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Following the yellow brick road? Developing inspiring learning and teaching in the pursuit of teaching excellence in higher education

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Following the yellow brick road? Developing inspiring learning and teaching in the pursuit of teaching excellence in higher education

Inspiring learning and teaching are a matter of growing importance in today's marketized higher education sector. To date, much research in this area has a focus on reviewing literature or adopting a single-stakeholder perspective – typically that of staff or students. This paper reports on the findings of a qualitative study adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective on inspiring learning and teaching. The study sought to address the following questions - what is inspiring learning and teaching, and what are the conditions under which universities might achieve it? Thirty-two participants from three English universities took part in the study including heads of learning and teaching [n=4], academic staff [n=13], and students [n=15]. Adopting a phenomenological position using interviews and focus groups, the study found that rather than being a tangible 'something', inspiring learning and teaching is the outcome of a complex interplay between all relevant stakeholders, requiring an authentic commitment to learning. Drawing on the findings, the authors propose a model that captures the multi-faceted and multilateral nature of inspiring learning and teaching, demonstrating the inter-relatedness of the following factors: authentic relationships, partnership and collaboration, student reciprocity, and pedagogical leadership. The authors conclude by exploring the necessary institutional conditions required to apply the framework in practice in order to foster inspiring learning and teaching, such as recognising and rewarding inspiring teaching; providing professional development opportunities for staff who are keen to develop inspiring teaching; and having time and space to nurture authentic and trusting relationships with students in learning and teaching.

Keywords: inspiring learning and teaching; teaching excellence; higher education; multi-stakeholder perspective

The word inspiring, or derivatives thereof, often appears in university marketing activities as well as in its strategies. However, it is a contested phenomenon with different meanings for different people at different points in their lives (Cotterill, 2015; Jensen et al., 2014). Furthermore, where universities commit to inspiring learning and teaching, whose job is it to realise this? Is it the tutor's job to inspire students through their outstanding teaching? Is it the student's job to adopt a mindset and work ethic whereby they are able to be inspired? Is it the institution's job to create a learning environment and curricula that inspires? This article reports on a research project that sought to answer the question, 'what is inspiring learning and teaching and what are the conditions under which universities might achieve it?' The phenomenon of inspiring learning and teaching was explored from a multi-stakeholder perspective, involving teaching staff, students and institutional managers from institutions whose learning and teaching strategies explicitly committed to inspiring learning and teaching. The findings suggest that the phenomenon is multi-faceted, relying on a complex interplay of key actors in order for it to be achieved.

The increasing globalised marketisation of the higher education sector positions modern universities in competition one with another, leading to increasingly business-oriented, ends-focused approaches to organisational management and consequently to teaching and learning (Serrano, 2018). In this model, students are positioned as consumers of a product. The neo-liberal argument is one that suggests where competition exists, so quality between providers increases. In this market, so the neo-liberal argument continues, consumers are offered more choice about where they study and are better informed about the unique aspects of the 'product', enabling a more informed value-for-money judgement to be made. Consequently, recruitment and retention of students takes on vital importance for universities, whose main source of income is student fees (HESA, 2021). Enter the professional marketeer whose words are designed to entice, to glamorise, to reassure and to inspire. Some may call these 'weasel words' - the type of word used so often in marketing taglines, logos and campaigns that their true meaning is lost (Goldney, 2008 cited in Pinar et al., 2011). But what about where universities use these words in their missions, values and importantly, in their strategies? McGill (2020) highlights the inherent institutional tensions of market-driven versus values-based motivations suggesting that where universities 'sell' an experience to students through their marketing, there is an onus to deliver, though this does not always materialise. Thus, from a values-based perspective, when these words are committed to

strategy they become more than just weasel words; for in a strategy a university formally sets out its future ambitions (aims) against which it must be measured (key performance indicators). Therefore, the university commits to delivering what it sets out in its self-authored strategies and is obliged to fund and support its operationalisation. Knowing what inspirational teaching and learning is from the perspectives of those who strategise, who teach and who are taught, then, becomes of critical importance. By drawing on other researchers' work (Derounian, 2017, Jensen et al., 2014, Wood & Su, 2017) this paper argues that inspiring learning and teaching is situated within the domain of teaching excellence, yet it is a distinctly different phenomenon requiring the active and authentic commitment of key stakeholders, to create the conditions in order for it to be realised. The research is unique in that it contributes an empirical multi-stakeholder perspective and model of inspiring learning and teaching that can be applied regardless of teaching modes.

