

# Exploring the Role of Academic Development in Supporting Tertiary Educators' Well-Being: The Case of Online Consultations at UniSA.

## *A Practice Report*

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### Abstract

In this practice report, we posit that academic development encompasses more than improving and developing courses; it offers a space for tertiary educators to develop professionally, personally, and improve their well-being. The report is focussed on an initiative of a Teaching Innovation Unit to offer individual consultations to tertiary educators as a way of supporting well-being while building professional knowledge and capacity. Preliminary findings based on evaluation data suggest that the consultations were indeed a valued resource for educators. Moving forward, we propose that our assertion of the value of the consultations can be tested by applying well-being models and frameworks, such as Ryff and Keyes' (1995) scale and Wheatley's (2022) workplace well-being framework.

**Keywords:** Educator wellbeing; academic development; online consultations.

### Introduction

One on one online consultations (OCs) are positioned in this report as an example of academic development practice that supports not only tertiary educators' professional development, but also their well-being. In the following sections we discuss the rationale for establishing the OCs at the University of South Australia (UniSA), describe the practical steps taken to implement and manage the OCs, and share some preliminary results of our evaluations. Our aims are: (a) to reframe academic development units as key players in a holistic approach to tertiary educators' well-being that includes strategies for addressing structural factors, and (b) to pave the way for research studies evaluating such approach.

### Background

Concern for the well-being of students and teachers has been growing steadily over the past two decades, as evident through a search of relevant terms in Google Books Ngram Viewer (<https://books.google.com/ngrams/>). While much of the discourse has centred around students and, to a lesser extent, schoolteachers, some research on tertiary educators has also appeared. Berry and Cassidy (2013), for example, identified structural factors that are commonly reported in the scholarship to have a negative impact on university lecturers' well-being. These include loss of autonomy, increased pressure and workload due to growing numbers of students and expectations from management, as well as anxiety about the future and job security, mainly due to frequent changes to administrative and academic structures.



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In recent years, educators at the UniSA, like many other tertiary educators, have been subjected to factors that have affected their well-being. UniSA underwent organisational restructure in 2020, which resulted in a traditional discipline-oriented structure being replaced by a student and program-centred one. As part of this process, the Teaching Innovation Unit moved from being embedded in academic divisions (i.e., Faculties) to a centralised model, and educators felt uncertain about where and how to seek support as processes changed and previously established connections weakened or were perceived as lost.

It was against this backdrop of organisational change that UniSA found itself at the beginning of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid pivot to remote delivery of teaching and learning activities. This created additional stress for staff, who had to quickly adapt their approach to digital learning. In some cases, the change required a complete shift from on-campus lectures, workshops, practical work, and exams, to fully online delivery with little or no prior experience in using online conferencing or digital assessment tools. The Teaching Innovation Unit thus identified an urgent need for taking a proactive approach to supporting academic staff's well-being, focusing on work-related factors that may be positively influenced by academic development practices.

### ***Academic Development and Workplace Well-Being***

Many of the demands of modern academia listed by Berry and Cassidy (2013) and in other recent studies (e.g., Whittet, 2021) are in direct contrast to elements of well-being included in popular models and frameworks, such as Seligman's (2011) PERMA and Ryff and Keyes' (1995) psychological well-being scale. For example, as outlined in Table 1, erosion of academic freedom and increase in administrative workloads are likely to limit Ryff and Keyes' dimensions of Autonomy and Purpose in life. Given its rigorous validation and its emphasis on cognitive aspects of well-being such as self-evaluation, autonomy, personal growth, and self-efficacy, Ryff and Keyes' (1995) scale seems especially suited to research in academic environments. However, it is not designed specifically to deal with workplace well-being.

**Table 1**

*Mapping of Increasing Demands of Academia, Workplace Well-being, and Academic Development Practices*

