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DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING TEACHING EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Academic work has changed significantly in recent decades, as universities worldwide respond to globalisation, the massification of higher education (HE) and the increasing demands placed upon them by their national governments. New public management and neoliberalism have become powerful political drivers of a quality culture in HE across the world (Behari-Leak, 2017; Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Enders & de Weert, 2009; Hénard, 2010) as discussed in Chapter 2. Governments have sought to exercise greater control over universities' activities by introducing initiatives to evaluate the quality of their investments (Weir, 2009). Research and innovation are key quality dimensions linked to economic development that have underpinned successive HE reforms

and the more widespread occurrence of excellence initiatives in HE (OECD, 2015; Pruvot & Estermann, 2014). However, research as one important mission of HE has perhaps overshadowed an equally important core mission of HE: teaching and learning (McAleese, 2013).

The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>) and the German Exzellenz Initiativ (DFG, 2013) are examples of systems for the evaluation of research quality that are powerful determinants of institutional status (Brusoni et al., 2014). In a competitive environment encouraged by league tables and rankings (e.g. QS World University Rankings; Times Higher Education World University Rankings), research excellence is central to a prestige culture that influences which institutions can recruit the best students and world-leading staff from an international market (Blackmore, Blackwell, & Edmondson, 2016; Forstenzer, 2016). Given the prestige afforded to research excellence, teaching excellence has been perceived as less important in many HE institutions (Brew, 2012; Cashmore & Ramsden, 2009a, 2009b; MacKenzie & Robertson, 2009). This is particularly the case at more senior academic levels. The report on excellent education in research-rich universities by Fung, Besters-Dilger, and van der Vaart (2017, p. 7), for the League of European Research Universities, noted that education-focused leadership has 'had less favourable conditions for reward and promotion' in these institutions. This concern was borne out by Gunn and Fisk (2013) in their review of the literature on teaching excellence, which found that teaching leadership tends not to be recognised in promotions. This may leave staff with teaching-focused careers feeling undervalued and demotivated.

This chapter seeks to address the recognition, support and development needs of teaching-focused academics. It considers the complexities of teaching and educational leadership

roles and the need for recognition of different forms of teaching excellence across the academic career profile. It suggests the importance of collaborative forms of professional development and engagement to promote in teaching-focused academics a sense of belonging to a valued university community; to promote greater reflectivity, review of habitual practices and openness to new theoretical and pedagogical perspectives; and to support the collation of evidence of what is excellent in teaching across a range of career phases and profiles.

RECOGNISING AND REWARDING TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Excellence ‘is an emotive, if familiar, word in HE, but its pursuit is permeated by socio-cultural characteristics such as gender and ethnicity’ (Deem, 2015, p. 4). Female academics, for instance, have voiced concerns that selection processes for senior posts tend to focus on rather narrow sets of achievements, such as awards received and papers written, whereas the teaching, administration and outreach work in which many women excel are not sufficiently valued (Jarboe, 2016). Jarboe (2016, p. 49) cites Professor Dame Athene Donald, Professor of Experimental Physics, who suggests the need to appropriately *reward and embed different types of success, such as teaching, outreach and departmental support; activities that ... are not currently a meaningful part of recognition and advancement in universities.*

Data from the UK (HESA, 2015–2016) indicating that while women make up 47% of the academic workforce, only 23% of professors are women supports these concerns. Similarly, in Europe only 18% of full professorships are held by women (Vernos, 2013), while reports from America and

Australia also indicate that women hold fewer senior posts than men (Deem, 2015). A note of optimism is, however, evident in that ‘committed and collective action to increase women’s leadership’ has begun by the HE funding bodies, sector umbrella bodies and individual HE institutions (Jarboe, 2016, p. 4).

