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The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in England and Northern Ireland: a Review.

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Abstract

In the late 1990s, the Higher Education Funding Councils of England and the equivalent body in Northern Ireland (DEL NI) took the positive step of supporting the development of initiatives that promoted and supported innovation, and the recognition of excellence, in learning and teaching in Higher Education. One of the earliest manifestations of this support was the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, making this a timely opportunity to consider the personal and professional impact this scheme has had on the quality of teaching throughout the Higher Education sector locally, and the implications of this development for the wider EU community.

Introduction

In this paper we trace the history of the National Teaching Fellowship award scheme which was introduced in 1999 as part of a complex initiative to raise awareness of the importance of teaching quality in England and Northern Ireland and to enhance its status in the light of the traditional focus on the supremacy of research within the sector. We then outline the purpose of the award and go on to consider the results so far. This includes the unanticipated formation of the Association of National Teaching Fellows, a review of the limited work that has been conducted to determine the scheme's success and the impact it has had on students, on the recipients personally, on their institutions, and on the wider national and international community. We conclude by considering how this innovation may be extended to other EU countries, given the concurrent developments which have resulted from the Bologna Declaration (1999).

History of the Scheme

During the first three years of the National Teaching Fellowship scheme, eligible Higher Education Institutions were invited to nominate their most outstanding lecturer. The twenty considered to be the best of those nominated were chosen by a criterion referenced selection process agreed by a panel of their peers and were given an award of £50,000. This was to be used over three years to complete what was termed a "funded activity", a deliberately vague term which in practice encompassed anything from funding a music festival to a major pedagogic research or inquiry project. The process was co-ordinated by a small team of staff from the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) who gave preliminary advice to the winners on how to manage their projects and funding. Thereafter, individuals

were largely allowed to run their projects as they saw fit, without reference to institutional targets or strategies, though always in line with their institution's financial management systems. In effect the funding body adopted a very light touch in terms of monitoring and evaluating progress, which was highly unusual for the sector and which would not have occurred with any disciplinary research grant. It was argued, successfully, that those who had demonstrated a commitment to teaching excellence by developing their own practice and that of others were responsible enough to manage their own funds. The award was modified in 2003 to allow those at different stages of their academic career, or who were engaged in supporting student learning, to be considered for an award. Each year a total of 50 awards were made to those within 6 years of starting their academic career (rising stars), established academics and those in non-academic roles who were responsible for supporting student learning, such as librarians and ICT specialists. These winners were again provided with an award in recognition of their outstanding achievement, which again was to be used to carry out a specific piece of research or inquiry. In this phase of the award, a portion of the monies (£5,000) was withheld until a final project report was received by the funding councils. In addition, the process was managed by the newly established Higher Education Academy (HEA) who administered the award on behalf of the funding councils.

In 2006, the award criteria changed again. Now 50 individuals are chosen annually to receive a reward of £10,000 each. This may be used for their own personal or professional development. Although, as before, the process is managed by the HEA through an individual's home university, the winners can spend the money as they see fit within the boundaries of the fiscal policy of their home institutions. The rest of the National Teaching Fellowship Fund (around £2 million pounds) is awarded to specific pedagogic research projects in a competitive bidding process with a National Teaching Fellow making a substantial contribution to the bid. These projects generally are expected to impact on HE pedagogy and the student experience as well as address institutional or national strategic priorities. Cross-institutional collaboration is particularly encouraged as is the inclusion of partners from Further Education colleges delivering Higher Education, and overseas partners. Between ten and twelve projects are awarded annually.

Purpose of the Award

The National Teaching Fellowship award was one of several initiatives undertaken by the funding council. The other major initiatives were the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF), which provided financial resources to develop the practice of pedagogy at both an institutional and cross institutional level, and the establishment of twenty two subject centres, whose purpose was to develop discipline specific teaching and learning practices.

When the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme was first announced, it was met with some scepticism. It was seen as an artificial way of attempting to redress the balance between those who engaged in disciplinary research and those who focussed mainly on their teaching activities. In fact, as a result of a consultation process with the wider higher education community, HEFCE concluded that:

‘There is considerable support for a programme which recognises and rewards individual academics who have demonstrated excellence in learning and teaching. Many see national and institutional funding incentives that focus on individuals as being crucial levers in increasing the importance and status of learning and teaching. Furthermore, many argue that this element of the TQEF should be an early priority for the Council’ (HEFCE, 1999).

HEFCE’s strategic plan for 2003-2008 continued to reinforce the need to recognise and reward excellent teaching specifying one of its core objectives as, ‘To provide rewards to celebrate and encourage excellence in all modes, pedagogies and approaches to teaching, and to promote the professional development of teaching staff’ (HEFCE, 2003, p. 15).

