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Increasing access to professional learning for academic staff through open educational resources and authentic design

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Abstract

This research examines the design and delivery of a new Foundations of University Teaching Practice (FUTP) program delivered through asynchronous online modules. The freedom to choose defines the new momentum of openness in distance and open learning. University teaching staff expect quality resources to support their professional development within the reality of limited time for learning and a desire for increased accessibility. Openness and increased access bring both opportunities and challenges. This paper uses mixed methods to examine the FUTP from the perspectives of both the designers and the academic staff who participated in the program. Using personal reflections, focus groups, a survey, and interviews, we explore those opportunities and challenges within the context of the design and delivery of the program and report on the findings. Our research confirmed the value of openness and increased access to professional learning in higher education

Keywords

open educational resources; teacher preparation programs; learning design, online learning; early career academics; professional learning

Introduction

Foundations programs across the higher-education sector have long introduced new academics to the fundamentals of learning and teaching in higher education. Encouraging academics to engage in pedagogical training through such programs is one way that institutions have met the goals of improved student learning experiences and enhanced quality assurance (Gibbs & Coffey 2004). An extensive national Australian Learning and Teaching Council project report published in 2010 (Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson & Luzecky) provided an in-depth analysis of foundations programs for new academics. Of the 25 universities that provided details about their foundations programs as part of this study, only two reported that their programs were online. However, in the second decade of the 21st century, the professional learning landscape of teaching and learning is shifting. There is a stronger focus on external teaching and learning standards, coupled with new opportunities offered by technology to make professional-learning options more open, flexible and attractive to academic staff. A 2015 Office of Learning and Teaching project (Whelan & Slade 2015, p.3) pointed out an emerging trend “towards unbundling of formal programs and a focus on modularisation”.

Contemporary definitions of openness encompass the notion of *open learning* (to study and learn anytime, anywhere and at any pace), *open access* (inclusive and equal access to educational opportunities without barriers) and *open scholarship* (no-cost access, use, adaptation and redistribution of educational resources) (Naidu 2016). The Foundations of University Teaching Practice (FUTP) in this study is an open-learning experience, designed to use the opportunities of open scholarship and meet the challenge of providing continuing professional learning (CPL) in an open-access environment for today's academic staff. These academics are time-poor but need foundational frameworks about teaching and learning on which to build their careers. The new FUTP moves away from a traditional online Graduate Certificate-level qualification to a more flexible, online, granulated (micro-credentialled) open-learning model. It offers a foundation-level program (130 hours) comprising six modules, the content of which is divided into small, bite-sized credentials. This is designed as a better fit for both the target academics and the broader university context.

For this program, we built openness into the design: freedom of place, pace and time, plus freedom of format (HTML, PDF) and openness through use of open educational resources (OERs). Open educational resources are:

Any educational resources (including curriculum maps, course materials, textbooks, streaming videos, multimedia applications, podcasts, and any other material that have for use in teaching and learning) that are openly available for use by educators and students, without an accompanying need to pay royalties or licence fees. (UNESCO & Commonwealth of Learning 2015, p.5)

OERs include both large-scale, institutional resources (courseware) and resources produced by individuals (assets). The distinction between various resources is mostly one of granularity (Pegler 2013). Large OERs can arise from projects. Weller characterises these more substantial resources (2011, p.105) as “usually of high quality, contain[ing] explicit teaching aims...presented in a uniform style and form, part of a time-limited, focused project with portal and associated research and data”. Few teaching and learning centres can themselves produce all the resources they need; adapting OERs is a response to this challenge. However, the use of OERs in our research uncovered new challenges: resource availability, suitability, capabilities and context, and devising

design mechanisms to assimilate these resources to align to both the learning outcomes and the learning activities across each of the program's modules.

The next section provides the context of the study and the details of the FUTP. We go on to explain the research focus and methodology we used to gain feedback from the initial group of academic staff who enrolled in the program, share our design goals and discuss the results of our research. While we see this paper as making an academic contribution to the online professional learning literature, we also wish to put a spotlight on the design process, its challenges and our solutions – an area often under-reported in studies of programs like the FUTP. We also seek to understand more about the strengths and weaknesses of openness in what is a new approach to the development of a more flexible professional learning framework for university teachers.

