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Developing a Regional Approach to Outstanding Teaching and Learning: A case study

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Introduction and Context

It has often been acknowledged that teaching in higher education is afforded a relatively low status when compared to its more lucrative relation, research, and this is echoed in the literature (for example, Weimer, 1997; DfES, 2003 in Young, 2006). Teaching awards are reputed to provide many benefits to institutions and participating academic staff. Research indicates that teachers in higher education need recognition for their teaching efforts, respond positively to this recognition, and that teaching awards are one effective way of recognising and rewarding teaching (e.g. Ruedrich et al., 1992, 1986; Dinham and Scott, 2003). It is also acknowledged that when good teaching is rewarded, academic staff will remain committed to the improvement of teaching (Carusetta, 2001). This is not to suggest that the concept of the teaching award is universally ratified and supported (cf. Layton and Brown, 2011). Difficulties are reported, for example, in respect of identifying what teaching awards actually endorse (Chism, 2006). Other research has worked on identifying how to refine systems for recognising excellence, and interrogate, in a constructive way, the assumptions on which these systems are built (Skelton, 2004). Some recent commentary asks whether teaching awards and similar initiatives might actually lower the status of teaching despite best efforts to the contrary (see MacFarlane, 2011). The underlying challenge for the educational developers tasked with implementing the teaching award initiative described in this chapter was to establish a professionally useful process in a national (and global) environment of ‘entrepreneurialism, managerialism, massification, commercialism and reductionism’ (MacFarlane:163), a system which would have, and be perceived to have, academic and professional integrity. This system, which arose as part of a cross-institutional strategy of a conglomerate of higher education institutes, was re-imagined as a *process* which would, to as large an extent as possible, mitigate aspects of the ‘game’ of academic development, as Layton and Brown (2011: 164) characterise it, where ‘irresolvable, profound and unremitting contradictions hold sway’.

In a time of reduced resources but increasing competitiveness, the Shannon Consortium was designed to establish the Shannon region as a zone of excellence in teaching and learning at third and fourth level and was part of a broader targeted initiative (the Strategic Innovation Funding cycle, 2006-2010). Four institutions in the mid-west of Ireland (University of Limerick, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick Institute of Technology

and Institute of Technology Tralee) worked to achieve a regional goal of developing and supporting outstanding teaching. This comprised two bedrock initiatives: the development of a regional award process designed to foster teaching excellence and endorse it and, as corollary, the establishment of a peer support network through peer observation of teaching (PoT). This was a mammoth task insofar as there was no central support for teaching and learning in three of the participating institutions; consequently a new culture of teaching and learning had to be envisaged, developed and nurtured in tandem with the more practical work of establishing institution-based teaching and learning frameworks, in terms of systems and personnel. Two main objectives were identified in relation to meeting the regional goal and in terms of supporting academic staff in their continuous professional development. These were the establishment of a regional teaching award system and the initiation of a peer support system for academics to develop and learn from each other the various approaches to teaching within their disciplines. In order to establish and progress the high aspirations of the Consortium's teaching and learning vision for the region, a very high level of leadership was required in addition to transparency and support. The various organisational cultures which prevailed were crucial factors in relation to how these initiatives were viewed by the four institutions, and understanding these differences was also essential. Once all partner institutions had recruited a project leader by early August, regular meetings were established, complemented with on-going communication via email and phone.

This evidence-based chapter will provide the rationale for, insights into, and practical recommendations on how a regional approach to excellence in teaching and learning was successfully developed and sustained within the higher education sector in this region in a difficult economic climate. It provides key issues for consideration by educational development practitioners and academics alike.

Developing a Regional Approach to Teaching and Learning

In order to contextualise the objective of the Shannon Consortium, and subsequently the practical steps that were taken to achieve it, it is important to position the activities themselves in the Irish higher education context. In comparison with the US higher education context, where it is reported that the first teaching award was given at the University of California in the 1950s (Sorcinelli & Davis, 1996; Skelton, 2007), or even the slightly more analogous, yet more advanced, teaching and learning climate in the UK, teaching awards are relatively new in Ireland. This is a significant difference to the international context. In Australia, for example, the Carrick Institute in Australia has done much to develop teaching awards in terms of processes, procedures and initiatives as has the relatively recent National Teaching Fellowship scheme which was established in the UK in 2000. In Ireland, within the Shannon Consortium the first year of the regional award was 2007. The National Awards for Excellence in Teaching (facilitated by the National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning, NAIRTL) began in 2008. Although there were a small number of institutions offering awards for excellence in teaching prior to these initiatives (for example, at University College Dublin, Trinity College Dublin or the University of Limerick), collaborative and multi-institutional awards did not exist prior to 2007.

