Learning and teaching from the edge to centre stage: Critical factors in embedding sustainable university-wide engagement in external awards and grants funding initiatives

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Teaching awards, grants and fellowships are strategies used to recognise outstanding contributions to learning and teaching, encourage innovation, and to shift learning and teaching from the edge to centre stage. Examples range from school, faculty and institutional award and grant schemes to national schemes such as those offered by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the United States, and the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning in higher education in the United Kingdom.

The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has experienced outstanding success in all areas of the ALTC funding since the inception of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in 2004. This paper reports on a study of the critical factors that have enabled sustainable and resilient institutional engagement with ALTC programs. As a lens for examining the QUT environment and practices, the study draws upon the five conditions of the framework for effective dissemination of innovation developed by Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers and Abraham (2005, 2010):

1. Effective, multi-level leadership and management
2. Climate of readiness for change
3. Availability of resources
4. Comprehensive systems in institutions and funding bodies
5. Funding design

The discussion on the critical factors and practical and strategic lessons learnt for successful university-wide engagement offer insights for university leaders and staff who are responsible for learning and teaching award, grant and associated internal and external funding schemes.

Keywords: education reform, learning and teaching, funding

Introduction

A number of initiatives have been developed by national governments to provide funds to reward, recognise and foster quality teaching. Australia has a checkered history of such initiatives including the National Priority Reserve Fund (1990); the Commonwealth Staff Development Fund (CSDF) (1990); the Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) (1992); Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (CUTSD) (1997); and the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) (2000). In 2003, the response of the Australian Government to the Higher Education Review, *Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future* (Australian Government. Department of Education Science and Training, 2003) provided significant funds for educational reform, which was based primarily around three program initiatives. The first program arising from the government's response was the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund, established in 2006. This somewhat controversial performance-based incentive fund rewards institutions that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching, based on indicators from the Course Experience Questionnaire, graduate outcomes in terms of employment and further study and low attrition and subject completions. While seeking to recognise and reward excellence, the Fund also aspires to afford learning and teaching excellence equal status with research excellence (Australian Government. Department of Education Science and Training, 2004).

The two remaining initiatives which were aimed at heightening the status of teaching and focussing attention on learning and teaching included the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education established in 2004, and renamed the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) in 2008, and the strengthening of the Australian Awards for University Teaching (Australian Government. Department of Education Science and Training, 2004). Both initiatives provided a pivotal national focus for the enhancement of learning and teaching in Australian higher education institutions, at the same time recognising the importance of such schemes in recognising and rewarding excellence and promoting the message that teaching is valued.

The creation of the ALTC was a watershed in the history of Australian higher education. It saw an investment of approximately $27 million annually to advance, in a systemic way, learning and teaching in Australian universities. The budget of the predecessor body, the AUTC, was approximately $1 million.

In a review of the ALTC, Professor Lee Dow (2008) concluded the "ALTC is clearly established within the fabric of Australian higher education. It is accorded a distinctive role that is acknowledged and valued by a majority and a broad range of university leaders" (p. 4). The 2008 Review of Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales) provides further validation of ALTC's worth, maintaining that the ALTC should continue to play a significant role in the further improvement of teaching and learning in higher education with no need for any major change to its mode of operation or focus.

However, despite evidence of the ALTC's success, the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced in January 2011 that the ALTC is to be abolished in January 2012 as part of the funding cut backs to support the 2011 Queensland flood relief (Gillard, 2011). The announcement sends a clear message to universities that national learning and teaching award and grant funding opportunities are both volatile and vulnerable. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) will administer funding for the

grants and awards programs from 1 January 2012 (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2011). In this current context and given Australia's variable history of national funding to foster quality learning and teaching, the importance of resilient institutional systems, practices and governance that enable timely and systematic engagement with the programs afforded through bodies like the ALTC takes on vital significance.

How then can universities best position themselves to maximise engagement with award, grant and fellowship programs funded by such bodies? How can universities ensure that their capacity to respond to such programs remains central and not on the edge of their core business? What are the enablers and inhibitors to successful and sustainable engagement with external learning and teaching funding bodies? How can institutional resilience be sustained with their ebb and flow? These questions provided the motivation for this study.

