How teaching academies promote interdisciplinary communities of practice: The Helsinki case

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ABSTRACT: Universities invest in teaching academies to reward outstanding teachers. Few studies have been published about the impact of teaching academies on teaching communities. The aim of this study was to see who excellent academic teachers spoke to when they discussed teaching and learning, and what kind of community a Teachers’ Academy established in 2013 offered to its Fellows. We analysed the answers to two open-ended questions from two surveys. The first survey (2013) was addressed to first-round applicants to the Academy in 2013 (N = 46, 32%) and the second (2018) to its Fellows (N = 56, 65%). In both surveys, most teachers had meaningful discussions with their close colleagues. In the second survey, the conversations with pedagogical experts merged with the discussions at the Academy. The 2018 survey also examined how well the Academy’s key objectives of providing teachers with an interdisciplinary community and peer support had been achieved in five years. The Academy had become an important community for teachers, in which teachers shared mutual appreciation for teaching and collaborated across disciplinary boundaries and campuses. A challenge for

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
Teachers and students are the most valuable resource of universities. Becoming an excellent university teacher requires not only scientific excellence, but also a deep interest in student learning, inspiring discussions and sharing ideas with peers. We studied teachers’ conversation partners and the community that the Teachers’ Academy, established in 2013, offered to its Fellows. Teachers reported meaningful conversations with colleagues, pedagogical experts, students and family members. Five years later, Academy Fellows reported inspiring, interdisciplinary conversations with teachers appointed to the Academy. In five years, Teachers’ Academy had become not only a reward system but an important community for its Fellows, in which they could discuss and share their enthusiasm for teaching and learning and collaborate across disciplines and campuses. Our research findings suggest that many universities would benefit from our experiences, rewarding excellent teachers, encouraging them work collaboratively across disciplines and campuses to create new learning culture at universities.
A teaching academy is to support its fellows in implementing the principles of scholarship of teaching and learning, that is, carrying out scholarly educational projects and sharing the results locally, nationally and internationally.

**Subjects: Interpersonal Communication; Higher Education Management; Study of Higher Education**

**KEYWORDS:** teaching academy; community of practice; scholarship of teaching and learning; conversation

1. **Introduction**

An important trend in pursuing teaching excellence in higher education has been that universities have established teaching academies to promote the appreciation of teaching and to reward outstanding teachers (Chism et al., 1996; Olsson & Roxå, 2013). Academies give excellent teachers important recognition for their work, an inspiring discussion forum, and a community that enables its members to communicate and operate beyond individual departments and faculties, thus fostering the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas and experiences on innovative teaching (Chism et al., 1996). It is important for the members of the teaching academies that the fellowship is valued throughout the university community, and the fellows receive official recognition for the broad excellence in their educational roles (Searle et al., 2010). Irby et al. (2004) have emphasised that the members of these academies should be selected through a rigorous peer review process that assesses their contribution to teaching, curriculum development and management, and educational research. Academies have been a major investment in university teaching, but so little research has reported findings on their impact on members and teaching communities.

In most cases, teaching academies are based on the principles of the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), requiring Fellows not only to demonstrate excellent teaching practices and course evaluation, but also to pursue a scholarly perspective on study and student learning (Irby et al., 2004). Boyer (1990) defined that the scholarship of teaching included outstanding academic teaching in which the teacher not only transferred information but critically collected, processed and synthesised it, and presented it in an expanded form to students. L.S. Shulman (1987), L. Shulman (1993) and Hutchings (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999) extended the concept of teaching scholarship to cover student learning. Trigwell et al. (2000) further expressed that scholarship required teachers to be familiar with the key research literature on teaching and learning, implemented educational knowledge in their teaching, investigated student learning and their own teaching, related their observations with those in the educational literature and communicated their work in a peer-reviewed format (See also Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; L.S. Shulman, 1987; L. Shulman, 1993). Later, Felten (2013) stated that the student perspective was central to SoTL: it required both an emphasis on research for student learning and scholarly work done in collaboration with students.