Inspiring learning and teaching and teaching excellence discourse in higher education

The discourse on teaching excellence in higher education is heavily influenced by the policy context of the TEF (Wood and Su, 2017) and conceptualisations of excellence as an endpoint. Ends and outcomes are assessed by metrics, 'providers' located in relation to benchmarking and TEF is intended to act as a driver of teaching quality. Whatever the future shape of the TEF post-Pearce review, it seems safe to assume that 'a TEF of some kind is likely to become a permanent feature of the higher education landscape' (Brink, 2018:141) and as such will continue to influence the discourse. The language of excellence in higher education is co-opted and imported from a business world lexicon which commodifies and limits conceptualisations of teaching excellence through the language of 'provider' and 'consumer'. Consumerist discourses do not seem out of place in the marketised world of higher education today and the UK was an early adopter, in fact 'the first country in Europe to adopt quasi-market mechanisms and consumerist discourses' (Naidoo et al. 2011:1142). Just how ill-defined and ambiguous the term 'teaching excellence' is, has been well rehearsed in the literature (Bartram et al., 2019; Gunn and Fisk, 2013), with some authors arguing cogently that different understandings to the dominant market rationality and emphasis on the private benefits of higher education are not only possible but pressing, and linked to the wider allied project of restoring the idea of higher education as a public good. Gravett and Kinchin (2020) reconsider teaching excellence from a posthumanist perspective that 'shifts the

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gaze beyond the measured individual to explore our intra-actions within a wider context' (p.1029). They suggest that taking 'a posthuman lens' may 'offer openings for us to think differently, moving from notions of excellence as a performative, measurable, concept to an affirmative, values-based, ethical approach' (p.1033).

'Teaching excellence', 'teacher excellence', 'excellent teaching' as 'competing coinages' reflect the 'degree of terminological flux in how the construct is expressed '(Bartram et al., 2019:1285). Allied terms such as 'inspirational teaching' in higher education are sometimes used interchangeably. Inspirational teaching is an idea about which clarity and agreement are also lacking and for which there is a dearth of literature (Jensen et al., 2014:37). Understandings of these terms are rendered more meaningful and complete when they include the perspectives of stakeholders. An often-cited definition of 'stakeholder' as 'all of those groups and individuals that can affect, or are affected by, the accomplishment of organizational purpose' is from the work of Freeman (2010), who also suggested that 'each of these groups has a stake in the modern corporation, hence, the term, 'stakeholder' '(p.25). The language of 'stakeholder', often applied to higher education these days, is reflective of the influence of a business milieu and conceptions of education as a commodity in what is, suggests Nixon (2007:15), 'an increasingly competitive and market driven system of higher education'. Furthermore, 'Excellence - the word and the thing itself- has become a commodity that can be bought and sold in an increasingly competitive market place' (Nixon, 2012:11). It has been argued that 'teaching is but a means to an end, which is learning' (Brink, 2018:138), thus the quality of teaching is to be considered in relation to student learning. Having explored the broad notion of teaching excellence within the wider context of higher education, the discussion now turns to a more specific focus on the knowledge and skills of the excellent teacher.

The knowledge-base around teacher excellence is well developed and there would appear to be a consensus around the characteristics of the excellent teacher. By analysing a selection of relevant literature (such as: Handy, 1990; Elton, 1998; Horan, 1991; Hativa, Barak and Simhi, 2001; Fried, 2001; Ramsden, 2003; Kane et al., 2004; Bain, 2004; McGonigal, 2004; Feldman, 2007; Su and Wood, 2012; Jensen et al., 2014; Cotterill, 2015; Lin and Huang, 2016; Derounian, 2017;

Mimirinis, 2020), we have highlighted the key characteristics of excellent university teachers in two categories - 'hard' knowledge and skills vs. 'soft' knowledge and skills in the table below.

<Insert Table 1 here>

In our view, the 'hard' knowledge and skills are fundamental for an excellent university teacher. In addition to subject knowledge and expertise, an excellent teacher needs to master relevant pedagogic knowledge and skills. These include: well thought-through assessment and evaluation methods; continuing reflective practice; appropriate curriculum design; well prepared and organised teaching; timely and effective assignment feedback; research informed teaching; ability to stimulate students' interest and thinking; ability to facilitate students' independent learning; capability in the use of educational technologies; and commitment to ongoing professional development.

'Soft' knowledge and skills are also essential, for example, one of the most important characteristics emerging from literature is a teacher's enthusiasm and passion both for their subject and the teaching. This is closely followed by good communication skills and clarity in the teaching. A teacher's ability to create a positive learning environment and develop a positive rapport with students is also significant to students' learning.

Whilst we recognise that the teacher has a significant role to play, this literature is skewed in emphasising a mono-directional role of the teacher, intimating that it is the teacher's job to inspire student learning. However, inspiring learning and teaching is an intangible phenomenon (Robertson et al., 2019), a unique something that defies measurement instead involving a complex affective interplay between key actors (Su and Wood, 2012). It is the outcome of a collaborative and collective venture requiring a carefully designed learning and teaching experience and cannot exist without the commitment of both the teacher and learner. It results in a transformational experience that has a sustained impact on how students think about, view and act in the world (Jensen et al, 2014). Barnett (2007) cogently argues that students must play their part in demonstrating a *will to learn*. Cotterill (2015) re-frames inspiring teaching by emphasising less the inspiring teacher and more the good inspirer of learning, and, in agreement with Jensen et al

(2014), suggests a focus on student learning rather than teacher delivery. Derounian (2017) captures the importance of the development of a good relationship between the teacher and student, recognising that neither is solely responsible for realising an inspiring learning and teaching experience.

