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Teaching Excellence Awards in Scottish Higher Education

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Abstract

The status of teaching and recognising and rewarding teaching are major national policy issues and, given the lack of a national teaching excellence award scheme (TEA) in Scotland, there is a particular Scottish dimension to this issue. A recent UK-wide survey of HE staff showed that there is still a widely held perception that teaching is not afforded the same status or valued to the same extent as research in promotion decisions and other reward and recognition institutional mechanisms (HEA/GENIE CETL, 2009).

This paper presents the findings of a short survey to gain insights into the extent and nature of TEAs in Scottish higher education. Although there is no national TEA scheme in Scotland, a number of Scottish institutions have developed their own intra-institutional schemes. This small-scale study aimed to explore:

- how widespread TEAs currently are in Scotland
- how they are being administered

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- what criteria are being used to make these awards

A short survey was distributed to the Educational Developers community in Scotland and we present here the findings from that survey and then explore what these mean for Scottish HE with the hope of encouraging debate about rewarding teaching in the Scottish sector.

Keywords: teaching excellence; recognition and reward; teaching awards

Introduction

There is a drive to re-evaluate the status of teaching relative to research in Higher Education as seen through government legislation and institutional and national policy and practice. One aspect of this re-evaluation is the need to recognise and reward good teaching. This was recognised in the UK Government's 2003 White Paper *The Future of Higher Education*:

'Teaching has been seen by some as an extra source of income to support the main business of research, rather than recognised as a valuable and high-status career in its own right. This is a situation that cannot continue. Institutions must properly reward their best teaching staff; and all those who teach must take their task seriously.' (DIUS, 2003)

Reward and recognition of teaching in higher education has been the subject of several studies in the past in Australia (including Ramsden, Margetson, Martin & Clarke, 1995) and more recently in the UK (Higher Education Academy [HEA] & Genetics Education Networking for Innovation and Excellence Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning [GENIE CETL], 2009). The results of these surveys and the issues they raise are remarkably consistent despite the different HE systems and 14 year gap. In the current UK survey, the results clearly show that there is a large gulf in staff perceptions between how they feel teaching ought to be rewarded and recognised in their institution and how they feel it is. Interestingly this perception is held amongst staff across all types of institution, although it is more prevalent amongst those in research-intensive universities.

The recognition and reward of teaching in higher education takes many forms. The focus of this paper is to look at the public recognition of excellent teaching through the provision of awards for excellence. Awards for teaching excellence have existed for many years, mainly in North America. Kreber writing in 2001 (p. 100) stated that “Most campuses in North America now have teaching awards to recognize excellence in teaching at the departmental, faculty, or institutional level. Perhaps more importantly, many regional, provincial, and national awards exist”. In the UK, Paul Ramsden Chief Executive of the Higher Education Academy argued in 2008 that:

‘To sustain quality and ensure an effective student experience in the future, we must find better ways to recognise and reward university teaching. National initiatives in England are well developed compared with other countries, but institutional processes are still seen by many academics to be inadequate, despite progress in policies related to promotion and the gradual ‘professionalisation’ of academics in their role as teachers.’ (Ramsden 2008, p. 14)

The most publicised Teaching awards in the UK are the ones bestowed through the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], (HEA n.d.). The scheme has been running since 2000 and is open to teachers in Higher Education Institutes in England and Northern Ireland. There is no equivalent scheme in Scotland or Wales. The aim of the scheme, in addition to recognising and rewarding individuals is to “raise the profile of learning and teaching.” The criteria used in the original scheme were the abilities to:

- influence students positively, to inspire students and to enable students to achieve specific learning outcomes
- influence and inspire colleagues in their teaching, learning and assessment practice, by example and/or through the dissemination of good practice;
- influence positively the wider national community of teachers and learners in higher education in relation to teaching, learning and assessment practice;
- demonstrate a reflective approach to teaching and/or the support of learning

Originally the scheme recognised 20 ‘excellent teachers’ each year, conferring on them the title of ‘National Teaching Fellow’ (Skelton, 2004). The NTFS has evolved since its inception; for instance individual honoraria for personal development have been

reduced from £50000 to £10000 and there is now a project strand for institutions to apply for. The criteria for individual recognition have also changed and are now:

- Individual excellence: evidence of promoting and enhancing the student learning experience.
- Raising the profile of excellence: evidence of supporting colleagues and influencing support for student learning in (and, if appropriate, beyond) the nominee's institution, through demonstrating impact and engagement beyond the nominee's immediate academic or professional role.
- Developing excellence: the nominee's commitment to her/his ongoing professional development with regard to teaching and learning and/or learning support.