Kreber (2002) said that in SoTL, teachers’ innovations should not only be disseminated in prestigious academic circles and published in international journals, but also should be shared locally, where the teaching and learning took place, among teachers and students. Thus, the development of teaching and learning could not be seen as a personal endeavour of an individual teacher, but as an academic collaboration that emerged and evolved in discussions between teachers (Boud, 1999; Boud & Brew, 2013; Gibbs, 2013; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; L.S. Shulman, 1987; Mårtensson et al., 2011; Pyörälä et al., 2015).

As discussions between teachers were so essential to the scholarly development of teaching, it was important to examine how teachers collaborated and what they talked about when developing teaching together. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) sought to answer these questions in their study, in which they explored with whom teachers discussed teaching and what was characteristic...
of those conversations. They reported that academic teachers had intellectually intriguing and valuable conversations about teaching with a small number of people with whom they shared ideas and tested and constructed new conceptual understanding. The conversations were confidential, based on mutual trust and were crucial to enhancing teaching and learning cultures (Roxå et al., 2011). Teachers often had these conversations behind the scenes of the teaching arena, in break rooms and closed offices, rather than in formal, public arenas (Pyörälä et al., 2015; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009).

Thomson and Trigwell (2018) explored informal conversations between mid-career academics and identified several categories of conversation, such as managing and improving teaching, and reassuring and ventilating teaching practices. Teachers rarely referred to conversations that changed their thinking about teaching. The authors encouraged researchers to explore in more detail, how the discussions fostered teachers’ scholarly thinking about teaching and learning.

Academic communities are still largely divided by discipline and becoming a member of a research community plays an important part in building a professional academic identity. Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) observed that about half of teachers’ conversational partners were found inside the teachers’ disciplinary community. If their local context was intellectually and emotionally stimulating, the number of significant others in the administrative unit increased. However, teacher networks did not necessarily adhere to organisational, departmental, or disciplinary boundaries.

Moreover, Mårtensson et al. (2011) discovered that diverse and interdisciplinary collaboration provided teachers with important new impulses that developed their educational thinking and supported their scholarly development. This fitted well with the idea of communities of practice (CoP) developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), in which community members had different backgrounds and competencies but had a common interest and goal (Wenger, 2000). Barab et al. (2002) defined a community of practice as a persistent, sustaining social network of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, a set of beliefs, values, history, and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise (Steinert, 2020).

In the academic context, CoPs could play an important role in stimulating educational development and fostering SoTL. CoPs could provide teachers from different disciplines with interesting perspectives on teaching and learning, as well as the opportunity to share experiences, practices, and a mutual interest in teaching. When teachers collaborated between disciplines and units, they were able to develop fresh approaches to educational challenges (Gibbs, 2013). Teachers established CoPs in both formal and informal settings. The formal contexts in which they emerged were pedagogical courses and workshops offered by universities. In addition, they evolved through informal teacher meetings and networks of enthusiastic teachers. Becoming a member of one or more academic CoPs could be a critical step in becoming a better university teacher (Steinert, 2010, 2020).

1.1. A teaching academy at the university of Helsinki

The University of Helsinki (UH) invested in teaching for three decades mainly by offering pedagogical courses to its teachers. Many teachers completed these courses, even though they were voluntary. The 2010s were the time to introduce new ways to show appreciation for teaching. In 2012, UH decided to take an important step to enhance the value of teaching in the academic community by establishing its Teachers’ Academy to reward teaching excellence and create an inspiring community for teachers across all disciplines and campuses.

When outlining the UH Teachers’ Academy, international models of academic reward systems were studied and the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) was chosen as the theoretical framework for the Academy (Boyer, 1990; Felten, 2013; Hutchings. & Shulman, 1999; Kreber, 2002; L.S. Shulman, 1987; Trigwell et al., 2000). The international examples of teaching academies
showed that it was necessary not only to reward outstanding teachers but also to support creating an interdisciplinary community of practice through which teachers could share their enthusiasm and collaboratively foster innovative teaching (Chism et al., 1996; Searle et al., 2010; Steinert, 2020).

