

Title: Sharing experiences of an online HEA Fellowship scheme and its impact on learning and teaching

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Abstract

Although professional development has been recognised for decades as key to effective organisational change and to improve student learning and experience, it seems to have been in the spotlight recently. This has been mostly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to upskill and build capacity in online learning across the UK higher education sector has increased. In addition to this context, increasingly universities and professional accredited bodies (e.g. in nursing) have adopted professional recognition such as the Fellowship of the Higher Education Academic (HEA) offered by the Advance HE. This is one of the strategies to offer professional development and recognition to staff in teaching and learning support roles. It is also the case for the Open University (OU), which is the largest online learning provider in the UK and is internationally known for its excellence in learning and teaching.

Applaud is The Open University's institutional scheme for Accrediting & Promoting Professional Learning & Academic Development. In line with the OU's distance learning approaches, Applaud is a fully online scheme and offers individuals the opportunity to gain external recognition as an Associate Fellow, Fellow or Senior Fellow of the HEA. The fellowship category will depend on an applicant's role, experience and responsibilities in teaching and supporting learning. Every four years the scheme is re-accredited by the Advance HE (previously known as HEA). As we prepared for the accreditation of the next period, which started on 1st September 2020 (2020-2024), the research team has conducted an evaluation of the previous scheme through an online survey that was sent to over 450 participants who successfully gained their HEA fellowship through Applaud, with 108 valid responses. Survey responses indicated that the scheme has had a positive impact on participants' practices (81%), as 72% of them were more confident in their role as teachers/supporters of learning, and 66% felt more confidence to undertake scholarship of learning and teaching.

Preliminary analysis of this data was used to inform both changes in the scheme and the second stage of data collection, which included online interviews with some of the survey participants who demonstrated interest in being interviewed. Fourteen interviews were conducted, audio recorded and transcribed. We adopted deductive and inductive approaches to thematically analyse the data and NVivo has been used as Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software. In this presentation we will share some of the key findings of the Applaud evaluation, including participants experiences in the scheme, the usefulness of the online support provided, and the impact of receiving HEA fellowship on teaching practices. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities globally have adapted the delivery of their professional development activities, including accredited schemes, such as Applaud, to fully online, and in some cases for the first time. This presentation will give an overview of a scheme that has been successful delivered online for four years, providing a framework of competencies that supports practitioners in reflecting on their practice and evidencing impact.