

Reinterpreting teaching excellence

This special issue developed out of the guest editors' interest and ongoing research into the idea of teaching excellence (Su and Wood, 2012; Wood and Su, 2017). The special issue aims to explore teaching excellence from an international perspective, helping us to understand broader conceptions and practice of teaching excellence as situated in contrasting geographical and policy contexts. Increasingly the marketisation of higher education and stakeholders' demands on and expectations of the value of higher education has led to increased interest in questions such as – what is teaching excellence in higher education? How might excellence be defined, operationalised and measured? Who are the key stakeholders in pursuit of teaching excellence? In this special issue, teaching excellence is explored through conceptual, theoretical, policy and academic practice lenses.

The spread of neo-liberal ideology and its attendant application of market mechanisms to higher education have resulted in the growth of a competitive and consumerist environment, characterised by the increasing use of metrics, rankings and customer satisfaction ratings. Gourlay and Stevenson (2017, p. 391) note how such factors have become a feature of contemporary higher education policy discourses globally. This new operating environment is pervaded with the language of excellence, “the new currency of the higher education market place”, as Nixon (2008, p. 20) puts it. Saunders and Blanco Ramírez (2017, p. 398) go further and describe this idea of excellence as “a technology of neoliberal ideology”. Conceptions of higher education have been refashioned and universities are now regarded as providers of higher education and students are re-designated as customers and consumers. The idea of teaching excellence sits at the heart of this conception. However, Healey (2011, p. 203) reminds us that “being prepared to take risks, and as a consequence at times failing, is integral to striving for excellence for both our students and ourselves”. A consumerist conception of higher education, with its focus on quick fixes and expectations that consumers/students will be given what they want, does not appear to align well with such ideas about excellence.

This special issue offers a timely exploration of teaching excellence in higher education and develops understandings of this from international perspectives. Our contributors identify the blurry and nebulous idea of teaching excellence and this obfuscation can be unhelpful when it comes to the development of informed critical debate. Writing in the context of higher education in Australia, Cooper's (2019) article raises some broader questions of private interests and the public good in policy discourse, and in a similar vein Wood and Su (2019) note wider questions about matters of purpose which have been displaced by a hollow space when the rhetoric of excellence holds sway.

In identifying “how the original academic utility of the notion of “teaching excellence” has been compromised and colonised by an accountability agenda, which in turn has had disempowering consequences for those interested in understanding and improving HE teaching further” Wood and O'Leary's (2019) discussion connects with some of the wider issues regarding the drivers for the teaching excellence agenda. Tsvetkova and Lomer's (2019) article offers an analysis of Russian higher education policy through the lens of neoliberalism and the effects of this seen for example in competition, measurement and world university rankings. Our contributors identify possibilities, alternative conceptualisations and opportunities and in doing so they enrich our thinking and offer refreshing insights into some of the issues and debates.



Writing in the context of higher education in England, Wood and O'Leary (2019) suggest why a possible new approach to pedagogic development needs to be considered. Having first surveyed the shifts and changes in meanings ascribed to "teaching excellence", they suggest that a new approach to pedagogic development needs to be considered to establish a more positive and critical approach at both institutional and sectoral levels. The article outlines a possible approach to developing such renewal. Based on their thoughtful critique of the current conceptualisation of teaching excellence, they offer a refreshingly different narrative and perspective. Their argument unfolds which, as their title suggests, moves beyond current debate to develop a "different narrative". Based on a "bottom-up" system focussing on dialogue, sustainability and "unhasty" time, they argue for a re-establishing of a holistic approach based on emergent pedagogies as opposed to teaching excellence. They recognise that the enactment of this requires flexibility as "due to the complexity of the contexts in which pedagogies are generated and developed, there can be no single, 'correct' approach which can be introduced and replicated across an organisation or the sector. Flexibility is required, driven by the particular needs of academics and students in localised contexts". It therefore serves to remind us, as the familiar saying goes, there is no "one size fits all" or universal prescription for this. Recognising that "at a broader level, however, there are core requirements if the organisation is to move forward", and there are no easy answers, some useful ideas are suggested to move in the direction of this sustainable emergent model.

Employing a critical management perspective to explore the teaching excellence discourse in the Australian higher education context, Cooper (2019) engages us in a critical exploration of teaching excellence and offers fresh "rethinking" of how this has been constructed and how it has become "naturalised" in Australian university management. The theme of sustainability which features in the work of Wood and O'Leary may be discerned here too as one which underlies the discussion of how excellence has been used to co-opt university teaching staff into supporting the myth that teaching quality can be maintained as per capita funding of university teaching has declined steadily in the Australian context. The concept of teaching excellence has been used to distract attention away from discussions about funding and the conditions required to promote good teaching in universities. The construction of teaching excellence as an attribute of individual teachers has co-opted university teachers into supporting the illusion that teaching quality can be maintained, despite falling organisational support. Responsibility for this problem Cooper suggests, is in the underlying management approach and the regulatory framework, which can only be resolved if addressed through national policy. To illustrate this point further, the article analyses four pillars of Australian higher education quality policies. On more of a personal level, the author's reflections offer insights into a first-hand encounter with the tensions between a view of excellence as an attribute of individual teachers and their "individual performance" contrasted with a view of excellence which duly recognises the teamwork which belies good teaching, along with institutional support and reflexive self-criticality as the author identifies. The article concludes that teaching excellence is unhelpful as a concept and is antithetical to good university education and it offers some thoughts regarding initial first steps towards possible alternatives.

