

## Central Queensland University

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### **‘Friend or foe?’: Is learning and teaching policy mainstream or marginal?**

#### Abstract:

A plethora of regulatory frameworks—including the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australian Quality Framework (AQF), Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), and Commonwealth and State laws and regulations—permeates all aspects of Australian higher education institutions and their activities. As a result, working with, and within, framing policy, administrative and management structures is increasingly both expected and necessary in the contemporary academic environment. Within the Australian university, the area of learning and teaching is core business for both faculties and their staff, and the divisions that support this activity.

Many disciplines, including those in the creative arts, extol the strength of their learning and teaching, especially the engagement of their students and the expertise of their staff in this area. At the same time, various faculty management positions, such as Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching and Heads of School, have in their position descriptions a requirement to show leadership in learning and teaching. In this, a key responsibility is to promulgate and implement learning and teaching policy and processes to faculty staff, both academic and administrative. Yet these policies and procedures are often perceived by university staff (including some managers) as being both limited and limiting. In this, university learning and teaching policies and regulatory procedures are often understood as marginal, an annoying distraction from the core business of the faculty and/or discipline area. This paper explores a different point of view. It posits how working with, and through, these policies and processes can be collaborative and inclusive and to the benefit of individuals and disciplines.

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## **Introduction: Context**

A plethora of regulatory frameworks—including the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Australian Quality Framework (AQF), Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), and Commonwealth and State laws and regulations—permeates all aspects of Australian higher education institutions and their activities. This regulation is, moreover, becoming greater in its scope, level of organisation and powers. In 2009, for instance, the Rudd Government allocated \$A57 million to establish a new national agency for regulation and quality assurance. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) has a foundational brief to ‘oversee the development of strengthened quality assurance arrangements and protect the overall quality of the Australian higher education system’ (DEEWR 2009a). It will do this by accrediting providers, developing comparative benchmarks, carrying out audits to evaluate the performance of institutions and programs, and reforming current regulatory arrangements to provide consistency across the sector nationally. This new agency, which aims to address underperformance and lift standards across the entire tertiary sector (including universities, TAFE and private providers) from 2013, will not only audit institutions every five years, as well as whenever the agency considers an evaluation necessary. It will also have real powers, including those of applying a range of sanctions against higher education providers that do not measure up against their standards, fulfilling the brief to provide increased levels of information to potential domestic and international students about these performance levels, and deciding who qualifies for performance-linked funding (Gillard 2009).

As a result of such current and developing initiatives in this area of quality and regulation, working with, and within, framing policy, administrative and management structures is not only expected, but essential, across all the various areas that comprise the contemporary university. Within the Australian higher education context, areas of core business are usually identified as learning and teaching, research, and professional and/or community engagement (sometime called professional and/or community service). This paper focuses on one of these areas, learning and teaching and the policies that seek to determine its processes, as core business for faculties and their academic staff, as well as the organisational units that support this activity.

To drill down to the discipline level, many higher education disciplines in Australia, including those in the creative arts, extol the strength of their learning and teaching, the expertise of their staff in this area, and the achievements and engagement of the students so served. In this, learning and teaching are matched against, and even valorised in relation to, institutional imperatives for university staff to be research active and output driven in terms of that research activity.<sup>[1]</sup> Various faculty management positions, such as Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching and Heads of School, moreover, usually have as a key component of their position descriptions a requirement to show leadership in learning and teaching. In this, an important responsibility is to promulgate and implement compliance with learning and teaching policy and processes across all faculty staff, both academic and administrative. Yet, these staff—including some managers who have direct and overarching responsibility for implementation—often have no input into developing these policies and/or view these policies and procedures as both limited and limiting. These university learning

and teaching policies and regulatory procedures are, indeed, often understood as marginal, an annoying distraction from the core business of the faculty and/or discipline area in terms of teaching and learning. This paper explores a different point of view. It posits that working with, and through, these policies and processes can be of direct benefit for both individuals and disciplines. Moreover, it posits that academic involvement in their development is not only preferable, but essential.

### **Learning and teaching policy: Frameworks and significance**

Government regulation sets out the legal framework for the delivery of education to students in Australia. As an example, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations regulates the education and training sector's involvement with overseas students studying in Australia on student visas through the Education Services for Overseas Students legislative framework, the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act. This Act governs all aspects of learning and teaching for international students including the obligations of providers in relation to contact hours and modes of delivery, and defines a range of minimum standards (DEEWR 2009b). Falling out of such legal frameworks, specific university policy on, and about, learning and teaching is essential to the governance and functioning of those institutions and is, in most cases, directly integrated into university planning at all levels—including their strategic and operational planning. With regard to learning and teaching, our institution's Strategic Plan 2010–2013 states that “CQUniversity will attract and retain more students, helping them to achieve their educational goals. We will provide a stimulating learning environment that promotes learner engagement; is supported by appropriate technology, infrastructure and services; and which helps all students realise their unique potential. CQUniversity will also have a reputation for producing workplace-ready, successful graduates.” (endorsed by Academic Board, 2009). Another example is from the University of Ballarat in Victoria, Australia, which states that ‘the enhancement of learning and teaching is central to the vision, mission, culture, activities, practices and future development of the University’ and that part of its purpose is to ‘articulate the University’s commitment to creating effective and meaningful learning opportunities and experiences through the development of high quality, relevant and current courses and services that are aligned with the University’s strategic direction’ (2008).

