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**Rewarding excellence in education  
Establishing a merit system for teaching at university**

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## ***Abstract***

### **Rewarding excellence in education Establishing a merit system for teaching at university**

University staff are required to divide their time between research and teaching. However, most incentives are directed towards excellence in research rather than excellence in teaching, and research impact and output is the main yardstick for ranking both individuals and institutions. To address this imbalance, the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Science at the University of Bergen has implemented a reward system where individual staff members can apply for the distinction *Excellent Teaching Practitioner* (ETP) based on proven merit and commitment to teaching and educational excellence. Here we present the reasoning, criteria, and practical implementation of the merit system.

## **Presentation**

### **Rewarding excellence in education Establishing a merit system for teaching at university**

Institutional work to enhance and secure quality in education includes a range of mechanisms and components. Higher Education (HE) institutions typically require (basic) pedagogical competence, offer pedagogical training, engage in developing and using new teaching tools and learning platforms, and initiate and support teaching development. Systems for quality assurance monitor quality and point to areas for improvement. Effort and excellence in teaching is typically rewarded through teaching prizes, based on “performance” and student satisfaction (popularity).

However, pedagogical competence is increasingly affecting appointment, promotion and pay rise. In Norway, several national mechanisms are now in place to promote educational quality – like the Centres for excellence in education and the National Educational Quality Prize (Bråten & Børsheim 2016).

The existing mechanisms and systems have given little attention towards, and recognition for, the systematic educational quality work carried out by the individual teacher. The documentation and dissemination of such work is also scarce and fragmented, as are the potential outcomes for educational quality and student learning – possibly due to lack of incentives and recognition. This is unfortunate, as we know that systematic and collegial work towards developing educational quality at the local level, within courses, programmes, and institutions, has great impacts on student learning and teaching quality (Olsson & Roxå 2013, Gibbs 2009, Mårtensson et al. 2011).

bioCEED – a national Centre for Excellence in Biology Education based at the University of Bergen, has been a driving force to establish a merit system for teaching. An important bioCEED strategy is to move from the teacher-centred tradition towards learner-centred education through building a scholarly and collegial teaching (SoTL) culture, using the research culture as a model. This strategy follows from the observation that the teaching culture would benefit from being hypothesis-driven, evidence-based, and peer-reviewed – and that these aspects are not new to the staff as they are already integral to the research culture (Boyer 1990; Fjørland et al. 2016). A merit system with such SoTL-based criteria will support a cultural shift, as it is the systematic, scholarly, and collegial teaching practice that is rewarded.

Several HE institutions in Norway have worked towards establishing merit systems to recognize and reward pedagogical competence (Bråten & Helseth 2017). The Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences at the University of Bergen (MN-UiB) is currently piloting such a merit system, and where the first Norwegian institution to merit teachers. The merit system was initiated in 2016 as a pilot project lasting for five years, and aims to strengthen the systematic quality work through evaluating and rewarding teachers with the status of Excellent Teaching Practitioner (ETP). An integral part of the merit system is the newly founded Pedagogical Academy where awarded ETP teachers become members.

The merit system has two main purposes – reflected in the criteria given in the next section for being awarded; the first being that the Faculty will give attention to, and acknowledge, systematic and documented work with educational development, and develop a collegial and scholarly culture for teaching and learning. The second purpose is to underline that the Faculty focuses on students and student learning in all work on educational quality.

The idea of rewarding excellence in teaching is based on clear intentions on a governmental and institutional level to give equal status and attention to research and education in the scientific community. Such merit systems are supported by the union Norwegian Association of Researchers (Forskerforbundet 2016), the National Union of Students in Norway (NSO 2016) and the Norwegian

Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (Bråten & Helseth 2017). Although a relatively new idea in Norway, systems and schemes for recognizing excellent teaching and excellent teachers exist in several forms across different countries and HE institutions. Especially the experience from Sweden has been an important inspiration when developing merit systems in Norway. In the recently published White Paper on Educational quality (KUF 2017) merit systems are one of the mechanisms for developing a quality culture in higher education, and will be implemented at all Norwegian HE institutions by 2019.