Our paper asks and answers two broad questions: Were the design goals of the FUTP achieved? What benefits did academic staff expect, and experience, from participating in the FUTP?

Background

This study is based within Southern Cross University (SCU), a multi-campus, Australian university. SCU operates across five campuses, including three regional campuses (Lismore, Gold Coast and Coffs Harbour) within a 200km radius. SCU serves more than 14,000 students who attend on campus or study online, and employs approximately 300 teaching staff, not including casual or sessional appointments (Southern Cross University Planning, Quality & Review 2016). Like most Australian universities, SCU appoints academic staff on continuing or casual/sessional appointments, affecting career development and job security. These issues of context affect staff motivation to engage in CPL and staff capacity to complete entire programs in prescribed time limits.

SCU operated a fully online Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice from 2012 until late 2016, when it was discontinued. The Graduate Certificate comprised four units (subjects) drawing on core and elective units, usually completed over two years. In early 2016 a new Foundations of University Teaching Practice (FUTP) program was designed; it was made available in mid-2016.

The FUTP comprises six online modules, each containing two assessment tasks. It is designed as equivalent to a single unit of study (130 hours) within a standard Graduate Certificate in higher-education teaching and learning. This equivalency is determined through benchmarking data available regarding other Australian universities' foundations programs from an Australian Learning & Teaching Council project (Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson & Luzeckyj 2010). Each module is designed around a core educational concept or experience applied to the academic staff member's teaching role and context, supported by activities and underpinned by authentic assessment tasks directly relevant to their teaching. Uploading and submission of all assessment tasks is through the portfolio tool in Blackboard. Academic staff are provided with criteria and standards for each assessment task against which to self-assess their work before submission. All assessment tasks are graded as Satisfies Requirements (SR).

An inquiry-based learning approach framed the program's design, based on the work of Laurillard (2002, 2012), who identifies five pedagogical approaches in online environments that affect how teachers teach and students learn. One of these approaches is "learning through inquiry". In this approach teachers

- set a *challenging task* that has been designed to assist learners in linking theory and application using learning approaches relevant to the learner;
- provide specific task *resources*; and
- guide the learner.

Within the FUTP, one module – “Becoming an Effective Teacher” – is designed as an entry-point module to be completed first. This module provides exposure to fundamental issues of importance to new teachers: a focus on the role of the teacher, understanding how different beliefs and values held by individuals affect their teaching, the importance of a teaching-philosophy statement and an introduction to the scholarship of teaching and learning. After that, academic staff can enrol in any of the other five modules in any order. Figure 1 below illustrates the learning pathway for this program, and the progression route from entry module to completion.

