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Awarding teaching excellence: 'What is it supposed to achieve?': Teacher perceptions of student-led awards

Although there is lack of agreement as to what constitutes teaching excellence, there remains a steady effort to make an intangible, ambiguous, multifaceted concept incarnate in the form of 'student-led' teaching awards schemes within higher education institutions. What teaching staff say about such schemes have largely been ignored. This article attempts to address this gap in knowledge by accounting for the extent that academic teaching staff at one higher education institution in the United Kingdom (UK) value and perceive their teaching awards scheme. At the same time, this article presents some challenges in implementing a student-led teaching awards scheme for higher education institutions.

Keywords: staff perception; teaching award; teaching excellence

Context

Students rating and nominating their lecturers for university teaching awards, or what has been termed 'distinguished teaching awards' in the United States (Elton 1998), fall under the category of teaching excellence (Bradley *et al.* 2015). Rewarding and recognising teaching is axiomatic of teaching excellence. However, there is a lack of agreement of what constitutes teaching excellence in higher education (Gunn and Fisk 2013; Land and Gordon 2015; Little *et al.* 2007; Skelton 2007, 2009). It is a contested concept (Land and Gordon 2015; Macfarlane 2007; Skelton 2009), with varied competing interpretations. Teaching excellence in the form of awards may be based upon teaching portfolios or self-nomination (Cashmore *et al.* 2013; Centra 1993; Olsson and Roxa 2013). In the UK, these particular assessments are aligned with the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching in higher education and application for National Teaching Fellowship. However, for *student-led* teaching awards, the dominant

methods to judge teaching excellence have been teaching observation and evaluation questionnaires, which Macfarlane (2007, 49) has argued are biased in favour of a 'dramaturgical metaphor' where teaching is linked to performance as if one was an actor performing in theatre. Despite criticisms such as this, there remains a steady effort to make an intangible, ambiguous, multifaceted notion of teaching excellence incarnate, such as in the form of student-led teaching awards schemes.

In 2009 in Scotland, the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) piloted Student-Led Teaching Awards, which then expanded to other institutions in the UK in 2011. The premise given for launching this awards scheme was to raise the profile of teaching and celebrate best practice (Davies *et al.* 2012). Student-led teaching awards (as organised jointly by the NUS and HEA) were envisioned as a new approach to raising the profile of teaching and identifying good practice, helping students to consider and positively influence their learning, and developing stronger partnerships between students and staff.

The vision and intentions of this approach emanates from a place of recognising teaching excellence and a sense of aspiration-raising of teaching practice (Bradley *et al.* 2014; Gunn and Fisk 2013). This is the *public face* of the scheme, congruent with Goffman's (1959) notion of frontstage in his dramaturgical metaphor of presentations of self (see Land and Gordon 2015). However, there have been divergent sentiments expressed about the divisiveness of such schemes (Gibbs 2007; Skelton 2007), *in private,* in the backstage (Goffman 1959; Hallett 2010), and questions about whether they are a popularity contest and whether students are capable to identify what constitutes good teaching practice (Davies *et al.* 2012, 12; Macfarlane 2007).

It is this tension between competing interpretations of what these kinds of teaching award schemes may symbolise to higher education practitioners that stirs the

sociological imagination. The relative lack of critique of such awards schemes with the

exception of Gibbs (2012) is of concern. In addition, the discounting of discordant staff

views of such schemes should be placed in the foreground. For instance, Davies *et al*.

(2012) found in their evaluation of student-led teaching award schemes that a small

amount teaching staff expressed dissent and scepticism, and indicated that these views

'are perhaps not statistically pressing' (Davies *et al.* 2012, 12). It is argued here in this

paper that although staff expressing dissent may be a minority, these views *do matter*,

particularly in engaging staff to such an initiative that attempts to recognise their work.

Empirical work on student-led teaching award schemes has been reliant on

student feedback (Bradley *et al.* 2014; Davies *et al.* 2012; Jensen 2013). Staff

perceptions about such schemes have largely been ignored. The nearest work, so far,

are small-scale studies focusing on staff award winner perceptions on *self-nominated*

award schemes in Ireland (Fitzpatrick and Moore 2013) and in New Zealand (Shephard

et al. 2011), in an effort to inform academic practice. This paper attempts to do

otherwise, addressing the lack of criticality, by analysing and accounting for the extent

that academic teaching staff, whether award winners or not, at one UK higher education

institution value and perceive their student-led teaching awards scheme.

