

Viewpoint: Understanding criteria changes of effective teaching in Australian higher education

Introduction

The Australian higher education sector is highly internationalised and has enjoyed a global reputation for quality, innovation and performance. According to [the Times Higher Education \(2023\)](#) ranking, there are 37 Australian universities within the top 1,000 universities worldwide. Significantly, seven of these Australian universities are in the top 100 universities worldwide ([The Times Higher Education, 2023](#)). Teaching is one of the five categories judged in a university's ranking, which is worth 30% of a university's total score ([The Student, 2022](#)). The other four categories include research (30%), citations (30%), international outlook (7.5%) and industry income (2.5%). Thus, the quality of teaching and learning is a key factor in how a university is perceived, which in turn drives recruitment of both domestic and international students. The pressure to ensure effective teaching in universities and to demonstrate that effectiveness is also rising ([Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2010](#)). Effective teaching impacts students' academic, physical, social-emotional and behavioural well-being. Effective teaching occurs best when all education stakeholders (e.g. educators, students, future employers, policymakers, community members) share responsibility for continuous improvement and student achievement ([Killion and Hirsh, 2011](#)). Therefore, the role of effective teaching is critical in the enhancement of higher education. The concept of effective teaching in higher education can have resonance and meaning within a changed and changing context.

This paper draws on relevant higher education literature and topical contextual developments to examine the notion of effective teaching. With a focus on the Australian context, the paper examines a national understanding of effective teaching as developed in the Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards (AUTCAS) framework. The AUTCAS framework of effective teaching is then analysed against the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) excellence in university teaching criteria.

Definitions of effective teaching

The importance of teaching to improve students' performance is unquestionable. Academics are required to have necessary qualifications and certifications to meet the job requirements. However, highly qualified teaching does not necessarily equate to highly effective teaching. Meanwhile, the question arises: what is effective teaching, and how is it measured? Indeed, defining effective teaching is complex and can sometimes generate controversy. There are many different conceptions of effective teaching, including academic behaviour (warmth, civility, clarity), academic knowledge (of subject matter, of students), academic experience, academic beliefs ([Heydarnejad et al., 2022](#)). [Mastrokukou et al. \(2022\)](#) indicated that effective teaching is a contested concept with different definitions. Notably, the two commonly accepted components of effective teaching are a set of particular skills and practices, and the ability to shape the teaching approach to different contexts ([Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2010](#)).

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In the narrowest sense, effective teaching is defined as an academic's ability to improve student learning/achievement measured by student gains on standardised achievement tests (Stronge, 2013). However, there are several problems with this definition of effective teaching. To begin with, student learning cannot be attributed exclusively to the quality of teaching students received. Student learning is influenced by multiple factors such as individual commitment, peers and/or family support, school resources and community involvement. Secondly, the information provided by the test scores is limited. For example, student achievement gains do not indicate the retention rate or a caring environment created by academics. Likewise, learning is more than average academic goals. Student social development such as attitude, motivation and confidence, should contribute to learning as well. Most notably, the definition could lead to the measurement of academic effectiveness only using student achievement gains. Alternatively, a better approach is to define important aspects and outcomes of teaching first, and identify methods to measure them accordingly.

Effective teaching or teaching excellence at any given moment in time may be viewed differently by students, academics, politicians and employers within a particular system of higher education (Carless, 2015). A useful definition of effective teaching should be intentionally linked to the specific context where teaching is evaluated (Carless, 2015). Mockler (2018) also found that the language used to discuss the work of academics matters to the understanding of education as a society. For instance, "academic quality" implies that if there is a problem with quality in schools, it is a problem with the academics themselves. Whereas, "teaching quality" implies that the quality has to do with how an academic is teaching. It is argued that "where a good teaching is understood as being about practices rather than bodies, there is likely to be stronger receptivity to the idea of change in pedagogy" (Mockler, 2018). In addition, Carless (2015) pointed out that existing guidelines on effective teaching skills vary across countries and education institutions in scope and content, lacking concrete and grounded descriptions of what university teaching entails. As stated by Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010), the criteria of effective teaching in higher education are understood to comprise particular skills and practices applied within particular contexts.

