ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Navigating the complex terrain of online professional learning for academic staff: The role of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

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Professional learning plays an important role in improving teaching skills of university academics. Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is a central framework as well as methodology for designing and delivering professional learning. As of 2022, 39% of Australian universities offer a graduate certificate in learning and teaching (GCLT) or similar to upskill academics. These courses are either fully or partially online; and nearly all include a dedicated SoTL unit or draw on SoTL generally across its content. Little is known about how GCLTs and similar courses affect teaching practice and long-term professional growth of academic staff, calling for a deeper exploration of SoTL-informed professional learning on academics' skills and careers. This study offers an evidence-based perspective through the exploration of academic experiences in a SoTL-focused unit within a fully online GCLT in a mid-range Australian university. A survey of the unit's first three graduating cohorts (2015-2017), attracted 30 respondents (56% of invitees), generating new insights into how professional learners navigate online, self-regulated, asynchronous learning spaces and how this learning affects their teaching and careers. Findings speak to learner motivation, impact and general effectiveness of online professional learning.

Keywords: Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, professional learning, online learning, impact

Introduction

What can be learned from evaluating a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) unit within a Graduate Certificate of Learning and Teaching (GCLT) designed to upskill academic workforce? Given the unit's focus is on understanding and evaluating the impact of teaching, it is salient to explore how academics are affected by their experiences as learners, in what ways, and whether the impact is meaningful to their careers.

As of 2022, 36% of Australian universities offered a GCLT or similar to upskill academic workforce (Pechenkina, in prep). A small number of these courses are exclusive to the university's own staff, but most are open to external participants, attracting diverse internal and external, as well as international, cohorts. Nearly all these courses include either a dedicated SoTL unit or draw on SoTL frameworks and tenets more generally. This signifies the recognised importance of SoTL in upskilling academic staff and fostering scholarly teaching excellence. However, evidence of effectiveness and impact of such professional learning in regard to improving teaching practices and advancing academic careers remains limited (Jones et al., 2017).

This study answers the call for evidence of professional learning's impact on the practice and careers of academics by offering empirical insights into how academics experience professional learning in online, self-regulated, asynchronous learning spaces. This research is timely as most GCLTs are fully or partially online, and how these courses are designed and delivered plays an important role in engaging their unique learners. The study evaluates the impact of online professional learning on academics' teaching practice and career progression, focusing on a SoTL unit within a fully online GCLT in a mid-range, dual-sector Australian university. The findings offer new knowledge on professional learner motivation, learning design, peer learning and other key factors of effective online professional learning.

Literature review

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Professional learning is a holistic, ongoing process, aligned with the ideas of lifelong learning and self-improvement (Scherf, 2018). It differs from professional development, which can be seen as standalone offerings, workshops or seminars, designed to upskill staff in specific skills and tasks, such as mastering a piece of technology or learning how to create a rubric. Professional development is pragmatic and gravitates toward one-size-fits-all approaches. Professional learning is agentic and imbued with transformative power (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2009). The collegial and networked nature of professional learning is also acknowledged (Oddone, 2022; Trust et al., 2017). Reflective teaching, practitioner inquiry and communities of practice are also key elements of professional learning. But how can the impact of professional learning be evaluated? Peer reviewed, evidence-based studies on the topic remain scarce.

The state of Professional Learning in Higher Education

The importance of professional learning in creating and sustaining a thriving, highly skilled and motivated academic workforce is generally not questioned. Scholars researching in this field argue that both the knowledge of teaching techniques as well as self-belief of one's own ability to teach are key to successful teaching practice (Fabriz et al. 2021; Harrison et al., 2022). Programs aimed at improving teaching skills are common in universities (Ilie et al., 2020), and historically there has been a global focus on the quality of teaching and the ways teaching can be improved and its quality sustained. In professional learning, a particular emphasis is made on enhancing academics' knowledge of teaching techniques as well as methods of introducing mindful innovations into their teaching practice (Bélisle et al., 2024; Gibbs, 2013).

Evaluations of professional learning's impact on academics' skills and careers have been limited (Chalmers & Gardiner, 2015; Jones et al., 2017; Winter et al., 2017). Among the challenges of such research is the difficulty of defining the very nature of effectiveness (Winter et al., 2017), which can range from academics' perceived satisfaction to their self-efficacy, to the performance of their students. Methods of measuring the effectiveness of professional learning have also been the subject of debate. The matter is further complicated by other factors, from educator's personal characteristics (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010; Hattie, 2015) to their self-efficacy, self-concept and subjective attitudes to teaching (De Rijdt et al., 2013).

