Principles for developing system-wide approaches teaching excellence in higher education

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Abstract

This article discusses the challenges of developing system-wide approaches to teaching excellence and offers three principles that can support the develop of more effective approaches.

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Introduction

There have been increased attempts to devise system-wider approaches to teaching

excellence.

Approaches to promoting system-wide teaching excellence

There are two approaches to promoting system-wide teaching excellence: 'Exemplar' and

'Mapping' approaches. Exemplar Approaches either focus on identifying particular cases of

individual teachers or centers of teaching excellence at a national level and have operated,

for example in Finland, Germany, Norway, South Africa and the UK. Mapping Approaches

seek to assess teaching across the whole system, which can be national or international in

scope. The two main examples of are the OECD's unsuccessful piloting of the AHELO

(Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) and the Teaching Excellence

Framework (TEF) in England.

This article assesses existing Exemplar and Mapping Approaches in relation to three

questions: How is teaching excellence defined? How is teaching excellence measured? How

does the teaching excellence scheme lead to the enhancement of teaching and learning?

Based on this principles are identified for developing more effective approaches to system-wide teaching excellence.

How is teaching excellence defined?

Under Exemplar Approaches, teaching excellence is defined by those who are applying to be awarded the status of 'excellence'. The logic of such approaches is that applicants develop an evidence-based account of the ways in which they are excellent. This allows the space for a variety of different definitions of teaching excellence to flourish.

In contrast, Mapping Approaches identify the expected outcomes of excellent teaching and assess these across the system. For example, in the TEF, universities were assessed on a series of metrics based on students' views of teaching, student dropout rates, and employment outcomes. Assessors initially assessed institutions' performance on the metrics before considering an institutional submission outlining their claim to excellence, with performance on the metrics the most important contributor to institutions' TEF outcome. Neither approaches offer an explicit definition of teaching excellence, which highlights a central contradiction. How can system-wide schemes claim to have identified incidents of teaching excellence if they do not know what teaching excellence is? The answer is that they are based on implicit views of what constitutes teaching excellence which is not subject to public scrutiny. Approaches would be more effective if they developed explicit definitions of teaching excellence that is explicitly aligned with the educational purposes of higher education and shows how teaching contributes to the successful education of students. This suggests that the first principle for system-wide teaching excellence schemes is:

Principle 1. Definition: System-wide schemes of teaching excellence need to offer a definition of teaching excellence that reflects the educational purposes of higher education.

How is teaching excellence measured?

Under Exemplar Approaches, applicants develop their own accounts of teaching excellence and provide evidence to support these accounts. There may be particular types of evidence that are requested, such as the outcomes of student evaluations of teaching, but these tend to be tailored to the account of the applicant who selects which measures to focus on and explains the ways in which they are significant.

Mapping Approaches tend to focus on common measures of student outcomes, whether these are the ones selected in the TEF or students' performance in common tests such as in AHELO. The problem these scheme face is encapsulated in Goodhart's Law that once a measure becomes a performance indicator it ceases to be a good measure. Though a measure may have co-varied with quality in the past, as institutions seek to maximize their performance, its relationship to quality is lost. This can be addressed by focusing on measures of processes as well as outcomes because this creates a situation where the simplest way to 'fix' the system is to actually engage in processes that will enhance the quality of teaching and learning. This is not to argue that outcome measures should not be included but rather that they need to be underpinned by measures that provide evidence about how these outcomes have been achieved.

Overall, a range of separate measures of teaching excellence are needed that focus on both the processes and outcomes of high quality teaching. Given principle 1, these need to offer evidence about the extent to which the definition of teaching excellence has been achieved. Thus the second principle is:

Principle 2. Measurement: Measures of system-wide teaching excellence need to be aligned to the definition of teaching excellence and focus on educational processes as well as educational outcomes.

How does teaching excellence lead to enhancement?

Exemplar and Mapping Approaches are based on different views of how they lead to the enhancement of teaching. Exemplar Approaches are based on a contagion model of change, which assumes that if the best individual, department or institutions can be identified and rewarded, then they will share their excellent practices and help to encourage others to become excellent. Whilst these schemes can play a role in signaling the importance of teaching and can provide significant benefits to individuals and departments, they do not enhance every day teaching and learning across the whole system.

Mapping Approaches are based on a competition model of change, in which the best institutions are rewarded and the others will improve their practices, lose students or cease to offer degree programs. The problem with such an approach is that, for enhancement to occur, it relies both: on the measures of teaching excellence being valid, precise and accurate; and on applicants using these measures to inform their choice of degree program. Neither of these appear to be the case. The problems with measurements of teaching excellence were examined in the previous section and studies consistently show that students tend not to use information in this way to make their choices.

This suggests that both exemplar and mapping approaches are based on flawed theories of change. An alternative approach can be developed based on Goodhart's Law. If we include

in our measures of teaching excellence an indication of the extent to which institutions are engaged in practices that research has shown support high quality teaching and learning then this is likely to lead to institutions improving their practices.

Based on this review of how system-wide teaching excellence can lead to enhancement, the third principle is developed:

Principle 3. Enhancement: Improving performance on measures of teaching excellence should only be possible due to improvements in teaching practices.

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