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Raising the profile: an institutional case study of embedding scholarship and innovation through distributive leadership

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Distributive leadership, which has been described as a distribution of power within the sociocultural context of universities, provides a valuable model for encouraging scholarship and innovation in learning and teaching. By nurturing, rather than imposing, leadership responsibilities, and relating them to personal, as well as institutional priorities, there is potential to foster creativity and support career progression. This paper explores the impact of this approach through a university-wide initiative which has firmly established itself as a key aspect of continuing professional development. The case study describes how the initiative has benefitted from the experiences and findings of national and international developments and adapted them to the local context by supporting, encouraging and acknowledging evidence-based practice across the curriculum, including the integration of learning technology. It provides an overview of evaluation findings which indicate that scholarship and innovation in learning and teaching are being enhanced through increased staff engagement and institutional acknowledgement.

Keywords: evidence-based practice; scholarship; distributive leadership; embedding innovation

Introduction

Raising the profile and status of innovative pedagogic practice in higher education can be problematic, due in no small part to continuing pressure on academics to focus on career enhancement through disciplinary research. Whilst lip service may be paid to the central role of learning and teaching, the culture within institutions often systemically embeds the imbalance, as research, rather than excellent pedagogic practice, continues to attract higher status and remains a central tenet of academic promotion (Vardi & Quin, 2011). Against this background, an emphasis on scholarly approaches to learning and teaching is essential if the profile of pedagogic practice is to be enhanced and opportunities for career progression through the learning and teaching route increased.

Evidence-based practice can be interpreted in many ways and from a range of perspectives. Originating in the field of medicine, the concept has been widely adopted in education to ensure that pedagogic practice is effectively informed by the findings of high quality educational research, although as Biesta (2007) points out, this is a nuanced concept which merits critique. It has often been linked to

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scholarship in learning and teaching (Boyer, 1990) which Prosser describes as 'evidence based critical reflection on practice to improve practice' (2008, p. 2). Whereas aspects of educational research can foreground theory, innovative scholarly activity, underpinned by action research, is firmly rooted in day to day learning and teaching activities (Mills, 2000; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Although the value of these scholarly, evidence-based approaches to the learner experience is largely undisputed (Jenkins, 2009), institutional culture, disciplinary priorities and a lack of acknowledgement of innovation can have a negative impact on staff engagement in continuing professional development (CPD) and scholarly activity in learning and teaching.

In this digital age, the effective use of technology is also central to academic practice. Nevertheless, for those who pursue innovation through the application of technology, the task of gathering evidence to support career advancement can be particularly daunting as technology enhanced learning frequently stands accused of technological determinism with insufficient evidence or theoretical underpinning to support its claims of effectiveness (Bennett & Oliver, 2011; Creanor & Walker, 2012). Tensions continue to exist between technological and pedagogic drivers, rendering problematic maintenance of a scholarly focus against a backdrop of constant change and relentless technological advances (Watson, 2001). Hence, the strategic implementation of evidence-based, technology-enhanced learning linked to career progression within the disciplines is perceived as a challenging goal which requires explicit encouragement and support through institutional recognition and influential leadership (Conole, White, & Oliver, 2007).

This case study outlines the experience of one UK university over a four-year period as it sought to embed evidence-based academic practice across the curriculum. The paper aims to explore the impact of the distributive leadership model in effecting transformational change in attitudes towards, and engagement in, scholarly activity in learning and teaching across the institution. It begins by outlining the background and rationale for a strategic CPD initiative designed to address these issues, informed by relevant national and international developments. It goes on to describe the implementation, outcomes and findings to date before reflecting on the overall impact of such an approach and outlining plans for future development to ensure sustainability.

Influencing models and frameworks

Innovation as a concept is problematic within higher education with varied foci encompassing local, often individualised, developments in learning and teaching alongside more managerial and business-oriented institutional and political strategies (Findlow, 2008; Hockings, 2005; Smith, 2011). Attempts to drive forward innovation in learning and teaching mirror this variation in conceptual understanding, with strategies and policies veering between top-down and bottom-up implementations which result in a similarly diverse range of outcomes.