A large urban university with three campuses and approximately 40,000 students and over 4,500 academic and 2,000 professional staff, the QUT has experienced considerable success in all areas of ALTC programs since their inception and now has the fundamental foundations in place to ensure responsiveness to existing and new opportunities. QUT's practices and strategy for engaging with the ALTC are well documented. A continuous cycle of review and improvement has underscored the embedding of a sustainable University-wide engagement strategy as has a rigorous reporting regime to key University committees and senior management on ALTC engagement and outcomes at the University, faculty and individual level. The integration of ALTC-related activity into the institutional operational environment has reinforced the significance of this engagement and affirmed the centre stage status of learning and teaching.

Forty-six Australian higher education institutions are eligible to apply for the range of ALTC programs. In terms of ratio of applications submitted to ALTC and those that are successful QUT outcomes have been excellent. In the period 2006-2010 QUT's cumulative success rate across ALTC programs has been: Grants 36% as the lead institution, Awards (including Citations) 52%, Fellowships 45%, all above the national average. On national comparisons QUT has consistently been at the leading edge in terms of the numbers of awards and fellowships received and has a solid track record on grants.

Given this success and the need for institutional resilience and sustainability, the central research question of this study was:

> What guidance and practical advice for university leaders and staff responsible for learning and teaching award and funding schemes can be derived from the experience of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in the initial years (2005 - 2010) of the engagement of the Australian higher education sector with the ALTC?

This paper reports on a study of the critical factors that have enabled and at times hindered QUT's engagement with ALTC programs – factors which ensure that the University is well positioned for ongoing future engagement with national learning and teaching award and grant funding opportunities, whatever shape that may take. Although this paper focuses QUT's experience it worth noting that the 2010 ALTC Project *Sustainable leadership of teaching and learning initiatives: Lessons from the Promoting Excellence Initiative* will offer insights from a sector-wide perspective on the leadership challenges and models for sustaining learning and teaching engagement.

The approach

Literature on critical factors in embedding sustainable university-wide engagement in external awards and grants funding is limited. Searches on different keyword combinations, such as the terms: "higher education, grants, awards, sustainability, embedding, dissemination, upscaling, teaching or learning" yield few results. QUT's engagement with the ALTC has been informed by the scant and predominantly ALTC focussed literature that examines dissemination, uptake and embedding of learning and teaching projects and innovations. In particular, the ALTC's view that dissemination is most effective when it is principally engaged-focussed has been influential in shaping QUT's approach to embedding University-wide engagement. The ALTC Dissemination Framework explains that "dissemination also requires that some action has been taken to embed and upscale the innovation within its own context (discipline or institution) and or to replicate or transform an innovation in a new context and to embed the innovation in the new context" (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2008 p. 1). In the context of this study, the ALTC Awards, Grants and Fellowship programs are interpreted as the innovation and dissemination as the University's active engagement with these programs.

Of the literature that is available, a number of studies have analysed and identified factors which influence the embedding or sustainability of project outcomes. Lesley Parker (2008) undertook a review of the ALTC Leadership Program and the 22 projects that were funded during 2006 and mid-2008. Among other things the subsequent report drew "together the synergies and learnings from the projects... and discusses operational and strategic issues of importance to the sector, individual institutions, policy developers, the ALTC and other key groups" (Parker, 2008, p. 1). Factors were identified "that appear to facilitate successful outcomes and sustainability" [of projects] (Parker, 2008, p. 13). While McKenzie, Alexander, Harper and Anderson (2005) analysed a number of case studies to reveal the conditions that favour the dissemination and implementation of innovations, the study by Southwell, Gannaway, Orrell, Chalmers and Abraham (2005) systematically investigated Australian and international learning and teaching grant schemes and their outcomes, to determine strategies the Carrick Institute [now ALTC] might employ to maximise the likelihood of achieving large-scale change in teaching and learning across the Australian higher education sector. De la Harpe and Radloff (2006) provide a useful synthesis of two major change models and three studies (including Southwell et al, 2005 and Mackenzie, 2005) that examine the factors that enable project or innovation success.

