

Enhancement and Recognition of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

The Impact of Teaching and Excellence Prizes

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This article aims to map the landscape of teaching and learning excellence prizes across higher education and research institutions in Europe, to evaluate their impact on the recognition and assurance of the quality in higher education and to identify the most successful models of teaching and learning. The research supported this article was developed by the University of Porto (Portugal) and European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) as part of the European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EFFECT) project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.

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1. Introduction

Contextual changes

Nowadays higher education institutions face a demanding and complex context. Many of the current challenges in higher education have to do with decades of expansion and massification (Trow, 2010). One of the major developments usually associated with this expansion is increasing diversity in higher education, which applies in multiple aspects, such as type of institution, programmes offered, students enrolled and staff recruited (Teixeira, Rocha, Biscaia, & Fonseca Cardoso, 2012). The expansion of higher education has led to a move from an expanding sector to a mature industry (Levine, 2001). In an expansion phase, growth is seen as a sign of improvement and higher education manages to keep public and social actors satisfied by accommodating larger numbers of students. In a mature phase, the external stakeholders become more demanding and will not be satisfied just by adding more activities or expanding existing ones. Hence, the political and social environment has given increasing attention to the level of efficiency and effectiveness of higher education (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

Quality assurance and enhancement in higher education

With the systems of higher education in Europe growing, diversifying and becoming increasingly internationalised, the questions of quality assurance and enhancement are taking a central place in the discussion of effective education for the future (Rosa & Amaral, 2014). Public assessments and international rankings of higher education institutions are often based mostly on achievements in research, “using research performance as a yardstick of institutional value” (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008, p. 5), while undervaluing the teaching part of the higher education mission. However, encouraging high quality and innovative teaching and learning should also be at the forefront of higher education policies as effective higher education is created through interaction between qualified, well-supported educators and engaged students (Fung, 2017). Moreover, several studies have pointed out the risks for the quality of education in institutional contexts in which too much attention is focused on research (Arum & Roksa, 2011) or on commercialisation of services to the community (Bok, 2003).

Thus, in recent years the promotion of the quality of teaching and learning has become a growing concern among the leadership of European higher education institutions. The results of the TRENDS 2018 survey¹ show that 31% of the higher education institutions-respondents who have departments/units for teaching and learning development organise teaching excellence awards and prizes. Ireland and the UK are

¹ EUA TRENDS survey aims at providing a comprehensive overview of the most important developments in learning and teaching in European higher education. More information available at www.eua.be/policy-representation/higher-education-policies/trends-in-european-higher-education.aspx, last accessed on April 19, 2018.

the most active in promoting teaching enhancement through this kind of prizes, followed by Austria, Belgium Flanders and Germany.

Institutional teaching excellence awards and prizes are at the centre of discussion in this article which is based upon recent research performed by the University of Porto (Portugal) and the European Trade Union Committee for Education² as part of the European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EFFECT) project³. The study aims to map the landscape of teaching and learning excellence prizes across higher education and research institutions in Europe, to evaluate their impact on the recognition and assurance of the quality in higher education, and to identify the most successful models of teaching and learning enhancement through awards.

EFFECT project and study aim

An online survey⁴ was prepared and shared by EFFECT partners' representatives in their countries during 2017, obtaining 78 answers (Table 1). The research involved mostly multi-disciplinary universities and universities of applied sciences in Germany, Poland and the UK (with some examples from Ireland and Portugal), publicly founded and equally distributed in terms of size, with a smaller number of very large universities (more than 25.000 students).

Online survey

Germany	39
Poland	21
UK	11
Portugal	5
Ireland	2
Overall	78

Table 1 The number of responses per country

In order to evaluate the impact of teaching and learning enhancement prizes on the recognition and assurance of the quality in higher education, the research analyses the most common objectives of the existing teaching excellence prizes and the progress made in achieving these

Structure of the article

² The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 132 education trade unions in 50 countries from all levels of the education sector, including educational personnel in higher education, academics and researchers.

³ The European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EFFECT) project aims to facilitate the exchange of experience and effective methods in staff development of university teachers' development.

⁴ Access to the online survey: <https://goo.gl/forms/foxZRUI9eDoImi2>.

objectives, as well as an actual impact that prizes have on the quality and diversity of teaching and learning in the institution. Moreover, in order to identify the most successful models of teaching and learning enhancement through awards, the article focuses on the various elements of the nomination and evaluation of candidates for the excellence prizes, and the scope of dissemination of the competition's results. In the final section some conclusions and recommendations for higher education institutional leaders and national education authorities will be presented.

2. Teaching and Learning Enhancement Prizes

2.1 Objectives to Establish the Excellence Prizes vs Actual Impact of the Prizes

The contribution of the teaching excellence prizes to improving overall standards of teaching in higher education has been subject to extensive debates. In particular, some experts criticise the tendency to focus on raising the profile of, and rewarding, individual teaching rather than on the strategic development of teaching and learning across the sector (Trowler, Ashwin, & Saunders, 2014, p. 4), including systemic continuous professional development of academic staff. Other risks of recognising teaching achievements through individual awards (especially when they are linked to monetary remuneration) include performance-based assessment of teaching and creation of constant competition between academics instead of the collaborative work. For example, some of the respondents even noted that teaching excellence prizes are “divisive” and “do not promote enhancement of learning and teaching”. However, other experts highlight the particular benefits of incentivising outstanding performance in teaching and learning, such as reminding of the value of teaching in higher education mission, highlighting good practice and recognising exemplary, inspirational teachers, and attracting the positive attention to the need of research into quality teaching and learning in universities (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013).

