Student-led fellowships: developing partnerships to identify best practice and promote change

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Introduction

Awards to recognise teaching excellence have become commonplace within the Higher Education Sector (Piascik et al, 2011). Gunn and Fisk (2013), in their recent analysis of teacher excellence, highlight difficulty in defining such concepts as 'excellence' and consequently, therefore, in schemes to measure teacher excellence. From the literature, Gunn and Fisk (2013) identify within emerging themes two core conditions for individual teacher excellence: "being dynamically engaged in teaching practice and inspiring and practically scaffolding the potential dynamic engagement of one's students." Teacher excellence awards take many forms, including sector-wide strategic approaches, disciplinary awards or institutional awards, each with its own recognition criteria (Gunn and Fisk, 2013). McLean (2001), in her study of medical students' perception of excellence, found distinct differences and contradictions between what the institution values and what the students value, noting that students tend to rate more highly personal attributes and interactivity. This raises the question as to how institutions and students can work together to recognise and address these differences, in order to reward, value and disseminate best practice.

In 2009/2010, the Higher Education Academy and National Union of Students, Scotland, developed student-led teaching awards and evaluated their impact. They identified a number of benefits that these awards brought to students, the institution and the students' union. The benefits included: raising the profile of good teaching, empowering students to get involved in improving learning and teaching, learning more about what students value, sharing good practice to improve professional standards, rewarding excellent teaching and raising the profile of students' unions within the institution http://www.studentledteachingawards.org.uk/.

Building on the success of these initial pilot projects, Cardiff Metropolitan University sought to instigate its own Student-Led Teaching Fellowship Scheme. However, unlike other similar schemes, this one sought to develop joint ownership, providing the opportunity for closer working in partnership between the University's Learning and Teaching Development Unit (LTDU) and the Students' Union (Cardiffmet SU), to establish categories and criteria, develop an evidence-based nomination system and provide greater opportunities for the dissemination of good practice. This case study will seek to illuminate some of the advantages of this partnership between the LTDU and Cardiffmet SU and highlight some of the issues that remain in trying to use these fellowships to instigate change through sharing good practice and recognising excellence.

Cardiff Metropolitan Student-led Teaching Fellowships

In 2011/2012, the LTDU and Cardiffmet SU met to establish a student-led scheme aimed at recognising and promoting best practice in teaching and learning. After a review of student-led teaching fellowships in other institutions, where awards were primarily administered by student unions, it was felt that partnership between the LTDU (responsible for enhancement of academic practice) and the Cardiffmet SU would enable student voice to have more

impact. This partnership would enable institutional drivers to be used, together with insight into the real experiences of students, to determine categories for nomination. It would also enable a rich discussion and shared understanding of important learning and teaching principles and promote an awareness of the issues affecting staff. Finally, though the awards would, as in other institutions, be used to highlight best practice, the central role of LTDU would increase opportunities to use student voice to inform the development of academic development activities, disseminate best practice through publications and promote change.

The aims of this partnership were to:

- provide opportunities for more and closer working in partnership;
- empower students to influence their learning experience;
- identify clearly what students value in learning and teaching;
- identify best practice across the University and provide a platform for sharing this practice;
- improve levels of student satisfaction;
- reward and recognise staff for excellence in learning and teaching, thereby raising the profile of learning and teaching;
- provide an evidence base for good practice within the institution, to inform future initiatives.

The Partnership

The partnership has several layers: a core team, comprising three members of the SU (the President, the Manager and the Employability Officer) and three members of LTDU (the Dean of Learning and Teaching, a Principal Lecturer in Academic Development and the Senior Quality Enhancement Officer), has responsibility for the development of the nomination categories, the setting up of the process and the selection of winners; school student representatives liaise with course representatives to ensure that all students are informed of the nomination process and that there is consistency and equity across all schools; LTDU is responsible for the dissemination of outcomes and resulting publications, whilst the President of the SU presents award winners with their awards at graduation. This partnership is now well-established and has recently led to the appointment of a paid student intern to work across both units on a variety of joint initiatives. Funding for the awards, provided centrally, demonstrates the institution's commitment.

Developing categories for nominations

Categories were developed through data analysis of such surveys as the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE), retention and withdrawal data and consideration of strategic drivers (e.g. the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and national and sector-wide themes). This provided the opportunity for the partnership to develop a shared understanding of national higher education initiatives and institutional drivers and to identify areas within the institution that demonstrated best practice or were in need of some pedagogical development and enhancement. Within each category, questions were framed to help students identify best practice; these also served to illuminate the current level of commitment of staff to the enhancement of the student experience.

LTDU designed the prompt-questions for each category, based on principles of best practice identified through the pedagogic literature; the partnership worked to re-design them with student-friendly, accessible language.

An example is provided below:

Category: Best Feedback

This category was developed through analysis of the NSS, which indicated that feedback within the institution could be enhanced. The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy also identified improvement of feedback as one of the institution's priorities and this reflected a national driver to improve assessment and feedback.

