Pioneering a new career pathway in education and scholarship
Susan Smith and David Walker, University of Sussex

Introduction

As higher education practices come under increased scrutiny from students, regulators, media and the public, the development of a culture of scholarship and continuing professional development in teaching and learning is imperative if universities are to address the many current and emerging challenges they face (Myatt et al., 2018).

Despite Boyer’s work on the integration and interaction of the different forms of scholarship thirty years ago (Boyer, 1990), reward and promotion structures within Universities have been slow to respond, continuing to emphasise the development of an individual’s research profile with their development as an educator often a secondary concern. In part this can be attributed to vagueness around definition and measurement of what constitutes scholarship (Kern et al., 2015). However it is also a factor of cultural inertia across the higher education (HE) sector and a failure of institutional policies to rebalance opportunity, career progression and security when it comes to teaching and research (Cashmore, Cane and Cane, 2013).

To address this gap, and to seek to establish parity of opportunity and esteem with research, new teaching and scholarship career paths are emerging. Whilst, originally, teaching focused colleagues were engaged to address unexpected growth in student numbers (Smith and Urquhart, 2018) there is an increasing realisation that those who pursue this route are often experts in teaching and learning within their subject area. However, despite the increasing prevalence of such career paths there is often little structured support to encourage development in teaching, learning and scholarship in this area, combined with a lack of clarity of the evidence required for the purposes of promotion (Crow et al., 2018; Magin, 1998).

This article explores some of the challenges in engaging faculty with teaching and learning using our own experiences of leading the launch of a new career track in education and scholarship and asks how we can work towards a culture of continuous professional development in this area for all staff involved in teaching and supporting learning.

Background

The University of Sussex, as part of its Strategic Framework 2025, undertook a review of academic career structures with the express aim of supporting the delivery of new institutional strategic objectives which included achieving parity of esteem between teaching and research. The new structures unified a previous divide which saw different academic titles and promotion routes for those on a Teaching and Research Career Pathway and those on a Teaching Fellow Career Pathway. The revised dual track includes routes for staff employed in Teaching and Research roles and Education and Scholarship roles with all staff previously engaged on the Teaching Fellow pathway having the opportunity to carry the academic title of Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader or Professor and to transition to a standard academic contract aligned to revised role profiles.

Updating career structures and unifying academic titles was an important first step and marker of intent on the part of the University. However, it was recognised that to achieve true parity of esteem between the career tracks it would be essential to agree a common understanding of scholarship, recognising that the new career pathway would benefit from increased clarity and a working definition with sufficient flexibility to allow discipline specific variations within a common framework. It was felt that increased clarity would help reduce arbitrage across career paths and support colleagues to plan and develop their scholarly practice. There was also recognition of the need and importance of developing a sustainable structure to build capacity and cultivate scholarship across the institution.
akin to the extensive supporting infrastructure and development opportunities linked to research (Fanghanel et al. 2016). The combination of an institutional commitment to scholarship as a concept, reward and recognition for scholarship work and the presence of a scholarship network across a university has been demonstrated to be effective catalysts for supporting scholarship (Kenny, Watson and Desmarais, 2016).

To establish a common definition of scholarship; determine different means by which scholarship could be evidenced and to establish support for academic staff to enable them to develop their scholarship and scholarly practice, an Education and Scholarship Working Group was formed at Sussex. Comprising cross-institutional representation, the group was tasked to critically reflect on the work required to successfully implement the new career pathway. The Working Group identified five priorities around which to focus efforts:

- Build institutional awareness of scholarship
- Promote equality of scholarship
- Effect a cultural shifts in parity of esteem between teaching and research in the University
- Build capability in the internal community (specifically the Education and Scholarship career pathway)
- Establish processes and support structures in line with and on a par with those for research development

The programme of activities associated with the Working Group were to be supported by the University’s new team of Academic Developers, recruited in the summer of 2020 to help realise the ambitions of the University’s Strategic Framework and in particular the Learn to Transform Education Strategy.

Defining Scholarship

A consultation process led by the Working Group, and involving the University’s Leadership Team, returned a consensus that any definition of scholarship should not only be internally consistent at Sussex but also consistent with definitions broadly adopted across the wider HE sector in the UK and internationally. This decision was cognisant of the growing global community of practice on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL); the University’s strategic commitment to external engagement, and the value of open access as a means of sharing and promoting engagement with scholarly outputs.

