Preparing doctoral students for academic practice

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The importance of preparing new academics to be good teachers and researchers is becoming increasingly important. In this paper I will report on the evaluation of a professional development program for doctoral students who are also teaching part-time and intending to be academics in the future. The evaluation has focused on the impact of the program in developing effective and useful skills and knowledge that would be useful for new academics. The perspectives of the strengths and weaknesses of the program in achieving these aims has been sought from those who have completed the program. The program was intentionally interdisciplinary in nature, however the evaluation has highlighted a number of disciplinary specific issues that will be debated and discussed during the presentation. I will also seek advice from the audience on the data collected and the messages that it might provide for those responsible for the design of future academic development programs for doctoral students.

Introduction

Professional development for casual staff has gained increasing acceptance in the United States and lately with the Higher education Authority in the United Kingdom (Barrington, 1999). Yet the issue is still a relatively new one in the Australian context (Kift, 2002). Although an estimated 40 per cent of the academic workforce are sessional staff (Keogh and Garrick 2005) there is little recognition of their needs in policy or in practice at most Australian Universities.

Since the publication of the Dearing Report into higher education (1997), there has been increasing recognition of the need to prepare all academic staff for their teaching roles. In Australia there has been a lot of activity in this field but the major focus has been to provide support for tenured or contract staff. Almost every University conducts some sort of induction to teaching program. Formal induction and development of university teachers usually occurs within the first three years of full-time higher education teaching experience. These introduction to teaching programs are generally seen as playing a significant role in fostering and supporting the quality of teaching and learning at both the individual and institutional levels (Dearn, Fraser and Ryan, 2002).
Now, with the increase of sessional staff teaching in universities, their preparation to teach becomes significant. Dearn, Fraser & Ryan (2002) suggested that preparation programs for sessional teaching staff should be included in all university preparation programs. A few Australian universities have had sessional staff training programs in place since the mid-1990s but these programs are often of shorter duration than those offered to permanent staff. The Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) now has a published guide to what sessional staff should receive in the way of induction and training from its 2002 project, "Training, Support and Management of Sessional Teaching Staff". This AUTC Project aimed to promote the development of policies and support mechanisms for sessional teachers within Australian Universities. Their definition of ‘sessional teacher’ is:

For current purposes, sessional teachers are defined as any university instructors not in tenured or permanent positions. This may include part-time tutors or demonstrators, postgraduate students or research fellows involved in part-time teaching, external people from industry or professions, clinical tutors, casually employed lecturers or any other teachers regularly employed on a course-by-course basis.

A large proportion of these sessional staff are doctoral students who are required to teach in the faculty in which they are enrolled as well as completing their studies. Often they undertake this teaching with little training and support. They may be required to run tutorials, mark work, supervise practical sessions or even give lectures. In some universities they may be the “academics” with which the students have greatest interaction.

A recent study of doctoral students' experiences reports, 83 percent of the doctoral students surveyed stated that, “enjoyment of teaching made them interested in being a professor” (Golde & Dore, 2001, p. 21). The respondents also indicated that support for such work - organized and sustained training and induction into teaching- varied greatly across institutions and within and across departments. These authors also noted that, traditionally, it was not preparation for teaching that comprised the major part of graduate student work but, preparation to conduct research. Yet, it was accepted practice for graduate students to teach undergraduate preservice courses in their departments as part of their graduate assistantships, but without any appropriate training. It is sometimes considered: “on the job training” for academic careers. Earlier Langenberg noted:

*I am certain of one thing, however... If one considers the very different categories (of) graduate teaching assistants, postdoctoral fellows, adjunct
faculty, and part-time faculty and asks what the individuals in them have in common, the answer is not much except for one thing—they are all defined by what they are not: they are not regular faculty. That would simply be a fact of life, not a problem, were it not for the propensity of our status-conscious regular faculty, and hence our institutions, to think of them and to treat them as if they were lesser species. (Langenberg, 1998, p43).

Recently, however, universities are acknowledging the contribution that doctoral staff make to their sheer volume of teaching, and thus to the quality of the teaching which they ask undergraduate students to rate or evaluate. University administrators have noticed that students do well and finish their studies when taught by good academic teachers and have decided that the casual workforce should be trained to deliver a “good product” to the students who provide the bulk of the universities’ income. Kift (2002) asks “What training are they given to take on the new imperatives of balancing content acquisition (the know what) with skills attainment (the know how to do)? How do they engage with the dimensions of experiential learning and the scaffolding, modelling and feedback requirements that underpin the delivery and assessment of these new course objectives?” (Kift, 2002).