Whilst recognising the enormous importance of what goes on within the classroom, our argument extends beyond the boundaries of teacher-student interplay. The literature already mentioned presents perspectives of inspiring learning and teaching from staff, students, or both. But within this work, there is a more tacit stakeholder at play - the learning organisation such as a university and the wider context it operates within. It is within the learning organisation, whether physical, virtual or blended, that the majority of learning and teaching experiences are conceived and enacted. Therefore it is vital that attention is also given to the perspectives of this stakeholder, through which the development of appropriate institutional conditions supports a positive culture of inspiring learning and teaching.

The study

This qualitative research project involved the exploration of a range of different stakeholders' perceptions about the construct of inspiring learning and teaching in higher education. Using an interpretivist theoretical perspective, the study explored the alignment of institutional discourse around teaching excellence and inspiration, with the lived experience of three key stakeholder groups from three different institutions in the UK. Identifying the institutions involved in the research was done systematically as part of a content analysis process (Bryman, 2012). During the period when the research was conducted, there were 164 higher education institutions in the UK, as defined by those which made a data return to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). These universities are often members of specific representative bodies, based on their size, origins, ethos and ambitions. It was not possible within the constraints of this research project to explore all 164 universities, so the GuildHE representative body was chosen as a reduced sub-set of 32 institutions. GuildHE represents smaller, specialist HEIs and was selected because the first two authors' home institution is a member of this group. All 32 institutions' websites were trawled with a focus on identifying each university's mission and vision statements, looking specifically

for the word inspiring (or derivatives); 7 institutions were identified. The second stage of the analysis involved identifying which of the 7 universities' learning and teaching strategies explicitly used the word inspiring (or derivatives); three universities remained. Of the three GuildHE universities, one was unable to participate in the research. It was replaced by a large post-92 institution with which one of the authors had professional links. Whilst this institution did not meet the same profile as the GuildHE institutions (heritage and size), its learning and teaching strategy did meet the requirements of the project. The difference in profile of the post-92 institution was not deemed to be detrimental to the core aims of the research. Rather and perhaps serendipitously, this was seen as a strength, enabling perspectives from a different type of institution to be included in the research.

The next stage of the research process involved a purposive sampling approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015) to identify role holders to participate in the research. Palys (2008) makes specific reference to stakeholder sampling, which is argued to be particularly useful in the context of evaluation research and policy analysis. This strategy involves identifying who the major stakeholders are in the design, delivery, participation or administration of a given service or programme. The stakeholders identified were:

1. Heads of Learning & Teaching (HoLT[n=4]), who are most likely to be involved in shaping and operationalising learning and teaching strategies.
2. Academic staff (Academic[n=13]), this stakeholder group comprised colleagues who were required as a formal part of their role to teach and support student learning. Some were Heads of Postgraduate Certificates in Learning & Teaching, responsible for formally developing early career academic staff through professional development programmes. Some were early career academics occupying a range of different organisational roles, but with a responsibility for teaching and supporting the learning of students.
3. Students (Stu[n=15]), these stakeholders are proportionally representative of the largest stakeholder group within this research. In the neoliberal model of Higher Education, this stakeholder group represents the consumer and therefore it is with this stakeholder group in mind, that almost all university strategies and policies are created. Thus, when

universities talk about inspiring learning and teaching, it is this group of stakeholders who are the intended beneficiaries.

Participants were identified and invited to participate via an email containing an information sheet explaining the research, which also confirmed ethical approval. Data were generated using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The semi-structured interview is a form of one-to-one interview that encourages open and honest dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee (Quinlan et al., 2015). Using this approach, a question guide was created as a prompt for discussion but allowed the conversation to digress at appropriate points and used techniques such as probing to gain clarification where required. This approach is designed in order to explore in more detail, the attitudes of the interviewees (Walliman, 2015). In total, eight semi-structured one-to-one interviews lasting between 43 and 60 minutes were held with individuals from stakeholder groups 1 and 2.

Focus groups are a specific type of group interview involving between four and ten interviewees (Saunders et al., 2019) who have been selected because they are known to have had a certain experience (Bryman, 2012). They are particularly beneficial for the qualitative interviewer for several reasons. Firstly, and pragmatically, they are a time-efficient way of generating data; all participants are invited to engage at a specific time and date and are gathered in a single location for a set period of time. As a result, the interviewer is able to gain the perspectives of several participants in one session. Furthermore, as a result of the dialogic interactions in a focus group, participants often share common experiences, meaning that the method can facilitate a deep exchange of ideas and promote rich discussion (Quinlan et al., 2015). A total of six focus groups were conducted including colleagues taken from stakeholder groups 2 and 3, involving 24 participants in total; the durations were between 48 and 95 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim in preparation for analysis.