There is a lot of commonality in the grouping of factors that were identified by the studies, including:

- Distributed and distributive leadership – which is represented by senior level support and strong collegial networks and partnerships that facilitate communication, support, resourcing and ownership
- Clear and shared vision and goals – which is represented by a culture that promotes and values teaching, innovation and change, and the alignment of internal and external priorities and strategies
- Institutional infrastructure to support staff and projects – which is represented through systems, policies and processes, human, financial and physical resources

With such a correlation between the factors and as one of the authors of this study was a QUT staff member, it was decided that the five conditions that were identified in the Southwell et al

(2005, 2010) study, and which were critical in the successful implementation, embedding and up-scaling of an innovation, would be used as a meaningful lens for examining the factors that enabled or successful engagement with the ALTC Programs from an institution-wide perspective.

These five conditions of the framework for effective dissemination of innovation are:

1. Effective, multi-level leadership and management
2. Climate of readiness for change
3. Availability of resources
4. Comprehensive systems in institutions and funding bodies
5. Funding design
    (Southwell, et al., 2005, 2010)

Findings from the initial analysis were then examined using Southwell et al's (2005, 2010) five conditions for effective dissemination as outlined above.

The findings

Drawing on Coburn's (2003) and Southwell et al's (2005, 2010) observations on the distinction between dissemination, embedding and scaling up of a project provided a useful reference point for the initial analysis of the critical factors that have enabled or hindered QUT's strategy for engaging with ALTC. For example the following questions were posed in the initial analysis phase: How did the strategy move beyond communication or raising awareness about external award and grant funding opportunities? How was the strategy embedded and mainstreamed into local processes and institutional practices? How effectively has the strategy been up-scaled to become central as opposed to peripheral to the University's business?

Southwell et al's (2005, 2010) five conditions for effective dissemination as outlined were then used as a lens to further distil the findings from this initial analysis. Table 1 provides an overview of factors enabling QUT's engagement with the ALTC and elaborates further on the five conditions. A description of the factors that hindered QUT's engagement follows the table.

Table 1: Factors and indicators that enabled engagement

Factors and Indicators	Supported engagement
1. **Effective multi-level leadership and management**	
	• Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), ALTC-related responsibilities and advocacy • Director of Learning and Teaching Development, line management, advocacy and resourcing of the Awards and Grants Service • Strong, cohesive and influential network of Assistant Deans (Teaching and Learning) with oversight of the identification of prospective ALTC applicants and nominees at a faculty-level • The Awards and Grants Service with a leadership remit to enable and facilitate wide engagement with ALTC Programs • Selection panels for ALTC Awards and Fellowships comprising a mix of senior management positions and past successful nominees • Faculty-based Learning and Teaching Developers offering guidance to Assistant Deans (Teaching and Learning) on prospective nominees and grant applicants and providing a local touchstone for staff on all ALTC

