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What makes an excellent lecturer? Academics' perspectives on the discourse of 'teaching excellence' in higher education

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What makes an excellent lecturer? Academics' perspectives on the discourse of 'teaching excellence' in higher education

In the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), we examine academics' perspectives on the discourse of 'teaching excellence' based on an empirical study with 16 participants from five post-1992 universities. The article reports the findings on academics' views of the term and concept of 'teaching excellence', examples of what 'teaching excellence' may look like in practice, whether a distinction between 'good', 'good enough' and 'excellent teaching' can be made, and the measurability of 'teaching excellence'. The research findings suggest we need a more nuanced inclusive interpretation of 'teaching excellence' which recognises the conjoined nature of teaching and research in higher education, and also rebalances a focus on outcome-related measures with understandings of purposes and development of the processes of learning.

Keywords: teaching excellence, research, higher education, teaching excellence framework

Introduction

This article reports the main findings of an empirical study of academics' perspectives of the concept of 'teaching excellence' in higher education. In the study, the sample was drawn from five post-1992 universities in England perceived foremost as 'teaching-led' or 'teaching intensive' institutions. The article then offers the reader a critical exploration of 'teaching excellence', a concept positioned to the fore in UK policy debate in higher education, being placed at the centre of government policy reforms in the 2016 White Paper 'Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2016). The White Paper states that 'this Government will introduce a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), to provide clear information to students about where the best provision can be found and to drive up the standard of teaching in all universities.' (13).

Blackmore (2016b) has discussed some of the tensions in academic life between research and teaching and has suggested that this White Paper may represent an attempt to rebalance the dominance of research and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) by raising the status of teaching through the introduction of a TEF. Blackmore argues that 'it remains unclear whether a TEF can or will achieve its aims of raising the status of teaching.' (10). There are problems with using the metrics as measures of teaching quality. Gibbs (2016) has discussed some of these issues in the Higher Education Policy Institute report to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills as a response to the higher education green paper 'Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' (2015), maintaining that:

> The quality of teaching is measurable and there are a number of potential metrics that could be used with some confidence in the TEF. However, using such metrics to make the kind of decisions the TEF requires, within the proposed timescale, is not without problems. (Gibbs 2016, 15)

We acknowledge though that neither are qualitative 'process' measures unproblematic. Gibbs (2016, 24) suggested that 'Process measures of teaching quality provide better indicators than outcome measures, but are not yet sufficiently developed.'

We are critical of measurability and performativity, suggested by some to promote teaching excellence. We propose that in the reconceptualization of 'teaching excellence', attention should be paid to the ethical and relational aspects and that an inclusive interpretation, something we will explain further shortly, may contribute to the development of understandings of what makes an excellent lecturer. Whilst positioned in a UK policy context, the issues we discuss have wider relevance for readers in other contexts elsewhere in the world, for 'excellence is at the heart of debates about what the contemporary university stands for and what it is attempting to achieve.' (Skelton 2007,

257). Ideas of excellence in university teaching have relevance for institutions globally and 'added urgency has arisen around engagement with notions of excellence in university teaching, especially in areas of the globe particularly affected by the economic downturn: Australia, US, Europe.' (Gunn and Fisk 2013, 10).

Building on our previous research and writing on the topic (Su and Wood 2012, 2017a and 2017b), we reject the underlying authoritarian assumptions about competition and performativity inherent in neoliberal ideology. The 'vacuity of excellence' is demonstrated in Collini's parenthetical example:

> But vacuity is now rendered more vacuous still by the requirement that the 'excellent' must become 'yet more excellent' on pain of being exposed as complacent or backward-looking or something equally scandalous. (A recent advertisement for a senior administrative post in a British university announced that the appointee would be expected to take the institution 'beyond excellence', which may represent the logical comeuppance of this way of talking.) (Collini 2012, 109-110)

Our purpose is to contribute understandings which displace the dominant shallow polemics and 'vacuity of excellence' with a more expansive view, one which sees academic practices of teaching, scholarly activity and research as inter-connected and in which Nixon's (2008) three themes of relationship, purpose and connectedness (to which we return later), have a central place.

