



Catalyst of Innovation: How CA Elevates Education at Curtin University

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ABSTRACT: The CA(CA) is an integral part of the Curtin University community, established to enhance learning and teaching quality by recognising and rewarding teaching excellence. In recent years, universities have faced significant challenges in maintaining high standards of learning and teaching, particularly with the rise of online education and the need for innovative teaching practices that support student engagement. The CA addresses these challenges by fostering a culture of excellence and innovation in education, including by involving students as partners and adopting other collaborative learning practices. CA aligns with Curtin University's strategic goals of people, planet and partnership. CA champions global educational trends, focusing on promoting innovative and inclusive teaching practices and research-informed teaching. This approach aligns with the university's goal of maintaining high educational standards, excellence, sustainability and social responsibility through programmes like the New Colombo Plan and Mentoring Circle. To ensure continued success and address challenges for the future, Curtin Academy's strategies at local, national and international levels are proposed.

KEYWORDS: Academy; fellowships; learning and teaching; peer review of educational practice

1. Introduction

Universities worldwide have been under increasing pressure to deliver high-quality education amidst rapidly changing educational landscapes. The shift toward online learning and the growing demand for innovative teaching approaches have created a need for institutions such as Curtin University to adapt and thrive in an increasingly agile environment. The CA was established to address these needs by supporting academic staff in their professional development and promoting research-informed teaching practices. CA Fellows have played a critical role in facilitating workshops and initiatives aimed at enhancing teaching excellence. Despite these efforts, the CA has occasionally faced challenges in maintaining its relevance and impact while ensuring that its initiatives align with the university's strategic goals.

Nevertheless, the Academy has addressed these challenges by continuously engaging with a diverse range of educators and aligning its initiatives with institutional priorities [1].

Recent research on digital stress among academics has indicated that many academics felt overwhelmed in their roles [2]. In 2023, 74% of surveyed academics reported high or very high levels of emotional exhaustion, while 73% reported varying levels of psychological distress. Additionally, 75% indicated that they were required to undertake an excessive workload, and 89% reported insufficient time to complete their tasks [2]. Within this context, universities in Australia have continued to face pressure to improve student satisfaction outcomes. The CA has focused on supporting academic staff to enhance their teaching expertise and promote excellence across the university. Its initiatives have aimed to empower educators, improve student outcomes, and position Curtin University as a leader in educational innovation. Without sustained efforts, there is a risk that the university could fall behind in delivering high-quality education, potentially affecting its reputation and its ability to attract and retain students. By supporting educators through mentoring programs, strategic collaborations, and innovative projects, the CA has played a vital role in advancing the university's values and vision [1, 3].

This study examined the CA by addressing several key questions, including its primary objectives, the ways in which it has supported learning and teaching at Curtin University, and the impact it has had both within the institution and beyond. It also explored the key factors contributing to the Academy's success in supporting learning and teaching, as well as how its initiatives have aligned with Curtin University's strategic goals and broader global educational trends.

2. Methodology

The research methodology adopted in this study involved a comprehensive desktop review of the first ten years of the CA, with a particular focus on its impact in empowering educators, promoting research-informed teaching, and fostering collaboration across the institution. The desktop review approach enabled the systematic examination of existing secondary data sources without the need for primary data collection. These sources included institutional reports, policy documents, internal records, workshop materials, programme evaluations, and relevant academic literature related to teaching and learning initiatives at Curtin University. Publicly available documents, such as university strategic plans and published outputs associated with the Curtin Academy, were also analysed to ensure a holistic understanding of its development and contributions. To ensure a structured analysis, the review was guided by key thematic areas aligned with the core objectives of the Curtin Academy. These included: (1) initiatives aimed at empowering educators through professional development and mentoring programmes, (2) strategies promoting research-informed and evidence-based teaching practices, and (3) activities designed to foster collaboration among academic staff, both within the university and with external partners. The collected materials were analysed using a qualitative thematic approach. Relevant information was systematically categorised and synthesised to identify patterns, trends, and key outcomes associated with the Academy's initiatives over the ten-year period. This process facilitated the evaluation of the Academy's effectiveness in supporting teaching excellence and its alignment with institutional goals. Overall, the desktop review provided a comprehensive and longitudinal perspective on the

Curtin Academy's contributions, enabling an informed assessment of its impact on learning and teaching practices within the university.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Making the invisible visible.*

