

## **UKPSF: a vehicle for development or hierarchical ladder?**

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Higher education is again in a time of flux, a result of ever-changing national policy and priorities; student demographics; a greater sector awareness of what this means for teaching and the support of learning in higher education; and a conception of students as consumers or customers in a marketised system. This neo-liberal conception of higher education led to the government including a chapter on enhancing teaching in the 2011 White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* (2011), arguing that this marketization of higher education would drive up teaching quality as students chose to spend money on those institutions with the best reputation for teaching, research and employability.

The HE market has resulted in new measures of accountability, and success and data, previously safeguarded by the academy, is now firmly in the public domain, available for scrutiny by a range of potential stakeholders: prospective students, parents, schools, the state and other institutions. As a result, universities now find themselves more directly answerable to these stakeholders and are now cast as competitors. Along with this access to information have come new expectations, including that those with responsibility for teaching and/or supporting learning should be able to evidence competence in these domains.

Of course, many universities still rely largely on their research excellence; however, particularly in newer institutions, the number of staff perceived as 'qualified to teach' in HE is now considered a potential marketing tool. The term 'qualified to teach' is, of course, contested and contestable, but, for the purposes of Higher Education Statistics Agency returns and data accessible to the public, one proof of competence in the HE classroom is Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Until HESA returns began to incorporate these data on the number of staff qualified to teach, only those colleagues with a real focus on and passion for teaching engaged actively with the HEA to gain recognition for their experience and expertise in teaching and supporting learning; now, because of this new directive, colleagues from across the whole of the academic spectrum are following suit.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. As noted in the HEA Impact Study Report (2010), there are real reasons to value the framework, including asserting one's identity as a teaching-focused academic and using it as a means to recognise teaching in more varied academic roles. The framework also allows for recognition valued nationally and is a means of demonstrating parity between HEIs. It opens the opportunity for a conversation around teaching and the support of learning, which hitherto, could be difficult to enable. This increase in the status of teaching in HE and the demand for formal recognition bring challenges.

The majority of those wishing to seek recognition do this as a result of successful participation in accredited provision and subsequent institutional recommendation to the HEA. The accreditation process for such provision itself is rigorous, and rightly so: those working with such provision need some evidence that the provision is of a high standard, commensurate with its status as vehicle for the award of fellowship to internal colleagues. The HEA then relies on those administering the schemes locally to maintain the rigour, consistency and integrity of the accredited provision. The HEA is far from being the guardian of academic integrity, so this would seem a democratic and logical approach. The issue then becomes that of safeguarding this promised rigour and objectivity and of ensuring that individual schemes do not become impoverished versions of their accredited selves, through slackened practices or internal politics or pressures.

Internal politics are a rich source of potential friction and problems for the conveners of such schemes. The UKPSF descriptors and, consequently the HEA Fellowships, are rightly criterion-based, awarded to those who have provided evidence that they have fulfilled the criteria necessary for recognition at a certain level, not those who apply merely on the basis of an elevated role or position. Internal hierarchies must be eschewed when decisions about recognition are made in favour of impartial, evidence-based judgements; however, are there sufficient safeguards in place to ensure that decisions remain consistently based on these, rather than on political expediency? And are we able to reassure colleagues that this is the case? A colleague recently asked whether her application for Fellowship had been unsuccessful as a result of threatened redundancies: if she were not awarded Fellowship, would this make it easier to make her redundant? At the other end of the spectrum it can take a brave soul to tell a VC, a DVC or a line manager that they have not achieved the level of fellowship for which they have applied. Indeed, one high-placed academic was overheard recently at a conference commenting that he was not prepared to submit an application without a guarantee that he would be awarded the level of Fellowship he perceived as commensurate with his status. The maintaining of rigour, objectivity and reliance solely on the application itself are indubitable necessities for all provision but remain perhaps one of the more challenging elements to apply consistently.

Many accredited schemes are designed and run by institutional educational development units and the colleagues within these units often act as mentors or guides to those applying for recognition. This is a difficult combination to balance: if an application is unsuccessful, it can put the mentors in an invidious position. They are seen internally as the 'experts' on the UKPSF. They have devised the provision, perhaps led guidance workshops to explain the criteria and the steps needed to proceed towards recognition as a fellow of the HEA, read drafts, given feedback, all in the light of their knowledge and expertise. Should a colleague who has followed this route fail, however, the expert is then relegated to deficient mentor, who has been unable to offer the advice and guidance needed for success. Of course, this is

the role of the lecturer vis-à-vis his/her students each day, however, for some reason this is not seen as transferable to the professional development context: if advice is sought by those 'in the know' then success should be the inevitable outcome.

