

Teaching excellence: recognising the many as well as the few

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Australian higher education institutions actively pursue strategies to recognise and reward teachers, with an apparent goal of improving overall institutional teaching quality. However, most of these strategies involve competitive recognition of “teaching excellence”, and reward relatively few staff. In 2014, an Australian university tried a new strategy, introducing an international scheme with the potential to recognise all staff who can demonstrate appropriate professional experience and effective engagement in university teaching and support of learners. Within 30 months, more than 400 academic and professional staff—from that university and from other Australasian institutions which sought involvement—had made successful applications for recognition under this scheme. With more institutions now adopting this international scheme within Australasia, the paper will consider the four attributes of this scheme—inclusiveness; an experiential, reflective and developmental focus; peer review, peer feedback and peer engagement; and the international perspective—that are contributing to its success.

Keywords: professional recognition, university teaching, teaching excellence

Introduction

Australian higher education institutions assess and reward effective teaching in many ways, in the pursuit of teaching excellence. The most common, but perhaps the least rigorous and most contested, approach is to compare teaching, and teachers, through measures of student satisfaction established through standardised summative evaluations (Darwin, 2012). A second common strategy is to make individuals or teams compete for institutional or national teaching awards by evidencing their “innovative and excellent” teaching performance: student feedback is again a key source of evidence. The competitive and comparative nature of both approaches means that they tend to focus on the few who appear to demonstrate the elusive trait of excellence. For those interested in an institution’s overall teaching quality, however, rather than on its peaks, the question arises as to whether such quality is most effectively nurtured by seeking the very best among many, or whether such an approach divides more than it unites.

Methodological concerns about the way in which excellence is defined and identified (Gibbs, 2008) are matched by concerns about the impact of teaching awards after the media release, even within awardees’ own institutions, let alone beyond (e.g., Cashmore & Scott, 2009; Israel, 2011; Snipes & Carter, 2012). Indeed, competitive recognition of individual teaching excellence may even be counter-productive in terms of institution-wide impact, by suggesting that excellent teaching is a rare and unusual quality found only in a few, and therefore not worth striving for by the many. In a recently commissioned project on recognition of teaching for the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), James et al. (2015,

p.26) noted that “the extent to which [university teaching] awards stimulate innovation and best practice is debatable as it is unlikely that teachers are motivated to improve or to innovate by the prospect of an award”.

The need for a broader purview of teaching effectiveness and quality at the institutional level has driven recent practice-based approaches to assessing teaching that, like research, focus on peer review. The highly successful Peer Assisted Teaching Scheme (Carbone, 2015) and Peer Review of Teaching (Crisp et al., 2009) engage reviewers trained in informal or formal peer observation and mentoring. For academics, however, the gold standard reward for quality teaching is success in promotion applications (Cashmore and Scott, 2009; James et al., 2015; Ramsden, 1995). Student evaluations, teaching awards and peer reviews are thus widely interpreted not only as proxies for institutional assessment of overall teaching quality, but also as appropriate ‘evidence’ for individual promotion cases. Israel (2011), however, found no guarantee of promotion even for teaching award winners. When rumour or research data suggests that promotion, especially to professorial level, is less likely for academics who emphasise their teaching—even if they win awards—academics will either stop teaching to the best of their capabilities and instead meet minimum standards, or they will continue to put the institution’s students ahead of their own research, but refuse to engage in promotion processes. In the latter case, institutions lose the leadership input of teaching experts. The risk of such tangible negative impacts may explain the eagerness with which a third of all Australian universities took up the offer to explore their institution’s approach to “Reward and Recognition: Promotion Process and Policy” in the 2014-15 OLT *Transforming Practice Program* (Crookes, 2015).

Has the cult of the individual teacher of excellence inadvertently robbed higher education in Australia of a broader focus on quality teaching? Could there more effective ways to enhance institutional teaching quality? Would recognising the many rather than the few better support the majority of university teachers aiming to be “the best they can be at this moment” rather than simply “the best”? Could such a strategy be built on consistent evidence, with recognition built into promotion indicators?