The Regional Teaching Excellence Award

As the regional award process is the only regional award of its kind in Ireland, many issues were considered in order to establish and promote this initiative across the four

partner institutions. The major objectives were to: (i) develop a process that would be motivational; (ii) have clear and realistic processes of progression in terms of professional development; and (iii) be perceived to be professionally valuable. It was acknowledged that as an incentive, the teaching award, according to reported best practices in developing teaching awards, should be ‘future orientated, perceived to be valuable, [be] moderately difficult to attain, but...realistically available’ (Menges, 1996:5). Therefore, in developing the overall awards programme, careful consideration was given to clear criteria in terms of broad general qualities of excellent teaching that are characteristic of all disciplines and environments within the third level sphere (Chism, 2006). The main consideration from all perspectives was encouraging as many academic staff members as possible to engage. Therefore, it was agreed that there should be an emphasis on the availability of support mechanisms. Subsequently, very clear guidelines were developed by the partner institutions which could be applied by all nominees irrespective of discipline, institution or background, and these formed the basis for the criteria upon which the portfolio would be assessed (such as teaching philosophy; volume, versatility and quality of teaching; planning and preparation; assessment strategies and evidence of continuous professional development). Each institution provided key milestones on their websites and internally circulated information on key dates for nominees in relation to regional workshops, one-to-one consultations and final submission dates.

The process was staged and each stage was made explicit in all circulated information. Figure 1 below presents a flowchart of the process.