Methods

To address this gap in knowledge, a study was designed to capture teaching staff views

on an institution's existing student-led teaching award scheme. The institution itself is

one of the bigger English universities with over 30000 students in attendance.   The

institution's scheme had been in operation for a few years before study began. It had

never been evaluated since its implementation. Knowledge generated would inform the

institution's practice as well as contribute to the ongoing debate of the value of such

schemes in informing teaching excellence (Clegg 2007; Gibbs 2007, 2012; Skelton 2009). The questions to address in this research were:

- to what extent do teaching staff engage with the institution's teaching awards scheme?
- how much value is placed upon the teaching awards scheme by teaching staff?
- how do teaching staff perceive these kinds of awards and recognition?

Unlike previous evaluative work which were small scale and restricted to award winners (Fitzpatrick and Moore 2013; Shephard *et al.* 2011), the research was set to be bigger in scale through an online survey to all teaching staff throughout institution. The design of the research is distinct from the work of Graham (2015) with the Royal Society of Engineering, as it did not incorporate one-to-one interviews with online survey work. Moreover, particular focus of study was on teaching staff perceptions of existing student-led teaching awards scheme within institution. Unlike Graham (2015), it did not explore notions of teaching excellence with career promotions. There were two reasons for sticking to an online survey: (1) to capture a diverse range of staff voices whether they have been awarded, nominated for award or not nominated for award across the institution; and (2) to ensure potential staff respondents of their anonymity in completing survey. The objective in the latter was to impress upon potential respondents of a genuine commitment to pursue objectivity in the roll-out of their relatively new teaching awards scheme. Moreover, in order for the sake of anonymity, the research did not specifically ask for details of one's academic department or course teaching. The rationale and design of study were scrutinised by the institution's ethics committee for approval in the spring of 2013.

An email link of electronic survey was sent out only once to learning and teaching staff (n=2357). There were 329 respondents to survey accounting for a 14% response rate. The data was gleaned to ensure that all data gathered was anonymised to ensure that survey respondents could not be identified.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. So, in addition to descriptive statistics presented in this article, there are also qualitative comments which have been analysed thematically. There were four optional open-ended questions asking respondents for further comments: (1) on being nominated for a university teaching award by students; (2) on receiving a university teaching award; (3) on having a university teaching award scheme; and (4) on improving the university teaching awards scheme. All comments were extracted from the survey and analysed in Nvivo v.10. There were twenty-two themes that were initially derived, and then narrowed down to dominant staff perceptions of scheme which were positive, cynical and critical.

Seventy-three per cent of those who responded to survey (n=239) indicated that they were nominated for a university teaching award by their students. Of these survey respondents, 11% of them (n=25) indicated that they actually received the university teaching award. Although the majority of respondents who completed survey were nominated for an award, attitudes expressed about the scheme were mixed.

Public face of the scheme (frontstage)

'It is wonderful for those who receive an award…'

The majority of respondents (79%) indicated that they either strongly agreed or agreed with the following survey statement that: *Colleagues value University recognition of their teaching practice and support for students*. Being recognised as an excellent teacher is tied with notions of being collaborative with students, possessing a repertoire

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of teaching skills, showing enthusiasm and displaying creativity (Macfarlane 2007, 48). Receiving such professional recognition was affirming and encouraging for respondents, and this was highlighted by respondents in the open-ended comment boxes within the survey, particularly when questioned about being nominated for teaching award. A majority of positive responses were related to personal feelings of happiness, and an appreciation of being recognised by their students and the University for their teaching:

> An amazing experience, I struggle with issues of confidence and it was a confidence boost for me - a real encouragement.

> Very pleasing

> Very flattered

> It made me feel great!

Furthermore, the award scheme is based on student nominations and comments from an institutional survey conducted on an annual basis. It is one of the many surveys tied to the university's key performance measures, similar to the National Student Survey. The survey is emailed to all students at all levels within the institution. Since the student voice is the basis of the scheme, it connotes being 'student-led' as opposed to a self-nominated teaching award scheme (Fitzgerald and Moore 2013; Shephard *et al.* 2010). This aspect conjures a positive image of the award as indicated by some staff respondents:

> It is wonderful for those who receive an award. And it is good that the students are the 'judges' and that they have a voice.

To have your students celebrate and express thanks for your work is a wonderful and extremely valued experience.

While colleagues value recognition of their work with students, they do not necessarily see the teaching awards scheme as the answer. Only 61% of all respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: *Colleagues value University recognition of their teaching practice and student support via the teaching awards scheme*. This is significant considering that the majority of survey respondents were nominated for a teaching award. Reasons for respondent misgivings of award scheme, in a nutshell, have to do with perceptions of seeing the scheme as divisive, lacking transparency and lacking credibility. More details about staff misgivings of the scheme are laid out below.

Private face of the scheme (backstage)

Reflecting on the survey results, only 55% of all respondents agreed that the scheme raises the profile of teaching and student support in their department. In addition, at course level, only 40% agreed that it was an incentive to improve the quality of teaching and student support. Many of the accompanying staff comments reflected overall survey results, with comments even questioning the scheme's purpose: 'I can't see any BENEFITS arising from the scheme. What is it supposed to achieve?'

