

Inducting New Academic Staff into a Flexible Education Environment

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***Abstract:** The Faculty of Engineering and Surveying at the University of Southern Queensland has developed and facilitated a two-day Teaching and Learning Workshop for inducting new academic staff. This paper explores the reasons for this initiative and then describes the three Workshops that have been held to date. The extremely positive response from the participants in the first two Workshops led the University to sponsor the third Workshop and request the Faculty to open it to new academic staff from across the University.*

***Keywords:** academic staff induction, training programs,*

Background

The Faculty of Engineering and Surveying, at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), offers a range of highly articulated undergraduate programs in engineering, surveying and geographic information systems (GIS). All of the programs are offered in both the on-campus and distance education modes, although not all of the majors are available by both modes of study. Increasingly the Faculty is enhancing each mode of delivery through the addition of online discussions and web or CDROM delivered multi-media learning resources.

Over recent years this teaching and learning environment has become increasingly complex and is reaching the point where staff need to constantly update the skills they use to teach, assess and administer the students in their courses. Entering this complex teaching and learning environment is a daunting prospect for new academic staff, particularly when the University's formal induction program does not include any sessions on teaching. This paper describes the Faculty's response to this issue, which because of a surge in recruitments, was beginning to impact on the ability of the Faculty to deliver its programs in a consistent manner.

Rationale for a Teaching and Learning Workshop

Two different phenomena led the Faculty to become aware of the need for a formal induction program that would cover the teaching and learning aspects of an academic's role.

Firstly, an external audit of the Faculty's Quality Management System in 1999 disclosed a lack of reporting on the induction procedures at a Faculty level. This led the Quality Management Committee to review the existing induction processes and develop mechanisms to report on those activities. During this process it became apparent that no formal induction into teaching occurred either at the University or Faculty Level.

Secondly, an extensive review of Faculty's programs, and the teaching and learning environment in which they are delivered, also highlighted this weakness in the induction process. The aim of the review, which was conducted during 1999 and 2000, was to prepare the Faculty for a visit by an Accreditation Panel from the Institution of Engineers, Australia (IEAust) in late 2001 (Dowling, 2001). The review was broken into ten separate tasks. The aim of the ninth task, Task I, was: To Enhance the Educational Culture within the Faculty.

This task was undertaken partly in response to the emphasis the IEAust accreditation process places on the teaching and learning environment, which is one of the three principal elements used to assess *whether the attributes of the graduate engineer are being achieved* (IEAust, 1999, p5). Part of that determination includes an assessment of the educational culture in a Faculty.

The Board will look for evidence of a dynamic, innovative and outward-looking intellectual climate in the engineering school. (IEAust, 1999, p15)

Staff should actively role model the generic engineering attributes and should be continually aware of their responsibility to do so. The Board will also look for awareness of current educational thinking and best practice and for a proactive attitude to its adoption. Staff development programs should aim at developing teaching practice as well as discipline expertise. (IEAust, 1999, pp 15-16)

The work undertaken as part of Review Task I led the Faculty to implement a number of initiatives aimed at enhancing the existing educational environment.

After a lapse of several years the Engineering Education Seminar Series was reinstated in April 2000. The series continues, with seminars run weekly during most semesters, although this depends on staff needs and the availability of presenters. These seminars enable staff to: share their experiences; innovations they have introduced; discuss new methodologies; and learn about new university systems. Whilst most of the presenters have come from within the Faculty, many have come from other Faculties, other sections of the university or from other universities.

The seminar series has proved extremely beneficial for those who have attended, however, most of the seminars only attract about 40% of the academic staff in the Faculty, with the presenters often preaching to the converted. It was soon recognised that this was not providing for the needs of new staff in a systematic or timely manner.

In late 2000 the author developed a proposal for a two-day Teaching and Learning Workshop. This was endorsed by the Faculty Board and implemented early in 2001.

The 2001 Workshop

The two-day Teaching and Learning Workshop was designed to give new academic staff an understanding of the teaching and learning policies and practices used in the Faculty. The emphasis was to be on the need to align teaching and assessment with course objectives. The specific objectives of the Workshop were to provide staff with the opportunity:

- to gain an understanding of current teaching and learning strategies;
- to develop the skills required to write learning objectives;

- to learn how to develop a teaching plan for a course;
- to learn how to develop an assessment strategy for a course; and
- to gain a good understanding of the teaching and assessment regulations and processes used in the Faculty.

