AN EXPLORATION OF THE POSSIBLE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REWARD AND RECOGNITION AND TEACHING EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

M. Warnes
Anglia Ruskin University (UNITED KINGDOM)

Abstract

In this paper, I present preliminary findings from a research project investigating the possible relationship between reward and recognition (via Teaching Fellowships) and teaching excellence.

Having developed a model of teaching excellence, I interviewed five recipients of National Teaching Fellowships, and 21 recipients of University Teaching Fellowships at three UK universities. I asked participants to offer personal definitions of teaching excellence, to comment on the fit of the model to their lived experience, and to explain their motives for achieving excellence in teaching. I also asked them to discuss the impact receipt of the award had on them, their colleagues, their managers, and their students.

Findings show that reward and recognition schemes have little impact on recipients beyond the initial ceremonial elation, and, in extreme cases, are reduced to little more than email signature decorations. Similarly, they have no motivational effect, and teaching excellence is an almost entirely driven by intrinsic drives, either to be excellent regardless of the undertaking or, more frequently, an altruistic drive to facilitate students’ development to reach their full potential.

Crucially, awards have no impact at all on the student experience. Since they are retrospective awards, students already have an excellent teaching experience which doesn’t become any more excellent as a result of a Teaching Excellence award. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, students are entirely unaware of the award.

This challenges the primary discourse around reward and recognition schemes for teaching excellence, which is that they are, in and of themselves, highly valuable.

Keywords: Reward and Recognition, Teaching Excellence, Student Experience.

1 INTRODUCTION

Reward and Recognition of Teaching Excellence has been a feature of the UK HE sector effectively since the Dearing Report [1]. The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) was introduced in 2000, and awards were initially gilded with a £50,000 grant to undertake pedagogic research. Even though this amount has reduced over the years until 2016 when it was reduced to zero with no noticeable decrease in the number of applications for this prestigious award [2]. Some University Teaching Fellowship (UTF) schemes still have a financial component, to allow recipients to carry out a pedagogic research project, which, counter-intuitively, takes them away from teaching so that they can conduct a pedagogic research project.

Many authors have discussed the topic of Teaching Excellence (cf. [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12], [13]). Despite this, there is no single, uncontested definition of Teaching Excellence. Consequently, a meta-analysis of characteristics of teaching excellence listed in the literature was conducted to develop a working definition for this project. This definition subsequently became a model of teaching excellence.

Collins and Palmer [14] suggest a list of the various ‘types of acceptable recognition and/or rewards’:

Financial: Money, pay scale/increments, one-off payments
Recognition: Titles/fellowships, promotion, nice office for a year, guaranteed parking space
Opportunities: Secondments to industry/consultancy, time for research/sabbaticals, going to a conference, staff development (2004, p. 6)

However, it was impractical to investigate all of these, it was decided to concentrate on Teaching Excellence awards at both institutional (i.e. UTFs) and national levels (i.e. NTFs).
The two primary research questions for this project were:

- How do current definitions of the theoretical concept of ‘teaching excellence’ fit with the lived experience of teaching staff?
- Is there a relationship between ‘reward and recognition’ and ‘teaching excellence’ and, if so, is this experienced evenly among recipients?

To answer the first question, recipients of NTFs and UTFs were interviewed and asked to define what teaching excellence meant to them, and to comment on how closely the model matched their lived experience as an excellent teacher. To answer the second question, interviewees were asked to comment the impact that their award had on them, their colleagues, their managers, and, crucially, their students.

In addition to the interviews, the criteria against which claims for awards were measured, were obtained for the NTFS and the three UTF schemes. Moreover, results from the National Student Survey (NSS) were obtained for each participating institution as a proxy for the student voice.

Finally, having completed the research, the findings were compared with the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which was a topic of concern for many interviewees.

2 METHODOLOGY

As teaching excellence is not a physical, measurable entity, but rather is subject to any number of competing definitions, it is, therefore, a social construct. Consequently, a primarily qualitative approach to data collection was adopted, although since some aspects of the project involved quantitative data, this was expanded into a Mixed Methods approach [15].

Four case studies were created which, as Neuman [16] explains, ‘enable us to link micro level, or the actions of individuals, to the macro level, or large-scale structures and processes’ (2014, p. 42). The four case studies were one for each of the three participating institutions, and one for the NTFS. Each case study contained data from the awardees (i.e. interview data), the institutions (i.e. criteria of excellence used to award UTFs), and the students (i.e. NSS Data).

Insufficient space exists in this paper to present a full analysis of the comparison of the case studies for similarities and difference. Consequently, the findings presented here are drawn from the combined data.

