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The value of the Australian Awards for University Teachers (AAUT): Building and maintaining excellence in teaching and learning across the nation

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The value of the Australian Awards for University Teachers (AAUT): Building and maintaining excellence in teaching and learning across the nation

Abstract

In this commentary I provide an overview of the national award program, the Australian Awards for University Teachers (AAUT), that has been running for 23 years. I argue that the benefits of the awards are widespread in higher education. They recognise and reward creativity and innovation, they have helped build a culture of collaboration and mentoring that extends across universities and states, and most of all they validate the importance of good quality teaching in universities, providing a recognition and promotion pathway to match that of research awards. The current federal government has made the decision not to fund the awards after 2021, a decision I believe is not only short-sighted but could be damaging for Australia in the global education market. I propose three possible options to continue support for this valuable award program and encourage senior academics and past award winners to work as a group and pursue replacement funding and a sustainable management model for this program. The AAUT awards have an integral role in promoting creativity and innovation in teaching and learning, as well as opening promotion pathways and collaborations across and between universities, and across and between disciplines.

Practitioner Notes

1. Maintaining the profile of teaching within the Australian higher education sector
2. Rewards and recognition of university teaching through AAUT promotes creativity and innovation
3. Enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in universities
4. Direct and indirect impacts on the career advancement for individual award winners
5. Promotions and opportunities to support teaching awards

Keywords

Teaching reward, recognition for teaching, Higher Education teaching excellence

Introduction

The Australian Awards for University Teachers (AAUT) is a national award program that recognises and rewards excellence, innovation and creativity in higher education teaching and learning programs. It has been part of the Australian higher education landscape for 23 years, with awards funded by the Federal Government during that time. The 2021 Federal Government has declined to continue funding these awards into 2022 (Campus Morning Mail, 2021). I am not alone in my opinion that this decision is very short-sighted (Rowbotham, 2021). The award program is supported by Deputy Vice Chancellors (Academic) (DVCA), Deans and Pro-Vice Chancellors of Teaching and Learning from all Australian universities. Indeed, many universities benchmark their own internal Learning and Teaching awards on the AAUT format. Since 1997 the AAUT Board and teams of Assessors have reviewed thousands of applications for Citations, Teaching Awards and Program Awards. The final decisions of the Board have had a direct positive impact on over 2000 academics at different stages of their careers. I have held the position of AAUT Awards Team Director since 2018. The benefits of the AAUT program are wide reaching. University marketing departments often promote the award winners in their institution profiles to attract future students. In 2021, for the first time, the Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous Education was unique in being available for Indigenous teaching staff only (Universities Australia, 2021). This is the only national award of this stature for Indigenous teachers in Higher Education and is now at threat of being defunded.

I know through personal experience that the award legitimises the teaching and learning career path. In 1998 I was the recipient of the Prime Minister's Award for University Teacher of the Year. This award started my own career in teaching and learning of which I am proud and grateful. As will be seen in the rest of this commentary these awards open promotion pathways, recognise creative and innovate curricula and help build and create networks of peers and colleagues. This is all within the overarching aim of improving student learning and engagement in universities through recognition of the highest quality of scholarship in teaching and learning.

Pathway to elevate profiles and provide opportunities for promotion

The tension between teaching and research in universities is well known. For many years promotion panels have given research publications and awards preference over teaching accolades when considering promotion applications (Dobele & Rundle-Theile, 2015). The AAUT awards have played a significant role in reducing this tension. The importance of the awards to legitimise the career path of academics who are expert teachers and creative innovators cannot be underestimated (Israel, 2011). The awards provide a pathway within themselves starting with Citations and building to Program or Teaching awards. The pinnacle for the last 23 years is an individual or a team being awarded the coveted Australian University Teacher of the Year (AAUTY) title.

From the words of our award winners, who willingly share their stories, the winning of the awards significantly impact on the recipients' career path. Winners of the AAUT awards often report that they are invited as speakers at national and international conferences, have increased opportunities within their own university, and in some cases state that the awards have helped them build national and international scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) research partnerships.

Receiving this award has been a very humbling experience, and I cannot help but reflect on the mentorship I have received throughout my career from some of the best teachers and scientists in the world. Their guidance has shaped my approach to learning and teaching, and I am hopeful that my work can further elevate the international profile of science education. As a general rule of thumb, teachers do not go into this profession expecting to receive recognition for their work! ...

In the short time since the 2020 awards were announced, I have not only heard from many colleagues and former students but also forged new collaborations with academics all across Australia. I want to use these networks to design high-quality online resources and curricula that can be shared by science educators all across the country --Recipient of AAUTY, 2020 (Carbone et al., forthcoming).