The Faculty approached USQ Human Resources who agreed to sponsor the Workshop, as it was an important initiative that could be adopted by other Faculties.

The program

Initially the program was designed to give the participants the skills and knowledge required to be an examiner for a course. However, the program was modified to avoid any overlap with other staff development workshops offered by other sections of the university.

Consequently the followings topics were not covered:

- How to prepare and present a lecture
- How to prepare and run a tutorial, using a variety of formats; and
- How to prepare the study materials for, and run, an external offer of a course.

The topics finally included in the program were selected to enable staff to achieve the Workshop objectives. Additional time was allocated in each session to ensure that there would be ample time for discussion. In addition, it was hoped that staff would be able to use the practice sessions to review and redevelop the course materials for one of their courses.

The session topics were:

Day 1

1. Introduction to teaching and Learning at USQ
2. Teaching and Learning Fundamentals
3. Writing Learning Objectives – included practice
4. Developing a Teaching Plan for a Course – included three case studies and practice

Day 2

5. Developing an Assessment scheme for a Course - included practice
6. Marking and Grading – included practice at preparing a marking scheme
7. Resources to Enhance Teaching and Learning – included 4 case studies and review of course materials
8. Results processing with Faculty software – included practice

Because this was to be the first offer of the Workshop a degree of flexibility was built into the program. Some changes to the program occurred during the Workshop mainly due to the presenters running overtime, or due to the amount of discussion that occurred in most sessions. This meant that the practice sessions were either shortened or replaced by general discussion. Whilst this was unfortunate, the discussions proved to be valuable for all concerned.

The presenters

Eight experienced members of the academic staff gave presentations at the Workshop. Seven were from the Faculty and one from the Faculty of Education. Three of the Faculty's staff were present for all of the sessions and acted as mentors during the practice sessions.

The participants

The Workshop was open to all members of the Faculty's academic staff. Eleven participated in the Workshop, six new staff and five existing staff who had worked in the Faculty for more

than 2 years. The Dean “encouraged” three members of the existing staff to attend because of their poor results in the University sponsored student evaluation of teaching survey, which is undertaken each semester. With the presenters, this meant that at least 16 staff attended each of the sessions.

The evaluation

A nine-question evaluation instrument was distributed at the end of the Workshop and it was completed by 10 of the 11 participants. A brief summary of the results is given below.

- The average rating given by the participants for each of the sessions varied from 2.8 to 3.1 on a four-point scale. The average for all sessions was 3.0, which equated to the “Very Useful” rating.
- The participants were asked to rate the Workshop overall, with the options being: Excellent, Very good, Good, or Poor. One participant rated it as being “Good”, four rated it as “Very Good” and four rated it as “Excellent”.
- The following comments were made in the “Any other comments?” section of the evaluation form:
 - (a) Some interesting discussions & input from other participants
 - (b) I found it very worthwhile, very informative & useful. I definitely needed these sessions (new staff member)
 - (c) The Workshop has been highly beneficial for me and well worth undertaking (existing staff member)
 - (d) The two days are probably collectively too packed (Existing staff member)

Outcomes and Recommendations

Whilst the program was modified during the Workshop, the overall objectives were achieved and it proved to be a valuable experience for both new and existing staff and also for each of the presenters. One of the unexpected outcomes was the high level of bonding that occurred between the mentors and the new staff. This proved to be a valuable outcome during the following semester as the new staff felt comfortable about approaching the mentors when they needed assistance. An hour-long session was organised at the end of semester 1 to answer any follow-up questions.

A recommendation was put to the Faculty Board that the Faculty offer a Teaching and Learning Workshop at the beginning of each academic year. The author also proposed that the Workshop should continue to be sponsored by USQ Human Resources, and that it should be widened to include new staff from all of the Faculties. It was recognised that parts of the program would need to be modified to suit local conditions.

The 2002 Workshop

The objectives for this Workshop were the same as those for the 2001 Workshop. However, after reviewing the feedback from that Workshop, the program was modified with additional emphasis being placed on the nexus between learning objectives and the teaching and assessment plans.

