

Institutional approaches supporting the development of national tertiary learning and teaching grant applications

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This paper reports on findings from an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) special initiative project that investigates institutional resources, activities and processes that support applicants to develop OLT learning and teaching grant applications. The project is developing an online resource to assist institutions to benchmark their practices in order to lead quality improvements and professional development. Thirty-five institutions responded to an ethics compliant online questionnaire which sought information about institutional approaches that support authors to develop competitive OLT grant applications. This paper considers the responses for three questions from the larger questionnaire, namely, what respondents believe their institutions did well in this area, whether or not their approaches have been benchmarked since 2012 and the nature of any benchmarking exercise. The project's findings constitute the first mapping of practice in this area of endeavour across the sector. Analysis of the data for the question of what respondents thought their institutions did well identifies a range of resources, processes and activities which can assist institutions to benchmark their approaches. The data also suggest that there are differences in the level of resourcing between smaller and larger institutions which impact on the layering and complexity of practice. The data indicate that only four out of the 35 respondent institutions have benchmarked their approaches since 2012.

Keywords: Learning and teaching grant applications; Benchmarking; Professional development; Institutional support

Introduction

Competitive, national learning and teaching grants have gained prominence in the Australian higher education sector over the last decade (Smeal et al. 2011). The Office for Learning and

Teaching (OLT¹) has played a major role in this by administering a range of high profile learning and teaching grant (and teaching award and fellowship) programs and resources on behalf of the Australian Government that aim to foster leadership, excellence, innovation and development in learning and teaching. In 2015, approximately \$8 million is available through the OLT grants program “to provide funding for academics and professional staff to discover, develop and implement innovations in learning and teaching” (OLT 2015). The funding is significant and “has mobilised and enabled systemic change and improvement in learning and teaching in Australian universities” (Smeal, in James & McCormack 2013, p. 6). It also plays an important part in the development of the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching (SoTL) in Australian higher education institutions (Rifkin et al 2012, Velliaris et al 2012).

The recent classification of OLT learning and teaching grants as ‘Category 1’ research income has resulted in heightened awareness of their availability in a broader cross-section of tertiary staff. While this is potentially good news, conversations with colleagues across the country indicate there has been an increase in the number of applications for OLT learning and teaching grants from staff, many of whom, and despite their discipline expertise, are inexperienced in comparatively large scale, complex SoTL-focused research projects like those supported by OLT. Developing ideas for such projects and writing grant applications is time-consuming, challenging and painstaking even for experienced educators with strong SoTL backgrounds. The surge in interest in OLT grants has prompted discussions around what institutions are doing to support applicants to develop competitive applications. The answer is that little is known nationally of the nature and variety of approaches that are utilised. This is reflected in the observation by Smeal et al. (2011) that “[l]iterature on critical factors in embedding sustainable university-wide engagement in external awards and grants funding is limited” (p. 300).

To this end, the OLT has supported a special initiative project to map the resources, activities and processes across the sector so that knowledge of approaches can be shared and, where the context suits, taken up by institutions as they see fit. The project’s work aims to assist institutions to be in a better position to benchmark their practices. While the project also involves New Zealand institutions which can access grant funding through Ako Aotearoa, an organisation similar in nature to the OLT, this paper focuses on the project’s Australian engagement by outlining some of the approaches utilised by the 35 Australian institutions which responded to an online questionnaire in late 2014. The paper presents data from selected questions and discusses the implications for institutions and authors of grant applications.

¹ Including its predecessors, the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC).

Benchmarking to promote good practice

A key project deliverable is to document the range of resources, activities and processes across the sector that support the development of OLT grant applications. This represents the first phase of a five phase benchmarking model developed by Garlick and Pryor (2004) to enable staff ‘at the coalface’ in universities to work towards better practice in contrast to older benchmarking processes of mapping university activities for the benefit of the senior management (e.g. see McKinnon, Walker & Davis 2000). The first phase is concerned with “comprehensively reviewing the current situation and environment as it relates to the targeted function” (Garlick & Pryor 2004, p. 46). For the project, this means developing publicly-accessible information to allow institutions to compare approaches across the sector, and thereby engage in any or all of the subsequent four phases of the Garlick and Pryor (2004) benchmarking process, namely “undertaking a process of strategic planning targeted at improvement; a program of implementation with the resource commitment of senior management; a process of review to establish the degree to which improvement has occurred; and a recognition that learning from the previous phases can lead to further improved approaches in an ongoing process” (ibid).

