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Shaping and upskilling the university workforce of the future in a dual sector experience: Co-designing an academic development framework

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The Australian tertiary education sector is undergoing significant transformation, driven by evolving workforce demands, technological disruption, and the imperative for inclusive, future-focused learning environments. In response to national policy directions, this paper presents the co-design and implementation of Swinburne University of Technology's Educator Capability Framework (ECF), developed to support professional learning across both higher education (HE) and vocational education (VE) contexts. The ECF maps educator capabilities across four developmental levels and four domains of practice, aligning individual growth with institutional strategy and sector benchmarks. Guided by a stakeholder-informed methodology, twelve interviews with university leaders shaped the framework's design, revealing key themes including inclusive teaching, reflective practice, curriculum coherence, and industry engagement. The ECF's capabilities-based approach offers a replicable model for institutions seeking to build a skilled, adaptable academic workforce. This research contributes to the national conversation on educator development by demonstrating how co-designed frameworks can foster equity, responsiveness, and strategic alignment in professional learning across dual-sector institutions.

Keywords: professional learning, academic development, capability framework, learning and teaching framework, dual sector

1. Introduction

The Australian tertiary education sector is undergoing significant transformation, driven by evolving workforce demands, technological disruption, and the imperative to create inclusive, future-focused learning environments. The Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024) underscores the urgency of this shift, calling for greater flexibility across post-compulsory education and stronger collaboration between higher education (HE) and vocational education (VE) sectors. Central to this vision is the development of a skilled, adaptable academic workforce capable that meets diverse learner needs and contributes to national productivity and innovation. In this context, professional learning (PL) and academic development are critical levers for institutional and sector-wide change. While many Australian universities offer a range of professional learning opportunities, these are often fragmented and lack alignment with strategic goals or national standards. The Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024) recommends the establishment of professional standards for university educators, drawing on international models such as the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) (AdvanceHE, 2025), which has already recognised over 169,000 educators globally.

In response, institutions such as Swinburne University of Technology are co-designing structured frameworks that support educator development across both HE and VE contexts. Swinburne's Educator Capability Framework (ECF) exemplifies this approach, mapping capabilities across four capability levels; foundational, proficient, accomplished, and expert and four domains of practice. The ECF supports individual professional growth while aligning with institutional performance expectations, sector benchmarks, and the evolving demands of teaching and learning. This paper explores how co-designed professional learning development frameworks, such as the ECF, can shape and upskill the university workforce of the future. Drawing on national policy, sector exemplars, and capability development theory, it argues for a coherent, inclusive, and future-ready approach to academic development in dual sector institutions. A stakeholder-informed co-design approach guided the initiative, with twelve interviews conducted and analysed, identifying commonalities and

challenges. This ensured responsiveness to stakeholder needs and quality assurance of both the process and the framework. The paper concludes with evidence-based insights and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

Recent literature exploring approaches to upskilling university workforce and developing frameworks around these processes offer important insights. Lifelong learning is consistently at the centre of this research, with studies like Lang (2023) discussing alternative credentials, like microcredentials, to support lifelong learning and upskilling, and others (e.g., Daher-Armache, et al., 2025) centering experiential learning, mentorship, and external partnerships in designing professional learning frameworks. A number of recent studies (such as Hajam & John, 2024) discuss upskilling (and reskilling) in the times of AI, calling for human-centric approaches and prioritising inclusivity and adaptability. An important aspect this research highlights is that positive impact of any professional development/learning framework depends on whether a change to the institutional mindset can be achieved and the framework's value recognised within the organisational culture.

2.1 The current state of professional learning in Australian universities

Professional learning (PL) in Australian universities is delivered through a mix of formal and informal approaches, including qualifications such as the Graduate Certificate of Learning and Teaching (GCLT), workshops, mentoring, online resources, and communities of practice. Sector-wide opportunities, such as conferences and research collaborations, also support educator development. However, aside from formal programs like the GCLT, many PL offerings are ad hoc and lack a coherent structure, making it difficult for educators to align their learning with career progression to institutional goals (Loads et al., 2020). Despite these limitations, informal PL remains highly valued. It enables educators to adapt to changing teaching environments, engage with emerging technologies, and contribute to innovation (Arvanitakis et al., 2019). Educators consistently express a preference for accessible, flexible, and high-quality learning resources (Wilson et al., 2018). To address the need for structured PL, Swinburne has introduced the Educator Capability Framework (ECF), aligned with the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) 2023 (AdvanceHE, 2025). The ECF allows educators to benchmark their capabilities and plan development across four levels of expertise, consistent with the Advance HE Fellowship model, which is gaining traction in Australian universities.

The Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024) outlines a vision for a more inclusive, flexible, and collaborative tertiary system. A key recommendation is the development of national professional standards for teaching staff, supported by high-quality PL. This reflects growing recognition that educators must be equipped to navigate evolving pedagogies, technologies, and diverse student needs. Complementing the Accord, the Council of Australasian University Leaders in Learning and Teaching (CAULLT) has proposed a taxonomy for credentialing educators, focusing on learner-centred teaching, inclusion, assessment, and Indigenous knowledge (Dinan-Thompson et al., 2022). While informal PL remains rich, the sector is shifting toward structured, standards-based approaches to ensure quality, equity, and relevance in academic development.

2.2 Professional learning frameworks in Australia

In the absence of national level professional standards for university educators in Australia, several institutions have independently developed frameworks to articulate academic or educator capabilities and guide professional learning, performance, and career development. These frameworks are typically aligned with institutional values and strategic goals, and they vary in structure, scope, and intended use. For example, RMIT University's Educator and Researcher Capability Framework (n.d.) spans educators, researchers, and professional staff, while Chisholm Institute's Professional Educator Framework (n.d.) supports self-evaluation and workforce planning through seven educator domains. Deakin University's Teaching Capability Framework, aligned with the PSF, is designed to support professional learning, career development, and recognition through teaching awards. Charles Sturt University's framework (n.d.) is structured around five behavioural pillars and is used flexibly across human resources functions. Victoria University's model for vocational educators includes 13 capabilities across four domains, emphasising equity, technology, and applied research. These institutional frameworks demonstrate a sector-wide commitment to enhancing educator capability

through structured, values-aligned, and evidence-informed approaches. They also highlight the need for a coherent national framework to unify and elevate professional learning across the Australian tertiary education system. In developing its framework, Swinburne University adopted stakeholder-informed approach grounded in evidence and institutional context. At the core of ECF was Swinburne's intent to support educators in identifying, accessing, and engaging with professional learning opportunities that align with their evolving roles and aspirations. The paper's next section offers a detailed look at this approach, followed by insights gained from stakeholder interviews.

2.3 The Swinburne Educator Capability Framework (ECF)

Swinburne's ECF is designed as a structured and developmental approach to professional learning for educators within a dual-sector university context. The ECF is organised into four high-level domains: learning and teaching practice, self-development practice, community practice and specialised education practice. Each domain encompasses multiple areas of practice, which represent specific aspects of an educator's role. These areas are further divided into streams, which provide more granular pathways for professional development. This hierarchical structure from domains to streams enables educators to navigate the framework according to their individual needs and institutional expectations. A key feature of the ECF is its four-tiered capability levels: foundational, proficient, accomplished and expert. Each level is defined by capability descriptors that articulate the standards of practice and achievement expected at that level. These descriptors are applied broadly across the framework and specifically within each area of practice.

The ECF is underpinned by a capabilities-based approach to professional identity and growth. Drawing on Walker's (2005) capabilities theory, the framework positions educator development as a process of achieving what individuals value in their professional lives. This aligns with Bonni and Gasper's (2009) dimensions of capability; well-being, participation, and empowerment; which are particularly relevant in dual-sector institutions where educators navigate both higher education and vocational education contexts. By integrating disciplinary, institutional, and pedagogical knowledge with self-awareness and professional skills, the ECF supports educators in adapting to the dynamic demands of contemporary teaching and learning environments. It also provides a foundation for aligning professional learning with institutional strategy, performance development, and sector-wide standards such as the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) 2023 (AdvanceHE, 2025), as recommended by the Australian Universities Accord (Department of Education, 2024).

