Literature review: Teaching awards

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Isolating a teaching award literature – as for a body of research on any circumscribed theme – is a somewhat messy business. Part of a wider literature relating to reward and recognition of (specifically tertiary) teaching excellence, analyses of the existence, nature, scope, design, administration, and impact of teaching award programs also overlap with a number of other fields and topics, among them the question of what constitutes teaching excellence or effectiveness, and how it can be measured; the relative value and rewards attached to teaching and research; other kinds of recognition for teaching, most notably learning and teaching grants and promotion; the emergence of teaching-track or teaching-only appointments; and the meaning and importance of ‘scholarly’ or ‘research-led’ teaching, including the place of a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) within it.

The literature also spans a number of disciplines, and research in seemingly unrelated areas can shed a different light on many of the pertinent issues. For example, Michèle Lamont’s *How Professors Think: Inside The Curious World of Academic Judgment* (2009) examines the peer review process in relation to academic research and especially the nature of negotiating ideas about excellence, originality, and significance on a panel uniting specialists from different fields with differing standards. Although it does not comment directly on the world of teaching awards (or even teaching), the book’s concern with the debated areas of excellence, evaluation, and transparency is shared by those researching award programs and excellence in university teaching. Within the teaching award literature itself, several writers in recent years have pointed outwards from targeted higher education research to other methods and perspectives: Frame et al (2006) draw on a sociological discourse in their discussion of the contemporary mania for giving awards and the prize culture as a strong feature of modern life, as well as indicating the relevance of resource management theory for thinking about awards and their impact; Taylor (2007) turns to social policy and management literatures in order to conceptualise higher education’s growing performance culture; and Prior (2010) presents her own experience of applying for a national teaching award using an autoethnographic approach.

Most relevant texts are either found in journals of higher education research and development or take the form of government-commissioned reports on various aspects relating to teaching awards. A very few books and a seemingly infinite supply of discipline-specific (notably medical education) articles round out the corpus. Earlier literature reviews were carried out by Chism and Szabo (1997) and Huggett et al (2012). An exponential increase in the literature over the last two decades can be attributed to the rapid rise of award schemes in particularly Australia and the UK during that period, which in turn is related to growing pressure to improve the quality of university teaching. (The beginning of this shift is sometimes traced within the UK to the publication of the Dearing Report (1997), but Ernest Boyer’s classic 1990 work *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* identified early on a new focus within the higher education sector on the quality of undergraduate education, and a number of Australian surveys and reports in the 1990s indicate an increased interest in teaching awards as a potential means of improving both the practice and the status of teaching within universities.) Most articles and papers in the field are broadly consistent in their
findings, but less so in their analysis of the existing literature – while at one end of the spectrum it is regretted that teaching awards ‘have not received much attention in the literature’ (Carusetta, 31), at the opposite end it is asserted that certain aspects of the topic, such as the evaluation of teaching, have been among ‘the most studied and researched topics in higher education’ (Hammer et al, 8). Differing perceptions on the state of the field seem to have less to do with chronology (although these two assessments are separated by almost a decade) and more to do with ideas about what might constitute an adequate treatment in the literature.

My consideration of the relevant literature on teaching awards and related topics will focus on 1) the central players and texts in the field – the foundational and otherwise indispensable surveys and analyses of teaching award programs; 2) the ‘undergrowth’ of minor and largely derivative literature on specific award programs or contexts that nonetheless provide a dense source of information on what is happening ‘on the ground’ – higher-level studies frequently draw on this material as evidence; 3) other, more scholarly articles on particular award-related issues, including fellowship schemes, the teaching excellence debate, and the personal experiences of award winners.

1. Key texts and writers

In a broad sense, as already noted, the seminal text in the field can be considered Boyer’s Scholarship Reconsidered (1990); many researchers and writers on teaching awards look back to his introduction of the category of a ‘scholarship of teaching’, and characterise themselves as working towards the ‘more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar’ (24) that he advocates.

