



Writing a compelling teaching award application

Teaching award applications—for any scheme, in any category—are tricky. If you've ever sat down to write one and felt mystified or awkward and that you just can't be yourself, you wouldn't be the first person to feel that way. It's all too common to hear, *"This is so hard. I hate talking about myself!"* But that doesn't mean that they can't be done, and in a way that feels authentic to you.

This guide offers a few tips and practical suggestions to help.

What do the Selection Committee want to know?

The key questions the reviewers of your application are looking to be answered in your application are (conveniently) linked to the criteria for award. To be successful, explain to your readers:

- Q1. Who your students are.** Describe your cohort. What's unique about the students you teach? How many of them are there? How many do you think you've taught over time? What's unique about what your students need to know?
- Q2. The context of your teaching, both within UQ and beyond.** What is typical for teaching in your discipline? What do your students need to learn from their degree? What are the characteristics of the future industries that we are preparing them to enter?
- Q3. The problems, challenges and opportunities you observed for your students.** What has prompted you to take initiative and implement an intervention? Was there a high dropout rate? Did you receive the worst SECaT of your life and realise something had to change? Was there a high fail rate in the course? Did you recognise that your students just weren't *getting it* and couldn't demonstrate their understanding of a threshold concept?
- Q4. Your approach, your contribution, your design.** What did you develop and use to address the challenges? Over what time frame did you do so, and for how many students (per cohort, and as a total over time)? It's so important when describing your approach, that you don't only describe what you did; it is vital that you explain and describe what your students do in class. You'll want to paint a clear, detailed picture of what it's like to be a student in your classroom.
- Q5. How you know that your contribution, approach, program, activity or design works.** Explain what has changed. What's different now? What's different about your students' achievements? What impact have your interventions had? Make sure that your outcomes are directly related to the challenges and problems that you have described. Make sure that the outcomes can be directly related to an intervention that you have made. Make clear the link between the two.

This is what we talk about when we talk about an award narrative.

Responding to the Criteria

No matter which category of award you are applying for, you will need to align your application with criteria outlined within the guidelines. If you're following this guidance, and answering the questions posed throughout this document, then you will have responded to the criteria for most teaching award schemes.



How do I tell the assessors what they want to know? Thinking about Structure

There are many ways to go about this. The application guidance for any award category will provide you with the rules for what you're required to include. Some applicants find it quite easy to draft an application using a very structured template, in which each of the award criteria are addressed in turn.

However, many successful applicants have found that this very structured approach does make it difficult to draft a cohesive narrative. The assessment criteria don't necessarily lend themselves to telling a good story.

Generally, a good application will follow a Problem, Solution, Impact narrative structure and in using this approach addresses the assessment criteria throughout.

Problem

No matter the situation, there was a catalyst prompting you to make a change. It might not necessarily have been a problem, but there was a reason. So, when describing your achievements, you need to do so in the context of the before state. We need to know:

- What problem or challenge was occurring for your students? Why did you address it? What would have happened if you didn't?

The way that you frame your problem is the beginning of your award narrative and how you tell your story. Getting this section right is critical to your success. It's how you hook your reader, and encourage them to see the 'so what' in your practice.

Solution

In describing the solution, this is where you will explain what you did to make a change. Explain what the solution is. How did you address the problem? What did you do to resolve the challenges your students were facing, and very importantly, [what did you have your students do?](#)

As with everything that we do at UQ, in demonstrating its effectiveness and impact, you must also demonstrate that your approach is evidence informed. Demonstrate that you know the steps you've undertaken to address the challenges faced were appropriate because they have been informed by published theory/research/scholarship.

As you describe your solution, you'll find that demonstrating how innovative or creative your approach comes most naturally. You can do this by explaining how your solution is different from the way your discipline is typically taught (another fantastic opportunity to reference appropriate literature).

It's rare that change leads to the perfect, intended outcome straight away. **Solutions are also, typically, stories of iterative development over time.** Assessors will be looking for you to demonstrate your critical reflection on the evolution of your approach and an ethos of continuous improvement and development.

Impact

The solution will be utterly meaningless to the committee, if you don't also demonstrate the impact of that solution for students. How you demonstrate your impact will be highly dependent on the challenges you're addressing for your students and how you have chosen to address them.

Remember that you teach students and not curriculum. And so, when you discuss your impact, you want to focus on them, their response and their achievement. That does mean that you will focus less on you, or your teaching, or the curriculum. If you do find yourself making a lot of "I" statements, reframe some of these to make "My students" statements instead.