Template Analysis (TA) was used to analyse the data. A major benefit of the Template Analysis approach as Brooks & King (2014) argue, is that it is considered to be extremely flexible; it does not contain a distinct methodology, nor a clear method of data analysis. Rather, TA is a pragmatic approach to data analysis and refers to a varied yet related group of techniques for thematically

organising and analysing data. There are six clear steps outlined by Brooks et al. (2013) to follow when using the TA approach: become familiar with the accounts to be analysed, conduct preliminary coding, organise emerging themes into clusters, define an initial coding template, apply the template to further data and modify, finalise the template and apply to the full data set. Templates were generated for each distinct group following the iterative process above, before being combined into a single template representing all four stakeholder groups.

Ethical approval for the project was granted by a university research committee. Participants were provided with an information sheet and given the option to withdraw their consent up to four weeks after the data collection activities took place. All data were anonymised and securely stored for the duration of the project.

The limitations of this project are largely methodological ones. Firstly, the originally intended sample of institutions was not the sample that engaged in the final research work. The original universities chosen were all from the GuildHE group of institutions, meaning that they were homogenous in terms of their size, backgrounds and their ethos being teaching-led, as opposed to research-led. However, the introduction of a much larger university which did not fall into the same mission group, and which had a strong research culture, meant that the original homogeneity was disrupted. Whilst this has been presented as a strength, it could be argued that the findings may have included different themes, more usefully tailored to GuildHE institutions specifically, had the original sample group of universities been retained. Secondly, regarding the focus group activities that were conducted with students and ECAs, these were undertaken using a purposive convenience sampling technique; no data were collected regarding participants' disciplinary backgrounds, which could have been useful. Therefore, it could be argued that the views of these participants may have been affected by their disciplinary allegiances. Finally, despite a template analysis being conducted for each institutional stakeholder group, the findings have been presented holistically. Had the research been conducted in such a way that more and diverse participant data were gathered, there was potential for a more comparative fine-grained analysis to have been undertaken by institution, discipline and stakeholder group. Future researchers might consider doing a larger scale research project, comparing the findings of this research across a range of institutions, with a view to developing the themes and modifying the model.

The findings

From the initial analysis completed, a final template was generated for each stakeholder group. Templates for each different stakeholder group were further refined into a master template which has been used as the basis for the presentation of these findings. This resulted in the identification of four first-order and three integrative themes. Integrative themes are those that permeate all of the first-order themes (Brooks & King, 2014). Each of the first-order themes are explored in more detail in this section. The three integrative themes of relationships, wider conditions and authenticity are integrated into the model and explored in more detail in the following section.

1. *Intangible* - For all groups, there was a sense of inspiring learning and teaching as being something difficult to define. The following quotation from a Head of Learning and Teaching captures the suggestion of a personal, multi-faceted and complex phenomenon.

> HoLT4: It's one of those phrases, isn't it? That is bandied around and I'm not sure… I think a lot of people would probably have some vague notion of what that might mean without ever really pinning it down. Maybe it's one of those concepts that is very difficult to pin down in the sense that, if you could bottle it, if you could articulate it, if you could measure it and define it and do the dot to dot, it would probably cease to be what it is supposed to be.

From a student perspective, the sense of developing a relationship was perceived as important,

> Stu1: I think it's always nice if a teacher tries to get to know you on a bit more of a personal level. You're not just a student number with an email address, you're an actual person in the classroom that's very interested in the subject they're trying to teach...

As was a sense of academics showing that they care.

> Stu4: I think day to day contact with them even though you might not be talking necessarily about what has gone on in lectures or seminars, the way they interact with you shows that they care. Once you know that they care, I think you buy into what they're telling you a bit more.

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For all participants, a sense of excitement, passion and thrill seemed to result as a consequence of tutor techniques, as this student comment suggests

> Stu13: Well, if you can see the teacher has passions [sic] for the subject, it's somehow contagious.

In the business world, Fredricks et al., (2004) introduce the idea of *mood contagion*. This is where leaders express positive emotions such as enthusiasm and passion, which are spread amongst their followers. Balwant et al., (2018) use the same idea within a higher educational context suggesting that academics can act as instructor-leaders, able to inspire students through activating pleasurable emotions as part of a student-leadership approach.

Key themes to emerge within this first-level theme of *Intangible* were the development of mutually respectful relationships and the affective dimensions of inspiring learning and teaching. This sense of a mutually respectful relationship was also a finding in the work of Bain (2004), whose extensive study explored the practices of 'highly effective teachers' in a US context. He found that these teachers cultivated relationships characterised by openness with and trust in students, that they evaluated their own practice and made adjustments accordingly.

2. *Techniques* - These are specific ways of working that would appear to contribute to feeling a sense of being inspired. They include rapport and mutual respect, active student centred pedagogy, problem-based activities and relevance to the wider context, all of which would appear to contribute to a sense of feeling inspired. The first technique, rapport and mutual respect, related to establishing the right dynamic between staff and student.

> Stu2: I think establishing initial rapport with students is far more important than being the cleverest person in that field. Because if you don't have people listening to you or respecting you then you've got no chance.