Impact of the Scheme

The impact of any single intervention in a complex environment is very difficult to measure. The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme is no different. Very little concrete research has been carried out to look at its impact. Initial studies, such as that by Skelton (2002) failed to reach any meaningful conclusions because they had been undertaken too soon after the inception of the scheme. In addition, changes in the criteria meant that the scheme altered quite considerably in the early years. However a study by Frame *et al* (2006) examined those who has received the award between 2000 and 2002 and found evidence of both positive and negative impacts on those early award winners.

In 2005, the Academy commissioned an evaluation of the scheme which although not extensive, provided evidence that at a senior management level within institutions there was concern that individuals were being given large sums of money to work on projects that did not necessarily impact on, or relate to, the institutional strategic targets. This argument led to the most recent change in the scheme, reducing the individual’s award to £10,000 (still a substantial amount) and pooling the remaining money to support projects which are led by an NTF but align with institutional strategies. This has led more recent fellows to initially consider themselves to be ‘the poor relations’. However, their success in attaining NTF project funding has proven this assumption to be false. In 2008, a review of the HEA clearly identified the NTF scheme as one of the most successful activities associated with the Higher Education Academy.

Although extensive, qualitative research has not to date been carried out, in 2006 the HEA published a number of personal accounts from NTFs which described how the award had impacted on individual and collective practice. The use of “stories” has long been recognised as an illuminative research method, and it is from such stories supported by concrete examples from the academics involved, that we can form a clear view of the impact of the scheme. In 2007, the committee of the Association of National Teaching Fellows invited its constituents to contribute to a letter to HEFCE describing their experiences as National Teaching Fellows. Whilst subjective on an individual level, collectively it captured the spirit of the Association, the impact of the award and how much its recipients value it.

Student Impact

Colleagues have stated that receiving the NTF gave them the confidence not only to continue to develop their own practice, but to go on and lead bids to the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL), for Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) and NTF project bids, thereby multiplying the effect of their personal award and its impact on student learning by disseminating their work and embedding it in the practice of their peers. An evaluation of several FDTL4 projects demonstrated that they had a clear impact the student experience (Eales-Reynolds, 2006)

Such NTF engagement has been to the benefit of thousands of students over the years. They have developed innovative approaches to teaching, assessment, and supporting students, which have enhanced recruitment and retention and greatly improved the student learning experience. This work has been widely shared and disseminated leading to a much greater impact than individual NTFs may have had alone.

Personal Impact

At a personal level, many NTFs have identified their award as being the key to their personal and professional development in Higher Education, as the following direct quotations make clear.

“A great value of the scheme is the way in which it has recognised the contribution of "support" staff such as myself on a level playing field. The opportunities it has given me have been wonderful, not least being accepted into such an inspirational community of open minded teachers. This is an important aspect of the scheme - I can't think of any other national arena where we have such a good mix of academic and other staff.”

“As a member of a small and specialist institution I think the scheme has offered individuals such as myself opportunities that would never otherwise have been possible.”

However, not all NTFs have had positive experiences on receiving their awards.

‘I have been told that winning the NTF has no relevance to my career advancement in a 5* research department and in fact has the opposite effect owing to my now being labelled as someone more relevant to teaching.’

‘Professionally here in the institution, it’s been horrible. No one’s interested (apart from a few colleagues); strategy exactly in the area of my fellowship has completely ignored my work’

These were comments from NTFs who received their awards in the early years of the programme, before it became held in such high esteem. However, it is still not unusual to hear such comments from new winners.

Although fellows have had bad experiences in some institutions, the outcome has often been that they have moved to universities where the award is appreciated and desired.

'It [winning] precipitated a spate of bullying from my immediate managers and a junior colleague ... which precipitated my leaving. The move gained me a Chair [Professorship].

National Teaching Fellowships have been conferred at every level of organisational hierarchies. The Association now includes a large number of Professors, Deans and even some Pro-Vice Chancellors who cite their award as being a key factor in their career progression. The recently instituted recognition scheme within the Academy – the award of Senior Fellow of the Academy- also reflects the impact of the national teaching fellowship scheme. A large majority of the Senior Fellows of the Higher Education Academy are National Teaching Fellows.

Many Fellows valued the fact that this was a personal reward giving them the academic freedom to be innovative and inventive. They felt that it had been truly motivational. This is reflected in the fact that a number of NTFs appointed in the last few years have deliberately built up their careers with the achievement of this award as a goal. In effect it has been a significant part of their of profession development plan. Fellows have also identified the fact that the process of selection for submission to the scheme was also valuable, since within their institution it placed their work under the spotlight, thereby raising their profile. In some institutions even those who are unsuccessful found the process useful because the support and feedback they had received had helped their career development.