2.1 Model of Teaching Excellence

The first stage, however, was to operationalise the concept of Teaching Excellence. To do this, reference lists were extracted from existing literature on the subject from which a reading list was created. Consequently a collection of over 800 PDFs of source material (i.e. journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, newspaper articles, and reports) was imported into NVivo to create a searchable database [17].

The documents were searched for the word ‘excellence, which appeared 4,187 times in 287 documents. The frequency of occurrences of the word ‘excellence’ in these 287 documents ranged from 1 to 361. Documents with a frequency of six or more references to excellence (n=114) were then selected as the initial reading list. These articles were then read and documents referring to research excellence, or generic excellence, or any type of excellence other than teaching, were excluded. While reading the texts, I was also coding them, and, although specifically looking for ‘characteristics of excellence’, I created a total of 139 codes.

The code ‘characteristics of excellence’ was applied 166 times in 38 documents. Eighteen of the 38 documents contained generic references to characteristics of excellence and the coded extracts from these articles were subsequently removed. The extracts from the remaining 20 articles (i.e. [14], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], [32], [33], [34], [35], [36]) were edited to create a list of the characteristics specified. This list included 206 characteristics which were meta-analysed using Braun and Clarke’s [37] six phase model of Thematic Analysis to generate initial codes (i.e. Characteristics of Excellence), and then grouped into overarching ‘core’ themes [38], called the Qualities of Teaching Excellence (see Table 1).
Table 1. Qualities of Teaching Excellence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>42.2</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Scholarship / Professionalism</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>26.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student-centred Teaching</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>30.1</td>
<td>Assessment and Feedback</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7.8</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>Personal Qualities</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8.3</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pastoral</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence / Motivation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table was then reimagined as a graphic model (see Fig. 1):

Figure 1. Model of Teaching Excellence.

Thus this meta-analysis identified three key qualities of teaching practice that excellent practitioners possess: Professional Qualities; Practical Qualities; and Personal Qualities, each of which is comprised of three characteristics. According to the literature, then, the most important quality defining teaching excellence is Professionalism, with Practical Ability as the second-most important quality, and Personal Attributes as the third [39].

2.2 Interviews with Excellent Teachers

The next stage in the project was to interview recipients of national and institutional teaching excellence awards. An invitation to participate in interviews was distributed to NTFs via the NTFS mailing list, to which five responses were received. Three UK universities were also contacted, and interviews arranged with the UTFs: seven at University A (UNIA), nine at University B (UNIB), and five at University C (UNIC). Thus, in total of 26 interviews were conducted.

Interview data were gathered using telephone, Skype, or face-to-face interviews, depending on the circumstances [40], [41], but the method made no measurable difference to the length or quality of the interview.

All interviewees were asked the same ten questions:
Please tell me what ‘teaching excellence’ means to you

Please tell me how closely my model of teaching excellence matches your experience

Please tell me what motivates you to be an excellent teacher

Please tell me about your award

Please tell me what impact this had on you

Please tell me if you have changed your behaviour as a consequence of receiving the award

Please tell me what impact this had on your departmental colleagues

Please tell me what impact this had on your managers

Please tell me what impact this had on your students

Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about your perception of teaching excellence?

All interviewees had been provided with a Participant Information Sheet and Participant Consent Form prior to the interviews and all had signed to indicate that they were happy to participate. My employment as a University Research Fellow helped to put the interviewees at ease, and we quickly developed a rapport on the basis of shared experiences. In addition, many participants offered, often critical accounts of their universities, under Chatham House Rules, where ‘participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed’ [42].

2.3 Teaching Excellence Criteria

In addition, the criteria against which claims for Teaching Excellence Awards are measured were gathered. The criteria for the NTFS are available from the HEA website [43], and each of the participating institutions provided their criteria for comparison. These criteria represent a spectrum of excellence, or those ‘qualities and/or conditions that separate excellent teachers from those who are very good, competent, or incompetent’ [19, p. 66].

2.4 The Student Voice

As resource constraints prohibited direct contact with students to identify their views on teaching excellence and the awards associated with it, NSS scores were collected for each participating institution. Analysis of these data offered an insight into those elements of teaching excellence covered in the NSS, and comparison between the institutions suggested how well each of them were performing in relation to national averages.

3 FINDINGS

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the data. Despite a small number of individual and university-specific differences, responses from all interviewees were similar and no significant differences were found. Findings are therefore drawn from the full dataset, rather than based on discrete case studies. In addition to direct questions, interviewees were also asked to make any additional comments related to teaching excellence and, inevitably, many chose to raise the TEF.

3.1 Definition of Teaching Excellence

When asked, as excellent teachers, to define teaching excellence, the 26 awardees gave a total of 119 responses. This is unsurprising since, as has been established, no single definition of teaching excellence exists. The most frequent group of responses were related to the student experience (i.e. Student-centred teaching, Learning facilitator, Student outcomes, Engage with students, and so on).

