International Journal of Comparative Education and Development

Number 2

International perspectives on teaching excellence in higher education
Guest Editors: Feng Su and Margaret Wood

77 Editorial advisory board
78 Guest editorial
83 Rethinking teaching excellence in Australian higher education
  Trudi Cooper
99 Parents as “stakeholders” and their conceptions of teaching excellence in English higher education
  Margaret Wood and Feng Su
112 Moving beyond teaching excellence: developing a different narrative for England’s higher education sector
  Phil Wood and Matt O’Leary
127 Academic excellence as “competitiveness enhancement” in Russian higher education
  Elena Tsvetkova and Sylvie Lomer

ISBN 978-1-83867-683-4

www.emeraldinsight.com/loi/ijced
EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

I-Ru Dorothy Chen  
National Chi Nan University, Taiwan

Sicong Chen  
Tohoku University, Japan

Yeow-Tong Chia  
University of Sydney, Australia

Liz Jackson  
University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Reva Joshee  
University of Toronto, Canada

Kerry Kennedy  
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Kenneth King  
University of Edinburgh, UK

Moo Sung Lee  
University of Canberra, Australia

Jun Li  
Western University, Canada

Ji’an Liu  
Shang Hai Jiao Tong University, People’s Republic of China

Shuiyun Liu  
Beijing Normal University, People’s Republic of China

Will Yat Wai Lo  
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Mitsuko Maeda  
Osaka Jogakuin University, Japan

Greg William Misiaszek  
Beijing Normal University, People’s Republic of China

Jon Nixon  
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Yamin Qian  
Guangdong Foreign Studies University, People’s Republic of China

Lyn Sharratt  
University of Toronto, Canada

Xiaoyang Wang  
Tsing Hua University, People’s Republic of China

Billy Wong  
University of Reading, UK

Jinting Wu  
University at Buffalo, State University of New York, USA

Lan Yang  
The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Akiyoshi Yonezawa  
Tohoku University, Japan

Jingshun Zhang  
Florida Gulf Coast University, USA
Guest editorial

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 focusing 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.

**Feng Su**  
*Faculty of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK, and*  
**Margaret Wood**  
*School of Education, York St John University, York, UK*

**References**


**About the authors**

Dr Feng Su is Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University, UK, and Visiting Research Fellow to The Education University of Hong Kong, China. His main research interests and writings are located within the following areas: the development of higher education policy and its impact on student experience and academic practice. His most recent books include *Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Academic Leadership in Higher Education* (edited with Wood, 2017); *The Reorientation of Higher Education: Challenging the East–West Dichotomy* (edited with Adamson and Nixon, 2012); and *Professional Ethics: Education for a Humane Society* (edited with McGettrick, 2012).

Dr Margaret Wood is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at York St John University, UK. She has a particular research interest in educational enquiry in higher education, through which she aims to develop pedagogic understandings by creating structures and conditions for genuine dialogue to develop student agency and to embed this within practices. She is Co-Editor of *Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Academic Leadership in Higher Education* (2017), published by Bloomsbury.
Rethinking teaching excellence in Australian higher education

Trudi Cooper

Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore: why the concept of teaching excellence has been uncritically accepted into the lexicon of university management; and how it has been used to co-opt university teaching staff into supporting the myth that teaching quality can be maintained as financial support for teaching has declined.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is conceptual and analytical rather than empirical and a critical management perspective is adopted.

Findings – Per capita funding of university teaching has declined steadily. 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 and decreased funding.

Research limitations/implications – Teaching in universities can only be improved through changes to the management approach and maintenance of per capita funding, and ultimately democratisation of universities. This will require changes to the regulatory framework, and national policy.

Practical implications – The author concludes that teaching excellence is unhelpful as a concept. Instead the focus of discussion needs to return to ensuring that the necessary conditions for responsive teaching are in place.

Social implications – Democratise the workplace and management methods; adopt matrix management structures; Rebalance to focus on social benefit and public good.

Originality/value – This paper uncovers tensions, contradictions and missing elements in current policy and concludes with suggestions for change.

Keywords Management, Policy, University, Australia, Critical management, Teaching excellence

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

[...] the true task of good teaching is to make human beings human (Stolz, 2018, p. 151).

Concepts of teaching excellence have come to prominence in the UK and Australia through teaching award schemes, and more recently through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in the UK. The TEF purports to rank teaching quality in universities and many empirical studies have focussed on the efficacy of technical features of the TEF scheme (see, e.g. Berger and Wild, 2016; Frankham, 2017; Gillard, 2018; Gunn, 2018; Perkins, 2018). The beneficence of teaching excellence is assumed in these studies, even though authors differ in their conceptualisation of it. Others have questioned the coherence of the concept of teaching excellence (Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017; Saunders and Blanco Ramirez, 2017; Wood and Su, 2017; Wood, 2017).

In Australia, as in the UK, higher education policy has reduced per capita university funding over the past three decades (Bradley et al., 2008; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Norton and Cherastidtham, 2015). Some have applauded these cost savings as improved university efficiency (Kemp and Norton, 2014; Miller and Pincus, 1998). Others have expressed concern that worsening staff student ratios have led, or will lead, to declining educational quality (Bradley et al., 2008; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011). Supporters of efficiency discourses counter this claim with assertions about improved student satisfaction and
responsiveness to student choices (Kemp and Norton, 2014), improved lifetime incomes for graduates (compared with non-graduates) (Walker and Zho, 2013), and claims about improving teaching innovation, quality and excellence (Kemp and Norton, 2014). In the context of declining per capita support for teaching, the concept of teaching excellence is viewed by some as a marketing tool to enable universities to raise fees (Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017) and gain competitive advantage (Wood, 2017), whilst resources allocated to teaching have declined.

I have used research methods developed within critical management studies to interrogate the origins of “teaching excellence” as a management approach in universities. Three questions will be addressed:

1. How has the idea of “teaching excellence” become naturalised in Australian higher education management?

2. How do teaching excellence narratives co-opt academic staff into masking the effects of reduced university support for teaching?

3. What are some possible alternatives?

These questions are important because teaching is a core function of higher education, and Australian universities derive most of their income from teaching-related activities (Bradley et al., 2008; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Norton and Cherastidtham, 2015). Despite falling per capita income, Australian universities subsidise research with money gained from teaching (Norton and Cherastidtham, 2015).

I will trace the genealogy of teaching excellence to its origins in management theory to uncover the management assumptions that underpin contemporary approaches to teaching excellence in Australian universities. I will use critical management methods to explore how academics are drawn into supporting management practices that undermine educational purposes. The methods used are analytical rather than empirical.

**Critical management studies as method**

A critical management orientation is adopted within the analysis. The purpose in utilising these methods is to show how ideas become internalised into our practices, so that we self-police our actions, whilst remaining mostly unaware of what is occurring. Criticality contributes to our understandings about the meanings we make of the world of work, our identity as workers, and how we become entangled with ideas, practices and social norms that mutually reinforce self-surveillance.

Critical management studies begins from the assumption that although there is a real world, social institutions, like workplaces, are socially constructed and hence cannot be understood objectively. They are sites of power, domination and self-censorship that we participate in as socially constructed beings, held in place by shared social expectations and by social norms of our constructed world. Commonly used methods include: re-storying (Boje, 2001); use of alternative metaphors to frame discussions about organisations (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Morgan, 1986); and, attention to how language is used to claim power, marginalise people in organisations, mystify and mask power relationships or allow power relationships and social inequalities to be uncritically naturalised (Deetz, 2003). By naturalisation, Deetz means the process by which these assumptions are taken as not only self-evident, but also unquestioned, and unquestionable.

Critical management studies uses critical postmodern methods and neo-Marxist critical theory to study management and organisations (Alvesson et al., 2011; Alvesson and Willmott, 2003). From critical theory, critical management scholars gain insight into the importance of “framing” and its relevance to studies of the workplace (Grey and Willmott, 2005). Framing is the idea that psycho-socio-political beliefs about the world (the goodness
or otherwise of human nature, social obligation, social entitlement, naturalness of social and racial hierarchies or patriarchy, essentialness of gender, the value we place on money-saving and efficiency) shape how we interpret the meaning of our experiences in the workplace, our expectations about how the workplace ought to be ordered, the (im)possibility of changes to structural features of the workplace, as well as assumptions about the naturalness of workplace social norms that structure work interactions. Framing, also affects and is affected by how we understand socio-political concepts such as rights, justice, democracy, and equality and fairness, including whether we consider these values should apply in the workplace. From critical postmodern theory, critical management scholars gain understanding about the importance of language, social norms and expectation for legitimation and for construction and reproduction of social institutions, social relationships and self (Grey and Willmott, 2005). Methods used in Foucauldian analyses, include paying close attention to language usage and genealogical approaches that trace how ideas and practices emerge and change over time. This paper applies a genealogical analysis of excellence in management theory.

Central to this method is the need for reflexivity on the part of the researcher and a commitment to placing oneself within the research to expose biases and complicity (Deetz, 2003). To this end, I acknowledge that the meaning I make of teaching excellence is influenced by my experiences. I am a woman with 30 years of teaching experience at a university that has been ranked in the highest band for teaching quality for the last 12 years. I have had a career-long commitment to teaching, and have prioritised teaching, sometimes at the expense of my own career progression. I am a qualified teacher and an Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow. I have led a national curriculum renewal project and have won a national award for a curriculum contribution to student learning. I have also judged national awards for teaching innovation. When I was approached to apply for a teaching excellence award I was initially flattered, but I chose not to proceed. In a context where class sizes had increased steadily and time allowance for preparation and marking had reduced, I also could not reconcile the expected focus on individual performance and self-promotion with my intellectual understanding of good teaching, which, I believe, depends upon teamwork, institutional support and reflexive self-criticality. This paper is, in part, a response to my sense of unease, and an exploration of its origins.

A genealogy of management and excellence

University policy and university management has been influenced by ideological assumptions and practices found in both industrial management and public management. Here I trace contemporary university management orthodoxies to their origins in management theory, and make explicit their underpinning assumptions. This exposes the origins of discourses about excellence, and related university management practices. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, various approaches to management have been popularised. This section provides an overview of four contrasting approaches to industrial management (“scientific management”; “human relations management”; “Deming’s quality management” and “corporate culturalism”), plus, two contrasting approaches to public administration (“traditional public administration” and the “new public management”) that are relevant to understanding how teaching excellence has become “naturalised” in Australian university management.

In industrial management, four competing perspectives coexist, all of which begin from different tacit assumptions (taken to be self-evident) about human nature, motivation, social hierarchy and the natural order of social relationships. The differing assumptions led to contrasting approaches to people management, excellence and the avoidance of faults. These were: the “Scientific management” movement, the “Human Relations management movement”, the “Deming’s quality management movement”, and “Corporate Culturalism”. Each will be briefly outlined below.
“Scientific management” was epitomised by the thinking and methods of Frederick Taylor (Pugh and Hickson, 1993) and Henri Fayol (Pugh and Hickson, 1993) in the first decades of the twentieth century. Scientific management used a meta-narrative involving the application of the rational scientific method to the management of industrial production processes (Reed, 1996). The meta-narrative drew analogies between an organisation and a machine, tacitly placing human and non-human material together to be ordered and controlled. The central concern of scientific management was the maintenance of order and control, and the workforce was assumed to be inherently intractable (McGregor, 1995). The central values of scientific management were technical efficiency (low unit cost), and the central quality concern was product conformity. As a result, scientific management deskilled complex work by breaking work into simpler tasks. Quality was maintained by a regime of inspection, and penalties were applied for substandard work. Another tacit value that underpinned scientific management was the acceptance of hierarchy as normal, and disregard for the humanity of the workforce (who were viewed as extensions of the machines they operated). This theory emerged at a time when democracy had not been fully implemented and when beliefs in “natural” class, gender and racial hierarchies were strong.

