

Promoting Excellence in Teaching and Learning through an Institutional Teaching Fellowship Scheme

Angela Benzies
Academic Development,
Edinburgh Napier University
a.benzies@napier.ac.uk
Tel: 0131 455 6105

Abstract

The Edinburgh Napier University Teaching Fellowship Scheme was set up in 1997 as a way to recognise and reward excellence in teaching and to raise the profile of teaching within the institution. Initially fifty Fellowships were created and each successful applicant was awarded a pay increment; it was thus viewed as an academic promotion. The scheme has since evolved with the introduction of a Senior Teaching Fellow grade and the inclusion of professional services staff with a teaching role. The most significant alteration has arisen from the introduction of the national Framework Agreement combined with an institutional review of academic promotions and has led to a fundamental change to the reward mechanism for individual Fellows.

This article describes the development and achievements of the Edinburgh Napier Teaching Fellowship Scheme and its role in facilitating good outcomes for the university through the opportunities provided to its staff. In doing so it seeks to pose questions about teaching excellence and its reward within higher education institutions.

Keywords: teaching excellence, knowledge management, strategic development, innovation, staff rewards

Promoting and Recognising Excellence in Teaching

The Dearing Report (The National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997) raised important issues regarding the professionalism of teaching, recognising that good subject specialists are not necessarily good teachers and therefore that some education and training in teaching is appropriate. Also raised were issues of the lack of esteem in which teaching is held and associated paucity of promotion opportunities for those primarily engaged in this activity. The debate continues about the usefulness or otherwise of postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching, whether it matters to some or all universities, whether excellent teaching can be effectively encouraged and supported and, if so, does it make a difference to the student experience and can it help staff towards promotion? And what does excellence mean anyway?

Skelton (2005) states that “teaching excellence is a contested concept which is situationally and historically contingent” and argues that we must engage in a critical approach to it that includes the examination of values. For example, excellence in teaching may be defined by some as recognised expertise within the discipline domain, i.e. a research orientation, for others it may be defined in terms of the attention given to the student experience, or it may point towards a scholarship of teaching and learning that includes pedagogical research. He contends that the reasons for fostering excellence should be subject to scrutiny as these may be a manifestation of what some see as a thrust towards a standardisation of working methods that disempowers the academic and emphasises central management control in a detrimental sense.

In an opinion piece in *Academy Exchange*, Rowland (2007) argues that “the way in which excellence is defined is strongly influenced by the dominant forces in society” and because “the purposes of education are contested” it is not therefore possible to describe teaching as excellent unless “teaching is merely a skill in which values play no part”. Skelton (2005, pp 4-5) puts forward the notion that excellence in teaching in higher education may be thought of in terms of managerialism (focusing on economy, efficiency and effectiveness), the market (emphasis on teaching excellence as a way of staying ahead of competitors), and ‘performativity’ (compliance with targets, indicators and evaluations). It is therefore clear that ‘excellence’ is itself a contested value and may have a negative connotation in the minds of some.

Writing in her capacity as a representative of the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE), Allen (2003) states that an emphasis on excellence could be a barrier in developing a positive reward system for teaching in that “if individuals are to be competitively judged on their performance in order to give short-term pay supplements to a few, then it is an unhelpful and divisive concept”, suggesting that an excellence focus might undermine motivation in those not so rewarded. While some would agree that an emphasis on collaboration and teamwork is a good thing, should it preclude rewards for outstanding individuals and can those excellent individuals not enhance the results of such collaborative work through their contributions? And should an ideological stance that emphasises equality and fairness be used to argue against rewarding the excellent?

Each institution would need to formulate its policy according to its own values in this regard. We are all of equal value as human beings, but we are not all the same in terms of abilities or interests, and while universal teaching excellence is a laudable aim, it is not at all clear that this is always achieved and, if that is the case, then it may well be legitimate to reward those who prove they are outstanding. And, if it is accepted that excellence in teaching can lead to promotion, then it would be important to use a mechanism that allows teachers to continue teaching, rather than them having to move to a different field in which they may be less qualified, e.g. management, in order to achieve career progression, as that may ultimately not benefit the individual, the institution or its students (Hartley, 2003). The same type of problem has long been observed in many types of business organisation and has led to the revision of pay scales to allow promotion through technical grades.