Large-scale initiatives

Examples of large scale initiatives within the UK include those supported separately by the Funding Councils in England and Scotland. From 2005–2010 considerable amounts of government funding were disbursed by the Higher Education Funding

Council for England to establish 74 centres of excellence in teaching and learning (CETLs), each with a particular pedagogic focus. These centres, many of which incorporated technology enhanced approaches, were locally hosted by the successful bidders but had a sector-wide remit. The dual aims for this initiative were, '… to reward excellent teaching practice and to further invest in that practice so that CETLs funding delivered substantial benefits to students, teachers and institutions'.[1]

While success in embedding innovation and evidence based-practice is clearly evidenced by sections of this strategic initiative (Anderson, Bullen, Alltree, & Thornton, 2008; VLL, 2010), an interim evaluation of the impact of the CETLs noted that,

> The tradition of deliberate strategies to change and enhance learning and teaching in higher education in the UK has a relatively short history. Traditionally, its legitimacy among numbers of academics has been uncertain. Central or cross-disciplinary standards, approaches, suggestions and development have run up against the canon of concerns traditionally held by academics. So, academics do not appreciate a heavy central steer on practices that have been very much the local preserve. (Saunders et al., 2008, p. 9)

In a parallel development in Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) invested £6 million in an E-Learning Transformation Programme from 2005–2007. Six large-scale projects involving both higher and further education institutions addressed topics such as e-assessment and feedback, blended learning and online resources with the aim of effecting transformational change in the integration of technology across the curriculum.[2]

Echoing the CETL interim review, the final evaluation of the SFC E-Learning Transformation Programme identified that,

> The emerging breadth of focus for the projects demonstrates that it is not realistic to attempt to transform the curriculum without taking people with you on that transformation journey (including learners, teaching staff and institutional managers). Nor is it feasible to attempt to transform academic practice without a context and a focus for curriculum change. (Glenaffric, 2008, p. 11)

These findings suggest that despite top-level encouragement and substantial resource, local ownership, empowerment and individual agency remain key influencers of engagement and impact in encouraging creative, evidence-based learning and teaching practice. Without a real sense of long-term commitment to the projects, continuation and embedding beyond the initial funding period is difficult to achieve (Bates & Sangra, 2003; Gunn, 2010a).

The individual perspective

In contrast to these large scale initiatives, empowering and developing the potential of individual academics was the focus of the Australian Faculty Scholars Network. Supported by the Australian learning and teaching council, it has extended its impact from the initial pilot institutions to a wider group of participating universities. The original aim of the initiative was to assess the validity of a leadership development capacity framework for teaching and learning (Parrish & Lefoe, 2008). This approach is underpinned by the concept of Distributive Leadership (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003; Knight & Trowler, 2001) which is described by Lefoe, Smigiel, and Parrish (2007) as:

> … a distribution of power within the sociocultural context of universities, and a sharing of knowledge, of practice and reflection through collegiality. (2007, p. 5)

Originally conceived as a way of preparing future leaders in learning and teaching for a rapidly evolving higher education system, this model promotes the development of leadership skills amongst the staff who do not necessarily have a formally recognised leadership role in a hierarchical sense. The model has been used successfully to take forward key learning and teaching priorities including assessment, feedback and online distance learning (Keppell, O'Dwyer, Lyon, & Childs, 2010; Lefoe, 2010), with participants rewarded with small amounts of funding, partial relief from teaching duties and support through the network of Faculty Scholars. One outcome of this initiative has been a Distributive Leadership Development Framework which can be adapted to suit the local context. Results showed that participants gained confidence in their own ability to act as leaders and to influence colleagues and senior managers in taking forward key learning and teaching innovations.

> With distributive leadership, those people who may not sit in hierarchical positions of leadership have an opportunity to lead both upwards and sideways among their colleagues and through this mechanism have a real opportunity to influence others and more importantly influence those with power that comes with hierarchical positions of leadership. (Parrish & Lefoe, 2008, p. 2)

The focus on the individual is also integral to the recently revised Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education in the UK (UKPSF, 2011). Developed by the higher education academy (HEA) in collaboration with the sector, the framework identifies a series of levels and criteria against which an academic's professional development in the scholarship and leadership of learning and teaching can be gauged. The framework can be contextualised at a local level, indeed institutions are actively encouraged to do so, and it links to accreditation as an Associate, Fellow, Senior Fellow or Principal Fellow of the HEA. Although not, as yet, a universally compulsory requirement, an increasing number of UK institutions require new academic staff to attain fellowship of the HEA at an early stage, either by undertaking an accredited programme of study or through a direct application based on prior experience. The framework is used by institutions to inform their postgraduate certificate programmes in learning and teaching and to shape CPD activities.

