Scholarship and teaching-focused roles: an exploratory study of academics’ experiences and perceptions of support

Article (Published Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/108421/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
Scholarship and teaching-focused roles: An exploratory study of academics’ experiences and perceptions of support

Susan Smith & David Walker

To cite this article: Susan Smith & David Walker (2022): Scholarship and teaching-focused roles: An exploratory study of academics’ experiences and perceptions of support, Innovations in Education and Teaching International, DOI: 10.1080/14703297.2022.2132981

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2022.2132981

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 09 Oct 2022.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Scholarship and teaching-focused roles: An exploratory study of academics’ experiences and perceptions of support

Susan Smith and David Walker

Department of Accounting and Finance, University of Sussex Business School, Brighton, UK; Vice Chancellor’s Office, University of Brighton, Brighton, UK

ABSTRACT

Teaching-focused career tracks are increasingly prevalent across the Higher Education sector internationally, driven by student number growth and perceived managerialist agendas. Opportunities for advancement are challenged, however, by ambiguous and inconsistent conceptual frameworks regarding the role of scholarship in career progression, structural inequalities relating to available development support, and an absence of role models. The findings of a survey conducted with teaching-focused academics working in the UK identified an urgent need for clarity from the sector and more structured development opportunities for those employed on teaching-focused career paths. It is critical to ensure equity in professional opportunity, to truly embed teaching-focused careers into academic culture, and for institutions to fully benefit from the output of their scholarship activity. Until a more precise and consistent understanding of the concept of scholarship is established and the developmental support infrastructure is more comprehensive, barriers for those pursuing teaching-focused career routes will remain.

Introduction

The growth in teaching-focused academic roles and career pathways is an international phenomenon (Bennett et al., 2018; Flavell et al., 2018; Tharapos & Marriott, 2020; Trigwell et al., 2000; Whitton et al., 2021) partially attributable to the expansion of the Higher Education (HE) sector and the rise of managerialist policies (Flavell et al., 2018). In the UK, Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data indicates that the number of staff categorised as being employed in teaching only roles has increased by 37% over the 5 years to 2019/20, while the number on combined teaching and research contracts shrunk by 1% (HESA, 2021, January). The data also indicate differences in career trajectory for those on teaching-focused pathways with low levels of teaching professors as a percentage of those classified as teaching only (2019/20 1.2%) in contrast to the significantly greater percentage of research and teaching professors (2019/20 21.5%). This is echoed in discipline-based investigations, e.g. (Anderson & Mallanaphy, 2020; Chartered Association of Business Schools, 2019). With increasing numbers of academics following...
a teaching-focused career path, clarity concerning the requirements for progression and access to support are important precursors for advancement.

The expansion in teaching-focused roles has been linked to improvements in teaching quality and student experience (Simmons et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2020). A more negative framing may though be considered in the context of exercises in research excellence, e.g. the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF), which has, it is posited, encouraged a polarisation between those deemed ‘research active’ and those who are not (Chalmers, 2011), and reported cases where those who do not meet the criteria being migrated to teaching-focused career pathways (Bennett et al., 2018). Others argue that there should be no differentiation between research and teaching and that the creation of alternative career paths results in an ‘othering’ of teaching excellence (Macfarlane, 2011).

The term ‘scholarship’ is present in the naming of many teaching-focused career pathways, for example, ‘teaching and scholarship’ terminology is often adopted. Similarly, it is also a commonly identified requirement in promotion criteria for teaching-focused routes. However, the term is used almost interchangeably across activities and between levels, with a greater emphasis on educational/pedagogic research at the higher levels (Smith & Walker, 2021). Examples of activities that may be considered scholarship include evaluative work, sharing and dissemination of practice through events and reflective writing, digital scholarship including blogging and open educational practices, active participation in and leading of professional groups and networks, mentoring, and scholarly teaching. This can include both teaching of the discipline and the wider discipline of higher education academic practice. The assumption underpinning the inclusion of scholarship in promotion criteria is that engagement supports continual personal development (Simmons et al., 2021), and the global community that such academics are part of offers a source of best practice and innovative thinking which can benefit both the individual and the institution (Bernstein, 2013). Scholarship has been criticised, however, as a ubiquitous, ‘… slippery term’ (Trigwell & Shale, 2004, p. 525) stemming from the absence of an agreed sectoral definition and ambiguity arising from its relationship to pedagogic research and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Often it appears to include activities beyond those traditionally understood to be scholarships, e.g. scholarly teaching (Smith & Walker, 2021).

