Expanding the Horizons of Professional Learning: A Foundations Alumni Network

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Abstract

University foundations programs are offered by the majority of universities across Australia. These programs provide professional learning to support academics with learning and teaching in higher education. A subsequent challenge is that of sustaining and expanding the professional learning opportunities by developing individual and organisational capacity in learning and teaching. This paper reports on the case study of a Foundations Alumni Project at one metropolitan university. Reflective practice, inherent in the Participatory Action Research approach framing this project, provided the data to inform the answer to sustaining and expanding professional learning horizons: a foundations alumni network. The case-based process leading to the establishment of a network is outlined, together with the challenges encountered. Challenges included establishing an effective communications strategy and the lack of recognition of participation in workload models. The development of practical strategies, informed by the literature, and their role in growing and supporting such a network are discussed.

Keywords: foundations programs, alumni, learning and teaching, professional learning

1. Introduction

University foundations programs are "formal programs that induct and develop university teachers with the aim of fostering and supporting the quality of teaching and learning in the university" (Goody, 2007, p1). The majority of universities, in Australia (Kandlebinder & Pesata, 2011) and internationally (Hunt & Chalmers, 2012), offer a foundations program (and/or an equivalent such as a graduate certificate in Higher Education). These professional learning programs are targeted at academics new to teaching and learning. There exists a range in practice as to which groups are supported in attendance, with full-time, continuing, tenured staff most likely to attend and less consistency in support for the attendance of sessional (casual and short-term contract) staff (Percy, et al., 2008).

There is a lack of consistency to the structure and delivery of these programs across the national sector (Staff Development and Training Unit Flinders University, 2003) with a disparity in "theoretical frameworks and pedagogical practices" (Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson, & Luzeckyj, 2010, p.10). While the majority of foundations programs support participants articulating into a postgraduate certificate program of study (Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson, & Luzeckyj, 2010) there is a paucity of literature on the strategies that have been employed to expand the horizons of professional learning beyond these foundations programs. This paper aims to make a contribution to this new literature base by reporting on the Foundations Alumni Project at one metropolitan university. The main aim of the project was to initiate an official foundations alumni network as a strategy to expand the horizons of professional learning. This strategy could be realised as an active alumni provided the potential to: maintain connections established in the foundations program; establish and sustain new connections across the various alumni cohorts and build organisational capacity in enhancing learning and teaching quality and scholarship. The three year project and the strategies employed are outlined in this paper.

The foundations (in Learning and Teaching, FILT) program was initiated at Macquarie University in 2004. Macquarie is a metropolitan university with 37,921 students and 1,288 full-time academic staff as at 2011 (Macquarie University, 2012). This theoretically based program is offered to teaching staff (both permanent and sessional) who are either new to teaching, or who want to explore aspects of teaching and learning practice. This program aims to provide participants with the knowledge and skills to enable them to operate as effective

teachers. The program's theoretical framework reflects the Presage, Process and Product model (Biggs, 2003) for learning and teaching in higher education, emphasising constructive and student-centred learning. The five modules of the program focus on the student, the teacher, aligned curriculum design, assessment and evaluation. To date, 460 staff have participated in this program and are eligible members of the foundations alumni. National benchmarking of the program (Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson, & Luzeckyj, 2010) summarised that the program's strengths included the duration and depth of the program, the supportive resources, the large cohorts and the ability to articulate to higher degree studies.

Building on the success of the foundations program and on the new interdisciplinary and community connections established by participants the ensuing challenge became evident: how do we sustain and expand these networks for learning and teaching? A foundations alumni network presented great potential for expanding the horizons of ongoing professional learning through interactions with peers, across disciplines and through scholarship.

