Understanding ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education: a critical evaluation of the National Teaching Fellowships Scheme

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1. The Research Team
The research was undertaken between March 2001 and February 2002, by a team based in the Higher Education Research Centre (now the Centre for Higher Education & Lifelong Learning) at the School of Education, University of Sheffield. The team comprised: Principal Investigator: Dr Alan Skelton; Co-investigator: Mr Richard Higgins (now Sheffield Hallam University); Administrative Support: Mrs Lisa Pass, Mrs Colleen Woodward, Mrs Tina Cartwright.

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3. Executive Summary of Research Results
A research project entitled ‘Understanding teaching excellence in higher education: a critical evaluation of the National Teaching Fellowships Scheme’ (NTFS) was conducted by researchers at the University of Sheffield between March 2001 and February 2002. The study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant no R000 22 3509). The aim of the research was to undertake a critical evaluation of the NTFS which would address questions beyond its immediate operational logic and procedures, thereby helping it to gain credibility within the sector. The study explored three inter-related question areas: 1) how ‘teaching excellence’ is understood within the NTFS 2) what are the key characteristics of the NTFS as a development mechanism and strategy and 3) what impact the NTFS has made on the professional lives and identities of the award winners. A variety of research methods were used to pursue these question areas including: a literature review of existing work into ‘teaching excellence’; documentary analysis of the NTFS; interviews with members of the National Advisory Panel (NAP); focus groups with students and staff from the University of Sheffield and further interviews with all 20 of the 2000 NTFS award winners.

3.1. How ‘teaching excellence’ is understood within the context of the NTFS
Our data suggested that ‘teaching excellence’ within the NTFS is underpinned by a model of ‘reflective practice’. This model draws principally on the work of Schon (1983; 1987) and involves fellowship holders reflecting upon their own teaching, identifying solutions to practical problems, and disseminating ‘good practice’ to colleagues. This model of reflection draws principally upon psychological theories of teaching and learning, emphasising the transaction between individual teachers and learners and ignoring the wider social, political and economic context within which higher education is located.

Our data also clarified how the criteria for ‘teaching excellence’ were generated in the NTFS. We found that the amount and quality of deliberation within NAP meetings was limited. In presenting a provisional set of criteria to the NAP, the ILT drew on previous research into award schemes and some of the more focused, professional writing on teaching excellence. However, they did not address any of the ‘meta-level’ debates about education that underpin understandings of ‘teaching excellence’, and these were not made available to the NAP or featured in NAP discussions. The
provisional criteria were consistent with ILT membership criteria. NAP chose to develop their own four broad criteria, making a distinction between ‘teaching excellence’ and competence. Panel members expressed different views on the extent to which there had been inter-judge reliability in the use of these criteria to assess applications. Some felt that there had been insufficient deliberation around the criteria to make this possible. A ‘defence-then-voting’ system of reconciling differences in assessment was perceived to be highly unsatisfactory by most respondents.

3.2 The NTFS as a development mechanism and strategy
No explicit model or strategy for educational change appears to inform the work of the 20 fellowship holders. Implicitly they are viewed as reflective practitioners who will disseminate ‘good practice’ within the sector. This approach appears to be based on ‘transfer’ theories of learning which do not recognise the complexity of educational change. The nature of the teaching fellows’ development projects will influence the impact they will have within the sector. Our research found that most of the projects resemble a form of ‘technical’ or ‘practical’ action research. Such projects can be beneficial in fostering collaboration and producing outcomes that are highly relevant to practitioners. But they tend to be under-theorised and divorced from the wider social context within which higher education is located. Plans for the teaching fellows to work collectively to promote teaching and learning have met with limited success. A ‘shared identity’ beyond camaraderie had not developed and some people expressed disappointment that no common values and purposes had been established.

3.3 The impact of the NTFS on the professional identity of the award winners
Three people had been promoted to professorial level following NTFS recognition. A national award for ‘teaching excellence’ may therefore represent an ‘objective’ measure that promotion panels can recognise, particularly in ‘teaching intensive’ institutions. Receiving an award validated people’s contribution to teaching, giving renewed impetus to their work. Award winners described how their confidence had increased, some becoming a ‘voice’ for educational matters within their departments. Some individuals in ‘research intensive’ institutions, however, said that receiving an award was a ‘poisoned chalice’ as it took them away from their substantive research interests. Many award winners appear to be part of an emerging cadre of staff with expertise of educational development work within the disciplines. This new professional identity allows academics within disciplines to validate their interest in pedagogical issues. To embrace this new identity fully, however, one would need to abandon substantive research interests within a discipline. Some of the award winners were unwilling to do this, particularly those in ‘research intensive’ institutions.