The merit system at MN-UiB is largely based on the Pedagogical Academy at the Faculty of Engineering (LTH) at Lund University in Sweden (LTH 2005). LTH have rewarded excellent teaching practitioners for more than a decade, and have documented enhanced quality in teaching and concrete outcomes for the institution (Olsson & Roxå 2013).

Parallell to MN-UiB, the Arctic University of Norway (UiT) has implemented a similar, but not identical, merit system in cooperation with NTNU (Grepperud et al. 2016). Several other Norwegian HE institutions are currently developing merit systems.

### **Excellent teaching practitioner and the Pedagogical Academy at MN-UiB**

The criteria for being awarded status as an Excellent Teaching Practitioner and becoming a member of the Pedagogical Academy at MN-UiB are based on the principles of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and have been developed from the criteria used at LTH Lund University. The detailed criteria were discussed and developed at several levels at UiB, through two sets of working groups. A university wide group consisting of educational leaders from different disciplines (Faculties) and student representatives drafted the first version based on the LTH criteria. The criteria were then finalized by a group of teachers, students, educational leaders and pedagogical experts at the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences.

This resulted in a system with four governing main criteria, each supported by sub-criteria as given here:

#### **1. Focus on student learning**

- The applicant has a clear focus on student learning in all her/his teaching practice and activities
- The applicant considers the relationship between teaching method, learning outcomes, assessment and types of learning
- There is a clear and documented connection between the applicant's teaching and learning views/philosophy and teaching practice
- The applicant has a good relationship with the students, and seeks their feedback and reacts constructively to it

#### **2. Clear development over time**

- The applicant has worked consciously and systematically to develop her/his teaching, both in form and content, to support student learning
- The applicant has ideas and plans for continued development of her/his pedagogical competence and teaching practice in the future

#### **3. A scholarly approach**

- The applicant plans, investigates, evaluates and modifies her/his teaching practice to best support student learning
- The applicant reflects on her/his teaching using education theory and knowledge of discipline didactics

- The applicant's teaching is research based, both in the sense that the form and content is based on new and relevant disciplinary research, and that the students use elements of the research process in their learning

#### 4. A collegial attitude and practice

- The applicant shares experiences with others, and interacts constructively with students and colleagues to develop teaching and educational quality
- The applicant cooperates with others through mutual exchange and sharing, for example through discussions, conferences and publications
- The applicant contributes to the strategic goals for educational quality at the institution

It was important during the development of the merit system to underline the cultural aspect of the system. Although it rewards individuals, the desired outcome is a collegial and scholarly teacher culture, which will benefit the entire organization. ETP awarded teachers are therefore appointed members of the Faculty's Pedagogical Academy. The Academy will be an integral part of the merit system, and supports the development of a collegial culture based on the principles of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The Academy will initiate and participate in scholarly educational development, share and disseminate experiences and knowledge, mentor colleagues, and evaluate peers for future ETP status. To support such activities the Academy will administer funds for pedagogical development work.

#### Application process, evaluation and feedback

ETP status is awarded to teachers based on an application to the Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, and subsequent evaluation and interview by an evaluation committee. The committee includes both pedagogical and disciplinary expertise, and student representatives. Successful applicants will receive the distinction Excellent Teaching Practitioner, and the status leads to a permanent rise in salary for the individual teacher.

According to the guidelines developed, applicants must describe, analyse, discuss and document systematic work with educational quality in their own teaching practice, toward the four main criteria, in two main parts:

- The main application document (limited to 10 pages) consisting of a **personal teaching portfolio**, with examples that document the applicant's qualifications and practice towards the governing criteria. An important part of the portfolio is personal reflection on teaching and learning in relation to pedagogical theory and literature. The portfolio must show how the teacher views the relationship between teaching and learning in their own practice, and through examples and cases highlight the teacher's pedagogical philosophy, development and competence. The application should include documentation that supports the cases and reflections made.
- A teaching-centered curriculum vitae focusing on formal pedagogical and didactical qualifications, teaching activities, curriculum development and educational leadership, experience sharing and publishing related to teaching activities and educational development.

The first call to apply for ETP status at MN-UiB was issued in June 2016 to all full time academic staff, with an application deadline of January 31st 2017. The period between the call and deadline was intentionally made generous to allow time for workshops and individual guidance of potential applicants, provided by staff from LTH Lund with experience in evaluating pedagogical competence in a similar merit system. This guidance was deemed necessary as the academic staff at MN-UiB, though accustomed to submitting disciplinary research applications and scientific papers, had little or no experience in describing teaching philosophy, practice and merit.

