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Bonuses cause concern that students may get an easy ride

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Critics fear that giving teachers cash based on class satisfaction will damage standards. Jon Marcus reports

A number of US universities are offering cash bonuses to academics based on student evaluations. The payments are designed to raise the profile of teaching after years in which research has been more highly valued.

But some faculty critics argue that the move will encourage academics to pander to students at the expense of good teaching.

Proponents say that in the present economic climate, students need reassurance that they are getting the most out of their university tuition.

"The only people who could possibly fear a bonus system based on student satisfaction are those who fear being held accountable by the customers who pay their salaries," said Brooke Leslie Rollins, president of the free-market research institute the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The institute agitated for one of the most high-profile bonus programmes, at Texas A&M University. Last month, 80 professors at the institution who chose to participate received bonuses ranging from \$2,500 (£1,740) to \$10,000 each, based on evaluations they received from students during the autumn term.

The university's faculty senate opposed the bonus plan, which has cost it \$1.1 million so far, and several professors have criticised the involvement of a conservative political group in educational policy.

But the criticism did not stop 500 of the first 1,800 eligible academics from applying for the bonuses.

The University of Oklahoma has a similar programme for its colleges of business and engineering, whose scholars are being awarded up to \$10,000 based on student evaluations. Academics at Kent State University in Ohio receive bonuses if the student retention rate goes up.

Several schools avoid using the word "bonus" because of its negative connotations in the current economic climate. At Texas A&M, for example, the bonuses are called Teaching Excellence Awards.

A deserving class

Frank Ashley, Texas A&M's vice-chancellor for academic affairs, explained the rationale for the awards. Unlike research faculty, "the people who are actually in the classroom doing all the teaching don't get any perks", he said. "They usually get the lowest salaries."

The 16 evaluation questions used in the award scheme were devised with the help of administrators, academics and students, he said.

To be eligible for a bonus, a professor must teach a class of at least 15 students, at least two thirds of whom must fill in the evaluation. This ensures that academics who teach the most classes with the highest enrolment levels are rewarded, Dr Ashley said.

But Clint Magill, professor of genetics at Texas A&M, argued that if teaching staff were underpaid, they should simply be given pay rises.

He added that bonuses encouraged academics to try to win over students in ways that may not have anything to do with good teaching.

"Ask 100 professors or laypeople what they think would be the easiest way to raise scores on teaching evaluations, and you can guess the answer they would all give," he said. "There is the perception, whether it is true or not, that if you are trying to win a \$10,000 prize, you could help yourself by giving higher grades or throwing your students a party."

But Dr Ashley argued that there was no evidence to support this position.

"It insults me as a professor to think that I would lower the requirements of my class to get a Teaching Excellence Award," he said.

"The biggest complaint we've had is that you shouldn't use student evaluations as a sole source for faculty evaluations, which I agree with," Dr Ashley added.

"If I am looking at tenure or promotion, I wouldn't base it solely on student evaluations. This is just something that we can do to reward good teaching."

Not all the bonus plans are aimed at rewarding teaching. Under its Success Bonus Pool, Kent State's faculty members also share 2 per cent of growth in fundraising revenue beyond a certain level, and 10 per cent of any increase in research income.

It is no coincidence that these are measures used in the US' all-important university rankings.

The University of Arkansas, too, provides bonuses to academics who bring in research grants.

Bonus backlash

A few of these programmes have got the same sour reception as the bonuses paid to executives of corporations, including failed banks.

News that academics at the University of Florida College of Medicine received \$7.6 million in bonuses last year has caused uproar on campus, where budget cuts portend layoffs and slashed academic programmes.

At the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Jon Gow, the chancellor, has proposed suspending its Star Fund bonus programme for recruiting and retaining standout academics because of budgetary problems. The money saved will be spent on financial aid for students.