

University Teachers – A New Approach to Staffing in Higher Education

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Abstract

In this short paper I will attempt to describe the thinking behind the introduction of the post of University Teacher (and senior UT, Reader and Chair) positions at the University of Glasgow. Since the drafting of this paper the post of Reader within the UT structure has been removed. The criteria used for promotion will be discussed and the support issues for this group of staff discussed. The paper will attempt to look at the pros and cons of such appointments and the lessons that can be learned from this approach.

Key words university teacher, scholarship

Background to the Glasgow Approach

The University of Glasgow (2008a) states on its web site that:

“Our mission is to undertake leading-edge, internationally-competitive research while offering a challenging student-centred learning environment. Through our status as a leading international university, we aim to sustain and add value to Scottish culture and society, to the natural environment and to the national economy”.

Prior to 2002 this meant that any University Lecturer seeking promotion would have to achieve high standards in the research arena/sphere of research. This disadvantaged many members of staff who carried very high teaching loads in their department, usually

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because they wanted to. Meanwhile active researchers were rewarded by having lower teaching load as well as a distinct advantage in the promotion stakes.

In both the 2001 and, more recently, the 2008 Research Assessment Exercises (RAE), and the use of volume indicators for research active staff meant that many University's sought to maximise the number of 'research active staff' being returned, or put another way to minimise the number of staff who could NOT be returned.

In 1999, the then St Andrews College (a teaching training college in Glasgow) merged with the University and a new Faculty of Education was formed. Because many of the academic staff from St Andrews College had no research remit, only approximately 20% of the Faculty of Educations academic staff were returned in the 2001 RAE. Elsewhere in the University, especially in the professional faculties, heavy teaching and clinical requirements mitigated against research development.

Policy and Principles of the University Teacher Development

At the outset it was clear that 'teaching only' appointments were unacceptable. Given the research intensive nature of the University, the view from within the institution was that 'teaching only' appointments would imply that these staff would not be exposed to research, far less engaged in any kind of scholarly activity and that this would lead to a significant diminution of the learning experience of students.

After considerable debate, including a number of papers produced by the Teaching and Learning Service on what the literature reported and what other institutions had done, a way forward was identified. Concepts of 'research – informed' teaching and 'scholarship' activities were introduced as alternatives to 'research – led' and 'research'. The new position of University Teacher was created for those engaged in the former.

The grading and status accorded to University Teachers was directly comparable with University Lecturer. This was, in practice, easy to do in terms of salary and terms and condition, but status within the academic community in the University was more problematic. It took a number of years for Heads of Departments to accept that University Teachers were not to carry exceptionally heavy teaching and administrative

loads, but they needed time to carry out 'scholarly' activities. There was also a considerable 'educational' programme required for members of appointing committees and promotion committees in order that they understand the very different requirements of the new posts.

There was introduced at the same time as University Teacher a promoted position analogous to Senior Lecturer, Senior University Teacher. This was seen as essential – to give a career structure to those who embark on this route. The promotion criteria for Senior University Teacher needed to be as robust as those for Senior Lecturer.

Finally, transferability between the two career routes was built in. In practice, in the early days, the majority of the traffic has been one way i.e. from lecturer to teacher. At the present time appointments are made to one grade or the other with little or no transfer taking place.

Roll-out of the New Grade

The new grades of University Teacher and Senior University Teacher were inaugurated in December 2002 after consultation with the relevant trade unions and getting the approval of the University Court. This meant that existing members of staff who wished to transfer to the new grade as well appointments to the new grades commenced in January 2003. The introduction of Clinical University Teacher and Senior Clinical University Teacher in both the Dental and Medical School followed later in 2003. The first applications for promotion to the senior grades were available in academic year 2003-04. Anecdotal evidence from those promoted in the first round of promotion clearly showed that those who obtained promotion would certainly have not met the criteria for Senior Lecturer. However, promotion 'reinvigorated' many and several Heads of Department commented positively on the impact of the new career grade.

Readership and Professorship grades were introduced for the academic session 2004 – 05. In 2009 the readership grade was removed. It was clear that those who gained promotion via this route were widely acknowledged across the campus as individuals who had made a really significant contribution to teaching and learning developments

across both the university and within their own discipline. So once again the anecdotal evidence suggested that the new grades were a success.

Issues for the Scheme in Practice

Criteria for Senior Promotions

It may be worthwhile at this stage to look at the criteria for senior promotions. At the outset there was considerable debate about whether or not a chair position should be available to colleagues taking this route. However, the argument that there needed to be complete parity between the two career structures won the day.

The criteria for promotion to a personal chair are as follows:-

“Academic leadership and distinction in Teaching, Learning and assessment, including contribution to the advancement of knowledge and understanding or its creative or professional application in the field of learning at the highest level and the ability to influence, stimulate and inspire others; and outstanding achievement in contribution to student learning as evidenced in either peer-reviewed or peer-reviewable outputs including excellence in practice in the field”.

