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The online presence of teaching and learning within Australian university websites

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Abstract

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The online presence of teaching and learning within Australian university websites

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Abstract:

Teaching and Learning as a form of scholarship has historically struggled for recognition in universities, with one of the biggest hurdles being visibility. As the internet is now one of the primary sources of visibility, this study examines how Australia's 39 universities present their teaching and learning profiles online. The purpose was to examine the aspects of teaching and learning that were visible and those which were not, highlighting the areas of scholarship that may require enhanced focus. The study used a scoring system of 15 primary criteria drawn from the literature, in conjunction with common teaching and learning website elements as ascertained from a brief study of 20 websites. The results revealed that while certain teaching and learning aspects such as professional development and awards are consistently presented across the Australian tertiary sector online, other aspects such as scholarship of teaching and learning research foci and external impact are not generally visible on Australian university websites.

Keywords: higher education, internet, teaching and learning, recognition, scholarship, teaching and learning web profile, web visibility of teaching and learning

Introduction

With the ever-growing significance of the internet as the primary visibility portal for universities both nationally and internationally, there has never been a more important time to stop and analyse how different aspects of university functions are being presented to world-wide audiences. A more inclusive understanding of the public visibility of universities on the internet, both generally and in relation to specific functions will have growing implications in relation to university management, planning and governance (Lee & Park, 2012). In order to build on this understanding, this article focusses on how the often overlooked area of teaching and learning has been presented across all Australian university websites, by examining what specific information is provided by the universities online regarding these functions.

Teaching and learning has traditionally struggled for recognition in universities, often being side-lined in favour of discipline-specific research (Chalmers, 2011). Though the 1990s saw a shift in this attitude, as major movements began in America, the UK and Australia to improve the status and quality of teaching (Chalmers, 2011; Kulski & Groombridge, 2004; Parker, 2008), progress across the tertiary sector remains painfully slow, with countless institutions still failing to accord teaching and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) the attention and resources it requires (Boshier, 2009; Chalmers, 2011). This has led some teaching scholars to describe teaching as a career 'cul-de-sac' (Cashmore, Cane, & Cane, 2013, p. 7) despite the fact that "institutional performance in learning and teaching is now more important in the development and preservation of university reputations" (Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD), 2011, p. 5). Often this disinclination towards the adequate recognition of such scholarship can be seen from the most apparent of university marketing portals – their public website, with research showing that the visibility of teaching on university websites is often overshadowed by that of research (Cox & Emmott, 2007, 320).

Using a scoring system of 15 primary criteria, this study examined what information is provided by Australian universities regarding their teaching and learning activities on their official website and considers how this information may reflect the inherent value and status

accorded to this work across the Australian higher education sector. As websites are increasingly essential as a recruitment point for prospective students, academics and benefactors (Cox & Emmott, 2007), it was a conservative expectation of this study that the more attention and detail presented on the teaching and learning sections of a university's website and the easier it was to access this material; the more perceived marketable value it appeared to be accorded by that institution.

Aims

There were two main aims of the study:

1. To examine all 39 Australian university websites and do a cross-sectional study of the information they presented about their teaching and learning activities online.
2. To analyse the kinds of teaching and learning information that were or *were not* visible online and reach some brief conclusions in relation to what aspects of these activities Australian universities appear to regard as worthwhile or marketable.

Methodology

The methodology behind this study was a cross-sectional data gathering investigation of Australian university websites, focussing on their public teaching and learning webpage(s). The data collection for the study was undertaken between the 22nd of December 2013 and the 10th of February 2014. All 39 Australian university websites were examined, with 17 primary questions employed. Two questions (16 and 17) were not used in the scoring system but were engaged purely for contrast purposes. The remaining 15 questions were scored one for each 'yes' or zero for each 'no', producing a score out of 15 for each university. This inquiry process was conducted by one of the authors and an initial data set was generated. This data was then discussed with the second author and all scores were mutually agreed. The 15 scored questions are contained in the first column of Table 1 and the two unscored questions (Questions 16 and 17) are contained in the first column of Table 2.

