

# ***The Teaching-Research Nexus from the Policy-Maker's Perspective***

**Paper by**

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Colleagues -

The website that has just been launched ([www.trnexus.edu.au](http://www.trnexus.edu.au)) provides materials which I think can be of very great value to all of us interested in the teaching-research nexus. I would like to congratulate the team who have undertaken this project, produced this impressive and useful website, and arranged today's seminar. Thank you very much indeed.

I have been asked to speak about the teaching-research nexus from the policy-maker's perspective. Please forgive me if I speak with particular reference to this university. I hope that this will provide some thoughts of interest for colleagues from other universities also – whom I am delighted to see here at UWA. A very warm welcome. But my paper will be, at best, the perspective of one policy-maker in one university.

Perhaps I should also say that I am not wholly comfortable with the implicit assumption that someone like a DVC (Education) is best described as a 'policy-maker'. He or she is, at least in a university such as this, at best one voice – albeit an influential and perhaps even leading voice - in the shaping of institutional policy, and one pair of eyes in the monitoring of its implementation and performance. Moreover, I think that the role of a person in a position such as this is not simply to make policy, as though at a distance from the reality with which that policy is concerned, but to try to influence, through a variety of aspects of human leadership (and not simply policy-making and management), the way colleagues think about their priorities and how they go about them. I see the encouragement of discussion such as today, of conversation, of debate as important to this.

I also think it important that so-called policy-makers about education or teaching and learning be continually reminded that the importance of what they do ultimately depends upon its impact for good on the actual experience of students. Perhaps, rather than endlessly reiterate the phrase '*teaching-research nexus*', we should in fact occasionally rephrase it as the '*research-student learning nexus*', with teaching seen clearly as the intermediary means to an end – a good student learning experience - rather than an end in itself.

Having said that, however, I also want to emphasise that it seems to me that the importance of the teaching-research nexus should be, not only the benefit that it has for student learning (important though that this), but also the positive effects it can have for research that is enhanced by its interaction with the teaching of students. Speaking as someone who has encouraged and supervised much undergraduate research work, some of which has been published, I also know, for example, that some of my own research has been greatly enriched

by years of discussing the underlying material with undergraduate as well as postgraduate students. And yet it seems that the emphasis on the teaching-research nexus *tends* to come from those concerned with the promotion of good teaching rather than those concerned with the promotion of good research. So perhaps one of the first points for the policy-maker to note on the teaching-research nexus is the importance of engaging his or her colleagues in *both* the teaching *and* the research ‘sides’ of university policy-making and performance management, and indeed of trying – as we try here at UWA - to overcome the sense that there are ‘sides’ at all.

One of the reasons the emphasis on the teaching-research nexus appears to come more from those of us on the teaching ‘side’ than those on the research ‘side’ may be because, at least in research-intensive universities, talk of the teaching-research nexus is partly a way of claiming space and attention for teaching in a culture in which research has often seemed more greatly valued. In some universities, on the other hand, it may be partly to claim space for research in a teaching-focussed culture. UWA is a university which has traditionally placed strong emphasis on research. In the last ten to fifteen years, it has admirably placed a renewed emphasis on improving the quality of teaching, learning, and the student experience. This has required raising the profile of teaching and learning, and seeking to balance the research-intensive culture with a focus on teaching and learning.

Getting the balance right between teaching and research seems to many people to remain a continual issue or challenge. This reflects the fact that it cannot be taken for granted that the interaction between teaching and research will invariably be positive. Indeed, it may well be negative. Teaching and research compete for time. They may reflect competing priorities. For example, in teaching we may think it important to help students develop an overview of a discipline, including inter-disciplinary perspectives and the broader context of knowledge in which the disciplinary specialisation can best be understood; research may encourage ever-greater specialisation within a discipline or sub-sub-discipline (though I would also point out that there has in recent years been increasing emphasis again on the importance of interdisciplinary approaches in research as well as teaching). Discussion of a teaching-research nexus may be an attempt to square the circle – to reconcile the otherwise-competing approaches or demands of teaching and research; to turn a negative relationship into a positive one. While seeking a positive nexus as an aspiration and a strategy is highly desirable, our talk of a teaching-research nexus does not of itself make the relationship a positive one. To pursue the example I just gave: it would only be positive if the emphasis on research-led teaching was combined with an emphasis on the kind of breadth that is also educationally desirable.

