

Project Summary of the Development of UniSA's Quality teaching Framework for Teaching Excellence

1. Project focus

In early 2014 the University of South Australia won a place on the national Office for Learning & Teaching project titled the 'Transforming Practice Programme (TPP) - Reward and Recognition: Promotion Process and Policy'. In all, 13 Australian universities worked independently throughout 2014 on transforming their practice in an area of learning and teaching in higher education. UniSA's self-selected project was to develop 'a quality teaching framework for teaching excellence at UniSA'. It was constructed using an iterative, literature- and project-informed, data-driven, collaborative- and consensus-building approach. It was envisaged that the framework would be adopted as 'whole of institution' view of teaching quality which will, for example, guide teaching practice and related professional development, inform recognition and reward processes, aid discussions on teaching performance, planning and review, influence recruitment and promotion processes, and drive day-to-day institutional discourse on learning and teaching.

2. Institutional context

Profile: The University of South Australia was founded in January 1991 through the amalgamation of the South Australian Institute of Technology and the Magill, Salisbury and Underdale campuses of the South Australian College of Advanced Education. According to the University's Act, its mission is "to preserve, extend and disseminate knowledge through teaching, research, scholarship and consultancy, and to provide educational programs that will enhance the diverse cultural life of the wider community". Over the past quarter of a century the University has developed into one of the largest multi-campus tertiary institutions in Australia with more than 33,000 students enrolled in a range of degree programs across urban, regional and offshore locations.

The University values and promotes inclusive, engaging and innovative teaching that provides students with high quality face-to-face, blended and online learning experiences and outcomes to prepare them for life and work in the 21st Century. UniSA's Strategic Action Plan 2013-2018, *Crossing the Horizon*, and its Digital Learning Strategy herald exciting developments for the institution, particularly around how teaching will deliver outstanding student learning outcomes. Students will be taught by culturally aware academic staff, who are effective communicators and collaborators, and have a passion for providing high quality education and pursuing excellence in learning and teaching. Students will experience curricula which are flexible, informed by industry and scholarship, and delivered in physical and virtual spaces designed to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Context prior to engagement with the project: Over the years UniSA has had several learning and teaching frameworks subsequent to one another with their focus on, for example, student-centred learning, graduate qualities, flexible delivery, experiential learning, and 'learnonline'; the latter being a key component of UniSA's Personalised Learning Environment (PLE). These frameworks, plus the Assessment Procedures and Policy Manual, have driven both teaching practice and related professional development across the institution. UniSA has recognised and rewarded academic staff for high quality teaching through a mixture of internal awards aligned with national awards (e.g. Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning, and Teaching Awards) and excellent student evaluation data. In effect, the criteria for the awards and positive student evaluations have been tacit statements about what teaching quality and excellence is at UniSA.

Imperative for the development of teaching criteria: UniSA's participation in the OLT Transforming Practice Programme project in 2014 was timely given the University's 2013-2018 'Crossing the Horizon' strategic action plan. Elements of the strategic plan affirm UniSA's commitment to enhancing its educational offerings and providing an outstanding student experience, alongside increased human capital and efficiencies in the 'classroom' through a high performing, sustainable workforce which is passionate about education and committed to a culture of excellence.

The University was particularly interested to review issues of quality in teaching through a contemporary lens to ensure that it is fostered across the institution (e.g. supported through professional development and evident in practice), and recognised and rewarded (e.g. through learning and teaching awards and grants) and positive student evaluations, but also more broadly, (e.g. during performance review, through promotion and recruitment processes, and in day-to-day institutional discourse). The TPP offered an innovative way to approach a rigorous 'whole-of-institution' view on teaching quality, given its potential to generate focused work within the institution and receive input from external facilitators as well as cross-institutional and international collaboration.