> These themes – of relationship, purpose and connectedness – have emerged as central to the analysis of the moral foundations of academic practice. Practice is relational; it is purposeful; it assumes social connectivity. Similarly, the goods of practice predispose the practitioner towards the relational, the purposeful and the socially connective: inwards to the collected self, outwards to the collective good. (95-96)

Whilst we recognise that the current discourse on 'teaching excellence' in higher

education is heavily influenced by the policy context of the TEF, our interest is in 'teaching excellence' as a wider idea. This is not restricted to the narrow limited sense of the TEF and fundamentally, perhaps an important question to ask is how the measures link to understanding and developing the quality of teaching.

The contested idea of 'teaching excellence'

The language for 'teaching excellence' is problematic, as for example in the title of the White Paper 'Educational Excellence Everywhere' (Department for Education 2016), setting out the plan for the school sector to deliver just this. But the idea of 'excellence everywhere' is an oxymoron, as Clegg (2007,91) has observed:

> 'Excellence has become ubiquitous as a popular slogan, indeed the oxymoron 'excellence comes as standard' has thrown off its ironic resonance and is now routinely used to promote an astonishing variety of goods.'

Furthermore, excellence can denote elitism; for example, a 'quality as excellence' model suggests high quality and exclusiveness (Morrison 1998, 79). For Nixon (2007, 22), 'Excellence is a process of growth, development and flourishing; it is not just an endpoint'. The language and concepts employed by Nixon are in marked contrast to those invoked in managerialist and performative understandings. He argues for a different way of thinking by conceptualising excellence as a moral category. Intellectual virtues of truthfulness, respect and authenticity provide the lens through which teaching excellence comes into focus and which are enacted through the 'moral unity' of the academic practices of research, scholarship and teaching (22-23).

Different understandings of 'teaching excellence' in higher education abound. 'Teaching "excellence" is a contested concept' (Macfarlane 2007, 48), and the wider literature suggests it is an ambiguous term in the sector (Gunn and Fisk 2013). Examining conceptualisations of excellence, the Centre for Higher Education Research

and Information review of literature identified a need at the national level for 'much clearer explication of the precise meaning being attached to its use and for what purpose'; further critical appraisal of government-driven initiatives purporting to foster excellence in teaching and learning; and acknowledgement in policy documents of the distinction between teaching and student learning, noting too that 'the learner perspective seems to be given relatively little attention in discussions about excellence.' (Little et al. 2007, 52-53). Not only is 'teaching excellence' understood differently but so is the concept of 'higher education' too. This brings us to one of the three themes in Nixon's writing referred to earlier, namely matters of purpose referred to by Skelton as 'meta-level' questions:

> Different conceptualisations of higher education will have a significant bearing on what we understand by teaching excellence. For example, an excellence devoted to the production of a skilled workforce will have a different quality to that which seeks to develop student autonomy. In the former there would be a concentration on skill formation to meet the requirements of particular professions. In the latter, the emphasis would be on allowing students to make decisions about the nature and purpose of study, and on developing their ability to exercise independent judgement. In order to arrive at a deeper understanding of excellence, therefore, it is important that meta-level questions about the meaning and purpose of higher education are addressed. (Skelton 2005, 22).

Consideration of teaching excellence often has a focus on practical matters: how it is recognised, rewarded and promoted (Skelton 2005, 14). Rather than a 'restricted' view of excellence narrowly confined to practical concerns, a wider, more expansive view is also taken by Nixon, who has related excellence to a conception of 'the public good'. Nixon has suggested that what is needed is 'a different way of thinking and talking about excellence; a way of thinking and talking which recognises excellence as a moral category'. (Nixon 2007, 16). Arguing for a different understanding of excellence as a moral category contrasts to a performative understanding of teaching excellence which

presupposes that excellence can be evidenced through standardised market-driven quantitative measures. The TEF is proposed for higher education as a means to ‘tackle the challenge of measuring teaching quality head on so that students can be served better in the future.’ It is intended that

> The TEF will provide clear, understandable information to students about where teaching quality is outstanding. It will send powerful signals to prospective students and their future employers, and inform the competitive market. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2016, 13).

However, how meaningful such measures are as indicators of the complexities of a construct such as ‘excellence’ can be questioned. As Boxall (2016) noted:

> The problem is that the new approach risks homogenising and oversimplifying the diversity and complexities of higher education and learning. The great strength of the higher education system has always been the diversity of opportunities that it provides. The very nature of higher education varies hugely between disciplines, from intensive lab-based science projects to one-on-one tutoring for aspiring artists and musicians. This diversity cannot be captured by standardised metrics… [No pagination].

