

Designing teaching and learning conferences as inclusive academic development: distributed leadership in practice

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Introduction

This case study demonstrates the design of a university teaching and learning conference as inclusive academic development. It examines how aligning themes and keynotes with institutional priorities, embedding distributed leadership to support emerging leaders, offering multiple formats for diverse scholarship, and designing for inclusivity and cognitive manageability enabled collective academic development.

Context

Teaching and learning conferences in higher education have increasingly become strategic sites for responding to sector-wide change, including the rise of generative AI, evolving assessment practices, national policy agendas, and institutional commitments to equity and inclusion. However, such conferences are often positioned as discrete events, with limited connection to ongoing academic development or leadership pathways.

At Deakin University, the Teaching and Learning Conference has been established over many years and has continued to evolve successfully in scale and purpose, necessitating a more intentional approach to conference design. In 2025, Drawing on my role as Conference Chair, a series of deliberate approaches were implemented to strengthen alignment with institutional priorities, support the translation of strategy into everyday teaching practice, and make leadership within the conference more visible, distributed, and developmental, positioning the conference as a form of collective academic development for an event that attracted more than 320 participants.

Project aims

- + To intentionally redesign the Teaching and Learning Conference as a form of inclusive academic development rather than a standalone dissemination event
- + To align conference themes and keynotes with institutional teaching and learning priorities in ways that support translation into everyday pedagogical practice
- + To embed distributed leadership within the conference structure by creating visible and developmental leadership roles, particularly for emerging and education-focused academics

- + To support diverse forms of pedagogical scholarship through the use of multiple presentation formats
- + To design the conference for inclusivity and cognitive manageability, enabling sustained and meaningful participation across diverse academic roles and needs

Project implementation

The project was implemented through a deliberately designed conference planning process, embedded within the existing conference structures. Rather than introducing a new conference model, changes were integrated into established practices over successive conference cycles.

Conference design was guided by four interrelated principles: alignment with institutional priorities, distributed leadership, support for diverse forms of pedagogical scholarship, and inclusive, cognitively manageable participation. These principles informed decisions about conference themes, keynote selection, session formats, scheduling, and accessibility.

Leadership was distributed across multiple roles. The Conference Chair worked in partnership with a steering committee of senior academic leaders and a cross-faculty selection committee responsible for reviewing submissions and shaping the program. Session chair roles were intentionally broadened to include early career and education-focused academics, embedding leadership development within the operational structure of the conference.

Multiple presentation formats were implemented to accommodate different forms and stages of pedagogical work, including short papers, panels, lightning talks, and live demonstrations. Scheduling decisions incorporated structured pauses and manageable parallel streams to reduce cognitive load and support inclusive participation.

Outcomes

Aligning theme and keynote with institutional priorities

Teaching and learning conferences can play an important role in helping educators interpret institutional priorities into their own teaching. When conference themes and subthemes are thoughtfully designed, they do more than structure a program; they provide a shared frame that connects strategic intent with everyday academic practice. At Deakin, we deliberately align these themes with broader educational goals. For 2025, our theme, Beyond Fifty Years of Education: Innovation and Collaboration for a Changing World, linked areas like GenAI, assessment redesign, and equity and co-design. This was about inviting educators to explore how these priorities are enacted across disciplines and learning contexts.

This process highlights the two-way relationship between leadership and the classroom. While the university sets the direction, the sessions themselves shape how those priorities are understood. For instance, discussions on AI and assessments quickly shifted from high-

level policy to practical, discipline-specific approaches to academic integrity and student support.

Alignment is further strengthened by how the keynote is positioned within the program. By positioning the speaker's ideas within our themes and sharing an introductory interview on the conference website beforehand, we create a sense of coherence that extends beyond the presentation itself. Feedback consistently shows that this clarity helps educators see how their own work fits into the bigger picture at Deakin, refining their thinking on the future of teaching and learning.

Empowering emerging leaders through distributed leadership

Effective teaching and learning conferences thrive on a distributed leadership model, which views leadership as a collective effort emerging from shared expertise rather than a single role. In higher education, where change is often driven by local experimentation and peer learning, this collaborative approach is essential.

