated aims of the program are:

- encourage participants to adopt a learning paradigm, rather than an instructive paradigm;
- enhance participants’ understanding of student-centred/focused learning;
- introduce alignment as an effective approach to curriculum development;
- encourage ongoing reflective practice.

**Evaluation and effectiveness**

Each year, participants are invited to give feedback (which is made publicly available) and this, together with review and reflection by the teaching staff, provides for continual revision and improvement. The program is evaluated against constructive alignment principles and recent and relevant professional learning of the academic developers delivering the course. It was as a result of this ongoing review process that the course was changed from face-to-face to fully online in 2007.

In terms of effectiveness, ongoing feedback suggests the course is successful in meeting the needs of participants, particularly in the online format. A further indication of this is a consistent number of staff, employed prior to the program being mandatory, who enrol out of choice, based on word of mouth. The program is also very positively viewed in applications for promotion.

**Challenges**

Most of the challenges in delivering the program relate to the online teaching environment, and can be overcome with attention to online pedagogy. The first is to ensure that the most is being made of the technology. This has meant that those delivering the course have needed to come to terms with the LMS and what it offers, as well as the pedagogical practices that are necessary to make it effective, including remaining vigilant to postings and continually encouraging engagement.

Other identified issues are:

- getting the initial buy-in to the unit (that may require prompting by out-of-the-system email),
- getting participants to keep their postings
- short enough for people to read, but long enough to demonstrate understanding, and
- making
- pedagogical decisions on how much to guide discussions, without ‘doing it for them’.