
How and why I became a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy

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In *CUCD Bulletin* 45 (2016) [Ellie Mackin](#) gives a useful and authoritative account of how CPD schemes offer a route to HEA Fellowship at various levels. In this article I shall try to give a sense of what it means to apply for and gain Principal Fellowship. Ellie fully explains the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) and the mechanics of application, which I shall not attempt to repeat here in any detail. I do however want to say something about the purpose of these schemes before offering some personal reflections on the process.

The big picture

The Higher Education Academy was established in 2003 with a mission to professionalise teaching in the sector. The main way in which HEA does this is by awarding four categories of fellowship (Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow), which can be taken as equivalent to teaching qualifications for University academics. The years since 2003 have seen sharp rises in the proportion of staff in the sector who are qualified to teach, so that it is now normal (if not quite prevalent) for early career academics to apply for jobs with an FHEA next to their PhD. The [HEA website](#) tells us that (as of March this year) there are over 86,000 Fellows worldwide. It might be objected that plenty of academics are expert teachers who do not have this distinction, and I will return to this point, but it is undeniable that HEA's role in the recognition of expertise has grown enormously. In December last year HEFCE published [HESA data](#), for the first time, on teaching qualifications in the sector. The data show that, in 2014-15, 44% of teaching staff were qualified (as against 26% not qualified and 30% unknown) and that just over half of the qualifications held were HEA Fellowships at various levels (compare 27% that were PGCEs).

Publication of the data will become an annual event and will doubtless increase the interest shown by HEIs in how qualified their staff are to teach. The immediate effect looks to be a sharp drop in the proportion of unknowns, followed by a slow but steady rise in the proportion that are qualified. At the same time there are threats to the current way of doing things. HEA's public funding has steadily diminished. It now relies on subscriptions by individual HEIs, not all of whom have opted in. Universities pay for a number of these sector-wide bodies, leading to calls for them to be rationalised. The result is that HEA is likely to be [merged](#) with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Equality Challenge Unit.

Nevertheless, HESA's measurement of teaching-qualified staff is unlikely to go away, given that it is one of the more reliable indicators of teaching quality in Higher Education. This matters because behind every single digit in the data is the story of an individual academic and what he or she aims to achieve in the seminar room or lecture theatre. And behind the story

of each academic is quite considerable impact on the learning of hundreds of students. I shall try to illustrate this from my own experience.

What I did

To start with why I applied: the short answer is that my current job contract obliged me to gain either Senior or Principal Fellowship by the end of July last year: the former was easily within reach and the latter more of a risk. I chose the riskier path and I expect that an element of personal pride was in play here – I had been in a leadership role for a few years – but I also realised that I would have more to learn from a failed application for Principal Fellowship than I would from going through the motions for Senior Fellowship.

I applied through the Flair scheme, which is the University of Reading's in-house scheme, accredited by HEA. I could have applied directly to HEA (and paid their fee to avoid the potential humiliation of going before a panel of my own colleagues). The main reason for going with the in-house scheme was the range and quality of advice I had from our excellent Flair team.

The Flair scheme is similar to [many other HEA-accredited schemes](#) and is designed both for academics and for colleagues in academic services. It consists of an Academic Practice Programme (APP) and a CPD scheme. The APP consists of two taught modules, worth 40 credits at M Level, on completion of which participants become FHEAs. The CPD scheme is for more experienced colleagues. It works on the premise that they have gained expertise through professional experience, which can be developed into a case against the UKPSF.

A colleague of mine, who recently made a strong case for Senior Fellow through the CPD scheme, described the experience as 'a bit of an odd experience – though surprisingly enjoyable at times'. That was my experience too. The oddness exists at several levels. In the first place the style of writing is odd: you need to combine the unabashed self-praise of a job application with moments of raw self-reflection; secondly, this all needs to be a set in its proper scholarly context, which (unless your subject is Higher Education) is not likely to be your home turf; and, thirdly, the whole thing needs to be mapped and cross-referenced against the UKPSF.