Research supports this framing. Drawing on ALTC-funded projects, Jones et al. (2012) argue that sustainable leadership in universities depends on respecting academic autonomy while sharing responsibility across all roles and levels. Their ASERT framework (Action Self-Enabling Reflective Tool) offers a practical way to embed values like trust, respect, and collaboration through learning conversations and collegial connection.

When I stepped into the role of Conference Chair, I joined an established structure grounded in this shared responsibility. The Conference Chair, a steering committee of senior academic leaders, and a cross-faculty selection committee had long worked together to shape the conference's direction. My role was not to introduce distributed leadership as a new model, but to make this framework more visible and developmental.

One intentional shift within this model was to prioritise early career Education-focused Academics as session chairs. While these roles have traditionally been held by senior teaching and learning leaders, opening them to emerging academics created visible leadership opportunities that are often limited early in academic careers. In line with Hanser's (2021) critique of conferences as spaces oriented toward established scholars, this shift aimed to increase the visibility of emerging education-focused academics within the teaching and learning community and to create leadership opportunities that they might not otherwise have access to at this stage of their careers, without changing the function of the role itself.

The response to this approach demonstrated strong interest from Education-focused Academics. Their involvement as session chairs mirrored that of more established leaders, facilitating discussion, supporting presenters, and drawing connections across sessions.

By framing session chairing as a form of academic development rather than a purely functional task, this approach created pathways for leadership at multiple levels and as reflected in post-conference feedback from session chairs, contributed to building confidence, recognition, and cross-faculty networks.

Multiple formats for diverse scholarship

A central aim of a contemporary teaching and learning conference is to create meaningful opportunities for educators to share diverse forms of pedagogical work. Effective communication now depends more on clarity, focus, and good design, and conferences are moving away from long papers toward multi-format programs that are better paced and more diverse in how ideas are presented. This shift goes beyond attention spans to rethink how knowledge is shared. From a constructivist viewpoint, conferences are active sites where knowledge is built through dialogue and reflection (Sweeting & Hohl, 2015). If we rely solely on one-way presentations, we lose those opportunities for collaborative sense-making. By designing diverse presentation formats, we create the right conditions for real pedagogical insight to emerge.

Format diversity also recognises that pedagogical scholarship takes multiple forms and develops at different stages.

Educators choose to share reflective accounts of practice, early-stage or exploratory ideas, or more established Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research. Supporting this range of work requires adaptable formats rather than standardised ones. The 2025 conference therefore incorporated twelve-minute papers, panel discussions, lightning talks, and live demonstrations or case-based session to support these different forms of contributions. Traditional papers provided space for more established projects, while shorter formats created opportunities for emerging or exploratory ideas. Panels enabled multi-voice exploration of complex issues such as generative AI, and live demonstrations made teaching practice visible through discussion and collective problem-solving. Feedback confirmed this worked; educators felt the variety sparked new conversations, broadened perspectives, and ensured the conference reflected the true breadth of teaching work across the university.

Designing for inclusivity and cognitive manageability

Inclusivity and accessibility must underpin every aspect of conference design, moving beyond simple compliance to create a space for meaningful participation. A holistic approach considers physical, financial, and cognitive dimensions (Walters et al., 2018), specifically recognising the needs of disabled and neurodivergent educators, whose participation in activities may be shaped by cognitive, sensory, physical, or social factors that are not always visible (Sarchet, 2024).

Pacing plays a key role in how inclusive a conference feels. As Hanser (2021) notes, the cumulative fatigue created by intense conference schedules can limit participation and undermine belonging, particularly for academics with cognitive disabilities. To manage cognitive load, we built in five-minute pauses between presentations and ten-minute transitions between concurrent sessions. These design choices allowed participants to manage their cognitive load, move comfortably, and engage at a pace that suited their energy and mobility.

We also structured choice to reduce decision fatigue. By carefully distributing topics across four parallel streams, we offered flexibility without being overwhelming. This balanced schedule ensured participants didn't have to repeatedly choose between closely related sessions, making the breadth of the university's teaching work more accessible.