The NTFS and Teaching Excellence Award (TEA) schemes in general are not without their critics, however. Skelton (2009, p. 110) stated that the 'teaching awards culture which has proliferated in recent years has been successful in recognising the achievements of dedicated individuals but evidence from evaluation reports show[s] that they do little to raise overall performance.' TEAs have also been likened to 'the "kiss of death" at research institutions' (Chism, 2006 p. 589) and have been accused of being symbols of 'tokenism' (Palmer & Collins, 2006 p. 197). It has also been argued that the criteria used for these awards lack objectivity and reliability and that they are demotivating for those who do not receive them (Gibbs, 2007).

Although the NTFS is not available to staff in Scotland, it should be noted that Scotland-based academics are eligible for TEAs offered by a growing number of Higher Education Academy Subject Centres and a briefing highlighting these opportunities has been recently published (HEA, 2009). However, a number of Scottish institutions have introduced their own awards for teaching excellence. The purposes of this small-scale study were to: explore how widespread TEAs currently are in Scotland, how they are being administered and what criteria are being used to make these awards. We did this by distributing a short survey to the Educational Developers community in Scotland. We first present the findings from our survey and then explore what these mean for Scottish HE with the hope of encouraging debate about rewarding teaching in the Scottish sector.

Methods

To elicit responses from HEIs in Scotland we posted a request to the Scottish Higher Education Developers (SHED) email list in December 2008. This list hosted by JISC was set up by the Universities Scotland Educational Developers' subcommittee and is open to anyone involved in the field of Educational Development in Scotland and has representatives from all of Scotland's 20 HEIs. In our request we asked for responses to a short email questionnaire. Respondents were asked to name the institution in question and the questions included:

- Does your institution give awards for Teaching Excellence?
- What are the criteria used in these awards?
- Who makes the decisions about who should receive these awards?
- What do the winners of these rewards receive?
- How are the awards publicised/ celebrated?

We present the data gathered in response to each of these questions. We then briefly report information gathered regarding another form of reward for teaching excellence, teaching fellow or scholar schemes.

Results

We received responses to our survey from eight out of a possible 20 Scottish HEIs. The eight responding institutions comprise: one ancient, two pre-92 institution, three post - 92 institution, Scotland's main distance learning provider and one small and specialist HEI.

Does your institution give awards for Teaching Excellence?

For the purposes of this paper we have defined awards as one-off prizes in recognition of teaching excellence. Of the eight responses we received, five indicated that the institution did bestow awards in the form of prizes for teaching excellence. The remaining three responding institutions did reward teaching excellence but through teaching fellowship or scholar schemes rather than the presentation of an award. For

examples of these schemes see Benzies (2009) and Littlejohn and Nimmo (2009) in this issue.

Since participation in our survey was voluntary it is likely that we have missed one or more institutions that rewards teaching excellence through an award scheme however, as can be seen from Table 1, we received responses from each of the categories of HEIs in Scotland and we therefore believe our findings are likely to be a fair representation of the current situation in Scotland with regards to the characteristic features of TEAs.

Table 1. Categories of Scottish HEIs that responded to our survey and that reward teaching and/or grant awards for Teaching Excellence

| Type of institution | Number in Scotland | Number that explicitly reward teaching excellence | Number giving TE Awards who responded to our survey |
|---|--------------------|---|---|
| Ancient | 4 | 1 ¹ | 1 |
| Pre-92 | 4 | 2 ² | 2 |
| Post-92 | 6 | 3 ³ | 0 |
| Distance provider | 1 | 1 ⁴ | 1 |
| Other HEIs (including small and specialist) | 5 | 1 ⁵ | 1 |
| | 20 | 8 | 5 |

- 1 The University of Glasgow
- 2 Heriot Watt University and the University of Dundee
- 3 Glasgow Caledonian University, Napier University and Robert Gordon University
- 4 The Open University in Scotland
- 5 Scottish Agricultural College

What are the criteria used in these awards?

In addition to generic TEAs, we identified three specific categories of award in our survey, these were: for sustained excellence or lifetime achievement (n=3); early career awards (n=2); and an award for innovative teaching (n=1). Two of the five institutions in our survey who give TEAs have only a single award (i.e. they don't specify one of the above categories), two institutions recognise two distinct categories and one institution bestows awards in all three categories.

