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Are Australian universities promoting learning and teaching activity effectively? An assessment of the effects on science and engineering academics.

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Summary: The Australian Federal Government and Australian universities have embarked on a bid to raise the profile of learning and teaching (L&T) in universities. Current strategies include increased funding of competitive grants for L&T projects, a wider range of teaching awards and fellowships and a controversial new national competitive Learning and Teaching Performance Fund. Despite these initiatives, advertised positions still target strong researchers, rather, and rewards for L&T initiatives are meagre. To assess the likely impact of these efforts, this report offers findings on the L&T culture among two distinct groups of Australian science, technology and engineering academics: a comparison of the research and L&T behaviours and attitudes of 22 senior academics, and the L&T perceptions and needs reported by 32 academics across all levels. The results are unequivocal: (1) senior academics still perceive that there are far higher professional rewards for research activities than for L&T activity, place far higher value on research leadership roles than L&T leadership, and gain far more job satisfaction from research activities. Moreover, they feel that their seniors support and encourage them far more strongly for research efforts than for L&T efforts; (2) academics at all levels still experience a lack of role models, support and reward for L&T activities; and resent L&T policies that neglect discipline-specific needs. The implications are clear. Unless rewards and support for L&T activities become comparable to those for research, and mainstream job opportunities materialize for academics who invest substantial time in L&T activities, national and institutional rhetoric strategies to encourage L&T activity will continue to be judged as window-dressing and be received with cynicism; and changes in academic behaviour will be marginal.

Classification: C75 D45 B40

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