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Surviving and sustaining teaching excellence: A narrative of ‘entrapment’

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Abstract

”This paper discusses the key concepts of ‘surviving’ and ‘sustaining’ in the context of teaching excellence in contemporary universities, and reports the findings emerging from a work-in-progress study of Award Winning Teachers. It provides evidence that teachers recognized for their passion, commitment and expertise in teaching, work well beyond their paid hours to achieve excellence. Most become ‘entrapped’ in a culture of over-work that can have a negative impact on their lives and well-being. Factors that influence ‘teaching sustainability’ are presented, to support university teachers, administrators and managers in thinking about ways to improve the teaching and learning environment for teachers as well as for students.”

Surviving and Sustaining Teaching Excellence: A Narrative of 'Entrapment'

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Abstract: This paper discusses the key concepts of 'surviving' and 'sustaining' in the context of teaching excellence in contemporary universities, and reports the findings emerging from a work-in-progress study of Award Winning Teachers. It provides evidence that teachers recognized for their passion, commitment and expertise in teaching, work well beyond their paid hours to achieve excellence. Most become 'entrapped' in a culture of over-work that can have a negative impact on their lives and well-being. Factors that influence 'teaching sustainability' are presented, to support university teachers, administrators and managers in thinking about ways to improve the teaching and learning environment for teachers as well as for students.

Intended Audience: University teachers; administrators and managers; Higher education researchers

Introduction

'Surviving' and 'sustaining' are two key concepts featured in the conference title. Whilst the intent of the theme is not articulated, the two inter-linked words carry powerful everyday meanings. Survival implies over-coming life-threatening circumstances and events. Sustaining suggests prolonged effort, but can also imply nurturing, suggesting that 'sustaining' includes a very positive and enriching dimension, not just surviving but thriving (Macquarie University, 1999). This paper looks at university teaching through the lens of social sustainability. It argues that teaching is a very complex and challenging role, that the demands for quality in teaching and learning are rising, that resources are reducing; and that even highly motivated, passionate, committed and expert teachers are finding it difficult to sustain their work at a good enough quality.

Teaching can be imagined as a vocation attracting committed, enthusiastic and highly skilled people, well able to meet these challenges and fully satisfied by the intrinsic rewards of the role. However, the literature suggests that while most teachers are intrinsically motivated, many are finding their work increasing difficult (OECD, 2006), they do not always feel highly valued, and they also want fair and equitable treatment and reasonable rewards for their work (Crosswell, 2006; McInnis, 1999). Sadly, the pay, status and working conditions of university teachers in much of the developed world is falling (American Federation of Teachers, 2009; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009) and employment has become more insecure, with teaching increasingly undertaken by people on a casual basis (Brown, Goodman, & Yasukawa,

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2008; Junor, 2004; Pocock, 2004). The seminal work of Boyer (1990), also highlights the difference in recognition and rewards that excellence in research activity attracts compared to excellence in teaching.

Work-related stress in teaching has been recognised in schools as a serious issue for some time (OECD, 2005; Tennant, 2007; Tremayne, Martin, & Dowson, 2007; Whitehead, Ryba, & O'Driscoll, 2000). Studies of tertiary teachers are less prevalent, but have been growing in number and significance across the last two decades (American Federation of Teachers, 2009; Asheley, 2007; Benmore, 2002; Fisher, 1994; Martin, 1999; Soliman & Soliman, 1997). Many factors are identified as interacting to create pressure on lecturers and increase their workloads and stress:

- rising (and conflicting) expectations of different stakeholders (Altbach, 2004; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998; Marginson, 2002);
- lack of resources, and casualization of teaching (OECD, 2008a);
- excessive change, institutional breakdown, reform and restructuring (Asheley, 2007 (Murray & Dollery, 2005);
- increasing student numbers, (OECD, 2008b); and changes in student demography;
- increasing diversity of students (Devos, 2003; Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton, & Cullity, 2008);
- increasing numbers of students in paid work with little study time, (James, Bexley, Devlin, & Marginson, 2007);
- (re)conceptualization of the student as customer (Longden, 2006);
- technological change and need for teaching with, and for, rapidly changing technologies (Hannon, 2008; Herrington, Herrington, Mantei, Olney, & Ferry, 2009);
- increasing governmental control through the imposition of national protocols, guidelines and extensive accountability and quality measures (Salmi, 2009; Woodhouse, 2003).