3.4 Using the research data to improve our understanding of the NTFS and to offer feedback to the HEFCE and the ILT.
Our research suggests that certain aspects of the NTFS would benefit from further review and development. We recommend that the following points are given due attention: the conceptual legitimacy of the ‘reflective practitioner’ model that underpins the scheme and its criteria; the extent to which a ‘psychologised’ form of reflection recognises the disciplinary diversity of potential applicants; the under-representation of certain groups in the NAP; the range of previous research into ‘teaching excellence’ that was made available to NAP and the time that is made available for deliberation; some of the selection processes established by the ILT (e.g.
procedures for institutional self-selection); the degree of inter-judge reliability in the assessment of NTFS applications and the suitability of one of the main methods for reconciling differences in the grading of applications. Further details are given in the full report.

Our research also found that the NTFS would benefit from a more explicit strategy for educational change. We recommend that the NAP clarify the status of the projects undertaken by award winners and the relationship between ‘teaching excellence’ and pedagogical research. We also recommend that award winners have academic support for their projects. If the teaching fellows are to work together effectively to promote teaching and learning within the sector, they need help to do this and a greater sense of shared values and purposes. As the ‘individual’ strand within the TQEF, we would suggest that the NTFS could be doing more to complement and balance the disciplinary emphasis of the ‘subject’ strand. This could be achieved by fostering an active inter-disciplinary network amongst fellowship holders to support productive links with and between LTSN subject networks.
4. Full Report of Research Results

4.1. Background
The research team undertook a critical evaluation of the NTFS, which was launched by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) in April 2000. The aim of the NTFS is ‘to not only reward teaching excellence, but…to raise the profile of teaching and learning across the sector’. Whilst the HEFCE itself reviewed the scheme after its first year of operation, there are important questions that fall beyond the immediate remit and scope of the review, which need to be addressed if the scheme is to gain credibility. As Barnett (1997: 18) has noted, any serious evaluation incorporates an element of critique, which provokes a debate from a ‘wider perspective than that in which the internal debates are usually conducted’. Although national award schemes for ‘teaching excellence’ have existed for many years in other countries and have been subject to evaluation (McNaught & Anwyl, 1993; Ramsden & Martin, 1996), the NTFS is the first national award for excellence in the UK. Evaluations of teaching award schemes in the UK have already been the subject of research, but these have focused on variations in institutional provision (Thomas, 1993; Warren & Plumb, 1999).

Our research was informed by an understanding of ‘teaching excellence’ as a contested concept which is historically and situationally contingent. In other words, there are different definitions of what it means to be an ‘excellent’ teacher and these are located within a shifting social, economic and political context. In recent years, for example, UK universities have been subject to the introduction of ‘new managerialist’ practices (Clarke and Newman, 1997), as the state has sought to increase its economic return from higher education (Salter and Tapper, 1994). Such practices have influenced the way people think about teaching, as a new ‘language of business’ has taken precedence over educational terms and principles (Barton, 1994; Barnett, 1994). The concern for economic advantage in the global, knowledge-based economy has also encouraged a commitment to the expansion of student numbers in higher education (NICHE, 1997). Whilst this commitment to expansion has not been accompanied by an increase in the unit of resource (leading some to point out that the quality of teaching is inevitably related to its material conditions: see Morley, 1997), the ‘massification’ of higher education has simultaneously driven an interest in pedagogical responses to student diversity (Skelton, 2002; Higgins et al., 2002).

‘Teaching excellence’ in higher education is also inescapably connected to broader social and technological changes: the use of new technologies being one of the most significant innovations in teaching and learning in universities in recent years (Hannan & Silver, 2000). Understandings of ‘teaching excellence’, therefore, are always intimately connected to the wider social, economic and political context and underpinned by broader discourses or ideologies of education (Williams, 1961) and models of the higher educator (Zukas & Malcolm, 1999). The degree to which particular understandings of ‘teaching excellence’ are dominant in a particular time and place, reveals something about the relative status of these broader visions about the nature and purpose of higher education.