Influenced by, and building on, these examples, the following case study outlines how such models and frameworks have influenced the approach of one UK institution which sought to attain strategic impact in learning and teaching through the empowerment of individuals, acknowledgement of scholarly activity and the encouragement of evidence-based practice across all disciplinary areas.

Caledonian scholars and associates

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) is a post-1992, campus-based Scottish institution with almost 17,000 students studying in its three academic schools in the areas of business and society, health and life sciences and engineering and the built environment. With a significant widening participation agenda, it places a strong

emphasis on learning, teaching and the student experience. Nevertheless, promoting recognition for excellence in learning and teaching and encouraging engagement in CPD in a meaningful way have been challenging goals. While undertaking the University's postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching for higher education (PgC LTHE) is expected of all new staff, participation in ongoing CPD for learning and teaching beyond this stage is generally optional and unrecognised. The University sought to address these inter-linked challenges in an informed way, building on experiences in the sector both nationally and internationally.

The national, large-scale initiatives had taught that local ownership and control were essential for sustainable transformation within a strategic framework, therefore the focus was primarily on empowering individuals based on a Distributive Leadership model which recognises and encourages localised ownership of innovation and change. Inspired by the successful Faculty Scholars Network in Australia and informed by the UKPSF, the Caledonian Scholars and Associates initiative was launched in summer 2008. It supports the implementation of GCUs CPD Framework for Learning and Teaching, which in turn reflects the key priorities of the University's LTAS as well as the core knowledge, professional values and areas of activity of UKPSF.

The aims of the Caledonian Scholars and Associates initiative are to,

- Provide opportunities for new and experienced staff to maintain continuing engagement with scholarly approaches to learning and teaching throughout their careers.
- Enhance learning and teaching practice and the quality of the student experience.
- Recognise individual endeavour and address a number of promotion criteria through the learning and teaching route.
- Actively promote innovation in learning and teaching to benefit students, departments and academic schools.
- Enable lecturers and staff who support student learning to gain university recognition for commitment to, and investment in, scholarship in learning and teaching.
- Acknowledging the increasingly ubiquitous presence of technology and its central role in learning and teaching, learning technology is integral to, rather than separate from, GCU's LTAS, CPD framework and the Caledonian Scholars and Associates initiative.

Implementation

The initiative is facilitated by the central department with responsibility for academic development, learning technology and educational research. An annual call is issued for applications which are aligned to the university LTAS and school/departmental priorities. Submissions must be approved by line managers before being peer reviewed by international experts, with final decisions on acceptance made by the Pro Vice Chancellor (learning and teaching). The criteria for the role of Caledonian Scholars and Associates are in alignment with distributive leadership principles and are explicitly identified in GCU promotion documentation as contributing evidence towards career progression through the learning and teaching route.

A relatively small amount of university funding has been made available for projects undertaken by Caledonian Scholars (£2k over two years) and as an additional incentive, workload remission of up to 5 h per week can be negotiated with school senior management. The number of scholar projects accepted at each call is normally limited to a maximum of seven or eight due to the level of funding and support available. Successful Scholars are experienced staff who can evidence an ability to provide leadership and influence peers in the area of learning and teaching, and have a proven record of achievement in educational design, educational technology or relevant strategy development.

Extending the original Australian Faculty Scholars model, a new role of Caledonian Associate was also created in order to encourage less experienced staff, including those with a student support role who perhaps lacked the confidence to undertake an in-depth, two year action research project, but who nevertheless had an interest in becoming more involved in scholarly activity. Caledonian Associates do not receive funding, but they are entitled to negotiate workload remission of up to 3 h per week and access ongoing support from the central team as well as the wider community of Scholars and Associates.