Winefield, Gillespie, Stough, Dua, and Hapuararchchi's survey of Australian Universities (2002), revealed serious problems of job satisfaction, morale, and mental health, with the most severe stress and lowest job satisfaction was amongst Level B & C academics working in new universities, particularly in the Arts and Humanities. The Report concluded:

Australian university staff, particularly academic staff, are highly stressed. Diminishing resources, increased teaching loads and student/staff ratios, pressure to attract external funds, job insecurity, poor management and a lack of recognition and reward are some of the key factors driving the high level of stress. (p8)

The literature also points to institutional problems in achieving and sustaining quality when teachers are exhausted and dissatisfied. It provides evidence that attracting and retaining good staff is becoming problematic (OECD, 2006; Van Ummersen, 2005). In terms of 'teacher survival' and 'teaching sustainability', these findings are significant. Sustainability principles argue for the well-being of all people, so lecturers need to be nurtured, not exploited within the university community. Further, if the well-being of

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lecturers is threatened, this in turn will challenge the capacity of institutions to achieve and sustain excellence in teaching and learning into the future. The current literature suggests that although many universities are keen to address environmental sustainability, few fewer are taking leadership in managing for internal social sustainability (Hammond & Churchman, 2008).

The Study

A qualitative, longitudinal study of Award Winning Teachers (AWTs) was conducted in a Western Australian university from 2003 and 2009, with the intent of revealing insights about the value of teaching awards in promoting, valuing and encouraging good teaching. The study took an insider-participant approach, informed by developmental phenomenology (Bennett, Foreman-Peck, & Higgins, 1996; Bowden & Walsh, 2000). Ten participants were interviewed in 2003 and again in 2008 and a further 18 were interviewed in 2008 only. The participants were diverse in gender, discipline, level (Academic A, B, C, Associate Professor, & Professor), age and experience. They had all won teaching awards at university and/or national level. This may indicate that they are an atypical group of teachers with exceptional interest, expertise and commitment to teaching, and maybe other personal characteristics not reflected. However, the purpose of this qualitative research is to reveal richness of insight through individual narratives. The relevance and applicability of the findings to the wider population was evaluated through analysis of the existing literature and may be explored in future studies of different groups.

To encourage participants to share personal values and reveal the things that are most important to them, the interviews were conducted in an informal way around a series of open-ended questions that invited them to comment on their experiences and perspectives: For example, "Tell me about your experience of teaching awards?" Probes were used to deepen the conversation, investigate key issues emerging, and broaden the range of ideas considered. Issues of sustainability emerged as significant in the first interviews (2003) so became an area of interest probed with all participants. 2003 participants re-interviewed in 2008, were given their original transcripts and an executive summary of the analysis and interpretations made of the original data. They were asked to comment on any changes in their thinking and comment on the overall findings: these included the issue of workload and the difficulties of achieving good teaching in less than 40 hours per week. 2008 participants were engaged through open-ended questions first, and then given the findings from the 2003 participant interviews to comment upon.

All interviews were audio-taped and transcripts were analysed manually and electronically (with Nvivo) using an iterative approach. Emergent themes (including sustainability) were identified and these were used along with key concepts found in the literature, to code and re-code data (Moghaddam, 2006). Themes, codes and summaries of analysis-in-progress were shared with participants and independent experts to support accuracy and confidence in interpretation. Findings were tabulated to facilitate rigor in comparisons across time and individuals (Richards, 2005; Siccama & Penna, 2008). Tables were used to illuminate the initial responses of participants, any changes in their thinking (between 2003 & 2008) and their subsequent reflection on their own ideas, and the ideas and experiences of others.

Findings

You can be a good teacher in the context of everybody working 8 hrs a day, but you can't be as good a teacher as you want to be, you are always making compromises,

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there are just more demands than there are hours available. I work, tend to work a six-day week. I was here [at work] starting an exam at six am and then I ended up here until nine last night. But then, as my daughter said to me (she's a fan fiction reader) "Looking at you, you are a workaholic, but if I could get paid for writing or reading sci-fiction I'd probably enjoy myself as much as you enjoy your work". I do love it, BUT...