A number of studies have been undertaken on how institutions define, identify and reward teaching excellence, for whatever purpose. For example, a set of illustrative cases compiled by Warren and Plumb (1999) identified four types of scheme: ‘traditional’ award schemes (i.e. prizes); teaching fellowship schemes; educational development grant schemes; and promotion/bonus schemes. Mindful of their institution’s (University College London) reliance on research income, they considered the appropriateness of the various types of award. They rejected a traditional award scheme that recognises past performance because it did not seem to affect teaching quality or innovation in the longer term and had the disadvantage of being bureaucratic.

A teaching fellowship scheme was rejected due to the expense associated with large numbers of appointments, as well as a concern that it would widen the teaching-research divide. As they believed that existing promotion criteria allowed for recognition of excellent teachers, an educational development grant scheme was recommended because it was judged to be an effective way to promote innovation and foster collaboration, even though their study showed that these were more expensive than traditional award schemes and required both initial and subsequent summative assessment.

In 2000-2002 an initiative from the Educational Development Sub-Committee of Universities Scotland resulted in the set up of a project entitled PROMOTE, which studied how high quality teaching environments were being promoted within Scottish Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and, in particular, what pedagogically-related posts were being created to support this (McArthur *et al*, 2004). Twenty two HEIs were surveyed and approximately twenty five models of teaching enhancement posts, roles or structures were discovered, which were then grouped into five categories, based on their primary function or objective:

- Promotion and reward
- Research, innovation and dissemination
- Networks, representatives and conduits
- Support, administration and development
- Student and learning focus.

Studies on recognition, rewards and promotion in higher education, including those cited above, indicate complex issues over which there is often no agreement, even among staff in the same institution. However, it is clear that staff in organisations generally have expectations that their hard work will deliver reward, especially if they feel their performance distinguishes them from their peers. While some express concerns over equal treatment of all staff, and equality legislation perhaps increases such anxieties due to fear of litigation if mistakes are made, the basic psychological contract between employer and employee which is “based on employees' sense of fairness and trust and their belief that the employer is honouring the 'deal' between them” is important as “where the psychological contract is positive, increased employee

commitment and satisfaction will have a positive impact on business performance”
(Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2008).

The Edinburgh Napier Teaching Fellowship Scheme

The Edinburgh Napier Teaching Fellowship Scheme was set up in 1997 as a way to recognise, encourage and support excellence in teaching among the university’s academic staff and to foster and promote innovation in teaching within the Fellow’s school, faculty and across the university. The Scheme was created by senior staff from what was then the Educational Development (now the Academic Development) professional service, working in conjunction with the University’s senior management team, and had an initial aim of appointing fifty Fellows across the institution. University funding was used to award each Fellow an increment on the pay scale for the duration of their five-year appointment, while leaving their substantive grade unchanged. Applications were invited annually from permanent members of academic staff working full or part time, including both lecturers and senior lecturers, and were evaluated internally by Educational Development staff and an external assessor with nationally recognised expertise in learning and teaching development. Human Resources then formally invited successful applicants to accept a five year, renewable Teaching Fellowship. The Scheme seeks to recognise the past performance of the teacher with the expectation of an ongoing role in promoting excellence in teaching within the institution through the Fellow’s individual contribution and in collaboration with peers.

In 2002 the Scheme introduced the new role of Senior Teaching Fellow to recognise those Teaching Fellows who had made an exceptional contribution to teaching and learning at Edinburgh Napier and also developed a strong external profile in pedagogy. The Senior Teaching Fellow role particularly emphasised leadership and collegial support, the criteria stipulating a requirement for a proven ability to lead, influence and inspire colleagues at school, faculty and university levels in the design, delivery and support of learning, teaching and assessment. In recognition of this extra expertise and responsibility, Senior Teaching Fellows were awarded a second pay increment for the duration of their appointment.

At present there are forty nine Teaching Fellows and twelve Senior Teaching Fellows, ranging from lecturer to Dean in terms of substantive post.