Teachers seek to become members by applying for a Fellowship in an application round by submitting a teaching portfolio that provides clear evidence and documentation of the applicant’s excellence in the continuous development of teaching and supervision, practices that improve student learning outcomes, ability to produce up-to-date learning materials, and foster collaborative development of teaching and learning. The Fellows are selected through a rigorous peer review process. Those appointed to the Academy are awarded with a permanent Academy Fellowship and a grant (€20,000). In addition to the personal grant given to teachers elected to the Academy, their administrative units are rewarded with a grant (€30,000) for educational development.

In the first application round, 30 out of 132 applicants were selected as the Inaugural Fellows of the Teachers’ Academy. New Fellows were initially elected once a year and every two years from 2015. At the beginning of 2021, the Academy had 86 Fellows. Since 2013, the number of applicants has varied from between 62 and 132 and the proportion of appointed Fellows between 10% and 29%.

The Teachers’ Academy forms a university-wide interdisciplinary network led by a steering group elected from among the Fellows for two years. The Academy has taken university level initiatives, such as a proposal for developing a career path for university lecturers. Since the beginning, the Academy has collaborated with senior lecturers in university pedagogy and the Centre for University Teaching and Learning, whose research and teaching staff act as expert members of the Academy.

The UH Teachers’ Academy has established thematic groups that have developed active learning and assessment methods, created innovative learning environments, invested in mentoring young university teachers, and supported educational leadership and interdisciplinary learning. The most influential achievements of the Academy include the formulation and publication of the university’s teaching philosophy at the end of 2014 and the interdisciplinary research project on assessment in higher education (Myyry et al., 2020, 2021).

Several Fellows of the Academy have been appointed by their faculties or administrative units to work in key teaching development roles. Many of them are heads of degree programs or members of the degree program management team. In addition, they contribute to university, faculty and unit level working groups for the development of teaching and learning. Academy Fellows meet at four campuses at least twice a semester to share educational practices, innovations, and challenges. They contribute to the organisation of educational development events at the university.

Grants awarded to Fellows and their administrative units have increased participation in national and international education conferences, enabled visits to international units through which new refreshing scholarly contacts and collaborations have emerged. In addition, the grant for the unit has been used to organize educational development events, to invite international scholars to the unit and to provide inspiring workshops for the teaching and learning community.

One of the specific features of the UH Teachers’ Academy selection criteria was that the applicant had to demonstrate that they had developed teaching and learning through systematic collaboration and interaction with teachers, researchers and students. Because collaboration and interaction were such important criteria, we wanted to examine how teachers collaborated, with whom, and what they discussed when developing teaching and learning. A qualitative study by Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) on teachers’ significant networks and meaningful conversations was an excellent example for exploring these themes. Inspired by that research, we collected the first set of data from the first-round applicants of the Teachers’ Academy in early 2013 and published
the results in 2015 (Pyörälä et al., 2015). The second set of data was collected in 2018 from the Fellows of the Academy after the Academy had been in operation for five years.

1.2. Aims of the study

This exploratory case study was related to the Teachers’ Academy, the time of its establishment, and the situation five years later. One of the goals of the Academy was to create an inspiring community for outstanding teachers and to increase collaboration between teachers throughout the university. The aim of our study was to see with whom excellent teachers held discussions with when they talked about teaching and learning. Given the limited research findings on the impact of academies on teaching communities, we also set assessing whether the Academy’s goal of providing a stimulating, interdisciplinary community for the Fellows was achieved within five years as one of our aims. More specifically, we wanted to answer the following research questions:

(1) With whom did the Fellowship applicants and Fellows have meaningful conversations about teaching and learning?

(2) What did Fellowship applicants and Fellows talk about when they discussed teaching and learning?

(3) Did the Academy provide Fellows with an inspiring discussion forum and an interdisciplinary community that supported their work?

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Research context

The University of Helsinki is an academic community of about 4,200 teachers and researchers and 31,600 students in 11 faculties across four campuses. UH is a research-intensive multidisciplinary university, where research has traditionally been valued more than teaching in the recruitment and promotion of academic staff. For several decades, however, the university has offered university pedagogy courses which teachers have taken voluntarily. In 2012, UH established its Teachers’ Academy to improve the status of teaching, the quality of student learning, and to provide an interdisciplinary community for teachers.