In some cases, award winners tell us how the award has helped them secure a longer contract, a permanent position, or enabled them to gain a promotion to a more senior role in their department. For example, one award winner reported that receiving the award:

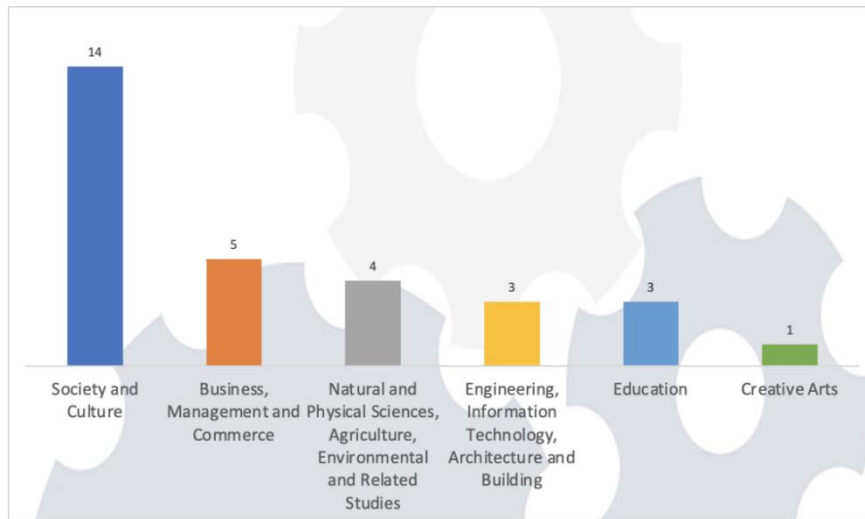
formed a strong component of my successful application for Associate Professor. ...in the short amount of time since receiving the award, I have received an invitation to be on Linkage grant application with a learning and teaching focus. It has been a wonderful acknowledgment of my 37 years of service to education in Australia and internationally in both primary education and university education --Recipient of AAUTY, 2018 (Carbone et al., 2019, 17).

Recognising and promoting creativity and innovation

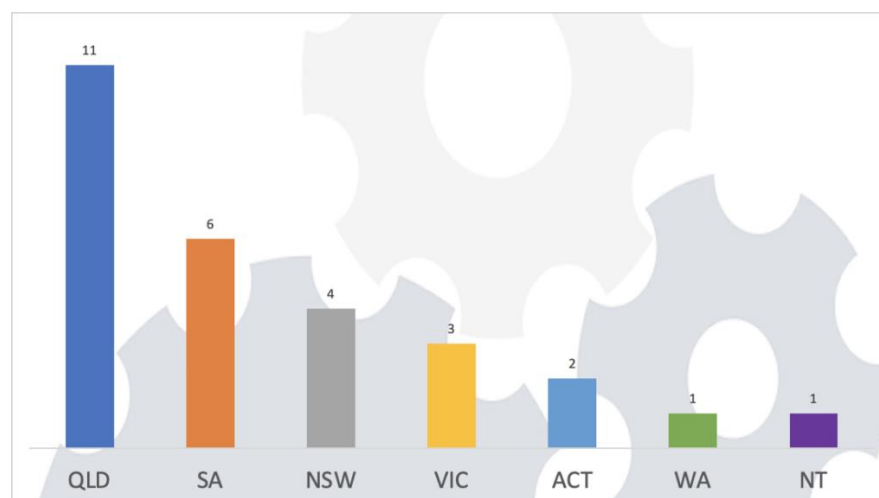
The AAUT rewards creativity and innovation in teaching and learning programs. In doing so it allows academics to experiment and track curricula and pedagogy for its effectiveness in student learning and student engagement. For example, a recent AAUTY award winner (2019) was a team who created a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) about the psychology of criminal justice (edX, 2021). They tapped into modern technologies and the current zeitgeist of crime drama to allow students the “experience of different roles in the criminal justice system”. The winning team reported:

The award has given us a renewed confidence that we are on the right track with our approach to teaching and learning. The application preparation encouraged us to think what we could do next to enhance student learning and engagement, especially in the context of the changes and challenges due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic --Recipient of AAUTY, 2019 (Carbone et al., forthcoming).

Creativity is not limited to the Creative Arts when it comes to teaching and learning innovations. The awards recognise new ways to deliver higher education courses across the whole of the university. Figure 1 shows the discipline spread of the Teacher of the Year award. All disciplines are represented.

Figure 1.*Distribution of the Teacher of the Year award across disciplines (Carbone et al., forthcoming)*

The awards also help build a culture of excellence in teaching and learning, as they appear to be doing in Queensland (Figure 2). The Teacher of the Year award has gone to academics from Queensland almost twice as often as from any other state (11), with the University of Queensland academics receiving this award five times and Griffith University academics four times. There have been six Teachers of the Year in South Australian universities, four from New South Wales and three or less from each of the other states. The awards are highly competitive and assessed by senior academics and discipline experts, for individual institutions to win so many indicates a growth in the value of scholarship of teaching and learning in those institutions.

