

Utilising the Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning for strategic transformation

Voluntary but irresistible: owning the PSF to incentivise great teaching

—

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Contents

1	Situation	2
1.1	A brief profile of the Aga Khan University	2
2	Task	2
2.1	Transformational teaching for engaged learning	2
3	Action	3
3.1	The PSF as a lever for teaching culture change	3
3.2	Embedding the PSF in policy and practice	3
3.3	Recognising and rewarding teaching through fellowship	3
4	Result	4
4.1	The impact of the PSF: on faculty practice, student learning and creating an institutional teaching culture	4
5	Reflection	5
6	Peer reflection	5
6.1	Dr Gelareh Roushan, SFHEA, Head of Centre for Fusion Learning Innovation and Excellence, Bournemouth University, UK	5
7	References	5

1 Situation

1.1 A brief profile of the Aga Khan University

Established in 1983, the Aga Khan University (AKU) positions itself as “a university of, and for, the developing world”. Guided by its core principles of quality, access, relevance and impact, it functions as one single global university with integrated campuses distributed across three continents and six countries: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and the UK. The university supports core disciplines: health sciences, teacher education, Muslim cultures and civilisations, and media and communications at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Despite its large geographic spread as a private, not for profit university, it has a total student body of 3500, a faculty size of 600+ and approximately 50 staff supporting teaching and learning. As stated in its mission, AKU aims “to offer programmes of international quality; prioritising teaching and research that underpin intellectual innovation and change; and developing leaders through its educational programmes.” In 2018, AKU became the first, and only, Advance HE-accredited institution in Pakistan and East Africa to offer HEA Fellowships through the HEA’s Teaching Enhancement Accredited Certification or the Teaching Enhancement Accredited Certification (TEACH) continuing professional development (CPD) scheme for Associate Fellow (D1) and Fellow (D2). Today 61 academic staff have gained Fellowships across all four descriptors (D1-D4).

2 Task

2.1 Transformational teaching for engaged learning

AKU’s commitment to the provision of quality teaching and learning is evident with the establishment of the [Network of Quality, Teaching and Learning](#) (QTL_net) in 2014. Rather than a ‘centre’, this university-wide, global distributed support ‘network’ was created to respond to the large geographic spread of AKU. QTL_net reports directly to the provost through the vice provost (quality, teaching and learning) and is made up of a small team of 12 staff that includes two quality assurance officers, four educational developers, three educational technologists, one instructional designer and two administrators. QTL_net aims to promote the highest quality of teaching and support excellence in the student learning experience by transforming teaching. AKU believes teaching must be both learning centred and research led with teaching excellence recognised and rewarded across the academy. As set out in the QTL_net strategic plan 2020-25, a range of services, resources and programmes are offered, in safe, inclusive and interdisciplinary spaces, to faculty and academic units on pedagogical practice, teaching excellence, teaching with technology, scholarly teaching and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). This is integrated with support from QTL_net for periodic programme and curriculum reviews to create a quality culture of continuous improvement.

3 Action

3.1 The PSF as a lever for teaching culture change

The PSF is embedded institutionally as a benchmark for teaching effectiveness and excellence through the continuum of policy, professionalising practice, reward and recognition of teaching.

3.2 Embedding the PSF in policy and practice

The AKU Teaching and Learning Framework aligns with the PSF. One of its aims is to ensure the efficacy and accountability of faculty development activities based on the dimensions of the PSF. QTL_net has a global team that facilitates a range of professional development activities for faculty members and for those who support teaching and learning at AKU through face to face, blended and online approaches. Despite the geographic spread of its campuses, 95% (380) of AKU's 400 faculty have engaged in QTL_net programmes with 88% (352) returning for other support, showing the value added. When advertised, these programmes highlight how the dimension of the PSF is aligned to each related professional development activity. At AKU it is important that Fellowships are not just seen as 'another qualification to gain' but rather are transformative to teaching through reflective practice, often a new concept to staff as they engage in the application process, benchmarking against the PSF.

Prior to the TEACH CPD scheme, academic promotions needed no evidence of effective teaching practice. However, the academic promotion policy now requires the submission of a mandatory teaching dossier that aligns to the PSF as an essential criterion for academic promotion. This initiative is a significant achievement in a research-led university, ensuring that teaching is seen as a scholarly activity.