From a critical management perspective, this approach to management is ethically problematic because of its lack of concern for the humanity of the workforce, its active brutalisation of the workforce, and because of assumptions about the acceptability of authoritarianism in human relations in the workplace.

The second management theory (1930s and 1940s) was the “Human relations-centred management” movement of Mayo, and Barnard, and later, Likert and Macgregor (McGregor, 1995). This approach challenged the central assumptions of scientific management about human nature, especially the assumption that people need constant surveillance and coercion. This movement rejected task simplifications methods (McGregor, 1995; Pugh and Hickson, 1993). Human relations management had as its meta-narrative the value of social integration and the “naturalness” of “system” harmony (Reed, 1996). It drew analogies between the organisation and the “family” or “community”, based upon tacit assumptions about the goodness and naturalness of a harmonious family and community cohesiveness, and a structural-functionalist view of society. Ideologically the central problem for the human relations management movement was maintenance of consensus rather than control (coercion) of the workforce. Management methods attempted to align work organisation with intrinsic human motivations (McGregor, 1995) to build loyalty, to avoid the need for close surveillance and coercive management. Management focussed on modifications to work structures, the physical environment, and the use of benevolent (paternalistic) management methods. Central quality concerns were whether the organisation had managed to achieve an environment where staff were content, productive and self-motivated. Quality and excellence were inward looking and focussed on worker satisfaction and harmony. Several large family-founded firms (e.g. John Lewis) adopted this ethos. From a critical management perspective human-centred values would be welcomed. However, concern would be expressed about how the need for harmony and consensus might exclude some marginalised groups from the workforce if they failed to fit in. There would also be concern that paternalism, even when benevolent, imposes hierarchies and dependencies that are inconsistent with democratic values.

The quality management movement began with the work of an American statistician, W.E. Deming, who helped Japanese industries to rebuild after the Second World War. The post-war transformation of Japanese industry from a low-value, low-quality producer to a producer of high-value and high quality goods was attributed to Deming’s quality management methods combined with Japanese workplace social, cultural and interpersonal norms (Walton, 1989). Deming asserted that the purpose of data analysis was to understand where processes were failing so they could be corrected. He insisted that numerical targets
should not be set for production. His reasoning was that numerical targets undermined quality because in order to achieve targets, people cut corners. In addition he contended that failures to meet a target frequently arose from system failures that were beyond the control of the individual. Socio-cultural norms in Japan supported the proposed methods, including a cultural preference for co-operation rather than competition, personal responsibility, the importance of duties and obligation (Whitehill, 1990), interpersonal norms such as avoiding arrogance and complacency, and low individualism. Ouchi studied selected Japanese organisations, compared them with similar US organisations, and found that American and European societal cultures differed significantly from Japanese societal culture, and contended that this had implications for interpersonal norms and values, particularly attitudes to competition and individuality (Kotter and Heskett, 1992; Ouchi in Pugh and Hickson, 1993). From a critical management perspective, Deming’s work raises some interesting possibilities that have been missed by some critical management scholars who have not distinguished between Deming’s work and the work of other quality management writers. Deming’s work challenges the assumption that workplaces have to be competitive and that pay needs to be merit-based. Workplace norms interact with social norms, and more egalitarian and more collaborative workplaces have the potential to modify social norms. This raises the question of whether contemporary competitive workplaces are a source of social harm through their reinforcement of competition and hyper-individualism.

Cultural Corporatism was espoused in Peter’s and Waterman’s (1982) In Search of Excellence, and was an adaptation of Deming’s quality management methods in order to be more acceptable to American cultural norms. In adapting Deming’s work they disregarded Deming’s key points about how data should be used, the importance of team work and social equality, and the importance of not attaching rewards to targets. Peter and Waterman asserted that the task of management was to build “strong” cultures. Many critical management theorists do not differentiate between Deming’s work and Corporate Culturism. Wilmott is especially critical of Peter’s and Waterman’s lack of rigor and apparent willingness to provide uncritical promotion of the dominant practices within American industry. Willmott (2013) compared their approach unfavourably with the self-delusory methods of Orwell’s 1984:

By happy coincidence, Peters and Waterman (1982) discovered that the exceptional strength of their cultures was the common feature of “America’s Best Run Companies” (the subtitle of In Search of Excellence). Strengthened culture, their research “demonstrated”, resulted in employees’ autonomous and self-actualized, yet also disciplined, delivery of corporate priorities (p. 449).

Deming also rejected the premise of these adaptations and outlined why dominant competitive styles of management needed to change (Deming, 1986, 1993), he also discussed which elements were not suited to an educational environment, identifying in particular that education had different purposes (Deming, 1993).

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been two contrasting approaches to public management, and each is presented below. The first is “traditional public administration”, and the second is the “new public management”.

Traditional public administration had its origins in the nineteenth century and was concerned with improving the administration of functions of government. Modern “western” administrative practices had military origins and assumed norms of management through autocratic command within hierarchical organisational structures (Meyer et al., 1985). Embedded within the concept of public administration is the value of “impartiality” or “universalistic” and “depersonalised” decision-making (Boje et al., 1996; Schafffer, 1973), and concepts of “public good” and “public interest”. Traditionally, the standards for judging public administration differed from those for judging the management of industry (Caiden, 1975; Pugh and Hickson, 1993). In public administration, priority was placed on policy effectiveness
in achieving outcomes rather than efficiency of resource usage (Drucker cited in Zifcak, 1994, p. 10). The “public servant” has “upward accountability” where they are answerable to their immediate superior, and ultimately, to senior bureaucrats and politicians, rather than “outward accountability” to the public, who are recipients of services (Corbett, 1996). For this reason, prior to the 1980s the relationship between the “public servant” and the public was not conceptualised as a customer relationship (Corbett, 1996). From a critical management perspective, the traditional public service administration model was open to criticism for reproducing outmoded hierarchical social norms and for being unresponsive to service users. The focus on the importance of policy effectiveness and upon values such as public good and public interest challenges contemporary assumptions about the naturalness of the primacy of efficiency. The current public inquiry into the Australian banking system has affirmed public concern that corruption prevention and cultures of integrity should be given greater priority.

New public management emerged with the rise of neo-liberal ideology, when market-oriented theories of management began to dominate management thinking in public services and universities. New public management changed perceptions about public services and led to a focus on outward accountability to demonstrate value for money and the satisfaction of service users. This concept of accountability combined elements of scientific management (efficiency) with those of market ideology (concern for customers). Audit practices developed and shaped their internal policies and priorities. From a critical management perspective, market oriented-management strategies are problematic for public services because of irresolvable tensions between public services and markets, and dehumanising features or corporate management.

Management in Australian universities
Prior to 1987, public universities in Australia were self-governing entities supported by government funding. They were neither commercial firms, nor public services. Traditional universities were considered to be different from the public service because academic freedom meant universities were independent from government (even though in many cases they received public funds), and different from commerce, because their purpose was educational (concerned with knowledge development and dissemination), rather than profit. Classical university management of this era favoured collegial self-management (administrative positions were frequently elected by peers and rotated between academic staff members) (De Lacey and Moens, 1990), and was rarely theorised. Quality within this perspective was conceived in terms of disciplinary integrity, transmission and advancement of knowledge and academic standards (De Lacey and Moens, 1990). Within this frame of reference, students were viewed as recipients of disciplinary learning, where teaching was only one part of the learning process. Although some view this era favourably, others point out that this form of management normalised gender bias (Roe, 2001), and was exploitative of junior academics (Rodan, 2001).

The rise in dominance of the neo-liberal corporate model of university management is well-documented around the world (Amsler, 2017; Gyamera and Burke, 2017; Ingleby, 2015; Marginson and Considine, 2000; Wright and Greenwood, 2017), beginning in Australian higher education policy with the Dawkins (1987) reforms. Corporatisation of universities has prompted increased competition between universities (Kemp and Norton, 2014; Marginson and Considine, 2000; Sheehy, 2010) and has resulted in the increased marketing of universities within a global higher education economy (Szekeres, 2010). The purpose of university education has been constructed in instrumental terms (Universities Australia, 2013), to provide economic benefit to students, employers or to society (Bradley et al., 2008; Kemp and Norton, 2014). Corporatisation has commodified both the education process and the students who attend universities (Sheehy, 2010). Student fees were introduced
(or re-introduced) in Australian in 1987 and this ultimately led to an ambiguous positioning of students as consumers (Morley, 2003), and both customers and products (Cooper, 2002a). A rationale for the corporatisation of universities was efficiency, but also better accountability for public spending. A genealogy of management in the twentieth century shows why these ideas became powerful as drivers of change at that time, and also illuminates possibilities in the roads not taken.

Teaching excellence has been a recent concern of higher education in the UK and Australia, emerging as part of the audit and quality improvement “turn” in higher education that commenced in the 1990s. Concerns about teaching quality assurance and improvement began after the expansion of the Australian higher education system, as set out in the Dawkins (1987) report. In the decade after these changes, the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training established an “Evaluations and Investigations” programme that evaluated teaching quality in universities (e.g. Moses et al., 1993). Subsequently, the department commissioned reports on quality assurance in universities (e.g. Anderson et al., 2000; Harman and Meek, 2000). The timing of the expansion of the university system and the emergence of the focus on quality assurance and quality improvement occurred over a similar period in the UK (Harvey, 2005), where the development of the TEF meant that the term “teaching excellence” became widely used to describe all aspects of teaching quality.

In Australia, higher education teaching quality policy has four pillars, each described in separately developed policies. The first policy pillar is the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), which sets the overarching standards for awards at each qualification level (Qualifications Framework Council, 2013), and attempts to ensure that qualifications in different disciplines are of a similar academic standard for the same qualification level (e.g. at Bachelor degree level). The second policy pillar is the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2011). The primary functions of TEQSA are to audit universities, and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2011) Act legislates the inspection and compliance framework for Australian Higher Education. This includes an audit of teaching quality, as well as an audit of the systems that support teaching. The third policy pillar is the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018), which is maintained by the Social Research Centre, Australian National University. This website facilitates comparisons between universities on selected learning and teaching surveys and outcomes data. According to the website, the purpose is to ensure that prospective students have the information they need to make informed choices. The fourth pillar was the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), which used to manage teaching awards and fund innovation research and teaching and learning quality improvement programs. The OLT was disbanded as a separate body in 2016 and the Department of Education and Training took over its residual functions. The teaching awards were maintained for one further year, but no new research and improvement grants were awarded.

These formal policies and regulatory approaches are supplemented by various global university ranking systems, for example the Academic Ranking of World Universities, the QS World University Rankings, and the Times Higher Education Rankings, which universities use to promote their teaching and research expertise. Each of the components embeds particular purposes for university education and conceptions of teaching, but these concepts receive little discussion compared with the attention given to the mechanics of measurement.