There were three grading levels accorded in this study. If a university received between 12-15 points (80-100 per cent) it was considered to present a High Profile in relation to teaching and learning on its web-site. If it received between 8-11 points (53-73 per cent), it presented a Medium Profile. If it received 0-7 points (0-47 per cent) it was considered to present a Low Profile. A score of seven points was chosen as the cut-off for the lowest level because it is indicative of a score lower than 50 per cent. The set of 17 questions (15 scored and 2 unscored) was created after an exploration of the websites of 20 randomly selected Australian universities had been completed and a short review of some of the literature on teaching quality indicators had been conducted.

As there is a recognised dearth of literature in the area of university web visibility (Chapleo, Duran, & Diaz, 2011; Lee & Park, 2012, 202), the literature that was engaged with for this study drew on popularly recognised indicators of teaching and learning quality ascertainable via a university webpage. As most literature in the area of teaching quality focusses on individual indicators (Gunn & Fisk, 2013), not institutional indicators; or focus almost exclusively on promotional processes and outcomes for teaching scholars (an inaccessible criteria for this study), the authors tried to focus on finding indicators that were both institutionally focussed and externally accessible. Several popular indicators of quality at an institutional scale include: parity between teaching achievements and other forms of achievements (Wills et al., 2014); achieving impact or recognition at a national or international level (Cashmore, et al., 2013, 32; Little, Locke, Parker, & Richardson, 2007, 41); engaging in teaching leadership (Little, et al., 2007, 18); providing professional

development (Cashmore, et al., 2013, 32; Chalmers & Thomson, 2008, 4); providing rewards for teaching such as teaching awards or fellowships (Cashmore, et al., 2013, 33; Little, et al., 2007, 19); supporting applicants for national teaching awards (Chalmers & Thomson, 2008, 4; Wills, et al., 2014, 23); engaging in teaching evaluation, including peer review and students evaluations (Cashmore, et al., 2013, 32; Chalmers & Thomson, 2008, 4; Little, et al., 2007, 23); and promoting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Cashmore, et al., 2013, 32; Little, et al., 2007, 19; Wills, et al., 2014, 23).

As with many forms of data collection, this method is not without significant limitations which need to be openly acknowledged. With a scoring system that makes 1 point available for each question, this process is not refined. It follows a 'blunt instrument' approach, which does not (for example) differentiate between a university with multiple internal teaching awards of high value and a university with only one award of low value. This method also relies solely on each university's online data, which means that it will fail to take into account any activities or initiatives which were not viewable by the public at the time of the study or that are not easily navigated to from a university home page. Though this remains a significant limitation of the approach, as the study relies on the conservative expectation that the web presence of certain activities gives an indication of the perceived marketable value or simple level of existence of those activities, the study still achieves its aims. For the purposes of this study, the key is 'what can be seen?' not 'what is actually happening?'

It is also important to note that as data collection for this study was undertaken within a two-month period between December 2013 and February 2014, it only captures a snapshot of the presentation of online university webpages and sections within that specific period. As websites are generally living resources which change continually and sometimes dramatically, this data is only applicable with certainty to the time period in which it was collected. Despite this, it remains valuable in capturing a snapshot of cross-sectional data that gives some broad indications of contemporary Australian university attitudes to teaching and learning.

A deliberate decision has been made not to identify the scores of individual universities in this article. The purpose of this research was not to be critical of single institutions, but was instead aimed at identifying patterns of online teaching and learning visibility across the sector.

Results

The following tables outline the results accumulated from the examination of all 39 Australian university websites.

Table 1 shows how many institutions received a score of 1 point for each individual question. This number is then converted into a percentage of the total number of Australian institutions scoring a point for that item. This data indicates what information surrounding teaching and learning is presented by Australian universities online and the visibility of information related to teaching and learning on university web sites across the sector.

