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Teaching Excellence from whose perspective?

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Abstract
This article presents the work undertaken as part of a Higher Education Academy Change Academy project focused on recognising teaching excellence in a UK Higher Education Institution. There is a brief introduction to the ongoing issues of recognising and assessing teaching excellence and reference to the evaluative project methodology used. The data collection using surveys and workshops enabling views from 181 participants is outlined and the approach to analysis. The findings from the project and some of the discussion in the workshop undertaken at the Twentieth International Conference on Learning held in Rhodes, Greece in July 2013 and then discussed together. Through the project it has been possible to identify four main themes for teaching excellence which are, the teacher's personal attributes, teacher role related activities, the teacher-student relationship and the scholarly teacher. In addition five main areas of evidence have been identified. These are peer review and esteem, student feedback, education documentation, evidence of impact and lastly evidence based practice. The article then concludes with three recommendations one of which is to evaluate the use of the new themes and criteria in the award scheme.

Key words Teaching excellence, teaching awards, recognition, award criteria, evaluation, assessing excellence

Introduction
This article focuses on a Higher Education Academy Change Academy project for recognising teaching excellence undertaken within a UK Higher Education Institution. This was a one year project that started in December 2012 with the aim of raising the profile of teaching excellence in the institution but, also enabling a review of the award scheme for learning and teaching that had been running for twelve years. The article provides a brief introduction to the issues of recognising teaching excellence, the project methodology, the data collected through the change academy project and some of the discussion in the workshop undertaken at the Twentieth International Conference on Learning held in Rhodes, Greece in July 2013. It then concludes with recommendations and reference to the future actions related to this project.

Background
The recognition and reward of teaching excellence has continued to gain interest internationally over the last fifteen years. In the UK initiatives such as the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) offered by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) which commenced in 2000, the increasing number of institutional award schemes including student led awards, the National Student Survey results and the introduction of the increased fees have all contributed to the continued focus on this topic.

The literature in this area demonstrates the growth and interest in teaching excellence and the variety of criteria in schemes which are not always clearly defined or transparent (Chalmers 2011; 28, Gibbs 2008, 3, Piascik et al 2011, Skelton 2004, 457 & Young 2006). The author knew that despite some evaluation of the award scheme over a period of time there had not been any critical review of the criteria used across the institution and there was a lack of explicit discussion of these. In addition discussions with colleagues highlighted some lack of awareness around how teaching excellence was assessed. Most colleagues

assumed that this was mostly through student evaluations and module scores. However it is essential that a range of perspectives are taken into account when assessing teaching excellence. Alongside student views data can be collected from peers, the individual through reflection and a range of other evidence such as external examiner views and course materials (Hammer et al 2010 & Lilly, Rivera-Macias and Warnes 2013). The author was also aware that there was a lack of planned dissemination of good practice from these awards which others such as Halse, et al (2007), Palmer & Collins (2006) and Skelton (2004) had noted and, limited use was made of those who won awards in terms of mentoring others (Little et al 2007).

The Higher Education Academy Change Academy project provided an opportunity to explore some of these issues. The author outlined the opportunity this project would provide at an advisory board which examines the strategy for the author's department and suggested submitting a project bid with a team. The team of volunteers included the author, two Associate Deans for Education one from the Cass Business School and one from the Health Sciences School, a member of the Student Academic Services team who have a remit around policy development and the Student Union Vice President for Education. The bid was successful and the team were one of seven institutional teams involved in this Change Academy. The team knew this was a only a one year project and recognised that reviewing the current award scheme and revising it would require work beyond this one year but felt that a valuable amount of work could be undertaken in this time.

Project Methodology

The project started in December 2012 with an initial meeting of all institutions involved in this Change Academy so aims and plans could be shared and peer feedback gained. The team had written the project plan in the late summer of 2012 and so had time to undertake some preparation work prior to commencing the project. One of the first stages was to submit an application for ethical approval through the University process so that data could be collected from the start of the project. This was granted in November prior to the project commencing.