Policy analysis

The AQF does not discuss teaching or teaching excellence. The framework aspires to establish standards that transcend disciplines, and therefore rejects previous methods of establishing disciplinary standards or norms by peer review. Instead teaching quality is
inferred from learner outcomes. Learner outcomes are expressed as criteria, using a modified form of Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) to provide a vocabulary of verbs to describe demonstrable outcomes appropriate to different levels of academic award (certificate, diploma or undergraduate and post graduate). The AQFs main remit is to establish “confidence in Australia’s education and training system” (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013, p. 9), which illustrates a primary focus on commercial rather than educational concerns. The AQF operates in tandem with accrediting authorities like TEQSA, which is responsible for monitoring the quality of qualification-issuing organisations (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). Within the AQF there is an emphasis on the curriculum as written, and learner outcomes, without any discussion of what good teaching processes or practices might look like. This renders teaching a “black box” of whatever works to get good learner outcomes. Barnett and Coate (2005) correctly identify that this type of approach imposes a particularly narrow and instrumental form of curriculum by stealth.

The audit and institutional quality assurance orientation of TEQSA means that regulations focus on methods to assure teaching quality or “excellence” rather than what constitutes teaching excellence or teaching quality. TEQSA monitors university regulatory compliance and prevents non-registered organisations from offering courses that claim to be degrees. The purposes of the TEQSA Act are to:

- provide for national consistency in the regulation of higher education;
- regulate higher education using a standards-based quality framework and principles relating to regulatory necessity, risk and proportionality;
- protect and enhance Australia’s reputation for, and international competitiveness in higher education, as well as the excellence, diversity and innovation in Australian higher education;
- encourage and promote a higher education system that is appropriate to meet Australia’s social and economic needs for a highly educated and skilled population;
- protect students undertaking, or proposing to undertake higher education by requiring the provision of quality higher education; and
- ensure that students have access to information relating to higher education in Australia (www.teqsa.gov.au/teqsa-act).

The language of audit and consumer protection dominates within these policy statements. The purposes emphasise commercial transactions and instrumental goals. TEQSA inspects standards for academic governance, and has collective oversight of the academic community, which includes, “[…] rigorous scrutiny and peer review of academic activities, carried out independently and separately from the staff who are directly involved in those activities” (Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Act, 2017, p. 1). Institutions must engage in regular monitoring, review and reflection upon their course offerings, course delivery and course performance by undertaking benchmarking through “[…] external referencing against comparable courses (including student performance data) […] to be informed by student feedback” (Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Act, 2017, p. 3). Institutions are expected to use their monitoring and review activities to “inform corporate awareness and decision making” (Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Act, 2017, p. 3). The audit process also includes examination of curriculum documentation to ensure it complies with the AQF. TEQSA warns that the consequence of not paying enough attention to feedback from students is that it “[…] will lead to adverse student experiences and raise potential reputational and market risks” (Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Act, 2017, p. 3).
whilst inattention to the integrity of provider operations or governance “[...] will call into question the credibility and authenticity of any qualifications issued” (Australian Government Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Act, 2017, p. 3). Student performance data and student feedback are given emphasis by TEQSA as important indicators of quality teaching as well as being supportive of good governance and good reputation. As has been noted by many others, this kind of exercise is very resource intensive (Harvey, 2005; Skelton, 2005), and it diverts resources away from teaching. Many researchers have directed criticism at the choice of indicators, since, for example, the measurements chosen are usually selected because it is easier to gain the data rather than because it is the most useful data (Chun, 2002). Obvious problems with the metrics used for graduate employability (Frankham, 2017) or student retention (Cooper, 2002b; Tinto, 1993) have been discussed at length. Arguments have been made that an audit culture may be self-defeating, lessening the likelihood of quality as more resources are spent on measuring it (Harvey, 2005).

On the QILT website there is no explicit statement about teaching quality or teaching excellence. Teaching quality is to be inferred from the indicators presented. These include collated data that allows prospective students to compare student outcomes (employment, starting salary) from various courses, and to consider feedback from students about their teaching experiences. For example, the Student Experience Survey, is “designed to collect information that will help both higher education institutions and the government improve teaching and learning outcomes, and reports on multiple facets of the student experience” (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2018). The site includes data from Employer Satisfaction Survey that collects employer feedback about the generic skills, technical skills and work readiness of graduates. The QILT website is interesting for its omissions and for the aspects of accountability that are not included. The site does not make any reference to “public interest” or “public good” or community service by universities. It does not provide information about what proportion of teaching revenue is spent on teaching activities.

Finally, the OLT was established for the Promotion of Excellence in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PELTHE). The OLT encouraged research and innovation in learning and teaching through the PELTHE programme, which provided project grants to support and fund fellowships, teaching awards and support for teaching networks. The OLT activities included:

- providing funding for initiatives to improve teaching and learning (innovation, curriculum renewal and cross-institutional collaboration and system-wide change in learning and teaching);
- recognising teachers who were exemplars in their field (teaching awards);
- funding fellowships that allowed good teachers to share their knowledge and teaching practices more broadly; and
- improving the quality of teaching and learning by facilitating collaboration and resource sharing.

This was the only policy pillar that discussed teaching, focussed on innovation, sharing, collaboration and improvement. In 2016 the Government discontinued grants and fellowships and it appears that the final teaching awards were offered in 2017. This changes the policy balance towards compliance and away from quality improvement, collaboration and sharing of teaching activities.

Discussion
In the discussion I will return to the initial questions that I posed at the beginning of the paper, namely how teaching excellence has become naturalised within universities,
how staff have been co-opted into defending teaching quality as supporting resources have been removed, and possible alternative management responses.

Teaching excellence has become a naturalised and unquestioned element of university management even though there are many reasons to believe that teaching excellence is not a useful concept. This raises the question of how the concept became naturalised in the university system. Vidovich (2001) described “quality” as a slippery, chameleon concept, and teaching excellence is similarly impossible to define meaningfully. Deconstructed into its components, authors have suggested that teaching excellence is either a compound, multi-faceted (Su and Wood, 2012) heterogeneous concept, or a vacuous or tautologous concept (Saunders and Blanco Ramirez, 2017; Wood and Su, 2017; Wood, 2017). The competing definitional elements of excellence include: instrumental-technical definitions (Frankham, 2017; Gillard, 2018; Gunn, 2018; Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017), definitions that focus on ethics and the goodness of the teacher (Su and Wood, 2012), and definitions that embed teaching excellence in reflective practice (Skelton, 2005). After an extended discussion, Phil Wood (2017) concluded that teaching excellence may not be much more than “virtue signalling”, and he proposed that it is preferable to simply discuss teaching. Others have documented the limitations of student feedback as an operational measure of teaching excellence, including known gender bias from students who are not comfortable with women in positions of authority (Morley, 2003), observations about “edutainment”, and the observation that dislike of learning does not necessarily mean that the teaching is not good (Morley, 2003).

From a critical management perspective, the concept of excellence is closely tied semantically to Corporate Culturism. Peter’s and Waterman’s “Corporate Culturism” easily aligns with the dominant managerial orientation in universities of corporate plans and marketing slogans, and this approach reinforces top-down corporate power structures. It is the most likely inspiration for the “excellence” movement in university management, of which teaching excellence is the latest example.

The primacy given to efficiency and a reliance on audits and inspections in contemporary university management has parallels in the values and assumptions of scientific management, along with an orientation towards the workforce that distrusts workers and maintains surveillance. Modern technology provides universities with more powerful surveillance methods than were available to twentieth century industrial managers. In twenty-first century universities, the academic role is not bounded by set work hours and academic work does not end with the sounding of a factory siren. A feature of scientific management was the introduction of work study methods to evaluate how long different tasks ought to take. In universities work study is not used and there is concern about academic work intensification (Ogbonna and Harris, 2016). Structural arrangements in modern universities mean that the work elements of scientific management (surveillance and control) are being used without the safeguards that contain the volume of work (assisted by work study and a fixed working day).

New public management is reflected in changes in the way staff engage with students in the classroom and how staff come to understand teaching, for example, when students are treated as customers. When new public management is applied to university teaching, there are two inherent tensions. The first tension is between efficiency and accountability. Audit requirement are time-consuming and expensive (Skelton, 2005) and reduce efficiency by diverting resources away from the core task of teaching. This is evidenced by the plethora of mechanisms that are used to audit, measure, assure and disseminate information about teaching. A second tension is between the public good elements of policy effectiveness and the private interests represented by student satisfaction. A reliance on student satisfaction (or employer satisfaction), undermines independent considerations of public good or social need in policy.
The human-relations centred management approach has influenced some university managers, especially where their personal value system aligns with a humanistic orientation. There are also traces of this approach in organisational strategies (e.g. staff wellness programs). However, the inward-looking approach of taking care of staff is in tension with dominant quality management and teaching excellence policies in contemporary universities that promote competition and individual achievement. A consensus-based value system might also raise fears about academic freedom.

Deming’s ideas present a radical challenge to contemporary university management in general, and to teaching excellence in particular. Following Deming’s methods, the focus of management is to improve processes that support the work. Universities would collect data about employment, retention and students’ perceptions, as is current practice, but they would change their priorities for data usage. Within Deming’s methods the sole purpose of data analysis is to improve understandings about processes, to identify better ways to support work tasks, to deepen understandings about how education processes are working and to identify whether change is required. Central to this management method was the insistence that data collected about processes must not be used to assess, reward or punish individual or team performance management. The reasons for this are that competition and blame inhibits team work, and instils fear, which inhibits communication about problems. For many complex tasks, including research and teaching, strong team work is especially beneficial and open communications are essential. Many parts of Deming’s approach would be fully compatible with a learning communities approach or approaches to teaching where parts of the curriculum were co-designed with students. It would be highly beneficial if this management method replaced the current methods used in universities.

Within university management, some elements of the public administration ethos remain, especially expectation of higher levels of integrity. For this reason, maladministration complaints against universities can be referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner Act (1971), and complaints about corruption can be referred to the Government of Western Australia (2015). From the perspective of teaching excellence, integrity complaints usually relate to impartiality in assessment, equality of respect and access during teaching interactions, and the appropriate maintenance of sexual boundaries, where higher standards of impartiality are required than would be expected in a commercial transaction. Within the public administration approach, policy effectiveness was of high importance, and was defined in terms of public good and public interest. Current measures of teaching quality within Australian higher education focus on student satisfaction and to a lesser extent employer satisfaction and hence the scope of policy effectiveness has been reduced, and personal benefit has displaced societal benefit.