2. Method and Theoretical Approach

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) framed the design and development of the Foundations Alumni Project which has been conceptualised as an organisational case study. As a case study, this project is an empirical enquiry investigating "a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context" (Yin, 1984, p.23). The case study method was chosen for its capacity to "capture the process under study in a very detailed and exact way" (Flick, 2009, p. 134). The PAR approach offers the benefit of an emphasis upon flexibility, collaboration and collegiality, essential to a multi-level and interdisciplinary project such as this. This is achieved as the action research cycle (of plan, act, observe and reflect) is enacted and re-enacted, multiple times throughout the project. These action cycles have been sequenced as daily cycles throughout the program by the convenor, facilitators and participants; as formal cycles of post program reflection and planning by the foundations management team incorporating participant reflections; and lengthier quality assurance and review cycles of the whole project which has been in action for three years. The participatory nature of the PAR approach ensures that the actions in each action cycle, are co-constructed by the alumni themselves, contributing to research findings that work "better for them" (Wadsworth, 2011, p. 114).

Action and reflection were therefore integral to the project. Action research provided the holistic approach (Wadsworth, 2010) whilst acknowledging all project members as "participant observers" with a focus on "action that is evaluated and researched with a view to identifying both where it has 'worked' and what to do if it can be improved by those who are parties to that action" (Wadsworth, 2011, p.16).

The four reflective lenses of Brookfield (1995): autobiographical, collegial, student and the lens of the literature were used to identify the parties to the action of the Foundations Alumni Project. The four parties to this action would therefore provide multiple perspectives, or multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009) that may contribute "deeper and more interconnected understandings" (Wadsworth, 2011, p. 103) to inform the case study project. Multiple perspectives reflect the multiple leaders across this project, with a distributed leadership approach in action (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012). The autobiographical lens drew upon the reflections of the program convenor, which had been systematically documented as monthly summaries over a three year period. This data was shared and reciprocated with the lens of colleagues, namely, academics, educational developers, and professional staff who all contributed to the program. The lens of the student was represented by a large body of evaluative data from the staff who participated in the program. The theoretical lens was informed by the relevant literature reviewed for the project. The synthesis of findings from each lens is now discussed. For pragmatic purposes the reflective learnings from each lens is discussed separately, but it must be stressed that in practice, each of the lens were explored through overlapping or concurrent action research cycles thereby interdependently informing and guiding this project.

3. Gathering Data: The Four Lenses

Ongoing reflections were documented by the foundations program convenor, contributing an **autobiographical lens** of data. This reflective data were recorded during and after each action research cycle to inform reflection for action (Schon, 1983). These autobiographical reflections, supported by the limited available literature, revealed that the intensive learning occurring through the foundations program contributed to the development of the participants' learning and teaching capacity as they adopted a more student-centred focus to their teaching (Prebble et al., 2004; Southwell & Morgan, 2010 in Chalmers, Goody, Goerke, Stoney & Gardner, 2011). A recent reflection records:

> I stayed on and on, as participants insist I listen to their new insights! I heard "I will change the way I teach forever" as I "listen to my students" and "no longer teach" for I am now a "co-learner" (Convenor, July, 2012).

Following iterative cycles of reflection, the convenor drew upon felt-knowing (Walkerden, 2005; 2009), informed by professional judgment, to conclude that there was a need to expand the foundations program with "the creation of as many opportunities as possible for informal discussions and shared work" (Trowler & Knight, 2000, p.39) on learning and teaching to sustain this newly developed capacity. The foundations alumni needed time to develop their reflective skills (Moon, 2004; Larrivee, 2008), time to reflect upon their new knowledge and understandings around learning and teaching in higher education, and "ongoing professional development opportunities need to be available" (Convenor, March, 2009). It was at this stage of the project that the idea for a foundations alumni as a connector, a structure, for supporting collegial reflection, informal discussion, current research and "the potential of developing leadership for learning and teaching" (Convenor, April, 2009), was first explored.

Many colleagues contribute to the foundations program and through the **lenses of our colleagues** we were able to gather additional data. Academics teach in the program and facilitate workshops. They collaboratively review the program, content, learning and teaching activities alongside educational developers who provide an expert focus on integrating technologies in learning and teaching. Professional staff with responsibility for the administration and management of the program and the learning space also contribute to collaborative ongoing review.