'I am concerned that the Award is divisive…'
Gibbs (2012) highlighted that teaching award schemes within universities causes divisiveness between individuals. His assessment was confirmed with the evidence generated in the study. A number of staff raised the issue that individuals nominated for an award are singled-out from the team, which sends out the message that those nominated are 'elite' in comparison. Those members of staff that are not nominated, or

do not receive any votes, can be left feeling as though their work is not good enough. They do not feel valued. Singling out individuals leads to a divisive environment as one participant indicated, 'Isolating individuals as [excellent] only makes those individuals look good, instead of whole departments like it should be!'

There are comments from those who have been nominated for an award who indicated that the scheme demoralises members of staff who have not been nominated. As one respondent recognised, 'the shortlisting seemed unjust - I knew of so many colleagues who were doing an outstanding job and had not been recognised. I didn't like the hierarchy of excellence implied by the scheme and actually found it de-motivating.' Due to this, some of them have kept their own nomination for a teaching award private to prevent embarrassment and to protect those who have not been nominated. This, of course, signifies the lack of credence given to the university teaching awards scheme. This may be attributed to staff perceptions on the transparency of the nomination process.

Contact time and being nominated

Macfarlane (2007) highlighted that teaching excellence, using a dramaturgical metaphor, needs to consider and recognise the amount of work done backstage, not just onstage. The problem with teaching award schemes, in general, is that mainly the 'onstage' work is highlighted in student feedback. The evidence taken from our study suggests that a number of staff respondents recognise that this is the case. They observed a correlation between contact time with students and the likelihood of being nominated for award. There was a strong belief among staff respondents that those who teach only a few classes will be less likely to be nominated. This belief, of course, impacted on how staff viewed the awards scheme and their chances of being nominated

and receiving an award:

> Small student groups mean certain courses are subsequently left out of the award
> system - students commented on this at graduation.

> The current system favours those tutors/staff who teach on programmes or engage
> with large cohorts as they are more likely to get votes.

> Would tutors teaching much smaller cohorts or fewer modules to a particular
> cohort gain enough nominations to win?

> The way nominations are judged is biased in favour of those who teach on modules
> with large numbers of students.

These suspicions of fellow staff members being nominated due to being
entertaining or having more contact time with students are far removed from the
rationale of awards scheme, such as engaging in innovative academic practice and
raising aspirations to develop professionally as a university teacher (Gunn and Fisk
2013). A sense of cynicism amongst staff underlines the rhetorical question asked by
one of the respondents: 'What is [the scheme] supposed to achieve?' As another staff
member has observed, 'There is no direct relationship between the [teaching award
scheme] and the improvement of teaching the curriculum.'

Transparency - 'It is a silly scheme. There is no serious method.'

This lack of transparency was articulated by respondents in their open-ended responses:

> To be frank it means nothing as a) we don't know how or why they nominate and
> b) I have seen staff who are hated by students nominated, staff who are viewed as
> having 'favourites' and therefore cultivate a few close relationships which will
> obviously then result in a nomination.

One colleague has a litany of student complaints against him yet he is also nominated in successive years - surely this would mitigate against their inclusion?

General feeling is nominees feel encouraged about being nominated and getting recognition of their work however the lack of transparency is cause for concern. Due to reasons of confidentiality in the nomination and award process, respondents do not know the students who nominated them and their reasons for doing so. Thus, there is no incentive for nominated staff to continue being 'excellent', whatever that may look like, or improve upon their performance, making the scheme appear meaningless:

It is lovely to know that someone has taken time to recognise you but it also feels that the university doesn't really value it.

Deeply embarrassing - I would hate for it to go any further I am extremely thankful not to have been awarded.

It is a silly scheme. There is no serious method. I actually felt a bit embarrassed by the nomination.

Issues about the scheme's transparency and methodology have led to questions about the purpose and aims of the scheme itself, even its legitimacy. The scheme presents a public façade of excellence, particularly to clients and students. However, internally, amongst the majority of staff respondents surveyed here in this study, the scheme lacks legitimacy.

'Students are not professionally qualified…'

A significant feature of the institution's awards scheme is that it is based upon student feedback from an institutional student experience survey. Staff are nominated by their own students, thus the scheme has the *student voice* embedded within it. However, this feature is accompanied with questions of student ability and awareness to discern

teaching excellence in higher education (Davies *et al.* 2012). Evidence taken from our

own reading and analysis of survey findings is consistent with this critique:

> I am not convinced that the student audience is the most reliable arbiter of who is,
> or is not, [excellent].

> Students are not professionally qualified to assess the quality of university
> teaching.

