



Quality unit co-ordination: achieving excellence with sessional academic leaders

Sharon Davies

Curtin University, Australia

Val Morey

Curtin University, Australia

Abstract

This paper presents an action learning project demonstrating how a structured professional learning (PL) programme transformed the capabilities of sessional academic staff, enabling them to transition into unit coordinator (UC) roles. By equipping these staff with the leadership skills necessary to manage digital learning environments effectively, the study explicates a model that enhances student engagement and institutional teaching quality. The aim was to develop a consistent approach to the design and delivery of the PL programme that would position sessional teaching staff to move into UC roles. The work of these UCs is critical in ensuring quality experiences for students who learn in primarily digital-based learning environments. Approaches to professional development that focus on fostering transformational change (Lamm et al., 2021) were taken rather than the transactional information-giving that characterises some PL. Key to the approach was the application of an action learning cycle and scaffolding frameworks and tools. The underpinning critical reflection elicited deep participant input and perspectives that created a fruitful social constructivist learning environment (Chuang, 2021). The paper demonstrates how transformational learning was achieved for the participant group and focuses on explaining their learning journey through the systematic application of Brookfield's reflective lenses (2017) as well as other key scaffolds. This report provides guidance for a capacity-building model that will inform those in higher educational leadership seeking to develop staff into first-level leadership roles.

Keywords: higher education leadership; professional learning; action learning; sessional staff; reflective practice.

Background

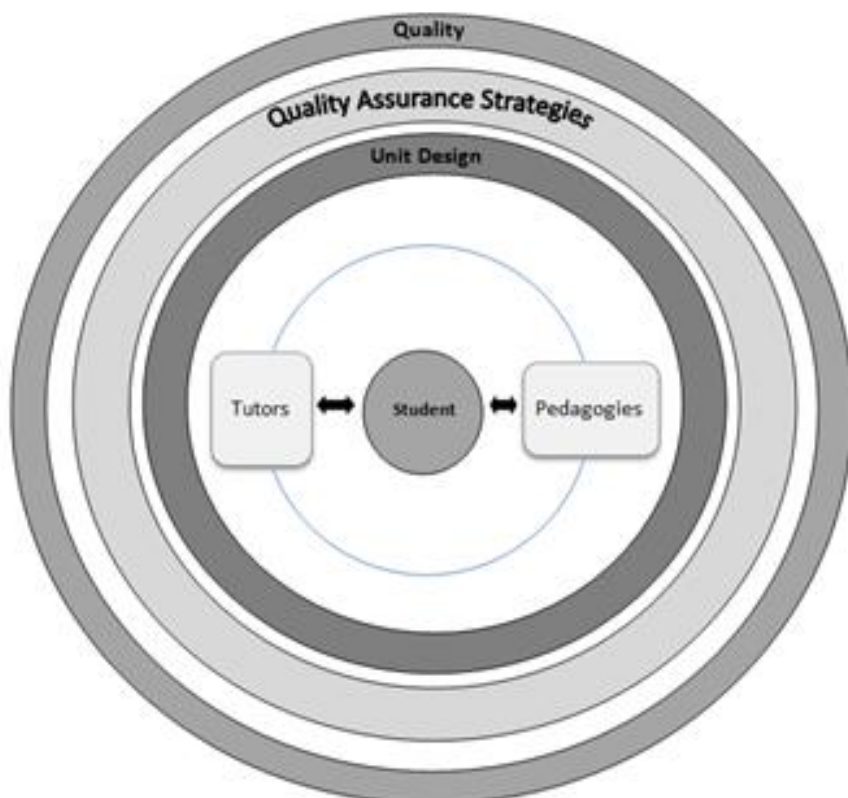
Educational leaders are commonly concerned with managing complex factors that impact student experience, engagement, and retention. Much research into how to optimise student engagement and retention in higher education (Christie, Munro and Fisher, 2004; Scott, 2005; 2009) has focused on the relationships between recognised at-risk student cohorts and academic performance and retention outcomes. While interventions for such cohorts can potentially benefit all students, models that only use at-risk variables often exclude other more generalised measures central to student engagement and retention, such as the support provided by lecturing staff, course satisfaction, and student achievement (Willcoxson, Cotter and Joy, 2011). Research findings by Farr-Wharton et al. (2018) suggest that lecturer–student exchanges are of pivotal importance in engagement and retention modelling and these exchanges must be adapted effectively to increasingly digital learning environments to build engagement. The critical role of PL for teachers and leaders in optimising student impact in digital learning environments has been recognised for some time (Dixon and Dixon, 2010; Goold et al., 2010) and continues to be a focus as digital environments become more ubiquitous and sophisticated, particularly post-pandemic (Robinson and Al-Freih, 2024; Zhao et al., 2024). The question of how to effectively and efficiently design and deliver quality PL for those engaged in teaching higher education students now and in the near future is therefore of interest to many. Alongside this concern is the challenge of ensuring that growing numbers of sessional academic staff remain engaged in PL that supports them and develops their skills. This paper provides an explanation of the design of a PL programme that can be both repeatedly applied in the context described and enable application to other contexts and purposes. It describes how a theory-based pedagogical model provided a strong theory–practice link for leaders and participants and informed design of the programme.