Excellence in teaching is something that the sector celebrates and for which funding is made available, as for example through teaching excellence awards and the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE) Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). The CETLs initiative was a key strategy of the HEFCE to raise the status of teaching in higher education in England. The initiative was designed to 'recognise, celebrate and promote excellence by rewarding teachers who have made a demonstrable impact on student learning and who can enthuse, motivate and influence others to do the same' (HEFCE 2005, 9). The importance of the CETLs initiative was signalled by the funding of £315 million it was allocated by HEFCE between 2005 and

2010. The Higher Education Academy manual for the design and implementation of teaching award schemes (HEA 2008) was based on Gibbs (2008) HEA-funded research 'Conceptions of teaching excellence underlying teaching award schemes.' Weaknesses in schemes were apparent, for example Gibbs' study found differences between schemes

> Their foci of attention were found to be so different that they would require very different kinds of evidence in order to be able to make a case for excellence, and it is hard to see how an application judged to be excellent in an institution with one focus could also be considered excellent in another institution with a different focus. (HEA 2008, 4).

Referring to the Australian context and the Australian Learning and Teaching Council criteria for excellence in university teaching, Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) draw attention to the importance of definitions of effective teaching keeping pace with changes in the context in which it takes place. O'Connor and O'Hagan (2015) raise concern about the evaluation of excellence and its implication for gender inequality based on their study in an Irish higher education context.

Bain (2004) studied the practices of professors in the US context who had 'achieved remarkable success in helping their students learn in ways that made a sustained, substantial, and positive influence on how those students think, act, and feel' (5). The aim was to find out 'what outstanding professors do and think that might explain their accomplishments. Most important, we wanted to know if the lessons they taught us could inform other people's teaching' (4-5). Amongst other things, Bain found out that the best teachers know their subjects, and they

> used their knowledge to develop techniques for grasping fundamental principles and organizing concepts that others can use to begin building their own understanding and abilities. They know how to simplify and clarify complex subjects, to cut to the heart of the matter with provocative insights, and they can think about their own thinking in the discipline, analyzing its nature and evaluating its quality. (16).

Amongst the other features of the best teachers, Bain noted that the best teachers expect 'more' of their students and they favour objectives that 'embody the kind of thinking and acting expected for life'; they often try to create conditions in the learning environment that are 'challenging yet supportive conditions in which learners feel a sense of control over their education; work collaboratively with others; believe that their work will be considered fairly and honestly; and try, fail, and receive feedback from expert learners in advance of and separate from any summative judgment of their effort' (Bain 2004, 18). Bain also found that 'highly effective teachers' cultivated relationships characterised by openness with and trust in students, and they evaluate their own efforts and make appropriate changes. They are learners themselves and as such are 'constantly trying to improve their efforts to foster students' development, and never completely satisfied with what they had already achieved.' (20).

In our study, we aimed to understand academics' views on these matters, the topic of 'teaching excellence' and the sense they made of this in the current English higher education context.

The Study

This study draws on empirical data gathered via email interviews with 16 academics in higher education. Email was chosen as the main medium for the interviews because it overcame issues of distance and consequent resource implications, email exchange could be entered into asynchronously, thus having advantages of convenience and

flexibility for our participants, and because this asynchronous, iterative nature of the exchange was believed to facilitate reflection by participants. The research participants were at different stages of their careers, ranging from postdoctoral teaching fellow to full professor. The participants were from five post-1992 universities in England perceived foremost as ‘teaching-led’ or ‘teaching intensive’ institutions. The participants were recruited via professional academic networks. Some of the participants’ contact details were located from the staff index on the universities’ websites. These participants were subsequently contacted directly to participate in the research. Over thirty academics were invited to participate in the study and sixteen of them subsequently did so. In the email interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their perceptions of teaching excellence and to explore whether ‘teaching excellence’ can be evidenced and ‘measured’. (See Appendix for interview protocol and questions)

Email as an interview tool to collect research data offers speed and immediacy. As an ‘epistolary interview’, it allows the conduct of in-depth personal interviews at a distance in an asynchronous fashion (Debenham 2007). It enables participants to respond to interview questions at a time to suit their own circumstances and permits time for reflection. Wellington (2015) argues that the choice of the interview formats should facilitate gathering a research respondent’s views, perspective or life-history. The email interview approach provided the researchers and the participants with an online dialogic space and reduced the problem of interviewer effect in the conventional face-to-face interviews. The research process often involved a number of email exchanges to clarify or explore participants' responses further. The use of email interviews in this study was crucially important to elicit substantial, reflective responses to the interview questions.

