

# **Action Learning as an Approach to Staff Development in Tertiary Education**

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes a scheme to encourage staff development in tertiary education using an action-learning approach. The requirements of formal qualifications for tertiary teachers in Australia and Britain are described, and with a brief description of action learning and action research, action learning is contrasted with formal qualifications in a scheme for staff development. The paper details how the provision of small strategic grants and project management support has enabled a series of action learning projects to be undertaken to improve teaching and learning at RMIT University. The strategic features of the scheme's design and implementation are outlined and the impact of these factors on students and staff is discussed, together with the benefits for the organisation. The outcomes of a number of projects are described, as well as the pit-falls to avoid for those seeking to implement a similar approach.

## **Introduction**

The case for action learning is a strong for staff development in the tertiary education sector (Kember 2000; Tjabane 2003; Zuber-Skerritt 2003: 360). Currently there is a strong focus on formal teaching and learning qualifications for staff in tertiary education. As a way of facilitating continuing teaching development, the Office of Program Quality in the Faculty of Life Sciences at RMIT University has chosen to encourage action-learning projects contextualised in the quality improvement of degree programs, as an alternative to promoting the acquisition or refreshing of formal tertiary teaching and learning qualifications. While such projects could be used as credit towards formal studies, the projects are also grounded in experiential learning and linked to tangible outcomes for staff in their daily practice.

## **Formal Qualifications and Action Learning**

Currently there is a trend in the international English-speaking tertiary sector towards formal qualifications for teaching staff. For example, the Department for Education and Skills in Britain announced this year that a new teaching quality academy will be established to determine professional standards for tertiary educators. By 2006 all new teaching staff in universities will be required to obtain a teaching qualification to meet those standards (DES 2003: 54).

While some, such as Dr Erica Smith of Charles Sturt University, argue that Australia should also adopt a standardised qualification for tertiary educators (Cook 2003: 4), this has not yet happened in higher education. However, a growing number of universities offer a teaching qualification for tertiary educators. Some examples are in the table below.

**Table 1. Examples of Formal Qualifications for Tertiary Educators in Australia**

Qualification & Institution	Details	Notes
Graduate Certificate in Higher Education – Monash University	Equivalent to one semester full time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It is intended primarily for staff who are beginning their academic teaching careers. However, experienced staff may also find it useful and are encouraged to apply.”</li> <li>• Fees for tuition and amenities waved for qualifying Monash staff.</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www.celts.monash.edu.au/html/gche.html">http://www.celts.monash.edu.au/html/gche.html</a></p>
Graduate Certificate in Higher Education – Griffith University	1 year part-time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fee-paying</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://www14.gu.edu.au/cis/p_cat/admission.asp?ProgCode=3044">http://www14.gu.edu.au/cis/p_cat/admission.asp?ProgCode=3044</a></p>
Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education – Flinders University	Consisting of two subjects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fee-paying</li> </ul> <p><a href="http://wwwed.sturt.flinders.edu.au/edweb/programs/pgtert.htm">http://wwwed.sturt.flinders.edu.au/edweb/programs/pgtert.htm</a></p>

RMIT University is a dual-sector institution that provides both TAFE and higher education programs. Contrasting higher education, in TAFE the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) requires all staff who teach in nationally accredited vocational education and training programs to hold a Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment or equivalent. This applies to those teaching in TAFE institutions and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). (See ANTA (2001) Standard 7.) In this way, the requirements for formal qualifications for teaching staff differ in TAFE and higher education.

While formal qualifications offer a structured approach to staff development, there are a number of limitations to the formal qualifications model. First, staff who already possess an equivalent qualification are unlikely to use this form of staff development, therefore it does not address the development needs of established teaching staff. Second, formal qualifications require involvement with an organisation that can confer the qualification, while action learning can be conducted within any organisation. Third, action learning ensures that the activity is directly linked to professional practice by focusing on real-life experiences in the workplace. Fourth, with a number of the formal qualifications in Australia offered on a fee-paying basis, action learning represents a cost effective form of staff development.