The second question asked how the teaching excellence narrative co-opted academic staff into masking the effects of reduced university support for teaching. Wood and Su (2017) found that although many university teachers were uncomfortable with dominant definitions of teaching excellence, they felt it provided them with recognition. Similarly, Perkins (2018) found that although staff were concerned about adverse effects of the TEF on academic identity, they too wanted recognition for teaching. In a competitive environment the desire for recognition for teaching is strong. Teaching awards provide this. In Australia, potential teaching award applicants are approached by their universities to submit an application. The application may include artefacts, including examples of teaching materials or a short video presentation. The academic staff member receives varying amounts of support from their institution to develop an application. If they are successful, the institution will use the staff members award in their promotional activities. The awarded “heroes”, become role models of excellence; as different from the many other teachers who have not been selected or who have not applied. However, success for the applicant will be influenced by the experiences and resources of the team that supported their application, although this will never be publicly acknowledged.
From a critical management perspective, the event is understood differently, as a dividing practice that promotes competition and individualism; one that may strain solidarity between staff members, and promote vanity and a distorted sense of self-worth in winners. It is also an instrument of co-option aimed at those who care most about teaching. The myth of the “excellent teacher” maintains the illusion that excellent teaching depends only upon the appointment of excellent teachers. Conversely, it implies that poor teaching results are a consequence of individual failure by the teacher. The process encourages a culture of individualistic self-promotion, in which awarded winners become complicit, and distracts attention away from the systems that support teaching. The process obscures the reality that a smaller share of resources is allocated per student to support teaching, which means that class sizes have been rising steadily for two decades (Bradley et al., 2008; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Universities Australia, 2013), and as student groups have become more diverse, preparation time has decreased, and student contact hours have declined.

Possible alternatives
There are fundamental tensions inherent within the dominant university management practices in Australia, which stem from tensions between marketisation and the purposes of education. The construction of “teaching excellence” is entangled within these contradictions and reinforces them, even though the cause of the difficulties extends beyond this particular concern. Unresolved problems include that: the efficiency discourse is undermined by cumbersome accountability processes; a competitive environment engendered by marketization undermines collaboration and team work; and, a focus on private interests of students or employers undermines public interests and social needs (Cooper, 2018).

A first step to improving teaching quality and collaboration would be to follow Deming’s (1993) advice, and change the way data is used within universities. This would refocus data-use on improving systems that support teachers and students, rather than upon monitoring individual academic staff performance. This would require a change of assumptions to prioritise supportive systems over individual “heroes”. This would provide better support for collaborative approaches to teaching and learning and for the formation of genuine communities of scholars.

More radically, from a critical management perspective, the problem resides in the underlying assumptions about how management is executed. From this perspective, authoritarian management systems (such as neo-liberalism) are unethical because they dehumanise both workers and management. Wright and Greenwood (2017) contend that there is a fundamental incompatibility between the core purposes of universities (to promote learning) and authoritarian management systems. They propose that universities should create the conditions for a learning society by democratising structures within universities and by adopting matrix management structures, similar to Mondragón University (Wright and Greenwood, 2017). They also suggest that universities, should become trusts with beneficiary ownership, operating in partnership with communities for the public good.

References


De Lacey, P.R. and Moens, G. (1990), The Decline of the University, Law Press, Tahmoor.


Pugh, D.S., Hickson, D.J. and Pugh, D.S. (1993), Great Writers on Organizations, Dartmouth, Aldershot.


Further reading

About the author
Trudi Cooper is Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow, and Associate Professor of Youth Work at Edith Cowan University, Australia. She leads the Social Programme Innovation Research and Evaluation (SPIRE) group. Her research includes higher education policy and curriculum research, portfolio assessment, quality in higher education teaching and teaching evaluation. She has been recognised nationally for her contribution to university teaching. Trudi Cooper can be contacted at: t.cooper@ecu.edu.au

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:
www.emergalgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Parents as “stakeholders” and their conceptions of teaching excellence in English higher education

Margaret Wood
School of Education, York St John University, York, UK, and
Feng Su
Faculty of Education, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, UK

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore parents as “stakeholders” in higher education in England and how they perceive teaching excellence.
Design/methodology/approach – The study adopted a qualitative research design using an interpretative approach through which the authors aimed to develop understandings of parents’ perspectives as higher education “stakeholders”. The empirical data were gathered via focus group interviews and an online survey with 24 participants in the UK.
Findings – This study found that the majority of parents wished to be treated as an important stakeholder group in higher education. Parent participants perceived that teaching excellence could be evidenced through indicators and measures, for example, the design and delivery of the courses, progress measures, contact hours, speed of return of marked work, graduate employability and so on. They also saw value and significance in the students’ exposure to ideas and perspectives not previously experienced, in zeal and passion in the teaching, and in an academically nurturing, understanding and supportive pedagogical relationship between academic and student.
Originality/value – This study uncovered some apparent tensions, contradictions and challenges for parents as stakeholders in higher education, for example, in reconciling the co-existence of their desire to be involved and engaged with scope for students to be formed as independent young adults. Parents’ desire to measure teaching excellence is also compounded by their concern that excellent teaching is thereby reduced to a box-ticking exercise. This study has implications for higher education institutions wishing to engage parents as a stakeholder group in a meaningful way.
Keywords University, Teaching excellence, English higher education, Parents as “stakeholders”

Paper type Research paper

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

“On Children” by Kahlil Gibran (2016, p. 33)

This paper reports the findings of a study of parents as “stakeholders” in higher education in England and how they perceive teaching excellence. To speak of “stakeholders” may not seem out of place in higher education discourse today, the inherent assumptions suggestive of a conception of higher education in economic terms. The maxim “if markets work ‘properly’, consumer interest is maximised: real competition will ‘drive up quality’ and ‘drive down prices’” (Collini, 2017, p. 158) is apparent in government policy in England proceeding from an ideological conviction that:

Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. (DfBIS, 2016, p. 8, para. 7)
Unsurprisingly therefore it seems that the language of “stakeholder” is often employed now in higher education. Operating in a competitive environment it appears to make good business sense for higher education providers to know their stakeholders and their needs. Factors including the decrease of academic self-governance, the declining power of academics in university decision making and an increased role for external stakeholders in the governance of higher education institutions are referred to as “the main ingredients of boardism” (Veiga et al., 2015 in Magalhães et al., 2018, p. 738). This has significance as:

Under the framework of governance reforms, and influenced by boardism, the role of external stakeholders has been further enhanced, bringing forward to higher education institutions both the sensitivity to the external environment and the managerial and decision-making practices coming from the non-academic world. (Magalhães et al., 2018, p. 738)

It may be considered unusual to refer to parents as “stakeholders” in higher education and in the literature they are not always included amongst the stakeholder groups mentioned in relation to the university. The work of Leveille (2006) is drawn on in this paper because it includes parents amongst the “people who influence stakeholders or customers” (p. 155) and studies have identified the role of parents as one influence on how students choose college and university (Hazelkorn, 2015, p. 138) and furthermore “students (and their parents) have become savvy consumers” (Santiago et al., 2008 in Hazelkorn, 2015, p. 6).

Against this backdrop we examine teaching excellence and what sense parents, often these days having contributed financially towards the costs of their children’s university education, make of this idea. The concern of our research, reported in this paper, was with the development of understandings of parents’ sense-making when it comes to teaching excellence in higher education – what is teaching excellence, how should it be measured and what evidence might be used?

This paper refers primarily to England as most of our participants were from England. One participant was from Northern Ireland. Higher education is a devolved matter in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (DfBIS, 2011). The funding context referred to in this paper is that in England. There are two types of costs for higher education: tuition fees and living costs. Students can apply for a tuition fee loan to cover all or part of their fees (typically £9,250 per year at the current time) and a maintenance loan to help towards the costs of living expenses (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2018).

Parents as “stakeholders” in higher education

We recognise that some people are brought up by adults other than their parents and in using the term “parents” we include parents and carers but have chosen to opt for “parents” as a less cumbersome, shorthand form. Whilst recognising that university students are young adults, we have also referred to “children” rather than sons or daughters or the oxymoron “adult-children” or even “offspring”, because parent participants in our study referred to their own “children” rather than their “young people” and some had sons or daughters about to go to university and who were therefore still of school age. We also recognise that some university students are parents themselves, however, in this study we refer to students who are parented rather than students who may be acting themselves in a parenting role.

There is a well-established literature about parental involvement in schools. It may be questioned why parents should continue to be involved and considered to have a stake when on reaching the post-compulsory stage of education, young people are deemed to have entered adulthood. Having left the compulsory phase of education, the relationship of parents to university is very different to the previous parental role and relationship with the school, which acted in loco parentis. However, on the other hand, transition into adulthood today can be a protracted process in a challenging economic climate. It is interesting to note the increase in young adults now living with their parents than was the
case a decade ago, as reported by the Intergenerational Commission (2018, p. 15). The concept of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2015) is characterised by “longer and more widespread education, later entry to marriage and parenthood, and a prolonged and erratic transition to stable work” (p. 8). Factors such as debt, poor growth in earnings and a significant proportion of income spent on housing costs (Heath and Calvert, 2013; Intergenerational Commission, 2018) may contribute to increased dependence on family support as an aspect of young people’s lives.

Parents appear to be positioned in the White Paper “Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice” as having a role in informing students’ choices:

Higher education is a life-enriching experience which can positively enhance many different aspects of a person’s future – including their future earnings. Faced with such decisions, it is vital that young people and their parents have access to the best possible information to help them make the right choices. (DfBIS, 2016, pp. 57-58, para. 41)

Our analysis of parents’ positioning as a “stakeholder” group in higher education is preceded by brief examinations of the concepts of “stakeholder” and “teaching excellence” in higher education.

Freeman’s definition of “stakeholder” is often cited: “all of those groups and individuals that can affect, or are affected by, the accomplishment of organizational purpose”. And, Freeman (2010) continues, “Each of these groups has a stake in the modern corporation, hence, the term, ‘stakeholder’ ” (p. 25). Our application of this concept to higher education is informed by the work of Leveille (2006, p. 150) writing in the context of higher education in the USA, pointed to a need for more explanation of who the stakeholders are and their role in higher education. Within “the higher education stakeholder community” he distinguished between “stakeholders”, “customers” and “influencers”. The “stakeholders” he defined as “Any person, group, or organization that can place a claim on an organization’s attention, direction, or resources. Stakeholders typically include faculty, staff, administrators, policymakers and major donors” whereas “customers” are “Any person who brings dollars or other valued resources into the organization or rely on the product of the organization in the conduct of their own business. Customers include prospective students, current students, donors, alumni and employers”. As “people who influence the stakeholders or customers”, parents are positioned within the “influencers”, who may also be stakeholders or customers (Leveille, 2006, p. 155). Our research suggested that parents can have an important role as influencers when it comes to shaping students’ higher education choices and therefore it is important to understand their views about the purposes of higher education, how they judge its quality and to consider what might be the implications of parents’ views of higher education purposes and of teaching excellence for universities.

Teaching excellence in higher education

Ideas about teaching excellence in higher education are heavily influenced in the UK context by the teaching excellence and student outcomes framework (TEF) and, as we have argued elsewhere (Wood and Su, 2017), there is a range of different perceptions of what it is and how it may be evidenced. The TEF is a national exercise, which was introduced by the UK Government in 2016. It assesses excellence in teaching at universities and colleges, and how well they ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study. Three ratings, Gold, Silver and Bronze, are currently used in the TEF assessment. When the TEF was introduced, the government argued that:

The TEF will provide clear, understandable information to students about where teaching quality is outstanding. It will send powerful signals to prospective students and their future employers, and inform the competitive market. (DfBIS, 2016, p. 13, para. 26)
The concept of teaching excellence is often problematic and contested:

Concepts of excellence, like concepts of quality, are subject to debate. How excellence is defined, operationalised, and measured in relation to teaching and learning still lacks a clear consensus. (Gunn and Fisk, 2013, p. 9)

Our previous research into academics’ perspectives on teaching excellence suggested a concern to retain a focus on the pedagogical relationship at the heart of learning and teaching in a discourse dominated by outcomes and measures (Wood and Su, 2017). Performative interpretations of teaching excellence provide a limited view of teaching and Skelton (2007, p. 3) has argued for recognition of the broader purposes of higher education:

If teaching excellence is to become a meaningful concept in our lives it has to look beyond current preoccupations with the economy, efficiency and effectiveness – in common parlance “what works”. It also has to look beyond interpersonal relations to examine the broader purposes it might serve as higher education seeks to make a full and valued contribution to wider society.