The status of teaching and the reward and recognition of teaching and teaching leadership have become national policy issues for HE (MacKenzie & Robertson, 2009). This is evident in the fact that quality assurance (QA) initiatives for research excellence (REF) are now mirrored in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) initiatives for teaching. The adoption of revised *Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European higher education area* (2015) and beyond have been presented as a means to address the perceived imbalance between teaching and research and to reward excellent teaching in HE. Initiatives in countries worldwide, including South Africa (Leibowitz, Farmer, & Franklin, 2012; Searle & McKenna, 2013); Finland (Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council – FINHEEC); the Netherlands (Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders – NVAO); Australia (the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching); and New Zealand (New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit) have introduced quality measures for HE teaching (Dittrich in Brusoni et al., 2014). The introduction of a TEF has been presented as a means ‘to recognise and reward excellent teaching in UK HE providers’ (HEFCE, 2017).

Attempts to reward good teaching are welcome (Gibbs, 2016). However, when ‘discourses of neoliberalism intersect with teaching and learning practices’ (Burke, Stevenson, & Whelan, 2015, p. 29), the stated intentions to rebalance the ways in which teaching is regarded compared with research are met with a degree of scepticism (Cashmore, 2009a; Weir,

2009). There is little empirical evidence to indicate that quality measures employed by TEF capture the complexity of teaching excellence demonstrated across institutions and cultural contexts, disciplines and programmes, and by individual or collaborative teams of academics (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015; Skelton, 2004). The ‘normative universalising of teaching excellence’ (Greatbatch & Holland, 2016, p. 11) has been criticised for reifying systems over the development of strong values and cultures of teaching (Searle & McKenna, 2013). There are concerns that the real aim of external quality audits is to make universities more accountable rather than to enhance the quality of learning and teaching (Searle & McKenna, *ibid.*).

Some studies suggest that a combination of external audit and internal university processes can stimulate change and improvement in teaching (Greatbatch & Holland, 2016). Beckmann (2016, p. 1), however, questions whether approaches that are in essence both competitive and comparative, and focus on the few that can demonstrate the ‘elusive trait of excellence’, actually ‘divide more than they unite’. This can lead to performative cultures and an intensification of competition and individualism in the quest for recognition and reward rather than valuing collegiality (Weir, 2009).

Comparison of practices can be productive, however, when it is used to develop, recognise and reward teaching excellence at all levels, to identify and share effective practices and to incorporate them in resources and initiatives that can help to facilitate change (Wills, 2010, cited in HEA, 2013b). The international *Promoting Teaching* Project (HEA, 2013a, 2013b) sought to support the development of a quality culture for teaching by drawing on expertise and innovative practice examples from Australia and the United Kingdom to produce such resources (this initiative and its outputs will be referred to in more detail later in the chapter).

Responding to concerns within the sector, mechanisms to support, recognise and celebrate excellent teaching at institutional, national and global levels have been developed (Brusoni et al., 2014; Fung et al., 2017). Organisations such as the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the United Kingdom have devised awards to recognise and reward individual excellence (National Teaching Fellowships), collaborative teamwork (Collaborative Awards for Teaching Excellence, 2016) and institutional excellence (The Global Teaching Excellence Award, introduced in 2017). The Global Teaching Excellence Award is thought to be the first HE award of its kind to recognise commitment to teaching that is considered to be world-class, in terms of the leadership of teaching, students' learning and student support (HEA, 2017).

A number of universities have also developed internal methods and mechanisms to acknowledge the contribution of academics to teaching excellence, although there is as yet a lack of convincing evidence that they are being systematically used and valued (Cashmore, Cane, Cane, & Stainton, 2013; HEA, 2013b; Mackenzie & Robertson, 2009). More development work is needed to communicate and build on policy initiatives, to address the perceived status of teaching excellence compared to research excellence, to grow and develop excellent 'communities of leader-scholars, willing and able to learn and tackle together the challenges of contemporary academic life' (Hill, p. 30) and to build a quality culture around teaching (Fung et al., 2017).

