

2011

Fellowship Final Report

The key to the door? Teaching awards in Australian higher education

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Achieve International Excellence

Support for this fellowship has been provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Ltd., an initiative of the Australian Government. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council or the Australian Government.

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ISBN 978-1-921856-85-3

2011

Cover image: <www.photocall.com.au>

This document is available from:

<<http://www.altc.edu.au/resource-teaching-awards-higher-ed-uwa-2011>>

Advice for Award Winners

Celebrate, enjoy the fuss and the sensation of success for a few days. Thank your colleagues and students for supporting your nomination, and then brace yourself for pressure. Everyone now expects you to be a stellar performer. However, great teaching is not reducible to stand-up comedy and the gift of the gab. Great teachers inspire learning, link research and teaching, and respect and support students and it is worth thinking about what you might do to further those aims.

Be prepared for disappointment. Other academics may not know about your award, may not care or may be envious. Remarkably, some may think less of you as a result of the award, perhaps suggesting that recognising, rewarding and celebrating teaching is a misguided pursuit. Whatever the reasons, their silence or, even worse, their barbed comments can be hurtful. Steel yourself for these possibilities, rise above any pettiness, and don't let the negativity of others undermine your achievements. And be aware that there are people out there who really do value your work, appreciate your effort, and want you to share your talents with them.

You may need to allow yourself some time to get used to having a higher profile. A teaching award may shoot you out of your comfort zone and offer new possibilities. It's fine to feel off balance, and even a little anxious, for a while: but we would encourage you to **grab your opportunities** with both hands.

Manage upwards. Your supervisor, executive dean and vice-chancellor might be excited by your success but may not have thought strategically about what you might do next. Help them identify what would and what would not be good for you, your faculty and your institution. For example, what presentations do they want you to do, to whom, and why? Are there any leadership roles in the faculty, university or more broadly

that you might be able to take on? Which requests are your supervisors happy for you to refuse?

Beware becoming your institution's 'show teacher', trotted out on special occasions to demonstrate the 'institution's commitment to teaching excellence'. Repeated focus on the work and achievements of an individual or small group of people may be counter-productive. Just imagine the annoyance and frustration of long-serving and highly effective colleagues. They may not have received awards and perhaps quite justifiably feel that their sterling work is being overlooked and undervalued. And in such cases you may well find that it is you who is the focus of those frustrations, not the institution.

Rattle some door knobs. No-one really knows what a teaching award allows you to do. Identify some of the things that interest you and try using the award as the opening. Look beyond your traditional hunting grounds – outside your discipline, institution and geographical location. Think of some of the ways skills you have demonstrated so clearly in teaching might be transferred to other fields. Sometimes, when you look for an opening, you'll get a polite no. Sometimes, you'll be ignored. Sometimes, you'll be met with tail-wagging, face-licking enthusiasm. Try to look for activities that might support any longer-term ambitions you have for service, management and research as well as teaching.

Plan your next promotion application with the teaching award as one of the jewels in your crown. Your organisation will have stated, all over its strategic plans, that teaching excellence (or similar) is one of its core objectives. Encourage promotion committees to prove it.

Prepare to defend your research track record. One of us was warned that a teaching award represented the end of his



career as he would either be seen as a non-researcher or would inevitably head in that direction. In the simple everyday categorisations many people make of one another's academic roles and activities, it is possible that you'll be seen as a teacher first and foremost. So, take care to manage your academic identity to create the impression you want or need. If it is important to you, protect your research interests and find ways to keep going. Consider whether new areas of research may open up for you around the teaching-research nexus. Make the teaching award work for you, not against you, in all areas of your professional life.

Encourage and support your colleagues.

What are the chances that you really are the best teacher in your institution? Offer to review applications for your institution – you will probably be asked to do so anyway. Nothing takes pressure off you faster than having colleagues in your discipline or institution emulating your success. Build networks with other award winning teachers, both within and beyond your own organisation, and consider what you can do to extend best practice, support the wider teaching community, and develop teaching-research groups.

