

# Professional development in a transnational context

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*This paper offers a process for the development of (i) a higher education professional development framework for transnational teachers, and (ii) resources to sit within the framework, for use by academics who are often stretched as they balance teaching, research, and administrative duties. As the resources go online, effective promotion is vital to ensure there is take-up. We need to know who is using the resources, and whether those teachers who are using them are finding them useful. Through evaluation, we hope to learn more about the users and their particular needs.*

## Introduction

Looking back, I really wish I'd known more about what my students wanted from me and what the needs of the group were. The task was massive. I could see that my teaching needed to be tighter (Quote from a first-time UniSA transnational teacher).

Internationalisation of higher education, particularly transnational (or offshore) education, is expanding at a rapid rate. Greater physical and virtual mobility, combined with trade liberalisation and free market economics, are driving influences which will ensure that this global trend continues (Knight, 2003).

Australia is recognised as the third largest provider of transnational education, behind the USA and the UK (Middlehurst & Campbell, 2003) and within Australia, UniSA is one of the leading transnational institutions. In 2005, UniSA is delivering 42 programs to more than 7,000 students in eight countries outside Australia, and within 5 years UniSA expects to have 17,000 transnational students (*UniSA 2010* on the UniSA website, 2005). To achieve this ambitious target UniSA need to develop sustainable and flexible modes of delivery and high quality programs.

The most common transnational delivery model at UniSA sees Australia-based staff travelling offshore to teach intensive course 'blocks', supported by local tutors and partner institutions. These tutors are a contact point for students in the intervals between the teaching periods. In some cases, local academics are recruited as the main teachers in a program.

If the quality of the teaching and learning environment is not up to the required standard the implications for the University and the students are significant. Professional development becomes an important quality assurance mechanism. As Knight asks, 'As education/training programs move across borders what are the implications for quality assurance?' (2003, p. 17).

While we accept that professional development is integral to all teaching programs, we must ask ourselves if a particular professional development approach is required for transnational teachers. Knight, for one, differentiates between 'at home' international and cross-border (transnational) education, identifying both similarities and differences (2003).

Location is an obvious and significant factor. Gribble and Ziguras (2003) state that having up-to-date information about the country of delivery assists visiting academics to become genuinely interested in the cultural and academic context they are entering. This is vital to creating a good teaching and learning environment, and is an important professional development issue.

Another element of teaching unique to the transnational context is the need for teamwork between Australian staff and local tutors. Local tutors have opportunities for professional engagement with the 'cultural other' in the transnational context i.e. the visiting Australian academic (Leask, 2004). Local tutors on the other hand, provide a cultural bridge to the students, especially if the relationship in the teaching team is egalitarian and collegial.

Clark and Clark (2000) describe the specific professional development needs of teachers new to the transnational context as:

- the opportunity to speak with teachers who have taught transnationally;
- strategies for encouraging good work in intensive classes;
- knowledge of the students' backgrounds;
- skills for facilitating group discussion;
- skills in adapting materials and teaching methods to different environments.

Nevertheless, Gribble and Ziguras (2003) note there is often little formal training for transnational academics, with most support given through mentoring and informal briefings.

UniSA is committed to following a different path and developing a comprehensive approach to the professional development of transnational teaching staff, both on and offshore. This process has several key stages:

- Developing a professional development framework for the transnational teaching and learning environment;
- Developing the resources identified within the framework;
- Promoting the resources and raising awareness among transnational teachers;
- Evaluating resources with a view to revision/improvement.

## **Construction of the professional development framework**

In 2004 UniSA gained funding through the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC) to create a *Professional Development Framework for Academic Staff Teaching Australian Programs Offshore*. The project team, led by Associate Professor Betty Leask, addressed the question: 'How can Australian and local staff be appropriately inducted and trained for this distinctive teaching and learning environment?' (Leask, Hicks, Kohler & King, 2005, p. vi).

An underpinning strategy for developing the framework was continuous and intensive consultation with intended end-users – academic staff teaching in transnational programs. This approach was critical both to the relevance of the content and to giving staff a sense of ownership of the resources. This is a key component of promotion and up-take of professional development resources in an 'information overloaded' higher education environment.

The initial scoping activity involved an extensive literature review and three subsequent surveys designed to identify the essential and desirable knowledge and abilities of staff teaching UniSA transnational programs (Leask et al, 2005). Face-to-face focus groups and individual interviews with both students and staff were completed concurrently with the surveys. Participants in the surveys were (a) Australia-based academic staff, (b) offshore/local tutors, (c) transnational students and (d) key management and administrative staff.

