Principles for developing effective approaches to system-wide teaching excellence

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Abstract

This chapter explores system-wide attempts to promote and measure teaching excellence in higher education. It discusses the challenges of defining teaching excellence and examines international approaches to promoting teaching excellence across systems of higher education. Two broad approaches to enhancing system-wide teaching excellence are identified: exemplar and mapping approaches. Based on the limitations of these approaches, three principles for the development of effective system-wide approaches to teaching excellence are advanced, which are focused on defining, measuring and enhancing teaching excellence. The chapter concludes with a worked example of what an approach that is aligned with these principles could look like. The intention is not to offer the definitive approach to teaching excellence, but rather to demonstrate that it is possible to develop approaches that align with these principles. Taking these principles seriously is important if system-wide schemes of teaching excellence are to lead to the sustained enhancement of university teaching.

Keywords: Teaching Excellence; Higher Education Systems; Quality Enhancement; Measuring Teaching Quality.

Introduction

There is nothing new about teaching excellence in higher education (Skelton 2005). What is striking, is the variety of international contexts in which teaching excellence is being explored and policies and practices established - in Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Asia (for example, see Courtney 2014; Land and Gordon 2015). The focus of attempts to develop teaching excellence has shifted over time. Initially the emphasis was on the development of excellent individual teachers, or 'teacher excellence' (Sherman et al. 1987; Kreber 2002; Gunn and Fisk 2013), and on promoting teaching excellence across departments and institutions (for example see Elton 1998; Frost & Teodorescu 2001).

However, more recently attempts are being made to devise approaches to system-wide teaching excellence.

In this chapter, I explore system-wide attempts to promote and measure teaching excellence. First, I discuss the challenges of defining teaching excellence and then examine international approaches to promoting teaching excellence across systems of higher education. I identify and review two broad approaches to enhancing system-wide teaching excellence. Based on the limitations of these two approaches, I advance three principles that can inform the development of effective system-wide approaches to teaching excellence. I conclude the chapter by working through one example of what an approach that is aligned with these principles could look like. The intention is not to offer the definitive approach to teaching excellence, but rather to demonstrate that it is possible to develop approaches that align with these principles. Taking these principles seriously is important if system-wide schemes of teaching excellence are to lead to the sustained enhancement of university teaching.

The meaning of 'teaching excellence' in system-wide approaches to promoting teaching excellence

Whilst teaching excellence is always about 'exceptional performance' (Elton 1998; Little et al. 2007), the nature of this performance is contested. Skelton (2005) argues for four meta-understandings of teaching excellence: 'traditional' where excellence is focused on cultural reproduction and is located in the disciplinary knowledge of the teacher as subject expert; 'performative' where excellence is focused on system efficiency and located in rules and regulations that are enforced by the teacher; 'psychologized' where excellence is focused on effective learning and is located in the individual relations between students and teachers; and 'critical' where excellence is focused on emancipation and is located in the material

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conditions that are produced by participatory dialogue between an informed citizenry and critical intellectuals.

In thinking about system-wide schemes of teaching excellence, it is important to be clear that the meaning of 'teaching excellence' is relational. The meaning changes as we move from considering the teaching practices of an individual academic, to thinking about the teaching practices across a department, to deliberating about teaching practices across an entire system of higher education. This is more than simply a reflection of the contested nature of the concept of teaching excellence. It is that the foregrounded features of teaching excellence change as we move between these scales. For example, when considering individual teaching excellence, it is possible to have a notion of teaching excellence that is focused on how an academic's teaching practices improve over time based on their reflections on their teaching practices (for example, see Ashwin and Trigwell 2004). However, when reflecting on teaching excellence at the system level, three elements must be taken into account if the notion of teaching excellence is to be meaningful.

First, teaching excellence can only make sense at the system level if it is based on public accounts of teaching excellence. These public accounts of excellence require some definition or framework through which excellence can be understood. These public claims for excellence need to be supported by stronger evidence than is required at the individual level (Ashwin and Trigwell 2004). This makes questions about the evidence of teaching excellence much more prominent in system-wide approaches to teaching excellence.

Second, a key debate is whether exceptional performance is identified by distinguishing who is better than others (norm-referenced excellence), or by reference to particular intrinsic qualities that indicate excellence (criterion-referenced excellence) (Strike 1985; Greatbatch and Holland 2016). Within system-wide approaches to teaching

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excellence, there are difficulties with adopting either option. A purely norm-referenced approach, which is generally used when institutions are in competition with each other (Strike 1985), faces the danger of becoming meaningless because it is simply about being better than others rather than about the intrinsic quality of teaching (Strike 1985; Readings 1996). This has led some to reject the notion of excellence because what is wanted is an improvement in quality across the sector rather than a few examples of excellence (Evans 2000). The danger of a criterion-based only approach is that the criteria of excellence are either framed in a way that excludes some individuals or groups from ever being considered excellent, or they present the possibility that everyone can be considered excellent. Both options threaten the credibility of the claim to have identified teaching excellence. This suggests that within system-wide approaches, teaching excellence needs to be both norm and criterion-referenced.