A university such as this is strongly committed to a positive interaction between research and teaching. In 1998, in the wake of the Boyer Commission Report, *Reinventing undergraduate education: a blueprint for America’s research universities*, with its stress on ‘learning as inquiry’, UWA’s Teaching and Learning Committee created a working party on the teaching-research nexus, chaired by the then Deputy Vice-Chancellor and now Vice-Chancellor, Alan Robson; and in 2001 UWA took part in a joint study of practice and policy with Curtin and Ballarat universities, published by the federal education department under the title *Strengthening the Nexus Between Teaching and Research*. This University might not have adopted a stand-alone policy such as the University of Melbourne has under the title ‘The Teaching-Research Nexus: How research informs and enhances learning and teaching in the University of Melbourne’, nor a ‘Teaching-Research Nexus Plan’ such as Swinburne plan

to develop. But the teaching-research nexus is nonetheless very prominent in policy documents, as well as in practice, at UWA.

In its strategic plan, this University lists nine ‘defining characteristics’ of itself. One of these is simply: ‘research-intensive, with a strong teaching and research nexus across all our disciplines’. This may be thought to be a classic case of a rhetorical claim or aspiration to a teaching-research nexus. But there is more to it than that. A good deal flows from this statement.

Within the University, this claim is followed through in a variety of ways in the processes of planning, reporting, review, and accountability, that provide the structure and processes through which university policy is articulated and its implementation overseen. It may truly be said that the desire positively to combine research and teaching *flavours* a great deal of what the university does, and how it does it – staff recruitment, development and promotion; student mix; approaches to curriculum and teaching methods; resource allocation; publicity materials; and on and on. It is also possible to point to many good, even exceptional, instances of positive teaching-research nexus – including the disciplines in which from first semester of first year, the subject is approached through a research focus, and the field in which the faculty dean personally oversees the research-focussed work of outstanding undergraduates from first year on.

More specifically at a university policy level:

- The broad strategic plan leads into what we call an ‘Operational Priorities Plan’, and to management plans in particular areas. UWA’s Operational Priorities Plan for 2006-2008 contains a section, under teaching and learning, which sets out an ‘operational objective’ ‘to further develop the links between teaching, learning and research’. It sets out strategies and specific actions to implement this, and assigns operational responsibility to a range of officers of the University, including deans of faculties.
- The University’s management plans for teaching and learning, and also for research, both refer to giving effect to the teaching-research nexus.
- In the cycle of review of *courses* – e.g. the BA or the BSc– a report is required on the ‘functionality and visibility of [the] teaching-research nexus’.
- In the cycle of reviews of *schools* within the university (our equivalent of academic departments), a report is required on ‘the coordination and collaboration in curriculum development and research (including graduate output) achieved between teaching and research areas in the school’ and the ‘extent of [the] teaching-research nexus’.
- The University’s ‘Guidelines for the Establishment and Review of UWA Research and Training Centres’ say that ‘a centre should enhance the teaching-research nexus in clearly identifiable ways’ and ‘In particular, research staff in centres should be encouraged to contribute to teaching and/or supervision of students enrolled in cognate schools.’ Proposals for the creation of centres require an account of how they will enhance the teaching-research nexus in the University.
- The description of the role of the University’s informal ‘discipline groups’ says: ‘Discipline Groups are likely to have their roots in research but, through the teaching-research nexus, will have an influence on teaching’.

- Academic staff are required to prepare an ‘Academic Portfolio’ for promotion, tenure and annual Performance Development Reviews. The portfolio covers teaching, research, and service, and in the teaching and learning section staff are asked to ‘Outline how your curricula promotes the teaching-research nexus and encourages student engagement with the discipline and its emerging issues/directions.’

