

The value of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in recruitment and promotion of academic scholars

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ABSTRACT: The concept of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has influenced expectancies of academic scholars, not just by reinforcing teaching aspects, but also in the way of doing that. An earlier attention to mere teaching skills, has partly been replaced by requirements on reflective practice based on educational research, and in some cases also on making knowledge public and subject to critical scrutiny. The value assigned to different aspects of academic scholarship, including SoTL, in recruitment and promotion of academics will impact academia, by deciding who the future scholars are and by influencing their view on what to strive for. Despite the great importance of these decisions for academia, institutions, departments and individuals, the knowledge and awareness of them is, however, not particularly prominent, neither in research nor in academic practice and collegial dialogue.

Through analyses of empirical findings from peer review letters we address two research questions: How are values ascribed to educational aspects in the recruitment of full professors and the promotion of excellent teachers? What are the implications of diverse peer review practices in different appointment processes? In addition, we discuss possible consequences for future academia.

We describe, analyse and discuss tensions within the evaluation practice of peer review, educational aspects valued, and the gate-keeping function of academia. In order to evaluate academic scholarship, reviewers must develop their professional judgement and competence in assessing a complex integrated scholarship.

1 SELECTION OF SCHOLARS IN THE CONTEXT OF PEER REVIEW

In attracting and retaining valuable academic staff the processes of recruitment and promotion have become increasingly important in competitive academic systems (Fumasoli, Goastellec and Kehm 2015). Much is at stake in the selection of academic scholars, not only for universities and the society they are expected to serve. It is also vital for the academic profession and the formation of research and teaching as well as the careers of individual academics. Still, studies of the processes through which academics are selected are relatively sparse (Weiser 2012). The focus has mainly been on scholarship related to research, while teaching primarily has appeared in academic development or anecdotal literature and in policy analyses (Meizlish and Kaplan 2008).

In this comparative study we investigate the evaluation of the 'best' academic scholars in the recruitment of full professors and the promotion of excellent teachers in an old Swedish comprehensive research-intensive university (henceforth the University). The full professor is the highest academic rank and excellent teacher is the most prominent title a teacher can be admitted. All teachers, from lecturer to full professor may apply for the title excellent teacher. To qualify as professors academics have to demonstrate proficiencies in both teaching and research. In the evaluation of excellent teacher various aspects of education are especially assessed, although in the context of academic scholarship.

We will use data from a research project developing knowledge on academic scholarship, in particular aspects related to teaching and learning, and how they are articulated and valued in selection processes of academics (cf. Levander and Riis 2016, Levander, Forsberg and Elmgren forthcoming). Thus, our interest is directed towards the so called black box (van den Brinck 2010). In many countries these processes are marked by blind reviews and confidentiality (Lamont 2009). Due to the Swedish principle of public access to official records and the use of external peer reviews in the selection processes key data are available to research, first-hand. Committees may go against reviewer's ranking, although this is uncommon. Consequently, the peer evaluation practice involved in the selection of academics has an institutional gate-keeping function of the meaning and value of academic scholarship (cf. Musselin 2013).

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

This paper is theoretically framed by research on scholarship related to education, especially in studies focusing peer review in selection processes of academics. Two research questions are addressed:

- How are values ascribed to educational aspects in the recruitment of full professors and the promotion of excellent teachers?
- What are the implications of diverse peer review practices in different appointment processes?

In addition, the gate-keeping function of peer review and possible consequences for future academia will be discussed in the final section.

While the concept of scholarship earlier was restricted primarily to discovery (original research), Boyer (1990) included integration (across disciplines), application (service) and teaching. Beside expertise in research, especially 'teaching skills' has been set forth in national policy as a desirable scholarly quality (O'Meara 2016). To stress the end product of scholarly teaching, the concept were refined to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Over time, a number of models and the concept of SoTL have been further discussed and a lack of conceptual clarity has been identified (Albergaria Almeida 2010). Already before the turn of the century Glassick, Huber and Maeroff (1997) recognized the importance of how the wider notion of scholarship should be evaluated. However, almost two decades later the evaluation of SoTL is still considered problematic (Kern, Mettetal, Dixson and Morgan 2015).

Regarding the concept of SoTL we take our point of departure in Trigwell and Shale's (2004) model with three interrelated key features of teaching: knowledge, practice and outcome. We apply this perspective including its indicators to analyze what values peer reviewers ascribe to educational aspects in the appointment processes. In comparison with the notion of teaching skills this means a shift in focus from action to interaction, from individual to collective, from internal to external, and from an intuitive to a scholarly approach.

This shift has partly influenced assessment practices, to rely not only on trial lectures and student course evaluations, but also on teaching portfolios including documented and reflected teaching experience, course syllabuses, teaching materials, testimonials from peers and employers, and teaching philosophy (Seldin, Miller and Seldin 2010).

