

Tips for Successful Academic Promotions Applications – Teaching, Learning & SOTL

One of the hallmarks of university academic careers is the promotions process. Universities articulate and benchmark a series of levels, with position and role descriptions which specify the expectations for each level. The application process includes assembling and presenting evidence of achievements, contributions and impact.

Typically, academic promotions applications require academics to address three components of their work: (1) Teaching, Learning and Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL); (2) Research; and (3) Service.

Academics often comment that they find the research component of the application the easiest to write because there are established indicators and metrics, many of which are of a quantifiable nature. The teaching component, on the other hand, tends to have fewer benchmarks and more nuanced activities. It also involves the challenge of conducting qualitative impact analysis. This handout has been designed to disseminate tips and strategies for gathering evidence and making a strong case for the teaching, learning and SoTL part of the academic promotions application.

It is important to consider that applicants are demonstrating meritorious achievement relative to their academic level and opportunities. In higher education, promotion is not automatic after a certain number of years. Applications emphasise where academics have gone above and beyond the expectations of their current role. Successful applicants put considerable time and effort into their applications. An effective overall strategy is to ask someone to read a draft of the application (after completing many versions). It is suggested that applicants choose someone who can be trusted to give honest and rigorous feedback. The questions to be considered are: Does the application provide a clear and coherent picture for the reader? Is it convincing? Does the teaching, learning and SoTL aspects reflect/align-with the weightings that have been selected? Consider what percentages have been given to particular sections and then check that the page length is proportional to this. For example, if the applicant allocates 50% to teaching, then approximately 5 pages of a 10 page application should be dedicated to detailing achievements in this area. Ensure that there is a strong introduction and conclusion for each section, and carefully proofread so that there are no grammatical or spelling errors.



The following are 8 tips, designed to assist you to present a strong case for promotion. In other words, if you consider these points, you will improve your chances of preparing a coherent documented case for promotion with examples, supported by evidence, to demonstrate your practice, approach and leadership.

1 Write an engaging narrative.

Your academic promotions application is like a focussed career autobiography. It is important that you convey what is distinctive about your approach to teaching and learning and tell that story. The application should flow, with transitions between the sections of the narrative. Some academics find it useful to create outlines, diagrams and/or story-boards in which they group their achievements under the three areas (as outlined above) and reflecting on the interrelationships between these achievements.

As part of your story, share your philosophy about teaching (your informed beliefs about what works) and learning (your informed beliefs about what learning is and how students learn) and how you bring this philosophy to life with your students. Ensure that your story (and therefore your teaching) is research-led and evidence-based.

The research and evidence part of your philosophy are drawn, and interwoven, from three sources: (1) **Your teaching experience**, whereby you describe an issue, demonstrate what courses of action/response are published in good practice literature, explain what you did, present the outcome and discuss the difference it made; (2) **Praxis**, which is defined as enacting theory, so in other words, embedded referencing of two to three educational theorists/scholars who inspire your philosophy and your teaching; and (3) **Discipline-based teaching and learning**, where you demonstrate, with evidence, an awareness, and application, of effective teaching and learning approaches (published good practice) in the context of your discipline.

2 Strategically sort your actions and achievements.

There are often overlaps between teaching, research and service. It is important that you do not double-dip. In other words, you can only count each achievement once. For example, the same journal paper publication cannot be inserted into the *research* and the *teaching* parts of your application. In cases where you may have a role on a committee (for example, the School-based learning and teaching committee) you cannot count this in both your *teaching* and your *service* sections without clearly showing which parts of this role fit in each area. For example, you may wish to show how the role has allowed you to demonstrate leadership in the School through chairing this committee

and driving the quality agenda for the School. You may also choose to discuss the service component of this role, in that section, focusing on how your contribution to this committee has assisted the school to achieve its goals and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within the broader university strategic direction.

If you cannot clearly separate two components of a role, then you have to decide which of your achievements to put in each *bucket*. To do this, you need to consider which elements make the best case for you, in which categories.

3 Include evidence.

It is important that you apply the principle of – show rather than tell. For example, rather than writing: *I am an innovative, inspirational teacher,* write about how your quality ratings, or teaching awards are illustrative of your innovativeness and how summary reports of evaluations from workshops or students support your claims of being an inspirational educator.

Demonstrate how you consistently take a scholarly approach to teaching and learning, and that you think-about each innovation or change as an investigative activity that is based on research/literature and that generates data and measurable outcomes or impact. Student comments about the impact of your teaching on their learning are stronger than student comments about your personality; focus your evidence on what you did rather than who you are.

4 Be focussed and remember that often, less is more.

As you begin thinking about the next stage of your career, reflect on the culmination of a period of leadership and development that is captured in the promotion application. Promotion applications should be written after a substantial period of focussed scholarship, and time spent planning and gathering the relevant evidence to support the application. This is a future oriented exercise, showing what you can do in the future based on your achievements. As such, applications show that you are already operating at the next level, not how you will get there once promoted.

When you are ready, select the most compelling cases/examples and describe only these in your application. Including everything will distract from the big-ticket items. Remember that you will also be including details in your accompanying portfolio; material should not be replicated from your portfolio in your application. Promotions panels are not looking for a recount of everything that you have done as an academic, but examples and highlights of new, novel and/or high-impact achievements and contributions and evidence, through your narrative of insight and self-reflection, showing your growth and progression through your academic career as a result of these experiences.