Purpose and conceptual foundation

The importance of appropriate design and theoretical foundation have been found to be central to quality PL for teaching in digital learning environments (Dixon and Dixon, 2010). One Australian study (Maor and Volet, 2007) found good quality programmes that were theoretically grounded, but urged more development of effective pedagogical models, built from theoretical foundations, to ensure strong theory–practice links. A conceptual framework applied to learning and teaching quality was developed for this project to

ensure that strong links were maintained to theory-informed methodology. Figure 1 depicts a framework that positions students centrally and shows tutor/UC-student actions and interactions as being vital to creating good quality learning and student experience (as illustrated in the diagram below).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework to ensure quality of the product, the teaching and the learning (Davies and Morey).



PL setting and design

This project comprising the design and implementation of a PL programme was situated in an Australian university that conducts PL for approximately 200 sessional academic staff who are hired on a casual basis to work in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses. PL for new unit co-ordinators (UCs) had previously focused on technical skills and building knowledge of university policy and procedures. The project sought to develop more transformational approaches, to address deeper leadership development that equipped new UCs for the complexities and demands of their roles. An action learning process was applied to engage participants in a structured action learning cycle to build deep engagement, with Brookfield's framework (2017) employed to enable deep and targeted reflection and a structured digital tool to scaffold and record such reflections. Brookfield's four lenses were applied to the role of UC in a unit of study in a university programme.

Justification for selecting Brookfield's framework is provided in the literature review that follows.

Guiding questions

Three questions guided the project:

1. What are the essential characteristics, culture, and conditions of effective PL design that help unit coordinators develop their skills for technologically enhanced learning environments?
2. How can action learning and an action learning cycle support UCs in implementing, observing, and critically reflecting on their interactions with students and teams?
3. In what ways can unit coordinators respond to the needs of students in technologically enhanced units to enhance their learning experience and engagement?

Literature review

A review of literature was undertaken to determine an appropriate theory base for the design of a programme for quality PL for casual academic staff, which also takes into account increasingly digital learning environments.

Theoretical/philosophical approach

As the project was concerned with developing leadership capacity, it was essential that the programme design reflected a theoretical approach to leadership appropriate to educational leadership. In this project, the intention was to clearly link individual PL to teaching practices that impact on students. The programme thus represents a vital part of the quality assurance strategies as shown in Figure 1. The challenges of providing PL for sessional academic staff have been well recognised in Australian and global higher education (Beaton and Gilbert, 2013; Harvey et al., 2015; Crimmins, Oprescu and Nash, 2017; Baik, Naylor and Corrin, 2018; McComb, Eather and Imig, 2020) and so solutions needed to be workable with sessional academic staff.

The intention of the project was to transcend limitations that had previously been assumed in order to provide authentic and transformational PL for sessional staff. Transformational approaches recognise the complexity and interrelatedness of the various components of educational leadership roles: technical knowledge, conceptual framing, relational skills, and anchoring to a values-driven educational purpose (Lamm et al., 2021; Kennedy, Pavlova and Lee, 2022). Such approaches go beyond simple transactions of work for extrinsic reward. Lamm et al. (2021, p.2) claim that transformational leadership development approaches will be the only way that universities will be able to meet the challenges of current higher education environments and begin to address the 'dearth of individuals who specifically possess enhanced leadership skills and competencies that twenty-first century educational institutions demand and need'. Networks/relationships theory (Brass et al., 2004; Borgatti and Halgin, 2011; Azorin, Harris and Jones, 2019) also informs the work in recognising the two-way relationship of impact between employees and their organisations as various conditions and actions are present. Borgatti and Halgin emphasise the enhanced impact that can result from systematic actions that involve and engage employees, with Azorin, Harris, and Jones discussing the impact of purposeful distributed leadership. The ideas about role fulfilment that arise from networks/relationships theory also align to Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (1985) which highlights the importance of fulfilling individual psychological needs, in this case as linked to employees' view of themselves as competent professionals.

