

Challenges in sustaining technology enhanced learning: Recruitment, employment and retention of learning designers in Australian universities

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Universities require learning designers with creative digital experience and significant knowledge of educational theory and practice to meet institutional teaching and learning strategic priorities. Little is known about how best to attract and retain learning designers or alternatively, to assist learning designers navigate their career pathways in higher education. In response to these needs, this study aimed to provide a snapshot of current learning design practices across Australian universities; to document relevant skills, knowledge, education and professional background, role types and employment conditions, challenges for directors, and to identify areas for future attention. The researchers used two separate online surveys to target 1) directors of central teaching and learning units and 2) learning designers employed in universities. The results are useful as a means to sustain and improve practice through evidence-based decision-making in the conceptualisation of learning designer positions, the management and retention of learning design staff, and to assist learning designers in their career choices.

Keywords: Learning designer, directors, recruitment, employment, retention, career progression

Introduction

Directors of central teaching and learning centres in Australian universities are responsible for the translation of sector and institutional strategic priorities into academic practices (Ling & Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD), 2009). Centre directors look to learning designers to meet diverse roles and employment conditions within the changing higher education sector. Other titles, such as educational designers, instructional designers or similar also describe learning design roles, although each has its own definitional nuances, due to the type and frequency of different roles and institutional contexts (Mitchell, Simpson & Adachi, 2017). Learning designers are conventionally understood as professional staff who help individual academics introduce and use educational technologies in their teaching for improved student experience (Browne & Beetham, 2010) or those who create digital teaching and learning resources for a wider audience (Fraser & Ling, 2014). Learning designer responsibilities, however, have broadened, as explained by Obexer and Giardina (2016) to 'the role of supporter, change agent, catalyst and provider of expertise in [higher education] and is seen as critical in supporting sustained change' (p. 138).

It is imperative that directors recognise learning designers' marketability and strong connections with professional networks outside an institution and provide work contexts that will be attractive to recruit and retain effective learning designers (Whitchurch, 2012). For example, lack of professional recognition and career progression can lead learning designers to move into other roles (including academic), or accept a better contract elsewhere; with both alternatives detrimental to the original employing institution (Shurville, Browne & Whitaker, 2009).

Yet, little is known about how best to attract new learning design staff members, both from an institutional and employee perspective (Shurville et al., 2009). Directors can be responsible to envision the requirements of new learning designer positions and the development of the appropriate position descriptions and selection processes. Directors also oversee the teams in which learning designers work and need to be able to retain capable learning design staff. Without understanding current baseline practices, this situation inherently brings challenges for directors in conceptualising and designing new roles, attracting suitable learning design staff, providing ongoing effective management and securing retention of excellent staff members. Similarly, learning designers lack information about entering the field, gaining career security and opportunity for promotion.

This research aims to shed light on the role of the learning designer and to provide a current snapshot of learning design practices in Australian universities, to enable directors to write well-defined position descriptions to recruit effective staff, and have better understanding of how to manage and retain learning design employees. Further,

this work informs learning designers about the current employment context and provides empirical evidence for their career decision-making.

Theoretical lens – third space professionals

Beckmann (2018) notes that learning designers (or equivalent) often work in innovative areas of academic development with significant impact on students' learning environments. Learning designer roles may overlap with those of an academic, academic developer, e-learning and/or information technologist, for example. As such, learning designers are an integral part of sustaining and scaling up technical and pedagogical priorities in teaching and learning centres, which makes their successful recruitment, employment and retention essential.

Researchers theorise the idea of the 'third space' of collaboration to explain the porous nature of role delineation in academic development (Whitchurch, 2008; Veles & Carter, 2016). For example, Gray (2015) explains that while staff may be appointed to academic or professional roles, they find themselves crossing role boundaries because of the nature of their day-to-day work. By the very nature of the learning designer role they become boundary crossers to ensure the success of projects, as described by Motteram, Forrester, Goldrick and McLachlan (2007) in their study about managing the complexities of producing e-Learning courseware.