Another driver for the development of a teaching quality framework specific to UniSA was the establishment of 'teaching focused' academic positions at the end of 2014. Teaching Academics undertake no more than 80% teaching and administration with the remainder of the workload devoted to scholarship activities. Teaching Academics, along with Teaching and Research Academics (40% discipline research; 40% teaching; 20% administration) deliver the majority of UniSA's taught courses. The teaching quality framework, while it applies to all academic staff who teach at UniSA, has particular significance for Teaching Academics.

3. Teaching criteria

As indicated earlier, while teaching at UniSA has been driven by several teaching frameworks over time, none have really promoted a detailed set of teaching criteria as such that explicitly outline teaching quality and excellence. The most fine-grained examples would be the criteria of the UniSA and national citations and teaching awards, and promotion guidelines, which have been more aligned with recognition and reward.

4. Approach to implementation

The teaching quality framework which was developed in 2014 can support a whole-of-institution engagement with quality teaching and teaching excellence at UniSA. In this sense it is the beginning of a journey that will see the UniSA framework refined and augmented over the next few years. Further work needs to be carried out such as developing a web presence for the framework, and a set of interpretative web tools and workshops to assist staff at different levels to both understand and utilise the framework.

5. Role of the Australian Universities Teaching Criteria and Standards (AUTCAS) framework

This section provides detailed information about how the UniSA teaching quality framework was developed in 2014. Critical engagement with the [AUTCAS framework](#) by the UniSA community was a feature of the process. The AUTCAS framework was developed via a national project supported by the Office for Learning and Teaching.

The UniSA TPP project initially utilised the AUTCAS framework as its foundation. This was contextualised to the UniSA setting (e.g. using UniSA terms and nomenclature) then 'road tested' by five focus group interviews with UniSA students, Lecturers A & B, Lecturer C, Lecturer D, and Lecturer E. In all, 42 staff and students were involved in the five focus group interviews between July 8th and August 14th. Prior to attending their focus group, students and staff were sent the contextualised AUTCAS framework so they could come to the discussion already informed.

The main themes that emerged from the focus group data were:

- Participants were generally supportive of the concept of a teaching quality framework.
- Participants were generally supportive of the seven criteria in the AUTCAS framework.
- Participants generally found that the AUTCAS framework, as a whole, was overwhelming.
- Many AUTCAS bullet points were perceived by participants as being 'activity-based' which they believed may not necessarily lead to or indicate 'quality student learning'.
- Some participants commented that many AUTCAS bullet points did not look like they were drawn from either 'good practice' or the related literature on teaching and learning in higher education. (Note: The AUTCAS framework comprehensively interrogated practice and the related literature.)
- Some participants thought that many AUTCAS bullet points used 'weasel words', e.g. 'effective'.
- Many participants found the language in the AUTCAS framework to be 'pretty dry' and not inspirational.
- Some participants perceived that the framework suggested that Level E was the only classification where 'teaching quality/excellence' would be found. (Note: The AUTCAS framework does not advocate this.)
- Student evaluation data was perceived as being problematic for (solely) describing teaching quality. (Note: The AUTCAS framework does not advocate for student evaluation data as the sole indicator of teaching quality.)
- Some participants said the AUTCAS framework looks as if it tries to document 'everything', that is, every possibility related to teaching and such an 'atomistic' view cannot (re)constitute 'the whole'.
- Some participants thought that 'teamwork' was not strongly articulated in the AUTCAS framework.
- Some participants thought that the framework does not explicitly promote, for example, diversity and inclusivity; both important in the UniSA context.

From the outset, the UniSA TPP team was determined to build a framework that resonated with the University community and knew that considering and responding to the issues listed above would be important. The main activities and initiatives that subsequently led to the production of the UniSA framework are succinctly presented below:

- Adoption of the seven criteria from the AUTCAS framework.