As academics in higher education with responsibilities for research and teaching, the authors acknowledge their 'positionality' in relation to this research. Between us, we have experience as academics in a post-1992 university and also in universities that have achieved university status relatively recently. It is important therefore to recognise our subjectivities and that our interest in this topic we have chosen to study, together with our experiences of teaching in higher education, will make any claims to objectivity questionable. We have been mindful of this in the design and conduct of this study; for example, we have aimed to allow our participants' voices to be heard in the presentation of the findings and to offer some validation for our judgements by referencing these to the literature. We are also grateful to peers who have offered formative comments on the inferences we have drawn from our data which have supported the development of robust analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from both authors' institutions prior to the commencement of the study.

What we found

The study was designed to be empirically grounded, qualitative in methodological orientation, and socio-cultural in its conceptual framing. The latter was important given its capacity for generating important questions. Interview questions (as shown in the Appendix) were used as a framework of analysis that (a) gathers what we see to be the salient issues and questions on the topic of teaching excellence; (b) guides and informs the data analysis; and (c) provides an analytical structure for the following data analysis section. For the data analysis, we went through the following steps - immersion, reflecting, taking apart data, recombining data, relating and locating one's data, reflecting back and presenting the data (Wellington 2015). During the process, we immersed ourselves in the data by re-reading participants' responses to the interview

questions. As a 'continuous iterative process' of analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994, 12) our concerns included the imperative to ensure a rigorous process of conclusion drawing and to have due regard for the context in which the data was generated. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, each participant's identity is coded in the report of the findings. Characteristics of each of the participants quoted in this article are provided, which include their gender and academic position.

Academics' views on the term and concept of 'teaching excellence'

Most participants viewed the term 'teaching excellence' as innocuous and even positive. They suggested that in their minds it primarily relates to the effectiveness of academics in enabling students to learn. At the same time, each participant articulated it differently.

> It means achieving a level of competence in teaching which maximises students' learning gain and their capacity for original, critical thought, and which is recognised as exemplary practice by peers. (OD, female education developer)

> The term teaching excellence summarises the essence of good practice. The term encompasses the need for research driven and pedagogically informed teaching. It should be fundamentally relevant and up to date and should aim to have an impact on the student's knowledge and experience. (SA, male senior lecturer in Education)

Some participants attempted to visualise what an excellent university lecturer would look like. For example, one participant envisaged somebody

> who has high levels of subject knowledge and command of the area, highly developed presentational skills with optimum use of technology (be it high or low tech), empathetic approach to the planning, teaching, feedback and assessment, appropriate support material and quality reflection. (CM, male senior lecturer in Education)

However, for some participants, the term of ‘teaching excellence’ itself is problematic and ‘politicised’, and they felt therefore that they would like to suggest an alternative term to capture its essence. In their views, the term raised questions about the feasibility and sustainability of achieving it:

> I disliked and have always disliked the term ‘excellence’. It is overused, forms part of every rhetorical statement about education and now is almost meaningless. Even before when it did mean something I would have been very hesitant about using it, as it has to be a rare and exceptional quality – how can we all be excellent? I would prefer a word like ‘dedicated’. (NQ, female professor of Educational Research)

Some participants believed that the term might be interpreted differently by different stakeholders:

> student expectations of excellence may not be the same as staff. Students might misinterpret this as expecting a high level of support (hand-holding) whereas staff may feel it facilitates students in developing their higher level skills and fosters independent learning. (TL, female lecturer in Biology)

Some viewed the term ‘teaching excellence’ as a shorthand for a set of skills, knowledge and attitudes that

> maximise the effectiveness of learning in a given context; disseminate excellent practice by involving peers in and beyond the institution; and develop effective professional relationships with students and staff which help motivate their learning/engagement and transforms their thinking and aspirations. (BP, male senior lecturer in Computing).