The Faculty received a total of 20 applications from teachers belonging to a variety of disciplines within the natural sciences and mathematics. This represents just under 10% of the permanent scientific staff, and applicants came from 6 different Departments of a total of 8 belonging to the MN Faculty. 35% of ETP applicants were female, while the overall percentage of women in permanent scientific positions at the MN Faculty is 19.

Experience from the similar merit system at LTH Lund has shown that being evaluated concerning personal teaching skills and competence is often more personal and uncomfortable for applicants than having research proposals or scientific papers rejected. Traditionally, teaching is seen as a more personal activity than research, and more relying on your innate abilities or talent as a teacher. Rejection, or criticism, can therefore be more challenging to take. The feedback given to applicants is therefore essential to support those rejected in moving forward and underline that excellent teaching can be achieved through systematic and scholarly hard work – you are not born an excellent teacher. Rejected applicants and sceptical colleagues might question the legitimacy of the evaluation process. For this reason, much effort went into constructing a thorough evaluation process with external and internal legitimacy, as well as giving detailed and constructive feedback to both successful and unsuccessful applicants.

A steering committee was established to oversee and coordinate the evaluation. This group included pedagogic and disciplinary experts drawn from both UiB and other Norwegian HE institutions, and student representatives. Faculty- and bioCEED leadership, as well as two advisers with experience from evaluating similar applications in Sweden, were also included. This steering committee divided the 20 applications between three different evaluation groups with three members. Each evaluation group had one member with pedagogical expertise and two members with disciplinary expertise (i.e. teachers/peers from mathematics and natural sciences). In addition, one of the three representatives in each group had to be external (from an institution other than UiB), and both men and women had to be represented in all three groups. The three evaluation groups were tasked with preparing preliminary written assessments for each applicant, based on the four main criteria described above.

The assessment reports from the three subgroups were later discussed and reviewed in a joint meeting with the steering committee to ensure consistency. When it was found that all four criteria for awarding the status as excellent teaching practitioner might be fulfilled, the applicant was called for an individual interview. This resulted in interviews with 8 of the 20 applicants.

The interview was held as an, as far as possible, informal discussion based on the written application and how it met the four governing criteria. The intention was to complement the teaching portfolio and teaching CV, especially in relation to educational theory, principles and personal teaching practices - and how these constituted an integrated whole. The applicant had the opportunity to clarify any points which might remain unclear from the written application, and could also expand and further elaborate on any points they deemed important. The applicants were also invited to give their thoughts and any criticisms concerning the evaluation criteria and evaluation process.

After the interviews were completed, a final joint meeting with all evaluators and the steering committee was held to reach a final recommendation based on both the written applications and the interviews. Of the 8 interviewed applicants, 5 were considered to meet the criteria for being awarded the status of *Excellent Teaching Practitioner* and be appointed members of the Faculty's Pedagogical Academy. The recommendation that these five be given ETP status and a permanent rise in salary was then sent to, and approved by, the Faculty Board, and the title conferred to them in a formal ceremony.

The final task of the steering- and evaluation committees was to provide each candidate, whether successful or not, with thorough written feedback. This was based on both the preliminary assessments of each candidate from the evaluation groups, the following discussions in the joint meetings, and the interviews when conducted. The assessment report was done qualitatively

according to the criteria and with two main perspectives: the applicant's overall comprehension and the degree of research based approach to teaching and learning development. The written feedback to each candidate was typically 8-10 pages in length, and consisted of the following five main parts:

- A reiteration of the general background for the merit system and the four governing evaluation criteria
- Detailed information about the evaluation process, including who took part in the different stages of the evaluation of the candidate's application
- A general summary of the submitted application document (teaching portfolio) and CV
- A detailed discussion on how the application measured up to each of the four governing criteria, and whether each of the criteria was considered to be sufficiently met
- Conclusion and final recommendation concerning ETP-status for the applicant, and suggestions for further development

An example of the conclusion and final recommendation for one of the successful applicants (X) is given here (anonymised by the authors):