REFINING NOTIONS OF TEACHING EXCELLENCE

Challenging the normative notions of teaching excellence that permeate quality audit criteria and frameworks is

problematic, especially, when there is no consensus on a more acceptable definition of excellence (Bråten, 2014; Greatbatch & Holland, 2016; Land & Gordon, 2015). A challenge for the sector is to consider how best to respond to the particular conceptualisation of teaching excellence permeating TEF and HERB (see Chapter 2 for more detailed discussion).

The widespread ‘lack of sophistication in conceptualisation of university teaching excellence’ (Gunn & Fisk, 2013, p. 7), particularly in terms of how the academic role may change over the course of a career, needs to be addressed. The development of a dialogue to refine understandings of what is ‘necessary’, what is ‘good’ and what is ‘excellent’ in university teaching, can lead to more nuanced conceptions of teaching excellence that may help institutions to recognise the multidimensional and dynamic nature of teaching (Quinlan, 2014; van Lankveld et al., 2016; Gibbs, 2016; Forstenzer, 2016), as discussed in the preceding chapters. Recognition of threshold, good and excellent teaching requires that the nature and mix of evidence will vary across a range of academic career profiles, to show development over time and demonstrate relevance according to context, for example, in teaching or research-focused institutions (Australian Learning & Teaching Council, 2009; Cashmore et al., 2009a, 2009b; Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Law, 2011; Locke, Whitchurch, Smith, & Mazenod, 2016; Probert, 2013). The contribution to excellence of education leaders, of teachers with sophisticated, research-informed professional beliefs, identities and practices, and of innovative, collaborative teaching teams should not be overlooked (Blackmore et al., 2016; Fung et al., 2017; Searle & McKenna, 2013; Stevenson, Burke, & Whelan, 2014).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND TEACHING EXCELLENCE

In parallel with mechanisms for the reward and recognition of teaching excellence, professional learning and development initiatives are important to help teaching-focused academics to feel supported and valued (Van Lankveld et al., 2016). Providing opportunities to reflect upon the ways in which teaching has developed in response to academic, social, economic and political challenges can help colleagues to construct an evidence base for pedagogical development and innovation. With widening participation, technologisation, internationalisation and the growth of transnational education, come opportunities to demonstrate excellence through innovative, inclusive, culturally sensitive teaching. Raising aspirations, providing students with different cultural perspectives, improving interactions between students, developing their leadership and intercultural skills (Leask, 2009; Mak, Daly, & Barker, 2014) and their responsible use of technologies is important in readiness for the world of work and, perhaps more importantly, to encourage socially responsible citizenship (Clifford & Montgomery, 2014; Reid & Spencer-Oatey, 2013, cited in Robson, 2015).

Teaching-focused academics may take for granted excellent aspects of their teaching that could be used as evidence to support promotion or award applications. However, time and support to consider, collate and present evidence of excellence appropriate to their career stage can be valuable in achieving recognition, and in professional identity formation (Fanghanel, 2007, 2012, Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Quinlan, 2014). The *Promoting Teaching* project (HEA, 2013a, 2013b) was commissioned to provide benchmarking resources for institutions seeking to review and develop their

promotion practices and procedures for teaching-focused academic careers. A further timely outcome of the project was the production of a guide, *Making Evidence Count* (HEA, 2013a). The benchmarking tools and the evidence guide were primarily intended to support those making judgements about promotions cases, and individuals seeking to articulate excellence in their award and promotion applications. The resources have, however, also proved to be useful in professional development activities for promotion committees, heads of department and schools, and other leaders and mentors. They can be used to engage with and debate on notions of excellence and to support the review of the criteria on which they determine the reward or recognition of excellence (McHanwell & Robson, 2017). The intention is not that these resources should be regarded as definitive criteria for assessing teaching quality, but that they can be used to stimulate dialogue and encourage review of the breadth of evidence from a wide scope of activity that is considered important to cases of teaching excellence. The resources encompass threshold expectations for student-facing work, such as student engagement and curriculum development, which are already key elements of accredited training and development offerings. They also encompass leadership and collaboration, research and scholarship, and professional learning. These perhaps less consistently recognised forms of excellence are therefore discussed in turn.

LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

Leaders have key roles to play in relation to learning and teaching development. Yet there is a scant literature on leadership of teaching (Marshall, Orell, Cameron, Bosanquet, & Thomas, 2011; Quinlan, 2014). Hofmeyer, Sheingold,

Klopper, and Warland (2015, p. 182) offer useful distinctions between 'leadership as position; leadership as performance; leadership as practice; and leadership as professional role model'.

Leadership at programme level, to oversee the design and delivery of the curriculum, to monitor the teaching and assessment methods employed, and the quality of the student experience, is generally recognised as an important and largely managerial position that contributes towards the achievement of excellent learning outcomes for students (Robson, 2015). Professional training for module leaders and programme leaders is routinely offered in many institutions. More senior teaching-focused leadership positions, for example the role of Dean of Undergraduate or Postgraduate Studies, also tend to involve the more managerial and quality assurance aspects of teaching. This reflects the conceptual ambiguity around the terms 'leading' and 'managing' (Marshall et al., 2011) underpinning the official designation of teaching-focused positions.

Recognition of a range of forms of teaching leadership is variable and promotion for leaders of teaching, particularly to the higher levels of Reader/Associate Professor and Chair, is uneven across the sector (Behari-Leak, 2017; Cashmore et al., 2013; Fung & Gordon, 2016; Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Quinlan, 2014). More nuanced understandings of excellence in leadership are needed to acknowledge leaders' contributions to the promotion of a quality culture around teaching (Bendermacher, noude Engbrink, Wolfhagen, & Dolmans, 2016; Blackmore et al., 2016). Teaching leaders who influence organisational processes, act as professional role models to other aspiring leaders and shape the socio-cultural environment of the campus (Quinlan, 2014) facilitate a critical dialogue around learning and teaching that is vital to culture change. Creating a collaborative culture in which teachers

engage in critical dialogue about learning and teaching helps to develop a sense of agency, and a sense of connection in their contribution to teaching excellence (Van Lankveld et al., 2016).

Recognition of more democratic and less hierarchical models of leadership is increasing, as a means to develop leadership capacity in teaching and a sense of collective responsibility for changing HE cultures (Bolden, Jones, David, & Gentle, 2015; Quinlan, 2014). Ensuring that appropriate mentoring and support for professional learning is available to teaching-focused colleagues is important as they navigate the personal and professional, structural and cultural challenges that they may encounter as they construct their professional roles and identities (Behari-Leak, 2017).

The ability to demonstrate a wide sphere of influence, and contribution to the review and development of policies and practices at one's own and other institutions, locally, nationally and internationally, evidenced through publications and participation at conferences or in other professional fora, is important to senior teaching leadership development. Excellence in educational leadership at this level can facilitate transformations in policy and practice (Fung et al., 2017) that attract national and international recognition, and should be rewarded in comparable ways to research excellence.

RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Leadership at senior level requires parity of opportunity in terms of time for research, scholarship and collaborative engagement with peers, which many academics regard as preferred forms of professional development, enabling them to provide the evidence of 'valued contributions to the

academy', such as publications and awards, that are often required in promotions criteria (Locke et al., 2016, p. 77).