Within the global context of the quest to improve rankings both within Australia and in relation to overseas indexes (Marginson & van der Wende 2007), and to better serve their students and other key stakeholders, many universities are attempting to do more than comply with overarching policies. They are also attempting to continuously improve learning and teaching practices, and this is being attempted, at least in part, through the development and refinement of governing policies and then attempting to ensure adherence to those policies. This is, however, complex and complicated by a range of factors. Learning and teaching policy requires continuous updating as best practice is identified and such new pedagogical processes such as online learning and teaching emerge and become more prevalent (Sachs 2008). Developments outside the university itself also bring the necessity to modify and change policy, as such

developments influence how learning and teaching is both conceptualised and carried out. New communication platforms and paradigms such as the creative commons for sharing and modifying of information and software and Web 2.0 social networking sites, and changes in copyright legislation and other legal aspects all have to be accounted for in, and translated into, policy. New discipline knowledge and advancements in pedagogy and the philosophy of learning and teaching more generally also impact on policy. Those within the university may perceive these changes as too rapid—or not rapid enough—but their impact will eventually be felt on learning and teaching and this must then be absorbed into relevant policy. After having been used in learning and teaching situations for almost a decade, for instance, many universities have or are now developing policies on mobile phone usage in learning and teaching situations (see, Alexander 2004; Ally 2009).

The regulatory environment sketched in above also affects learning and teaching in different disciplines in different ways. Creative arts programs are generally not, for instance, formally accredited by professional bodies as programs in accounting, education, engineering, psychology, law, medicine and other such disciplines usually are, yet programs in the creative arts often have close affiliations with professional bodies which seek to have input into learning and teaching processes and policies. In relation to (creative and professional) writing programs, for instance, the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) has been actively involved in both internal and external policy discussions regarding quality assurance (Brien & Webb 2008) and towards the benchmarking and accreditation of writing programs (see, Kroll 2002; Carey, Webb & Brien 2008). Similar work has been done in other creative arts disciplines, for example in dance (Phillips, Stock & Vincs 2009); visual arts (see Baker's current ALTC project) and music (Brooker 2001). In relation to the creative arts internationally, the UK has already instituted a system on which at least some of the new TEQSA in Australia seems based, based around a regulatory agency with powers to close higher education providers, and some UK providers already shut down as a result. New Zealand is also instituting such practices, with its evaluation frameworks, including that for research considerably further developed than the ERA initiative (Excellence in Research for Australia) is in Australia.

It is not surprising that, given the above, the audit timetables and requirements of the various regulatory agencies are not just checking the content of, and adherence to, policies, but are also driving policy development and regimes of implementation. There are, however, various complexities and difficulties involved in even this seemingly simple symbiotic relationship between regulation and learning and teaching policy. To begin with, despite at least a decade of international discussion, university-developed policies are not always coherent with individual faculty, school, discipline and/or academic needs, and are not always created, or updated, with any significant input from these key stakeholders (Alfred 1998; Fish 2007). The responsibility for following such university learning and teaching policy, although often acknowledged as being mandatory for all staff within the organisation, may not be followed consistency across the organisation, and non-compliance may not be captured in any meaningful way or acted upon consistently. The resourcing of the implementation of new policy also creates difficulties, especially when the need for

increased compliance and reporting is contiguous with less overall funding to universities (Bradley et al 2008: 141).

The revamping of learning and teaching policy in Australian universities is, moreover, not only in response to the above requirements to comply and the increased scrutiny offered by the regulatory and quality frameworks, but also in direct relation to a real increase in the valuing of learning and teaching across the sector. Assessment of the quality of teaching, student outcomes, and feedback from students is now included in, for example, applications for academic positions and promotions. Moreover, external funding bodies such as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) not only make awards that reward excellence in teaching and fund research into learning and teaching, but also use the evidence of quality teaching and learning in awarding those prizes and grants (ALTC 2009). This has, in turn, spurred institutions to set up internal award and grant schemes (and policies) that mirror those of the ALTC to build capacity and track record for applying for these external awards and funds. Internally, however, this does recognise, record and reward excellence in teaching to some extent, although this is not always equivalent to the privileging of research.