An Australian University Teaching Council funded project conducted in 2002 showed that “…Sessional teachers who are unsupported, uninformed, or given inadequate training inevitably leads to inconsistencies in teaching and marking and, therefore, student complaints …” (AUTC Project website 2003).

Another indicator of good teaching is being an ‘expert in the field’ (Hildebrand et al., 1971; McEwan, 2002). Unfortunately, many postgraduate students are new to the field of education and have limited knowledge of the topics that they are required to teach. Various frameworks have been developed to identify teachers’ development, both in their subject area and in their teaching role. For example, Nyquist and Sprague (1998) have identified that graduate teaching assistants spiral through a framework from senior learner, to colleague in training, to junior colleague. Similarly, Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) identify a movement from novice to expert in skills acquisition, which can be applied to the teaching context (Tiberius, et al, 1998).

Recently, at Flinders University we surveyed sessional staff and found that when asked why they did the job as a sessional teacher 63% replied because they wanted to teach, 58% said they did it for the money, 50% stated they wanted an academic career. There are many sessional staff who intend to have an academic career but more importantly these sessional staff whether they want a teaching career or not are teaching our students and in some cases are seeing more of the students than the permanent staff.
It is therefore very important that doctoral students who are also sessional teachers in our universities receive development in skills of teaching so that there can be good learning outcomes for the undergraduate students with whom they interact now and also to prepare them for future teaching roles.

With these concerns in mind, in 2007 I implemented a pilot program that targeted students undertaking a research higher degree who were also teaching part-time in the Institution and had aspirations to become academics. The program aimed to assist Doctoral Students to:

1. Develop a set of skills and knowledge in teaching and research that will assist them in their current roles and will prepare them for academic future roles.
2. Explore a range of relevant teaching strategies
3. Reflect on their own practice as a potential academic
4. Improve assessment practice
5. Develop networks with other scholars across the university
6. Foster a balance between teaching and research and develop required scholarship skills in new academics.

The program was conducted over a year through the Academic Development section of the Staff development and Training Unit which is a central unit providing support to academics in their teaching and research. The program was therefore cross-disciplinary with 6-7 nominees from each of the four Faculties (Health Science, Science, Engineering and Technology, Social Sciences, and Education, Theology, Humanities and Law).

The program began with a two day intensive workshop held off campus which allowed time for participants to get to know each other and to lay the foundations for the rest of the year. The remaining sessions were 3 hour workshops held every month for the rest of the year. Each workshop had a focus on an area of teaching or research for example; assessment, providing relevant feedback, asking good questions. Participants were also required to work with a doctoral student from another faculty to develop and present a 10 minute interactive session which introduced other participants to an innovative method of teaching.
Evaluation was conducted in several stages throughout the program and as a follow-up 4 months after the program was completed. One on-going theme throughout all stages of the evaluation was the perception that the program made the participants feel more valued:

"The internship program has been the best thing for me! I finally feel like a valued member of the Flinders staff, a real person!"

"I remember there was a new internship program for academics run by staff development and Training Unit at the beginning of this year. I expressed my interests, but I missed it because of number limitation. Could we organise more this sort of training courses? So more people will be able to get involved."

The first evaluation was conducted after the two day intensive program. At that stage we asked participants what they had learnt from their participation in the program. Some of their comments were:

- Sharing in a safe place
- Working in pairs (cross faculty) and within faculty groups – repeated exposures that developed trusting relationships
- Reflecting and moving on – teaching will always present challenges; learn from them
- A much better understanding of being an academic. This is the first time anyone has ever taken the time to expose me to the ‘nitty-gritties’ of what it is to be an academic. Thank you. Despite it sounding terrifying I think I might stay the course.
- I really enjoyed reflecting on my teaching and learning how to reflect. I think I’ve just discovered that I am a reflector and look forward to exploring it more as a way to evaluate what I am doing and where I am going.
- It is nice to know that someone in the university cares about our career progression – a really change from feeling like a number
- I learnt a lot about myself, my own assumptions and approaches which I think will make me a better teacher/mentor
- The program gave me the opportunity to kick-start my academic experience, motivate me to actively seek teaching experience and to aim to improve myself as an educator.

