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“Frankly, as far as I can see, it has very little to do with teaching”.

Exploring academics’ perceptions of the HEA Fellowships

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Abstract

The United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) is a national framework that aims to enhance and raise the status of teaching and supporting learning in Higher Education (HE). This paper provides an overview of the adoption and an indication of the impact of Higher Education Academy (HEA) Fellowships through a document review and a qualitative study. The document review suggests that the adoption of HEA Fellowships has grown substantially, to half of the academics and related staff in the UK but shows no positive or negative relationship with the perceived quality of teaching in the National Student Survey (NSS) over the same period (2011-12 to 2017-18). The relationship between HEA Fellowships and the enhancement of teaching practice is the focus of the qualitative study.

The analysis of in-depth interviews (n=11) conducted with senior academics who have obtained Senior Fellowship, at a post-1992 and a research-intensive university, reveals a complex relationship between the recognition schemes and the enhancement of practice. This needs to be understood against the managerial realities underpinning engagement, the limitations of the recognition schemes, and standards for the enhancement of teaching practices. The discussion explores the implications for academic developers, leaders, and policymakers involved in HEA Fellowships.

Keywords

Managerialism, educational development, professional learning, professionalisation, UKPSF, HEA Fellowships

Setting the scene

The context of this paper is formal HEA accredited professional development that is aligned with the United Kingdom (UK) Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). The UKPSF is developed, managed and overseen by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), a national body that is now part of Advance HE (Advance HE, 2018). A comprehensive introduction to the UKPSF, independent from Advance HE, is provided by Hibbert and Semler (2015). Briefly, the UKPSF is designed to benchmark 'success within HE teaching and learning support' and to accredit institutional initial and continuous professional development (CPD) frameworks, and is considered 'essential to enabling enhancement, and raising the profile, of teaching and learning in HE' by Advance HE (2020, npn). It comprises Dimensions of Practice (DoP) and four Descriptors or HEA Fellowships. The DoP is a 'comprehensive set of professional standards' that 'reflect the complexity and multi-faceted nature' of those involved (UKPSF FGN, 2012, p.1). The four levels of recognition, also called HEA Fellowships, are presented on an incremental scale, and awarded depending on individuals' responsibility and influence. However, the scale is debated and considered truncated as for most academics FHEA is considered the minimum, and SFHEA the highest level of HEA recognition achievable (Peat, 2014; 2015).

The premise of this article is that in the context of higher education (HE) the definition of CPD lacks clarity, does not take place in a neutral environment, and is positioned in a dynamic, complex, contradictory and contested terrain of individual circumstances, institutional expectations and national policy drivers (Di Napoli, 2014; Macdonald, 2009). The focus of this article is formal CPD, which can be defined as a systematic attempt, requiring investment from individuals and institutions, to advance the knowledge, competencies and skills of individuals, which might lead to changes in the understanding, thinking and practice of teaching, to the benefit of student learning (c.f. Bostock and Baume, 2016; Macdonald, 2009).

Often a link is assumed between the achievement of the HEA Fellowships and teaching quality at a national (Advance HE, 2020), as well as institutional level (Botham 2017b; Thornton, 2014), and this assumption is traveling quickly and globally. Drowning out individual interpretations and arguments while acknowledging the structural context in which accredited professional development is situated will draw out more critical perspectives. A more critical framing will be helpful when trying to understand how teaching practice and CPD are enacted in messy situations of individual circumstances and intertwined with personal, managerial and institutional, social and political practices.

Institutional investment and attention to the HEA Fellowships needs to be understood against the changing HE policy landscape. Developments such as the growth in student numbers, an increased share of private funding, and the emphasis on metrics, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and more recently the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), are used to rank universities and stimulate marketisation and competition (Blackmore et al., 2016; McNay, 2017). The UKPSF is increasingly exported internationally and adopted in, for instance, Australia, the Middle East, and North America, and although this study focuses on data collected in England, the findings might resonate with a growing international audience (see Table 1) (Pilkington, 2018). These developments have stimulated institutional interest in teaching and supporting students, and CPD (Locke, 2014; Pilkington, 2018). This is reflected in the means by which institutions try to enhance the student experience, for instance, through providing workshops on a range of topics to enhance practice; establishing events, conferences, and networks to stimulate exchanges around teaching and learning; raising their profile by rewarding contributions to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) as research outputs; and championing good practice with prizes and awards (Fung and Gordon, 2016; Locke, 2014).

