

# Academic culture and the scholarship of university learning and teaching: Wearing two hats for a win-win

Professor Greg Shaw, PhD

## Abstract

Universities as we know them today have their roots in over a thousand years of development. And yet, education and even adult education is part of the very essence of what we are as humans and it can be traced back to the very beginnings of human culture. The first universities emerged from religious communities. Centred on conversations and studies of religion, philosophy, language, mathematics, they represented communities of teachers and scholars. In many ways the organisation of these 'university communities' and the kinds of educational activities that community members engaged in have not changed a great deal. Universities were, and still are, places of learning and sharing, of education in its broadest sense. They were, and still are, places of knowledge generation as well as knowledge dissemination. Like any community, universities formed and evolved their own subcultures of norms, practices and standards. Today the traditions that we hold within our individual universities are so often traced back to previous generations, and indeed in many examples, back to the European mediaeval university traditions, including the degrees that are offered and the academic dress that we so often recognise as symbolic of a university. But there are other artefacts that represent a university, particularly in relation to teaching and learning in universities.

Today the modern university in any country services many purposes. Present still is the centrality of the importance of research, and yet very often it is the educational endeavours within universities that dominate, enabled from a funding and activity point of view. Thus typically, there are two aspects of university academics' work, being teaching for student learning and research.

Universities today unlike in the past have become popular and universal. The percentage of people within a population undertaking university education is steadily growing such that class numbers are swelling and teaching workloads increasing. Coupled with this is an increased expectation for university academics to continue to engage in research and to collect the measurable outcomes of success through research publications and citations. The 'publish or perish' culture has not gone away but has increased in urgency including further expectations of publication quality and impacts. Within the workloads that academics today face, balancing the expectations of providing a quality learning experience for increasing numbers of students coupled with a growing expectation of producing quality research outputs, often causes stress points.

The need to provide a quality learning experience for students is causing us to rethink the nature of university teaching, and the professionalisation of university teaching. The idea that having a Master degree or increasingly a PhD as the only requirement to be employed as a university teaching academic is being tested. Increasingly there is a movement of professionalisation of university teaching and the accreditation of teaching academics that goes beyond holding a discipline higher degree. There is a research supported recognition of

principles of teaching practice in university education and theories of adult learning and pedagogy, and that university teaching academics can achieve better learning outcomes in their students when they know something about these things. In many cases though academics themselves still believe that subject-based expertise is all that is needed.

There is an increasing sense that university teaching academics have two professions. They hold qualifications and experience in their subject profession, and typically their research activity reflects this. However, university teaching academics have a second profession as a university teacher. In most other areas of teaching, such as elementary schools and secondary schools, teachers are required to undertake a professional course as a teacher which incorporates not only subject content but also knowledge and skills of things such as curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, classroom management, psychology of learning etc. Schoolteachers are also required to achieve teacher registration. Teachers in universities are the exception to this, typically they are not required to have a qualification as a university teacher nor are they required to get registration as a university teacher. Increasingly though this position is changing.

As a university teacher, with a second area of professional focus, there are also opportunities for university academics to engage in research in their profession as a university teacher. Indeed, there are many advantages for university academics to do this. First, it provides a natural link into strengthening the concept of university teaching as a profession. One area that defines a profession is a research base associated with the profession. Additionally, when university academics engage in research around their practice, or around student learning, or around other issues relating to learning and teaching in universities, they strengthen their own understanding about learning and teaching in universities. This has a positive effect on the professional practice of university academics and their sense of well-being and professionalism within this, but equally as important it has a positive benefit to the quality of learning experiences and successful learning outcomes that university students have. However, there is an even more interesting possibility when academics engage in research relating to their profession as a university teaching academic.

When university teaching academics engage in processes of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), they also have opportunity in this to turn the scholarship of teaching and learning into research and into academic publications. So now we have the possibility of a double benefit for the individual academic. Not only are they improving their knowledge and skills as a university teaching academic, but they are also providing an additional opportunity of focus for their research and publication. In an environment where publication outputs are increasingly important for individual academics, the possibilities for generating SoTL publication outputs becomes a positive personal, as well as institutional, outcome.

## Bio Greg Shaw

Prof Greg Shaw is the Dean of the College of Education at Charles Darwin University, Australia. His research has focused on a range of topics within education but typically addresses teachers' professional development, and the use of digital technologies in educational contexts particularly in online approaches to teaching and learning. He has extensive international experience, having worked in Papua New Guinea, China, Malaysia, Philippines, Fiji, Indonesia as well as in Australia. He began his career as an agricultural science secondary

school teacher and has taught in primary schools, secondary schools, vocational education and training, and for the last 30 years at university.