Current Issues of Recognition, Rewards and Academic Promotions

The scheme's criteria and documentation were reviewed and revised in 2006 by a working group of the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee (LTAC), and a further major adjustment was made in 2008 following the implementation of the national Framework Agreement in late 2006 and in light of a general university review of academic promotions.

The work surrounding the common national pay scale and associated grading structure, and the new academic promotions arrangements required a rethink of how the Teaching Fellow role was to be rewarded. It had never been the intention that a Teaching Fellow's substantive grade would change from, e.g. lecturer to senior lecturer, but the pay increment (or two, in the case of Senior Teaching Fellows) was a recognition of the extra work carried out over the period of the appointment and was effectively a promotion, albeit a small one. However, using grading tools such as the Higher Education Role Analysis (HERA), Teaching Fellows could well score more highly than their peers, but not highly enough to cross the boundary into the next grade, especially as HERA's 'optional competencies' of interpersonal skills, influencing skills, and tenacity and change focus, which would seem to be particularly appropriate to the role, were not included in the analysis. Edinburgh Napier has not as yet introduced contribution points to the common pay scale so no mechanism exists to provide the equivalent of the former reward of a pay increment. In fact, such performance-related rewards are generally problematic across the sector in that most academics are still progressing through pay scales on the basis of length of service, rather than contribution, even though two thirds of HEIs have introduced contribution points (Newman, 2008). It was therefore decided that Teaching Fellows could no longer be awarded a pay increment or personal allowance, but would instead be able to access money from a university Teaching Development Fund to support either their individual work as a Fellow, or to conduct group projects in learning, teaching and assessment, effectively incorporating aspects of an educational grant scheme. The criteria for

appointment remained unchanged from that agreed in the 2006 review, though the period of appointment was reduced from five to three years.

One of the outcomes of the review of academic promotions at Edinburgh Napier has been that the role of Senior Teaching Fellow has been removed from the Teaching Fellowship Scheme and instead established as a promoted post within the university structure at senior lecturer level, which equates to level four of the National Library of Academic Role Profiles (NLARP) for Teaching and Scholarship (Edinburgh Napier University, 2008a) and grade seven on the common pay scale. This makes the post equivalent in grade and standing to that for Reader and to managerial positions at School level such as Subject Group Leader, or Director of the Student Experience. In future Faculties will annually evaluate their requirements for promoted posts of each category, submit relevant business plans and, if approved, then recruit internally for Senior Teaching Fellows, Readers and academic managers.

The Application and Appointments Process

Staff are awarded the title of Teaching Fellow on demonstration of excellence in teaching as judged against a set of criteria endorsed by Edinburgh Napier's Academic Board. The applications guidelines (Edinburgh Napier University, 2008b) describe the Teaching Fellow candidate as a member of staff who:

- designs, organises and facilitates learning experiences that assist students to achieve desired outcomes
- creates and delivers learning experiences and assessments that integrate knowledge, skills and attributes
- uses valid, reliable, fair and useful assessment that is designed to promote student motivation and high quality learning
- supports the development of students' ability to learn both independently and collaboratively
- responds effectively to student diversity (including culture) with sensitivity and empathy

- generates and fosters students' enthusiasm for learning through using a range of approaches designed to maximise student engagement and empowerment
- refines learning, teaching and assessment practice based on self-evaluation and reflection and on feedback from students and peers
- uses a scholarly approach to analyse, evaluate, and apply good practice, and to challenge orthodoxy in learning, teaching and assessment practice where appropriate.

There is a reward for past performance and individual teaching skill, but additionally there is a clear expectation of an ongoing role post-appointment, including leadership activity, acting as a role model and working as an agent of change in pedagogic practice. Indeed, evidence is sought at application of how the candidate has already influenced the learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) activity of their area. The applicant must be a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, the argument being that this professional qualification is a necessary indicator of the progression from competence to a commitment to develop excellence.

The original Scheme started with fifty Fellowships but there is now no quota so concerns over equity are less likely to arise. However, studies have indicated that a large number of awards may devalue a reward scheme and recent surveys at Edinburgh Napier indicate a desire to ensure that the titles of Teaching Fellow and Senior Teaching Fellow remain a badge of excellence. It thus remains to be seen how this will develop over the next few years. The inclusion of professional services staff with a teaching role will provide recognition for them and may assist in collaborative work, for example in the areas of scholarly skills development, but it does represent quite a change in approach and some staff may lack confidence to put themselves forward for consideration.