When the proposal was made to explore the establishment of a foundations alumni network during a regular reflective meeting, all participants supported the strategy. Nevertheless, there was a desire to learn more about such networks. Consequently, the collaborative lens was expanded to include colleagues from other institutions, through informal meetings and through a workshop at a formal national colloquium. Suggestions arising from this collaborative reflection were then evaluated for relevance to our university context, with some being adopted for a new and growing alumni network. Examples included: offering an amnesty for completion of the program's final assessment task which had the additional benefit of acting as a strategy for heightening the university's awareness of the foundations program and the alumni community; providing a scholarship to support conference papers, memorabilia for alumni and extending invitations to all alumni to learning and teaching activities.

Other academic colleagues are also the students of foundations programs and they provide the **lens of the student**. Over 200 evaluations of the program have been gathered and they have been consistently positive. They are appreciative of the programme, but always ask for more, for example as one academic stated (of their own teaching):

> Introducing simple class management turned the dynamic around and I have enjoyed greater
> energy just by placing ownership of their own learning back in their hands. I wish to explore
> this further…(foundations participant, 2011).

While the university offers a suite of learning and teaching workshops and seminars, a consistent approach that provided opportunities to expand learnings from the foundations program was needed to maintain and develop learning and teaching capacity. A foundations alumni could provide such opportunities.

Gathering evidence through the **lens of the literature** was achieved through a literature review. A search using the Boolean combinations of teaching, university and alumni; higher education, alumni and academic; alumni and lifelong learning; resulted in limited literature around student alumni and negligible literature for academic alumni, with none located on the alumni of university foundations programs. Related literature was then reviewed to inform the decision to establish a foundations alumni network.

One study (Ginns, Kitay & Prosser, 2010) found that the skills developed through a formal program of study in higher education may not transfer back to the classroom. It was posited that this was due to the lack of support for the scholarship of learning and teaching and cultural alignment within the participant's departments (op cit). Departmental culture that may "not support learning that has occurred on the program" (Hicks, Smigiel, Wilson & Luzeckyj, 2010, p.17), and the lack of opportunities for participants to engage in an ongoing discourse on learning and teaching is an impediment to expanding horizons. One strategy that can support participants as they return to the differing cultures of their departments is that of a community of practice (Mathias, 2005; Viskovic, 2006). A foundations alumni network can be this community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and with its cross-disciplinary membership can act to mitigate conflicting learning and teaching cultures (Barlow and Antoniou, 2007; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylännee & Nevgi, 2007).

4. Expanding Professional Learning: A Foundations Alumni

An official foundations alumni network specifically offers a strategy to both reduce the *impediments* while at the same time expand the learning and teaching *opportunities* that would be proactive in supporting *ongoing*

discourse on learning and teaching. If departmental culture does not support scholarship then an alumni network offers the potential of a culturally supportive environment and a community or "clan" for the foundations alumni. Clanning is a trend observed by futurist Popcorn (2001, in Green, 2002) and defined as "belonging to a group that represents common feelings, causes or ideals; validating one's own belief system" (p. 298). The alumni clan can play a role in establishing, building and expanding interdisciplinary connections for learning and teaching communities.

Having conceptualised and initiated the innovative strategy of a foundations alumni network, an early step in the development process was to articulate the aims of the network in expanding ongoing professional learning and enhancing capacity. Over many participatory action research cycles, these aims were generated by both alumni and by colleagues contributing to the foundations programme. Identified aims for the alumni network included: ongoing collegial and scholarly engagement with contemporary learning and teaching issues; networking opportunities for collaboration on learning and teaching projects; the sharing and dissemination of successful learning and teaching strategies, and the identification of potential peer observation (Bell, 2012) and curriculum review partners. A pivotal criterion for any network activity was that it had to be sustainable. To achieve sustainability the network would need to

> Establish and maintain intellectual, pedagogical and organizational integrity while pursuing four intermediate objectives: ensuring inclusive participation, linking core community functions to our educational mission, ensuring well-grounded programming, and maintaining strategic networking within and beyond the university (Kelly, 2003).

