

The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in England and Northern Ireland.

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Summary

In the 1990s, the Higher Education Funding Councils of England and the equivalent body in Northern Ireland (DEL NI) took a positive step by 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.

History of the Scheme

For the first three years of the National Teaching Fellowship scheme, (1999-2001), twenty of the most outstanding university teachers were awarded a prize of £50,000, to be used over three years to complete 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.

The award was modified in 2002 to allow those at different stages of their career or 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. These winners were again provided with a prize fund in recognition of their outstanding achievement which again was to be used in carrying out a specific piece of research or inquiry. In this phase of the award, a portion of the prize 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 prize 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 winner can spend the money as they see fit. 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 leading each bid. These projects generally address institutional or national strategic priorities and cross-institutional collaboration is particularly encouraged.

Purpose of the Award

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. Indeed, 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 report on consultation on L&T strategy 1999-2004).

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 Award

The Association of National Teaching Fellows

In this 10th year of the scheme, we now have more than 400 National Teaching Fellows, which is a lifetime award and confers 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 that 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 fellow was invited to attend the conference and provide an opportunity for continuing dialogue between international teaching fellows.

Impact of the Scheme

Very little concrete research has been carried out to look at the impact of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. Early studies failed to reach any meaningful conclusions because they were too early. In addition, changes in the criteria meant

that the scheme changed quite considerably in the early years. However a study by Frame, Johnson and Rosie (2006) examined those who has received the award between 1999 and 2002 and found evidence of both positive and negative impact on those early award winners. In addition, a review of the HEA in 2008 clearly identified the NTF scheme as one of the most successful activities associated with the Higher Education Academy.

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, it captures the spirit of the Association and the impact of the award. 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, whilst appreciating that it is almost impossible to evidence this in any meaningful way.

Student Impact

Colleagues have stated that receiving the NTF gave them the confidence 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 multiplying the effect of their personal impact on student learning, disseminating their work and embedding it in practice. This has been to the benefit of thousands of students over the years. NTFs have developed innovative approaches to teaching, assessment and supporting students which have enhanced recruitment and retention and enhanced the student learning experience. This work has been widely shared and disseminated leading to a much greater impact than the NTFs may have had alone.

Personal Impact

At a personal level, many NTFs have identified their award as being key to their personal and professional development in Higher Education.

“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.”

“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.”

National Teaching Fellows have been conferred at every level. 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 to this point so that it has been part of profession development plan. Fellows also identified the fact that the process of selection was submission to the scheme was also valuable since within their institution it had placed their work under the spotlight. In some institutions even those who are unsuccessful had found the process useful because the support and feedback they had received 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 supporting their employees to apply for an award suggests that the reputation of the scheme makes it a sought after accolade. Many colleagues have stated that through the validation 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 the NTFS and some have capacity building schemes for supporting colleagues several years in advance as potential future institutional nominees.

The Scheme has achieved a lot in changing the perception of what constitutes good and effective teaching in Universities. 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 institutional success. The move into strategic leadership roles of a number of NTFs demonstrates more than commitment to pedagogy and pedagogic research. It demonstrates commitment to whole institutional development including regional, national and international issues.

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 measures up to the external recognition 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 be hard. 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. Many of the other TQEF initiatives 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.

There is no doubt that there has been a significant shift in attitude towards reflective and evaluative teaching that is in part driven by greater recognition. The NTF scheme is an important part of such recognition because it confers external validation. It is unlikely that internal schemes, welcome though they are, could provide the same the leverage.

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. 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 Scandanavia and Holland.

Its 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 meeting 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.

In conclusion

This is just a brief and of necessity, subjective account of the some of the impacts of the NTF Scheme through which, HEFCE has facilitated the development of powerful advocates for enhancing the quality of the student learning experience: passionate, enthusiastic teachers committed to scholarship in teaching and learning. The scheme has been praised throughout the World and we mustn't 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 and is disappearing and we urgently need to work collaboratively with colleagues around the world and especially in Europe to magnify our impact.