Role and Activities of the Edinburgh Napier Teaching Fellow

Teaching Fellows have a specific role in the achievement of the strategic goals of the University through active involvement in the commitments and activities identified in Edinburgh Napier University's *Strategy for Learning Teaching and Assessment*:

promoting learning for achieving potential (2008c). The Strategy states that, along with Professors and Readers, Teaching Fellows should be active in “identifying, encouraging and promoting acknowledged good practices within the university and from within the sector (and) engaging with the development and integration of key initiatives that support the implementation of this strategy” and that they engage in the learning, teaching and assessment (LTA) and Quality Committees at school, faculty and university level.

The activities fall broadly under the categories of academic enhancement activities (such as innovations in assessment methods, online learning development, internationalisation of the curriculum); supporting the professional development of colleagues (acting as mentors, organisers of and speakers at university LTA seminars and conferences); leadership of and/or contribution to standing and short-term committees and groups; and LTA scholarship and dissemination, including external activity. The list of activities is not exhaustive and a Teaching Fellow will normally assume only a subset of these activities, reflecting their own particular interests.

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is not a topic that has been explicitly explored within the wider Teaching Fellowship community in recent years, though members are active in making their pedagogic work public and available to their peers through participation in internal and external learning and teaching events and through peer reviewed publications, and as such go some way to addressing the definition of Lee Schulman, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning who has said:

“For an activity to be designated as scholarship, it should manifest at least three key characteristics: It should be public, susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and accessible for exchange and use by other members of one’s scholarly community” (Shulman, 1998)

Work is currently being done by Senior Teaching Fellows, assisted by Academic Development, to build capacity in pedagogic research and this, combined with a drive to make Teaching Fellow contributions more visible and their publications more easily available within the wider university, is likely to see an increased level of debate around SoTL.

The Teaching Fellow Community

Fellows and Senior Fellows together form the Teaching Fellow Community which may be thought of as a community of practice, defined as a group of people “who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, 2002 p. 4). According to Wenger, the three elements of a community of practice are the domain or area of mutual interest, the community as defined by its interactions among members, and the practice, i.e. the requirement that members are practitioners in that area of shared interest. The Edinburgh Napier Teaching Fellow Community thus fulfils the Wenger definition in that it brings together higher education practitioners in a mutually supportive network and provides opportunities for members to share knowledge for the purpose of enhancing teaching practice. At a basic level, Fellows may ask each other for advice using the Teaching Fellows electronic forum, but they share knowledge more widely by organising and then participating as speakers alongside other colleagues in an annual, university-wide staff conference on a topical teaching and learning theme.

It is worth remembering that communities of practice, i.e. groupings of people that have been deliberately set up to achieve a particular purpose relevant to the organisation’s objectives, exist outside of academia and are considered to be helpful in coping with a variety of rapidly changing environments where “organisations are moving away from structures of the past that are based on hierarchies, discrete groups and teams and moving towards those based on more fluid and emergent organisational forms such as networks and communities” (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004, p. ix). Although the area of practice differs, it is suggested that much may be learnt from considering the purpose, mode of operation, recognition and reward systems in other organisational contexts. While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider the area in depth, Hildreth and Kimble go on to evidence how knowledge management and innovation may be facilitated through communities of practice by describing the experiences of several very different organisations across the world. In a similar vein, Saint-Onge and Wallace (2003) discuss the development of communities in a variety of commercial contexts and examine their benefits, particularly in relation to learning, sharing knowledge and being catalysts for change. Edinburgh Napier’s Teaching Fellowship Scheme was not set up primarily to fulfil a knowledge management function but aspects of this are evident

within the Community already, and there are plans to develop this further for benefit of Fellows, the wider institution and its students.

Conclusions

The current academic promotion arrangements within Edinburgh Napier University clarify the different routes available to senior lecturer grade and show that excellence in teaching is one of them. The Teaching Fellowship Scheme itself does not now confer promotion but facilitates staff members functioning in a community of teaching practice that helps them to engage in institutionally funded work which promotes excellence in teaching across the university.