Learn to say no, with grace. You might find yourself approached incessantly – and with little regard for your other commitments – to review applications, participate in learning and teaching focus groups, lead professional development sessions... Manage your workload, or ask your supervisor to help you with this. Not every offer is a good offer. There are some things you will be asked to do that no-one else would agree to. There may be good reasons for their lack of interest. If you might agree to invitations under particular conditions, state them. Ask yourself what's in it for you, and for your institution. Consider whether there's any particular reason why you are the right person for this, and if there isn't, perhaps say no or deflect the request to colleagues who might be looking for such an opportunity. You're a busy person.

Enjoy. Hold the award lightly, don't take yourself too seriously, let your professional life open up, grab opportunities, speak to new issues, challenge institutional poor practice, take risks, see where serendipity leads you – celebrate others' successes, toast the award winners who come after you, be a mentor, and above all have some fun. You've earned it.



Advice for Institutions

The first thing should be easy. **Celebrate.** If your institution includes something like ‘quality teaching’ as a core value or objective in its strategic documents, then a national teaching award is an opportunity to reinforce both your commitment to this value and your institution’s achievements. Celebrate visibly and, where appropriate, involve students in the celebration. By marking the occasion within the institution, you communicate to your staff and students that you do indeed value teaching excellence. By recognising the event in external publicity, you again confirm the value your institution places on teaching – and, in a world where institutional performance is ending up on display in league tables, this is something employers, prospective students and their parents, want to hear.

Debrief your awardees. Get to know, and find ways to develop, these high-value employees. Don’t make it easy for other institutions to test their loyalties by trying to poach them. Awardees have reported that they find it difficult both to handle a higher profile than they’re used to and to make the most of any opportunities offered by the award. Offer practical support to maximise the impact of the award. And point out opportunities for leadership development, if this is something that would interest the awardee. Encourage award winners to be creative and imaginative about what they’d like to achieve – and then see how you can support them towards their goals as well as those of your institution.

At the same time, you may be able to **discern directions and opportunities** the award winner hadn’t thought about. But don’t jump in too fast. First, you need to work out how the particular strengths of the award winner might suit them to particular paths and tasks. Then you can tailor opportunities for development.

Be sensitive about what you ask your award winner to do in the interests of the organisation. Don’t assume every award winning teacher is an extrovert who loves nothing more than to entertain graduation ceremonies or whole-of-institution teaching symposiums. Some will have won awards because they are reflective, thoughtful teachers who work quietly to nurture others’ abilities. Yet others may be prickly characters with scholarly depths. To ask these introverts to take on an extrovert’s role would be clearly unfair – and also a poor strategic move since, if they don’t shine in that situation, people will start asking questions about what teaching awards mean.

Don’t bleed award winners dry. You’ll probably want to use your awardee to raise the profile of teaching and learning. But if a teaching award means that their workload doubles overnight, most winners are going to burn out. By all means, ask your award winners to engage with others in ways that will work for them – for example, supporting others who are working on teaching portfolios, and by promoting and encouraging good teaching in a range of ways. But balance this out with buy-out, strategic professional development or some other means at your disposal.

Don’t pigeonhole your award winner into a teaching-only profile. Many winners of national teaching awards are committed and talented researchers, who are in no hurry to give up their research portfolio. Not surprisingly, many great teachers are well-rounded scholars. Some are fearful that being given a high profile as a teacher means they will lose the time and opportunity to focus on research – and that could be detrimental to their career, if not their professional identity. It’s important to develop individualised plans for each award winner – and this may include research development and opportunities.



Build networks. If you're lucky enough to have more than one award winner, consider creating a group of winners to raise the profile of teaching and learning in your institution. Groups of award winning staff might advise your senior executive on issues relating to teaching, establish teaching and learning mentoring circles, and provide a framework of peer support for potential award nominees and for the general enhancement of teaching quality.

If winning national teaching awards is important to you, it should be **part of your institution's strategic thinking**. Embed systems to identify potential award winners and to mentor people through the awards process. Your institution's current award winners can be enormously helpful. But you also need heads of departments to be building the potential for teaching awards into performance reviews and evaluations through identifying a teaching award as one aspect of career planning. You need your teaching development unit to work proactively. Don't leave it to individuals – build up an infrastructure for the award winners of the future.

Value all your nominees. Nominees for national awards have invested considerable effort in promoting the activities of your institution. For some, lack of success can be crushing. They need to know that it is a

significant achievement to be nominated by your institution. Celebrate their work, offer feedback on their nomination and advice on the next steps in their career. Where appropriate, support them if they wish to reapply. Many eventual recipients are not successful first time round and you need to manage expectations and disappointments sensitively.

