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Developing a quality culture through the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Katarina Mårtensson [a] , Torgny Roxå [b] & Thomas Olsson [b]

[a] Centre for Educational Development, Lund University, Sweden
[b] Faculty of Engineering, Lund University, Sweden
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Katarina Mårtensson[a]*, Torgny Roxå[b] and Thomas Olsson[b]

[a]Centre for Educational Development, Lund University, Sweden; [b]Faculty of Engineering, Lund University, Sweden

The critical features of a strategy to promote improved teaching and learning are explored in this article from a socio-cultural perspective in a research-intensive institution. The paper presents theoretical underpinnings and implications as well as an empirical case study of such a strategy and its seemingly successful results. The strategy builds on Scholarship of Teaching and Learning beyond individual development and aims at cultivating a culture of continuous improvement of teaching and student learning. The case study describes a number of co-ordinated and interrelated activities at various institutional levels to support the strategy. The results are discussed in terms of academic engagement. Important aspects such as academic freedom, professional identity and leadership are also discussed.

Keywords: academic freedom; culture; identity; leadership; Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

Introduction

Academic teaching appears peculiarly resilient to all sorts of reform efforts made by managers and politicians. Despite attempts made by both internal stakeholders, such as individual academics, heads of departments and deans, and by external stakeholders, such as governments and other policy-makers, to influence practices in higher education, teaching mostly remains unaffected (Bauer, Askling, Marton, & Marton, 1999; Gordon, 2002; Newton, 2002; Stensaker, 2006; Trowler, 1998). The lack of visible effect is intriguing and constitutes the main question discussed here with a focus on how educational development initiatives relate to academic freedom. How can academic teaching be understood through a socio-cultural lens so that this durability becomes transparent? Answers to this question could support the academics themselves in their effort to preserve their core values and help external stakeholders to constructively direct their efforts.

The critical features of a strategy geared towards continuous development of teaching and learning, in a research-intensive academic environment, are discussed in this article. We will describe a case where such a strategy is used. The overall objective of the strategy is to support the emergence of a quality culture in relation to teaching and learning, where teaching develops slowly but constantly by the active involvement of academic teachers. It offers a possible direction for academic developers, leaders and university managers who struggle with academics' low interest in teaching and learning, as it might appear on the surface. The strategy is based on the

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Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Boyer, 1990; Kreber, 2002) and is guided by the following important principles:

- Sustainable change must be owned by teachers.[1]
- Informed discussion and documentation is paramount for achieving a quality culture in relation to teaching and learning.
- The driving force for change is peer review among teachers.
- Clarity in vision and careful timing while taking structural measures is a crucial part of leadership.

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning includes systematic observations of student learning and analysis within explicit theoretical frameworks. It also implies documenting and making results public for peer-review purposes (Kreber, 2002; Trigwell & Shale, 2004). In the strategy described in our case, the socio-cultural perspective of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning is emphasized in order to develop and enhance the teaching and learning culture, be that a working group, a department, a faculty or at the university as a whole. In other words, the strategy uses *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* as an instrument, not only for individual development, but also, and more importantly, for the development of the university's aggregated ability to support student learning.

Why, then, would any individual teacher want to engage in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, especially in an environment where research is the major driving force for personal engagement and institutional ethos? In order to understand this we need to explore *academic identity*. Henkel (2005) refers to two international studies she conducted on reform in higher education. She concludes that 'the two things that emerged as most important for academic identities were the discipline and academic freedom' (p. 166). Supported by this, we claim that attempts to change academe and academic practices tamper with identity and therefore make it difficult to succeed. In fact, the defence put up by the people concerned can be fierce: 'When people's identities are at stake, passions run deep', as Becher and Trowler (2001, p. 126) put it in their book *Academic tribes and territories*.

In the following we will discuss implications of this perspective. We take a cultural approach to academic identity, meaning that we foreground the social processes within and beyond the discipline. We also discuss academic freedom as crucial to change in academic teaching. A case study from Lund University, Sweden, is the empirical source for the claims that are made. The case unwraps a strategy which has attracted national and international interest for its success in engaging academics in the development of teaching and learning in an old, research-intensive institution.