Factors and Indicators	Supported engagement
	Programs • Informal leadership leveraged by past ALTC Award, Grant and Fellowship recipients
Clear goals	• Key Performance Indicators (KPI) at an institutional and faculty level on the number of ALTC Awards, Grants and Fellowships received
Shared vision	• Direct alignment between the purpose statement of the Awards and Grants Service whose remit is to enable engagement with external learning and teaching related funding bodies and the University's Blueprint
Stable and consistent leadership	The following formal leadership positions were relatively stable 2005-2010, abreast and engaged with the national funding body's remit: • Three Deputy-Vice Chancellors • Director Learning and Teaching Development • Manager of the Awards and Grants Service • Assistant Deans (Learning and Teaching) in each faculty
Level of commitment to success	• Highly motivated multi-level leadership and management, bolstered by institutional KPIs
Complementary leadership development	• All QUT Assistant Deans (Teaching and Learning) participated in the 2005 ALTC Project *Caught between a rock and a hard place* (Southwell, West, & Scoufis, 2008) led by QUT's Director Learning and Teaching Development. The project was oriented to building leadership capacity for excellence for Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning), this raised their awareness and understanding of ALTC
2. Climate of readiness for change	
Recognition of the need for change	• Recognition and advocacy at the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Director of Learning and Teaching Development level that optimising engagement with ALTC paralleled the complexities of that required for successful engagement with the Australian Research Council
Skills, disposition and knowledge	• Manager of the Awards and Grant Service and Assistant Deans (Learning and Teaching) shared a long history of engagement with the QUT community through the University's substantial internal learning and teaching grant and award schemes
Review of policies	• Inclusion of an ALTC engagement policy in the University's Manual of Policy and Procedures
3. Availability of resources	
Human	• In 2006 the Awards and Grants Service comprised one person, three full-time staff members joined the team at intervals to 2010. • Critical readers appointed on a casual basis to support the work of the Awards and Grants Service in providing feedback on applications, capped at 10 -15 hours per application
Financial	• The injection in 2008 of $219,686 ALTC funding to QUT under the Promoting Excellence Initiative, directed predominantly to salaries to build the human resource base of the Awards and Grants Service
Infrastructure	• A comprehensive Awards and Grants website • Investment in information management of an institutional repository of ALTC-related activity
Resources	• In-kind support from the media development area for desktop publishing and copy editing of award submissions and resources
Align to University strategic initiatives	• KPIs of the University aligned to ALTC
Identify and document resources	• Comprehensive suite of resources developed for the QUT context to complement those available through ALTC. Resources are accessible from the Awards and Grants website
Provide professional development to build capacity and expertise	• A cohesive suite of professional development activities provided for those applying or nominated for external awards and grants: • Workshops and information sessions • Selection panel, review and feedback (involving Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Executive Deans and past ALTC Award and Fellowship

Factors and Indicators	Supported engagement
	recipients) • Individual consultations and feedback from the Awards and Grants Service • Critical readers • Informal mentoring from past recipients
4. Comprehensive systems in institutions	
Provide ready access to institutional planning, communication, reporting, and systems	• A comprehensive and embedded reporting cycle to the Vice-Chancellor (six weekly), Executive Deans and Assistant Deans (Learning and Teaching) through annual engagement reports by faculty and national comparative data reports • The Manager of the Awards and Grants Service meets annually with each Assistant Dean (Teaching and Learning) to inform a three year strategic plan of future award and fellowship nominations • Strong partnerships between the Awards and Grants Service and Corporate Reporting, Office of Research, Office of Commercial Services, Project Portfolio Office
Develop collegial communication and interactions on teaching and learning matters	• The Awards and Grants Service operates in partnership with faculties, the model for engagement is consultative and collegiate and is recognised as such across the institution. • The Awards and Grants Service brokers connections for staff on learning and teaching matters and between QUT's ALTC scholars and the wider QUT community
Provide support for quality processes, monitoring and evaluation, and access to resources	• Governance is stipulated in policy • Processes for applying for national awards, grants and fellowships are consistent, transparent and articulated in policy • Modelling good practice in program evaluation through formative evaluation of the Awards and Grants Service aligning with QUT's Quality Improvement Cycle and summative evaluation of the Service by an external evaluator
5. Funding design	
Contextualise funding framework, processes and guidelines pertaining to national schemes	• An established funding framework underpins the work of the Awards and Grants Service to support and maximise engagement with national funding body • Internal processes, guidelines, templates, calendar brochures, align to the national scheme.

The one important factor that has *inhibited* QUT's engagement with the ALTC has been the lack of alignment between the University's internal teaching awards and grants and the ALTC programs. Strategies that have been put in place to rectify this problem include submissions to senior management, the inclusion of senior management in learning and teaching on internal awards selection committee and extending lead-time to develop national applications to accommodate lack of alignment. Synergies between internal grants and external funding opportunities have also not yet been consolidated.

Discussion and implications: Critical factors in enabling engagement

As outlined in Table 1 there are a number of factors and indicators that support institution-wide engagement with ALTC.