The information gathered through the literature review, surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews was shaped into four broader themes (Leask et al 2005, pp.26-30) – namely, transnational teachers need to be:

- Experts in their field;
- Skilled teachers and managers of the learning environment;
- Efficient intercultural learners;
- Aware of the necessary personal attitudes and attributes.

The structure of the resulting framework (Leask et al 2005, p36-45) has two main sections, one for Australia-based teaching staff and one for local tutors. Each section is separated into three career stages: **induction, early career orientation, and ongoing professional development**. The four themes identified become reference points for selecting the necessary content and developing specific sample resources and professional development activities.

The framework was developed during the first six months of 2005. Resource development began prior to the completion of the framework, and has remained consistent with the framework's final recommendations.

## Resource development process

During early 2005 two professional developers were assigned to produce resources for transnational teachers. Their brief was to populate the transnational website with practical and relevant information, guided by the AVCC framework recommendations.

These resources needed to be web-based to allow access for staff who are often isolated, or who have work commitments preventing their access to other forms of teacher development. They can easily be printed off and used as reading materials during long flights or train journeys between 'home' and the transnational classroom.

Most of the resources listed below are ready to use, with just a few still in development:

### Introduction to teaching and learning at UniSA

- Overview of transnational teaching at UniSA
- About UniSA: An induction resource for transnational staff
- Induction package for local tutors
- Academic scholarship, integrity and plagiarism
- Teaching@UniSA: Online for local tutors
- Teaching@UniSA: An out of session task

### Teaching and learning resources

- Introduction to transnational teaching for Australia-based staff at UniSA
- Organisational seminar: UniSA teachers speak
- Teaching strategies when travel is disrupted
- Supervising international research students
- Improving intercultural interaction in transnational teaching at UniSA
- Developing Graduate Qualities in transnational teaching at UniSA
- Supporting student-centred learning in transnational teaching at UniSA
- Stimulating discussion and group-work in transnational teaching at UniSA
- Developing a scholarly approach in transnational teaching at UniSA

### Supplementary resources

- Glossary
- Professional development activities
- Scenarios and case studies in transnational teaching
- Quick Guide links and resources for transnational teaching

In collecting ideas for the first resources, the writers consulted a range of staff, including:

- UniSA professional development team members;
- A resource reference group, consisting of transnational teaching staff from each of the University's four academic divisions;
- Deans: Teaching and Learning from the four divisions;
- Student learning advisors;
- Transnational lecturers, supervisors and program directors;
- Transnational program managers and coordinators.

A variety of ideas and opinions were gathered during this consultation process, but these were at times contradictory. There is always a degree of subjectivity about effective teaching approaches. What works for one does not necessarily work for all. Despite the diversity of opinion and the intensity of the process, it was an important activity and resulted in significant refinements and improvements to the resources. Those involved also developed a sense of ownership of the final product, again an important way to create advocates for the resources in the long term. For these reasons, we chose to err on the side of 'over-consultation'.

Finding the right balance between theoretical and practical content in the resources is not always easy. Gribble and Ziguras (2003) point out that transnational teachers prefer more informal methods of professional development, with an emphasis on knowledge of the cultural, political, legal and economic contexts of each country. Also important are practical case studies and examples relevant to local students and local issues. Our decision was to make the resources as practical as possible, with ideas teachers could use immediately.

This approach brings with it risks. Ramsden (2003, p.108-110) describes three generic elements of university teaching:

- Theory 1: Teaching as telling or transmission
- Theory 2: Teaching as organising student activity
- Theory 3: Teaching as making learning possible.

Time-pressured, inexperienced transnational teachers may prefer to use methods associated with Theory 1. Professional development resources need to move such teachers beyond the *telling/transmission* stage, while still taking into account the limited amount of time staff are likely to commit to these activities. When we want resources to be immediately *useable*, it is tempting to focus on 'teaching techniques', introducing activities that will lead to greater involvement of the students.