The above sense of rapport and mutual respect seemed to depend upon an active and student centred pedagogy which included discussion and dialogue, problem-based activities and relevance to the wider context. The ability to be able to generate discussion and encourage dialogue was

viewed as an important technique in contrast to a teaching experience that is more didactic, as this student commented.

> Stu11: Lecturers that engage people, make it more like an open discussion and get people to talk together and make it a more open experience for everyone.

Effective discussion would appear to be facilitated through the tutor having a good understanding of the students as these quotes suggest.

> Stu7: …it's playing off of the group who you know. And the lecturer should know the students and so, they should know what is going to work best for the individual class which it is.

These quotes link closely with the integrative theme of relationships. Therefore, it would seem that there are two aspects to consider here. Firstly, there is the requirement to have the skill to be able to facilitate a discussion effectively. Secondly, the effectiveness of the discussion would seem to be mediated through the development of mutually respectful relationships with students, which in turn would appear to contribute to a potentially inspiring learning and teaching experience. Layered on top of these two components is the relevance of the discussion beyond the confines of a university-context.

Problem-based activities where students experience a sense of agency and responsibility, were seen as important to design into the learning experience as a vehicle through which they can begin to see the applied nature of their learning, as this Head of PGCert commented.

> Academic8: students are then very much on their own to develop the project and to make the project happen…students are challenged to make real change happen in the outside world.

Students themselves experience a sense of feeling inspired when they can see the relevance of their learning in a wider context.

> Stu7: [the] …lecturer wasn't limiting you to just being a student in the sense of (sic) he gave you the opportunity to realise, "I'm not going to be a student forever, I've got to be able to take this out into the world afterwards."

3. *Behaviours* - This theme combined the way in which tutors act as well as their personal characteristics that influence the ways in which students might learn, a duality explored by Lin & Huang (2016). It included subject-knowledge, levels of challenge, planning and preparation.

Knowledge was a theme that came through strongly for all stakeholders. For the student below, knowing that the tutor had good subject knowledge gave them confidence to participate and engaged them.

> Stu8: I would say in my case, it is very important for me to feel that they are a very knowledgeable person in the subject. It straight away keeps me more engaged, more focused and more willing to contribute if I feel the person can answer all my questions within the subject.

However, it does seem that for some students, a lack of knowledge can be mediated by the tutor demonstrating that they are approachable.

> Stu15: Even if you don't have all the knowledge but I feel comfortable to talk to you, then I'm going to talk to you and find out. Then you can help me, and I can go find some more knowledge which you might not know. But I'm not going to do that if I feel like I can't approach you.

Challenge is linked to intellectual stimulation. Bolkan & Goodboy (2010), developed the Student Intellectual Stimulation Scale (SISS) which proposes three constructs that reflect lecturer behaviours deemed to impact on students' intellectual stimulation: interactive teaching style, challenging students and encouraging independent thought. In short, creating an environment where both staff and students feel comfortable to challenge and be challenged is important. The difficulty comes in creating the environment, which once again, seems to be mediated through a relational component, as this Head of L&T articulates.

> HoLT3: I have a lot of colleagues that talk about challenge and challenging students and challenging each other as colleagues, my experience is that everyone likes to challenge but few people like to be on the receiving end of challenge, and unless the relationships are again very positive, affirmative, we are for each other relationships, I'm not sure how this rhetoric of challenge works or how effective it is, I think if the quality of the relationships are there

you can use challenge, personally I don't like the language even though I've used it, I'd much rather talk about confidence building and aspiration raising, because I think that fits far more, in my world view far more positively with this language of relational education.

For this student, there is a fine line between challenging and overloading students with too much information suggesting that tutors need to have the technical skills to be able to explain information clearly and in a way that is pitched at the right level so as to pique student interest, but not put them off.

> Stu9: For some people it's difficult just to take on all that knowledge on, it's too much to take on. So, you've got to try and get it across in a way that is easy to understand but also, you're trying to challenge the student. Because if you're trying to challenge us to look more into it and think, "Actually, that interests me, I want to do more research." Then that means that you're inspiring us to look at it more and obviously, maybe that could be a topic that we go into and we can find a passion for.

4. *Challenges* - Stakeholders indicated the following challenges posed to inspiring learning and teaching: inexperience, neo-liberalisation and developing effective relationships.

Inexperience emerged as a theme for all stakeholders. From the student perspective this is closely linked to confidence with two key elements - students' confidence in their tutors and tutors' confidence in themselves. For some students a perceived lack of experience and/or subject knowledge led to questioning the value from teaching input in relation to fees paid.

> Stu5: …there's just like a huge difference between someone who's got that sort of like three, four, plus year's experience, than someone who's like a trainee teacher. I wouldn't expect a trainee teacher to be like, you know, 10/10. But the difference, the gap between someone who's experienced and someone who's sort a trainee PhD teacher, whatever, it's just in some cases, it is huge. And it also goes back to the point of we're getting sort of value for money.

From the academic perspective, inexperience emerged in relation to behaviour management and knowing how to deal with certain situations to ensure that all students were able to learn. This quotation captures the sense of frustration with trying to cope with a disengaged student.

