

A review of the learning and teaching award processes of The University of Notre Dame Australia

Prepared by The Learning and Teaching Office on behalf of the Learning and Teaching Committee

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Executive Summary

This review examines the practices and processes related to Notre Dame's Vice Chancellor Promoting Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Supervision (PETLS) Awards and the articulation with the national learning and teaching awards, in particular the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT). It examines staff perception towards the Notre Dame awards including perceived enablers and barriers. Based on evidence collected, changes to future administration and promotion of learning and teaching awards at Notre Dame are recommended.

The PETLS Awards began in 2010. The process is underpinned by Policy and Guideline documents which have undergone regular edits every 12-24 months since then. The purpose of the awards is "to recognise and reward at the institutional level, sustained contributions to high quality teaching, learning [and] supervision for degree by research". This, aligns with the Notre Dame Learning and Teaching Plan and supports the Objects and strategic goals of the University. There are three categories of PETLS Awards: 1) Initiatives that Enhance Learning; 2) Teaching Award; and 3) Leadership Award. There has been a dramatic decrease in the engagement by staff in the awards process with 22 nominations and 18 awards in 2010 to six (6) nominations and three (3) awards in 2018.

Beyond institutional recognition and reward of high quality teaching, the PETLS Awards seek to encourage leadership and strengthen institutional quality assurance processes. They are also intended to provide a conduit for identifying and preparing institutional nominees for two external teaching and learning awards – the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) and the Australian Financial Review Higher Education Awards¹. Involvement in the AFR Awards has been minimal which may be because they are less well known (a total of six nominations have been made by Notre Dame from 2017-2019), while participation in the AAUT Awards is well established across the sector² and has seen stronger engagement from Notre Dame. However, the downward trend in engagement in the PETLS Awards has impacted on the flow of potential nominees for the national AAUT awards. Since the instigation of the PETLS Award, Notre Dame staff have won a total of 11 Citations and one (1) Program award. To-date, Notre Dame has not been successful in the Excellence in Teaching category. In three of those years (2011, 2013, 2017) Notre Dame did not receive any AAUT Awards.

This review set out to better understand the factors that were influencing this decline in engagement and the subsequent ripple effects of decreased reward and recognition of staff. To understand the contributing factors, academic and general staff across all campuses were surveyed. In addition, some key stakeholders in the process contributed their reflections and the Policy and Guideline documents were reviewed. A pilot was also conducted which encouraged preliminary nominations from a broader base, including any staff member or student of the Notre Dame community.

The review found that there was a considerable lack of awareness of the PETLS Awards and who is eligible to apply. There was also a degree of misinformation related to the process and a strong negative feeling towards the process of self-nomination which had become the norm. Further, it was found that the processes as documented in the Policy and Guidelines had a number of inconsistencies both within the documents and between them. Further, the processes did not align well with those of the AAUT Awards making the transition from one to the other overly problematic.

¹ The Australian Financial Review Higher Education Awards have been in existence for 5 years. They aim to highlight at a national level "the contribution that the Higher Education sector makes to Australian prosperity and quality of life". <https://www.informa.com.au/event/conference/afr-higher-education-awards/>

² In 2019, 39 Higher Education institutions participated in the AAUT Awards.

The pilot initiative allowing for preliminary nominations from staff and students resulted in an astounding 251 responses (25 staff members and 226 students) identifying a potential 119 nominees. While not all of these will progress to formal nominations, due to ineligibility related to employment longevity or because the staff member chooses not to proceed, the process has been successful in opening up the conversation related to the awards and making the processes more transparent.

Recommendations

The findings of the review resulted in the following recommendations. The evidence for these recommendations are elaborated in detail in the body of this report.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Processes and requirements of the institutional awards be completely aligned with the national AAUT Awards to facilitate transition from one to other and that the Policy and Guidelines documents be replaced by a Policy document, a Procedure document and an Instructions for Applicants document to reflect this.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The LTO produce a draft revised Policy and create a Procedure and an Instructions document for award applicants for consideration by the Learning and Teaching Committee.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The amendments to policy come into effect in October 2020 for the 2021 awards and that until then, the current awards process continue with the minor adjustments that are permissible within the existing Policy.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Awareness of the awards and their positive purpose continue to be promoted through the LTO but also through Schools, i.e., Deans to talk about teaching and learning excellence generally and about the awards more specifically.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Calls for nominations to staff and students be made in the last few weeks of Semesters one and two to ensure the teaching that occurs in Semester one is not hidden.