Our research also draws upon an analysis of development mechanisms and strategies for the support of teaching and learning in higher education. Three main approaches to developing teaching and learning can be detected: individual, guided and directed
(Hannan & Silver, 2000: 6-9). Up until the late 1970s an ‘individual enthusiast’
approach dominated, where interested lecturers experimented with new teaching
methods. This gradually changed from the 1980s onwards as higher education became
more accountable and institutional structures for staff and educational development
were strengthened, supporting a period of ‘guided innovation’. Programmes such as
Enterprise in Higher Education, the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme
and the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning also began to be
introduced by national government and its agencies during this period. ‘Directed’
development initiatives of this kind were policy-driven and related to defined, often
‘vocational’ aspects such as work-based learning and key skills (DfEE, 1998).
Teachers involved in these initiatives had some scope to define them in terms of their
own priorities and concerns, adopting a pragmatic form of ‘action research’ for
reflecting upon and improving practice (McNair, 1998). As part of the Teaching
Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) introduced by HEFCE in 1999 (which also
includes development strands at subject and institutional levels), the NTFS represents
a continuation of this directed policy. The NTFS recognises 20 ‘excellent teachers’
each year, conferring on them the title of ‘national teaching fellow’ and allocating
£50,000 to support development projects. Prior to the introduction of the NTFS, there
had been considerable discussion within the sector of what ‘teaching excellence’
meant, how it might be recognised and what mechanisms for rewarding and
promoting it might be adopted (Elton & Partington, 1993). Surveys of teaching staff
opinion have shown that formal recognition through the promotions system is
regarded as the best way to reward good teaching, with awards for teaching being
seen as of minor importance in comparison and, for some people, alienating
(Ramsden & Martin, 1996). Despite these findings, awards for teaching excellence in
higher education have become commonplace in recent years, the NTFS drawing upon
similar schemes in Australia, the USA and Canada. As such it forms part of a growing
world-wide ‘excellence movement’ (McDonald, 1990, Fritzberg, 2000) and ‘awards
industry’ (Arena, 2001).

The growing literature on the professional identity of teachers in higher education
helped to contextualise our research and enabled us to explore the potential impact of
the NTFS on the award winners and their colleagues in the sector. For example, the
introduction of awards for ‘teaching excellence’ is consistent with the view that
teaching and learning need to be restored at the heart of university life (Nixon et al.,
1998) with the ‘scholarship of teaching’ becoming just as important as ‘blue-skies’
research or the ‘scholarship of discovery’ (Boyer, 1990; Boyer, 1994). Teaching
awards may also open up new professional identities as an emerging cadre of
academics become teaching and learning experts within their own discipline (Healey,
2000). Alternatively awards for teaching could become a ‘poisoned chalice’ for many
academics, since the take up of an emphasised ‘teaching identity’ may be costly in the
research culture of universities (Leon, 2002a). They may further polarise teaching and
research, accelerating the emergence of ‘teaching only’ contract staff and institutions
with differentiated and stratified ‘research’ and ‘teaching’ missions (see Nixon et al.,
2001: 232). Awards like the NTFS may therefore further erode what is taken by many
to be the fundamental ‘idea of the university’ (Barnett, 1990) since it is argued that
university education will only be revitalized once teaching and research are brought
into a closer and more productive relationship (Rowland, 1996).
4.2. Research objectives

1. The acquisition of new knowledge about how ‘teaching excellence’ is understood within the context of the NTFS. Data from phase one and two of the research addressed this objective.

2. The illustration of the NTFS as a development mechanism and strategy, looking in particular at the planned work of the fellowship holders and the way this articulates with wider constituencies of teachers and students in higher education. Again, data from phase one and two of the research addressed this objective.

3. The identification and description of ways in which the NTFS impacted upon the professional identity of the award winners. Data from phase two interviews with the 20 award winners in particular addressed this objective.

4. Using analysis of the data in phase three of the research to improve our understanding of the NTFS and to offer feedback to the HEFCE and the ILT. We are aiming to contribute to the future development of the NTFS. We are also seeking to contribute to future policy on how excellent teachers in higher education might be recognised and rewarded.

4.3. Methods

The research was organised in three phases:

- In phase one, a literature review of the existing research on ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education was conducted, together with an analysis of award schemes found in other countries. We carried out a documentary analysis of the NTFS, its procedures and criteria, as well as exploring its relationship with the TQEF. We analysed the way in which the non-educational and educational press (Times Higher Educational Supplement and Education Guardian) had covered the NTFS, looking, in particular, at the extent to which the reporting had allowed readers to engage critically with questions related to ‘teaching excellence’. We conducted four focus groups with teachers and students at the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University to elicit their perceptions of ‘teaching excellence’. These phase one processes helped to generate the semi-structured ‘interview guides’ (Patton, 1990) that formed the basis of work in phase two.

- In phase two, we conducted interviews with all 20 of the first cohort of teaching fellows. We were interested in their perceptions of ‘teaching excellence’ how they were selected within their institutions, what they aimed to do with their project grant of £50,000 and how the award impacted upon their professional identity. We also undertook interviews with six members of the National Advisory Panel (NAP). The NAP is the expert panel responsible, with the help of the ILT, for devising the criteria for ‘teaching excellence’, which underpinned the NTFS. We interviewed an equal balance of men and women, participants from ‘old’ and ‘new’ universities and a student representative. We were interested in the process that had occurred within NAP to generate the criteria for excellence; what deliberations had occurred and how different interpretations had been resolved. We also conducted interviews with representatives of a diverse range of institutions that had not participated in the NTFS to ascertain their reasons for non-involvement. We anticipated that ‘non-participating’ institutions might be well placed to think critically about the assumptions underpinning the NTFS and its understanding of ‘teaching excellence’.
In phase three, a content analysis of the data generated from these interviews was conducted, identifying common themes, contradictions and alternative cases. There was a movement ‘back and forth’ between theoretical ideas generated in phase one and phase two data to keep the analysis dynamic (see Lather. 1986).