Choosing an appropriate methodology for the project was also essential as the overall aim was to evaluate the award scheme that had been in place across the institution for a number of years. There were two key objectives that the team wanted to achieve and they were:

1. to identify what criteria had been used to date and those that staff and students believed we should use
2. to examine what data had been used to assess applications and nominations and gather student and staff views about the data they believe should be used for assessing teaching excellence

In order to meet the aim and objectives of the project the data would need to be qualitative so that rich descriptions of participants' views could be collected. The most appropriate methodology was an evaluative approach that enabled the worth of the current scheme to be explored (Robson 1993). However the team also acknowledged that the context of the institution would also be important and so Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic inquiry approach was felt to be the most appropriate.

Research Questions

The objectives led to two very broad research questions being developed. These were:

- What do staff and students consider to be characteristics of teaching excellence?
- What evidence can be used to make judgements about teaching excellence?

Data Collection and Analysis

The team wanted to draw upon as many participants as possible using a range of data collection tools to maximise engagement in the project. Data collection commenced in

December 2012 with students as the first participants. The team set up a walk by stall in the main University campus corridor to ask students their views on teaching excellence and 53 students engaged with the team and provided written comments. We then used workshop activities with 30 PhD students and staff who were undertaking the first module of the MA Academic Practice programme focused on learning, teaching and assessment, 21 staff who were Learning Development Fellows and 20 staff at our annual learning and teaching conference in 2013. We also asked the question about what characteristics do you think indicate teaching excellence in another survey we ran for the MA Academic Practice programme participants about their experience and gained 39 (40%) responses from a possible 98 responses. In all this enabled us to gather data from 163 participants. Alongside this the author and the team undertook a literature review, a review of award schemes within Higher Education Institutions where this information was available on websites, an analysis of the 2013 student voice award nominations and a survey with a sample of 42 previous award winners which gained responses from 18 (43%). This survey focused on their award and what it meant to them but respondents were asked if and how they had shared the practice that led to the award? and, had the award led to them mentoring others?

Our approach to data analysis was focused on identifying themes using direct quotes from the data where this helped illustrate the theme further. The data analysis was an iterative process being undertaken as each set of data was collected. By the time the author undertook the workshop in Rhodes all the data outlined above had been collected and analysed. The findings from the data analysis prior to the workshop and, the exploration of these in the workshop with further findings being provided are discussed in the next part of this article.

Discussion of the findings

Much of the literature the team had examined was focused on higher education and, all the data collection prior to the Rhodes workshop had been from students and staff within higher education. The opportunity to share this data in a workshop at an international conference with participants who came from a much broader range of backgrounds including primary, secondary and higher education was considered valuable by the team in terms of exploring the possible application of the findings in other contexts. The workshop was attended by 22 participants from at least 7 countries including, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, India, Sweden, UK and USA. The findings from the project and the workshop are therefore discussed together enabling the similarities and differences to be highlighted.

There were two key activities in the workshop and the first was focused on asking the participants to write on three separate post-it notes, three things they believed demonstrated teaching excellence. This generated a lot of discussion in the session but also when the comments were grouped together they mirrored the findings from the project in terms of the four main themes the team had identified. These were personal attributes, teacher role related activities, teacher- student relationship and the scholarly teacher.

Participants in the Change Academy project and the workshop identified enthusiasm and passion as two of the most essential personal attributes. This is not surprising given the literature cites these two qualities as central to inspiring the student and facilitating their interest in even the most difficult subjects (Burden, Bond & Hall 2006; 9, Gibbs 2008, 4, Gibson 2009, 4, Hillier 2002; Moore & Kuol 2007, 140, Palmer & Cooper 2006 & Skelton 2005). However two additional attributes that arose from the project participants but were not identified by those in the workshop were creativity and innovation. These were cited in a study by Vielba and Hillier (Hillier 2002) although they did not expand on how these were manifested. However, Skelton (2005) did discuss creativity and imagination as characteristics of excellence and like the participants in the Change Academy project linked these to teachers trying something new and taking risks in terms of teaching strategies. The

author was therefore surprised that some of the workshop participants did not mention these as most came from countries where experimentation with pedagogy was encouraged.

Teacher role related activities such as authentic student engagement, stimulating students to think and, interacting and communicating with them had been identified by the project and workshop participants as well as in the literature by others such as Gibbs (2008), Hillier (2002) and Skelton (2005). In all the face to face activities through the project and in the workshop there was a lot of discussion about what authentic student engagement meant and how students could be engaged in active in their learning. Additional comments gained from the Change Academy project participants but not the literature or the workshop participants were *"making the students curious"* and *"pushing us to grow". S*tudents needed and wanted to feel challenged in their learning*.* Lastly in relation to this theme both participants in the project and the literature mention *"being organised"* and *"structuring things coherently"* but not the workshop participants and this provided an interesting discussion around whether this was expected practice or excellent *(*Burden, Bond & Hall 2006, 9, & Palmer & Cooper 2006).