Third, given the costs of generating this evidence across a system, there is no point in gathering evidence unless it leads to improvements in teaching practices. The desire to enhance teaching across the system also brings us back to the need to offer a definition of teaching excellence. If one is to have a coherent sense of what constitutes enhanced teaching practices then there is a need to be clear about what higher quality (or excellent) teaching looks like.

These elements of system-level teaching excellence mean that there are three key questions that need to be considered when examining such schemes. First, how is teaching excellence defined? Second, how is teaching excellence measured? Third, how does the teaching excellence scheme lead to the enhancement of teaching and learning?

Approaches to promoting system-wide teaching excellence

There are two broad approaches to promoting system-wide teaching excellence. The first, which I call 'Exemplar Approaches', focus on identifying particular cases of teaching excellence, whether at the level of the individual teacher, department or subject grouping, or institution. The second, which I refer to as 'Mapping Approaches', attempt to gauge the level of teaching excellence across the system of higher education.

Exemplar Approaches either focus on individual teachers or centres of teaching excellence. There are many national schemes that identify excellent individual teachers (for example, see Skelton 2004, 2005; Leibowitz et al 2012; Behari-Leak and McKenna 2017; Efimenko et al 2018). These schemes tend to be based on a nomination by students, colleagues or the institution and the individual then producing a portfolio that makes a case for their teaching excellence. This is then assessed in comparison with other applicants, and excellent teachers identified and rewarded. There are also a number of national schemes that identify centres of teaching excellence, for example in the UK (see Trowler at al 2014); Finland (see Kauppila 2016), Norway (see Andersen Helseth, Alveberg et al 2019) and the 'Competition for Teaching Excellence' (*Wettbewerb Exzellente Lehre*) in Germany (Brockerhoff et al 2014). The German scheme focuses on the institutional level while the others are more focused on particular subject groupings. However, they all have a common structure in which units compete to be awarded excellence status based on an assessment of their previous achievements and their plans for developing excellence further. They are similar to individually-based schemes with the main difference being that they operate at a departmental or institutional level.

Mapping Approaches seek to assess teaching excellence across the whole system of higher education rather than identifying particular instances of teaching excellence. All

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teaching across the system is evaluated, which can be national or international in scope. The two main examples of this approach have assessed institutions on their success in supporting students to achieve certain defined outcomes. The OECD's unsuccessful piloting of the AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) (see Ashwin 2015 for a discussion and critique) attempted to develop an international assessment of teaching excellence. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England (see Ashwin 2017 for a full explanation) seeks to assess teaching excellence across a national system of higher education.

The following sections of this chapter assess existing Exemplar and Mapping Approaches in relation to the three questions outlined earlier: How is teaching excellence defined? How is teaching excellence measured? How does the teaching excellence scheme lead to the enhancement of teaching and learning? This assessment is of system-wide approaches to teaching excellence that are currently adopted with the intention is to formulate principles to help develop more effective approaches to system-wide teaching excellence in the future. In the final section of the chapter, I offer an approach to teaching excellence that meets these principles in order to show that they provide a practical way of developing system-wide approaches to teaching excellence.

How is teaching excellence defined?

Under Exemplar Approaches, teaching excellence tends to be defined by those who are applying to be awarded the status of 'excellence'. In some cases, applicants are asked to respond to particular dimensions related to excellence or the applicant has to pass a threshold to be considered excellent. However, the nature of the applicants' excellence is something that they develop in their case for excellence. The logic of such approaches is that applicants

develop an account of the ways in which they are excellent and then support this with evidence. This allows the space for a variety of different definitions of teaching excellence to flourish.

In contrast, under current Mapping Approaches to teaching excellence, the approach has been to identify the expected outcomes of excellent teaching. If we take the TEF as an example, universities are assessed on a series of metrics. These have changed between different iterations of the TEF but generally include students' views of teaching, assessment and academic support as reported in the National Student Survey (NSS), student dropout rates, and rates of employment and salary levels. In order to prevent student intake determining the outcomes on these measures, institutional performance has been benchmarked against the demographic characteristics of their students and based on this, their performance flagged when it was statistically significantly better or worse than the benchmark. Assessors initially assess institutions' performance based on the number of flags obtained, and then examine contextual information and the institution's narrative case for the excellence of their teaching. This institutional submission gives the space for institutions to develop a case for their particular version of excellence in a similar way to Centres of Excellence schemes, but performance on the common metrics is the most important contributor to institutions overall performance. This means that whilst the TEF does not seek to define teaching excellence, the metrics that are used to measure teaching excellence do imply a particular view of the outcomes of high quality teaching.