Institutional Impact

There cannot be any question that the NTF scheme has had an institutional impact. The fact that even those institutions who are research intensive are now encouraging their employees to apply for the award, and supporting them in this process, suggests that the reputation of the scheme makes it a sought after accolade. Many colleagues have stated that through the validation of their activities that their reward confers, they have been able to positively influence both the policy and practice of learning and teaching within their institution. This has had a knock on effect with colleagues who now see scholarship in learning and teaching as not just a valued professional activity, but as a viable pathway to career development. Indeed, many institutions have modelled their internal fellowship schemes on that of the NTFS and some have capacity building schemes for supporting colleagues several years in advance of their applications as they are regarded as potential future institutional nominees.

The Scheme has achieved much in changing the perception of what constitutes good and effective teaching in Universities, and indeed what we now regard as good academic practice generally. It has also, perhaps more than any other initiative, encouraged the sector to acknowledge the importance of scholarship in learning and teaching and the role that committed teachers play in ensuring the success of their students and thereby, their institutional. The move into strategic leadership roles of a number of NTFs demonstrates more than a commitment to pedagogy and pedagogic

research. It demonstrates a commitment to “whole institution” development, which extend beyond the boundaries of an individual organisation to encompass regional, national and international initiatives.

NTFs act as beacons of good practice, either through taking on leadership roles or perhaps more indirectly, through sharing good practice in a variety of other ways. The NTF also provides an externally-calibrated recognition scheme that equates with the external recognition mechanisms that are available for disciplinary research.

National Impact

The NTF scheme has changed a number of times over its lifetime and definitively measuring its impact in a meaningful way will not be the easiest of tasks. However, we believe that if we were to compare teaching and learning practices before the scheme with those we see now, we would see significant enhancement and be able to demonstrate the influence of National Teaching Fellows. Indeed, many of the other major teaching quality enhancement fund initiatives which have clearly impacted on practice in Higher Education have been led by colleagues who were NTFs, or those who have come into contact with the scheme or were aspiring to be part of it.

One of the key National impacts of the scheme has been the development of wide ranging collaborative networks and the sharing of good practice. Many Fellows commented on the fact that Institutions are very often inward looking and often (maybe inadvertently) put up barriers to cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional collaboration. The NTF Scheme has gone a long way to destroy those barriers with regard to the scholarship of learning and teaching, by providing a forum where like-minded and informed enthusiasts can work together productively. Thus a geographer, a dance specialist, an economist, an IT specialist, a marketer and a human resource management lecturer, all NTFs from six different universities, worked together on the topics of transition in university (Frame *et al*, 2005), and the impact of age differentials on learning (Frame *et al*, 2006).

In 2004, HEFCE announced the opportunity to bid for a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) which had to be predicated on evidence of existing excellence within the bidding university and in which it expected National Teaching Fellows to take a major lead. Indeed, many of the 72 successful CETLs were led by, or had a major input from, one or more NTFs. These CETLs have gone on to form networks, often linked to those formed by the involved National Teaching Fellows. An example is the Healthcare Simulation Education Research Group (HSERG), which was formed by a group of CETLs to enhance the pedagogic research into the impact of simulation on learning and teaching in the medical, dental and healthcare professions. This group now encompasses representation from all four countries of the United Kingdom and is linking up with established simulation networks which focus on practice. Thus, the NTFs are again helping to provide the research-informed evidence-base for teaching and learning.

There is no doubt that there has been a significant shift in attitude towards reflective and evaluative teaching that is, in part, driven by the greater recognition and rewards that the National Teaching Fellowship scheme, in its various manifestation, provides

and encourages . The NTF scheme is an important part of such recognition because it confers external validation on internal, and often unrecognised excellent practice. It is unlikely that internal schemes, welcome though they are, could provide the same leverage in themselves, though they are a welcome prelude to the national scheme.

International Impact

There is also clear evidence of the impact of the NTF scheme around the World. Where other recognition schemes have failed, the NTF has not. This is probably because of the sizeable investment made by HEFCE in the scheme but also because it is a National scheme and has been well supported by the Academy. Indeed, in the recent independent review of the Academy, the NTF Scheme was held up as an exemplar of the work of the Academy.

Owing to this success, the scheme has been used as a model for similar schemes in Australia and New Zealand. Although the Canadians have a successful scheme (the 3M Scholars) UK NTFs are envied owing to the financial support which allows those recognized to develop and embed their work even further. There has also been interest in Europe in the NTF scheme particularly in Scandinavia and Holland.

It is not just the scheme which has had an international impact. The Fellows themselves have collaborated with, mentored, and provided consultancy to, colleagues across the World. NTFs regularly contribute to international meetings focusing on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and have been highly active in the Multinational Scholars Forum which has met at a major international conference for the last 4 years. Through this group, the Association of National Teaching Fellows has links with the Carnegie Scholars in the USA, the 3Ms Scholars in Canada and with equivalent Fellows in Australia and New Zealand. In addition, Fellows have stated that their NTF award has opened doors in their disciplinary worlds as well, giving them access to international networks that might otherwise have been closed to them.