A socio-cultural perspective on academic identity

If university teaching is to be discussed through a socio-cultural lens we have to start by defining a perspective on culture. Following Alvesson (2002) *culture* is what constitutes a group and makes it visible as a variation to its background. The group can be small or large, but as in all groups, the members share something: for instance, a tendency to use certain phrases during conversations more often than what others do, certain ways to act in specific situations or common ways to react to people outside the group. A group of teachers and their culture can be distinguished from other teachers because they have an inclination to favour particular teaching methods, to

explain students' mistakes in similar ways and to base their practice on commonly shared assumptions about learning. Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Trowler (2009) describe these cultural traits as 'Teaching and Learning Regimes' (TLRs). These TLRs influence individuals and thereby make some teaching methods, explanations or assumptions more prevalent than others.

An individual teacher can choose not to comply with a regime, but he or she cannot choose not to be influenced by it. Therefore, acting according to a regime or against it will result in positive, neutral or negative responses from the other members (colleagues and others) of a local teaching and learning arena, e.g. a department or a work group. These responses will in turn, and in the long run, affect the individual's status and academic identity.

The socio-cultural perspective offers a representation of how university teachers act in interplay with socially constructed structures and how this interplay is strongly connected to their identity and status. It can also shed light on how improvement of teaching and learning relates to the professional identity of teachers.

Complementary research of communication in academe shows how academics have a tendency to avoid conflicts with colleagues: 'The inclination to play safe – to minimize the risk of making professional enemies by not opposing or being critical of colleagues' views – is also reflected in the preference, noted earlier, of many academics to steer clear of direct competition with others' (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 127). This is important in relation to teaching and learning. In fact, as we will demonstrate, these communication patterns have to be influenced if a culture of quality in teaching and learning is to evolve.

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009a) have explored how academic teachers do engage in sincere discussions about teaching and learning. These conversations include only a limited number of selected peers – a '*significant network*'. Furthermore, the conversations mainly occur backstage and therefore remain hidden from the majority of colleagues. It is during these conversations that teachers develop or maintain a personally integrated understanding of teaching and learning. As these conversations are outside the official agenda, teachers have the opportunity to carefully choose when to bring a personal opinion into the open and challenge a ruling TLR or any other part of an institution's or a department's official agenda. (For a fuller account of the relation between TLRs and significant networks, see Roxå and Mårtensson [2009b].) We will return to the importance of the significant networks in the final section of this article.

Taken together, these accounts indicate how university teaching takes place in a structural landscape where individual teachers often choose not to oppose the traditional way of teaching. They do so in order not to jeopardize their academic identity. But, this does not mean that opposition is non-existent. Instead, it shows itself within the significant networks where conversations are earnest, personal and sometimes rebellious – however, these conversations mostly remain hidden backstage.

There are several lessons to be learnt from the above regarding change in relation to university teaching and learning. First, brute external pressure does not work as teachers activate defence strategies and at best comply, but only as frontstage behaviour and without personal commitment. Second, traditions and TLRs can be affected from within if involvement and critical perspectives from significant networks are brought into the open. The latter have a potential to create a climate of sincere peer scrutiny and, possibly, start a process of continuous drive for development similar to the cybernetic and self-propelled processes causing constant development in research. But the question is: How can this be brought about? Are academics not liable to hide

under the banner of academic freedom? The answer is that engagement in developing teaching and learning has to become a natural part of the culture, in the same way as the peer scrutiny they must engage in while involved in research. Before we offer a possible answer to how this engagement can be incorporated into the professional identity of an academic teacher, we look at academic freedom and explore its meaning and existence among university teachers, students and others.

Academic freedom

Academic freedom is an important consideration as we strive to understand how teachers can be influenced to willingly choose to change their teaching practices. The concept, however, is open to many interpretations. A starting point is to track its origin from Humboldt and the word *Lehrfreiheit*: the 'right of the university professor to freedom of inquiry and to freedom of teaching, the right to study and to report on his findings in an atmosphere of consent' (Rudolph, 1962, as cited in Tierney & Lechuga, 2005, p. 8). One interpretation of this is that academics have the freedom to do what-ever they want without interference from anyone except their peers. This interpreta-tion is not without opposition. Tierney and Lechuga (2005), among others, investigate the concept through a historical lens and place it in an American context. They declare that any 'investigation of academic freedom needs to include not only examples of individuals who faced sanction or dismissal because they had a particular viewpoint and were penalized, but also a consideration of the larger social and cultural contexts in which academic institutions are embedded' (p. 12). Such a statement points towards academic freedom as dependent on society.