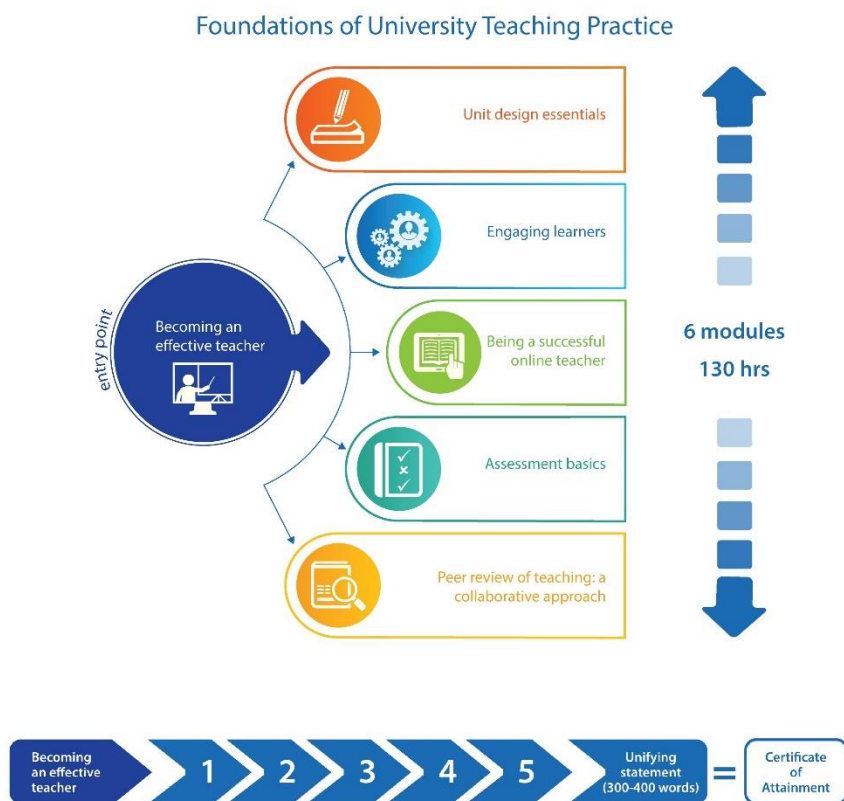


Figure 1. FUTP learning pathway, showing six modules and progression route

After completing each module, academic staff receive a digital credential in the form of an electronic badge. This credential is evidence of completion of the module. A statement of attainment is sent to staff upon successful completion of the six modules plus a final unifying statement, which is a final written task that provides an opportunity for reflection on the skills and knowledge gained through the FUTP. The completed FUTP portfolio is submitted electronically

and assessed by a panel of academic staff against the criteria and standards set for the assessment tasks in each of the modules.

For the first iteration of the program, this new FUTP experience was open for three-and-a-half months, with the experiences of the participating academic staff evaluated during that time. We discuss the outcomes of this evaluation in the Results section below.

Design process

In the context of this research we adopted the definition of learning design as “a representation of the learning experience to which students are exposed” (Oliver, Harper, Wills, Agostino & Hedberg 2013, p.103). Our processes mirrored much of what Goodyear’s (2005, p.91) description of the design process:

...typically a process extending over a period from a few hours to a small number of days, [involving] several iterations around a cycle of articulating design goals (what am I trying to achieve?) and design commitments (what will I ask the students to do? what resources will they need?).

Goodyear and Retalis (2010, p.13) point out that “design works best in teams, to which people bring a range of complementary skills and knowledge”. Learning-design processes within our team were a complex web of team interactions, individual contributions, debates and discussions combined with constraints of time and resources. Below is an insight into the learning-design approach we used as a team to develop the modules and the design features we employed to structure content and learning activities. The design approach and module features were established iteratively over the development of the modules.

Design goals

Our team had three key design goals for the FUTP program:

Design goal 1: Create a flexible suite of professional-learning modules that optimise the use of OERs and offer flexibility in pace and place of learning.

Design goal 2: Design an engaging program that increases staff members’ knowledge and understanding of designing teaching for learning.

Design goal 3: Use the Blackboard environment to showcase design features.

As a team, we adopted the roles of both designer and content developer. We devised a way of working where we took individual responsibility for single modules and then came together weekly to critique each other’s work as we moved the design and development processes forward. We worked over a period of five months using an iterative, backwards-design process (Wiggins & McTighe 2005), first identifying learning outcomes, then planning assessment and learning tasks. At weekly team meetings, we projected content onto a large screen to visualise text, OERs and graphics. By working as a team across all modules we could maximise linkages within and across modules; ensure the consistency of design, module structure, activities and assessment; and revise any design features iteratively. Each week, team members would take away any agreed changes or modifications to our core design features and apply them to individual modules.

The learning outcomes for each module were a central element of the design approach. We were continually referring to and aligning with these outcomes as we developed learning activities and assessment tasks and searched for OERs. Uppermost in our minds were our “learners” – time-poor academic staff – and the design challenge of not producing printed materials or a printed reading list as the focus for their learning; instead, we made the conscious decision to use OERs.

Our work led to the development of a series of core design features implemented within a new html-based online study guide format for all six modules:

- A welcome page provides entry to each module’s study guide. This page contains learning outcomes, an assessment summary and links to the assessment task and criteria and standards embedded in the module.
- Each module is available on-screen or as a downloadable PDF – all accessible from the welcome page.
- A sliding menu on the left side of each module enables easy access to different sections of the module from any point in the study guide.
- Each module comprises three to four sections, all accessible from the welcome page.
- A mix of text and activities is used throughout each module: reading, writing, viewing, reflecting.
- Two assessment tasks are designed for each module, each mapped back to the module learning outcomes and each producing an outcome submitted via an online portfolio tool.
- Criteria and standards are defined for each assessment task to enable self-checking by the learner.
- A closing page indicates a checklist of tasks to guide completion of the module.