RECOMMENDATION 6

The processes of open nominations from staff and students piloted in 2019 be adopted.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Resources be made available through the LTO both online and face-to-face to assist in demystifying the award process, including the expectation of exemplary practice.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Selection Advisory Panel (SAP) membership be reviewed so that it draws from experts in learning and teaching internal and external to the University.

Background

The purpose of the Vice Chancellor Promoting Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Supervision (PETLS) Awards is “to recognise and reward at the institutional level, sustained contributions to high quality teaching, learning [and] supervision for degree by research”. This, aligns with the Notre Dame Learning and Teaching Plan and supports the Objects and strategic goals of the University. Beyond institutional recognition and reward of high quality teaching, the awards seek to encourage leadership and strengthen institutional quality assurance processes. They are also intended to provide a conduit for identifying and preparing institutional nominees for external teaching and learning awards – the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) and the Australian Financial Review Higher Education Awards.

Between 2010 and 2018, three categories of awards have been offered: 1) Initiatives that Enhance Learning; 2) Teaching Award; and 3) Leadership Award.

Since their instigation 93 awards have been made to staff from a total of 165 nominations. The breakdown of awards is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of PETLS winners by award category.

	Initiatives that Enhance Learning	Teaching Award	Leadership Award
2010	13	4	1
2011	5	3	-
2012	14	0	1
2013	15	3	-
2014	1	1	-
2015	8	2	-
2016	8	2	-
2017	8	1	-
2018	2	1	0

– indicates no nominations 0 indicates no award despite nominations

The process of nomination for institutional PETLS Awards has come to involve identification of potential candidates by the University Awards and Grants Officer or Deans of Schools, followed by self-nomination by the candidate. This pathway to nomination is not specifically noted or required in the Policy, however over time has come to be the practice employed and understood as the only way to be nominated for an institutional award.

Prior to the introduction of the PETLS Awards, nominees for the AAUT Awards were identified via a process of preliminary (internal) nominations. From 2011, Notre Dame nominees for national AAUT Awards were identified from the winners of the PETLS Awards. Table 2 shows the annual number of nominees in each category of the national awards and the number of awards received.

Table 2: Numbers of Notre Dame nominees that translate to AAUT Awards 2009-2018

Award Category ³		Citations		Teaching Award		Program Award	
		nominated	awards	nominated	awards	nominated	awards
Prior to VC Awards	2009	unknown	3	unknown	0	unknown	0
	2010	7	3	1	0	1	0
Nominees identified from VC Award winners	2011	6	unknown	0	0	0	0
	2012	7	3	0	0	0	0
	2013	3	0	0	0	unknown	1
	2014	unknown	3	0	0	0	0
	2015	1	0	0	0	unknown	1
	2016	4	2	1	0	0	0
	2017	4	0	0	0	0	0
2018	7	3	0	0	0	0	

In the two years prior to the introduction of the PETLS Awards, Notre Dame received a total of six national awards, predominantly Citations. Between 2011–2018, 13 Awards (11 Citations and two Program Awards) have been received.

Since 2017, Notre Dame has put forward nominees in the AFR Higher Education Awards (two in 2017; three in 2018; one in 2019). While the majority (four) of these were identified through the PETLS Award process, nominations were also received as a result of an open call and Expression of Interest. To date Notre Dame has not been successful in these awards.

This review is being undertaken at a time when the evidence is available to allow for considerable reflection on the process. It is clear that the number of nominations for PETLS Awards have fallen steadily since they were first introduced. In the case of Initiatives that Enhance Learning, and Teaching Awards combined, the nominations have declined from 34 in 2010 to five in 2018. This in turn, obstructs the aim of the awards acting as a conduit to national learning and teaching awards and recognition.

In order to better understand and recommend possible changes to the awards practices and processes at Notre Dame, the following research questions framed this review:

- What is the perception by staff of the institutional (PETLS) Awards and associated processes?
- How are the PETLS Awards promoted and supported?
- What processes underpin the processing of award nomination and how effective are they in achieving their stated goals?

Methods

In order to answer the first of the research questions, an institution-wide online, anonymous survey was sent via email to all staff (academic and general). Two general demographic questions related to campus, School or Area

³ The AAUT offers 3 Award categories: 1. Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning; 2. Awards for Teaching Excellence, and 3. Awards for Programs that Enhance Learning. <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/policy-submissions/teaching-learning-funding/australian-awards-for-university-teaching/>

and employment type. The rest of the questions related to awareness of, and attitudes toward, the PETLS Awards. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. All questions were optional.