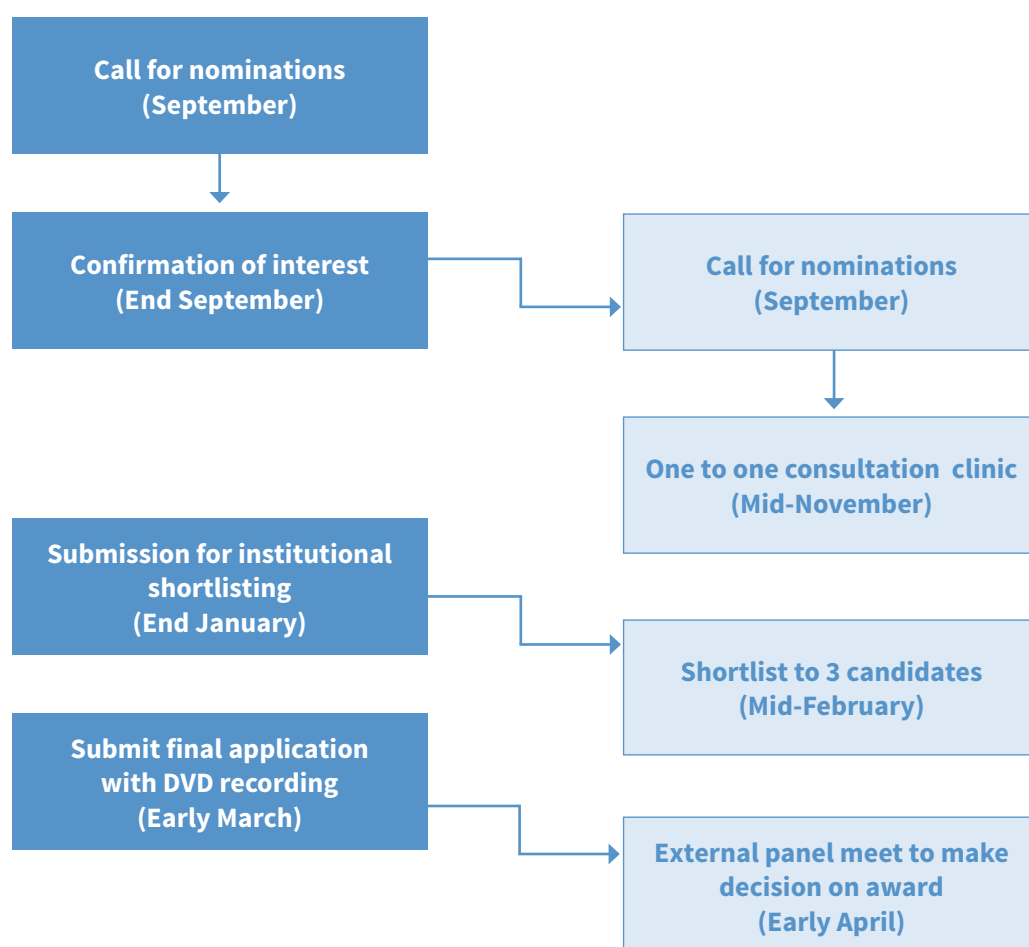


Figure 1: Flowchart of Shannon Consortium Regional Award Process

A call for expressions of interest was made across the Consortium in early September where academic staff members were invited to submit an expression of interest for the award. Individuals were then contacted to confirm their interest in progressing these nominations and thereafter the process began in earnest. A regional workshop on portfolio development was offered in October, and was facilitated by an external consultant from the UK. This was followed by one-to-one support clinics offered by the same consultant in November whereby candidates sent their portfolios to her in advance of the meeting. The rationale for this confidential clinic was that individuals would get objective, frank, and constructive feedback from an external third party, and could convert this feedback into action points for finalising the teaching portfolios. The deadline for short-listing of the submissions was in mid-January and each institution made their own arrangements for short-listing with external consultants (in this case also UK-based consultants) deemed most appropriate in the first year.

All candidates received detailed feedback on their submissions with three candidates from each institution progressing to the next and final stage of the process. These candidates had three weeks to finalise their submission and record a teaching session for dispatch to the external panel. In line with best practice (Biggs, 2001), the focus was on the teaching (not just the teacher) and so a teaching portfolio, a DVD of a teaching session and evidence that supported the substance of the portfolio, such as peer observations, was to be included in each submission. The external panel received all application material one month before a meeting was convened to discuss the applications at the University of Limerick in April.

The panel was chaired by the UK expert on portfolios, with three UK academics and one Irish academic independent of the institutions involved on the panel. The meeting was observed by the Teaching and Learning advocate from the Consortium's lead partner in the overall teaching and learning strategies (in later years the Teaching and Learning Advocate from each institution would be present) and all feedback was carefully noted for dissemination to each candidate in order to provide everyone shortlisted with feedback that would round off and, within this context, 'close the feedback loop' (Watson, 2003), while also presenting material for future reflection. The overall process culminated in an award ceremony where all shortlisted candidates were acknowledged and where a presentation was made to the commended academic staff and to the overall winner.

A standalone, yet complementary, partner project, a peer observation and support network, was designed and established to run concurrently with the regional award process, and this process is explored below.

Peer Observation of Teaching Network

While teaching awards date back to the late 1950s, peer observation of teaching, at least as a centrally supported and systematic institution-wide process (see Donnelly, 2007 or McMahon, Barrett and O'Neill, 2007), was also a new departure for the partner institutions in the Shannon Consortium. While peer observation is conceived of as an independent initiative in its own right, it does support the development of the reflective teaching portfolio integral to the regional award process. All candidates developed a reflective teaching portfolio for the regional award process engaged in peer observation of teaching and used it as a valuable source of evidence. However, the philosophy underpinning the initiatives was that they should be completely voluntary, optional and driven by individual professional development imperatives. The peer observation network was established and supported by the Teaching and Learning Advocates in the partner institutions

through an induction process which involved training and awareness-raising for staff. It was informed by the lessons learned in the United States and Australia in the 1990s but also the more recent experiences of institutions in the UK post-Dearing (Lomas and Kinchin, 2006). Chief amongst these was the need to ensure that participants were very clear about the purpose of peer observation, would feel comfortable about the process itself, and find it professionally beneficial in that it would inform and aid reflection on and development of their teaching practices.