Respondents were also asked to say why they had received their awards. Despite being University Teaching Fellowships, only two awards were for classroom practice, while the majority of awards were for design rather than delivery.

3.2 The Model versus lived experience

Respondents were presented with the Model of teaching excellence derived from the literature, and asked to describe how closely it matched their lived experience as excellent teachers. The most frequent
response was that the Qualities and Characteristics that make up the model were accurate, but the proportions were not.

Awardees placed much greater importance on Personality, Reflection, Student-centred teaching, and Pedagogy, and much less on Scholarship and Professionalism. This shift in emphasis reflects a difference between the authors of the papers, who are primarily scholars more focused on research, and teaching staff. As one respondent pointed out, scholars’ ‘aim has been to publish on teaching and learning… If you’re doing a literature review then you are going to get the people who are publishing’.

3.3 The impact of the award

Respondents were asked to comment on the impact of their award on themselves and their teaching, their managers, their colleagues, and their students.

3.3.1 On the awardees

Although two respondents noted how they had been able to use their awards to support applications for promotion, interviews all stated that they were not ‘Trophy Hunters’ and were not motivated to achieve excellent teaching simply to qualify for the award. When asked what motivated them to become excellent teachers, over half of the respondents stated that they wanted to help students achieve their potential.

The primary impact on recipients was a sense of affirmation which gave them the impetus to continue what they were doing. In some cases this acted as a form of ‘permission’ which helped to reduce feelings of ‘imposter syndrome’ [44]. None of the awardees felt that their behaviour had changed as a consequence of receiving the award.

A third of awardees noted that the initial elation at receiving the award quickly paled, and that within a year it had been reduced to letters at the end of their email signature.

3.3.2 On the awardees’ managers

Half of the respondents stated that their awards had no effect on their managers in any way. A quarter of awardees’ managers were supportive and celebrated the awardees’ achievement, and shared congratulatory emails with all staff, while another quarter reacted negatively. Awardees frequently commented that their awards were appropriated by managers to improve institutional statistics. In addition, some awardees found themselves being treated as teaching experts, and being expected to engage in teaching management roles, often mentoring early career colleagues, or delivering continuing professional development courses.

3.3.3 On the awardees’ colleagues

With only a couple of exceptions, awardees noted that their award had not motivated their colleagues to apply for an award. While some colleagues were supportive and celebrated the awardees’ achievement, the two primary effects on colleagues were apathy and/or hostility. Half of the awardees’ colleagues were unimpressed by the award, and a third were sarcastic and behaved like ‘school playground’ bullies. Some colleagues also expressed a desire to avoid being associated with excellent teaching as this would impede their research career.

3.3.4 On the awardees’ students

All interviewees stated that their current students were unaware of their teaching excellence award. At one institution, outgoing students who had nominated lecturers for awards were aware, but subsequent cohorts had no idea. Awardees commented that this was not something that they would advertise to incoming students as it felt as if they were bragging. Consequently, the reward and recognition of teaching excellence has no impact on the student experience.

3.4 Teaching Excellence Criteria

All three participating universities use the NTFS criteria, and, although they differ marginally in the spectra of excellence against which they measure applications (e.g. Strong - Good - Partial - Poor - Little or no match), the process and outcomes are broadly similar. The consistency between the four groups in using three criteria of excellence (i.e. Individual Excellence, Raising the Profile of Excellence, and Developing Excellence) is an indication of the mutual acceptance that Excellence is too complex to be defined as a single unit.
Each of the case studies use typical, yet different, terminology to distinguish between the different points on the spectra of excellence. The words used to define the highest rating are ‘Outstanding’, ‘Excellent’, ‘Exceeds’, and ‘Strong’. However, there are possible semantic differences between them. For instance, ‘outstanding’ is a much more forceful word than ‘strong’ yet both words are performing the same function. In addition, the value of these types of measure depends on the meanings that reviewers apply to the terms. As the differences between the terms cannot be quantitatively measured, reviewers use their own qualitative judgement to decide on the appropriate measure. Thus it is likely that an application could appear ‘poor’ to one reviewer might appear ‘satisfactory’ or even ‘good’ to another.

3.5 The Student Voice

Significant differences existed between NSS scores for the three participating universities. Apart from Overall satisfaction, UNIA student ratings exceed those for the sectoral average in all eight aspects of the student experience and 19 of the 26 questions. The shortfall in six of those seven questions is less than one percentage point. UNIB student ratings do not exceed those for the sectoral average in any of the nine aspects of the student experience and four of the 26 questions. The shortfall in eight of the 26 questions is less than one percentage point. UNIC student ratings exceed those for the sectoral average in one of the nine aspects of the student experience (i.e. Learning opportunities) and five of the 26 questions. The shortfall in two of the 26 questions is less than one percentage point.