We focused in particular on the first year of the NTFS (2000) to try and understand what assumptions about ‘teaching excellence’ were feeding into the development of the scheme and its procedures and criteria. During the period of the research we were able to gain some sense of how the scheme was developing in subsequent years, and to make comparisons where appropriate, but we found that the basic structure of the scheme remained intact during the first three years of HEFCE funding.

4.4 Results

4.4.1 How ‘teaching excellence’ is understood within the context of the NTFS

The NTFS is a significant contributor to an emerging and ‘official’ discourse of ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education. Linked to the HEFCEs teaching and learning strategy and offering rewards of £50,000, this first national award for teaching excellence in the UK carries considerable authority and symbolic appeal. Many institutions are developing their own awards based on the NTFS model (HEFCE, 2002). The explicit and implicit messages about ‘teaching excellence’ that are conveyed in and through the NTFS are therefore permeating many UK higher education institutions.

Research undertaken during phase one suggested that ‘teaching excellence’ within the context of the scheme is informed strongly by a model of ‘reflective practice’. This model draws principally on the work of Schon (1983; 1987) and involves teachers reflecting upon their own teaching and disseminating ‘good practice’ to colleagues within the sector. Reflecting upon one’s own practice involves identifying a mismatch between ‘espoused theories’ (how one should teach) and ‘theories in use’ (how one actually does teach) and proposing a practical solution to overcome this mismatch (McLean & Blackwell, 1997). The dissemination of good practice to colleagues represents a further layer of ‘reflection-on-action’: teaching fellows refine their ideas by sharing them with other people. The model of reflection underpinning teaching excellence in the NTFS draws mainly upon psychological theories of learning. Such a model emphasises the transaction between individual teachers and learners and ignores the wider social, political and economic context within which higher education is located (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001: 34-6). This model may favour those people who draw upon psychological theories of teaching and learning. Teachers who bring their own and/or different disciplinary perspectives to bear on questions of teaching and learning in higher education may find that their understandings of teaching excellence are not so easily recognised by the NTFS. Previous research has established that ‘reflective practice’ is often presented in the higher education literature as taken-for-granted ‘good practice’; its conceptual dominance within the sector demonstrated by the way it has been incorporated, without explanation, into the ILT accreditation framework (Zukas & Malcolm 1999: 2).
In our interviews with members of the NAP in phase two, we were able to explore the process by which the criteria for ‘teaching excellence’ were established and used to judge applications. We found that the amount and quality of deliberation within the NAP was limited. This was partly due to the time made available for discussion: there were four meetings of the panel in total during 2000, only one of which focused on identifying criteria for ‘teaching excellence’. An emphasis on ‘speed and efficiency’ appeared to characterise the meetings. The NAP was large, representing a range of institutions and different ‘voices’. But there were significant exclusions (one respondent characterised the panel as ‘white and grey’), limited student representation and a high number of educational developers. The NAP worked within structural parameters for the NTFS preset by the HEFCE. Members of the panel expressed concern about two of these parameters: firstly, the emphasis on ‘individual’ ‘teaching excellence’ in the awards and secondly, the decision to only recognise and reward an elite group of 20 award winners rather than the larger group of institutional nominees.

Criteria for teaching excellence were generated deductively by NAP acting as an ‘expert panel’ rather than inductively from a consideration of real cases. Some of the complexity involved in understanding excellence only became apparent when people tried to apply the criteria. In presenting a provisional set of criteria to the NAP, the ILT drew on extensive research they had conducted into award schemes and some of the more focused, professional research on ‘teaching excellence’ (for example, Elton & Partington, 1993). But they did not address any of the ‘meta-level’ debates about education that underpin understandings of ‘teaching excellence’ - for example, work on ideological traditions in education (Williams, R. 1961), different discourses of higher education (Williams, J. 1997: 27-45) and different models of the higher educator (Malcolm & Zukas, 1999) - and these were not made available to the NAP or featured in NAP discussions. Consequently there was little self-conscious, rational debate about alternative interpretations of ‘excellence’ within NAP.

