

Future Trends in Academic Professional Development

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Rationale for Increasing the Quality of University Learning and Teaching

Universities have changed over the past two decades in response to more dynamic employment environments (Hager, Holland, & Beckett, 2003). Government and employers around the world expect university graduates to have more relevant knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, a range of professional skills developed as a result of their university education (Business Higher Education Round Table, 1999, 2001, 2003). Today's students are also different. Greenburg (2004) identifies students' perceptions of their university as "a means to an end ... less apt to buy into academic beliefs regarding knowledge for its own sake and other romantic educational traditions" (p. 13). Levine and Sun (2002) indicate that only 20% of the current university demographic include "traditional college student" who live on campus and study full time (p. 4). Increasingly, "The majority of college students are ... older, attend classes part time, hold jobs, have families, and live off campus" (p. 4). They want a different relationship with their college to that of traditional students, "they are bringing with them consumer attitudes to higher education ... [and are seeking] ... convenience, service, high quality, and low cost" (Lao & Gonzales, 2005; Levine & Sun, 2002, p. 4). Hence, the quality of students' learning experiences comes into sharp focus with these discerning consumers of the higher education product.

Many universities around the world are focusing on learning and teaching as an equally important activity to that of research. This may be due to government pressure, but more often due to their burgeoning awareness of the need to maintain national and international competitiveness and to increase students' satisfaction with their university experiences (Ramsden, Margetson, Martin, & Clark, 1995). Greenburg (2004) identifies this trend stating universities have to consider and take ownership of their own renewal in terms of "people, its property, and its productivity in business terms" (p. 15). Therefore, the trends that are emerging encompass teaching academics being encouraged to expand their range of skills and strategies (Ramsden, 2003), implement more technologically-friendly resources (de la Harpe & Radloff, 2008), acknowledge and potentially use educational theories such as learning styles (Dunn, & Griggs, 2000), and to understand and better cater for educational diversity, such as, multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1999) and cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998, 2007). With the advent of technology, university teaching is more transparent and open to public scrutiny as course materials are freely available on the web so instructors are more likely to seek assistance to ensure the quality of their educational materials and practices (Price & Kirkwood, 2008).

University teaching is problematic as most academics are discipline experts without any formal teaching qualifications. Therefore they tend to teach the way they were taught with the inherent dangers of proliferating uninformed, out-dated, and/or inappropriate teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Ramsden (1998) indicates that university teaching is characterised by unclear expectations and poor alignment between course outcomes, learning activities, and assessment. Additionally, many of the assessment processes and practices do not assess students' deeper understandings, fails to encourage active, deeper, independent learning, and reflection. He states that most of the teaching mode is lecturing without actually talking with students. The prevalence of lecturing has increased due to high student-to-instructor ratios (Knapper, 2010; Ramsden, 2003). Even with these pressures and problems, Dunn and Wallace (2004) indicate though, almost in "spite of some of the sectoral pressures, academics still focus on teaching and learning, not for the sake of 'performativity' ... but because of a commitment to their discipline and students" (p. 291). So the

will is there to become better university teachers, but frequently the professional development processes are less than effective to support academics in this goal.

Traditional Academic Development

Over the past decade, universities have tended to establish centralised professional development departments designed to provide support and instruction about teaching, learning, and assessment (Knapper, 2010). The traditional operations of these teaching and learning support departments tended to be fragmented and ad hoc, focused on conducting workshops on various teaching topics, and providing one-to-one support and advice to instructors (Scott, 2002). In some cases, they were also charged with advising and writing learning and teaching policies, and/or administering and monitoring quality assurance processes using student evaluation of teaching as the central performance indicator. The usual clientele for workshops were the overtly conscientious, novice, insecure, or poor performing instructor. There were many instructors who did not actively seek out support from these centralised departments for a range of reasons, such as: the programs were too generalised; not discipline specific or relevant; attending programs across campus was inconvenient; constraints with time (Dixon & Scott, 2008); the lack of a relationship with professional developers; the perceived lack of credibility of presenters (Garmston & Wellman, 1992), and/or the overall perspective that teaching was a secondary university priority to that of research (Ramsden & Martin, 1996). These centralised professional development approaches were frequently less than successful in supporting widespread, systematic, discipline-embedded, and continuous improvement in learning and teaching across the varied university faculties (Scott & Dixon, 2009). Considering the evidence tells us that these traditional, centralised models of teaching-focused academic development are less successful in facilitating whole-faculty engagement, what other models or approaches are available?