Among the most cited of the early literature on teaching awards are two surveys of award schemes in Australia and the UK respectively. McNaught & Anwyl (1993) explore the range of teaching award programs in existence at 37 Australian universities, and comment on the benefits and drawbacks of the awards. Warren & Plumb’s study (1999) was commissioned by University College London in 1997 as a preliminary step to establishing their own award scheme, and proposes four classifications for such schemes: traditional award schemes (ie, prizes); teaching fellowship schemes; educational development grant schemes; and promotion/bonus schemes. Although referenced by many of the writers who come after them, most of the content of these reports is superseded by later, more in-depth treatments of the same issues and details.

Further government reports build on this work as national award schemes evolve and change. Ballantyne et al (2003) review the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT) and, while finding that the existing scheme has played an important role in raising the profile of teaching within Australian higher education, discusses a number of issues with the awards program and makes four recommendations for its reform: to refine the selection criteria and process; expand the award categories; encourage linkages with internal schemes; and incorporate dissemination strategies into the awards process. James et al (2005) follow this up with their own 38 recommendations for an expanded program of Australian awards, developing from a review not only of the AAUT scheme but of comparable overseas schemes and the relevant literature a model that was subsequently adopted by the Carrick Institute (afterwards the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, whose responsibilities were then absorbed by the Office for Learning and Teaching).
Perhaps the stand-out treatment of the topic of teaching awards from the last few years is Mark Israel’s *The key to the door? Teaching awards in Australian higher education* (2011), the report from an ALTC-funded project on the impact of teaching awards on individuals and institutions. Arguing that to use award schemes as a means of recognition alone is a missed opportunity, Israel explores the ways in which awardees can use a teaching award as a key to unlock various doors, as well as how institutions can make the most of their award winners in order to influence teaching practices and policies more widely across the university. With summaries of advice for award winners, institutions, and DEEWR (the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) respectively, and chapters on issues such as celebrating awards and building networks of award winners, *The key to the door* encourages a view of teaching awards as stepping stones rather than end or high points of an academic career.

Shifting our focus to some of the most active writers on teaching awards over the last decade or two, perhaps the most widely acknowledged authority on the subject is Graham Gibbs, who has commented on the recognition and reward of university teaching in a range of contexts, from a brief but pithy article in *Change* (1995b) which offers advice to institutions seeking to promote excellent teaching to a Higher Education Academy (HEA) project on the different conceptions of teaching excellence that underlie teaching award schemes (whether explicitly or not, and whether consciously or not). The report from this project, published in 2008, identifies 24 distinct concepts of teaching excellence in total, and urges designers of award schemes to carefully consider which concept(s) their institution wishes to promote and then to align the selection criteria and the evidence required with that conception. It is accompanied by a manual, *Designing Teaching Award Schemes* (2008b), which reiterates Gibbs’ findings in the report and includes annexes describing highly specialised and successful award programs at the universities of Oslo and Lund. An article written while the project was being researched, ‘Have we lost the plot with teaching awards?’ (2007), offers an especially engaging and trenchant account of some of the problems and disillusionment associated with teaching awards.

Paul Ramsden has also headed up research projects for both the Australian government and the HEA in the UK on recognising and rewarding good university teaching. His 1995 Australian report, co-authored with Margetson, Martin, and Clarke, like other reports of its kind, offers recommendations to institutions on how to reward teaching effectively, and emphasises among other things the need for stronger confidence among academic staff in their institutions’ commitment to supporting and rewarding teaching; the importance of explicit criteria and clear standards for good teaching at different levels of appointment; and the insufficiency of teaching awards and similar incentives to improve teaching without the right institutional conditions. Ramsden and Martin (1996) generalise the conclusions from this report – partly for UK and US contexts – in an article in *Studies in Higher Education* which particularly stresses the importance of promotion as a lever for improving teaching standards and practices in universities. The later HEA reports (2009) again take up the question of reward and recognition, the first by focusing on academic staff perceptions and the second through an examination of institutional policies for rewarding good teaching and how they are being implemented. Ramsden notes that the findings from this study are ‘consistent with previous research’ (52).