2.2. Participants

This study compared teachers’ meaningful conversations about teaching and learning between two groups of teachers, Fellowship applicants and Fellows of the Teachers’ Academy (Table 1). The target groups of the two surveys were similar but not identical. The first survey in 2013 was answered by teachers who applied for Fellowship in the first application round. 71% of them were appointed Fellows in 2013–2017. The second survey was answered by those appointed as Fellows in 2013–2017 and the survey was conducted in 2018, after the Teachers’ Academy had been operating for five years. Respondents were asked for informed consent for the study and their anonymity was secured throughout the research process.

In both surveys, two-thirds of the participants were women. The respondents represented a good cross-section of the faculties, institutes and disciplines at UH. They were dedicated teachers, with a history of developing teaching and learning in their disciplines, units and faculties. Almost all respondents had completed a considerable amount of university pedagogical studies.

Respondents were experienced teachers, second-round respondents even more experienced than the first round. In the first round, 67% of the respondents had more than ten years’ teaching experience and 28% more than 20 years. In the second round, the corresponding figures were 42% and 52%. Most respondents in both rounds were university lecturers or clinical teachers but some were full professors.
## Table 1. Background information of the respondents of the two surveys

| Cohort (Year) | N   | Total number (Applicants/Members) | Female | Male | Academic position (Four categories/ percentage) | Experience (years/percentage) |
|---------------|-----|-----------------------------------|--------|------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2013 Applicants | 46  | 132                               | 32     | 14   | university teacher 13% | <10 5 |
|               |     |                                   |        |      | university lecturer, clinical teacher, assistant professor 67% | >10 67 |
|               |     |                                   |        |      | full professor 13% | >20 28 |
|               |     |                                   |        |      | Other 4% | 
| 2018 Fellows  | 52  | 80                                | 34     | 18   | university teacher 0% | 6-10 6 |
|               |     |                                   |        |      | university lecturer, clinical teacher, assistant professor 75% | >10 42 |
|               |     |                                   |        |      | full professor 8% | >20 52 |
|               |     |                                   |        |      | Other 17% |
2.3. Data and analysis

The study was based on two online surveys. The questionnaires were not identical, but they contained the same two open-ended questions about with whom the teachers had had meaningful conversations about teaching and learning and what they had talked about in those discussions.

The first survey in 2013 was sent to all first-time applicants to the Teachers’ Academy (N = 132), of whom 32% (N = 46) responded. This survey was extensive and included questions about teachers’ perceptions of quality teaching and learning, approaches to teaching and learning, the impact of university pedagogical courses on teaching, and questions about teachers’ networks and conversations. The second survey was conducted at the turn of 2017 and 2018 and was sent to all Academy Fellows appointed in 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2017 (N = 80). The response rate was 65% (N = 56). The survey consisted of statements asking respondents to rate on a five-point scale how well the Academy’s goals had been achieved. It also included the same open-ended questions about teaching networks and conversations that we had in 2013 survey.

We examined teachers’ answers to identical open-ended questions in two datasets using content analysis, a research method traditionally used to quantify extensive textual data by counting the number of cases belonging to categories set by researchers (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Mayring, 2014). In this study, we used qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Vais moradi et al., 2013), which can be applied to the study of textual data and interviews (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Mayring, 2014). The creation of categories is at the heart of qualitative content analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In this study, we formed categories inductively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), which required immersion in teachers’ responses and the formation of categories based on them. When refinements to categories were needed, we returned to teachers’ original responses and make corrections accordingly (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

First, we separated the teachers’ qualitative responses from the quantitative survey data. We read the textual data several times and started open coding for creating preliminary categories, which were then grouped and similar categories were merged. Each answer could contain several codes and thus belong to several categories. For example, if a teacher mentioned more than one interlocutor, such as close colleagues, family members, and students, the same answer was divided into three categories (1) colleague, (2) family member, and (3) student. Some of the categories, such as the colleague category, could include several conversational partners. Teachers had valuable ongoing dialogue with close colleagues in their own teaching units, while discussions with national and international colleagues were less frequent but inspiring and provided an opportunity to reflect on their teaching and educational topics at the national and international levels. We ended up splitting colleagues into two categories. In this way, we examined the responses from the two surveys and compared the results, looking for similarities and differences, and ensured that all teachers’ interlocutors fit into a category and did not fall between them. We present the results of the content analysis both as data extracts that provide examples of different categories and as relative proportions of the categories in both data sets, allowing a comparison between them.