Viable tool for encouraging pedagogical enhancement

In the EU, awards and prizes for excellent teaching are considered a viable tool for encouraging pedagogical enhancement throughout higher education institutions, raising awareness of the need to promote quality in teaching and learning in national policymaking, and developing institutional and national strategies and programmes in teaching quality (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013). However, the actual impact of the existing prizes differs significantly from the aspirations, depending on the administrative level of

the prize, their focus and organisational model, application requirements, evaluation criteria and the distribution of the outcomes.

According to the respondents (see Figure 1), the most important objectives for establishing teaching and learning enhancement prizes are:

Most important objectives

- to motivate academic staff for high-quality teaching;
- to encourage innovation in teaching and learning activities; and
- to improve institutional recognition and awareness about teaching and learning enhancement.

Promoting recognition of the teaching mission vis-à-vis other educational missions such as research, for example, was also named by many respondents as a significant objective of organising the teaching enhancement prizes. Improving student satisfaction was mostly valued by respondent universities in Germany and the UK; in both countries, almost two thirds of respondents named this objective as rather important or very important.

Among the least important objectives for establishing teaching and learning enhancement prizes appear promotion of the differentiation of academic profiles, and encouragement of a competitive attitude among academics. The opinions seem to differ on whether encouraging an attitude of peer review and stimulating collaborative work in pedagogical issues should be considered a significant goal for organising teaching enhancement prizes, with more universities seeing it as rather not important.

Least important objectives

However, there appears to exist a significant gap between the importance of these objectives and the actual effect of the teaching and learning enhancement prizes on achieving them (see Figure 2 and 3). Even though the list of the most important objectives nominally matches the list of the most impacted areas, the numbers and hierarchy in the second list differ significantly from the first one. The highest difference was noted in the objectives motivating academic staff for high-quality teaching (33.8% difference) and encouraging innovation in teaching and learning activities (34.6% difference).

Gap between the importance and the effects

Promoting recognition of the teaching mission vis-à-vis other missions such as research, for example, and improving student satisfaction were also marked by the respondents as rather accomplished objectives. However, the difference between the number of respondents who named them as very important objectives and the number of respondents who named them as areas strongly affected by the prizes, differ for 23.3% (promoting recognition of the teaching mission) and 18.2% (improving student satisfaction). The only objective where the impact of the prizes appears to be stronger than its declared importance is the differentiation of academic profiles.

Areas where prizes have little or no impact

Moreover, areas where teaching and learning enhancement prizes seem to have no or very little impact include:

- promoting differentiation of academic profiles;
- encouraging a competitive attitude among academics;
- encouraging an attitude of peer review and stimulating collaborative work in pedagogical issues; and
- developing new programmes and courses.

Teaching prizes have to be adapted to the aims

To summarise, even though the research shows that teaching and learning enhancement prizes have a strong impact on such areas as motivating academic staff for high-quality teaching, encouraging innovation in teaching and learning activities, and improving institutional recognition and awareness about teaching and learning enhancement, it can be concluded that the characteristics of the excellence in teaching prizes have to be adapted to the aims that are perceived by this kind of initiative. Alternatively, improved models of awards or other incentivising initiatives should be implemented to increase staff motivation in learning and teaching innovation.

