

A Conference Especially for Professional Staff? Who Would have Thought!!!

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***Tanya Rubin** has worked in the tertiary education sector for 19 years, during which time she has held various professional staff roles in human resources, faculty management, research administration and corporate services. Prior to working in higher education, Tanya had a long career in human resources in both the television and radio industry, and the public service.*

Tanya is currently the Manager, Policy at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and she also holds a Master of Commerce (Workplace Relations) from UWS. Tanya has a particular interest in university related policy development, delegations and process mapping.

This paper will present the story of an initiative introduced for professional staff at one university. The Professional Staff Conference was borne as a new scheme instituted under a Reward and Recognition Project of the University's staffing strategy. With commitment from the Vice-Chancellor and specific funding support, the conference was based on the model used by the TEM Conference, and launched in 2010 with 200 professional staff attending. It has since been held on an annual basis, and it has been hugely successful, growing from strength to strength each year.

The university's executive staff are fully supportive and ensure their availability to attend, present and speak at the Conference, often as part of a panel, giving professional staff the opportunity to hear from and ask questions of their senior colleagues in an environment of unity and collegiality.

It provides a training ground for staff before they present at an external conference, it allows staff to demonstrate various projects currently taking place, and it provides a networking opportunity for professional staff in a university that is located across six geographically constrained campuses. It demonstrates the value and contribution of professional staff in supporting and achieving the university's strategic mission. The Conference showcases innovative ideas and initiatives in higher education practice developed by professional staff within UWS.

A by-product of the Professional Staff Conference is the exposure of staff to the larger university picture which boosts staff morale. Communication within any large organisation is always difficult with an overload of emails, bulletins, notices and written material. Staff work within their unit and rarely have the opportunity to converse with fellow staff from other units, let alone from other campuses, unless they are directly required to. The conference facilitates an excellent networking opportunity whereby staff can catch-up with colleagues from other units and build personal relationships within their work community.

Sponsorship is sought from university suppliers and internal university agencies. These areas are able to showcase their products to conference attendees and also to raise awareness of services available to staff within the university, such as child care centres and the University's Staff Social Club.

Many professional staff may never attend an external conference, however with the Professional Staff Conference staff have the opportunities to grow personally, professionally and be more aware of what is happening both at their university and throughout the higher education sector.

The presentation will walk through the development stages of the inaugural conference and discuss those aspects that have made the Professional Staff Conference highly successful.