The second and third research question were addressed both through responses in the survey and the document analysis (webpages, Policy and Guidelines). In addition, the perceptions of institutional Awards Officers and QMO staff were sought through written reflections.

In the latter part of this review process, a pilot of some immediate changes that were indicated as desirable in the responses from staff was implemented. These changes were possible within the existing Policy. An evaluation of the pilot is provided in this review.

Results

The survey resulted in 156 responses from staff spread across all campuses, Schools and Areas⁴. Sixty four percent (64%) of participants were academic staff and 36% were general staff. An estimate of the response rate amongst academic staff was made by drawing on the most recently available 2019 QMO School Review data (Sydney: 21%; Fremantle: 13%). The highest response rate was from the School of Nursing in Sydney (39%), while five School(s) had response rates less than 10% (Schools of Medicine: 9%; School of Nursing and Midwifery, Fremantle: 4%; Schools of Arts and Sciences: 6%; School of Physiotherapy: 7%; and School of Health Sciences, 7%). Key themes arising from an analysis of the data are presented below.

Staff perceptions

Awareness

With respect to the general awareness of the awards, 13% of respondents reported that they had not previously heard of them, while 50% said they were aware of the awards but did not know much about them. The most commonly reported means of hearing about the awards was via “all staff email” (92 responses) which was almost four times greater than the next most common responses (“Discussions with colleagues”: 27; “Notre Dame/LTO website”: 24). “School-wide emails” (15) and “Interactions with the LTO” (12) were the least commonly cited sources of knowledge that the awards existed.

The processes

The majority of respondents (63%) indicated they had never contemplated nominating for a PETLS Award and 16% reported thinking about nominating but had not progressed the nomination. The main reasons given for not progressing a nomination included: “the additional workload involved in completing an application (43%); “the award categories excluded them” (22%) and; “believed their nomination would not be of sufficient standard” or “were too modest/uncomfortable to self-nominate” respectively (22%).

When the question of self-nomination was explored further, 63% of respondents replied that they would not be willing to self-nominate in the future. The main reason academic staff gave for this response was that they believed that nominations should come from others (19%). This was expressed in statements such as “I believe these awards carry more prestige and transparency when nomination are made to honour and acknowledge colleagues”, “I would nominate someone else but I do not feel it is appropriate to nominate oneself for recognition” and “I think it should come from others, especially students”. While for general staff the main reason for not nominating was a belief that the awards were not intended for them (34%). Comments supporting this

⁴ No responses were received from the Nulungu Research Institute

view included: “VET staff not eligible”, “Don’t fit categories” and “As a general staff member I don’t think these are for us”.

In contrast to the 63% of respondents not willing to self-nominate, 84% of respondents replied that they would consider accepting a nomination and preparing an application if they were nominated by a colleague or student. Comments supporting this included: “sometimes it takes an outsider to identify the quality of what you may be doing”, “If someone else felt I deserved the award, I would feel grateful and if they took the effort in nominating me, I would put in effort as well”, and “Yes, I would feel more comfortable doing that. It would fit more to my ethical principle”.

Perceived value of the Awards

For the respondents who were aware of the awards, the positive aspects included:

- The formal acknowledgement of excellent teaching, a celebration of success and a source of inspiration
- The promotion of personal reflection and growth
- Showcasing of good practice and leadership.

Barriers to nominating for an Award

Thirty seven respondents (28%) noted that they believed there were barriers to nominating for an award. The barriers were identified by those who had not been through the nomination process indicating that they were significant enough to prevent them from applying. These barriers reflected the beliefs and attitudes outlined below. Notably though, barriers were also identified by a considerable number of respondents (32%) who had already nominated or won an award. These included:

- Time constraints and timing of the awards
- The lack of school based support
- The perceived complexity of the application especially related to evidence
- Understanding the criteria for selection.

Negative beliefs and attitudes

A number of negative beliefs and attitudes related to the awards were detailed in the responses to the survey questions. While these were not necessarily the predominant views they are worth acknowledging. They included:

- A lack of knowledge and misinformation about the awards
- A sense that the awards engendered an unproductive competitiveness between colleagues
- A belief that there was a lack of transparency related to the processes involved
- The culture of the institution is at odds with the awards process
- A sense that potentially worthy nominees remained unnoticed in the awards process.

Process of nominations and applications

Data relating to the process of nomination was collected from Policy and Guideline documents, and LTO staff responses and documentation. A call for nominations is made in October of each year with nomination forms due in December and full applications in February of the following year. To date the process has relied predominantly on Deans of Schools and the University Awards and Grants Officer identifying potential candidates, who are then asked to self-nominate. That is, the students who are the beneficiaries of exemplary and innovative teaching are effectively locked out of the process.

