

Teaching Excellence Awards and Their Relationship to Teaching Standards

Noella Mackenzie, Charles Sturt University, Australia

Introduction

Education in Australia is no longer a 'fashionable value' (Kelly 2000, 9) and although it may appear that Australia is moving towards a knowledge economy with increased numbers of students in higher education, government spending on education 'shrank from 4.9 percent of gross domestic product to 4.4 percent in the five years to 1998' (Colebatch 2000, cited in Smyth 2001, 20). As the world enters a 'phase in history in which education is the central figure', Australian politicians appear to view education as a low priority: a 'cost rather than an investment' (Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE 2004, 1). During the 1990s the education landscape was 'irreversibly re-contoured to conform with the new orthodoxies of economically dominated public policy, rather than with the best collective wisdom of educators' (Beare 2003, 15). This led to the work of teachers becoming increasingly determined by forces outside schools and an emphasis on achieving 'acceptable end products' (Smyth 2001, 6) resulting in state-wide testing and performance appraisal techniques aimed at 'value for money'.

Teaching excellence awards were not part of the teaching culture when most of Australia's teachers joined the teaching profession. My own experience as an award recipient in 2001 suggests that awards can have a positive impact on recipients. However, having conducted a study into extrinsic teaching awards between 2001 and 2003 I now question the impact of awards presented to so few from such a large profession, suggest that the outcomes of awards are not always positive and argue that awards may serve political ends which relate to economic rationalism, competition and quality control.

Australian teachers in the early 21st century – A profile

Australia's teachers are highly qualified with a median age which increased from 34 to 43 years over the 15 years to 2001,

during which time the proportion of teachers older than 45 years rose from 17 percent to 43 percent. The proportion of Australian teachers under the age of 34 years is currently less than 29 percent. Data from the 1999 National Survey: *Teachers in Australian Schools* (Australian College of Education (ACE) 2001a) indicates that while female teachers outnumber male teachers by 2:1 overall, of the teachers in the 21 to 30 years age bracket women outnumber men by 3:1.

Employment and career prospects

The majority of Australian teachers (88.2 percent) are permanently employed on a full-time or part-time basis by education authorities, either State/Territory government authorities or Catholic diocesan authorities (DEST 2003, 75). Beginning teacher salaries in Australia compare favourably with most other professions, however, teaching is less financially attractive the longer a teacher remains in the profession (DEST 2003, 176). The majority of teachers reach the top of their salary scale within ten years. Promotion opportunities are limited, in most cases lead out of the classroom and favour males (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, *A class act*, 1998, iii).

The status of the teaching profession

Hoyle (2001) claims that the formal occupational status of teaching in official statistics is that of a profession (p.144), but warns that the recognition of teaching as a profession by political and related reference groups continues to remain ambiguous. Crowther (2001, 2) argues however, that after two generations of being 'under a cloud' teaching 'is a profession whose time has come'. Lovat (2003) supports

this, claiming that teaching is ready to move into a new era of professionalism. In contrast, Sachs (2001, 3) argues that currently the teaching profession in Australia is suffering from a struggle between 'various political and social education groups' at a time when the media have 'become powerful in setting education agendas' concluding that this has resulted in a lack of trust, moral panic and a 'dynamic of risk adversity or even risk anxiety'.

Professional teaching standards

Teaching standards appear to have been on the agenda in Australia for a similar length of time as have teaching excellence awards. O'Donnell (1999 cited in O'Donnell 2001) argues that 'members of the public do not accord teachers full professional status on the grounds that teachers do not control the standards of practice of their occupation' (p.2). The report, *A Class Act* (1998) suggests that the establishment of a national professional teaching standards and registration body would have a strategic and coordinating role for a range of activities all building towards effective national standards. According to Ramsey (2000) Australia needs a professional body for teachers, to develop explicit standards of practice for teachers and to accredit teachers, schools and teacher education programs according to those standards. This national body would be the prime mover in the assessment of teacher performance against these standards and is further supported by the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) (2004). Brock (2000, 10) however sounds a warning in this regard arguing that any professional teaching standards must be flexible enough to enable, indeed celebrate, that quality of individuality which is a hallmark of being a professional.

