

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE

**REFLECTING ON THE UNSW SCIENTIA EDUCATION  
ACADEMY: A CASE STUDY FOR INSPIRING  
EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Universities around the world are facing challenges of how to promote, recognise, and reward educational excellence. In this article, we present a reflection on the Scientia Education Academy at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, examining its creation, goals, and activities. The resultant emergent learning and understandings add to the literature of alternative, comparative, and complementary perspectives on teaching academies in the higher education landscape. We hope that the article will help to inform higher education institutions who may be considering ways of promoting, recognising, and rewarding educational excellence through the design, creation, and operation of an appropriate academy.

**Keywords:** Academic development, educational leadership, educational development, teaching and learning; university teaching

## INTRODUCTION

Leading research-intensive universities around the world recognise the importance and challenges of valuing and rewarding educational excellence (Kindler, 2012). A number of universities have adopted the strategy of creating cross-disciplinary networks of staff interested in education to improve teaching practice and the recognition of teaching excellence. One variant of these networks is the distinguished academy with a limited membership, where members are selected based on their outstanding contributions to teaching, or more broadly, to education.

Within the Asian region, The National University of Singapore (Lakshminarayanan *et al.*, 2012); and Nanyang Technological University (NTU Teaching Excellence Academy, 2012) have created teaching academies. In Australasia, Monash University has formed the Monash Education Academy (MEA, n.d.); while in North America, institutions such as University of Texas, Austin (UTA, n.d.) and The University of Toronto (UT, n.d.) have established teaching academies. Each academy is set up differently, and pursues slightly different goals. It is beyond the scope of this short, reflective article to fully review existing academies in higher education and we thus refer the reader to Savory (2005) for many historical examples.

This article presents our reflections on a recently established academy: the Scientia Education Academy (henceforth “SEA”), commenced at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney in 2016. Three years on, we present our reflections on the SEA with respect to its creation, its goals, and its activities. It is through this reflective process that new learnings and understandings emerge. This includes responding to such questions as: What progress has the SEA made towards its goals? What were the barriers to, and drivers of, success?

Consequently, we believe that the present work will help inform universities, colleges, and polytechnics that may be considering ways of recognising and rewarding educational excellence through the design, creation, and operation of an appropriate academy.

## **MISSIONS AND GOALS**

The *raison d'être* of the SEA (SEA, 2016a) is to inspire educational excellence. Our mission statement is essentially a statement of purpose and, looking back, we see that having a mission statement was a necessary and important part of the strategic management process for the SEA (Darbi, 2012). Not only was it essential for decision-making, but it was useful for practical day-to-day operations (Mullane, 2002).

However, in retrospect we acknowledge the struggle between vague, high-level motherhood statements on one hand, and narrow, authoritarian prescriptions on the other. We thus learned that a balance was required—something strong and inclusive with broad appeal, while still providing some focus and meaning.

Thus, the mission statement was fleshed out in more detail to form SEA's strategic vision for education (SEA, 2016a), namely, to:

- Promote a scholarly, evidence-based approach
- Champion innovation
- Enhance the student experience
- Advise on policies and strategies
- Model a collegial community of mentoring.

On reflection, we found that these extra layers embody, on one hand, inspirational, aspirational, wide-ranging and inclusive principles while providing guidance, framing and direction on the other.

## **CREATION AND EARLY DAYS**

The first discussions for the establishment of an academy came soon after an important event. In 2014, an unprecedented number of UNSW staff were recognised via national awards for educational excellence (Australian Government, 2016). Consequently, at that time there was strong interest and attention regarding teaching excellence across the institution. Looking back, this timing provided a strong impetus not only for fostering discussions around initiatives for teaching excellence, but also for taking action.

An environmental scan of existing academies from Asia, North America, and Australia was undertaken. This not only included the academies mentioned in the Introduction, but also institutions such as Curtin University (Curtin University, 2016), Griffith University (GU, n.d.), University of

Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison, n.d.), and University of Wollongong (WATTLE, 2018). Through this process we have come to know the benefits of considering different kinds of academies across the globe, bringing meaningful aspects into the design of the SEA.

Drawing on this prior work, a blueprint was developed that aligned with the UNSW 2025 Strategy's themes of educational excellence as well as supporting and valuing teaching excellence (UNSW, 2015). In hindsight, this alignment with the larger strategic goals of the institution helped to ensure that the SEA and its members would push in the same direction for mutual advances.

An initial motion for the establishment of an education academy was endorsed by the University Council in 2015. A business case (Crisp, 2016) supported the establishment of the SEA. Looking back, we have learnt that the support of the executive leadership team within the university was of critical importance, and that establishing appropriate funding and clear expectations were crucial.

