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Title: Fostering lifelong learning through professional development and recognition at the Open University UK

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Abstract

Professional development has long been recognised as key to effective organisational change and to improve student learning. This is even more the case today as the need to upskill, build capacity and recognise expertise in online learning across the higher education sector has increased due to the pandemic.

This paper reports on the findings of the evaluation of the Open University's Advance HE accredited fellowship scheme, called Applaud. Applaud is an online scheme and offers OU colleagues the opportunity to gain recognition for their excellence in teaching and support their learning. Since Applaud started in 2016, the scheme has recognised over 700 fellows. As an attempt to continue improving the scheme and understand participants' experiences, an evaluation of the scheme was conducted through an online survey and then follow up online interviews.

In this paper, the research, including the impact of a reflective process that underpins HEA fellowship on teaching practices and on students' experiences, will be shared. By providing teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice, and to be recognised for their efforts in enhancing students' experiences, Applaud helps to promote lifelong learning and quality education, which is aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 4.

Background and literature

Recently, the number of universities and professional accredited bodies (e.g. nursing) seeking professional recognition such as the Fellowship of the Higher Education Academic (HEA) offered by the Advance HE has increased substantially. One of the reasons for this increase could be due to the policy landscape in the UK, as universities are now required to report on their number of HEA fellowship in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (van der Sluis, 2021). In addition, professional recognition is one of the strategies used by some UK universities to offer professional development and recognition to staff in teaching and learning support roles. This is also the case for the Open University (OU), which is the largest online learning provider in the UK and has one of the largest accredited Fellowship schemes in the country.

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. 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.

In the UK, there are now over 120 professional recognition schemes, resulting in institutionally focused evaluation studies examining their impact (Spowart et al., 2019). Despite of this, the literature on the impact of these schemes is still limited. The ones available show a combination of positive and not so positive outcomes. A study by van der Sluis, Burden & Huet (2017, p. 126) suggested that accredited schemes,

“contribute to participants' staff development, provide opportunities for the enhancement of practice and that those who participate in the scheme identify value in the reflective process for reconciliation, confirmation of achievements and reinforcing commitment to teaching and/or supporting learning”.

Another study indicated that institutional culture plays an important role in encouraging staff engagement in such programs, but that this does not necessarily promote teaching development (Spowart et al., 2019). The fact that UK universities now report the numbers of HEA fellowship recognition in their TEF reports means that some universities have used political agendas to increase these numbers and meet other metrics to measure student experience and to inform institutional rankings (Spowart et al., 2019). Spowart and colleagues (2019, p.

1299) provide scheme leaders a word of caution saying that while “evidence shows the process of seeking accreditation can lead to an enhancement in teaching practices, caution must be taken to ensure that the professional development opportunities offered by accreditation schemes are fully realised”.

In order to gain deeper insights on participants experience in the scheme and to fully understand the impact of the scheme on learning, teaching and scholarship across the university, the researchers planned phase two of the Applaud evaluation, which was funded by Praxis Scholarship Centre in WELS. This paper focuses on the findings of this scholarship project aimed at uncovering these deeper insights and impact of the scheme through additional data gathering and analysis.

Methodology

This was a predominantly qualitative study; however, we have adopted a mixed methods approach to data collection and analysis. Data gathered via the online survey provided both quantitative and qualitative information, as participants had ample opportunities to include their insights and views on several aspects of the scheme. Data collected through the interviews were predominantly qualitative. We developed a semi-structured interview guide, which gave interviewees the opportunity to provide in-depth perspective on their experiences while engaging with Applaud. Semi-structured interviews were used to help the researchers to keep a dialog with participants while providing opportunities to probe for emerging themes (Minichiello, Aroni, & Hays, 2008).

