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'Can I just check...do we HAVE to do this?': Exploring staff motivations for applying for HEA fellowship (0067)

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Context

The status of teaching within UK higher education has been slowly creeping up institutional agendas for the past 15 years . Since 2010, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has supported the development of institutionally-focused CPD schemes aligned to the sector-owned UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) at four levels from Associate Fellowship through to Principal Fellowship . This development was encouraged by the 2011 White Paper , as well as moves to gather institutional data on the qualifications of staff involved in teaching. Consequently, many UK universities are working towards the professional accreditation of **all** staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning .

By November 2012, 32 institutional schemes had been accredited by the HEA, with the intention of supporting the needs of more experienced staff at a local level . This number continues to grow. The move towards the professionalization of teaching whilst welcomed by many “is regarded with deep suspicion by some” . This paper examines the reflections of a group of experienced staff working towards professional accreditation for their teaching experiences, to inform our own support processes. ¹ The outcomes should also be useful to those developing and embedding similar institutional accreditation schemes.

¹ For the purpose of this paper, we are defining experienced staff as those with a minimum of 3 years full-time (or equivalent) experience teaching and/or supporting learning in a H.E context.

In July 2012, University X achieved HEA accreditation, with the scope to award Fellowships at all four levels. Since then, more than 100 staff, from technicians to senior managers, have engaged with the accreditation scheme. Whether supportive or critical of the accreditation agenda, staff motivation to be involved is a significant issue. We were therefore interested in what value the professional accreditation of teaching holds for these experienced academics, what motivated them to apply, and the challenges and opportunities accreditation presented.

Methodology

The project is informed by the concepts of 'third generation' activity theory . This lens encourages us to foreground *both* the individual subject *and* the influences of the society in which they operate, thus providing a powerful tool when considering the "relationship between the micro and macro level of analysis" . Activity theory is regarded as being particularly valuable when applied to situations that are in a process of rapid and constant flux . Given the current political drivers around the professionalization of teaching operating at both a national and an institutional level , alongside the many and varied motivations for engaging in CPD activity theory fits neatly in the context of this study.

Data and analysis

An electronic questionnaire was administered to everyone engaged with the scheme in the 2012/13 academic year. This captured demographic information, as well as initial reflections on motivations and experiences. Subsequently, twenty respondents were selected for interview which built on themes emerging from the questionnaire data.

Engestrom's (1999) six mediating factors provided us with our initial framework for analysis:

- 1) The 'object' or purpose of the activity;

- 2) The 'subject', person or people involved in the activity;
- 3) The 'community' which surround the subject.
- 4) The 'division of labour' involved in achieving the object;
- 5) The 'tools and artefacts' which form the resources available to each staff member to achieve accreditation;
- 6) The 'rules', either formal or informal, which exist in relation to the object.

These six aspects enabled us to conceptualise the association between the individual and their discipline, as well as the broader context of the university and UK Higher Education generally. A number of preliminary themes emerged under each of these headings in the first phase of analysis. In the second phase, the data were scrutinised again, specifically looking for similarities and differences.

Results

The data analysis is on-going, but headline themes reveal the significance and various meanings teaching accreditation holds for staff:

♦ Awareness of the broader political agenda to enhance teaching

Most participants demonstrated a good awareness of the broader political agenda and welcomed an in-house scheme. As participant 3 put it, "*certainly if I was looking to have my children go to university, I'd be more inclined to send them somewhere staff have teaching qualifications*".

♦ Levelling the playing field between teaching (and supporting learning) and research

Staff who did not hold lecturing or senior management positions felt that the accreditation helped to raise their profile and status in the institution and beyond. "*I've been doing quite innovative stuff...[accreditation] was a really good way to demonstrate and bring it all together*" (Participant 5). Subtle

gender differences were also revealed, with women tending to value the professional recognition more than men.

◆ **Showcasing personal achievements**

Some participants were quite strategic in their applications, to deliberately draw attention to the scope of their work. Accreditation *“recognises and rewards the experiences and the work I’ve done...cos sometimes I think you can be pigeonholed slightly”* (Participant 10).

◆ **Job security and career advancement.**

The security of permanent full-time employment has become a thing of the past , and academia is no exception to this . Participant 8 commented that her accreditation *“may just prompt people to give [her] a bit more work”*.

◆ **Role modelling**

Those seeking Principal Fellowship presented a more unified view of the accreditation process, regarding their engagement as important for ‘role modelling’, as well as status. Senior managers are at a critical point of academic influence , and it is important that they champion the accreditation process, shaping the norms and attitudes of their colleagues in a positive way.

Predictably, for those staff required to undertake HEA accreditation for contractual reasons, there was some initial cynicism. However, upon completion, all staff articulated a number of personal and institutional benefits, and reflected upon the process in a mostly positive way.

[989 words]

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