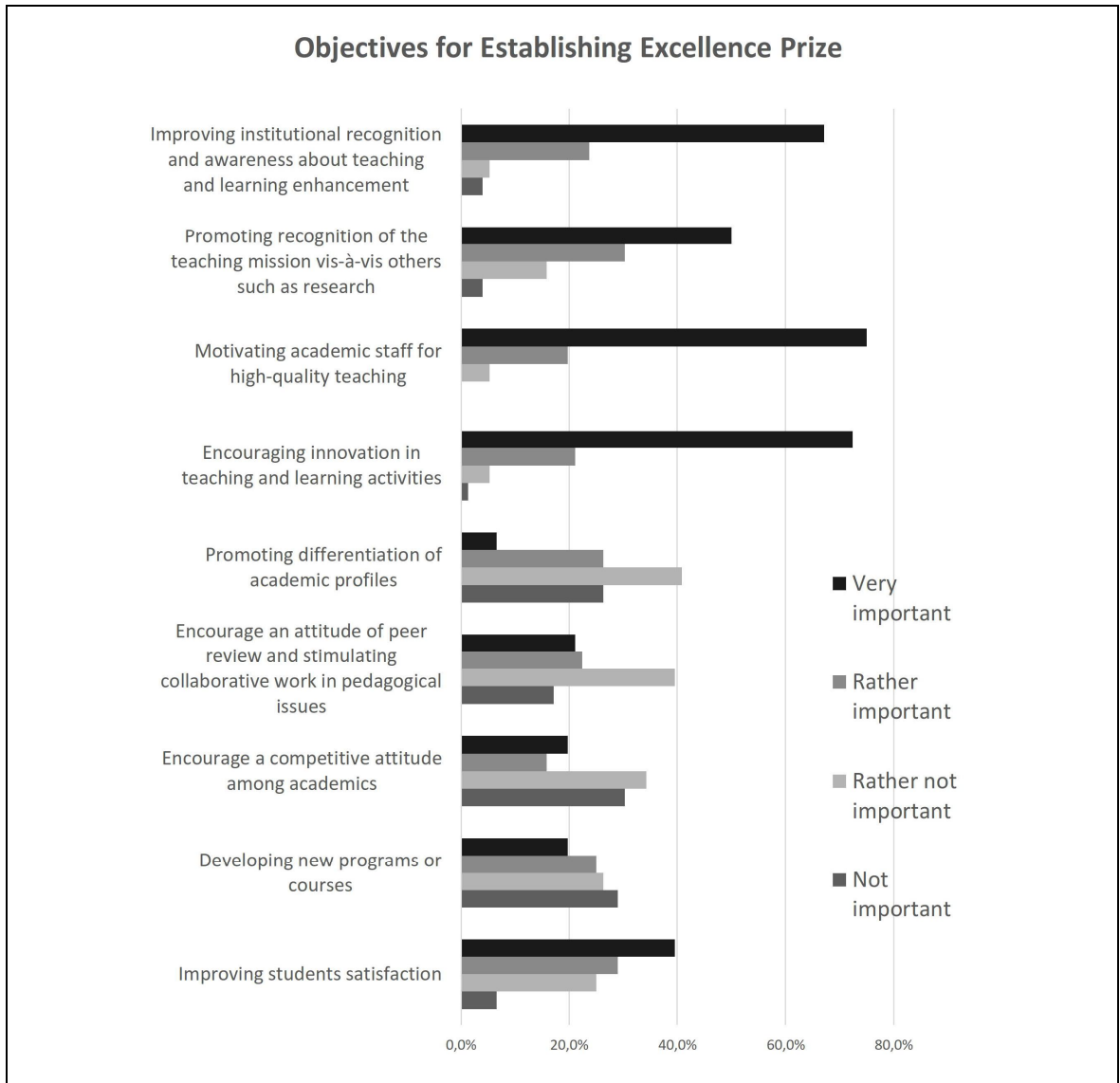


Figure 1 The importance degree attributed by the respondents to various objectives of the teaching excellence prizes

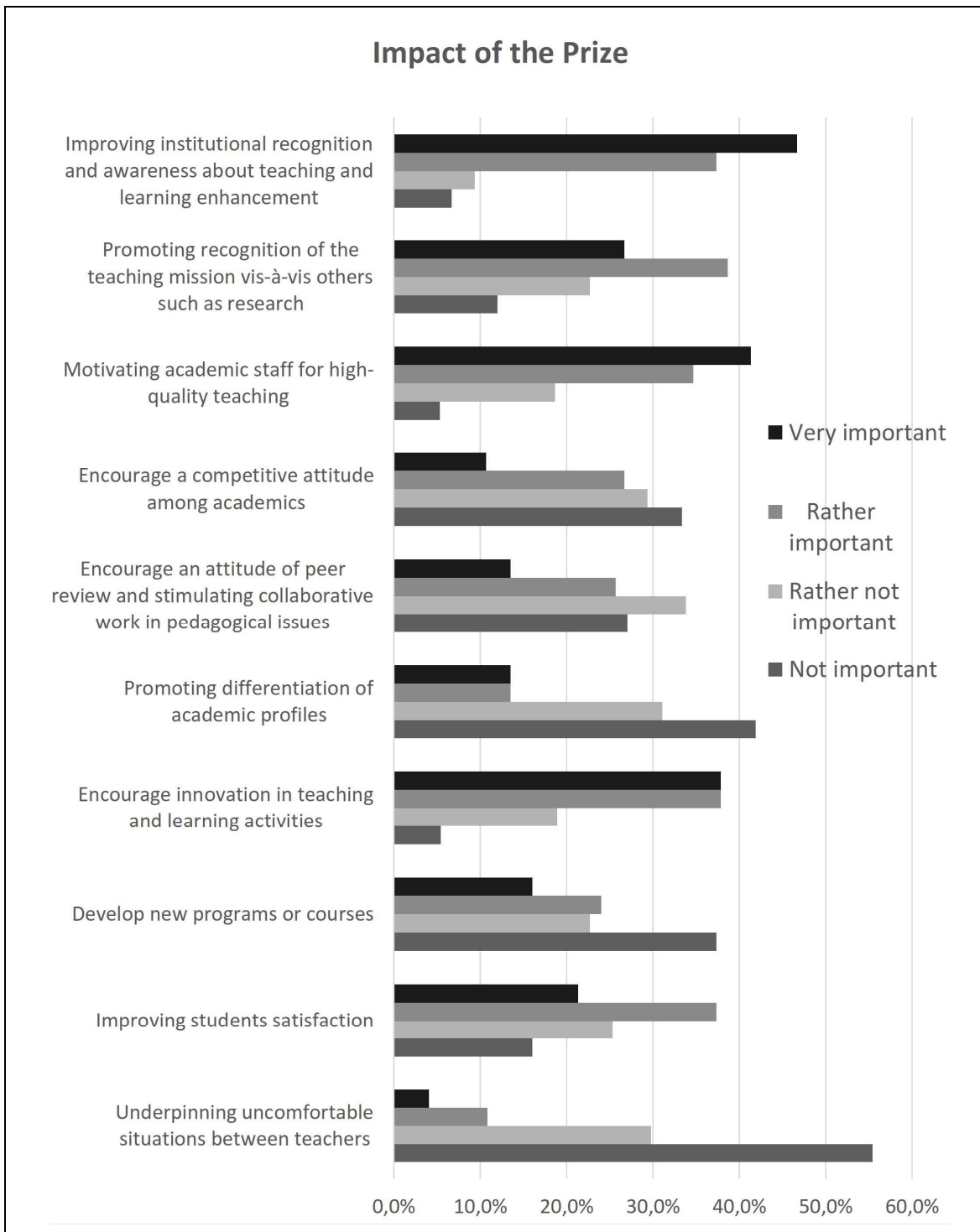


Figure 2 The significance attributed by the respondents to the impact of the prizes on achieving the proposed aims

