ACADEMICS ARE STUDENTS TOO: RETHINKING OUR APPROACH

Nicola Shapland
Griffith University (AUSTRALIA)
n.shapland@griffith.edu.au

Abstract
This paper suggests structuring academic professional development for early career academics (ECAs) through a 5-phase Academic Lifecycle Model. It places ECAs as learners, arguing for a tailored and targeted approach to support ECAs through each phase of their career trajectory.

The paper firstly provides a range of significant arguments as to why the academic development of ECAs merits such attention.

A 5-phase Academic Lifecycle Model is proposed, as a possible way forward, and focus for further discussion and debate. The suggested phases are recruitment, commencement, continuation, progression and leadership. It proposes that each stage or phase within the Academic Lifecycle Model be the target for further discussion and research into appropriate life-cycle relevant academic development activities and strategies that can best support an ‘ECA as teacher’.

Keywords: Academic lifecycle, early career academic, academic development.

1 INTRODUCTION
Whilst acknowledging the nuanced complexity of the role of all academics and the limitations of focusing on one aspect only, the paper never-the-less focuses on the development of the ‘ECA as teacher’.

There is a lack of shared meaning of an ECA with many studies allowing contributors to self define [1]. This paper broadly defines ‘ECA as teacher’ as: An academic lacking knowledge, skills and/or confidence to be effective in the teaching role that is required of them.

This paper argues that the need for institutionally supported, systematic approaches for the recruitment and development of ‘ECA as teacher’ is becoming more important and apparent.

2 THE IMPERATIVES
The demand for higher education, ageing academic workforce, inexperience of ECAs, increasingly complex teaching and learning environment and insufficient current support for ECAs is creating an imperative to re-evaluate our current approaches to their academic professional development.

2.1 Demand for higher education
The drive to develop knowledge intensive economies is certain to increase the number of students engaging in higher education [2]. Australia is part of this international drive with its own student participation targets to achieve [3]. As the demands for higher education increase, so too will the demands on the academic workforce.

2.2 Ageing academic workforce
As the demand for an academic workforce is certain to increase, the next two decades heralds the retirement of the baby boomer generation [2]. In Australia, this group accounts for 42% of the overall workforce, and 56% of the current Australian academic workforce. This presents the Higher Education sector with a significant recruitment challenge [2].

There are three main pathways to an academic career; newly qualified PhD students, staff joining from public and private sectors and staff recruited from overseas [4].

It can be reasonably anticipated that recruitment of early career academics from all three pathways will be needed over the coming decades to meet this recruitment challenge.
2.3 Inexperience of early career academics

Regardless of the entry pathway, many ECAs arrive with little knowledge or skills in curriculum development, teaching and assessment [1]. Even for those who have gained experience in the classroom (eg. graduate students in the United States), learning is often by example without any pedagogical understanding [5]. This limited understanding of fundamental educational pedagogy is at odds with an acknowledged acceptance that high-quality teaching is fundamental to Higher Education [4].

2.4 Increasingly complex teaching and learning environment

Learning and teaching within Higher Education is becoming increasingly more complex. Examples of critical issues on the discussion agenda in Higher Education include ‘inclusive curriculum’, ‘learner-centred curriculum’ and ‘internationalising the curriculum’ [6]. There is a growing demand for flexible, student centred, multi-modal delivery including e-learning, distance learning and experiential learning [4]. The ‘flipped-classroom’ (a pedagogical model that switches class work with homework and vice versa) is gaining popularity [7]. A review of any University’s website will reveal a list of core skills or graduate attributes which are purported to be taught. Most Australian Universities have added work integrated learning (WIL) to their strategic directions [8], and Australian medical schools now have an accreditation requirement to include interprofessional learning (IPL) [9]. All this (and more) is to be conducted within a quality assurance framework that requires rigorous processes in assessment to safeguard academic standards [10].

How many academics, let alone ECAs, have the breadth and depth of educational pedagogy and experience to navigate, let alone be successful in meeting such high and multifaceted expectations? “Effective pedagogy depends on the learning of those who support the learning of others” [11].

This paper argues that much more must be done to support the learning of those who support the learning of others.

2.5 Academic development and support of early career academics

Academic development and support for ECAs is as diverse, nuanced and as individualised as the Institutions that provide it. Most Universities offer a range of introductory teaching development programmes and other forms of instructional processes; with some offering formal qualifications [12]. In the United States, some Institutions require new academics to undertake centralised post graduate programs as part of their probationary requirements [13].

