

Organising Academic Work and the English Teaching Excellence Framework (0225)

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In this paper I want to reflect on issues about universities as organisations and teaching and learning in higher education as part of wider patterns of the organization of academic work, particularly in the context of the plans in England in 2016 to introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2016), which is likely to have a significant effect on the organization of academic work. I also draw on my own experience of working in a senior leadership role concerned with teaching. The themes I explore, all of which have wider relevance to higher education systems, are: differences between managing and leading teaching, the relationship between the changing work and identities of academics and other university staff who support teaching and finally, possible future alternative organizational structures for higher educational institutions.

What is proposed in England is an exercise supposedly comparable to the long-standing research selectivity exercise currently known as the Research Excellence Framework, but focused on teaching, with the alleged aim of raising the standard and status of teaching. This will initially be done for 2016-17 by allowing all higher education institutions that have passed their periodic Quality Assessment audit (itself in a process of change) to 'pass' and therefore to charge slightly higher fees to home undergraduates. No direct benefit to excellent teachers or excellent teaching is planned. In the next stage after a voluntary pilot in 2017-18, metrics related to student satisfaction, student progression and post-graduation destinations plus others possibly including contact hours but with an element of contextualization by institution, will be introduced for 2018-19 and finally there will be a discipline-based exercise in 2019-20 which will have an element of self-assessment. TEF, though ostensibly about teaching, is actually about further marketising higher education, with the idea that making it easier for new providers to enter the system will 'drive up' standards of teaching and lower fees (though ironically the only benefit of TEF to HEIs will be the right to *increase fees*).

Increasingly, roles which involve overseeing of teaching and learning (at any level) are vital to complex universities. Unlike research, teaching can be regarded as a very routinized activity, tightly timetabled, with content and assessment heavily specified, the outcomes (as quality assessment requires) carefully set out. Managing it can often be a matter of keeping things moving and dealing with crises. But there is a difference between *managing* teaching and *leading* teaching (Gibbs, Knapper et al. 2009). The former is a routine activity whereas the latter seeks to develop and nurture teaching as an important part of university life, not just a necessary evil which stands between academics and their research. We can't assume that people who undertake roles around management and leadership of teaching will know in advance how to do those tasks in imaginative ways. This

needs to be an integral theme in their continuing professional development. But TEF will present leaders/managers of teaching in England with particular dilemmas because much of the exercise is not related to directly to teaching and may just serve to further bureaucratise teaching and increase performance management of it.

Other changes are already occurring to academic work in many countries, due to various factors (Nyhagen and Baschung 2013), including reduced public funding, massification of undergraduate entry, introduction of new technologies, changes to academic labour markets (Musselin 2009, Musselin 2012) and changes in work-pace (Ylijoki 2011). These developments have led to some significant changes in the work itself, such as casualization. Other changes include more specialization (Nyhagen and Baschung 2013) and greater job and between-country mobility (Kenway and Fahey 2008), as well as speeding-up of the job, the latter particularly affecting the extent to which academics see a sharp, blurred or no boundary between their academic work and the rest of their lives (Ylijoki 2011). The consequences of some of these changes affect not just academics but also many other university staff. Administrative staff and academics who only teach often have to cover work (student contact, assignment return, unpopular courses) of research-engaged academics whilst they are working at home or roaming the globe. Furthermore, teaching by academics does not take place in a vacuum (Deem 2015) but is supported by many other staff from cleaners, audio-visual technicians and timetablers to laboratory technicians and student services. As TEF gets underway, the interdependence of academics and administrators is likely to increase but at the same time managers will be taking on 'policing' of teaching and student experience to a greater extent than now. They may also increasingly use digital techniques to do this as well (Selwyn & Facer 2014) as more conventional surveys of teaching modules and student satisfaction.

Finally I would just like to focus briefly on what kinds of future organizational structures in universities might be needed in order to facilitate high quality teaching and learning, in ways that actually support teaching rather than bypassing it in search of yet more marketization and academic and institutional precarity. Leisyte and Wilkesmann suggest that the typical German university, lying somewhere between a company and a German club, democratic and consultative albeit with accountability and some elements of hierarchy, might provide a model for other countries seeking new organizational forms for their higher education institutions (Leisyte and Wilkesmann 2016). This is obviously worth exploring. So too is the example of a university in Northern Spain run as a co-operative. This is Mondragon, University, which has hardly any administrative staff and a very flat structure, but good relationships with other local organisations, strong teaching and a high record of student employment after graduation (Wright, Greenwood et al. 2011). There is, despite big variations in culture and other aspects of local context, a lot of copying, policy borrowing by politicians and evidence of isomorphism in many institutions of higher education. A sustained effort to look at alternative organizational models and how they could facilitate higher quality teaching in

a collegial context might prove a better bet than any number of teaching excellence initiative look-alikes would. (998 words)

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