What then can be derived from the QUT experience in the initial years 2005 - 2010 of engagement with the ALTC in terms of guidance and practical advice for university leaders and staff responsible for learning and teaching award and funding schemes?

Bradley (2008) maintains that the future success of the Australian higher education system is inextricably linked to its ability to meet the challenge of providing all students with a stimulating and rewarding higher education experience. QUT's engagement with ALTC with its focus on improving the student learning experience by supporting quality teaching and practice was positioned from the outset as core University business. This positioning has played a significant role in QUT's successful engagement across all ALTC programs.

QUT's engagement with the ALTC is mobilised through formal and informal leadership roles that encourage a collaborative approach. Following Southwell et al's (2005, 2010) recognition of the importance of leadership buy-in in the project context, the supportive leadership from senior management has been integral to successfully embedding and up-scaling QUT's engagement strategy with ALTC.

The Awards and Grants Service with its remit to enable institution-wide engagement with the ALTC offers an example of how supportive leadership from senior management has facilitated effective multi-level leadership. It is notable in the context of this discussion that the Awards and Grants Service comprises four professional staff members, none of whom are members of senior staff. The leadership contribution of the Service is captured in Figure 1.
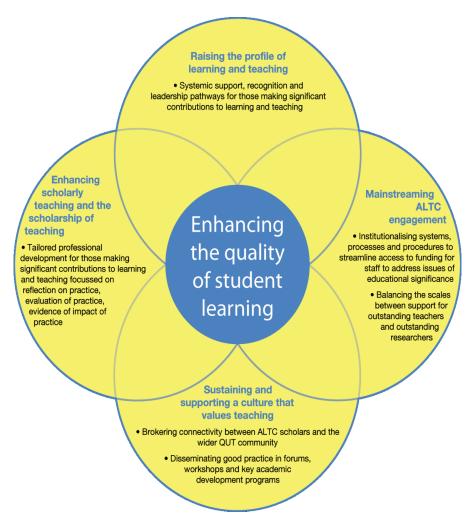

Raising the profile of learning and teaching
• Systemic support, recognition and leadership pathways for those making significant contributions to learning and teaching

Enhancing scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching
• Tailored professional development for those making significant contributions to learning and teaching focussed on reflection on practice, evaluation of practice, evidence of impact of practice

Enhancing the quality of student learning

Mainstreaming ALTC engagement
• Institutionalising systems, processes and procedures to streamline access to funding for staff to address issues of educational significance
• Balancing the scales between support for outstanding teachers and outstanding researchers

Sustaining and supporting a culture that values teaching
• Brokering connectivity between ALTC scholars and the wider QUT community
• Disseminating good practice in forums, workshops and key academic development programs

Figure 1: Value adding of the Awards and Grants Service

A number of important roles are noteworthy:

The *Director of Learning and Teaching Development* position has contributed strong senior leadership, advocacy at the Deputy Vice-Chancellor level, resourcing to establish QUT's interface with ALTC and has led and/or evaluated a number of ALTC projects. This contribution has been particularly significant in building QUT's national profile and leadership credibility within QUT on engaging with the external funding body.

Assistant Deans (Learning and Teaching) are a strong, cohesive and influential network with primary oversight of ALTC engagement at the faculty-level. This group contributes through their commitment to success, their oversight of the internal learning and teaching awards and grants and collegial cooperation and communication around teaching and learning matters. Many have led ALTC projects or received Australian Awards for University Teaching. They have a clear understanding of the merit of engagement with a body such as the ALTC.

Learning and Teaching Developers provide a distributed model of academic support involving co-location from the central Learning and Teaching Unit in faculties 4.5 days per week. This model contributes a vital conduit for awareness raising, communication and advice on ALTC-related activity at the faculty level and, through working in partnership with the Awards and Grants Service, provide one of the key links in QUT's comprehensive systems.

ALTC Award, Grant and Fellowship recipients are an influential and respected critical mass of QUT staff who contribute in a raft of ways to leadership, promotion, support and sustaining engagement with the ALTC.