In terms of the teacher-student relationship the key issues for the workshop participants and for those involved in the Change Academy project were building a good relationship with students through being approachable, being friendly, having time to listen and learning students' names. Within the literature although discussions have not always been as specific as this the value of effective communication with students has been highlighted (Burden, Bond & Hall 2006, 9, Hammer et al 2010, 2, Hillier 2002; Johnson-Farmer & Frenn 2009, 269 & Vaillant & Rossel 2012, 93). Macfarlane (2007, .48) found that this communication was linked to a genuine desire to build an authentic relationship with the student going beyond the subject delivery. The students in the project particularly cited this as an important theme and having an impact on their whole experience. Comments from the student voice award data also support this as being one of the key factors in students staying the course.

The last theme, the scholarly teacher had not been a key theme in the Change Academy project prior to the workshop but this is mentioned in some of the literature and participants in the workshop felt this was important. Gibbs (2008) in his work had a range of areas that fitted into this theme such as engaging in reflection, having a philosophy of teaching and using pedagogic literature. In the workshop participants discussed those who were seen as excellent teachers as having good subject knowledge, being up to date, analysing their own teaching, using a variety of teaching and assessment strategies, sharing their knowledge with colleagues and one particular quote that the author feels embodies an excellent teacher is that they *"show a personal thirst for knowledge"*. Others have also noted the importance of the teacher keeping up to date, reflecting on their practice and sharing their work with their colleagues (Gibson 2009, 3, Johnson-Farmer & Frenn 2009, 269, Layton & Brown 2011; 166, Palmer & Cooper 2006, Skelton 2005 & 2009, 110 & Vaillant and Rossel 2012, 93). Following the workshop and further discussion with colleagues this has now been included as a fourth key theme for the institution's award scheme.

It was interesting to note that despite the variation in teaching and geographical background the workshop participants were mostly in agreement about the key areas that signified teaching excellence. Given the level of agreement found in the literature from discussions of various award schemes, the data from the Change Academy project and the workshop activity it is interesting that setting transparent measurable criteria for assessing teaching excellence is still an issue in many institutional and national schemes.

The author and Change Academy project team have now undertaken some further work around the four themes and have developed some draft criteria for each theme. These have been further shared through a poster presentation at an international conference and through a national workshop with a further 30 participants. Discussions in these two

conferences showed general agreement for the four themes and colleagues were interested in the development of the criteria. The themes and criteria will be used for the 2013-2014 learning and teaching award scheme across the institution so that further evaluation of these can be undertaken.

A second area that gathered importance throughout the Change Academy project was assessing teaching excellence. Individuals who provided their views of the characteristics started to ask how these could be assessed rigorously and, this linked to an earlier point about some staff in the author's institution believed there is a lack of clarity around why some staff received awards. The author explored this question in some of the workshops that had been run within the institution. The Learning Development Fellows in particular agreed with Allen's (2003, 9) view that assessing teaching should be as rigorous as assessing research outputs and so this influenced some of their thoughts around the evidence that could be used. There is less discussion in the literature about evidence but there has been reference to student evaluations, peer review and references, Dean's endorsements, interviews with panels and, personal reflection and self-assessment (Gibbs 2008, 21, Hammer et al 2010; Layton & Brown 2011, 167 & Skelton 2005).

This second activity in the workshop focused on this with data from the project leading to five main areas of evidence being identified. These were peer review and esteem, student feedback, education documentation, evidence of impact and evidence based practice.

In terms of peer review and esteem many Change Academy project participants and those attending the workshop identified the importance of both internal and external review, through classroom observations, videoing sessions and the conversations about teaching. There was also a discussion in the workshop about having a critical friend you might work with over a year who could focus on ongoing performance and not just a "snap shot" of teaching. Peer review is commonly used in most institutions for both developmental feedback and to promote sharing of practice and so using this as evidence for award schemes would be a source many staff have to hand. The data related to esteem arose from the Change Academy project and not the workshop discussion but related to invitations to be an external examiner, to provide key notes at conferences and events, taking on a role as an external panel member and having gained a previous award which was also mentioned by Piascik et al (2011). Many of these activities are undertaken by academics and so evidence of these would also not be difficult to compile.