The CA was established in 2014 to enhance teaching excellence and innovation at Curtin University. It aimed to recognise, reward, enable, and extend teaching excellence at both national and international levels [1]. The Academy functioned as a hub for academic development by promoting a culture of continuous improvement and innovation in teaching practices through an interdisciplinary network of academic leaders. The primary objectives of the CA included empowering educators, promoting research-informed teaching, and fostering collaboration. It provided professional development opportunities and support for academic staff to enhance their teaching capabilities. In addition, it encouraged research and scholarship in learning and teaching to promote evidence-based practices. The Academy also facilitated collaboration by building partnerships within and beyond the university, including engagement with students, to enhance teaching and learning outcomes [3].

The CA played a central role in celebrating and fostering innovative teaching practices while advocating for a culture that values high-quality education. It operated as an independent body that provided strategic leadership and advice on teaching-related matters, supporting the university's educational goals through collaboration and dissemination of best practices. Its responsibilities included fostering teaching excellence, promoting scholarly teaching practices, and aligning its initiatives with Curtin University's strategic priorities in learning and teaching. The Academy worked closely with the Curtin Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence Centre (LITEC) to propose and implement professional development initiatives. New Fellows were inducted annually through a selection process chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), and they contributed to the Academy's mission over renewable three-year terms. Governance of the CA was managed by the CA Executive, which was elected by the Fellows. The Executive consisted of a Chair, an Incoming Chair, six Fellows, and an Executive Officer. It was responsible for leading the Academy in accordance with its terms of reference, with decisions made by consensus among voting members. Meetings were held quarterly, and reports on activities were submitted annually to the University Learning and Teaching Committee. The terms of reference were reviewed annually and required approval from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic).

3.2. *CA support for learning and teaching.*

The CA supported learning and teaching at Curtin University through a range of professional development initiatives designed to empower educators and improve student outcomes. It contributed to institutional processes such as the Peer Review of Educational Practice (PREP), mentoring aligned with the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and the evaluation of teaching excellence through university-wide teaching awards. The Academy also implemented structured mentoring programmes, including the CA Mentoring Network (CAMN) and the CA Mentoring Circle (CAMC). These initiatives provided support for academic staff by fostering innovation and excellence in teaching while encouraging cross-disciplinary and cross-faculty collaboration. Furthermore, the programmes supported early-stage Innovation and Scholarship

of Learning and Teaching (iSOLT) projects through seed funding and mentorship provided by Academy Fellows. In addition, the Academy organised Illumination Events, which featured expert presentations and panel discussions. These events created opportunities for sharing best practices and engaging educators in discussions on key issues in higher education. Strategic collaborations were also established with international institutions, such as the National University of Singapore, facilitating knowledge exchange and enriching educational practices at Curtin University [3].

3.3. Impact of the CA on teaching and learning.

The CA had a significant impact on teaching and learning at Curtin University and beyond. It contributed to raising teaching standards by supporting academic staff in their professional development and encouraging engagement in research-informed teaching practices, particularly through iSOLT initiatives. Evidence of this impact can be observed in the number and diversity of projects, outputs, and mentoring activities supported by the Academy over recent years, as summarised in Table 1. The table highlights trends in funding allocation, research outputs, thematic focus areas, and participation in mentoring programmes.

Table 1. Summary of CA iSOLT projects and outputs (2021–2024).

Year	Funds (USD)	Outputs*	Project Themes	Mentors	Mentees
2021	53,923	5 JA; 9 CP; 5 PS; 1 M; 1 S	Student learning (4); Capacity building (2); Assessment design & students as partners (1); Student engagement (1)	7	13
2022	14,137	2 LR; 1 DC; 2 F	Practical teaching tools & workshops (2); Goal setting & wellbeing (2)	5	9
2023	40,980	2 DC; 2 CP (ongoing)	Student learning (4); Assessment design (4); Capacity building (2); Students as partners (1); Teaching tools & workshops (1)	6	27
2024	43,154	Outputs ongoing	Student learning (8); Student wellbeing (3); Student engagement (2); Assessment (1)	20	17

JA: Journal Articles; CP: Conference Presentations; PS: Pilot Studies; S: Symposium; M: Model/Framework; LR/DC: Literature Review/Data Collection.