Individuals or small teams of two or three colleagues working collaboratively can apply for these roles. The projects undertaken normally use an action research methodology and are linked to the distributive leadership principles of generating engagement, shared responsibility and capacity building. To date (June 2012) there have been 43 projects involving 47 scholars and 14 associates spread across all discipline areas, focusing on topics such as assessment, employability, induction and internationalisation. Reflecting the central role of technology in pedagogic innovation, technology enhanced learning has featured in 70% of the projects including re-usable learning objects in health, online induction in biology, virtual worlds in cyberpsychology, blogs and wikis in media journalism and online communication in law. Indeed, it seems that by not insisting on a technology focus, the growth of interest in innovation through technology appears to have been nurtured through the exchange of knowledge and experience both at regular meetings and in an online community where information can be shared and blog updates posted.

Evaluating the impact

Two reviews of the initiative have been carried out with the aim of evaluating the relevance of the distributive leadership model and its impact on those involved. The first was conducted in 2009 at the end of the first year of operation by an external reviewer who had also evaluated the Australian Faculty Scholars network. In-depth interviews focusing on the distributive leadership role were conducted with participants and elicited highly positive feedback, with obvious support for the opportunities presented by the initiative, e.g.

> [We have] a huge amount of praise for the project. We've really appreciated all the support … we've been encouraged to look for dissemination opportunities and to use the networks to build capacity.

> [the Scholar role] does get you noticed.

The report concluded that,

> The Scholars and Associates Program has proved beneficial to participants in a variety of ways in the initial phase. The Scholars were keen to talk about and reflect on their experience, and many useful suggestions were offered for future Program activities. Further value could be realized by harnessing the creative ideas of those involved. Encouraging their leadership as co-creators of future iterations of the Program would be a true reflection of the distributive leadership concept in action. (Gunn, 2010b, p. 7)

The second evaluation was conducted internally the following year with data gathered from focus groups and discussions with a range of stakeholders. Again, the findings confirmed that the distributive leadership model was seen as pertinent and valuable. The involvement of external experts in the application reviewing process was perceived to confer credibility and status to the initiative. The 'two-tier' system of scholar and associate roles was considered useful as it gave less experienced staff the opportunity to engage with evidence-based practice and action research at an early stage in their careers.

Challenges were also acknowledged, including differences in the way Schools engaged with the initiative, often influenced by the extent to which informal CPD was encouraged and supported locally. Variation was also evident in the way schools and departments addressed the recommendation for workload remission for scholars and associates, which could be problematic depending on the local context and priorities. It is recognised that these are aspects which merit attention in the future development of the initiative.

Outcomes

Caledonian Scholars and Associates are required to submit interim and final reports incorporating literature reviews, methodology and outcomes. Findings to date indicate that projects have generally been effective in enhancing the student experience, and valuable recommendations to inform continuing research, scholarly activity and improved practice within schools and departments have been proposed and implemented, confirming the effectiveness of distributive leadership. The scholarly profiles of the individuals concerned have been enhanced through 37 national and international conference presentations and with 18 peer-reviewed journal publications achieved to date. Several scholars and associates have been successful in gaining additional small grant funding to extend their projects, both externally through the HEA subject centres and internally through locally available funding streams.

A key aspect of the Caledonian Scholars and Associates initiative is its explicit alignment with career progression for academics through the learning and teaching route. In the most recent (2011 and 2012) promotion rounds six scholars and associates were promoted from lecturer to senior lecturer and one to professor, suggesting that the initiative is beginning to have an impact in this regard. An increasing number of scholars and associates are either graduates of the PgC LTHE or current students, demonstrating a clear alignment with progression through the CPD framework. In addition, at least four scholars are currently aligning their projects with doctoral studies. A Caledonian scholar was the winner of the recently launched (2011) Principals' Award for Teaching, and received particular commendation for

the creative use of a range of learning technologies, with others featuring strongly in the student-led teaching awards.