Sachs (2001, 11) suggests that 'the development of teacher professional standards has the potential to control the practice and form of teacher professionalism' and that this type of control 'may not be in the best interests of teachers working in schools, nor may they reflect the diversity of the teaching profession itself and the contexts in which teachers work' leading to a sanitised 'one size fits all form of teacher professionalism'.

Teacher morale

Smyth (2001, 11) describes teacher morale as currently very low, with teachers feeling 'frustrated and prevailed upon'. Positive teacher morale is identified as a useful indicator of healthy effective schools (OECD 2000). Alternatively, low morale for teachers can lead to decreased productivity and a detachment from the teacher role, colleagues and students. One way of lifting morale may be the recognition of individual teachers, schools or programs, through extrinsic awards. Scott (2001, 1) suggests however, that while teachers justifiably complain that 'authentic recognition is rare for members of their profession', not all teachers 'enthusiastically endorse awards schemes'.

Extrinsic teaching excellence awards

Although there is little research into the impact of teaching excellence awards on teachers in schools, the need to recognise the accomplishments of teachers has been discussed in the literature for almost two decades and more particularly in the last three or four years (Cummings 2003, Dinham and Scott 2003, Fitzgerald 2002, Boston 2002, Beare 2002, Dinham 2002, Galbally 2002). Cummings (2003) describes 'a rapid expansion in the growth of award schemes and other forms of professional

recognition' as a result of a 'seismic shift in attitude' with regard to 'acknowledging and rewarding teachers' work' (p.7).

In 2002, Boston advised the need to 'uncover and perceive qualities which already exist, but which have previously gone unnoticed' (2002, 2) with individual teaching excellence awards being a possible way to do this. At the same time, Beare (2002) identified a strong link between public prestige and the awards process suggesting that the teaching profession should 'draw attention to its most able and respected members and to its major achievements in order 'to command public prestige' (27). Beare (2002, 27) suggested that the profession needed awardees as much as the awardees needed the honour of receiving an award. The desire to recognise, applaud and reward teachers who are making a difference to the future of young Australians appears to be the major motivation for a number of extrinsic teaching excellence awards currently being conferred on teachers in Australia including: The *National Excellence in Teaching Awards* (NeiTA 2003), and The *Quality Teaching Awards* (ACE 2001b). However, not all in the teaching profession in the current era are supportive of the use of extrinsic teaching excellence awards with some teachers suspicious about their use (Scott 2001). Fitzgerald (2002, 33) questions whether the awards that are currently being presented are 'likely to encourage an enhanced sense of confidence in education' or suggest to the community 'that there are winners and losers in education'. A connection between a school's marketing orientations has already been suggested as an outcome of awards (Myers 2003), which highlights competition between schools and reflects an economic rationalist approach to education.

Although a direct link between teaching standards and teaching excellence awards is not identified in the small amount of literature and research into teaching excellence awards it is highly possible that those teachers receiving awards may be seen as a benchmark or standard for teaching excellence and a demonstration to the public that standards are important to the profession and are measurable.

The study

The study reported in this paper involved an examination of the intent of extrinsic teaching excellence awards, the awards process and the impact of these awards as viewed through the eyes of award recipients and their non-recipient colleagues. Data were gathered between 2001 and 2002 from 101 volunteer teachers working in NSW Department of Education (DET) schools. In 2002, the NSW DET reported 51,160 fulltime teaching positions and 14,812 fulltime non-teaching positions (NSW DET 2003, 152), a figure which has been fairly consistent over the past ten years.

Data were gathered in two stages (12 months apart) using questionnaires and interviews. Document analysis, using public documentation regarding extrinsic awards added to the data. Schools were identified as those schools with at least one staff member who had received a significant extrinsic teaching award between 2000 and 2002. Both award recipients (44% of sample) and non-recipients (56% of sample) contributed to the data. Participant profiles may be reviewed in table 1 (below).