One of the Academy’s selection criteria was the applicant’s collaborative way of developing teaching and one of its goals was to provide a stimulating, interdisciplinary community for teachers. Thus, in the 2018 survey, in addition to the answers to two open-ended questions, we calculated the means and standard deviations for the responses to the questions in which we asked Fellows to rate how well the Academy had achieved its goals. Responses were aggregated on the five-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = nor disagree or agree, 4 = somewhat agree, 5 = completely agree). Among these statements, there were questions about teaching communities and collaboration.
3. Results

3.1. Meaningful conversations about teaching and learning

When we formed the categories of conversational partners the teachers reported in 2013 and 2018, we found that they were similar in both surveys (Figure 1). Almost all respondents reported discussions with several partners. However, the number of references to different categories varied between the two surveys. Teachers’ important conversation partners were close colleagues, national and international colleagues, pedagogical teachers and peers in pedagogical courses, other Fellows in the Teachers’ Academy, students, family members and friends. A notable change in the responses in 2018 was that conversations with Fellows of the Academy had overtaken discussions with senior lecturers in university pedagogy and peers in pedagogical courses. Examples of teachers’ responses to open-ended questions in the 2013 and 2018 surveys are shown in Table 2.

In both surveys, the most important conversation partners were close colleagues (62% in 2013, 72% in 2018). Moreover, the topics and nature of these discussions were similar. It was important for teachers to share their ideas about teaching with like-minded colleagues with whom they were able to talk freely, on a low threshold, about both practical issues related to teaching and ideas for improving teaching as they evolved. Thus, teachers were able to brainstorm with colleagues and work together with potentially new, creative solutions. In addition, close colleagues allowed teachers to ventilate challenging situations confidentially with students, workload, and frustration about constant change.

In addition to close colleagues, teachers valued their colleagues in national and international contexts. In 2013, 28% and in 2018, 21% of respondents reported national and international colleagues as being important discussion partners. Respondents appreciated their ability to discuss and reflect on the development of education and assessment as well as degree reforms nationally and internationally. Some respondents played an active role in national and international scientific organizations, and it was interesting that educational development was discussed in these organizations. International contacts were important for active teachers with an extensive network at Helsinki University and nationwide. Some respondents reported that there were few teachers in their field at their own university and nationally. For these teachers, contacts with international colleagues, discussions and exchanges of ideas with them were particularly rewarding and could lead to international teaching experiments.