The contested concept of teaching excellence itself is most fully examined, questioned, and defended by Alan Skelton, who has written a number of articles and books on the subject. A 2003
article in *Medical Education* identifies three issues to consider in relation to teaching fellowship schemes — the lack of consensus on what constitutes teaching excellence; the need for a clear strategy for educational change; and the ambivalent status that such rewards can in fact confer on teachers in research-intensive institutions — and a further article in 2004 applies these issues to a consideration of the UK’s National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. Skelton’s book *Understanding teaching excellence in higher education* (2003) represents the first in-depth treatment of the topic, and his edited volume *International Perspectives on Teaching Excellence in Higher Education* (2007) brings together essays by a range of higher education researchers including Bruce Macfarlane, Sue Clegg, Richard Gale, and Philippa Levy, on topics ranging from braided practice and the integration of research and teaching to discussions of existing policies and initiatives in South Africa, New Zealand, England, Japan, and Canada. Skelton’s introduction to the volume argues that the frequently over-used and consequently devalued concept of ‘teaching excellence’ ‘needs to be treated as a matter of serious intellectual investigation’ (3). He considers different models or understandings of teaching excellence as well as examining some problematic assumptions that generally underlie the concept, before urging the higher education community to move from common sense to rigorous critical thinking on the issue.

A short article motivated by the same concerns is also worth noting; Skelton (2009) puts forward his personal view of teaching excellence in a thought-provoking piece that upholds the importance of developing a personal teaching philosophy, the constant struggle between pedagogical ideals and their enactment within a messy reality, teaching excellence as a moral and not just a practical category, and the impact of material conditions, rather than heroic individuals, on teaching quality within an institution.

Two journal issues devoted exclusively to the issue of recognition and reward of teaching serve as helpful overviews of the subject from a range of perspectives. A special issue of *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* titled ‘Honoring Exemplary Teaching’, published in Spring 1996 and edited by Marilla Svinicki and Robert Menges, contains a total of sixteen articles covering topics such as the giving of teaching awards to individuals and to groups respectively, certification, the recognition of teaching in different types of institutions (such as the research university as opposed to the liberal arts college), the use of student evaluations and teaching portfolios, and characteristics of exemplary teachers. Articles of note are Menges’ oft-cited, relatively early assessment of teaching awards, which raises common issues for award programs and proposes three tests (a selection validity test, faculty motivation test, and test of public perceptions) for effective award programs that are frequently applied by later researchers to existing programs; Smith and Walvoord’s evaluation of a certification paradigm as a way of creating a market for teaching excellence comparable to the one already established for research; Lunde and Barrett on departments as the primary locus for determining what constitutes effective teaching, and for creating a better teaching climate; and Svinicki and Menges’ (again, frequently cited) recommendations for those designing programs to recognise excellence, including the importance of consistency between a program and the institution’s own mission and values, of rewarding collaborative as well as individual achievements, and of asking winners to contribute to the development of others.

*An Exchange* issue from 2003, edited by Sally Brown, takes the focus of ‘Recognising and Rewarding Excellence’. A magazine rather than a scholarly journal, it is made up of very short, punchy articles on a range of relevant topics, such as ‘Can all teachers aspire to excellence?’; ‘The Swedish
experience’, and ‘Excellent Teaching or Excellent Learning?’. A series of case studies of award or fellowship programs are of particular interest.

A few individual articles also deserve a mention here. Nancy Chism’s 2006 article ‘Teaching awards, what do they award?’ considers in-depth the qualities sought in award winners, the indicators used in selection, and the standards used to rank candidates, in order to gauge the relationship between the three (generally, according to her findings, non-existent or very limited). One of few extended analyses of teaching awards specifically, the article’s take-home message is the necessity for those designing award schemes of being clear on the program’s intended outcome, and lining up criteria, evidence, and standards accordingly. Layton and Brown (2011) from the University of Wollongong have written perhaps the only article to focus specifically on support processes for teaching awards, exploring the role of academic development units (ADUs) in promoting teaching excellence and questioning whether awards function as a managerialist, disciplinary practice as theorised by Foucault. MacDonald (1998) and Collins and Palmer (2004) offer relatively short and informal but stimulating discussions of teaching excellence and how it can and should be rewarded.

2. Undergrowth

Most of the articles that make up the literature on teaching awards are much more limited in scope, methodology, and ambition than those discussed above. These more numerous but less comprehensive studies mostly fall into three categories: attempts to answer a particular question concerning teaching excellence or practice by talking to teaching award winners; discipline-specific discussions of reward programs; and descriptions and evaluations of particular award schemes, usually in place at the author’s institution.