This multi-level leadership and management approach has been instrumental to the evolution of QUT's successful engagement with the ALTC.

The historical corporate knowledge and enduring partnerships that existed prior to the launch of the ALTC have made a significant contribution to QUT's climate for readiness to build and maximise the interface with ALTC and its programs. Prior to ALTC's inception a learning and teaching Awards and Grants Service managed by one staff member existed at QUT to support in particular the institution's long standing internal grants scheme. This meant that ALTC programs could be dovetailed into an existing service that had already established its credibility and productive working relationships with faculties/divisions and staff. The existing framework for collaboration between the faculties/divisions and with staff through QUT's awards and grant programs has been pivotal to embedding an integrated model for engagement with ALTC opportunities. The involvement of senior management in selection panels and feedback loops to nominees, Assistant Deans (Teaching and Learning), faculty-based Learning and Teaching Developers, previous ALTC Award, Grant and Fellowship recipients and centralised expertise from the Awards and Grants Service has enabled the bedding down of an integrated model and University-wide sense of ownership and involvement. Maintaining an integrated model, while perhaps the most difficult to establish, is advocated as the most robust and most effective, ensuring an ongoing central and local involvement in academic development.

The scholarship of teaching and learning and the valuing of teaching have been institutional hallmarks through QUT's learning and teaching grants, awards and fellowship programs. The enduring Teaching and Learning Grant scheme was an innovative initiative when it was

established at QUT in 1992. The Grant scheme has an annual investment of approximately $650,000 and associated expertise for managing the scheme continue to be in place today.

Policy systems at QUT were responsive and dynamic, in part evidenced by the inclusion of an ALTC engagement policy in QUT's Manual of Policy and Procedures.

Key lessons learned from QUT's engagement with the ALTC of relevance to other higher education institutions seeking to build or enhance their interface with similar national funding bodies, such as DEEWR from 2012, are:

- An institutional climate of readiness for change is pivotal to building a sustainable model for engagement
- Multi-level leadership is instrumental to mobilising and sustaining staff engagement
- The infrastructure required to optimise engagement parallels the complexities of that required for successful engagement with the Australian Research Council (ARC). Insights from ARC (or equivalent) and the associated engagement and advocacy at the most senior levels is pivotal to embedding an engagement strategy
- A developmental, iterative approach to developing submissions is highly motivational for staff engagement. This tailored professional development validates and recognises those who are making significant and outstanding contributions to learning and teaching. Irrespective of whether a grant, award or fellowship is successful staff repeatedly report that the developmental experience is of exceptional value in terms of reflecting on and continuously improving learning and teaching scholarship. Similarly the nominations and applications, the artefacts of this process, are redeployed for multiple learning and teaching purposes
- A clearly articulated institutional policy on engagement is essential to providing transparency to processes and procedures and defining the roles and responsibilities of university officers
- The level of support that can effectively provided in a large and complex organisational context must be made explicit

Conclusion

Universities have traditionally conferred more status and reward on research achievements. Teaching has been acknowledged to have a lower status and therefore less access to rewards and recognition in comparison (Chalmers, 2011 p. 34). The ALTC and its programs offered a window of opportunity for balancing the scales between two interdependent agendas, research and teaching, moving teaching from the edge to centre stage. The volatility of Australian national funding bodies oriented to enhancement of learning and teaching reinforces the relevance of critical factors that enable sustainable and resilient approaches engagement with national funding bodies such as the ALTC.

There was a consistent view among senior staff and faculty staff involved in ALTC programs, that QUT had successfully targeted its engagement with the ALTC in close alignment with the University's institutional priorities. The use of high level faculty and University selection panels to select nominees and to review ALTC Award and Fellowship applications provides an excellent mechanism for aligning the latter with institutional priorities. This approach also engages senior staff with the ALTC programs and together with the excellent reporting by the Awards and Grants Service to senior management ensures that the ALTC remains constantly on the radar of the University's key decision makers (Cummings, 2010 p. 13).

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