Make sure your institution's internal **reward structures align** with your institution's teaching and learning strategy. If an award winner is feted by the university – and then applies unsuccessfully for promotion – they won't be the only ones who think they can see where the institution's values really lie. If you promote teaching award winners, then you very visibly discount the myth that teaching 'doesn't really count'. The impact can be expected to be an increased commitment to, and valuing of, teaching among staff.

Help award winners make a contribution to the sector. While at your institution, look for ways of enabling them to engage with other institutions and national policy formation in a way that reflects your distinctive mission. Long after award winners may have moved on to bigger things, your institution's values may continue to shape the way that they think and act and influence important educational policies and practices.



Advice for DEEWR

Recognise and reward excellence in teaching. Awards and award ceremonies are one way for the sector to celebrate and reward excellence. Awards are not the only way, are not the most important way, and they are not sufficient in themselves. However, awards are an established and accepted part of the sector's calendar. Manage the awards professionally, using people with an understanding of the higher education sector and good relationships with academics.

Build the legitimacy of the awards. In the early years of the awards, rumours circulated that the judging process might be biased. The current processes have ensured awardees have credibility among prospective nominees. Manage the awards in a transparent and accountable manner. Use easily understood criteria. Draw on a pool of assessors and an award panel who are trusted by academics. Invite awardees to fill roles as judges and offer them a place on the Australian Awards for University Teaching Committee.

Use awardees as assessors. Most awardees are happy to be asked to assess applications for citations, awards, grants or fellowships. But not relentlessly. They are likely to be busy people and may prefer coordinated requests and some variety. Offer them a choice about which schemes they might be asked to assess and when, and explain how tasks will be allocated. Ask awardees what else they would like to do to support your programs.

Look to **add value through the awards.** The awards should not be seen in isolation, but as part of an integrated strategy for nurturing teaching excellence, encouraging academics to invest their time and energy in teaching before, and long after, they apply for an award. While some academics may choose to redirect their attention towards research after they win an award, this should not be the perverse result of a sector determining

there is nothing more an awardee might achieve in teaching. Help establish possible pathways for awardees to grants and fellowships, and to leadership roles within their institutions.

Initiate and resource a **network of award winners.** Award winners have said they want to work together, sharing experiences and ideas. They could form a community of practice that promotes and supports further development of higher education teaching and learning policy and practice. However, this has not happened in any formal way in Australia. Offer awardees an opportunity to meet as a cohort and to hear from previous awardees, possibly at the time of the awards ceremony. Maintain a database of the expertise and contact details of members of the network and made these details available to prospective collaborating partners. Link the network of award winners to the existing networks of ALTC Fellows and Discipline Scholars.

Enhance the capacity of **awardees to direct their own activities.** The network needs to extend its role beyond just networking. Ensure the network is given the structure, space and resources to determine and pursue its own priorities.

Plug awardees and their networks into existing structures. The network established by awardees will have its strengths and weaknesses. It should be seen as complementing rather than competing with other groups at local and national levels. Help awardees to work within or with groups of associate deans, deans, senior management, groups of universities, and with HERDSA.

Build international links. Australian academics learn from and contribute to international debates in education. They: exchange staff and students; internationalise curricula; attend conferences; work as teachers, examiners and reviewers outside



Australia; collaborate in scholarly activities, and draw inspiration from colleagues outside Australia. As individuals, many act as global citizens. Australian universities have built campuses or run programs offshore, and are part of international networks. The international peer networks that sustain our work should be fostered at all levels, extending well beyond the senior executive. Help a network of award winners to establish collaborative relationships with their international equivalents, including the Ako Aotearoa Academy, the 3M Fellows in Canada and the Association of National Teaching Fellows in the United Kingdom.

Engage with the awardees' home institutions. Many universities have aligned their internal processes with those of the

AAUT. They are geared up to win awards. However, not every institution has thought strategically about how it might work with and reinvest in award winning teachers to develop their skills and careers. Encourage universities to help award winners make a contribution to their institution, discipline and the sector as a whole.

Engage with the disciplines. Awardees can help focus attention on teaching and learning matters within their disciplines, initiating or contributing to education workshops at discipline conferences and working with the appropriate council of deans. Continue to fund disciplines to work with awardees, and ensure that knowledge of how to access this funding is disseminated across the sector.