Prompt-questions:

- Have you received feedback that helps you recognise good performance and outlines expectations? *(Developed from the Re-Engineering Assessment Principles – REAP* http://www.reap.ac.uk/ *)*
- Did that feedback help you recognise your strengths and weaknesses and provide you with high-quality information about your learning? *(Developed from the NSS)*
- Did feedback promote conversation around learning with your peers or tutor? *(Developed from REAP* http://www.reap.ac.uk/ *)*
- Did feedback motivate you to learn and assist you in reaching your desired performance by providing examples and opportunities for improvement before the final grade? *(Developed from REAP* http://www.reap.ac.uk/ *)*
- Was the feedback early enough to make a difference? *(Developed from REAP* http://www.reap.ac.uk/ *)*

Examples of other categories have included: best preparation for work (strategic and national drivers); assessment that enhances learning (strategic and NSS drivers); promoting confidence in learning (NSS and retention drivers); most innovative teaching and most inspirational teaching (both driven by institutional drivers to promote creativity).

The nomination process

Students are given the opportunity to vote online or on paper, with a request to provide examples of practice to justify their nominations. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the scheme has been to try to ensure parity of knowledge of the scheme across the five schools and different courses. The Cardiffmet SU has been instrumental in its advertising and mobilisation of student representatives to encourage engagement and we have seen a year-on-year rise in nomination numbers, with a two-fold increase this year (2013 – 2014). Involvement of student representatives at a school, year and programme level has ensured that as many students as possible are aware of the scheme. This, together with a strategy that has included both face-to-face and online advertising, has brought rewards. However, reaching post-graduate students remains a challenge, as their working patterns and priorities are often different. The partnership has yielded dividends in this area too, by harnessing the communication mechanisms of both LTDU and Cardiffmet SU and thus broadening the range of channels of communication with students.

The selection process

The selection process provides the opportunity to analyse what students have highlighted as valued practice and also to identify areas where students are less able to identify best practice. The make-up of the panel, comprising the Dean of Learning and Teaching, a Principal Lecturer in Academic Development and the Senior Quality Enhancement Officer, together with the Manager, President and Employability Manager of the Students' Union, ensures that any findings from analysis of the nominations can be used to inform enhancement activities by both the Students' Union and LTDU. Partnership broadens awareness of factors to be taken into consideration (such as cohort numbers and nature of the teaching context) that may inform the selection decisions. A qualitative analysis of the nominations, using a coding and categorisation methodology, allows for the emergence of themes and enables a rigorous selection process. These themes provide an excellent platform for reporting the nature of practice drawn from across the institution. The nature of the collaboration has also served to ensure a common language between all panel members and promoted discussion about priorities for staff and student development in pedagogy.

Using Student-led Teaching Fellowship Scheme to instigate change

Promoting best practice

The partnership has also provided a wider platform for dissemination of best practice. One of the most important aspects has been the institutional buy-in from senior management, valuing the scheme and therefore giving it prominence within the academic calendar. Award winners, introduced by the president of the Cardiffmet SU and congratulated by the Vice Chancellor, receive their certificates at graduation and are presented to the audience with extracts from their nominations. The articulation of inspirational practice is powerful in demonstrating staff commitment to both parents and students. Standing ovations and loud applause from the students within the graduation ceremony serve to acknowledge those who have influenced their learning. This prominence of the award is important in making students aware that their voice counts and is valued at all levels within the institution.

The appreciative inquiry approach (Cooperrider et al, 2008) adopted in the nomination process ensures that students provide examples of best practice to evidence their nomination. This evidence is crucial to guarantee that the nature of the selection process is robust and not viewed as a popularity contest. As previously mentioned, the analysis methodology identifies common themes and categories and these are used to disseminate best practice to staff members, through a yearly publication. This publication is distributed to all staff across the institution and is made available online to collaborative partners, featuring interviews with award winners, emergent themes, student nomination quotes and, this year (2014) an identified teaching tool from each winner that could be adopted by others. The value placed on the awards is exemplified by the professional design and production of the publication, which provides suggestions for change in practice, recognises excellence in teaching and highlights key pedagogical ideas or principles. An example is given below:

Theme Best Feedback

> *Students value feedback that:*

- *is constructive;*
- *is timely, regular and current;*

- *is confidence-promoting;*
- *is easy to understand;*
- *is detailed;*
- *provides an opportunity for reflection and improvement prior to submission of work;*
- *is transferable to other modules;*
- *uses peers to provide insight;*
- *utilises multiple feedback sources (audio, visual etc.).*

Example of student nomination…

"Fantastic feedback throughout our three years, always very constructive and allows for improvement to be made. She provides feedback in a number of ways, mainly verbally but also via email, feedback forms and voice recordings. Her feedback always provides a base to move a project forward and improve it."

Extract from interview with award winner*…*

How do you see feedback in the academic setting helping future employability?