The broader purposes and importance of universities today cannot be defined solely in terms of the outcomes and “instrumental goods” because unlike commercial businesses, “most of the important goals of a university are not quantitative, they can’t be measured; they will need […] to be judged” (Collini, 2012, p. 138).

In his discussion of the public/private distinction in higher education, Marginson (2018, pp. 323-324) has argued that in higher education:

Anglo-American policy focuses on the private benefits for students/graduates, principally higher earnings, and on their individual choices and customer satisfaction. The emphasis on private benefits, consistent with the marketing ethos that has gripped many HEIs, is used to justify tuition regimes. The public dimension is defined narrowly in terms of a market economy in which individual benefits are paramount.

Parents may hope that private benefits such as employment prospects and earnings potential for their children will be enhanced through gaining a degree. A desire for higher education to develop a broader outlook on the world and to enable students to make “a full and valued contribution to wider society” (Skelton, 2007, p. 3) can co-exist with this but appears to be located within a discourse which is less individualistic and more aligned to the purpose of citizenship, society and the common good.

Many researchers have identified some possible unintended consequences of marketisation of higher education for student learning and pedagogic relationships between academics and students. Based on their empirical study, Bunce et al. (2017, p. 1973) suggest a negative relationship between a consumer orientation and academic performance. On the pedagogic relationship, Nixon et al. (2018, p. 927) suggest that:

[…] market ideology in an HE context amplifies the expression of deeper narcissistic desires and aggressive instincts that appear to underpin some of the student “satisfaction” and “dissatisfaction” so crucial to the contemporary marketized HE institution.

The findings of our previous research demonstrated a range of understandings, meanings and emphases from academics in their responses to the question of what constitutes excellence. For some, excellence seemed to refer primarily to pedagogic competence and skills. For others it embraced research-informed pedagogic practice. Further factors identified as important included the relationship with the students, the teacher’s influence on them and subject knowledge. The research participants recognised limitations inherent in the discourse of “excellence” and that the term is open to myriad interpretations and understandings. Unsurprisingly perhaps, views of measurability appeared to be dependent on the definitions and interpretations of excellence. To many participants, excellence was almost impossible to “measure”. The TEF was perceived by some participants as “problematic” and as something
that could, potentially, reduce teaching excellence to an evidence-gathering process. The research findings suggested the need for a more nuanced, inclusive interpretation of teaching excellence which recognises the conjoined nature of teaching and research in higher education and which also rebalances a focus on outcome-related measures with understandings of purposes and the development of the processes of learning.

Our earlier study on students’ perspectives on teaching excellence indicated that students tended to relate teaching excellence to their personal experience of quality teaching, and the attributes of a “good” university lecturer (Su and Wood, 2012). Our study suggested that students perceived it to be a combination of the lecturer’s subject knowledge, willingness to help and inspirational teaching methods that made a “good” university lecturer. In addition, being humorous and able to provide speedy feedback were also perceived to be important factors. Our study also demonstrated that the definitions of teaching excellence cannot be obtained adequately from typologies and descriptions of techniques and skills. What emerged was that conceptualisations of teaching excellence appear richer and more meaningful when established through dialogue with students as respected co-constructors of knowledge.

Whilst different “stakeholder” groups emphasised particular aspects of teaching excellence, there appeared to be commonality too in the significance attributed to factors such as pedagogical relationships, knowledge, expertise and pedagogic skills of the lecturer. There was a measure of agreement (as will be evident too in the parent respondents’ views in the research which informs subsequent sections of this paper) that not all aspects of teaching excellence can be evidenced through metrics.

The study
The study reported here was a qualitative research study using an interpretative approach through which we aimed to develop an understanding of parents’ perspectives as higher education “stakeholders”. This study drew on empirical data gathered via focus group interviews and an online survey with 24 participants. The same questions were asked of all participants. The methods were complementary, for the online survey allowed access to a wider group of respondents whereas the semi-structured focus groups enabled responses to be probed and offered opportunities to gather more in-depth insights. Two focus groups were held in Yorkshire and Merseyside with eight participants, and 16 participants responded to the online survey. Each focus group interview lasted up to an hour and each was transcribed afterwards. In the focus group interviews and the online survey, participants were asked to share: their perceptions of the role and value of higher education for their children; their role and involvement in the decision-making process in their child’s choice of university; whether the concept of “stakeholder” was one with which they would identify as parents; and their understanding of “teaching excellence” and whether this could be measured.

The participants were from different backgrounds in relation to their employment status and their education levels. Participants were from the following geographical locations in the UK: Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Yorkshire, Cumbria, Northern Ireland and Cleveland. The majority of the participants ($n = 20$) were female, many participants ($n = 21$) had university-level education themselves and almost all of them ($n = 23$) were in professional career positions. The authors make no claim that this sample is representative of all parents. This was a non-probability sample which included snowball sampling and convenience sampling. Some of the shortcomings of a convenience sample as “one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility” (Bryman, 2008, p. 183) were compensated for to some extent, through the combination with snowball sampling where “the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contacts with others” (Bryman, 2008, p. 184). Participants were invited
to recommend others with children of university age to contribute their views. As such we were able to access the views and experiences of a sample of participants in relation to the purposes of this study.

Newby (2014, p. 60) maintains that the choice of sampling method should be “the method that gives us the best results for the circumstances of our research”. With this sampling strategy it would be unwise to suggest our findings are definitive and we recognise that the benefits of accessibility must be weighed against the shortcomings of unrepresentativeness. However, the data have generated interesting findings which may serve as “a springboard for further research or allow links to be forged with existing findings in an area” (Bryman, 2008, p. 183). We have begun to do the latter through the discussion in this paper which is informed by literature in the field. Regarding the former, avenues for follow-on research which suggest themselves from this study are identified in the conclusion.

Findings
In the discussion of the findings, a coding system was devised in order to safeguard anonymity of the respondents who are therefore identified only in terms of their general geographical location and basic information about their children. Each participant also has a letter identifier to allow data to be attributed to individuals, for example, “Participant R1, who has a child studying at university”.

The idea of parents as a “stakeholder” group
The majority of research participants believed that parents should be treated as an important stakeholder group for various reasons. One was because their children’s education is at stake and another that they are funding their children’s university education by paying some of the costs of it:

I think particularly in the current climate where there is such a financial commitment. Certainly, we would have a major contribution to that financial cost if my son goes to university. So immediately we’re stakeholders. (Participant R17, who has two sons studying at school)

Some participants also noted that the “stake” has emotional and financial dimensions:

It is important that whilst the student develops a sense of adult responsibility, the relationship with the parents must remain positive and supportive in order for the student to gain the maximum from a university education. This support comes in many forms including financial and emotional. (Participant R3, who has a daughter currently studying at university)

Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with how universities engage with them currently as a stakeholder group, perceiving there to be a huge difference between how schools and universities engaged with parents. It appeared to them that universities tend to engage parents only at open or applicant days when their children choose their degree study and at the graduation ceremony when their children have completed their degrees:

It would be useful to have the option of discussing the course with parents during the time the students are there. This should be voluntary and agreed by the student that their parents should be involved. So many times I have only met the lecturers at the degree ceremony. (Participant R14, who has two children recently having completed university degree courses and two who are currently at university)

It appeared that respondents influenced their children’s decision making to varying extents. Typically, they were involved in decision making, guiding this process, for example, through research and information gathering. One participant told us:

I leave it up to my children – I guide them, I make sure they’ve researched it properly and then I help them with their decisions. (Participant R22, who has two children, one currently at university and one at school)
Another made a link between their interest in decision making and their investment:

It’s a big investment for parents now, as well. So, you are going to have more of an interest because we’ve invested enough. (Participant R23, who has three children and two currently at university)

Another shared more detail about the part they had played in deciding to which universities applications would be made:

I sat with all of them and it was about, what subject to you want to study? And we started at it from that angle and then we talked about geography – I had one son who was really keen to look at the Times and the listings and all of that and was really swayed by that […] at the end of the day it was about, what do you want to do? Where do you want to do it? And that instantly narrowed it down. You know, if they wanted to do geography and wanted to live in the north of England it left us with five to choose from. So, I put those four or five down. And then we drilled down to look at courses but they did it more than me, really. (Participant R24, who has three children, two who have completed university and one currently at university)

There was also some evidence of tensions experienced when parents tried to reconcile their impressions of the suitability of a particular university if these differed from those of their child:

I want him to be happy. I wanted him to choose the university that he felt comfortable with […] And yeah, you stand there and you go around these open days and you’re thinking, you’re not coming here and then you’re thinking, what if he chooses to come here? (Participant R18, who has a son studying at university)

At the same time, almost all participants were cautious about the extent to which they should be directly involved as a stakeholder group, in their children’s university study. They viewed university study as a transition phase, as their children move into adulthood and during this time they, rather than their parents, should be given independence and responsibility for their own study. A difficulty with this though was that during this transition, the participants did not consider their children to be fully independent adults both in financial and emotional terms.

Some participants suggested they would welcome some university engagement with parents during their children’s university study and some specific suggestions were made as to what forms this might take. These included the possible use of parents’ newsletters, having parent representatives on university governing councils, having a dedicated personal tutor to speak to regarding their children’s general well-being and general performance:

An information sheet for parents at the beginning of each year saying what was happening that year in terms of subjects, assessments, course dates, exam dates etc. Not just for information but also to check that the student is keeping up and putting work in on time. This didn’t happen with my second son and he lost valuable marks as he hadn’t realised an online test had to be done by a certain date. If I had known about it, I could have reminded him. (Participant R14, who has two children recently having completed university and two currently at university)

Some participants went further by suggesting that there should be a parent stakeholder group at each university, and that representatives of parents should sit on the university governing boards.

It should be noted that a minority of participants (n = 3) did not consider parents to be university stakeholders. They expressed the view that parents should not be involved formally at all as this conflicted with their belief that universities are for adults and that their children, as young adults, should be respected in such a way.