### **What is action learning?**

Action learning can be described in a number of ways, but generally it is a type of learning-through-doing that involves participants in reflecting on their experience. The terms “action learning” and “action research” are frequently used interchangeably. Both approaches have been widely adopted and documented in various sectors such as business (Parkes 1998; Koo

1999), nursing (Rayner, Chisholm & Appleby 2002) and education (Carr & Kemmis 1986). Action learning and action research share characteristics in common:

- The project examines a real problem in real time that will not lead to one “right” answer (Smith & O’Neil 2003: 64).
- The project focuses on a problem that is directly related to the reality of the participants’ workplace (Smith & O’Neil 2003: 64).
- The project moves through a “spiral of cycles” with stages such as *plan, act, observe* and *reflect* leading to on-going cycles of learning and action (Carr & Kemmis 1986: 66).
- The project is participative (McNiff and Whitehead 2000: 203).
- The project invites participants to engage in self-examination as part of their learning (McNiff and Whitehead 2000: 203).
- The project is usually conducted by a team, sometimes referred to as a ‘set’ (McGill and Beaty 2001).

Zuber-Skerritt (2003) argues that action research has grown out of the social sciences and is located in a paradigm that is phenomenological, interpretive and often draws on qualitative data, and contrasts this with the natural science model, which tends to be positivist, normative and is more likely to use quantitative data. In essence, action learning and action research seek to develop a specific solution to a complex, real-life situations, while research in the positivist framework aims to develop generalisable solutions. Each is useful in different contexts.

While it is not within the scope of this paper to provide a detailed introduction to action learning or action research, the literature in this area is extensive. See, for example, Kember (2000), McNiff and Whitehead (2000) and Weinstein (1999).

### **Staff Development and Action Learning in the Faculty of Life Sciences, RMIT**

The Office of Program Quality (OPQ) coordinates and manages a range of initiatives that are designed to advance teaching and learning in the Faculty of Life Sciences through the implementation of RMIT University's Teaching & Learning Strategy.

OPQ fosters innovation and promotes excellence in teaching and learning in the Life Sciences by planning, coordinating and supporting:

- The development, amendment and renewal of education and training programs in the Life Sciences in line with University, national and international criteria to ensure programs that are sustainable, competitive and flexible in meeting stakeholder needs
- Program quality assurance processes that develop continuous improvement in education and training programs
- The enhancement of academic and teaching staff capabilities to facilitate learning in the Life Sciences in an internationalised knowledge economy
- The scholarship of teaching and learning

OPQ pursues these goals through a number of initiatives including a staff development activity called Strategic Initiative Projects that employs action learning.

### **Strategic Initiative Projects (SIPs)**

In 2002, complimenting a “compliance” model of program improvements required by changes in University teaching and learning strategies and policies, the Office of Program Quality introduced Strategic Initiative Projects (SIPs), which provided action-learning grants in teaching and learning. SIPs were based on an approach developed by Alex Radloff and

Barbara de la Harpe at the Centre for Educational Advancement, Curtin University (Radloff and de la Harpe & Wright: 2000a and 2000b).

Participation in SIPs requires staff to reflect on their teaching and learning practices, devise ways to improve their methods, and disseminate their findings in a scholarly manner. In this way staff are able to build their research profile while achieving program enhancement in line with the organisation's strategic teaching and learning goals.

### **Building a Strategic Focus**

Project planning began with OPQ drafting guidelines and application procedures. At this stage the strategic aims for SIPs were clarified and embedded into the project's framework by using them to develop the selection criteria.

The kinds of questions considered in drafting the guidelines were:

- As life-long learning and the expansion of tertiary education both locally and internationally lead to more diverse students and increasingly varied modes of delivery, how can we adapt and improve the ways in which we assess students to support their learning?
- Since a number of the programs that we offer are related and include areas of knowledge and expertise that overlap, how can we foster the use of shareable course-ware, or a modular approach to teaching?
- RMIT University has a number of initiatives at TAFE and higher education level to ensure that program leaders work with the industries and professions to develop curriculum that prepares graduates for the work place. How can we do more to strengthen our connections with industries and professions?
- In the context of rapidly evolving information and communication technologies, how can we use them to support good teaching and learning in innovative ways?