Introduction of communicative activities to the classroom is a positive step, but not in itself enough. As Ramsden stresses, good teaching is more than just keeping students active. It involves 'finding out about students' misunderstandings, intervening to change them and creating a context of learning that encourages students to engage with the subject matter' (2003, p.110). This approach to teaching involves deciding which teaching methods will most effectively engage students with the content. We must find ways to inspire quality teaching, to urge teachers to stimulate, challenge and encourage students to critically engage with key issues. Developing concise, generic professional development resources that meet the challenge of emphasising the relationship between content and method is not easy. We addressed this challenge by focussing on the importance of reflective practice, listening to the student voice, and stressing the link between research and good teaching methodology.

We also faced decisions about the need (or otherwise) for separate resources for Australia-based teachers and local tutors. We worked from the principle of having the same resources for all teachers wherever possible. There were times however, where it became apparent that the needs of local tutors were very specific and we had to defend our reasons for developing separate material for them.

One of the resources designed specifically for local tutors, **About UniSA**, exists already within the University's website, and aims to provide information about the structures of the University of South Australia and its strategic directions. Here we couldn't assume knowledge about

important issues like student-centred learning, or an understanding of all the 'local' terminology and reference, such as descriptions of UniSA campuses. We needed to write a version that would be relevant, concise and clear to someone who may never have been to Australia.

In **Academic scholarship, integrity and plagiarism**, we tried to recognise and give value to the experiences and values of other cultures, while explaining the University's own expectations in the area of academic integrity. It was important to refer specifically to other perceptions of the use of someone else's words. In some cultures, memorising or reproducing the words, ideas and findings of a mentor, without acknowledgement, is understood to be an honourable practice indicating respect (Carroll, 2003).

The UniSA online advisory team was involved throughout the design process, influencing all aspects of the web work, including formatting, layout, style, readability, compliancy and accessibility. With input from so many 'experts' with specific training in web writing, the writers devised guidelines to keep the resources reasonably consistent.

The guidelines we followed had the advantages set out below:

| Guidelines for resource preparation   | Advantages   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short in length (maximum of 2-3 pages)</li> <li>• Minimal preamble</li> <li>• Simple, readable, unambiguous language</li> <li>• Use of active (rather than passive)</li> <li>• Concise sentences, short paragraphs and use of bullet points</li> <li>• Use of culturally sensitive and inclusive language</li> <li>• Provision of links to further websites and resources</li> <li>• Most resources are logically linked but can also stand alone</li> <li>• Use of quotations from practitioners in the field</li> <li>• Names of the resources carefully chosen to enable easy searching</li> <li>• Minimal use of tables and images, to prevent accessibility problems</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to read and print off for those who dislike reading from a screen</li> <li>• Understandable for those whose first language is not English</li> <li>• Quick and easy to scan for information</li> <li>• Easy to focus on areas of most interest</li> <li>• Evident that the content is based on research and 'tried and true' strategies</li> <li>• Teachers recognise the relevancy to their own context</li> <li>• Easy to find in the internet</li> <li>• Easy to download</li> <li>•</li> </ul> |

To date not all of the planned resources have been completed. The intention is to continue with the development process whilst at the same time gathering user feedback on the finished resources. Using the information from this evaluation process, we will refine existing and future resources.

## Promoting professional development resources

Effective promotion of teacher development programs increases their value and the value placed on teaching itself (Biggs, 2003). Online resources in particular can sit idle for long periods. What good are the resources if they are not used?

When addressing the issue of promotional strategies for promoting the new resources, we considered the following questions:

- What prevents/inhibits transnational academics from accessing and using of professional development materials?
- Which channels and personnel can we use to reach onshore and offshore teachers?
- How do we ensure that those who had input into scoping of the framework are informed and engaged in the initial promotion process?

There are a number of reasons why teachers in higher education institutions do not always access professional development resources and opportunities. Gelade and Quinn point out there are various levels of teacher resistance to professional development. Academics are generally 'ambivalent to negative' (2004, p. 9) towards professional development activities. If these offerings are not compulsory, or obviously practical and relevant to their needs, teachers might not use them.

Gelade and Quinn also describe a lack of clarity about the goals of the resources, resulting in 'misunderstanding about the intention of professional development' (2004, p. 9). Research also suggests that transnational teacher development opportunities are affected by issues of time and workloads, and difficulties in finding a balance with onshore responsibilities and research priorities (NTEU, 2004).

Some teachers may be afraid of exposing their perceived inadequacies or lack of knowledge when they ask for help, experiencing 'underlying feelings of avoiding anxiety or inadequacy versus seeking satisfaction or challenge' (Akerlind, 2005, p.27). Previous negative or positive experiences with training programs may also affect attitudes to professional development support, and result in general feelings of insecurity.