Other participants emphasised the importance of subject and pedagogic knowledge and ability to communicate that knowledge, and some argued that excellent teachers would also have a further impact on their students:

> An excellent teacher ought to leave the students feeling something positive and in some way fulfilled. (RB, female principal lecturer in Education)

Examples of 'teaching excellence'

In this study, participants were invited to give a specific example of 'teaching excellence' as they would have defined it, and to reflect on the factors and attributes that made it so. Participants commented on the difficulties of providing such examples due to the complexity and contested nature of the term 'teaching excellence':

> It is quite difficult to give specific examples of excellence in teaching if you take the view that it is a complex and holistic concept. Any examples inevitably omit things, otherwise you end up with 'War and Peace'. (BP, male senior lecturer in Computing)

However, a female participant remarked that she would be able to identify an example of excellent teaching as soon as she sees one:

> I remember watching a former colleague lecture on structuralism and hearing students coming out of the lecture hall discussing ideas and raising questions as soon as they were leaving the building, which emphasised to me that they had taken something significant out of the room where the teaching was actually taking place. (BS, female senior lecturer in English Literature)

Examples provided by participants appear to address particular aspects of teaching. One male participant suggested the TED lectures, whilst for others it was more to do with a particular approach to teaching such as experiential and enquiry-based learning, problem-based learning (PBL) and fieldwork based learning. Examples of particular approaches included:

> Experiential and enquiry-based learning strikes me as excellent teaching for the reasons the students gave – it brought them away from the periphery of the research community of their discipline and into its centre; it required a 'letting go'

> by the tutor so that students could discover and create new knowledge as researchers with some degree of independence; and it was linked with knowledge retention by the students. (OD, female education developer)

For some participants, excellent teaching was about providing learners with a safe learning space:

> A dedicated teacher makes the fear of learning manageable and provides a safe space for the student to make mistakes, so that failing is seen as learning and growing. A specific example might be a teacher who supports a student through periods of self-doubt while still challenging them to do it again, do it better, persevere until the student is successful (supporting a student to achieve a C grade instead of a D can be just as big a learning gain as supporting a student to get a first class degree or a PhD). Another example might be showing a student that even as a teacher, you also struggle with learning and sometimes they may teach you! (NQ, female professor of Educational Research)

The distinction between 'good', 'good enough' and 'excellent teaching'

In this study, participants were also asked to reflect on the questions – How would you know if you are 'excellent' or not in your teaching? What distinguishes 'excellent' teaching from 'good' or 'good enough' teaching? In their responses to the first question, many participants highlighted the importance of the student feedback, self-reflection and peer review:

> One characteristic of excellent teaching is the impact it has upon students and the time that the learning is retained. The feedback given by students is important here, alongside the evidence of learning (i.e. the retention of subject knowledge). (EI, female senior lecturer in Education)

> 'Excellent' teachers would need to demonstrate a clear commitment to helping students in their exploration of a subject/discipline as well as ensuring that they continue to evaluate their practice – evaluation leading to appropriate and

> innovative development / evolution of their teaching practice. (CT, male professional tutor in Health)

Another participant observed that 'one person's "excellent" is another person's "good"'. (OD, female education developer). Commenting on the use of student engagement as a good indicator of 'excellent teaching', one participant felt that

> Student engagement/empowerment is a good indicator, students wanting to go beyond the minimum needed to pass, being motivated to learn more about the subject rather than focus on assessment results. Results are a good indicator as a by-product. The desire to study more in this area is also an indicator. (BP, male senior lecturer in Computing)

While valuing students' feedback on teaching quality, one participant argued for the importance of students' feedback after they have completed the whole degree course:

> Student feedback after graduation is one of the most powerful indicators, for me, of whether teaching has achieved excellence. Memorable, transformative, impactful learning experiences leave a mark that lasts longer than an end of course evaluation. (BS, female senior lecturer in English Literature)

In their response to the question 'What distinguishes 'excellent' teaching from 'good' or 'good enough' teaching?', some participants argued that the quality of teaching is best thought of as a continuum, and that it is also context specific:

> I don't think there are ways that we clearly demarcate between good/good enough and excellent. They are on a continuum. (BC, female director of Learning and Teaching)

> Excellence is at one end of a continuum, and I believe that we all operate along the continuum, often offering differential effectiveness. By that I mean that a challenging teaching session could be excellent for one student and totally inaccessible for another. It is clearly a question of degree and is context-specific. (CM, male senior lecturer in Education)

For others, ‘good’ or ‘good enough’ teachers deliver the curriculum well, while excellent teachers would go beyond the job to inspire students.