### **Institutional reflections on policy as mainstream and marginal**

The authors come to this evaluation of the value of learning and teaching policy from a twinned scope of interest. Although both are now employed as faculty-level managers at the same institution (an Associate Dean of Learning and Teaching and a Head of School), we come from academic, discipline-based backgrounds and are still actively involved with learning and teaching in those disciplines, although not necessarily in the classroom context. We have both, moreover, come from career backgrounds outside the academy, and experienced the various levels of academic work, beginning with sessional tutoring, marking and contract positions to permanent positions through the academic A, B, C and D levels. Between us, we have to date been heads of three different schools, are currently on nineteen different committees/boards at faculty and university level, a number of which one or other of us chairs either regularly or occasionally (and some of which we sit on together), as well as on numerous school, faculty and university-level working parties and other work groups. Most of the above committee activity relates directly or indirectly to learning and teaching. We have held, and hold, a series of internally- and externally-funded learning and teaching grants, with one completed ALTC project (Webb & Brien 2008) and two currently funded projects in process (Kent et al 2009; and de la Harp et al 2009). We also represent our universities and disciplines on the executives of professional organisations with a learning and teaching focus or orientation outside the university, including on the teaching and learning networks of both the Australian Business Dean's Council and the Deans of Arts Social Sciences and Humanities; and as Immediate Past President of the Australian Association of Writing Programs.

In our situation, a professional responsibility for, and genuine personal interest in, maximising the efficacy and value of learning and teaching policy is overlaid onto the complex, dispersed faculty population and unique history of our institutional context, CQUniversity, Australia (hereafter CQU). CQU currently services approximately

18,000 students across 11 locations in Mackay, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Bundaberg, Emerald, Noosa, Brisbane, Gold Coast, Sydney, Melbourne and Singapore, as well as those studying at a distance across Australia and throughout the world. The original institution was founded in 1967 in Rockhampton as the Queensland Institute of Technology (Capricornia) and introduced distance education in 1974. Between 1978 and 1989, campuses were established in the Central Queensland region at Gladstone, Mackay, Bundaberg and Emerald. An additional learning site was established in Noosa in 2001. The institution achieved university status in January 1992 and, in 1994, with a full-time student load of 5,000 (then the fourth lowest in Australia), the University expanded, establishing its first on-shore teaching site for international students in Sydney. This was followed by establishment of campuses in Melbourne in 1997, Brisbane in 1998 and the Gold Coast in 2001 (CQU 2009). By 2006, Central Queensland University was acknowledged as the largest provider of education to international students studying on-shore in Australia, although this has not been without considerable critique. The majority of international students are situated on the capital city campuses, which are managed by the University's (since 2009) wholly owned company, Campus Management Services. Programs and courses are developed across the domestic campuses, with the majority of course (unit-level) and program (degree-level) coordinators and most of the university management and administration staff located on Rockhampton campus. There has been, moreover, since the mid 1990s, not only a series of almost constant faculty and university restructures, but also a great deal of public, media and government scrutiny of the university and all aspects of its operations.

Learning and teaching, and its quality, have certainly been at the core of most of this development and changes, as well as much of the critique. In such a complex, unstable and shifting environment, and where consistency in delivery across delivery sites and modes is enshrined in legislation and audited by AUQA, the development of functional learning and teaching policy and its implementation across the entire learning and teaching footprint is essential and foundational to practice. Or, in the terms of this discussion, these teaching and learning policies are absolutely mainstream in relation to the university's operation. Yet, while such policies can be devised, written and ratified, they are difficult to implement when processes already in use do not match these guidelines. The procedures, moreover, as laid down in our university policy are at times very complicated and/or time consuming to follow, and this can make these policies difficult to understand, let alone implement in practice.

These lacunae, moreover, create a space whereby detractors can argue against the validity of learning and teaching policy and refuse to respond to its imperatives. This response is often in the context of reasonable critique of the audit culture that infuses much of modern life including higher education (see, for instance, Shore & Wright 2000) and is having a real affect on the identity formation and behaviour of academics and other university staff (Henkle 2000). Questions around the content, usefulness and accountability of such an audit culture (Pillay & Kimber 2009) have become blended with what various commentators have characterised as 'intellectual non-engagement and avoidance' (see, for instance, Casey 2005), whereby a policy is supported or discounted according to a strategic understanding of one's position in

terms of allies and position in various ongoing debates, rather than the content or value of the policy itself. Common charges against the value of policy creation and adherence is that such practices are nothing but bureaucratic ‘adminis-trivia’ and have no inherent value in themselves; that the concern with policy is an indication of the rise of the style of people management known as the ‘new managerialism’ (Trow 1994, Deem 2007); and that policy is disconnected from actual learning and teaching practices and/or anathema to academic freedom, denying individual excellence in attempting to legislate for a ‘one size fits all’ learning and teaching experience.