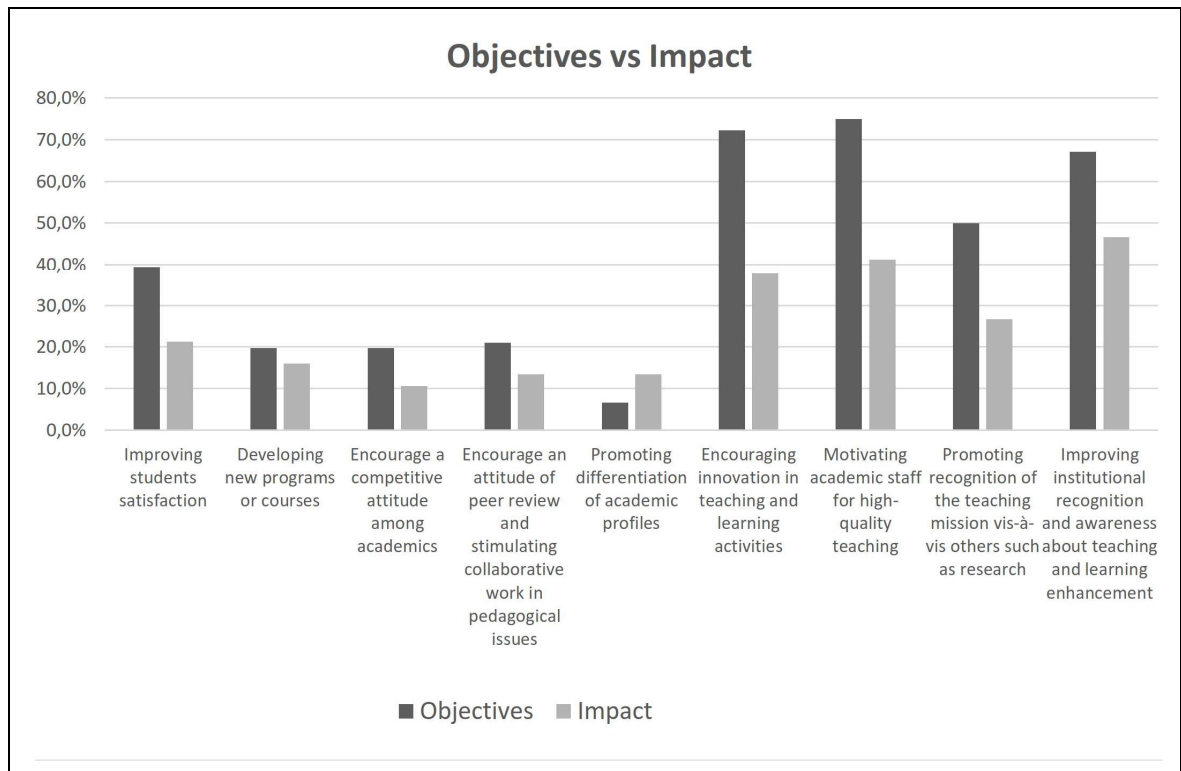


Figure 3 The comparison between the importance of the prizes' objectives and the actual impact they have on achieving these objectives

2.2 Nomination for the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Prizes

Making excellent teaching visible, promoting its reputation and providing incentives for outstanding academics is a viable strategy for highlighting the central role of teaching and learning in higher education. However, the difficulty of constructing an effective system of incentives and rewards in higher education needs to be able to take into account the variety of types of teachers and teaching styles, including part-time and support staff and newly recruited educators (Palmer & Collins, 2006).

Nomination practices

There are several different mechanisms used by respondent institutions for nominating candidates to apply for the prize (see Figure 4). Most of the candidates are nominated either by students, their institution, or they are self-nominated. Candidates can also be nominated by their peers or their nomination can be based on a combination of nominations from their institution, colleagues, students and their self-nomination.

Participation of all education institution bodies

These results provide evidence that principles of student-centred learning are becoming increasingly important in higher education as student-centred learning enhances the quality of the students’ experience and thus facilitates achieving the desired learning outcomes (ETUCE Position, 2014). However, experts have some reservations about giving the whole nominating ‘power’ only to students as some students do not perceive a challenging educator as being good educator and tend to blame their teachers for all problems in their university experience (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008). In fact, the nomination can be a sensitive point of the process which results in a low number of teachers applying for the prizes. As noted by one of the respondents, other teachers “feel demotivated” because they are not seen by students as charismatic. Therefore, the participation of all education institution bodies, including students, peers and academic authorities, in the teachers’ nomination for the award could be a useful tool to increase the number of applicants and to give visibility to the prize.