Of course, these comments were made very early in the year long program but it was interesting to note that even a year later participants were still commenting about the importance and value of the two-day intensive program:
• 2-day intensive component was very effective in establishing rapport between participants and staff…set up the mood well for a very valuable program.
• 2-day intensive particularly good for icebreaking and getting to know people

Throughout the program I was very concerned that we met the needs of the various discipline groups. In some sessions we invited academics from each of these faculties to provide perspectives or address issues that were particularly relevant within their discipline. This strategy was particularly useful, particularly when we discussed research methods. However, comments from the doctoral students indicated that they found the cross-discipline nature of the program particularly positive:

• Enormous gains, learnt from others’ experiences; networked; also recognised unexpected similarities and problems.
• It was great to network with people on the other side of the lake and understand that an academic career is the same among all disciplines.
• … broader concept of ways teaching and research is carried out in different faculties. Also the idea that diverse as we are, most of the problems/opportunities we deal in are similar.
• It was interesting to learn that a number of issues are universal, ie. Across all faculties. As a scientist, it was also interesting to be challenged to use ‘my whole brain’!
• Sense of common purpose – of a community of academics and potential academics. Networking opportunity – the benefits of which may only be realised at a later point in time.
• The issues in the faculties and what we are expecting to do as academics are the same. I thought that collaboration and understanding among faculties is very essential for academics. Also, as a PhD student, it was a good opportunities for us to share our progress (and issues…).

The program was designed to address cross disciplinary needs but I was still surprised that it had been achieved at such a high level. Even at the time of writing the initial proposal for this paper I predicted that I would be able to include a “cross-faculty comparison of outcomes”. Yet, when students were asked whether the program meet their disciplinary needs 80% said yes and others made very interesting (but supportive) comments:

…though that’s a tough one because even within the School of Education, my area of study is quite specific (drawing on sociological traditions). I’m not sure what else you could have done to cater for ‘me’ whilst simultaneously doing so for everyone else, too?

Yes, but I see the focus of the program being about extending our vision and capacity for interdisciplinary collaboration in research and teaching.
Yes, the science-specific topics and activities were appropriate also for medical research

Only four comments were critical and these were contradictory with one person believing that we had privileged discussion in the sciences and another perceiving that we had spent more time on the humanities:

Because grant money for sciences is so much, in comparison to humanities, it’s natural that a lot of the discussion around this is science-based. But it would have been good to get more on discussion on this specific to my discipline.

The program must reflect the needs of the majority - ‘text-based’ PhD’s – but I felt there was enough supplementary material for those of us in the minority – ‘lab-based’ PhD’s – for the program to remain relevant.

I personally thought the Internship Program was somewhat biased towards my discipline, and most examples of innovative teaching methods, and academic practices were applicable to me. In saying that, I don’t think other disciplines were poorly represented, as many aspects of the Program were multidisciplinary.

Yes, it was interesting to see interdisciplinary activities going on. But I felt that there was too little from the Humanities and non-practical-based departments.

One interesting aspect, that may have a connection with appropriateness for various discipline areas came to light when I surveyed students about “where they are now”. Only 5 had completed their Doctoral studies and of those: one is Having a post thesis holiday/writing up publications, one is 0.4 postdoctoral research fellow and 0.6 clinical psychologist in adult mental health the third got a lecturer/researcher position at Flinders University, the fourth is working full time as a research associate at University of South Australia and waiting for my PhD to be approved and the fifth is working full time as a research associate at Flinders University. Four of these students are working in the sciences or health sciences.

Another criticism of the 2007 program was that it could have contained more hands-on activities:

- … though I really would have appreciated a hands-on goal setting/career planning session
- I would have preferred if there was a bit more of ‘hands-on’ work – ie. An exercise in writing an ARC grant application.
• Generally good, though I think there was some lost opportunities for some of the sessions to include slightly less ‘straight instruction’; more practical involvement.

On reflection, although each session timetabled presentations from the students which were interactive, more than half of the rest of the time was spent on interactive discussions or presentations. In the program for 2008 this balance will be redirected to more hands-on practical tasks that can be used in teaching and research in faculties. In 2007 we also attempted to bring in many guest speakers from Faculties and Schools across the University and this lead to a range of more formal presentations that were appreciated but could have been more interactive:

• Most presentations were of a very high standard, with academics willing to answer questions, etc.
• Guest speakers were well-prepared and well-informed.
• All people who spoke at the sessions were very informative. Also, my supervisor and Faculty Head have been very supportive.
• Fantastic opportunity to meet leading academics and researchers at Flinders. Good range of input across disciplines.
• Being able to discuss/reflect on teaching/research issues with people from other faculties/schools considerably broadened by my views and experience.