- Engagement with the UniSA project's Reference Group (The Provost; Acting Director: Learning and Teaching; [A Faculty] Dean: Teaching and Learning; Manager: People Development and Performance, Human Resources) at key project milestones.
- Engagement with the AUTCAS project team through two workshops (May and October) held at UniSA to discuss the AUTCAS project and framework and UniSA's developing framework.
- Skype conversations every two months between the UniSA TPP leader and the national TPP project leader to discuss UniSA's project work and progress.
- Participation of UniSA TPP project team members in three interstate workshops (February, April, November) facilitated by the national TPP project.
- Close scrutiny of Curtin University's 'Teaching Excellence at Curtin' document which has its origins in the AUTCAS framework.
- The UniSA TPP project team's decision to limit the 'size' of the UniSA framework to make it approachable yet still convey a clear message about quality teaching at our University. This was achieved by:
 - Using all seven AUTCAS criteria but dispersing Criterion 6 (Evaluation of practice and continuing professional development) and Criterion 7 (Professional and personal effectiveness) across the other five criteria by means of the UniSA framework's right-hand column titled 'Portfolio of evidence of professional and personal effectiveness'.
 - Limiting the number of bullet points in the framework's 'Teaching Practice' column to what the project team believed were the most critical four elements of teaching at UniSA for each criterion and at each academic classification (A, B, C, etc.) but acknowledging that this is not meant to encapsulate the entire range of teaching-related work that lecturers engage in.
 - Keeping each academic classification to one landscape A4 page only.
- Building 'teamwork' into the UniSA framework's criteria and their bullet points, where appropriate.
- Incorporating 'inspirational' language where possible.
- Incorporating reference to Human Resource's new 'core attributes of UniSA staff' where possible.
- Avoiding what may be perceived as 'weasel words' in favour of more concrete terms.
- Confirming that the bullet points in the AUTCAS framework are indeed drawn from practice and theory.
- Recognising that while it is difficult to avoid 'activity-based' bullet points, high quality work in relation to described activities can be a proxy for 'quality student learning'.
- Recognising that despite perceived challenges with student survey data, mobilisation of the student voice makes an important contribution to improving teaching practice and course and program development.
- Acknowledging some defining features of teaching and learning at UniSA, e.g. connections with industry, equity, inclusive learning environments.
- Development of a '1-page flyer' as an introduction to the UniSA framework.
- Conducting interviews in November 2014 with approximately 15 participants from the various focus groups to obtain views on an updated version (*post* focus group) of the UniSA framework.

- Hosting a 'Presentation & Workshop' capstone event in mid-December to present current work and further refine the framework to make it a useful guide for quality teaching practice at UniSA. Twenty three academic staff attended the event and provided valuable feedback on the version of the UniSA framework that was updated as a result of the one-on-one interviews with staff in November.

6. Achievements and emerging issues

The development of a teaching quality framework for UniSA in 2014 through a literature- and project-informed, data-driven, collaborative- and consensus-building approach was a significant achievement. One of the hallmarks of the UniSA project was the purposeful engagement with UniSA academic staff and students through focus groups, interviews with individuals, and a capstone presentation and workshop in December 2014. At that session, staff acknowledged that a particular strength of the UniSA project had been its engagement and communication with the UniSA community. As indicated earlier, the building of the framework is the beginning rather than the end of a journey. While it is anticipated that in 2015 it will begin to be widely promoted and influence practice, it will take a number of years to be further refined and deeply embedded such that it becomes a 'whole of institution' view of teaching quality which influences teaching practice, and recognition and reward. The larger OLT TPP project, led by Professor Patrick Crookes from the University of Wollongong, came along at an important time for UniSA and its thinking about learning and teaching. The larger project clearly has played an extremely pivotal role in supporting the development of UniSA's quality teaching framework.

The UniSA project team was composed of Ms Tina Armiento, Senior Workplace Strategy Advisor, Human Resources; Dr Veronika Kelly, Program Director: Visual Communication, School of Art, Architecture and Design; Prof Vicki Waye, Dean: Teaching & Learning, Business School; Ms Dale Wache, Lecturer: Academic Development, LTU; Mr Arun Thomas, Immediate Past USASA President; Dr Gavin Sanderson, Senior Lecturer: Teaching Excellence and Innovation, LTU (Project leader).