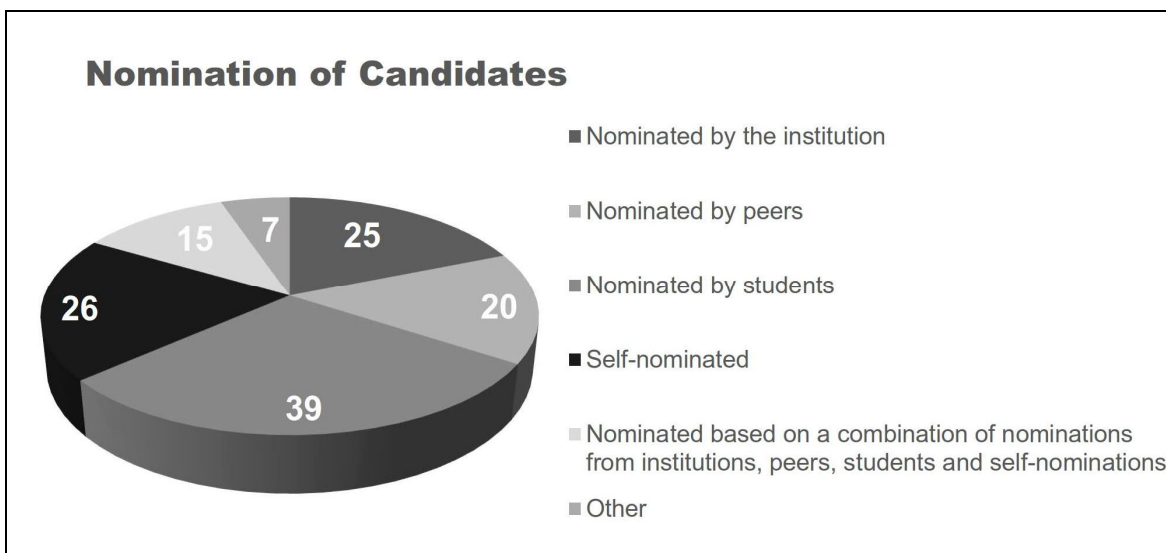


Figure 4 Distribution of different types of candidates’ nomination indicated by the respondent institutions

2.3 Evaluation and Assessment Procedure of the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Prizes

Evidence as an issue

The ultimate goal of teaching and learning enhancement prizes is to reward and promote teaching excellence. However, many experts note the problem of producing evidence of excellent teaching, as quality of teaching should not be reduced to only a question of achieving learning outcomes that can be easily measured (ETUCE Policy Paper, 2014). This problem is often explained by the iceberg metaphor,

which means that “80–90% of what produces effective student learning is unseen” (McAlpine & Harris, 2002, p. 9), and therefore, that the process behind the learning outcomes is responsible for the actual quality. In the context of teaching and learning enhancement prizes, this means that adequate evaluation of teaching excellence requires consideration of the evidence from a wide range of activities and resources, including both quantitative and qualitative feedback.

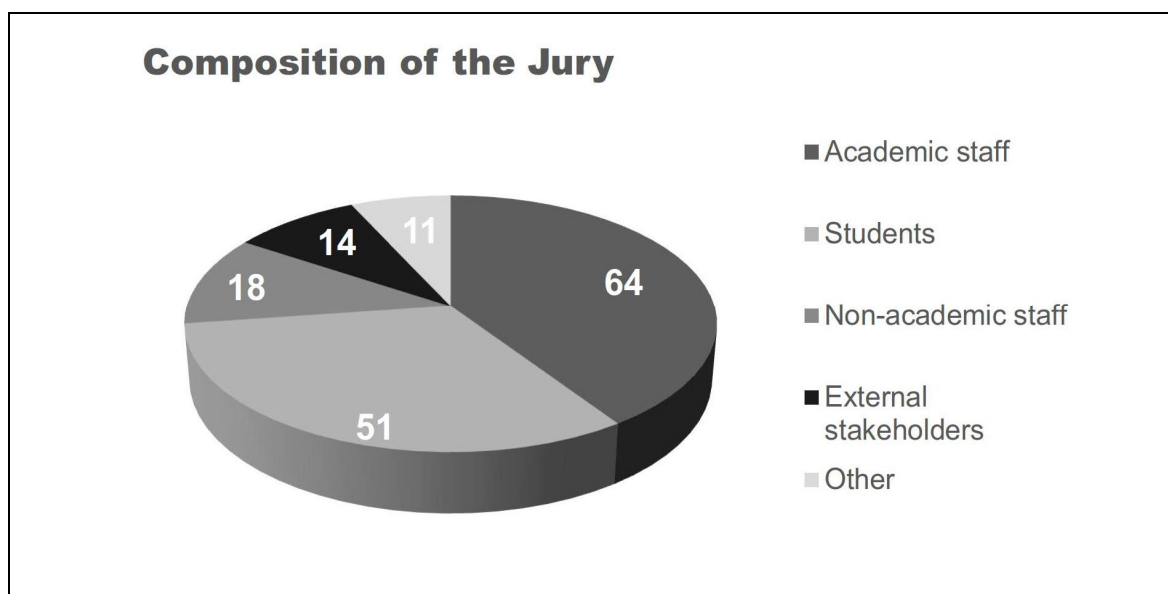


Figure 5 Composition of the teaching excellence prize jury in the respondent institutions

The jury is a crucial factor in achieving the aims of the prize and providing credibility to the evaluation process. Diversity of players seems to be a characteristic in the majority of the institutions (see Figure 5).

Importance of the diverse jury

In the last few decades, European stakeholders in education have highlighted the need to involve students actively in all aspects of teaching quality assessment (European Commission, 2009). This tendency is illustrated by the results of the study: in 69% of prizes, students are members of the jury, and in 53.5% of prizes student evaluation surveys are used as one of the criteria for assessment of nominees for the award. Additionally, students can often influence the process of prize awarding via the opinion of the student representatives in the institution’s governing body. However, as mentioned before in section 2.2, some experts note that students’ opinion about their teachers may strongly depend on students’ interest in the subject taught and on whether they consider it useful for their career, as well as on individu-

Students

al abilities and social background of students, the teacher-student ratio and many other, often subjective factors.

Academic staff

Another major group conducting and influencing the assessment of teaching prizes is the academic staff: In 86.5% of prizes, the jury includes academic staff members. The opinion of academics on the nominees for the prize is considered in other various ways, such as peer assessment, opinion poll/voting, pedagogical survey and via academic staff representatives in the institution's governing body. Peer evaluations are considered a more comprehensive tool of quality assessment as they also focus on the teaching and learning process, not only on the learning outcomes. However, some experts argue that they may hinder teaching innovations if they are 'too creative' for more conservative academics, or even result in self-praising (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008, p. 5). Therefore, many respondents note that more objective nomination and evaluation of the candidates for the teaching prize should involve various actors. For example, in Ireland, the nominations of the candidates for the President's Award for Excellence in Teaching (University College Cork) are accepted even from the alumni of the institution. Another effective evaluation model that involves various institution bodies is applied by the prize Prémio de Excelência Pedagógica at the Faculty of Engineering (FEUP) in the University of Porto (Portugal): Results of the student evaluation survey are considered in the first round of the candidates' evaluation, while academic peers are members of the jury during the second round.