As shown in Table 1, the CA consistently supported a diverse range of projects across key thematic areas, particularly student learning, assessment design, and capacity building. Over time, there was an observable increase in mentor involvement and project diversity, indicating the expansion of the Academy's influence. Although some outputs remained ongoing, the steady investment in funding and participation demonstrated the Academy's sustained commitment to enhancing teaching and learning practices.

For example, a 2022 CA Fellow mentored a cross-faculty iSOLT project exploring interdisciplinary communities of best practice for assessment rubrics and incorporating a student-as-partners approach to align with discipline norms and ensure optimal learning outcomes. The project team's iSOLT outputs are included [4–10]. While it was challenging to quantify the impact of these papers, they demonstrated that all grant recipients involved in the CA Mentoring Circle were engaged in continual reflection, action, and review of their classroom practices. As a direct consequence of this CA-funded iSOLT, the team was successful in gaining Faculty funding [\$9,990] in 2024 to undertake the project *Students as Partners (SaP) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) created by students for students*. In 2022, budgetary restrictions secured \$15,000 for the Mentoring Circle, enabling provision of seed funding for four iSOLT projects at approximately \$3,000 each. In 2023, thirty projects

were submitted, and six secured CAMC funding, with an additional six securing joint funding through the CA iSOLT grants partnership with the Curtin Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence Centre. This partnership evolved to increase collaboration, knowledge sharing, and support across similar learning and teaching-focused areas of the university. The outputs of projects receiving funding in 2023 and 2024 remained ongoing since the projects were active, and several conference presentations were planned by project teams for the end of 2024. Overall, the CAMC initiative became a pivotal funding source for iSOLT initiatives and research at Curtin, significantly enhancing the capacity of early-career academics to conduct higher education research aimed at exploring and elevating the student experience. Moreover, this initiative provided a useful steppingstone to enable early-stage projects to develop to a point at which the project teams could then apply for additional grant funding to further expand their project outcomes and deliverables. The ongoing success of CAMC was underscored by the voluntary commitment of a CA mentor for each mentee team, fostering cross-faculty collaboration and resulting in joint publications authored by the teams, including the CA mentors.

Through strategic initiatives, the CA significantly increased the visibility of teaching excellence, enhancing recognition of Curtin’s teaching initiatives and positioning the university as a leader in educational innovation. Evidence of this capacity-building is demonstrated through the Illumination Events, as summarised in Table 2. These events were seminars in which topical learning and teaching issues were presented to wider academic audiences, often involving national and international collaborators.

Table 2. CA illumination events and engagement (2022–2024).

Date	Illumination Event Title	Reach	N
31/07/2024	The Role of Teaching Academics: New Ideas and Practices for Engaging with Scholarship of Learning and Teaching	International	66
29/05/2024	Future Fit: Authentic Learning, Professional Identity and AAUT Awards	Internal	17
15/02/2024	Supporting Student Well-Being in Higher Education	Internal	38
06/10/2023	The Changing National Tertiary Agenda: A National Conversation	National	87
23/02/2023	Students as Partners: Co-Foraging Learning for the 21st Century	Internal	56
08/02/2023	Championing Excellence and Innovation in Learning and Teaching	Internal	138
24/08/2022	Creating Bridges Across the Unfamiliar: Supporting Diverse Learners	Internal	49
23/02/2022	Digital Information Ecology of International Students	International	23

Note: N = number of attendees.

The Academy’s programmes extended their reach internationally, influencing pedagogical practices in countries such as Malaysia and Dubai, thereby contributing to global education discourse. In addition, the CA facilitated three international study tours through the New Colombo Plan initiative, enhancing student learning through design thinking approaches applied to real-world challenges in cross-disciplinary teams, supported by industry experts, peers, and CA Fellows.

3.4. Key factors contributing to the success of the CA in supporting learning and teaching.

Several key factors have contributed to the success of the Curtin Academy. Strategic leadership within the CA Executive, characterised by a clear vision and a commitment to making teaching excellence visible, has been central to its success, and alignment with Curtin’s strategic plan has ensured sustained institutional relevance and support. A significant external advocate for