According to Cardoso et al. (2015) and Milienos et al. (2021), the quality of teaching and learning in higher education has been emphasised globally in the last decade. The new educational vision of higher education is to guarantee effective teaching in universities and to be able to determine this effectiveness. Some researchers (Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2022; Mastrokouskou et al., 2022; Tadesse and Khalid, 2023) concluded that university teaching can be defined as an academic activity that requires extensive professional skills and practices. At the same time, both high level of disciplinary and other contextual expertise is also required.

The Australian learning and teaching council criteria

There is no universal definition of effective higher education teaching as teaching effectiveness depends on characteristics such as type of subject, size of the class, student ability, assessment practices and other contextual factors (Mastrokouskou et al., 2022). The notion of effective teaching is continuously changing, undergoing shifts and renewal over time. Prior to the development of AUTCAS framework, the ALTC criteria was accepted as the proxy list of skills and practices of effective university teaching in Australian higher education (Australian Learning and Teaching Council, 2008). The criteria employed by the federally funded organisations were used for national recognition and reward. The five key guiding criteria of ALTC are:

- (1) Approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn;
- (2) Development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field;

- (3) Approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning;
- (4) Respect and support for the development of students as individuals; and
- (5) Scholarly activities that have influenced and enhanced learning and teaching.

The Australian university teaching criteria and standards framework

The Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards (AUTCAS) framework is an indicative framework that provides universities and their academic staff with a practical and flexible guide to develop their own teaching criteria and standards, expectations for each level of appointment and indicators to guide the collection of evidence used to substantiate claims for performance and promotion (Chalmers et al., 2014, 2015). The AUTCAS was funded by the Australian Federal Government as an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) project in 2014 to improve the lack of appropriate mechanisms that systematically reward and recognise effective teaching. The AUTCAS project was conducted over an 18-month period from September 2012 to February 2014. During the project, a comprehensive literature review was conducted synthesising understanding of the definition and principles of quality teaching. Based on the ALTC criteria, literature review, previous project reports and internal university documents, a list of 27 principles was generated (Chalmers et al., 2014). The list was circulated at the 2013 Western Australian Teaching and Learning Forum and in a meeting of the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development. Feedback on the list informed a review and led to refinement of 27 principles to 10 principles, underpinning quality teaching across universities and disciplines (Chalmers et al., 2014). Additional feedback was sought from academic senior executives and human resource managers, which led to the development a framework with seven quality teaching criteria. To facilitate dissemination of the framework, a high-quality website was developed including the framework, project documents and examples of quality teaching practice at www.uniteachingcriteria.edu.au.

Hence, the AUTCAS is a criteria and evidence matrix that gives examples of performance and achievements under seven criteria related to different aspects of teaching (Chalmers et al., 2014). The seven teaching criteria are:

- (1) Design and planning of learning activities;
- (2) Teaching and supporting student learning;
- (3) Assessment and giving feedback to students on their learning;
- (4) Developing effective learning environments, student support and guidance;
- (5) Integration of scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching and in support of student learning;
- (6) Evaluation of practice and continuing professional development; and
- (7) Professional and personal effectiveness.

All academic staff can use the matrix for career planning, in preparation for performance development reviews and in preparation for applying for promotion or teaching awards.

Comparison of AUTCAS and ALTC criteria

The AUTCAS framework has proven to be highly influential, with over two-thirds of Australian universities and a number of private higher education institutions taking into account of the framework to inform their criteria, performance expectations, development and management processes (Chalmers, 2019). In this paper, details of the AUTCAS

criteria are compared against the ALTC criteria of effective teaching to determine the degree of alignment between the two criteria. Furthermore, new criteria and revised criteria in AUTCAS are discussed with reflection on the recent literature.

As Table 1 shows, AUTCAS criterion 1, “Design and planning of learning activities”, mostly aligns with ALTC criterion 2, “Development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field”. However, AUTCAS criterion 1 neither reflects ALTC’s criterion 2 on “development of imaginative resources”, nor emphasises the importance of “communication for student learning”. AUTCAS criterion 1 focuses on the preparation and knowledge of the educator. In addition, “use of technology” in teaching has been highlighted. Technological advancements enable, inform and revolutionise higher education teaching through the application of artificial intelligence, blended and hybrid teaching, use of micro-credentials and open educational resources (Devlin and McKay, 2016; Pelletier et al., 2021).