Importance of the comprehensive evaluation process

Another important issue is the evaluation process of the candidates. The objectivity and transparency of the process need to be assured in order for the excellence prize to be recognised by the academic world. According to the study results, candidates are usually evaluated through the analysis of their written project or written proposal on a pedagogical issue, or their written paper on a pedagogical task they have completed. In some cases, candidates for the prize are assessed based on their oral presentation, their CV and teaching portfolio, or students'/academic staff members' evaluation of their work (see Figure 6). Using teaching portfolios in the evaluation of quality teaching is argued to be more objective as it considers various sources of evidence, but the problem of bureaucracy of the portfolio-based system remains as it is not always clear how much weight should be assigned to each point of the portfolio (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008, p. 5). As noted by one of the respondents, "teaching is about human relationships and should not be subject to the rules of competition".

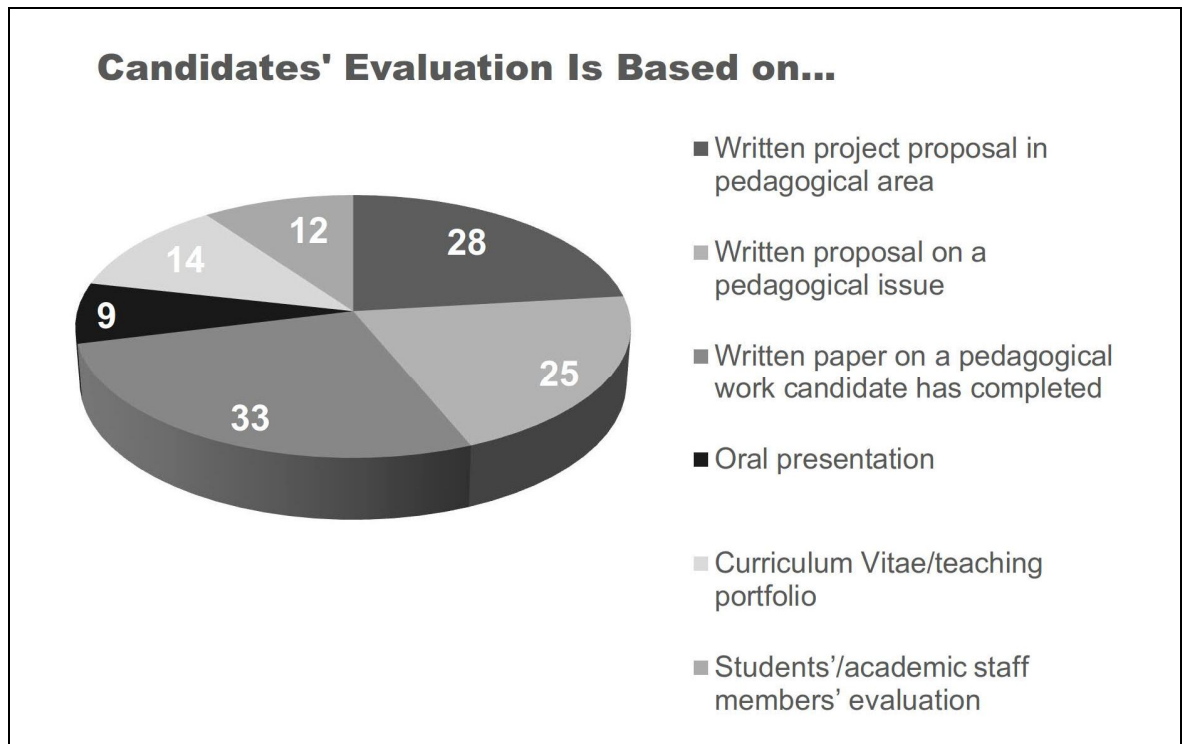


Figure 6 Forms of work required from the candidates in the excellence prize evaluation in the respondent institutions

The main challenge of creating a ‘fair’ assessment procedure of the teaching excellence prizes is to provide the most inclusive set of criteria possible, considering that a one-size-fits-all standard of quality teaching and learning may be difficult to define in European higher education where institutions are so diverse in their missions, goals, scope and budget (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013). The results of the study show that the majority of the prizes recognise both the individual work of the candidates and their team work while, however, rather a very significant number of awards consider only the individual work of the applications (39.2%). Many respondents noted that the awards that encourage and value teamwork within an academic community are a useful tool to demonstrate that, as in research, collective work also plays an essential role in the quality of education (Henard & Roseveare, 2012). For example, in Germany, for the prize *Ars legendi*, the collective applications have de facto replaced individual applications, while Sheffield Hallam University in the UK is planning to extend the Inspirational Teaching Award to team-based awards in the next year as “a recognition that teaching is not just an individual endeavour but one that involves teams of colleagues across disciplinary and professional boundaries.”

Encourage and value teamwork within an academic community

Teaching prizes' evaluation criteria

The study shows that teaching prizes' evaluation criteria focus primarily on the teaching innovations and the development of teaching and learning strategies. That the most cited criteria are the following:

- good teaching practice;
- use of new technologies to support teaching and learning;
- pedagogical innovation and strategy;
- stimulation of the active learning and student-centred learning; and
- contribution for the development of new educational models.