Factors increasing job-specific demands in academia	Elements of wellbeing likely to be affected by job-specific demands listed in yellow column		Academic development practices that may support elements of workplace wellbeing listed in blue columns (and mitigate job-specific demands)
	Psychological well-being scale	Workplace well-being framework	
<i>Berry &amp; Cassidy (2013)</i>	<i>Ryff &amp; Keyes (1995)</i>	<i>Wheatley (2022)</i>	<i>(Authors' original contribution)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing demands for efficiency and accountability</li> <li>• Increased and diverse workloads</li> <li>• Erosion of academic freedom</li> <li>• Increased stakeholder demands</li> <li>• Increased administration</li> <li>• Larger class sizes</li> <li>• Student seen as 'customer'</li> <li>• University as a 'service institution'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy</li> <li>• Environmental mastery</li> <li>• Purpose in life</li> </ul>	<p><b>Job properties:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autonomy and control</li> <li>• Workload, intensity, role overload</li> <li>• Job resources</li> <li>• Complexity and variety</li> <li>• Meaningfulness of work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognise and reward the professionalism of educators; empower educators to make their own decisions</li> <li>• Showcase inspiring teaching and promote innovation and exploration of new approaches</li> <li>• Offer resources to support quality of teaching and learning design</li> <li>• Offer suggestions on how to build efficiency into teaching (e.g., using marking rubrics)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longer working hours</li> <li>• Increased overtime</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental mastery</li> </ul>	<p><b>Flexibility:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance</li> <li>• Working hours and overwork</li> <li>• Flexible working arrangements</li> <li>• Work recovery and breaks</li> <li>• Work location</li> </ul>	<p>(Limited scope)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer suggestions on how to build efficiency into teaching (e.g., using marking rubrics)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of research funding</li> <li>• Lack of time for research</li> <li>• Increased job insecurity</li> <li>• Uncompetitive Salary</li> <li>• Lack of Promotion opportunities</li> <li>• Increased technological demands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal growth</li> <li>• Self-acceptance</li> </ul>	<p><b>Rewarding careers:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay and benefits</li> <li>• Job security and contracts</li> <li>• Training skills and education match</li> <li>• Career development and progression</li> <li>• Effort-reward and recognition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer suitable professional development opportunities</li> <li>• Support career development and progression (e.g., facilitate applications for grants, fellowships, promotion)</li> <li>• Showcase and reward good practice</li> </ul>
N/A (not discussed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive relations with others</li> </ul>	<p><b>Relationships:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional relationships and social capital</li> <li>• Leadership and trust</li> <li>• Conflict at work</li> <li>• Worker relationships and employee voice</li> <li>• Social relationships and connectedness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate relationship-building and mutual exchange among educators based on common interests (e.g., Communities of Practice)</li> <li>• Establish and maintain positive relationships with educators based on Partnership principles (Knight, 2011)</li> </ul>
N/A (not discussed)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose in life</li> <li>• Positive relations with others</li> </ul>	<p><b>Giving:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer and civic engagement</li> <li>• Charitable giving</li> <li>• Social support</li> <li>• Workplace helping</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate peer-mentoring and other opportunities for staff to 'give back' (e.g., offering peer-feedback on award or fellowship applications)</li> </ul>
N/A (not discussed)	(Out of scope)	<b>Physical space and activity</b>	(Out of scope)

Over the past century, numerous attempts have been made to describe and measure the relationship between well-being and the workplace (Wallace, 2022). The framework for workplace wellbeing proposed by Wheatley (2022) is a synthesis of many of these attempts, and lists well-being supporting factors that are intrinsic to the job or workplace itself, rather than separate initiatives or services offered to staff. The framework thus highlights what organisations can do to support employees' well-being, by aligning workplace features with elements of the framework. A proactive approach that embeds worker well-being throughout work practices is thought to offer considerable benefits for organisations (Wheatley, 2022). These include a reduction in sick leave requests, greater productivity, and employee satisfaction, which in turn may contribute to retention and cost savings, and reputation of the institution as a desirable workplace. Importantly, employee satisfaction and well-being may affect the experience of the customers or clients who engage with the organisation (Wheatley, 2022:43).

While customer satisfaction is not an appropriate quality indicator for educational institutions, similar links have been identified between educators' well-being and the quality of student learning experiences (Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Gunson et al., 2016). In other words, there is a mutual influence between student learning and satisfaction, on the one hand, and educators' well-being on the other hand. Therefore, by supporting employee's well-being, educational institutions are also likely to draw benefits in terms of improved quality of their offerings and student experience. Organisational benefits aside, from a human and societal perspective, supporting educators' well-being is a valuable goal in its own right. With this in mind, initiatives have been put in place to both understand factors that may affect educators' well-being, and to alleviate and prevent stress, anxiety, and burnout caused by the demands of modern academia (e.g., Gunson et al., 2016; Savage & Morrissey, 2021).