AUTCAS criterion 2, “Teaching and supporting student learning” maps to ALTC criterion 1 “Approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn”. ALTC criterion 1 suggests effective teaching to “foster independence in learning”, whereas AUTCAS criterion 2 highlights the “use of a student-centred approach”. AUTCAS criterion 2 recognises the value of “collaborative and innovative teaching” and contributes to students’ global competency via utilising “resources from different contexts and countries”. In contrast to traditional view that teaching is a relatively solitary activity, educators have been seen to increase collaboration with peer colleagues, industry associates, librarians, educational designers, digital experts and other specialists in the process of building, teaching and assessing their courses (Devlin and Samarawickrema, 2022). A range of colleagues and other contributors could provide extensive specialist input and support educators to design dynamic, meaningful and opportune learning (Devlin and McKay, 2016; Universities Australia, 2019).

AUTCAS criterion 3, “Assessment and giving feedback to students on their learning” incorporates all the elements in ALTC criterion 3, “Approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning”. Furthermore, AUTCAS specifically points out the need for “authentic assessments” and “cumulative assessments”. The use of authentic assessments has a positive influence on learning, autonomy, motivation and self-regulation, as the authentic assessments limit opportunities for plagiarism and contract cheating (Villarroel et al., 2018; Bretag et al., 2019). The adoption of cumulative assessments allows educators to provide rich formative feedback. Students could achieve iterative and incremental development and be able to monitor and evaluate their own learning progress (Boud et al., 2018).

AUTCAS criterion 4, “Developing effective environments, student support and guidance” is consistent with ALTC criterion 4, “Respect and support for the development of students as individuals”. Both criteria promote “student equity and diversity”.

AUTCAS criterion 5, “Integration of scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching and in support of learning” covers elements in ALTC criterion 5, “Scholarly activities that have influenced and enhanced learning and teaching”. In addition to recognising the integration of scholarship, research and professional activities, AUTCAS highlights the importance of incorporating “professional, industry and work-based practice and experiences into teaching practice and the curriculum”. Academics are expected to demonstrate a “contribution to teaching and learning within or beyond their discipline”. Mentoring and coaching can be a good practice and have a positive impact on the career ambitions and expectations of higher education academics, which decreases the perception of isolation in academics’ work (Li and Yu, 2012). The creation of teaching networks to foster collaboration,

Table 1. Comparison of AUTCAS criteria and ALTC criteria of effective teaching

Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards (2014)	Australian Learning and Teaching Council criteria (2008)
Criterion 1: Design and planning of learning activities Planning, development and preparation of learning activities, learning resources and materials, for a unit, course or degree program; including coordination, involvement or leadership in curriculum design and development. Good practice in relation to this criterion might include demonstration of: • Preparation • Knowledge of the discipline • Knowledge of the student learning process • Knowledge and appropriate use of teaching techniques • Knowledge and application of curriculum design • Knowledge and appropriate use of technology • Innovative design or use of technology Criterion 2: Teaching and supporting student learning Quality teaching, including: lecturing, classroom, on-line, field, work-based, studio, laboratory, workshop, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and supervision of student research. Good practice in relation to this criterion might include demonstration of: • Engaging students and stimulating interest • Encouraging active participation • Explaining concepts in a way that students can understand • Helping students that encounter difficulties • Use of a student-centred approach • Knowledge and use a range of teaching activities • Use of a collaborative teaching approach • Utilise examples and resources from different contexts and countries • Innovative teaching Criterion 3: Assessment and giving feedback to students on their learning Design and execution of assessment tasks that are aligned with student learning outcomes and the provision of appropriate and timely feedback. Good practice in relation to this criterion might include demonstration of: • Support for students to develop and demonstrate the intended learning outcomes and educational principles • Provision of constructive and timely feedback • Clearly stated assessment requirements/criteria • Design of assessment tasks closely linked to the unit objectives	Criterion 2: Development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field • Developing and presenting coherent and imaginative resources for student learning; • Implementing research-led approaches to learning and teaching; • Demonstrating up-to-date knowledge of the field of study in the design of the curriculum and the creation of resources for learning; • Communicating clear objectives and expectations for student learning Criterion 1: Approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn. • Fostering student development by stimulating curiosity and independence in learning; • Contributing to students' critical thinking skills, analytical skills and scholarly values; • Encouraging student engagement through enthusiasm shown for learning and teaching; • Inspiring and motivating students through high-level communication, presentation and interpersonal skills Criterion 3: Approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning. • Integrating assessment strategies with the specific aims and objectives for student learning; • Providing timely, worthwhile feedback to students on their learning; • Using a variety of assessment and feedback strategies; • Implementing both formative and summative assessment; • Adapting assessment methods to different contexts and diverse student needs

