

# A tailored approach to professional development for enabling educators at UniSA College

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on a suite of innovations developed to address challenges commonly faced by casual teaching staff when transitioning from teaching in undergraduate programs to teaching in enabling education. We have witnessed how being unaware of the best practice models of teaching in enabling cohorts can disempower otherwise excellent educators unfamiliar with, or unaware of enabling pedagogies. The development and implementation of a number of professional development initiatives has produced positive outcomes for the student satisfaction of teaching as well as the confidence of the educators to engage and support students from under-represented groups.*

## Introduction

Australia has identified targets for widening educational participation and many universities have commenced delivery of pre-degree enabling programs. UniSA College (of University of South Australia) is closely aligned with Australia's widening participation targets, specifically the 2020 target that '20 per cent of undergraduate enrolments in higher education should be students from low socio-economic backgrounds' (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales 2008, p. xiv). The students who join enabling programs have often left high school early or attained limited success in their final year, so have then chosen to reengage with education through UniSA College. Our pre-degree programs also provide equity groups with a supported transition into university. Students develop academic literacies and competencies to succeed in a tertiary environment and on successful completion, earn a score for undergraduate application. Since its establishment in 2011, UniSA College has strived to provide opportunities in a responsive framework which offers a 'second chance' for those who have struggled in other educational systems.

A small team of academics at UniSA College are leading a suite of innovations to address the challenges commonly faced by sessional teaching staff when teaching into enabling programs. We identified that some sessional staff were struggling with the demands of teaching a diverse cohort of non-traditional students (see Figure 1) or approached teaching enabling students from a deficit view. While all sessional staff have experience in teaching in their undergraduate program disciplines, only a minority have experience teaching enabling students due to the low demand in this specific field until the growth of the enabling sector. The university facilitates a generic 'Tutoring at UniSA' workshop for new tutors that encourages a student-centred approach but does not cover the pedagogical tools needed to engage and support a diverse cohort attracted

<i>BIP data 2018</i>	<b>All UniSA</b>	<b>UniSA College</b>
<i>Low SES - 2017</i>	23.11%	53.25%
<i>NESB</i>	4.72%	10.70%
<i>Disability</i>	8.47%	16.35%
<i>ATSI</i>	1.28%	8.56%

Figure 1

specifically to pre-degree programs. Enabling pedagogy (Bennett et al 2016; Stokes 2014) contrasts with the ‘monological banking-style of higher education that positions the teacher as expert and the students as an empty vessel, lacking knowledge’ (Burke et al., 2016). Instead, there is an emphasis on adopting a dialogic approach to teaching sets out that the ‘teacher does not talk knowledge *at* students but talks *with* them’ (Shor, 1992). Affirmation and validity of the learner is encouraged with a strong emphasis across the curriculum about demystifying the university experience and avoiding a deficit approach, rather we look for ways to draw on the resources the students bring with them (Moll, 1992). We recognise the importance of scaffolding assessment to enable students to demonstrate skill development across the semester and that the affective elements (Ahmed, 2004; Motta & Bennett, 2018) of being a new student are often key to transition and a sense of belonging, and can be a determining factor in whether students complete the program.

Since 2011, the College teaching team has grown from 8 sessional staff to 34. We have witnessed how being unaware of best practice models of teaching in enabling cohorts can disempower otherwise excellent tutors unfamiliar with, or unaware of enabling pedagogies. Approaching teaching of enabling students with the same expectations or pedagogy found in undergraduate teaching can lead to increased attrition, reduced student satisfaction and negative experiences of higher education (Bennett et al., 2016). Significant work has been conducted more broadly on the importance of professional development of casual staff teaching in Bachelor and Post-Graduate programs (Heath, 2018; Crimmins, Oprescu & Nash, 2017). The *RED Report, Recognition - Enhancement - Development: The contribution of sessional teachers to higher education* (Percy et al., 2008) argued for attention into how professional development is delivered to sessional tutors as they found across the 16 universities in the study, only a handful had a cohesive strategy to support and train their casual staff.