Why is the project working with the first element of the benchmarking model by Garlick and Pryor (2004)? The earlier reference to Smeal et al (2011) states that there is limited literature on the topic. This may in part be attributed to the competitive nature of securing project funding. Some institutions may regard their approaches as ‘commercial-in-confidence’. This project team found successful applications from other institutions are certainly not easily procured. Another reason could be that perhaps not every institution has internally documented their approach in a comprehensive manner. If in fact they have, they may purposefully not be broadcasting this information on their public website. Either way, there is limited information in the public domain around developing OLT grant applications. With many institutions currently moving their administrative and business processes to sit behind their respective firewalls, it is reasonable to suggest that whatever information does exist² will become increasingly difficult for the public to access.

What is known, mainly via conversations with colleagues in other institutions, is that while some institutions have highly-structured, well-resourced and explicit, systematic, internal processes supporting the development of OLT grant applications, others take a less prescribed and less resourced approach. This statement is made with the understanding that the approach of any institution is shaped by a variety of contextual factors and ‘one size’ is unlikely to fit all, especially as the resourcing and sizes of the institutions vary enormously. Nevertheless, having an insight into the variety of resources, activities and processes that exist across the sector should provide institutions with an opportunity to make comparisons with their own approaches and adjust them according to need.

² For example, see <http://w3.unisa.edu.au/teachinglearning/goodteaching/grants/olt.asp>

The limited amount of related information in the public domain notwithstanding, there is an emerging sentiment that there is value in institutions sharing rather than withholding information, and undertaking benchmarking to promote and ensure quality in approaches to developing learning and teaching grants (and awards). To date this has occurred in pockets, rather than nationally. This shift is evident in particular through the work of the five Promoting Excellence Networks (PENs³) which are state- and territory-based networks funded on a project basis by OLT. Their activities offer professional development to staff supporting applicants for OLT's award, grant and fellowship programs. For example, the OLT-funded 'Queensland Promoting Excellence Network' (Q-PEN) has made available on its website a series of downloadable resources used by different universities to support the development and internal review of national teaching awards and learning and teaching grants (Q-PEN 2013). In addition, the NSW/ACT PEN has recently compared institutional processes for teaching awards across that network's institutions to identify and disseminate examples of good practice (NSW/ACT PEN 2013). The various PENs have also run professional development activities for staff interested in developing OLT grant applications.

Writing a competitive OLT grant application

This section provides a brief overview of the main aspects of developing a competitive OLT grant application. The aim is to highlight the exacting nature of the application development process and implications for institutions in supporting authors. The quotation below indicates that the niche activity of writing an application for (indeed any) project funding should be viewed as a specialised and scholarly activity in itself.

Writing a grant application is vastly different to the type of writing undertaken professionally by most academics. It requires a convincing argument for an effective concept, combined with details of a practical approach, all written directly and powerfully. Even a great idea will not be funded if poorly conceptualised and described. (James & McCormack 2013, p. 11)

Developing an application is a time-consuming and context-dependent activity that is best approached in a staged and structured way. James and McCormack (2013) advise potential applicants that "it will likely take a minimum of 80 to 160 hours to develop your application" (p. 18), the upper end being equivalent to four weeks of full-time activity. The development of the application includes a significant amount of preparation, for example, having a project idea and being familiar with its applied and theoretical aspects, the alignment of the idea with institutional and OLT priorities, and discussions with line managers about workload implications. The funding body and its requirements need to be clearly understood. An example is applications having to express anticipated impact through OLT's IMPEL framework⁴. Potential partners have to be identified and invited to join the proposed project. Thought also needs to be given to planning and managing the project (including data

³ <http://www.olt.gov.au/state-based-networks>

⁴ The Impact Management Planning and Evaluation Ladder (IMPEL) (OLT 2014, pp. 37-39).

collection and ethics clearances), developing a budget that includes in-kind contributions from participating institutions, seeking formative feedback on successive drafts of the application, and navigating the local endorsement requirements, to name a few key activities.

As mentioned, OLT learning and teaching projects are actually medium-to-large scale SoTL projects of significant complexity. The application development process requires authors to be realistic about the work that is required and resilient not only through the formative stages of building the application, but also in case summative assessments do not result in success.

Grant writers need to develop a thick skin. There are many reasons your proposal may not be successful first time round ... If your proposal is not funded, take account of the feedback, which will guide you as to whether your idea is worthwhile for re-submission in the next round. (James & McCormack 2013, p. 30)

So it is not just in practical matters that institutions should think about supporting applicants. It extends to nurturing a disposition of resilience and wellbeing to deal with disappointments and setbacks along the way.