![Figure 1. Teachers’ meaningful conversational partners at the launch of the Teachers’ Academy and five years thereafter, expressed as percentages of coded references in relation to the number of respondents in two qualitative data.](image-url)
| Close colleagues | 2013 | “We design courses together, discuss and test ideas for alternative teaching methods with each other. We discuss the assessment of learning, whether exams can and should be replaced by other types of assignments and whether exam questions can be formulated in a way that does not test rote memory. You dare to implement new kinds of practices when the idea has been tested on a few smart people. And after all, teaching and learning are interesting topics.” |
| National and international colleagues | 2013 | “Teaching, teaching techniques, assessment, practical training and Europe-wide harmonization of education. All are important issues, and discussions always have had an impact on the curriculum reforms and implementation of education.” |
| Pedagogical experts | 2013 | “When you teach at a university, it is vitally important to achieve a theoretical background in teaching and learning. It has helped me to give students a rationale for the learning methods I have chosen and given me self-confidence … I discuss (teaching and learning) with other university lecturers in my own faculty and with the senior lecturer in university pedagogy … With the pedagogical lecturer the discussions are more theoretical since we have co-authored several publications.” |
| 2018 | “We talk about everything between earth and sky. Teaching formats and methods, teaching techniques, assessment, learning and paradigms in general…” |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Students | 2013 | “Primarily, I talk with students. They are by far the most important conversational partners. The students are SO smart.”  
“I talk to students about their thinking and development ideas, learning technology, and new learning environments.” |
| 2018 | “I talk with my lovely and infinitely talented students about 80% of the time, 10%: with my wife (she is lovely too <3), 10% with some great colleagues, practically all of whom are Fellows of the Academy.” |
| Family members and friends | 2013 | “I have three children, all of whom are university students. They often bring me back to earth in terms of teaching and give me valuable perspectives on students” wishes, interests, needs, concerns and fears.” |
| 2018 | “First, with friends who are active in my disciplinary organisation, secondly with students, thirdly with my wife, and fourthly with other friends who are interested in teaching and learning.” |
| Teachers’ Academy Fellows | 2018 | “Assessment, essay writing, digitalisation, finding suitable teaching materials, etc. Everything.”  
“At the Teachers” Academy, we talk about everything possible, especially in thematic groups about their themes. There is just too little time to get involved in everything you want. Then we talk about exam practices, essay writing, the Flipped classroom, workplace learning, entrance exams.”  
“(We talk about) the non-existent opportunity for university lecturers to advance in their academic careers. The salary criteria are obscure and unfair. No merit seems to increase your salary, the fact that you are a docent, that you have been evaluated as being qualified for a professorship at two universities and have taken responsibility for the professor’s duties…” |
In 2013, one-third (30%) of respondents reported that conversations with pedagogical experts and peers in pedagogical courses were inspiring to them. The courses, which were attended by teachers from a range of disciplines, provided important new insights into academic teaching and learning and course participants were in contact with each other long after completing the courses. Pedagogical experts supported teachers in advancing their conceptual thinking on teaching and learning. A few respondents described their educational research projects with pedagogical experts and reported that collaboration with and support from a pedagogical expert had been crucial in adopting a new research paradigm and publishing educational research. Five years after the establishment of the Academy, these discussions were still important for some of its Fellows, although there were fewer references to these conversations (15%) than in 2013.

In the 2013, more than a quarter of the teachers (28%) emphasised that they had valuable discussions about teaching and learning with students. They were excited that the students were so active and innovative. In the 2018 responses, there were fewer references (15%) to discussions with students but for some teachers, students were again important, invigorating and inspiring conversational partners. In both surveys, teachers’ responses highlighted that students were positive about new learning environments and encouraged teachers to integrate new technologies into their teaching.

Stimulating conversations spread from campuses to the daily lives of teachers. In 2013, 20% of respondents discussed teaching and learning with their family members and friends, and in 2018, 15% of respondents. They had interesting conversations with their academic spouses and their children who studied at the university. With them, teachers were able to reflect on their teaching experiences, test their educational ideas, and gain down-to-earth perspectives on teaching and student learning.

In 2018, five years had passed since the founding of the Teachers’ Academy. More than half (57%) of the respondents reported having had inspiring and rewarding discussions with members of the Academy. Fellows felt that in the Academy they were among their own “tribe”, where their enthusiasm about teaching was allowed and valued. Fellows discussed both practical teaching and broad educational topics. Special thematic groups had been set up at the Academy to focus on pedagogical themes such as assessment. In these groups, Fellows worked across disciplinary and faculty boundaries to create new practices. In addition, Fellows discussed the career path initiative for university lecturers and the challenges of academic careers, for which many felt in the same position.

The responses to the 2018 survey reflected substantial educational changes at the university, such as the reform of all curricula in 2015. Several respondents were in key leadership roles, such as degree program leaders, working group chairs, and education development group members. In these roles, they worked hard to develop studies and to implement pedagogical principles in new degree programs. Their workload increased extensively in 2014–2018. Respondents shared these challenges in conversations with other Fellows, so the Academy also served as a confidential support group for busy educational activists.

