

# Peer Review of Teaching in Australian Universities: Current Activities and Issues

## Introduction

Funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, in 2007-08 the Peer Review of Teaching in Australian Higher Education project<sup>1</sup> will create principles and resources to assist Australian universities to effectively implement policies and programs of peer review of teaching.

The first stage of this project has involved the 'mapping' of peer review of teaching activities to get a picture of how peer review is currently being used in Australian universities. This paper is a summary of the results of this process.

## Summary of findings

The results of the mapping exercise suggest that peer review of teaching is not a widespread professional activity in Australian universities, and that it is uncommon for it to be used formally, either for purposes of evaluation or teaching development. Broadly speaking, it is therefore likely that relatively few academic staff at Australian universities have engaged in peer review of teaching activities in any systematic or formalised way. While this is the case, there are institutions where peer review programs have been implemented successfully or are in the early stages of implementation.

In summary, key aspects of the findings of the mapping stage are:

- That size and type of university has no bearing on whether peer review of teaching is used and how;
- That the context in which peer review of teaching is used most frequently is for new and sessional staff as part of foundations courses and/or tutor training programs;
- That where there are practices around peer review of teaching, they are generally not embedded in policy: for example, two out of 25 institutions surveyed list peer review of teaching as a required source of evidence in promotion applications;
- That peer review of teaching programs appear to be most successful when they have both a management-level 'champion' and a coordinating staff member with specific responsibility for development and implementation.

## Methodology

The mapping process entailed two primary methods: searches of university websites for information about peer review of teaching activities and resources and interviews with staff from a number of Australian universities. It was determined that staff from academic development and teaching and learning units would be the primary contacts for this part of the mapping process as it is likely these people are in the best position to have a broad understanding of the use of teaching development and evaluation methods across their institution. However, it should be noted that this does not mean they have a detailed knowledge of *all* teaching and learning activities in what are often large and complex institutions. Thus, the responses received should be treated as subjective and are the perspectives of individuals, rather than representing institutional responses.

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<sup>1</sup> This project is a collaboration between the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne (lead agency) and the Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources, University of Wollongong and is funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council under the Priority Projects Program (2007-8).

Contacts from a total of 26 universities were surveyed for the mapping stage, the majority via semi-structured telephone conversations, but in a few cases responses to questions were returned by email.

## **Peer Review of Teaching in Australian Universities**

### **Graduate Certificate and foundations courses**

A small number of universities (seven out of 26) include peer review of teaching in the curriculum for Graduate Certificate in University Teaching (or equivalent) courses – to varying degrees of intensity and formality – but most (17) do not. Two universities included in this survey do not offer a Graduate Certificate in University Teaching.

Peer review of teaching activities are, however, slightly more likely to be run in foundations courses for new staff and in tutor training programs: ten of the 26 universities employ some form of peer review in these programs. Again, the nature and depth of activities varied between universities.

### **Dispersed activities in departments, schools and faculties**

It appears that it is relatively rare for individual academic departments, schools or faculties in Australian universities to be conducting in-house peer review of teaching programs, at least in any systematic way. Contacts suggested that there was probably *ad hoc* or informal peer review taking place in their institution (for example, where one staff member asks another for advice on teaching or a head of department reviews a staff member when there are questions about teaching performance) but the majority were unaware of any formal programs running in departments.

While there were a few exceptions to this rule, even at universities where departments were engaging in peer review it was on a relatively small scale and tended to be occurring ‘in pockets’ (as one contact put it).

### **Current policy linkages**

Peer review of teaching activities are also taking place in order for academic staff to collect evidence for promotion applications. Thirteen of the 26 universities surveyed include peer review as a possible source of evidence (although it is impossible to know how many staff are actually using it) while 11 universities’ promotion policies contain no mention of peer review of teaching. Two universities have an institution-wide requirement that staff provide peer review evidence as part of promotion applications (one faculty at another university includes it as a requirement). At these two institutions it is mandatory for applicants to submit student evaluation data and peer and/or supervisor evaluation as evidence of teaching quality.

Where other personnel policies are concerned, two universities have a link between probation policies and peer review of teaching: at one institution a large faculty is using peer review of teaching as a mandatory element of the probation process, and at another university participation in the Graduate Certificate of University Teaching (which includes two peer review of teaching sessions) is compulsory for probational staff who have teaching roles. Apart from these, no other policy linkages – for example, to appraisal or performance development - were reported by contacts at any of the universities surveyed.

## **Reported challenges in implementing peer review of teaching**

Contacts surveyed during the mapping process were asked what they believed to be the challenges in implementing peer review of teaching more broadly in their particular institutional context. It would appear from the responses provided by contacts that peer review of teaching is a largely unfamiliar activity that is generally unsupported both by policy and culture in Australian universities.

The most common challenges reported by contacts were:

- Time and workload of academic staff;
- Teaching culture: teaching is perceived as a private, ‘closed-door’ activity;
- A lack of understanding of the benefits of peer review of teaching among academic staff and university management;
- How peer review is ‘sold’ to staff: suspicion about managerial objectives; rejection of ‘top down’ mandates or that peer review is ‘yet another instrument of accountability.’

### **Conditions that appear to assist in implementing peer review of teaching**

It is worth noting that while teaching culture was identified by a number of contacts as a barrier to peer review of teaching being adopted more widely, the picture was not entirely bleak, with some contacts describing their institution as committed to improving teaching or there being a ‘lot of energy for teaching’ at the present time, even if peer review was not one of the strategies on the agenda for teaching enhancement. In addition, while a large number of contacts felt staff would react negatively to the prospect of undertaking peer review of teaching for the reasons outlined above, others (though admittedly a smaller group) indicated that staff at their institution would, broadly speaking, consider peer review a reasonable requirement and/or would be willing to engage in it if it were able to be accommodated within their current workload model.

While the diversity in the breadth and nature of the various peer review programs/activities that are taking place at Australian universities makes it difficult to draw conclusions about why these particular programs have been successfully established, there are two major commonalities in the conditions that emerge. These are described below.

#### **At least one management-level ‘champion’**

Successful implementation of peer review of teaching appears to depend, to a large extent, on the unequivocal support of at least one senior-level manager. While support at this level is obviously influential, where peer review in faculties and departments is concerned, the support of faculty Deans and/or Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) or a head of department is essential to the uptake of peer review of teaching.

#### **A staff member with specific responsibility for peer review of teaching**

As well as having high-level support, the successful implementation of peer review is often contingent on the appointment (be it formal or informal) of a staff member who has responsibility for designing and supporting the implementation of peer review of teaching programs. In most - though not all - these cases this person has had a personal interest in peer review of teaching and has provided the time and energy to raise awareness of and interest in peer review among departments, faculties, or individual academic staff.