Simultaneously these developments can be viewed structurally, through the lens of governmental oversight over the quality and direction of teaching and research, which is reflected in the increased regulatory regimes, which emphasise accountability and performativity, both nationally and internationally (Ball, 2012; Bottrell and Manathunga, 2019; Brown, 2015). The TEF and related metrics, such as the NSS, have come to determine institutional reputations, have considerable financial implications, and might drive managerialism and confirmativism (Scott, 2015). The implications of the TEF for the quality of teaching and learning have not yet become fully visible. It is expected that institutional agendas will continue to drive targets and priorities that emphasise HEA accredited CPD frameworks as a means of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Blackmore et al., 2016; Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017; Pilkington, 2018; McNay, 2017; O'Leary et al., 2019). Many institutions have set ambitious but debatable targets to raise the number of staff with an HEA Fellowship, and have embedded the Descriptors as desirable for recruitment, and as a probation and progression requirement (Peat, 2015; Pilkington, 2018; O'Leary et al., 2019). The managerial oversight might lead to concerns about academics' agency to engage with accredited CPD, and how they take it forward for their practice (Di Napoli, 2014; Peseta, 2014, p.66; Teelken, 2012). However, the response might depend on the institutional and individual configurations, contexts and contingencies (Manathunga and Bottrell, 2019). It is the aim of this study to provide an insight into how senior academics perceive and understand formal HEA accredited CPD for their own practice.

Adoption and influence of HEA accredited CPD

To provide a rationale for this investigation, it is useful to shed light on the assumed link between HEA Fellowships and its influence on teaching quality at a national level through a brief document review. Currently, the majority of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a CPD framework in place that, besides taught programmes, focusing on early career academics, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in HE (PgCertHE), supports experienced staff in obtaining a Fellowship of the HEA through a recognition scheme (Pilkington, 2018). As the former predates the UKPSF and the influence on practice is relatively established (c.f. Parsons et al. 2012), the focus of the study below will be senior academics obtaining an SFHEA through a recognition scheme. Currently the majority of HEA Fellowships (>85%) are awarded through an institutional Advance HE accredited CPD framework (HEA SR, 2018).

From the time of the introduction of the UKPSF in 2006 until its revision in 2011 the number of individuals with HEA Fellowships grew to 36,557 (Turner et al., 2013). After the revision of the UKPSF in 2011 the number of individuals recognised with an HEA Fellowship increased considerably based on the HEA annual Report and Financial Statements (2011-12 until 2016-17) and Advance HE Statutory Accounts 2017-18 (see Table 1). Advance HE (2020) reported over 125,000 Fellows in 2020.

To provide an indication of its take-up among academics, the number of HEA Fellows can be related with data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) between 2012 and 2019 (see Table 1) (Hibbert and Semler, 2015). Associating the HEA Fellows with the HESA figures shows that the percentage of academic staff with an HEA Fellowship grew over the period 2011-12 to 2017-18 from 20% to 50%. However, the percentage of academics with an HEA Fellowship is likely to be slightly lower, as, for instance, staff in professional services and managerial roles are also included in the Advance HE numbers, as well as Fellowships awarded to individuals outside the UK (Pilkington, 2018). Nevertheless, it might be concluded that the uptake and adoption of the HEA Fellowships among academics and staff in roles supporting teaching and learning since 2011 has been substantial, and increasingly it could be considered an expected benchmark for academics and related staff (Spowart et al., 2019).

Since the aim of the UKPSF is to enhance the quality of teaching and supporting learning, and in view of the growing number of individuals with an HEA Fellowship, it would be expected that an enhancement of the student experience would be noticeable, as suggested at an institutional level (Thornton, 2014). To provide an indication of the influence on the quality of teaching and learning, the number of Fellowships can be associated with the results of the NSS between 2012 and 2018.

Arguably, the NSS is designed to probe different aspects of the student experience, which are grouped into seven categories. Based on one or more questions each category is given an overall percentage score. Categories 1, 3, and 7 probe the perceived quality of teaching and supporting learning and are shown in Table 2. Correlating the number of HEA Fellowships with categories 1, 3, and 7 of the NSS shows no significant relationship (see Figure 1 and Table 1). This indicates that the growth in HEA Fellowships has no significant positive or negative association ($p > .05$) with students' perceived quality of teaching and academic support, and their overall satisfaction with the course. However, considered a key indicator in the TEF, the NSS as a measure of teaching quality is debated. It has been considered a driving force for improving services and teaching institutionally, but the emphasis on the former might conflate the measurement of the latter (Bell and Brooks, 2018; Burgess et al., 2018). Moreover, the NSS as a measure of comparing quality nationally is considered limited given the diversity and scales of operating within the sector (Burgess et al., 2018; Fielding et al., 2010). As such the assumed relationship between the HEA Fellowships and the NSS might need to be considered with care. Nevertheless, the absence of an association does raise questions about the contribution that formal HEA accredited CPD is making to the advancement of teaching and supporting learning. This study aims to contribute to our understanding, by exploring how academics experience and perceive the influence of HEA accredited CPD from their own perspective.

