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The screenshot shows a mobile browser interface on an iPad. The address bar displays 'theconversation.edu.au/when-rankings'. The page header includes the site logo 'THE CONVERSATION' and a search bar. A navigation menu lists various categories like 'Business + Economy', 'Environment + Energy', etc. The article title is 'When rankings and research rules, students come last', dated '3 October 2012, 2.32pm AEST'. The author is 'Adrian Lee', an Emeritus Professor at UNSW. A disclosure statement mentions NHMRC funding. The main text discusses university rankings and research priorities. A photo of students in a classroom is included. Social sharing options (Comments, Republish, Email, Tweet, Share) and tags are visible on the right. A 'RELATED ARTICLES' section at the bottom shows a thumbnail of another article.

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Put students first! Can TEQSA save us?

Recently, I helped my wife with the memoirs she wrote for her grandchildren. I had such fun I decided to write mine. So it was off to the shed to go through filing boxes full of my life to get ideas, quotes and ammunition before I started writing. I was an academic for nearly forty years, teaching microbiology to medical and science students and researching bugs in the gut - especially bacteria as a cause of ulcers. Happily, there were rich pickings amongst the papers but also some stark reality checks. Looking through my past publications, I came across the following:

“We come to the university with virtually no experience and are ‘thrown in the deep end and expected not only to teach but to plan our teaching. The only analogous situation I can think of is parenthood; and yet we are being paid for being university teachers. Thus the issue becomes: How can we make university teachers more professional?” and

“The Williams Committee of enquiry into education and training made the following recommendation. ‘R5.24 The Committee recommends an expert working party to formulate programs for staff in the theory and practice of teaching, curriculum development and examining, and then later consider how satisfactory participation in such programs might become a normal condition of tenured appointment.’” and

“With the stimulus of the Williams Report, it is now time for the university administrators to pull their head out of the sand and do something about the poor reward for teaching”.

The really depressing thing is that the Williams committee report was published in 1979 and my paper (1) was published in 1980 – 32 years ago. So little has changed that I could have written almost exactly the same paper yesterday!

Many with children about to attend University might be surprised at this. They might reasonably assume that, given the substantial monies provided by Government to fund tertiary education, university managers would place high priority on improving the student experience in their institution. They would be keen to demonstrate the excellence of their university’s teaching to prospective students. Sadly, with a few significant exceptions this is not the case. Research rules and our university leaders put much more effort into climbing the research league tables than creating a transparent reward system for their staff that excel in teaching.

Although there are many outstanding teachers in our universities, ask the majority of Australian academics why they do not put more effort into teaching and they will reply they that are under continuing pressure from their Vice Chancellors, Deans and Heads of School to lift their research performance. Universities claim to have promotion systems that reward excellence in teaching but in reality most staff know that the key to success is the number of research grants and publications they achieve. These are much more significant than evidence that they have created a truly outstanding learning experience for their students.

That said, there have been some notable successes that have raised the profile of teaching in our universities within the last decade. The Learning and Teaching Performance Fund provided real monies as an incentive to improve teaching quality and the creation of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council provided some symmetry with the work of the well-established Australian Research Council. Alas, these initiatives

are no more and we are back to the environment that has prevented the enhanced profile for teaching I was dreaming of 32 years ago.

Is there light on the horizon? When my grandchildren go through my boxes in another decade or two will they see the continuing *status quo* of not enough reward or incentive to excel in teaching in the universities I hope they attend?

As an optimist, I can see a way forward. The impact of the recently-formed Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) could stimulate the much-needed change in environment. In this newspaper there have been alarms raised by some university leaders that TEQSA will be an unnecessary bureaucratic burden and that established universities have the ability to ensure quality without this burden. They should be left alone to do what they have been doing and the Agency should mainly protect the public from the risk of shonky private providers. But I say not enough has been done to bring teaching to the forefront, so let the Agency do its work. I eagerly await the Teaching Standards to be developed by the Higher Education Standards Panel lead by Alan Robson. It is reasonable to expect that all universities will fulfil these and TEQSA's role will be to monitor that this is being done.

This need not be too onerous. Let's suppose a Standard which states "*All universities have in place a transparent reward system for excellence in teaching including promotion criteria for truly outstanding teaching performance*". This would give hardworking academics hope that the prevailing culture will change. A University, for its part, would be required to have its promotion policy and criteria readily available on the web and be able to provide evidence of the implementation of this policy at short notice. If adherence to this Standard and others is a requirement for continued registration as a tertiary institution then this will undoubtedly stimulate university leaders to review their priorities and insist that the Teaching Standards are fulfilled to the ultimate benefit of their students.

The possibility that TEQSA can request a small expert panel to visit a University at short notice to review their policies and assess the adequacy of the evidence that the policy is being implemented should be sufficient to assure quality. No glossy portfolio that takes months to prepare, just a regularly-updated website that contains relevant policies and data to demonstrate that policies are being implemented. For the example above, this might be simply the number of promotions based on outstanding teaching compared to outstanding research performance.

All potential students and their parents should demand evidence that the university they are considering takes teaching seriously. All universities should aim to convince those making their critical, life-changing choice of institution that they will be provided with a first class learning experience; that they will not simply be herded into lecture theatres with hundreds of other students, assessed on the basis of regurgitated facts and treated as a source of funding to support the institution's research ambitions.

Of course, excellence in research is important. I used to love researching my stomach bugs and I feel the students benefitted from my research. But excellence in teaching and excellence in research are not mutually exclusive. It is just that there is an urgent need, as there has been for these past 32 years, for a better balance between effort put into teaching compared to that put into research. If universities want to lift their game, they should raise the profile of excellence in teaching. After all, there are more ways than ever of learning and more institutions than ever offering opportunities to learn. Those without a clearly demonstrable commitment to teaching quality will surely lose out.

1 Adrian Lee, 1980 *Teaching Scientists for the Year 2000* Search **11**, 413-415

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