> In terms of what distinguishes so called ‘excellent or dedicated’ teaching from ‘good or good enough’ depends I think on the individual teacher’s personal pedagogical philosophy and values, ‘good or good enough’ is a job, ‘excellent or dedicated’ goes beyond the job to something quite central to one’s view of life, the world and people. (NQ, female professor of Educational Research)

The measurability of ‘teaching excellence’

Almost all participants believed it difficult or impossible to measure ‘teaching excellence’. In their view, only certain aspects that contribute to teaching excellence could be measured:

> The pure essence of teaching excellence is often difficult to pinpoint. It goes hand-in-hand with the desire to make a difference. To feel we have a positive impact on those we teach. This is very difficult to actually measure. (SA, male senior lecturer in Education)

> We can measure proxies of teaching excellence only, we cannot measure or reduce to what is measurable the complexity of the learning teaching encounter. (NQ, female professor of Educational Research)

One participant suggested that there are markers of teaching excellence e.g. student feedback and attainment, but really these are at best pointers or indicators of a complex and multi-layered idea.

> It is a complex area; any metrics are difficult to identify that will capture the richness of excellence. Simplistic ones such as student satisfaction and assessment performance clearly are related, but I doubt if they can distinguish between good and excellent. (BP, male senior lecturer in Computing)

In participants’ reflections of the measurability of ‘teaching excellence’, many of them

raised their concerns about TEF and how the discourse is used by the policy makers. Participants worried that a genuine commitment to excellence in teaching may be reduced potentially to an evidence-gathering quality assurance process.

Some participants believed that TEF is just a type of New Public Management in the context of neoliberalism:

> This is just another example of the accountability agenda being taken too far in the current neoliberal climate! (EI, female senior lecturer in Education)

> The TEF is simply another example of a rhetoric about quality, choice, rigour which is anything but. At best it is an attempt to get universities to focus on the student experience and produce quality outputs; at worst, it is a stick to beat Higher Education with. Teaching quality can be calibrated but qualitatively not quantitatively. In terms of measurement, it should be possible to capture the features, describe them and use them as a guide to make judgments that have a shared currency. Again, I think this is only part of the story which should be about learning. (CM, male senior lecturer in Education)

However, while recognising the issues with TEF, many participants also welcomed the prospect that TEF might raise the profile of teaching and enable it to have a similar status as research:

> In spite of all its obvious limitations, I welcome it in the sense that it raises the status of teaching, but I fear it will never have the same prestige as research; however to the individual dedicated teacher, that would not really matter. (NQ, female professor of Educational Research)

> Whilst I have serious reservations about the terminology and measurements/metrics surrounding teaching excellence, I welcome the prospect that the status of teaching will be raised in research-intensive institutions. I hope that the renewed focus on teaching and students will encourage a less individualistic culture amongst academics in HE; however, I also hope that 'what students want' is not taken as what ought to be done. I also hope that research and

> teaching are not pitted against each other, since good research should lead to good teaching. (OD, female education developer)

> If it achieves the equality of status between research focussed academics and teaching focussed academics, including chairs for excellent teaching, it will be good. (BP, male senior lecturer in Computing)

At the same time, many participants envisaged potential detrimental consequences of the full implementation of TEF:

> My concerns regarding the TEF would be that it may result in result-led and target - driven teaching and learning which potentially stifles student or learner individuality and places barriers in the way of their progress. I can see creativity being side lined and the focus of enquiry being narrowed. (RB, female principal lecturer in Education)

On the issue of TEF, one participant also expressed concern about the potential inequality between teaching-led post-92 universities and research-intensive Russell Group universities.