TABLE 1 Individual Question Results

Question	Number of institutions to receive 1 point	Percentage of total
1. Is teaching and learning visible on the front page of the website?	23	59%
2. Is there a teaching and learning Unit or Centre?	38	97%
3. Is there a teaching and learning academy, think-tank, centre or other special body?	9	23%
4. Is there a teaching and learning focus beyond the internal staff and students?	10	26%
5. Is there professional development in relation to teaching?	38	97%
6. Are there any references to 'leadership' within the teaching and learning section of the web-site?	20	51%
7. Is a higher education teaching degree or certificate offered?	25	64%
8. Are there internal teaching awards?	35	90%
9. Is there support for scholars to apply for external teaching awards?	33	85%
10. Are internal grants for teaching and learning available?	27	69%
11. Are there any references to institutional success in relation to national teaching awards/fellowships?	29	74%
12. Is teaching evaluation apparent?	24	61%
13. Is there a formal system for peer-review of teaching?	23	59%
14. Is Scholarship of Teaching and Learning shown?	32	82%
15. Are there Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research foci?	16	41%

A key element to emerge from this data was the contrast between high and low visibility information. Highly visible information included the existence of teaching units or centres and professional development in relation to teaching and teaching awards. Low visibility information included teaching and learning academies or special bodies and a teaching and learning focus beyond the internal staff and students.

As can be seen in Table 1, the lowest scoring question overall was Question 3, which asked 'Is there a teaching and learning academy, think-tank, centre or other special body?' A positive result for this question required a university to have something beyond the teaching and learning Unit, such as a special body that has been created by the university for the purposes of enhancing teaching and learning or the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in or beyond itself. Of the 39 institutions, nine had such a body visible on their website.

Whether this is a true representation of how many Australian universities actually have such an entity cannot be accurately ascertained through this study as it is solely based on publicly available web information. Nevertheless, the results seem to indicate that either Australian universities do not generally have such bodies or they do not advertise or promote them publicly on their websites. Interestingly, the results showed a positive correlation between those institutions that displayed a special academy/body and overall scores. The mean score for universities that scored a point for Question 3 was 12.11 points, well above the mean of universities which did not (9.26 points). Even if the one point that was awarded for the presence of a special academy/body was removed, the mean of these institutions was still approximately 12 per cent above that of universities without such a body. This result could be seen to indicate that the presence of a teaching and learning focussed academy/body (at least which is visible online) will generally mean that more information on a university's teaching and learning activities will be made prominent to the public online.

The second lowest scoring question was Question 4, which asked 'Is there a teaching and learning focus beyond the internal staff and students?' A positive result for this question required a university's teaching and learning unit or special body to have shown on its website, a proactive interest in enhancing the scholarship of teaching beyond its own staff and students. This could have taken a variety of forms, including: a national or international network, a higher education teaching certificate or qualification that is openly available to scholars from other universities etc. Ten institutions scored a point for this question. From the results, it appeared that those institutions that had registered a point for having a special academy/body in Question 3 were considerably more likely to have achieved a point for having a focus beyond the internal. This was because those bodies were often the site at which universities extended their teaching and learning focus beyond their own institution, through the use of scholarly networks and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research based centres with a national and/or international focus. This low result is worthy of some consideration, as it has revealed a largely internalised (perhaps introspective) approach to these activities among Australian universities, at least from a web-publicised perspective.

The third lowest scoring question was Question 15, which asked 'Are there Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research foci?' A positive result for this question required that the webpage specify some scholarship of teaching and learning related research areas or projects being undertaken. It could be the projects/research foci of the Unit or special body as a whole or could relate to specific scholars work at the institution. Sixteen (16) institutions scored a point for this question.

There was a tie for the highest scoring question(s), with Question 2 ('Is there a teaching and learning Unit or Centre?') and 5 ('Is there professional development in relation to teaching?') both recording 38 positive results out of the 39 Australian universities. These results are positive as an indicator of some degree of consistency (and emphasis) across the sector. The high scoring nature of Question 2 shows that Australian universities are publicly acknowledging that teaching requires development, organisation, quality control and leadership. This is again reinforced by the results of Question 5, with the large majority of universities displaying professional development opportunities for staff in relation to teaching on their website.

