

53 Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About

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Rewarding excellent teachers may not improve teaching much

In the early 1980's I organised what was probably the first conference in the UK devoted to recognising and rewarding excellent teachers, with speakers from several countries outlining award and promotion mechanisms already in place at their institution. SCEDSIP, the organisation that eventually became SEDA, published the proceedings. I was optimistic that if only the way rewards were allocated could be changed, then teaching would become more highly valued and academics would try harder to be good at teaching, and teaching would improve. My institution, Oxford Polytechnic, changed their promotion regulations to emphasise teaching excellence to a much greater extent – and it created quite a stir. I remember a prominent researcher from a Science department, who had a reputation as a quite dreadful teacher, crashing into my office and shouting at me for 15 minutes, arguing that research was the only thing that really mattered. My response was to say: “If that is what you believe then I suspect you are working in the wrong institution”. He stayed, and carried on teaching, badly. I carried on undertaking research into award and reward mechanisms and publishing practical guides on how to do it and how to build it into institutional strategies.

Fast forward 20 years and I was the speaker at a research University's first ever teaching

awards event. One of the award winners was a man of 65 who had, that morning, retired. He said, in public, that receiving a teaching award was the first time that his teaching had been acknowledged in public in his entire career. There was not a dry eye in the house. But I felt that the people in the room were in a small minority in their institution, seeking solace together with like-minded souls, temporarily shielded from the harsh realities outside. A month later I was at a research University in the north of England (that will remain nameless) again speaking at their first teaching awards event. The VC turned up, spoke for five minutes about the primary importance of research, and left before the awards were made. I was a little surprised they bothered carrying on with the event and did not all troop off to drown their sorrows.

Teaching awards seemed to have been added like sticking plaster to organisations whose values lay elsewhere. In some institutions the 'rewards' for excellent teachers are parallel career paths that guarantee lower status and worse conditions, pay and prospects. I have heard it argued that a teaching award is a kiss of death to promotion prospects. My wife, then an academic at a Russell Group University, was advised to remove three books she had written about teaching from her CV in case the promotion panel got the wrong idea about her priorities.

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I am also not at all convinced that awards change behaviour. I have spoken to quite a few people who have received teaching awards from their institution, or nationally. I was interested in whether they sought awards or whether they just concentrated on doing what they thought right, and personally rewarding, sometimes for many years, until someone persuaded them that they should apply for an award. No-one has ever said to me that they had set out, in their teaching, to win an award. There have always been at least some truly wonderful teachers and there always will be. It is nice that they get recognised, but they are not the issue. The issues are, firstly, whether rewards improve teaching and second, whether all the teachers who are unlikely to ever get awards, perhaps 90% of all teachers, are affected at all.

Another decade on, and over 30 years since the first conference on rewarding excellent teachers, and the Conservative Government have published a Green Paper containing national policy proposals for a 'Teaching Excellence Framework', the goal of which is claimed to be redressing the balance between research and teaching. It does not feel as though progress has been all that quick.

The Conservatives' proposals are to allow institutions to charge students even higher fees if they can prove they are excellent at teaching – reward through funding. This is supposed to incentivise academics to teach better so that their 'teaching metrics' are more impressive so that they attract more students who are prepared to pay more for such

excellence and so the teachers will make more money. But I have seen what happens if a Department can show they can attract more students: their intake is increased without additional funding and they end up with huge classes without the resources to teach adequately, and teachers struggle to provide a decent education and have to work harder. Such Departments are used as cash cows to cross subsidise other departments who do not attract students, for whatever reason, or to pay for research now that RAE and REF funding has collapsed, or for posh buildings that might attract students. It is hard to believe that individual teachers would try harder to teach well, under this regime, unless there were strong guarantees that those who earned more cash got the cash they had earned – and perhaps not even then. It seems an unlikely motivator. Institutions will want to play this game, but will individual teachers?

Institutional mechanisms about teaching excellence that I have seen that appear to work, function rather differently. They set the base level of adequacy at teaching very high, and crank it up over time. For example Stanford University, an elite research institution, argue that they cannot afford to charge such eye-watering fees if any of their teaching is less than quite good. Their Provost, who has to sign off all appointment and tenure decisions made by departments, will veto any employment decision that is not supported by convincing evidence that the individual concerned is really quite good as a teacher. This helps the value climate at Stanford as no-one who is neglectful or poor as a teacher is

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likely to be employed there. They do not pretend that they employ the best teachers – they clearly employ the best researchers. But they are very careful indeed to not employ researchers who just don't care about their students. At Utrecht, another serious research university, there is a defined level of competence as a teacher that has to be achieved for each level of an academic career. Each Department works out what this means in practice and learns how to judge it – and this can take a decade to get it right. But over time Departmental standards go up and no academics progress unless they meet these standards. Again the emphasis is on everybody being a lot better than poor, rather than on a few unusual individuals being absolutely wonderful. Sydney also has a formal mechanism for ensuring that no-one climbs the slippery promotion pole without paying quite a lot of attention to their teaching. Each

of these mechanisms, in their different ways, establishes a high floor, rather than a very high peak.

While the REF is claimed to be about rewarding excellent research it has actually acted largely as a punishment for the majority, taking away some or all of research funding and leading to many academics' careers and daily patterns of work being changed for the worse against their will. It is a selective and exclusive mechanism, and deliberately so, and only a few can win. I fear that the proposed TEF, despite the rhetoric, will be similarly punitive, punishing all but the elite with public opprobrium and constrained funding. I have become sceptical about the value, and nature of impact, of teaching reward mechanisms that are not inclusive and that do not involve everybody.

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