> I feel slightly cynical that the Russell group power lobby will skew it to ensure they come out as excellent irrespective of other inputs. (BP, male senior lecturer in Computing)

Discussion - towards a more inclusive interpretation of 'teaching excellence'

The study findings demonstrate a range of understandings, meanings and emphases in response to what constitutes excellence. For some, excellence seemed to refer primarily to pedagogic competence and skills, for some it embraced research-informed pedagogic practice, for some the relationship with the students and the teacher's influence on them appeared to have particular importance, whilst others emphasised subject knowledge. The research participants recognised limitations inherent in the discourse of 'excellence' and that the term is open to myriad interpretations and understandings.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, views of measurability appeared to be dependent on the definitions and interpretations of excellence. To many participants, excellence is almost impossible to 'measure'. The TEF was perceived by some participants as 'problematic' and as something that could potentially reduce the genuine commitment to teaching 'excellence' to an evidence-gathering process. The data suggested a need for a more critical interpretation and evaluation of excellence.

The idea of 'teaching excellence' as a monolithic concept capable of being reduced to a set of outcome indicators is questionable. We suggest a need for a more nuanced understanding which recognises the embedded aspects of the concept viewed through different lenses and understood and enacted – and therefore made meaningful – in different ways. There is a saying that 'weighing the pig doesn't make it fatter', and therefore the focus on outcome measures and indicators does not necessarily 'improve' teaching. In our study, the choice of outcome measures was also seen as problematic in terms of whether they serve to demonstrate or 'prove' excellence, indeed our participants expressed anxiety that the Teaching Excellence Framework 'may result in result-led and target-driven teaching and learning' suggesting that a performance measurement culture may detract from a focus on improving processes. A focus on mandated measures and targets can mean a loss of sight of matters of purpose (Seddon and Brand 2008) whereas a learning and improvement orientation is a characteristic of services focused on purposes:

> Measures that relate to the purpose of the service from the users' point of view enable learning and improvement, as opposed to outcome-related measures that encourage cheating and hide failure demand. (Locality 2014, 39)

From our findings, the excellent teacher appears to be someone who is 'dedicated' and 'committed', able to establish motivational learning relationships, has expertise in their

subject discipline and is skilled in pedagogic approaches that encourage learner independence and critical thought. The excellent teacher influences learners such that they develop their desire to learn and experience 'safe' learning spaces where they can try out ideas, share thinking, make mistakes, innovate and experiment.

Metrics are substitutes for 'excellence', and what they say about and contribute to the experience of student learning is questionable. Our data highlighted how complex teaching excellence is and how unclear academics appear to be about how it is to be understood and enacted in meaningful ways. It would seem that there is a need for the development of a shared 'currency' in terms of understandings of teaching excellence and that this should also include understandings of student learning in higher education.

The data therefore points us towards the importance of locating excellence within the pedagogical relationship between teacher and learner. A 'good' pedagogical relationship is one which points beyond the teacher and the learner to embrace a wider sphere, recognising cosmopolitanism is part of human life and understanding in a globalised world (Nixon 2012, 14-15). The over-privileging of economic concerns has diverted attention from the purpose of higher education (Harris 2011), the language has become impoverished, and economic value has dominion over the processes and the relational:

> It is strange that a phrase such as 'the delivery of learning outcomes' is taken to be serious and meaningful, but not 'inspiring a love of learning'. (Rowland 2008, 353).

Nixon (2008, 106) has remarked

> Teaching is about encouraging people to learn; and encouraging people to learn is about helping them find reasons for taking their own learning seriously; and helping them do that involves reaching out to them beyond our existing horizons.

This study suggests that ‘reaching out’, inspiring with confidence and developing critical capable learners may not sit easily within the current policy discourse. Our contention is that an inclusive perspective on academic practice may help to restore these things to a position of primacy in discussion of ‘teaching excellence’. We began this article with discussion of some of the underlying assumptions of the White Paper 2016 in the current policy debate, and it is to some of these premises that we now return. Seddon (2008, 196) argued that people need freedom to act in the best interest of their stakeholders, and this is a consideration which we suggest must inform the bigger policy picture for teaching excellence in higher education. Excellence can be understood differently when viewed from a policy perspective, a professional perspective, an institutional, discipline or personal perspective. Excellence is a construct negotiated within a milieu of several different influences and our study has focused on the professional academics’ perspectives. To make the concept of ‘teaching excellence’ more meaningful, discussion is needed in order to develop shared understandings; freedom is needed to innovate and develop ‘excellence’ together with measures which are focused on ‘measuring the right things’ (Seddon 2008). Restoration of the moral bases of academic professionalism is a necessity for we need to restore ‘an idiom – a way of speaking, writing and thinking about academic practice – that reinstates the moral dimension’ (Nixon 2008, 95). Nixon’s three themes – relationship, purpose and connectedness – are at the heart of our inclusive interpretation.

