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Teaching-Focused Career Pathways and the Ambiguities of Scholarship: A Qualitative Case Study from a UK University

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

While the scholarship of teaching and learning has rapidly developed since Boyer (1990) introduced the idea of teaching as scholarship, universities and academics alike are still unclear about what scholarship means in practice, how it is measured and how it is evidenced in career development plans and appraisals of staff on the Teaching and Scholarship (T&S) track. Set within the context of the marketised state of the UK higher education sector, where staff productivity is not only high on the agenda but highly metricised, this study evaluates career development and career progression initiatives for T&S staff at a dual-intensive university. Drawing on Habermas's colonisation thesis, we present the dual perspectives of the system and lifeworld by unpacking the experiences of stakeholders (Teaching-focused staff, head of schools and human resources officers) involved in the development, assessment and engagement of scholarship.

Full paper

Introduction

Since Boyer's (1990) seminal work, the literature on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has expanded significantly. A corollary to this growth is the emergence of teaching-focused academic roles and the institutionalisation of Teaching and Scholarship (T&S) or teaching-focused pathways (Tharapos & Marriott, 2020; Smith & Walker, 2024). In the UK, the proportion of academic staff on teaching-only contracts has steadily increased, from 26% in 2015/16 to 36% in 2023 (HESA, 2024). During the same period, the percentage of staff with research in their contracts declined from 73% to 64%. The rise in teaching-only roles has been attributed variously to the growth of part-time and fixed-term contracts

(Advance HE, 2024), increasing attention to teaching quality and the student experience, expansion of SoTL, and the revised Research Excellence Framework's (REF) guidance on 'impact' and research-active staff (Tight, 2017, Smith & Walker 2024).

Despite this shift, SoTL remains contested. Trigwell et al. (2000) proposed four dimensions to assess scholarship engagement: engagement with existing literature; reflective practice within disciplinary contexts; dissemination of pedagogical theory and practice; and conceptions of teaching focused on student learning. While this suggests that SoTL has a "researcherly" dimension to it, confusion and overlap still exist between SoTL and, on the one hand, pedagogical research, and, on the other, higher education research in general (Tight, 2017). With SoTL becoming an established strand within HE research, much of the literature focuses on 'how to do' SoTL (Fanghanel, 2013; Kreber, 2003; and Tight, 2017), with less attention paid to how it is rewarded or recognised across institutions.

While universities increasingly include engagement with scholarship as a promotion criterion, institutional definitions vary, often reflecting the conceptual ambiguity in the literature and institutional guidelines (Vardi and Quin, 2011; Smith and Walker, 2024). This lack of clarity creates risks for staff navigating promotion systems and for institutions attempting to align teaching excellence with formal reward structures (Vardi and Quin, 2011). In contexts where teaching scholarship is positioned as equivalent to traditional teaching and research (T&R) track, parity in intellectual rigour and recognition becomes essential to avoid perceptions of SoTL as a 'soft' route to promotion. This paper explores how T&S staff at a dual-intensive university (investing both in teaching and research) define and experience SoTL. We examine how career development, scholarship requirements, and institutional expectations are interpreted in practice through the perspectives of critical stakeholders on staff promotions in the university.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study draws on Habermas's critical theory to illustrate how the technicality of the system colonises the lifeworld of teaching-focused academic staff. We use Habermas's "dual perspective" of the lifeworld and system, which denotes not merely distinct spheres of reality but also different analytical perspectives that can be applied simultaneously to examine a phenomenon from both the standpoints of the lifeworld and the system (Habermas, 1987; Edwards, 2017). This study aims to "test the thesis of colonisation sociologically" (Habermas, 1987, p. 367) through a qualitative case study involving interviews with stakeholders, including T&S staff (n=25), Heads of Schools (n=12), and Human Resources Officers (n=3). This approach enabled the institutional observability of how scholarship is defined at the university and how academics on the Teaching-focused track experience it across faculties and disciplines.

Summary of Findings

Our findings show a widespread ambiguity in how scholarship is defined, the duties and responsibilities of T&S academics, the promotion criteria, and the methods for evidencing them. This lack of clarity was attributed to a combination of factors, including a lack of awareness among TS academics and the underrepresentation of senior T&S academics on the promotion committees responsible for vetting progression, promotion, and recruitment. Our study also showed that the positive reception of T&S as a career pathway is linked with a good peer-supporting environment, adequate time allocation, balanced workload, bridging the divide between T&S and T&R staff and a head of school who actively supports career progression for TS staff.

Conclusion

We conclude that the lack of clear expectations of what scholarship means, limited guidance on how to evidence it, and unbalanced workload allowances to pursue scholarship activities colonise the lifeworld of academics on the teaching and scholarship track. We recommend a meaningful commitment to an organisational culture that recognises the value of T&S academics and invests the effort and resources necessary for a viable and effective career pathway.