Design challenges

Table 1 below indicates the challenges we faced during the design process, and the design solutions we devised in response. These challenges included finding ways to limit onscreen text; dealing with complex, text-heavy information; engaging academics with relevant open educational resources; and designing authentic assessment tasks. We examine two of these challenges – OERs and authentic assessment – in detail below.

Table 1. Design challenges and design solutions

| Design challenge | Design solution |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Limiting onscreen text | Use of OERs OERs were harnessed as a form of content. This reduced the production of onscreen text. OER quality therefore became paramount. |
| Asynchronous online context | Use of reflection Reflective practice became the link between OER “content” and an individual’s teaching and learning context. Activities and assessment were used to drive this reflection. |
| Complex, text-heavy information | Use of diagrams |

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| | Diagrams simplified complex material, making it easier to understand. “Interactive” diagrams (including interactive tables or roll-over reveal text) added a level of activity online. |
| Making OER relevant | Use of activities Each OER was linked to an activity. The OER was introduced and its relevance explained. In some cases, specific comments were included about the OER to encourage participants to look for specific features within the OER. |
| Relevance of the learning | Use of authentic assessment tasks/outcomes Each assessment task was aligned to one or more learning outcomes; importantly, it was also linked to the participants’ real teaching and learning context (e.g., audit the design of a real unit or design a real flipped-classroom experience). |
| Making assessment clear | Putting assessment and criteria and standards up front Consistent assessment design across the modules Setting clear criteria and standards |
| Accessible, flexible structure | Use of sections Each module contained discrete sections, and each section was “chunked” into clearly signposted concept areas. |
| Copyright issues | Use of OERs Using links to OERs meant diagrams etc. were not reproduced within modules. Copyright permission was not needed. |

OERs as a design solution

A great deal of time was required to interrogate websites and internet resources to identify OERs suitable for the program. Some identifying features of good OERs are relatively simple: currency, clarity, relevance and brevity. However, there are more subtle, subjective features affecting the selection, integration and success of OERs that relate to context – both the learning context, including the learners themselves, and the broader institutional and national context.

Guidelines exist to assist academic staff to identify and evaluate quality OERs (UNESCO and Community of Learning 2015). It was pivotal to our design of the FUTP that any single OER chosen formed a good fit to our context, and that we provided a reflective environment to encourage academic staff to engage with the OERs and apply the learning to their context. It was also essential to integrate a range of OERs that offered engagement beyond text: video clips, interactive diagrams, published websites, animations, interviews, case-studies and outputs from national and international teaching and learning projects. Our experience highlighted the relative lack of quality resources in some areas.

Assessment tasks as a design solution

Each module includes two assessment tasks, with each task aligned to one or more of the module's learning outcomes and set within explicit criteria and standards. In all assessment tasks, academic staff are asked to apply the module content to their teaching and learning context, and combine this with a reflection on the assessment task itself. For example, Figure 2 below illustrates an assessment task from the module "Engaging Learners". In this task, academic staff are asked to apply a design template to scope a flipped-classroom learning activity in their own context. This task assesses the learning outcome "design an engaging learning activity" and provides the academic staff member with a design tool (a template) and an insight into how a flipped classroom is applied to their context. The assessment task includes a table of criteria and standards to allow for self-assessment of the task. Appendix 1 gives details.

Method

This section examines the approach taken in answering the study's two research questions:

- To what extent were the design goals of the FUTP achieved?
- What benefits did academic staff expect, and experience, from participating in the FUTP?

This small study lies within a qualitative field of inquiry (Stake 1995), and a constructivist-interpretive paradigm was used to guide the analysis of the data gathered (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). In this approach multiple data sources were used to triangulate findings. Our sampling approach with staff was based entirely on those who responded to our request to engage with the researchers regarding participation in either a focus group, an online survey or an interview. All three academic developers on the design team contributed their reflections on their experiences. This methodology gave a strong participant presence to the research and emphasised the participants' voices. However, the small number of participants in this study is a potential limitation when generalising findings to other contexts.

