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+ The impact of the Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education 2023: Strategy, Policy and Practice

University of Sydney



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The university is a member of the Group of Eight (Go8) coalition of Australia's leading universities, recognised for 'research and academic excellence'¹. The student population is around 68,000 students, (~40,000 undergraduates and 28,000 graduates). A strong commitment to diversity is reflected in the student population: 49% international students, mature-aged entry, pathways for indigenous students and support for disabled students. The range of disciplines include Veterinary Science and Agriculture, Business and Law, Music, and Clinical/Healthcare Education.

Teaching and learning support staff comprise around 3,700 academic staff and 5,300 professional staff (2023). Staff hold a wide range of teaching and learning support roles, from a 70% teaching and teaching-related workload to professional roles such as educational technology, educational policy, library services and learning spaces. Some academic roles are research-only.

¹ Data in this section is derived from Sydney's submission for accreditation, November 2024

Professional Standards Framework-based provision

The University of Sydney runs the following Advance-HE accredited pathways to Fellowships:

- + **Sydney Educational Fellowship Program (Descriptors 1-3)**
- + **Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education) – Fellowship Plus (Descriptor 2)**
- + **Sydney Professional Certificate in Foundations of Higher Education – Associate Fellowship Plus (Descriptor 1)**

These lines of provision were accredited without conditions in December 2024. Feedback from the Advance HE accreditation panel identified many areas of good practice and commended the University for their Strategic Plan 2034 as it ‘sets out a strong institutional commitment to creating an inclusive and diverse learning environment, aligning closely with the Professional Values of the Professional Standards Framework (PSF 2023)’.² 655 staff members have gained Fellowships since a pilot programme in 2016.

Strategy and policy

Sydney’s strategic approach to achieving their aim ‘to be the best Australian university for teaching and learning’³ is informed by their institutional Academic Excellence Framework (AEF). Professor Adam Bridgeman, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning), stressed the centrality of the PSF 2023 to this institutional framework⁴.

The advent of the new PSF was timely because ‘when the new [PSF] came in, we could use it to put into the [internal] Academic Excellence Framework’ as an integral part of the ‘academic development machinery, so we could inform the work we were doing and the PSF informed how we were responding in terms of evidence, in terms of our accreditation’.

² Extract from ‘Advance HE Accreditation Panel Outcome and Feedback’ letter to Professor Adam Bridgeman, Pro Vic-Chancellor Education Innovation, 17 December 2024.

³ Sydney’s submission for Advance HE teaching and learning accreditation, November 2024.

⁴ The source of all the PVC’s statements is an interview on 15 May 2025

The PVC explained:

“What we liked was that it [the PSF] isn’t just classroom teaching. This is sustained leadership and I think that’s what we needed to demonstrate.” The perception that you ‘could get promoted all the way to professor just by being a star in the classroom [is] clearly not enough in 2025’.

The ‘cultural aspect’ of transformational change whereby in the past ‘research was more important, was more recognised, was more valued’ was a ‘major challenge’. The goal was:

‘to at least get the status of teaching and educational leadership on a par with research or maybe above research, given that ... our income actually derives from teaching’.

The PVC sees promotion criteria as key and highlights his initiatives on ‘getting the promotion policy ... and the drivers for academics to align with the educational vision of excellence and innovation’. Fellowships are embedded in the key performance indicators of Heads of Schools and Deans. He suggests conversations along the lines of:

‘you are applying for promotion to level E [senior post] and you’ve not got a Fellowship... we’re not going to promote you’. Fellowship is ‘recognised as an expectation and a measure of performance and potential’.

As for workforce planning, Sydney has:

‘recruited a lot of education-focused staff’ and sees them as ‘our educational leaders ... from a workforce planning perspective’.

This category of staff (70% teaching-focused) needed ‘a protected route to promotion’. The solution was:

‘we tied the education-focused expectations position description very much to the PSF, and that was useful’. He described the recruitment drive as ‘very structured and aligned to the PSF’ with a requirement that new staff ‘complete the graduate certificate’.

The significance and high quality of the Advance HE accredited Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education) (GCESHE) is a central element of Sydney’s ambitious goals for academic excellence.

As for staff with a 40% teaching role alongside 40% research, the PVC explained that:

‘if they’re not interested in students, they’re not interested in teaching or teaching leadership, they’re not going to get promoted’. This is ‘important to send a cultural signal’.

