



The Teaching-Research Nexus

A guide for academics and policy-makers
in higher education

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Examples from Australian universities

A Program for Mentoring Research and Evaluation into Individual Teaching Units

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Broad discipline area:

- Academic development / Higher education

Year level:

- Any

TRN strategy:

- Conducting and drawing on research into student learning to make evidence based decisions about teaching

Teaching and learning context:

- Curriculum design
- Course evaluation

Brief description of the initiative:

Swinburne's Lilydale campus has traditionally been a teaching-only campus, but with changes in strategic direction of the university, academic staff are now expected to become active researchers and publishers. Many of these staff are inexperienced in research, and not sure how to design a research plan, apply for ethics clearance and funding and publish the results of the research.

This program provides the opportunity for one-on-one mentoring in a small research project, designed to evaluate a teaching innovation. Academic staff are mentored throughout the entire research process, from the initial research planning stages, to applying for funding, gaining ethical clearance, conducting the research project, and finally preparing and submitting papers for publication.

Small amounts of funding are available from the Faculty Learning & Teaching committee for successful applicants. Typically, two to three projects are conducted each semester.

Each project is conducted within a defined timeframe (typically a single semester), targeted at improving and evaluating individual subjects, while at the same time mentoring staff new to research. Subjects may be either new or redeveloped units, or identified from student feedback as 'poorly performing' units. A range of modifications or innovations are implemented, and then a small research project developed to assess the effectiveness of these changes, and to suggest further improvements. Results are published in peer-reviewed journals & conferences.

Each individual project involves a range of evaluation methodologies during the semester, targeted at gaining information on the effectiveness of the specific innovation or modifications. Subsequent evaluation in the following year (to monitor impact on students and to foster ongoing improvement) typically involves analysis of institutional-run student surveys, with small focus group interviews with students conducted for some projects.

Support from someone external to the immediate teaching team (in this case, the Educational Development Adviser) has proved essential to drive the projects. Academic teachers get caught up with the day-to-day workload of managing their teaching, so someone taking a project management role has been vital to keep the projects moving and on schedule.

This program started in semester 1, 2007, and to date, has resulted in acceptance of two refereed conference papers, with a further two papers currently under review. Academic staff who have participated in the program report the experience of actually formulating a research plan has been the most valuable part of the program (anecdotal evidence only).

Published papers (outcomes of this project):

Rajendran, D., Weaver, D, Bell, A & R. Jopp (2007) Supporting undergraduate management students to develop employability skills. 21st annual conference of ANZAM (Australian & New Zealand Academy of Management, Sydney, Dec 4-7, 2007).

For further details:

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