In 2013, the Australian National University (ANU) began to explore these questions in practice by introducing an internationally-accredited scheme, underpinned by a tested sector-wide standards framework. The aim was to recognise academic and professional staff for their experience and effective engagement in teaching and learner support. After 30 months of the scheme’s operation, it is clear that individuals in Australia’s higher education sector are hungry for recognition that is much broader than teaching awards. Even though the scheme is new to Australia, and requires significant individual effort from applicants and significant cost investments by universities, more than 200 ANU academic and professional staff, at all levels, and another 200 staff from other institutions, have successfully applied. Using data from an ongoing series of research activities supported by the author’s National Teaching Fellowship, this paper analyses key attributes that are influencing the scheme’s success and enhance its potential, in time, to influence overall teaching quality by recognising the many rather than the few.

Background: Recognition through the Higher Education Academy

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) champions teaching and learning in the tertiary sector, originally only in the United Kingdom but increasingly across the world. In 2011, the HEA launched the revised *United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework for Teaching*

and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (PSF), together with an associated professional recognition scheme. The latter identifies four descriptors of PSF-associated experience, with each leading to a category of HEA fellowship. Thus Descriptor 1 leads to the career entry level of Associate Fellowship (AFHEA); Descriptor 2 leads to Fellowship (FHEA), for competent and experienced educators; Descriptor 3 denotes Senior Fellowship (SFHEA), for those with sound experience as well as strong peer engagement in supporting others; and Descriptor 4 leads to Principal Fellowship (PFHEA), for those who evidence sustained, effective strategic leadership in teaching and learning at an institutional level and beyond.

Compared to other professional body memberships, this scheme is powerfully unusual in three ways. First, HEA fellowships link directly to a set of standards aimed at higher education, comprising 15 generic elements that are appropriate to many higher education sectors worldwide, and potentially to all staff involved in teaching and supporting learning in those sectors. The PSF's universality and generality are its great strengths, as they foster a breadth of thinking and possibility for impact well suited to a world where flexibility is increasingly valued. In a UK survey, 86% of respondents (70 higher education institutions) reported institutional changes under the influence of the PSF (Turner et al., 2013). Second, the breadth of recognition categories provide a scope for inclusiveness, in marked contrast to the typically exclusive approach of professional membership.

The third unusual, and exciting, aspect of the HEA recognition scheme is that not only is recognition in all four categories accessible through direct application to, and assessment by, the HEA, but there is also opportunity for HEA-subscribing institutions themselves to be accredited to award this recognition in formats that suit the nature of the institution and its staff. Accreditation processes, and the schemes accredited, are highly quality assured by HEA, to ensure that the fellowship standards remain equivalent across the diversity of institutional locations, structures and purposes. Nevertheless, accreditation allows an exciting opportunity for variety in the pathways by which staff may achieve HEA recognition. Some institutions may accredit existing professional development formats, such as Graduate Certificates or Foundations of University Teaching courses. For others, the 'experience' route is favoured, by which staff present a reflective account of their own practice that evidences their commitment to all the PSF elements and to the relevant Descriptor. Most commonly, this reflective account is required to be written, but some institutions also accredit an oral 'dialogic' or 'conversational' process. Combining multiple pathways—allowing recognition of formal study, experience, or a combination—provides an intense level of flexibility for individual institutions in recognising the full diversity of their staff and their teaching and learning achievements. Together with the diversity of valued experience afforded by the standards themselves, these characteristics deliver a scheme that extends beyond academics who teach to professional and technical staff who support learners.

The ANU Educational Fellowship Scheme

In mid-2013, the HEA and ANU signed a Memorandum of Understanding: ANU became the first higher education institution outside the UK to subscribe to the HEA, and thus to invest in a professional recognition of teaching strategy open to all its staff. To initiate the institutional standard, a small group of academic staff with track records of teaching excellence—identified by institutional/national teaching awards, and/or institutional/discipline leadership—successfully applied directly to HEA as Senior or Principal Fellows. This provided a cohort of champions across campus to provide high level visibility and endorsement of HEA recognition, and to support others in developing applications.

Accreditation documentation established the ANU Educational Fellowship Scheme (EFS), with a written application pathway for all four categories, based on the applicant's experience against the relevant Descriptor. A dialogic route (the 'Professional Conversation') was made available on invitation to Senior Fellow applicants who could supply existing evidence of peer-reviewed reflective writing on their practice (e.g., submissions for institutional or national awards). In late 2013, the HEA accredited the ANU EFS, which was launched at the beginning of the next academic year (February 2014). A distributed leadership model, overseen by the EFS Co-Chairs, was put in place, such that assessors were generally Principal and Senior Fellows within the EFS. Some 30 months later, the EFS has awarded HEA fellowships to more than 200 ANU staff, and more than 200 staff from eight Australian, one New Zealand and two Chinese universities. Many more applications, from more universities, are being submitted in 2016.