Table 2. The criteria used in Institutional Teaching Excellence Awards in Scotland

| Criterion for Teaching Excellence Award | No of responding institutions (of five with TEAs) |
|--|---|
| Enhancing student learning | 5 |
| Innovation or change | 4 |
| Leadership, mentorship or influencing the practice of peers | 4 |
| Linking teaching with research/scholarship | 3 |
| Developing students' academic or employability skills | 3 |
| Explicit links to Institutional Learning and Teaching Strategy | 2 |
| Explicit links to Quality Enhancement Themes | 2 |
| Evidence of engagement with the Higher Education Academy | 2 |
| Responding to diverse student needs | 2 |
| Improving retention and progression | 2 |
| Contributions in the field of student support or guidance | 2 |
| Evidence of using student evaluations of their teaching. | 1 |
| Explicit links to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning | 1 |
| Demonstrate a reflective approach to practice | 1 |
| Evidence of effective collaborative working in learning & teaching | 1 |
| Pedagogical research publications* | 1 |

*this criterion was stipulated for a lifetime contribution award.

The range of criteria used for TEAs in our survey is summarised in Table 2. The most frequently cited criterion is evidence of improving or enhancing student learning or an “active involvement in ... the support of learning.” Another frequently cited criterion is introducing innovation or facilitating change in learning and teaching; four of the five responding institutions that awarded TEAs, stated this explicitly and, as mentioned above, some one of the institutions in our survey had a specific award for innovative teaching. Four of the responding institutions also mentioned leadership or mentorship of colleagues within the institution or influencing the practice of peers within the institution and/or their own discipline, for example: “to influence and inspire colleagues in their teaching, learning and assessment practice, by example and/or through the dissemination of good practice.” The next most frequently cited criteria each outlined by three of the six institutions are: linking teaching with research/scholarship and developing students' academic or employability skills. Less frequently cited criteria include explicit links to Quality Enhancement themes, links with the Higher Education

Academy and responding to a diverse student body. Criteria such as using student evaluations, making explicit links to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and using reflection to enhance practice were only cited by a single institution.

Who makes the decisions about who should receive these awards?

All of the institutions in our survey, including the institutions operating fellow and scholar schemes rather than TEAs indicated that the decisions about teaching excellence awards were made by a panel or divisional management team. The constitution of these panels varied but included: Deputy or Vice Principals, Deans or Associate Deans, Academic Registrars, Members of the Board of Governors and Heads of Academic Development units. Three of the six respondents indicated that their panels also include student representatives, e.g. President of Students' Association or student sabbatical officers and some panels included lay and/or external members. In the case of one of the institutions that operates a scholar scheme, decisions are made by external reviewers along with their Pro-Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching.

What do the winners of these rewards receive?

All of the TEAs granted by the institutions in our survey include some form of honorarium. All but one of the respondents indicated a value for this award; these range in value from £1000 to £3000 for personal or team prizes. These funds are to be used either 'at the discretion' of the winner or winning team, or should be spent on 'professional or personal development.' Most of the institutions that awarded TEAs gave certificates of recognition; often these are presented at graduation or other formal ceremonies. Whilst most of the respondents did not state that winners receive honorary titles, one institution does confer an honorary title in one of its categories of awards.

How is teaching excellence celebrated in different institutions

The TEAs are publicised or otherwise celebrated in a number of ways. Commonly the awards are publicised on University and/or Academic Development unit websites and newsletters. There is also dissemination to schools/faculties through Associate Deans or Directors of learning and teaching. One institution specifically informs their student

association about the recipients of its awards. And, as mentioned above, the award is often conferred at a public ceremony or learning and teaching conference.

Some institutions use TEAs in an explicitly developmental way using the winners' practice as exemplars by, for instance, making TEA recipients' portfolios available via the institutional intranet or inviting recipients to 'contribute to a number of dissemination activities by, for example, having a DVD recording made of their teaching practice' or through involvement in institutional postgraduate certificates in learning and teaching.

Other rewards – fellow and scholar schemes

Three of the institutions that responded to our survey do not grant Teaching Excellence Awards as we have defined them but instead operate teaching fellow or scholar schemes to recognise and reward teaching excellence. All three are post-92 institutions; none of the responses we received from Scottish post-92 universities operate a TEA system per se.

