Writing Exemplar for Area of Activity A1

A1 Design and plan learning activities and/or programmes of study

I am acutely aware that many Early Career Academics (ECAs) exhibit anxiety and overload due to the challenges of a new institutional environment (Clarke & Reid 2012) (K1). In 2008 I took over the coordination of academic orientation sessions at UQ. The ECA cohort was diverse – including Research Only (RO) academics, Teaching and Research (T&R) academics, and Teaching Focussed (TF) Academics, in an approximate ratio of 10:9:1. I quickly realised that the current pedagogical approach was dry, overloaded with detail and provided no guidance on prioritising the vast number of demands on a new academic (Pitt and Mewburn, 2016).

I decided to create an authentic learning environment in which ECAs felt supported, valued, and empowered to succeed (K2, K3).

Making changes involved articulating my aims to the University Executive and influencing their contributions to the workshops. I met with the DVC Academic, DVC Research and Heads of Divisions to discuss the need for their presentations to be consistent with my objectives. I produced simple resources (such as a list of acronyms!), introduced additional discussion space and time for sharing experiences, and invited an ECA to speak about their recent (and authentic) experiences. The evaluation results improved, and the University Executive were pleased, but the RO academics remained unimpressed; they reported no relevance to the focus on university teaching. I therefore designed an orientation specifically for RO academics. Evaluation scores for these redesigned sessions rose to greater than 4 out of 5 (K5), indicating that the relevance of the program had increased, a key element of my teaching.

In working with ECAs in this context I believe I showed respect for my students and their career contexts. This depth of understanding led me to change the design of the course, improve learning outcomes and engagement, as reflected in the evaluation scores (V1). I continue to look carefully from my students’ perspective at the learning environments I create, and the learning activities I design. It’s really important that I understand students’ challenges, and that the learning and the learning activities have a practical focus and practical outcomes.