Chapter 17

Achieving Excellence in Teaching:
A Case Study in Embedding Professional Development for Teaching within a Research-Intensive University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the challenges of achieving systemic change in the teaching culture of a research-intensive university. The chapter makes use of a teaching improvement case study to identify both the challenges and the solutions to engaging academics in a research-intensive university with educational professional development. Ongoing issues are identified and future research directions are presented.

INTRODUCTION

In the first few months of 2009, the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences (FMHS), The University of Auckland (UoA), New Zealand initiated a project to provide academics with a set of resources to support them in achieving excellence in teaching. The FMHS Faculty initiative will act as a case study for discussing the challenges

involved in achieving systemic change in the teaching culture of a research-intensive Faculty. The deliverables for the project included: a teaching performance rubric, a set of online Educational Professional Development (EPD) modules aligned with the performance guidelines, and an electronic portfolio (ePortfolio) to enable academics to create teaching records for formative and summative purposes (https://fmhshub.auckland.ac.nz). The project was referenced to University and Faculty teaching excellence priorities, to University policies and guidelines on teaching standards and to the requirement for academics to engage in teaching improvement activities. Referencing in this way provided the rationale for the project in terms of the perceived need to provide staff with the appropriate resources and supports to help them to achieve excellence in teaching and in terms of the overall project aim of effecting broad change in the Faculty teaching culture.

According to change management theory (Kotter, 1995), transformation efforts tend to fail in the absence of a sufficient sense of urgency or in the absence of a sense that the proposed changes are necessary for the ongoing success of the organization. One reason for this is that successful change requires the cooperation of many people over an extended period of time and creating and communicating a sense of urgency is a way to motivate individuals to engage with the change process for the requisite period of time. The issue that we faced in a successful research-intensive Faculty was that our project—which ultimately aimed to embed EPD within the teaching culture of the Faculty—was not perceived as necessary for organizational success. Therefore, in the absence of a sense of organizational urgency, we had to devise alternative strategies to bring about the sort of changes that we wanted to see. These strategies included: managing change in a way that ensured the support of senior figures within the Faculty, conveying the strategic importance of the initiative to multiple stakeholders, making a transparent and concrete connection between EPD and individual reward and recognition, and creating professional development resources that aligned with academics' stated professional development needs and with the needs of other stakeholders such as academic managers responsible for supporting academics in their teaching.

BACKGROUND

EPD is arguably vitally important for educational institutions operating in a time of significant societal, market, technological, and pedagogical change. Ideally, ongoing EPD—along with, for example, regular curriculum renewal—would be standard practice for educators and a defining aspect of teaching and learning cultures. As a result, educational institutions might respond appropriately to the multiple forces that are impacting upon higher education. Teaching environments might then be

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