“The NTF has given me the opportunity to widen my understanding of how Higher Education works globally, particularly in disciplinary areas in which I have an interest. The NTF accolade provides an excellent entree for such international connections of course, and gratifyingly, colleagues overseas are interested in the experience of UK NTF people too, so there is reciprocity in such relationships.”

The Association of National Teaching Fellows

In this, the 10th year of the scheme, we now have around 380 National Teaching Fellows; a lifetime award which confers on the winners the postnominals NTF. In 2002, at one of the annual events organised by the National Co-ordination Team, the existing National Teaching Fellows (NTFs) decided that they could have more impact on raising the national profile of learning and teaching in Higher Education if they worked together as a co-ordinated group. To this end they decided that they should form an organisation. A small group of self-selected individuals formed the interim co-ordination group and worked on developing the vision and mission for the Association of National Teaching Fellows. They also started conversations with the

Higher Education Academy and developed a Memorandum of Understanding to cement the relationship between the Academy and the new Association. Finally, in 2004, the memorandum was signed and the new Association came in to being under the Chairmanship of Mr Bob Rotheram.

Since that time the Association has gone from strength to strength. It now organises (with the Academy) the induction of new fellows, has representation on the Board of Directors and the Academic Council of the Higher Education Academy, has a strategic plan and has re-introduced the annual National Teaching Fellows symposium. Last year, for the first time, an eminent international keynote speaker who is also a Canadian 3Ms teaching fellow was invited to attend the conference. His acceptance provided an opportunity for continuing and developing the dialogue between international teaching fellows. We hope to extend that opportunity this year by including fellows from Australia and America. In this our anniversary year we also hope to enhance the impact of the scheme more widely through a series of publications and joint presentations. We also intend to run workshops for organisations who are eligible to propose candidates for a National Teaching Fellowship but rarely do so. In this way we hope to provide the Higher Education in Further Education and the small and specialist higher education establishments with the same type of support that is available within the larger universities.

One of the benefits of the Association is that it gives a voice to a collective of individuals who have been recognised for their excellence in teaching practice and their ability to inspire both colleagues and students. NTFs regularly contribute to national debates concerning strategy and policy development in Higher Education including Professor Ramsden's paper on the student learning experience for the Rt Hon John Denham's governmental review.

In conclusion

This is just a brief and of necessity, a somewhat subjective account of the range of impacts the NTF Scheme has achieved. The funding body, HEFCE, has facilitated the development of powerful advocates for enhancing the quality of the student learning experience: passionate, enthusiastic lecturers committed to scholarship in teaching and learning. In addition to contributing to the evidence-base for research-informed teaching practice through the work of Fellows, the scheme has allowed a transformation of teaching in many institutions. Engagement, inspiration and leadership in teaching and learning are areas that have flourished in recent years and National Teaching Fellows believe that there is a direct causal relationship with the NTF scheme. The scheme has been praised throughout the World and we must not underestimate the potential damage that would be caused should the scheme be discontinued or devalued in any way.

Central to HEFCE's strategy is the transformation of the student learning experience but this cannot be achieved by top down legislation. It has to be led by inspired and inspiring practitioners who are allowed to investigate new approaches to teaching and learning. A number of Fellows have mentioned that while their Universities were becoming risk adverse (to greater or lesser degrees) in relation to "experimentation" in teaching practice, (perhaps owing to the pressures for performance from the National Student Survey and other quality assurance requirements) they felt that as

an NTF they were allowed more leeway to innovate and support others in doing the same.

The status (and funding) attaching to NTFs seems to improve the possibility of practitioner-led innovation, that promises the real possibility of change for the better. There is no doubt that the scheme has led to the development of a community of scholars engaged in pedagogic research and inquiry, something which is desperately needed today where our student body and the ways in which it learns are vastly different to those that existed even 15 years ago. Higher Education is facing an identity crisis and rigorous research into higher education policy and practice should be encouraged and supported. Unfortunately with the current economic crisis, funding for such innovation is under threat and we urgently need to work collaboratively with colleagues around the world and especially in Europe to magnify our impact.

Indeed we would suggest that, as an element of the harmonisation presaged by the Bologna Declaration, which aims to create a Common European Higher Education Area by 2010, serious thought should be given to the introduction of a further objective. This would comprise a reward scheme, similar to that outlined above, but mindful of the various national contexts, which recognises and celebrates the efforts of the individual. In this way, the impact of the scheme would have both a macro impact on the Economic Union as a whole (through enhanced reputation) and a micro impact at the level of the individual lecturer (through recognition and reward of excellent teaching practice). Both are needed if teaching quality is to be meaningfully enhanced and the EU is to retain its competitive position in the global Higher Education arena.

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