Like many other organisations, UniSA has long recognised the importance of supporting employees' well-being. Interventions in place include both reactive and proactive approaches. For example, UniSA offers free access to psychological counselling for staff. Preventative initiatives include exercise and meditation sessions, as well as online well-being coaching. While these initiatives are invaluable, they tend to position employee well-being as something individuals should pursue independently of, or alongside their work practices. In other words, they assist employees in finding strategies to cope with existing systemic and contextual pressures, rather than considering how the pressures can be mitigated. As an academic development unit, we felt that we could do more. To this end, we mapped connections between: a) the factors for increasing job-specific demands that Berry and Cassidy (2013) identified as threats to university lecturers' well-being; b) the components of psychological well-being included in Ryff and Keyes' (1995) scale and c) elements of Wheatley's (2022) workplace well-being framework that are likely to be affected by these demands. The result of this exercise is offered in Table 1. As b) and c) were not developed with a specific reference to academic workplaces, we added a column in which we have suggested academic development practices that may be relevant to each factor.

Two elements of Wheatley's (2022) framework, namely a) Physical space and activity, and b) Flexibility, appear less likely to be influenced directly by academic development practices. On the other hand, the three remaining areas of (i) Job properties; (ii) Rewarding careers; and (iii) Relationships can all benefit from the academic development practices suggested in the right-most column of Table 1. Interestingly, many of these practices are consistent with factors that recent research (e.g., Rehal & van Nieuwerburgh, 2022) has identified as contributing to educators' flourishing, which reinforces their potential benefits. One of the initiatives implemented at UniSA to support educators' well-being were the online consultations.

### **The Online Consultations (OCs): Design and Implementation**

OCs were proposed primarily as a solution to facilitate academics' development of competency and self-efficacy in online teaching and learning, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for widespread remote delivery. Consequently, OCs initially focused on enabling academics to rethink their course design and use online tools for synchronous delivery of lectures and tutorials, as well as for recording and sharing video presentations. Upskilling was also required in managing online exams and scheduling remote proctoring arrangements.

The OCs therefore supported the 'Job properties' and the 'Training' elements of Wheatley's (2022) workplace well-being framework, for example by helping academics regain a sense of control as they received advice, feedback, and encouragement from TIU staff, or by facilitating access to job resources that eased workload while providing variety and encouraging student engagement. However, the OCs also served an important role in enabling the 'Relationship' aspect, as they allowed us to re-establish a sense of connection with educators and helped them feel 'heard' and valued during a highly stressful time. These relational elements were at risk of being lost, not only because of the social distancing imposed by the pandemic, but also due to the recent history of structural change at UniSA, as has been previously mentioned.

In terms of management and organisation of the OCs, academic developers and online educational designers offered availability on different days and times, so that the OCs were available five days a week, during regular business hours. The OCs were advertised through the Teaching Innovation Unit's intranet site, staff announcements, and internal newsletters. Educators could request an OC using the Moodle Scheduler tool in a purposely designed website. Slots were a default duration of 25 minutes, but users could request multiple slots if needed to address a complex issue. There was no limit to the number of OCs that could be requested by any one user, provided slots were available in the Scheduler.

OCs were monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis to assess their outcomes and impact on resources and staffing. Initially there were no set practices around record keeping, with an emphasis on crisis management and meeting educators' immediate needs. Initial evaluation therefore focused on identifying patterns in usage to anticipate demand and ensure enough support staff were available. As the COVID-19 emergency subsided, we adopted a standardised approach to data collection, with users required to add a brief message upon requesting a slot to allow for preparation, and brief post-meeting notes by support staff added to each OC record in the Scheduler. This approach has allowed for enhanced analysis of the different types of challenges discussed in OCs. Additionally, we have begun actively seeking feedback from educators in the form of online surveys, with links being sent out to users after each OC.

### **The Online Consultations (OCs): Evaluation**

Records were extracted from the Moodle Scheduler to observe the frequency and usage of OCs between 18 March 2020, when the OCs were first offered, and 20 December 2022. During this period, 1729 OCs were requested by UniSA educators; however, only 1416 were recorded as attended. It is possible that some OCs were indeed attended, but not marked as such by support staff. However, initial bookings are also sometimes cancelled due to unforeseen changes in circumstances. The OCs were requested by 507 unique users and offered by 15 online educational designers and 13 academic developers. A majority of users (57.4%) requested at least two OCs during the considered period, with 72 (14.2%) users requesting more than 5 consultations. A small number of educators (N=29, 5.7%) requested 10 or more consultations.

