
OTHER

Standards of university teaching

Paul Glaister¹ & Elizabeth M Glaister²

¹Department of Mathematics and Statistics, University of Reading, Reading, UK

²Kendrick School and University of Reading, Reading, UK

Corresponding author:

Paul Glaister, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, University of Reading, P.O. Box 220, Whiteknights, Reading, RG6 6AX, UK

Email: p.glaister@reading.ac.uk

Abstract

A set of standards is proposed for university teaching. Embedding these within the Higher Education Academy UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) would allow a more robust assessment of whether a university teacher has met a minimum acceptable threshold.

A teacher's primary responsibility is to facilitate learning. In our view, an excellent teacher is someone who does their utmost to ensure that every student reaches his or her potential. But what is the minimum threshold acceptable for a school teacher to be allowed to practise? In England the current criteria is laid out in the Department for Education's Teachers' Standards. These represent a demanding set of standards which Initial Teacher Training students and Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) are assessed against, the latter in their first year of teaching while on probation.

So what changes when school students enter university and encounter a greater variety of styles of university teaching, a greater number of university teachers and, more importantly, university teachers with a wider range of attributes and aptitudes for teaching?

University teaching over the last 30 years or so has changed enormously, as has teaching in schools. This is roughly the length of time one of us has been in Higher Education (HE) and the other in secondary schools and HE. The changes and improvements in university teaching have not been uniform, in contrast to the changes that have happened in schools during this period. But one aspect that has changed in HE is the increased importance placed on high quality and effective teaching (and by implication the quality of learning) by all stakeholders: students, universities and government. National Student Satisfaction surveys and higher tuition fees clearly have a bearing on this too.

The usual requirement is that new lecturers or new teaching staff undergo a three-year induction/probation period. During this time there will be varying amounts of staff-development training available, mentoring from within their own discipline/department by a member of academic teaching staff, and the requirement to pass a postgraduate certificate or similar qualification equivalent to a certain number of credits at Level 7 within the National Qualifications Framework.

By the very nature of such a certificate being a Level 7 qualification within a national framework that can sit alongside Masters' level programmes, this can look much more like an academic qualification as opposed to an assessment suitable for establishing that a trainee teacher has met an agreed set of standards and qualified to teach. There is likely to be some kind of assessed project on an aspect of teaching, learning or supporting students, and possibly related to staff development workshops. There will also be a 'practice' element in teaching and learning involving peer observations of teaching and discussions with a mentor, again assessed in written form by a reflective portfolio.

The overarching framework within the UK is the Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) developed by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). As its first aim, the UKPSF 'supports the initial and continuing professional development of staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning'. The Academy supports the Framework by providing a recognition and accreditation service which enables staff providing teaching and/or learning support to be recognised, depending on their role and experience as either Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow of the Academy based on a set of statements outlining the key characteristics of someone performing in four broad categories of typical teaching and learning support roles within HE. The professional development activities described earlier for probationary members of staff would be expected to enable someone passing probation to meet the criteria for the designation of Fellow.

While we very much support the UKPSF, having seen the Teachers' Standards being used as a mechanism for establishing whether someone is fit to teach, and bearing in mind the nature of the postgraduate certificates that are prevalent in UK HE, we cannot help but feel that universities and the UKPSF could benefit from a more objective assessment of whether or not someone is an effective university teacher. That is not to deny that schools and universities are not identical in terms of their mission; indeed, university students need to become independent learners (almost exclusively) as they leave for employment or further study. However, universities need to make the transition from school as smooth as possible, and should also share the same goals for teaching: facilitate the best possible learning to ensure that every student reaches his or her potential. So, while the current practice in HE (which varies from institution to institution) supports those aspiring to become good university teachers, we believe that a debate needs to be had, or at least provoked, within institutions, or in the MSOR community to start with, by proposing, in addition to, and as part of, the UKPSF, a set of standards for university teachers that can be assessed in a similar way that they are assessed in schools through someone akin to a 'professional tutor' (using school terminology). We feel that the adoption of standards along these lines, whether institution, discipline or even department-based, will bring university teaching more into the spotlight as something worth doing well and increase the importance that is placed upon it. We also believe that, notwithstanding the existing induction/probation/support mechanisms, and the requirement to pass a postgraduate certificate along the lines we discussed, the establishment of agreed standards can bring the assessment of a new member of staff's teaching much closer to the desirable/essential outcomes in terms of the learning of their students, and facilitates more opportunities for best practice within a discipline/department/university. Our preference is that standards along these lines are embedded within the UKPSF, supplementing and enhancing it, making more specific what is expected of teaching staff to be an accredited university teacher, with specific targets set by the member of staff in conjunction with the professional tutor, and more rigorous scrutiny of planning, delivery and reflection of teaching sessions, with much greater emphasis on observations and assessment by the professional tutor.