Peer review in selection of academics is a form of summative evaluation expected to be based on scholarly judgment and discretion (van Arensbergen and van den Besselaar 2012). In other words, peers are supposed to use their expertise about different kinds of scholarship in the "process of determining the merit, worth, or significance of things" (Scriven 2003 p. 15). The legitimacy of the process is supposedly based on trust, integrity and fairness (Merton 1973).

However, peer review is affected by several biases, such as values and beliefs (O'Meara 2006), stereotypical judgement (van den Brink 2010), reputation of alma mater, habitus and networks (Bourdieu 1996), epistemic bias (Niebur Walker 2013) and lack of experience and knowledge in assessing scholarships other than research. Furthermore, assessment of educational scholarship is often seen as lacking a proper basis for objective measures. In order to minimize bias, clarifying criteria and indicators, have been discussed (Elken and Wollscheid 2016). Both formal credentials (degrees and certifications) and informal credentials (testimonials and self-reflection) ought to be included (Krauser 2008). Crucial is also engaging peers with relevant expertise and training (Eisenhart 2002).

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The design is basically comparative, including two different kinds of selection processes. The focus is on how different educational aspects are articulated and valued in review letters by external peers. Since the assessing peers are external to the University, and often from other countries, the views they exhibit give a broad picture of meaning and value ascribed to educational aspects. The wide range of scientific domains at the University contributes to this.

Two data sets are used. The first is the 41 peer review letters, concerning all (109) applicants to all (17) appointments regarding full-time professorships during 2012 at the University. The second is the 155 peer review letters concerning all (68) applications between 2012 and 2015 to be appointed as excellent teacher (with no major differences between the years).

There were at least two reviewers appointed in each case. The distribution among the disciplinary domains is shown in *Table 1*.

<i>Disciplinary domain</i>	<i>Review letters full professors</i>	<i>Review letters excellent teachers</i>
Humanities and social sciences	20	34
Medicine and Pharmacy	10	30
Science and Technology	11	91
<i>Total</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>155</i>

Table 1. Distribution of review letters concerning recruitment of professors and appointments as excellent

In both cases relevant aspects was coded in Excel, allowing analyses of similarities and differences across cases. This was followed by cursory reading. Review letters concerning the professorships were coded in NVivo 10 (for details, see Levander, Forsberg & Elmgren, forthcoming). The analysis of review letters regarding excellent teachers is in process, with content analysis regarding the chosen aspects.

Based on the codes referring to reviewers articulations of education aspects, themes were constructed and continuously developed in dialogue between theoretical standpoints and the empirical data. Furthermore, the ways the reviewers write about and explicitly value different aspect of academic proficiency were analysed. The analyses were also related to the various policy documents. Further, the impact of differences related to disciplinary domain were taken into account (cf. Beacher & Trowler 1989).

4 THE EVALUATION PRACTICE OF PEER REVIEW

For the professorships there are national and institutional policy documents, which, together with the appointment profile, frame the evaluation. The admission of excellent teachers is only regulated within the University, and to a large extent governed by different faculty rules.

In the hiring of professors the assessment regularly include assessments of eligibility, selection of a top group, and ranking of top candidates. The applicant has to demonstrate both research and teaching expertise to be eligible, and as much attention shall be given to the assessment of both types of expertise. Nevertheless, the assessment criteria may be weighted differently in the final ranking depending on conditions defined in the appointment.

Assessment of excellent teachers focusses on aspects of SoTL, although in the broader concept of academic scholarship, with the research teaching nexus taken in consideration. Here only the eligibility is important, since there is no competition between candidates. The requirements are, however, far more demanding than those to be hired at any academic position.

The educational qualifications to consider in recruitment are supposed to primarily consider quality. A description on valuable characteristic is given, but the degree of fulfilment is unspecified.

In the case of excellent teachers, a specific set of fairly strict criteria are to be met by the applicant, to come into consideration for admittance. These criteria vary between faculties, both in content and level, but the bar is higher and more specified, than for recruitment.

Presumptive full professors are assessed by at least two external reviewers, particularly knowledgeable in the subject area.

In contrast to the reviewers concerning professorships, most of the reviewers of presumptive excellent teachers are experienced evaluators of aspects of SoTL, being appointed excellent teachers at other institutions, specially trained for the task or with vast reflected experience on similar duties. At least one of the reviewers has scientific expertise in the same field as that of the applicant.