A similar perspective emerges in an Australian study conducted by Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003). They analysed data from 165 social science academics who were asked to respond to the following statement: 'Academic freedom is not a well-defined concept. We would like to know what academic freedom means to you'. The authors' phenomenographic analysis results in a range of conceptions of academic freedom – from an absence of constraints on academics' activities, to an absence of constraints in combination with responsibilities on the part of the academics and loyalty to the institution where they work. Åkerlind and Kayrooz view these conceptions as a nested hierarchy, where those conceptions that include responsibilities in relation to academic freedom are the most complex. Consequently, academic freedom might be understood as an experience of absence of constraints, but also as an experience of professional responsibilities towards an institution and towards society.

These accounts of academic freedom tell us more about how the concept may be interpreted than about the importance of academic freedom among university teachers. Since the case presented below is located in Sweden we employ three sources – students, academics and government – where each is used to place academic freedom within a national context. The first source is a questionnaire answered by 1867 students who were active within the Swedish higher education system in 2004 (Barrling Hermansson, 2005). The results reveal that the concept of academic freedom is not used by a majority of the students. Many of them exhibit values related to academic freedom as well as expectations of higher education that correspond with the concept, although the term itself is not used. The second source is an evaluation of a major national reform in the early-1990s (Bauer et al., 1999), which pursued decentralisation and quality issues. The evaluation reveals that the reform had little impact upon the basic values held by university teachers. Cautiously, the authors conclude that some 'changes in

values, therefore, may occur concurrent with the pressure for new tasks and shifts in the roles for the academics. Even so, under the surface, the basic academic values seem to be as strong as ever' (p. 246). The displayed values, according to the authors, correspond with a 'humboldtian' view, including a concept of individual autonomy and freedom. A third source is a governmental directive to a national investigation, *Ökad frihet för universitet och högskolor* ['increased freedom for universities', our translation] (Swedish Ministry of Education and Research, 2007). Notably, the term 'academic freedom' does not appear anywhere in the text even though it expresses views complementary to academic freedom: '… the freedom of research is not to be jeopardized … the management of an institution shall not carry the main responsibility for the content in teaching or in research. … A balance must be maintained between the interest of strong management at all levels in the institutions and a more decentralised, collegial influence' (p. 11 – our translation from Swedish).

Thus, academic freedom appears as being important in Swedish higher education, even though the term itself is not often used. It is not possible to determine what the perspective means in a Swedish context but we assume that the meaning is embedded rather that explicit and close to that presented by Åkerlind and Kayrooz (2003).

The case of Lund University

A primary conclusion that can be drawn from the previous discussions is that any strategy for change in university teaching that does not consider identity issues and academic freedom will most likely have a limited or even zero effect on teaching practices and, consequently, on student learning. Another conclusion is that any strategy must aim for commitment from the academic teachers. If these terms are not met, the teachers will at best comply instrumentally with the formulated strategy, but not charge the teaching with personal involvement. Such teaching would correspond to a surface approach to learning that is sometimes adopted by students and that often results in poor knowledge and fragmented skills (Ramsden, 1998).

The purpose of this section is to discuss a strategy for the development of teaching used in a research-intensive university and to focus on the level of involvement in pedagogical issues as shown by university teachers. Increased engagement on the part of teachers form evidence of a cultural shift in relation to teaching and learning. We claim that the level of engagement can also be seen as evidence of a developed professional identity for academic teachers.

The strategy described has emerged over the past decade and has achieved, among other things:

- a positive national and international reputation,
- a leading position in national conferences on teaching and learning,
- an increasing number of students stressing the quality of education as an important reason for choosing the institution and
- a positive evaluation from the Swedish national agency for the development of higher education.

Lund University is located in the southern part of Sweden. It is the largest university in Scandinavia and one of the oldest, having been founded in 1666. It is research-intensive and has 5500 staff, including roughly 4000 academics. It has 40,000 students in eight autonomous faculties: humanities and theology, social sciences, medicine,

engineering, natural sciences, economy and management, law, and fine arts, music and theatre.