In addition, sustainability required "institutional will" and "collective commitment" (Clarke, 2003, pp. 112-113) and this was provided by the Provost through the Learning and Teaching Centre and the members of the foundations alumni.

This network was created around a clearly articulated set of five aims, namely that alumni would be provided with the opportunity to:

1) Participate in an active network;

2) Explore the latest issues in higher education learning and teaching;

3) Hear dynamic speakers to motivate them towards teaching excellence;

4) Be updated on innovations and future directions, and

5) Support alumni leadership potential as champions of learning and teaching. (FILT Alumni Network, n.d.)

These aims align with Kelly's (2003) objectives for sustainability. Participation is directly addressed by the network's first aim; linking core community functions to educational plans is addressed by the third and fifth aims; exploring learning and teaching issues, innovations and directions in higher education will support well-grounded programming, and the alumni network together with leadership opportunities will maintain strategic networking within and beyond the university.

Part of the sustainability challenge was that limited resources would be available to support this network. The impact of this criterion includes using electronic resources where possible versus the printing costs of hard copies and drawing upon the strengths within the organisation for guest speakers, thereby continuing to build organisational capacity whilst avoiding the costs of professional presenters. Realising Kelly's (2003) objectives for sustainable learning communities, the foundations alumni network has developed and implemented a range of sustainable strategies to achieve its listed aims.

5. Strategies for Expanding A Foundations Alumni Network

Building on evaluation data collected at the conclusion of each foundations program, and workshopping with a group of alumni to use their generative capabilities (Bandura, 1997) a range of strategies for expanding a foundations alumni network began to emerge. These strategies ranged from network seminars, through to opportunities for supported reflection; co-teaching and developing scholarship in higher education learning and teaching. Each strategy is now discussed.

5.1 Foundations Alumni Network Seminars

The Foundations Alumni Network was launched at its first seminar three years ago. The intention is that these seminars, which are both informative and social, are to be held once each semester, featuring a guest presenter on a contemporary or contentious learning and teaching issue. This speaker shares recent research findings, new insights gained from learning and teaching experiences and strategies and implications emerging for the

foundations alumni participants. An open forum for discussion is always a key part of the session providing alumni with an opportunity to clarify, question and reflect on these issues.

A specific goal of the first network seminar was to gather data on the ongoing and emerging professional learning and development needs of this cohort. Participants were specifically asked to identify learning and teaching topics and issues to inform ongoing planning for the network seminars. The second network meeting featured a National Learning and Teaching Fellow speaking on the teaching-research nexus, an issue that had been identified by the first gathering of alumni. As the seminars are only held twice yearly, the suggestions for seminar topics have also been used to inform the development of other workshops and seminars offered through the university's centralised Learning and Teaching Centre. Workshops offered in response to the alumni's needs have included practical sessions on writing assessment rubrics, on effective group work and communicating learning and teaching issues with sessional academic staff. As capacity expands, alumni are now volunteering to present at these network meetings to share good practice and research.

Participants were also surveyed as to their preferred method for communications. The majority of respondents indicated that they prefer electronic communication and there was little support for use of other communication channels such as wikis, the learning management system or social networking platforms. Consequently it was decided to continue using the foundations alumni email distribution list, generated from the central database, as the main avenue for communications. An additional idea that was explored was the possibility of a mentoring scheme whereby foundations alumni mentor new foundations participants in learning and teaching. This is now the focus of a related internal university project.

