Scientia Education Investment Fund Grants Final Report

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Project Title: Blended Transactional Learning: A sustainable feedback model for developing teaching capabilities of sessional staff

School/Faculty: School of Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences, Faculty of Science

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1. Executive Summary

- Summarise the project, context, priorities addressed, outputs, key findings and recommendations (if relevant)

Recognising the key role that sessional staff play in teaching at UNSW, the main objective for this project was to provide both online and face-to face training and resources for sessional staff. Many of these staff have limited or no teaching experience nor have they received training to prepare them for teaching. In our School (Biotechnology and Biomolecular Sciences, BABS), as in most Schools in Science, the sessional staff are postgraduate students who not only need professional development opportunities around best practices in teaching, they also require support to confidently supervise and direct students.

The initial phases of the project encompassed surveying sessional staff to identify the resources they felt that they needed, the design and development of these resources and then the delivering of the resources. Later phases involved evaluation and refinement of the resources.

The major achievements for the project were the development and deployment of the project resources. This means that we now have diverse forms of comprehensive training and support resources for our sessional staff. These have been delivered to the sessional staff in the School from Session 2, 2017 through 2018 and 2019. The resources comprise:

- Four face-to-face workshops delivered by professionals, delivered at strategic times throughout the session to provide information and support around challenging areas.
- Development of a Moodle site for the program that provides a discussion forum; survival guide with FAQs; and scenario-based animations of commonly encountered educational issues and challenges.
- Feedback on teaching for sessional staff from students. The students in four large (200 students) second year BABS courses were surveyed twice (mid-semester and at the end of the semester) regarding the teaching provided by the sessional staff. The feedback from the students helped to change the quality of teaching practice during the semester and the success of this was evidenced by the higher student satisfaction scores at the end of the semester. The sessional staff were required to participate in a self-reflective exercise using this data to identify areas that needed to be addressed.

The resources have been well-received by the sessional staff who have participated voluntarily in all workshops and reflective practice activities. They have utilised the online resources and have valued the student feedback as this has helped improve their performance and has also provided them with evidence of their teaching practice. If they complete all elements of the training program, they are provided with a certificate of completion which documents their training.

The modules that have been developed for the sessional staff in BABS could easily be re-purposed for use in other Schools. All online resources have been developed within Moodle while the face-to-face workshop material can be made available and readily adapted to other contexts.

2. Outcomes and impact

- Describe the major achievements of your project in relation to the outcomes and deliverables.
- Discuss project impact – how and to what extent has the project impacted students, staff, faculty institution, and higher education as relevant to the project.
- Include the strategic priorities addressed.
- Include the number of courses/programs/students likely to benefit from this project.

As noted in the Executive Summary, the overall purpose of this project was to provide resources that would support sessional staff in the development of their teaching practice. The intention was also to help create a community that would meet regularly to discuss teaching, either virtually or face-to-face in workshops. Consequently, a suite of resources was designed and deployed according to the schedule shown below. This schedule has now been amended to comply with the new UNSW 3+ teaching schedule.

Weeks	OW	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Break	8	9	10	11	12	13
Induction and OHS	■														
Development Workshops		■							■					■	
Formative Feedback							■	■						■	
Discussion forum		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Scenario-based animations	■				■						■			■	

The various elements that were developed and deployed are described below.

