

# Recognition for university teachers takes a \$600k federal budget cut

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The move is a “really bad decision” argues, RMIT University STEM College associate deputy vice-chancellor, learning, teaching and quality, Professor Angela Carbone.

The federal government’s axing of the \$600,000 Australian Awards for University Teaching in the budget leaves the sector without formal recognition of excellence in teaching and learning innovation unless other sources of funding can be arranged.

The four-yearly funding for the prestigious awards, which include the Australian University Teacher of the Year, will terminate after the round this year, ending the government’s more than 20 years of support for the program.

Universities Australia, which is allocated the funding to administer the awards, was blindsided by the announcement. Its chief executive, Catriona Jackson, said the peak body was “disheartened” by the decision and noted that “over several years the government has reduced its support for quality and innovation in university teaching”.

UA deputy vice-chancellors (academic) committee chairman David Sadler, who is also DVC (education) at the University of Western Australia, called it a “retrograde step” but vowed to find a way to continue the program.

“This is still pretty raw, but we’re certainly not giving up on the recognition of teaching and teachers,” Professor Sadler said.

“We’ll have to find a way, whether it be convincing government that they’ve made the wrong call for a very small amount of money or some other way, but we are certainly not at a sector level — as well as individual institutions — giving up on this one.”

The awards began in 1997 under the aegis of what was then the department of employment, education, training and youth affairs. Their management passed through various hands until they were transferred to UA in 2018.

Two-thirds of the \$600,000 allocation was spent on the awards, which included covering the salaries of two staff and the software used to administer the awards.

There was no payment for the many academics who assessed the entries and judged the final winners.

The rest of the funding was used to build and maintain the UA Learning and Teaching Repository of research and resources.

The move has been condemned as “a really bad decision” by the academic who runs the scheme for UA, RMIT University STEM College’s associate deputy vice-chancellor learning, teaching and quality, Angela Carbone.

“The perception will be that the Australian government doesn’t really value excellent teaching or the quality of education we give our students or doesn’t value innovations in the higher education landscape,” Professor Carbone said.

She was the recipient of the 1998 Australian University Teacher of the Year award.

Professor Carbone said while the awards had meaning for the individual and for the institution, they also had meaning for the country. “Internationally, it’s saying we’ve got an education system that we’re not really interested in,” she said of the loss of funding.

A former winner in the social and behavioural sciences category, Macquarie University professor of learning technologies Matt Bower said he and colleagues had been devastated to learn the news and that support for innovation was necessary in university teaching.

“This need is particularly acute in 2021, with unprecedented upheaval in higher education brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and other policy forces,” Professor Bower said.

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