Theoretical rationale for the approach

Action learning frameworks provide a theoretical foundation as well as the structures and processes that forge theory–practice links. Engaging in critical reflection is essential for continuous development of teaching practice, and an action learning approach can enable and manage reflective processes, both individually and as part of the learning community. Action learning which utilises cycles of learning and critical reflection in a real-world context, with authentic problems to be solved, has been applied by numerous practitioners as a powerful and empowering way of effecting change (Brockbank and McGill, 2003; Dewar and Sharp, 2006). Crucial to the action learning process is the role of the critical friend (Noor and Shafee, 2021), which a significant component of the learning programme developed.

Whilst critical reflection is key to transformative learning and praxis change, it does not necessarily occur organically nor always effectively. Its value can be enhanced through the application of frameworks which develop understandings about the nature and purpose of critical reflection, such as the concept of the reflective labyrinth (Sellers and Moss, 2016). Frameworks also structure steps and guide participants into productive reflective habits (Bolton, 2001; Hickson, 2011; Brookfield, 2017). Brookfield's framework (2017) is based on a construct of four lenses or perspectives: self, (in this case the participants as new UCs); students (their students being taught in an online unit); peers (their fellow participants and the programme facilitators); and scholarship (the relevant theoretical literature). The framework's value as a model that integrates well with other aspects of transformative learning and personal development has been advocated by Pohland and Bova (2000) and White (2021). Brookfield's framework was thus found to be well matched to the context and intent of the project undertaken and to the development of the learning programme. The literature found enabled the PL design to go beyond the simplistic provision of information through methods that provided a framework that promoted critical reflection and growth and remained linked to a theoretical frame.

Method

An action learning cycle was implemented with five participants new to the role of unit co-ordination, with the action learning embedded as they embarked on their first co-ordination of a unit taught online. The project was conducted in two phases over a 19-week timeframe: 1) a PL and development phase followed by 2) an action and reflection phase.

Participants

Sessional tutors teaching in ITE programmes in technologically enhanced learning environments in an Australian university were invited to participate in the project as a pathway to becoming a UC. Five participants were recruited and participants were financially compensated. The study was conducted with the approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the authors' institution (Curtin University, Western Australia). Participants have been anonymised and assigned the following pseudonyms: Bailey, Casey, Jamie, Morgan, and Sam.

Planning

A small trial was conducted with participants to elicit valuable feedback and input into the design of the programme. The trial helped to identify their key learning needs and formulate the learning outcomes.

Phases

Phase One comprised a theory-based PL and development package where researchers facilitated three two-hour modules via Microsoft Teams across a six-week period. Pre and post tasks/activities were emailed to each participant one week prior to and following each of the three modules. These included reflective activities, relevant readings, video links, and resources. Following each of the three modules, participants anonymously completed a GroupMap to record their thoughts and ideas. Prompts were provided for each reflection: what I liked, what I learned, what was lacking, what I longed for.

PL participants also documented their thoughts as anonymous responses using GroupMap. This provided a safe space for participants to share opinions, understandings, and misunderstandings, and enabled researchers' decision-making about how to tailor discussions and questions during future modules and discussions. Anonymous responses aimed to reduce power imbalances, fostered co-construction of knowledge, and encouraged dialogue and reflection between researchers and participants, as well as among participants themselves. Trust, communication, and collaboration were also facilitated, which contributed to evolving the community of practice (Eggs, 2012; Akinyemi, Rembe and Nkonki, 2020).

In Phase Two, an action and reflection phase which followed immediately, participants were each assigned as UC to a 13-week ITE university unit of study teaching in a technologically enhanced learning environment. During this teaching time, participants engaged in four one-hour online sessions with researchers, using Microsoft Teams.

Structure and tools

Both phases included synchronous (scheduled) and asynchronous (self-paced) learning. Participants were provided with a digital reflection tool (DRT) which was formulated to stimulate, structure, and record reflections. The tool was created using Microsoft PowerPoint, with scaffolding questions that encouraged critical reflection and which

incorporated the Harvard visible thinking framework 'I see, I think, I wonder' (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2022). The pivotal role of the critical friend (Noor and Shafee, 2021) was provided by the researchers in this project, who were experienced UCs, and university academics. Throughout Phase One and Phase Two, they engaged collaboratively with participants to share reflections and provoke critical questioning around UCs' reflections. Table 1 summarises the method followed.