Figure 2.*Teacher of the Year Awards across states (Carbone et al., forthcoming)*

Since 2002 the Neville Bonner Award for Indigenous academics has recognised the importance of teaching within and about our Indigenous communities (Australian Awarded University Teachers' Network [AAUTN], 2021a). The nominees must have demonstrated excellence, leadership, and sustained commitment to indigenous education. This year for the first time the Board made the decision that this award be available only to indigenous academics and included nominations by Pro-Vice Chancellors (Indigenous) and Deputy Vice Chancellors (Academic) (DVCAs). This has resulted in many nominees from over 20 different institutions. Not only does this show an enthusiasm for the change in the award requirements but indicates that there are many creative and innovative teaching and learning programs being delivered to educate Indigenous and non-indigenous students in our universities.

The AAUT awards extend to academics at the highest level in our institutions. Leaders in Higher Education who have contributed more than 25 years' service to change and improve the way Teaching and Learning operates in the academy are also recognised through the Career Achievement Award (Universities Australia, 2021). The winners of this award have changed the landscape in Higher Education. For example, Professor Sally Kift (2017 winner) introduced the concept of transition pedagogy which moved universities away from the one-week focus on orientation to a staged and structured series of interactions to transition students from all backgrounds to university. Sally's first national teaching award was in 2003 for introducing change in Queensland University of Technology and she has been an inspiration to many including myself. In subsequent years, her transition pedagogy has been widely adopted across Australia. Like Sally, other winners of this award have made a significant impact that has had a ripple effect across the culture of teaching and learning in our universities. Sally's case also emphasizes the importance of the award to build and legitimise a career in teaching and learning. She deplored the governments continuing decrease in investment in quality learning and teaching (Kift, 2016). She wrote:

\$88 to \$54m to \$28m to \$0. That is what strategic investment in educational innovation for a world class education system, that is incidentally Australia's largest service export, is worth to our federal government. At a time when the government is investing \$1.1 billion in its National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA), as Gavin Moodie has observed, this mover "reinforces the view that, while teaching and learning is universities' most important role, in national policy, it is very much a second priority to research (Kift, 2016, p.4).

Building collaborative and mentoring networks

The AAUT awards are one visible way of enabling a culture of mentorship and collaboration to grow between and within our universities. In 2016 we introduced a mentoring program (AAUTN, 2021b) and as of July 2021 we have 50 past winners volunteering to mentor academics and teachers in how to structure and write award submissions. Many of these mentors hold senior positions within the academy, and all have won a Teaching Award, a Citation or been part of a Program Award team. Some have been fortunate to hold the Teacher of the Year award. This voluntary service exemplifies the way the awards build a community of collegiality. Mentors provide advice across types of awards and even across disciplines if needed. They are often called upon to provide advice to potential nominees in their own institutions as well. It will be negligent to lose this depth of collegiality when the funding for the AAUT ceases at the end of this round.

Similarly, there is a community of award assessors who hold senior Learning and Teaching roles in our universities and are considered as experts in their disciplines, who voluntary work in teams to assess awards each year. Their expertise and depth of knowledge fosters growth and

collaboration between and across states. They are supported by DVCAs to participate in these roles for this reason, and because their participation allows them to bring innovative and creative ideas in the SoTL back into their home institutions. The team approach to assessment acts as professional development for all involved. Over the past three years 460 senior academics from 41 institutions have expressed their interest to participate as assessors. The high number is indicative of the commitment universities have to the AAUT. This will be another lost resource when the funding for the awards cease.

The ripple effect of the AAUT networks is demonstrated by the initiation and growth of state-based networks to help build a localised collaborative support network to share resources and ideas (AAUTN, 2021c). These were initially funded by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council grant, and now operate independently. They often support the state-based awards ceremony for AAUT winners (pre-COVID-19) (Universities Australia, 2021).

How teaching excellence is recognised overseas

While many countries have a national research award system, Australia has been part of a smaller group of countries that recognise the value of teaching and learning in universities through a national award. I highlight three countries who have programs similar to the AAUT program and a strong commitment to recognising teaching as much as research in universities.

