Ulster staff engagement with learning & teaching: implications for academic development

Background

The engagement of staff in the enhancement of L&T is a persistent challenge for academic development and is linked to academics' general lack of interest in teaching and learning (Martensson, Roxa & Olsen, 2011). Gibbs (2013: 11) contends that 'it is simply not possible to change a university's teaching by working repeatedly with the same few enthusiasts … You have to find ways to engage almost everybody'. However, Kahu (2013: 763), argues that engagement is a flexible psychological process that varies in intensity and is 'responsive to the environment'.

Aims

During 2015/16 CHERP undertook research with the aim to explore and more fully understand the key issues that influence staff engagement at Ulster. The research was prompted by an awareness of the following issues:

- A marked increase in overall levels of staff engagement coinciding with the introduction of targets for UKPSF;
- Significant variations in the levels of staff engagement within and across schools.
- Varied opinions among staff on the value and status of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) and pedagogic research;
- Some staff engage with L&T opportunities in a perfunctory manner to 'tick a box'.

In the current context of the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and associated metrics, significant organisational change and the formulation of a new strategic plan, it is clear that these issues around staff engagement pose a challenge for the successful achievement of institutional aims and objectives around L&T. With that in mind, the study also sought to make use of the findings to identify the implications for future academic development.

Methodology

The study utilised a three phase multiple method approach.

1. Evidence from institutional professional development and SoTL activities and reward and recognition schemes were collated and analysed at school level for patterns of engagement between 2010 and 2016.
2. An online survey was circulated to 250 academic members of our internal community of practice (CoP) during November 2015. A total of 66 staff responded to the survey which explored: the motivations and barriers to engagement; the extent and character of informal conversations with colleagues about L&T; and perceptions of the school context around the value and status of, and support for, L&T.

3. Interviews were conducted with 12 academic members of staff, during February-April 2016, to explore the issues arising from the survey in more detail.

A detailed report will be available in November 2016.