Table 1. Summary of method over phases one and two.

PHASE	PARTICIPANTS	TIMELINE	KEY ACTIVITIES	MECHANISMS AND FRAMEWORKS
Phase One	Five sessional academic staff members interested in becoming UCs	Six weeks	Three two-hour online professional learning modules (synchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Teams • Microsoft PowerPoint • Embedded interactive tools (GroupMap) • Brookfield's lenses • Reflective labyrinth
			Module One: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project aims and tools • Action learning • Critical reflection • Critical friend support • Brookfield's lenses 	
			Module Two: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership models • Mindsets • Communities of practice • Community of inquiry 	
			Module Three: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community of inquiry • Theoretical framework • Unit coordination life cycle • Communication styles 	
			Online facilitated collaborative activities following each module (asynchronous)	
Informal online peer (with other UC participants) interactions (asynchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Teams • Blackboard Collaborate 			
Individual participant journaling (asynchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital reflection tool 			
Pre and post tasks/activities: individual (asynchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Via email 			
Phase Two	Same five sessional academic staff members working in their first UC role	13 weeks	Participants actively engaged in their online units as UCs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blackboard Learning management system
			Four one-hour online facilitated discussion and support sessions (synchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Teams • Digital reflection tool • Framing and scaffolding questions using Microsoft PowerPoint

			Informal online peer interactions (with other UC participants) (asynchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Teams • Blackboard Collaborate
			Individual participant journaling (asynchronous)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital reflection tool

Data collected and analysed

Qualitative data collected included participant reflective comments in the DRT entries documenting personal reflections, anonymous GroupMap responses, and researcher notes from interactions during sessions. Thematic analysis and inductive coding were conducted (Braun and Clarke, 2006), followed by triangulation of analyses between researchers to validate the emerging themes. Data were analysed thematically related to the research questions and quotations from participants are included in this paper. The findings and discussion address the focus questions guiding the project and highlight key learnings for participants.

Limitations

This paper reports on a single project undertaken in one institution, therefore the experiences and findings may not be generalised to other contexts. The purpose of the project was to gain rich understandings of how structured and informed processes could enable authentic PL for the sessional academic staff asked to co-ordinate units. The small group size may not be generally representative of the wider cohort of sessional academic staff at the institution, but the emphasis was on how the design of the programme enabled each participant to learn and develop in a supportive environment.

Findings

Findings for each of the research questions are summarised here, with examples and illustrations indicative of all participants’ learning provided in the ensuing discussion of the themes emerging from each.

Focus Question One was concerned with key characteristics, culture, and conditions of effective PL design to support new UCs. Findings were that careful structure of content;

the creation of safe, collaborative environments that enabled peer learning as well as guidance from experts; and the extended, practice-embedded application of the action learning cycle were critical to providing the necessary support.

Focus Question Two asked how an action learning approach could support UCs working in technologically enhanced learning environments in the implementation, observation, and critical reflection on interactions and experiences with students and their teams. Findings were that the action learning cycle enacted developed the practice of all participants due to the structure and guidance provided using Brookfield's lenses as well as other scaffolding tools.

Focus Question Three asked how UCs could be responsive to students enrolled in technologically enhanced units of study in ways that aim to enhance student experience and engagement. Findings were that the new UCs discovered insights relevant to each of them that enhanced their ability to be responsive to diverse students in their units.

Discussion

The findings illustrate the impact of the key components of the programme in enabling new UCs to better respond to the needs of their students. The theoretical and conceptual design foundation showed: how tutors/UCs and pedagogies interact as agents that impact on students (as shown in Figure 1), how the participants underwent a PL experience which was personally and professionally transformative, the pivotal role of social networks, and the value of clear and supportive practical frameworks and templates. The discussion section is structured by the research questions and provides illustration of insights related to the themes.

Characteristics, culture, and conditions of effective PL design

The transformative approach relied on diverse methods of engagement, encouraging participants to share their input and perspectives. This approach fostered a respectful and productive learning environment, aligned with social constructivist principles (Chuang, 2021). As a result, the programme successfully established the culture and conditions required for meaningful transformative learning. Casey commented that 'having the time to stop and reflect on my practice has been of benefit, but most importantly has been the

opportunity to work with a small group of like-minded peers'. Sam also remarked that the PL 'certainly made me think differently about my role — particularly with the theory... all gave me opportunities for reflective practice in ways I hadn't considered before'. The remuneration for the time spent engaging in the PL programme contributed to a culture based on professional respect and allowed willing participants to extend their learning as they sought a new teaching role. The learning programme and tools provided supported new UCs to be able to lead and manage units and teams in ways that enhance the student experience, and thus the PL design was found to be effective, with the overall aim achieved.