The single nomination date is potentially problematic as staff that only teach in semester one may be inadvertently excluded from the nomination process (i.e., the teaching and learning experiences of semester one have faded to be replaced by the immediate experiences of semester two).

Another concern is that with the processing timeline stretching across two calendar years, confusion has existed regarding the year awards refer to. Consequently there have been recording and documenting issues. For instance, the nomination forms have been labelled the year of the nomination rather than the year in which the award is made. The timeline, however affords nominees the end-of-year break to prepare their application. The granting of the awards in the new year also provide a good period of time for institutional nominees to prepare their national applications. In widening access to include semester one staff and give staff the chance to work on their applications, it would be possible to maintain the end-of-year break for writing applications, but have two call for nomination periods.

Applying for a PETLS Award has been a two-step process:

1. Nomination requiring a signed endorsement from the applicant's Dean or equivalent
2. Submission of a full application which also requires the endorsement of the Dean or equivalent

While this double endorsement may have been intended to ensure the standard of submissions, it has not been successful and has resulted in an unnecessary burden for both nominee and Dean. Nevertheless, it is necessary to identify whether a nominee is ready to apply for an award before they commit time and energy to developing their application. A self-assessment process against the criteria may provide the solution to easing the burden. Not only does self-assessment provide greater transparency, it gives staff agency in deciding whether they have the strength and volume of evidence required to proceed from nomination to application. With this in place, a single endorsement by the Dean, or equivalent, at the point of nomination would be consistent with the practice of national awards.

An ongoing challenge has been that some applications describe good practice, as expected of all educators, rather than exemplary award-worthy practice. LTO staff supporting national award nominees have noted that this makes the articulation to national awards at times a difficult process. There is therefore a clear need for a greater understanding across the Notre Dame community of the nature and expectations of the awards and associated process.

During the period when nominees are preparing their application, the LTO has been available to provide some assistance, including workshops to outline the requirements of the awards. The Awards Officer has also provided one-to-one support to some nominees in the form of review and advice on draft applications. LTO staff have noted that while this allows for capacity building for those seeking feedback, it results in demanding workloads for the LTO team and uncertainty regarding the support available. Greater transparency around the type of support available is thus required.

[Process of review and assessment](#)

The PETLS Awards are assessed by a Selection Advisory Panel (SAP) comprised of the Heads of Campus (or delegates) from Fremantle, Sydney and Broome; LTO staff; a staff member who has won a PETLS Award; a Research Office representative, and; an undergraduate or postgraduate representative.

The SAP members are tasked to rank the applications on the evidence provided in support of the assessment criteria outlined to applicants in the Guidelines document. In 2018 SAP members were provided with comprehensive rubrics to assist in their assessment. While the rubric available for the Category A Awards (Initiatives that Enhance Student Learning) reflects the stated criteria, the rubric for Category B Awards (Awards for Teaching) does not align well with the stated criteria for that award.

Category C Awards (Awards for Leadership) have only been conferred twice in the history of awards at Notre Dame. This award requires applicants to submit a portfolio and attend an interview with the SAP. While there is an identified need to grow leaders of higher education, this award does not align with any national award types. Furthermore, it is arguably redundant as all award types necessitate a degree of leadership in order to be exemplary. In 2019 suggestions were made that the Leadership Award not be offered pending discussion with and advice from the QMO and the DVCA.

Articulation with external awards (AAUT)

A stated objective of the PETLS Awards is “to provide a process of identifying institutional nominees for external Teaching and Learning awards”, predominantly the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) Awards. Currently, articulation with these awards is supported by the timing of the Notre Dame awards but is hampered by a series of other elements: (1) there exists a mismatch between the institutional and the national awards in name, eligibility, application requirement and assessment. This makes the progression to the national awards unnecessarily more challenging; and (2) it can be argued that the mismatch between the awards also contributes to a quality of applications which make the progression to a national environment more difficult. As is contextually appropriate, the PELTS Awards are institutionally focused but in order to ensure a successful transition to national awards there is a case for raising the standards required.

The documentation

The processes and procedures that underpin the PETLS Awards are outlined in two key documents, namely *Policy: Vice Chancellor Awards (PETLS)* and *Guidelines and Forms: Vice Chancellor Awards – Promoting Excellence in Teaching, Learning and Supervision (PELTS)*. Review of these two documents identified a number of inconsistencies both within and between them.