In demonstrating your impact, respond to the following:

- Through your approach or contribution, your students learn. But what do they do to learn? How do they demonstrate to you that or what they have learned?
- What is the flow on impact of your approach for your students, for the students of your colleagues or students in your discipline, for the University and/or for the Sector?
- How sustained is that impact? How long have you seen these results for?

Evidencing your Contribution

A general rule, no matter which category of award you are applying for, your evidence should be chosen carefully, relevant, diverse, and credible.

What does my evidence need to demonstrate?

When you are looking for evidence to support your submissions, focus on the collecting and describing evidence that demonstrates:

- the impact on your students' learning
- that there has been breadth and/or depth of impact by collecting information about what has happened around you as a consequence of your intervention or initiative
- impact that has been sustained over a period of time (use the application assessment criteria as your baseline; for most categories of UQ awards, this is 3 years and does not include your pilot year)
- that there has been some recognition from your peers, particularly important to include if it originates from beyond your course or program, discipline area or school
- examples from your practice
- a breadth and depth of data by drawing from multiple sources

Evidence of your teaching context

Remember that you're not only going to provide evidence that your approach is effective and impactful (though this is critically important), you're also going to provide evidence of the problem and challenge that you're addressing. What was happening with your students? How did you know that something needed to change? Student Cohort Data is really useful. Draw on student achievement data. If you can't access grades, do you have a peer who can comment on what has happened with your students?

Some additional things to consider

Direct quotes are a good source of evidence, but only use quotes that directly support your case. We know you're a great teacher, and your students think you are one of the best people they've ever met. We know they 'want to be [you] when they grow up'. But these quotes aren't the best evidence of the effectiveness and impact of your approach.

Make sure that any evidence you include is explicitly linked to your claims, and explicitly connect the evidence to the points that you are making throughout your narrative.

Provide evidence that your approaches have been recognised by your colleagues (at UQ and beyond) and the university. Include evidence that you have shared your approaches and that they have been adopted by others. Where possible, include evidence originating from beyond the course, program, school, or discipline.



SECaTS and Standardised Teaching Evaluations are one (expected) source of evidence only. For them to be meaningful in the context of your application, be selective. Choose questions that support your case and include the question wording. They might be presented in a table, but space is premium, so don't waste it with a large table of irrelevant data. Include the mean score, the number of students enrolled and number of students responding to the survey (response rates).

Provide comparative and benchmarked data where you can (e.g. Faculty averages; or results compared with similar cohorts).

Breadth and depth of data from multiple sources is very important (peer, self, student learning / assessment/ outcomes, and student perception). There is a list of possible evidence sources outlined on the following page that includes evidence each of these spheres.



Suggestions for sources of evidence

The below table includes suggestions for the kinds of evidence you might draw on to support and substantiate your claims of impact. Your application will be stronger, if you can draw on a variety of evidence across all columns. Consider what you already have to draw on, what you might need and that can be collected quickly, and what will take more time to gather.

Student Learning	Peers	Self-assessment	Student Reactions / Engagement
<i>What indicators of student learning attest to the success of your strategies?</i>	<i>Peers may comment on your approaches, emulate what you do, invite you to present or contribute, conduct a formal review of your teaching</i>	<i>Think about why you do what you do and why it has the effect it has.</i>	<i>What do students tell you about your teaching and their learning</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluation of generic skills/outcomes/attributes • results of student achievement: assessment, examinations, prizes and other forms of success • trends in grade data – any changes? What's happening in the semester? Do grades improve by the end of semester? • outputs of student learning e.g. projects, publications, exhibitions • discussion board participation rates and responses • qualitative analysis on reflection work by students • employer/workplace feedback from placement • rates of retention/attrition, pass/failure, student completions • employment outcomes, student progression to further study • class attendance • retrospective assessment by alumni • assessments made by graduate recruiters and employers with respect to specific courses/experiences • student and/or institutional prizes/achievements that can be linked to specific course/programme • Comments from feeder schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tutor or clinical supervisor feedback • peer review of classroom performance (observations/video), course materials, assessment practices, or student interaction (face-to-face or online) • instances when peers have emulated or adapted: curriculum materials or teaching and learning strategies • relevant invitations and appointed positions • recruitment into leadership roles • relevant grants and awards • publications and presentations on teaching/scholarship of learning and teaching • HEA fellowship, or offices of professional bodies • Authorship of textbooks or instructor resources and their impact e.g. adoption by others/institutions • Editor's/reviewer's comments • External examiners' reports on units • Industry partners and associations, and accreditation processes and feedback • Invited external examiner, reviewer or advisor at other institutions or for accreditation bodies • Evidence of employer or schools linkage • Letters of congratulation from Dean, DVC, etc. • Visiting appointments at other institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teaching philosophy • teaching journal • analysis and evaluation of data to inform and change teaching • responsiveness to student feedback • impact as course or unit coordinator • publications • teaching and learning research grant for T & L development projects, the grant income, and outcomes. • impact of leadership roles and activities e.g. as a result of leading an accreditation process of courses by professional bodies, departmental or faculty leadership in education, active membership of Learning and Teaching Committee or equivalent, relevant extracts from minutes of working groups or committees demonstrating action or leadership. • professional teaching qualifications or PD and impact on your teaching • contribution to education courses on T&L • impact of mentorship • impact of education policy formation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quantitative and qualitative student feedback on formal student evaluations (SECaT) • student self-reported learning gains – derived from student interviews (focus groups, phone calls, email questions) or informal student feedback gathered in class • student logs and journals can include self-reported learning (knowledge/skills gained and honed) • unsolicited student feedback • informal student feedback (facebook groups, LinkedIn, polls, twitter) • LMS surveys • Hits on a website or other usage statistics • Dynamic feedback: during semester in time to adjust your approaches with students (e.g. from self-administered surveys)