In our personal experience, however, we can attest to how recent policy developments and refinements in, for instance, our grading and assessment policy were an important step towards ensuring consistency across the domestic and international campuses. This is important for ensuring equity for students as well as the accountability of our assessment processes. Yet, our faculty processes that were then in place did not totally match either the old or new iterations of the university policy, and nor was there any real alignment between the processes of the two faculties which had recently restructured into one. Policy and processes around generic graduate attributes provide another such example. It is widely recognised that identifying and embedding the development of such attributes is valuable for learning and teaching both conceptually and in practice (DEST 2002: 12–14). Graduate attributes are, however, described, embedded and assessed to different degrees in the different courses, programs, schools and faculties at our university. Moreover, until recently, the university had no real policy framework around these, even though much of the discussion around graduate attributes was being driven by regulation and audit requirements.

To give a contrary example, in 2009, the university decided to move to the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS). This has been a very collaborative process with a project manager who has included representatives from almost all parts of the university in the project. Academic staff within the faculties were included in the early stages in the decision making regarding which learning management system would best suit the university, and that involvement has continued with the setting up of an Academic Reference Group which included academic staff from faculties and non-faculty areas as well as staff from the Information Technology Division, the Curriculum Design and Development Unit, and the Academic Staff Development Unit. An LMS Board was established with a Pro-Vice Chancellor at the helm who has ensured that, as agreement was reached on various stages of the project, plans and processes were approved by Academic Board to ensure their legitimacy, and then communicated throughout the organisation so that all staff were informed of progress and when they could provide further input into the project and its implementation (Tickle, Tennent & Muldoon 2009).

In considering the above examples, our problem is obvious. The intent of learning and teaching policy is absolutely mainstream in terms of academic practice, but its functional implications can be either perceived as intrinsic or marginally important—or actually be functionally marginal—in terms of the day-to-day work that these policies inform. In our examples, faculties and their staff are responsible for implementing many of the learning and teaching processes, but—as others have discussed—we have found that this operationalisation much easier to achieve when

those faculty members have meaningful input into the development of the framing policies, and where this meaningful input is beyond that of discussion at committees (see, Alfred 1998, Fish 2007, Hearn 1998, Lapworth 2004, Maguire 2009). If this contribution is made, received and incorporated into learning and teaching policies, managers such as ourselves can then prepare guidelines and procedures for academic staff that have some relation to their work and aspirations and, thus, have a real chance of both being successfully operationalised and improving learning and teaching practice.

### **Concluding remarks: Ways forward**

Our promotion (and support) of learning and teaching policy as mainstream—that is, as integral to all aspects of our work in learning and teaching—is based on a number of key tenets. We believe that these policies can and should fall out of, and iterate into, the structures we actually work in; that they can be used to improve learning and teaching; and that they embody ways of embedding and embodying the teaching-research nexus in many aspects of academic practice. We also see learning and teaching policy as a site of equity, ensuring fairness for students and a level playing field for staff. Moreover, these policies provide a necessary efficiency, supplying guidelines for processes and decision making in learning and teaching that leaves more time for other academic activities such as research, creative practice and professional and community service activities. Furthermore, policy development can provide a common and affirming space for collaborative practice across the university, whether this involves managers and their staff, academic leaders and early career academics, or staff and students. Such practice can indeed provide a space for student and other stakeholder input into the institution—including those stakeholders located outside the institution in business, industry, professional bodies and local communities. There is, indeed, an increasing number of studies that posit that it is only when policy is co-developed with such a range of staff and stakeholders that buy in (and, thus, compliance) will be achieved.

In order to move, therefore, past the impasse of assertions regarding whether policy is mainstream or marginal, managers and academic leaders need to engage all staff and university stakeholders in understanding what policy is and why it is both important and useful. Academic leadership in this area must, moreover, find a space in which staff and a wide range of stakeholders can contribute to forming and reforming policy, rather than looking for ways to invite (or attempt to force) staff to follow already formulated policy in which they have no investment. In this, intra- and cross-institutional initiatives can provide ways forward. New technologies can be mobilised in relation to their networking, repositories of knowledge, and archives of past practice functions. While bodies such as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council could openly promote this area as a priority area for projects, and professional bodies pay more attention to university policy, individual institutions could also begin to recognise the value of this important area of academic work in their reward and career structures.

## Endnotes

[1] Despite the promotion of what in Australia is called the ‘teaching-research nexus’ (see, for instance, Krause et al 2008), various studies argue there is no evidence to indicate the existence of a simple functional association between high research output and the effectiveness of undergraduate teaching (see, for instance, Ramsden & Moses 1992; Coate, Barnett & Williams 2001).

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