In 2016, the SEA was officially launched with the announcement of 15 inaugural Fellows.

## **WHAT'S IN A TITLE?**

After three years, when we look back we can see that the heart of the academy is its Fellows. The title of Fellow has become the highest educational honour at UNSW, surpassing the previous benchmark of Vice-Chancellor's Awards for Teaching Excellence. These fellowships have acknowledged outstanding UNSW educators for their drive, enthusiasm, and expertise in teaching, curriculum design and delivery, and for inspiring students and colleagues to strive for excellence in educational outcomes. Each Fellow has proudly used the title "UNSW Scientia Education Fellow". We have thus learnt that prestige has played an important role in positioning the fellowships as the highest form of institutional acknowledgement regarding educational excellence.

## **ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE**

The Academy has grown each year to its current mature size of approximately 40 Fellows. The collegiality experienced by the initial cohort of Fellows led to a strong desire to maintain a "flat" non-hierarchical design free of internal reporting lines. However as the Academy has grown, some organisational structure has been necessary. We have settled on a minimalist approach with a Director (and from 2019, Co-Directors) and three Deputies of the SEA elected by the Fellows to provide internal and external leadership. Executive

leadership and steering has been provided by ex-officio members of the SEA, namely, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education). The leadership group primarily undertakes a co-ordination and dissemination function. Individual projects by the Academy may be led by volunteers from the whole membership group. This balancing of positions with volunteering helps to maintain the strongly collegial and egalitarian nature of the Academy. Through this recollection, we can see the value of the egalitarianism and comradery personified by the omission of internal reporting lines, balanced with the important needs of leadership.

As of 2019, the SEA has grown to include 40 Fellows, drawn from every faculty across UNSW. This ensures a rich diversity of interests, skills and perspectives. On reflection, we have been strengthened by the ethnic, gender, and cultural diversity of the Fellows. As a community of practice, the Academy has been characterised by especially high levels of respect and collegiality. Through this we learnt the importance of the SEA embodying diversity and respect as key principles.

## **EXPECTATIONS OF FELLOWS**

As with the creation of any new role, clearly communicating expectations has been paramount. Scientia Education Fellows are expected to:

- Provide leadership and vision in learning and teaching across UNSW and in the higher education sector
- Enhance the profile and quality of learning and teaching within UNSW, including innovation in curriculum design and delivery, including face-to-face, blended and online education
- Contribute to the overall UNSW learning and teaching strategy, the Scientia Education Experience Model and improvements in educational practice
- Contribute to positioning UNSW as an exemplar institution for student experience and outcomes
- Contribute to scholarly outputs in learning and teaching.

In retrospect, we see that establishing these principles helped to shape the academic identity of each Fellow, as they grew into their new role and embodied their Fellowship (Israel, 2011). Furthermore, we learnt that new Fellows could contribute more quickly and effectively when they knew what was expected of them (Wallace, 2009).

## NOMINATION OF FELLOWS

Potential Fellows are nominated by the Dean of each faculty through the submission of a written application, with the final decision resting with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education). Each Dean has an opportunity to contribute and shape the SEA by putting forward representatives from their own faculty. Generally, Deans have discharged this responsibility through the use of internal committee structures. By having Deans nominate Fellows, there is institutional support for each Fellow and this has helped to boost their status. However, on reflection we recognise that there remains a risk of a perceived lack of transparency in the process which is largely linked to the process a Dean chooses to take selecting nominees. Thus, we have learnt the importance of lucidity in the nomination process.

## ACTIVITIES

Since 2016, SEA Fellows have proposed and developed a range of activities that can be aligned with inspiring educational excellence. These activities include opportunities to foster the individual work of Fellows, and activities that aim to build collaboration within and beyond the SEA.

### *Monthly meetings*

Monthly meetings have given the Fellows an opportunity to come together, build a sense of community, and discuss matters related to teaching and learning. When we look back, we see the value of these structured meetings due to the meaningful and value-for-time (Peterson, 2015; Harvey *et al.*, 2017) discourse taking place, aligning with the SEA's mission of inspiring education excellence—both internally (Fellow-to-Fellow), and externally as individual Fellows or a group. These monthly meetings provide not only a forum for exchanging ideas, but have also enabled the establishment of collaborative projects.