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards (2014)	Australian Learning and Teaching Council criteria (2008)
• Design of assessment tasks that build cumulatively towards a capstone outcome • Use a variety of assessment tasks • Design of assessment for authentic learning • Innovation in the design and execution of assessment Criterion 4: Developing effective environments, student support and guidance Activities related to the creation of an engaging learning environment for students. Including: supporting transition, the development of learning communities and strategies that account for and encourage student equity and diversity. Good practice in relation to this criterion might include demonstration of: • Availability for consultation • How you link students to appropriate support and services • How you encourage students to support and engage with each other • How you building communities in the unit/ course or discipline • How you respect and require students to demonstrate respect for others • How you support students with diverse backgrounds and perspectives • Innovation in supporting students and creating supporting or engaging learning environments Criterion 5: Integration of scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching and in support of learning 1: Teaching and learning research incorporated into teaching practice. 2: Inclusion of discipline-based research in the curriculum and engagement of students in pedagogically sound discipline-based research. 3: Incorporation of professional, industry and work-based practice and experiences into teaching practice and the curriculum. Good practice in relation to this criterion might include demonstration of: • Incorporation of the scholarship of teaching and learning research into teaching practice • Contribution to teaching and learning within or beyond your discipline • Inclusion of discipline-based research in the curriculum • Engagement of students in pedagogically sound discipline-based research that supports learning	Criterion 4: Respect and support for the development of students as individuals. • Participating in the effective and empathetic guidance and advising of students; • Assisting students from equity and other demographic subgroups to participate and achieve success in their courses; • Influencing the overall academic, social and cultural experience of higher education Criterion 5: Scholarly activities that have influenced and enhanced learning and teaching. • Showing advanced skills in evaluation and reflective practice; • Participating in and contributing to professional activities related to learning and teaching; • Coordination, management and leadership of courses and student learning; • Conducting and publishing research related to teaching; • Demonstrating leadership through activities that have broad influence on the profession

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards (2014)	Australian Learning and Teaching Council criteria (2008)
• Incorporation of professional, industry and work-based practice or experiences into teaching practice or curriculum Criterion 6: Evaluation of practice and continuing professional development Criterion 7: Professional and personal effectiveness	
Source: AUTCAS (Chalmers et al., 2014) and ALTC (2008)	

sharing and inquiry contributes to advancing the processes and practices surrounding data gathering, analysis, interpretation and response planning and implementation.

AUTCAS criterion 6, “Evaluation of practice and continuing professional development” and criterion 7, “Professional and personal effectiveness” expand on ALTC criterion 5, “showing advanced skills in evaluation and reflective practice”. However, the ALTC is more focused on the skills of practitioner themselves, while the AUTCAS criteria is supported by collecting evidence of learner benefit from different types of data sources. According to [Alkema \(2011\)](#), different types of data sources that can be used to gather evidence are central database, attendance data, diagnostic assessment or pre-course testing of context specific knowledge and skills, satisfaction or experience surveys, interview and focus groups, observation of learners and practitioners (including in e-learning environments), formative assessment, summative assessment, retrospective evaluation by graduates, employer questionnaires.