3.3 Recognising and rewarding teaching through fellowship

The Haile T Debas Teachers' Academy, established in 2020, is the first interdisciplinary teachers' academy in the developing world. It is made up of outstanding AKU teachers recognised for their excellence in teaching and leadership in higher education who peer-mentor other faculty to enhance teaching practice. The PSF was used as a guide to develop an application template for membership, benchmarking teaching practice against an international standard. Out of 19 members, 16 have already gained their HEA fellowship. The members acknowledged that the process of applying for the HEA fellowship gave them the confidence to write reflectively for the Teachers' Academy membership application and demonstrate their excellence in teaching.

Since 2020, engagement in TEACH CPD and gaining HEA fellowships have been set as conditions for the most prestigious university-wide award on teaching, which is recognised at annual graduation ceremonies. The prestigious Award of Excellence in Teaching and Teaching Leadership specifies that applicants must have engaged in applied learning from CPD in their teaching practice, including within AKU's TEACH scheme and have benchmarked their teaching practice internationally (eg HEA Fellowships).

4 Result

4.1 The impact of the PSF: on faculty practice, student learning and creating an institutional teaching culture

An external unit review of QTL_net's first five years concluded that the PSF led to institutionalising a teaching culture at AKU:

“QTL_net has been remarkably successful in raising the profile of the importance of teaching and learning within AKU in a very short amount of time. The number of faculty who have taken advantage of the (TEACH CPD) programmes and who have very positive outcomes based on their experience is exceptional”

(Dawson, Quinney and Welch, 2019).

The majority of faculty who gain annual teaching awards or membership of the Teachers' Academy have also gained Fellowship and are recognised as teaching champions within their academic entities.

AKU won the [Award of Excellence for Disruptive Education](#), of the inaugural [Zairi International Award in Higher Education 2022](#), supported by UNESCO and Advance HE. AKU was selected from 90 applications received from 31 countries and acknowledged for its uptake of the PSF as a lever of change.

Spowart et al's (2020) study of institutional impact of accreditation showed the impact on students of the TEACH scheme aligned to the PSF:

“There is a lot of difference in the [lecturers] who are really trying, who are trying, who are upgraded, who are really working on their educational methods, going to conferences who knows what works better [compared to] those who are not upgraded. We can see a visible difference in their [teaching] styles.”

(Students' union representative 2)

“I can say there are some changes because I am in contact with some alumni.... we normally talk [about] how they were taught, how we are taught [now] and they are saying ‘You are lucky these days, you are getting this, we didn't get this, we didn't get that’ so I can say there are some changes that are happening in the teaching and learning processes.”

(Students' union representative 1)

5 Reflection

Dr Jane Rarieya, SFHEA, Interim Dean, Institute for Educational Development and Director of Teaching and Learning

As a dean, the PSF has provided me with a framework to advocate for teaching effectiveness among my faculty. It indicates the professional teaching competencies and values required for a faculty to aspire to and be recognised against. It also demonstrates that teaching is a scholarly activity and that the scholarship of teaching and learning is an important educational research area to contribute to. The PSF has not only improved individual faculty's teaching practice but has brought prestige to teaching in a university where faculty felt they were either financially rewarded for their clinical practice or promoted based on their research outputs. Today, the PSF guides teaching dossiers that are a part of academic promotion and the basis for application to the elite Haile T Debas Teachers' Academy.

6 Peer reflection

6.1 Dr Gelareh Roushan, SFHEA, Head of Centre for Fusion Learning Innovation and Excellence, Bournemouth University, UK

The Aga Khan University (AKU) clearly values teaching quality and teaching effectiveness and has applied the PSF to develop an institutional culture of teaching excellence. Although a different context to my own institution, Bournemouth University, a UK university with international reach, AKU's use of the PSF to recognise and reward staff in their learning and teaching practice resonates with our own strategy of excellence in education. AKU has used a systematic approach to embedding the PSF in its policies and practice across its entire portfolio, which is incentivising and rewarding teaching enhancement and innovation. As a step to maintain a high standard of teaching and learning, the university may consider monitoring and review of the PSF at discipline level and create more opportunities for cross-disciplinary sharing of practice. This is an approach we have used at Bournemouth University by creating an ecosystem of educational enhancement for student success, and by embedding the PSF within our university's mission, policies and processes.

7 References

Dawson, D, Quinney, A and Welch, J (2019, unpublished) *External peer unit review of AKU's network of quality, teaching and learning*. Global: The Aga Khan University.

Spowart, L, Turner, R, Dismore, H, Beckmann, E, Carkett, R and Khamis, T (2020) *Assessing the impact of accreditation on institutions*. Plymouth: University of Plymouth.



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