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Educator Reflection on Online Delivery of Professional Development to Precarious Academic Staff

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Introduction

Teaching in Higher Education

Within higher education, staff members on short-term, precarious employment contracts make a significant contribution to curriculum delivery, as universities are heavily dependent on these staff for frontline teaching (Percy et al., 2008; May et al., 2013). These sessional or casual staff are classed as individuals without a permanent employment contract who work in a range of learning and teaching roles such as lecturers, tutors and demonstrators. This type of employment practice is common not only within Australian higher education institutions but also across Europe and the United States, as temporary employment arrangements for teaching staff reflect a rise in student demand and lack of investment in long-term teacher positions (Crimmins et al., 2017). It is estimated

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that up to 80% of undergraduate courses are taught by academics who are subject to precarious work arrangements (Klopper & Power, 2014).

Despite institutional reliance on these staff, many of these educators receive little or no professional development in learning and teaching (Heffernan, 2018). For example, research into practices in universities in the United Kingdom and Australia found that casual staff were often left out of formalised development programmes and were thrust into teaching roles with little to no preparation or awareness of the complex skill set required for professional practice (Hitch et al., 2018). Others have recognised that quality professional development should be available to staff under precarious employment arrangements, as these educators are responsible for the majority of teaching and therefore have a significant impact on the quality of the student learning experience (Hamilton, 2017; Harvey, 2017).

UK Professional Standards Framework

Quality professional development programmes need to capture the nuances of practice required for staff to provide effective learning and teaching. Aligning professional development to the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) (The Higher Education Academy, 2011) is one method of allowing educators to benchmark their learning requirements and gain awareness of the areas of practice they need to focus on. The UKPSF is a set of internationally benchmarked standards for learning and teaching professionals within higher education. The standards can be used as a rubric of practice through which to self-assess teaching effectiveness (Woodlands, 2021) and can also underpin reflection and enhancement of teaching practice (Ambler et al., 2020). The standards allow educators to reflect on their practice in areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values and, if desired, benchmark their practice to gain recognition via Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. The UKPSF provides an inclusive framework for various types of higher education staff to benchmark their learning and teaching activities, knowledge and values. The wide use of the PSF in the UK in particular has also

prompted research into the specific professional development needs of precariously employed academics (Bradley, 2008).

Background

Academic Development Support at QUT

Queensland University of Technology (QUT) is an Australian higher education institution, with over 50,000 students and more than 2500 academic staff. While the proportion of academic staff in fixed-term, casual or permanent roles is not publicly reported, the institution's staff profile reflects employment trends from across the sector in that a significant proportion of academic staff are subject to precarious employment arrangements. Within QUT, these staff work across five faculties to deliver lectures, workshops, tutorials and practical demonstrations to students as well as provide marking and feedback to both undergraduate and postgraduate learners.

To enable staff development, the central learning and teaching unit provides workshops, seminars and training on learning and teaching. In 2019, an extensive review of professional development support and provision was conducted in consultation with university stakeholders. This review provided the foundation for a proposed redesign of professional development that would best serve the needs of the contemporary university workforce. The proposed redesign and development included a foundational learning programme coordinated as part of a blended learning framework that aligned with recent academic development literature to support the need for development provision that is designed in a bespoke and responsive manner (Hott & Tietjen-Smith, 2018). While the professional development programme is aimed at all learning and teaching staff in the university, a core audience is staff on precarious employment contracts. These staff were encouraged to prioritise professional development through an attendance allowance for completing eligible modules.

The new suite of four core foundational learning modules, to be implemented at the beginning of 2020, was designed to support staff new to teaching or staff interested in reviewing core concepts in effective educational practice. These foundational learning modules are aligned with the first four areas of activity from the UK Professional Standards Framework and are titled:

1. Approaches to Planning and Designing Learning
2. Principles of Teaching and Supporting learning
3. Effective Assessment and Feedback
4. Creating Effective Learning Environments

The strategy to support professional development in learning and teaching was shaped by several core principles including a digital-first approach to enable participants to begin their learning on demand. This was intended to allow staff to access training and development in a flexible and timely manner, as educators often access professional development when a specific skill or information is required (Vaill & Testori, 2012). Each module includes a self-directed online learning component along with a facilitated workshop with peers.