Acknowledging the variability in the interpretation of the term, this paper examines the way ‘scholarship’, as framed in career pathway titles and promotion criteria, is understood and experienced by those employed on teaching-focused career pathways in UK higher education and the extent to which scholarship activity is developmentally supported to facilitate career advancement.

The findings seek to add to the sector’s understanding of scholarship concerning this expanding employment category by identifying ongoing barriers to career advancement for those on such pathways to promote equity of progression opportunities across academic tracks. The work draws on and extends previous research related to scholarship by taking a broader approach that also incorporates SoTL by establishing a picture from academics across the UK HE sector. It builds upon existing case study research, e.g. with Australian academics (Trigwell et al., 2000), comparing the UK and North American contexts (Webb & Tierney, 2020), and small groups of educational leaders (Kreber, 2002).

This study investigated the following research questions:
RQ1 – How is ‘scholarship’ – as framed in career pathway titles and promotion criteria – incorporated and experienced by those employed on teaching-focused career pathways in UK higher education?

RQ2 – To what extent is scholarship developmentally supported to facilitate career advancement for staff on teaching-focused pathways?

**Literature**

In reviewing the literature, the authors examined the lenses through which teaching-focused roles and promotion pathways have been considered; the origins of scholarship as a term; and the implications arising from scholarship emergence as a facet by which career progression may be judged. Several related themes were identified, including uncertainty around scholarship activity and its output; opportunities, and capacity to engage in scholarship activity; and issues associated with the availability of internal role models and local leadership.

**Teaching-focused roles**

The literature explores teaching-focused career tracks from several perspectives, the institutional (Geertsema et al., 2018; Myatt et al., 2018), conceptual (Boyer, 1990; Kern et al., 2015), and the personal accounts of those on such career paths (Anderson & Mallanaphy, 2020; Bennett et al., 2018; Brooke et al., 2020). Role confusion is a common theme and is often attributed to a lack of institutional support for those on these routes (Bennett et al., 2018; Whitton et al., 2021). Scholarship, whilst increasingly a required element of the role (Smith & Walker, 2021), is often portrayed as inferior to research, creating confusion both at institutional and individual levels (Bennett et al., 2018; Whitton et al., 2021).

**Scholarship and its outputs**

Part of the currently confused articulation of scholarship can be traced to the disaggregation of Boyer’s scholarships (Boshier, 2009). Boyer had called for a ‘more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar’ (Boyer, 1990, p. 24). This view included four types of scholarship as part of the academic role; discovery, integration, application, and teaching. However, the delimitation between the act of teaching and the scholarship of teaching remained uncertain, leading to attempts to elaborate the term (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999) resulting in an extension of Boyer’s initial definition and giving rise to the term scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL; Shulman, 2000).

The literature tends to focus on SoTL as a more clearly defined concept than scholarship, despite ongoing debates that similarly surround it (Chick, 2014). SoTL, like scholarship, remains an imprecise term, often leading to a conflation between scholarly teaching and SoTL (Potter & Kustra, 2011). Kern et al.’s Dimensions of Activities Related to Teaching (DART) model helps to organise the continuum of activity from teaching through to SoTL (Kern et al., 2015). This helps to contextualise the progression towards the rigorous evaluation of scholarship that Boyer claimed was possible (Boyer, 1990) and acknowledges the various new forms of scholarship that have emerged since Boyer’s work, e.g., digital scholarship. The challenge is the inconsistent approach to valuing these forms of scholarship and their impact.
The extent to which acceptance of SoTL activity (and scholarship as a proxy) beyond peer-reviewed journals is valued in practice remains a matter of institutional practice and despite efforts to focus on impact, ‘Articles in reputable journals are the coin of the academic realm’ (Boshier, 2009), reinforcing the publishing hierarchy (Tharapoš & Marriott, 2020). In addition, training in SoTL-related research methods is also often lacking (Kim et al., 2021; Tharapoš & Marriott, 2020; Webb & Tierney, 2020) creating a significant barrier to academic acceptance in an environment where quality continues to be judged and rewarded through a traditional research lens of peer-reviewed outputs, originality, rankings, and similar ratings.

In the context of career progression for teaching-focused roles, individuals’ capacity to engage with SoTL is repeatedly linked to having sufficient time within the institutional workload model (Flavell et al., 2018). Indeed, institutional culture may actively work against teaching-focused faculty aspiring to enhance academic practice and student learning by limiting opportunities or incentives for those in teaching-focused roles to engage in SoTL (Simmons et al., 2021). In cases where workload allocation for SoTL is non-existent or is insufficient, the research identifies teaching-focused academics using their free time to undertake the research required to secure career progression (Bennett et al., 2018; Simmons et al., 2021). This compounds the challenges for others who cannot invest similar amounts of personal time in such activities and raises serious questions of equity.