The responsibility for development of teaching at Lund University is decentralised to the faculties. Consequently, academic development has grown mainly at faculty level, although there is also a central teaching and learning development unit. Different faculties have been 'ahead' of others in terms of activity and innovation. In terms of the strategy described in this text, the Faculty of Engineering has been the one to most systematically develop the various activities. Two important features of this decentralised tradition have emerged. First, ideas and innovations have migrated between the faculties. Second, at different times, some faculties have defined themselves as competing with others.

Embedding Scholarship of Teaching in order to cultivate cultural change

In the following section we will briefly describe a number of coordinated and interrelated activities that have gradually been launched with careful timing in order to promote the embedding of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and to cultivate cultural change.

Pedagogical courses

Since the 1970s, Lund University has had a history of offering pedagogical courses for its teachers on a voluntary basis, mainly within faculties. Courses have been well attended by both junior and senior staff and have focused mainly on developing reflective practice within the discipline in a theoretical framework of student learning (Ramsden, 1998). Participation has escalated in numbers since the 1990s. When the Swedish government made pedagogical courses mandatory for permanent tenure in 2003, Lund University's track record was recognised and it was offered the task of formulating the basic principles and learning outcomes of such training. The learning outcomes were based on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (see Lindberg-Sand and Sonesson [2008] for an account of this process and of the suggested learning outcomes). The result was also a consensus decision among all rectors for Swedish higher education institutions to recommend 10 weeks of training to be concluded within two years of employment. Thus, the development can be seen as a process where increased voluntary participation in pedagogical courses during the 1990s was recognised by the government and the rectors, who then decided to make pedagogical courses compulsory.

Thus, participation in pedagogical courses at Lund University expanded even further, and are offered to new as well as to established staff. The recommended 10 weeks of teacher training are modularised in order to support progression of knowledge and skills, as well as to support an increased sophistication of scholarship of teaching and learning (Roxå, Olsson, & Mårtensson, 2008). During 2007, more than 900 participants were registered in pedagogical courses at Lund University, most courses ranging from 40 to 200 hours total participant working time.

Project reports

Within the pedagogical courses, teachers reflect upon their own teaching experience and work on self-chosen projects directly related to their practice. These projects are

reported in a scholarly way, incorporating the use of educational literature and peer review by colleagues within the same course or within the faculty where the teacher is active. In 2007, the total number of peer-reviewed reports was more than 400. These reports are used by other forthcoming course-participants for inspiration or to build upon, again to support the enhancement of the local culture. The project reports have recently been subject to a meta-analysis within the university in order to inform policy about issues that teachers address when pursuing scholarship of teaching and learning (Ahlberg, Andersson, & Larsson, 2008).

Critical friends

A model based on the idea of critical friends (Handal, 1999) is used in order to build bridges between what is addressed in pedagogical courses and the socio-cultural context in which the teachers practice. This includes providing a critical friend of one's own choosing with the draft report from the pedagogical course, and to have a discussion based on the ideas and results put forward in the text. The result of the discussion is included in the final version of the text, which is the exam assignment in the pedagogical course.

Departmental seminars

As a result of the critical friends model, departmental seminars have been initiated in some places where teachers present their development projects to their departmental colleagues. This is done in order to support serious and theoretically underpinned discussions about teaching and learning within their disciplines. The projects are explicitly underpinned by educational theory to deepen understanding of the teaching practices. In this way new perspectives continuously fuel collegial discussions.

Campus conferences on teaching and learning

The high number of documented and peer-reviewed projects has contributed to the fact that three faculties now organise biennial campus conferences on teaching and learning. These are organised as a complement to the university-wide conference on teaching and learning, also organised every second year. Each conference has a call for papers, which are peer-reviewed according to pre-formulated criteria inspired by scholarship of teaching and learning. The conferences commonly attract about 30–50 abstracts each, resulting in 20–25 papers being presented to 100–200 participating academics. Each conference is documented and published as conference proceedings on the university website. As a consequence, teachers from Lund University are among the most represented at national conferences on teaching and learning.