This blurring of roles creates highly collaborative 'third space professionals', such as learning designers, who have strong agency, assume professional development responsibility for themselves and others and envisage career progression as an ongoing personal journey (Veles, Carter & Boon, 2018; Whitchurch, 2012). These professionals use relational and collaborative foundations to enable strategic lateral skill-learning opportunities rather than only upward career progression (Veles & Carter 2016), which is contrary to the hierarchical career pathways and siloed operational structures in universities (Whitchurch, Skinner & Lauwerys, 2009). These authors suggest key recruitment, employment and retention issues include:

- Managing the disconnection between 'portfolio' careers and higher education's hierarchical career pathways and siloed organisational structures
- Designing job descriptions so that they are enabling rather than prescriptive
- Providing flexibility to allow individuals to enter higher education later on from other sectors; and
- Enabling appropriate professional development opportunities (p. 59).

The research questions guiding this investigation of learning designers as third space professionals are:

1. What are the key considerations for directors when recruiting, employing and retaining learning designers?
2. What is the career progression cycle like for learning designers?
3. In what ways can directors support the career progression of a learning designer?

Research context and survey design

The research team included an academic, a senior academic developer, a lead learning designer and an experienced research assistant from two Australian universities; all of whom have a strong interest in this research area. A small grant was secured from the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD now CAULLT) which enabled the researchers to design and deliver two online surveys. The research assistant helped with the qualitative data analysis.

Previously, two of the researchers undertook a pilot scan of advertised learning (or equivalent educational, instructional) designer positions (n=38) advertised across Australian universities from July – December 2016. Findings pointed to a diverse, ad hoc set of employment criteria and expected roles. Centre directors wanted professional staff with creative digital experience as well as significant knowledge of educational theory and practice to fill the work gaps, often on a project basis. This scan of position descriptions and the researchers' experience in higher education indicated there is a growing heterogeneous group of professional staff, commonly called learning designers in Australia, who are asked to undertake an extensive (often overwhelming) suite of roles. These learning designers are usually employed at HEW 7 or 8 levels, on short-term contracts, making them a cheaper and more flexible pool of talent than employing academic staff. These initial findings informed the larger research project that surveyed centre directors and learning designers across Australian universities.

Themes found in this pilot scan (e.g. length of employment, salary level, selection criteria and supervisor position) informed the design of two separate online surveys. These surveys targeted the following stakeholder groups: 1) directors of central teaching and learning centres (n=40), and 2) learning designers employed in universities (number unknown). The knowledge and experience of the research team working in central teaching and learning units with learning designers was also considered in the survey design. The survey was reviewed by the research

reference group and given to a small test group of learning designers to complete and provide feedback to strengthen its rigour and relevance. Human ethics permission for the research was initially granted by the University of Queensland and approved by the University of the Sunshine Coast through the prior ethical review pathway in March 2017.

Data collection and analysis

In 2017 we invited directors and learning designers (or equivalent) in Australian universities to respond to online surveys about current learning design practices. We contacted the directors via their publicly available professional email address to explain the purpose of the study and potential involvement for themselves in completing the directors' survey online (link included in the email). The Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form was attached to the recruitment email (and again at the beginning of the surveys online). The potential participants needed to click on the link to the online survey if they wished to activate participation, and thus would remain anonymous.

We also asked relevant professional networks such as CADAD, Australasian Council on Open, Distance and E-Learning (ACODE), HERDSA, ASCILITE, Group of Eight (Go8) and the Regional Universities Network (RUN), to distribute the research information (including the necessary human ethics documentation) and survey links to their members (both directors and learning designers) so as to increase the potential number of participants that may be missed by other methods. Some learning designers contacted the researchers directly and asked for details about participation. They were directed to the project webpage that contained links to both surveys and further participation decision making information.

We considered the use of an online survey method, through a platform such as SurveyMonkey that includes quantitative and qualitative elements, as a resource efficient and time effective way to explore the depth and extent of current practice. The quantitative data were analysed using a descriptive statistics approach, based on those found in SurveyMonkey and checked by the research team. The qualitative responses were analysed and categorised according to themes developed by the research assistant using NVivo 11 Pro software and in iterative discussions with other members of the research team.