The first category includes articles with such titles as ‘Award winning university teachers’ concepts of teaching’ (Dunkin & Precians, 1992), ‘What can we learn about teaching from our best university teachers?’ (Johnston, 1996), and ‘Perceived attributes of superior teachers’ (Goldsmid et al, 1997). This kind of research works backwards from the fact of teaching awards to determine what makes excellent teachers (already tagged as such by the receipt of an award) excellent. Tollefson and Tracy (1983) compare teaching roles, behaviours, and perceptions between award-winning and non-award-winning faculty (using a very limited sample) and discover little real difference between the two. Trunnell et al (1997) survey award-winning health educators in order to try to isolate factors associated with creativity in successful teaching in this area. Kreber (2000) takes a strongly quantitative approach to the question of how teaching award winners conceptualise academic work, in particular the relationship between teaching and research. These studies, while taking teaching awards as their starting point, in fact bear no direct relation to the design, function, and impact of award programs, being concerned rather with definitions or specific aspects of teaching excellence.

Although teaching awards are a feature of many academic departments and disciplines, hugely over-represented in the literature in comparison with other disciplines are award programs in medical education and schools of pharmacy. Other subjects surface occasionally – Pluske and Holmes (2006), for example, compare two science faculties in Western Australia and Ontario in order to consider the usefulness of awards as an incentive for adopting learning and teaching initiatives – but these two vocational fields dominate the literature (perhaps partly due to the existence of established journals
in medical and pharmaceutical education respectively). In pharmacy, a succession of studies—Draugalis (2003), Kalis and Kirschenbaum (2008), and Hammer et al (2010)—survey existing award programs at US schools and colleges of pharmacy. In medicine, Gastel (1991) and Brawer et al (2006) each describe and consider the impact of a particular faculty award and are thus by nature very limited in their application (the former, however, is of interest for some unusual features of the program discussed, which is based purely on student nominations and culminates in a reception given by students for both nominees and award winners at the end of the year). Ruedrich et al (1992), working in the area of psychiatry, arrive at the widespread conclusion that awards are useful for the purposes of recognising good teaching but fail to serve a significant motivational function. Olmesdahl (1997) and McLean (2001) examine the functionality of teaching rewards in South African medical schools, and identify several problems with existing schemes. John Aucott and David Aron co-author two articles with different colleagues in 1999 and 2000 on teaching awards as potentially the ‘kiss of death’ for an academic career in a department of medicine.

Jacobsen (1989), Carusetta (2001), Jackson (2006), and Jones (2010) evaluate the effectiveness of particular award, grant, or fellowship programs at Messiah College, Pennsylvania; the University of New Brunswick; the University of Sydney; and the University of Brighton respectively. Jacobsen concludes that the incentive program discussed has had no significant impact on teaching quality, but considers ways it might be more successfully leveraged. Carusetta applies Menges’ three tests of effective awards programs to the Alan P. Stuart Award for Excellence in Teaching at her institution, but her article is not underpinned by any rigorous research. Jackson discusses a range of issues related to teaching awards, and concludes (like so many others) that teaching awards need to be part of a broader policy regime if they are to enhance the status of teaching; this article’s analysis of two initiatives in particular, a Scholarship in Teaching Index and a Teaching Academy, contributes in valuable ways to thinking about how to prolong and deepen the impact of awards in a research-oriented university. Jones outlines a fellowship scheme in place at Brighton that has a strong emphasis on development following receipt of the award and on the importance of pedagogical research, using a ‘communities of practice’ framework in order to enhance institutional learning and teaching overall.