While these are some of the issues that tertiary sector is currently engaging with, an organisation in a different sector could explore other issues using a similar approach.

Once these strategic areas were identified, selection criteria for SIPs' funding required applicants to address at least one of the strategic areas in their application. The SIPs application explained:

Priorities for support during 2003 are projects that contribute to one or more of:

- improving practices of assessing student learning
- developing a modular approach to teaching
- strengthening program partnerships with external organisations
- innovating with teaching and learning technologies

(RMIT, 2003)

In addition there were further strategic aims that each SIPs project should:

- Provide outcomes that benefit more than one award program.
- Develop graduate capabilities – in line with a strategic move to a graduate capabilities curriculum across the University.
- Build staff capability and research profiles by requiring participants to present at an internal Teaching and Learning Forum, and to also disseminate their findings outside the University at a conference or in an academic journal.

The SIPs application stated that each of the following criteria had to be met:

1. Improving program quality in more than one RMIT award program

Projects will evidence improvements in terms of one or more PQA criteria, i.e. the strategic and business case for the programs, educational design of the programs, program provisions for access and equity; educational resources for the programs; aspects of programs' routine operation.

2. Developing graduate capabilities of students through changed teaching practices

Project participants will contribute to the Graduate Capabilities in the Life Sciences research project, in a format negotiated with GC project coordinator Robyn Lines. For example concepts or examples of how the project helps to develop specific graduate capabilities in the programs concerned may be documented in a short report for inclusion in program logs and for reference in 2003 program annual reports

3. Disseminating advances in teaching and learning in the life sciences

Participants will make a formal presentation to the Faculty in a forum or seminar at the conclusion of the project. In addition, participants must formally report in an appropriate forum outside RMIT, for example a conference publication, an industry review submission, an award or external grants scheme application.

(RMIT, 2003)

“Improving program quality in more than one RMIT award program” can be done by applying strategic thinking to the way that the project is documented. For example, one of the SIPs in 2003 involves a staff member learning how to design, moderate and assess an on-line discussion group. To ensure that this project is able to benefit other award programs, the staff member is developing a guide for staff who are new to e-moderation. It will include tips for areas such as designing the course and coping with technical problems.

Additional features that make the SIPs scheme strategic are drawn from the work of Radloff, de la Harpe and Wright (2000a: 5-6). The scheme involves:

- An educational underpinning
- Support staff with appropriate backgrounds and experience in education
- Funding for projects
- Support from management
- A focus on curriculum change
- Professional development that is integrated and on-going
- Project that relate to participants' real-life teaching experiences
- Projects that are educationally sound and aligned with organisational strategic direction
- An environment of high challenge and high support to promote effective learning
- Reflection and dissemination

While these strategic elements are appropriate for a tertiary institution, again they can be adapted to suit other organisations with a different strategic direction and core business.

## **Implementing SIPs**

“A number of Faculty grants of \$1000 - \$8000 will be made available to support action learning projects that foster graduate capabilities through improvements in student learning experiences and teaching methods.” (RMIT, 2003)

After drafting the guidelines and application procedure, an application pro-forma was developed. Expressions of interest were invited through promoting SIPs by email, flyers and the Office of Program Quality web site.

In 2002, seven proposals were received and after a thorough process of consideration by the Selection Panel, all seven projects were accepted – conditional on alterations or clarifications to the proposal as required. In 2002, SIPs were supported by one project officer who helped applicants modify their proposals. All were granted funding after review. In this way, seven semester-long projects were conducted that involved undergraduate, postgraduate and TAFE programs across disciplines including nursing, complementary medicine and medical science.

The project participants committed to attend one OPQ-facilitated workshop at which they discussed their experiences, reflections and resources. They also prepared a final report for publication on the Faculty intranet and presented a paper at a Faculty Teaching and Learning Forum, which was open to all University staff.

