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Standards applied to teaching are lower than standards applied to research

As someone who has spent my entire working life trying to redress the balance between research and teaching it may seem like heresy to say that research standards are higher. But they are, and this is made inevitable by our current procedures and practices.

Training, knowledge and expertise

Undergraduates may be taught a number of modules that are, in effect, research training modules, or at least students learn about experimental methods, or statistical analysis, or how to run a project. The effort put into developing seminar presentation skills, for example, is likely to be modest in comparison. Those students progressing towards an academic job then study for a PhD – perhaps 4,000 hours of training to a standard judged by experienced researchers to be equivalent to that normally found in the discipline. Some PhDs are very narrow in nature and academics might end up with a more limited base in knowledge and methods than their subsequent academic lives would benefit from, but nevertheless in most cases the level of sophistication achieved as a researcher is tolerably high. In contrast some lucky postgrads receive twenty hours of training as a teacher and may have the opportunity to experience a hundred hours of teaching. In comparison to the scale of their research training and experience this is feeble.

Most academics have no knowledge at all about the variety of ways their discipline might be taught, and indeed is taught in different institutions, let alone the expertise to actually use any of these alternatives. Any knowledge about course design or teaching practices is likely to be extremely narrow – sometimes no more than passing familiarity with local conventions. They rarely read about pedagogy, let alone regularly keep up to date, and rarely go to conferences or seminars about teaching – though a lot less rarely than in the past. Most of the debates about educational issues I have experienced in academic committees over the years have been characterised by almost total ignorance of what is known about university teaching and its efficacy. A debate about research that was similarly uninformed would be roundly criticised and those involved would lose credibility.

In the UK we are proud that we have professional standards for teaching, but the courses that lead to these standards are often less than 100 hours in duration and the standards do not specify a minimum length of training. Indeed it is possible to become accredited without taking a course at all. There is an equivalent in research of achieving a qualification on the basis of a portfolio of evidence rather than by passing a postgraduate course; I have a Doctorate by

publication. But I achieved it after more than a quarter of a century of research, publication and public presentations, not in my first year as a research assistant. I have little confidence that the kinds of teaching portfolio that can achieve professional teacher accreditation in the UK actually assure much in the way of standards, because they can be produced so easily, so quickly, with so little training or supervision, on the basis of so little experience and knowledge, and are often judged by people whose most senior qualification in education is the same introductory level as the person they are judging. There are now several institutions that are approaching their target of achieving 100% of their teachers being accredited. Given that there will be good, average and bad teachers, almost inevitably, this is in itself illuminating about the standard of accreditation. An academic course with no failures ever is unlikely to be of a very high standard.

Standard of judgements

When an academic is judged on their research, for a job or for promotion, this is a 'second stage' judgement. It is based on judgements that have already been made at an earlier stage about the academic's research grant applications and journal submissions, by experts in the field, by reviewers. There may be dozens of such prior judgements. The grant application or journal submission reviewers involved saw the applications and submissions themselves and there were usually two or three reviewers to iron out unwanted variation and maintain rigour. In contrast judgements about an academic's teaching are almost always made without this first expert stage having taken place. Those judging the teaching will probably not have seen the teaching themselves and instead rely on sources such as course evaluations or even claims made by the academic. The judges are also not likely to be experts in pedagogy, but in the discipline or in research in the discipline, or sometimes only in management. Instead of expert judgements having been made on many occasions over a number of years they are made once. It seems inevitable that the standards applied when judging teaching cannot be as high or as consistently applied as for research. I have seen promotion systems where prior judgements by expert teachers is brought into play and where the final arbiters can rely on such prior judgements having been made with some rigour, but such systems are very rare. Given that peer review is the cornerstone of quality throughout higher education this seems quite a blind spot.

Competition

To do well as a researcher you have to compete - and win. You have to be better than other applicants for research posts and all the other applicants will have a PhD in the same specialism and an impressive research record. You have to compete for research grants – and the competition is fierce. There are many more rejections than successes and a few stars from the prestigious institutions win sufficiently often to make it even harder for the rest of us. To get funding at all, in effect to be able to undertake any substantial research at all, you

have to be not just competent but better than the others, and a great deal better than average. My last research grant involved a competitive bidding process in which there were 155 applications for five grants. Then there is competition to get published, and it pushes the standards up again. Some journals are beyond the reach of mere mortals. Journals with high acceptance rates are often of very patchy quality.

Applying for academic positions involves a very much less rigorous and competitive process with regard to teaching. You are unlikely to be faced with a bunch of competing applicants who are all already established teaching stars each with a stellar teaching CV. There is sometimes no competition at all for the right to run a course. The course may have been on the books for years and it is simply assumed that it must carry on being run. Some courses have negative competition – experienced teachers run a mile and only the mugs end up teaching it. If you were to propose a new course there would probably be no competitors. Imagine what it would be like if, first, academic pay depended on them teaching courses and second, only one course proposal in five were approved, or if there was a public competition from academics from any institution for the best proposal to run a named course! I imagine that over time course design standards would soar, and those academics with few course design skills would find themselves with no courses to teach - and perhaps be shunted off to zero hours contracts. I am not proposing a dog eat dog world of competition in the teaching realm, but it is easy to see why teaching standards are sometimes lamentable while research standards are always being pushed up.

A side-effect of the competition for scarce research funds and for precious journal acceptance, is that a majority of academics in higher education have already lost in this game and have given up (if they ever started competing). They do not do research. Despite all the rhetoric that virtually every university subscribes to about the centrality of research to teaching, a very large number of teachers do not do any research, or at least not to a standard that is valued. Many institutions submit only a tiny proportion of their academics into periodic research assessment exercises – only the strongest researchers are deemed 'active' researchers. In contrast all academics teach: the wonderful, the average and the truly dreadful, the committed and the negligent. The range of teaching quality is bound to be wider, and the level of the bottom lower, and the average lower, when everybody does it. Imagine a situation in which the bottom 75% of academics, in terms of teaching quality, were labelled 'inactive' as teachers and so didn't do it (and so were not paid for it).

This difference in standards is not inevitable – it is a consequence of certain values being built into institutional procedures. Different values and different procedures could eventually redress the balance.

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