It was noted that there is considerable difference between the guidelines for the PELTS Awards and those of the AAUT Awards. Since the PETLS Awards are intended to be a means of identifying nominees for the national teaching awards it is argued that this mismatch is counterproductive to the process. The following changes are proposed in order to better align the two award processes.

Table 3 below summarises the proposed major changes to the Policy and Guideline documents and the rationale for doing so.

Table 3: Major changes to documentation in response to issues identified

Problem/Issue identified	Changes proposed
The three PETLS Awards do not correspond to the AAUT Award types	Remove the <i>Leadership Award</i> and introduce a <i>Program that Enhances Learning Award</i>
The categories within the PETLS Award types do not align with categories in the corresponding AAUT Awards	Change the categories to correspond to the AAUT categories for each award type
Policy notes four award (Category A-D) types although only three have ever been awarded. Category D is not mentioned at all in the Guidelines document	Remove the School based award from the Policy
Policy only allows for team nominations in <i>Initiatives that Enhance Student Learning</i> compared to AAUT in which team nominations are permitted in all categories	Allow team-based nomination in all award types and change Policy and Guideline to reflect this.
Policy requires successful applicants to wait two years before reapplying for another institutional award – this is not consistent with AAUT processes and may unnecessarily exclude good applicants	Allow successful applicants to reapply in a subsequent year in a different award type providing the application is significantly different and change the documentation to reflect this
Policy does not specifically articulate who is permitted to nominate candidates, leading to the belief that it is only by self-nomination	Clarify in the documentation that both staff, and students may nominate others for a teaching award. Self-nomination still stands
Policy implies progression to national awards nomination is automatic for successful PETLS Award winners (3.26) and that “award recipients must be prepared to accept the University’s request ... by becoming institutional nominees”	Change the wording of the Policy to clarify that progression to a national award is not automatic and is at the discretion of the University, and the award nominee
Mismatch of eligibility criteria between Policy and Guidelines documents – Policy 3.6 (at least 2 full semesters of service) vs Guidelines 4.2 (sustained for a period of no less than three years)	Adjust Policy and Guidelines documents to consistent 3 years sustained practice which also aligns with AAUT requirements

Pilot promotion and opening up of nominations to the Notre Dame community

While the Policy does not specifically dictate that self-nominations are the only process possible, it has become standard practice and therefore understood that peer and student nominations were not permitted. This was strongly reflected in the survey responses where this nomination procedure was negatively perceived.

In the course of this review it became possible to implement a pilot nomination process that encouraged staff and students to nominate colleagues and educators. Once the call for nominations were made in early October all-staff emails were sent from the National Director of the LTO encouraging staff to nominate peers. Emails were also sent to students via the student associations in Fremantle and Sydney (request to Presidents to disseminate). A notice was also placed on the Blackboard landing page in the announcements section (facilitated by Senior System Administrator, Information Technology Office), as well as the LTO Sessional Staff Facebook page. Staff and students wishing to nominate others were directed to a Survey Monkey site.

As of 22 November, 226 students and 25 staff members had nominated 119 staff for PETLS Awards. The breakdown on nominations by Campus and School/Area is shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Staff and student nominations by Campus and School/Area after two weeks

Campus	School/Area	Nominations
Broome	Majorlin Kimberley Centre for Remote Health	2
	Nursing and Midwifery	1
	Nulungu Research Centre	1
Fremantle	Arts and Science	10
	Business	3
	Education	8
	Health Science	6
	Law	6
	Medicine	6
	Nursing and Midwifery	22
	Office of University Relations	1
	Philosophy and Theology	4
	Study Centre	1
Physiotherapy	3	
Sydney	Arts and Science	10
	Business	3
	Education	6
	Health Sciences	1
	Law	3
	Medicine	12
	Nursing	9
	Philosophy and Theology	2
Study Centre	2	
Total		119

Conclusion

The results of this review indicate that institutional teaching awards are not effectively meeting the stated objectives. That is:

- “to recognise and reward at the institutional level, sustained contributions to high quality teaching, learning [and] supervision for degree by research”;
- “supports the Objects and strategic goals of the University”;
- “the Awards seek to encourage leadership, strengthen institutional quality assurance processes”;
- “to provide a process of identifying institutional nominees for external Teaching and Learning awards”.

The steady decline of nominees for institutional awards and the narrow means by which they have been identified has likely resulted in the omission of many worthy nominees. This assessment is supported by the large number of nominations that resulted from opening up the process of peer and student nominations.