5 EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS VALUED IN PEER REVIEW*

Within the process of recruiting professors, elements connected to teaching, especially scope, breadth, depth and temporality, together with PhD supervision and teacher training are considered to be most important, judging by it being mentioned by almost all reviewers. Some aspects are also considered to be of such importance, that deficiencies in them were pointed out. Teacher training, PhD-supervision and teaching within relevant areas are most often referred to in this way. Reviewers assigned value

mainly in the performed activity and not its outcome. Mostly, the mere teaching, rather than student learning or the relationship between them, is stressed. Teacher experience is thus taken as a sign of quality, not further elaborated. While experience of internal individual teacher action is seen as important, external collegial interaction within or outside the department is more seldom considered. Remarkable is the minor value put to teaching-research nexus, as well as planning, teaching methods and examination.

There are more and higher demands on the excellent teachers. Striking is the expectation of a scholarly approach with a reflected practice, based on educational research. Experience of teaching is seldom found to be of intrinsic value, if the quality is not discernible. Typically, the assessments are built not only on what, but also on how and why something was carried out, and the result thereof. Other aspects taken into account in a higher degree was development of teaching and examination, linkage to higher education and discipline based education research, dissemination of experience and opening for critical review, a holistic view, and educational leadership. Large parts of many review letters points out missing aspects or deficiencies in e.g. linkage between reflected practice and educational research.

Explicitly ascribed value judgements are often absent in evaluation of professors, and when appearing mostly short, like “detailed and thoughtful”, and “excellent”. Explicit valuations are more frequent in reviews of excellent teachers, often included with single words in connections with more factual statements, but sometimes more elaborated as when an applicant "appears as an experienced, discerning, mature and confident educator who consciously and critically reflects on his experiences in the dialogue with educational principles and pedagogical practices”.

Demands for evidence, like testimonials, course evaluations and awards were much more pronounced in reviews of excellent teachers; both presence and deficiencies were commented on. Additionally, excellent teachers were requested to give examples of course planning documents and examination tasks.

Explicit references to policies are made by two thirds of reviews concerning professors, and by most concerning excellent teachers. Adherence to policy might also be made in an indirect way; a reason for teacher training being asked for by many reviewers of professorships might be the clearly stated requirement. The many aspects of SoTL evaluated and valued in the assessment of excellent teachers might partly be due to a stricter adherence to the criteria, but the reviewers evidently show independence in relation to them using their academic competence to interpret and in some cases question the policy, e.g. "I find the formulation in the guidelines that all aspects should be met, problematic. Weakness in the documentation regarding one aspect cannot be compensated with vast skills in another aspect of the same criterion".

Differences between the disciplinary domains are small for the professors, but reviewers in humanities and social sciences mention fewer themes, than reviewers in medicine and pharmacy, and science and technology. Regarding the excellent teachers, a higher degree of difference can be expected, due to different criteria. However, consistencies between them might be based on shared academic values.

For professors both research and education proficiencies are required criteria of eligibility, but no candidate was considered ineligible on account of insufficient educational qualifications alone. Deficient documentation is commented upon by six reviewers, although, it does not influence the final outcome. A striking example is reviewers pointing out that “assessment of education/teaching is not possible to do properly, based on documents available but we assume that he also meet the qualifications in this respect”, placing the candidate in the top-group.

When candidates were not admitted as excellent teachers (which was the case for almost forty percent), it was because of deficiencies in various educational aspects. The expectancies on academic teachers to link teaching to research within the discipline, and to exhibit pedagogical content knowledge was, however, not commonly decisive.

6 GATE-KEEPING OF ACADEMIA

Academia is still a scholarly gated community with peers at the centre of high stake activities (Musselin 2013). The academic expert evaluation has a long tradition in the professional life of researchers, who are informally trained from doctoral education and onward. Educational related

activities has until recently been regarded as locally embedded, and to institutions internal matter. Scholars are thus more experienced, skilled and confident in assessing research quality.

Our findings show that reviewers of professors primarily serve as gatekeeper of disciplinary research and not the education thereof. The reviews of excellent teachers demonstrate that a more nuanced evaluation of aspects of SoTL is possible, but also this evaluation practice uphold research and education as distinct rather than integrated aspects of academic scholarship.

Criteria and specialist reviewers might play a key role in developing the evaluative practice. But awareness is called for. In our study, reviewers specifically chosen for their insights in evaluating reflected educational practice seemed to be better equipped to evaluate education, but were partly neglecting the research-teaching nexus, which is a risk when using peers outside the discipline. Too specific criteria and indicators might also lead to instrumental practice, which seemed to be the case in some of the evaluations, especially in faculties with a tradition of checklists.

To reach an evaluation of the integrated scholarship, academics in all disciplines must develop their professional judgement and competence in assessing complex educational related phenomena, and to argue in an academic way also on educational issues. For SoTL to become integrated in the scientific community and evaluated with the same intellectual rigour there is need for changes in the university culture, in the conceptualization of academic scholarship, and in the qualifications of the peer reviewer.

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* Findings referring to the professorship are based on the forthcoming report in Levander et al.