

Improving the status and valuation of teaching in the careers of UK academics

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Summary of a joint project undertaken by the Academy of Medical Sciences, The Physiological Society, Heads of University Biosciences and the Society of Biology.

Summary

The quality of tomorrow's research, and the knowledge and skills of our future graduates, all depend on the quality of today's teaching. However, the low status and undervaluation of teaching contributions, compared with research, disadvantages many academics who use teaching as a strand of evidence for progress in their academic career. With changes to the higher education funding model driving heightened interest in teaching quality, redressing the teaching/research balance has become an increasingly prominent challenge. Three years following a 2010 report¹ that examined and made recommendations to address this issue, four organisations came together to assess progress in the sector, and identify challenges to and opportunities for further improvement. This work included a survey of more than 250 UK academics working across the breadth of the biosciences – including the biomedical sciences² - and a national workshop.

There is much to be optimistic about: examples of good practice have been emerging over the last three years, and there is now a broad and enthusiastic cohort (from all levels within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as well as national bodies) interested in addressing this imbalance of status and valuation. However, there is still much to do to integrate research and teaching and to raise the status and valuation of the teaching component to ensure that further progress is made to implement the 2010 recommendations. Funding is a relevant issue, but there is also an urgent need for a change in culture and to develop a widely established framework for identifying and measuring good teaching, as there is for research. The report recognises the need for:

- Identifying, developing, raising awareness of, disseminating and iterating best practice within the sector;
- Developing new, and building on existing, opportunities that individual academics could use as evidence of good teaching;
- Developing clear guidelines on evidencing and evaluating good teaching that capture both activity and impact; and
- Encouraging individual academics to proactively record evidence of their own achievements and to provide feedback on the activities and impact of their peers.

Background

The Academy of Medical Sciences, The Physiological Society, the Heads of University Biosciences and the Society of Biology formed a joint steering group in 2013 to review the status and valuation of teaching in Higher Education (HE) in the biosciences three years after the publication of the Academy's 2010 report '[Redressing the balance: the status and valuation of teaching in academic careers](#)'. The membership of the steering group, which included representation from the Higher Education Academy, is [available online](#).³

The aim of the steering group was to:

- Assess the extent to which the 2010 recommendations have been met and whether there is still an imbalance in the status and valuation of teaching, compared with research, in academic careers across the biosciences.
- Determine which, if any, of the recommendations continue to be of key relevance in the current policy context, and how these can be addressed.
- Raise awareness in order to share best practice, discuss barriers to progress, and catalyse activity to redress any identified imbalance across key stakeholders.

¹ Academy of Medical Sciences (2010). Redressing the balance: the status and valuation of teaching in academic careers.

<http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/redressing-the-balance-the-status-andvaluation-of-teaching-in-academic-careers/>

² In the context of this report, 'biosciences' includes the biomedical sciences.

³ In this report, 'available online' links to

<http://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/redressing-thebalance-the-status-and-valuation-of-teaching-in-academic-careers/>

To meet these aims, the steering group undertook the following two activities:

- A survey of over 250 individual academics across bioscience departments and medical schools in UK universities in the summer of 2013. The academics represented a wide range of university mission groups, clinical and non-clinical departments, careers stages and teaching loads. Results from the survey indicated that there is still much to do to raise the status of teaching. The steering group's interpretation of the survey results is [available online](#).
- A national workshop on 28 March 2014, which raised awareness of the 2010 report, its recommendations and the extent of their implementation in 2013; further promoted the importance of the issue to a range of HE stakeholders; disseminated case studies that highlight good practice ([available online](#)); and discussed processes for evidencing and evaluating good teaching ([available online](#)). The workshop was attended by approximately 80 guests: representatives from funders, national bodies and Learned Societies, as well as those from across the HE sector - including Vice Chancellors, Pro Vice Chancellors of Education, Deans of Faculty, Heads of Bioscience and academics of all career stages. The workshop agenda is [available online](#).

This short report draws on these activities to summarise: the changes to the landscape since 2010; the implementation of the 2010 recommendations - progress, challenges and opportunities; and the next steps that can be taken by organisations and individuals to improve the current situation.

Changes to the landscape

Major changes to the policy landscape since 2010 include:

- Changes to the HE funding model are driving increased concern for teaching quality. The shift from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to direct student fees following the [Browne Review](#) (2010) and the [Government White Paper](#) (2011), as well as the increasing role of the [National Student Survey](#) (NSS), is driving the sector to focus on teaching quality.⁴ There is a role for students as partners rather than consumers within this new system.
- HEFCE reductions in the recurrent grant for teaching and faster-than-planned withdrawal of government support for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) could send signals that undermine the status and valuation of teaching. The HEA currently provide a significant amount of both subject specific and generic support – including the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) – for academic and teaching careers and it is not clear how this support will be impacted.
- In the absence of an equivalent driver for teaching, the financially-driven Research Excellence Framework (REF) continues to tip the academic career away from teaching. The REF explicitly links institutional income to research performance. Although much institutional income arises from student fees, there are however no equivalent transparent drivers to link that income with teaching quality. Such drivers need to be developed, embedded and celebrated, underlining the need to evolve existing – and develop new - mechanisms for evidencing teaching quality.
- There is now a broad and enthusiastic cohort interested in addressing these issues, and examples of good practice exist in the sector