Professional development can be seen as predicated on the concept that the powerful (the 'holder of knowledge') helps those in knowledge deficit (McWilliam, 2002). This perception may block communication among equals and adversely affect attitudes.

To overcome this range of barriers we chose a multifaceted promotional approach. The key promotional strategy has been the ongoing involvement of target staff. Important to note are the principles which underpin the selection of the promotional strategies we chose:

- To allow each of the 4 academic divisions to finalise the promotional approach that will work best within their structure and culture;
- To build enthusiasm by emphasising relevance and usefulness of the resources, so academics see their potential and want to use them;
- To initially involve more experienced teachers, administrators, and program directors, encouraging them to interact with less experienced colleagues.

The first step began with a **university-wide approach**. The materials were launched on the University website mid-2005, available to anyone with Internet access. The readiness of the new site was announced in a general weekly newsletter to all staff.

Next followed a crucial strategy, aimed at the **academic divisions**. We met with key divisional personnel, including deans: teaching and learning, heads of schools, and transnational program managers and coordinators. At these initial meetings we developed individual plans based on the specific characteristics of each division, like communicating through school newsletters and course information sites. We arranged presentations to groups such as divisional teaching and learning committees, international working committees, and school boards, as well as to transnational program administrative officers, program directors, and course coordinators.

The third stage involved developing **networks of key people** across transnational programs, cultivating advocates for the materials. In establishing good relationships with Australia-based staff, channels of communication open with those who reside offshore. For example, program directors who are convinced that the resources are useful will be more likely to share their professional knowledge with their colleagues overseas, use some of the resources in their induction training, offer hard copies to staff working in their programs, and encourage others to consider the ideas offered.

Ideally, we expect program directors to have responsibility for the professional development of local tutors and supervisors in their programs, but in reality they are often hard-pressed to meet all of these demands. Ensuring that local academics commit to engaging fully with teacher development materials can be an enormous task for program directors who have a full workload and limited time. The question remains whether it might be feasible to engage a professional developer to deliver face-to-face in-service training for local offshore tutors and supervisors.

## Evaluating the professional development resources

UniSA has many professional development resources available online. The resources for transnational teachers have now joined this pool of online information. Clearly though, having the resources available is not enough. Critical questions must be answered. In the case of these resources, it will be important to know:

- Are transnational teachers using them?
- Are they finding them helpful?
- How can the resources be improved?

Deciding on how to evaluate the resources has been an issue of much discussion and thought. An underlying concern has been the possibility of getting a poor response to attempts to evaluate the impact of the teaching resources. Academics are busy with both teaching duties and administration. Overloading already busy staff with evaluation tasks might serve only to alienate those we are trying to help.

According to Gelade and Quinn (2004), there is a level of distrust of surveys among academics. Local tutors have a range of additional issues – they do not always have easy access to online survey formats; there are language and intercultural communication issues to consider; and often the tutoring role is something they do in addition to their full-time work.

The Planning and Advisory Services (PAS) Unit in UniSA was consulted to help us devise evaluation mechanisms. PAS oversees major institutional monitoring and evaluation activities, gathering feedback from both students and staff. With their expert input, we gained valuable insights into structuring questions/statements carefully to gather the sort of feedback that will help us improve the resources. As Bruner says, ‘evaluation is often viewed as a test of effectiveness – of materials, teaching methods or whatnot – but this is the least important aspect of it. The most important is to provide intelligence on how to improve these things’ (Ramsden, 2003, p. 223).

As a result, we decided to try a mix of approaches, incorporating an electronic survey, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and individual interviews. We hope that this variety will enable us to gather feedback from a wide range of sources.

The major evaluation tool will be the survey. This makes use of the **TellUs2 survey** format, an online feedback instrument created for use by UniSA. TellUs2 is a flexible instrument that can be adapted to elicit many types of feedback. Using TellUs2, it is possible to construct different types of questionnaires or surveys, using simple, single response questions or multiple-choice questions. It is possible to develop questions that enable the ranking of answers, or collection of free text responses.

The survey questions are attached as an appendix to this paper. We tried to use clear, unambiguous language, given the number of non-English speaking background tutors who will be asked to complete it. The survey sets out to:

- Identify the resources used;
- Rate the usefulness of the resources;
- Establish staff impressions and attitudes to the resources;
- Identify modes of professional development staff find most helpful (eg. informal face-to-face, online, mentoring);

- Identify how people found out about the resources.