However, time for research and scholarship is important at all career stages. Knowledge about learning and teaching can be constructed through formal research, collaborative enquiry, engaging with the literature and through practice and experimentation (Mentkowski et al., 2000, cited in Kreber, 2002, p. 9). Whereas 'training' programmes for university teachers are often criticised for inherent weaknesses, including concerns about the relevance and transferability of content and methods for different disciplinary contexts (Fanghanel, 2012); time to engage in research and scholarship, as identified earlier in this chapter, is a key concern for many teaching-focused academics. Research and scholarly activity are often regarded as the most valuable forms of professional development, not only for those seeking job security and promotion (Locke et al., 2016; Robson, Wall, & Lofthouse, 2013) but also for those wishing to enhance their professional learning. For colleagues with more student-facing roles, scholarly leave or sabbaticals to develop textbooks, course materials or e-learning resources, or, for those engaged in vocational subjects, to refresh their experience as practitioners in their professions, can benefit the individual, their institution and the students (Locke et al., *ibid.*).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Opportunity to engage in collaborative enquiry with colleagues across disciplines and institutions, professional bodies and special interest groups, associations and committees, can be a highly valued and productive form of professional learning for teachers at all levels. In the global knowledge economy, access to international networks and communities

provides increasingly valuable professional learning fora (Guruz, 2011). Technological advances make virtual connections possible; and collaborations are facilitated when members share a common language, a common focus and a capacity to work in intercultural environments (*ibid.*, p. 19).

Socially oriented, participatory paradigms of professional learning can contribute to active and dynamic identity formation and renegotiation through different forms of participation (Jawitz, 2009; Stibbe, 2010–2011; Vandamme, 2014), supported by critical self-reflection and social recognition (Gu, 2011).

Networks for collaborative enquiry, drawing on action research and action leadership models, can provide professional learning in participatory, non-hierarchical, democratic, ethical and inclusive ways (Quinlan, 2014; Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher, & Kearney, 2015). They provide fora for dialogue, opportunities to share practices and beliefs, and to critically engage with relevant literature, methodologies and partnerships for research. Expertise is developed through authentic and theorised approaches to teaching, as a process, or as a product, of ethical enquiry (Gregory & Gregory, 2013; Jawitz, 2009; Kreber, 2002; Robson et al., 2013).

Comparison of practices can be productive within such networks. Robson et al. (2013) note the compelling evidence to suggest that teacher learning is enhanced in collaborative settings, where practices involve critical reflectivity and scrutiny and critique by peers (Andresen, 2000; Cordingley, Bell, Evans, & Firth, 2005, cited in Robson et al., 2013). Their methodology for systematic, collaborative inquiry into teaching and learning practices not only provides a structure in which the epistemological and pedagogical foundations and rationales for practice can be discussed and developed, but also rigour through sharing the

outcomes of the inquiry for public critique (Stenhouse, 1981, cited in Robson et al., 2013). Inquiry networks of this kind can support colleagues to consider the structures, policies and environments in which their teaching is located and to identify how departmental, faculty, university, national and international agendas shape their identity (Fanghanel, 2007). Systematic inquiry into teaching can provide rich data to challenge negative perceptions of practice knowledge (Hammersley, 2010, cited in Robson et al., 2013) and to demonstrate the impact on learning outcomes and the student experience of the theorised practices employed by excellent teachers.

Networks for collaborative enquiry, based upon more democratic notions of teaching excellence, can promote inter-*actional* leadership, in which different members provide leadership in response to particular situations, tasks and decisions, regardless of their roles (Knight & Trowler, 2000). Expert guidance from network members can give communicative power and legitimacy to the ideas and practices that develop (Robson et al. 2013; Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015). The network can provide the productive conditions for development sought by many teaching-focused academics, through professional learning as participation (Wenger, 1998). This helps to explain how practices evolve, and identities are developed and transformed as members provide interpretive support for others in their communities of practice (*ibid.*). As network members explore and reflect on their work, engage with each other and with the literature, ideas are interpreted and reinterpreted and more theorised or principled accounts of teaching are constructed (Light, Calkins, & Cox, 2011; Sadler, Selkrig, & Manathunga, 2017; Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015), contributing to the quality culture in their institutions (Fung et al., 2017).