The main purposes and value of higher education as perceived by parents
In the responses to questions of the purposes and value of higher education, three broad interconnected aspects were apparent: academic and social development; employability and career prospects; and intellectual curiosity and self-formation.
In relation to the first, most participants believed university to be a safe space for their children to develop and grow to become well-rounded, both academically and socially. They wanted their children to experience university and all the opportunities they felt it can offer:

- Gaining self-confidence and moving out into a wider world of people from different backgrounds;
- becoming interested and engaged in the knowledge and skills associated with their chosen pathway;
- gaining a clearer sense of how they want to carry their skills and capabilities though into the world of work. (Participant R7, who has two children recently having completed university study and one who is currently at university)

I have a strong belief that higher education is an end in itself — that studying for a degree is valuable because it allows you to think, explore, broaden your horizons, develop “soft” skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, how to be independent. It exposes you to ideas and perspectives you may not have experienced before. (Participant R6, who has one child is at school)

In relation to employability and career prospects, these emerged as important issues during the participants’ deliberations over the purposes and value of higher education:

- A university degree is essential for many professions today. A university education would prepare my son well for his intended future career as it’s a huge investment for him and the family both emotionally and financially. (Participant R1, who has a child currently at university)

In relation to intellectual curiosity and self-formation, for some participants priority was given to university as a formative experience:

- I agree with what people have said about universities being a wonderful place of formation as well as a place of learning. What I also sort of see as a very different kind of learning experience than you get from secondary school. My hope is that my daughter will gain that love of intellectual curiosity and so I think the idea of independent intellectual pursuit, which university does encourage. For me, it’s also about social skills, the whole formation of yourself as an independent young adult. (Participant R21, who has a daughter studying at university)

The priority and ranking of these purposes were different for each participant as they argued that this would be related to their families’ socio-economic backgrounds, social class and their prior education level. In addition, the value of higher education would also be different depending on their children’s interests and expectations.

**Parents’ perspectives on teaching excellence**

Views expressed related broadly to the design of relevant degree courses, the delivery of these courses and the support for students and their learning.

In relating the idea of teaching excellence to the design and delivery of the degree, many participants reported that they expect academics to be “experts” in the subject they teach, to be passionate about their subjects, and able to excite and engage students. For some participants, their children’s relations with academics were a key element of teaching excellence, believing teaching excellence to be evident when academics recognise individual students’ needs and support them accordingly:

- I think “teaching excellence” should be about two things – one is to do with the relevance of the degree programme; another one is how staff deliver the programme, for example, are they passionate about the subjects and are they caring about the students they teach. (Participant R1, who has a child currently at university)

When asked about the measurability of teaching excellence, most participants expressed the view that teaching excellence should be measured, and various indicators were suggested:

- I think teaching excellence is about both the quality of lectures, but also the quality of seminars and tutorials. It is also about being available for students who may have questions. It should be measured by observation, auditing marking, availability of lecture notes, speed of marking, and the
attitude of lecturers, i.e. showing a commitment to teaching over research. (Participant R10, who has one child currently at university and another one at school)

I think “teaching excellence” relates to a number of indicators (e.g. contact hours, employability etc). I would like it to relate more to outcomes (has the student made the progress expected?), and student voice, and perhaps through qualitative measures (e.g. observation, work scrutiny). (Participant R6, who has one child at school)

At the same time, some parents raised concerns about measuring of teaching excellence, believing that the judgement of this is not always amenable to measurement on a predetermined scale as currently used in TEF:

I'm not sure it can be measured in a way that gets to the essence, but it should not be measured by simple metrics and/or data just because it can be easily collected. The views of teachers and students of the experience and their reflections on it are part of the evidence but not in ways that reduce evidence collection to simple surveys of whether the teaching was enjoyable or not. (Participant R13, who has one child recently having completed university study and another one who is currently at university)

**Discussion: parents as non-typical stakeholders**

Knowing who the stakeholders involved in higher education are may be considered important in lending competitive advantages and as a “fundamental step” towards identifying their needs and how these might be met (Mainardes *et al.*, 2010, p. 77). The term “stakeholder” may also suggest a primary focus on individuals, each with their own business stake in higher education primarily as a financial investment, in contrast to the centrality of a relationship with people, based on commitment to the broader purposes and value of higher education and learning. Our respondents saw their “stake” in terms of a financial commitment but also, as parents they had an important stake in their children’s well-being and happiness.

Universities serve different “constituencies” or communities, each with their own interests in higher education (see Leveille, 2006). However, there can be tensions for universities to navigate in promoting student independence as adults and their agency and development through higher education to become autonomous critical beings, whilst at the same time mindful of the constituency of parents as “influencers” who have their own expectations of university education and conceptions of excellent teaching. There was some ambivalence amongst the parents themselves as to the legitimacy of their engagement in their children’s university education, recognising that during this time the young person gradually becomes independent and therefore may benefit from the support of their parents not only financially but also in emotional support. Therefore to enable them to do this, an argument was made by our respondents for universities to engage with parents, although at the same time there was evidence of some conflict for parents in reconciling this position with a desire to give their children the freedom and space to live and grow as independent young adults.

Tensions, contradictions and challenges for parents emerged in this study, for example, in reconciling the co-existence of their desire to be involved and engaged with scope for students to be formed as independent young adults. The idea of “helicoptering” is a term which has been invoked in the literature to refer to “those who closely monitor their student offspring and who are ready to intervene at any sign of difficulty” (Lewis *et al.*, 2015, p. 417) and for Von Bergen and Bressler (2017, p. 3) it is used to describe “excessive levels of involvement, advice, problem-solving, control, protection, and abundant and unnecessary tangible assistance in the service of their offspring’s well-being”. With reference to higher education in a North American context, Von Bergen and Bressler (2017, p. 4) suggest that “Helicopter parents seem to maintain continuous contact with their college-aged adult children as well as with the school administration. Cell phones, it seems, have become virtual umbilical cords”. This excessive “hovering” and over-protection potentially may become a barrier to growth into maturity. When parents expect that universities should adopt the role
of protective parenting this may influence students’ attitudes and present challenges to the idea of what higher education is:

Some students feel the need to be sheltered from facing intellectual challenges and any conflicting ideas, thoughts, and words despite research showing the value of dissent, not for the truth that it may or may not hold or for its ability to persuade, but rather for the thinking that it generates. (Von Bergen and Bressler, 2017, p. 5).

Although well-intentioned, parents’ desire to promote well-being through “helicoptering” behaviours may at the same time undermine the value of higher education as expressed by some of the parents in our study. Parents in our study recognised the self-formation of independent young adults and exposure to ideas and perspectives previously not encountered as being a valuable part of higher education whilst also affording value and significance to pedagogical relationships between academics and students which are academically nurturing, understanding and supportive.

Given their role as influencers, we were particularly interested in parents’ conceptions of teaching excellence. Their responses indicated a recognition of aspects of this that they felt could be evidenced and quantified and also acknowledgement that some aspects defy measurement, including, for example, the “feel” of the institution, openness, the passion conveyed by academics for the subjects taught and whether the institution cares about and supports students’ learning needs: “Once we begin to measure, we begin to tick boxes and then we always, always lose something” one respondent told us. Their conceptions of how teaching excellence is to be judged ranged from very specific expectations expressed as performance measures – contact hours, attendance, programme completion, student feedback and student satisfaction data, research quality, degree results and employability after university – to more intuitive and affective aspects. It was suggested that the latter should not be overlooked in favour of simple metrics which can be more easily collected and are more amenable to measurement.

Excellent teaching was believed by some parents to be amenable to indicators and measures, for example, they cited progress measures, contact hours, speed of return of marked work, graduate employability and so on. As previously explained, there also appeared to be recognition that whilst aspects such as these could be measured according to scales and indicators, there was an important role for individual judgement to be exercised too because some things, for example, those that “get to the essence”, may be subjective, specific to particular contexts and also matters of personal interpretation and judgement rather than measurement according to universal scales. Whilst measurement tends to be trusted, judgement may be viewed with some misgivings and:

[…] the trouble is, as I’ve already insisted, that not everything that counts can be counted. Sometimes we can only know if something is a good example of its kind by the view taken of it in the long term by those competent to judge. (Collini, 2012, p. 139)

Parents’ views seemed to reject a rigid vocational/liberal dichotomy in that they wanted university education to be a good preparation for a career whilst also wanting their children to broaden their outlooks, develop intellectual curiosity and independent thought. These two of course are not contradictory and appeared to co-exist in their conceptions of teaching excellence. Therefore enhanced employability and career prospects were seen by parents to be important aspects of the value and purposes of higher education which co-existed with a desire for the experience of higher education to develop a broader outlook on life. This expectation of graduate employability raises some dilemmas for universities which are not of their making. In line with a neo-liberalist agenda:

[…] universities are set-up to resemble a market economy, competing against one another for student enrolment and thereby tuition and rankings in accordance with employment outcomes. (Kinash et al., 2018, p. 303)
Yet whilst they are judged and ranked according to these outcomes, the lack of graduate employment opportunities is impacted by wider factors in the economy and wider trends and changes in society which are not within the remit of universities to control. Kinash et al. (2018, p. 303) suggest some critics argue that:

[…] blame is placed on individuals and institutions when failures are actually due to the tail-end of the global financial crisis and over-enrolment in popular degrees/disciplines […].

Significant unresolved tensions for parents and universities appear to emerge from this study. Parents appeared to want a continuing role in monitoring their children’s well-being and progress, although views about the extent of this differed. Explanations for this may be associated with the concept of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2015) and perhaps also in parents’ awareness that young people may need continued support in becoming adults, seeing this as a journey towards independence, rather than an “event” whereby “adulthood”, independence and autonomy are gained at the point of entry to university at the age of 18. There was a desire amongst the parents to allow their children to experience higher education as an opportunity to grow into mature, independent adults capable of making their own decisions. There may be tensions though between a desire to support a journey towards independence on the one hand and “helicoptering” tendencies of some parents referred to in the literature and which may be linked to a desire to minimise exposure to “risk”. A desire to minimise exposure to risk taking, for example, to provide shelter from views that may challenge and disturb existing beliefs, may create tensions for universities where the development of critical, mature, adult beings with a capacity for independent thought have an essential place.

A universally agreed definition of teaching excellence is elusive, being dependent on views and beliefs about the purposes of higher education and, how one answers the question “excellence for what?” (Runté and Runté, 2018, p. 78). The TEF metrics argue Runté and Runté (2018, p. 77):

[…] are the metrics of a manpower discourse: student employment outcomes; the learning environment measured by manpower-orientated criteria such as the dropout rate; and teaching and assessment measured by criteria such contract hours, course design, and (presumably) student feedback.

Parents’ views of teaching excellence appeared to reflect elements of this discourse in their suggestions of specific measures by which judgements of teaching excellence might be made. Amongst the implications of a “manpower discourse” for academic practice may be “curriculum-centred course design, based on the skills and knowledge identified as crucial by employers” (77).

Conclusion
The current level of engagement by universities with parents as “stakeholders” emerged as unsatisfactory in the view of many of our respondents. The role of parents in higher education may be considered substantively different to their role when their children were at school. However, an argument was suggested for some form of continued involvement of parents in higher education because young people move gradually into adulthood and their dependence on parents may be typically over a protracted period. An argument for continuing dialogue with parents during the period of students’ study at university therefore appears to commend itself from this research. The role of parents in informing and influencing decision making when their children were at the stage of choosing a university and a course of study was apparent. However, parents appeared to have little formal contact and to experience a sense of detachment from the university after the initial choice and induction stage and there was some evidence of an appetite for continued engagement with universities in some form.
The research has suggested that there may be scope for further exploration of the implications for universities to develop their engagement with parents as a stakeholder constituency and as a source of support for students as they journey towards independence. If adulthood is conceptualised as a journey rather than an event at the age of 18, then it may be useful to give further thought to the scope for continued dialogue with them during the students’ undergraduate studies. Through dialogue with parents and students, more nuanced, balanced interpretations of teaching excellence may also develop which afford importance not solely to outcome-related measures but also to the processes of learning and the wider purposes and value of higher education.