Academic3: It's just difficult because my biggest class, I think there's fifty one people in it, to have fifty really engaged students that are all trying to contribute to a class, to then have to go… it almost stops your flow because you'll see everyone being engaged and progressing and you'll see one student doing nothing...it almost makes you choke under the pressure when you just see this one person not caring, purposefully trying to interrupt the class. I don't have a method yet to sort it.

Neo-liberalism and the marketisation of higher education was recognised as being problematic. For this Head of Learning and Teaching, the massification of HE conflicts with the integrative relational theme of inspiring learning and teaching.

HoLT1: …it is hard to give that real singularity of attention to students. You don't know them particularly well, we see them in short supply. I don't have a class of two hundred but lots of them [academic colleagues] do have classes of two hundred. It's very difficult to develop a personal relationship with them in a way that you see them once a week for an hour. It's very difficult to do that.

For another, there was a tension highlighted between institutional values and operating within a neo-liberal context, meaning that academic colleagues were asked to do more with less.

HoLT3: I do think we are at an interesting moment in UK higher education where due to the neo-liberal reassembling of UK higher education and how it works, we are faced with, as managers, as a manager I am faced in terms of learning and teaching, with asking my colleagues to do more with, at the very best, the same amount and in many cases with less, that's a challenge for me, to maintain that very positive student at the centre, we are for each other, students and staff as part of one learning community, that ethic that we have at [institution] that runs through us.

For these academics, the value for money rhetoric championed by the Office for Students seemed to cause a sense of frustration.

Academic6: we're basically saying, we're portraying this image that it's all for you [the student]. So, because you pay now, you are the customer, you are the market and therefore, we have to supply you. We have to give you that First or that 2.1 and nothing else will do.

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In response to the above comment, another academic suggested the potentially worrying implications for inspiring teaching that performativity measures invite.

> Academic1: When I first started I went in and very much like, I had three or four slides; the start, a couple of pictures, a couple of words and then chatted about it. Then, you get the mid-module feedback and they say, "Well, there is nothing on the slides, so we don't know what's going on."

There is an ironic suggestion here then, that performative frameworks rather than encouraging enhancement of learning and teaching activities, may have the effect of reducing them to formulaic approaches. This is echoed in the findings of Harland & Wald (2018) who refer to this formulaic approach that seems to satisfy all baseline requirements as 'vanilla teaching'.

Relationships and the development of meaningful interactions between teachers and students is clearly a strong component of the idea of inspiring learning and teaching. However, the realities of achieving a good staff-student relationship were presented as being difficult to achieve.

> Academic11: Half the time at the lecture you might get thirty-five or forty and then at a seminar, you might get seven, eight, as opposed to twenty-odd. So, you think, "I don't know who is here and who is not here." I just can't get to know them because I don't know who actually, is ever going to turn up so, there is only a few.

Interestingly this quotation positions the problem with the student, whereas some student data positioned the problem with the tutor. For example, if students perceived sessions as transmissive and non-interactive, they were less likely to physically attend.

> Academic6: I see enormous amounts of students, for the most part, I'll see them maybe once, possibly twice, throughout the university career. Most of the kind of formal classroom teaching I do; I give a lecture for all the first years about their kind of getting started with the research and I usually give a lecture for the final year students about doing their literature searching for their final year dissertations or final year projects. And in terms of actual classroom time, that's pretty much all I get.

For this academic, their subject specialism and the way in which they were timetabled to interact with students meant that developing effective relationships was not considered possible.

Discussion: Towards a model of inspiring learning and teaching

The identification of the themes outlined in the previous section emerged from the iterative Template Analysis (TA) process and care has been taken to present a representative set of quotations for the complete stakeholder sample. However, yet to be discussed in detail are the integrative themes of relationships, wider conditions and authenticity. These themes permeated all of the first-order themes but rather than dealing with each in a discreet way, they are included tacitly in our model. That is to say, each of the integrative themes are part of the segments of the model which we now discuss.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

This model captures the multi-faceted and multilateral nature of inspiring learning and teaching, demonstrating the inter-relatedness of these factors. The inner quadrants are encased within an outer circle denoting that inspiring learning and teaching are impacted by 'wider conditions' in global, national and local contexts, including for example global and national policy landscapes, economic conditions and capacity, institutional imperatives and resources, socio-cultural factors and so on. Further, where higher education institutions commit through their learning and teaching strategies to engender a sense of inspiring learning and teaching, it is incumbent upon those institutions to create the conditions for this to happen. This includes a commitment to creating a culture that values learning and teaching as an endeavour of equal importance to research-related activities. Addressing recruitment criteria for teaching staff, updating promotion routes, funding pedagogic initiatives and committing to appropriate and timely academic development are all demonstrable examples of this commitment. These conditions are represented in the model as encasing and impacting on the four central components, each of which will now be examined.