So there are a variety of ways in which the teaching-research nexus is reflected in University planning, approval, and review processes. It may be evident to you, and unsurprising, that there are different notions here of the ways in which research and teaching do and should positively interact.

This University’s efforts to produce a positive interaction between teaching and research is reflected in such strategies as:

- Expanding opportunities for research-based learning in undergraduate courses, including the introduction of fully-funded research projects for undergraduate students;
- Expanding the Postgraduate Teaching Internship Scheme, which gives selected ‘higher degree by research’ students supported teaching experience while undertaking their research;
- Revising HR policies and school management policies to reduce barriers between career research staff and ‘teaching and research’ staff; and
- Promoting teaching opportunities for career research staff.

We see one intended outcome of our ‘Foundations of Teaching and Learning’ program as being that new, or newish, academic staff ‘demonstrate the relationship between teaching, research and scholarship in your own teaching practices’; and we see a growing recognition of the value and legitimacy of ‘the scholarship of teaching and learning’.

Encouragement of linkages between teaching and research will come indirectly in other ways. For example, under the theme of encouraging ‘student engagement’ in the out-of-classroom life of the university, we should be encouraging students to attend, say, special public lectures or research seminars by outstanding scholars. This aspect of emphasis on ‘student engagement’ should encourage the teaching-research nexus.

No doubt the graduate attributes we seek to encourage – or, as UWA calls them, ‘educational principles’ we seek to apply – are encouraged by teaching-research linkages. But we – like, I am sure, most universities - do not really know how well those attributes are developed, let alone what contribution the teaching-research nexus makes to them.

And so the question remains: how much impact do the teaching-research nexus and our policies about it actually have on the teaching and the research our academics undertake; and, above all, how much impact do they have on the real learning experience of students? Is there a *co-incident* of research and of teaching, rather than a concerted and positive *interaction* between the two? How, indeed, do we know that the negative effects of the competing demands of research and teaching do not overwhelm the positive effects of their interaction?

Here at UWA, we know – for example - that our Student Guild is in principle supportive of the importance of the teaching-research nexus; but we do not know what impact students

actually think it has on them. The principal teaching and learning indicators which this University uses – for example, for operational targets for faculties, and for performance review purposes – are the CEQ and our internal student evaluations of units, SURF, which stands for Student Unit Reflective Feedback.

- Yet there is no question on the CEQ which relates directly to the teaching-research nexus. This is important. The student evaluation used across the country to measure institutional performance in teaching and learning has no direct reference to the teaching-research nexus. If that nexus is to be taken seriously across all institutions, perhaps it should. I will come back briefly to the question of whether it will be taken seriously in all institutions.
- Students are able to make comments about their course on the CEQ form, and these comments are analysed using the CEQuery software package. None of the over-25 categories under which comments can be categorised relates to the teaching-research nexus.
- Our internal SURF survey, which only has six questions, also has none that refers directly to the connection between teaching and research.

More encouragingly, the bank of questions which individual teaching staff can choose to use for their confidential SPOT – Student Perception of Teaching – surveys, does include questions that staff can choose to use relating to research skills, use of recent research findings, and so on. But SPOT surveys are for the use of individual staff only, for their own self-reflection, and are not used by the institution to monitor what, or how, we are doing.

It is commonly said that ‘what gets measured gets done’. The absence of any connection between the teaching-research nexus and the standard teaching and learning indicators seems to me to make it less likely than it would otherwise be for the teaching-research nexus to be taken seriously by all of us – including deans of faculties, heads of schools, unit coordinators, and individual academic staff members.

Another way of saying this is that we do not measure the extent of teaching-research interaction, nor the effects (benefits and costs) of this; and, although we have policies and strategies aimed at encouraging this in various ways, our incentives towards this – for faculties and schools, and individual academics - are few and blunt. It would be good if the combined effect of this Teaching-Research Nexus project and the Teaching Quality Indicators project were to make it straightforward to change this.