Results

Twenty-one directors responded to the survey, which we considered a high response rate, at 50 per cent of the available sample of Australian institutions. One hundred and three learning designers responded to their survey. Whilst this was a good sample size from learning designers across institutions, we are not able to confirm the number of learning designers employed nationally as this information is not readily available. The learning designers were asked additional demographic information at the beginning of the survey. Of the learning designers who completed the survey 76 were female and 27 were male. They were aged between 25 and 74 years of age, with the largest group in the 35 to 44 age brackets (39 per cent) followed by 45 to 54 age brackets (31 per cent). Only one respondent was over 65 years of age and none indicated they were under 25 years.

To best explain the results, the next section is organised using the following three categories: Recruitment (demographic data, educational and professional background, challenges in recruitment, length of current employment); Institutional context and employment conditions; and Professional development and potential career projectories.

Recruitment

The directors were asked about the greatest challenges in recruiting learning designers. Responses were collated around finding applicants with the breadth of expertise, experience, knowledge, capabilities and personal attributes needed for current learning designer positions (12 responses); an understanding of both technical and pedagogical aspects (5); and who were attracted to the University's location or reputation (3). Two respondents recognised a lack of career pathways for learning designers while another one acknowledged the challenge of having the appropriate remuneration for an upcoming position.

The learning designers were asked several questions related to recruitment. The first question asked about the highest level of education they had achieved. Seventy per cent of the respondents stated they had attained a post graduate qualification, 17 per cent a bachelor degree, 4 per cent an associate diploma or certificate and 2 per cent some university study but no degree. Six per cent answered the 'Other' category giving more detail – post graduate

certificate (1), post graduate diploma (1), masters (1), doctor of philosophy (2) and one respondent was currently a doctor of philosophy candidate.

When asked about the discipline of study, learning designers provided a diverse range of responses (Table 1) with 61 per cent of respondents having studied multiple disciplines. Education was the most frequent response including graduate certificates, masters of arts and adult education, master of arts/information and communications technology (ICT), higher education (graduate certificates), undergraduate primary and secondary teaching, graduate diplomas and/or doctorate in education. There was a significant per cent drop from Education at 68 per cent to a variety of disciplines between 13-6 per cent, followed by four disciplines at 4 per cent, three at 3 per cent and eight at 2 per cent.

Table 1: Educational background of learning designers

| Discipline | Respondents % | Discipline | Respondent % |
|--|---------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Education (primary, secondary, adult or tertiary) | 68 | Languages | 3 |
| Arts | 13 | Philosophy | 3 |
| Media | 11 | Visual Arts | 3 |
| Science | 11 | Creative Industries | 2 |
| IT | 10 | Engineering | 2 |
| Business or Economics | 8 | Gender Studies | 2 |
| Design | 7 | Law | 2 |
| Information Systems | 6 | Literature | 2 |
| Communications and Marketing | 4 | Mathematics | 2 |
| English | 4 | Project Management | 2 |
| History | 4 | Psychology | 2 |
| Linguistics | 4 | Other | - |

Respondents were then asked about their professional background before becoming a learning designer (Table 2). There was a diverse range of previous experience noted, with 40 per cent having a teaching background and 25 per cent worked in technology or academic-related areas. Over 20 per cent of respondents had more than one professional background before becoming a learning designer. The 'Other' category responses were incredibly diverse with no more than two respondents identifying the same profession; therefore, it was difficult to cluster any further.

Table 2: Professional backgrounds of learning designers

| Role | Respondent % | Examples |
|-----------------------------|--------------|--|
| Teacher | 40 | Primary school teacher; Teacher K-12 technology, design, software |
| Academic | 25 | Lecturer in Linguistics courses; Academic, Philosophy, 10 years |
| Other | 22 | University office administrator; Architect; Librarian |
| Graphic/Media Design | 18 | Web producer and designer; Multimedia designer |
| Human Resources | 9 | HR advisor; University organisational development consultant, 23 years |
| Tech | 7 | IT analyst; IT professional |
| Student Services | 3 | Teaching academic skills, and designing academic skills resources for university students; Academic skills adviser at university |

Although the largest proportion of respondents were teachers, they too were diverse in career characteristics. It is evident that there is no one pathway or progression into the role of a learning designer.