Studies of impact of GCLTs offer some evidence of professional learning's effectiveness. Ginns et al. (2008) found that upon the completion of such a course, academic staff had fostered "a shift in self-reported experiences of teaching, from less to more complex" (p. 180), while also reporting "a more complex understanding of the scholarship of teaching" (p. 181), which they have attribute to completing the course. Professional learning has also been linked to higher standards of teaching skills as well as conceptual and attitudinal changes among university staff (Stensaker et al., 2017; Van Dijk et al., 2020).

What constitutes impact and how to evaluate it? Impact is complex, multi-faceted, and imbued with various meanings (Jones et al., 2017). Professional learning courses like GCLTs involve a range of stakeholders in addition to its primary target groups of learners (e.g., established and emerging educators). Hence, the types of impact these courses produce differ between stakeholder groups. Depending on local contexts in which these courses operate, their aims and objectives are contextualised as well.

Different levels of impact should be considered when evaluating professional learning's effectiveness. Drawing on Simmons (2016), the author's own work (Pechenkina, 2020) builds on the micro-meso-macro-mega framework of impact and offers a rubric collating various types of evidence of impact. For example, improved teaching is listed among the types of impact harnessed by the act of evaluating one's teaching. It also offers metrics by which to judge whether various levels of impact (from local/classroom to global) have been reached (e.g., transformed academic identity, enhanced reflective practice, interdisciplinary exchange, etc.). Applied to understanding the impact of GCLTs and similar on academic staff, the rubric offers a number of evaluation approaches, from measuring the impact on the personal level to the external dimension of career progression.

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Higher Education's (HE) post-pandemic terrain is a new frontier for professional learning. The role universities play in society is less certain, with institutional identities and processes affected by geopolitical, local and global challenges. With universities today more than ever competing for students, income and resources, it is not just their reputation on the line, but their very survival. Academics who embody teaching excellence play a crucial role in shaping student experiences, attracting positive student evaluations, which in turn help improve and maintain the University's public standing. Professional learning for academics is a critical dimension of this equation. It is timely to explore the long-term effects of professional learning on academic staff and draw meaningful conclusions of how to design and deliver effective professional learning into the future.

The Study

Context, rationale and research questions

The unit at the centre of this study has been taught since 2015 as an elective within GCLT(HE), an award-winning postgraduate course offered primarily to academic staff at a mid-range, dual-sector Australian university. This fully online course is free to eligible staff, with tuition waved through faculty agreements. External domestic and international students can also enrol in this course, either on an individual or institutional basis. The course is aimed at those currently teaching or planning to teach in the future, seeking to improve their teaching skills, further their pedagogical knowledge, and expand their horizons by learning about frameworks and theories behind the teaching methods they might already be using.

The unit is dedicated to SoTL and scholarly teaching, focusing on the tenets and methodologies of evaluating one's teaching in order to improve student learning, while developing a portfolio of artefacts to support academic promotion and other outcomes. Over the years, the unit's cohorts have created a variety of artefacts, from grant applications to teaching citations, to research designs aimed to explore the experiences of their students. However, the unit's impact on its graduates has never been studied, until now. This study is guided by the following questions: 1). Can SoTL-focused units achieve meaningful impact on academics' teaching skills and careers?; 2). What shapes does 'impact' take?, and 3). What can we learn from studying this impact in regard to the design and delivery of fully online professional learning?

Methodology and method

Guided by the tenets of SoTL evaluation and evidence-based scholarly teaching, this study is a practitioner-inquiry into teaching practice, seeking a better understanding of graduates' trajectories in relation to academic careers. An online survey was chosen as the method of research due to its practicality and convenience, given limited time and resources of the researcher and participants. Informed by the existing literature dedicated to professional learning for the academic workforce, the survey comprised four sections—demographics, learner motivation, learner experiences, and lastly, the impact of the unit on learners' teaching practice and career.