Boyer’s (1990) definition of Scholarship as ‘knowledge acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice and through teaching’ was thus adopted. It was agreed that scholarship should also be viewed as a proactive concept, such that, knowledge is actively and continually developed, applied and improved, and collaboratively shared with the wider university community and beyond.

For academic staff on the Education and Scholarship pathway at Sussex this can take the form of subject specific scholarship or scholarship in the wider field of higher education. It was recognised that scholarship and scholarly practice would likely evolve as colleagues progress through different career levels, moving from a focus on developing the academic’s own knowledge and practice to influencing and leading the field as illustrated in Figure 1. This sought to broadly align with the dimensions of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and categories of Fellowships (both AdvanceHE and SEDA) enabling colleagues on the career track to build a scholarship profile that would not only potentially serve promotion routes but also form the basis of valuable evidence for professional recognition.
Personal Scholarship Plan and Teaching Portfolio

To embed a formal review of prospective scholarship plans and scholarship outputs into the university cycle of annual review and reward we established a Personal Scholarship Plan (PSP) along with a Teaching Portfolio template. The personal scholarship plan process was designed to mirror the personal research plan process undertaken by research and teaching faculty. The PSP enables staff to articulate their plans for the upcoming year and is structured around the areas identified in the University’s Scholarship Framework. The PSP is designed as a planning aid to help staff to proactively consider future activities and their potential impact along with any resources needed to help achieve the expected outcomes of the scholarship work. The PSP feeds into the annual appraisal process and facilitates the discussion of achievements and plans for the upcoming year. An initial version of the PSP has been piloted with faculty in the University of Sussex Business School. Feedback from the pilot project has been used to refine the planning document and work is now underway to operationalise the process of rolling out the PSP for all education and scholarship track faculty.

The Teaching Portfolio reflects the range of activity and achievements, in other words it is retrospective while the personal scholarship plan is forward looking. The portfolio template provides guidance on the expected content and examples of potential evidence that might be included. A teaching portfolio is a requirement to support promotion applications, although a template had not been specified before. The template includes both a reflective statement of teaching philosophy including the following:

1. Rationale for the individual’s approach to teaching
2. Teaching methods employed that link to the teaching rationale
3. Summary of teaching achievements
4. Summary of scholarship achievements

In addition, the portfolio includes a statement of future aspirations to encourage the candidate to articulate their plans for the role, the development required to fulfil these aspiration and how they align with the University’s values and strategy. The University intends to pilot the new portfolios in the upcoming academic promotion round following which an evaluation will be conducted to assess their effectiveness and to inform potential enhancements.

Building capacity and supporting faculty engagement in Scholarship
The University of Sussex Learning to Transform strategy commits that we will afford the highest quality learning experience to our students. To achieve this goal, the importance of establishing an infrastructure to support the development and progression of all staff involved in teaching and the support of learning was recognised with the development of capacity and capability in educational scholarship a fundamental underpinning.

A proposal was developed to create a dedicated network focussing on the development, advancement and promotion of recognition in education - aligning with the new Education and Scholarship promotion pathway. This new network was named DARE to Transform, a name selected both as a challenge to colleagues to be courageous in their personal and professional development but also to express the University’s stated commitment to be disruptive in its approach to innovating its educational provision and established delivery model.

DARE to Transform, established and coordinated by Dr David Walker and Dr Susan Smith, has been designed to serve as a scholarship and pedagogical research incubator, establishing a community of practice and with a range of supporting initiatives to advance practice, encourage educational experimentation and enquiry. Crucially, DARE to Transform seeks to connect colleagues across the institution, providing a vehicle for collaboration to address common areas of challenges and for the promotion and sharing of outputs and outcomes from scholarly activities.

Launched in 2020, DARE to Transform has rapidly expanded through:

- Establishment of an Engaging in Scholarship and Pedagogical Research Seminar Series addressing a different thematic focus each semester. The first theme in Spring 2020 focussed on foundations of scholarship and welcomed guest contributions from Professor Pam Parker SFSEDA, City University on the ‘Scholarship of Teaching and Learning: the evidence for my practice’ and Professor Lydia Arnold, Harper Adams University on ‘Getting started with pedagogic action research’.

