

Balancing university teaching with research – what is the challenge?

For an academic career to be successful, it needs to be rewarding; there has to be passion, dedication and commitment. These elements need to be concomitant with a fine balance between teaching and research. This is surely an expectation and a principle of academic life.

Publishing research material is now considered an essential academic activity for a university academic. Furthermore, for this to be effective, research output needs to make an impact and be available for assessment. However, it may be argued that as a result of this, academic performance has now become balanced on an uncertain fulcrum whereby career progression depends on research as a core element.

Has the value of academic teaching been relegated against this growing culture of research assessment? Does the balance need to be re-addressed? Involvement in research has certain rewards and incentives which can be contributory factors in tipping the balance of priority.

There is the availability of grants and a greater chance of promotion and recognition. Tutors may be drawn to the elevated status which deeper academic knowledge can bring.

In addition, a higher investment in teaching gives rise to a reduction of funds for other activities; conversely, spending more budget availability on research projects can be self-fulfilling or possibly result in profit.

So could universities be denigrating the role of teaching to something that is necessary – but not worthy of quite so much attention? Of course, this would be preposterous: universities depend on excelling in their teaching for funding and recognition. However, a lecturer who is engaged in academic research must also be engaged in good teaching; this should be a balanced equation.

When universities offer schemes for promotion with research as a contributory element is it surprising that younger members of teaching staff are tempted away from teaching in favour of high levels of research activity? Do the older members, for whom research was not an integral part of their early career, feel compelled to join them?

It would be more prudent to encourage older staff to take research more seriously with the aim of raising teaching standards. Similarly when excellent teaching standards are recognised, this must be linked to reward. Institutions need to think laterally about ways of attracting new investment. Separating careers into teaching or research is not conducive to academic excellence: lecturers must be involved in research in order to teach.

With the introduction of higher fees, quality of teaching will increasingly determine the choice of institution for student study. However, a reputation of excellence in teaching does not constitute an academic career. The vast majority of university lecturers do take research as a balanced part of their teaching role and this is to be applauded. However, is it not time to reassess the balance?

To conclude: choosing an academic vocation means dedication towards research assessment at a critical and intelligent level, exploration and discovery of untapped knowledge – and achievement in scholastic excellence.