The development of an online platform for peer-directed learning: A Moodle site was developed for BABS sessional staff (see below) containing resources for effective teaching, a discussion forum, online lessons, material from face to face workshops. The Moodle site is accessed by approximately 100 sessional staff involved in all the BABS courses every year. The site is designed in a way so sessional staff at any level of teaching can select and choose which resources they interact with and most beneficial for them. As has been noted: *Organic self/peer directed learning provides opportunities to learn in a variety of fashions including reciprocal learning, learning cell model and Proctor model like learning environments (traditional and progressive models).*
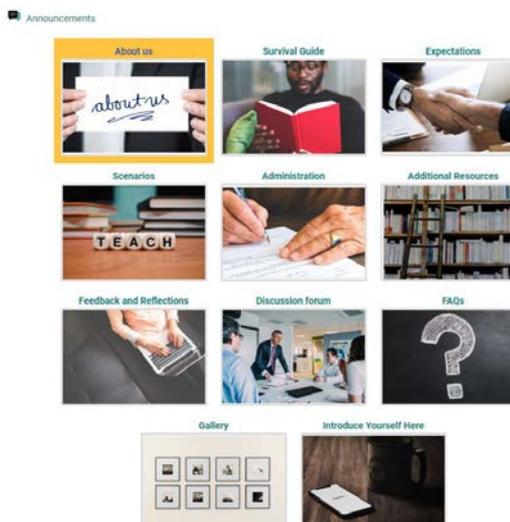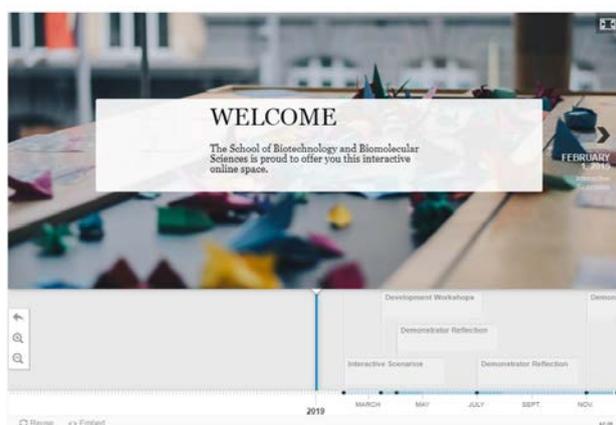
Production of animations: Five rotoscope video animations were developed. These provided scenarios around dealing with difficult students, grading assessments, quality of feedback, diversity awareness, communication skills, and mental health and wellbeing. These topics were selected based on feedback from sessional staff where they perceived these to be essential in their day to day interactions with students. These animations are housed on The Box and have been incorporated in to Smart Sparrow Scenario based lessons the sessional staff work through in their own time. The scenarios help the sessional staff develop their problem-solving skills in peer-based teaching scenarios as these are likely scenarios, they will face in their teaching environment. Understanding how to respond to these issues in an online environment prior to facing them in real life helps them prepare in an effective way, resulting in a better learning experience for students. When surveyed, 86% of sessional staff found these animations to be helpful in their teaching.

Face-to-face professional development workshops: Each semester, 3 professional face-to-face professional development workshops were run to increase the skills and overall well-being of sessional staff members. To date the following sessions were run by the project team as well as invited guest speakers include:

- Diversity and Equity (guest speakers include ALLY, Disability Support Services)
- Plagiarism and Marking (guest speakers include Learning Centre, Faculty of Science Learning and Teaching Unit, Experienced Sessional Staff)
- Mental Health and Wellbeing (guest speakers include CAPS, Black Dog Institute)
- Student Interaction and Asking Questions
- Troubleshooting and Important Points of Contact
- Demonstrator Notes and Reflection

The feedback on all of these workshops have been very positive. All the attendees of the workshops found them to be useful and 88% said they felt these workshops increased interaction with their peers and built a sense of community. These workshops have helped to ensure that the sessional staff are equipped with knowledge and insight which can provide students with the best learning experience.

Gathering student feedback on sessional staff: Part of the program involves gathering feedback from the students on sessional staff performance twice during the semester. The initial feedback provides sessional staff with enough time to reflect on their teaching and adjust their performance if necessary, to improve student experience. The feedback from students and the sessional staff on this model has been extremely positive. The students appreciate the opportunity to raise their concerns about their sessional staff early on and the staff appreciate understanding how they are progressing especially if they are first time teachers.

Formal certificate of completion: Sessional staff who have completed the following were awarded with a certificate of completion to document their training and achievements.

- Attend face to face induction training (Safety and Teaching);
- Complete the online components for specific training scenarios during the semester;
- Attend scheduled professional development workshops;
- Participate in the online discussion forum;
- Complete the reflective exercise on student feedback about their teaching during the of semester.

The Certificate of Completion acts as a documentation of evidence on the training and competency of the sessional staff. This will allow them to utilise this certificate in future job applications and as a reference to their training. It is hoped that this will also form the basis for applications for teaching awards. By the end of 2018, 35 sessional staff have obtained the certificate of completion.