"One of the things that students say they value is honest feedback. They want us to give them feedback that makes them think and agree or disagree with what we are saying and then be able to do something about it. When they leave here and join the workforce, whether it is dealing with clients or employers they are going to be brutally honest and so being prepared to put our own opinions on the line and back it up with reasons for why something works or doesn't is important..."

The findings from analysis of the nominations have also been used to inform academic development activities and to help staff recognise what students identify as good practice and where gaps are evident. For example, it is clear from the nominations that students have been less able to express what aspects of their learning experience have prepared them for the future. This has identified the need for much clearer articulation of graduate attributes and employability within the curriculum design process, together with teaching methodologies and assessment that enable engagement with the real world, such as problem-solving, creativity and team work. For the Students' Union, the nomination process has also highlighted the need for clearer articulation and provision of extra-curricular activities that promote employability skills.

Identifying change agents

The student-led teaching fellowships have been instrumental in identifying change agents within the schools. Those nominated by students are recognised as being inspirational and innovative in their practice and this identification of individual skills enables the Learning and Teaching Development Unit to compile a directory of teachers with the potential to develop others, whether by mentoring, peer observation, delivery of workshops or other staff development activities. The beauty of the Fellowship Scheme is that it provides insight into that which often goes on behind closed doors and is observed only by students.

The nominations have revealed, to name a few exemplary methods, innovative assessment, cross-disciplinary collaborations, techniques for engagement of large groups and creativity of

approach. Ordinarily, it is difficult to capture a cross-institutional view of teaching practice, as innovative teachers often display such humility and student-centred approach that they don't shout about their practice, but see it as just part of what they do. This process has provided the means of identifying these individuals and encouraging them to go for other awards or recognition, such as the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. This insight has also enabled like-minded people to be linked together to form Communities of Practice (Wenger et al, 2002) to share ideas and opportunities for collaboration.

Future challenges still remain…

Though the scheme has been running for three years, with an increase in the number of student nominations each year, it is difficult to ensure that all students are encouraged to nominate and have the opportunity to do so. The nature of the student representative system is much stronger at an undergraduate level, where school, year and course representatives are all involved to ensure that students are informed and encouraged to participate. Despite efforts to reach all the student population, pockets of students remain difficult to engage. In particular, nominations from post-graduate students remain low. This may be because post-graduate students are often part-time and have other work or family commitments. Though the number of postgraduate student nominations rose this year (2013 – 2014), the challenge of engaging a greater number of them in the scheme remains.

Other publicity methods have been used, including individual emails linking to the online nomination process, advertising on screens across the campuses and printed publicity with previous winners and examples of nominations. Despite these measures, the promotion of the scheme is still an inexact science and we are therefore keen that nominations are not used for performance review purposes but remain related to enhancement activities and truly appreciative in nature.

An additional challenge is how we communicate the outcomes and benefits of the award to *all* students of the University and thereby encourage them to vote in the next round. Within other institutions, the students' unions provide an award ceremony open to all students, whereas Cardiff Metropolitan University, by choosing to award the winners at graduation, offers the opportunity to applaud the winners only to third-year students.

It is hoped that, in 2015, the scheme will extend to collaborative partners across the world, to further the sharing of good practice and provide an international perspective. This presents even greater challenges in ensuring student engagement and participation, something in which the Students' Union will take a central role.

Conclusion

The benefits of this partnership between the Students' Union and a centralised Learning and Teaching Development Unit focusing on enhancement practices have been central to the importance placed upon and use made of the Fellowship Scheme. The wealth of qualitative material gained to inform enhancement activities and identify change agents places student voice at the centre of the change process. The importance of capturing also teacher voice in identifying good practice cannot be over-emphasised in ensuring the credibility of the awards. This has been achieved through the publication that provides insights into

innovative and inspiring practice. Challenges remain to ensure the validity of the process and achieve parity across all schools, between collaborative partners and at all levels of student learning.

Recommendations

Experience confirms that these awards have provided the opportunity to capture student voice and use it to recognise and disseminate excellent but often unrecognised practice. Those thinking of doing something similar may like to consider the following key recommendations and thoughts:

Recommendations

- Establish institutional buy-in to ensure credibility.
- Use national and institutional data, together with students' union feedback, to identify areas of priority for change and use these to form categories for nomination.
- Give value to student voice. Providing the means by which to communicate to staff members what students have recognised as good practice is key to influencing change.
- Get nominated staff to illuminate their practice, through examples identifying key messages for change. Examples provide other staff with ideas as to how to change their practice.
- Identify ways to communicate best practice. The more channels for communication that can be sought, the better the chance of change in practice (i.e. publications, graduation celebration, use of award winners to transfer skills for others' continuing professional development).
- Use award winners as change agents within the institution.

Thoughts

- The partnership has ensured that the awards remain credible and are seen not as a popularity contest but as the means to reward and recognise best practice.
- A working partnership with the Students' Union provides a platform for shared understanding of the real experience of both academic staff and students. This, in turn, has helped to identify further initiatives to promote meaningful change.

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