A lack of internal role models to mentor and guide faculty can lead to reported feelings of isolation (Simmons et al., 2021). However, technology has made it increasingly easy to access international networks that offer mentorship and support, for example, the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) and the UK Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA). In addition, a growing number of developmental programmes have been established to support institutional SoTL capacity building; see, for example, (Fanghanel et al., 2016; Whitton et al., 2021). Such initiatives support the move from disciplinary expertise to educational expertise and can also help foster group identity and feelings of belonging, helping individuals to develop as education leaders (Whitton et al., 2021). Involvement in, or access to, such communities (Bailey et al., 2021) can confer a considerable advantage in terms of career progression, providing an important means to develop social capital through enhanced opportunities to identify and engage in scholarly activities, including publication opportunities (Heffernan, 2021).

Methodology

The researchers constructed an electronic survey (Oppenheim, 2000). Data collection was restricted to those employed in the UK HE sector to ensure that respondents were employed under equivalent employment legislation and within a broadly equivalent structure of education. By identifying common themes, comparisons can then be drawn with similar studies in other settings. This approach complements findings from previous work that focuses on participants’ understanding of scholarship in teaching, e.g.a case study at an Australian University (Trigwell et al., 2000).

Questions were developed to elucidate how those on teaching-focused career paths experience them and framed using key themes emerging from the literature relating to the recognition of scholarship activity and its outputs, training in appropriate research methods, the time within the institutional workload to engage with scholarship activity,
and leadership with reference to career progression. The questions also sought to understand how advancement was supported and valued institutionally to identify practice-based recommendations. A mapping of the research questions to the research instrument and themes is included in Table 1.

The survey was distributed through Twitter and LinkedIn, where both researchers are part of active HE networks, inviting UK-based academics on teaching-focused contracts to contribute to the study. This approach enabled a broad range of perspectives to be captured (Heffernan, 2021), rather than the smaller samples typical of many qualitative studies (Braun et al., 2020). This dataset is not intended to be statistically representative of the wider population (Braun et al., 2020). In addition, the anonymity of the survey is intended to promote a broader engagement amongst participants who may feel institutional pressures could prevent them from responding to the participation request (Braun et al., 2020). The ability to take the survey at a time that suited the respondent offered flexibility for academics (Ross, 2020). However, a limitation of the study relates to the voluntary nature of the survey. Ethical approval was received from the researcher’s institution, and data were stored following the relevant policies.

The survey was open for a period between June and September 2021 and attracted 171 respondents. From this sample, we removed those who selected the categories teaching and research and ‘other’ leaving 134 valid responses from 55 unique institutions, including both pre- and post-92 universities from across the UK. Respondents represented a range of disciplinary areas including the Arts and Humanities, Business, Social Sciences, Life Sciences, Medicine, and Engineering. Of the respondents who identified as being in Teaching Only roles (based on HESA role categorisation) 81% indicated that they were contractually required to engage with scholarship activity as part of their role. Of those who indicated that they were contractually required to engage with scholarship, only 25% responded that they were aware of an institutional definition of scholarship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities considered scholarship</td>
<td>Peer-reviewed publications, Curriculum development, Grant income, Confused definitions</td>
<td>RQ1 Does your institution have criteria that recognise scholarship as part of academic promotion? What activities does your institutional criteria recognise as scholarship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges to engaging with scholarship for career advancement</td>
<td>Variability in the evaluation of scholarship activity, Workload time dedicated to scholarship, Legitimation tool for teaching-focused academics</td>
<td>RQ1 What do you feel are the challenges to engaging with scholarship in your current role/institution?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for and monitoring of scholarship activity</td>
<td>Scholarship networks, Seminar programmes, Mentoring schemes, Writing retreats, Informal mechanisms, Annual appraisals</td>
<td>RQ2 How is scholarship activity supported in your institution? How is engagement with scholarship monitored or reviewed in your institution? What suggestions do you have for improving support for scholarship activity as a means to facilitate career development and progression?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The responses offered a sufficiently rich dataset to address the research questions. The qualitative responses were coded by the researchers to develop the analysis of the dataset and to go beyond summarising (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Braun et al., 2020). Coding was conducted from a bottom-up perspective from the survey responses, and comparisons were discussed between the coders to ensure an agreement was achieved. A selection of representative quotes is included to illustrate the findings relevant to the themes and sub-themes developed from the dataset (Table 1).