According to the respondents, such criteria as student academic results and fulfilment of the administrative tasks are considered by the prize jury much more rarely. Among other criteria contributing to the evaluation of the teaching and learning enhancement prize applicants, the respondents named adaptability, sustainability and diversity of the teaching concepts and methods used by the candidate; transformational impact on students in their transition in, through and out of their programme of study; popularising teaching activities; punctuality; accuracy; and even class cancelation; rescheduling ratio and contribution to raising the reputation of the institution.

2.4 Dissemination of the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Prizes' Results and Winners

It is still a matter of debate whether teaching and learning enhancement prizes contribute to raising the standard of teaching in higher education institutions. However, various mechanisms of the dissemination of the best practices and teaching proposals presented by the award nominees can be useful tools for ensuring continuous professional development of academic staff and encouraging teaching innovation.

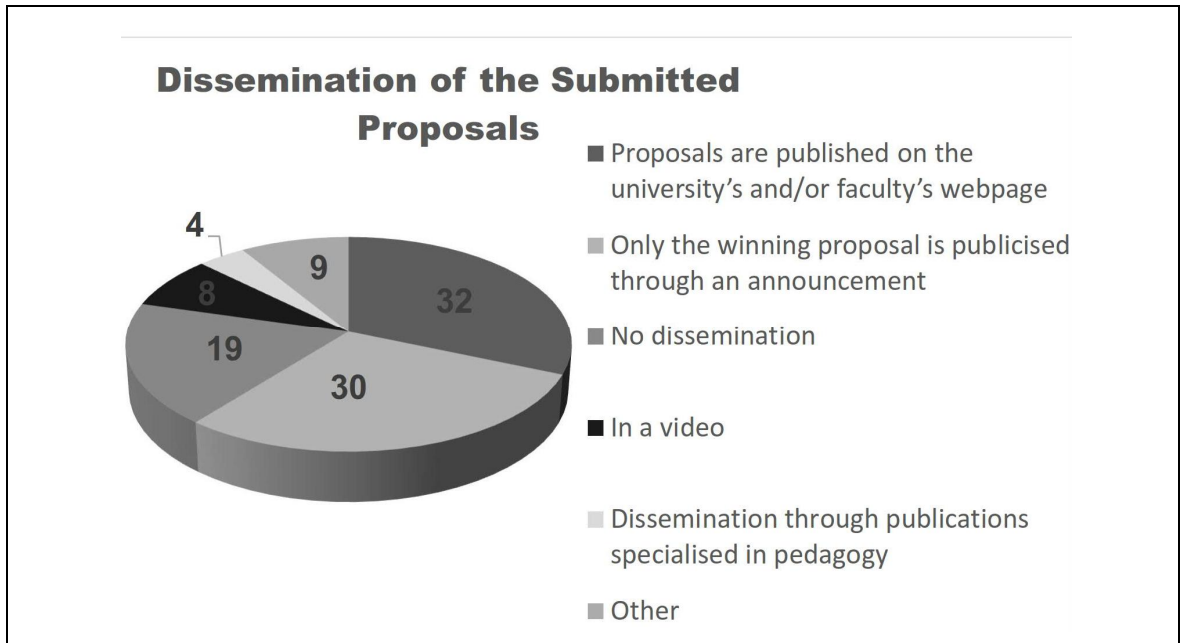


Figure 7 Methods of distribution for the proposals submitted for prizes

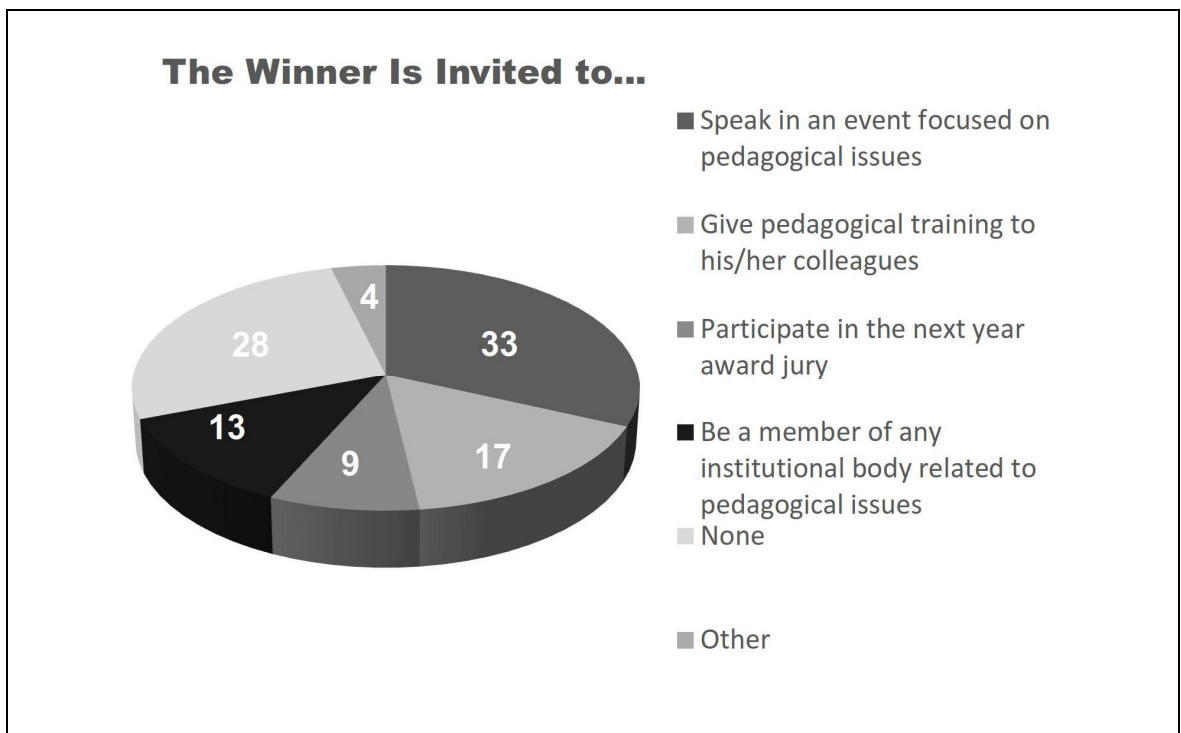


Figure 8 Forms of recognition of the teaching excellence prize winner

According to the respondents (see Figures 7 and 8), the dissemination of successful proposals and award winners' ideas could be improved in their institutions. In fact, submitted proposals are only published on the university's and/or faculty's webpage or solely the winning proposal is publicised through an announcement. In more than a quarter of the cases, there is no dissemination of successful proposals at all. The same situation is observed with dissemination of award winners' ideas, most often there is no follow-up of the competition or the winner/s is/are only invited to speak in an event focused on pedagogical issues. Even more rarely, the winner/s is/are invited to give pedagogical training to his/her colleagues, be a member of any institutional body related to pedagogical issues or participate in the next year award jury. For example, in Poland, the winner of the Prize of the Minister of Science and Higher Education is invited to participate in the institutional body that works with pedagogical issues.

Encourage bottom-up initiatives

Teaching excellence prizes can be a good starting point for promotion of quality in teaching and learning in higher education, but instead of replacing the "necessary long-term systemic training of all academics as professional teachers" (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013, p. 38) it should rather be used to encourage bottom-up initiatives from the faculty members, collegial governance and constant peer learning.

3. Conclusions and Recommendations

Improve the status of teaching

Most international higher education ranking systems are focused on the institutions' research achievements or mechanical use of learning outcomes that have proved to be misleading as indicators of relative or absolute quality (ETUCE Policy Paper, 2014). However, the mission of universities includes not only generating but also disseminating knowledge and preparing students to think critically and creatively. As rightly indicated in the Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education's report to European Commission, "good teaching, unlike good research, does not lead to easily verifiable results but consists rather in a process" (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013, p. 36). That is why it is important to identify the most useful mechanisms for improving the status of teaching in higher education and for incentivising high quality and innovative teaching, as well as for encouraging peer learning, without creating a "race for the best score" or business competition among academics.

Take into account various types of teaching styles