Part of the feedback received from SIPs participants in 2002 was that the projects were given insufficient time. As one participant recommended: “Start earlier. My only reservation about the SIP grant process was that it was a little rushed. A year long project may have been better.” In response to this feedback, in 2003 the SIPs application process began in February and projects were accepted in early April. Following refinements of the grant process, applications for SIPs increased to 15 in 2003. Of those, six were approved.

Another change was the involvement of two project officers in 2003. Each was employed in the Faculty full-time and held responsibilities outside SIPs. One project officer was responsible for administrative issues, including the application process, employment paperwork and facilities for the Teaching and Learning Forum. In addition, each project officer worked in a supporting role with three of the SIPs projects. In this year, one project officer possessed expertise in the evaluation of education programs, while the other held a background in educational research and project management.

The ability to assist with evaluation in both years was particularly valuable. In 2002, the project officer noted: “I spent most of my time advising how to conduct the various project evaluations: the ‘observation’ component of the action research cycle (plan, act, observe, reflect).” In 2003 all participants worked with a project officer to refine their approach to evaluation. This is a common experience. Kember (2000: 38) reflected that during a large scale Action Research Project, “the support team spent more time, by far, advising on observation than the other three phases put together”. In addition, Kember noted that participants valued help with evaluation. When asked to rank the help received from support staff in order of importance, participants responded (Kember 2000: 153-154):

1. Opportunities to network and disseminate findings
2. Advice on project evaluation
3. Assistance with research methodology

The importance of advice and assistance with project evaluation and research methodology shows how valuable it is for support staff to possess these capabilities.

### **Support Staff as Critical Friends**

A body of literature has developed to examine the relationship between the staff supporting an action-learning project and the participants. Kember (2000: 155) details the potential difficulties in this relationship that include:

- Imbalance in the power or authority in the relationship
- Support staff undermining the strengths of participation and ownership by exerting too much direction
- Participants possessing a limited ability to learn and develop

Within the context of SIPs, all of these issues were foreseen and considered by the project officers.

Stenhouse (1975) noted in Kember (2000: 155) offers an alternative model for the role of support staff by introducing the idea of the 'critical friend'. In this model the supporting staff member becomes more like a collaborator. This can lead to many facets in the role, as Kember documents (2000: 155-168), describing the critical friend as a:

- grant-awarding liaison
- project design consultant
- sounding board
- teaching consultant
- evaluation and research adviser
- resource provider
- matchmaker
- writing consultant
- deadline enforcer

Within the SIPs, the project officers, or critical friends, took on all these roles at one time or another. In addition, the SIPs experience and set-up led to roles such as the critical friend as:

- mentor
- project manager
- focus group facilitator
- advocate

Many of these roles were fluid and varied between project teams depending on their needs and the level of involvement they sought from the project officers. For example, SIPs participants required various levels of support in their research methodology depending on their background. Some participants were established academics with PhDs and considerable experience conducting research that was funded by external grants. Others were at the start of their academic careers and became involved in SIPs specifically to gain more research experience. Still others were confident about research in their academic discipline, but were conducting research into teaching and learning for the first time through SIPs.

One of the roles that the project officers promoted was the role of project manager. SIPs participants rated project management as an important contribution from the project officers, stating:

- “[The Project Officer] did a great job... it is essential to have someone around to keep things moving.”
- “[The Project Officer] or equivalent as a project manager is v. useful.”

When this current round of the SIPs scheme is complete, OPQ will seek more feedback from SIPs participants on the importance of collaboration with project officers.

### **Some Project Outcomes**

SIPs projects lead to outcomes such as presenting at the Teaching and Learning Forum, and presenting at conferences external to the University. All seven SIPs projects from 2002 presented at a Teaching and Learning Forum, which was open to all staff. (A similar Forum will be held for 2003 SIPs.) The Forum allowed SIPs participants to publically present their projects and findings illustrated by a PowerPoint presentation. The Forum also provided an opportunity for participants to gain feedback by receiving comments and questions from the audience, which in turn could be used to refine future presentations. SIPs participants also went on to present at international conferences in fields such as nursing, education and complementary medicine.