Effective Professional Development

Literature from the adult learning domain indicates that for professional development to be successful it must encompass a level of control or autonomy in choice of topic and process of engagement. Adults relish learning experiences that take into account and validate their personal and professional experiences. They need to perceive the value of the content and learning experiences within programs (Merriam, 2001). Academic development is most effective when adults are intrinsically motivated to engage due to a cognitive dissonance and a desire to learn. Real-life problem solving is one of the most effective experiences which can motivate adults to engage in continuous learning (Knowles, Holton III., & Swanson, 2005, p. 72). Academics are frequently discomfited by negative student feedback and this impacts on their satisfaction with teaching, and their levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Galbraith, 2004) and can act as a demotivator to engage with learning and teaching academic development programs (Dixon & Scott, 2008; Wlodkowski, 2004). Hence, professional development that is psychologically safe, whereby academics can discuss, reflect upon their teaching, share ideas and resources, and feel empowered to try different teaching and assessment strategies, has been found to be highly effective in changing practice and dramatically increasing student satisfaction (Scott, Issa, & Issa, 2008). Wenger and Snyder (2000) also advocate for “communities of practice” (p. 139). They posit this communities approach promotes the development of professional skills and drives strategy, problem solving and the promotion of best practice (Wenger, 1998). These communities also enable individuals to “galvanize knowledge sharing, learning” and facilitate “change” (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 139).

As academics lead busy lives and are frequently juggling the demands of teaching, research, administration, personal life commitments, and service to their wider community, they need to have professional development processes that are convenient and relevant to their discipline and work realities. Ramsden (2003) recommended academics have opportunities to engage with colleagues to examine learning and teaching and develop strategies for enhancement in a scholarly way:

Good academic development engages us in the excitement of discovery and makes learning about teaching as exhilarating as doing research These [accomplished]

teachers do not segregate practice and theory; on the contrary, they seek productive relations between them to establish better ways of helping their students to learn The key to professionalism is learning how to fuse theory and practice. ... For most lecturers, this will mean working with people who are active in research and whose approach to staff development is driven by a spirit of stimulating inquiry. (p. 245)

Although we advocate for academic colleagues to work collaboratively on enhancing the quality of the learning experiences for students, it is also important that pedagogical expertise is included into these communities of practice. This is to avoid “pooling their own ignorance’ due to the lack of expert help available to them to establish best practice” (Scott, 2003, p. 3484). Additionally, with so much teaching and research at the university reliant on some form of technology, it is imperative that information communication and technology (ICT) experts are included into expertise colloquiums. In effect these colloquiums can be considered as “webs of enhanced practice” (Scott, 2009) (see Figure 1). These webs facilitate the collaboration of academics and experts through blended formats, that is, face-to-face, online, and synchronous and/or asynchronous, and ensure the greatest flexibility for adult learners working and living within “increasingly unpredictable and dynamic environment[s]” (Burns, 2002, p. 79). Therefore, we contend that professional development within the university context must be flexible, multimodal, overtly focused on enhancing teaching, learning, and assessment, discipline-relevant, and realistic, but what exactly could academics be doing in these webs of enhanced practice?

Future Trends and Opportunities

Figure 1
Webs of Enhanced Practice (Scott, 2009)