This Workshop was initially planned for February 2002 but was postponed until June of that year, to allow the attendance of some new staff members who arrived during semester 1. However, the delay did disadvantage some new members of staff who taught in semester 1.

The presenters

The Workshop sessions were presented by the same staff used in the first Workshop except for the person from the Faculty of Education who was not available at the time of the Workshop.

The participants

Once again the Workshop was open to all members of the Faculty's academic staff. Ten participated in the Workshop, five new staff, two sessional staff, two postgraduate students and one existing staff member who had worked in the Faculty for more than 2 years. With the presenters this meant that at least 14 staff attended each of the sessions.

The evaluation

The same nine-question evaluation instrument was distributed at the end of the Workshop and it was completed by all 10 participants. A brief summary of the results is given below.

- The average rating given by the participants for each of the sessions varied from 3.0 to 3.6 on a four-point scale. The average for all sessions was 3.3, which lies between the "Very Useful" and "Most Useful" ratings.
- The participants were asked to rate the Workshop overall, with the options being: Excellent, Very good, Good, or Poor. Four participants rated it as "Very Good" and six rated it as "Excellent".
- Only two participants, both new staff members, made comments in the "Any other comments?" section of the evaluation form:
 - (a) This is a very good and timely Workshop, particularly for new staff.
 - (b) Thankyou for a thoroughly informative and enjoyable Workshop. It will certainly help me better prepare for the teaching and learning environment here at USQ, particularly the external mode of delivery. Your Workshop has been a unique experience for me. After two days, I have rediscovered my motivation, enthusiasm and vigour with which I started my teaching life some 18 years ago.

Outcomes

Once again the Workshop proved to be a valuable experience for both new and existing staff and the presenters. In addition it affirmed the Faculty's commitment to offer the Workshop annually.

The AUQA report.

The Australian Universities Quality Agency conducted an audit of the University of Southern Queensland in July 2002. Their report was published in October 2002 and it contained the following pertinent comments and recommendations relating to the induction of academic staff.

Staff Induction

New staff at USQ undergo an initial induction from Human Resources (mainly with respect to employment details) and then attend a one-day University induction program. Different Faculties may then augment this, particularly in terms of teaching induction. Such augmentation ranges from a two day program in the Faculty of Engineering and Surveying to a lack of further formal induction in some other Faculties. (AUQA, 2002, p34)

... the Audit Panel was concerned at the apparent lack of systematic induction, especially to the role of teaching. This is especially an issue given the multimodal nature of USQ and its commitment to the support of teaching and learning. At present, it is possible for teaching staff to be recruited and commence teaching without any teaching preparation whatsoever, let alone across different study options. (AUQA, 2002, p34)

Recommendation 19

That USQ establish a formal academic staff induction program, with emphasis on teaching in all USQ's study options. (AUQA, 2002, p34)

Recommendation 20

That USQ give consideration to developing means by which to address the interrelated issues of: (a) the systematic induction to university teaching of academic staff; (b) an ongoing staff development program informed by the discourse of university teaching improvement; (c) harnessing the benefits of individual teachers' research for the benefit of the entire University; and (d) conducting research into developing teaching and learning systems. (AUQA, 2002, p35)

Following the publication of the AUQA report, the author and the Dean encouraged the University to once again sponsor the Workshop so that it could be open to new academic staff from across the university. The University finally accepted this proposal in January 2003 and an intense period of planning began with advice being sought from across the university.

The 2003 Workshop

Planning for the third Workshop began in November 2002 and dates were adopted in mid-February 2003.

Objectives:

Following the feedback from the previous Workshops, and advice from the other Faculties, the objectives were modified for the 2003 Workshop. In particular the focus shifted from the requirements of the Faculty of Engineering and Surveying to a more generic set of requirements.

At the completion of the Workshop participants should be able to:

- Apply appropriate teaching and learning strategies for each of the modes of delivery used by USQ;
- Prepare a course specification in accordance with University regulations;
- Develop a teaching plan for a course;
- Develop a valid assessment scheme for a course;
- Undertake marking and grading duties in accordance with University policies and regulations; and
- Develop and enhance teaching materials.