Therefore, we can see that in both Exemplar and Mapping Approaches to teaching excellence, a definition of teaching excellence tends not to be developed. Rhetorically this can be explained in terms of not wanting to set limits on teaching excellence and allowing individuals or institutions to develop their own accounts of excellence. However, this points

to a central contradiction in such approaches. 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, even if this is not made explicit from the outset. This lack of explicit criteria for excellence means that such schemes tend to be norm-referenced and thus face the danger of emptiness identified earlier.

Given the importance of defining teaching excellence, on what basis can a definition be developed? Whilst different schemes might define teaching excellence differently, what should be invariant is that any definition of teaching excellence is explicitly aligned with the educational purposes of higher education and show how it 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?

As discussed above, under Exemplar Approaches to Teaching Excellence, applicants tend to develop their own accounts of teaching excellence. This shapes the measurement of teaching excellence with individuals or institutions providing their own evidence to support these accounts. There may be particular types of evidence that are requested or encouraged, 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.

We have already seen in the previous section how Mapping Approaches to Teaching Excellence 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. Unsurprisingly, given their design, much of the discussion of mapping approaches focus on issues of measurement.

These discussions tend to be fuelled by two measurement myths: 'big data' and 'the silver bullet'. The myth of big data is the belief that measurement will be improved if we increase the points of measurement across students' experiences of higher education and combine them. Thus there are moves to combine measures of students' skills, competencies, content knowledge and personal development to gain a precise insight into the nature of teaching excellence. The problem with this way of thinking is that it misunderstands the kinds of measures that we have at our disposal. There are two aspects to this misunderstanding. First, it fails to take account of the process of 'commensuration' (Espeland & Stevens 1998; Espeland and Sauder 2007), through which qualities are transformed into metrics. This involves stripping out the context from the measures, and converting different qualities into numbers, which leads to the view that these measures can be combined and related in an unproblematic manner. This leads to the second aspect of this misunderstanding: it treats skills and competencies as if they are precise ways of measuring students' gains from education. In reality, they have the precision of a sledgehammer. For example, where do skills end and competencies begin? What is the difference between developing personally and gaining new knowledge? These measures overlap in a myriad of ways because they are different ways of describing the same educational processes, rather than separate aspects of an educational experience. The level of overlap means that they

cannot be combined into a precise account of students' experiences and any attempt to do so is doomed to failure.

The myth of the silver bullet accepts that there is no meaningful way to combine different measures. Instead, it looks for one single measure that is often related to a high quality outcome, though it does not capture everything about quality. The problem with this is that any silver bullet will ricochet against Goodhart's Law (for a discussion in relation to performance measures in higher education see Elton 2004), that once a measure becomes a performance indicator it ceases to be a good measure. Though a factor may have co-varied with quality in the past, the moment it becomes a high stakes performance measure, institutions will seek to address it, often at the expense of quality more generally. The most likely outcome is that the relationship between the factor and overall quality is lost as those assessed try to 'fix' their performance on the measures. As Elton (2004) argues focusing on measures of processes as well as outcomes helps to address the tendency of institutions to try to 'fix' outcome measures. This is 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 we should not include outcome measures but rather that these need to be underpinned by measures that provide evidence about how these outcomes have been achieved.

Dealing with the myths of big data and the silver bullet means that we need to have a range of separate measures of teaching excellence that focus on both the process and outcomes of high quality teaching. Clearly any measures need to offer evidence about the extent to which the definition of teaching excellence discussed in the previous section 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 tend to be based on different views of how they lead to the enhancement of teaching. Exemplar Approaches are based on a contagion model of change (Trowler et al 2014). The underlying theory is 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. Exemplar Approaches tend to emphasise the importance of recognising and rewarding excellence. Whilst these schemes can play a role in signalling the importance of teaching, raising its profile and can provide significant benefits to individuals and departments, their long term effects tend to be felt more by a small group of specialists who benefit from engaging with them rather than changing every day teaching and learning across the whole system (Trowler et al 2014).

Current Mapping Approaches to Teaching Excellence are based on a competition model of change. Here the idea is that the best institutions will be rewarded and the others will improve their practices, lose students or cease to offer degree programmes (for example see DBIS, 2015).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 programme. Neither of these appear to be the case. We have seen the problem with measurements of teaching excellence

in the previous section and studies consistently show that students tend not to make their choices in this way and that choice processes are structured by applicants' social background (see Reay et al. 2005; Haywood and Scullion in press).