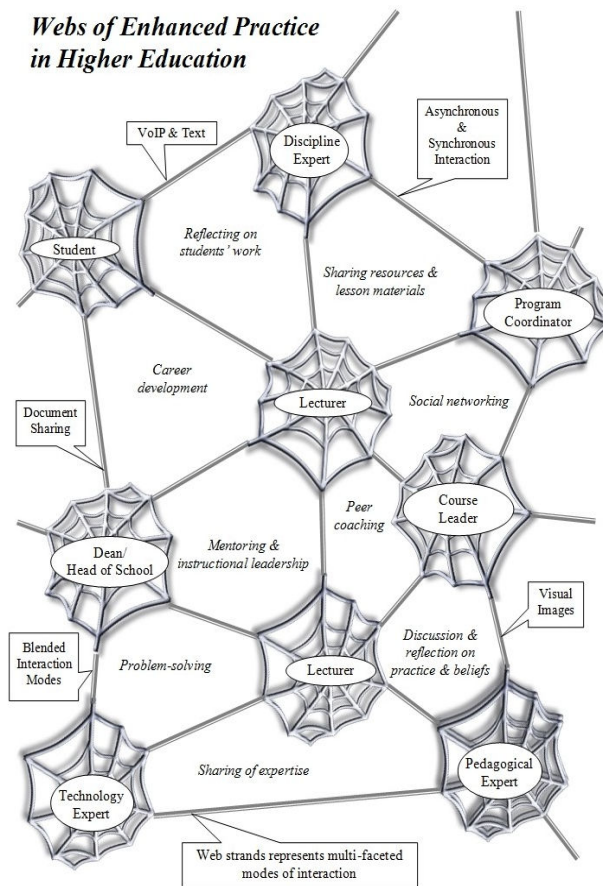
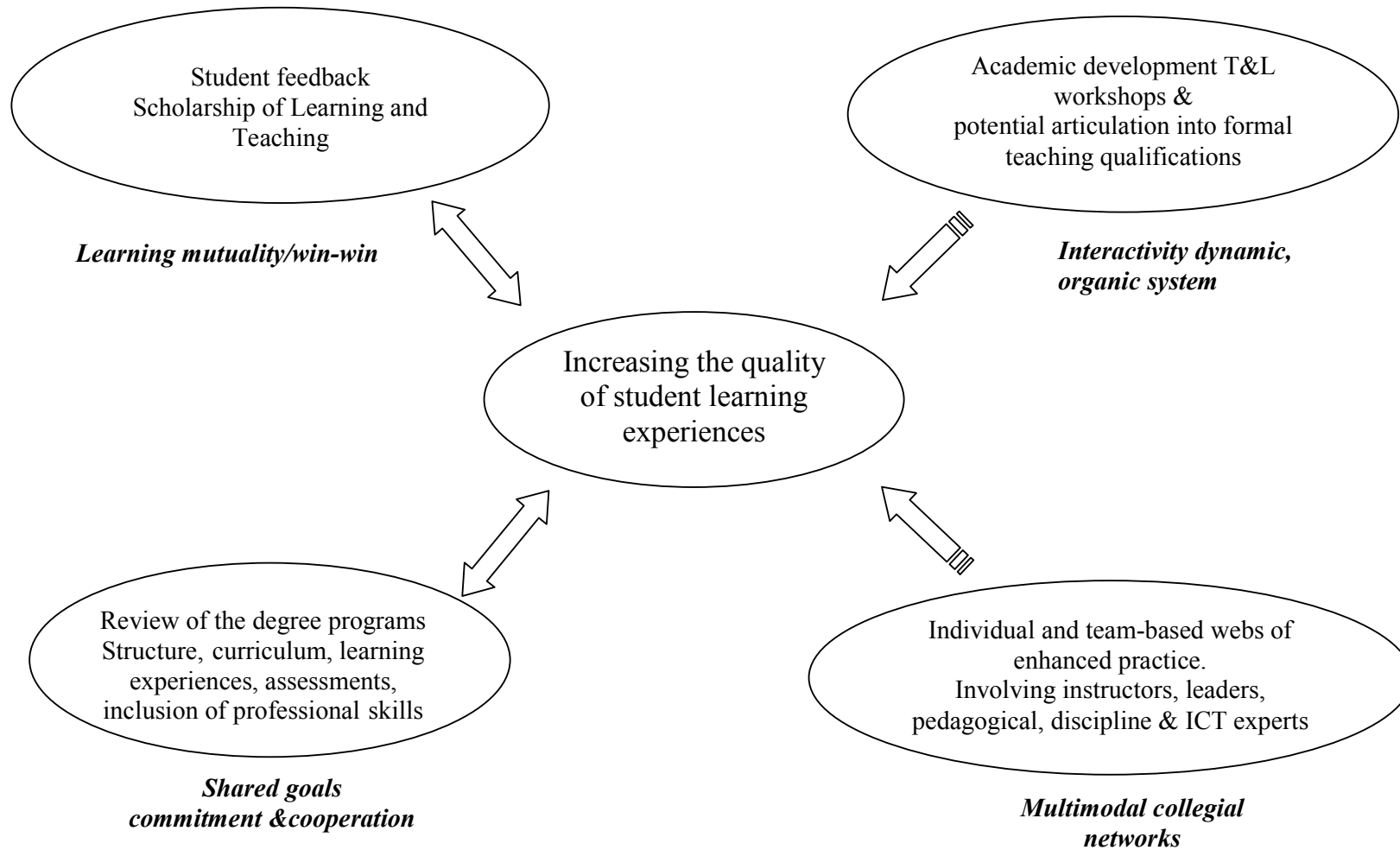


Figure 2

A Student-focused, Multidimensional Approaches to Professional Development (modified from Scott & Dixon, 2009).