Institutional acknowledgement is apparent in a variety of ways: the outcomes of the initiative have been commended by senior university committees; it was high-lighted as a case study in a recent Quality Assurance Agency institutional review and Schools include the achievements of their scholars and associates in annual reports, validation and subject review documentation. In addition, scholars and asso-ciates are actively influencing learning and teaching across the institution at both practice and policy level through membership of strategic committees such as the Blended Learning Implementation Group, and are demonstrating their leadership skills through encouraging and mentoring less experienced colleagues. Overall, there is growing evidence of the 'upwards and sideways' leadership identified by Parrish and Lefoe (2007, p. 2) which is creating closer links between research, scholarship and academic practice along with an enhanced university-wide recogni-tion of their value.

Although further research is required, these early outcomes indicate that advances are being made in shifting the institutional culture to greater acknowledge-ment and a more scholarly appraisal of pedagogic innovation. Literature reviews, action research and increased awareness of current thinking in the field are leading to thoughtful evidence-based approaches which benefit students and teachers alike.

Future development

As the Caledonian Scholar and Associate Initiative approaches the end of its fourth year of operation, consideration is being given to its future evolution. Crucially, there is a need to create continuing opportunities for building capacity in scholarly activity and distributive leadership beyond the completion of Scholar and Associate projects to ensure sustainability (Gunn, 2010a). While evaluations show that the dis-tributive leadership model is relevant and effective, it is also evident that given the limited time available for scholars and associates to implement their projects during the academic year, leadership activities often only become truly effective on com-pletion of the action research projects. To encourage continuing engagement, a clear pathway for the ongoing development is required which builds leadership capacity in learning and teaching while simultaneously strengthening links with personal career development through the learning and teaching route. This is also central to alignment with the more advanced stages of the revised UKPSF.

The University has now approved a Senior Scholar role which will be launched later this year, specifically aimed at those who have successfully completed their Scholar projects or who have otherwise demonstrated leadership in advanced learning and teaching activity. As recommended by the initial evaluator, this has been shaped by input from current Scholars thus embodying the distributive leadership concept. Criteria have been mapped to the University's revised CPD Framework, currently awaiting accreditation by the HEA, which ensures alignment with HEA Senior and Principal Fellow status. The emphasis will be on strategic developments which are creative, cross-disciplinary, action-focused, sustainable, reflective of professional values and, of course, evidence-based. Senior Scholars will have the opportunity to raise their profiles further by leading influential, collaborative projects with university-wide impact.

Conclusion

Effecting transformational, cultural and attitudinal change takes time and sustained effort (Garrison, 2011). The potential of the Caledonian Scholars and Associates initiative to effect such change is only now becoming increasingly apparent. Over four years, there has been a gradual shift from localised project outcomes to a wider understanding and acceptance of the potential of the distributive leadership model as a means of embedding and rewarding evidence-based practice across the institution. Scholarly activity and innovative practice, often embracing technology and enhanced learning, have undoubtedly gained ground, underpinned by a growing evidence base and promoted by committed opinion leaders and change agents, many of whom did not perceive themselves as such, at the outset of this CPD experience. Although the initiative is facilitated centrally, ownership of the action research projects remains with the participants, their Departments and Schools, bearing out findings from previous transformational change projects that local 'buy-in' is an essential factor in ensuring longer term sustainability (Mayes, Morrison, Mellar, Bullen, & Oliver, 2009; Nicol, 2009). The effort expended by Caledonian scholars and associates has been acknowledged by peers and university management, and in several cases, rewarded through promotion, additional funding, student-led teaching awards and an enhanced external profile.

The initiative has not been without challenges, primarily with regard to workload issues and internal structural changes. Nevertheless, the commitment of senior management to support and expand the initiative is itself evidence of its success to date, as is the fact that this remains a competitive process, providing a valuable stepping stone in scholarly activity for less experienced staff and a means for the experienced staff to raise their profile, enhance their own practice and that of others, and improve their prospects for career advancement.

Only time will tell if the institutional and cultural change required for long term sustainability has been achieved (Gunn, 2010a). Meanwhile, encouraging the active involvement of staff at all levels within the institution as the living embodiment of distributive leadership continues to raise the profile of, and foster an ongoing commitment to, scholarly and innovative pedagogic practice.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/tinits/cetl/
2. http://www.sfc.ac.uk/effective_institutions/eLearning/elearning_transformational_change.aspx

Notes on contributor

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