We conducted deductive and inductive approaches to thematically analyse data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) and Miles and Huberman (1994), the deductive approach informs the study with a start list comprising of themes for the coding process. Therefore, we analysed the open-ended questions informed by participants’ survey answers in phase 1 of the study and identified the core themes which were: impacts of Applaud on professional development, engagement in scholarship, students’ experience and career support. After that, data analysis approach involved working exclusively inductive from the participant experiences, which drove the analysis entirely. Using deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis achieve rich interpretation and well-investigated data results (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Fourteen online interviews were conducted and transcribed. As demonstrated in Figure 1, the interview sample included staff from all OU Faculties and some Unit, such as LDS, PVC Student, IET and Graduate School. Thematic analysis began while the interviews were ongoing, transcripts were analysed one by one using NVivo 12. As analysis progressed, a table of emergent codes was developed and refined. Each new transcript led to codes being further expanded or adjusted. Once all the transcripts were analysed, researchers refined each code in order to identify any duplicate coding or emerging patterns. Upon completing this, the themes were developed, refined, and named.

Findings

Some of the key findings from the interviews are summarised below.

Impact of Applaud on scholarship engagement

Some of the interviewees explained the different activities and initiatives related to scholarship of teaching and learning that they got involved encouraged by their engagement with the Applaud scheme. One of these activities they engaged with was applying for scholarship projects within their Faculties. Participants then explained other benefits of getting engaged in scholarship such as the understanding of literature that supports and inform their practices and the practice of others.

Reflection on practice

For the majority of interviewees, an Applaud application offers the opportunity to reflect on practice. For some interviewees, reflection on practice may occur spontaneously, but the Applaud process highlights it more explicitly. The impact of Applaud on reflection on practice has been expressed differently between interviewees. For example, capacity building, self-confidence, etc.

Impact of Applaud on professional development

Interviewees discussed the different ways in which Applaud has impacted positively on their professional development. For example, more appreciation of CPD and training opportunities, opportunity of being an Applaud mentor, working in a team, these are examples of how the impact on professional development has been manifested.

School/Department support

The majority of interviewees mentioned that they receive positive encouragement and support from their school/department to complete their Applaud application. They also mentioned that this type of support has increased, which is positive. One participant explained that they did not receive support from their School and that the preparing and writing an Applaud submission is time consuming, and not recognised in workloads.

Impact of Applaud on students' experience

Different views have been reported about this theme; however the majority of responses were positive. Some interviewees related the impact of Applaud on students to the nature of their jobs. For some, it is easier for staff in teaching roles to demonstrate impact of Applaud on students' experience. This is a different reality for participants in support learning roles, who might have no/limited teaching experience and direct contact with students. Overall, this was a problematic question to answer for all participants, as it is very difficult to identify the impact of professional development, recognition and reflection on practice on students' experience.

Career support

All interviewees found that Applaud contributes to their career development as being a national and international recognition of their teaching excellence. They believe that it supports their future career path either with continuing their current job in the OU or moving to another academic institution. For two interviewees, HEA fellowship was a plus on their CV that facilitated their promotion and/or begin offered a permanent role in the OU.

Experience with Applaud mentor

Interviewees' experience with their Applaud mentors vary between positive and negative experience. However, participants also highlighted that the mentor is part of the whole support provided, as the support from the Applaud team and colleagues who experienced the same process with was helpful and encouraging.

Challenges of Applaud process

Interviewees experienced some challenging while working on their Applaud application. One of the challenges was the lack of clarity of Applaud guidance and documentation. Another challenge faced by participants was that the process of preparing a HEA fellowship application is time-consuming. One challenge reported by a few interviewees, who seem now to be mentors in the scheme, was about problems with communication between the scheme and the mentors, who were not aware at that time of who they were mentoring.