3.2. Achieving the academy’s goals of teaching community and collaboration

In the 2018 survey, we asked Fellows to assess from their perspective, how well the Academy had achieved the goals set for it. We used seventeen statements, to which they responded on a five-point Likert scale. We calculated the means and standard deviations of the responses (Figure 2). The statements about the achievement of the Academy’s goals, especially those that referred to community and collaboration, received the highest rates. Respondents almost unanimously agreed that the Academy had provided them with an interesting interdisciplinary community (M = 4.9) and collegial support in educational development (M = 4.8). Moreover, they clearly expressed that the Academy had helped to disseminate good teaching practices across the faculties (M = 4.8). In addition, almost all respondents fully agreed that becoming a Fellow of the Academy had been an important step in their academic careers (M = 4.9). These results were
consistent with the 2018 survey responses to open-ended questions in which Fellows described the positive value of the Academy community to its members.

4. Discussion
It has been suggested in the research literature (e.g., Chism et al., 1996; Irby et al., 2004; Olsson & Roxå, 2013; Searle et al., 2010) that teaching academies are a successful model for universities to recognise and reward outstanding teachers for their work and provide them with a stimulating scholarly community. In our study, the appointment as a Fellow of Teachers’ Academy had been an important step in the respondents’ careers. The Academy was also an inspiring community and important discussion forum for Fellows. Academies have been significant investments by universities, but so far analysis of their impact on teaching communities is hard to find.

A key goal of the UH Teachers’ Academy was to provide teachers with an interdisciplinary community and peer support. The respondents said that as Fellows of the Academy, they had become part of a community in which enthusiasm for teaching and learning was allowed and encouraged. The Academy had become a CoP, where teachers shared mutual interest and appreciation of teaching and collaborated across disciplines and units to develop fresh approaches to educational challenges (Gibbs, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Steinert, 2010, 2020).

Our results were consistent with previous studies in that teachers’ main conversational partners were still colleagues in the discipline, mainly in their own unit (Pyörälä et al., 2015; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). These discussions addressed the practical implementation of teaching from different perspectives. In addition, teachers tested their ideas, aired their views, and discussed challenges with their close colleagues. Discussions with national and international colleagues complemented communication with close colleagues and provided refreshing stimuli (Robson, 2011). For some respondents, interaction with national and international colleagues was the main support for their work.

At its best, the local teaching culture supported teachers’ efforts to develop education (Boud & Brew, 2013; Gibbs, 2013; Mårtensson et al., 2011), but it could also have adverse effects. Ginns et al. (2010) found that a negative attitude or low interest in a teacher’s pedagogical training and development in the local administrative unit reduced their impact on teaching (Gibbs, 2013; Ginns et al., 2010). However, in our previous study (Pyörälä et al., 2015) and the first survey used in this study, we found that pedagogical courses empowered respondents to develop their thinking about teaching and learning and to network with pedagogical experts and like-minded teachers.
Pedagogical experts also supported respondents in designing and publishing the results of their research projects by supporting their progress on their scientific path (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; Trigwell et al., 2000).

Our respondents referred relatively rarely to conducting scholarly educational research and sharing the results in a peer-reviewed format according to the SoTL principles (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999; L.S. Shulman, 1987; L. Shulman, 1993; Trigwell et al., 2000). Such action is a key principle of teaching academies and vital for the development of higher education teaching and learning. For many Fellows, the requirement of publishing peer-reviewed educational research was challenging, especially if their own discipline was science or life sciences. Therefore, in universities setting up teaching academies, it is vital to develop low-threshold ways to share the results of teaching development projects at meetings and seminars at the local and university levels (Kreber, 2002). The Academy’s position in a research-intensive university is strengthened by its Fellows demonstrating the implementation of SoTL by conducting research on teaching and student learning, mirroring their findings with research literature, presenting results at prestigious seminars and conferences and publishing them in peer-reviewed journals.