Research methodology

This paper is informed by participant feedback and other data collected through multiple informal and formal processes (ANU Human Research Ethics Protocol 2014/146). First, throughout the design and implementation of the EFS, the author (EFS Co-Chair) and other EFS team members were participant observers of the diverse EFS activities. We regularly debriefed on outcomes, and on informal data from applicants and successful fellows (e.g. through individual conversations or emails). In addition, in late 2015 semi-structured interviews were held with individual ANU Senior Fellows and Fellows (n=14; selected representatively across campus from those who had held fellowship for more than a year and had EFS experience as referees, mentors, assessors, and forum participants). In April 2016 an online anonymous survey on fellowship outcomes was sent to all recognised fellows (all categories, all universities) with accessible email addresses (n=302; response rate about 50%).

Results and Discussion

Support from leaders

Applications were received from established and senior academics, early career academics, sessional academics (including research students working as tutors and undergraduates in paid peer mentoring roles), and professional staff. However, senior staff predominated through a deliberate policy at ANU (and subsequently at other universities that became involved) to encourage early recognition by those most able to model the process to others; to mentor others towards applications; and to report back on the 'proof of concept' in Australasia. This meant that about half the total awards in the first 30 months of operation were Principal Fellowships (distinguished by evidence of strategic institutional/national leadership, n=14), and Senior Fellowships (distinguished by substantive experience of peer mentoring and peer engagement to improve teaching quality and learner experiences; n>180). These applicants were institutional or discipline leaders—both those in executive and other identified positions (e.g., Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Pro Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Associate Deans of Education, Heads of School, Directors of Academic Development) and those in distributed leadership positions (e.g., national award winners, program heads). Motivations for these leaders to apply were both institutional and personal:

I have devoted my whole career to progressing quality education. [The EFS] was another manifestation of that. ... (SFHEA interviewee)

The more I learnt about [the EFS], the more I thought this actually is articulating quite well what I do believe ... how do you best support teaching, and how do you support academics as they become teachers? (SFHEA interviewee)

Nevertheless, the EFS has also shown clearly how professional recognition can reach well beyond award-winning teachers into the rank-and-file of academia. Applicants have repeatedly identified four key attributes as attracting interest and commitment—inclusiveness; the experiential, reflective and developmental focus; peer review, peer feedback and peer engagement; and the international perspective. These attributes were deliberately engineered into the scheme, either in its original planning or in its first two years of evolution. As they appear to be contributing to success in these early years, they are each considered in some detail.

Inclusiveness

The EFS is open to all staff who either teach directly or who support learners in other ways. Applicants have included staff from diverse groupings—academic and professional; tenured, contract, and sessional; senior and junior; teaching-intensive and research-intensive; discipline specialists and skills specialists; overseas-trained and Australian-trained; and highly experienced and relatively inexperienced. Many applicants were attracted by this inclusiveness of the diversity of staff and roles:

... that was the thing I really liked about it, the fact that the scheme did allow for people at different stages in their career to be involved. That really appealed to me. (SFHEA interviewee)

Academics

A common motive for academics to apply was a search for validation in the teaching space: “People see research publications and they can look at your research ... but no one sees you teach. [Professional recognition] is an acknowledgement of educational work. That was particularly attractive to me” (SFHEA interviewee).

By providing an external esteem indicator of teaching experience, recognition allows academics in groups more prone to unconscious bias in terms of research-focused track records to be more fairly judged in promotion or other competitive processes that rely on measurable outputs: “I am really impressed by this whole process and what it represents for women academics ... who have teaching-intensive responsibilities. I see it as a wonderful way to mentor our female colleagues” (email, NTEU Representative, 2015). Work with clinical educators, women academics with intense teaching loads, women STEM academics, and Indigenous educators will explore how professional recognition might support these sometimes marginalised groups.