Data was gathered at different points throughout the program: midpoint focus groups, an online endpoint survey, endpoint interviews and design team reflections throughout. Focus groups and interview responses were recorded in note form and as quotes; they were then summarised and themes were identified. All responses were de-identified. The study was conducted with institutional ethical approval (Ethics Approval number: ECN-16-268).

Participants

The FUTP was promoted to academic staff who registered and enrolled online. The program was available to staff for three and a half months, after which the site was closed. During this time, 42 staff registered and enrolled – this included individual academics interested in completing modules for CPL and members of staff interested in perusing the FUTP content and design but not interested in engaging as FUTP learners. All staff who registered were considered participants in this study; however, the focus was on those academic staff who completed one or more FUTP modules.

Design team

The design team was also a source of data through our reflections on the design process. These reflections were recorded throughout the process.

Focus groups – gathered at midpoint

All 42 academics who registered in the FUTP were invited to participate in facilitated focus groups at the midpoint of the study to provide feedback on their expectations and experiences. Six participants volunteered to engage with the focus groups, which were held on two campuses. Focus-group discussions emphasised the participants’ expectations, practical experiences and concerns. To enable more people to be involved in focus groups, online “virtual” focus groups were advertised; however, only one participant accepted this invitation. The low number of participants indicated that perhaps the focus-group method of data gathering proved to be an inaccessible model for participants.

Online survey – gathered at program close

An anonymous online survey was administered after the FUTP Blackboard site closed. The online survey consisted of a mixture of closed and open-ended questions. Of the 14 academics who had completed one or more modules, eight completed the survey, a response rate of 60%.

Within the survey the closed questions were of two types: type 1 provided a list of statements about the modules and resources, and participants indicated on a scale if they found these to be poor, fair, good or excellent; type 2 provided a list of statements and participants indicated on a Likert scale the degree to which they agreed (Figure 3).

In your experience is the following true?

| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| The modules informed me about university teaching practices. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| The modules broadened my understanding of teaching in a way that is useful in my work. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

Figure 3. Example of Likert-scale question asked in the online survey

Interviews – individual data

After the FUTP Blackboard site closed, academic staff who had enrolled in the FUTP but who had not participated in the focus groups were invited to participate in individual telephone interviews to enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the outcomes of FUTP experiences. Three staff participated in semi-structured telephone interviews. Interview responses (recorded in the form of notes and as quotes) were examined in relation to the study’s design goals. Relevant comments were identified and grouped as themes. The interview data also included responses to the specific question “What benefits do you perceive that you gained from participating in the

FUTP?”. The analysis of the interview data sets involved a thematic approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012). We identified themes across the data using an approach that was inductive (where we looked broadly across the data) and iterative (seeking themes). The interview responses were read and reread, and a simple thematic analysis was conducted on the three interview summaries. This data is presented in the next section.

Results and discussion

This section of the paper is structured around the study’s three design goals. By the close of the FUTP Blackboard site, 14 academic staff had completed one or more modules. Table 2 below indicates the numbers of staff who completed modules and related demographic data.

Table 2. Demographic data for academic staff enrolled in FUTP, including module completion rates

| | Total number of academic staff | Female | Male | Continuing staff | Sessional/fixed-term staff |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|--------|------|------------------|----------------------------|
| Completed one module only | 4 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| Completed 2 to 5 modules | 7 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 2 |
| Completed the FUTP | 3 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 14* | 8 | 6 | 6 | 8 |

* Three of these staff members completed all requirements and were awarded a certificate of attainment.

Design goal 1: Create a flexible suite of professional-learning modules that optimise the use of OERs and offer flexibility in pace and place of learning

In the midpoint focus groups, participants were asked to discuss their practical experience in engaging with the FUTP. They discussed questions such as:

- How long have you spent using the Blackboard site?
- How much time have you spent each week engaging with the program?
- Where do you prefer to work from?
- Were there any issues of time management about doing these modules?

At this early stage, focus-group participants had finished on average two modules, and it was apparent that a great deal of diversity existed across the pace and place of learning. One participant with a light teaching load allocated four afternoons a week to the FUTP, one allocated Sunday nights and many scheduled a couple of hours a week when not teaching. They reported a similar diversity for their place of learning. Some participants preferred accessing FUTP materials "on campus, at my desk"; others reported "definitely not in my office in business hours"; while others

showed flexibility: “I preferred to do it from my work desk but have also been operating off a mobile device at home and that has been good. Very portable” and “One of its strengths is you can ‘park it’ and then pick it up again.”