This suggests that both exemplar and mapping approaches are based on flawed theories of change. An alternative approach can be developed based on our discussion of Goodhart's Law in the previous section. 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.

Towards the development of a principled approach to system-wide teaching excellence

The review of international approaches to system-level teaching excellence in this chapter has resulted in the elaboration of three principles that are intended to underpin their future development.

A difficulty with such principles is that they can be seen as an unachievable ideal rather than providing a practical way of informing the development of system-wide teaching excellence schemes. In order to address this difficulty, this final section of the chapter outlines an approach to system-wide teaching excellence that meet these principles. This is

not an existing scheme but an example that is intended to show that it is possible to design a scheme that meets the three principles.

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.

If we seek a definition of teaching excellence that reflects the purposes of higher education, then one option is to focus on how students are transformed by their engagement with the knowledge they encounter in their degree courses. Knowledge is central to the transformational nature of undergraduate degrees, in which students change their sense of self through their engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge. This involves students relating their identities to their disciplines and the world and seeing themselves implicated in knowledge. It does not always happen. It requires students to be intellectually engaged with their courses and to see it as an educational experience and is dependent on both students and the quality of their educational experience and (Ashwin, Abbas et al. 2015; 2016; 2017; McLean et al 2018). This supports a view of teaching excellence as the provision of educational experiences that successfully support students in this process of transformation

Based on this, teaching excellence can be understood as designing ways in which particular students can develop an understanding of particular bodies of disciplinary and/or professional knowledge (Ashwin et al. 2015 based on Shulman 1986). Such an approach positions teaching excellence as a collective endeavour rather than an individual endeavour. Teaching excellence is about how programme teams design their degree programmes in ways that explicitly take account of the previous knowledge and experiences of students who are studying the course. This involves being explicit about how and why the knowledge, which

students are offered access to, is important and powerful and how it enables students to understand and change the world. Finally, it involves having a sense of who students will become through their engagement with this knowledge; how this will enable them to contribute to society including, but not limited to, their employment.

This offers a way of understanding of teaching excellence that is focused on higher education's role in producing and making accessible knowledge for society. Rather than being focused on excellent individuals, it is about how programme teams collectively produce degree programmes that can transform students. (Ashwin et al 2015). This view of teaching excellence would support a system-wide Mapping Approach to Teaching Excellence that examines the extent to which degree programmes help students to develop these kinds of transformational relationships to knowledge.

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

So how would could teaching excellence as defined above be measured? One way would be to measure teaching excellence by examining the processes by which degree programmes are designed and developed over time. This would involve process measures that offer an insight into how programme teams use evidence about their programmes provided by metrics to evaluate the effectiveness of the design of their programmes. This would include an examination of how programmes are designed to take account of who the students are who are studying it, and how they are designed to help students develop transformative relationships to the disciplinary and/or professional knowledge that underpins the programme. It would also include outcome measures that examine the impact of this design

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on students' learning outcomes, as well as examining what graduates contribute to society after they complete the programme. Providing evidence of such complex processes and outcomes would require a mix of quantitative and qualitative measures, which could be both norm and criterion-referenced. This could draw on some metrics that are used across the higher education system but would also require that programme teams develop qualitative accounts of how the programme was designed in an evidence-informed manner.

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

The approach outlined above would align with Principle 3 because programme teams would be asked to develop accounts of how they have developed their programmes based on the available evidence. The advantage an approach that measures how programme teams use evidence to design, and improve the quality of, their degree programmes, is that it would directly lead to enhancements in that quality. In writing accounts of the design of their programmes, programme teams would collectively reflect on these processes, which is a key aspect of developing reflective approaches to teaching (Ashwin et al. 2015). The combination of process and outcome measures would ensure that the changes in the design of the programme were related to changes in student outcomes.

The brief discussion of ways of meeting the three principles gives an example, albeit limited given space constraints, of how a system-wide teaching excellence scheme could be developed that attempts to meaningfully capture teaching excellence whilst leading to the enhancement of the quality of teaching. It is important to be clear that developing any system-wide scheme of teaching excellence is difficult. All such schemes will have limitations and lead to unexpected responses that can result in perverse incentives and

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unintended consequences. However, a great strength of the approach outlined is that it foregrounds the difficulty of developing meaningful measures of educational processes and outcomes. It highlights how such measures can only be developed through collaborative conversations between academics, students, and other contributors to the educational processes rather than suggesting that assessing and measuring teaching excellence is a transparent and straightforward enterprise.

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