⁴ <http://www.delni.gov.uk/browne-report-student-fees>, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32409/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf, <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>, <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2013/05/15/2013-student-academic-experience-survey/> and <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/oct/21/universities-research-teaching-minister>

Key issues: progress, challenges and opportunities

The workshop included presentations on best practice in areas that were highlighted as a particular concern by the 2013 survey: teaching training; teaching allocation and parity of esteem between research and teaching; and valuing teaching expertise in recruitment and promotion. These slides are [available online](#). A key theme of the survey responses was that transparency and communication of initiatives and procedures is a real concern.

Although there has been progress since 2010 on many issues, there are still challenges to implementation of the 2010 recommendations. These are summarised below, alongside opportunities to build upon and expand this progress. Change relies mostly on culture, which in some cases would be assisted by additional funding.

Culture

- Most academic units now state teaching as a core part of their mission and expect all staff to teach.
- However, the culture in HEIs and funding bodies is still clearly a barrier to improvement in the status and valuation of teaching, with little change reported since 2010. The commonly perceived hierarchy in HEIs that research is more valuable than teaching, and in turn, teaching more valuable than administration is counterproductive and must be addressed.
- A community of academics is emerging that sees the importance of a culture shift, providing a positive foundation for further progress. It was suggested that bioscience departments may be able to act as engines of change within HEIs given the faster-changing nature of their curricula. Suggested actions included: addressing employers and funders 'buying' their researchers 'out' of teaching; ensuring prominent teaching contributions from HEI senior management; ensuring that academics are not advised to 'avoid' teaching to 'protect' their research time; and encouraging HEIs to commit to investing a certain percentage of income into research and development for learning and teaching activities. In addition, individual academics should be encouraged to take personal responsibility for maintaining a portfolio summarising teaching related activities and their impact. Conversely a culture in which individuals proactively offer feedback on the teaching-related activities of their peers must be developed. This should help to make evidence-gathering a more integral part of the career development process.

Knowledge of income from teaching and research

- There is a lack of knowledge of relative institutional research and teaching income.
- Appropriate communication of the relative contributions of teaching and research to departmental and institutional income is needed. The aim would not be to devalue research but to highlight that both often have an equal standing in an effective department and to ensure that the different contributions of individuals are valued.

Recruitment and promotion

- Since 2010 there have been changes to written promotion criteria with a larger number of institutions specifying promotion through teaching routes, and there is evidence that professorial promotions through this route have begun to emerge. Mrs Fiona Ford, Deputy Human Resources Director and Head of Organisational Development at the University of Bristol presented practice and progress at her institution (slides are [available online](#)).
- However, there is a widely-held view that interest, experience and expertise in teaching is not integral to recruitment or promotion in many institutions. In some institutions promotion to professorial level by teaching is not seen to be practically possible even if technically possible. A barrier could be that many criteria have been written with research in mind, which means some elements (e.g. external recognition) are much harder to evidence for teaching. It is therefore essential that more workable, effective and widely-accepted mechanisms for evaluating teaching contributions are developed (please refer to the Teaching evaluation section on the next page).

- For career pathways that involved teaching, recruitment processes could involve applicants presenting a lecture for observation. Different promotion pathways with defined and bespoke criteria to match the area of expertise in the pathways are also important. Both of these aspects were highlighted in the case study from the University of Bristol. Whilst recognising the difference in the alternate pathways is important, ensuring uniform job titles across the pathways and the ability to move between the different pathways would help demonstrate they are equivalent. Moving between these pathways could be challenging and so provision of support for any movement between them would be important. Ensuring that the equivalents in each career pathway receive parity of pay would be vital to ensure that this system is not undermined. Mentoring was felt to be a very helpful way to provide feedback throughout a teaching career to aid with promotion.

Teaching training for academics

- Professor Paul Blackmore, Director of the King's Learning Institute at King's College London presented practice and progress at his institution (slides are [available online](#)).
- One of the challenges is providing useful and relevant training that is realistic in timeframe. In particular, it can be difficult to define what training is sufficient, who should lead training, where the training should take place and what training is appropriate at what point. It is also difficult to determine if training should be specifically in teaching or in academic practice more broadly, and how much training should be subject specific.
- There could be increased funding for subject specific Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and increased fellowships and internships for teaching. This may be a challenge against the current backdrop of faster-than planned withdrawal of government support for the HEA, and other organisations may need to consider how they support subject-specific CPD. HEFCE recognise that students preferred teachers with teaching qualifications rather than more contact hours. If this is the case then might there be an opportunity to provide more time allowance and encouragement for completion of courses such as the Postgraduate certificate (PGCert) in learning and teaching.