The benefits and challenges of embedding peer observation at a structural level in higher education institutions have been well documented and were given serious consideration by the partner institutions from the outset. Gosling has done a significant amount of work on the various models of peer observation and the model that was considered most appropriate in this instance was the collaborative model (Gosling, 2005). The vision was very much in line with Bell's (2001:29) view that if the peer observation is truly collegial and developmental in nature it 'should encourage shared critical reflection on real life teaching experiences which could lead to transformation of both perspective and practice.' MacKinnon (2001) and others (e.g. Piccinin, 1999; Stanley et al., 1997) advocate the provision of formative feedback to teachers on their teaching as this can be one of the most powerful approaches to academic development. It has been suggested that consultation with a professional can have a long term effect on improving university teaching and creating an environment in which academics will feel more confident, competent and enthusiastic about their teaching (MacKinnon, 2001). It was with this in mind that the peer observation of teaching network was established to encourage teachers to talk about their teaching. The idea of creating a tangible, ratified context for dialogue around teaching, teaching beliefs and teaching practices was a critical one, as informal conversation with academic staff in the institutions had revealed that teaching staff rarely had the opportunity to discuss their teaching. Martin and Double (1998) have highlighted the benefits that accrue when teaching practices are unpacked and discussed in a peer observation context and acknowledge that teaching skills can be refined and developed through the observation of teaching and joint reflection in a supportive collaboration.

Furthermore, in the overall picture of evidencing teaching practice, it has been suggested that student evaluations of teaching, a relatively established conduit for generating this evidence, are not sufficient to provide the sort of information teachers require to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across departments (e.g. Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002). Hence, supplementary evidence is required and peer observation can provide a useful means of filling that gap. However, it is not without its difficulties, including how it challenges academic freedom; questions around accuracy of what is reviewed; and concerns about the objectivity of those who review (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005). All of these issues and concerns were considered prior to launching the Shannon Consortium process. One very real concern was in relation to how peer observation can be viewed by some academics as an intrusion into a very private element of their work (Martin et al., 1999). That may well be the case, with others citing it as an intrusion to their professional autonomy (Blackwell and McClean, 1996). Hutchings (1994) argues that the notion of teaching being a private activity, viewed only by students, needs to be addressed. However, it is widely acknowledged that inviting a colleague into a teacher's teaching space can provoke anxiety (e.g. Courneya et al., 2008), and steps should be taken to mitigate this anxiety. One of the key ideas transmitted for the Consortium process was that participants not only voluntarily engaged in the process, but would do so by nominating a trusted colleague as an observation partner. Almost without exception, the

Teaching and Learning Advocate within the institutions took on the role of peer observer in the first year of this initiative. This was not explicitly encouraged, and participants were invited to nominate any of their colleagues as a preferred observer, as previously mentioned. However, it became the *de facto* practice initially, perhaps because the Teaching and Learning Advocate was perceived to be experienced with the process and unlikely to be engaged in the discipline of the person being observed, thus enabling a focus on process rather than content. With peer observation of teaching, how teaching is viewed by the observer can be key to the feedback provided. For example, as Brannigan and Burson (1983, cited in Courneya et al., 2008) point out, the element of subjectivity, which includes different views on teaching and teaching styles, can have an impact on the process. This was considered a key factor in the design stages of the Consortium model. Training was provided on principles of constructive feedback in order to draw attention to the fact that observers may bring different, perhaps even diametrically opposed, perspectives on 'effective' teaching. This was considered an essential preliminary to maximise the benefits of peer observation. Giving and receiving constructive feedback on teaching is, more often than not, a skill that academics may have had little interaction with, let alone training in (Cosh, 1998: 173).

The main approach of the partner institutions was, therefore, to address all actual and potential academic staff concerns and to ensure that professional security and confidentiality was maintained and respected throughout. The voluntary aspect of the scheme was paramount in this regard; information and guidelines were provided in addition to workshops and seminars. The guidelines incorporated UK best practice in that participants needed to be focused on reaching understanding (Habermas, 1984) rather than making judgements, which would help individuals become more open to the ideas. As previously mentioned, the idea that both roles – observer and observed – would yield significant insights into personal practice was also foregrounded (Martin and Double, 1998). Various guidelines were developed to encourage this professional practice in such a way as to help the academics consider teaching in a positive and professional light. The peer observation network was launched via email invitations to participate which were sent out by the teaching and learning advocates at each institution on agreed dates. Accompanying the email invitation was a peer observation request form, and a short overview of the aims and principles of peer observation at the Shannon Consortium institutions, with an emphasis on an ethos of collegiality, professional development and a non-judgmental environment.

Ultimately, it was designed to be a voluntary initiative that would give rise to increased dialogue and involvement in teaching and learning initiatives, and continuous professional development as a consequence of this discussion and involvement. Those who have been observed on a number of occasions have now become more involved as actual peer observers, sharing their experience and again increasing the profile of teaching and learning by so doing. In fact, it has proven to be the initiative that has become the most devolved, with academic staff adapting and interpreting the process in ways that have the most perceived utility and professional resonance for them (see, for example, Kenny, et al., (in press)).