Acknowledgements
The paper is developed from a talk given at the Philosophy of Higher Education Conference at Middlesex University, London, in September 2018. The authors would like to thank the research participants in this study who shared their views. The authors would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who commented on the original submission of the paper. Lastly, the authors would like to acknowledge that this study was supported by the School of Education research seed funding at York St John University, and the Centre for Education and Policy Analysis (CEPA) at Liverpool Hope University, UK.

References


About the authors

Dr Margaret Wood is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at York St John University, UK. She has a particular research interest in educational enquiry in higher education, through which she aims to develop pedagogic understandings by creating structures and conditions for genuine dialogue to develop student agency and to embed this within practices. She is Co-editor of Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Academic Leadership in Higher Education (2017), published by Bloomsbury. Dr Margaret Wood is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: m.wood@yorksj.ac.uk

Dr Feng Su is Senior Lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University, UK and Visiting Research Fellow to The Education University of Hong Kong, China. His main research interests and writings are located within the following areas: the development of higher education policy and its impact on student experience and academic practice. His most recent books include Cosmopolitan Perspectives on Academic Leadership in Higher Education (edited with Wood, 2017), The Reorientation of Higher Education: Challenging the East–West Dichotomy (edited with Adamson and Nixon, 2012) and Professional Ethics: Education for a Humane Society (edited with McGettrick, 2012).

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Abstract

Purpose – Teaching excellence remains a contested term in English higher education (HE). This paper begins by reflecting on its complex and sometimes blurred meaning, charting the divergence between academic interests in the complexity and contextual questions relating to practice development and organisational and sectoral shifts which have been driven by managerialism, accountability and “top-down” ideas of change. The authors argue that this divergence, epitomised in the development of the teaching excellence framework, has led to a confused, if ubiquitous, use of excellence to identify organisational and sector-led ideas of what it means to deliver quality teaching. However, these frameworks have become progressively detached from the complexity of practice investigated by those interested in pedagogy. The paper aims to discuss this issue.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper which brings together literature from teaching excellence, organisational science, time and HE to develop an alternative approach to pedagogic development.

Findings – Based on a critique of the current, confused conceptualisation of teaching excellence, the authors offer a different narrative which demonstrates how a reconsideration of the factors is important in developing critical and challenging teaching opportunities. Based on a “bottom-up” system focusing on dialogue, sustainability and “unhasty” time, the authors argue for a re-establishing of a holistic approach in HE providers based on emergent pedagogies as opposed to teaching excellence.

Originality/value – This paper demonstrates why teaching excellence has become conceptually fractured in an English context, and why a new approach to pedagogic development needs to be considered to establish a more positive and critical approach at both the institutional and sectoral levels. This paper outlines a possible approach to developing such renewal.

Keywords Sustainability, Higher education, Teaching excellence, Dialogic change, Pedagogic practice, Teaching excellence framework

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The higher education (HE) system in England has seen a great deal of change in recent years, most notably with the introduction of student tuition fees, the ongoing development of the research excellence framework (REF) and more recently the creation of the teaching excellence framework (TEF). It is the latter of these developments that we are concerned within this paper, as the TEF is already having a growing influence on organisational strategy and policy making across HE providers in the two years since its introduction in 2016. Conceptions of teaching excellence in the HE system in England have been in constant flux over the last three decades as a result of policy reform and the TEF arguably represents another reincarnation. But what underlies these shifts? What is the meaning of teaching excellence? And does it still remain a concept with pedagogic focus and validity or has it been appropriated as an accountability imperative?

Our paper begins by tracking some of the evolving meanings of “teaching excellence”, from its early uses attempting to capture the breadth of practice developed by academics interested in pedagogy, through its translation into a framework for external validation,
to its present reinvention as both an organisational and national accountability tool. We contend that these shifts reveal 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. With this in mind, the second part of the paper puts forward the case for moving beyond current accountability orientated characterisations of teaching excellence in order to recapture some of the features of earlier attempts to promote and develop pedagogic practice as a basis for creating new ways of conceptualising and leading the development of teaching practice in HE. We do so by outlining a different imaginary of the university’s role in supporting the pedagogic values and practices that can best support students in developing critical and creative approaches to their chosen disciplines; whereas the trend over the past 30 years has been a divergence between practice-research and managerial understandings of teaching excellence, we argue for a holistic perspective which attempts to find a unifying basis on which to close the practice-research/managerial gap.

**Considering the changing conceptualisation of teaching excellence in England’s HE sector**

In England, teaching has long been an established and important element of academic life. In the 1850s, Newman suggested that research was best carried out beyond the university, the main role of HE being to help students pursue knowledge for its own sake through discussion and reading, a view of academic and pedagogic work which remained central to university life until well into the twentieth century. By the 1960s, research had been re-established as a core element of HE work and on which teaching should be based in the pursuit of truth through a bringing together of research insights and pedagogy as set out by the Robbins Committee in 1963 (Committee on Higher Education, 1963, p. 7):

> But the search for truth is an essential function of institutions of higher education and the process of education is itself most vital when it partakes of the nature of discovery.

The close link suggested by the quote above with teaching being reliant on and exploring advances in research meant that some of the new universities, which were built in the 1960s to increase the number of places available in HE, were as well known for their innovative teaching as they were for research (Anderson, 2010). The development of new and innovative approaches to teaching developed within a relatively diffuse field of interest in the sense that there was no explicit field of research for pedagogic practice (such as the later Scholarship of Teaching (SoT) outlined below), with academics and pedagogic researchers carrying out innovative projects and developing new practices in the absence of a unifying worldview. Early journals of HE research, such as *Studies in Higher Education* included a teaching focus. For example, Morgan (1976, p. 68) in the first issue of the journal discusses the various and potential uses of projects in architecture teaching, reflecting:

> The richer and more complex the project becomes, the wider will be the range of possible student response and the greater the need for flexibility in the supportive teaching, both in structure and content.

This is illustrative of a long and deep interest in developing teaching approaches in the English HE sector; an architectural academic taking interest in developing and sharing practice to help others develop new teaching approaches in their own contexts. However, this disparate field focused on developing practice came centre stage in 1990 when Boyer published *Scholarship Reconsidered*.

The 1990s saw a rapid rise in the volume of interest in teaching in the HE sector at an international scale. This was partly in response to the work of Boyer who laid out a set of
four foci for scholarship, one of which was the SoT which focused on the need for deep understanding of disciplinary knowledge together with equally deep pedagogic knowledge brought together to critically inform teaching practices, reminiscent of Shulman’s (1986) concept of pedagogic content knowledge. Approaches such as these began to popularise scholarship into teaching and provided frameworks which acted as an initial move towards the idea of excellence. The English context was also ripe for an explosion of interest in the SoT as major HE reforms such as the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 had led to the creation of a new wave of universities (the “post-1992s”), which had formally been polytechnics run by local authorities. Newly recast as universities, one of their main selling points was their quality of teaching. The breadth of HE providers subsequently grew even more as further education colleges were allowed to offer HE programmes. Within this expanded sector, scholarship and expertise in teaching became an important characteristic of HE providers.

It was also during the 1990s that new quality measures started to take hold in HE. The introduction of student evaluation of teaching and the beginnings of systems, both internal and national, to recognise the quality of teaching led to the development of “teaching excellence” as a recognised and fully fledged concept in the sector. For example, one way in which teaching excellence was defined and rewarded in the early 2000s was through the creation of centres of excellence in teaching and learning (CETLs). This initiative was funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) as part of a broader move to enhance the status of learning and teaching in HE, recognising that pre-existing esteem and reward systems within HE providers were often more likely to recognise excellence in research than teaching. Thus, the CETLs were introduced as “a major initiative designed both to reward and promote excellence in teaching and learning across the higher education curriculum” (Gosling and Hannan, 2007, p. 634). Funds were awarded to a selection of HE providers following an open bidding process. The CETL initiative remains the largest single funding initiative in learning and teaching to date, with a total of £315m made available from 2005 to 2010. At the same time as this organisational scheme of teaching excellence was created, HEFCE also developed the first National Teaching Fellowship awards to identify individuals who could demonstrate their impact and innovation in teaching. This process was subsequently made the responsibility of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2003 and was also slowly expanded to create a suite of fellowships based on teaching innovation and excellence which continues to remain active to the present. The HEA was established to provide an accreditation scheme for university teachers in the UK and in doing so it created its UK Professional Standards Framework, a set of standards and national benchmarking tool designed to outline the main dimensions of the teaching and learning support roles that exist within HE. Since its creation, the HEA has extended its scope internationally, with over 100,000 individual fellows registered worldwide as of March 2018 (HEA, 2018). HEA fellowships have thus increasingly come to be seen by some as an important proxy for recognition of teaching excellence and effectiveness. Indeed, within the HE sector, the possession of a fellowship is increasingly seen as a prerequisite when applying for academic posts and promotions.

While the concept of teaching excellence was starting to become embedded as a mainstream idea in English HE, it generated a lot of debate amongst academics, as to what the term “teaching excellence” actually means, a debate which continues to the present. Elton (1998, p. 3) reflected that “the lack of precision is due essentially to the multidimensionality of the concept, which leads to serious confusion in any attempt to reduce its dimensions to a single one”. Elton shows that at an early stage, teaching was being characterised as complex in nature, whilst at the same time there were organisational pressures to take a more managerial approach to teaching excellence. Hence, as early as the 1990s there were signs of the divergence of focus between
academics and organisations as to how teaching excellence could be utilised. For those interested in practice development and research, a number of perspectives began to emerge. For example, Skelton (2004) identified teaching excellence as being based on reflective practice, whilst Kreber (2002) emphasised the importance of performance, neither of which foregrounded the necessity for primary research. In both cases, whatever the contrast in focus, there was already an interest in the complexity and contextualised nature of teaching. Subsequently, others, such as Su and Wood (2012) have emphasised the ethical and affective attributes of teaching excellence. O’Leary (2017, p. 85) maintains that there is still a great deal of debate concerning the nature and qualities of teaching excellence, perhaps due to the fact that “whatever particular focus we choose to adopt when discussing teaching, it is clear that we are dealing with a process that is incredibly complex”. The range of foci for practice development suggests a multi-faceted and complex set of processes (Wood, 2017a). For those interested in understanding the processes and contexts of teaching practice, pedagogic development is seen as an ongoing emergent and the result of understanding the complexity of teaching and learning environments. However, organisational- and sector-level uses of the concept of “excellence” diverged from this more complex characterisation from the early 2000s onwards as performative cultures began to mature. Skelton (2005, p. 7) highlighted the tension between managerial imperatives and a counter-cultural attempt by academics to see teaching excellence as having a more positive, practice-based utility:

The question emerges as to whether teaching excellence can be appropriated by teachers and students in higher education. Can it become a valuable and meaningful concept rather than a technical and bureaucratic concern?