The third highest scoring question was Question 8, which asked 'Are there internal teaching awards?' Thirty-five (35) universities scored a point for this question by having at least one visible internal award for teaching. Though there remains some scepticism in relation to how

helpful teaching awards are at rewarding scholars, with some referring to it as a ‘poisoned chalice’(Cashmore et al. 2013, 9), awards were still taken in this study to indicate a positive appreciation of teaching’s worth and marketability by an institution. There also appears to be significant backing across the Australian tertiary sector for supporting applicants applying for external teaching awards, with 33 of 39 institutions scoring a point for Question 9, which asked ‘Is there support for scholars to apply for external teaching awards?’ The universities that received a point for this question generally referred to support they provided in regards to applying for Office for Learning and Teaching awards.

Table 2 outlines the results for the two unscored questions, 16 and 17. These questions did not contribute to the overall scores of the institutions, but act as a point of contrast in examining and analysing what information is commonly visible on university websites.

TABLE 2 Total Results for Unscored Questions

Questions	Number of Institutions with the answer ‘Yes’	Percentage of Total
16. Is research visible on the front webpage?	39	100%
17. Is research bigger/more prominently visible than teaching and learning?	34	87%

Though they did not play a role in the score that the universities received, the two unscored questions illustrated in Table 2 provide some interesting comparison results. Question 16 ‘Is research visible on the front webpage?’ was the only question in the entire study that received a positive answer by 100 per cent of Australian universities. Compared to the same question asked in relation to teaching and learning (Question 1 - which had a positive result of 59%) it becomes apparent that there is a clear difference between how the two areas of university activity are presented and valued as a publicised marketing point. Though the visibility of research should not be considered to have a corresponding impact on the visibility of teaching and learning, the question nevertheless provided a direct point of comparison in considering how visible the two functions were at the same institutions and point of time.

Even in cases where teaching and learning was apparent on the front webpage of the university website, it was usually presented in much smaller text than research, often at the bottom of the page or would only appear in a drop down list. As can be seen in the results of Question 17, 34 universities presented research either with bigger text or in a more prominent position on the front webpage (generally both). Only five institutions presented teaching and learning and research in similar positions and in the same size on their websites.

Table 3 outlines how many institutions across the study received the various scores and the number of institutions to subsequently fall into a particular grading. This data illustrates the (relatively low) level of visibility that teaching and learning information receives online across the university sector in Australia.

TABLE 3 Total Scores of Universities and Grading Results

Number of points	Number of institutions to receive score	Percentage of Universities	Grading Results
15	1	3%	High Profile n= 12 (31%)
14	2	5%	
13	3	8%	
12	6	15%	
11	6	15%	Medium Profile n=22 (56%)
10	5	13%	
9	7	18%	
8	4	10%	
7	1	3%	Low Profile n=5 (13%)
6	0	0%	
5	2	5%	
4	0	0%	
3	1	3%	
2	1	3%	
1	0	0%	

The overall mean score of universities was 9.92 points and the mode was 9 points. The data shows that there was a significant spread of results across the sector, with one university achieving the highest score of 15 points, while another received a score of only two points. There was a peak at nine points, but most universities were above this score. The grading data indicates that a large majority of Australian universities had a Medium Profile in presenting their online teaching and learning information. Interestingly, the number of High Profile universities was more than double that of the Low Profile.

Table 3 illustrates that only a few institutions fell into the Low Profile category, with five universities scoring seven or less points (an individual result of less than 50 per cent). All five Low Profile institutions failed to score a point for Questions 9, 10, 12 and 15 - criteria which involved: supporting scholars for external teaching awards; having an internal grant/s system available for teaching and learning scholars; making teaching evaluation apparent; and having visible Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research foci. The only areas where there seemed to be some consistent performance by the Low Profile universities was in Questions 2, 5, 8 and 14. All five institutions scored a point for having a teaching and learning Unit or Centre (Question 2). Four out of the five institutions scored a point for having professional development in regards to teaching (Question 5). Three out of the five institutions also scored a point for having internal teaching awards (Question 8) and for mentioning the ‘Scholarship of Teaching and Learning’ on their website (Question 14). As these four questions were within the top five scoring questions overall across all of Australian universities, it is clear that these are aspects of teaching and learning that are consistently considered necessary on university websites.