Although the literature on HE has revealed a lack of consensus in conceptualisations of university teaching excellence, looking to the broader educational research literature, [James and Pollard \(2011\)](#) outline useful, evidence-informed generic principles for effective teaching and learning drawn from 10 years of research in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). With the aim to improve outcomes for students of all ages, the principles are grouped under four main themes: educational values and purposes; curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; personal and social processes and relationships; and teachers and policies (*ibid.*).

[James and Pollard \(2011\)](#) note a key principle relating to teaching policies, that effective pedagogies for HE depend on the learning of all those who support the learning of others ([James & Pollard, *ibid.*, p. 9](#)). Developing teacher excellence through practice-based inquiry, involving practice and experimentation ([Mentkowski et al., 2000](#)), is especially highlighted.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This chapter has taken a critical perspective on discourses of ‘excellence’ in HE teaching. It has reflected on the extent to which academic work has changed in recent decades, with the massification of HE and the increasing demands placed upon universities by national governments and external agencies. The quest for quality reflects and responds to the academic, social, economic and political challenges facing HE institutions as discussed in Chapter 2. The market pressures facing the sector suggest that it is timely for universities to think beyond their reputation for research excellence and to celebrate teaching excellence, not only as a means to improve

their market position and competitiveness, but also as a means to attract, develop and retain excellent teachers.

Coates and Goedegebuure (2012) suggest that universities may need to consider their capacity to respond to the demands of the global student market. A review of selection, promotion and professional development procedures may be timely to ensure that prevailing conceptualisations of academic work reflect the reality of the modern academic role. 'There is an overarching need to consider the evolving nature of academic roles and for a fresh conceptualisation of academic work that is authentic and feasible' (*ibid.*, p. 875). The academic career structure should enable teaching excellence in all its forms to be developed and nurtured, recognised and celebrated.

Turning to the contentious issue of quality measures and teaching excellence: is it possible to design effective systems to both measure *and* improve the quality of learning and teaching in HE? Research carried out in the school sector suggests that student progress is the yardstick by which teacher quality should be assessed (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014; James & Pollard, 2011). TEF metrics can provide broad indications of quality in terms of evidence of student progress and student satisfaction, but they fail to tell the whole story about teaching excellence. The contribution to excellence of education leaders, of teachers with sophisticated, research-informed professional beliefs and identities, pedagogies and practices, and of innovative, collaborative networks and teaching teams, require more nuanced definitions of excellence, and differentiated forms of support and development.

This chapter has attempted to contribute to thinking about what more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of teaching excellence might involve and how HE institutions and quality agencies might enable these more complex forms

of evidence to be developed, presented, recognised and rewarded, to reflect the full range of teaching excellence across the academic career. It argues that a reframing of notions of teaching excellence in some institutions may be necessary to enable more sophisticated understandings of excellence to be communicated, debated and deployed to create a quality culture around teaching.

To add to the challenge for TEF, evidence of excellence is highly variable across institutions, faculties, and disciplines, cultures and contexts, because of differences in national and institutional missions and discourses. It is therefore difficult to envisage a single common measure of teaching excellence. A range of structural, social and cultural factors influence the positions from which teachers reflect on and theorise their practice (Lesnick, 2005) in the messy reality of the modern academic role (Debowski, 2012).

Strong and innovative arrangements for professional learning are strategically important to enhance the quality and relevance of learning and teaching in HE (Barnes et al., 1994). While each HEI will face specific economic and cultural challenges, the overall aim for HE teaching across the sector is strikingly similar – to ensure the quality of student learning. A greater emphasis on teacher professional learning is crucial to develop effective pedagogies for all those who support the learning of others in HE (James & Pollard, 2011). Professional learning through enquiry-based, interdisciplinary, inter-institutional and intercultural collaborations, networks and dialogue will help to ensure that the sector has the capacity to meet market demands with teaching that is theorised, evidence-based, principled, culturally responsive and inclusive. Further debate and dialogue would be welcome to consider the ways in which teaching excellence can become a priority for the HE sector in the ways that HERB outlines.

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