The UKPSF is a complex document. It aims to describe the professional attributes that underpin teaching and learning in HE, listed under 'Areas of Activity', 'Core Knowledge' and 'Professional Values'. As a further layer of complexity, there are detailed level descriptors to show how these are addressed in each of the four categories of Fellowship. (For example: an Associate Fellow shows 'successful engagement with at least two of the five Areas of Activity'; a Fellow shows 'successful engagement across all five Areas of Activity'.) The whole thing shows every sign of having been written by a committee but, in a way, that is its strength: the UKPSF is an agreed account of what makes for successful academic practice at various levels of seniority or experience.

The descriptor for Principal Fellow includes heroic expectations that a colleague has variously championed the UKPSF and put the conditions in place for colleagues to follow it. Principal Fellows are also expected to have had an impact on the student experience and on student learning at an institutional, sector-wide or even international level. The important thing to remember is that there are various ways of doing this. I know Principal Fellows who are Pro-Vice Chancellors and I know Principal Fellows who are Senior Lecturers.

In my own case I included very little to demonstrate impact beyond my own institution. This is because of career choices that I have made. For the last five years I have been an Associate Dean (or similar) and I am about to become a Head of School. Like most academics I am an all-

rounder, but most all-rounders do one thing more than the other. I am decidedly a batsman-who-bowls (I do modest little bits of research but I lead in teaching and learning) rather than a bowler-who-bats. To extend the analogy a little further, I don't at all mind being captain of the team: I find the work interesting, I work with some very nice and talented people and I have the opportunity to influence University strategy and policy in ways that (hopefully) have a deep and lasting benefit for colleagues and students. This has often taken me away from Classics because the issues are the same across the Arts and Humanities, and not so very different in other discipline areas. My case for PFHEA made some reference to sector-wide leadership within Classics but leaned rather more on leadership within the University and outside of the subject area. In other people's PFHEA cases – including some Classicists that I know of – the emphasis will have been the other way round.

My application included three case studies. The first case study was on efficient ways to plan and deliver modules so that an ethos of small-group teaching can be sustained even where there is limited resource for it. Behind this lay a rationale and pedagogy for small-group teaching. The second case study was on teaching and learning languages. It drew on my contribution, both to sector wide-discussions on the future of Latin and Greek language teaching, and to the development of modern languages within the University of Reading. The third case study reflected my interest in Higher Education policy, and especially on different ways to monitor and evaluate the success of a University's teaching and learning strategy. This led me to engage with the early stages of the HEFCE [Learning Gain](#) initiative.

So what?

So what has been the point of all this? Gaining my PFHEA has already given me the chance to correct my introspection and see a little more of how things work in other universities. There is a national network of PFHEAs (basically an email list with occasional meetings) and I have joined a regional group that meets in London three times a year. As for the process of writing the case, it was indeed a little odd (and more than a little time-consuming) but it allowed me to examine my own practice and contextualise it in scholarship. It was something of a voyage of self-discovery – not in any deep personal sense but because I found out that I had more expertise in Higher Education than I thought I did. It was a rewarding exercise.

The implications of this are worth pausing on. Firstly, a CPD scheme is a recognition scheme, not only because it provides professional recognition of underlying expertise, but also because it allows the individual academic to recognise his or her own expertise and achievements. It is by looking critically at one's own practice that one makes a strong case.

Secondly, it is for this reason a horrendously self-indulgent exercise and not something I would want to repeat many times, for all the benefits. I said above that I was contractually obliged to make the application and in many ways this is key to the whole exercise. Some people say they want to engage with the Flair CPD scheme but somehow never find the time; given the number of commitments that academics have to juggle, they tend to prioritise activity that has a more obvious immediate benefit for their students or colleagues. Often the only way to encourage colleagues to work selfishly on their HEA recognition cases is to wave a contractual stick; in my experience this is not resented but welcomed as long as we keep a sense of proportion.

Finally, although the process of recognising expertise in teaching and learning may sometimes seem artificial, it is a necessary process if teaching is to gain parity with research. Here I mean not just parity of esteem but also parity of endeavour. Traditionally the professional qualification for academics has been the PhD, which in this country is a research qualification and not a teaching qualification. When I came into Higher Education (about fourteen years ago) it seemed as if many of my colleagues considered research as something to think deeply about, but teaching as something they merely did. The CPD route to HEA Fellowship has helped to change this emphasis.

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