Project Outcomes, Lessons Learned and Sustainability for the Future

Some key learning and action points emerged over the lifetime of the project (and beyond) which resulted in the processes evolving. These provide an insight into the sort of outcomes we can identify which can be argued to support sustainability in teaching and

learning processes of this type. In addition, they point towards some guiding principles in implementing a process like this on a limited budget. In order to get the academic staff perspective on the process, interviews were conducted with participants in the lead institution at the end of the first year which identified some key supports that were considered to be very worthwhile in the overall scheme. One of the key supports that was considered to be of value was the one-to-one support available from the Teaching and Learning Advocates, the reasons for which are illustrated in the representative quotations below:

... the amount of support we got from T&L was fantastic. I knew there was somebody there, I knew the processes that were available to me, I knew the expertise was there, I knew the flexibility was there

The teaching and learning support was excellent. If I compare the first draft of the teaching portfolio to the last draft it's ... better and only because of feedback

Institutions with existing teaching and learning staff can therefore capitalise on one of the most important variables in supporting a new or adapted process. Workshops and interaction with other academic staff from different institutions (in the case of this process) and different disciplines were regarded as a hugely positive factor for participants:

I think it was chatting to other people as we were all broken into groups and just chatting to them about it as I never really talk about teaching – ever like – within our department.

The timelines, structure and deadlines were also seen as positive factors by participants in the process:

It was good in terms of allowing me or forcing me to take time to reflect and I know that in a busy academic life that is the way it is. This made you do it! There is nothing like a deadline to make you do it and I think that is a positive!

A staged, structured process comprising on-site development workshops and opportunities to interact with colleagues on teaching and learning themes can be managed on a small budget if there are dedicated teaching and learning staff within an institution. Equally, ensuring that there is a relatively light touch on reminders of deadlines, and a reasonable amount of support available in terms of feedback and advice is also possible even when budgets are constrained. From the perspective of the immediate partners, a number of issues that emerged at various stages of the project point to what we would argue are factors pivotal to the success of a process like this one. First of all, it is crucial that management level buy-in and support for the process has been established: in institutions where academic staff were sceptical about this, there was a much lower rate of participation. This connects to our second major learning: where an institutional culture of valuing teaching and learning activities exists and where academic staff are encouraged to develop professionally and be student-oriented, initiatives like those described easily take root. It takes longer where an institution has not previously been quite so teaching and learning focused, though this does not mean that embedding in such a culture is impossible. When teams that work on projects such as this share goals and engender positive team dynamics, this can be made possible. Ultimately, these foundational conditions need to be in place before communities of

practice can be nurtured and sustained, and a positive and organic process set in train.

There were a number of noteworthy outcomes for the institutions and individuals involved in establishing the processes. The first was for the Teaching and Learning Advocates who developed a growing portfolio of expertise and worked collaboratively on providing quality seminars, workshops and one-to-one support; this expertise had been previously sourced from outside the institutions – clearly, this has financial implications in a climate of ever diminishing resources. The Shannon Consortium *Conversations and Workshop* series has continued to grow and has provided opportunities for engagement in discussions and presentations in teaching and learning for academic staff from all partner institutions. To the extent that the aim of ‘increased dialogue’ is possible to quantify, the sustained engagement in these fora designed to create space for discussions about teaching and professional practice is encouraging.

In relation to the award process, the panel is currently chaired by a colleague from NUI Galway with three panel members from Ireland and the UK and some rotation over each academic year. The nomination process has been extended to include peer-nomination as a result of observations and feedback from others.

The programmatic aim was to foster inter-institutional dialogue by facilitating partnerships and groupings across the Consortium itself, through the development and nurturing of the community and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) that emerged in the pursuit of this goal. While this was largely successful, certain geographic and time constraints came into play. Nevertheless, the overall outcomes exceeded expectations as all goals were achieved with the additional benefits of increased dialogue about teaching and learning which is now evident: there is increased participation in general teaching and learning activities, increased level of academic staff volunteering to deliver and present ‘Conversations’ sessions, and there is an increased awareness, and participation in, the area of portfolio development for both personal and professional purposes. In summary, the regional award system has served not only to draw attention to the importance of teaching as an essential skill and critical dynamic in higher education and learning, but also to encourage more individual teachers to participate in professional development for teaching. Participation across the range of complementary initiatives equips academic staff with the evidence they need to draw on for their own professional progression and development, and it can be extrapolated that this should, and can, presuppose an impact on student learning.