Reward schemes

Three faculties at Lund University have introduced voluntary reward schemes for scholarly teaching. The most established scheme, the Pedagogical Academy at the Faculty of Engineering, was established in 2000. The intention was to promote pedagogical development and to increase the overall pedagogical competence by offering

monetary incentives not only to individual teachers but also to departments where rewarded teachers are active. Since no additional faculty funding is available, non-participating departments suffer reduced funding. Rewarded teachers focus their teaching practice on student learning, they show an advanced capability for scholarly reflection on their teaching practice and they strive to make their practice more public by engaging in scholarly discussions, conferences and publications. So far 76 teachers have been rewarded in the Faculty of Engineering. The scheme attracts teachers from all academic categories. The reward scheme is not an alternative career path; on the contrary, all teachers are encouraged to engage and show excellence in research as well as in teaching (Antman & Olsson, 2007; Roxå et al., 2008).

Tenure and promotion

The university is currently reviewing its processes for appointments and promotion. The two teacher appointment committees in the Faculty of Engineering have been inspired by experiences from the Pedagogical Academy – especially the research-based model for assessing reflective and scholarly practice (Antman & Olsson, 2007). This has led to an increased focus from the committees on applicants' abilities for scholarly reflection on their pedagogical practice and on participation in pedagogical training. Several applicants seeking promotion to the position of professor have been rejected in recent years because of shortcomings in this respect, something that has sent strong signals throughout the faculty. As an immediate result, the interest among experienced teachers in participating in pedagogical courses has increased considerably. The research-based approach and the alignment with basic academic values seem to be of fundamental importance in this development within the teacher appointment committees.

Evidence of cultural change

Aligned with the theoretical perspective in this paper, the numbers of individuals who engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning have to be linked to cultural change. Evidence of this type of impact is documented in an independent national evaluation (Gran, 2006). This evaluation draws on an extensive survey that includes 1100 teachers participating in pedagogical courses within five Swedish institutions, including the Faculty of Engineering at Lund University. Gran discusses, among other things, a classic problem in staff development: the 'return-problem'. Individual teachers may attend inspiring pedagogical courses, but once they return to their department they are confronted by a lack of interest or even hostility from their colleagues, making it hard to implement ideas and develop practice (Entwistle & Walker, 2000). In relation to the 'return-problem', Gran (2006) concludes that in the Faculty of Engineering at Lund University, where educational development is conducted systematically, the teachers 'are well aware of the fact that their contributions are valued' (p. 9). The report substantiates the teachers' experience that their departments use their developed pedagogical competence (p. 80) in contrast to teachers' experiences of the 'return-problem' in other universities.

Both levels of engagement by individual teachers *and* accounts about responses among colleagues after participation in staff development activities indicate effects on both professional identity and culture.

Leadership

Despite these encouraging results we would like to point towards another critical feature of developing a teaching and learning culture: that of leadership. Individual teachers only have control over a limited *space of action* (Bauer et al., 1999). They can decide to structure lectures, laboratory work, assignments and the like in different ways, but they are, at the same time, restricted by other structures such as curriculum design, regulations, resources and legislation. As a consequence, many teachers engaged in reforming their teaching perceive their space of action as smaller than their ambition. They may therefore choose to downplay their ambitions because they see no prospect in pursuing ideas they foresee as impossible to implement due to existing regulations. The phenomenon has been discussed in relation to university teaching by Trowler (1998).

Leaders often have a space of action where it is possible to influence these inhibiting structures. In an organisation characterised by internal responsiveness, leaders must be sensitive to the needs of teachers and change regulations when necessary in order to support and promote development. This requires methods by which leaders develop their capacity to listen to the experiences of teachers and also their ability to take appropriate measures in terms of supporting teaching and learning development. This is important for all the efforts made by individual academic teachers to reach their full potential in terms of collaboration and mutual support.

As leadership in academic institutions has been proven to have a direct impact on the success of the institution (Neumann & Neumann, 1999), it is important to develop both theory and practice in relation to how to lead university teachers (Middlehurst, 2008).