Their career progression is guided by the AEF, underpinned by the PSF especially in relation to educational leadership.

Overall, the PVC valued the ‘multi-dimensional and international benchmarking’ afforded by the PSF. He commented that it ‘is very hard for us to benchmark ourselves in education in terms of performance’. The PSF was helpful here. Staff engagement with accredited provision was impactful:

‘we have good stories; good data associated with our Fellows and our graduates from the graduate certificate and our MPLF (Modular Professional Learning Framework) graduates’.

There was no doubt that the impact on the student experience was positive:

“We have ... quantitative data where we can demonstrate the classrooms of the people who are engaged, not only are they better, but ... we can see marked improvements in individuals pre- and post-engagement... this has been fundamentally successful.”

Despite the success of these strategies, the PVC highlighted two areas which he wants to develop further: support for PhD students in their teaching and an increase in the number of Principal Fellows at Sydney. In general, he felt that ‘we still have a long way to go’ with more staff to reach. He said:

“I think there will come a day when everybody will have to have a Fellowship here, of some level... we still have lots to do in terms of teaching quality.”

Detail concerning the implementation of Sydney’s strategies through accredited educational development provision follow.

Practice

Dr Jessica Frawley, Senior Lecturer in Academic Development and Leadership, provided information on how Sydney’s strategies and policies played out at grass roots level⁵. This section is annotated with the PSF Dimensions to illustrate how relevant the Framework is to practice at Sydney.

⁵ Interview, 5 March 2025

She described how the:

‘education pillar of the [Academic Excellence Framework] ... was developed in a consultative way across the university’ and, like the PVC, remarked that ‘the PSF is a very useful framework. It’s very usable’.

Even learning pathways which do not result in Fellowship align with the PSF. The PSF 2023 came at an opportune moment as there were:

‘government bodies saying ‘we want to see more equity and inclusion’, and you’ve got the PSF 2023 where inclusive and effective practice is expected for all categories. So everything is ... coherent.’

Sydney’s requirement that probationers gain Fellowship is complemented by an inclusive:

‘modular professional learning pathway’ (MPLF) (A2), which appeals to professional services staff and offers the flexibility which is highly valued by participants across the university. Engaging with Fellowships enables participants to ‘[go] far beyond the opportunities of their position or role’ and ‘[develop] their leadership in a particularly robust way’.

In addition, ‘award feedback (A3) [is] a really good thing to cite in a promotion application’. Here we can see how institutional policy is enacted through the way provision is delivered by an educational development unit.

The PVC saw sustainability as a strength of PSF-based provision. Scheme alumni maintain their engagement in educational networks after they have gained recognition through Fellowships. Sydney has a Community of Fellows with over 90 mentors. Sydney also recognises the significance of the contribution of alumni by nominating ‘Distinguished Fellow Advisors’. Jessica Frawley outlined the criteria for nomination: engagement with mentoring (A4), assessing and providing quality feedback (A3), and disseminating good practice (V3) over a sustained period.

Alumni with a positive experience of participation in PSF-based CPD seek further contact with the teaching and learning community. Sydney has extended their Fellowship network, joining UNSW, to enable Senior Fellows to interact with colleagues from another institution (V4).

High quality [posts on teaching and learning](#) also abound at the University of Sydney with a strong focus on values-based approaches in line with the PSF (V1-V5). The PVC encourages these approaches, offering substantial Strategic Education Grants:

'designed to support teaching staff in improving student engagement and outcomes' (V2).

The implementation of strategy at Sydney demonstrates the powerful impact of scholarly approaches to teaching and supporting learning, underpinned by the PSF principles of evidenced effectiveness and deeply embedded inclusiveness. Early- (Descriptor 1, Associate Fellow) and mid-career (Descriptor 2, Fellow) learning opportunities enable the enhancement of teaching and learning. Active approaches to the development of educational leadership (Descriptor 3, Senior Fellow) equip more experienced staff to influence the professional practice of others.

Senior leaders have been awarded Principal Fellowship (Descriptor 4), which confirms their expertise in shaping strategic approaches to high-quality higher education practice. A variety of strategies have been adopted to achieve educational excellence across career stages and roles and in diverse contexts. Senior leaders have been awarded Principal Fellowship (Descriptor 4), which confirms their expertise in shaping strategic approaches to high-quality higher education practice.

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