Participants

After securing an institutional ethics clearance (reference number R/2017/319), graduates from the 2015-2017 unit cohorts were invited to participate in a survey designed to understand their experiences in the unit as well as their teaching and career trajectories post-completion. The survey was administered online in 2018 to 57 graduates, with 30 responses (56%). However, one response was incomplete, the respondent skipping the demographics section but replying to most other questions (the latter responses were included in the analysis). The respondents were evenly spread between the cohorts: 2015 (n=8), 2016 (n=9) and 2017 (n=12), where the year refers to their completion of the unit, not GCLT as a whole. Gender-wise, 13 respondents identified as female, 15 as male, and 1 as non-binary. In regards to disciplinary areas, STEM, management, finance, and social sciences were most represented.

Majority of the respondents (26/29) were employed in the HE sector, while two were from the vocational sector and one from an unspecified sector. Eight respondents were from an institution other than Swinburne, and majority were based in Australia. There was an equal split between respondents employed in 'traditional' academic roles (roles which typically incorporate teaching, research and service portfolios) and those in teaching-focused roles, including casual academics. Two respondents were in research-focused roles and one in non-academic role. A slight majority (16/29) were Early Career Academics (ECRs)—emerging scholars within five years of completing their PhD or PhD researchers engaged in teaching, often on casual basis.

Findings

What motivates professional academic learners?

When asked about their main reasons for choosing the SoTL unit elective, respondents could choose multiple options from five predetermined answers and respond to a free-text option. The majority (20/29) indicated their main reason for choosing this elective was because they wanted 'to evaluate their own teaching practice for improvement'. The second most common answer (7/29), was 'I needed an elective to progress in GCLT', implying they did not choose the unit specifically, but rather picked it because it was available and they had not done it before. Other responses (each appearing once) were: 'To produce a draft application for an award/promotion/grant', 'A colleague recommended this unit', 'My line manager/Dean suggested I take this unit'.

The free-text responses to this question included: "To develop a proposal for a PhD", "The content was of interest… and represented a gap in professional knowledge", "Because [the unit] had only two pieces [of] assessments", "Because I wanted to be able to publish from my teaching practice."

The reasons respondents gave for choosing this unit suggest most were driven by intrinsic motivation, wanting to improve their teaching, while also demonstrating levels of pragmatism, wanting to develop practical outputs, benefiting their careers as a result. There also appears to be a growing interest in SoTL and scholarly teaching among, suggesting University academics are exploring ways to build up their teaching and learning research, and possibly even transitioning into SoTL as a career path.

Learner perception of the unit

Self-regulated modular structure

Running over the 12-week semester, the unit had a modular structure. Its six modules covered key aspects of SoTL, guiding learners in how to conduct research into their own teaching for the purposes of exploration, improvement, evaluation, and dissemination of findings. Given that GCLT learners tend to be mature and in full-time employment, the elective was designed to be progressed through at own pace, with deadline-specific assignments, including a time-sensitive, ungraded peer review. When asked whether this self-directed modular structure worked for them, 29/30 respondents, either agreed or strongly agreed, one person neutral.

The instructor's role

Q&A style, synchronous online sessions were offered to students to clarify assessments and to discuss exemplars. The unit had two summative assessments; for each of these, two 'sessions were hosted per semester. Generally, a third of the cohort attended regularly, the rest choosing to watch the recordings.

When asked whether the instructor's involvement with the unit's interactive components (synchronous sessions and asynchronous Discussion Boards (DBs)) was sufficient to their learning needs, 24/30 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, one was neutral, and 7 strongly disagreed. While majority felt the instructor's presence in the unit was adequate, the response of 7 individuals who felt the opposite implies a mismatch

with learner expectation. As the entire GCLT is accredited as a fully online course, the allowable synchronous aspect is fulfilled by Q&A style live sessions. There was, however, a subset of students who wanted more live interactions with the instructor, even if, paradoxically, live sessions attracted modest attendance.

Engagement

Discussion Boards were instrumental to learner engagement in the unit, with learners prompted to post their reflections in response to content-themed questions. DBs were moderated by the instructor but due to the volume of posts it was not always possible to respond to every single post. It was reiterated throughout the semester that DBs were a voluntary, ungraded activity, envisaged as a reflection tool, as well as a way for learners to interact with each other. When asked whether they had regularly contributed to DBs, 13/30 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, 8 were neutral, and 9 either disagreed or strongly disagreed. When asked whether DBs were useful for learning, 19/30 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed, 5 were neutral, and 6 did not feel DBs were a useful tool for learning at all.