Study findings

Documentation analysed in this study indicated that teaching awards generally aim to recognise and applaud excellent teachers and promote the teaching profession in the community. Nominated teachers are examined against criteria designed by award providers. Criteria and procedures

Table 1 Participant profiles and participation details

Sex	Position	Age	Experience (years)	Types of Awards received
Male 42%	Teacher 37%	< 30 3%	< 10 3%	National 9%
Female 58%	Principal 21%	30 - 40 17%	10 - 15 11%	State 66%
	Executive 40%	40 - 50 42%	16 - 20 21%	Local 18%
	Other 1%	> 51 33%	21 - 25 24%	Other 7%
	Not given 1%	Not given 5%	26 - 39 23%	
			> 30 18%	

for awards vary. Both the literature and the study participants acknowledged that the conferring of awards is a relatively new phenomenon. The pattern of response emerging from the data in regard to awards was disparate, with experiences and attitudes ranging from optimism to negativism, exhilaration to cynicism, and empowerment to constraint. Although no respondent suggested that having a teacher receive an award could be negative for a school there was evidence to indicate that in many instances awards added to the complexity of the micro-politics (Hoyle 1988) within schools. No specific link to teaching standards is made by any of the award providers although the documentation pertaining to the *ACE Quality Teaching Awards* identifies 'learning from award recipients' as a goal of this award (ACE 2001c, 1). This could be seen as a way of identifying standards of best practice in the teaching profession while publicly identifying through the awards process a small number of teachers who have achieved this standard.

Positives

In some instances awards had a very positive effect on recipients, providing them with access to resources previously unavailable, and enabling them to take on new opportunities, as can be seen in the following statement made by the recipient of state award.

[Receiving the award] ... opened doors like you wouldn't believe. I've been offered all sorts of lecturing opportunities ...

Negatives

In contrast other award recipients, as illustrated by the following comments, experienced quite negative responses, including jealousy and resentment.

An air of apathy and even resentment. No one really wanted to know.

There were two executive members who decided to make life difficult.

Pressure to perform

A number of recipients of state awards described feelings of increased pressure to perform as a result of receiving an award as described by the following recipient of a state award.

I have found since the award, more is expected of me... more work – no extra pay

What about me?

If we accept the positive impact of awards on those recipients who were empowered by receiving an award, we are required to also consider the impact upon those who are not offered access to these same rules and resources (Giddens 1984) who may in fact be disempowered by not receiving an award. One principal described how she was blamed for not

nominating two staff members with one of these teachers asking for a transfer because 'she no longer felt respected'. Another participant believed that his status in the school had been diminished because he had not received an award nomination.

Political points?

A number of recipients questioned the motives behind the awards suggesting they were a 'cheap' way of scoring political points during a time when public education is experiencing problems.

I was honoured to receive the award but remain cynical about the circumstances surrounding the creation of the awards and the criteria for their distribution.

Mixed responses

While the majority of award recipients felt that the impact of their award had been positive for the most part, mixed reactions from colleagues were common.

[I received a] mixed reaction – one colleague said it was '##%&' there was a degree of negativity from some teachers.*

Local awards

Despite the growth of awards, it is likely that by the end of 2003, less than 0.5 % of the teachers employed by the NSW DET had received a national or state teaching excellence award, demonstrating the 'newness' and 'exclusiveness' of this phenomenon to date. While 'Local awards' may be accessible to more teachers, these did not appear to have been as positive in their impact on recipients as state and national awards with embarrassment cited as an unintended outcome by a number of recipients of local awards.

Conclusions

Research into the impact and outcomes of teaching excellence awards is limited, with no theoretical or research based rationale for the teaching excellence awards currently offered. Although 'tall poppies' may draw attention to the whole field of poppies (O'Connor 2004), too few of the quarter of a million educators, will ever be publicly honoured by state or national awards to see awards having a significant impact upon the status of the profession. Although local awards have been accessible to more teachers the evidence gathered in this study suggests that at best these awards have little effect and at worst are considered by teachers as embarrassing.

