

A Comparative Study of the Methods and Purpose of Professional Development Activities Undertaken by Professional Staff in Tertiary Institutions.

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Barbara May has worked in science and education administration for 26 years, including nine years as a School Manager while completing her Masters as a mature part-time student. Barbara believes professional staff are a valuable resource and are integral to the success of teaching and research activities throughout all areas of the tertiary sector. As a manager, she prioritises the provision of quality and relevant resources to professional staff in their pursuit of skills and knowledge development. Barbara's research is focused on identifying and promoting positive outcomes for professional staff through development activities that benefit the individual and the organisation

Professional development for professional staff can still appear to be a low priority within the big picture of a tertiary institution's resource allocation. However, when you consider the core business of the tertiary sector is knowledge development, it remains a concern that this perception still exists. The development of a skilled and knowledgeable, and therefore 'resilient' workforce is a necessity for all individuals working within this fast changing environment. Resilience is the ability to bounce back or improve a situation following disruptions or trauma experienced in the workplace (or elsewhere)..

The tertiary environment requires employees who are willing to be flexible and utilise their experience productively. This productivity is strongly influenced by the first level or middle level manager's actions, belief structure, and decision making process. In particular, and for the purposes of this study, the decisions made relating to the development of a staff member's skills, knowledge and personal capacity. Purposeful planning of development for professional staff is critical to sustain a flexible and forward moving infrastructure. The question is: 'do managers implement effective processes for the development and sustainability of a resilient work force?'

The Ian Chubb Career Development Award provided the opportunity to research and produce practical evidence on the decision making processes enacted by first and middle level managers regarding the development activities of professional staff. The Award stimulated an intensive preparation period in 2011 with the collection and analysis of data being carried out during 2012. Managers who have responsibility for more than one professional staff member were recruited as participants. All participants completed an on-line questionnaire, with a second phase consisting of interviews by participants who had volunteered to be contacted. First and middle level managers were selected as the research sample because research generally identified these managers as the most influential in implementing change strategies and the behaviour and performance of staff. It is therefore important to understand how professional development decisions are made and whether those decisions were purposeful and structured, or casual outcomes of informal processes.

The results of the study are expected to stimulate discussion, and reaffirm or challenge managers' current beliefs and practice, regarding the development of professional staff.