Embedded into the unit, Summary Videos were a way for the instructor to engage learners in key ideas covered in each module. Previous research, including Pechenkina et al. (2018), showed that students overall favour Summary Videos, some even crediting those as the reason they have persevered and completed their studies as they rely on Summary Videos for review and revision while preparing for assignments. This finding was confirmed for the professional learner cohort: 24/30 respondents felt Summary Videos were an effective learning tool, 3 remained neutral, and only 3 disagreed on the tool's effectiveness.

While learners were divided in their engagement with DBs, Summary Videos had more utility, professional academic learners exhibiting similar engagement patterns to undergraduate students in fully online degrees.

Learner experience with assessments

Formulating assessment tasks

As the unit's focus was on scholarly teaching, its assessments were designed to guide learners as they explored their own teaching, designed hypothetical innovations and developed impact evaluation plans. The assessments required learners to reflect on their own teaching or, for those with minimal teaching experience, hypothesise about their future teaching as well as reflect on their experiences as learners. Understanding how professional learners approached the unit's assessments is important, as their assessment outputs serve as artefacts that can enhance their teaching practice and further their academic careers.

A majority of respondents (20/30) did not have a specific idea in mind in regard to their assessments before enrolling in the unit. This indicates a third of respondents approached the assessment tasks in this unit pragmatically, specifically choosing it to develop their skills and career by becoming scholarly in their approach or even publishing in the field of SoTL. This was further confirmed by most of the students either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement 'I struggled to formulate my assessment tasks', where only 2 respondents either agreed or strongly disagreed, the rest remaining neutral.

As the unit cohorts were small in size, it was feasible to provide each learner with personalised support, to help them determine or refine the scope of their work. Early on in the semester, all learners were invited to schedule an individual consultation with the instructor, with approximately 70% taking up this offer. When asked whether the instructor helped them to identify and/or refine their ideas for the assessments, 21/30 respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. However, 5 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 4 remained neutral. It can be hypothesised that the segment who did not feel positive about the instructor's role in helping them formulate their assessments were those who did not take up the offer of consultation.

When asked whether their fellow learners helped them identify or refine their ideas for assessments, 11/30 agreed or strongly agreed, with 10 remaining neutral, and 9 disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This was likely shaped by the nature of learners' participation in the unit, where they had to make pragmatic decisions on when and how to engage, likely perceiving individual consultations with the instructor to be more useful than engaging with their peers via DBs, and more generally.

Engaging in peer review

At the time of data collection, the peer review was an ungraded activity and had no rubric. However, learners were provided with a number of resources outlining how to approach the task and how to write an effective peer review. The review was a double-blind process, where the instructor randomly assigned reviewers to de-identified submissions, facilitating the process via email. The instructor would then read each review and summarise key points, before sharing the summary and the reviews with the relevant learners.

While the peer review task was not compulsory, it was positioned as an effective tool for refinement of individual teaching narratives for the first summative assessment. Most respondents (27/30) elected to participated in the peer review task, submitting a brief narrative to be reviewed by their peers, while 22/29 received peer reviews from their fellow learners and used this feedback to revise their narrative ahead of the formal assessment. Seven respondents did not engage in this process at all.

Most respondents (19/30) had experienced peer assessment as a learner prior to taking the unit, however 11 had not experienced peer assessment at all beforehand. Half of the respondents used peer assessment with their own students, while 17/30 had experience peer reviewing for academic journals. Most respondents (22/30) had previously received peer reviews of their research articles.

Key results pertaining to how professional learners perceived the peer review task are presented as figures (1-4), with responses visualised for Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD), and Neutral (N).

