

Balancing teaching and research in higher education

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Teachers, Don't be afraid to show off your stuff!
Universities, Don't be afraid to show off your staff!

The current university environment in Australia rewards research productivity much more than teaching performance. As university employees, we are constantly reminded how important it is for our professional development to obtain research grants and produce good quality publications. Having an ARC discovery grant is 'very prestigious' and tells everyone that you are in the elite of the Australian research community. If you are successful enough you might be offered the 'ultimate reward': to buy out your teaching commitments in order to concentrate full time on research. But why is it that I get the feeling someone could be missing out on this deal? Oh yes, the students! Those annoying students. If it weren't for them we would have all the time in the world to devote to our research programs. Then again, if it weren't for them we wouldn't have universities in the first place.

It is easy to find reports in the newspapers about new scientific discoveries by university researchers, mostly promoted by the universities' press offices, but you will have a hard time finding reports about those wonderful university teachers that shape the lives of our young people on a daily basis and help to develop the professionals that will drive this country in the near future.

That is why it was so refreshing to participate in the 2005 Teaching and Learning Showcase at Central Queensland University where excellent university professionals were given a chance to 'show off their stuff' and were honoured for their success in their teaching careers. A variety of teaching approaches, methods, technologies and philosophies were discussed at the meeting. None of them had the ultimate answer to all problems but every single one of them provided important elements contributing to the overall quality of teaching and the student's learning experience. From the presentations and subsequent discussions it was clear that different situations call for different approaches and that differences in student demographics (internal vs external, national vs international, young vs. mature, etc.) can dictate the teaching methods of choice. I found it particularly enriching to learn about the specific challenges that other lecturers face in different teaching environments and the solutions devised to cope with those challenges.

I might be totally wrong, but I get the impression that there is a general sentiment that teaching is what you do when you haven't been able to establish a successful research program. Nothing can be further from the truth. Research and teaching are not mutually exclusive terms. On the contrary, an active research career is an extremely good asset to enrich the teaching and vice versa, the teaching experience

can open new horizons and provide new perspectives on your research projects. Over the last 5 years my research has attracted over 7 million dollars in funding, generated nine international patents and produced two spin-off biotechnology companies. However, I would consider my career a failure if I had not been able to get the approval and support of my undergraduate and postgraduate students. Events such as the Teaching and Learning Showcase should be promoted, and publicised, by universities in order to boost the value of good teaching in the university environment.