

Quality teaching in higher education? Insights from a pedagogy-focused professional development pilot for academics

Sally Patfield¹

Jenny Gore¹, Leanne Fray¹, Elena Prieto¹ and Kristina Sincock¹

¹ The University of Newcastle

The quality of teaching in Australian higher education has long been a contested and politicised issue. For decades, successive federal governments have sought to reform university teaching, with the current Liberal–National Coalition government even attempting to implement a new performance-based funding scheme ostensibly tied to indicators of teaching quality. Yet in the context of the commodification and internationalisation of higher education, such talk of ‘quality teaching’ is often deceiving, frequently linked to accountability, compliance and quality assurance, and seldom to instructional improvement. Indeed, many of the mechanisms currently in place within universities deemed to represent teaching quality fall within the remit of satisfaction surveys and student evaluations, merely quantifying student opinion as a proxy for effective teaching. In this paper, we shift attention to the practice of teaching, presenting the results of a pilot project conducted with 26 academics at one Australian university during 2019-2020. This study examined the benefits of pedagogy-focused professional development for academics by trialling the use of an evidence-based pedagogical framework, the Quality Teaching Model (QTM), which was utilised by academics either as a form of self-assessment ($n = 13$), as part of peer review of teaching ($n = 9$), or within a community of practice ($n = 4$). Our analysis of focus group data demonstrates the value and applicability of a pedagogy-focused approach to both the conceptualisation and improvement of teaching quality, with the QTM providing: a foundation for education theory; a tool for analysis of practice; a scaffold for course design; a mechanism for collaboration; and a means to improve the student experience. We argue that if the federal government is seriously committed to enhancing teaching quality in higher education, powerful professional development in teaching, such as this, is likely to be more valuable than the current emphasis on accountability through distal proxies.