

Strengthening the reward of university teaching: learning from effective institutional practice

Project outline – July 2026

Growing numbers of universities worldwide are working to strengthen how university teaching is valued and rewarded in academic careers. These wide-ranging reforms include changes to the design of academic career pathways and appointment/promotion criteria, as well as the ways in which university teaching is evaluated and supported. Despite the scale and ambition of many such activities, it is often difficult to gauge the extent to which changes in **policy** have led to real improvements in institutional **practice**. The success of these reforms ultimately rests on how they are experienced by the academic community: whether academics recognise a change in institutional decision-making and perceive a shift in the university's norms, values and priorities. The Teaching Cultures Survey¹ (TCS) is designed to provide this evidence.

In each of three surveys between 2019 and 2025, the TCS gathered the views of more than 12,000 academics on how university teaching is valued and rewarded at their institutions. The dataset is distinctive not only in its scale but in the community from which it is drawn: 17 research-intensive universities from diverse global contexts that have each engaged in sustained efforts to strengthen the reward of university teaching. The findings from the three survey waves are brought together in the 2026 TCS report², which provides a unique picture of the progress and nature of institutional reform. Across the participating institutions, the report identifies both areas of particular strength and areas of substantial progress over the six years of the survey. It also identifies a set of consistent factors that appear to shape academics' views and experiences irrespective of institutional context. However, while the survey pinpoints **what** positive outcomes and relationships exist, it cannot explain **how** these outcomes were achieved or **why** these underlying relationships occur. And, crucially, the survey cannot therefore offer insight into the institutional strategies and practices associated with positive change.

This study will move behind the survey data to answer these questions. Through in-depth qualitative case studies at the universities where positive outcomes and relationships are most pronounced, the synthesis report will explore the institutional strategies and academic experiences that lie behind the TCS findings. In particular, the study will address two central questions:

- A. What institutional strategies and conditions underpin successful efforts to strengthen the reward of university teaching – and what can other universities learn from these approaches?
- B. What are the factors shaping academics' views of how university teaching is valued and rewarded – and what can these tell us about the levers for driving cultural change?

The case studies will be organised into two strands – Section A and Section B – corresponding to the two questions given above. Each case study will focus on a specific finding from the TCS, drawing on interviews with academics and university leaders from across several participating universities.

Section A. Effective institutional strategies to strengthen the value and reward of university teaching

Across the 17 participating universities, the TCS dataset identifies distinct pockets of high performance and rapid improvement: institutions that perform particularly well or have improved markedly over time on specific measures of how university teaching is valued and rewarded. For each survey measure selected for case study investigation, the study will identify the universities demonstrating the strongest outcomes in the TCS data and use qualitative case studies to understand how those

outcomes were achieved. The case studies will identify the institutional strategies, priorities and conditions associated with these positive outcomes and explore what the wider higher education community can learn from these effective approaches. Initial analysis of the TCS data suggests that three survey measures are particularly strong candidates for case study investigation:

1. *How have universities strengthened the role of university teaching in appointment and promotion decisions?*
2. *How have universities increased the prominence given to university teaching in academics' annual performance reviews?*
3. *How have universities strengthened the status and career advancement prospects of education-focused academic roles?*

Section B. The factors shaping academics' views of how university teaching is valued and rewarded

The 2026 TCS report² identified a key set of factors that appear to play a pivotal role in shaping academics' views of how university teaching is rewarded, regardless of institutional context. Understanding why these relationships occur will offer important insights into how universities can improve academics' experiences of how university teaching is rewarded as well as identify the most effective levers for change. Three particular questions have emerged as strong candidates for case study investigation:

1. *Why do academics' views of their department leaders serve as such a powerful indicator of how they perceive wider institutional cultures, priorities and practices?*
2. *Why do early- and mid-career academics report markedly less positive experiences of how university teaching is valued and rewarded than their senior colleagues?*
3. *Why are university teaching cultures consistently stronger in institutions where education-focused and research-and-teaching academics are aligned in their views?*

Study design and outputs

The primary output will be a synthesis report designed to provide practical, evidence-based insights for universities seeking to strengthen the value and reward of university teaching. It will be informed by thematic case studies, each examining a specific TCS finding through evidence gathered from one or more participating universities. It is anticipated that six case studies will be undertaken in all, three from each section of the study. The primary source of evidence will be interviews with academics and institutional leaders drawn from universities where the TCS outcomes and relationships are strongest. Participating universities may choose whether to be identified by name or to remain anonymous. All universities named in the report will be invited to review relevant draft material to identify any errors or omissions prior to publication.

The report will form part of the *Advancing Teaching*³ suite of outputs and will be made freely available as an open-access resource. The study will be led by Dr Ruth Graham and co-funded by a consortium of universities and organisations, whose representatives will form the project advisory group. Interim findings will be presented and discussed at the next *Advancing Teaching* meeting, in October 2027.

¹ Teaching Cultures Survey: www.teachingcultures.com

² *Advancing the Reward of University Teaching: insights from three waves of the Teaching Cultures Survey (2026 report)*: <https://www.teachingcultures.com/Findings/>

³ Advancing Teaching: www.advancingteaching.com