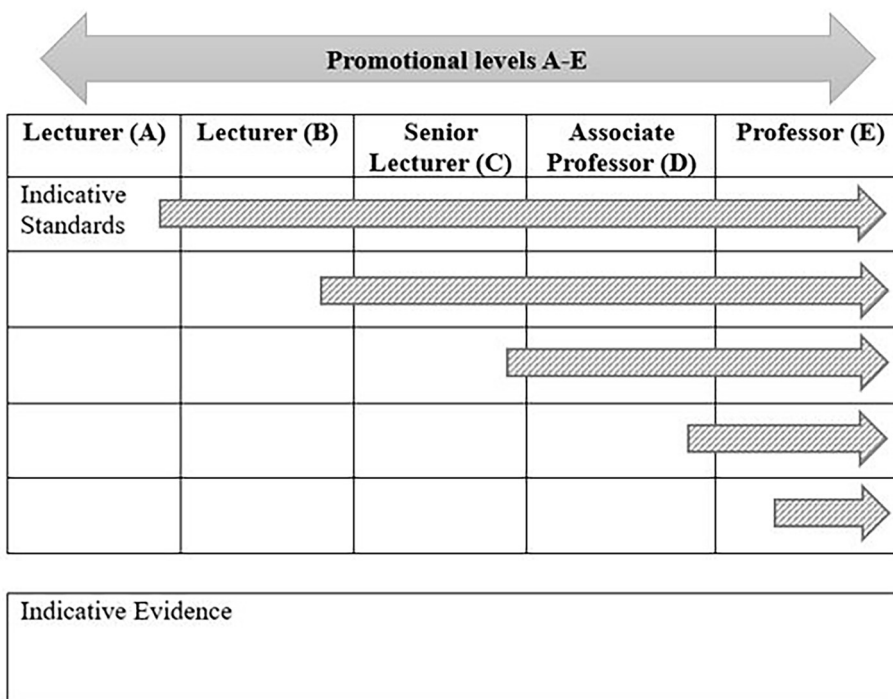
Finally, although AUTCAS criteria do not use the term “work-integrated-learning” specifically, suggested good practices demonstrate the response to the demand for graduates with work-ready skills. Educators are expected to redesign curricula, embed assessments that align with workplace outcomes and increase connections with industry and community to provide authentic learning experiences to students ([Universities Australia, 2019](#)).

The implementation of AUTCAS framework in Australian higher education

The AUTCAS framework is intended as a practical, flexible guide to assist universities and their academic staff to clarify what constitutes quality teaching. The framework constitutes a set of clear criteria that characterises effective teaching, enabling universities and the higher education sector to recognise and reward their excellent educators. For each AUTCAS criterion, the framework suggests standards of achievement that might be applied to each promotional level. The structure of the levels is incremental as illustrated in [Figure 1](#). It is not a wholesale replacement in the required skills as an academic moves up the levels. Academics are expected to build on and deepen skills developed at a lower level. Each criterion is accompanied by examples of indicative evidence that could be used to demonstrate achievement ([Chalmers et al., 2014, 2015](#)).

Evidence suggests that traditional quality assurance in the form of assessments, accreditations and audits has more effect on organisational and managerial control than on teaching and learning improvement ([Shah and Nair, 2013](#); [Allais, 2014](#); [Aamodt et al.,](#)

Criterion #



Source: Adapted from Chalmers *et al.* (2014)

Figure 1. Illustration of the framework structure by criteria

2018). Education institutions must avoid “death by a thousand performance indicators”, where lots and lots of different measures of performance exist and vast amounts of time are spent collecting data. Institutions and academics then pretend that the existence of the data implies they have solved the problems of measuring performance effectively and making professional judgements about quality (Laurillard, 2013). It is important to appreciate that the AUTCAS framework is developed with the intention that the criteria, standard and indicative evidence could be adapted by each individual university to suit their own context. This reflects the view put forward by Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) that effective university teaching must align with the context in which it takes place. Contexts not only vary greatly between disciplines, departments, faculties and institutions, but also vary according to societal, political, economic, technological and demographic change forces.

The AUTCAS provides guidelines on how to use the framework at two levels: institutions and individuals. At the institution level, universities could use the framework as a tool to clarify their expectations and set indicative standards for performance review and promotion. One of the challenges in promoting effective teaching is the high dependency on research performance in academic promotions, which results in academics being reluctant to devote too much of their time to teaching activities (Probert, 2013; Locke, 2014). Although both

knowledge production and knowledge sharing need to be nourished to satisfy the key roles of being a university academic, they require different professional skills. For universities who pursue both education and research, they tend to put more emphasis on their “researcher” role than their “educator” role ([Aamodt et al., 2018](#)), even though “education” forms part of the responsibilities of academics. When it comes to recruitment procedures and contract renewal criteria, qualifications as a researcher play a more dominant role than being an effective academic or educator. However, it is noted that a productive and successful researcher does not equal to a successful academic/educator at universities ([Kaynardağ, 2019](#)). Quality in education should be reconsidered accounting for the current learning environment and students’ needs, which requires ongoing training and development ([Biggs and Tang, 2011](#)). The AUTCAS framework supports universities to develop policies and processes related to recognising and rewarding teaching. Universities can use the framework as a template to develop job descriptions, set teaching criteria and standards across promotional level and guide academic staff development and performance review policy ([Chalmers et al., 2014](#)).

