

Leading University Teaching: Exploring the rationale, decisions and evidence

Jones Anna, *Glasgow Caledonian University, UK*

The aim of the study is to develop a clearer understanding of the leadership of teaching in universities. Despite a growing emphasis on leadership in higher education there is little evidence about how *teaching* leadership is conceptualised and practiced and what lies behind decision-making regarding institutional teaching policies. The project has two key objectives: a) to understand how teaching leadership is defined, distributed and practised; b) to consider what forms of evidence influences those with leadership responsibilities for implementing changes in teaching policy and practice.

Teaching has changed considerably in recent years. Modularisation, assessment practices, on-line teaching technologies, the introduction of graduate certificates for new academics and quality assurance procedures are some key examples of a mosaic of changed assumptions, procedures, policies and professional practices at institutional level. They are also areas of substantial research enquiry, part of which at least has been a response to explicit efforts to raise the status and quality of teaching in universities (for meta reviews of this research c.f Haggis 2009; Kandelbinder & Peseta 2009, Tight 2004).

Alongside these activities, the nature of government expectations about the purpose and funding of undergraduate education has changed substantially. Once taken for granted assumptions about the roles and orientations of academics to teaching have been eroded (Collini 2012; Macfarlane 2012). The idea of the (largely) autonomous expert concerned in some measure with learning for knowledge, self-formation, citizenship or, even, democracy has been challenged by different models based around the idea of the managed academic providing a different orientation to learning. The latter include reconfigured expectations about the purposes, quantity and value of teaching, the rise of the student as consumer and student satisfaction and concerns with indicators to demonstrate how teaching leads to an improved student experience and to appropriate graduate attributes and graduate employability.

A key issue in the changing context of higher education is the leadership of teaching. In particular this study is concerned to examine what informs policy and decision-making. While there is a growing body of research into teaching in higher education, it is not clear to what extent this is informing policy or more specifically at what level of the decision-making hierarchy this research is having an impact. There has been important research in the field of leadership in higher education (Bryman 2006; Coates et al 2010; Middlehurst 1993, 2008; Ramsden 1998; Smith et al 2008; Whitchurch & Gordon 2010) and the management of change and development in teaching (Blackmore & Blackwell 2003; Martin et al 2003; Trowler 2001). However, the role of research into teaching in shaping the development of leadership policies for higher education teaching remains an under researched area. Recent work into the leadership of teaching (Gibbs et al 2009) considers what leaders do, but there has been little detailed empirical investigation of how research evidence about teaching is used by leaders or its influence on decisions about the re-design and implementation of teaching policies and practices.

The project addresses this gap in our understanding of the leadership of teaching. It does so through an exploratory study of how teaching is conceptualized against policy and strategic considerations at institutional level. It will examine how these approaches are translated into the provision and

support of teaching, contextualize how the research-policy-practice 'loop' operates in relation to teaching and assess by whom, how and with what purposes research or other forms of evidence is used.

The study explores the ways in which the leadership of teaching is conceptualised and enacted through policy and practice in two case study institutions. Two universities were selected because they have similar characteristics, both being established in the 1960s with visions of innovation and imagination in teaching and research. The principal method in each case study is semi-structured interviews with key staff including PVCs (L&T), heads of department, heads of academic development, heads of quality and registry and teaching staff. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed in full.

All participants expressed a great interest in the project, commenting that it explored questions that had not, to date been answered. The findings suggest that while teaching is considered very important in both case study institutions, the ways in which decisions regarding the leadership of teaching are made are not always grounded in research evidence. Furthermore, the rationale for decisions regarding the leadership of teaching vary, depending upon the role of the decision-maker (i.e. whether the decision-maker is part of the senior executive or 'on the ground' teaching staff). Leadership of teaching is distributed, with leadership occurring across levels from senior management, from middle levels such as directors of teaching and learning and some bubbling up from teaching staff. Leadership takes a range of forms and there is not always sympathy or good communication between those making decisions and those implementing them. The perception is that central decisions tend to be based on financial, administrative or strategic considerations rather than educational ones. There is a sense that the leadership of teaching (and perhaps universities more generally) has lost its way and while driven by the necessities of financial considerations (and all participants understand these imperatives) this is a fragmentary vision of what teaching should be. Research evidence, in particular educational research is used by some leaders of teaching, but this is very patchy.

This paper suggests that there are a number of challenges: a) To translate educational research into a form that can be used by those responsible for leadership and to communicate this effectively; b) to harness the good 'bottom up' leadership so that it can inform decisions made further up the chain; c) to find ways of integrating the imperatives faced by senior management with those of teaching staff in ways that will enhance student learning and the university experience.