Image 1: Relationship between NSS (categories 1, 3 and 7) (Full and part time, England) and HEA Fellowships

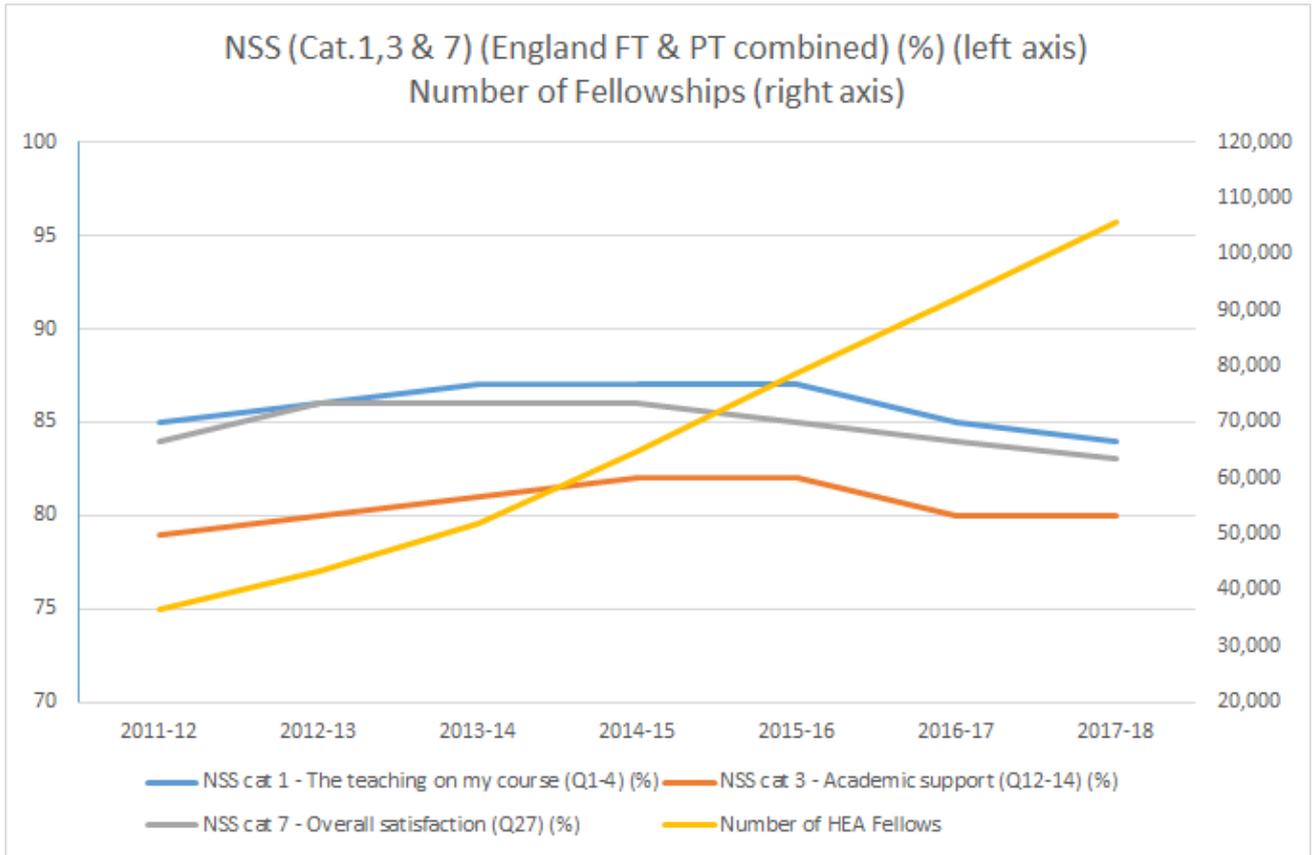


Table 1: HEA Fellows, Academics staff and NSS

Academic year	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	Pearson r	p (two-tailed)
Number of HEA Fellows	36,557	43,300	52,000	65,000	78,703	92,073	105,878		
HESA Staff (excluding atypical)	378,250	382,515	395,780	403,835	410,130	419,710	429,560		
HESA Academic staff	181,385	185,585	194,245	198,335	201,380	206,870	211,975		
% Academic staff with HEA Fellow	20%	23%	27%	33%	39%	45%	50%		
Institutions with HEA CPD accreditation UK		40	70	100	118	125	128		
Institutions with HEA CPD accreditation international		0	2	2	6	7	12		
NSS cat 1 - The teaching on my course (Q1-4) (%)	85	86	87	87	87	85	84	-0.41	0.36
NSS cat 2 - Assessment and feedback (Q8-11) (%)	68	72	73	74	74	74	74	0.73	0.06
NSS cat 3 - Academic support (Q12-14) (%)	79	80	81	82	82	80	80	0.18	0.69
NSS cat 7 - Overall satisfaction (Q27) (%)	84	86	86	86	85	84	83	-0.60	0.16

