



# Learning Through Teaching Program: supporting PhD students working as sessional teaching staff



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## - Priority Focus and explanation of PATS variation

The focus was Quality Improvement. The Learning Through Teaching Program (LTTP), as a variation of the PATS mentoring model, brought together PhD students who were employed as sessional teachers, and their workplace supervisors to investigate the provision of feedback in the assessment of students.

The LTTP framework aimed to develop skills and awareness of the role of feedback in the assessment of students with an emphasis on the improvement of academic writing skills and intercultural awareness. In particular, aspects such as meaningful feedback, writing skills development, rubrics, intercultural understandings and curriculum alignment were of interest. The secondary focus was on quality assurance in that the participants came together to calibrate their understandings of feedback, intercultural literacies and assessment as a community of academics.

### Why

PhD students are often employed in casual/sessional teaching roles, drawing on an apprenticeship model, in an effort to provide pathways into academia. However, as *apprentice* academics employed on a needs basis, they are rarely provided with explicit training in teaching practices (De Fazio, 2013). In fact, they are often marginalized, if not, excluded from the discourse on learning and teaching that defines professional development for mainstream academics. Paradoxically, apprentice academics are often responsible for tutoring and marking assessment, especially in first or second year level units/subjects. Additionally, as PhD students, they have their own challenges in receiving, interpreting, drawing on and negotiating feedback on their own scholarly work.

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The premise for the variation is that the provision of feedback to students is a complex activity which requires an understanding of learning, academic literacies and intercultural understanding and expectations of academia itself.

### People

PhD students employed sessionally at Victoria University participated as mentees. Mentors were full-time academic development staff, a unit coordinator who was also a PhD supervisor and a staff member whose role is in retention and transition across the university. The mentors all had considerable experience in academia and were particularly interested in the LTTP professional learning model.

The participants were from a range of campuses and represented various disciplines including law, health and business. They were all volunteers and did not receive any financial reward for their participation.

### Timeframe

Peer partnerships are formed for a period of 10 weeks across the academic year. The model was piloted for the first time in 2015 and was deemed successful. The program has now been accepted by the University as a professional learning model for both mentors and mentees.

### Scope: Whole of University

The scope was PhD students employed as sessional teaching staff at Victoria University.

## - Key Outcomes

### PATS variation – outputs and outcomes

The LTTP PATS variation provided the University with a mentoring framework to support PhD students as apprentice academics. The mentoring staff were able to draw on their rich knowledge and experience to mentor and scaffold PhD students through issues around assessment and feedback, particularly in relation to the development of academic writing skills and intercultural awareness. This provided an opportunity for quality improvement of the work of the apprentice academics in their assessment of students (formal and informal) as well as being able to reflect on and transfer skills and understandings to their own research-based studies.

The quality improvement element was also an outcome in regard to mentor practice as mentors reported they were able to revisit, explore and calibrate their own understandings and practices through the various LTTP interactions.

It was noted that a collegial and constructive culture developed through the process of investigating the issue of feedback and assessment resulting in an enriched practice for mentees and mentors.

The LTTP framework will now be taken up again by the University as a valuable model for engaging PhD students as apprentice academics as well as harnessing the knowledge and skills of mentors. The mentors have expressed a keen interest in participating in the role again for the next iteration.



### System level impacts

Within Victoria University, this PATS variation aimed to have impact at IMPEL levels 1, 2, 3 and 4.

1. **Team members:** collegial culture that fosters and supports professional development, engaging in scholarship, close working with colleagues with opportunities for collaborative research.
2. **Immediate students:** delivering quality, peer supported outcomes to enable achievement of learning outcomes by students.
3. **Spreading the word:** dissemination of the model at conference presentations and providing staff opportunities for professional development.
4. **Narrow opportunistic adoption:** uptake of mentoring model across the university.

### - Learning

#### 1. Barriers and opportunities

**Opportunities:** The provision for a broad range of academic staff expertise to be drawn upon to initiate a professional learning dialogue which, in turn, supports the development of key understandings and skills for PhD students as apprentice academics.

The inclusion of PhD students employed as sessional teachers who are normally marginalized from professional development due to the temporal nature of their teaching work.

Investigation of the LTTP mentoring model as one that enables quality improvement in teaching practice for all participants.

**Barriers:** The sessional nature of teaching resulted in issues associated with scheduling key activities. For example, the start of the LTTP had to be delayed until sessional staff were recruited and on staff, teaching activities did not necessarily follow a weekly sequence therefore opportunities for peer observation were not possible for some mentees.

Funding to cover time release for mentors and time commitment for the mentees was not possible due to budgeting issues. This may have impacted on numbers in the recruitment of participants for the pilot.

#### 2. What worked well

Participants were very obliging and committed to the LTTP. All participants contributed to collegial discussions and took part in a range of activities. They attended all workshops and completed tasks. Given the varied circumstances that is inherent with sessional teaching, flexibility and individualisation of outcomes was critical. These were negotiated and this in itself became a positive feature of the program itself, as acknowledged in participant feedback.

Mentors were enthusiastic about their role and provided substantive support and assistance to mentees. They also provided critical feedback to how a next iteration of the LTTP might be improved.

#### 3. What didn't work well

Time pressures resulting from a later start to the LTTP than that originally envisaged resulted from administrative lag in recruiting PhD students as sessional staff. This created a tension between ensuring the program could run with the intended number of interactions and the

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practicalities of semester breaks and then staff juggling commitments. An earlier start date might permit the possibility of peer observations of teaching.

### 4. What was learnt

The pilot provided a valuable opportunity to trial a model that was regarded by all participants as successful and valuable. The mentoring framework allowed deep professional learning that is often not available with other more customary professional learning arrangements such as workshops. The individualization that was an integral component of the model meant that each participant was able to explore issues pertinent to his/her own teaching and learning context. Further, that each participant was enriched by the learning that occurred in a type of 'partnership approach' to reflecting on practice, issues, theories and contexts.

### 5. National System Impact

- IMPEL Level 2: Changes by team members leading to changes for students who are directly influenced.
- *Contributing to* IMPEL Level 5: Systemic changes at participating institutions leading to changes for all relevant students.