Two of these institutions recognise excellence in teaching through a Teaching Fellowship scheme and in both instances the 'winners' are entitled to use the title "Teaching Fellow." One of the two schemes also awards additional salary points within the winner's pay grade and this is a permanent reward. The other institutions' scheme no longer results in additional payments; but provides opportunities to "bid for funding, for personal support or individual or group projects' from the institution's Teaching Development Fund. The third post-92 institution that responded to our survey offers staff the opportunity to be recognised for their teaching through an institutional scholar or associate scheme which is intended to provide individuals with raised kudos within the institution on the basis of their excellence in learning and teaching and which has three different categories of recognition mapped to the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (UKPSF). The Higher Education Academy has accredited this institutional continuing professional development framework which is the first of its kind in Scotland and one of only a handful in the UK, at the current time. Scholars in this instance have amongst other characteristics, 'a proven ability to provide leadership and influence peers in the area of learning and teaching.' The associate status would appear to be aimed at more junior

staff; criteria include a 'desire to be proactive in the identification of opportunities to innovate in areas related to learning and teaching.' Those who are successful in applying for the title of Scholar receive a maximum of £1,000 per year for a maximum of 2 years; associates can receive remission of their workload of up to 3 hours per week for up to a year.

Discussion

Warren and Plumb identified four types of 'distinguished teaching award schemes' in their 1999 survey. These they define as: traditional award schemes (i.e. prizes); teaching fellowship schemes; educational development grant schemes; and promotion/bonus schemes' (p. 245). Although our intention was to only look at the first of these categories, it became clear that examples from the other categories exist. Thus, teaching excellence is being rewarded in Scottish institutions but not just through TEAs. Some of the institutions in our survey operate a mixture of these four categories, however, we concentrate here on only the first two categories: awards for teaching excellence and teaching fellow or scholar schemes.

We received eight of a possible 20 responses to our email survey and five of these institutions indicated that they endow TEAs, however the criteria for these are variable. Unsurprisingly, all institutions recognise that excellent teaching must be associated with an impact on student learning. Innovation and changes to institutional practice are also highly valued as four of the five awarding institutions stipulated this as a criterion. Other common criteria are: influencing or leading peers and colleagues within the institution and within the practitioners' disciplines, developing students' academic or employability skills and making explicit the links between teaching and research and scholarship. Other criteria stipulated less frequently include: links to external bodies and initiatives e.g. HE Academy and the QE themes; making improvements in terms of retention and progression and recognising the student support and guidance roles of practitioners in HE.

While some of the criteria echo closely those originally devised for the NTFS scheme, i.e. to enable students to achieve specific learning outcomes; to influence and inspire colleagues; and the wider community, the fourth NTFS criterion 'to demonstrate a

reflective approach to teaching and/or the support of learning' is only explicitly stated as a criterion by one institution in our survey. There appear to be two possible explanations for this: one, that reflective practice is not widely valued or associated with excellence in the institutions in our survey; or two, that reflective practice is 'taken for granted.' As Skelton (2004) puts it: 'Previous research has established that "reflective practice" is often presented in the higher education literature as taken-for-granted "good practice", its conceptual dominance within the sector demonstrated by the way it has been incorporated, without explanation, into the ILT accreditation framework.' It may be that reflective practice is now so 'conceptually dominant' that it has become an implicit criterion when adjudging teaching excellence. Interestingly reflection is also not explicitly referred to in the UK Professional Standards Framework (HEA 2006) and it is no longer present in the more recently prescribed NTFS criteria.

All of the five TEAs in our survey have an associated honorarium, most included a certificate and the award itself was usually recognised at a formal event, for example at graduation ceremonies. Only rarely is the award associated with an honorary title. The awards are publicised at institutional level through newsletters and websites. And whilst some award winners may use their honorarium to be used at their own discretion, others stipulate that it must be used for personal or professional development. Although, on a much larger monetary scale (initially £50000 and now £10000 per individual or team), the NTFS, in its original form, supported development projects (Skelton, 2004 p.453) and its current incarnation stipulates that funds are to be used for "personal development in learning and teaching" (HEA, n.d.) The TEAs are publicised or otherwise celebrated in a number of ways. Commonly the awards are publicised on University and/or Academic Development unit websites and newsletters. There is also dissemination to schools/faculties through Associate Deans or Directors of learning and teaching. One institution specifically informs their student association about the recipients of its awards. And, as mentioned above, the award is often conferred at a public ceremony or learning and teaching conference, providing further publicity and raising the recipients' profile within the institution.