Table 2: NSS T&L categories and questions (Unistats, 2018)

Cat. 1 - The teaching on my course
1 - Staff are good at explaining things.
2 - Staff have made the subject interesting.
3 - The course is intellectually stimulating.
4 - My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.
Cat. 3 - Academic support
12 - I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.
13 - I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course.
14 - Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course.
Cat. 7 - Overall satisfaction
27 - Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.

Understanding the experience of HEA accredited CPD

The implications for academic developers establishing and embedding HEA accredited CPD schemes have been widely examined (Peat, 2014; Shrives, 2012; Spowart et al., 2016; 2019; Thornton, 2014), as have the implications of the use of professional dialogue or oral examinations to assess academics in their claim for a Fellowship (Pilkington, 2013; Smart et al., 2019). The role of professional standards, competencies and professional bodies informing and overseeing the educational sector has been explored in other settings (Lester, 2014; Lucas and Nasta, 2010; Westera, 2001), but the experiences and perceptions of academics with the UKPSF to enhance practice has not been fully examined in depth (van der Sluis, 2019).

The relationship between HEA accredited CPD and the enhancement of teaching and learning is explored by Thornton (2014), van der Sluis et al. (2016; 2017), Shaw (2017) and Botham (2017a) who suggest that the relationship between the recognition schemes and the enhancement of practice needs to be considered with care. Van der Sluis et al. (2017), Shaw (2017) and Thornton (2014) found that some academics reported changes to their teaching practice, but these changes were moderate in nature. Nevertheless, changes were found beyond the context of direct teaching and/or classroom practice, such as increased confidence to engage in mentoring and leadership (Botham, 2017a; van der Sluis et al., 2017). The latter is a particular focus of a Senior Fellowship application (Lea and Purcell, 2015). Moreover, relevance was found in the opportunity for reconciliation, confirmation of previous achievements, raising awareness of the UKPSF, as well as

the institutional circumstances and the wider HE setting (Shaw, 2017; van der Sluis et al., 2017), and validating and confirming as well as reconstructing and renegotiating research and teaching identities over time (van der Sluis, 2019).

Van der Sluis et al. (2016; 2017) and Shaw (2017) questioned the emphasis on retrospection and reflection as the main form of professional learning within the recognition schemes. Participants on a recognition scheme are not exposed to new knowledge, skills and competencies, but focus on developing a reflective account of their practice, which describes their successful engagement with, involvement in, and influence on teaching and supporting learning, and is assessed by a panel to obtain an HEA Fellowship (Lea and Purcell, 2015). This retrospection might restrict participants' orientation on previous engagements and activities rather than evaluating and developing ongoing and future practices (van der Sluis et al., 2016, 2017).

Case studies examining the implementation of accredited CPD frameworks show the importance of active management as a means of stimulating engagement with the HEA Fellowships (Peat, 2014; Spowart et al. 2016; 2019). The availability of institutional resources in terms of schemes, programmes and academic developers is important, but limited in motivating academics to engage with the HEA Fellowships. To stimulate further engagement institutions have set targets and integrated the HEA fellowships with policies for probation and progression (Peat, 2015; Spowart et al., 2019; Thornton, 2014). The implications of the institutional imperatives stimulating, mobilising or driving engagement have been described as a limiting factor for the outcomes of CPD (Di Napoli, 2014). It has been suggested that coercion, resistance and compliance might play a significant role in the adoption and experience of HEA accredited CPD (Peat 2015; Hall, 2010), but it is recommended that further work should be done to understand how senior academics perceive and take it further for their practice (Spowart et al., 2019; van der Sluis, 2019).

Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted as the data collection method. To provide sufficient structure and maintain the focus an interview guide was designed to support the interviews using a topic based structure, but care was taken that it did not constrain participants' narratives through the use of closed-ended questions (Brinkmann, 2017). The interview guide encouraged participants to share their experience with the recognition scheme and their perceptions of the HEA Fellowships and the UKPSF, and to explore the influence of these on their practice.