The present study on teaching and learning enhancement prizes suggests that an effective teaching excellence award needs to take into account all various types of teachers and teaching styles, consider the opinion of different stakeholders in education, and be based on as

many examples of evidence of the teaching and learning process as there can be found.

Moreover, the final stage of the awarding, the dissemination of the best practices by prize nominees and sharing of winners' teaching knowledge and expertise, is the most valuable part for achieving the declared objectives of the teaching and learning enhancement prizes. However, the results of the study also indicate that this final stage is widely neglected by the institutions, which strongly undermines the actual impact the prizes have on the enhancement of teaching and learning standards, practices and innovations.

Disseminate best practices

The research described here indicates that while institutions introduce teaching excellence prizes mostly with the aims to motivate academic staff for high-quality teaching and to encourage innovations in teaching and learning, they succeed only to some degree in promoting recognition of the teaching mission vis-à-vis other missions and improving institutional recognition and awareness about teaching and learning enhancement (judging from the size of the gap between the importance of the objective and the impact of the prize on achieving it). Teaching prizes are mainly used for the recognition of the teaching mission, but, in the majority of cases, not for stimulating collaborative work on pedagogy or promoting the differentiation of academic profiles.

There are also some positive tendencies identified by the study. For instance, research results indicate that peer review and student feedback have become common criteria in the evaluation of teaching excellence as both students and academics are members of the award jury and have various channels for influencing the evaluation of the nominees. Considering some limitations of the 'one-sided' evaluation, the evaluation model that involves diverse sources such as nomination by the institution, peer review, students' evaluation, and self-nomination can be recommended as the most objective model of the teaching excellence prize.

Involve diverse sources in evaluation

The analysis of the evaluation criteria for teaching and learning enhancement prizes indicates that most of them focus on the future development of educational models, including new technologies, active learning and pedagogical innovations. It still is the current challenge of teaching in higher education to be able to guarantee the best possible learning experience for all students, which means enhancing teaching and learning at the strategical level, not by rare individual awards. Thus, considering that the majority of the prizes recognise both the individual work of the candidates and the team work, the collaborative work on the enhancement of the future teaching and learning would be a very beneficial outcome of the prizes.

Strengthen collaborative work

Disseminate nominees' proposals, projects and best practices

Another way to overcome the current individualistic nature of the teaching prizes and to turn them into being collectively-beneficial is to ensure the widest possible dissemination of the nominees' proposals, projects and best practices (not only the winning ones) and to give the nominees plenty of opportunities to share their knowledge, methods, skills and inspirations with their colleagues. Moreover, the disseminating strategy can be implemented not only at the institutional policy level, but also at national (e.g. integration of the country-wide criteria for award to enhance institutional schemes) and European level (e.g. a European conference with presentations of award-winning projects). As indicated in the Tempus survey report by the European Commission on *Enhancing Quality in Higher Education*,

staff development and training is a fundamental aspect of the implementation and sustainability of a quality assurance and enhancement culture (European Commission, 2009, p. 13).

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Biographies

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