Interestingly, teaching in higher education does not require a particular qualification in Ireland as yet and while other professions are very open to, and engage in observation of practice, this was hitherto a rarity in higher education in the Irish context. Without the resources to sustain a peer observation scheme, for example, it has been suggested the danger is that interest in peer observation can peter out (Gosling, 2003; Hammersly-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Crutchley, et al., 2005). It is clear within this region that the opposite is the case as people continue to engage in peer observation yet without the ‘middle man’ – with pairs and groups of individuals electing to work collaboratively on developing peer observation partnerships using as a baseline the supports that currently exist (see, for example, Kenny et al., (in press). Peer observation reports identify a clear shift in pedagogy with new methodologies initiated and adopted which illustrate a deeper understanding of student learning. The importance of the wider institutional environment can encourage or discourage peer review (observation) processes (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002; Gosling, 2003 and 2005; Ramsden and Martin, 1996; Cox and Richlin, 2004) and this appears to be the case when one considers the level of engagement in two of the institutions where no support or recognition of the process was given. There are research

groups in two of the partner institutions which are using the peer observation network to improve teaching in their departments and within their disciplines. In addition, the regional award has been aligned in some instances with the National Teaching Award (National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning) (for example, in the lead institution, the process is such that the overall winner is automatically put forward for the NAIRTL award).

The overarching success factor was the leadership and collaboration within the project team which allowed for the initiatives to take shape, and the flexibility in terms of supports offered at different locations/institutions. This was accomplished through combining expertise, by sharing best practice and by helping one another with the practical, political, organisational and pedagogical challenges that prevail in higher education settings. The Shannon Consortium has been acknowledged by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland as an example of successful inter-institutional collaboration and how this can successfully impact on not only the primary, original objectives but also give rise to ripple effects of positive and unexpected outcomes (see Davies, 2010). These initiatives have continued beyond the initial three years of the Strategic Innovation Fund project that gave rise to them and have now been mainstreamed with the lead partner leading and sustaining the initiatives. There is a constant focus on what is next in relation to excellence in teaching and learning and in these uncertain times it is an exciting adventure pinning that down.

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Response to

Developing a Regional Approach to Outstanding Teaching and Learning: A case study

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This chapter describes the ambitious development, the challenges and the successes, of establishing infrastructure, culture and practices to underpin a cross-institutional, regional Teaching Excellence Award scheme and a peer observation of teaching network.

The authors describe the experience of developing a Consortium among four geographically close higher education institutes to work together to 'level the playing field' between teaching and research by collectively working to improve the status of teaching in their institutes. In three of the four institutes the project included developing a fundamental infrastructure of support, in this case, the appointment of advocates in each to lead and champion the Consortium's goals and work. The choice of title for these individuals seems very apt and indeed, as the authors reflect on the project, these role holders, as individuals and as a network in the region, have clearly had a substantial range of positive impacts on the profile and practice of teaching within and beyond the expectations of the original project. The authors' observations and cautious conclusions about the impact of the role holders and the scheme they championed will be of interest to international developers and higher education managers looking at the impact and effectiveness of resources spent on teaching and learning initiatives, in terms of returns on both investment and on expectations.

The authors articulate a well-developed sense of what was wanted from the outset of the project: to support reflection and developmental dialogue on teaching through peer review and a portfolio-based awards process. The leadership and clarity of vision that was clearly established among the team is commendable and evidenced in the chapter as it reports on the process and outcomes of the project.

The two main arms of the project, the regional award scheme and the peer review network, are areas of teaching and learning practice and development that have wide international relevance. Readers will be struck by the thoughtful use of the global literature, developing theory and experienced consultants to underpin the early delivery of the Consortium's goals. When the project began, the authors were aware that they were breaking new ground with their work and were careful to ensure that they learnt from diverse international practices and accumulated expertise. The work here described takes its rightful place among the global literature on developing awards and peer review schemes and provides a useful addition in that it explicitly addresses working across different institutional cultures. It also emphasises how dialogue and collegiality were principles at the heart of the success of the project in a range of ways and among both the team of advocates and the academic colleagues they supported across the region.