After obtaining ethical approval from the university's ethics committee, interviews were conducted in the workplace and recorded digitally and fully transcribed. The transcripts were analysed using

thematic data analysis, which involves reading and coding the individual transcripts and searching for patterns and recurring thematic topics iteratively across them to allow further analysis. A flexible framing of the findings was taken. The findings below are developed following the thematic interview guide, as well as emerging out of the recurring themes within the data, and discussed in relation to the existing literature, (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Javadi & Zarea, 2016).

Purposive based sampling was applied to support the transferability of the results to a wider context (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). It was decided to select academics at two different HEIs, but with a similar approach to supporting academics obtaining an SFHEA through a recognition scheme. At both institutions, in line with the requirements of a direct application to the HEA, applicants had to submit a reflective account of practice (RAP), which was assessed by a panel against the criteria of the UKPSF to obtain an SFHEA. The institutions had comparable approaches to stimulating engagement by embedding the need for an HEA Fellowship in policies for probation and academic progression. UA92 is a post-1992 university, located within a large metropolitan city. It is part of the University Alliance group, is primarily teaching focused, received Bronze in the 2017 TEF results, and is ranked towards the bottom of the University League Tables 2019, which weigh both teaching and research (The Complete University Guide, 2019). SRIU is a smaller research intensive Campus University with a civic history. It received Silver in the 2017 TEF results and is ranked within the top 30 in the University League Tables 2019 (The Complete University Guide, 2019). All of the participants were experienced full-time academics and both teaching and research active. Care was taken to select participants from a wide range of disciplines and professional backgrounds, which are summarised using Biglan’s (1973) commonly applied classification into hard-soft and pure-applied, for ethical reasons. All 11 participants (5 female, 6 male) had obtained an SFHEA. Each has been given an anonymous ID (see Appendix, Table 3). To strengthen the credibility of the study, all quotes are given with the corresponding line numbers in NVivo (Korstjens and Moser, 2018).

Table 3: Participant characteristics

n	ID	HEI	Years' experience T&LHE)	Role	Discipline
1	UA01	UA92	> 10	Associate Professor	Hard-pure
2	UA02	UA92	> 20	Senior Lecturer	Soft-applied
3	UA03	UA92	> 20	Associate Professor	Soft-applied
4	UA04	UA92	> 10	Associate Professor	Hard-applied
5	UA05	UA92	> 20	Professor	Hard-applied

6	SR06	SRIU	> 10	Associate Professor	Soft-pure
7	SR07	SRIU	< 10	Senior Lecturer	Hard-applied
8	SR08	SRIU	< 10	Senior Lecturer	Soft-applied
9	SR09	SRIU	< 10	Senior Lecturer	Soft-applied
10	SR10	SRIU	< 10	Senior Lecturer	Soft-applied
11	SR11	SRIU	> 20	Professor	Soft-pure

Findings

The findings below start by describing academics' perceptions of HEA accredited CPD for their practice. The sections thereafter explore their perceptions of the recognition scheme as CPD, the UKPSF to inform practice, and lastly the role of institutions in stimulating engagement.

Perceived relevance of the HEA Fellowship for practice

Most participants questioned the relevance of the recognition schemes for the development of their teaching practice. They made little reference to the development or advancement of their skills, competencies or theoretical understanding. Nor did they make any reference to enhancing aspects of their teaching, student learning, assessments and/or course design practices as a result of obtaining an SFHEA. The lack of perceived relevance is in line with the findings of Shaw (2017) and van der Sluis et al. (2017):

Has it changed what I do and how I do it? Not really, not very much. Do I think that's a case for other people? Absolutely. You don't hear people talking about it really" (UA03, 574-577).

References to changes were made in regard to contexts beyond direct teaching and/or classroom practice. After obtaining the SFHEA participants felt strengthened and more self-assured with regard to teaching-related roles and more confident engaging in mentoring junior colleagues, sharing practice, approaches or examples, and supporting others applying for an HEA Fellowship:

"I am not sure it alters anything in the classroom, but outside of it, it has enriched my thinking and has made me more committed to looking at things like the sharing of good practice and how we disseminate" (SR06, 475-476).

Applying for an HEA Fellowship through an institutional recognition scheme raised academics' awareness of the UKPSF, its influence on the sector, and institutional integration with progression policies. The raised the awareness of UKPSF on the wider setting, might need to be understood

against the requirements applying for SFHEA. At both institutions, in line with the sector and Advance HE's applications, the main purpose of the recognition scheme was to develop their RAP (Lea and Purcell, 2015). Applying for a Senior Fellowship requires paying considerable attention to evidencing leadership and the mentoring of other colleagues (Lea and Purcell, 2015), which might have diverged attention away from enhancing practice and student outcomes.

