

## **SPECIAL ISSUE: Enhancing Student Learning Through Innovative Scholarship Conference 2016 (ESLTIS16)**

### **The Role of Teaching Focussed Academics in Developing Teaching Excellence**

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In this short editorial, we'll discuss the second Enhancing Student Learning through Innovative Scholarship conference, of which this volume contains contributed papers. This conference, the second national meeting open to all teaching (as opposed to teaching/research) focussed academic took place at University College London in June 2016.

With the advent of the TEF the focus of this conference was explicitly not on metric driven measures of excellence, but rather a much broader definition that encompassed the work of the large community of teaching focussed academics at UK and international Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their work in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. A central question raised by this and the inaugural Enhancing Student Learning Through Innovative Scholarship conference is how do institutions recognise the contribution of teaching focussed staff, particularly those on teaching and scholarship contracts. A recent study by the HEA puts this issue into context:

“HESA data for 2012-13 show that just over 25% of academic staff were on teaching-only contracts. The report shows too that there is a predominance of teaching-only contracts among part-time academics, and that while an increasing proportion of teaching is undertaken in universities and colleges that do not have research degree awarding powers and do not receive significant amounts of research funding, a clear hierarchy exists, with research widely seen as ‘more important’ – for institutional reputation and career advancement than teaching. There remains, the report says, a significant gap between policy and implementation regarding promotion policies in higher education institutions, and few identifiable promotions to senior positions solely on the basis of teaching excellence.”

This second meeting took place on 28 and 29 June 2016, and was attended by 114 teaching focussed academics, representing 45 UK Universities and 2 overseas Universities. A key focus of the inaugural session was a keynote followed by a panel discussion of the HEA report “Rewarding educators and education leaders” by one of its authors Professor Dilly Fung (Fung & Gordon., 2016). The key questions of this study were:

1. How are educators and education leaders currently employed, rewarded and regarded in research- intensive institutions?

2. How and why are these practices changing, and how might they change further to meet the needs of such institutions in the modern era?

The key recommendations of this study were discussed against the experience of a range of teaching focussed staff from both research and non-research intensive institutions. A key element in this discussion was a perceived change in the way HEIs were managing their teaching track, with a shift towards a recognition of SoTL in promotion criteria, though it was felt that there was a significant way to go to reach true equality between the esteem in which teaching and research are held.

The meeting itself proved to be a highly successful event, with future meetings planned for 2017 (University of Sheffield) and 2018 (University of Bristol). A venue for the 2019 conference is currently being discussed. What follows are invited papers from the delegates which explore further the roles of teaching Staff and their scholarly activity and look in particular how many teaching focussed academics often work in partnership with students to develop their innovative approaches to teaching and learning. The papers broadly fall into two main inter-related themes. The first is the support for the development of SOTL at the level of the individual and at the level of the institution.

In the first paper by Jarvis et al, they explore the use of a key interdisciplinary working group to provide support to staff in enhancing their Scholarly practice. In particular, they flag the need to develop mechanisms to support leadership development in learning and teaching, and the need to recognise SoTL within the workload model. Southall's paper then suggests an approach where sessional teaching staff can be developed to support enhancement initiatives with the institutions as a key resource. Given the challenges around workload for full time academic staff, this could be a potential way to develop SoTL through partnership. The second theme is approaches in the broadest sense, but covers a multitude of facets. The paper by Warwick discusses a problem many of us are familiar, inheriting less popular modules to each, and looks at strategies to turn this situation around, through (for example) developing experiential learning. Experiential learning, with its strong ties to employability comes up again when Cranwell, Page and Squires discusses the role of final year research projects in undergraduate study, and in particular how these are assessed. Given the development of a range of broader skills as part of the students' study, this paper gives an insight into the relevancy of different forms of assessment. O'Leary's paper takes this a stage further and moves onto discuss how employability can be embedded in the curricula by working with external partners to deliver project based learning where students can be experience real-world problem solving as part of their University curriculum.

In the advent of the first full round of TEF, institutions are grappling with their outcomes and this new measure of "excellence". In the current unstable political climate, this conference series raises the question, if one is to actively define teaching excellence then who better than those working at the forefront within our Universities? A theme which will form a key element of the Sheffield meeting in 2017.

## References

Fung, D. & Gordon, C., 2016. Rewarding educators and education leaders in research-intensive universities. York, UK: HE Academy. Accessed July, 27, 2016