*It is evident that this is a very strong application. X is clearly committed to the enhancement of student learning and the development of an open and encouraging teacher culture marked by collegiality. X is committed to scholarly practice in teaching and to exchanging knowledge and disseminating results from educational change initiatives – in short, to SOTL practices. X has a solid foundation in the pedagogical and science education literature, and seeks to be in dialogue with other educators and SOTL practitioners about educational practice and enhancement. X has taken on leadership roles related to enhancing educational quality. X has also invested deeply in his own courses, and has actively experimented to improve student learning.*

*Although the deep engagement in these areas is relatively recent – X began teaching in 2002, was (...), and became particularly active during that period – X has much to show for the extensive work over this relatively short period. X was also called for an interview, which gave .. the opportunity to further discuss and elaborate on the topics discussed in the written application. This interview further enhanced the evaluation committee's very positive impression as conveyed in the assessment above.*

*The evaluation committee considers that X documents that he/she undoubtedly fulfils all four criteria to be rewarded as an excellent teaching practitioner at The Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences and be appointed as a member of the Faculty's Pedagogical Academy.*

### **Preliminary results and discussion**

The announcement of the ETP merit system, and the first call for applications, has had immediate impact at several levels. First, there was a need for guidance of potential applicants. In collaboration with bioCEED and LTH Lund, the Faculty offered support during the application process through information material, meetings, and teaching portfolio workshops. These were new collegial activities at the faculty; motivated and necessitated by the merit system. Information about these collegial educational activities was channelled through the local department leaders, who also encouraged academic staff to apply. This represents an added value in the form of leadership focus on educational quality.

A number of staff from a range of disciplines and several departments participated in these collegial activities, creating new meeting places and local debates over teaching and learning. This new dialogue constitutes an outcome in itself.

Twenty applications were submitted, each accompanied by reflective teaching portfolios and documentation. This documentation of teacher perspectives is also an important outcome, as it



represents a new way of describing and motivating one's own teaching practice and philosophy. In addition, the application guidelines required documentation of teaching development and results, which raised the awareness among teacher on the importance of collecting and analysing data, documentation and student feedback.

The process of implementing a merit system for teaching in Bergen sparked both a local and national public debate on merit systems, rewarding excellence, and teaching and learning in general (see Andersson et al. 2017). MN-UiB has been asked to present the system for rewarding and evaluating teaching merit at several other Norwegian HE institutions and national conferences, thus contributing to the national implementation of such systems required by 2019.

The Pedagogical Academy consisting of the successful ETPs is an important vehicle for spreading good teaching practice locally. The local knowledge and disciplinary background and association will lend more weight and impact to suggestions put forward by the academy members - who are peers, compared to suggestions by external experts and institutional leadership.

Given the premise that the award of ETP-status should be recognized as a true mark of excellence in teaching, and therefore accompanied by a substantial rise in salary, it was deemed important that only the very best applicants - who undoubtedly fulfilled all the four governing criteria, were rewarded. This also carries the implication that many of the unsuccessful applicants are also highly qualified teachers and might have fallen short on only a single criteria. The response of these unsuccessful applicants to the detailed feedback they were given has generally been very positive. Several of the unsuccessful applicants have stated that they consider the application process and subsequent feedback a valuable learning experience, and have announced their intention to improve in the areas where they fell short and apply again at the next call.

A criticism often raised in the local and national debate around merit systems for teaching is that teaching quality is a property that is difficult or impossible to measure, assess, and document accurately. However, our experience from the evaluation process is that there was little or no disagreement between evaluators from the different institutions, and with differing backgrounds in pedagogics, mathematics or natural sciences, in ranking the applications.

In our view, perhaps the most important outcome at the Faculty level is a heightened awareness and more discussion in general as to what constitutes good teaching and good educational practice. The realisation that pedagogical competence is more than the teaching skill alone (Olsson et al. 2010), and the clear message that student learning must be the core of all teaching activity, have led to a new way of thinking about teaching and learning. This contributes towards a cultural shift and a more collegial teaching culture where lunchtime discussions about educational quality are as frequent as discussion about research. Higher education institutions recognize the need for a cultural shift away from traditional lecturing to more varied and student-centered teaching that better support learning. It is our belief that the ETP merit system contributes to accelerate this process.



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