Nevertheless, many participants did appreciate the opportunity to consolidate their previous commitments and engagement with teaching and supporting learning. For many this had been one of the first opportunities they had had to evidence and showcase their previous investments and initiatives to enhance students' learning experience in a structured and recognised way:

“It did provide an opportunity for me to reflect on what I had done, [... which] can be very valuable to recognise what you have done and to formalise that” (SR07, 412-413).

Academics perception of the recognition schemes

Most of the participants acknowledged the importance of the institutional investment made and the availability of resources, such as the recognition schemes and academic developers, as indispensable for obtaining the SFHEA. For instance, most participants recognised and appreciated the work of academic developers associated with the recognition schemes, and the difference the advice and guidance to obtain an HEA Fellowship had made for themselves and others.

Despite the availability of resources and support, most participants were critical about the content and format of the recognition scheme as a form of CPD and its value for practice. Although the process and activities were not experienced as complex, they were not considered to be intellectually inspiring or stimulating. For most participants completing the RAP was experienced as a “tick-box exercise” (UA05, 314), requiring “filling in forms” and other documents, and “painfully trying to think of stories to tell” (SR08, 54-55); it was considered “kind of wordy and over-complicated” (UA03, 230), and “incredibly dry and uninviting and bureaucratic” (SR06, 420).

Participants confirmed the limited relevance of the retrospective and reflective focus of the RAP. As an assessed piece, the RAP stimulated the presentation of successful and polished examples over case studies that are open-ended, messy and imperfect, but could be relevant as a basis for further investigation and inquiry (Shaw, 2017; van der Sluis et al., 2017). Moreover, it raised questions in terms of credibility. From the participants' point of view, the RAP demonstrated their ability to write, and use a reflective narrative to present themselves favourably in order to be assessed, instead of representing authentic practice:

“You are writing your own story, now whether it’s true or not... a chunk of it is your ability to understand what’s expected, define and evidence the stuff, you know” (SR08, 527-528).

Furthermore, in terms of credibility, participants at both institutions felt that the RAP did not involve other forms of confirmation or practice and as such “the quality of your teaching is never really assessed” (UA01, 579). For instance, the RAP was reported as not leading to an inquiry into participants’ practice, nor did it involve collegial or student consultation, observation or review, which might stimulate reflection and further development (Blackmore, 2005; Fletcher, 2018):

“[it is] form than content, [...]. It’s an exercise allegedly about teaching that frankly, as far as I can see, it has very little to do with teaching” (UA02, 205-213).

The RAP is a considerable piece of writing (Lea and Purcell, 2015) but participants did not utilise it after completing the recognition scheme, except for sharing it with others as an exemplar. Some participants suggested that an alternative requirement for a Fellowship could stimulate interest based on experiences with a taught programme, by writing an essay or report investigating current and ongoing practice, or a piece of journalism to inform others. In this way they felt that the RAP could be adapted or built upon.

Academics perceptions of the UKPSF

The use of standards and/or a list of competencies to enhance professional and educational practice has been investigated and debated (Lester, 2014; Westera, 2001). How the UKPSF might inform practice in HE has not yet been discussed in the emerging literature (van der Sluis, 2019). Although not an explicit focus of this investigation, this was discussed by participants. Having standards, qualifications and a professional body to represent and champion teaching and learning was seen by most participants as a positive and relevant development for the sector. Some participants drew comparisons with their own professional affiliations and the benefits of a regulative body, and subscribed to the idea of professionalising teaching and learning. At the same time participants drew comparisons between other recognised and chartered professional bodies and the non-charted Advance HE, in regard to representing, influencing and shaping the sector:

“I am not sure how the HEA can influence the government to transform the direction of universities... [...] I think the HEA might not be seen as a strong body that can influence [the sector]” (UA04, 534-537).

Some participants made comparisons between the HEA Fellowships and other professional qualifications in terms of the time invested, as well as its credibility. Obtaining an HEA Fellowship

through a recognition programme was not considered equal to other professional qualifications, or as having a similar reputation or standing:

“[but SFHEA] is essentially recognising what you have already got and there’s no pain to get to the point where you are. [...] It’s self-validating isn’t it? [...] It just doesn’t operate as a professional qualification. (SR08, 519-530).