Canada has had major learning and teaching awards since 1986. The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) in partnership with 3M Canada co-fund the award that is granted to ten Fellows annually. Each Fellow receives \$25,000 for their commitment to the highest ideals of teaching excellence and scholarship (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2021)

The United Kingdom has had the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme to celebrate and recognise individuals who have made an outstanding impact on student outcomes and the teaching profession in higher education since April 2000 (Skelton, 2004). They also support an association of over 900 National Teaching Fellows who commit to collaborate and mentor across the four home nations to promote teaching and learning as well as run an annual symposium (AdvanceHE, 2021). The prize money allocated to Fellows has declined from a £50,000 prize initially, to £10,000 in 2006 and £5,000 in 2016 (Israel, 2011, p.59). In 2018 the award was given with no prize money attached (Rolfe, 2018). This is a topic of concern and controversy among university academics.

In New Zealand the *AKO Aotearoa Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards* have been in existence since 2001. They recognise the ten top tertiary teachers each year and confer two awards for *Sustained Excellence for Tertiary Teaching in a Kaupapa Māori Context* with \$20,000 grants. In addition, one annual endorsement is selected from the above two categories for *Excellence in supporting Pacific Learners*. One academic from the group receives *The Prime Minister's Supreme Award* and an additional \$10000 (AKO Aotearoa, 2021).

Our other main competitor in the education market is the USA (Anderson, 2021). There is no national award scheme to celebrate and promote teaching and learning in higher education in the USA since the U.S. Professors of the Year awards program was discontinued in 2016 (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2015). While there are national research awards programs recognising teaching excellence resides within individual universities. The same applies to Singapore where universities are autonomous and do not come under the Ministry of Education. For example, the Nanyang Education Award is a multi-tier award

scheme that elevates teaching recognition at higher levels within that university (Nanyang Technological University, 2021).

It could be claimed that Australia's recognition of teaching in universities through national awards has contributed to our strong position in the international education market (Universities Australia, 2015). Prior to the COVID pandemic, university education was our third largest export after iron ore and coal (International Education, 2015). This position may now be jeopardised due to the retrograde step of ceasing to fund the AAUT awards, signalling that higher education is no longer a priority for our current government.

The challenge going forward

Given the current world challenges it is highly unlikely that the Federal Government will commit to the continuation and longevity of the AAUT program. Therefore, funding will need to be sourced elsewhere. Three feasible options that could be investigated further include:

1. Seek external sponsorship from industry for the awards. This could be explored with technology companies who already have a large investment in universities through their uses of hardware, software, and enterprise systems. As is the case with the Canadian model (supported by the 3M Canada Company), industry is rewarded with increased branding reach and good-will for supporting the awards.
2. Invite each of the 39 Universities Australia member universities higher education providers in Australia to support Universities Australia in the running and managing the awards. On current estimates this would be at a cost which is considerably more than the current subscription fee each institution pays Universities Australia. Costs could be based on a sliding scale depending on the number of students in each institution.
3. Draw on the expertise of Council Australasian University Leaders in Learning and Teaching (CAULLT) to manage the awards for Universities Australia. CAULLT is an Australasian professional organisation that supports leadership in Learning and Teaching, and members are usually Directors of Academic Development units, with considerable expertise in learning and teaching scholarship.

Any of these options are possible, or a combination of each. The DVCAs is currently exploring such options to help save the awards from extinction.

Conclusion

I am passionate about supporting the continued funding of the AAUT awards. They strongly affected my own career trajectory. Immediately after receiving the Teacher of the Year award in 1998, I was granted a one-year full-time appointment at the professorial level. This was an incredible leap for a Level A academic and opened networks and opportunities that I may not have accessed otherwise. I was invited to deliver keynote addresses at conferences, opening addresses at graduations, lead a state-based learning and teaching network and assessed external award applications. These activities helped me build a profile to apply for national teaching fellowships, and senior learning and teaching positions that could directly influence others and the way they approached their teaching.

Apart from the benefits to the individuals the discontinuation of these awards will leave a substantial gap in learning and teaching. The AAUT awards have an integral role in promoting creativity and innovation in teaching and learning, as well as the ripple effect of ongoing

mentorships and collaboration across and between universities and across and between disciplines. In the words of two past winners:

... the AAUT's motivated university academics to contribute beyond their institution through the sharing of innovation, resources, good practice and provision of professional learning. They also encouraged educators to strive for teaching excellence by providing formal recognition at the highest level... these awards catalysed important and necessary conversations... (Bower & Van Bergen, 2021).

Having no national learning and teaching awards may affect the ability of Australian Universities to maintain their reputation of innovation in learning and teaching in a global environment. In the current climate the cutting of the funding is a retrograde step for Australia. The costs to keep them running are a fraction of the amount the government spends on infrastructure. The short-sightedness of this federal government in ceasing to invest in their largest service exporter is reprehensible. I encourage you to explore possible opportunities to continue with the national Awards scheme into the future, even if the 2021 Federal Government ceases funding.

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