The issue of the credibility and the value of the UKPSF and an HEA Fellowship in the eyes of many colleagues can also be problematic, particularly when a Key Performance Indicator of 100% recognition is set and the educational developers are then tasked with operationalizing this strategic initiative. As stated in the HEA Impact Study Report (2010):

'[Unfortunately, the change I am aware of is that] the UKPSF has become a benchmark for compulsory box-ticking exercises which do not actually enhance teaching and learning but take staff time away from directly supporting students. The specific language of the UKPSF has become fetishized, and changes to come into line with it are largely cosmetic.'

Thus recognition against the UKPSF runs the very real risk of becoming a tokenistic exercise, engaged in purely as a result of institutional pressure and league table priorities or because of internal criteria, linking probation, progression and promotion to formal HEA recognition. Academics are well versed in writing and presenting to task. It is, therefore, relatively unproblematic for them to fulfil the criteria of most accredited schemes by writing or presenting focussed applications about how their work in teaching and supporting learning is underpinned by a fervent commitment to the UKPSF. Reality and measures of student satisfaction may tell a very different story, however.

A further area of concern with the UKPSF and the awarding of the different levels of fellowship arise when considering who can realistically aim for the highest levels. Although the HEA has been at pains to point out that the different levels of fellowship should not be seen as linked to specific job titles or considered as hierarchical, it is difficult to see how this could not be the case. Is it possible for a lecturer, who spends all his/her time designing, preparing and leading inspiring and engaging sessions to groups of students, whilst keeping abreast of all the concomitant 'administrivia' and maintaining an acceptable research profile, to have the capacity to be involved in initiatives, which will allow him/her to demonstrate 'successful strategic leadership'? Indeed, in some smaller faculties, there is only room for one or two colleagues to have real engagement with strategy beyond that of their own programme. Of itself, this level of commitment would not provide the evidence required for recognition beyond that of Fellow. Equally, a colleague with the remit of leading a faculty or school may not be involved in sufficient outward-facing strategic work to be eligible for the highest level of recognition, despite exemplary practice in his/her role. A faculty head is necessarily charged with a focus on his/her faculty and facilitating the implementation of strategic initiatives at local level. Is this sufficient to meet the criteria of Descriptor 4? This then raises the question of whether the highest levels of fellowship are attainable to those most deserving of recognition.

My final reservation is in terms of the hierarchy implicit in the HEA Fellowships. The UKPSF is a developmental framework and, of course, not everyone should be able to aim immediately (or perhaps, ever) for the higher levels of recognition. To label the levels as Descriptors 1, 2, 3, 4 and give the fellowships the titles of Associate, Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow, however, imbues the framework with an inherent sense of hierarchy: a Principal Fellow is clearly several rungs 'higher' than a mere Fellow. This nomenclature suggests, perhaps particularly to those engaging with the UKPSF framework and associated discourse for the first time, that those attaining D3 and a Senior Fellowship must be far more effective practitioners than those at D2, rather than the correct message that Senior Fellowship has merely been awarded as it is appropriate for that particular role and level of experience. Perhaps it would be more helpful – and more positive in terms of being a developmental process – to re-name the fellowships as 'Fellow: Teaching and Supporting Learning; Fellow: Leadership of teaching and supporting learning; Fellow: Strategic development and leadership of teaching and supporting learning.' This way, each category would be seen for what it actually is, rather than just a rung in a hierarchical ladder.

In conclusion, the current emphasis on the quality of teaching and support of learning in higher education must surely be hailed as a move in the right direction. Students deserve to be taught by academics who have some knowledge of, competence in and, hopefully, interest in pedagogy. Formal recognition of this is, therefore, to be encouraged, as, in our credentialist society, this gives teaching in higher education a kudos it has not necessarily previously held. Whether the UKPSF and the associated fellowships are the best vehicle for this, is still, I suggest, open to vigorous debate.

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