Institutional context and employment conditions

Both surveys asked respondents the network of universities in which they work. This question used four classifications of Australian university networks i.e. Group of Eight (Go8) research intensive universities (<https://go8.edu.au/>); the Regional Universities Network (RUN) of six universities (<http://www.run.edu.au/>); the

Innovative Research Universities (IRU) of seven universities (<https://www.iru.edu.au/>); the Australian Technology Network (ATN) (<http://www.atn.edu.au/>); and an ‘Other’ option. Responses were received from all university networks with the largest proportion from the Go8 for the learning designers and the RUN network for the Directors as shown in Figure 1. The majority (52 per cent) of learning designers report working in a central learning and teaching centre, 26 per cent said they work in a faculty, and the others are in schools, cross-faculty and in information technology.

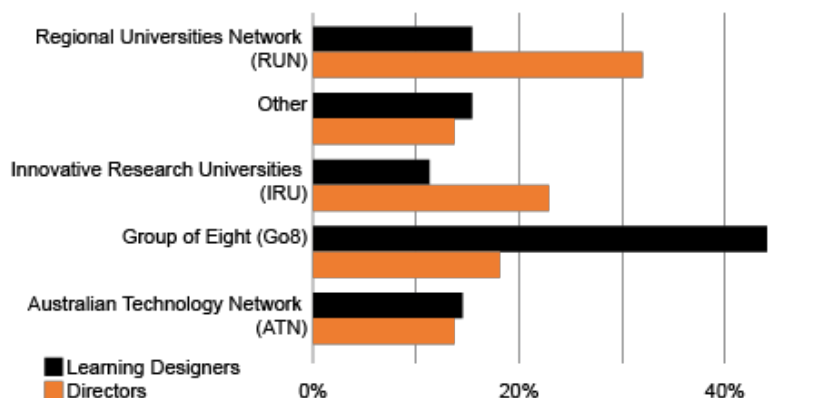


Figure 1: Respondents identified university network

The directors reported employing more full-time learning designers than part-time. Ninety per cent reported that they have learning designers in full-time roles and only 35 per cent of directors reported part-time roles. The data received from the learning designers indicated that 50 per cent of respondents were employed full-time and 50 per cent were on a contract (47 per cent) or casual (3 per cent) as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Mode of employment for learning designers

| Mode | Full-time | Part-time | Total % |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Ongoing | 47 | 3 | 50 |
| Contract | 38 | 9 | 47 |
| Casual | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Total | 87 | 13 | 100 |

The learning designers were asked about the professional level classification of their appointment (Figure 2). The majority are employed at either HEW Level 7 (40 per cent) or Level 8 (37 per cent) of the Higher Education Industry professional staff award, as interpreted by their institution. Only 4 per cent were employed at a lower Level 5 (1 per cent) or Level 6 (3 per cent) and no one reported being below Level 5. The qualitative ‘Other’ category (19 per cent) captured ten Level 9 responses, six academic appointments and one Level 6-7 banded position.

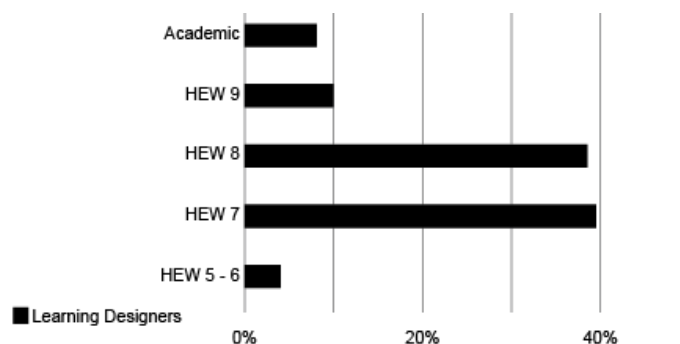


Figure 2: Learning designers identified level of employment

There were two further questions for learning designer respondents about employment. Firstly, the length of time they had worked as a learning designer and secondly, how long they had worked in their current role (Figure 3). Forty-three per cent of the respondents have worked as a learning designer for more than six years indicating some consistency and stability among the learning designer environment. Sixty-two per cent of the total learning designer respondents have been in the same position for less than four years.