Action learning to enable UCs' observations and authentic critical reflection on interactions and experiences

A focus of the research project was on UC's own critical reflections on practice. The Phase One and Phase Two learning environment facilitated collaboration, mutual support, and a community of practice between participants. Development of the PL programme into iterative cycles of theoretical input, reflection, and on-the-job action over an extended period enabled the synergies of action research and action learning to be realised (Sankaran, 2015). This local innovation improved on the earlier approach of providing theoretical/technical knowledge in formal sessions and then expecting that personal learning and development would ensue organically and without scaffolding mechanisms. The action learning approach that framed the action learning undertaken by participants made the learning process deliberate and explicit, and enabled the aims of the project to be realised. Critical reflection allowed for a deeper level of exploration of assumptions, beliefs, and values to challenge existing ways of working and inform future actions.

Integral to enabling structured reflection was the role of the researchers as experienced UCs and acting as critical friends to participants. Peer relationships that developed between participants brought an added layer of critical friend support, stimulating discussion based on real life experiences and current interchanges between student and lecturer (MacPhail, Tannehill and Ataman, 2021). This was highlighted by Casey, who said:

I feel that our small group has become a great support to each other. We respond quickly to each other, both acknowledging strengths and fears as part of the process of this steep learning curve.

The iterative nature of the cycle and the feedback from experts and peers allowed the time for focused application of each of Brookfield's lenses in ways that were directly relevant to the observations of and interactions with students in real time. Thus, the action learning cycle demonstrated the power of well-informed action learning framework and process applied in a way that enabled authentic problem-solving that responded to an immediate need to 'get things done' (Brockbank and McGill, 2003).

A key resource provided to the participants to support reflections was the DRT. This tool served as a written diary for participants and was valuable for them to articulate and record their thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout the project. It acted as record of personal growth as participants were able to reflect on past entries, gain insights on their own perspectives and beliefs, identify achievements, and see any challenges.

Enabling unit coordinators to be responsive to students and enhance student experience

Tools and frameworks were found to be critical to transformative learning, translating participants' learning to their teaching practices, and enhancing their responsiveness. The application of Brookfield's lenses proved a productive and valuable theoretical frame for process, and the DRT was key to developing praxis. The DRT was motivating for participants as it gave transparency to recognising how they were applying their learning and transferring skills to this new context. Bailey confirmed this motivation, stating that:

I have found it motivating to engage in new tasks and tasks that help develop me as an individual — especially as we had to often be accountable too — so the reflections kept me on my toes in wanting to do well for the university, the course co-ordinators, and the students.

Reflections included ideas for managing their technologically enhanced learning environment and for how they intended to establish a safe, supportive environment for working with students. This was highlighted by Bailey, who said:

Our mindset seems linked, particularly in supporting our students. Not treating every student the same and recognising that everybody comes from a different background. The way in which the current generations think differently and the best way to present information to them.

These notions were echoed by Morgan, who said 'I will feel more empathy for the role of students as learners who are positioned to receive information by relying on my expertise. Trust is crucial'.

Immediately following the PL modules in Phase One, UCs began teaching and fulfilling the role of UC in Phase Two. This marked a transition in thinking by participants, from an operational approach to unit coordination, to how Brookfield's framework could be embedded in their teaching practice. This was evident in Casey's contrasting reflection from Phase One, stressing that, 'the theory on leadership practices was interesting, but secondary to the urgent operational tasks we needed to know how to do'. In a later remark made during Phase Two, Casey added 'I am beginning to understand that being a UC is far more than just knowing unit content, administrative tasks and managing students'.

As participants began to focus on finding opportunities to support and encourage the process of creating a deep and meaningful learning experience for students, Jamie commented:

Loved the four lenses. It made me really examine and reflect on my method of teaching and how my experience is echoed in my approach. As a UC, I need to be conscious of placing the operational part of my role in the wider context of social constructs, informed by Brookfield's theoretical framework.

Thus, during Phase Two, participants began to embrace aspects of Brookfield's framework, which enabled a positive approach to change in understanding the UC role and signalled the transformational processes.