3. Methodological approach and method

Swinburne's framework development was guided by co-design approach, involving interviews with key stakeholders to ensure continuous quality assurance, and culminating at developing and refining the framework. Typically used in service design and policymaking, this approach is becoming more widespread in educational settings (Gray et al., 2021). Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, all of whom are leaders across various areas of the university, from student engagement to Indigenous teaching and learning, and including the university's global and transnational partners. Thematic analysis enabled identification of frequently mentioned themes, ideas and concerns across the interviews, also highlighting the main points of connection. This data informed the development and implementation of the ECF. The key themes from the interviews included the importance of inclusive and student-centred teaching practices, the urgent need for structured professional development and support systems, and the challenges of aligning the framework with existing institutional structures and cultural contexts.

4. Findings

The stakeholder interviews conducted as part of the ECF development were analysed thematically to identify shared ideas, priorities, and challenges. The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for rich, nuanced insights to emerge organically, with participants raising a wide range of topics with minimal prompting. This approach enabled a deeper understanding of the values and expectations that underpin educator development across both higher education (HE) and vocational education (VE) contexts.

Three key themes emerged most frequently across the twelve interviews: reflective practice and continuous improvement (mentioned eight times), inclusive and compassionate teaching, and professional development and recognition (each mentioned seven times). Stakeholders consistently emphasised the importance of inclusive practices to meet the diverse needs of students, including considerations around mental health, accessibility, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Empathy and human-centred communication were highlighted as essential components of effective teaching. Reflective practice was described in terms of ongoing self-assessment, peer learning, and iterative teaching strategies; all seen as vital for enhancing educator effectiveness and improving student outcomes. Other prominent themes included curriculum coherence and alignment and industry engagement and real-world contexts, each raised six times.

The student-centred nature of the framework was discussed five times, reinforcing the need for the ECF to be responsive to student needs and outcomes. Additional themes raised four times included support for sessional staff, challenges specific to the VE sector, and institutional values and structures. These discussions highlighted the need for better onboarding, induction, and recognition pathways for casual educators, who often lack access to professional development opportunities. Several other topics were mentioned three times each, including student experience and engagement, developmental levels and capability, framework implementation, collaboration and peer learning, feedback and assessment, onboarding and communication, inclusivity and relevance, resource development and support, cultural and structural challenges, and recognition and accreditation.

These insights reflect the multifaceted nature of educator capability and the importance of embedding support structures within the framework. Stakeholders also emphasised that professional development must be linked to formal recognition, such as promotions and awards, to motivate and retain educators. The ECF must align with these opportunities to be effective. The inclusion of student voice in the co-design process was identified as a priority, ensuring the framework remains grounded in student outcomes and experiences. Finally, the unique challenges of dual-sector institutions were acknowledged, particularly the compliance and assessment requirements of the VE sector. Stakeholders stressed that the ECF must be practical, relevant, and aligned with industry standards. Institutional support was deemed critical to successful implementation, requiring leadership buy-in, strategic alignment, and adequate resourcing.

5. Discussion

This paper discusses the process of creating Swinburne's Educator Capability Framework (ECF), a co-designed, structured, inclusive, and future-ready framework within a dual-sector institution. Guided by national policy and stakeholder-informed methodology, the ECF was developed to align educator capabilities with institutional strategy, sectoral benchmarks, and evolving teaching demands. Twelve stakeholder interviews provided nuanced insights, shaping the ECF's design and implementation by highlighting the importance of reflective practice, inclusive teaching, curriculum coherence, and industry engagement, ensuring the framework is both student-centred and educator-empowering. These findings validated ECF's emphasis on capability tiers and domains of practice, ensuring its responsiveness to diverse educator roles and contexts.

With the ECF currently in the implementation phase, its ongoing refinement is subject to feedback and alignment with institutional strategies and priorities. Future work includes embedding the framework into performance development processes, expanding access for casual staff, and integrating student voice, all of which are essential steps for ensuring the framework's sustainability and relevance. This research addresses a critical gap in the Australian tertiary education system: the lack of coherent, inclusive, and strategically aligned professional learning frameworks. By demonstrating a stakeholder-informed, capabilities-based approach, the ECF serves as a replicable model for institutions seeking to upskill their academic workforce in ways that are equitable, future-focused, and responsive to national and global educational shifts.

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