The program

The session topics were:

Day 1

1. Introduction to teaching and Learning at USQ – the Context
2. Learning - included VARK workshop (Visual, Aural, Read/write, Kinaesthetic – a guide to learning styles –see Fleming, 2001).

3. The Course Specification – included group review of a course specification
4. Developing an Assessment Scheme for a Course - included practice

Day 2

5. Delivery of a Course
6. Off Campus Teaching – included external, online and overseas
7. Marking and Grading – included practice at preparing a marking scheme
8. Results processing with Gradebook software
9. Resources to Enhance Teaching and Learning – included 2 case studies and a review of course materials

The presenters

Eight experienced academics and one administrative staff member gave presentations at the Workshop. Three academics were from the Faculty of Engineering, two from the Distance Education Centre and one each from the Faculty of Business, the Faculty of Education, and the Faculty of Sciences. The three staff members from the Faculty of Engineering and Surveying have participated in all three Workshops.

The participants

USQ Human Resources invited a total of 38 new academic staff to the Workshop. Unfortunately only 26 were able to attend, with many of the others having prior commitments. Most of those who participated had been at the University for less than a month and some only for a few days.

The evaluation

A comprehensive evaluation was completed by the participants at the end of each of the two days. The results are still being analysed but the following is a summary of the findings to date:

- The participants were asked to rate the importance of each of the sessions which enabled the topics to be ranked from the most important to the least important:
 - Developing an Assessment Scheme for a Course
 - The Course Specification
 - Learning
 - Marking and Grading
 - Introduction to Teaching and Learning at USQ – the Context
 - Delivery of a Course
 - Resources to Enhance Teaching and Learning
 - Off Campus Teaching
 - Results processing with Gradebook software
- The 17 participants who attended on day two were asked to rate the Workshop overall, with the options being: Very good, Good, Satisfactory, or Disappointing. One participant rated it as being “Satisfactory”, three rated it as “Good” and eleven rated it as “Very Good”.
- All of the comments written in the “Any other comments?” section of the second day’s evaluation form are listed below:
 - (a) Very helpful for new staff.
 - (b) Run it again – but be aware of people’s level of experience – don’t assume too much.
 - (c) Please run it again for future staff. It may need more than two days!
 - (d) I found the sessions invaluable. The effort expended in developing and presenting the material is appreciated. Thanks and regards.

- (e) If possible Faculty input where procedures differ.
- (f) A very good networking tool. Great to demystify the rules and regulations.
Wonderful for new staff
- (g) Everything was well linked to the academic duties required – so from my perspective were very useful especially at this time in my career. Well done guys and thanks.
- (h) A must for new staff. Have a mid-year update session for all the questions between now and then!
- (i) Thanks for organising this.

It should be noted that 6 participants were not able to attend the second day of the Workshop due to marking and other Departmental commitments.

Outcomes

The results of the evaluation, and the individual written comments, demonstrate that the shift from a Faculty based workshop to a University wide workshop did not diminish the success of the two-day experience for both the participants and the presenters. The participants who attended both days demonstrated they had achieved all of the objectives during the group discussion times and through their work in the practice sessions.

However, the shift did impact on the planning and organisation of the Workshop. A considerable amount of time was required to liaise with staff from other Faculties and sections about the program and to organise presenters. In addition, the involvement of a number of new presenters from outside the Faculty had the potential to disrupt the flow of information from topic to topic. This was exacerbated by the very short period that was available to prepare the program and brief the presenters, and because they were not all able to meet together to run through the program. In the final analysis, the program flowed very well and the participants were happy with the outcome.

Conclusion

The Teaching and Learning Workshop developed by the Faculty of Engineering and Surveying has proved to be an important part of the induction of new academic staff at USQ. The trial Workshop facilitated by the Faculty in 2001 was adopted as a model for the University in 2003. It is expected that the University will continue to sponsor the Workshop, and in future it will be offered twice a year, in the period immediately before the beginning of each semester. This will mean that all new academic staff should be able to attend a Workshop prior to commencing teaching duties. The midyear Workshop may be opened up to existing staff as the number of new staff commencing mid-year is not as great as at the beginning of the year.

The formal adoption of the Teaching and Learning Workshop by the University should enable it to demonstrate, at the next AUQA audit, that it has fulfilled Recommendations 19 and 20(a).

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