*Includes suggestions provided here: https://aautn.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Suggestions-for-Sources-of-Evidence_2025.pdf

How do I apply this advice to an Expression of Interest in this year's UQ Awards for Excellence in Teaching and Learning?

Now that you understand the key principles of the award application genre, you're probably curious as to how that can be applied to your Expression of Interest. And, you're absolutely right; the translation may not appear to be straightforward. The greatest challenge is to distil all of these requirements and expectations, down into what you'll need to submit in your Expression of Interest. But it does correlate, and we'll outline this below. You will need to summarise the information you've pulled together in response to the many questions outlined above, for brevity, to do so.

To begin with:

- If you are applying for an **ATE** or **APEL**, in your **Synopsis**, you need to summarise your responses to the questions under the heading '[What do the Selection Committee want to know?](#)' (Q3 – Q5 in particular) into **200 words**. Be concise. Be clear.
- If applying for a **COCSL**, under any nomination category, summarise your contribution (responding specifically to Q4 and Q5 in the [What do the Selection Committee want to know](#) section) in **25 words**.

In both cases, these are third person descriptions. This is what we'd like you to imagine your colleagues are saying about you, your practice and your impact on students.

In every section following this, everything that you write should be in first person perspective. We want you to refer to yourself as 'I', to 'my students', and to 'my colleagues'.

In the next section, **Overview of your contribution and its context**, you'll offer your readers more information (and a bit of your personality!), by responding to questions 1 – 4 in more detail. This is where you outline your context—who are your students and how are they taught (Q1, 2), what was the challenge you needed to address to teach them better (Q3), what did you do to address that challenge (Q4) and you have **300 words** to do this in. This is what you have to draw your reader in and what will give meaning to the information that you provide in your Summary of Evidence.

The **Summary of Evidence** gives you 1 A4 page in which to relate your answers to Q5 (i.e. How do you know that your contribution works?) and to the assessment criteria:

- Impacted student learning, student engagement or the overall student experience (check the length of the contribution in the Application Information and Instructions, it's different for different nomination categories).
- Gained recognition from fellow staff, the University, and/or the broader community.
- Shown creativity, imagination or innovation, irrespective of whether the approach involves traditional learning environments or technology-based developments.
- Drawn on scholarly literature on teaching and learning to inform the development of initiatives, programs and/or practice.

We've also provided a great long list of the kinds of evidence you might like to draw on in the previous pages. It's key to do two things. Firstly, do not just list the item of evidence you can draw on without providing an example of that evidence; always provide samples of the data where it's relevant to do so. For instance, include the statistics, a sample quote, the name of an award and the year it was won. Secondly, link each source of evidence back to your intervention or to the contribution that you have made. For example, it's not enough to say that you have won an award, what does that award acknowledge and why is it important to your case?



I've received a Faculty Award. I can copy and paste it, right?

Applicants often question whether they can just reuse a past award submission, and the answer to that question is really *"to a degree"*.

Criteria for Faculty Teaching Awards are really similar to the University of Queensland Awards for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, so if you have successfully applied for a Faculty award, you have a great foundation from which to work when developing your EoI (and hopefully your full application once you're shortlisted).