In this study, 22 Australian universities scored in the Medium Profile range of 8-11 points, a percentage outcome of between 53 - 73 per cent. This was the largest group by far, heavily outweighing the High Profile and Low Profile universities combined. While this may be perceived as a reasonably positive result, it remains important to note that 11 out of these 22

institutions still fell below ten points overall. This appears to show a limited perception of how teaching and learning is considered as a worthwhile or marketable aspect of Australian universities online identities.

In assessing the results of the universities, a sub-analysis was undertaken with the aim of exploring whether there were any major differences in overall outcomes between the primary groupings of Australian universities. These groupings are the Australian University Technology Network, the Group of Eight, the Innovative Research Universities and the Regional Universities Network. Table 4 illustrates this sub-analysis, with arrows indicating how far above (↑) or below (↓), the grouping was both in points and percentage score, to the overall mean of 9.92 points. The results for unaligned universities were also noted.

TABLE 4 University Groupings Sub-Analysis of Means

University Grouping	Mean	Point difference from overall mean	Percentage difference from overall mean
Australian University Technology Network	11	↑ 1.08	↑ 11%
Group of Eight (Go8)	11.37	↑ 1.45	↑ 15%
Innovative Research Universities	10	↑ 0.08	↑ 1%
Regional Universities Network	8.5	↓ 1.42	↓ 14%
Universities not associated with a grouping	9.15	↓ 0.77	↓ 9%

Of the 39 Australian university websites, 12 received a High Profile score of 12 or more points, a percentage score of over 80 per cent. Of these 12 High Profile universities, 10 were associated with an identified university grouping.

The Group of Eight universities achieved high results in the study, with a mean of 11.37 points. This result was approximately 15 per cent above the overall mean of 9.92. The Australian University Technology Network also performed above the overall mean, averaging 11 points (approximately 11 per cent above the overall mean). The Innovative Research Universities also came in above the overall mean, albeit slightly.

In contrast to the other groupings, which all performed above the overall mean, the institutional results of the members of the Regional Universities Network placed that grouping approximately 14 per cent lower than the overall Australian university mean. This was an unanticipated outcome considering the generally positive performance of other university groupings. There were two Low Profile universities in this grouping and this appears to have greatly affected the overall mean performance of the group.

Few conclusions can be drawn from this sub-analysis, with the exception of the fact that universities in groupings did tend to perform slightly better overall than those universities not affiliated with a grouping, which (when analysed as a group) performed nine per cent below

the overall mean. Without more detailed data collection and analysis it is impossible to ascertain what these data mean practically. What does appear to be the case however is that Australia's most research intensive universities (the Go8) tend to make teaching and learning issues more visible on their web-sites than the rest of the nation's universities, as measured by our scale.

Discussion

What the final results reveal is that Australian universities have web-sites which contain certain consistently recognised aspects of teaching and learning, but many remain lacking in areas that focus on the recognition of teaching and learning scholars and the promotion of quality scholarship in teaching and learning. Though little weight can be given to the above results in terms of the actual 'value' Australian universities place on teaching and learning, it is difficult to dispute the strong possibility of a link between value and visibility. The results shows that although some features or terms were consistent on teaching and learning webpages across the university sector, when the criteria focused on higher level aspects such as scholarship or external dissemination, the results tended to drop. As such, this study appears to illustrate a largely internally focused and limited approach towards teaching and learning from a web visibility perspective in Australian universities.

The internalised approach to teaching and learning on Australia university webpages was especially apparent in the outcomes of Questions 3 and 4. The results of these questions have already been outlined above, but it is important to note the internalised approach they signal. By failing to reproduce the sorts of research centres and external approaches often synonymous with quality research; teaching and learning webpages may be indicative of the ailing focus of teaching and learning that has continually beleaguered it as an area of scholarship to be celebrated and valued. Perhaps the need to be seen to be research active, in this case in relation to learning and teaching, is one reason for the greater emphasis on teaching and learning on Go8 web-sites?