Findings

The findings are organised: RQ1, activities considered scholarship, challenges to engaging with scholarship for career advancement; RQ2, support, and monitoring of scholarship activity.

Activities considered scholarship

Clarity in promotion criteria is important to enable individuals to work towards career advancement. Responses indicated that expectations were similar to those for teaching and research paths where peer-reviewed publications, grant income, and delivery of research seminars dominate. Peer-reviewed publications were the main recognised form of scholarship activity, followed by curriculum development, and external teaching project grants. Many respondents identified a lack of time to engage with scholarship as a consequence of heavy teaching and administrative loads, pushing scholarly work to the margins.

The apparent alignment of institutionally recognised activities equating scholarship activity with research was reinforced in comments from respondents when they outlined other activities recognised as scholarship. A typical response included, ‘Acquiring funding, outreach, discipline-based research done at a lower rate than for Research staff’.

It was apparent from these and other responses that there is often a conflation between scholarship and service activities. The lack of clarity led one respondent to conclude:

‘Scholarship is a pointless word which is open to erroneous interpretation. There are consequences of this - being open to interpretation means that reward and recognition can be handed out subjectively. If you are serious about reward and recognition then it has to be by SoTL’

Other respondents commented on the broad spectrum of activities that could be considered scholarship leading to considerable uncertainty. The dichotomy was summed up by one respondent in this way:

‘Broadly speaking there are two camps: one is pushing for teaching and scholarship to become teaching and research in pedagogy and measure it like any area of the REF (i.e. publish 4* papers, win grants, have impact). The other camp uses some wishy-washy definition of engagement and dissemination, but then depending on who is talking, things like teaching awards are thrown into the mix. The end result is that no one is really certain about their status.’
Challenges to engaging with scholarship for career advancement

Variability in the evaluation of scholarship during promotion rounds was highlighted as a challenge, partly attributed to the fact that the career pathways are still relatively new and partly due to a lack of understanding of what constitutes scholarship by those undertaking the evaluation. This apparent constant state of flux in the criteria by which scholarship activity is judged may be likened to Bourdieu’s notion of hidden rules (Bourdieu, 1998): ‘I don’t know if I’m hitting the mark and will receive promotion or not’.

An emerging insight related to concerns about institutional motivations for incorporating scholarships as part of teaching-focused pathways: ‘Not sure that it does value scholarship … sometimes it feels like it’s just added on to our job description because we are supposed to be academics’. At one extreme, it was suggested that scholarship is merely a legitimating tool to signal that people are ‘academics’ and carry the symbolic capital to give credibility in front of students; at the other, it was viewed as a punitive managerialist mechanism for those whose research was deemed of an insufficient standard. A typical comment was: ‘Being on a teaching and scholarship career track is seen as being a punishment for not being good enough as a researcher’.

Such sentiments are of concern if there is a real commitment to building teaching-focused career pathways. In the first instance, a deficit narrative is created which permeates the whole track and leads to the perception that it is populated by those who are lacking in some way.

Support and monitoring

When asked about the mechanisms to nurture scholarship activity at their institutions, the primary approach identified was mentoring programmes, while other developmental opportunities including scholarship networks, seminar programmes, and writing retreats were also cited as means of systematic support.

The analysis revealed feelings that teaching-focused academics were left to their own devices to progress their scholarship rather than following a structured approach, with support in the form of mentoring offered in some instances as a reactive response to unsuccessful promotion applications rather than as a proactive developmental measure:

‘It is not formally developed so it ends up as a promotion within a small group of people who understand the informal rules (that they have largely developed)’.

‘Not really supported but there is an informal mentoring developed within the Faculty of Business - for those who show an interest in promotion on the teaching and scholarship track, usually offered after a failed attempt at promotion’

The first respondent highlights that the rules are not transparent to all which can result in misplaced efforts or a misunderstanding of what is expected, while the second respondent references informal mentoring mechanisms established in the absence of formal institutional programmes of support.
Annual appraisal or performance review emerged as the key means by which scholarship activity was reviewed and monitored within respondent’s institutions, with a small number of tailored processes identified including personal scholarship plans and dedicated paperwork:

‘Part of annual personal development review (same as research staff but different form & criteria)’

Concerns related to an institutional commitment to scholarship and recognition of the outputs of scholarship activity were, however, identified in responses, echoing issues of transparency of criteria and indicting an at times formative approach to scholarship whereby it is mentioned due to the procedural requirements of the appraisal process but is otherwise largely ignored the remainder of the time:

‘It is only mentioned once a year to me directly at my annual appraisal’.