The ILT presented provisional criteria for ‘teaching excellence’ that were consistent with those that people need to meet in applying to join the ILT. NAP developed their own criteria and made a distinction between teaching excellence and competence: they argued that excellent teachers need to demonstrate an ‘extended professionalism’ (Hoyle, 1980) beyond the classroom and contribute to the dissemination of good practice. ILT provisional criteria were appended to NAP criteria as a compromise – the ILT maintained that this was done to illustrate the range of evidence that might be considered but some panel members felt the two sets of criteria were contradictory (one ‘mechanistic and atomistic’ the other ‘organic and holistic’). NAP members had three main reservations about the selection process put in place by the ILT. These were a) the initial reliance on institutional selection of excellent teachers b) the absence of any observation of teaching and c) the limited and narrow range of evidence that was asked for in NTFS applications. Panel members disagreed about whether there had been inter-judge reliability in the assessment of NTFS applications. Some felt that there had been insufficient deliberation around the meaning of the four finally agreed broad criteria to make this possible. In the first year of the scheme, differences in the assessment of applications and the interpretation of criteria were resolved through a ‘defence-then-voting’ system. This was perceived to be highly unsatisfactory for most of the panel members we spoke to since it privileged those willing and able to robustly defend their own assessments at short notice. In the
second year of the scheme, more was done to encourage panel members to share and discuss their assessments, but this met with mixed success.

Phase two interviews with fellowship holders allowed us to elicit their understandings of ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education. Recognising the changing nature of the student body, the importance of teacher-learner interactions and the need to enhance students’ employment prospects, they identified seven key aspects: 1) reflecting upon and meeting the individual needs of students 2) ‘starting from where the students are at’ in their thinking and encouraging them to adopt an ‘active’ approach to learning 3) recognising the importance of communication: knowing and valuing students and being available for them 4) valuing and making use of new technologies in teaching 5) adopting problem-solving methodologies 6) recognising the importance of transferable skills and 7) offering learners flexibility and choice.

There were four different types of relationship between what teaching fellows said about ‘teaching excellence’ in their NTFS application and what they said to us in interview. These were (order based on reported frequency): a) correspondence b) ‘playing the game’ (one award winner used the term ‘reflection’ or a derivative 28 times in their application) c) reframing the NTFS (using it to support their own current interests) and d) ‘strategic compliance’ (Lacey, 1977: 72-3): where the individual complied with NTFS assumptions and requirements but retained private reservations about them (see Skelton, 1990).

Press coverage of the NTFS on the whole has been very positive. Non-educational press coverage in particular has maintained, legitimised and simplified the discourse on ‘teaching excellence’ initiated by the NTFS and made it available to the wider public. In reporting on the NTFS, the specialised educational press shifted from an initial ‘performance and glamour’ discourse on ‘teaching excellence’ to one which was more serious and questioning, offering readers some tools with which to engage critically with the NTFS and opportunities to explore nominees’ and award winners’ ideas and practices (see MacLeod, 2000; Currie, 2000a; Leon, 2002a).

4.4. 2 The NTFS as a development mechanism and strategy

No explicit model or strategy for change appears to inform the NTFS or the work of the 20 fellowship holders. No NTFS documentation adequately conceptualises the relationship between individual award winners and their wider constituencies. Although the TQEF as a whole is underpinned by a learning and teaching strategy (HEFCE, 1998), the aims of this strategy have not been pulled through as successfully into the NTFS as they have with the subject and institutional strands (for example, ‘good practice’ guidance for producing institutional learning and teaching strategies includes a discussion of ‘organisational change’ – see HEFCE, 2001). Within the documentation on the NTFS, the fellowship holders are viewed implicitly as reflective practitioners who will promote ‘good practice’ by disseminating the results of their project work to the wider higher educational community. But as teachers who have been identified and rewarded for their ‘teaching excellence’, it is also assumed that they have legitimate authority, as an ‘expert group’ (Gosling, 1996), to pass on their ‘everyday’ teaching expertise to others. The relationship that is implied between expert and other here is a passive one – the fellowship holder disseminates findings,
sets an example, identifies good practice and passes this on to colleagues. An assumption is made that project findings and good practice can be transferred from one practice to another in a relatively straightforward manner. This implicit model of dissemination and change is based on ‘transfer’ theories of learning (Fox, 1983) and is evident in many of the HEFCE publications related to the TQEF (For example, subject centres are sometimes referred to as ‘one stop shops’ and ‘delivery’ and ‘transfer’ feature frequently in the language of guidance material and ‘good practice’ guides, see HEFCE, 2001). Transfer theories of learning fail to recognise the complexity involved in educational change and the difficulty of ‘embedding good practice’. It has been demonstrated that ‘ordinary’ teachers will not accept and apply curriculum changes unless they share the educational beliefs and values that underpin them (Fullan, 1982: 30).