Language, representation, and materials further contribute to inclusive academic spaces. We, therefore, focused on the details of representation and materials (Joo et al., 2022). Presenters were provided an inclusive slide template designed for clarity, with high contrast and uncluttered layouts. Feedback suggests these practical decisions, pacing, choice, and design, created a manageable environment where colleagues felt they could sustain their engagement without pressure.

The conference as collective development

Through intentional design, teaching and learning conferences can move beyond showcasing practice to become sites of collective academic development. Bringing educators together across faculties and career stages helps break down silos and creates opportunities to think through challenges collectively. In this context, high-level strategy and policy are more readily translated into classroom practice through a collective sense of leadership and community.

Leading the Teaching and Learning Conference has reinforced that its value lies not only in what happens on the day, but in the broader cycle of collaboration, reflection, and learning that surrounds it. The conference is never an endpoint. It brings into focus what is working, what needs refinement, and where further attention is required. Some of these lessons only become clear in hindsight, whether noticing opportunities to distribute presenters more evenly or creating more space for genuine conversation. These insights continue to shape the event's evolution. Like teaching itself, designing a conference is an ongoing, iterative process that remains responsive to the needs of our academic community.

Reflections

Several factors supported the implementation of this work. Established institutional commitment to teaching and learning provided a strong foundation, including senior leadership support for aligning conference themes with strategic priorities. Existing governance structures, such as the steering committee and cross-faculty selection processes, enabled shared decision-making and distributed leadership rather than centralised control.

The work was also informed by research and scholarship on distributed leadership and inclusive conference design, which provided a conceptual framework for decision-making. Drawing on professional expertise in academic development and conference leadership supported the intentional design of roles, formats, and pacing.

Ways of working that emphasised collaboration across faculties and career stages further enabled the conference to function as a shared academic space rather than a series of isolated sessions.

One challenge related to managing scale and ensuring fairness in the selection of abstracts. The conference attracted its highest number of submissions to date, resulting in more than 50 presentations delivered within a single day. To support transparent and equitable decision-making, a clear assessment rubric was developed to guide the selection committee, with attention to balancing representation across faculties and disciplines.

A second challenge concerned sustaining meaningful engagement at scale. With a large number of parallel sessions delivered in a compressed timeframe, there was an increased risk of cognitive overload and a fragmented participant experience. This was addressed through intentional pacing, including shorter presentation formats, structured pauses between sessions, extended transition times, and careful distribution of topics across streams to support participant choice and reduce fatigue.

Sustaining meaningful participation and leadership visibility at scale also required careful attention. With a large number of presenters and sessions, there was a risk that leadership roles would remain concentrated among established academics. This was addressed by deliberately embedding distributed leadership through session chair roles, including early career and education-focused academics, supported by clear role guidance and collegial support structures.

Finally, the one-day format inevitably limited opportunities for extended dialogue and reflection. While this was partially addressed through panel sessions and facilitated discussions designed to draw connections across presentations, the need for additional time to support deeper conversation was identified as an important consideration for future iterations.

The approaches described in this case study are scalable and transferable to other institutional contexts, as they focus on principles of design rather than context-specific structures. Aligning conference themes and keynotes with institutional priorities, embedding distributed leadership, supporting diverse forms of pedagogical scholarship, and designing for inclusivity and cognitive manageability are practices that can be adapted to different organisational sizes, disciplinary profiles, and resource contexts.

While the scale of this conference was substantial, the design principles are applicable to smaller events, discipline-based symposia, and other academic development activities, including workshops, teaching forums, and professional learning programs. Distributed leadership roles, such as session chairing, can be embedded at varying scales, and inclusive design practices can be implemented incrementally.

However, transferability depends on institutional culture and leadership support. The effectiveness of this approach is shaped by the extent to which institutions value collaboration, academic autonomy, and inclusive practice. Adapting the model therefore requires sensitivity to local contexts, resourcing, and existing governance structures, as well as a commitment to iterative refinement informed by participant feedback.

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