Impact of COVID-19

At the beginning of 2020, the first semester of teaching at QUT was disrupted by an Australia-wide lockdown response to mitigate the public health risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. This direction resulted in a mandate that all learning and teaching delivery at the university was to be provided fully online. QUT provided a one-week pause on teaching activities to support staff with time to transition their programmes to the new mode of delivery. For many educators, this shift was their first experience of online teaching, with many educators also having no experience as an online learner or facilitator.

This shift in delivery to learners also meant that the new professional development provision required the same rapid transformation. For the core academic development team in the central learning and teaching

unit, the university-wide change in delivery became an opportunity to not only teach core teaching skills but also model effective online pedagogy. The need to change the professional development to meet the needs of participants meant that module coordinators needed to quickly transition from a digital-first to online-only provision. This included explicit signposting in asynchronous content and associated facilitated webinars. The foundational modules were structured as a three-hour learning load of self-directed content on the Learning Management System Blackboard, and an associated three-hour facilitated webinar was conducted on the web conferencing platform Zoom. Zoom was selected as it enabled a wide range of participant engagement functionality and was supported through an institutional licence.

Research Design

In this case study, critical reflection is used to capture key learnings on the transition to fully online and integration of online learning pedagogy into the modules. The participants in this research were academic development lecturers in the central learning and teaching unit. They are responsible for designing and delivering professional development in learning and teaching for all institutional staff in learning and teaching roles. The four coordinators of the foundational learning modules were invited to reflect on their experience of transforming professional development to support precarious academic staff during the teaching transition due to COVID-19.

Reflective Practice Using the UKPSF

This research seeks to capture and articulate the lived experience and personal perspectives of module coordinators in relation to how rapid curriculum changes impact upon pedagogical teaching decision-making. This is achieved through utilising critical reflection (Brookfield, 1995), which is recognised as an important part of practice and evaluation for higher education teachers and a way to provide critical insight into

nuances of practice (Harvey & Vlachopoulos, 2020). This research employs auto-ethnography as a tool to critically reflect on the relationship between theory and practice. The two authors of this research have adopted the role of participant-observer (Davies, 2008) as both researchers and module coordinators. Auto-ethnographic research provides a valid lens to surface ‘the intersubjectivity between researchers and their research contexts’ (Pink, 2007, p.23).

All four module coordinators who participated were senior fellows of the Higher Education Academy. Their status as senior fellows means that all participants are familiar with the UKPSF as a reflective tool, having used the standards to undertake structured reflection on their own practice and having mentored other educators to use the UKPSF to reflect on their teaching and learning knowledge, experiences and values.

Reflective Questions

The four module coordinators were asked to provide written reflections on their experience of transitioning the professional development programme using the following questions as reflective prompts. Each question was aligned with relevant dimensions of the UKPSF.

- (a) How did you design and plan the learning materials in a way that supported the needs of a diverse cohort?
- (b) What were you mindful of in your approach to teaching and supporting learning in an online environment?
- (c) What feedback practices did you incorporate based on how participants learn?
- (d) What evidence-informed approaches did you use to create an effective learning environment?
- (e) What methods did you use to evaluate the effectiveness of your approach during a rapid transformation of design and delivery?
- (f) What have you learned about teaching online that could help other educators in their professional practice?

Each participant provided a written reflection, with reflections ranging between 704 and 1248 words in length.

Results and Discussion

There were three key themes that emerged from the module coordinators' reflections on their experiences transitioning the professional development programme to fully online mode. These were the need for explicit scaffolding and modelling of active learning for online contexts; purposeful design that considered how online learners encounter and learn content; and an awareness of the diversity in knowledge and experience of module participants.

Scaffolding Online Learning and Modelling Active Learning

Module coordinators agreed that explicit justification and explanation of techniques and design were important factors in the redesign of professional development. This is supported by Crimmins et al.'s (2017) research where precariously employed academics suggested they needed demonstration of specific pedagogical strategies for instructing learners. Module coordinators identified a number of active learning opportunities they created for participants, including one coordinator who reflected on the importance of including 'a range of methods for participants to contribute—this included verbal discussions, responses in the chat, and polling'. This provided participants with an opportunity to see engagement in action, rather than simply being told it would be useful to use it in their own online teaching. All of the module coordinators noted that effective development includes not just presenting a range of tools or techniques, but also unpacking the reasoning for including these strategies with learners. Since technological competency and digital skills have been identified by academic staff as a developmental need (Klopper & Power, 2014), module coordinators explored ways they could model good practice and increase their participants' confidence:

There were a lot of what I call ‘meta notes’ I included. For instance, instead of just putting up a Padlet [an online collaboration technology] and asking people to interact, I also explained why I was doing it with instructional text like ‘using a Padlet in your online site will give your learners a way to interact with each other and create a space to respond to prompts you provide.’ I wanted tutors to feel like they weren’t just randomly using technology to work with students, but choosing tools purposefully.