The research approach

This paper draws on responses to selected questions from an online questionnaire that was developed for the 40 universities and seven colleges/institutes in Australia that are eligible to apply for OLT's learning and teaching grant programs. The questionnaire items were based on project team members' wide-ranging experiences and expertise in the area of OLT learning and teaching grants, for example, in administration, professional development, writing applications, formative and summative appraisal of applications and being part of project teams that have secured grants. Post ethics approval, the questionnaire was finalised by the project team using an iterative approach and then pilot-tested by two people outside of the project team from different universities who shared some characteristics with the target group, that is, people closely involved in OLT grant application administration and development. The pilot-test was valuable in helping to further refine the questionnaire.

In late October 2014 the online questionnaire was circulated to potential respondents through the list of OLT's Institutional Contact Officers (ICOs) at each of the eligible institutions. ICOs play a liaison role between their institution and the OLT. Each institution has at least one ICO and they are either academic or professional⁵ staff. While the project team had identified ICOs as being key stakeholders for the project and anticipated they would be well-placed to respond to the questionnaire, they were also asked to distribute the questionnaire link to others in their institution who they thought would resonate with the project's interests.

⁵ In some institutions referred to as 'general' or 'administrative' staff.

The research findings

By the end of January 2015, responses had been received from staff at 35 Australian institutions. For the purposes of this paper, the institutions were de-identified but categorised on the basis of the full time equivalent (FTE) number of academic staff they each employ according to the Australian Government's My University website⁶ which publishes staff demographics for each institution. In grouping institutions from 'smaller' to 'bigger', the project team was interested to see if relative 'economies of scale' – crudely identified by numbers of FTE academic staff – had any bearing on the breadth and depth and nature of processes, resources and activities that support the development of OLT learning and teaching grant applications. That is, would bigger institutions 'have and do more'? By the same token, would smaller institutions 'have and do less (and do more with less)?' or would it be less predictable that this? The respondent institutions were categorised and coded in the following manner:

- Nine institutions with fewer than 500 academic staff. (Coded as A1, A2, A3, etc.)
- Seven institutions with at least 500 but less than 1,000 academic staff. (Coded as B1, B2, B3, etc.)
- Eight institutions with at least 1,000 but less than 1,500 academic staff. (Coded as C1, C2, C3 etc.)
- Eleven institutions with 1,500 or more academic staff. (Coded as D1, D2, D3, etc.)

Questionnaire respondents

Forty-one people from 35 institutions completed the questionnaire. Thirty-one were ICOs and this was unsurprising given their key liaison role and, for many, their focused and deep engagement with administrative, management and professional/application development work in relation to their institution's engagement with OLT's awards, grants, fellowship and network programs. The ICOs who responded were variously academic and professional staff. The 10 staff who were not ICOs yet who responded to the questionnaire were nevertheless closely involved in their institution's OLT grant activities.

Respondent reflections on things that their institutions 'do well'

While the questionnaire sought specific information from respondents about the nature of the resources, processes and activities used to support authors developing grant applications, one open-text question early in the survey focused on what respondents believed their institution did well in this area. It was anticipated that responses to this questions would provide useful insights into the range of practices that exist across the sector. It is important to remember that this question was not meant to elicit everything that each institution did to support authors to develop applications. Instead it concentrates on what people believed their institution did well. In this way, the data should offer some ideas of potentially good practice

⁶ <http://myuniversity.gov.au/>

in the area. ‘NVivo10’ software aided in the thematic analysis and categorisation of data. The range of resources, processes and activities mentioned in sum from all categories of institutions is presented in Table 1.

The data show that some of the smallest institutions, for instance, those in the A-size category, and particularly those that are not universities, have quite limited means when it comes to supporting staff to develop grant applications. For example, the respondent from Institution A1 said “As we are a small private provider releasing time to be a partner in the development grants is all we are able to do well”. Their institution infrequently submitted applications where they would be the project leader. The respondent from Institution A5 expressed a similar sentiment by indicating that they rely on being partners in projects led by larger institutions. Nevertheless, other A-size institutions, particularly those with closer to 500 FTE academic staff, signalled they engaged in a range of activities, for example, communicating opportunities to staff, identifying project ideas that have potential, and offering workshops on OLT grants and application development, including compliance with OLT requirements. One-on-one support for authors was specifically referred to by most of the nine A-size institutions.