Executive Summary

Within Australia, the national Awards for Teaching Excellence have largely been conceived as an end or a high point, a way of recognising and rewarding good teaching without placing any expectations upon the winners. While recipients may be and indeed have been asked to do any manner of things, they are not required to do so as a condition of the award. Consequently, in the main, neither the administering authority, nor an awardee's home discipline or university have turned their attention to what happens next. Some awardees are quite content with this. However, many awardees might prefer to see receipt of the award as a point when the pace and direction of their career changed. They want to use the award to open up new opportunities and have more of an impact on the nature of education in Australia. If that is the case, it may matter that as a sector we have invested considerable effort in ensuring that excellent teachers *get* an award but have paid little attention to what they may *get out* of an award.

This research was funded by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Teaching Fellowship. It has used three different methods for investigating the Australian teaching awards and their impact on awardees and their institutions:

- review of AAUT and ALTC documentation held by the Australian government and the ALTC;
- semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interviews between late 2009 and early 2011 with 30 award winners. Additional interviews were conducted with people involved in establishing policy relating to teaching and learning at institutional level, or engaged in the awards process at national level;
- online survey of recipients of 119 ALTC national teaching awards (2005-10). Ninety-three awardees replied, a response rate of over 65 per cent overall and almost 75 per cent for the first named recipients.

Chapter One: Teaching Awards

National awards are well entrenched within the higher education sector. The Australian government has invested in the program as part of a long-term effort to recognise teaching excellence and focus universities' attention on the quality of their teaching. Most universities have oriented their internal processes to encourage and support applications, and there are signs that some discipline-based associations are following suit. The assumption across the sector at the level of institutions appears to be that it is worth competing for the awards, though the motivation for doing so may reflect both a commitment to driving teaching excellence as well as a desire for a marketing edge.

Chapter Two: Celebrating Awards

Public acknowledgment of successes has come easily to some universities. After all, a national teaching award is an opportunity to reinforce both an institution's commitment to teaching excellence as well as its achievements in teaching. As a result, awardees may find that colleagues are enthusiastic, that departments, schools and faculties celebrate and that the activities of awardees are repeatedly endorsed by senior staff at public events. Institutions can encourage staff to take delight in colleagues' achievements and project this to the wider community. By marking the occasion within the institution, members of senior management communicate to staff and students that they value teaching excellence. By



recognising the event in external publicity, they again confirm the value their institution places on teaching – and, in a world where institutional performance is ending up on display in league tables, this is something employers, prospective students and their parents want to hear. Some universities have been doing this for years. Sadly, others who are perfectly adept at celebrating research success appear more diffident when it comes to teaching. The same seems to be true for professional associations. This lack of enthusiasm can take the shine off success when it comes to celebration but also when it comes to developing the subsequent careers of awardees.

Chapter Three: Career Development

Many awardees identified a wish to develop their career to the point where they could influence teaching and learning in their current institution and thereby help their colleagues improve teaching. Many recipients found the awards had given them opportunities to do just this, and that opportunities occurred at a range of levels, ranging from the departmental to the international. Some recipients were content to wait for requests to be made of them, others were highly proactive and actively sought new openings.

Many of these activities required awardees to reflect further on their approaches to teaching so that they might be able to explain in public what they did and why. The awards also provided recipients with validation, credibility, visibility and increased career satisfaction. However, the opportunities the awards brought were not structured nor necessarily well timed, and awardees sometimes found it hard to cope with the quantity and nature of the subsequent workload. Few institutions helped awardees plan their future strategically so that the teaching award might work for and not against awardees in all areas of their professional lives and I make suggestions about the support institutions might offer recipients in *Advice for Institutions*.

Chapter Four: Leadership Roles

Many recipients assumed what they identified as leadership roles after their award. The award was sometimes received at the point when academics wanted to achieve influence on a greater scale or be engaged in a larger space – be it shifting from department to faculty, faculty to university, or university to national level. In particular, an award helped some people enter and then move up a developmental pathway through the positions of program director, associate dean at school and faculty levels, and university-level committees. Others were able to take a greater role in ALTC-funded projects or apply for ALTC Fellowships.