Our annual appraisal system - Head of School reviews (but doesn’t understand what they are looking at!)

The responses suggest that the scholarship support is variable across institutions and that even in institutions that are engaged in supporting scholarship, the monitoring and evaluation process is also inconsistent.

**Discussion**

The findings confirm that those employed on teaching-focused career pathways continue to experience uncertainty regarding institutional expectations and evaluation of scholarship. This is partially attributable to vague and idiosyncratic definitions of scholarship adopted by institutions. In addition, whilst support mechanisms for scholarship development exist or are emerging, the development of promotion committee expertise in the evaluation of scholarship work may be lagging and contributing to unexpected outcomes. If the establishment of teaching-focused routes represents a genuine commitment on the part of institutions to developing teaching excellence and parity of esteem for those who follow these pathways, the findings of this study indicate that it may be time for the sector to revisit vague ‘scholarship’ language so that academic development, institutional monitoring, and progression practices can be aligned.

The findings also reveal a continued uncertainty concerning the conditions for career advancement. For the majority of respondents, whilst scholarship in some form is part of the official promotion criteria, there exists considerable ambiguity regarding the actual requirements and significant concern about the time allocated to such activities in institutional workloads (Kim et al., 2021; Simmons et al., 2021). This was reinforced by the finding that the symbolic capital of journal publication continues to dominate understandings of scholarship outputs (Bosher, 2009), particularly those of promotion committees (Kreber, 2002), creating a mismatch with assertions that other forms of output can demonstrate a similar degree of rigour (Boyer, 1990). The study adds to prior research that refers to scholarship as a field-specific capital (Bourdieu, 1986) continually defined and redefined by institutions leading to uncertainty in practice and a lack of sectoral comparability leading to boundary careers (Smith & Walker, 2021).
Despite a now significant body of research in the field, in particular investigating the building of SoTL capacity (Kim et al., 2021; Tierney et al., 2020), mechanisms for the development of scholarship activity were still reported tending to the informal, principally through localised (school/department-level) mentoring programmes with limited and highly varied approaches to the planning and monitoring of activities, mainly through annual appraisal processes. The inequalities expressed in the findings, perceived or otherwise, reinforced notions of hierarchy in academia, which are exacerbated when institutional support, methods training, and infrastructure for scholarship are compared to that of research (Kim et al., 2021; Tharapos & Marriott, 2020).

The findings reinforce the importance of leadership commitment (Chalmers, 2011; Webb & Tierney, 2020) to ensure that underlying support infrastructures are effectively embedded into the university’s operations. Institutional clarity would also serve to support the training of line managers and promotion committees in the evaluation and support requirements of teaching-focused academics and start to address some of the concerns identified in the study.

Conclusion

Teaching-focused academics employed on pathways with contractual requirements to engage in scholarship face ongoing uncertainties arising from ambiguous or absent institution-specific definitions of scholarship. Tensions arising from this lack of clarity are evident, with particular concerns identified relating to opportunities to develop as scholars in the context of liminal structures that many feel constrain their ability to progress in their careers. Further work is required to establish greater clarity in terminology across the sector and around training and calibration of institutional promotion in the assessment of teaching-focused applications.

Establishing structured institutional support is critical to unlocking the potential associated with teaching-focused career paths and establishing clarity both internally in universities and across the sector. The current landscape of variable institutional development support and mechanisms for effective monitoring, combined with the quality issues identified in the literature (McKinney, 2006; Tharapos & Marriott, 2020), point to significant challenges for anyone seeking to achieve the standards or levels of influence required to breakthrough to the professorial level.

The research can be extended by operationalising the research themes and sub-themes into a likert-based survey that can be used to gauge a wider range of views and experiences. Future research could investigate the impact of institutional support on promotion success for those following teaching-focused career paths.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Susan Smith PFHEA NTF is Associate Dean (Education & Students) at University of Sussex Business School, UK. She leads the University’s work to support the development of scholarship activity. Her
interests focus on enhancing the student experience through working in partnership with students and staff.

David Walker PFHEA is Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education & Students) at University of Brighton, UK where he has cross-institutional responsibility for ensuring learning and teaching excellence and positive outcomes for students.

ORCID

Susan Smith http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0411-9327

References