I tried to incorporate modelling of best practice delivery into the workshops. This meant that attendees were able to learn not just about the content I was delivering, but also the facilitation methods that were appropriate for the online environment.

I noticed many times that people would ask questions about the techniques I was using in teaching rather than the content itself. For example, I had a countdown timer animation for breaks and people regularly commented on how useful that was and said they wanted to use it themselves.

Modelled demonstrations of classroom practice such as these are essential to contributing to academics’ awareness of the range of teaching skills and pedagogical practices required for effective student engagement (Ambler et al., 2020). Module coordinators also recognised the opportunity to shift their participants’ thinking from how to facilitate effective in-person activities to what was needed to facilitate online engagement:

I previously had an activity that looked at what strategies educators can employ to encourage students to engage in active learning. This relied on looking at the outcomes of a research study that was done in a face-to-face context. I added on an extra component where I asked people to think about how these strategies could be translated to the online environment which was a timely tweak.

The reflections aligned with previous studies of capacity-building for teaching online, which have found that participants benefit from experiencing learning from the perspective of their own learners, particularly if they are also being encouraged to reflect on pedagogy at the same time (Cleary et al., 2017).

Purposeful Design

The original design of the suite of professional development was a digital-first strategy to enable participants to access learning on demand. However, this strategy did not explicitly include the intention of preparing participants to be online educators during a time of rapid transformation and change for both students and staff. Since professional development should reflect the situational needs of educator circumstances (Hitch et al., 2018), one core advantage of the sudden shift to online was the shared training needs of all educators regardless of discipline. Module coordinators reflected on the challenge of how they designed content for orienting learners to how to facilitate online learning.

I had to be really mindful of not just seeing the [learning management system] site for my module as a repository for all the information I wanted people to be aware of. Otherwise, it just becomes like a long reading list, which isn't going to help anyone learn or apply it to their context.

Obviously, there are design elements that underpin [my module redesign], such as changing learning materials to be much more explicit in the expectations and instructions, and including opportunities to orientate people to the features of the platform you're using (in this case Zoom). Also I needed to adjust the materials themselves to ensure I was using activities that are possible (and well-suited) to do online, including thinking about the strategies that can mitigate against technology challenges.

Reflections also included suggestions in the future thinking of designing and planning learning for educators specifically needing development in online learning facilitation.

Centre purpose in all design decisions that you make—think about whether what you want to deliver is better suited to being delivered asynchronously such as video, or synchronously such as via a Zoom workshop. There needs to be some benefit for students in terms of designing for that live environment and taking advantage of interaction and collaborative opportunities.

I found the most valuable activity was seeking out my own professional development and undertaking some short courses online in a range of higher education teaching topics. That way, I could think about my

experience as a learner and the design features used. I implemented some of what I noticed straight away in my own module such as explicit listing of time duration and the main activity type to situate and pace learning.

The design of online learning should include investigation of best practice online learning platforms. Asynchronous online resources to support precariously employed academics are more effective when they include explicit signposting to unpack the purpose of the pedagogical strategies.

Diverse Learners

The challenge in designing professional development is to cater for diverse knowledge, skills and experience of higher education instruction, subject matter expertise and online learning experience. Module coordinators also considered the particular vulnerabilities faced by casual academics:

When designing and planning the foundational module, I first considered the likely makeup of the cohort of learners. I knew that these modules would be targeted mostly at casual academic staff members on precarious contracts and I thought they would be feeling particularly vulnerable to job losses due to smaller student numbers caused by pandemic-related border closures. I also considered that sessional staff have widely varying length of experience teaching and different amounts of pedagogical knowledge. As QUT had previously offered the vast majority of its courses in face-to-face only format, I expected that few educators would have knowledge of or experience in online learning.

