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Reimagining Teaching Recognition

Motivational Incentives in University Merit Systems

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Motivational incentives in teaching merit systems

Reimagining Teaching Recognition

1

Recognizing and rewarding teaching excellence in higher education

- Underutilized potential of teaching recognition as an institutional tool (Fanghanel et al. 2016)
- Documented transformation in university teaching reward systems, shaped by shifting institutional priorities and policy changes (Graham 2025)

2

Research questions

- What motivates academic teachers to apply to teaching reward systems?
- What motivates higher education institutions to establish such systems?

3

Exploring teaching merit systems in higher education

- Five reward systems in research-intensive Swedish universities
 - SoTL embedded within the assessment criteria
- Investigating motivational factors for teaching recognition systems
 - Analysis of institutional documents
 - Interviews with university/faculty leaders (N=5)
 - Interviews with rewarded academic teachers (N=10)

4

Motivational factors

Status	Social value resulting in respect and view of competence
Financial compensation	Increased salary, compensation which enables use of time of one's choice
Recognition	Respect and attention of sb's work as a valuable contribution resulting in visibility, heard and listened to due to her/ his value
Power and influence	Possibility to impact direction of activities based on formal or informal position
Autonomy	Ability to decide method of choice, use of time
Personal development	Make the individual grow as person and develop skills and competences further

Bolander, K., Jons, L. & J. Edsjö (2025)

5

Policy documents

Status	1/5 "give status to and make visible the importance of systematic and long-term pedagogical development with a focus on the quality of teaching and student learning at Xx".
Financial compensation	All Salary increase equal to scientific career step
Recognition	All "recognize and reward high pedagogical competence among teachers"
Power and influence	None
Autonomy	None
Personal development	2/5 "stimulate teachers to develop high pedagogical competence"

6

Interviews

7

Status

- Teachers

Nothing about status recognition or power and influence. It's nothing that I thought about before and it's nothing that I see a connection with afterwards either. (Lä10)

I decided that I would actually put it [the title]. Or maybe I didn't do it in the letterhead.(Lä8)

- Leaders

I think there are dimensions of both recognition and status there. Definitely in our system. (Le2)

8

Financial compensation

- Teachers

It was secondary. It was a nice bonus. (Lä6)

The salary. Very nice. (Lä1)

It may not be the most important thing. But I appreciate it as a reward. (Lä5)

- Leaders

Some want to accumulate those salary increases that are possible to get. Who knows if there would be any applications if there was no salary increase. (Le3)

9

Recognition

- Teachers

That those who actually excel in teaching should be able to be recognized for it. And that the university sees this. This is actually one of our core activities. (Lä6)

- Leaders

I think it's pretty certain that people actually apply because they think it's a recognition. (Le2)

... what you work so hard with and struggle with. That it has somehow been recognized from the leadership. (Le1)

10

Power and influence

- Teachers

When it comes to respect or power, influence. I already feel like I have it. So there's nothing new that comes with it. (Lä1)

Power and influence. It's not that important to me. And I don't see that it's something that comes with the title itself. (Lä5)

- Leaders

I think in my own [leader] role that I should use this group. There are lots of decisions on educational things and proposals and so on. And then you need, you would need this group, and they themselves have expressed that they would like to. (Le4)

11

Autonomy

- Teachers

I already have autonomy. Don't feel it increased. (Lä9)

- Leaders

The autonomy is already built in because you already teach at several different levels, and develop your own courses. (Le3)

12

Personal development

Teachers

You always want to improve yourself. For me personally, last year was the year I decided to work on personal development. (Lä6)

It was actually enriching to write the application. I gained a new perspective on my own field of practice. (Lä5)

13

Motivational factors for teachers

Status	Not seen as a significant effect of being recognized
Financial compensation	Increased salary valued, but secondary
Recognition	Respect and attention of one's work as a valuable contribution resulting in visibility is appreciated
Power and influence	No perceived links between being recognized in gaining power or influence
Autonomy	No perceived links between being recognized in having the ability to decide method of choice or use of time
Personal development	Individual growth as person and a driver to develop skills and competences further

14

Motivational factors put forward by leaders

Status	Giving status to teaching in the same way as status to research
Financial compensation	Salary increase important
Recognition	Respect and attention of teachers' work as a valuable contribution resulting in visibility is important
Power and influence	Recognized teachers seen as resource in developmental and strategic work
Autonomy	Not mentioned
Personal development	Not mentioned

15

Main findings

- Different motivational factors mentioned by leaders and teachers
 - Stronger emphasis on personal development on the teacher side
- Rewarding for teachers to engage in application process
 - Engaging in SoTL and being rewarded is perceived to be strongly linked to personal development
- Little formal power for rewarded teachers, but informally valued (not realized beforehand)
- Variation in leadership to embrace the merit system

16

Implications

- Align institutional incentives with educators' intrinsic motivations
- Being intentional about what the recognition should lead to
 - Underutilized potential of teaching recognition as an institutional tool for educational development
- Different drivers compared to scientific career steps
- Importance of leadership

17

Imagine new horizons

- Contribute to a broader conversation about the future of teaching recognition in academia
- Highlight the importance of aligning institutional incentives with educators' intrinsic motivations
- Envision academic institutions where teaching is not only acknowledged but meaningfully rewarded

18

Q&A

- How is teaching recognized and rewarded in your institution?
- Is SoTL work part of the reward system?
- What do you think are the motivational factors for academics to engage in SoTL work in your institution?