### *Public lectures*

Fellows have been invited speakers for the monthly Scientia Education Academy Lecture Series (SEA, 2016b). It is well known that the public lecture is a suitable forum for “the diffusion of knowledge”, with the concept dating back to well before the 1830s (Scott, 1980). On reflection, we have seen how these distinguished public lectures showcase and disseminate the innovative educational practices of Fellows who inspire their students to achieve great outcomes both in their studies and future careers. In addition,

audiences have come to know each Fellow's particular approaches to enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of students as well as their personal career journey (SEA, 2016b). Thus, we have learnt how these public lectures formed an important vehicle for making progress towards the SEA's goals. Placing these lectures online (<https://teaching.unsw.edu.au/scientia-education-academy-lecture-series>) has also resulted in significant exposure of the Academy beyond the university, and has allowed both colleagues and friends to catch up on lectures they missed. In retrospect, the Lecture series, and its associated publicity, has been one of the most significant recognition- and reputation-building aspects for the Academy.

### ***Overarching Academy projects***

There have been two noteworthy, overarching projects involving the SEA:

1. The first aims to address challenges of measuring educational excellence through portfolios, a strategy that has been identified to have many benefits (Seldin & Miller, 2008). This includes identifying the dimensions of teaching excellence, and designing evaluation tools that can be used to provide recognition and essential feedback to staff about their teaching performance. That project has resulted in the development of an ePortfolio which enables staff to demonstrate their educational achievements—myEducation Portfolio (SEA, 2019) On reflection, we can see that this aligns with, and has made progress towards, several of the SEA's goals, including promotion of scholarly evidence-based approaches, and advising on policies and strategies.
2. The second project involves elements of mentoring—a strategy that has been shown to bring benefits for mentees, mentors and their institutions (Johnson & Ridley, 2004). A targeted pilot scheme was established, where Fellows critically reviewed draft promotion or teaching award applications and gave feedback regarding appropriate forms of evidence and advice on how the drafts could be improved. Looking back, we can see how this aligned with the goal of modelling a collegial community of mentoring.

When we bear the above in mind, we can see that these initiatives have uniquely added to UNSW and have connected the SEA with the rest of the university, thus making progress towards the SEA's goals. We have learnt that through these initiatives, we have endeavoured to build a supportive culture—a community working together, rather than in isolation.

### ***Individual projects***

In addition to the above team project, there are a wide range of activities that are being led by the SEA Fellows on a more individual basis. Details of the projects and activities from 2017 may be found within the SEA's Annual Report (SEA, 2017). If we take a reflexive position, then we can see that these projects exemplify how the Fellows are contributing to the overall effort to enhance the quality of education at UNSW, in line with the UNSW 2025 Strategy.

### **SUPPORT**

In terms of central support, a full-time administrative role has been established, with the remit to support the SEA officially recognised within it. Central support included administrative management, promotion of the public lectures, website development, and grant management. In hindsight, we can see that a key element for the creation and functioning of our academy was support and resourcing. This aligns with the literature, in which “numerous studies have shown that perceived organizational support has positive consequences on both employees and organizations” (Caesens *et al.*, 2015).

Fellows had the opportunity to apply for an AUD5,000 individual grant each year, to be used for professional development or for projects that aim to enhance or promote educational excellence such as the Individual Project discussed earlier. In addition, there has been a recommendation that Fellows are relieved 10% of their time from normal duties to devote to their Fellowship and the SEA. On reflection, we have learnt that “buying out” time (Fox, 2007) is one of the ways in which management can meaningfully invest in supporting an academy.

### **WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?**

After three years, we consider it too early for the SEA to have fully achieved its goals. However, our reflection has led to learning about how enabling factors have assisted the SEA in progressing towards our goals.

Key considerations in the establishment and progression of the SEA were: a strong and balanced mission statement, leadership buy-in, a persuasive business case, autonomy of the Fellows balanced with appropriate governance/ leadership, diversity, transparency, establishing clear expectations, and providing administrative support.

Regarding operations, we observed that a sense of community was fostered through meaningful collaboration and opportunities to come together. Externally-facing events such as public lectures were important for visibility and dissemination. Moreover, support for team projects and individual activities was critical and realised through small grants and fractional time relief for Fellows.

Similar to case study research (Day Ashley, 2017), a generalisation to larger populations based on our single reflection is not our aim. Nevertheless, our very selection of an education academy case indicates that we are connecting it with a more comprehensive group of academy cases at universities, colleges, and polytechnics, and navigating towards a collective understanding of education academies within higher education.

These ideas add to the literature of alternative, comparative, and complementary perspectives on teaching academies in the higher education landscape. We encourage all institutions who may be exploring how they can promote, recognise, and reward educational excellence to consider the design, creation, and operation of an appropriate academy.

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