Awards have failed to take into account the impact that identifying individuals for awards has on school culture and staff dynamics. While some award recipients reported positive outcomes including empowerment and increased opportunities, others described increased pressure, discomfort, jealousy and resentment. If we accept that the culture of an organization 'controls the patterns of organizational behaviour by shaping members' cognitions and perceptions of meanings and realities' (Ott 1988, 69), that the culture of teaching is complex (Smyth 2001) and that the culture of each school is unique, awards may be accepted in some schools, while in others they may upset the existing staff dynamics. Awards may in fact work against a culture of collaboration, encouraging competition despite the research which supports the need for schools to develop a positive climate and culture which permits all teachers to perform effectively during times of change and increased workload (ACDE 2004).

More research is needed to gauge the impact on individuals of not ever being nominated for a teaching award. If, we accept

the positive impact of awards on those recipients who are empowered by receiving an award, we are required to also consider the impact upon those who are not offered access to these same rules and resources (Giddens 1984) and may in fact be disempowered by not receiving an award.

As there is no evidence to indicate that either teachers nor parents initiated the introduction of teaching excellence awards, awards may be seen by some teachers as a politically motivated economic rationalist response to a crisis in community confidence in education along with a perceived need to raise educational standards, improve international competitiveness and avoid an impending teacher shortage. While it has been suggested that education professionals are increasingly prepared to nominate their outstanding colleagues for awards, (O'Connor 2004) in this study the educational professionals initiating award nominations were almost always administrators, with teachers rarely nominating other teachers for awards.

While publicity may allow awards to achieve more of their stated goals, the data analysed in this study suggest that this has not been the case thus far in the short history of teaching excellence awards. While in some cases this may be due to a lack of planning or interest on the part of the media, in other instances the lack of publicity is quite deliberate. One award recipient participating in this study accepted nomination for an award only after receiving assurance from his principal that there would be no publicity and the new school he was moving to would not be informed. A reluctance on behalf of some teachers to be seen as 'tall poppies' may be linked to individual differences, the culture of particular schools or the culture of the profession, which may still see awards as something teachers use to motivate students in classrooms (Scott 2001).

Research evidence produced in this study does not show that overall in anything but a limited and idiosyncratic way teaching awards have substantially improved morale or raised the status of the profession, during the decade they have been conferred. Given the absence of sufficient research to indicate whether the aims of teaching excellence awards are being met, it may be that the awards process is either implicitly or explicitly serving significantly different ends. In this case the awards process may be seen as reflecting an economic rationalist approach to education, by publicly declaring and measuring teaching standards and leading to schools and teachers competing with one another. The standards identified through this process must be seen as identifying a small elite group of teachers who fit a particular set of standards designed by award providers. This must not be confused with the idea that award recipients are the only good teachers in a system.