Adopting a critical discourse analysis approach Tsvetkova and Lomer's (2019) article presents a critical examination of the Russian Academic Excellence Initiative (the Project 5-100) designed to propel five leading Russian universities into world university rankings by 2020. In examining the role of world university rankings in modernising the higher education system in Russia, the reader is made aware of the powerful influence of metrics in different national contexts. This connects for example, with Wood and O'Leary's article in which they have noted, in relation to higher education in England that alongside the development of a sector that has become increasingly commercialised and marketized,

reliance on accountability systems and metrics for research and teaching has increased (Wood and O'Leary, 2019). Similarly Wood and Su (2019) discuss the ways in which metrics, measures and outcomes dominate as performative interpretations of teaching excellence which diminish the role and importance of qualitative understandings regarding "the pedagogical relationship at the heart of learning and teaching". Tsvetkova and Lomer in some similar ways indicate that the metrics and performance indicators of the world university rankings reinforce understandings of excellence drawn from a neoliberal discourse. They cause us to reflect on some vital concerns, for example "the extent to which tangible benefits to a country's higher education system development are due to emphasising 'competitiveness enhancement' and 'quality assurance' instead of fostering, for example, 'teaching excellence' along social democratic lines, 'quality improvement' or 'academic freedom and autonomy'".

Wood and Su (2019) focus on the role of parents as "stakeholders" in higher education in England and their interest lies in what this "stakeholder" group make of the idea of teaching excellence in higher education. Their research suggested that a perception existed amongst the parent group that teaching excellence could be evidenced through quantitative measures but it was acknowledged too that there are qualitative aspects which have value and significance such as exposure to new ideas, passionate teaching and supportive pedagogical relationships between academic and student. Therefore whilst some desire for measures of teaching excellence was apparent, the problem that excellent teaching is thereby reduced to a box-ticking exercise was also recognised. The article may prompt the reader to consider the argument for some form of dialogue with parents to be sustained during the period of students' undergraduate studies. Such dialogue may also serve to develop understandings of stakeholder perspectives on the purposes of higher education and ways in which it may be "evidenced".

There are three key themes emerging from the articles included in this special issue. First, that whilst the concept of teaching excellence has become widespread and "ubiquitous as a popular slogan", it remains both a complex and context-dependent construct (Clegg, 2007, p. 91). Readings (1996, p. 21), writing in the North American context, reminded us that, excellence is "rapidly becoming the watchword of the University and to understand the University as a contemporary institution requires some reflection on what the appeal to excellence may, or may not, mean". Noting the term's ubiquity, Collini (2017, p. 42) reminds us that "in corporate-speak, excellence is now the ubiquitous term for what we in universities are, of course, passionately committed to". Because excellence is so widespread in its use and open to very different understandings we need to seek clarity about what is meant and how it is to be understood (Skelton, 2005, p. 21).

Second, there is an assumption underpinning political direction and policy that competition is a driver of excellence in the "market" of higher education. Some authors in this special issue have critiqued this and asserted that a dominant neo-liberal ideology has shaped the discourses of excellence in higher education. They also point out the potential damages and harms which could be caused by such ideology-driven policies and metrics. The consumer economy and the "norms and expectations of our self-centred culture" (Roberts, 2014, p. 3) may have some bearing on the cause of this concern. Roberts extends this analysis by a critique of the "impulse society" and the culture of expecting what we want now, even though this model "isn't the best for delivering what we *need*" (p. 8). When this cultural form is extended to higher education it may produce excellent customer satisfaction ratings and deliver what the customer wants and expects from education as a commodity. However, we should not overlook that a genuinely educative experience requires that "individuals often need to be told by someone who knows that a particular line of study is *worth* pursuing whether at the time they *want* to or not" (Collini, 2012, pp. 185-186). We should also be aware that, as Roberts maintains, our self-centred culture undermines civic ways of being and engaging with, or even tolerating people or ideas that do not relate directly and immediately to us (Roberts, 2014, p. 3).

Excellence appears to be embedded within the policy rhetoric of higher education today and “everyone can now buy into the excellence of their own choice – or so the argument runs” (Nixon, 2007, p. 15). As Skelton (2005, p. 3) notes, “teaching excellence is now part of the everyday language and practice of higher education”. The contributions to this special issue have currency at a time when teaching excellence is foregrounded in the policy rhetoric. They add to our awareness of the global reach of excellence initiatives in higher education and they also offer important critical insights that encourage us to think both differently and beyond the current dominant narratives. Skelton (2005, p. 177) explains that part of the critical approach to teaching excellence taken in his book was one which “recognized that current understandings, realities and practices could be different and indeed *better*”. Our contributors recognise the current realities of how dominant conceptualisations of teaching excellence are playing out in current practices and we hope that this may prompt readers to reflect on how a different and better future might be constructed.

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