In addition to presentations, SIPs participants produced a formal report, which was published on the University intranet to be available to other staff. Participants also produce materials to support their teaching practice, including a self-assessment tool for students, an educative web-portal, interactive electronic learning aids, and re-usable learning objects.

### **Benefits for the Organisation, Staff and Students**

The SIPs scheme creates numerous benefits for the organisation, including raising the profile of teaching and learning, encouraging and rewarding engagement with teaching practice, building staff capability, and focusing participants' activity on strategic outcomes.

SIPs work to raise the profile and status of core activities of the University: teaching and learning. This occurs through running the SIPs scheme and promoting SIPs when projects are funded and again when participants report in the Teaching and Learning Forum.

SIPs also encourage engagement with teaching practice. In higher education, teaching staff often straddle at least two discipline areas in their professional practice: the area they teach in, and education. For many staff members, SIPs provided the opportunity to develop their engagement with, and understanding of, teaching and learning. As project leaders stated:

- “The project nurtured my emerging interests in the scholarship of teaching and learning and the paper from the project will be the first I have written away from my discipline area.”
- “The SIP project involvement has provided an opportunity to expand my ‘serious’ reflection about teaching and learning...”

In addition, the SIPs program is a way to reward staff for engaging with, and researching into, their teaching practice by providing funding, public acknowledgment and a forum for their research.

SIPs provide a framework for staff to strengthen their professional capabilities. In the area of evaluation, SIPs motivated participants to make contact with support staff who possess expertise in evaluation. Participants in each of the projects worked with support staff to develop evaluative tools such as surveys, focus group questions, and pre- and post-tests. SIPs also strengthened participants' academic capabilities in educational research. In some cases, support staff assisted participants to gain capability in areas such as drafting a project plan, literature search and methodology. Some participants were introduced to the concept of a reflective journal for the first time. Participants were also assisted with academic writing, such as producing an abstract, journal article and following academic conventions.

Finally, SIPs benefit the organisation by requiring participants to develop projects that are in line with strategic directions. This was achieved by developing application guidelines and criteria that are in line with the University's strategic direction and policies.

In terms of benefits for staff, those who participate in SIPs benefit from the funding and support to improve their professional practice, and to strengthen their research profile by disseminating findings within and beyond the University. Staff also benefit from the opportunity to strengthen their professional capability in areas such as action research, evaluation and academic writing.

Students in programs connected to SIPs benefit from the innovative teaching practices. Students also gain from the tangible outcomes of SIPs, which have included new materials such as a self-evaluation tool, an educative web portal and re-useable learning objects. For some students, SIPs has created opportunities to be involved in research. Some projects employed students as research assistants to perform literature searches. In another project, where participants taught postgraduate coursework students, the students gained understanding of research by shadowing and assisting with the project for credit.

### **Continuing the Improvement Cycle for Implementing SIPs**

The Office of Program Quality works towards continuous improvement in the implementation of SIPs. At the time of writing a systematic evaluation of the SIPs program is being conducted. While it is too early to report on that evaluation, it is anticipated that the findings will feed into staff development activities in the Faculty of Life Sciences and related areas.

### **Pit-falls to Avoid**

There are a number of pit-falls to avoid in implementing a scheme like SIPs. These can be categorised into issues relating to communication, timing, methodology and implementation.

SIPs faced a number of communication challenges. The project officers' roles as "critical friends" in the context of action learning were not always sufficiently explained, which created the potential for misunderstandings. This was particularly true for participants who assumed the SIPs scheme operated as other grants schemes: outside the paradigm of action learning. This could be addressed by communicating the project officers' roles in terms of action learning more clearly in documentation and other contact. In the scheme described by Radloff, de la Harpe and Wright (2000), support staff held an information session before staff submitted expressions of interest. This is an approach that could clarify the aims of the scheme and the role of support staff.

As mentioned earlier, timing was also an issue for the implementation of the SIPs scheme. While the SIPs in 2002 ran for a university semester, after receiving feedback from participants, this was extended to seven months in 2003. Specific projects also faced timing challenges. While it seems obvious, participants were limited to gathering data from students when they were timetabled to be on campus. Exams and peak assessment times also needed to be avoided. This created challenges for participants who were juggling teaching responsibilities and SIPs, and required effective planning.