The results of Question 15 similarly indicate the continuation of longstanding issues that have beset the scholarship of teaching and learning, such as a lack of conceptual certainty, a belief that it is 'anti-intellectual' and difficult to evidence in ways that are appreciated by institutions (Boshier, 2009). It appears that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning lacks the focus on Australian university websites that could work towards creating a united vision of this area of scholarship. While the study showed that Australian institutions are consistent in their acknowledgment of the existence of the scholarship (with 32 universities scoring a point for Question 14) they continually failed to provide conceptual certainty and intellectual evidence of their Scholarship of Teaching and Learning activities online. Such conceptual clarity could include listing and providing links to related projects, initiatives, grants and teaching and learning-focussed research.

A lack of clarity is not only apparent within the teaching and learning pages themselves, but is similarly apparent on the university homepages more broadly. Questions 1, 16 and 17 made it apparent that teaching and learning is often not visible at all on the front page of Australian university web-sites and if it is, it is more often than not dwarfed by research. Across the sector, only 5 institutions presented teaching and learning in a comparable position and font size to research on the front webpage of the university. As all five of these institutions were in the High Profile category, these results appear to indicate that the equal presence of teaching and learning on a University's front webpage gives some indication of that university's broader online presentation of the scholarship.

Despite the internal and limited approach towards teaching and learning visibility on Australian university websites, there were some positive results to emerge from this study. As illustrated and expanded on above, Questions 2, 5 and 8 all received results of over 90%. This demonstrates clear consistency across the sector in relation to baseline indicators of accountability, responsibility and recognition in relation to teaching and learning in Australian universities.

Conclusion

While web presence is not a conclusive indicator of an institution's commitment to a particular activity or scholarship, it is difficult to argue that such visibility in the modern age is not intrinsically linked to perceived worth and marketability. In examining how Australian universities have presented teaching and learning on their websites (their most widely accessible expression of identity), this paper aimed to gather insight on how these universities value this function and what aspects they feel are worthwhile giving visibility to. The results of this study highlight that there remain distinctive areas in which teaching and learning is not given high visibility, which may in turn indicate a lack of resourcing or perceived marketable value. It may of course, also indicate that in some universities, such activities or entities do not actually exist – thus what was being found was evidence of absence, rather than absence of evidence. The overall mean of 9.92 points across the study (a score of approximately 66 per cent) cannot be viewed as encouraging considering the low hurdles presented by the questions. In total, the results appear to show that while there are some aspects of teaching and learning which are consistently presented on Australian university websites, overall there is a lack of depth and substance in regard to the presentation of serious scholarship and innovation in the field. Universities are generally failing to present evidence of more refined aspects of teaching and learning including specialised bodies to engage with the scholarship, dissemination of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research foci and national or international impact beyond the institution.

Though only giving a flavour of some of the issues that affect the visibility, and in turn the impact, of teaching and learning in Australian Universities, this study has succeeded in presenting an overview of some of the areas to which more focus may need to be prompted. Without such focus and subsequent visibility, teaching and learning will likely continue to struggle for consistency and quality across the sector, exacerbating the problems of a scholarship that has been struggling for recognition since its inception. Prospective students will also continue to be existentially led to make decisions about various universities' suitability for them from a research-intensivity perspective – not on what they might expect in terms of learning and teaching. An obvious next step in this research would be to repeat the study in 12-24 months with the aim of ascertaining if current levels of the visibility of teaching and learning on university web-sites is changing or increasing, especially in light of national teaching excellence initiatives such as the Transforming Practice Programme funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (Office for Learning and Teaching, 2014) and the publication of papers such as this. Universities meanwhile need to reflect upon what messages they intend to give and are actually giving to people who access their web-sites in terms of the apparent value they place on teaching and learning. In other words: 'do they care if they got a low score on our scale?' If they do, then they also obviously need to consider why they got the score they did and either enhance the prominence of the things they are doing, or start to do things which would enhance their performance in learning and teaching and *then* work on making it prominent on their web-site.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors acknowledge that there are no financial interests or benefits arising for them or any other persons from the application of this research.

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