Many participants felt that Advance HE did not provide an opportunity for identification with a larger community, an “idea of belonging” (UA01, 739), or any enhancement of their standing due to its affiliation. Moreover, aligned with debates on the nomenclature of the HEA Fellowships (Peat, 2014), participants referred to the limits of the post-nominals as a distinction and indicator of teaching quality and capabilities, as might be the case with incremental qualifications in other professional bodies:

“I cannot claim [...] I am a better lecturer than you because you are a Fellow or you are not SFHEA. [...] eventually [the HEA Fellowship] doesn’t tell you much about the quality of your teaching” (UA01, 566-577).

Participants reflected on the role of the UKPSF in informing and clarifying teaching and supporting learning. As part of the RAP participants had mapped their reflections against various dimensions and this was experienced by most of them as formulaic rather than an informative activity that enriched their understanding of their practice, or “lent itself to a lot of creative thinking” (SR07, 416), and considered “to be formalise and bureaucratise teaching” (SR06, 354-355).

Maybe it is not surprising that most participants expressed that after obtaining the SFHEA they made no further reference to these dimensions during their day-to-day practice. It did not feature in collegial conversations, mentoring, and personal reflections as a means to clarify, evaluate or analyse ongoing practice, which might challenge the objective of the UKPSF (c.f. Lea and Purcell, 2015).

Role of the institutional management stimulating engagement

Another theme emerging from the data analysis was how academics were motivated to undertake HEA accredited CPD. An institutional target at UA92 made a Fellowship mandatory for all academic members of staff, and an SFHEA had become a requirement for senior roles focused on teaching. At SRIU, an HEA Fellowship had become mandatory for all new academics, and was required for those focused on teaching.

All participants reported that the institutional alignment with progression played a considerable role in their motivation for obtaining the SFHEA. The alignment provided a “massive force” (SR11, 144-145), and “kick-started the urgency to apply” (UA04, 109-111):

“It was at a stage where the university [...] was encouraging people to do this and it was also creeping into promotion, so that you needed to be an HEA in order to get promoted. [...] it was very much extrinsic” (UA02, 330-333).

For some participants at UA92, an SFHEA became mandatory considering their role and responsibilities and they had only applied to fulfil the prerequisites of their job titles. For other participants an SFHEA was not mandatory but they felt that it had become an important signifier considering their roles and responsibilities and their focus on teaching within their department. The UA92 and SRIU participants in roles with a considerable research component applied for an SFHEA, as they wished to document their involvement and engagement in teaching and learning and strengthen their CVs and portfolios going forward for a professorship.

Besides responding to institutional targets and expectations, all participants shared an awareness of the wider setting that had assigned importance to the HEA Fellowships, which coloured their perceptions. Participants from UA92 placed the institutional attention towards the HEA Fellowships against the pressure that the institution was under as a result of the TEF, the NSS, its league table position and decreasing student numbers. Many felt that HEA Fellowship was put forward by institutional managers as a quick fix to address the structural issues, creating a “demoralising culture” (UA03, 558) where the “top management is not appreciative of us” (UA04, 587-588). For the UA92 participants the institutional target of imposing an HEA Fellowship by a certain date was considered to serve “managerial priorities and not necessarily educational ones” (UA02, 467-468). The HEA Fellowships were experienced as “a big stick to beat” (UA05, 332-333) and “bash people over the head” (UA03, 554) for not doing enough to enhance the student experience and they felt that it was “enforced upon them” (UA04, 611).

Similarly, at SRIU, protecting the university's reputation in the league tables, the TEF outcome, the student experience or the NSS, and the number of student applicants were considered “very important drivers” (SR06, 341) for the institutional importance assigned to HEA Fellowship. This relationship was considered with care:

“since I arrived here, I have seen HEA Fellowships become much more valued over the last years. [...] I would put a lot of that down to the student fees situation and all of the government oversight and regulation that's come along with that, [...]” (SR07, 242-244).

In comparison to participants from UA92, at SRIU the descriptions of senior management stimulating the uptake of HEA Fellowships among academics were less emotionally charged as institutional threats of demotion and redundancy were absent. The alignment with promotion was partly seen as creating opportunities for individuals who want to place more emphasis on teaching and supporting learning, while simultaneously representing a pragmatic “shift in culture” (SR07, 264) whereby the aim is to have more academics on contracts who can teach more hours to address the growth in student numbers.

Conclusion and discussion

The document review above suggests that there is a substantial uptake of the HEA Fellowships in the UK. Taking into account the limitations of the data, it can be concluded that the percentage of academic staff with an HEA Fellowship grew over the period 2011-12 to 2017-18 from a fifth (20%) to half (50%), which might be considered a substantial uptake for a scheme that is intended to be non-compulsory (Hibbert and Semler, 2015). Despite the limitation of the NSS as an indicator of teaching quality (c.f. Burgess et al., 2018; Fielding et al., 2010), a relationship is often assumed with the number of HEA Fellowships, justifying the investments in HEA accredited CPD, and the alignment with policies to stimulate engagement at an institutional level (c.f. Peat, 2015; Thornton, 2014). However, no significant positive or negative association was found between the growing number of HEA Fellowships and the NSS scores indicating teaching quality over the same period. Moreover, the findings of this qualitative study indicated that senior academics who obtained an HEA Fellowship through an institutional recognition scheme experienced limited relevance for the enhancement of their practice, which requires further discussion.