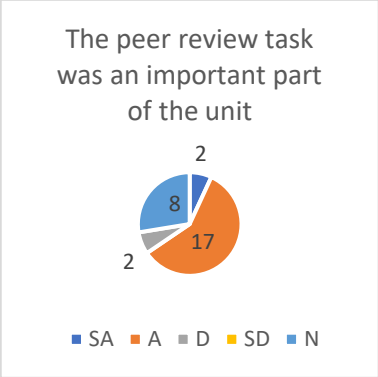

Figure 1

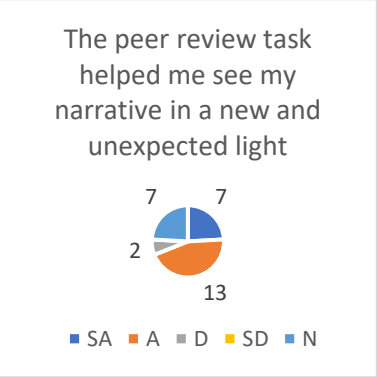

Figure 2

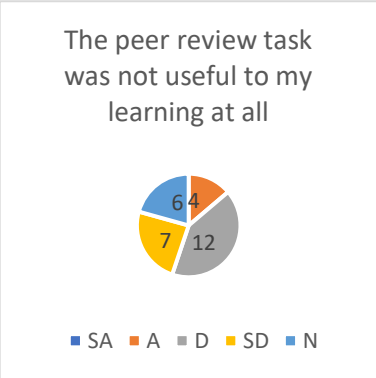

Figure 3

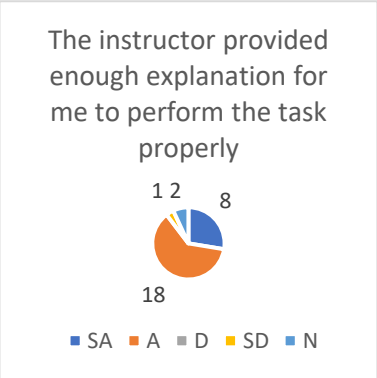

Figure 4

When asked whether they would engage with the peer review task differently if it was a graded assessment, the respondents were split in their answers. For example, 13 respondents agreed and 13 disagreed with the statement 'if peer review was a graded activity, I would be more likely to perform it', while 8 remained neutral.

However, regarding the quality of their feedback as a peer reviewer, most (14/29) did not feel they would have provided higher quality feedback to their peers if the task was graded, 5 agreeing with this statement and 10 remaining neutral.

In regard to the quality of feedback received from their peers, 10/29 respondents (9 of these agreeing and 1 strongly agreeing) felt they would have received a higher quality feedback from their peers if the peer review task was a graded activity. At the same time, 7/29 respondents agreed that they would have received higher quality feedback from their peers if there were better instructions provided on how to complete the peer review task, with most disagreeing (10) and 12 remaining neutral in response to this question.

Fourteen respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'I would have liked to be given more explanation on how to perform the peer review task', while 5 agreed and 1 strongly agreed, with 9 remaining neutral. In a reversed question, most respondents did not feel they would have offered higher quality feedback to their peers if there were better instructions provided on how to complete the peer review task (out of 29, 11 disagreed and 2 strongly disagreed), 8 agreed, 1 strongly agreed and 7 remained neutral.

At the time of the study, the peer review process was highly involved and time-consuming for the instructor. In the years following this research and in response to learner feedback as well as their rates of participation in the task, the peer review process has evolved into a graded activity. The manual process of assigning and processing peer reviews has been transformed with the peer assessment tool available via Canvas Learning Management System, though learners still have the manual processing option if they prefer it. Unsurprisingly, the participation rate in this task after it became graded has reached nearly one hundred percent.

The unit's impact on teaching practice and career

Several types of impact were explored. As reflection is among the key tenets of high quality teaching, respondents were asked whether completing the unit made them more reflective in their teaching practice. The majority of respondents (26/29) agreed (with 10 of those strongly agreeing), only 1 respondent disagreeing and 2 remaining neutral. This finding offers some promising evidence of GCLTs and other such PL degrees instilling reflection in learners, at least when measured based on a learners own perception.

Regarding other types of impact, such as that on academic careers, the following responses were given (N=29).

Statement	Yes	No
Completing this unit encouraged me to develop and/or submit a teaching citation application	15	14
Completing this unit encouraged me to develop and/or apply for a grant related to my teaching field	10	19

Completing this unit encouraged me to develop and/or submit an application for academic promotion	16	13
If you submitted an application for a teaching citation, grant and/or academic promotion, were you successful?	6	2

In response to the free-text question, 'If you haven't gone ahead with submission, what prevented you from applying for a citation/grant/promotion?', in the order of frequency, answers were:

- Tight deadlines to apply/lack of time (3 responses)
- Wasn't ready at the time but currently developing application (3 responses)
- Not eligible to apply (e.g., sessional academic; left HE, etc.) (2 responses)
- Administrative hurdles (e.g., seeking approval from Dean; undergoing performance management process, etc.) (2 responses)
- Not interested in pursuing academic career (but happy to be teaching part-time/casually) (1 response)
- Lack of confidence (1 response)
- Employer has no academic promotion process (1 response)

Nothing to improve?