It is clear from the above that there is still an expectation of peer-reviewed outputs from candidates seeking such a position. In practice these were not expected (nor required) to be RAE returnable pieces of work. However, they have included RAE returnable work as well as Web sites, DVD/Video training materials, and text books. Indeed the setting up of this journal, was initially inspired by the need to develop a ‘peer reviewed’ outlet for scholarship type outputs.

A small number of colleagues have achieved chair positions by this route. Their applications, like all chair appointments are subjected to external scrutiny by four external professorial referees. In all cases whilst I was at Glasgow, such appointments were strongly recommended by the external referees.

Thus it would appear that at the senior end of the career structure the new grade is working well. Those achieving professorial grade by this route are granted all the same

rights and privileges such as membership of Senate and, in the day to day business of the University, have the same status as those who achieved such a position by the research excellence route.

Issues for Staff on Probation

The major issue that has arisen with the scheme is with members of staff who are on academic probation. Academic probation is a process that new academic appointees have to go through to be confirmed in post. It is normally a period of three years during which time the probationary member of staff is assigned a mentor to guide them through the process. At the outset of probation the new member of staff in conjunction with her or his Head of Department set objectives for each of the three years of probation in terms of teaching and assessment, research and administration for Lecturers and teaching and assessment, scholarship and administration for Teachers. These targets are reviewed by a University committee (comprised in the main of senior academic colleagues from across the institution), and then reviewed on an annual basis by the probationer and their Head of Department, then by the probation committee.

The major difficulty was in setting appropriate targets for scholarship. What emerged was that both Heads of Department and mentors had little understanding of what scholarship targets might actually be. This was also an issue for the probation committee. It was clear to all that they needed to be 'measurable' and 'evidence-able' in some way, that they were NOT research targets, nor were they 'educational research' targets. This lack of clarity caused considerable angst to many probationary members of staff. The Educational Development unit took some steps to address the issue; it held a one day symposium to discuss the issue of what scholarship for probationary staff might actually be and set up a learning community to explore the issues behind the scholarship of teaching and learning (Bell et al, 2006).

It is clear from the ongoing operation of the system that some clarity has been brought to the issue of probationary targets, but there is still variation across the campus in terms of what is deemed acceptable by Heads of Departments. This makes the role of the probation committee crucial to ensure that probationary staff are supported in getting opportunities to engage in scholarship.

Some Thoughts on the Issues for Educational Development Units

It is clear from the Glasgow experience that Educational Development Units can play a crucial role in terms of acting as sources of help and advice for probationers, Heads of Department, mentors, and senior University managers on the operation of such a scheme, the setting of targets and determining what constitutes scholarship.

At Glasgow Masters degree in Academic Practice was developed specifically to allow UTs and lecturers to explore the scholarship of teaching and learning in greater depth, see University of Glasgow (2008b).

The ongoing role of an Educational Development Unit in supporting probationary members of staff, providing a forum for the critical discussion of issues relating to scholarship activities, as well as providing advanced academic qualifications is a key part of the success of these type of appointments.

A Critical Look at 'Teaching Only' Appointments

The trend towards an increasing casualisation of HE and in particular a growing number of academic staff on what are referred to as 'teaching only' contracts is well reported, Sanders (2005). This approach has been criticised by many who make statements like 'staff must be research active to deliver up to the minute material'. Yet the growing interest in the link between staff research and teaching shows that the relationship is more complex. Work by Jenkins and Healey (2005) has shown that the linkage between research and teaching is not just about subject content, what they refer to this as research-led teaching, but can also include research-oriented (understanding the processes by which knowledge is produced i.e. learning inquiry skills), research-based where the curriculum is designed around inquiry based activities and finally research-informed where the teaching itself is based on inquiry into the teaching and learning process itself. It seems to me therefore that many traditional academic staff concentrate their efforts on research led teaching. However, by looking at the three interpretations of the link between research and teaching it is clear that these offer significantly different student learning experiences and may well be better at producing graduates for the 21st Century (Ramsden 2008). It seems to me that the role of the University Teacher as

explained in this paper, is well suited to implementing the three other forms of research – teaching links. Finally as Ramsden (2008) states,

“There is a real sense among many academics that formal recognition is given to teaching in name only and that promotion can be obtained on research achievement alone. It is hard to see how further progress in enhancing the student experience can occur if attention is not given to amending the factors underlying these perceptions”.

Whilst the University Teacher structure at Glasgow continues to provoke debate, the development of a career path that values and gives parity of esteem in terms of a promotion structure is, in my opinion, a first step on the road towards addressing the issues raised by Ramsden (2008).

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