Module coordinators were aware of the dual role of the participant as learner and participant as educator and sought to include ways for participants to consider the application of their learning to practice. One opportunity module coordinators identified was to use digital reflective writing journals as a space to encourage this and a tool to overcome differences in prior experiences. Module participants were provided with prompting questions using the HEA standards framework to reflect on everyday teaching experiences, as this would draw attention to the

nuances of their own teaching journey (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). Coordinator reflections included the following:

You can capitalise on this tension in the teacher/learner-identity in your approach by directing the participants to think of their own students' online journey. For instance, after a set reading with questions, I'd put a reflection question about the process of reading the journal article and if they found it useful, or what could have prepared them better for the content. This helps educators develop a critical perspective to developing learner experience online.

When they arrived at a reflective journal section, I set up some key questions about the material and asked them to apply what they had read about or watched back to their own practice. This is a really important skill for learners to develop.

The asynchronous online component of the module which was self-directed relied largely on reflection. Here educators were encouraged to think about how theories and concepts related to their own context.

A community of practice approach can be used to develop educator capacity by normalising discussion of learning and teaching challenges. A key principle of modelling online best practice was the deliberate inclusion of informal conversations (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018) and peer learning within webinars to discuss and refine educator teaching practice.

In workshops, educators were able to get feedback from multiple places—myself as the instructor, their peers, and internal reflection. I drew upon mostly the first two modes because this is what synchronous learning is able to take advantage of—collaborative and interactive learning where learners can get immediate feedback on their thinking.

A challenge in providing teaching instruction to diverse learners is the desire for staff to receive discipline-specific training (Hott & Tietjen-Smith, 2018) while also acknowledging the diverse foundational skill set required for effective tertiary teaching (Klopper & Power, 2014). Given that staff from different discipline areas access the same professional development, module coordinators were acutely aware of the importance of providing development that would translate across multiple contexts.

One reflection included, 'I drew upon strategies that are applicable to a range of discipline areas. For example, facilitating whole group discussions, using small group activities, and using polling [online interaction tool] to gauge progress'. Furthermore, the nature of precarious employment by many university teaching staff was also taken into consideration with module design and delivery. Module coordinators expressed a desire to give teaching staff 'a professional edge' by looking for opportunities to 'get educators thinking about what they can do with their subject matter knowledge as dynamic, engaging teachers'. One coordinator reflected:

In my teaching and design of the module, I was cognisant of the uncertainties facing casual academic staff, particularly due to new budget constraints meaning there was less work than usual available. I knew many learners were participating not only to build their skills but to also build their future employability as academics.

Having a direct link between module content and the UKPSF placed effective practice at the forefront of learning. This deliberate signposting of reflective practice as a tool for professional learning helps to develop the awareness of professional identity and skill set of precariously employed academics.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While we acknowledge the importance of national and institutional context in designing professional development (Reimann et al., 2020), this case study has provided critical insights into the process of quick decisions for developing online professional development programmes for precariously employed academics. The four module coordinators reflected on key learnings from the rapid transition to the online environment. The summarised pedagogical recommendations for educators undertaking similar transitions in the future are grouped under designing and planning, facilitating and evaluating professional development:

Designing and Planning Online Professional Development

- Ensure that your design decisions for training others remain pedagogically driven, not technology driven. There will always be new and innovative learning technologies, but their use isn't justified unless there is a sound pedagogical rationale.
- It's tempting to overcrowd content online and over-provide information. Rather, think more about what you want people to do with what you're providing and how you can allow your learners to achieve learning outcomes.
- Expect your participants to have a range of familiarity and confidence in online learning and include instructions and pedagogical notes that reassure and justify making the design of learning explicit.
- Keep inclusive practices at the forefront of your design. What are the factors impacting your online learners? How have you demonstrated ways to include these learners, such as plain text, captioning, time-management prompts and clear signposting?

Facilitating Online Professional Development

- Model to staff how they need to orient students to technology and make expectations clear.
- Ask staff to normalise feedback conversations with students by disclosing to learners if they are becoming familiar with a particular learning technology and ask for immediate learner feedback.
- Take opportunities to be an online learner and think about how a student perspective can help you to identify changes to what you do.

Evaluation and Reflection on Professional Development

- Model reflective practice by seeking feedback from learners, both during asynchronous and synchronous learning. Explain how reflective

practice helps educators to continually refine and improve their teaching.

- Facilitate the opportunity for your learners to engage in collegial peer dialogues to share their teaching dilemmas and learn from the best practice of their colleagues.
- Encourage your participants to have their learning resources peer-reviewed as they are developed.
- Encourage precarious academics to consider how their engagement with professional development aligned with the UKPSF can give them a holistic perspective of their teaching and learning practice.

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