The nature of the teaching fellows’ development projects will influence the degree and level of impact they are likely to have on other teachers and students in the sector. Our research demonstrated that most of the projects resemble a form of ‘technical’ or ‘practical’ action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992) – emphasising solutions to specified teaching/learning problems, the development of teaching materials, textbooks and computer applications, and improvements in delivery methods (see HEFCE, 1998: 7). One of the potential benefits of technical/practical action research projects is that they can produce outcomes that are highly relevant to practitioners’ immediate concerns and interests. They can foster collaboration between teachers (and students) and lessons learned at the local level can offer potential insights for other teachers, thereby contributing to an evolving ‘grass roots’ ‘evidence-based practice’ (Pirrie, 2001). This type of action research, however, also has a number of recognised limitations. Firstly, it can be under-theorised and insufficiently related to previous work in the same field, leading to problems of ‘reinventing the wheel’ (Bell, 1982), ‘theory-building’ and ‘cumulation’ (Yorke, 2000). Secondly, it tends to provide details about research methods but little about ‘methodology’, including any reflexivity about its own positioning relative to other research traditions and paradigms (Antoniou and Stierer, 2002). Thirdly, it focuses on the immediate practical context of teaching and learning and ignores the wider social, economic and political context in which practices are located. Finally, generalising from such projects can be problematic given the highly context-dependent nature of teaching and learning. These limitations may influence the degree to which the NTFS projects impact upon the higher education sector.

Plans for the teaching fellows to work collectively to promote effective teaching and learning in higher education (ILT, 2000: 2) have to date met with limited success. There were four main reasons why a ‘shared identity’ beyond camaraderie had failed to develop amongst the fellowship holders: a) their perception of themselves as subject specialists b) their gravitation towards other individuals in the group of twenty who shared similar interests and/or project concerns c) the perception that some fellowship holders were more experienced in educational development work than others d) the overall focus on achieving one’s own individual project. The perceptions of the fellowship holders towards their group are typical of any inter-disciplinary group, split, for example, by subject and experience. If one of the aims of the NTFS is for the fellowship holders to work together to promote effective learning and teaching in higher education, then these perceptions may need to be challenged and the potential value of the group, as a collective, may need to be explored in more detail.
Some people expressed disappointment that no shared values and purposes had been established within the group of fellowship holders. They felt that this made it difficult for the group to have any significant influence on higher education policy and practice. The difficulty in developing a collective identity amongst teaching fellows may also be related to the increasing fragmentation and ‘proletarianisation’ (Halsey, 1992) of the academic workforce in the UK, which has led to calls for a ‘new academic professionalism’ founded on shared commitments and values (Nixon et al., 2001). It may also reflect underlying tensions in the NTFS between rewarding individual ‘teaching excellence’ and promoting a collective network for change.

4.4. 3 The impact of the NTFS on the professional identity of the award winners

The award winners described the various ways in which the NTFS had enhanced their professional lives and status. For example, at the time of interview, three people had been promoted to professorial level following NTFS recognition and in each case the award was perceived to have played an important part in this promotion. Although educational press coverage of the NTFS has featured criticism of the scheme for its failure to address the formal promotion system (Currie, 2000b), a national award for ‘teaching excellence’ may represent an ‘objective’ measure of teaching performance that promotion panels can recognise. Two of the three promotions were in new universities and the third a teaching intensive department in an old university. It may be the case, therefore, that ‘teaching intensive’ (Gibbs, 2000) institutions and departments are more able to recognise the NTFS as a legitimate basis for promotion to professorial level.

Virtually all of the NTFS award winners reported that their contribution to teaching and learning had been recognised by the NTFS and subsequently acknowledged by colleagues, students, the subject community and the institution. Some people expressed the view that their interest in teaching had been validated, giving purpose and value to their work. Others felt more confident in themselves and in their teaching, becoming a ‘voice’ for educational matters within their department. A number of ambivalent and less positive aspects about the award were also mentioned by some respondents. Several award winners in ‘research intensive’ institutions felt that receiving an award for teaching was problematic and that as project work took them away from their substantive research interests, the NTFS represented a ‘poisoned chalice’. This was a point also made in our focus groups with higher education teachers. Other NTFS holders maintained that the award had prompted negative or ‘ironic’ comments from colleagues and sometimes led to a feeling of being separate or isolated.

Most of the award winners had previous experience of educational development work (for example, involvement in the TLTP and FDTL programmes) and form part, therefore, of a growing number of staff who are involved in these activities within universities and colleges of higher education (Leon, 2002b). As a sub-set of the whole, the award winners might be thought of as ‘educational developers within the disciplines’ (Healey, 2000) – a new cadre of staff who are located within a discipline who are undertaking educational development work specific to that discipline. This new identity appears to offer some benefits. Academics within subject disciplines who are interested in pedagogical issues can validate this interest through the new identity.
It also offers potentially a way of bringing together ‘teaching’ and ‘research’ interests through the scholarship of teaching and learning. But there also appears to be potential drawbacks. First of all to embrace this new identity fully one would need to abandon substantive research interests in the discipline. Some of the award winners were unwilling to do this. Secondly, even if one was able to abandon these interests the consequences of doing so - particularly in research intensive institutions – may be severe and possibly costly in career terms.