Yet, the experience of many ECAs is still one of feeling overwhelmed. For many the transition into academe is still a major issue [14], a fraught experience characterised by feelings of stress and frustration [15]. Many academics view the early career period as one of ‘sink or swim’, with little or no guidance [5, 16].

Given the demands and complexities within Higher Education, and the current experiences of ECAs; it is timely to rethink and re-evaluate our approaches.

3 THE STUDENT LIFECYCLE MODEL

The learning journey of an ‘ECA as teacher’ has many parallels to the learning journey of a student.

An ECA can typically be expected to pass through stages of commencement, transition and development before maturing into their role as an experienced academic. It is a continuous learning journey with challenges, successes and promotion (hopefully!) along the way.

In the context of developing the ‘ECA as teacher’, the learning journey will need to include the acquisition of knowledge and skills in teaching, learning and assessment pedagogy; that can enable the ECA to become an effective ‘teacher’ or ‘lecturer’.

This is not dissimilar to the learning journey undertaken by students entering University to study. The various phases a student transitions through from commencement, orientation, progression each year to successful graduation are described through Student Lifecycle models [4, 17].

The Student Lifecycle as described by the Higher Education Academy [4] is a dynamic transitional process with six phases: aspiration raising, pre-entry activities, admission, first term/semester, moving
through courses and employment. Lizzio [17] describes the Student Lifecycle as an integrative framework encompassing students that are future, commencing, continuing, senior, graduates and post graduate; and alumni. Both models described the phases or stages of students’ progression through University; and both advocate and describe targeted activities to support student success at each stage of the Student Lifecycle.

4 AN ACADEMIC LIFECYCLE MODEL

This paper proposes adopting and adapting the concept of a Student Lifecycle to create an Academic Lifecycle Model that describes the various phases of an academic’s learning journey at which tailored life-cycle specific academic development and support can be targeted.

The proposed Academic Lifecycle Model consists of five key phases:

- **Recruitment:** Pre entry and orientation phase
- **Commencement:** Induction and transition phase
- **Continuation:** Role development
- **Progression:** Role enhancement and growth
- **Leadership:** Experienced and capable of leading and mentoring others

Commencing ECAs (like commencing students) come from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences that shape and influence their confidence and capabilities in and for their respective roles. Each academic will, thus, progress through the lifecycle in their own time frame.

4.1 Applying pedagogical principles

Whilst careful consideration of what an ‘ECA as teacher’ needs to effectively succeed in their role(s) is paramount, how this academic professional development is delivered is also critical.

Applying good principles of curriculum design used for student learning is one suggestion. Meyers and Nulty [18] propose five principles of curriculum design that support deep learning for students. A key principle of theirs is that learning and resources are constructive, sequential and inter-linked. Applying this principle to academic development of ECAs could mean explicitly structuring a scaffolded suite of teaching fundamentals (e.g. constructive alignment, assessment principles) and core practical skills (preparing a lecture, writing multiple choice questions) for commencing ECAs early in their learning journey. As the experience of an ECA develops, more ‘advanced’ or complex topics can be sequentially introduced and inter-linked (e.g. problem based learning approaches, utilising technologies).

Another example could be considering the ten principles of good assessment and feedback practice discussed by Nicol, in reference to the first year experience [19]. Principle three is based on delivering high quality feedback to enable learners to self-correct [19]. In the context of academic development for ECAs this could mean ensuring an experienced teaching mentor is assigned and provides early feedback to an ECA on their teaching practice (for example, within their first 2 weeks of teaching a course).

These are two, notwithstanding simple illustrations, of how the principles and way we approach the learning of students can equally be applied to the academic development of ECAs.

5 CONCLUSION

ECAs are vital and critical to the future success of the Higher Education sector. There are significant drivers in place including the ageing academic workforce, increasingly complex teaching and learning environment and ECAs reporting a lack of guidance, to justify re-evaluating our current approaches to their academic professional development.

This paper offers, through a new Academic Lifecycle model, a framework for further discussion and research into appropriate life-cycle relevant academic development activities and strategies that best support an ‘ECA as teacher’.
It suggests that pedagogical teaching and learning principles applied to student learning form part of a robust discussion on how best to support the learning and development of an ‘ECA as teacher’ as they enter and progress through their academic career path.

REFERENCES


