

Demonstrating and developing leadership through Principal Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy: a personal account



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Many universities are encouraging staff to gain a level of Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) for a number of reasons, not least anticipation that this could be one of the metrics included in the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework. Principal Fellowship is one way to demonstrate a level of leadership as it 'reflects a sustained record of effective strategic leadership in academic practice and academic development as a key contribution to high quality student learning'¹ and can also be a way of developing leadership, as I hope to demonstrate. I gained Principal Fellowship in 2013 and was the first person in my institution to do so, as well as being the first librarian to be accredited as such by the HEA.

I applied because I felt it was important to show how libraries support the whole learning and teaching effort of the university both through the provision of services based on evidence-based planning and decision-making, and directly through interactions with students and staff in person or online. It seemed to me that, as many librarians are able managers and leaders working within their organisations and in close collaboration with others, these aspects of library work should be eminently demonstrable. Principal Fellowship is not about role but about showing impact.

I had initially considered applying for Senior Fellowship (D3) but felt that Principal Fellowship (D4) actually seemed easier to evidence, and more appropriate for my level within the organisation. Evidence at this level can be 'further away' and can be at an institutional level rather than directly with students – for example, 'successful strategic leadership to enhance student learning...' (D4), rather than 'successful engagement in appropriate teaching practices...' (D3). My background as a subject librarian was helpful as I could show movement from designing, planning, delivering and assessing learners to strategic leadership of an academic support service. Librarians with backgrounds in systems or more general management will have a different journey, although membership of university committees that set policy in these areas may be helpful. The emphasis here is very much on how what you do improves learning and teaching within the organisation. My application explored the crossover between librarianship, education and management and the points at which these converge to produce integrated academic practice.

Principal Fellow applications need to demonstrate a sustained record of impact at a strategic level. This can be within an institution(s) or within a professional body or organisation. The impact would normally be beyond the institutional setting and at a national, or international, level. So work with bodies such as SCONUL can provide good evidence of national impact. International impact is not mandatory but work with IFLA and writing for journals were two areas of evidence I used.

The process

Principal Fellowship is gained either through an internal institutional route or through direct application to the HEA (which is the route I took). The direct application route requires successful submission of an Account of Professional Practice (APP) plus three Advocate Statements. The APP consists of a commentary covering four areas based on the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF):

- Successful strategic leadership to enhance student learning
- Establishing organisational policies and / or strategies for supporting and promoting others
- Championing an integrated approach to academic practice
- Continuing professional development

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This is backed up by evidence in the form of a Record of Educational Impact (REI), which is a description of different areas of engagement, and three Advocate Statements. Unlike the CILIP Fellowship process, which required a substantial amount of evidence and a short, reflective commentary, this takes the opposite approach as the main focus is the extended (5000–7000 words) APP.

It was important to remind myself that I was writing for a non-librarian audience and to explain some of the terms used, such as information and digital literacy. The REI ideally covers a 5-year time-span, but the process is flexible enough that older activity can be included – particularly when you are showing a developmental progression in values and service.

Developing leadership

Since gaining Principal Fellowship I have become more involved in our internal APEX programme. APEX (Academic Professional Excellence Framework) provides internal pathways to professional recognition, which are accredited by the HEA. On successful completion, staff have both a University of Portsmouth APEX Fellowship and the nationally recognised Fellowship of the HEA. My role within APEX is as an assessor and a representative of professional services on the validation panel. I have also helped deliver sessions for aspiring Senior and Principal Fellows, sharing my experience of the process. Externally I have written Advocate Statements for other librarians and helped deliver a SCONUL Fellowship Workshop.

On a personal level, although it was difficult to find time to manage the process, it gave me the space to think about my values, the values inherent in library services, how these are demonstrated and how all this integrates with the wider institution. As someone who has a predominantly activist learning style, I found this space for reflection very welcome.

Gaining Principal Fellowship demonstrates to the institution that the library service is an integral part of the learning and teaching function, as it demonstrates how what we do enhances student learning. Although many teaching colleagues do recognise this, it can be helpful to remind senior managers. At a time when a number of library services are being managed by a Chief Operating Officer or similar, there is a danger that we are seen as part of the infrastructure rather than part of the learning process.

Principal Fellowship also shows a level of engagement as it is aimed at staff with responsibility for leadership at a senior level within and beyond the institution. At a time when libraries are often reporting at lower levels within organisations, it reminds senior management that the services we offer and our responsibilities are significant and that they are recognised by an independent, external higher education body. I had already gained CILIP Fellowship, but the significance of this is not always readily understood within the wider academy, whereas the HEA is familiar and well recognised.

Since becoming an assessor for our in-house accreditation programme, I have found that my knowledge about the wider organisation and some of the excellent practices taking place has increased. Synergies can arise between librarians and other learning support staff, as well as faculty-based academic staff. As the spokesperson for the non-faculty staff, I afford the library an input to the process on behalf of the relatively small cohort of professional services staff who deliver teaching.

Finally, the library has a good record of encouraging and providing development opportunities for staff. Gaining Principal Fellowship, and encouraging others to gain Fellowship, further demonstrates our commitment to our staff. Fellowship accreditation provides a role model to library staff and

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others – indeed, there is emphasis within the process on being a role model and mentor and on championing the elements of the UKPSF (UK Professional Standards Framework).

Principal Fellows are still relatively rare, so your organisation will be interested in staff achieving this recognition. Leading the way from the library demonstrates our learning-focused credentials.

Reference

- 1 Principal Fellow Guidance Notes <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/download/principal-fellow-guidance-and-application-template> [Accessed 01 March 2016]

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