Discussion

It can be seen by the findings of this project that the Applaud scheme has had a positive impact on learning and teaching across the University. It has encouraged participants to engage in scholarship projects and has increased their awareness of SoTL that informs their practice. By engaging with the scheme, participants further realised the benefits of reflective practice and of undertaking continuing professional development for improvement. They have also recognised that the Fellowship of the Higher Education has supported their careers in several ways, including in promotion cases. Some of these findings are also aligned with the research in this area (Spowart et al., 2019; van der Sluis et al., 2017). However, participants' increase engagement with SoTL seems to be a unique feature of the Applaud scheme. There might be two reasons why this is the case. One reason could be that the Applaud scheme provided dedicated resources about SoTL on the Applaud website and addressed it during the workshops offered to candidates. Another reason could be due to the fact that the OU has an institutional strategy to promote and to increase SoTL engagement within and across Faculties and some Units. This strategy has led to each Faculty now having their own Scholarship Centres providing more opportunities for SoTL development and engagement.

Although the majority of interviewees had a positive experience while participating in the Applaud scheme, a small number of participants had a different experience, unfortunately. One participant did not receive support from their School while working on their claim, which is unfortunate considering the current push from the Faculties for staff to achieve HEA fellowship. In addition, some candidates did not get the support they expected from their mentors. In most cases, Applaud participants are paired with a mentor within their Faculty or Unit. The large majority of Applaud mentors are central or regional academics or academic related colleagues who voluntarily mentor for Applaud. They are required to attend annual update trainings as part of the accreditation requirement of the scheme. In total, Applaud manages over 115 mentors and despite of all the care taken by the Applaud team to support mentors, some do not have capacity to provide the attention required by some candidates. Other challenges Applaud participants faced while preparing for their fellowship application were lack of clarity in the application documents, that it is time consuming and that there was a communication issues between the scheme and some mentors.

It was interesting to see that although the majority of participants mentioned that their participation in the Applaud scheme might have impacted positively on students' experiences, none of them could really identify anything specific. This could be due to the different teaching and support learning roles OU staff have, making it hard to identify this impact, and that it is in general difficult to recognise the impact of professional development, recognition and reflection on practice on students' experience. Similarly, this could be due to the difficulty in attributing impact on students' study experiences to a specific aspect such as the Applaud Scheme.

These findings and insights from participants, including both positive and not so positive, have informed improvements in the Applaud scheme. We have created the Applaud Quality Steering Group; key representatives from all Faculties and related Units are part of it. This group was created to improve communication between Faculties/Unit and the Applaud scheme and to increase support to candidates. They have met twice this year and as a result of this collaboration, each Faculty now provides additional workshops to Applaud candidates, including their ALs. Also, the Applaud scheme now offers three workshops per cohort. These workshops take candidates through the Applaud process, including showing where key information and templates can be found on the website and also discussing expectations and the time required to prepare such applications. We have also improved communication between mentors and the scheme; they now can access information about who they are mentoring in each cohort and also reviewing through [My Applaud](#) tab on the Applaud website.

At the time of writing this paper, the changes above have been implemented in two Applaud cohorts (approx. 98 candidates). These improvements seem to have had a positive impact on candidates, mentors and reviewers. The workshops provided to each cohort have been well attended (60% to 80% attendance) and most candidates have felt more supported. As a result, completion rates have increased to between 70% and 80% (from approx. 20 – 30%). More support to candidates has also meant that the quality of submissions has improved, based on the reviewers' feedback. Feedback from mentors has also been mostly positive. The cohort structure means that they can choose a particular time of year that they are available to mentor Applaud candidates, helping them to better manage their workloads, instead of the previous ad-hoc approach.

Conclusion

This report presented the context, literature, methods and findings of a scholarship project funded by Praxis Scholarship Innovation Centre. As discussed above, findings from this project revealed that the Applaud scheme has had positive impact on learning and teaching at the OU. Candidates were able to put forward how the scheme supported several aspects of their practice such as professional development, career development and reflections on practice. Whilst the scheme has had impacts on the individual participants, the findings have also informed improvements in the Applaud scheme, which were then implemented by the Applaud team. There is still room for improvement and the Applaud team will continue evaluating the scheme so that it can successfully support Applaud candidates. The next steps for this project are to disseminate the findings through publications and conference presentations, including the Festival of Scholarship.

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