Overall, these participants showed a wide variety of ways of accessing the FUTP materials, finding ways that suited their variable workloads, pressures and priorities.

Within the online survey, 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “The opportunity to undertake professional learning in a flexible form, at my own pace, was helpful”. This was a very positive response, and confirmed the positive feedback received in the earlier focus groups.

The individual interviews enabled a personalised engagement with FUTP participants and a deeper understanding of the issues. It was possible to ask detailed questions based on the knowledge gained from the previous focus groups and survey. Interview responses indicated that the flexibility of the learning and the quality of the OERs were positive aspects of the program. The characteristics of flexible access were highly valued, as shown by comments about modules being completed “whenever I could, wherever, whenever I had time”. One participant, who worked across multiple campuses and lived a long way from her work, commented on how she loved to work from home, and said that these modules enabled her to “smash out an assessment item in the comfort of my home”.

The interview context enabled participants to reflect on their learning. For example, one participant paused and commented on the asynchronous nature of the FUTP: “A couple of times I would have liked to talk to people about what I was learning. I didn’t have any questions, I just wanted to talk about it.”

He was interested in his own reflection, because he admitted that while he knew other people who were studying the FUTP, he could have talked to them but didn’t. He reflected that “talking to people was work” and “It would have been good to talk to people but I also didn’t want more work.”

While we initially had concerns about the need for face-to-face interactions, the participants themselves did not raise this issue as a concern.

One remaining concern relates to feedback to academic staff following completion of their assessment tasks. All module assessment tasks require self-assessment through the criteria and standards tables provided. Individual assessment tasks are not formally assessed. Completed portfolios are read in full following submission of all six modules plus the unifying statement. Participants did not seem to have a full awareness of this approach to self-assessment, common in open-learning environments (for example, in MOOCs). They received a digital badge automatically on submission of each module; however, their assessment tasks were only read and assessed when they completed the entire FUTP. When this design was fully explained in one of the focus groups, a participant commented, “I think that the digital credential should equal completed and assessed.... I could not easily go back and make changes to an assessment task. That doesn’t seem like good design.”

These comments caused the design team to reflect on the design and realise that the self-assessment nature of this open-learning environment needs to be more clearly articulated to academic staff.

Overall the data indicates that design goal 1 was achieved. While the designers were confident of the quality of the OERs and the literature affirming the value of increased access, we were concerned that SCU academic staff might not respond well to this new learning environment. However, the results indicate that the FUTP successfully uses OERs and offers flexibility in pace and place of learning.

Design goal 2: Design an engaging program that increases staff members' knowledge and understanding of designing teaching for learning

Examination of this design goal occurred through the online survey and the individual interviews. Within the survey, 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statements “The modules informed me about university teaching practices” and “The modules broadened my understanding of teaching in a way that was useful in my work.”

In the open-text survey responses, participants mentioned that they had redesigned their teaching and shared the resources with colleagues, and one made an “active learning strategies” wall poster. This was all concrete evidence that knowledge about teaching and learning had been increased.

However, it was the individual interviews that most clearly revealed the impact of the program on teaching and learning. Through the interview environment, participants provided an insight into their backgrounds, their motivations and the impact of the FUTP. One participant admitted to having no training in teaching but wanted to know more. He said that he had learned a great deal about what makes good teaching and bad teaching: “It was a real eye-opener for thinking about how it [teaching] is done and why.” Another participant, also with a minimal teaching and learning background, said, “Biggest thing for me was the Unit Design module, with Bloom’s Taxonomy, learning outcomes and constructive alignment. Super, super helpful.”

The interviews and survey data showed that through their engagement with the FUTP, participants had learned new teaching skills, accessed useful resources and transformed in their understanding of designing teaching for learning. This shift was captured perfectly by one interviewee, who noted, “It’s all about how the student learns, not how I teach. That’s what I got from the modules. It’s a shift.”