But, there are some differences in the expectations of the committees that review the applications for university awards that you need to be aware of when working on your application.

Expectations for School and Faculty Awards

It might be helpful to think of the differences between how your Faculty Award application and your UQ Award application will be assessed.

Faculty Award applications are typically assessed by your peers, in a similar or like discipline, within your academic home. When applying for a School or Faculty Award, the selection committee is usually composed of experts in your general area of expertise. They understand your disciplinary context well> They may be better able to interpret your shorthand and understand the specific difficulties of teaching organic chemistry or the nuances of clinical placements in speech pathology.

You are expected to show how you've solved a problem specific to your field. And the evidence of impact expected would usually focus only on your specific courses, your students' feedback, and your immediate colleagues' peer reviews.

Expectations for a University Award

When you move to the University level, you can expect that the committee will include representation from across disciplines. There might be a Physicist, an Historian, or a Dean of Medicine assessing your application. They don't know the intricacies of teaching in your discipline or field; they don't understand your jargon and so the level of specificity must change. You must provide really clear explanations that assume no prior knowledge or expertise. Explain your practice like you would to your friend—who doesn't work in Higher Education—over a coffee on the weekend. You will also have to clearly explain your impact in a way that shows someone from a completely different field that your work is innovative (what might be innovative in teaching Chemistry may be commonplace in teaching a Humanities Course).

You are still expected to have demonstrated disciplinary mastery, and have solved a problem specific to your field. But at University level, that might look like you've extended your influence beyond your school, into another in your faculty (or another faculty; or another faculty at another University).

At university level, the committee will be looking to see whether you've considered the transferability of your work. Can something that you implemented in Nursing, for instance, be used as a framework or model for teaching in the Business school? And, while it isn't expected that all applicants will be able to evidence transferability, it is critical to demonstrate that your excellence isn't just a one-off success and that it could be a model that others might be able to follow.

Think about your ripple effect. Don't just talk about what you did; talk about who you mentored and how your approach is being used elsewhere (in your school, in your faculty, in your discipline, in another discipline outside of your faculty, or in industry and outside of the University?)

You are expected to show a track record (e.g., 3–5+ years of sustained excellence) rather than having had one great year. If you've just had one great year, keep collecting data! And then return to the idea of applying when there are three or four years of great data to draw on.



One of the key criteria for a university level award is to demonstrate validation from the outside the institution. Benchmark your work with others in your faculty or the University. When a colleague has changed their practice because of your influence, quote them on the impacts this has had on their teaching and their students' learning. If you have earned awards, have published, or your work is being cited in industry or used by other universities include that!

Make sure that you include some comparative metrics and benchmarking. Instead of simply saying "Students like my teaching as evidenced by the 4.8/5 SECaT Overall Teaching" say "I achieved the highest student satisfaction in the faculty for three consecutive years (Overall Teaching: 4.8(/5); Faculty Average: 4.2(/5))."

You might also like to consider how your work does relate to and advances the university's broader strategic goals for learning or addresses whole-of-sector priorities and concerns.



Helen Marshall's Guide to Writing a Compelling Teaching Award Application

In 2025, Associate Professor Helen Marshall received a UQ COCSL and a HASS Faculty ATE. And in her role as Director of Teaching and Learning for the School of Communication and Arts, Helen participated in the Selection of the 2025 UQ Awards for Teaching Excellence and Awards for Programs that Enhance Learning. She kindly shares her observations.

Structure Around Clear Problem-Solution-Impact Narratives

The most compelling teaching excellence applications follow a clear narrative structure that helps readers understand not just what you accomplished, but why it mattered and how it made a difference. Begin each major section by identifying a specific educational challenge or gap you observed—perhaps students struggling with abstract concepts, lack of real-world application opportunities, or inequitable access to learning experiences. Then describe your approach with sufficient detail that readers can understand your pedagogical reasoning and methodology. Finally, demonstrate measurable impact through concrete evidence rather than general claims.

For example, rather than stating “I improved student engagement through innovative assessment,” a stronger approach would be: “Students consistently struggled to connect theoretical frameworks to practical application, with 40% reporting feeling unprepared for professional practice. I redesigned assessments to include authentic industry scenarios and collaborative problem-solving, resulting in student confidence ratings increasing from 3.2 to 4.6 and 85% of graduates reporting feeling well-prepared for their first professional roles.” This structure helps readers follow your thinking and understand the significance of your innovations.