Concluding discussion

Lund University builds its strategy upon pedagogical courses, which are based on the assumption that university teachers already are concerned about teaching and student learning. This involvement is demonstrated in backstage conversations with significant others (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009a). Three factors are assumed to potentially obstruct this engagement from resulting in constantly improved practice. First, the tendency in academe not to challenge openly what is considered the dominating perspective (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Second, because the personally important conversations take place backstage in small networks and without any documentation, they do not affect the culture. Third, since the significant conversations normally do not use any other material than personal experience, they soon run out of ideas and new perspectives.

The strategy described here generates personal commitment to teaching and student learning by nurturing significant networks with the accounts of colleagues' teaching and learning experiences. This is achieved through careful introduction of documented accounts from university teachers or findings from educational research. Furthermore, the pedagogical courses function as essential arenas where teachers can start to document their personal teaching experiences and make a first acquaintance with educational research. They also 'go public' during discussions and interactions and thereby foster new significant relations. Because the conversations from within the courses are reified in written reports they can reach beyond the private domains. They can impact on the next generation of participants and the local culture within the department or faculty.

A critical issue concerns the ways in which teachers are supported on this journey from backstage, private conversations into open debate within university faculties. Perhaps the best example comes from the Faculty of Humanities and Theology where three subsequent modules of pedagogical courses deliberately guide the individual teachers into educational literature and onto the faculty arena where they contribute to the common effort for educational development (Roxå et al., 2008).

Another issue concerns whether or not the strategy should aim for a professional identity as a teacher that incorporates the identity of an educational researcher. This matter is discussed elsewhere by Roxå, Olsson and Mårtensson (2007) concluding that this would be un-productive. The demands on academic teachers to keep abreast with what is happening in their own discipline are already overwhelming. Some individual teachers will engage to a degree where they do educational research in its disciplinary sense, but probably not the majority. In order to have an impact on a particular culture, teachers engaging in scholarship at a *local level* (Ashwin & Trigwell, 2004) are probably the most important category, in contrast to those operating on a *global level* (for instance by contributing publications in international educational journals). Even so, the category engaging in greater depth is, no doubt, important for inspiration and consultation.

A conclusion to be drawn is that the level of engagement and the subsequent cultural impact at Lund University is successful since the strategy is aligned with academic freedom and with the institution and its ethos as being research-intensive. It is, however, important to emphasise that it is the ethos and basic values of the institution, as experienced by the teachers themselves, that they show solidarity with – not necessarily with what the management does or says. It is also important to note that the focus for investigation in scholarship of teaching and learning is chosen entirely by the teachers themselves. Only the requirements for documentation, theoretical underpinnings and peer-review are prescribed, mirroring the quality criteria in research processes. Again this is related to the specific view of culture used in this paper. Both teachers and management are influenced by the culture of the institution and their possibilities to influence the culture are constrained. If managers formulate policies that are not aligned with the ethos of the institution, as perceived by the teachers, these policies will most likely have a limited impact.

The view of culture expressed in this paper also includes the issue of possible contradictions between voluntary engagement and the fact that courses are mandatory, and that teachers who refuse to engage get delayed in the promotion processes. Do people engage only because of these established formal structures? Are the structures a result of the process or a prerequisite to it? We argue that they are both. In the beginning of the process described here, starting some years ago, the obligatory nature of pedagogical courses was unthinkable. Later, as a result of many individuals engaging voluntarily in conversations regarding teaching and learning, elements of the formal structures emerged as possibilities. Once these formal structures became established they then continued to reinforce the cultural change.

Even though teachers do engage, and this engagement slowly influences culture and their professional identities as academic teachers, it is not evident that support for student learning develops accordingly. The strategy presented here aims to influence culture, driven by a multitude of engaging individuals. It focuses on encouraging teachers to commit to the development of the quality of their teaching. And as has been shown above, they do. Moreover, they use educational literature while reifying their experiences in written reports and they expose these reports to peer-review by colleagues.

Future work for increasing institutional capabilities to support teaching and student learning at Lund University will focus on leadership issues (Irhammar, 2007). This will most likely include support for leaders to carry out their roles in more scholarly and practice-based ways. In other words, institutions need to develop the type of leadership that is capable of supporting the engagement shown by individual teachers, which, in turn, has to be encouraged even more and combined with top-down initiatives. Not until then can the institution get the most out of its support for student learning and personal development.

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Notes

1. The word 'teacher' is in this text used for academic staff who do both research and teaching.

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