Certain pit-falls have the potential to de-rail a SIP, resulting in a project not being completed. This potential seems to lie most heavily in the areas of methodology and implementation. In

terms of methodology, participants need to be supported in their understanding of action research. Support staff also need to work with participants on their methodology to avoid projects where the scope is too ambitious or beyond participants' capabilities. Participants' time commitment to the project must be realistic and manageable. It is not unusual for parts of a project to take longer than they anticipated. At RMIT, participants can negotiate their time commitment with their manager using the work-plan process. Some participants also chose to solve difficulties with time commitment by redistributing their budget to hire in a research assistant.

While some pit-falls – like communication and timing issues – can be avoided by careful planning and documentation, other issues relating to methodology and implementation are part of the learning experience that makes up action learning. Support staff can be genuinely collaborative by being on hand to support participants in the learning they require, and by being reflectively engaged in their role as critical friends.

### **Conclusion**

Action learning, contextualised in the quality improvement of degree programs, represents a practical alternative in staff development to formal qualifications in tertiary teaching and learning through a generic program of study. While it would be inaccurate to suggest that formal qualifications and an action-learning project offer identical learning experiences, there are strengths in the differences. The devolved nature of action learning enables participants to take responsibility for and own their learning experience and outcomes. Action learning also ensures that the project is based in participants' real-life experiences in the work place. In addition, the cyclical nature of action learning allows a project to evolve the direction most suitable for the participant's project.

Issues to consider when implementing an action-learning scheme like SIPs include the guidelines and criteria that lead to strategic outcomes; planning and preparation that avoid pit-falls in communication, timing and implementation; and the potential role of support staff.

Elements that contributed to the success of the SIPs scheme were its structure, the capabilities of project officers, and their contributions coordinating the program and working with participants. In addition, SIPs benefited from strong support from management. Finally, SIPs were successful because of the on-going hard work and good will of participants, and their commitment to their students.

### **Acknowledgements**

Table 2. Strategic Initiative Projects 2002

	<b>Project Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>
1	Who Assesses Who?: A Clinical Tool for Maternal and Child Health Nursing Students to Self-Assess their Clinical Experience Practice	Carol Jackson
2	Evaluation of Effective Use of E-Communication in Postgraduate Nursing Programs	Lina Shahwan-Akl and Aruna Akkireddi
3	Development of E-Portfolios in the Faculty of Life Sciences	Viviene Temple and Garry Allan
4	EnactEd: Innovating with Teaching and Learning Technologies to Improve Student Learning Experiences and Teaching Methods	Richard Guy, Judith Lyons, John Milton and Peter Rich
5	Enrichment of Web Portal for Chinese Medicine Education	Charlie Xue, Angela Yang, Chun Guang Li and Garry Allan

6	Involving People Honours Them: An Action Learning Project to Investigate Issues Impacting TAFE Staff and Student Capability Building Using IP Videoconferencing to Facilitate Communities of Learning Practice	Louise Palmer
7	Medical Science Honours Students' On-line Presentation and Discussion Environment	Emilio Badoer, Carolyn Rickards and Garry Allan

Table 3. Strategic Initiative Projects 2003

	<b>Project Title</b>	<b>Participants</b>
1	The Creation of Renewable Learning Objects in Microbiology	Danilla Grando and Marion Easton
2	Evaluating Student Learning when using Enact Ed	Richard Guy, Judith Lyons and Peter Rich
3	Integration: Developing Graduate Capabilities through Changed Teaching Practices	Narelle Hyde and Sarah-Jane Martorella
4	The Use of A-Synchronous E-Communication in Journal Club	Zhen Zheng and Wei Hong Yang
5	Strengthening Program Partnerships with External Organisations: Assessing needs of Primary School Teachers in the Implementation of Health Related Initiatives in the City of Whittlesea	Lina Shahwan-Akl and Arnuna Akkireddi
6	Building Learning Communities and Embedding Graduate Capabilities in Communication, Leadership and Team Work	Marian Dobos and Ralph Green

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