When planning the seminars and their timing a number of factors were considered. The importance of developing and sustaining network connections was the main goal. To achieve this it was acknowledged that time must be programmed to allow informal, but open and scholarly discourse. The foundations alumni organisers drew upon their years of experience in facilitating professional learning activities across the campus and concluded that a lunch time session, with lunch provided would be the best fit between the foundations alumni and their workloads and hence potentially increase network participation. The provision of lunch also sends an underlying message that the alumni are valued while creating an environment that is more social and thereby conducive to network building and distributed leadership capacity development (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012).

5.2 Supported Reflection

One of the outcomes of the foundations program is that participants will be able to "employ critical reflection" and apply this to their own learning and teaching context. The program recently initiated the learning strategy of "supported reflection" (Harvey, 2008) in response to the recognition that time is required for reflection to be effective (King, 2002). In effect, this means that time for reflection is part of the formal foundations program. Each module of the program allows for a minimum of half an hour for participants to reflect. Participants are "supported" not only with time, but with a variety of reflective tools and prompts which are hosted on the central learning management system. Participants are thereby scaffolded to reflect on their key learnings for the day and to generate applications of what they have learnt to their own learning and teaching context.

With the introduction of "supported" reflection sessions, the participation rate for reflective practice has quantitatively increased. Of greater impact, the depth of reflection has also increased (e.g., from descriptive to integrated, Marchel, 2004.). Alumni are able to continue to engage in discussion and collaborative reflective practice with their foundations community via the learning management system. The site also provides a private journal or blog function for individuals to document their reflections. An adjunct resource and showcase is the alumni website. The website features current news and announcements. Podcasts of presenters from the alumni seminars are available. This website offers the potential of acting as a resource repository and a means of dissemination.

5.3 Developing Learning and Teaching Capacity through Co-teaching and Leadership

Foundations alumni act as guest presenters for the foundations program and the alumni network seminars. The presenter shares their reflections on how their learning from the foundations program has been incorporated into the review and development of their own curriculum and the impact this has had on learning outcomes. These authentic and workplace specific case study presentations have the dual benefit of developing the learning and teaching capacity of both the individuals who are presenting and of the wider organisation.

The sustainability of the strategy of inviting foundations alumni as guest presenters can be measured by the learning and teaching trajectories of the presenters. Each presenter has strategically used the experience of

presenting to further develop their learning and teaching capacity and especially their self-efficacy for learning and teaching. This is evidenced in the stories of Chris and Kym, two new academics who became members of the FILT alumni network upon completing the foundations program. As an early alumni, Chris was invited to participate in a national Learning and Teaching project and within a short time led a curriculum review of the department resulting in renewed curriculum including aligned assessment. With a new passion for good practice in learning and teaching Chris has continued to lead program reviews. In the past two years, Chris has contributed regularly to the scholarship of learning and teaching though presentations to the foundations program and alumni, at organisational forums and at national conferences. Recently Chris was awarded an internal Learning and Teaching fellowship. The fellowship seconded Chris for one semester to lead a major learning and teaching project across the university. Chris has now moved into a promotional position as an academic developer with responsibility for multiple faculties.

Another new academic, Kym, had been a reluctant foundations participant. However, six months after the program, Kym was passing the FILT convenor's office and yelled out "I need to tell you something!" Kym proceeded to outline the impact FILT had had on personal learning and practice. Firstly, there was the admission that Kym had been a reluctant participant in the program, only attending because it was required by the departmental head. Then followed the admission that while attending and taking notes on the laptop, that each day these notes were sent to a new folder titled "official junk". However, a transformation occurred at the end of the third day. The transformation was a realisation that old and established learning and teaching practices had never been questioned. The FILT program was providing a theoretical framework to challenge and critique these practices. This was very testing. However, upon this realisation, the "official junk" folder was renamed the "learning and teaching" folder. A new capacity for learning and teaching had been seeded.