- Creation of the DARE to Transform blog (http://blogs.sussex.ac.uk/daretotransform) as an open, online publishing outlet for both early career and experienced colleagues across the University to share and disseminate scholarly outputs. Posts are invited across a range of thematic areas and may take the form of reflective articles, opinion pieces, educational resources or initial findings from pedagogic action research. To assist those colleagues new to writing for this medium, a dedicated style and content guide has been developed and a series of online workshops offered to provide colleagues with the support and space to produce outputs.

- Launch of the DARE to Transform Mentoring Programme, a strand of the University’s mentoring framework which has been developed in collaboration with colleagues from Organisational Development. Focussed in particular on the Education and Scholarship career pathway, the scheme seeks to match experienced (Grade 9 and 10) and early career (Grade 7 and 8) colleagues from within and across Schools to form a mentoring relationship enabling the mentor to gain experiencing of mentoring others (a common requirement of senior levels of professional recognition) and for the mentee to draw upon the knowledge of a more established colleague to guide the development of their personal scholarship planning activities. Prior to entering into a mentoring relationship both mentors and mentees must complete a training workshop addressing both mentoring skills and the University’s scholarship framework. The mentoring relationship runs for 12 months with mentors and mentees given the freedom to determine the frequency of meetings. Seven mentoring relationships were established in spring 2020 as part of the first cohort. Significant demand has resulted in a decision to run the programme on a biannual basis with a second and larger cohort inducted in the autumn.
Feedback from participants indicates that the network, in particular the new mentoring scheme, is already having a positive impact on nurturing the development of scholarship and building collegiate links across disciplinary boundaries:

‘I found this scheme very interesting as it is interdisciplinary mentoring across disciplines, which I thought would benefit me. I also considered that mentoring was part of my professional development. I have learnt that this mentoring scheme was different from what I have previously experienced from my doctorate supervisor. My current mentor supports me with information and advice to guide the development of my scholarship. After being involved in the mentoring scheme, I began to feel that I wish to support others like I have been supported.’

‘The opportunity to work with a mentor has changed my perspective and provided a different avenue to my initial interest in scholarship and enabled me to take a step back to consider the bigger picture. It helps to have someone that you can go to in a friendly and relax environment and seek help and advice without the fear of judgment. The selection and pairing process was very well executed with training for both parties and an introduction from the team to make the handshake much smoother. I consider myself lucky and I am very grateful for the opportunity.’

Future plans, areas for further investigation and questions for reflection
The Education and Scholarship career track at Sussex is in its infancy but notable strides have been made over a period of time when normal university operations have been significantly disrupted as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic. We are resolute in our aim of establishing parity of esteem between the Teaching and Research and Education and Scholarship pathways and we have ambitious plans to further extend those critical support structures under the umbrella of the DARE to Transform network.

As part of our future plans we aim to:
- Foster interdisciplinary scholarship collaborations between network members.
- Support pedagogic research grant writing activities.
- Over time, monitor the scholarship outputs and the career development of those who joined the network as mentees and their transition to the role of mentor.
- Develop a range of scholarship case studies to share the breadth of activity that is taking place across the university and evaluate the impact on the individuals, the department or school and the wider university.

As part of the ongoing work of the Education and Scholarship Working Group we will also seek to evaluate the effectiveness of the Personal Scholarship Plan and Teaching Portfolio. We will also continue to reflect on the fundamental questions that we have faced from the outset which are pertinent not only to our work at Sussex but potentially to those engaged in similar work at other institutions:

1. Is it possible for education and scholarship tracks to enjoy parity of esteem with traditional research and teaching tracks?
2. What steps can institutions take to ensure that education and scholarship is valued as highly as a research career track?
3. How should colleagues on education and scholarship career tracks evidence, plan and resource their scholarship
4. What mechanisms/processes should institutions implement to support staff to develop their scholarly activity? How important is it that these mirror those for research?

References
Cashmore, A., Cane, C., & Cane, R. (2013) Rebalancing promotion in the HE sector: is teaching excellence being rewarded? The Higher Education Academy. Available Online:


Dr Susan Smith is Associate Dean (Education and Students) at University of Sussex Business School. Dr David Walker PFHEA is Head of Technology Enhanced Learning at the University of Sussex.