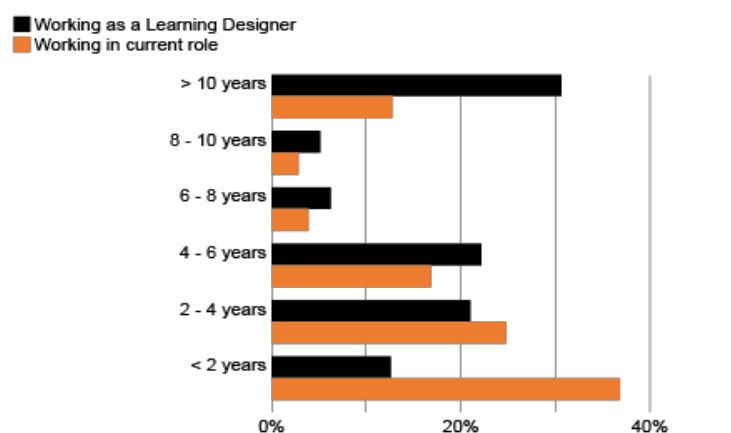


Figure 3: Learning designer's reported time in current role and as a learning designer.

Continuing professional development and potential career projectories

This section reports the responses to the survey questions related to continuing professional development and potential career projectories for learning designers. The surveys asked the directors and learning design respondents about the opportunity for and engagement in continuing professional development (Figure 4). In particular, the directors were asked 'What professional development is available for learning designers at your institutions?' and could respond with multiple answers. Sixteen respondents answered this question. The highest response was 'attending conferences' at 94 per cent, closely followed by 'engage with professional organisation' at 88 per cent, 'self-directed learning' was next at 81 per cent, and 'institutional communities of practice' at 75 per cent, then 'MOOCs' at 63 per cent and lastly, 'formal courses and training' at 31 per cent. The 'Other' category listed 'peer to peer learning', completing a portfolio for the Higher Education Academy fellowship scheme, 'team meetings' and 'in-house development'.

The learning designers were asked how they engage in continuing professional development and again could respond with multiple answers from the same list of options as the directors' survey. The highest response was 'self-directed learning' at 96 per cent, followed by 'attend conferences' at 80 per cent, being part of 'institutional communities of practice' at 70 per cent, followed closely by 'engage with professional organisation' at 67 per cent. 'Formal courses and training' at 52 per cent were followed closely by 'MOOCs' at 49 per cent. The qualitative 'Other' category included self-funded conference attendance, tacit knowledge from senior learning designers, 'trial and error' and a lot of help from other staff and then helping staff as well, 'industry communities of practice', 'postgraduate study', 'learning on the job', 'publishing resources', 'mentoring others', 'collaborative research', 'in house', and 'connections on social media'.

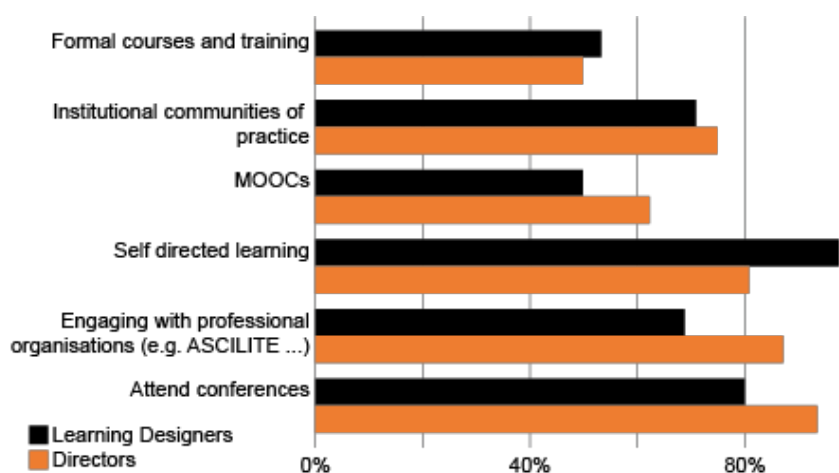


Figure 4: Learning designer professional learning activities identified by directors and learning designers

The directors were asked about their greatest challenge in retaining effective learning designers. Fourteen respondents answered with a variety of responses, mainly related to employment conditions with short-term contracts or project-based work, such as remuneration, consistent workflows, ensuring recurrent funding, and lack of promotional pathways. They were concerned that ‘good learning designers are often looking for more certainty’, ‘mismanagement by senior staff’ or ‘a disconnection between their expectations and the organisations’. Further, other concerns were learning designer ‘boredom’ and ‘motivation in the face of resistance by academics’ and losing good quality learning designers due to high demand elsewhere.

