PROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION FOR UNIVERSITY SCIENCE TEACHERS

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KEYWORDS: academic professional development, professional recognition, university teaching

The question: How do we assess 'practice-based experience'?

The *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)* requires teaching staff to have "skills in contemporary teaching'' and "qualifications one level higher than course being taught or professional or practice-based experience and expertise", How do we assess "skills in contemporary teaching"? Must we insist on every university teacher completing a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education? What about clinical specialists who teach our students in professional settings but are not primarily academic staff? What about science courses where interactive, inquiry-based and/or peer-engaged learning is the focus? Research suggests that the best tutors and demonstrators for students in such contexts may be near-peers: more advanced than the students they work with, but not always a full qualification ahead. How do we decide what is sufficient "professional or practice-based experience and expertise" in these cases?

One answer: Professional recognition against standards

The Australian National University (ANU) is developing its capability to recognise and reward staff who can evidence practice-based knowledge and experience of teaching and learning, and show their commitment to work-based professional development. To do this, ANU is using an internationally-accredited professional recognition scheme, in the context of the *Professional Standards Framework* (Higher Education Academy, 2011). This Standards Framework identifies five areas of teaching activity, six different kinds of relevant knowledge, and four kinds of professional values, as the key to effective contemporary teaching. ANU was the first non-UK university to be accredited, in early 2014, to award recognition—on the basis of appropriate levels of evidence against the Framework—through the four hierarchical categories of Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowship. More than 450 fellowships have now been awarded by the HEA-accredited ANU Educational Fellowship Scheme: more than 200 to ANU staff, and a further 200 to external applicants from some 15 other universities in Australia and New Zealand, after awareness-raising events around the country through the author's National Teaching Fellowship (Australian Government Office for Teaching and Learning).

Focus on Science Teaching

Academics who teach in science disciplines, including medicine and mathematics, have been keen to embrace this professional recognition: almost half of all recognised fellows at ANU are from these areas. Science tutors, demonstrators and specialist clinical educators are well suited to Associate Fellowship, which requires a more limited set of knowledge to be evidenced against practical experience with students. The focus on a developmental approach to recognition at ANU means that more of our most junior science teaching staff are now engaging in professional development, reflecting on their teaching, and coming forward to evidence their practice. Reported benefits for institutions and individuals suggest positive impacts on teaching self-efficacy and teaching quality.

References

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Proceedings of the Australian Conference on Science and Mathematics Education, The University of Queensland, Sept 28th to 30th, 2016, page 19, ISBN Number 978-0-9871834-5-3.