References

- Australian College of Education (2001a), *Teachers in Australian schools: A report from the 1999 national survey*, Executive Summary, (DETYA) (retrieved November 10, 2005 from www.austcolled.com.au).
- Australian College of Education (2001b), *Quality teaching award: Learning from and recognizing our best teachers*, The Australian College of Education and NSW Minister for Education and Training, Information Handout, Daily Telegraph.
- Australian College of Education (2001c), *Quality teaching award: Learning from and recognizing our best teachers*, The Australian College of Education and NSW Minister for Education and Training, Information Handout, Daily Telegraph.
- Australian Council of Deans of Education Inc (ACDE) (2004), *New teaching, new learning: A vision for Australian education*, October, Canberra.
- Beare, H. (2002), 'Honouring our fellow professional educators, in: *Unicorn, Journal of the Australian College of Educators*, 28(1), 25-29.
- Beare, H. (2003), *Thinking about the future, with wisdom, inspiration, and a bit of bravado* (opening keynote address at the 2003 Combined Annual Conference of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) and the Australian Secondary Principals Association (ASPA) (Retrieved January 2, 2004 from www.acea.edu.au).
- Boston, K. (2002), 'Professional recognition' in: *Unicorn, Journal of the Australian College of Educators*, 28(1), 1-4.
- Brock, P. (2000), *Standards of Professional Practice for Accomplished Teaching in Australian Classrooms*, Canberra, Australian College of Education.
- Crowther, F. (2001), *The teaching profession: The dawn of a new era* (G.W. Bassett Memorial Oration, 2001, Australian College of Education, Queensland Chapter, 30 March).
- Crowther, F. (ed.) (2003), 'Teaching, a profession whose time has come' in: *Teachers as leaders in a knowledge society*, College Year Book 2003, Australian College of Educators, ACT, Australia, 1-8.
- Cummings, J. (2003), 'Recognizing quality teachers' in: *Campus Review*, 12(40), 7.
- Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) (2003), *Australia's teachers: Australia's future. Advancing innovation, science, technology and mathematics*. Main report. Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, Australian Government, October.
- Dinham, S. (2002), 'NSW quality teaching awards – Research, rigour and transparency' in: *Unicorn, Journal of the Australian College of Educators*, 28(1), 5-9.
- Dinham, S. & Scott, C. (2003), 'Awards for teaching excellence: Intentions and realities', *Unicorn Online Refereed Article* no. 24 (retrieved July 16, 2003 from www.austcolled.com.au).
- Fitzgerald, D. (2002), 'And the winner is' in: *Unicorn, Journal of Australian College of Educators*, 28(1), 30-33.
- Galbally, R. (2002), 'The pursuit of excellence and sponsorship dollars' in: *Unicorn, Journal of the Australian College of Educators*, 28(1), 44-47.
- Giddens, A. (1984), *Constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Hoyle, E. (1988), 'Micropolitics or educational organisations' in: Westoby, E. (ed.), *Culture and power in educational organisations*, Milton Keynes, Philadelphia, Open University Press 255-269.
- Hoyle, E. (2001), 'Teaching: Prestige, status and esteem' in: *Educational Management & Administration* 0263-211X (200104) 29(2) London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, SAGE Publications.
- Kelly, P. (2000), *Paradise divide: The changes, the challenges, the choices for Australia*, Australia, Allen and Unwin.

Lovat, T.J. (2003), *The role of the 'teacher' coming of age?* Australian Council of Deans of Education, Discussion Paper, Bundoora, Victoria, RMIT.

Myers, T. (2003), 'Even at school the customer is always right' in: *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Friday, October, p.11.

National Excellence in Teaching (NEiTA). (2003), *The NEiTA foundation teaching awards* (retrieved September 29, 2003 from www.neita.com.au).

New South Wales Department of Education and Training (2003), *Annual Report* (retrieved May 10, 2004 from www.schools.nsw.edu.au/reports_stats/index).

O'Connell, T. (2002), 'NEiTA – Changing community perceptions' in: *Unicorn, Journal of the Australian College of Educators*, 28(1), 34-37.

O'Connor, C. (2004), 'Tall poppies? Let's hear it for a field of blazing colour' in: *Professional Educator*, 3(3), 1

O'Donnell, B. (2001), 'Prospects for the profession of teaching in Australia in the new millennium', *Unicorn On-line Refereed Article No. 08* (retrieved July 17, 2003 from www.austcolled.com.au).

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2000), *Knowledge management in the learning society, education and skills*, France, OECD Publications Service (retrieved January 7, 2004 from www.mszs.si/eurydice/pub/oecd/knowledge).

Ott, S. J. (1988), *The organisational culture perspective*, Brooks/Cole, Pacific Grove.

Ramsey, G. (2000), *Quality matters. Revitalising teaching: Critical times, critical choices*, report of the Review of Teacher Education NSW, Executive Summary.

Sachs, J. (2001), *Curriculum control: The cost to teacher professionalism* (paper presented at AARE Conference Fremantle, 3-7 December).

Scott, C. (2001), 'Just 'smiley stamps?' in: *Directions in Education*, Australian Council for Educational Administration, vol.10, no.9.

Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, (1998), *A class act: Inquiry into the status of the teaching profession*, Commonwealth of Australia.

Smyth, J. (2001). *Critical politics of teachers' work: An Australian perspective*. Studies in the postmodern theory of education, vol. 138, Peter Lang, New York.

Smyth, J., Dow, A., Hattam, R., Reid, A. and Shacklock, G. (2000), *Teachers' work in a globalizing economy*, London, USA, Canada, Falmer Press.