The following eight (draft) standards are based on the published Teachers' Standards, and in every case there is a strong argument as to why a university teacher (who is, after

all, training), should be assessed against each and every one of these *within their own discipline* and carried out by an appropriately qualified 'professional tutor'.

Standards expected of a university teacher

A university teacher is expected to demonstrate, through the collection of evidence, that the quality of their teaching facilitates learning to enable all students to reach their potential.

To achieve a satisfactory standard a university teacher is required to:

1 Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge students

- set goals that stretch and challenge students of all backgrounds, abilities and dispositions.

2 Promote good progress and outcomes by students

- be accountable for students' attainment, progress and outcomes in conjunction with any staff supporting their teaching
- be aware of students' capabilities and their prior knowledge, and plan teaching to build on these
- guide students to reflect on the progress they have made and their emerging needs
- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how students learn and how this impacts on teaching
- encourage students to take a responsible and conscientious attitude to their own work and study.

3 Demonstrate good subject knowledge

- have a secure knowledge of the relevant subject areas, foster and maintain students' interest in the subject, and address misunderstandings
- demonstrate a critical understanding of developments in the subject, and promote the value of scholarship
- demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of the correct use of standard English.

4 Plan and deliver well-structured teaching sessions

- impart knowledge and develop understanding through effective use of teaching session time
- promote a passion for learning and students' intellectual curiosity
- set formative (and, where relevant, summative) coursework, and guide students to engage in other independent learning activities outside teaching sessions to consolidate and extend the knowledge and understanding they have acquired
- reflect systematically on the effectiveness of teaching sessions and approaches to teaching
- contribute to the design and provision of an engaging curriculum.

5 Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all students

- know when and how to differentiate appropriately, using approaches which enable students to be taught effectively

-
- have a secure understanding of how a range of factors can inhibit students' ability to learn, and how best to overcome these
 - have a clear understanding of the needs of all students, including those with special educational needs; those of high ability; those with English as an additional language; those with disabilities; and be able to use and evaluate distinctive teaching approaches to engage and support them.

6 Make accurate and productive use of assessment

- know and understand how to assess the relevant subject areas effectively
- make use of formative and summative assessment to secure students' progress
- use relevant data to monitor learning and plan subsequent teaching sessions
- give students regular feedback, both orally and through accurate marking, and encourage students to respond to the feedback.

7 Manage behaviour effectively to ensure a good learning environment

- have clear rules and routines for behaviour in a teaching session, and take responsibility for promoting good behaviour in teaching sessions
- manage teaching sessions effectively, using approaches which are appropriate to students' needs in order to involve and motivate them
- maintain good relationships with students and exercise appropriate authority.

8 Fulfil wider professional responsibilities

- develop effective professional relationships with colleagues, knowing how and when to draw on advice and specialist support
- deploy administrative and teaching support staff effectively
- take responsibility for improving teaching through appropriate professional development, responding to advice and feedback from colleagues
- take advantage of continuing professional development opportunities, both locally and nationally, and to incorporate best practice in their teaching.

The intention would be that, as in schools, the trainee collects evidence throughout their three-year probation, bearing in mind that there are fewer teaching sessions and courses delivered in any one year by a university teacher compared with a school teacher who has only one year to demonstrate that they have met the standards. The evidence, in the main, will come from mentors, a 'professional tutor', other teaching staff, based on observed teaching sessions, together with other sources depending on the standard being assessed. In most cases the nature of the evidence that supports the meeting of a standard is obvious.

It is certainly the case that the evidence that will be needed here is much more closely aligned to, and connected with, the actual teaching sessions delivered by the member of staff, as well as the consequential learning of their students and ultimately the outcomes in terms of assessment of the students. In particular, the 'quality assurance agenda' which began in earnest in the late 1990s and which sought to assess teaching quality in HE [through the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)] included the observation of some teaching sessions. Unlike the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections in schools which happen with only a day's notice and which form the backbone of the inspection, the observation of teaching sessions in universities by external auditors through QAA came and went very quickly, and it is now essentially only paperwork that is scrutinised. We are

most definitely not proposing external inspections of university teaching, but something along the lines we have described earlier, would be a step closer to ensuring that we all have the same goal in mind and endeavour to achieve this – excellent teaching, leading to the best possible learning.

A related issue of course is that of existing staff – all teachers in school are expected to meet the standards throughout their career. Clearly trying to achieve this for existing university staff is currently a non-starter, which anyone working in HE will tell you. But we should start somewhere, and new staff with open minds are a good place to do that.

We believe that all university teachers should cherish the role that they have to play in their students' lives and champion this part of their work. The adoption of standards such as these can surely only serve to support this.

Let the debate commence . . .

References

Department for Education (n.d.) Teachers' Standards. Available at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/teachers%20standards.pdf>.

Higher Education Academy (n.d.) Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). Available at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/ukpsf/UKPSF_2012_v2_050912_1044.pdf.