Design goal 3: Use the Blackboard environment to showcase design features

In all data sources used to evaluate the FUTP, responses were very positive from all participants. Within the focus groups and the online survey, while no questions were specifically asked that targetted this design goal, participants had the opportunity to raise any issues with design aspects; however, none did so. In the individual interviews, participants were specifically asked about the design goals and if they perceived that these goals had been achieved; participants’ interview responses clearly showed their belief that design goal 3 had been achieved.

As discussed above, the modules contained specific design features that had been introduced in response to design challenges. The data revealed evidence of positive responses to the program design. For example, one design challenge was to create authentic, relevant assessment tasks. One participant said the authentic assessment tasks “made me think about things. I thought through how I teach. How units are put together. That’s something I have never reflected on before.” A second participant reflected that the assessments “felt completely relevant. They were also useful.

They made me think about the big picture.” This participant also commented that assessment embedded within the module was an effective design pattern because “the content was fresh in your mind and you were thinking about it”. These responses indicated the success of the authentic assessment tasks, which contextualised the participants’ learning.

The use of OERs was an important design feature that participants noted and appreciated. “I liked the videos with different people and different places. It gave it a real-world feel”. This interviewee went on to say:

It was really useful to hear different academics in the videos, how they use active learning, hear their ideas and real suggestions. The mini-clips of people from SCU...were interesting.... I knew some of the people from my discipline....

Another design feature in each module was the use of sections to achieve an accessible, flexible structure for participants who were busy and time-poor, and most likely would engage with the modules on many separate occasions. Participants noted and greatly appreciated this design feature. One interviewee said, “I loved the way the modules were set out. You could get to a part and stop. It was in bite-sized pieces. I liked the six modules and sections and then chunks inside the sections.”

The success of this design feature is reflected in the positive responses received for design goal 1, which relates to the flexibility in place and pace achieved through the module design.

By using multiple data sources to “triangulate” our findings, we could examine the effectiveness of our design goals from multiple perspectives and multiple (sampling) points in time. This approach strengthens our findings, even within the context of a small sample size. The interviews, focus group and survey responses indicated that we had created a flexible professional learning environment that optimised the use of OERs, while at the same time increasing staff members’ knowledge and understanding of designing teaching for learning.

What benefits did academic staff expect, and experience, from participating in the FUTP?

The effectiveness of the FUTP was also examined by comparing participants’ early expectations to their actual experience after completing FUTP modules. In the focus groups, participants were asked, “What do you expect to get out of the FUTP?”, with responses signalling expected benefits such as refreshed knowledge, gaining a deeper understanding of teaching and learning, gaining basic knowledge in design and online learning, and increasing knowledge of how to engage and motivate students. In general, participants did not find it easy to engage with this topic. One person had no real expectations, and perhaps had not really considered what they would “get out of the FUTP” at all.

In contrast, in the interviews following completion of FUTP modules, participants were very clear about what benefits they perceived they had gained. They reported benefits in knowledge of teaching and learning, skills (including in unit design, which they had applied immediately) and practical benefits from the resources. Interestingly, while it was not identified as a benefit by interviewees, two interviewees separately mentioned being more confident because of their participation in the FUTP: one felt more confident in explaining course design to students because

now she understood more about it; the other felt more confident in using design features because now he understood why they worked so well.

It was not possible to determine if participants' expectations of benefits were met, because it was difficult to determine those initial expectations. However, following completion of FUTP modules, participants could identify specific benefits from their engagement with the FUTP. These benefits aligned to design goal 2. The benefit of increased confidence, while not directly aligned to a design goal, is an excellent outcome for the program.

Conclusion and lessons learned

This paper has reported on the opportunities and challenges associated with the design and delivery of the new Foundations of University Teaching Practice program. We began by framing this study in the contemporary definition of openness. Our focus was on designing a professional-learning experience for academic staff within an open-learning environment. We have reported on the evaluation of the experiences of the first cohort of academic staff who enrolled in this program, and we have examined, and answered, the research questions posed. We emphasise that the study is a small one, designed to gather some early data on the program, and that caution is necessary when making broad generalisations to other institutional contexts.

In concluding this paper, we focus on lessons learned by the three authors in three different areas. The first of these is our use of OERs. A second is our concerns over the use of assessment in an open and modularised system. The third area focuses on how we worked as a design team.