Lastly, respondents were given a free-text option response to the question "What would you change in this unit to improve learner experience?" Thirteen responses were given, 8 of which can be characterised as "nothing to improve" type of answers. The responses to this question highlighted that the unit was "well-structured" and "excellent in [helping them become] a better teacher." Other responses identified peer assessment as being of most benefit, while also recommending the activity becomes part of assessment to boost participation. Lastly, responses to this question highlighted the instructor's presence in the unit, with respondents crediting their success in a grant application to the instructor's mentoring.

However, specific areas of improvement were identified as well. One respondent acknowledged the difficulty of "promot[ing] engagement online", while stating they were not sure "what else the lecturer could have done". Two respondents focused on the DBs and the peer review task in their suggestions, one saying that while they had appreciated the value of these elements, they were "only as valuable as the amount of people who take part". This respondent further added that they often felt like they were "posting and engaging to no one", learning "more from seeing what 'could' be done, rather than the physical act of doing". Similarly, another respondent felt they could have benefited from "more instructions on how to do peer evaluation", in particular more specifics in regard to the criteria by which to peer review their fellow learners' work. Lastly, one respondent expressed their wish for "more examples of teaching and learning practices that could lead discussions and critical reflection", while another, a sessional academic, felt more could be done to help sessional/casual teaching staff feel included by asking "what learning tools could you do/embed into the unit that would help [sessional academics] progress in their career?".

Conclusions

This study responds to the call for evidence of impact that professional learning might have on academics' teaching practices and careers (Jones et al., 2017). It offers new insights into how academics experience professional learning in university settings. Most respondents in this study showed pragmatism as well as genuine need for self-improvement, choosing the SoTL-focused unit elective to upskill their teaching practice, while also developing artefacts useful for career progression. Data showing how respondents engaged with the unit demonstrates that fully online asynchronous learning is a suitable fit for this cohort. The respondents generally felt positively about the unit's modular structure, the instructor's presence in the online spaces, as well as about most other aspects of their learning. At the same time, DBs were not well engaged with, this cohort preferring watching Summary Videos compared to engaging with their peers online. However, peer

assessment was found useful, with most respondents reporting a positive experience with this element of their learning. The latter finding speaks to earlier research, which emphasised the importance of the collegial and networked nature of professional learning (Oddone, 2022; Trust et al., 2017).

The impact data showing how respondents' academic careers were positively affected by the unit offers important statistics of the effectiveness of this kind of professional learning. With 90% of respondents in this study saying that completing the unit made them more reflective in their teaching practice, it demonstrates how vital SoTL units are and also speaks to the overall importance of GCLT-like offerings. This insight speaks to research which credits lifelong learning and self-improvement to professional learning (Scherf, 2018). As over half of the respondents were ECRs, it can be argued that the unit will have a lasting, positive impact on them from the start of their academic careers. It is important to make units like this, and GCLTs as a whole, available to ECRs as this is when their teaching perceptions and skills are forming, and the right kind of professional learning can help set them on the right track.

Another important piece of evidence comes from respondents' self-reported levels of being encouraged to develop relevant outputs as a result of their studies. Over half of respondents (52%) felt encouraged to develop and/or submit an application for teaching citation, 65% felt encouraged to develop and/or apply for a grant related to their teaching field and 55% felt encouraged to develop and/or submit an application for academic promotion. However, only 21% of respondents applied, and succeeded in their endeavours. The responses offer some insights as to what is stopping academics from achieving their full potential. A combination of administrative and personal reasons was at play here. While confidence of academics can be boosted by engaging them in units such as the one in this study, the organisational/administrative reasons named as barriers are something universities must work on.

The steady number of the respondents consistently choosing the 'neutral' response to all questions is another finding worth consideration. If learners have no strong reaction to their learning experience, does it mean they are content or disinterested? Research into reasons behind respondents choosing the 'neutral' response indicates this might be due to respondents being reluctant to expend the cognitive effort needed to formulate an opinion (DeMars & Erwin, 2005). As the percentage of neutral responses roughly corresponds to the number of respondents who enrolled in the unit because they had to (or perhaps were compelled to), there appears to be a subset of professional learners who do not possess personal motivation to learn/upskill but rather go through the motions. Their experiences need to be looked into with more granularity to inform how professional learning is framed and contextualised in the future to engage this group of reluctant learners.

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