At the individual level, the framework can be used as a guide to demonstrate and provide evidence of quality teaching in support of probation or promotional reviews, or direct personal and professional development ([Chalmers et al., 2014](#)). The framework has also been presented by academic level to demonstrate the expectations for all criteria at each academic level ([Figure 2](#)).

Furthermore, individual academics can find specific examples linked to each framework criterion on how evidence might be presented to illustrate features of good practice. AUTCAS emphasises the importance of evidence collection to demonstrate achievement under each criterion. In recognition of different context and teaching goals, AUTCAS suggests that individual academics employing this guide should consult their own institution’s teaching criteria and standards policy as a starting point. Several sources of evidence to demonstrate achievement are recommended: self-assessment and reflection, student feedback, student learning and peer review ([Chalmers et al., 2015](#)). In self-reflection, academics should be explicit when describing the way in which knowledge and values are reflected in teaching and the reasons behind the teaching methods. Academics could also collect student feedback from formal and unsolicited sources such as student surveys, evaluations and conversations. Student feedback can be used to measure student satisfaction, improvement in teaching quality over time, and to assess how student feedback has been used to enhance subsequent practice. In terms of student learning as a source of evidence, it is essential for academics to be able to demonstrate student progression as a consequence of their teaching. Possible evidence includes pre- and post- testing, external moderation of assessment tasks, external marking/moderation of student work and data on completions of higher degree by research (HDR) students. Additionally, peer review is a popular source to provide quality teaching evidence. Peer review can occur informally or formally through class room practices, review of curriculum and design, review of learning materials, activities and assessment tasks, participation in moderation exercises, mentoring relationships ([Chalmers et al., 2015](#)). Peer review can also witness scholarly contribution and research relating to teaching and learning. This self-audit process can identify strengths to build upon, and weaknesses to be addressed ([Al-Busaidi et al., 2016](#); [Nabaho et al., 2019](#); [Anderson et al., 2020](#)). To this extent, academics can devise development plans to improve the standard of their courses.

Academic Level (#)

Criterion 1: Design and planning of learning activities	
Indicative Standards	Indicative Evidence
Criterion 2: Teaching and supporting student learning	
Indicative Standards	Indicative Evidence
Criterion 3: Assessment and giving feedback to students	
Indicative Standards	Indicative Evidence
Criterion 4: Developing effective environments, student support and guidance	
Indicative Standards	Indicative Evidence
Criterion 5: Integration of scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching and in support of learning	
Indicative Standards	Indicative Evidence
Criterion 6: Evaluation of practice and continuing professional development	
Indicative Standards	Indicative Evidence
Criterion 7: Professional and personal effectiveness	
Indicative Standards	Indicative Evidence

Source: Adapted from Chalmers *et al.* (2014)

Figure 2. Illustration of the framework structure by academic level

Conclusions

This paper examines the notion of effective teaching drawing on relevant higher education literature. Extra attention has been placed on examining the criteria changes of effective teaching in Australian higher education. A comprehensive comparison between the AUTCAS framework of effective teaching and ALTC excellence in university teaching criteria is provided. It is one thing to develop sophisticated measures of effective teaching; it is quite another to help academics believe in improvement and become responsible for acting in ways that enhance teaching quality. Overlooking the distinction between the existence of quality mechanisms and the effects of these mechanisms encourages the inclination to present the sign rather than tackle the substance. To avoid the risk of fostering cynicism, disengagement by academics and the view of evaluations as an isolated add-on to academics' work, it is necessary to emphasise evaluation for development with quality monitoring and auditing (Dresel and Rindermann, 2011; Stein *et al.*, 2013).

The paper then discusses the implementation of AUTCAS in Australian higher education. Whatever criteria are used to measure effective teaching, they must be tested against the principle of whether they help academics enjoy what they are doing, and to relish the task of trying to do it better. Education institutions should not do anything that discourages academics from trying to criticise their own performance openly and candidly. Education institutions should encourage academics analysing the information they gather about their performance to enrich what they subsequently do. A good effective teaching criteria framework should provide both excellent accountability and encourage academics who are most closely involved in the business of teaching students to take maximum responsibility. It should clarify expectations and foster a self-critical, responsible approach.

Notwithstanding these criteria changes, there remains considerable discussions in effective teaching in higher education. Therefore, the AUTCAS framework lays the ground for ongoing impact in the higher education sector. It is worthwhile to consider the framework and establish policies and processes to embed into institutional and individual practices.

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