The significance of utilising Brookfield's framework continued to evolve during Phase Two. Increasingly, participants cited aspects of Brookfield's framework in their reflections. Sam reflected on working with peers and colleagues, emphasising that:

Asking for help is critical as we cannot be experts in all things. Leaning on the expertise of others to support our pedagogy enhances the experience in the role as Educator (UC), and the experience of the pre-service teachers (students).

Reflections by participants during Phase Two illuminated approaches informed by Brookfield's framework, demonstrating empowerment for the group as they tuned in to different perspectives and how they interacted with others.

On completion of teaching in Phase Two, feedback received by UCs from students was intrinsically rewarding for participants and offered confirmation of the value of utilising Brookfield's framework as a tool for teaching. Jamie commented on feedback from students:

I have received some lovely comments and emails from students which make me think I am coming across as I had intended — focused, on task and knowledgeable... conscious of the Brookfield lens two — our learners' eyes and ensuring they "are hearing what we wanted them to hear and seeing what we wanted them to see". I am also training them in "how to teach" — and cope!

Thus, not only did their learning about the value of Brookfield's lenses become apparent for their own learning journey, but also they realised the potential to incorporate those learnings into their own practice as teachers for the benefit of their students.

Conclusion and recommendations

This project sought to identify and explain key characteristics, culture, and conditions of effective PL design that supports UCs to adapt and develop their skills in technologically enhanced learning environments, through the application of an action learning cycle. This report shows how a framework and tools were used to move towards deeper, transformational leadership, and to provide guidance for managing shifts in focus from operational to authentic leadership. The experiences documented explicate the journeys of new UCs in their professional identity development. The findings contribute to discourse about the development of professional identity amongst sessional academic staff (McComb, Eather and Imig, 2020; Richardson, Suseno and Wardale, 2020; McComb and Eather, 2023) in explicating structures and processes that enabled the engagement and support of these staff.

Key to the success of this project was recognising that the allocation of time, appropriate staff, and the development of tools and resources are essential to ensure that the engagement activities are feasible, sustainable, and effective, and that the sessional staff

participants are adequately compensated and supported for their involvement (Baik, Naylor and Corrin, 2018; McComb, Eather and Imig, 2020). Enabling transformational perspectives takes time, planning, and purposeful effort: it cannot be achieved in a one-time PL session, nor without guiding frameworks and protocols. Shifting to transformational perspectives and leadership practices to support the development of staff, enhance programmes, and provide excellent learning and teaching environments requires trust that capacity will be developed. However, developing a culture of transformational leadership perspectives and practice can have broader and longer-term impacts for the participants and for the organisation, in enhancing motivation and supporting change processes.

To forge meaningful theory/practice links, an iterative, cyclic approach is optimum with frameworks, models, and tools essential to the process allowing people to recognise what needs to change and why. This project demonstrates that action learning is a very appropriate approach where iterative and increasingly deep changes can be achieved. Brookfield's lenses are an especially useful framework for this purpose, especially when combined with other tools that help participants link self-awareness of their current abilities to the organisational mission. The model and approach used provide the essential theory/practice links that were recommended by Maor and Volet (2007).

There are limitations to generalisability of findings stemming from the single case and small group size. However, the value of exploring approaches to the support and development of sessional academic staff and allocating sufficient resources to do so authentically will apply widely to different contexts.

Future research directions could include: the application of similar design processes in diverse higher education settings to enable richer understandings of transformative practice change; data analysis of student satisfaction in units led by co-ordinators who have engaged in action learning to transform practice; investigation of longer-term impacts on student retention; and an iterative review to determine the sustainability and persistence of practice changes. With this knowledge, students can benefit from enhanced expertise on the part of UCs who have a more sophisticated understanding of how to lead teams and manage units in ways that support the learning of diverse student cohorts. Students can benefit from a more coherent and consistent approach to the management of units that help enable a fair, equitable, and high-quality learning experience.

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Author details

Sharon Davies is an experienced Senior Lecturer who has held multiple leadership roles at Curtin University's School of Education in Western Australia, including coordinating undergraduate and postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses. She has extensive expertise in designing, developing, and renewing high-quality teaching content and materials, including curricula for various units and courses. Currently, Sharon is the Academic Lead for Quality Assurance, overseeing the accreditation of all ITE courses at Curtin University.

Valerie Morey is an Associate Professor of Education who has held senior leadership roles in the School of Education at Curtin University in Western Australia, including being Deputy Head of School and leading, managing, and developing staff. Val has experience with leading and overseeing programme design, as well as expertise in Initial Teacher Education programme accreditation. Val now works as a consultant to lead projects and undertake reviews associated with course accreditation, as well as continuing educational research.

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