Student-focused, Multidimensional Approach to Professional Development

Universities are complex environments therefore it is logical that a student-focused, multidimensional approach to professional development (see Figure 2) is more advisable than traditional, simplistic models (Scott & Dixon, 2009). There are four main components encompassed in this student-focused approach: 1) Use of student feedback data as the foundation for academic inquiry; 2) Review of academic programs; 3) Formal learning and teaching workshops and the potential articulation into formal teaching qualifications; and 4) Informal individual and team-based webs of enhanced practice.

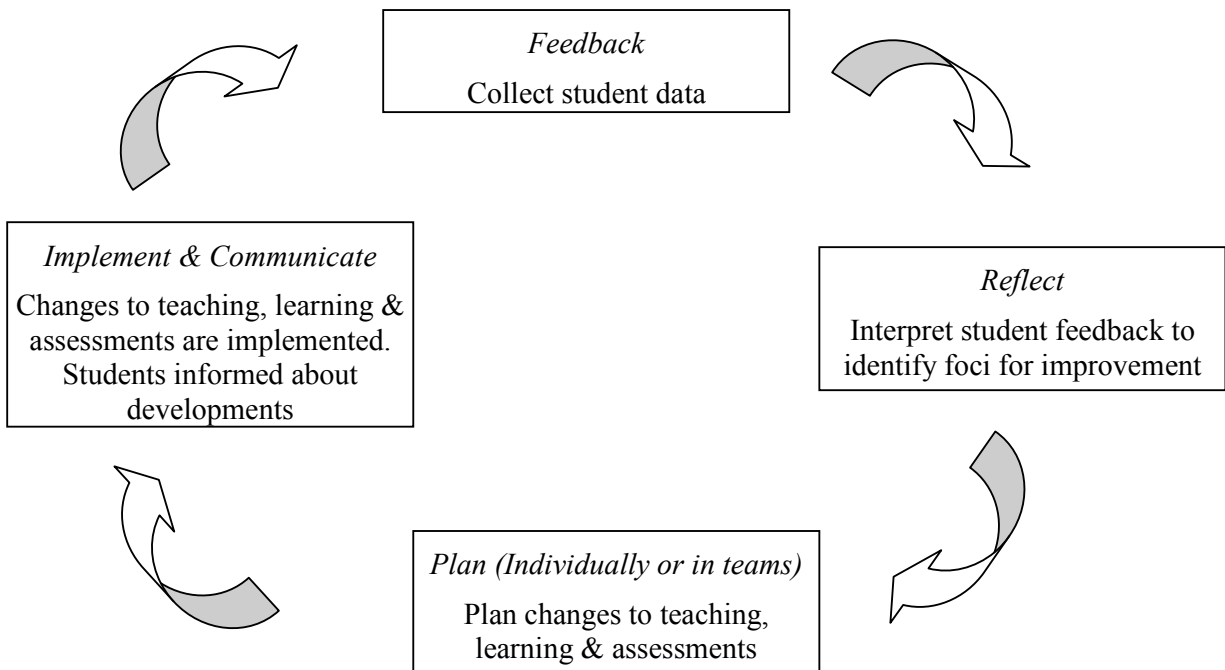
Evidence for the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching

‘Student feedback about their learning experiences’ data are routinely collected in universities but usually serve administrative purposes. Ramsden (2003) and other researchers (Marsh & Roche, 1994; Prosser & Barrie, 2000; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999b) identify the value of using these data as the foundation for scholarly inquiry into enhancing learning and teaching. Although some indicate student feedback is an indicator of “teacher popularity” and refute students’ competency to make “judgements” about teaching quality (Richardson, 2005, p. 407), Marsh’s (1987) and Ramsden’s (1991) research endorses the validity of these data as useful for informing teaching. In fact, Marsh states “student ratings are clearly multidimensional, quite reliable, reasonably valid, relatively uncontaminated by many variables often seen as sources of potential bias, and are seen to be useful by students, faculty, administrators” (Marsh, 1987, p. 257). Simply collecting student data, however, does not automatically lead to increasing the quality of the teaching or improvement in students’ learning.

Instructors must actively **use** their student feedback data (*feedback*) by identifying where the priorities are for improvement (*reflecting*), establishing a plan (*planning*), and implementing the changes and innovations (*implementing*). Discussing the proposed changes and why these have been made with subsequent student cohorts (*communicating*) invites them to be active partners in this Reflective Practitioner Cycle (see Figure 3). This increases students’ respect for their instructors as they recognise all in this partnership are engaged learners – the students and their instructors (*learning mutuality* and *win-win* see Figure 2). It further encourages students to provide honest and constructive feedback for the subsequent cycle as learning experiences continue to improve. This reflective practitioner cycle, supported by pedagogical experts within the webs of enhanced practice, can serve as the basis for the scholarship of learning and teaching whereby instructors can publish the findings of their action research within the university classroom (*win-win* see Figure 2).