Whilst diversity was evident, several themes were strongly and consistently voiced. The quote above provides a powerful summary of the 'sustainability entrapment' that characterized their experience. AWTs aspire to teach at a very high level and that takes time. They choose to work long hours because they love their work and get a real 'buzz' from teaching well, despite the impact on their work-life balance (and sometimes health and well-being).

Work-Life Balance

All participants stated that they could not deliver the quality of teaching they aspired to, within the hours they were paid for teaching:

Well, I think I could teach in 40hrs a week, if I didn't change anything and just did the dull stuff, but then I'd still be doing the research at the weekend.

They described their work hours as averaging from 45+hrs per week to as high as 80hrs, and for most it included frequent work at weekends, in the evenings and even within their four-week annual leave holidays. Most explained their behaviour in terms of commitment to students and to teaching well:

I don't get paid for a lot of the stuff I do ... absolutely true. But there is no doubt, sitting here at the end of semester that the thing that makes me feel a lot happier is some of the stuff I've got back from the students about a new unit I have just devised and run, and happens to have gone better than any unit I have run before, and I'm really happy about that because I had to do it while I was doing other stuff as well.... And that unit I put a lot into it, I wanted to win those students. I wanted to have it work well. I need good feedback, because I'm putting in extra effort over and above the call of duty....

Almost all participants acknowledged some negative impacts arising from their work commitment, particularly where this caused disruption, conflict or stress to family life; created exhaustion or ill-health; or disrupted their ability to fulfill other responsibilities, and often concerned about the well-being of colleagues:

Yes well I'm now in counseling to get over being a workaholic- I have a particular problem- I'm trying to do one day a week where I don't do any work and working towards a weekend- I could write the book at the weekend as something I could do- if I wasn't working so hard.

...teaching is really hard work- at the end of the semester I'm thinking oh the marking. The preparing and the dealing with the students can be so tiring, all that interpersonal stuff, so if you are not engaged with it at some level it would be a miserable job.

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Many participants revealed they felt overwhelmed by the demands of their work and uncertain of both their own capacity and colleagues' capacity to meet those demands:

... this week it all fell apart, and I just don't know how much longer I can keep doing it. And its not just me, I'm looking down the corridor and they [teaching colleagues] are all right on the edge.

Factors that Sustain

Five factors with a positive impact on “survival and sustainability” emerged from these data with particular consistency and strength:

- positive affirmation, recognition and rewarding of teaching;
- positive relationships and connection with others;
- institutional leadership and support;
- recognition and encouragement of diversity in the approach to teaching;
- professional learning and growth.

Positive Affirmation, Recognition and Rewards

Formal rewards for teaching through awards, pay and promotions were valued by AWTs, and many participants noted a small but positive improvement in their experiences and expectations of such rewards between 2003 and 2008. Improvements in promotions for good teachers were noted, although most still believed: “*Research is still number one*”. Participants spoke enthusiastically about recognition from mentors, colleagues and senior managers, and above all, from students: “*the biggest buzz comes from the students*”. Every participant noted, in some way, the nourishing impact of positive feedback and the importance to their well-being of feeling valued for their teaching.

Positive Relationships and Connection with Others

All AWTs referred to the importance of positive relationships and collegial connections. Professional networks, formal and informal mentoring, shared evaluation, reflection and review, and joint problem-solving activities contributed significantly to their sense of wellbeing. Symposiums, forums and conferences were highlighted in many interviews as important, and typically regarded as a “treat or reward”. Respectful, and engaged relationships with students were also critically important to most participants.

Institutional Leadership and Support

There was a general agreement that good leadership, clear direction and communication, clarity about priorities, effective management of resources and assertive management of problems could make a difference. Indeed, it was often the

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senior managers positive interventions and their ability to “really listen and respond”, which enabled teachers to overcome problems and difficulties that might otherwise have led them to give up or withdraw.

Recognition and Encouragement of Diversity

Participants placed a high value on acknowledgement of the needs and demands of their particular contexts, students, disciplines, professions; and to their values, beliefs and preferences in approaches to teaching. Although broad institutional directions were accepted, there was a strong belief that localized decisions were needed to maintain quality and to work effectively to achieve the most positive outcomes with the least negative impact on people.