Experience within UniSA has shown that local tutors rarely respond to online surveys. For this reason we plan to print copies of the survey form and have them posted out, or delivered by Australia-based transnational teaching staff when they visit partner institutions. Doing this will hopefully increase the response rate from this target group.

Asking for **oral feedback** is often an effective way of gathering feedback from Australia-based staff. In a work environment where people feel time pressured, being asked to provide 5-10 minutes oral feedback can be a time-efficient way of meeting evaluation needs. A small number of questions, based on the TellUs2 survey format, have been designed, and we will make time to speak with Australia-based staff who have been unable to complete the electronic survey. This will be done either face-to-face or over the phone.

The website for the resource materials has an **email link** for sending informal suggestions and comments. In addition, a **discussion board** has been set up to enable an online exchange of ideas.

This mix of evaluation tools should provide us with responses from a wide cross-section of users and potential users. Throughout the evaluation period, we hope to make good use of the teaching and administration staff who have had input from the beginning. We anticipate that their long-standing involvement will encourage them to give us feedback and to encourage their colleagues as well.

## Conclusion

There are many questions about the transnational teaching resources that we hope will be answered over the next 6-12 months:

- Are the resources pitched at the right level?
- Is there going to be uptake of the online resources?
- Will the promotional push raise awareness of the resources?

In the longer term there are more interesting questions to answer related to the impact of the resources, such as:

- Are the students satisfied with the quality of teaching?
- Is student learning improving?

One thing is clear. The push to improve the relevance and effectiveness of transnational teaching professional development resources will be ongoing, a cycle of development, delivery, evaluation and then further development. The work this paper describes is just one phase in this ongoing process.

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## Appendix 1

### Welcome to the 2005 Transnational Resources Survey

The results of this survey will be used to improve professional development materials, developed for UniSA transnational teachers.

If you want to know more about the resources, or are experiencing difficulties with the survey, please contact Karli Jozeps at [karli.jozeps@unisa.edu.au](mailto:karli.jozeps@unisa.edu.au)

#### 1. Which of the following best describes you?

- Lecturer
- Tutor
- Supervisor (Research)
- Head of School
- Program Director
- Other

#### 2. Do you mostly teach or supervise as -

- an Australia-based lecturer or tutor, who travels overseas to teach?
- a lecturer or tutor teaching in a country outside of Australia?
- other?

#### 3. If other, please specify

#### 4. How long have you been teaching in a UniSA transnational program?

- never
- 1 year or less
- 2-3 years
- more than 3 years

#### 5. Have you used any of the resources?

- Yes

- No (Go to Question 11)

6. Which resources have you used?

- Overview of transnational teaching
- About UniSA
- Academic scholarship, integrity and plagiarism
- Introduction to transnational teaching for Australia-based staff
- Improving intercultural interaction
- Developing Graduate Qualities
- Supporting student-centred learning
- Stimulating discussion and group-work
- Developing a scholarly approach
- Induction package for local transnational tutors
- Supervising international research students

7. In relation to the resources you have used, please order the following from 11 to 1. Apply the scale of 11=most useful, to 1=least useful, or never used.

|  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| Overview of transnational teaching                               | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| About UniSA  | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Academic scholarship, integrity and plagiarism                   | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Introduction to transnational teaching for Australia-based staff | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Improving intercultural interaction                              | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Developing Graduate Qualities                                    | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Supporting student-centred learning                              | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Stimulating discussion and group-work                            | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Developing a scholarly approach                                  | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Induction package for local transnational tutors                 | <input type="text" value="1"/> |
| Supervising international research students                      | <input type="text" value="1"/> |

8. Now, please elaborate on the features of the resources you found most useful, or least useful.

9. The resources addressed my teaching needs.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10. The resources were easy to understand.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree






11. What is the most effective way for you to get support for transnational teaching?

- face-to-face (informal discussions)
- face-to-face (formal training)
- online
- hardcopy printed resources
- a mix of the above
- I do not need professional development
- other (please specify below)

12. If you selected 'other', please specify.

13. To help us better plan future communication strategies, could you tell us how you first found out about these transnational resources?

- went to an information session

-  from a colleague
-  from a Learning Connection/ Professional Development adviser
-  from your Program Director/ Head of School
-  internet search
-  other

14. Any other comments eg are there any topics you are interested in but couldn't find in this list of resources?

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Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.