With regards to our use of OERs, finding the best resources to fit our learning outcomes and our context was time-consuming and required a high level of expertise that comes from a deep knowledge of the discipline area. Having identified appropriate resources, it was essential to maximise that fit by encouraging academic staff to reflect on how the learning from the resources could then be integrated with their own teaching context. Importantly, OERs provided our learning environment with variability of learning activities and gave our academic staff access to the wider higher-education sector, both nationally and internationally. One aspect for future consideration is always to ensure the closest fit possible between the activities designed and the OERs identified.

Assessment was a focal point of the design of the FUTP. It was deliberately positioned in the welcome section of each module, embedded within the modules close to the content to which it related, and supported by criteria and standards. The assessment tasks were linked to the real teaching and learning context of the academic staff. We made the decision early in the design of the program not to assess each module as it was completed, and to restrict formal feedback to the final portfolio and overarching statement. This approach flies in the face of current good practice in assessment, which emphasises the importance of formative feedback to learners. Interestingly, we have not experienced any academics asking for feedback at the end of each module. We believe that the reason for this lies in the success of the self-review process against criteria and standards set for each assessment task, which has guided staff as they work through each module.

Currently, the openness of the design enables and encourages academic staff to complete the entire program at their own pace. With no time constraint, however, participants may take a long time to complete it. We have set three times during the year in which final portfolios and unifying statements will be assessed as a way of managing formal assessment in this open environment.

Regarding lessons learned as a design team, it is essential that each team member has an in-depth knowledge of the program content areas and is also open to conversations, settling differences and staying focused. A vital aspect of this is the role played by face-to-face meetings in establishing relationships and facilitating communication between team members. A high level of trust and respect is essential when people are editing and commenting on each other's work. Future teams may find it beneficial to spend time at the beginning of the design process establishing relationships and understanding individuals' philosophical approaches to university-teacher development.

A final point relates to the potential use of the FUTP by existing staff as well as new staff. There is an opportunity here for professional learning to supply a baseline qualification for new teachers and to revise and refresh teaching and learning skill sets and approaches for all teaching staff. However, why did some academic staff not engage with the FUTP? Why did some not complete the modules in which they were enrolled? For those academic staff who did complete some modules, what factors hindered their completion of the entire FUTP? These questions should guide future work, as we seek to understand more about the factors associated with openness and increased access to professional learning.

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Appendix 1

| Assessment Task 2 – Scope the design for a flipped learning activity | | |
|--|--|---|
| <p>This assessment task is designed to bring together your knowledge of learners, learning approaches and theories, to scope the design of a flipped learning activity. (You may choose to build upon your response to Assessment Task 1).</p> <p>Design a flipped learning activity suitable for your student cohort using the supplied template containing the following steps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Step 1. Topic, learning outcomes, student cohort and context • Step 2. Design pre-learning • Step 3. Design in-class learning • Step 4. Consider integration • Step 5. Reflect and share <p>You will need to write 400 words to complete this task.</p> <p>Using this template, scope the design for a flipped learning activity to complete this task, then upload it to your ePortfolio.</p> <p>You may find that you want to develop this scoping task to a more concrete implementation design.</p> <p>This task relates to the Learning Outcome:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design an engaging learning activity. | | |
| Assessment Task 2 – Criteria and Standards | | |
| Criteria | Satisfactory | Unsatisfactory |
| Topic, learning outcomes, student cohort and context | You have clearly identified the topic, learning outcomes, student cohort and context for an engaging learning activity. | You have not clearly identified the topic, learning outcomes, student cohort and context for an engaging learning activity. |
| Design of learning activities | The design of the pre-learning and in-class learning activities is clear. Strategies to actively engage students are embedded in the activities. | The design of the pre-learning and in-class learning activities is unclear or incomplete. Strategies to engage students are not embedded in the activities. |
| Integration, reflection and sharing | Integration of the learning activity into the broader unit/course has been clearly explained. Your summary of the design is clear. | Integration of the learning activity into the broader unit/course is not evident or is unclear. Your summary of the design is unclear or incomplete. |

Figure 2. An assessment task embedded in the module “Engaging Learners”