Our contribution to the discussion on professional development strategies is specifically addressing the necessity to distinguish between traditional HE pedagogies and enabling pedagogies with our casual teaching staff in an enabling program. This paper will focus on how we have formalised professional development that has enhanced teaching and the student experience at UniSA College. We executed a suite of innovative tutor professional development initiatives to ensure that all sessional staff members were knowledgeable and practised in inclusive and enabling pedagogies. This paper provides an outline of these initiatives including; Specialised Enabling and Inclusive Pedagogy workshops, Teaching Squares, and extensive face-to-face training for Aboriginal Pathway Program and Regional tutors.

*In a progressively casualised academic workforce, there is a need for an approach that is both sustainable and empowering for both experienced and new academics. Key questions we pose are: what are the models of best practice for this type of professional development, and which space within the university should facilitate and deliver professional development for casual teaching staff? What gaps in knowledge and practice need to be addressed in professional development initiatives? Should mainstream HE adopt enabling teaching approaches to engage and retain an increasingly diverse student body?*

### **Innovations: Three-Steps**

Our first innovation is our leadership of Inclusive and Enabling Pedagogy Workshops, aimed to develop awareness of pedagogical approaches specific to the College. The first workshop

(Part 1) titled *'Raising Aspirations'* splits across two themes. We invited experts in each theme to share their knowledge with tutors. The first theme addresses the often complex teaching and learning needs due to the higher representation of students from equity groups and with a disability. As a current study shows, social class can influence a student's access to HE as well as the transition experience into HE once they are there (Threadgold, Burke & Bunn, 2018). With over 50% of the College cohort from low-SES backgrounds (See Fig. 1), the workshop delivered on the importance of incorporating inclusive and critical pedagogies. With double the university average of the cohort identifying as having a disability (See Fig. 1) we observed the need for a specific session on supporting these students delivered by Access and Inclusion Services: *"A crucial element of this initiative is that the support is now being offered more broadly. Previously it has targeted the Course Coordinators, now there is a focus on all members of the teaching team to be included"*. The second theme invites tutors to consider their role in contributing to the student's aspirations and engaging the students in learning. The theme of engaging students in the teaching space continues with a session on building relationships. 100% of staff surveyed rated the tutor training workshop as 'very useful' for their role (Survey Monkey 2017).

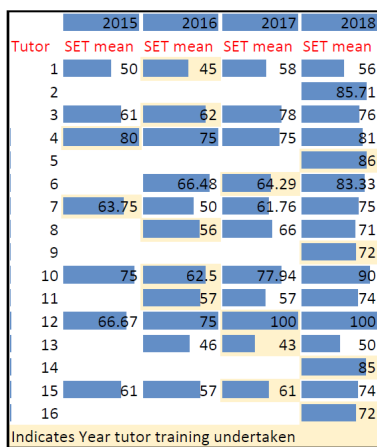
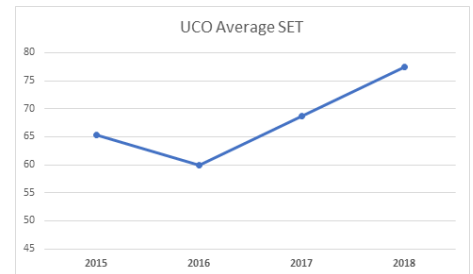
The second workshop (Part 2) titled *'Belonging, Effective Learning and Managing Students-at-risk'* features three sessions tailored to tutor feedback about their professional development needs. The first session explores the assumptions educators may hold about students' capabilities that can negatively influence the student experience. This specific session counters deficit views that may exist amongst the sessional staff teaching team in relation to socio-economic status, ethnicity or cultural background or prior education attainment. The second session was designed in response to survey feedback which challenged tutors to deliver best practice to encourage deep learning and engagement. While the increase in need for mental health support is prevalent across the university, as a team we observed a great need for explicit support in this area. A third session worked to empower tutors to manage complex behaviours.