4.4.4 Using the research data to to improve our understanding of the NTFS and to offer feedback to the HEFCE and the ILT.

The HEFCE have recently announced continuation funding arrangements for the TQEF (HEFCE, 2002). This follows a formative evaluation of the TQEF, which was commissioned by the HEFCE in May 2001. The evaluation report concluded that although the funds invested in the TQEF are relatively small, its impact has been significant. Commenting specifically on the NTFS, the HEFCE in the light of this report stated that: ‘We will continue to provide £1 million a year to fund the NTFS. The scheme has run successfully and is in its third year of operation’ (HEFCE, 2002: 10).

The HEFCE are currently inviting responses to their continuation funding arrangements. We feel it is timely, given the completion of the initial three year trial period, for these responses to be used by HEFCE and/or the organisation entrusted with the management of the NTFS (currently the ILT) as a basis for a systematic and critical review of the scheme. Whilst we would agree that there have been some successful aspects about the way the NTFS has run, particularly in terms of its own organisational logic, we also feel there are a number of important issues that need to be addressed if the scheme is to gain credibility within the sector. In the light of our research, three areas in particular need to be addressed: understandings of ‘teaching excellence’ implicit within the NTFS; the NTFS as a developmental mechanism and strategy and the impact of the NTFS on the professional lives and identities of the award winners.

‘Teaching excellence’ within the NTFS is underpinned by a model of ‘reflective practice’. This model of reflection draws principally on psychological theories of learning and teaching. We suggest that a critical review of the NTFS considers the conceptual legitimacy of the ‘reflective practitioner’ model, recognising that it has become almost ‘taken for-granted’ in the higher education literature (Zukas & Malcolm, 1999: 2). Such a review might also address whether a ‘psychologised’ form of reflective practice recognises sufficiently the diverse disciplinary backgrounds of potential NTFS applicants and allows them to consider broader questions about the social, economic and political context within which teaching and learning practices in higher education are located (Brookfield, 1995). A balanced reappraisal of the literature on ‘teaching excellence’ and award schemes (including academic as well as professional and managerial sources) needs to be undertaken by the managers of the scheme and made available to the NAP. Additional time for deliberation would help the panel to reconsider the scheme’s criteria. The NAP would also become more inclusive if there was greater representation from students, members of ethnic minority groups, research-active members of educational departments and academics.
who have a recognised involvement in teaching and learning within their own disciplines. Some of the selection processes used to date in the NTFS would benefit from being reconsidered. Institutional self-selection of NTFS applicants is acceptable as long as committees are constituted according to agreed minimum standards rather than in an ‘ad hoc’ way leading, as one respondent in our research put it, to the selection of the ‘usual suspects’. Applicants could strengthen their claim for excellence by providing evidence of different kinds. And the ‘defence-then-voting’ system for finalising shortlists and eventual award winners could be replaced by a process which is less adversarial.

Our research suggests that the NTFS would benefit from a more explicit ‘strategy for change’. This would clarify what type of group the NTFS are, what is the status of the knowledge they are creating through their projects and other development work, how they are meant to be working together to raise the profile of teaching and learning in higher education and what type of relationship is meant to exist between the award winners and other teachers and students within the sector. Our research suggests that, to date, the teaching fellows within the context of the NTFS are being viewed implicitly as an ‘expert’ group with the status and authority as ‘excellent teachers’ to lead teaching and learning developments within higher education. But the quality of the knowledge that is being generated by them – through a mix of experiential knowledge and technical/practical action research projects – has strengths but significant limitations (see section 4.4.2). We share the view put forward by the National Educational Research Forum and endorsed by Universities UK that there should be a stronger linkage between educational research and practice across all sectors of educational provision, including higher education (NERF, 2000; Universities UK 2001). We note the support given by HEFCE to pedagogical research as a means to improve teaching and learning within the sector (HEFCE, 2001: 29).

We agree that there are different approaches to pedagogical research which have their own particular standards of judgement (even the ubiquitous ‘action research’ is contested with a history of vigorous philosophical and methodological disputes – see Wallace, 1987). But good educational research in all cases, is located conceptually and methodologically, taking into consideration relevant previous studies and literature (NFER, 2000: 2).