Professional Learning and Growth

AWTs often described themselves as ‘hyper-active’, ‘over-enthusiastic’ learners, easily engaged (or distracted) by new ideas, research and improvement projects. They seemed to crave discipline/professional, and student-driven intellectual challenges and described them as “nourishing”. However, as there was never actually a time resource these commitments simply added to their ‘entrapment’. AWTs reported valuing professional development opportunities and academic study as sustaining experiences, although interestingly these were often the things that were squeezed out by time constraints.

Factors that Challenge Sustainability

Challenges identified from these data included: student numbers; students’ capacity, interest and commitment; commitment to improvement; loss of autonomy; lack of rewards and low valuing of teaching; large and diverse work responsibilities. Above all, at the heart of sustainability, from the participants’ point of view was the pressure of time and the stresses arising from continually having too much to do and too little time to do the things that matter to student learning and outcomes well.

Student Numbers, Capacity, Interest and Commitment

AWTs generally expressed great empathy, concern, interest and commitment to students, but supporting students who were in difficulties often had a personal cost:

I’ll give you an example, I’m dashing home at 5.30, to be with the kids after school, I’ve been late home every night this week. And a student comes in and they’re crying. So you stay to help them, and you think, ‘I’ll make up the time to the kids, I’ll go home early tomorrow’. But you never do because there’s always another student tomorrow...

Almost half the group reported frustration with students who did not demonstrate interest and commitment to their studies. Participants typically talked about their own efforts to support learners and they were disappointed when this was not appreciated or reciprocated:

... that subtle changing of attitude ... that it’s a service and you are always at the end of a machine and you will answer any questions immediately and be there... That

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attitude of instant gratification that students seem to come with all the time. Again, not all, one has to be careful about making generalizations. It might have increased, but maybe it's not the majority of them, I don't think it is the majority

While AWTs tended to welcome diversity amongst the student population and actively support the provision of higher education to an ever-widening group of entrants, they found they did not have the time or resources, or sometimes the expertise to provide adequate assistance. In particular, they mentioned the complexities of working with students who had lower than expected entry skills particularly in language (reading, writing and communication skills) and with mixed ability and experience cohorts. They wanted to help, felt pressured by the institution to “*help everyone get over the line*” but did not have the time or resources to achieve the improvement needed. This raised anxiety about graduate standards that again entrapped the AWTs into working harder and harder, to achieve quality outcomes.

AWTs were committed to an ‘ethic of care’ (personal and academic) but large classes intensified workloads and made it difficult to sustain their preferred approach: “*The problem is that we are moving away from good pedagogy to mass production types where student numbers matter- big classes- higher students to staff ratios are accepted these days.... It has got bigger and bigger.*” Entrapment also arose from the paradox that: “*...it takes so much time to help students, but if you don't it takes just as much time to solve all the problems you end up with*”.

Commitment to Improvement

Commitment to improving teaching also led to entrapment. “*Making it better*”, usually meant more work: responding to students at night and at weekends, continually updated materials, developing resources, integrating more complex tasks that involve external links. This was particularly true for assessment practices. High expectations for accurate grading, moderation and personalized feedback increased workloads, particularly for those managing teams of casual, sessional and inexperienced markers; and those in working in arts, humanities and professional courses. Some AWTs actually talked about assessment in terms of threats to their survival: “*I sit up marking all night to get it back in time, then I go to work and I think- I'm going to die if I do this any more!*”.

It was rare for this group to view technology negatively per se, but working in multiple modes, learning to use and incorporate constantly changing technologies both complicated work and intensified work. Often it was the sheer number of things that needed to be done, sometimes technical problems (such as computer or learning system failures) added difficulties. But equally trying to do it all at a very high, professional level caused real problems of work-overload. AWTs were entrapped by the convergence of unrealistic institutional, student and personal expectations for quality within the resource.