PhD students

One group rapidly taking up the opportunity for professional recognition are doctoral students who are already teaching, or who are teaching academics in their home countries. Many see their future in academia, and would like to be recognised for the experience and professional development in teaching they have gained before or during their doctoral studies. At least two thirds of the 70 Associate Fellows at ANU by the end of 2015 were PhD students employed as tutors, and another 30 PhD students from other institutions had also applied successfully. Some have already reported that recognition helped them acquire new teaching positions. In addition, many Senior Fellows and Fellows who supervise tutors use the EFS to encourage

professional development:

I [now] make it mandatory for my PhD students and my tutors [to] look at the Professional Standards Framework and reflect about it. It's an excellent framework for them ... a systematic way of thinking about teaching. (SFHEA interviewee)

Professional staff

Another group very excited by the possibilities for recognition are professional staff such as academic skills staff, librarians, academic developers, and educational technologists whose roles are centred on enhancing learning, either by supporting students directly, or by supporting academics who teach. Enabling these staff to apply for formal recognition, and to contribute actively as assessors and mentors, has been perceived very positively by the staff and their leaders:

I really appreciated ... that in this scheme professional staff could be involved. I think that is huge. ... Most of the other schemes that are being proposed by other universities ... are very much academic faculty based. [But] there is a huge number of professional staff that are involved in teaching and learning. (SFHEA interviewee)

Experiential, Reflective and Developmental Focus

As fostered by HEA, the fellowship application process encourages emphasis on reflection on, as well as description of, teaching and learning support experiences against the PSF. A second key attribute of the EFS is therefore its integral focus on developmental approaches to reflective practice. This focus has strengthened over time, partly to address perceived barriers for applicants ("Where do I start?"), and partly to ensure feedforward into improved reflective teaching and overall enhanced teaching quality at the institutional level. Each applicant receives group and individualised support, so that few submit an application feeling unsure of success:

... appreciate the immense time and effort that you have devoted to this process. Not only have you been patient and generous in your comments and suggestions for further improving the application, you have done so in such a way that is nurturing and motivating. (Email, EFS applicant for AFHEA)

While this could be seen cynically as 'teaching to the test', the process is much more focused on a customised 'coaching' style of professional development to support reflective practice: from this perspective, the application provides direction to ensure such coaching is tailored to the individual's own experience and needs. For example, applicants consistently report significant benefits, including improved personal practice, from learning to reflect in writing:

... I feel like I am having reflective writing training when I try to incorporate your comments in my narrative. (Email, EFS applicant for AFHEA)

You have actually changed the way that I give feedback—now I am much more patient with students, as I have learnt the value of patience from you. (Email, EFS applicant for FHEA)

Notably, very experienced educational leaders applying for Principal or Senior Fellowship report just as much difficulty in reflecting on, as opposed to simply describing, their practice as less experienced staff applying for Fellowship or Associate Fellowship. Having excellent facilitators to work with applicants is thus a crucial factor in the process being developmental rather than competitive, as the applicants themselves realise:

I genuinely enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on what I do, and why and how I have developed over the years. I learned so much (Email, SFHEA)

Your advice and feedback on drafts both shaped my thinking, and helped me create a stronger claim. I truly don't think I would have had such a great outcome without your mentoring and support. (Email, PFHEA)

I am thrilled to have achieved this and so grateful ... for your expert mentoring and support throughout the process. (Email, PFHEA)

While applications do not require formal professional development qualifications, applicants must evidence ongoing professional development in teaching, and show that their own practice is scholarly and evidence-based: “Thank you again for being so encouraging ... This has been a much more rigorous process than I expected ... really beneficial” (email, AFHEA). Even with extensive support pre-application, of course, assessors sometimes see gaps against the relevant criteria. The developmental approach then continues for these applicants, who are encouraged to provide specific additional material:

... if you don't get it quite right [in your application] you have the opportunity to re-submit ... you are getting that kind of collegial feedback and mentoring ... it really encourages reflective practice, it gets you thinking about that connection between pedagogy, practice and reflection, and the process of incorporating that [in your narrative]. (SFHEA interviewee)

Peer Review, Peer Feedback and Peer Engagement

The developmental focus continues into the third characteristic of the EFS, which is a strong emphasis on peer engagement throughout the application, recognition and post-recognition processes. The emphasis on discipline-based peer mentoring and refereeing at the application stage is balanced by an emphasis on cross-disciplinary peer review during assessment, so that the assessors focus not on subject content but on teaching practices. The EFS takes a distributed leadership approach (Jones et al., 2014), so applications are assessed by already-recognised peers (generally one category 'ahead' of the applicant), overseen by the EFS Co-Chairs. These peers provide all applicants with individualised and detailed 'blind' feedback, scoped for use in performance review or promotion cases, but written in the second person (“You are ..”) to maintain the personal peer relationship:

I am so thrilled and humbled by the [assessors'] thoughtful feedback. (Email, SFHEA)

Please pass on my thanks to my assessors for their very kind and detailed feedback. I realise these assessments must take a huge amount of time and I want them to know that it meant more than I can say to receive such a

positive evaluation of my work from an external party. (Email, SFHEA external to ANU)

While the distributed leadership model for assessment has its logistical strengths and weaknesses, it certainly has notable motivational and peer networking benefits, as Senior Fellow interviewees made clear:

I am now in the role of an assessor myself, and hearing amazing teachers talk about their experiences and learning from them is what is useful for me as an educator. (SFHEA interviewee)

... some applications are fantastically inspiring. (SFHEA interviewee)

[Assessing] is time consuming, but I don't see it as a cost. Mentoring is part of my role, and being an assessor has been only beneficial. (SFHEA interviewee)

Once recognised, fellows are encouraged and supported in intra- and inter-disciplinary peer engagement within and between institutions, for example through EFS travel bursaries for high-commitment assessors to share discipline-based practices. Annual service records of mentoring, reference-writing and assessment activities acknowledge fellows' support for the EFS. Post-recognition peer engagement—"fellowship" in its sense of non-competitive community of shared interests and friendly, supportive companionship—is maintained through events such as Fellowship Forums and EFS MasterClasses. The EFS is thus cementing an institution-wide community of practice, building on peer relationships established during face to face and online professional development modules (Beckmann, in press), and is already showing its capacity to transcend disciplinary and seniority boundaries:

The EFS provides me the opportunity to meet with people who consider teaching important, who are passionate about teaching ... this is more important to me than the recognition that comes with the HEA fellowship. (SFHEA interviewee)

International perspective

Initial concerns about the UK-centric nature of the model have subsided. Indeed, many fellows report that the international aspect of the EFS was central to their motivation to apply, and that they are grateful to share a language and understanding about university teaching with more than 73,000 recognised colleagues worldwide:

I went to England .. [in my field] over there you have to have a doctorate [which I don't] ... I remember some people saying, 'you can't be a Senior Fellow, you just can't!' ... I insisted I was, and I was able to get on the website and show them I was ... the attitude was different once they knew. So, that is an interesting thing: the recognition is more valuable there than here. (SFHEA interviewee)

At ANU, promotion applicants are testing the utility of internationally-accredited professional recognition:

Shortly after I received SFHEA, I was promoted ... which I don't think would have happened without that external acknowledgement. ... I [was then] appointed to this [educational leadership] role ... If I had not been promoted, that would

have not happened. If I hadn't got the Senior Fellowship, the promotion would not have happened. So, yes, [fellowship is] very valuable. Other people's perception of me has changed as a result. (SFHEA interviewee)

Conclusion

Having done an application, having written referee reports, and having done assessments, [the] system works. (SFHEA interviewee)

With the right strategic infrastructure, a recognition scheme has the potential to become the centre of a strong institution-wide community of practice that focuses on peer engagement and continuing professional development in diverse contexts. Introducing an internationally-accredited professional teaching recognition scheme at the Australian National University has seen an exciting and eventful first 30 months, with more than 400 staff from all walks of university teaching life being recognised as professional educators.

The scheme's developmental focus has played a key role in its success, both for individuals and for the institution. This has significant implications: a recognition scheme without an integrated and structured developmental component—both before and during application—will almost certainly fail to engage staff in what could be one of the most powerful long-term approaches to enhancing teaching quality. The ANU experience to date suggests that any scheme created primarily as an administrative mechanism is unlikely to have notable impact on university teachers or teaching quality. This has important funding and staffing ramifications: a recognition scheme structured on a developmental model requires funding well beyond its administrative costs to ensure effective support for applicants.

The developmental lens of the EFS is also evident in the synergy between it and the ANU Academic Professional Development program—a very flexible, modularised and micro-credentialled approach that focuses on empowered, reflective practice. There is an exciting potential for creating a seamlessly integrated flow from professional development into recognition, and then back again (for example, as staff seek to 'upgrade' their fellowship category over time, which the EFS actively supports).

With three more Australian universities now offering HEA-accredited schemes, and New Zealand universities considering the same, HEA fellowships will become more widely known and valued as esteem indicators in Australasia. This approach to the professional recognition of university teachers may well influence the future shape of higher education by re-valuing the contribution to teaching quality of the many rather than the few.

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