Next, directors were asked what types of roles they saw learning designers progressing to in their careers. The responses from the directors identify a variety of possible career pathways. Forty per cent said those roles may be an academic position as demonstrated by two directors who said:

I would like to think that they could pursue an academic path (Director A)

and

Multi choices e.g. moving into academic developers, CPD developers, academics, teachers (Director B).

Forty per cent of director respondents also suggested institutional leadership roles, including:

Management of Learning Technologies, User Experience Design, Manager of Educational Design Departments (Director C)

and

Increasingly, to leadership roles around designing and managing student experience: as the roles of academics become ‘unbundled’, it will become increasingly possible for learning designers to coordinate degree programs, innovative teaching initiatives, and university-wide student experience programs... (Director D).

The results from the learning designers show that they hoped to move into senior learning designer roles (25 per cent) or stay in a similar learning design role (23 per cent) in 5 years’ time. For example:

I like what I do so I hope to be doing much the same in 5 years’ time (LD A)

and

Similar but more in-depth work with academics and less across the board, surface level work (LD B)

Other learning designers shared they would like more leadership responsibility and/or involvement in more strategic and complex learning design work. For example:

I have for some time had my sights set on a director role. However, as tertiary ed continues to change, I see opportunities for emerging roles we have yet to name. So more often I see my next role as being one that combines learning design and leadership in addressing the challenges faced by the sector (LD C)

and

Learning design on complex, large scale projects with strategic value to the institution (LD D)

Two learning designers saw research having a greater priority in their future roles:

Greater research and leadership in academic development (LD E)

and

I would like to be a published Learning Designer or perhaps become an academic specialising in SoTL or Online Teaching/Design (LD F)

Only 9 per cent of learning designers indicated that they would like to be in a management role and less as a teaching academic.

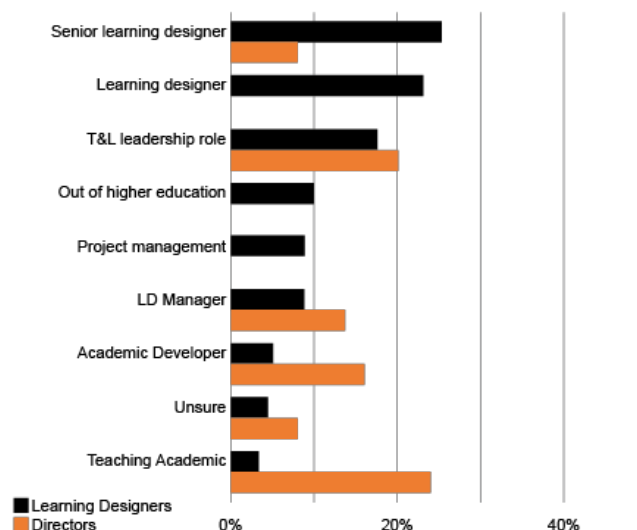


Figure 5: Career progression preferences for learning designers

Discussion and implications for practice

The results of this research highlight key issues, such as improving the attractiveness and consistency of learning designer recruitment, career planning and providing professional development opportunities that impact workplace planning for both directors and learning designers. It must be remembered however, that the results only represent a subset of the learning design population and should be viewed within this limitation.