Our survey results suggest that formal TEAs are more common in ancient and pre-92 institutions as all four of the older responding universities (including the distance education provider) do confer TEAs. This may reflect attempts in our research-oriented

institutions to publicly display that teaching is valued and to attempt to redress the traditional situation of valuing research over teaching.

All three of the post-92 institutions who responded recognise excellence in teaching but via an alternative to TEAs; through fellow or scholar schemes. These schemes reward excellent teachers by conferring them with a title of Teaching Fellow or institutional Scholar or Associate. Additional rewards vary. One institution gives a permanent increase in pay to successful applicants to their Fellowship scheme and another offers the opportunity to bid for teaching development funds. One of these institutions also has a recognised promoted position of Senior Teaching Fellow and thus is perhaps akin to the situation at the University of Glasgow described in this volume (Matthew, 2009). It is important to note that the title "Teaching Fellow" means different things in different HE systems and contexts. For instance, the title Teaching Fellow in North America is normally associated with junior appointments and in some instances is equivalent to graduate teaching assistants. This might be one of the three the post-92 institutions that responded to our survey have opted to operate a Scholar and Associate scheme for more and less experienced teachers respectively. The scheme rewards its Scholars/Associates by offering either small amounts of funding or remission from workload for a specific period. This latter scheme also makes explicit reference to SoTL; only one of the institutions who give TEAs gave this as a criterion. Kreber (2001, p. 101) argues that "Excellence in teaching is valuable in its own right and should be rewarded, but the rewards for it should be different from the rewards for the scholarship of teaching because teaching excellence and the scholarship of teaching are not the same." It is interesting to note, and seems somewhat ironic, that some TEAs provide funding to allow remission from teaching. This fact was also picked up in the recent survey of staff on the reward and recognition of teaching in higher education (HEA/GENIE CETL, 2009).

So what is meant by teaching excellence? Skelton (2009 p.109) states that excellence is a driver, 'a force within us that makes us want to get better and keeps us curious about what we do.' However there is evidence that the sector is becoming disillusioned with the concept of excellence. Skelton (2009 p.107) has stated that 'there appears to be a feeling at the moment, within a significant proportion of the higher education community in the UK, that teaching excellence is a meaningless or unhelpful concept that often fails to deliver on its promises.' Yet it seems that in Scotland, there are a

growing number of institutions which wish to recognise teaching excellence and view TEAs as a meaningful way to do so, however, since TEAs are relatively new in the Scottish sector, the longer term future and extent of such awards remains to be seen.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was not to undertake a rigorous analysis of the different policies and procedures the Scottish HE sector uses in rewarding excellence in teaching nor the philosophy or drivers behind the existence of TEA. It is clear, however, that TEAs do exist in the Scottish sector and are likely to grow in number; a number of categories of awards and fellow/scholar schemes in our survey were only introduced in the current academic session.

But are TEAs rewarding recognising and rewarding excellent teaching? And are they helping to redress the imbalance of status afforded to HE's two main functions: teaching and research?

It has been argued that teaching excellence awards are potentially divisive and demotivating for non-winners (Gibbs, 2007). Further research is required to establish if this is the case. Similarly, an exploration of promotion procedures would provide us with a clearer vision of what institutions value in terms of teaching from their staff. Are staff being promoted for their teaching excellence? And, is this happening in all sectors of HE from research-intensive to teaching focused establishments?

The debate surrounding the sector valuing teaching relative to research is a long and continuing one. Ramsden (2007, 5) believes that 'Recognition and reward, at local and national levels is crucial. Schemes that link teaching excellence to promotions and appointments in HEIs are more advanced than they used to be, but they must be sponsored by Heads of Department and Deans if they are to be credible and succeed in removing the persistent perceptions that "research counts here ... teaching doesn't.' Results from the current Higher Education Academy/ GENIE CETL survey (2009) show that amongst staff there is still a widely held perception that teaching is not afforded the

same status or valued to the same extent as research in promotion decisions and other reward and recognition institutional mechanisms.

The status of teaching and recognising and rewarding teaching is a major policy issue and, given the lack of a national TEA in Scotland, there is a particular Scottish dimension. However, some have described TEAs as the 'kiss of death' or a 'poisoned chalice' in research-intensive universities. Perhaps, rather than redressing the imbalance between teaching and researching, TEAs could be seen as contributing to a wider rift between these two activities at a time when there is a need for greater synergy between research and teaching if we are to produce graduates for the 21st Century who are prepared for all the challenges they will need to meet and cope with.

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