5 Present the full picture of student survey data and do not block-list student comments.

A frequently used source of evidence in promotions applications, is descriptive data and representative student comments from the USQ Course Survey Tool and/or Check In Survey. When including this evidence, present three or more years of data and explain trends. Present the question stem/s, the Likert scale, a comparison figure (such as the Program mean), the number of students enrolled and the student response rate. Do not block-list student quotes. Use short segments of student quotes sparingly, and embed them in your narrative. In other words, before and after the quote, explain what you are demonstrating through the quote. Also consider reporting thematic analysis of qualitative comments.

6 Go beyond student satisfaction to outcomes and impact.

Mean USQ Course Survey Tool and/or Check In Survey scores and accompanying student comments are one form of evidence, but should not be the only form. Remember that these scores are about student satisfaction. You will also need to show how you positively sustained or had a positive impact on: student grade distributions, pass rates, retention rates and/or graduate employment outcomes. Remember to link these outcomes to scholarly practice, or in other words, evidencing that these were the outcomes that occurred as a result of, or positively correlated with, changing your teaching and learning practice, activity, approaches and contributions.

7 When describing your role and responsibilities, describe what you accomplished.

Having formal learning and teaching-related professional roles, and related committee membership/s, are important mechanisms for enacting your leadership. Do not leave your application at listing these roles and memberships. Describe what you achieved, what impact you had and how you know this to be the case (evidence). For example, as part of your role, did you start a new program, or attract a number of new internships, or lead the development of a new University-wide strategy? Provide evidence of these achievements.

8 Describe your contributions and sector leadership in learning and teaching.

Making outstanding contributions to your own students' learning and success is one of the most important aspects of academic careers. It is also important that you have extended your influence beyond your own students, inspired other educators towards excellence in teaching and learning, and advanced the overall enterprise of higher education teaching and learning.

Include your publications about teaching and learning and how many times they were cited. Include Good Practice Guides which you have written and evidence that other educators and/or universities have adopted these practices. Include the titles, dates and enrolments in webinars and workshops you have designed and conducted for educators, and evidence that your approach to teaching and learning was adopted by participants. Other ways that you can show evidence of your wider impact is to include activities such as: peer reviews of other academic courses (both internally and externally); participation in accreditation processes (internally and externally); and/or education policy work (internally and externally).

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Working Definitions (in the context of Academic Promotions)

TEACHING	This verb stands for the actions that educators take to advance the learning and success of students. As such, teaching includes the broad-sweeping workload of: course and curriculum design; facilitating interactions with students; lecturing, tutoring and running laboratory work; collaborating with industry for learning and employability purposes; HDR student supervision; and designing and rolling-out assessment and feedback.
LEARNING	 The message behind this joke is that teaching is only meaningful insofar as students are learning and experiencing other indicators of success. Learning means that students have changed / made positive strides in knowledge, skills, attributes and/or identity. In promotion applications, academics provide descriptions of their teaching activities, which focus on the processes (e.g. lecturing, providing feedback). This is only half the story and highlights key components of materials included in the portfolio. Applications need to include, and focus-on, the accompanying story of students' learning which is evidenced by outcomes (e.g. grade distributions, retention rates) and impact (e.g. graduate employment and graduate success in becoming members of professional associations). It is important to connect-the-dots and provide evidence that it was the applicant's teaching approaches and contributions which produced the changes in student and graduate learning outcomes and overall success. The difference between outcomes and impact is that the former addresses what was produced, whereas the latter addresses what problems were solved and positive changes were made. Producing a strong application requires that academics put a great deal of reflection and effort into collecting evidence for the narrative section of the application. Collecting this evidence can take time, so it is important to plan well ahead of the promotion application for this. Evidence could be: student testimonials; peer reviews and other evaluation of teaching and/or course design; teaching awards; and industry or employer statements.
SOTL	SoTL stands-for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and is also increasingly paired with scholarly inquiry into employability (embedded into curriculum, pedagogy and assessment). A helpful depiction of SOTL is that academics put the same passion, energy, attention and rigour into teaching (and students' learning) as in specialised fields of research. For example, engineering academics usually conduct research into areas such as structural design. As university members, engineering academics (with teaching workload) are also expected to dedicate themselves to engineering education. In the context of a promotion application, scholarship refers to: posing questions about learning and teaching; identifying and attending to the characteristics of student cohorts; staying up-to-date with published educational research and applicable good practice guidelines; networking and benchmarking with education colleagues; designing and administrating educational research (including securing ethics proposals); applying for learning and teaching grants and awards; collecting data; writing reports and publications about learning and teaching; attending to publication impact data (such as publication citations); collecting evidence, closing-the-loop and continual improvement to learning and teaching (including innovation); testing, experimenting and piloting (including emergent digital approaches); sharing good practice (including through leading workshops); and other such activity in the realm of learning and teaching.

Additional Resources

Screencast on Evidence, Outcomes and Impact
https://works.bepress.com/shelley_kinash/249/

Podcast on Applying for Academic Promotions (Learning, Teaching & SoTL)
https://works.bepress.com/shelley_kinash/265/

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