Our findings from this small-scale study suggest that a democratic view of teaching excellence is needed and we would place ‘openness to others’ through conversation, connections and learning from one another at the centre. This is not a view of excellence as exclusiveness but rather a more expansive and inclusive interpretation of ‘teaching excellence’. Research and scholarship are not separate from

excellent teaching but are wholly conjoined to it, as reflected for example in the words of one respondent that ‘good research should lead to good teaching.’ Blackmore (2016a, 179) has described it as

> an article of faith in higher education that its teaching is distinctive because it is research-informed, and there is of course a strong argument that staff who are up to date in their field and its research are likely to teach better. However, dealing with this requires a finer-grained view of research, and a full acceptance of the value of scholarship that is linked with teaching.

Furthermore, Blackmore (2016b, 6) has suggested a need to move beyond a binary opposition between “‘blue skies’ research and teaching as transmission” through recognition that research and teaching are both ‘forms of complex learning’.

In his discussion of moral disagreement, Appiah (2007, 47) remarks that ‘This is the kind of disagreement where the struggle is not to agree but just to understand’. We apply this thinking to our discussion of excellence – the topic may not achieve universal agreement about excellence but we hope our discussion may make some contribution to the development of further thought and understandings.

Conclusion

This study has explored something of the complexity of the concept of ‘excellence’ in teaching and suggested that a range of understandings, meanings and emphases exist as to what constitutes excellence in the higher education context. This study may have wider relevance to readers elsewhere in the world who will be aware for example of the influence of ratings on institutional reputation and market standing. Our data evidenced academics’ awareness of the limitations inherent in a discourse of 'teaching excellence' which is open to myriad interpretations and understandings, and a concern that the

discourse of excellence may become reduced to an empty rhetoric. The vacuity to which Collini (2012) referred was also reflected in our respondents' views that in educational discourse 'excellence' has become empty and meaningless. Indeed our data suggested respondents viewed this as a complex concept with many layers of meaning and not easily captured by metrics. The potential for polarisation of teaching and research through a separate TEF and a REF is concerning, for as Blackmore (2016b, 24-25) has argued 'Teaching will gain if it is believed that it shares characteristics with research. Redefinition may help to emphasise what teaching and research share rather than what apparently separates them. To achieve this, it is necessary to broaden the ways in which research and teaching are often defined'. Drawing on the research findings, we need a more nuanced inclusive interpretation of 'teaching excellence' which recognises the conjoined nature of teaching and research in higher education, and also rebalances a focus on outcome-related measures with understandings of purposes and development of the processes of learning. Whilst process measures are not unproblematic as we have noted previously, by including both a moral dimension and a recognition of the relationship of teaching excellence to its enactment through the process of student learning in higher education, the concept of 'teaching excellence' is rendered more meaningful.

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Appendix: Interview protocol and questions

Dear Colleagues,

We would like to ask if you would be kind enough to participate in our study of academics' perceptions of 'teaching excellence' in higher education. Participation will not be onerous and it amounts to responding to the five questions below. There is a short information sheet attached. The research has been given ethical approval by the researchers' institutions.

1. How do you understand the term 'teaching excellence'? What is your view of this term?
2. Can you give a specific example of 'teaching excellence' (as you would have defined it) and tell us what are the factors/ attributes that make it so?
3. How would you know if you are 'excellent' or not in your teaching? What distinguishes 'excellent' teaching from 'good' or 'good enough' teaching?
4. Do you believe that 'teaching excellence' can be measured? If so, how might we measure it?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share with us on the topic of 'teaching excellence', e.g. the forthcoming Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)? Please feel free to do so.

If you would agree to share your views with us on the following questions and email your responses back to us within three weeks by Friday 30th June 2016 then that will be very much appreciated.

Many thanks for considering this and we do hope that you will participate and share your views with us.

Best wishes,

Dr Margaret Wood and Dr Feng Su