Recruitment

Given the high marketability of learning designers and their strong sector-wide connections, it is important to develop attractive recruitment and employment opportunities for them (Whitchurch, 2012). Learning designers are highly qualified professionals, with 70 per cent having a post graduate qualification, but due to their coming from diverse backgrounds and multiple disciplines, opportunities in such a profession are undefined (Shurville et al., 2009). A further challenge is that the title of 'learning designer' is unclear in terms of role definition and institutional practices (Mitchell, Simpson & Adachi, 2017). Similarly, there is no formal career pathway to enter learning design roles. Very few junior roles are available to foster career development as indicated by the fact there was no learning designer respondent under the age of 25 years. Lack of formal entry pathways into learning design roles, makes it difficult for directors to target potential recruits with the appropriate professional backgrounds and to find applicants with the breadth of expertise needed for current learning designer positions. There is an opportunity here, however, for directors to work through their professional networks to collaborate in an effort to develop consistent and enabling position descriptions across the sector (Whitchurch, Skinner & Lauwerys, 2009). This approach would allow learning designers to move within the sector and have their skills and knowledge acknowledged at all institutions through a shared understanding of the role/s.

Institutional context and employment conditions

Learning designer recruitment, employment and retention brings into play new ways of thinking for directors and other institutional decision-makers (Obexer & Giardina, 2016). The results report that learning designers tend to adopt the role of a learning designer for a long period of time, with 30 per cent greater than ten years. However, they may stay in each role for a short period of time due to the project and short-term nature of the work. We

know that 50 per cent of learning designers are employed full-time in continuing employment and the other 50 per cent are on contracts or work part-time. Employing learning designers as third space professionals challenges the conventional career progression pathways and institutional structures of universities because of their role, boundary crossing and attitudes to ongoing career development (Whitchurch, Skinner & Lauwerys, 2009; Gray, 2015; Veles, Carter & Boon, 2018; Whitchurch, 2012). Given that technology is ever-evolving, the work of the learning designers will be ongoing, making it necessary for directors to consider new ways of working to accommodate.

Learning designers prefer to be retained and recognised for the work that they do. Currently career pathways are limited for learning designers due to the professional classification levels of HEW 7-8. The experience and expertise of the learning designer cannot be highlighted within these two levels, for example, a starting HEW Level 7 is not as experienced as someone who has been in the role for a long period of time. Academic staff are rewarded for their research and their teaching but there is no similar recognition for learning designers. Learning designers support and build capacity within their teams and with one another, and have expertise and knowledge of a variety of areas but are rarely remunerated accordingly.

Continuing professional development and potential career projectories

Directors seem out of step with learning designer professional development activities and needs. Learning designers reported their highest professional development engagement was with 'self-directed learning' while directors reported 'conference attendance' for learning designers as the highest option. Directors may note visible professional development activities for learning designers, such as attending a conference, but for other learning designers who might not have the opportunity to attend such observable events, it is difficult to report their activities. Directors could suggest more broad-reaching opportunities that 'enable appropriate professional development opportunities' (Whitchurch, Skinner & Lauwerys, 2009, p. 59), such as ensuring space in work schedules for supporting learning designer networks, especially when other opportunities are unavailable.

The majority of learning designers want to continue in learning design roles with more senior responsibilities or complex large-scale projects, rather than progress to the management of staff. Even fewer learning designer respondents wanted to move into academia which was at odds with the views of the directors. An academic role would take the learning designers' attention away from what they enjoy in their roles to a more research and teaching focus. Again, there could be the opportunity to develop new roles, and thus more flexible role statements to facilitate more senior roles for learning designers. Discussing career aspirations and progression with staff will assist directors to plan for and support learning designers into more senior roles.

This indicative study provides a basis for future research to understand the roles of learning designers in higher education in sustaining technology enhanced learning and innovative teaching practice. While our survey does not intend to provide replicability or prediction, it does provide empirical foundations for discussions and workplace planning between differing stakeholder groups, with the view to improve recruitment, employment and retention of staff, and to ultimately enhance learning opportunities for students.

Conclusions

This research contributes understanding of the current learning design practices, particularly in recruitment, employment and retention, across Australian universities from the perspectives of directors and learning designers. It highlights the disparate avenues into the learning design profession, gaps in professional development, and the future career pathways desired by learning designers. The results of this research are useful as a means to improve practice through evidence-based decision-making in the conceptualisation of learning designer positions and the management and retention of learning design staff. It also demonstrates several gaps in understanding between directors and learning designers and provides opportunity for professional conversations and collaboration across the sector. Future research and practice areas include how to build capacity in the workforce for emerging learning designers, the development of effective learning design position descriptions in light of directors' needs, and ways to improve learning designer professional development and career progression.

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