In my experience in academic development, there is always a potential for ‘workshops’ to become lectures when a series of academics are asked to attend and cover various topics. They may be interesting and even interactive lectures but it is very difficult to develop the environment required for practical workshops during a one hour one-off session. I think the strength of the 2007 Internship Program was the continuity and I and my team provided by being there every session, running most of the program and helping to maintain an environment where students felt safe to experiment and try new approaches. For example:

I feel like I am very much more equipped to enter the lecture theatre or classroom now. Understanding individual learning patterns was extremely valuable and the encouragement to look outside the square and use innovative teaching tools was inspiring. I also liked the idea that as teachers we too are learning and the suggestion that we should reflect on the success, or not, of each class was very useful.

I was lecturing my first topic while the program was running, so I think it helped me to present my material in a more useful/interesting manner, plus helped me to be a little more creative with my practical sessions.
However, the real strength of the program, and the reason that I am increasingly convinced of the positive outcomes in a cross-disciplinary approach, was the benefits of networking across the university. Nearly all participants commented on this aspect:

Other than that, I’m still in contact with at least one other participant from the course and, in fact, we’re catching up this week! In saying that, the impact of the course probably boils down to networking and, for that reason, I imagine that the real impact of the internship program will be emergent: as my career unfolds and as I come to experience different aspects of what we talked about, and to meet different people in different fields, I’ll reflect back on the program and come to appreciate it in different ways.

Although, the program had a major focus on the development of teaching skills, we also spent time looking at the importance of research and community or professional contribution. There were also sessions on balancing the requirements of an academic career, time management, and grant writing. This multi-faceted approach seemed to have positive outcomes from the perspective of the participants:

The impact of the Program on my research skills is probably in the form of knowing what is expected of a young researcher, how to manage time and tips on publishing and creating an academic research image for oneself.

It has made me re-think my career very carefully. I feel in some respects much more capable and confident of taking on an academic position. On the other hand though, the idea of becoming an academic is now much more daunting. That said I now know I have the skills to overcome many of the difficulties that affect new/young academics. Overall, I am very pleased that I attended the course, I know I wouldn’t have found out the information otherwise.

I have decided to use the last 6 months of my PhD to do some focussed development of my teaching, taking on some less traditional appointments as a way both of broadening my career options but also to ‘spice-up’ what could otherwise become a very unbalanced, inward focussing year (write-up time).

For me, personally, I have been also been encouraged by the participants’ responses indicating that they found that the program assisted them to improve their teaching. When I run programs generally, I am always investigating ways to assist this to happen and I think that throughout this program this perception
was encouraged in two ways; first, through the variety of strategies that I and my team modelled when we worked with participants, and secondly and probably more importantly through the pair presentations that happened each time we met where cross faculty partners demonstrated to the class a teaching innovation that they had discovered and that they thought might work in their teaching context. These presentations were very interactive and were recorded so that over the year all participants experienced and discussed 12 new teaching approaches. In the evaluations participants commented:

I feel I’m more reflective and systematic about my teaching now, more interested in finding out about how people learn and how the material I’m teaching is amenable to different approaches.

Coming from a research-focused faculty, I now have a higher regard and priority for developing my teaching skills as part of my core learning and professional development, not just an adjunct to my research.

The Program has definitely made it clear in my mind that a purely theoretical and factual teaching regime is never going to be a success when it comes to keeping students engaged, and ultimately encouraging their satisfactory completion of undergraduate topic and subsequent re-enrolment. At the same time, the Program has offered me with a variety of techniques and stimulating ideas of how to create an interesting, thought-provoking and often less time-consuming syllabus.

It helped me to get a broad view on modern teaching techniques available for an early career teacher like myself.

This program is only one small initiative aimed at addressing the important issue of the professional development of doctoral students and evaluations indicate that the program is having positive results for this first cohort. There is no question that doctoral students need support and guidance to assist them to become quality teachers, and whether this program is effective in addressing this need in the long-term, will be the subject of future research.

Meanwhile universities across Australia are placing great emphasis on the preparation of university teachers once they have been appointed as full or part-time academic staff while far fewer resources are being used to support the sessional staff and doctoral students who are undertaking a large proportion of university teaching. I therefore question whether our current staff development induction to teaching programs are targeting the ‘right’ cohort of teachers or whether our energy would be better targeted at this new and growing cohort.
I believe that the early indications are that doctoral students not only need the support but are open to change and seem willing to undertake new challenges when given the opportunity of professional development.

It’s been a useful source of inspiration, structure and exposure to the broader university agenda/purpose, which has helped provide a context for the PhD, ie. Providing a helicopter view and some ‘pictures’ of what might be at the end of the PhD.

Yes. I feel that I have a lot more direction now and not entering a void. I feel like I am more equipped to teach, rather than just stand and lecture. It has given me confidence to go forward.

REFERENCES