

'Improving the status and valuation of teaching in the careers of UK academics': The joint steering group's interpretation of the results of their mid-2013 survey

Project background

In 2010 the Academy of Medical Sciences published a report entitled "[Redressing the balance: the status and valuation of teaching in academic careers](#)". This report highlighted mounting evidence of a growing disengagement between research and teaching in a number of universities and institutions, and an undervaluation of teaching.

To follow up this report the project's steering group circulated a survey in September 2013 to selected individuals at bioscience and medical departments at UK higher education institutions (HEIs), to investigate the extent to which the recommendations of the 2010 report have been implemented. The results are based on the opinions of over 250 bioscience academics from a range of institutions and career stages. The survey captured clinical as well as non-clinical academics, and individuals with a wide variety of teaching loads. Representation was sought from all mission groups, although Russell Group universities were heavily represented due to their larger size.

The status of teaching in HEIs: 2013 compared to 2010

The vast majority of staff surveyed report that teaching is a key mission of their institution (89%), and all staff are expected to contribute to teaching (76%).

Approximately half of respondents (54%) felt that the status of teaching had not changed in their institution since 2010. Those respondents who felt the status had changed - for better or worse - reported a number of drivers, including: the Research Excellence Framework, use of student feedback, changes in funding of HEIs and changes in the attitude of senior management.

Although many (62%) report that their institution awards teaching prizes at high profile ceremonies, there is considerable variety of opinion - and lack of certainty - regarding the relative prestige and monetary value of teaching prizes compared to research prizes.

Teaching training for academics

Only half (52%) of respondents overall considered the teaching training available at their institution to be useful, relevant and of a realistic timeframe - considering their other responsibilities. Early career academics were split on whether teaching training for them is realistic in the timeframe, or that they are adequately supported to take on teaching commitments without compromising initial establishment of their research programme (43% agree, 43% disagree, 14% unsure). Academics at a later stage in their career were less negative about teaching training for early career academics (25% disagree).

The steering group felt that these results may reflect a perspective heard during the 2010 project, that courses can sometimes be too generic and not tailored enough to

specific groups of academics, thus appearing to be conducted as 'tick box' exercises rather than for the benefit of those attending.

Issues with transparency, clarity and communication

The survey indicated a lack of transparency, clarity and communication on a number of important issues.

Teaching allocation

The vast majority of respondents (75-85%) reported that that the allocation of teaching in their institution conforms to three of the four key principles of the 2010 report, namely that allocation is: led by a senior academic; usually or always involves discussion with the academic concerned; and takes academics' other responsibilities into account, including flexibility at different career stages. However, less than half (42%) report conformity to the fourth key principle of the 2010 report, that there is transparency of distribution and an individual's allocation is made available to all other staff.

Teaching evaluation

Just above half of respondents (57%) reported that their institution has a clear strategy for evaluating staff teaching contributions. Later career academics were more likely to report there was a clear strategy (63%) than mid to late career academics (52% and 50% respectively). However, almost all respondents (87%) reported that student feedback plays a role in evaluating good teaching at their institution.

Promotion criteria

Respondents demonstrated significant uncertainty regarding locally unified promotion systems and the provision of University Teaching Fellowships. About half (55%) of respondents indicated scepticism that teaching is considered equally to research in professorial promotions, with an additional cohort of respondents (24%) indicating that professorial promotions based on teaching achievement were not possible at their institution. Only about a third (35%) reported that they knew of such a promotion in their institution.

Recruitment Processes

Only half (52%) of respondents believed that interest and expertise in teaching is evaluated as an integral part of recruitment.

Income from teaching and research

Respondents were asked to indicate the levels of staff awareness in their institution regarding the institutional income derived from teaching and research. The levels reported were of concern to the steering group. Only about half (56%) of respondents expected staff knew of institutional research income, and even less (36%) expected the same for teaching income. Additionally, despite the high relative contribution of teaching (as compared to research) income to institutions, over half (56%) expected that staff were unaware of this.

In conclusion

Nurturing the next generation of scientists depends upon the inspiration, training and knowledge transfer that arises from high-quality teaching at higher education institutions.

The 2010 report noted that a 'rising interest in how to improve the teaching of biomedical and clinical sciences is evident at individual, departmental and institutional levels'. Developments since 2010 have served to sharpen the debate. For example, a survey published by the Higher Education Policy Institute in 2013 confirms that the restructuring of higher education funding, which has taken place since publication of the Academy's report, has positioned HEI teaching as a critical issue of current concern for students.¹ Furthermore, the Minister for Universities and Science recently expressed concern about teaching at HEIs.²

To ensure high-quality teaching is enabled and supported in the long-term, the recommendations of the 2010 report need to be implemented across the sector.

¹ Higher Education Policy Institute and Which? (2013). *The academic experience of students in English universities*. <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/466-2154/2013-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-produced-jointly-by-HEPI-and-Which.html>

² <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/oct/21/universities-research-teaching-minister>