Loss of Autonomy

AWTs were often frustrated by what they saw as increasing institutional demands and a loss autonomy. They perceived increasing work, devolution of “*admin-*

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trivia”, decreasing support, and often a disrespect for their expertise and a lack of authority in their “own work”. Institutional demands were particularly strongly resisted where AWTs values and beliefs about good teaching were seen as compromised. A strong perception was articulated about increased centralization that could “*take away the sensitivity to actual, real people*”, and make it, “*harder and harder to teach well*”. Simple examples given included the difficulty of accessing discretionary funding for resources (needed immediately to resolve problems or improve teaching) or to cover crisis such as staff absence and issues of insensitive centralized timetabling:

So admin people don't always understand why you request specific classrooms and that can be because a specific layout works for you. When I've had to talk to someone about moving a room five times because they really don't understand that I need a tiered lecture room – and they say but why? Other people like it how it is- I say I don't.

Governance through rules and regulations, distance between teachers and the policy decision-makers, power and authority in the hands of people perceived not to have relevant knowledge and expertise in teaching and learning, all created a sense of frustration by limiting the academics' capacity to respond to local needs flexibly and quickly. Indeed, many AWTs regarded their ability to side-step or manipulate governance as a critical factor in their teaching excellence: “*well you have to bend a few rules if you want to do the job properly*”.

Lack of Rewards and Valuing of Teaching

AWTs were unanimous in feeling that good teaching was not given a high enough value. Examples of low valuing given included: poor pay, limited promotion opportunities and employment insecurity. Concern was expressed by many AWTs for the employment conditions of casual and sessional staff, as well as their own situations. The limited feedback they received on teaching; lack of interest in discussing teaching in formal management of performance meetings; dismissive, disbelieving or trivializing management responses to their workload problems and teaching challenges; the failure of management to deal effectively with poor teachers were also identified as indicating low value. The priority perceived to be given to research over teaching; and the lack of acknowledgement of the actual time needed for teaching activity in workload formulas, with much work being “invisible” were also raised as signs that teaching did not really matter.

All AWTs actively sought continuous feedback from students, however, a surprising number talked about their vulnerability to negative feedback. Few workers are so constantly and publically evaluated, and for people who are so intrinsically motivated by wanting to teach well, negative feedback can be very demoralizing even where it was unjustified, inaccurate or unreasonable. This was particularly acute for early career teachers.

Juggling Workloads and Diverse Work Responsibilities

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Many AWTs, found it difficult to juggle their different academic responsibilities: teaching, research, and community engagement. Setting priorities appeared to be very difficult (everything was important). Further, they often believed that their employment and career prospects were dependent on continued performance in all three. Juggling tended not to mean choosing which to leave, but which would be done at night, at weekends or in the holidays. AWTs who managed large courses, complex, new or multiple units, or teams of sessional teachers experienced acute "time-crunch", and the teaching-research nexus seemed particularly problematic for them. AWTs reported on huge workloads administering and managing teaching, (such as coordinating staff and students, developing teaching materials and training tutors) that receive little or no recognition in workload models, but made it impossible to fit all teaching related work into the time allocated. Academics are entrapped by conflicting demands for their time. A significant number of participants reported either "*giving up on research*" (and therefore on career progress through promotion) or strategically moving away from teaching.

Time, Energy and Exhaustion

In almost every interview, time, and the pressure of time, or the lack of time, was a powerful theme. Participants felt there was never enough time to do what needed to be done: not enough time to help students, not enough time to prepare teaching materials or think about good learning and assessment task, not enough time to reflect or meet and talk with colleagues, not enough time to commit to professional development and learning. Several participants commented on the amount and pace of change in their work. The effort required to manage change continually was regarded as a serious workload issue, even where they saw the changes as worthwhile. For most, the effort of trying to fit everything in led to exhaustion.

If 'survival' in this study is interpreted as the retention of excellent teachers in teaching, several further observations can be drawn from the data. At the time of writing, half of the 2003 participants, had left the university, and six of the ten took strategic decisions to re-focus their attention on research in order to progress their careers. Across the group there was an explicit awareness and concern for the loss of good teachers:

... I can say I am astonished at how many people who won awards early on are no longer teaching. ... 5 years on we don't see a group of good teachers teaching and getting huge daily satisfaction, but you see them holding professorships and leading research teams and that's an issue...