the Academy was a John Curtin Distinguished Professor, a 25-year veteran of Curtin University and Chair of Academic Board, whose ongoing support enabled the CA Executive to engage effectively with senior leadership, develop strategic “white papers,” and maintain regular interaction with the Vice-Chancellor and monthly meetings with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), thereby strengthening institutional traction and visibility. The Academy’s collaborative approach, both within Curtin and with external partners, facilitated knowledge sharing and resource exchange, which enhanced its impact on teaching and learning, and this was reflected in the diversity of membership across Curtin Malaysia, Mauritius, and Dubai, as well as the involvement of Deans and Directors of Learning and Teaching who were active members of the Academy, thereby strengthening cross-campus and cross-faculty engagement. Innovative programmes such as CAMC and Illumination Events supported academic staff by fostering continuous improvement in teaching practice through a collegial, peer-supported model characterised by lateral support rather than hierarchical direction, thereby embedding a culture of care, mentorship, and shared responsibility. The Academy also demonstrated strong adaptability to change, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it provided timely and decisive support to teaching staff; when the University Learning Innovation and Teaching Excellence Centre (LITEC) response was delayed, CA Fellows provided guidance on digital platforms and teaching tools to support the transition to remote learning, and the Academy further contributed to institutional and sector-wide dialogue through Campus Morning Mail articles, including those by Blackley and Tee on blended learning and Sheffield and Pinto on academic community value [11, 12], while also responding to broader policy developments such as the Australian Universities Accord and proposed changes to international student enrolments by facilitating an Illumination Event in late 2023 to support institutional reflection and discussion on these issues [13, 14].

3.5. Challenges and implications.

The CA plays a vital role in advancing learning and teaching at Curtin University, and its continued effectiveness depends on sustained institutional support, ongoing engagement, and continued adaptability, with sustained support requiring continued funding, resources, and institutional commitment to maintain high standards in teaching and learning across the university, while engagement and diversity are ensured through broad participation across academic staff and stakeholder groups supported by the Advisory Board, which strengthens inclusivity and representation across Curtin’s global campuses and external partners, and adaptation to change remains essential as the Academy responds to evolving educational landscapes including the growing role of artificial intelligence in higher education, which UNESCO has identified as a key driver of innovation with the potential to transform teaching and learning and accelerate progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 [15], while alignment with Curtin’s strategic goals and global higher education trends ensures continued relevance and impact. Despite these strengths, short-term challenges include potential declines in teaching engagement, reduced student satisfaction, and increased workload pressures contributing to staff burnout among CA Fellows, while longer-term implications include risks to Curtin University’s reputation as a leader in educational innovation and the need to sustain academic leadership capacity within teaching-focused initiatives, alongside the continued role of the Academy in providing an independence leadership.

4. Future Directions

Challenges for the future included addressing the Australian Universities Accord and a proposed reduction in the number of international students in Australian universities. To address these challenges, mitigation strategies were recommended at multiple levels. At the local level, support for the CA was strengthened through increased funding, resources, and institutional backing, and a culture of collaboration and innovation among educators was fostered to enhance teaching and learning outcomes, including the integration of the CA into new learning and teaching strategies at Curtin. At the national level, collaboration with other Australian universities was encouraged to share best practices and resources, promoting a unified approach to enhancing teaching excellence across the sector. At the international level, the Academy's global reach was expanded through partnerships with leading institutions worldwide, and international collaboration and knowledge exchange were promoted to enhance teaching and learning outcomes globally.

5. Conclusion

This paper demonstrated the significant role of the CA in advancing learning and teaching excellence through strategic leadership, collaborative engagement, and innovative programming. The Academy contributed to strengthening teaching practice across disciplines by fostering communities of practice, supporting cross-faculty collaboration, and enabling the development of impactful initiatives such as CAMC and Illumination Events. These activities enhanced institutional visibility of teaching excellence while also supporting reflective practice and pedagogical development among academic staff. The analysis showed that sustained leadership support, particularly through senior advocacy and strong alignment with institutional strategy, was central to the Academy's success. Equally important was the inclusive and collaborative structure that connected Curtin's global campuses and engaged diverse academic stakeholders. The Academy's responsiveness during periods of disruption, including the COVID-19 pandemic and broader sectoral change, further highlighted its adaptability and relevance in a rapidly evolving higher education landscape. Looking forward, the Academy's continued effectiveness will depend on sustained institutional commitment, cross-sector collaboration, and responsiveness to emerging challenges such as policy reform, changing student demographics, and technological transformation including artificial intelligence. Overall, the CA has established itself as a key mechanism for enhancing teaching quality, supporting academic development, and strengthening Curtin University's position as a leader in educational innovation.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualisation, writing, review, and editing of this manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Data Availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are included within the manuscript. Additional information is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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