Approximately half of awardees sought leadership roles. Perhaps the same number reported that they had indeed taken on such roles following the award, either formally or informally. This included a significant proportion of people who had played some role at university level. In some cases, promotion and both the opportunity to take on a leadership position and the skills to do so were facilitated by receipt of the award.

Unfortunately, two quite small groups of people were left angry or cynical. Some awardees did not receive a promotion and believed that this reflected badly on their institution. Other recipients did receive promotion but were abused by their colleagues as a result. Institutions need to tackle the myth that teaching ‘doesn’t really count’, legitimate a pathway to promotion and leadership through education at the level of policy and protect those who progress through this route, building networks to support the career development of those who might become involved in educational leadership.



Chapter Five: Building Networks of Award Winners

As the number of award winners has risen, several universities have made the decision to forge recipients into a group in order to raise the profile of teaching and learning. Groups of award winning staff have advised senior executives on issues relating to teaching. They have established teaching and learning mentoring circles, and have provided a framework of peer support for potential award applicants and for the general enhancement of teaching quality. However, the groups that have been created have not been without their problems. Isolated from both the formal structures that run teaching and learning and from senior management, they have been troubled by charges of lack of direction, elitism and illegitimacy. These consequences may be the result of poor planning or execution and, while groupings are always likely to go through periods when they are more or less active, it is quite possible that they need not be flawed in these ways.

Although some universities have chosen to create groups of award winners, the organisations responsible for the national awards have not. This sets Australia apart from countries against which we often compare our practices. In Canada and New Zealand, for example, independently resourced networks have enhanced the national debate and contributed to educational practices. Future custodians of the national teaching awards in Australia could follow suit at the national level. They could link Australian awardees with colleagues in networks outside Australia and work with those networks to encourage similar structures to evolve in countries that, like Australia, now have national awards but no national network.

Conclusion

It is possible that teaching awards might foster the emergence of educational leaders either by acting as an incentive for academics before they apply for such an award or by giving recipients of such an award greater authority and opportunities to influence teaching.

The award may well represent an end point for or, perhaps, a high point in an academic career. It acknowledges and celebrates the awardees' contribution to teaching and learning and places no obligation on them. Teachers may be close to retirement or content to continue in the same role long after they have received their award. There is nothing wrong with this. Indeed, it would be perverse if awards ripped away from their interaction with students the very best of our teachers.

However, there is a difference between not wishing to place an obligation on an awardee and failing to offer him or her opportunities to flourish. Were the awards to constitute recognition and no more, this would be a wasted chance. Instead, there may be a possibility that awards might constitute a turning-point, enabling some of the best teachers in Australia to have a greater impact both on the students for whom they already have a direct responsibility and more broadly through their institution, discipline or across the sector. Recipients could be strategic assets, playing a key role in developing teaching and learning initiatives and championing change in learning and teaching policies and practices. Indeed, national award winners have been used inside their institutions, across Australia and beyond as status symbols, teaching assessors, drivers for change and motivational speakers. They have been used to develop policy, write grant applications, and mentor colleagues. However, few institutions have worked strategically to tailor opportunities to meet the desires and strengths of the individual awardee or the considered needs of the institution. I urge institutions and DEEWR to assist awardees in making a contribution to the



sector, by finding out more about the strengths and weaknesses, hopes and ambitions of awardees, offering practical support to maximise the impact of the award, and helping to discern directions that an award winner has not considered.

It is crucial that a significant proportion of our future educational leaders move through their careers with a commitment to and an understanding of teaching and learning. For this to happen, some institutions will need to revise their approach to promotion so that policies for recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching are adhered to in practice and are seen to do so.

In presentations about this research, I have introduced a metaphor of 'the key'. Some awardees reported that they were content to wait for opportunities to come to them. Others were more proactive. If awardees can view the award as a key, they might be more tempted to try to unlock a series of doors with it. What awardees find behind some doors might be unattractive. Some doors might remain closed. However, a few might open, and allow an awardee to learn from and contribute to new educational communities. Some awardees might find themselves progressing within their own discipline or institution. Others might find themselves extending into areas well beyond their home discipline, institution or geographical location. With these hopes in mind, I invite awardees to enjoy what the award brings, let their professional life open up, grab opportunities, speak to new issues, challenge institutional poor practice, take risks, and see where serendipity leads them.