Demonstrator practical notes and videos:

In response to the focus groups and surveys conducted with the sessional staff, the need for course-specific demonstrator notes and videos on lab techniques/equipment was identified. Experienced sessional staff were hired to write laboratory notes which align with the lab manual for first and second year courses. This was especially timely, with the transition to UNSW3+ where many courses underwent changes of their teaching content. Lab specific videos are also being continually developed and hosted on the specific course Moodle site as another resource to assist sessional staff with the preparation of class.

2. Dissemination strategies and outputs
- Describe the dissemination activities and events that have been implemented and/or being planned in the future.
- Describe the outputs achieved until now and that are likely to occur as a result of this project.

The professional development workshops have been well-received and attended and the staff have requested that they continue to be provided. So, these are continuing to run in 2019, delivered by academic staff members (Lutze-Mann and Wijenayake). Currently, it is planned to hold an induction/training workshop at the beginning of each term for new sessional staff plus the addition of two professional development workshops per term. As changes to course content unfolds, the development of online videos will continue. The filming of these videos is assisted by the technical team in the School and aim to act as a readily accessible resource for all teaching sessional staff.

There is Sessional Staff Community of Practice forming among the Education Focussed staff and it is planned to provide access to these resources to the CoP so that they can be disseminated more widely. Many of the resources can be adopted with little or no change, while others can be evaluated for their applicability in other disciplines.

3. Evaluation of project outcomes
- Describe the evaluation strategy (formative/summative), tools and actions.
- Include any results of data collection or analysis.
- Provide an evaluation report on the approach and outcomes.

Feedback on the effectiveness of scenario animations was collected through online lessons, with details provided below:
I found this resource to be interesting and engaging – 8.3/10
This resource assisted me to further develop my teaching skills – 7.9/10

Please comment on what you liked most about this resource:
"I find all scenarios relevant to what generally happens in an actual class."
"The segment was short but still encompassed a number of issues which we might encounter while teaching pointed out several simple things that could easily be done wrong and how to fix it".
"The point of view was that of the student, which reminded me to put myself in their shoes."
"I really liked the animation video (quite creative and interesting!)"
"Even I missed the student coming in late in the first segment!! I think this would be quite easy to miss in class as well... I'll definitely be more aware of this."
"I think giving demonstrators a resource/scenario on how to deal with plagiarism is very helpful. I myself wasn't sure how to deal with it from a teaching perspective..."
"This resource informed me about the possible unfairness of marking students' work caused by different markers, and I think the suggestions are helpful (e.g. make sure I have understood the criteria before marking assignments)."

Please comment on what you would like to see changed in this resource:
"Whilst stylistically interesting, the use of actual faces would better engage the use of this resource."

"It would be good to break the video up into different components so that it's easier to distinguish the many problems being demonstrated."

"This resource needs to be more in depth going into grey areas not just the obvious ones shown."

"Maybe set a feedback/discussion section under the answer part so that senior staff can provide other possible solutions to each scenario?"

The sessional staff were surveyed at the end of 2018 for their insight into the value of the training program. Comments and feedback included:

- *"I've found these sessions generally very helpful especially as a first-time demonstrator".*
- *"Great work, we feel very valued and appreciate the formal recognition of these workshops also to enhance our teaching portfolio".*
- *"I think the marking and mental health workshops were pretty important and would be happy attending variations of these next year".*
- *"I found the site informative and easy to use!".*
- *I'm happy with all the resources available to me as a demonstrator. The talks run throughout semester (I did them 2 years ago now) were a great help, and the session on marking still comes up when we are debating how to mark".*
- *"Great to see BABS providing access to development opportunities for sessional staff. It would be good to see these opportunities delivered within a framework of academic development that would permit sessional staff who are highly committed to education focused academic careers to build their portfolio across all of the necessary criteria (research (L&T), teaching, service and engagement)."*

The students in the courses where the staff had undergone this training, really valued the opportunity to provide online feedback to the sessional staff during the teaching period so that any issues could be addressed and acted upon for the remainder of the teaching period. Overall, they indicated high satisfaction ratings for staff who were participating in the training.