Some would argue that schemes to reward teaching excellence have had little value in raising the profile of teaching relative to research, and that benefits to the student body have not been proven, but perhaps it is true that each institution needs to have a scheme that is suitable for them, i.e. 'fit for purpose' in their context. From an operational viewpoint, the Edinburgh Napier Scheme provides a greater breadth and depth of knowledge, and many more staff to help promote excellent teaching than would be possible with a small educational development professional service. Teaching Fellows within Edinburgh Napier have clearly communicated the value they place on the University's Scheme, and management and external bodies, including the Quality Assurance Agency, have recognised its positive contribution. It is a mark of the national standing of the Edinburgh Napier scheme that it has either been replicated or has strongly influenced schemes in a number of other institutions.

While there is much debate about definitions and values within higher education and their effect on reward system design and operation, it is worth remembering that basic issues of fair reward for hard work and differentiation between good, bad and excellent performance are dealt with routinely by management in all types of organisations outside of universities. Academic and other teaching staff in higher education are no different than anyone else in wishing to see significance in their work and to know that their employer appreciates it. The Teaching Fellowship scheme at Edinburgh Napier is one way of providing opportunities for recognition, personal development, community

involvement and the chance to make a difference to the institution in terms of the student experience, collegial support, and influence on institutional policies and procedures. The Scheme has evolved and adapted to changing circumstances and its future will continue to depend on the contribution of committed and skilled teachers who critically engage in the debate on its purpose, strategic direction and operations, and on the nature of teaching excellence itself.

References

- Allen, L. (2003). How should we reward teaching? *Exchange Magazine* (5), pp. 9-10. Retrieved September 26, 2008, from <http://www.exchange.ac.uk/files/eissue5.pdf>
- Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (2008). *The Psychological Contract*. Retrieved September 26, 2008, from <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/empreltns/psycntrct/psycontr.htm>
- Edinburgh Napier University (2008a). *National Library of Academic Role Profiles*. Retrieved September 26, 2008, from <http://www2.napier.ac.uk/frameworkagreement/assets/NLARP2.doc>
- Edinburgh Napier University (2008b). *Teaching Fellowship Scheme: guidance notes for applicants*. Retrieved September 26, 2008, from <http://www2.napier.ac.uk/ed/TF/TFguidancenotesAug08revised.pdf>
- Edinburgh Napier University (2008c). *Strategy for Learning Teaching and Assessment: promoting learning for achieving potential*. Retrieved September 26, 2008, from http://www2.napier.ac.uk/ed/pdf/LTA_2008.pdf
- Hartley, P. (2003). Reasons to be cheerful. *Exchange Magazine* (5), pp.26-27. York, England: Higher Education Academy.
- Hildeth, P. & Kimble, C. (2004). *Knowledge Networks: Innovation Through Communities of Practice*. London, England: Idea Group Publishing.
- McArthur, J., Land, R., Earl, S., Elvidge, L., Juwah, C. & Ross, D. (2004). *Promote: Professional Recognition of Methods of Promoting Teaching and Learning Enhancement*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh Napier University.
- Newman, M. (2008). Pay still linked to length of service. *Times Higher Education* (1,862), p9.

Rowland, S. (2007). Against excellence. *Academy Exchange*, 7, pp 20-21. Retrieved September 26, 2008, from <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/publications/exchange>

Saint-Onge, H. & Wallace, D. (2003). *Leveraging Communities of Practice for Strategic Advantage*. Burlington, USA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Skelton, A. (2005). *Understanding Excellence in Higher Education: Towards a Critical Approach*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Shulman, L. *Teacher portfolios: A theoretical activity*. In N. Lyons (Ed.), *With portfolio in hand: Validating the new teacher professionalism*, pp. 23-37. New York: Teachers College Press.

The National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (1997). *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. Norwich, England: HMSO.

Wenger, E. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice*. Massachusetts, USA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Warren, R. & Plumb, E. (1999) Survey of Distinguished Teacher Awards and illustrative series of case studies. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 23(2), 245-255.