Although they don’t fit into any of these three categories, two further articles and one government report should be included in this section. Symbaluk and Howell (2010) raise the issue of web-based student feedback by examining the site RateMyProfessors.com and comparing student evaluations for teaching award versus research award recipients. While not ground-breaking as a whole, the authors’ recommendation that students are given access in some form to the feedback they collectively give is compelling. Abbott (2012) compares the experiences of the ALTC and its New Zealand counterpart, the Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, since their creation in the middle of the last decade, thinking particularly about their different (and changing) levels of funding, activities undertaken, and relative influence in their respective spheres. Although not much more than an historical survey, the article furnishes useful background information to a consideration of national teaching awards in the two countries in recent years. In a similar vein, Nagy et al’s 2011 ALTC report on major themes that emerged from the initial PEI projects is useful partly as a record of the effect of the initiative on institutional award processes, serving on the whole to align them with criteria for national awards and grants.
Many of the articles that I classify here as literary ‘undergrowth’ are listed for their topical relevance but are of very limited use due to the lack of any empirical or analytical research actually undertaken by the writers. Not untypical is Carusetta’s remark concerning Menges’ third test of effective award programs, that of public perceptions: ‘Without conducting some research, it would be difficult to determine whether students and parents get better answers to their questions or whether legislators ask better questions’ (38). Quite.

3. Further issues

Among the miscellany of other issues treated by the literature relating more or less directly to tertiary teaching awards, perhaps the most prominent – discussed already in relation to Skelton’s work in the area – is that of teaching excellence: what it is, how to measure it, how to reward it, whether award schemes are appropriate ways of encouraging it. Elton (1998) considers the multidimensionality of teaching excellence, and distinguishes methods for recognising and rewarding it from equivalent practices for research. Trigwell’s (2001) discussion of quantitative and qualitative measures for teaching excellence and emphasis on the need for a scholarly approach to teaching as well as to align the criteria used to assess university teaching with those used to develop it are frequently quoted by later researchers. Shephard et al (2011), although the sample size they use is very limited, draw on interviews with award winners to ask whether particular award schemes explore or actually limit teaching excellence by defining it in particular ways. Livingston and Jun (2011) offer a different perspective in what can be a very ‘samey’ field, deriving a distinctive interpretation of teaching excellence from discussion with award-winning teachers at a faith-based institution. Their study focuses on the themes of teachers’ sense of calling, conviction that they can have a real influence on students, and level of career satisfaction, and proposes a ‘Sabbatical Mirror Theory’ in accordance with a finding that many teaching award recipients had taken time out from the profession before renewing their commitment to teaching as a vocation.

On the fraught issue of the relation of teaching to research, Halse et al’s 2007 article addresses the ‘research-teaching nexus’, investigating the extent to which outstanding teachers are also engaged in research, and whether they tend to disseminate their teaching expertise (broadly yes to the first question and no to the second). Macfarlane (2011) offers a kind of jeremiad (though a quite effective one) on recent efforts to raise the status of teaching in the UK, which he argues have – despite the best of intentions – only led to further bifurcation of research and teaching. He calls for a more rigorous SoTL that is not demarcated from ‘proper’, disciplinary research: ‘The only important distinction is between good research and poor research’ (128). A related study is Probert’s just-published report on the rise of teaching-focused academic appointments in Australian universities, which warns that most instances of the trend represent opportunistic (reclassifying researchers with lower outputs) rather than strategic (a way of valuing teaching more highly) initiatives on the part of institutions adopting this type of appointment.

A number of papers examine teaching awards from the angle of the experiences of applicants and recipients. Pat Leon, writing in the Times Higher Education Supplement in 2002, characterises his own and others’ experience of being awarded a UK National Teaching Fellowship as a mixed blessing. McCulla, Dinham, and Scott (2007), in a study of NSW quality teaching awards (offered at all levels of education, not just tertiary), consider what it can mean for teachers to ‘step out from the
crowd’ and seek recognition for their teaching. Prior (2010), using an engaging ‘autoethnographic’
approach, charts her own development of a national teaching award application; her article is of
particular interest for its description of the role of ADU staff in helping her to reflect on and
formulate her practice as a teacher in productive ways.