Authentic relationships - here the idea of 'authenticity' refers to the notion of true-to-self in one's learning and teaching practice. Authentic relationships are grounded in a way of working that enables a sense of mutual respect and trust to develop. For example, students may perceive that in 'authentic' relationships with their tutors, tutors are 'for them', wanting them to succeed and

willing to work with them in order to achieve this aim. Underpinning this relationship is a sense that they are cared about, for institutions that foster authenticity in relationships exhibit care for staff and students. For example, personal tutor relationships with their academic tutees often provide care and support for academic and pastoral needs, as noted by various authors (Barker & Mamiseishvili, 2014; Ghenghesh, 2018; Owen, 2002; Thomas, 2012). As part of an ethic of care, these relationships, underpinned by a commitment to values of respect, inclusivity and empathy, are nurtured when the right institutional conditions prevail, as Cownie (2019:686) suggested:

> Higher education institutions can build ongoing, committed relationships with students by demonstrating reciprocal commitment to students and creating environments to support academics to interact with students in a manner which is inspiring and generates a sense of belonging.

Partnership and collaboration - this component captures the idea of learning as a joint endeavour between staff and students that happens as part of the classroom experience. Jensen et al., (2014:40) suggested that, "inspirational teaching involves a collaborative ethos and a partnership approach where students' and teachers' roles and responsibilities are mutually constitutive in developing", whilst Fried's discussion of passionate teachers envisaged that rather than acting as disciplinary experts, these teachers invite students to search collaboratively for knowledge as partners. This "learning partnership" (Fried, 2001:26) is key to engaging students in the subject and in their own learning.

Student reciprocity - drawing on the literature, in this model student reciprocity is conceptualised as the extent to which students are committed to return the perceived efforts of their tutors. Arguably, if the institutional conditions are right and the efforts of tutors are perceived to be high, the extent to which students demonstrate equal commitment to their studies will also be high. Student reciprocity should be seen as an outcome of the other components of the model working together in harmony. It is more clearly linked to the affective dimensions of the learning experience surfaced in the findings and these include enjoyment, excitement and motivation. Balwant (2017) showed that student affect towards a learning and teaching experience was positively associated with effective instructor-leadership. The logical argument then is that students are more likely to demonstrate reciprocity with regards to active engagement in their learning experience if they feel

intellectually stimulated. Pedagogical leadership or 'instructor leadership' is turned to next, as the final component of the model. Related to student reciprocity, the role of staff student pedagogical partnerships and 'co-creation' in learning and teaching are also key to inspirational learning and teaching. Cook-Sather's (2020) research has shown the potential of staff- student pedagogical partnerships to contribute to the development of more equitable practices in higher education (p.898).

Pedagogical leadership (instructor) - the notion of instructor-leadership is derived from transformational leadership approaches. Drawing on the organisational behaviour and transformational leadership knowledge base, Balwant, et al. (2018), use the term instructor-leadership as embodying transformational leadership qualities, but being specifically related to the lecturer-student relationship. They define an instructor-leader as 'one who guides students towards a module's learning objectives, stimulates students intellectually and pays attention to the differences between students' (p.2). Intellectual stimulation may be seen as a key component of inspiring learning and teaching. In this model, the idea of instructor leader interacts with the three other aspects in its emphasis on guiding and transforming students through interactive and collaborative (rather than a less equal relationship in which academics adopt didactic approaches as deliverers of content, as the term 'instructor' may imply) learning experiences that can be applied in the wider context, for example in social, industry or field settings.

Discourse about inspiring learning and teaching which places the ineffable dimensions of this to the fore, is explored in this paper. It offers a counterbalance to the primacy of understandings shaped and honed in the language of 'deliverables' and 'measurables', and to what O'Leary and Cui (2020) refer to as 'the neoliberal policy narrative that has dominated policy thinking and decision making in HE in recent decades' (p.141). The current mono-directional thrust of consumers making demands and providers supplying education as a commodity, negates the idea of teaching and learning as interactive, reciprocal and co-constructive and the importance of pedagogical relationships. The multi-layered model presented in this paper is a tool with which to construct a more subtle and nuanced understanding. It is informed by stakeholders, and mindful of how teaching and learning is enacted within institutional conditions which, in turn, are framed by a wider policy context. The neoliberal educational reform agenda 'has been driven by the values

of marketization, competition, choice and accountability' (Clarke, 2013:230). The market, managerialism and performativity, conceptualised by Ball (2003) as a trio of *'policy technologies'*, are key interrelated aspects of education reform. These '*policy technologies*' constitute a different environment for the enactment of teaching and learning. The strands of the frame presented in this paper, combined with the perspectives of staff and students and shaped by the influences of the organisational and wider policy conditions, recognise the current stranglehold of performativity and commodification on higher education.