Student feedback comes in a range of formats but is mostly collected from module and programme evaluations and in class evaluation. This was felt to be an important source of evidence by participants in the workshop and the Change Academy project and is mentioned often in the literature as noted earlier. Participants in the Change Academy project whilst believing this was important and should be a key source of data for all award nominations also acknowledged the issues related to student numbers on modules which if small could have a negative impact through one student's view and the issues of modules taught by a range of staff but with evaluations that only permit an overall view of the module. These are important issues to take account of when using this evidence but they also provide support for the use of multiple sources of evidence.

Education documentation is the third source of evidence and again both the participants of the Change Academy project and the workshop identified being able to look at lesson plans, course documentation, assessment strategies and teaching portfolios. There was some discussion in the workshop about teaching portfolios because their use is not widespread in all countries however, there was recognition that if portfolios were not used often teachers would have some form of extended CV or other evidence that they could draw upon.

Lastly, in terms of evidence as noted above this falls into two areas, one around impact and participants in the Change Academy project and workshop noted that some of the aspects that could be explored were student results and employability as well as employer feedback. This area has not been clearly addressed in the literature and is worthy of further exploration. The second area relates to evidence based practice and participants in the workshop talked about teacher's rationale for using the strategies they used in class, their knowledge of pedagogical research and again reference was made to a portfolio. Additional areas found in the project have been evidence of engaging in continuing professional development, mentoring of peers, conference presentations and publications and, invitations to be an external examiner or a reviewer externally for someone else's programme. Some of the suggestions for evidence based practice do overlap with the earlier peer review and esteem category and so panels would need to be clear about where evidence was considered and they would need to be consistent in their use of this if staff were to believe the process was transparent. Clear guidance needs to be provided to all for both the development of any application for an award but also for those judging these applications.

It was again interesting to note the general agreement on the areas discussed despite there being less literature on this aspect. This is clearly an area for further exploration. As with the themes and criteria the evidence used in the 2013-2014 learning and teaching award scheme will be evaluated in order to further develop advice around this.

In terms of disseminating good practice and the use of award winners to mentor others this has not been addressed in any depth in the Change Academy project despite the earlier reference to these two areas. This was not discussed in the workshop but the author was able to gather some data from the survey with award winners. Most of the winners said that they had not disseminated the practice they had won the award for unless someone in their department specifically asked them and none had been asked to mentor other staff. The author sees this as a missed opportunity to disseminate good practice across the institution and so this year the award scheme has an explicit statement that anyone who wins an award will be required to disseminate their practice. There are a range of options to do this but, the person can provide a vignette for the educational blog supported by the author's department to share practice and report on projects, they can provide an interview or video to be posted as a link on the blog or they can write an article for the in-house peer reviewed journal. This should provide a library of evidence around good practice and enable colleagues to identify why specific staff had won awards.

Conclusion

The workshop provided a valued opportunity to share the findings from the Change Academy project as well as explore with participants their own views and examine how compatible the findings were. Whilst there were some differences there were many areas where the findings from the Change Academy project, the participants in the workshop and the literature were compatible. This as noted earlier suggests that developing criteria for such schemes should be possible however the literature continues to demonstrate this area is one where staff still considered there was a lack of transparency. The four main themes that have been identified from this project where criteria could be developed are, the teacher's personal attributes, teacher role related activities, the teacher-student relationship and the scholarly teacher. The project also found that there was general agreement around five possible areas of evidence which are, peer review and esteem, student feedback, education documentation, evidence of impact and lastly evidence based practice.

Whilst the Change Academy project completed in December 2013 there were some key recommendations that have arisen from the project which are:

- To evaluate the use of the new themes and criteria in the award scheme
- To examine the evidence used for making decisions about who is given an award

- To ensure all award winners disseminate the practice that led to their award

The author will continue to undertake the work related to the recommendations through further evaluation during this year. This will include further data collection with analysis of documentary evidence used by panels and interviews with members of panels making decisions about who gains an award. This will enable the rigour of the scheme to be examined and this work will further contribute to the evidence base in this area.

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