Leon’s article also represents an early contribution to the substantial literature assessing the impact
of two teaching recognition schemes in the UK over the last decade or so: the National Teaching
Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) and the establishment of a large number of Centres for Excellence in
Teaching and Learning (CETLs) in universities around the country. Skelton notes some of the issues
associated with the scheme in his 2004 article (referred to above), as well as in a chapter in his
volume *International perspectives on teaching excellence in higher education* (2007). Frame,
Johnson, and Rosie (2006) offer a sophisticated analysis of the initial experiences of NTFS winners
that draws on ideas from sociology and resource management theory to better understand the
impact of the awards, and whether they can be more accurately perceived as ‘a reward or a
millstone’ (414). Taylor (2007) evaluates both the NTFS and CETL initiatives within the context of an
increasingly dominant performance culture, especially in relation to public services. She asks
whether doing something excellently has become more important than what it is that is being done,
and proposes strategies for ensuring that reward schemes are equitable, transparent, and fit for
purpose. Turner et al (2008) explore the impact of an award scheme that came out of one of the
CETLs for colleges of further education; Bluteau and Krumins (2008) examine the workings of
academic creativity via a study of innovations that came out of one particular CETL, the Centre for
Interprofessional e-Learning (CiPeL) at Coventry University; and Turner and Gosling (2012) trace the
‘translation’ of the policy aim behind the CETLs into the local cultures of 15 different institutions.

One of the major problems the literature identifies with teaching reward programs generally is the
difficulty of changing practice across a department or university, rather than simply celebrating
isolated examples of excellent teaching. While many studies concerned with teaching awards
conclude with an acknowledgment of this seemingly intractable problem and leave things there, a
small but growing number of articles tackle the issue head-on. Johnston (1996) argues that the
concept of ‘dissemination’ is not in fact straightforwardly transferable from research to teaching,
that ‘teaching innovation’ is a more appropriate paradigm for changing pedagogical practice (rather
than merely transferring knowledge), and that we need to integrate strategies for improving
Teaching with what we already know about how people learn to teach. Asmar (2002), similarly, goes
beyond pointing out how challenging the process of bringing about a shift in culture can be to
propose ways of encouraging a view of teaching as a scholarly, research-based activity, including by
use of a Scholarship Index or points system to change institutional behaviour. Olsson and Roxa
(2008) provide an account of a reward system used by Lund University in Sweden that is also
concerned with influencing and modifying the local culture towards a more scholarly approach to
teaching and learning. Lund’s Pedagogical Academy is often cited by other writers as an exemplary
program in this respect.

Conclusion

In summary, the available literature on teaching awards covers a wide range of issues and contexts,
and overlaps at numerous points with related literatures on the nature of teaching excellence and
other ways of recognising and rewarding it, notably through grants, fellowships, and promotion. Although a few stand-out articles, books, and reports from government-funded projects offer particularly original, in-depth, or perceptive treatments of some aspect relating to the giving of university teaching awards, a majority of texts reiterate very similar findings concerning the design, implementation, support, and impact of award schemes.

Ideas that emerge repeatedly from these studies include: the lack of consensus on what constitutes teaching excellence and how to measure it, as well as the necessity of nonetheless having a clear conception of what counts as quality teaching; the importance for award programs of having clear selection criteria, requesting evidence consistent with those criteria and the conception of teaching excellence underlying them, and establishing transparent selection processes in order to achieve credibility; and the usefulness of awards in acknowledging and celebrating good teachers, but probable inadequacy for the task of raising the status of learning and teaching overall, or improving teaching practices more widely, within an institution. Representative of current thinking in the field is Chism’s (2006) conclusion:

‘Since teaching awards are shrouded by some uncertainties about goals and impact, the most fundamental question for those who are developing or administering awards concerns what the intended outcome of the awards program is. For most awards programs, there are several goals, ranging from symbolizing commitment to teaching to affirming those who teach well and encouraging those who might teach better. Unless a form of convenient symbolism is the only end, all of these goals are better achieved when teaching awards are nested within a broader system of evaluation of teaching that rests on consensus about characteristics of excellent teaching.’ (608)
References


McCormack, C., Prior, R., & Vanags, T. (accepted for publication 2014). ‘Things fall apart so they can fall together’: Uncovering the hidden side of writing a teaching award application. *Higher Education Research and Development*.


**Further resources:**

Grants Scheme 2009 Project Summaries, ALTC.
Grants Scheme 2008 Project Summaries, ALTC.
Grants Scheme 2008 Report, ALTC.
(all available from OLT resource library)

(summary of 2010 NTFS winners)

Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Report), 1997. [https://bei.leeds.ac.uk/Partners/NCIHE/](https://bei.leeds.ac.uk/Partners/NCIHE/)