As a member of the foundations alumni network, Kym was now committed to improving the quality of learning and teaching. Consequently, a complete review and redevelopment of the subjects Kym taught was undertaken, putting into practice the principles of curriculum alignment, good practice in assessment and an understanding of the variables impacting on the learning context. A program of unit evaluation was systematised by drawing on the support of a learning and teaching academic with expertise in integrating technology. Another year on, and Kym has sustained a commitment to quality learning and teaching. A recent communication asks "can you point me to …data about Australian students" exemplifying a new student centred focus. Kym now reads new research, actively participates and contributes to learning and teaching workshops and continues to develop new conceptualisations of the basic principles underpinning a personal pedagogical philosophy.

Objective evaluative data, to support observational and anecdotal evidence as in the documented stories of Chris and Kym, is now being systematically collected on the trend of foundations alumni receiving formal recognition of their learning and teaching achievements through being successful recipients of learning and teaching grants and awards; promotion based on teaching excellence and adoption of formal and informal leadership roles in championing quality learning and teaching, not only across campus, but also nationally and internationally. These grants fund their scholarly research into specific learning and teaching issues hence sustaining the cycle of capacity development. The capacity development of these alumni is aligned with a new capacity for distributed leadership of learning and teaching (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Ryland, 2012).

5.4 Developing Learning and Teaching Capacity Through Research: The Foundations Scholarship

The inaugural foundations Alumni Scholarship was launched two years ago. The aim of the scholarship was to support ongoing capacity development of foundations alumni in learning and teaching, with a focus on scholarly research and its dissemination. Any foundations alumnus is eligible to apply for this scholarship, a grant of $1000 funded by the university's central Learning and Teaching Centre. The funds can be used to either buy marking release to allow the writing up of a journal article with a focus on learning and teaching in higher education or to fund registration and travel for a conference at which the alumnus will present on learning and teaching. Following the first three cycles of scholarships, seven conference papers or journal articles have been submitted for publication. A condition of the scholarship is that the final paper is uploaded and showcased on the foundations alumni website, providing a resource for the local and virtual community of alumni scholars.

6. Concluding Reflections

The literature (Warhurst, 2006; Rindermann, Kohler & Meisenberg, 2007; Ortlieb, Biddex, & Doepker, 2010) indicates that programs which involve communities of practice, reflective practice and action learning, all tenets of the foundations alumni network, are most effective. A foundations alumni provides interaction with peers and mentoring, critical for confronting variations in conceptions held by new academic staff about teaching and learning (Hodkinson & Taylor, 2002). Given the alumni structure systematically provides each of these

opportunities for expanding horizons, it travels on a path to success.

However, the strong anecdotal and practice–based body of evidence on the positive outcomes of foundations programs, and we posit alumni networks, are often intangible and ongoing processes (Kreber, 2011) which *unfold slowly over time* (Sword, 2011) making immediate measures of program and network outcomes challenging. While early indicators suggest the success of the foundations alumni, robust evaluation data on the alumni network needs to be collected drawing upon the growing foundations alumni cohort, e.g. through the use of the Teaching Preparations Program (TPP) Effectiveness Indicator Framework (Chalmers, et al, 2011), before we will be able to judge the efficacy of this network.

Having informally evaluated the Foundations Alumni Project as presenting several successful strategies and outcomes, it is also necessary to acknowledge the challenges that have been raised by developing a foundations alumni network. Maintaining an effective communication strategy is one major challenge as the database of alumni can quickly lose currency as alumni leave the institution, change contact details or simply fail to read emails. It takes time to read through emails, and time to actively contribute to an alumni network, time which is currently not recognised or rewarded in workload models. The numbers of active alumni may also appear as relatively low, with up to fifty participating in seminar and network events and larger numbers in online events.

Overall, our initial observations and reflections indicate that the innovation of an alumni network to be a successful strategy in expanding the horizons of professional learning for learning and teaching and for expanding cross and multi disciplinary peer and research connections across the university. We suggest that such a strategy would be transferable across the higher education sector and encourage other institutions to test this transferability through the implementation of an alumni network.

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