Academic nursing in the UK: The case for parity of rigour, transparency and level of challenge between research and teaching career tracks

Ask any member of staff of a nursing school—‘who is your best researcher’, they will probably know. If you ask them to prove it, they should be able to respond with a set of quantifiable, objective metrics—numbers of papers in high impact journals, grants won, PhD completion rates and ‘H’ index data. Ask them the question ‘who is the best teacher in your school’, they will probably pause a bit longer—but still identify a few names. Ask them to prove it and maybe the pause will be longer, in the UK at least. They are very unlikely to be able to point you to a set of equally confirmable, objective metrics as in the case of researchers. Their views are very likely to be subjective—‘the students like them’ or maybe ‘they are very experienced’ or ‘they are senior fellows of the Higher Education Academy (HEA)’—as if that award in any way correlates with teaching ability (a matter for another editorial). In short, the metrics for teaching and scholarly activity excellence are not as quantifiable and objective as those for research.

This matters for several reasons. In academic nursing in the UK, we are—quite rightly—looking to develop academic careers for those staff whose roles encompass teaching and scholarship rather than research (Bennett, Roberts, Ananthram, & Broughton, 2018, Subbaye & Vithal, 2017). This has been a long time coming and is to be celebrated. As the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK places higher emphasis on teaching quality in universities, this is an issue all institutions are addressing (Ayres, 2018; Vithal, 2018). This new emphasis on teaching quality is to be welcomed—and presents an opportunity to develop and generate individual teaching excellence metrics that can be used in promotion cases. This will help to ensure that progress along this career track is as rigorous, transparent and as challenging as a research focussed career. This is important as it allows us to be clear about what criteria are used to evaluate teaching-related promotion cases and, vitally, to ensure the parity of challenge between teaching and research career paths. It is crucially important that those promoted on a teaching/scholarship track do not have to face comments about it being ‘easier’ than a research track. Such division is not good for the academy or nursing generally. The strongest response to this type of challenge is one supported with unequivocal, objective evidence.

I therefore return to my earlier point—how do we measure individual teaching and scholarly activity and how do we ensure that these benchmarks of quality equate to the ones researchers are judged against? This has to be by the collection of evidence-based metrics of individual teaching quality, for example, personal student pass rates and extensive student evaluations of teaching. Perhaps more contentiously, we should also consider unannounced observation of teaching—along the lines of the UK Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) system in UK schools and colleges that undertake inspection reviews of teaching quality (OFSTED, 2019). Teaching quality evidence is gathered routinely in some parts of the nursing academy—for example, I am often asked to review promotion CVs from South East Asia—where even for researchers, the amount of student evaluation and assessment data to demonstrate teaching excellence is substantial. In the UK, we seem to be reluctant to take this path—even within the TEF, the emphasis is on surrogate markers of teaching quality rather than actually directly observing/rating actual teaching. It is certainly causing some debate—showing how, unlike research—we still need to agree on how we measure teaching excellence at an individual level (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017; Wood & Su, 2017). This debate is quite strong around the issue of classroom observation and the rating of individual teaching ability/quality—with some arguing that scrutiny of this sort is unfair and inappropriate. The parallel to this would be a researcher refusing to let anyone look at their publications, grant applications or PhD completion rates—it is almost impossible to imagine this demand being acceded to.

It is important that there are clear metrics for teaching excellence attributable to individual academic teaching performance. The use of collective metrics, such as course completion rates and student feedback on department level teaching quality are inappropriate measures to use in individual promotion and career progression cases. They do not reflect individual performance and thereby may attribute either success or poor achievement unfairly. I also acknowledge the debate about how subjective student evaluations can be (Flodén, 2017; Kogan, Schoenfeld-Tacher, & Hellyer, 2010)—however, the response should be to do more of them rather than less—more data may mitigate this subjectivity. This argument certainly has not halted the exponential growth of student evaluation of everything else in UK universities. Students’ quantitative and qualitative evaluations of their tutorial and pastoral support should also be available to judge teaching effectiveness as should pass rates and grades achieved by personal students. Universities should have independent teaching reviewers and a system where staff are observed teaching, perhaps three times a year—in an unannounced observation. This would replace or augment the ‘peer review’ of teaching that occurs in many UK universities which is a pre-planned event, often with a reviewer chosen by the teacher themselves.
This objective, quantifiable evidence of individual teaching excellence would go some considerable way to address the issue of parity; that progressing along the teaching and research career tracks should be equally challenging along. However, there should also be a strong scholarly/pedagogic profile alongside teaching excellence for promotion through a teaching focussed track. My views on this are driven by what I believe are the most challenging part of academic work—apart from managing academics which is a dark art worthy of inclusion in the Hogwarts curriculum—which are to publish an internationally excellent paper, win a large competitive research grant and successfully supervise PhD students. Therefore, there should be a set of equally challenging benchmarks for scholarly activity—combined with objective and extensive evidence of teaching quality—to bring the two tracks of teaching and research together in terms of levels of challenge and difficulty. I suggest that a track record in teaching-related scholarly outputs and teaching/scholarly-related income generation should sit alongside teaching quality evidence forming an essential part of a teaching/scholarship track career development process. It is through the development of clear, objectively measurable teaching/scholarly-related outputs and teaching quality evidence that we can be unequivocal when we answer the question, ‘who is the best teacher in your school’ and ensure that all academics have an equally challenging path through their chosen focus in nursing academia.

ORCID

Mark Hayter https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2537-8355

Mark Hayter PhD, FAAN, RN, Professor
Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Hull, Hull, UK

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