> Students do not always choose staff that the staff would choose.

There was a commonality amongst staff responses on this issue as respondents

indicated a bias that a student may have towards members of staff, with more

entertaining, friendly, 'sexy' staff being nominated for their personal attributes

(Macfarlane 2007), not on their teaching skills:

> Are they getting the award because they deliver material well or are entertaining?

> I don't really think it is about teaching, it is more about establishing personal
> relationships, and little to do with good teaching practice.

> It should be based on merit not like-ability.

It was not envisioned to have received such a disproportionate amount of

negative comments towards the institution's teaching awards scheme. In a way, the

inclusion of a question within survey seeking ways to improve the awards scheme could

be perceived as wanting to solicit more progressive comments. However, responses to

this question were mixed. Out of 193 responses to the question, there were only fifteen

explicit comments stating that the scheme should not be continued. The majority of the

comments offered ways in which the scheme could improve to become a useful tool.

As one respondent declared, 'If it were to continue, then it's very serious shortcomings

must be addressed. The nomination process should be transparent and all staff in the department should be consulted.'

Improvements relate back to previous comments. Suggestions included making the scheme more transparent for both staff and students and widening the scheme, so instead of individuals being nominated, departments and teams are nominated (Land and Gordon 2015). Awards should recognise departments, not single-out individuals. Also, there were suggestions in having some form of external input if the scheme is meant to form an element of marketing (public relations) or teaching excellence status.

'Neo-liberal rubbish…'?

With the majority of respondents not in favour of the scheme for some of the reasons outlined above, questions have been raised about the purpose of the scheme. Gunn and Fisk (2013, 20) highlighted a tension between competing discourses within the 'teaching excellence' literature as revealed in the findings here, particularly a discourse of cynicism where teaching excellence is a facet of neoliberalism as opposed to a discourse of pragmatism in which institutions demonstrate teaching excellence to convince stakeholders (Ball 2003; McGettigan 2013). For instance, some respondents commented that the outputs from the scheme are meaningless, as the scheme exists for marketing and managerial reasons:

> It is manifestly transparent that management regard the whole process as a public relations exercise to demonstrate that [the institution] has 'excellent' teachers.

> Extremely divisive - neoliberal rubbish where people are divided into sheep and goats.

Unlike Gunn and Fisk's (2013) observation of competing discourses within the existing literature of teaching excellence, the research evidence presented here show

these discourses are interlinked. Yes, there has been much criticism levelled at the institution's teaching award scheme. However, at the same time, almost 80% of respondents surveyed supported the need for the institution to recognise and value teaching within the institution. It is not the rationale of the scheme that is contentious. It is the current method in place at the institution.

The respondent views highlight tensions existing, in private, within the institution in regards to the teaching awards scheme. Criticisms of the scheme run contrary to the public veneer of teaching excellence marked and endorsed officially by the institution. The idea of teaching excellence is very significant for the institution's legitimacy and survival in a competitive higher education market (Ball 2003; McGettigan 2013). The institution can highlight its 'teaching excellence' externally to the public. However, it would be imprudent to reduce the scheme as an artefact of neo-liberalism and new public management culture. Maybe, it is an artefact that is always in the making, caught-up in a constant tug-of-war of competing interpretations. This tug-of-war was evidenced amongst staff respondents, in private, expressing resentment towards the incarnation of teaching excellence in a student-led teaching award scheme (Goffman 1959; Hallett 2010). The public veneer, however, hides this internal tug-of-war of meanings attached to the scheme, protecting organisational legitimacy, alleviating inconsistencies and reducing conflict (Hallett 2010; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

From the evidence provided in this study, respondents have viewed the scheme more cynically in terms of performativity than the latter. This is the first instance of empirical work that questions the utility of these student-led teaching award schemes. With the exception of Graham (2015), there is a paucity of work which foregrounds the voices of teaching staff on such manifestations of teaching excellence.

Conclusion: '…sheep and goats…'

As stated earlier, teaching excellence has always been a contested concept (Macfarlane 2007; Skelton 2009). Despite this, universities, particularly across the UK, have instituted similar student-led teaching award schemes to signify that this concept of teaching excellence exists within their institutions. The findings presented here highlighted tensions that exist within one university of how this symbolic, multifaceted concept became incarnate (Hallett 2010). It is one thing to say that teaching excellence exists within the institution. It is another matter to say that teaching excellence is crystallised by an annual ritual of a student-led teaching awards scheme that divides lecturers into 'sheep and goats'.

If such schemes continue in the future, it would be interesting to see how they can be less divisive, and more transparent and credible amongst academic teaching staff. The findings here indicate that higher education teachers desire their craft to be recognised and valued by their institution. The question remains as to how this can be done, where tensions *in private* can be minimised.

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