Our research demonstrated that there was considerable uncertainty about the status of the NTFS ‘projects’ amongst award winners, members of non-participating institutions, NAP members, and ILT and HEFCE representatives. Virtually all of the award winners referred to them as ‘research projects’ whereas others used various terms such as ‘programmes of dissemination’, ‘development activities’ and ‘teaching and learning projects’. We share the concern identified by Yorke (2000: 113) who states that: ‘many teachers deemed ‘excellent’ may have only a sketchy knowledge of the literature of pedagogical research, which is a matter of concern in that they may provide models of teaching activity which are ignorant of, or run counter to, the evidence from research’. We suggest that the NAP clarify the status of the projects and whether it is possible and indeed desirable for excellent teachers to be pedagogical researchers (Stenhouse, 1975) or at least to have some understanding of and involvement with pedagogical research. We also recommend that the award winners have academic support for their projects in addition to the administrative support that is currently provided by the NCT. An experienced educational researcher acting as a mentor or ‘critical friend’ would help the award winners to locate their
work within existing research traditions and develop disciplinary perspectives on teaching and learning in higher education. We found little evidence that the award winners were working effectively as a group to raise the status of teaching and learning within the sector. Experiencing a sense of camaraderie but also exhibiting typical characteristics of any inter-disciplinary group split by subject, age, experience and interest, the NTFS holders did not feel part of a team with a shared sense of purpose and common set of educational values. If they are to work together effectively, therefore, they may need more help to do this. The NCT, or a team with a specific remit to support the collective work of the NTFS holders, could provide such help.

Many of the award winners reported that their ‘teaching identities’ had been validated through the NTFS. Although most people recognised that higher education was becoming increasingly research-orientated, the NTFS enabled contributions to teaching to be recognised even in the most ‘research-intensive’ institutions. This encouraged some people to contemplate a career as an educational developer within the disciplines – using the NTFS and previous educational development work as a springboard to develop an expertise and profile for teaching and learning in particular subject areas. Others commented that the intensification of their teaching identity in the light of the NTFS created dilemmas for them: they were not sure whether to pursue a career in educational development work or remain as a subject specialist. One award winner suggested that being recognised for teaching in an old ‘research-led’ university could be disadvantageous to a research profile and promotion. A critical review of the NTFS could consider how the scheme might support a more productive relationship between teaching and research in higher education: the place of the project and the scope for disciplinary-based pedagogical research being of potential import here.

In recognising and supporting a new cadre of professionals who are becoming educational developers within the disciplines, the NTFS also needs to consider some of the limitations of this emerging paradigm. For example, disciplinary-based approaches to educational development clearly have an advantage over generic programmes in being more relevant to the immediate concerns, subject knowledge and disciplinary culture of participants (Becher, 1989). But they can also be somewhat myopic in focus; becoming overly concerned with content and driven by the familiar ways of teaching within that culture (Burton & Haines, 1997) As the ‘individual’ strand within the TQEF, we would suggest that the NTFS should be seeking to complement the disciplinary emphasis of the ‘subject’ strand. This could be achieved by fostering a critical ‘inter-disciplinarity’ (Barnett, 1994: 135-7) amongst fellowship holders, which would underpin and strengthen their collective work to raise the profile of teaching and learning within the sector. As an inter-disciplinary group, the NTFS holders are well-placed to support productive links with and between LTSN subject networks.

**Activities**

Team members have presented academic papers to academic and ‘user’ audiences. Details of these and further planned contributions are shown in the appendix. Consultation meetings about the research and seminars have been held with the HEFCE, the ILT, the Higher Education Research Centre in the School of Education and local teachers and students at the University of Sheffield.
Outputs
Data sets have been offered to Qualidata. Conference papers have been presented to academic and user audiences. Dr Alan Skelton is participating in an international symposium on higher education at the BERA Conference in September 2002. Invitations to produce papers for three journals have been received (see appendix). A book contract is also being sought, following preliminary discussions with Open University Press and Routledge.

Impacts
The project has attracted considerable interest from policy makers, professional organisations, fellow academics and teachers and students in higher education. The HEFCE and the ILT are very interested in the findings of the study. The research has been featured in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* (Leon, 2002a, see appendix). Findings from the research will be fed back to local teachers and students through the M.Ed in Teaching and Learning for University Lecturers’ course, which Dr Alan Skelton directs at the University of Sheffield. A new institutional award for ‘teaching excellence’ has recently been introduced at the University.

Future Research Priorities
This current research study was undertaken over a twelve month period with a small research team. A larger follow up study could usefully address the potential mid to long term impact of the NTFS, focusing, in particular, on the outcomes of the teaching fellows’ development projects and their ability to work together effectively and create ‘synergies’ with the other strands of the TQEF.
References

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Appendix

Conference papers


Alan Skelton is contributing to a Symposium on Higher Education at the next British Educational Research Association Conference, University of Exeter, September 2002. This is being organised on behalf of the Higher Education Special Interest Group.

Publications

Invitations to produce papers have been received from:
International Journal for Academic Development
Teaching in Higher Education
Medical Education

Further papers are being prepared for Studies in Higher Education and the British Educational Research Journal

A book contract is also being sought, following preliminary discussions with Open University Press and Routledge.

Educational Press Coverage

The research was featured extensively in ‘Received with reservations’, The Times Higher Educational Supplement, 14 June, 2002.

An invitation to write an article on ‘teaching excellence’ in the THES was received following the above.