B-sized institutions offered grant applicants a number of supports that were evident in the A-sized group, for example, communication of opportunities, one-on-one support, and workshops. However, a clearer sense of defined processes was evident in the data, particularly when it came to peer review of applications for formative and summative purposes; the latter being whether or not an institution endorsed an application to be submitted to OLT. The respondent from Institution B3 commented on the approach taken by the internal appraisal panel:

We currently have an assessor panel who review the OLT grants about 8 weeks prior to submission providing the applicant with feedback for improvements to their applications. The panel will only review a fully developed application, it will be up to the panel to decide if the application should progress and be submitted.
(Questionnaire respondent, Institution B3)

Institution B2 also referred to having a “strong selection panel” which included Deputy Vice Chancellors (both academic and research), Academic Developers, Heads of School, Head of Learning and Teaching⁷ and prior OLT grant winners. The sense of teams of people working together, for example ‘grants teams’ and ‘assessor panels’, to support authors to develop and assess grant applications is stronger in the data from the B-sized institutions than it is for the A-sized institutions.

⁷ To preserve anonymity, ‘Academic Developers’, ‘Heads of School’, ‘Head of Learning and Teaching’ are terms used by the authors of this paper instead of the actual names of the positions.

The data from the seven C-size institutions also suggests a well-resourced approach. This is conveyed well by a respondent from Institution C2:

We have a developmental and staged approach to the development of ideas and actual applications. The processes involve multiple layers of support depending on the significance of the project ideas to the priorities of the university and on the quality of the work being proposed. We also have a well-established group of scholars and experienced grant leaders who provide a blind peer review process of grant proposals in development. (Questionnaire respondent, Institution C2)

The mention of previously-successful applicants being used as mentors was more evident in C-sized institutions than B-sized institutions. The respondent from Institution C4 said, “Previously successful OLT grant winners make themselves available informally to support staff in developing their application” while Institution C7 offered “Individual consultations with experienced grant writers”. At Institution C6 the provision of examples of previously successful applications from within the institution “is valued by applicants”.

Respondents from D-sized institutions mentioned many of the initiatives that were promoted by institutions in other categories, however, the D-group data suggest a stronger sense of documented processes underpinning the development of applications. For example, the respondent from Institution D1 said their university’s “policy and process relating to OLT programs provides a very clear and in depth process for the support of potential applicants and of the roles of all those involved across the university - so everyone will know what is expected of them (from the applicant to the VC)”. Documentation was also mentioned by the respondent from Institution D5 who indicated “We have developed documents which assist applicants in writing their applications”. Another practice that was highlighted was Institutions D3 and D7 using internal grants as a pipeline to generate a pool of people who could then develop OLT grant applications.

Benchmarking

The online questionnaire had two benchmarking questions. The first asked respondents to disclose if their institution had undertaken a benchmarking exercise since 2012 and the second, if ‘yes’ to the first, sought details of the exercise. Only four out of 35 institutions (A6, A7, B2 & D4) answered in the affirmative to the first question. Of interest, two of the four are A-size (smaller) institutions, with A6 and A7 indicating their benchmarking exercises included reference to information that they had become aware of through the OLT Professional Excellence Networks (PENs). (Institution B7 said this, too). The respondent from Institution A7 said their benchmarking included success rates comparative to similar-sized institutions. The respondent from Institution D4 said that they had interrogated “statistical information on grant and award outcomes” as part of their participation in an OLT project. The data from these four institutions did not provide a strong sense of the activities being ‘comprehensive benchmarking projects’ with documented aims and outcomes along the lines of the Garlick and Pryor (2004) model of institutional improvement. Instead,

they were more modest comparison exercises and follow-up activities, similar to limited versions of the McKinnon et al (2000) model of benchmarking.

Table 1: Summary of resources, processes and activities supporting OLT grant application development from all categories of institutions

| Types of resources, processes and activities |
|---|
| Communication of opportunities throughout institution. |
| Central email address for all OLT grant enquiries. |
| Internal documentation, e.g. (1) Nature of support available; (2) Application process; (3) Writing an OLT grant application. |
| Identification of staff/ideas with potential for success, e.g. 'Talent identification' and internal learning and teaching grants 'pipeline' to national applications |
| Professional development, e.g. (1) Workshops on opportunities and developing OLT applications; (2) Engagement with OLT Promoting Excellence Networks. |
| Application development support, e.g. (1) One-on-one support; (2) Provision of examples of previously successful applications (from within the institution); (3) Compliance assistance; (4) Editorial assistance; (5) Budget development assistance; (6) Mentors to work with applicants (and also unsuccessful applicants to further develop their applications); (7) Writing assistance provided to applicants; (8) Peer review (formative) (Note: Institution C2 uses a blind peer review approach. Institution D11 utilises 'readership committees'); (9) Whole of process support, i.e. project idea and application development, through to final review of applications for submission to OLT. |
| Peer review (summative), for example, panels that decide which applications should be endorsed for submission to OLT. |