Given that research is very unevenly spread across Australian universities, and therefore that the teaching-research nexus is liable to be variously interpreted and unevenly valued, I wonder whether there would also be very uneven interest between universities in any CEQ question that asks students about the links in their course between teaching and research.

There are other ways in which the strategic commitment to the teaching-research nexus is followed through. In the first round of AUQA audits, some of those universities that especially value the teaching-research nexus will have referred to it in their performance portfolio. In some cases – though from quick examination of AUQA audit reports, surprisingly few - this resulted in commentary and even a recommendation from AUQA related to the teaching-research nexus. Where there was a recommendation, in line with

AUQA processes this will have led to a follow-up report, and the expectation of more being said in the second-round AUQA audits now underway. In some universities, this will have provided some impetus to greater focus on the teaching-research nexus.

Here at UWA, there are a number of special projects and reviews underway which are important for long-term policy-making, and have implications for the teaching-research nexus here. These include:

- Our Review of Course Structures
- A working party on what UWA needs to do in its educational activities to become one of the top 50 universities in the world within 50 years, and
- Our involvement in the Teaching Quality Indicators project, and reviews of student evaluation surveys.

Our Review of Course Structures, which will report in about three months time, has been informed by a working party on the teaching-research nexus. That working party argued that ‘It is important that we articulate “research” as the essential survival skill of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, enabling graduates to access, interpret and use new knowledge throughout their lives, rather than conceiving research as an elitist engagement in essentially very esoteric knowledge’. Responding to this, the Review’s issues and options paper says that ‘While there are certainly challenges to be overcome, the creation of a research culture at all levels of tertiary study is increasingly important. In the information age, it is research skills that will enable graduates to become familiar with new fields, and that will equip them to respond to changes in the underlying base of knowledge within their discipline’. Various of the options for structural change at UWA which are currently being analysed further, before the Steering Group makes recommendations to the University, involve embedding research skills development into more, if not all, undergraduate degree courses. The Course Structures Review is thus providing an excellent opportunity to revisit the teaching-research nexus explicitly and directly.

Another process underway at UWA with potential for long-term policy impact is discussion of the educational attributes of the world’s ‘top 50’ universities. The discussion paper on this, while reflecting some ambivalence about the reality of a beneficial teaching-research nexus in some instances, draws particular attention to the fact that many leading universities are providing undergraduates with opportunities to participate in research themselves. We are engaged in a university-wide discussion of what we can learn from the educational attributes of ‘top 50’ universities for what we at UWA should do, and one important manifestation of this will be the priorities and strategies we choose for our next Operational Priorities Plan covering the five years from 2009 to 2013 – what is likely to be the most important planning document for UWA for the next five years.

It would be premature to predict what these processes of discussion at UWA will lead to, but it would be startling and disappointing if it did not produce further clarity regarding and emphasis on ensuring the reality of positive interaction between research and teaching.

Institutional planning and policy-making takes place within the framework of government policy. This too can have significant impact on the teaching-research nexus. It is possible that the current Bradley review of higher education will result in policies which encourage greater diversification of the missions and roles of universities. Some may over time become more

comfortable to be essentially teaching, rather than teaching and research, institutions. If this is so, it may further diversify approaches to the teaching-research nexus between universities. Similarly, it is quite possible that in the development of compacts between universities and the government – compacts related to the particular missions of individual institutions – there will be further emphasis on the teaching-research nexus in the case of some universities.

However this may turn out, as a so-called university ‘policy-maker’ really interested in what actually happens for students both in and outside the classroom, I again warmly welcome this project on the teaching-research nexus or, as I am tempted to rephrase it, ‘generating positive interaction between research and student learning’. I especially welcome the encouragement and help this project gives to individual academics to develop further the various links between research and teaching, and the encouragement and help it gives to policy-makers in encouraging and supporting our colleagues in doing so.