The largest number of OC requests was recorded in 2020, with a total of 740 appointments, followed by 2022 (N=522) and 2021 (N=467). This is not surprising as many of the consultations offered in 2020 were in response to the COVID-19 emergency. As this need subsided, the number of consultations initially decreased during 2021, then increased again during 2022 as the Teaching Innovation Unit made additional efforts to promote their uptake. Quantitative data suggest that the OCs were indeed a valued resource for educators, since at least eight consultations per week were requested, on average, during the three-year period. Our preliminary analysis of survey responses and other informal user feedback suggests that educators greatly appreciated opportunities to discuss their concerns and receive support from Teaching Innovation Unit staff, who were consistently praised not only for their competency, but also for their empathy and understanding of educators' struggles.

That the OCs has allowed educators to build relationships with Teaching Innovation Unit staff is further demonstrated by users requesting two or more repeated appointments with the same academic developer or online educational designer. This was true in 274 cases (54% of users). The majority of both single and repeated OCs attended were with online educational designers (N=1156, 82%), whereas 209 consultations (18%) were with academic developers. This reflects educators' initial concerns with pivoting to online teaching and learning, which is the main area of expertise of online educational designers. However, qualitative data suggest a shift over time in terms of the nature and purpose of the OCs.

Post-meeting notes recorded by Teaching Innovation Unit staff were analysed to identify emerging themes discussed in the OCs. Scattertext (Kessler, 2017), a visualisation tool developed for corpus analysis in Python programming language, was used to plot term frequencies and their relative distribution in the notes. We selected OCs attended in 2020 and 2022 (N=1262) for comparison and removed entries that did not have post-meeting notes, which reduced the corpus to 118 consultations in 2020 and 510 consultations in 2022. The resulting scatterplot (*Appendix*) shows terms that have high relative frequencies in 2020 and low frequencies in 2022 in the top-left corner, whereas words that have high frequencies in 2022 and low frequencies in 2020 are visualised in the bottom-right corner. The most distinctive terms of each year are also listed in Table 2.

**Table 2***Most Distinctive Words in Post-OC notes for 2020 and 2022*

2020		2022	
Change	Group	Follow (up)	Session
OED	Moodle quizzes	Help	Add
Referred	Case	Videos	Helped
Zoom	Online exams	Sections	H5P
Exams	Exams Moodle	New	Groups
Test	Type	Changes	Need
Open book	Written	Consult	Meeting

The most distinctive terms for 2020 tend to be strongly associated with online quizzes and exams; these are more likely areas in which educators required training because of the sudden changes to online delivery. The top terms for 2022, on the other hand, appear more generically linked to online teaching and e-learning design; they include discussion of follow-up sessions, videos, (Moodle) sections, groups, and H5P. This suggests that the 2022 consultations were less centred around the emergency of pivoting online and more broadly focused on individual educators' needs in relation to learning design and teaching, with emphasis on improving course design through the introduction of interactive multimedia elements. From this perspective, the more recent consults can be seen as contributing to the 'Job properties' dimension of Wheatley's (2022) workplace wellbeing framework, by offering personalised advice and resources that enable educators to achieve their professional goals.

### Conclusion and Future Direction

After three years since their implementation, the OCs have become a staple of Teaching Innovation Unit offerings and a valued source of knowledge and support for educators in any area of teaching, learning, and curriculum design. Our preliminary evaluation data suggest that the OCs are most likely to support the 'Job properties' and 'Relationships' dimensions of Wheatley's (2022) workplace wellbeing framework. From a 'Job properties' perspective, the OCs offer personalised advice and resources that educators can use to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning design and to build efficiency into their teaching. Positive relationships are also built through the OCs, as evidenced by our evaluation data.

These observations support our belief that academic development units have an important role to play in mitigating some of the challenges and demands of modern academia, and help educators find satisfaction and meaning in their work. Initiatives such as the OCs can support educators' workplace well-being 'from within', complementing other services offered by the organisation, such as professional counselling. We therefore invite colleagues in similar roles to consider how their practices may support educators' workplace well-being. We also recommend conducting rigorous evaluations to reliably demonstrate impact, by employing validated instruments, such as Ryff and Keyes' (1995) psychological well-being scale.

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## Appendix

### Scatterplot of Most Distinctive Terms in Post-OC Notes for 2020 and 2022