Provide Specific, Quantifiable Evidence of Impact

Strong applications move beyond anecdotal evidence to include concrete data that demonstrates the scope and significance of your impact. This includes enrolment figures, satisfaction scores, retention rates, performance improvements, and longitudinal outcomes (where possible). When presenting quantitative data, provide context about timeframes, comparison groups, and what the numbers actually mean for student learning.

Beyond numerical data, include evidence of behavioural changes—students choosing to continue in your discipline, pursuing advanced study, or applying skills in new contexts. Document the reach of your innovations: how many students have been impacted, over what timeframe, and whether effects have been sustained or grown over time. If your innovations have been adopted by colleagues or other institutions, quantify this influence as well. Remember that different types of evidence strengthen different claims—direct assessment data for learning outcomes, survey responses for satisfaction and engagement, and follow-up studies for longer-term impact.

Include Authentic and Substantial Student Voice

The most persuasive applications feature genuine student voices that demonstrate deep learning and meaningful change. Move beyond generic testimonials (“best teacher ever!”) to include detailed student reflections that show specific skills gained, perspectives changed, or professional development achieved. Look for quotes where students articulate what they learned, how their thinking evolved, or how your teaching influenced their approach to the discipline or profession. Short quotes can work in the body of the text, responding to criteria, but use some longer ones in your collection of evidence.



Demonstrate Teaching Through Vivid, Concrete Examples

Help readers experience what it's actually like to be in your classroom by describing specific moments, activities, and interactions in sufficient detail that they can visualize the learning environment you've created. Rather than stating "I use active learning strategies," describe a particular class session: the challenge you posed, how students responded, what you observed, and how you adapted in real-time. Include sensory details that bring your teaching to life—the energy in the room during collaborative work, the focused concentration during problem-solving, or the excitement when students make breakthrough connections. A little storytelling makes it come alive!

Articulate Clear and Distinctive Innovation

When claiming innovation, be precise about what makes your approach novel, necessary, and effective. Begin by clearly defining the problem your innovation addresses—what gap existed in traditional approaches, what student needs weren't being met, or what contextual factors required new solutions. Then explain specifically how your approach differs from standard practice, what inspired your particular solution, and why existing methods were insufficient.

Explain your design process: what alternatives you considered, how you tested and refined your approach, and what evidence guided your development decisions. This demonstrates thoughtful pedagogical reasoning rather than random experimentation. If your innovation draws inspiration from other fields or contexts, explain how you adapted concepts to your specific teaching situation and student needs.

Show How Scholarship Informed Your Practice

Strong applications demonstrate that your teaching innovations are grounded in educational research rather than intuition or tradition. Move beyond citing literature as background to show specifically how scholarly findings influenced your design decisions. For example: "Research on cognitive load theory suggested that students struggle when presented with too much new information simultaneously, so I redesigned the curriculum to introduce conceptual frameworks before technical skills, resulting in improved comprehension and retention."

Connect theoretical frameworks to practical implementation choices, explaining how research findings led you to adopt particular methods, assessment strategies, or learning activities. If you've contributed to scholarship through your own research on teaching and learning, demonstrate how this inquiry informed your practice and how your innovations contribute back to the field. Include evidence of how you stay current with educational research and integrate new findings into your teaching.

Address Implementation Challenges and Professional Growth

Honest applications acknowledge that effective teaching involves ongoing challenges and continuous improvement. Describe specific obstacles you faced in developing or implementing your innovations—student resistance, resource constraints, institutional barriers, or technical difficulties—and explain how you addressed these challenges. This demonstrates problem-solving skills and helps readers understand the complexity of your work.

Consider addressing sustainability and scalability: how have you ensured that innovations can be maintained over time or adapted by others? What systems or supports have you developed to make your approaches robust and transferable? This forward-thinking perspective demonstrates leadership and institutional impact beyond your immediate teaching.

Demonstrate Broader Influence and Recognition

While formal awards provide important validation, the strongest applications show influence through multiple forms of recognition and adoption. Document how colleagues have implemented your



methods, sought your mentorship, or invited you to share your expertise. Include evidence of institutional impact—policy changes influenced by your work, curriculum reforms you’ve led, or programs that have adopted your innovations.

External recognition might include conference invitations, publication opportunities, consulting requests, or professional organization involvement. If your work has influenced practice at other institutions, include specific examples and evidence. Media coverage, policy citations, or industry partnerships can also demonstrate broader impact beyond academic circles.