Participants in this study made some, but overall little reference to developing or advancing their skills, competencies or theoretical knowledge, or making changes to teaching and supporting learning as a result of obtaining an SFHEA. For most of them, applying for an SFHEA was not considered complex, but the writing of the RAP was not experienced as inspiring or intellectually stimulating, confirming the limits of recognising participants’ standing based on retrospection and reflection for the enhancement of practice (c.f. Shaw, 2017; van der Sluis et al., 2017). The writing of the RAP was perceived as a self-validation exercise, which did not require any form of investigation of ongoing practice, or peer or student evaluation. This raises questions about the credibility and validity of the HEA fellowships as a recognition of individual standing, but it needs to be acknowledged that applying for an SFHEA requires attention to individuals’ influence through mentoring and leadership, which might deviate attention away from practice (c.f. Botham, 2017a). As such, the current provision might emphasise participants’ claim for a Descriptor, and a careful

rethink of the focus, content and requirements of the recognition scheme will be needed, to ensure that value for practice is reinstalled.

The literature has discussed the limits of the nomenclature of the Descriptors (Peat, 2014), but the role of the DoP for practice has not been evaluated (van der Sluis, 2019). Participants in this study suggested that the DoP does not play a role in describing, problematizing or informing practice after obtaining an HEA Fellowship. As such the role of the UKPSF in supporting professional development to enhance teaching practices requires further scrutiny. A comparison with the use and added value of professional standards in other (educational) sectors will be an important line of further study (c.f. Lester, 2014; Lucas and Nasta, 2010). For instance, professional standards in other sectors might include statements of (minimal) expectation or standing, and are reviewed periodically, which might stimulate an ongoing engagement with CPD and the enhancement of practice (c.f. Peat, 2014; van der Sluis, 2019).

The HEA Fellowships are at many institutions put forward in a top-down managerial environment and their uptake is stimulated through technologies such as target setting, recruitment, probation and progression (Pilkington, 2018; Smith, 2019). The latter played an important role as an extrinsic motivator to engage senior academics in this study, and suggest that: leadership and management approaches underpinned the experienced reality of HEA accredited CPD; it was perceived as “serving effectively managerial priorities and not necessarily educational ones” (UA02, 467-468) (c.f. Platt and Floyd, 2015); it is primarily undertaken for purposes other than academic needs, and; as a result compliance and coercion played a considerable role in participants’ engagement (c.f. Di Napoli, 2014). Together this will foreground the questionable relevance of accredited CPD and the enhancement of teaching practice, and further work exploring the influence of senior management stimulating engagement with the HEA fellowships will be needed (c.f. Spowart et al., 2019; van der Sluis, 2019). This study focused on senior academics applying for an SFHEA through a recognition scheme. Further work establishing the relevance of the recognition scheme for different and more diverse categories of staff, will add to our understanding. Moreover, acknowledging the limitation of the document review above, the findings of this and other studies (c.f. Shaw, 2017, van der Sluis et al., 2017) indicate that there is a clear need to establish the impact of the HEA Fellowships for practice using robust and meaningful measures at a national level, to evaluate, discuss and justify the considerable individual and institutional investments made.

To initiate a critical appraisal, we might turn to what is not appropriated by Advance HE. Having an HEA Fellowship might have become close to the norm for most academics, as shown above, but the spread and uptake need to be considered against Turners et al.’s (2013) observations that attention to, and awareness of the UKPSF will vary considerably within the sector. This provides

opportunities to explore how (informal) forms of CPD might flourish or become marginalised as a result of different managerial configurations, taking into account the diversity of the HEIs in the sector (Macdonald, 2009). Moreover, as Advance HE and the UKPSF expand globally, aligning with international objectives of accountability, ranking and competition, it needs to be questioned how the UKPSF fits with CPD that 'acknowledges and values indigeneity, and local flavour or special character' (Buissink et al 2017, p.569; Hall 2010). This could be enriched by comparative studies with other national initiatives (c.f. de Jong et al., 2013) and proposals (c.f. Jorzik, 2013) to enhance the practice and recognition of teaching and supporting students' learning in HE.

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