Figure 3

Reflective Practitioner Cycle for Enhancing University Learning and Teaching



Review of Academic Programs

We live in a dynamic and demanding world so to be competitive we must create learning organisations with the capacity to be responsive to changing knowledge and skills within each discipline (Burns, 2002). It is important for faculties to regularly review all academic programs (see Figure 2) to ensure their relevancy and currency in preparing our graduates to take their place in the dynamic global environment. These reviews would include focusing not only on content relevance but also on ensuring that the professional skills demanded by employers are overtly incorporated and developed within coursework. These professional skills include: communication – written, verbal and interpersonal; critical and creative thinking skills – problem solving and decision making; team work; information communication technology; and, information literacy – being discerning consumers in this information age. The review should also focus on the quality of the learning, teaching, and assessment practices. Alignment between overarching course outcomes, learning experiences, and assessment tasks must be explicitly identified and documented for organisational purposes, as well as informing students. This supports both the instructor’s practice and students’ learning processes.

Formal Learning and teaching Opportunities

Formal professional development is important in ensuring that there is routine inclusion of essential learning, teaching, and assessment topics. There are core aspects of teaching that every instructor must understand and be able to do, for example, these may include (although this is not an all-encompassing list): ensuring the clarity of educational outcomes and expectations; designing coursework so there is alignment between outcomes, learning experiences, and assessment; understanding and promoting the development of professional skills; understanding and implementing the principles of sound assessment, including group assessments; understanding and appropriately structuring cooperative learning for learning and fairness; creating sound relationships with students; implementing effective teaching strategies for large classes; and harnessing ICT to support learning and creating humanistic environments. Even though these workshops could be

embedded within each faculty they are most effective when they are aligned with a formal teaching qualification. Providing the opportunity for faculty members to articulate their professional development into a formal teaching qualification acts as a further motivator to engage with these programs. Formal qualifications also add to academics' career pathways. Professional development offerings are "most potent ... where there is strong linkage between principles and practice, and where teaching techniques such as large class management and online interaction are developed against a background of knowledge about student learning" (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999a; Ramsden, 2003, p. 247). This means that there must be pedagogical experts involved. This formal component of the professional development is therefore representative of the new learning organisation paradigm characterised by *interactive, dynamic, and organic systems* that have the flexibility to grow and change as the needs of the members of the learning organisation changes (Burns, 2002, p. 81).

Informal Individual and Team-based Webs of Enhanced Practice.

The final component of this multidimensional approach includes facilitating opportunities for individual and team-based professional development situated within the faculty or school. This is where faculty members can examine the efficacy of their learning and teaching practices and explore ways to enhance these through the establishment of *multimodal collegial networks*. This is linked to the reflective practitioner cycle, whereby student feedback acts as valuable data to support academic inquiry. As Burns (2002) states:

In the learning organisation learning about job and self becomes a continuous process — a way of life, an environment where individuals learn about the process of learning itself. It cannot be strongly hierarchical, as hierarchical organisational structures do not lend themselves to people taking responsibility for their own learning, to self-development, to team-based structures. (p. 81)

The webs of enhanced practice, in which this informal professional development can be situated, supports individual and team-based learning and facilitates the following activities: reflecting on students' work to make positive changes; the sharing of resources and lesson materials; peer coaching; mentoring and instructional leadership; problem solving; sharing of expertise; discussion and reflection on practice and beliefs about teaching; social networking and career development. These activities can result in better faculty cultures, more understanding by leaders of their staff and faculty processes, nurturing of positive career aspirations, and enhanced quality of learning and teaching (Ramsden, 1998).

For webs of enhanced practice incorporating student-focused, multidimensional approaches to professional development to be operationally successful, there must be financial and organisational support for them. The organisation should invest in these webs of teams and individuals through "time and money in helping such communities reach their full potential ... [and] intervening when communities run up against obstacles to their progress, such as IT systems which don't serve them" (Wenger & Snyder, 2000, p. 144). More importantly, recognising and rewarding faculty for their engagement and positive educational outcomes will promote learning as a key organisational goal (Ramsden, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Institutionally, prioritising these structures and approaches to enhancing learning and teaching will also motivate faculty to engage and willingly seek change to their repertoire of teaching practices (Ramsden & Martin, 1996).

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