This paper has attempted to rebalance the focus by moving it towards understandings woven from a more subtle blend of pedagogic, relational, cultural and contextual threads. We have contrasted these with the rationalities of neoliberal education reform, with its emphasis on what can be measured and quantified (Clarke, 2013). Importantly, the rationalities of neoliberal education reform influence the nature of teaching in reductionist ways, as education becomes a 'commodity' and teaching a 'deliverable'. The 'authenticity' of relationships is undermined, trust eroded and the emotional labour of teaching undervalued. As Ball (2003:226) recognised, 'The policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self. These technologies have potentially profound consequences for the nature of teaching and learning and for the inner-life of the teacher'. In the grip of neoliberal rationalities, 'inspiration' in teaching and learning foregrounds a counter-discourse in which subjective understandings and qualitative dimensions are afforded primacy. To enable this, an enriched lexicon is drawn on, to replenish a vocabulary dominated by market rationalities. For example, inspiring teaching and learning is evoked in terms of 'authenticity', rapport, passion, enthusiasm and so on. It is also inclusive, recognising that the student body is diverse and students each have different experiences of and perspectives on teaching and learning. This research reminds us that inspiring teaching and learning is interactive and dynamic and fundamentally it concerns people, their pedagogical relationships and learning processes. Inspirational teaching and learning is seen and understood differently from the range of diverse stakeholder perspectives in higher education. It is therefore important that future research develops understandings that are informed by the experiences of stakeholders whose voices may be marginalised or under-represented in research studies, including for example Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, and academic staff with insecure, casual, short-term contracts. We suggest that their understandings and experiences

must inform the future development of inspiring teaching and learning for it to be inclusive, socially just and to recognise the actions of the systemic 'wider conditions' featured in this model.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our empirical study and the analysis of the findings in the context of the literature tell us that inspiring learning and teaching, though difficult to define, happens. Rather than being a tangible 'something', it is the outcome of a complex interplay between all stakeholders, requiring an authentic commitment to learning. In order for it to be realised, it requires all stakeholders to commit to it. This is predicated on an institutional commitment to developing a culture where learning and teaching are valued so that the conditions are created to enable inspirational learning and teaching. The following recommendations suggested by the foregoing discussion are necessary preconditions to enable inspirational teaching and learning.

Firstly, it is important that institutions dedicate the necessary resources, specifically time and funding for professional development and for recognition and reward for teaching-related roles, and that teaching roles and activities have parity with research-related roles and activities.

Secondly, for academics who have heavy teaching timetables and therefore little time to conduct empirical research, the model suggested above highlights the needs for space and time for continuing professional development. For example, professional development programmes might include contributions from colleagues having achieved external recognition of their teaching ability, such as National Teaching Fellows; other colleagues in the institution with specific learning and teaching remits in their subject disciplines; and colleagues actively engaged in pedagogic research. This may well add positively to the perceptions of academic staff regarding the credibility and value of such professional development programmes.

Thirdly, developing inclusive approaches to staff-student engagement which include marginalised and under-represented student groups in the student population is needed. The purposes are to enable the benefits from a collaborative ethos and partnership approaches linked to inspirational learning and teaching to be experienced by all students equally.

Finally, the imperative to allocate adequate staff time to academic and personal tutoring so that authentic and trusting relationships may be nurtured through personalised conversations with students is recognised. By allocating time for regular dialogues, a better understanding of students' academic and pastoral needs may be gained and strategies to support their aspirations and success put in place.

Acknowledgements

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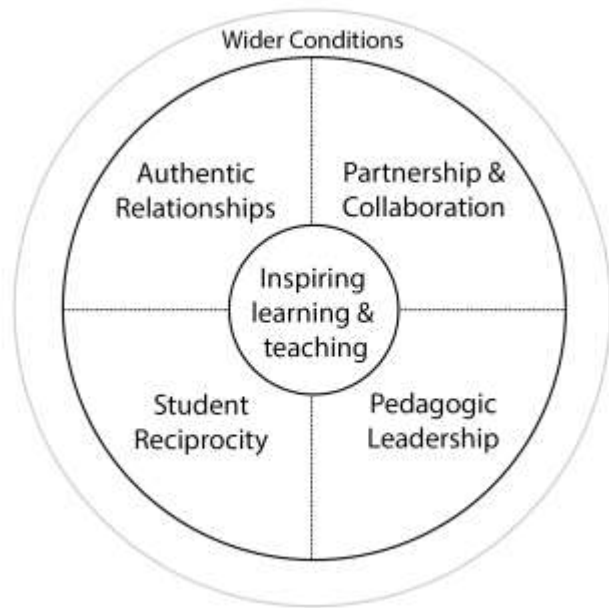Figure 1: A model of inspiring learning and teaching

Table 1: 'Hard' and 'soft' knowledge and skills of excellent teachers

'Hard' knowledge and skills	'Soft' knowledge and skills
● Subject knowledge and expertise ● Pedagogic knowledge and skills	● Enthusiasm and passion ● Good communication ● Clarity ● Concern and respect for students ● Trusting and respectful relationships ● Faith in students' abilities to achieve ● Being ethical – values-based, hope for a better future ● Ability to create a positive learning environment and have a positive rapport ● Sense of humour ● Supportive and being approachable ● Have high expectations of their students ● Questioning knowledge ● Bringing about change in the discipline