However, a possible explanation for these differences may be found in the Themes raised by the awardees in answer to Question 1 – Please tell me what ‘teaching excellence’ means to you, which fell broadly into two key areas: the student experience, and teacher activity. At UNIA, the number of Themes and References for each of these two key areas are almost identical, suggesting that UNIA treats both teacher activity and the student experience equally. At UNIB the number of Themes (although not References) for each of these two key areas are quite different, suggesting that UNIB treats teacher activity as more important than the student experience. Finally, the number of Themes (although not References) at UNIC for each of these two key areas are quite different, suggesting that UNIC treats the student experience as more important than teacher activity.

3.6 Teaching Excellence Framework

This project started prior to the introduction of the TEF, and, although I was unable to ignore it entirely, I endeavoured to keep it in the background as far as possible so that knowledge of it would not influence my research. I was aware that it used elements of various extant annual reports as proxies to derive an impression of the effect of teaching excellence but I chose not to investigate beyond this superficial level until my research was complete. That said, interviewees talked in general about the TEF during the interviews.

One respondent expressed concern about the TEF having a negative effect on Teaching Excellence:

where people are already doing a good job, the fact [is] that they’ll have to change things or do things in a certain way just to meet the TEF framework, without necessarily being the best thing to do for the students. I can see that happening in certain circumstances, and then the whole thing becomes counterproductive

When it was introduced, the TEF used metrics to award Gold, Silver, and Bronze status to institutions. The metrics were drawn from:

the National Student Survey (NSS) on teaching quality and the learning environment, graduate employment figures from sources such as the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) surveys and information on student retention published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (Hesa) [45]

However, as Cuffe [46] points out, the Royal Statistical Society has declared the TEF results invalid:

None of these metrics directly measures the quality of teaching and there are no actual inspections of lectures or other teaching…

The Royal Statistical Society said:

- the measures did not assess quality of teaching
- the benchmarking procedure does not properly take account of all of the differences between universities
the flagging system is too trigger-happy – too likely to flag an institution as different from the
norm
(2019, online)

As one respondent explained, the TEF metrics do not measure soft skills:

There are certain things that won’t be measured… because they’re not part of the metrics that
are being looked at… And the funny thing is that, thinking back to the model… [The TEF is] not
measuring anything that students find valuable

The metrics employed by the TEF are only tangentially related to teaching excellence at best, and the
one thing that most commentators agree on is that the TEF does not, in fact, measure teaching
excellence (cf. [47], [48], [49], [50], [51], [52], [53], [54]). Instead, the TEF should collect data related to
the Characteristics of the Model, and weight them according to the importance defined by excellent
teachers.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As noted above, the two primary research questions for this project were:

How do current definitions of the theoretical concept of ‘teaching excellence’ fit with the lived
experience of teaching staff?

Is there a relationship between ‘reward and recognition’ and ‘teaching excellence’ and, if so, is
this experienced evenly among recipients?

The answer to the first question is that while some differences do exist between the Model of teaching
excellence derived from the literature and the lived experience of excellent teachers, these differences
are related to emphasis rather than content. Excellent teachers are more inclined to get on with the job
of teaching, rather than focus on scholarly activities to the same extent as portrayed in the Model. Their
motivation is facilitating student development rather than their own.

The answer to second question, however, is more complicated. The findings indicate that reward and
recognition schemes do not motivate teaching staff to develop excellent practice, nor do they motivate
awardees’ colleagues to apply for them. Apart from a short-lived confidence boost, awards have no
effect on recipients, and are all but forgotten within a year. Although some recipients have been able to
use their awards to support applications for promotion, the main use to which managers put teaching
fellowships is to bolster corporate excellence through improved institutional statistics. Importantly,
however, there is no relationship between reward and recognition and the student experience. In
addition, teaching fellowships are only rarely awarded for classroom practice.

Any relationship between reward and recognition and teaching excellence is, therefore, inverse, in that
they reflect achievement already attained and, as such, have no impact in any important aspect of higher
education. This is, of course, because they are retrospective and not developmental. Support and
funding should be made available to those teaching staff who are working towards excellence.

Nevertheless, teaching excellence should be recognised and rewarded. Perhaps, however, the nature
of this recognition might be less of an Oscar-style ceremony, and more along the lines of dissemination
of a published collection of examples of excellent practice.

In addition, the TEF should be more closely aligned with the Characteristics of teaching excellence as
defined in this project, and measures should be derived to capture them. In this way, the TEF might
develop the same reputation as the REF, and support teaching-related promotional pathways.

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REFERENCES