One thought-provoking finding in our study was that respondents rarely referred to discussions with students and in the latter survey less frequently than in the first. This goes against Felten’s (2013) central principle of SoTL, according to which it is the inquiry of student learning and collaboration with students that should be at the centre of teachers’ scholarly work in higher education (Felten et al., 2019). We reflected on the reasons for this and suggest that the extensive degree reform launched in 2014 placed a significant burden on respondents in responsible roles. They continued to have formal meetings with students in reform working groups, but free discussions might have diminished. However, even in the midst of reform pressures, collegial discussions between teachers cannot replace an inspiring exchange of ideas with students who should always be involved in educational development (Felten et al., 2019). To promote the perspectives presented by Felten (2013), Fellows of the Academies implementing SoTL should also be encouraged to collaborate more intensively with students in the form of joint research projects.

Teachers also reflected on their thoughts on teaching outside the university, in their daily lives. It was important for teachers to discuss their experiences and ideas informally with family and friends, especially if the spouse and friends worked at the university and the children were students. As there are few research findings on informal discussions about academic work with spouses, family members and friends, we suggest that this topic be addressed in future research.

Our study also has some limitations. Firstly, we based our research solely on the responses to two online questionnaires that may limit our findings. Our goal for the future is to repeat the survey after the Academy has been in operation for ten years and to conduct interviews that would allow us to triangulate the findings and potentially gain new perspectives on teachers’ meaningful conversations and their communities of practice. Secondly, selection of participants was based on purposive rather than systematic sampling, from two groups of teachers linked to the Teachers’ Academy. Respondents to the first survey were first-round applicants, but 71% of whom later became members of the Academy. If we had sent a questionnaire in 2013 only to Fellows elected in the first round, there would have been very few respondents, as their total number was 30. The respondents to the second survey in 2018 were Fellows of the Academy. Thirdly, the response rate for the first survey was relatively low (35%), as is often the case in online surveys (Shih & Fan, 2009), although applicants were reminded three times to respond to the survey. In the second survey, the response rate was higher (66%).

In both surveys, the sample of respondents was a good match for the university’s faculties and disciplines. In 2018, we wanted to assess the achievement of the goals set for the Academy five years after its establishment, so we examined 17 statements that allowed Fellows to express how well the goals had been achieved. We found that respondents rated the statements referring to the interdisciplinary community and collaboration across faculty boundaries with the highest ratings.
The purpose of the study was to understand the phenomenon studied and the data were mainly qualitative, answers to open-ended questions from two online surveys. Inductive qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was well suited for this purpose and for such data. We followed the key principles of qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Mayring, 2014; Vaisar moradi et al., 2013), read and immersed ourselves in the data and formed the categories in a data-driven manner.

We evaluated the trustworthiness of our study using the criteria of credibility and transferability (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is established by providing the readers with appropriate information about the study design, course of the study and the rationale for arriving at the presented results (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). To ensure the credibility of this research, we described the background and context of the study, presented the progress of data collection and content analysis, and demonstrated the link between the data and results by providing authentic excerpts from each category. Furthermore, we triangulated the qualitative and quantitative data and the responses to open-ended questions and quantified statements were consistent, mutually supportive, and increased the credibility of the results.

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In principle, the findings of this type of inquiry are specific to a research setting and a small number of participants (Guba, 1981). However, detailed information about the context of the study and the participants allows the findings to be mirrored to similar setting. Many universities face the same challenges as our own university. They seek to improve the quality and value of teaching by investing in teachers' pedagogical training and reward systems. Teaching academies are one way to reward teachers. In addition, teaching academies have a special value for their fellows in that they create an interdisciplinary community that values teaching and inspiring collaboration that, at its best, leads to teaching experiments and scholarly publications. We hope that our findings can be explored and implemented in those universities that are planning to establish similar Academies.

To conclude, this case study provides new insights into research on teaching academies. Our research shows that stimulating conversations and interdisciplinary collaboration support the work of excellent teachers, and the development of teaching and learning. Teachers benefit from inspiring discussions about teaching in both local and cross-faculty teaching communities. The Teachers’ Academy at the UH has been a major investment in excellent teaching and has created new experiments and collaborations. Further inquiry should focus on how this key resource affects the quality of teaching and learning. In addition, more research is needed on how SoTL can be made to flourish both for those appointed as Academy Fellows and for those teachers who aspire to advance in their path towards scholarship and become a Fellow in the future.

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