Discussion and Recommendations

The research data analysis and findings need to be considered in the light of a number of limitations. The study is located in a single site, with an atypical group of teacher participants, and sustainability questions were not specifically fore-grounded in the study. Their experiences and perspectives are individual, context specific and cannot be taken as representative of other teachers' views. It is beyond the scope of the study to demonstrate clear relationships between individuals' personal characteristics, and their

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experiences and behaviours as teachers, although the narratives do acknowledge the significant of interaction between individuals' motivations, goals, personality and style and their approach to teaching. It may well be that award winning teaching teachers are self-driven to 'over-work', and that factors that make teaching 'sustainable' for them are individual and less significant for others. Nevertheless, strong, coherent, shared themes emerged from the group, and these resonate well with evidence in the literature. Congruence with a more focused work-stress study at the University of Western Sydney that investigated a more diverse population of teachers is particularly striking (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009) and suggests some integrity and validity has been achieved.

The data from both the study and the literature affirm that there is a real and significant problem of sustainability and that creativity, effectiveness and the well-being of tertiary teachers and teaching programs are threatened. Some teachers appear to be 'entrapped' by the demands of 'hungry' organizations struggling to meet increasing expectations with inadequate resources; and by their own interests, motivations and desire to serve students well. The study invites the question: does the university definition of sustainability include the well-being of teachers? Although many universities are actively trying to create working environments that encourage well-being, this study raises concerns about the inclusion of support and provisions for teachers as workers. This suggests that universities need to evaluate the effectiveness of their provisions (and the outcomes) for different categories of workers. Universities need to have accurate measures of the 'climate'. They need to invest in listening to their teachers, and take their experiences and perceptions seriously: in terms of sustainability this would be seen in actions and changed behaviours. Single-site qualitative studies, such as the one reported here are rare, but particularly valuable in identifying context specific points of tension, providing an evidence base to support local decision-making.

The highly stressed level B, C, and casual positions are most likely to be held by the least powerful teachers in university and therefore most vulnerable to exploitation: typically overrepresented by women and minority groups. Inequities are incompatible with sustainability goals of social justice (Hammond & Churchman, 2008), however, whilst teachers 'survive' in sufficient numbers to meet institutional needs, there is little incentive for management to change, unless they genuinely aspire to act differently.

The study raises many pragmatic and philosophical problems for the higher education sector: Do we have adequate and appropriate visions for "teaching sustainability", and policies, procedures and targets that align with sustainable teaching practices? Do we know how to act to achieve a more sustainable teaching environment? Do we know about teaching and assessment designs, resources and strategies that are effective for student learning but less time intensive for teachers? Do we know how to support teachers and teaching managers in achieving sustainable teaching for themselves and others? If we aspire to change, do we know how to achieve such change?

The findings suggest that as individuals and as organizations, we are not good at recognizing and acknowledging the time that many *good teaching practices* take, or managing effective teaching within the resources we have, or setting and working confidently with priorities. Clarifying our university purpose and priorities at institutional, departmental and individual levels is critical as is the appropriate distribution of resources to teaching and learning activities. However, we also need to

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set targets and plan in ways that take account of the actual resources available (particularly teacher time), learn more about how to manage our priorities in the realities of practice, find more efficient (sustainable) ways to achieve quality within our resources. Given the potential conflicts between the needs and expectations of students and the limitations of resources for teaching and learning we may also need to consider the way that we communicate and negotiate with students about the best use of resources.

The many questions posed by this study imply an urgent need for research into more resource-effective teaching, professional, organizational learning, and higher education reform: sadly very little funding is allocated to higher education research. Since issues of teacher quality, recruitment and retention are of national not just local concern, we also need to find better ways to communicate about sustainability issues in university teaching with governments and policy-makers, and include them in evidence-based problem solving for a better future.

Conclusions

Accepting the limitations of this study, the gaps in research and under-development of conceptual and theoretical frameworks, this work-in-progress still raises important questions for researchers, managers and teachers. The university community has been challenged to commit to sustainability as a global imperative. Teaching and learning in higher education has great potential to support positive change in the world, but faces challenges in meeting community expectations and demands within the resources available. Teachers are perhaps the most critical of all 'resources' and there is sound evidence to suggest many of them are finding it difficult to 'survive' the demands, even where they are passionately committed and highly skilled. If the higher education sector is to fulfill its sustainability mission, then governments, researchers, managers and teachers all have a part to play in ensuring that the well-being of teachers is acknowledged, understood and addressed. We need to collaborate in finding ways to not just to survive and sustain excellence in university teaching, but to thrive.

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