Discussion

With respect to what respondents thought their institutions did well in supporting the development of OLT grant applications, it is interesting not only to see the nature of practice across the sector but also how this plays out in the various categories of institutions. It is worth reiterating that the data represent what people believe their institutions did well and themes mentioned in one category only, for instance, internal documentation of policy and process in D-sized institutions, may not be absent from other categories. There is nothing explicitly prohibiting, for example, A- or B-sized institutions from having or developing internal policies and process documentation to support OLT grant application development. It is just that there was no mention of this by respondents in some categories of institutions. It may be the case that certain practices are leveraged by distinct economies of scale and engagement. There was evidence that the smallest institutions struggled to provide scope and support for the initiation and development of grant applications. They mainly communicated opportunities and offered one-on-one support. As institutions became larger there was evidence of an increasing resource base that sustained more defined support approaches, for example, teams of people (including mentors) working to support authors, panels to appraise

applications, documentation of support and appraisal processes, and internal resources on writing OLT grant applications.

With regard to benchmarking, it appears that the degree and nature of this undertaking in institutions are rather scarce and it is unclear how the benchmarking exercises are conducted and what impact they have. As mentioned, the data show that the benchmarking that has been carried out by Institutions A6, A7, B2 and D4 has largely, although in some cases not exclusively, a *post hoc* element to it where comparative success rates seem to be the focus of the activity. However, it is also evident from the data that the work of at least some of the OLT PENs is providing opportunities for institutions to share resources and compare processes and activities related to competitive teaching award and learning and teaching grant programs. This can particularly benefit smaller institutions which may have limited capacity and resources.

In terms of what this paper can offer benchmarking in the area, Table 1 provides a novel account from the sector of a diversity of resources, processes and activities supporting OLT grant application development. For example, a template can be constructed from the various elements in Table 1 which institutions can use to compare their practices with the range that has been documented in this paper. A straightforward check box approach could note what practices are utilised at a particular institution compared to all that are listed in the template. In the event of no ticks against certain practices or home-institution practices that do not appear in the template, the reasons for them not appearing in the institution's inventory can be articulated and reflected upon. Their absence could well be justified. By the same token, they might be usefully taken up.

A more fine-grained approach would be to consider different ways of engaging with like practices. Consider these two characteristics of internal appraisal panels. First, the respondent from Institution B3 said they review the OLT grants two months prior to the OLT submission deadline and that the panel only reviews fully developed applications. Second, Institution B2 referred to having a "selection panel" which included very senior academic staff. For those institutions that also utilise internal appraisal panels, a useful reflection might be to think about how long before the OLT submission deadline their institutional panel convenes and what affordances and challenges this brings. Also, does their panel only appraise fully-completed applications or do they allow advanced drafts and is this done as a blind peer review (as at Institution C2) where presumably the names of the reviewers are not disclosed to the author or is in an open peer review process? Again, it would be a matter for an institution to think about reasons for their current practice and whether or not it might be the best approach for the institution and its applicants. Another consideration would be to examine about the composition of the selection panel, for example, the positions and expertise of panellists, and if could benefit from being expanded or contracted.

Conclusion

The project's investigation of institutional resources, activities and processes that support the development of OLT learning and teaching grant applications is making a unique and timely contribution to documenting the range of approaches that exist across the sector and providing institutions with information they can use to interrogate the nature of their work in this area. While this paper has engaged with a limited amount of data from the larger data set from the online questionnaire, the results have nevertheless provided considerable evidence on practice from across the sector and certainly enough to contribute to benchmarking discussions and activities. While competitive grant opportunities are limited, institutional processes that support the development of applications play a significant role in capacity building both for academic (and professional) staff and also for institutions. As has been suggested in this paper, writing applications for learning and teaching grants is a specialised activity and while it is a positive sign that OLT grant opportunities are being explored by an increasing number of tertiary educators, some who are not necessarily experienced in developing OLT applications or running complex SoTL projects, their efforts will most likely benefit from institutional support that has been benchmarked in the pursuit of good practice.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge other members of the project team whose contributions have impacted positively on the project's development. They are Dr Matt Eliot (CQUniversity), Dr Sean Sturm and Dr Barbara Kensington-Miller (The University of Auckland), Ms Jan McLean (UNSW), Mrs Kerry Allison (Monash University), and A/Prof Tania Broadley (Curtin University).

Note: Support for this publication has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.

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