Evaluation of the workshops from mid-term teaching survey tool demonstrated exceptionally positive influence on the student experience. From 631 EFTSL enrolled across programs we received 353 student responses. Mid-term student satisfaction of teaching from this instrument recorded 71.43% as the lowest and 100% highest rates respectively (Survey Monkey 2017). Some qualitative responses to the question: 'What are the strengths of the tutor?' include *'Very accommodating to my disabilities'*, *'Provides active teaching, resulting in better learning and study.'* This satisfaction has been echoed in Sessional staff feedback about the impact these initiatives have on teaching: *'One of the most important learnings from the workshop was a better understanding of the characteristics of the student cohort, especially their demographic backgrounds, previous educational experiences and mental health/learning challenges. The workshops have helped me challenge my own assumptions of what defines a capable student'* – *Sessional Tutor, HH.*

Our second innovation to enhance teaching and improve the student experience is our implementation of Teaching Squares across the College. Teaching squares provide the opportunity to build confidence and capacity of tutors and a way to stimulate reflection rather than evaluation. This has been keenly implemented across five courses, with all participating over the past two years reporting positive tutor feedback: *'By seeing what works in other classes, I can also see my own teaching through the eyes of my colleagues, and make tweaks to improve on my teaching methods. It has definitely been a useful professional development*

activity.’ – VF, Tutor. Teaching Squares has fostered collegiality and reflective practice across the tutors. ‘A second visit too could provide more insight into individual’s teaching practice and how it adapts to smaller cohorts and different class dynamics as students and tutors have learnt to break down initial barriers.’ –Sessional Tutor FH.

Our third innovation has been leadership of regular regional tutor professional development. Since 2015, regional Aboriginal Pathway Program (APP) tutors have travelled to Adelaide every six weeks to further their professional development. We have collaboratively provided moderation and grading guidelines, discipline specific content, and shared enabling pedagogy, alongside hosting collaborations with Wirringka staff to expand cultural awareness and build relationships across our teams. This aligns with Both Ways pedagogy (Ober & Bat, 2007) which underpins the APP. Professional development for this team has also



**Figure 3: BIP Data 2018**

spanned across the university, including 100% completion of advanced Cultural Awareness Training. These efforts have translated into outcomes for students, with over 95% ‘Strongly agree’ to statements ‘My teachers treat me with respect, explain things clearly and are always happy to talk with me about course work’ (APP evaluation, 2017). In 2017 we expanded this to lead a three day tutor training for all twelve regional UniSA College teaching staff. Alongside the ‘Raising Aspirations’ session, tutors learned how to embed online and classroom wellbeing modules’ developed as part of a National Priorities Pool (NPP) Grant to ‘Promote Regional Student Success and Wellbeing’.

**Figure 2: Average Student Evaluation of Teaching**

The most significant evidence for the impact of our professional development innovations is the increase in student satisfaction data of all staff. This highlights the steady improvement of all staff as they have been involved in these innovations. Overall teacher satisfaction has increased from 84% in 2015 to 87% in 2017 (BIP, 2018). Evidence for improved Student Evaluations of sessional staff who have completed professional development is featured in Figure 2, showing individual tutor student satisfaction as a positive upward trend for twelve of the sessional staff that have participated in the tutor training program over the last three years. There was an outstandingly positive outcome for four new tutors who also participated with 85.71, 85.71, 72 and 85 respectively for 2018. This demonstrates that teacher satisfaction has improved or been of an exceptional standard for 16 of our sessional staff. With 27 participating in our professional development program over the last three years, this shows improvement in teaching practice and increased satisfaction of students for 59% of our sessional staff members (See Figure 3, BIP data 2018).

We sought to benchmark our resources and approach to the tutor professional development program by inviting their review by widening participation and enabling education scholar Professor Penny Jane Burke: *The excellent leadership demonstrated through this program in engaging with research to develop deep professional understanding about complex issues of equity, inclusion and belonging is very impressive. The team have translated the research insights into accessible, clear and supportive material that academics can then draw on to deepen their enabling*

*pedagogy and to develop students' capability and sense of belonging.* (Professor Penny Jane Burke, Global Innovation Chair of Equity Director, Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE), University of Newcastle).

## Conclusion

While the enabling education space has witnessed rapid growth over the last ten years (especially in South Australia), the development and identification of teaching approaches that produce positive outcomes and translate into widening participation to tertiary education for under-represented groups has been slower. The initiatives explained here aim to address this problem through the investment in professional development of casual teaching staff within our school. In the short and long term, these initiatives aim to improve retention, student satisfaction and engagement and the confidence and satisfaction of our teaching staff as well.

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