Teaching allocation

- Allocation of teaching in many institutions now conforms to three of the four key principles of the 2010 report, namely that allocation is: led by a senior academic; usually or always involves discussion with the academic concerned; and takes academics' other responsibilities into account, including offering flexibility at different career stages. Professor Richard Reece, Associate Vice-President for Teaching, Learning and Students at the University of Manchester presented practice and progress at his institution (slides are [available online](#)).
- However, in discussion it was agreed that there is widespread lack of transparency of teaching contributions between all academics and there is still more work to do in spreading good practice.
- Institutions could review their allocation models and make them transparent to all staff. The benefits of a teaching allocation model transparent to all staff at the University of Manchester were felt to outweigh any risks in this approach. Such transparency could help to instigate a culture shift, helping to encourage and recognise teaching contributions.
- To change perceptions that teaching is undervalued, senior HEI management should lead by example by ensuring they make prominent teaching contributions themselves.

Teaching evaluation

- The strategy for evaluating teaching is unclear at many HEIs. Effective mechanisms and processes to evaluate teaching are lacking, which hampers improvement in the status and valuation of teaching. There is little confidence within HE regarding mechanisms and processes to evaluate good teaching. This impedes the ability to go beyond simply ensuring teaching is above a satisfactory threshold, and to generate an evidence base for recognition. One of the key messages was that evidencing good (rather than simply satisfactory) teaching requires demonstrating and evaluating both the teaching-related activity itself and, importantly, the impact of that activity.
- The afternoon of the workshop was dedicated to discussing processes for evidencing and evaluating good teaching. A table summarising these discussions is [available online](#). There were strong calls to think creatively to develop novel ways to evidence good teaching, for example providing external experience for academics by arranging mutual systems between different HEIs such as guest lecture series. There is a role for learned societies in aiding the development of coherent teaching evaluation guidelines for HEIs and academics. These would need to appropriately weight different aspects of: student feedback; evidence of provision of support to students and peers; evidence of personal reflection; evidence of student learning; peer review; the UK Professional Standards Framework; scholarship; external roles and recognition. Mentoring could help to encourage self-reflective and self-reporting behaviour (e.g. keeping a portfolio of achievements in certain roles), and prepare individuals for the future as teaching evaluation evolves and becomes more commonplace.

Next steps for further progress

The 2010 report analysed the problem of the status and valuation of teaching in UK academic careers and made recommendations. In 2014, this problem is widely accepted and of increasing concern. However, despite some progress, much more remains to be done to address this imbalance between teaching and research. To ensure that further progress is made in the next three years, it will be necessary to develop, raise awareness of, share and iterate best practice within the sector, covering areas including:

- Recruitment and promotion
- Teaching training
- Horizontal transparency of teaching allocations
- Mentoring
- Communication and transparency of:
 - Income arising from research and teaching; and
 - The development and implementation of any initiatives undertaken to improve the status and valuation of teaching.

There are roles for HEIs and their departments, as well as the HEA and learned societies, in achieving these steps. Suggested activities include:

- Develop guidelines on evidencing and evaluating good teaching, taking the discussions at this workshop ([available online](#)) as a starting point. There are roles for learned societies and HEIs in developing guidance. There are roles for HEIs and individual academics in implementing guidance. Individuals also have a role in proactively maintaining personal evidence portfolios regarding their teaching activities and impact, and to provide feedback for their peers' portfolios.
- Research, identify and disseminate good practice in HEIs in the use of criteria to support a case for promotion to senior lecturer, reader and professor on the basis of achievements in teaching. This could include identifying and publishing case studies of individuals in the biosciences in a range of HEIs, for whom achievements in teaching have been an important aspect of their career progression/promotion. There is a role here for learned societies, perhaps in association with national bodies such as the HEA.
- External mechanisms for demonstrating and sharing best practice should be nurtured, developed and encouraged – for example, sabbaticals, the external examiner system and guest lectures series.

- Develop new opportunities for individual academics that could be used as evidence of good teaching. There is a role for academics and HEIs, perhaps with assistance from national bodies such as the HEA and learned societies, in undertaking this step.
- There is also a role for HEIs and their departments in considering whether to set targets for investment into Research and Development on learning and teaching.

Whilst this report has focused on the perspectives of the bioscience community, national transdisciplinary action is needed to tackle and embed many of the recommendations above. There is a role here for organisations such as Universities UK, Research Councils UK and HEFCE.

Conclusion

Teaching is a critical function of UK Higher Education and needs to be recognised appropriately in UK academic careers. There is a need at institutional and department level to instigate a culture shift and there is also a clear role learned societies can play to support such a shift.

Good research-informed teaching inspires students and changes lives; it also drives the UK's research base, leading to a virtuous circle between education and research that generates new knowledge and brings health, societal and economic benefits.

[Available online:](#)

- Interpretation from survey
- Breakout groups table
- Workshop Agenda
- Slides from case studies of good practice

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