As the HE sector in England has become ever more commercialised and marketised, so too has it become increasingly reliant on accountability systems and the use of metrics for both research and teaching. Stevenson (2017, p. 538) pithily captured the dominance of metrics-based approaches to understanding and improving educational provision and the current climate of education policy making when he comments that “the measurement of everything is central to the modern educational experience”. Teaching excellence, and excellence more widely, has ostensibly been co-opted into these emerging narratives to serve a purpose to help universities sell their “products” and to differentiate themselves from competitors. As Moore et al. (2016, p. 3) stated:

Because it lacks content, “excellence” serves in the broadest sense solely as an (aspirational) claim of comparative success: that some thing, person, activity, or institution can be asserted in a hopefully convincing fashion to be better or “more important” than some other.

Similarly, other researchers have highlighted that there is no such thing as “excellence” in the abstract and it is a vacuous and meaningless term when used in the context of policy debates about raising standards and improving quality (e.g. Readings, 1996; Collini, 2012).

This vagueness has been useful in branding various activities as “excellent” within the English HE system. Many institutions now have “centres for/of excellence”, including work across the spectrum from teaching and learning to various disciplinary and research-focused areas of interest. These have become important branding mechanisms for marketing institutional provision and services, as a means of communicating to prospective students and academics the esteem associated with such centres. It echoes Reading’s (1996) contention that excellence has become both amorphous and ubiquitous as a concept, rendering it largely meaningless.

Just as the wider notion of “excellence” has become embedded in the discourse of institutional narratives, so too has it been adopted as a gauge for categorising and valorising the quality of teaching. For example, the vast majority of HE providers in
England now have annual teaching awards, the underlying purpose of which is commonly articulated as recognising and rewarding teaching excellence. In a similar vein, external validation schemes, such as the HEA’s fellowship (now part of Advance HE), seek to recognise and accredit effectiveness in professional practice and leadership in learning and teaching in HE. By focusing on effectiveness these awards can be argued to be more formative than performative in nature, yet arguably one of the consequences of such schemes, unintended or not, is that they invariably end up codifying and benchmarking effectiveness according to a prescribed set of indicative descriptors and/or assessment criteria, thus creating the conditions for constraining normalisation (Foucault, 1977). Because many HE providers see the fellowships as offering prestige, there is the danger that they are linked to notions of “teaching excellence” which then become increasingly institutionalised and colonised both conceptually and operationally by sectoral and institutional systems that are driven by wider performance management agendas and needs. While academics may still find dialogue about teaching excellence beneficial these processes of normalisation and colonisation undoubtedly have a circumscribed impact.

An additional aspect of the changing nature of excellence rarely considered in HE is that of time and the temporal impacts on practice, as outlined by Vostal (2015, p. 73). He argues that “the currently ubiquitous doctrine of ‘excellence’ has specific temporal connotations”. He identifies the continual development of accountability structures, an increased number of imposed structures on academic work and the resultant feeling of a loss of control as being responsible for ever greater feelings of guilt and anxiety (Ylijoki and Mantylä, 2003). In the increasingly managerial context of the HE sector, there is ever greater time pressure and a loss of autonomy. Vostal (2015, pp. 81-82) saw the “excellence” narrative as fulfilling a role of insisting on ever better results, ever more pressure to improve:

> The omnipresent discourse of excellence, in turn, creates a highly competitive environment in which an increasing number of tasks and activities are subjected to keeping up with this hybrid criterion, as well as with surmounting existing thresholds and benchmarks.

As a result, rarely does teaching excellence lead to creativity, reflection and experimentation, as these are seen as inefficient and risky. Instead, efficient use of time, increased bureaucracy and the need to perform to targets over specified time-scales become ever more central to demonstrating excellence. This shows that we cannot ignore the temporal and, in this case, accelerated nature of work relating to development in teaching practices at the organisational level.

The definition and character of teaching excellence has shifted rapidly over the past three decades, from an informal descriptor used by those interested in developing pedagogy and gaining useful insight into practice, to a concept that has been colonised by institutional imperatives as a tool to satisfy performance management needs. Indeed, it could be argued that this shift in the conceptualisation and application of teaching excellence has led to a mindset that activity not worthy of the “excellence” title is in some way deficient, problematic and needs to be exposed to increasingly overbearing auditing and accountability systems.

**The rise of the TEF**

HE in England has seen a continual development of accountability systems since the 1990s. This has happened as part of the continued marketisation of the sector, with institutions needing to compete across a range metrics to gain funding for research and income from teaching. The new Office for Students (OfS) has been created with the publicly stated aim of looking after the interests of students through four objectives: first, the right to access HE where they have the ability; second, to experience a high quality education whilst at university; third, to progress to further study or high quality employment; and fourth, to ensure value for money (OfS, 2018). These objectives put teaching quality at the centre of
university activity given that tuition fees are the largest income generator for universities. As French (2017, p. 6) explained in her account of the development of the TEF:

The focus on teaching excellence in Higher Education and Research Bill (HERB) is not entirely unexpected, political interest in the quality of teaching standards, as a way of helping parents and students to make informed “choices” about which school to choose for their children, has after all, been a mainstay of governmental interventions in compulsory education for several decades.

The development of the TEF had a long gestation period, as part of the wider governmental ideology based on the increasing role of the market, regulation and accountability in public services. The OfS’s current guide identifies the TEF as being concerned with measuring three areas in particular: teaching quality, learning environment and student outcomes and learning gain (OfS, 2018, p. 2). The evaluation of each HE provider in the TEF is based initially on the interpretation of quantitative data from three existing metrics: data on student entry and retention, the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey. In addition to these metrics, institutions can present further evidence in the form of a written “provider submission” of up to a maximum of 15 pages to support their submission and to provide contextually specific information. By focusing primarily on metrics, teaching excellence has been narrowed to a reflection of sets of data which have little, if anything, to do with teaching, other than as possible, generalised proxies. As Canning (2017, p. 4) argued:

[...] universities will not be rewarded on the quality of the teaching (let alone learning) which takes place, but upon the metrics (ghosts) of measurements which may or may not reflect the quality of teaching.

The TEF is currently being developed further, through the piloting of a subject-level element (DfE, 2017) for which two different models are being trialled. Here, the same metrics as the first iteration of the TEF have been used but reported at subject as well as institutional level. There is also the addition of a “teaching intensity” metric. This will measure the number of hours of teaching per week in subjects and how large teaching groups are. These are argued to be a good proxy for student views concerning “value for money”. Hence, the focus appears to be economic as much as it is academic and centres on the degree to which students feel satisfied by provision rather than on the quality and challenge of the teaching.

The most recent development in teaching excellence in England therefore shows a system that has moved away from engagement with the situated meaning, process and complexity of teaching, towards a metrics-based system that relies on the use of questionable proxies that neither focus on the student (other than as consumer) nor the academic (other than as supplier) in a meaningful way. In this sense, government policy has arguably encouraged the sector to view teaching excellence through a detached, data-processing lens that is focused on the market and the satisfaction of its clients, disconnecting it from the complex acts that the key agents (i.e. academics and students) involved in learning and teaching undertake. Perversely, however, whilst the student is publicly positioned at the centre of the narrative on the TEF, in reality, this is a way of micro-managing university activity to meet the needs of the market, as Heaney and Mackenzie (2017, p. 8) stated:

The open-ended reputational economy which the TEF is presented as, for example, is an open mechanism of perpetual competition which is never completed. Teachers under the TEF, in this sense, will always be preparing for the next TEF and the next process of monitoring and are incentivised to adjust their behaviour according to these mechanisms of control.

Given the continued transition in the meaning of teaching excellence, from reflecting interests in pedagogical practice, innovation and research, to a framework for market activity and accountability, we argue that we need new ways of understanding the development of pedagogy to support well-evidenced and thoughtful approaches to teaching. To achieve this requires the reconceptualization and reconfiguration of teaching excellence. It is to this matter that the final part of this paper now turns its attention.
Moving beyond teaching excellence – developing a different organisational model as a basis for developing teaching

As the previous two sections have highlighted, the official meaning of teaching excellence within an English context has shifted over time. From its origins in interests concerning teaching approaches, it has been progressively appropriated by quality frameworks, accountability structures and national policies focusing on market development. At the same time, academics and students may continue to have views about teaching excellence which are more closely aligned to a process orientated approach, focused on teaching processes and learning environments. This makes the use of teaching excellence as a concept problematic and unclear. In this section, we consider how we might move beyond colonised frameworks of teaching excellence with a view to developing a different conceptualisation. In doing this, we suggest that we need to re-establish a link between the organisational level of pedagogic leadership and change, and that championed by academics focusing on developing their practice.

Our alternative model is based on critiquing the dominant model of change management in HE and argues that high quality pedagogy and pedagogic change come neither from the imposition of formal structures such as the TEF, nor the creation of excellence frameworks that identify individuals who have passed a self-referential threshold, but from a serious attempt to align organisational and academic processes to create academic communities in which pedagogic activity can thrive. We therefore begin by outlining the organisational environment we believe we need to aid the emergence of critical approaches to pedagogic practice.

Pedagogy and pedagogic development are major activities within any HE setting, and therefore need to be considered as an organisational strategic priority. This being the case, we need to consider the approach taken by the majority of English HE providers in developing strategic activity. Doyle and Brady (2018) characterise the HE sector as being driven by managerial processes in relation to organisational change. This is perhaps not surprising given that policy developments over the past 30 years have brought a managerial perspective to the sector. The most obvious examples are the REF and the TEF. The introduction of both frameworks has resulted in newly created roles and, in some cases, jobs at the institutional level. For example, in the case of the REF, there are those whose main responsibility it is to track research impact across an institution. In the case of the TEF, there are those tasked with analysing “big data” around destination, retention and the NSS, these analyses in turn leading to the generation of “top-down” initiatives to bolster the data in these areas. Interfaces with pedagogic approaches tend to focus on what the student as consumer suggests they want in survey data, combined with the employment and retention imperatives. As Molesworth et al. (2010, p. 197) stated, “satisfying student-customer demand may be as important to a university’s success as robust pedagogy”. This need to satisfy students in this way can further drive organisational co-ordination from the centre, with large-scale interventions imposed on academics to fall in with the strategic view in the hope of creating ever more positive metrics.

Doyle and Brady (2018), in a similar fashion to Iveroth and Hallencreutz (2016), characterise this view of change as being characterised by planned, rational activity. The organisation is seen as being controllable, with change being brought about by discrete projects which have a genesis at the top of the organisation in reaction to data analysis, cascaded through the system as a linear, predictable process. Such systems normally adopt a single, explicit model of change, such as systems thinking (Dunnion and O’Donovan, 2014), or total quality control (Asif et al., 2013). These frameworks in turn provide a clear set of aims and metrics by which success can be measured. Given the nature of the TEF, it is no surprise that responses in English HE providers have tended to follow this pattern of activity. Teaching excellence fits into this model quite comfortably, as the hierarchical structure can create threshold descriptors for the identification of excellent practitioners which fit this structure; it demonstrates clearly Reading’s (1996) claim that excellence as a
concept is meaningless, its meaning being contextually driven to suit the dominant narrative in a given system or organisation at a given time. This form of organisational leadership can also be linked to the dominant discourses within an organisation being of a diagnostic nature (Bushe and Marshak, 2009). Their research argues that organisational change driven by diagnostic narratives relies on planned and centrally managed change where valid data sets are used to diagnose problems, leading to episodic change projects focused on shifting behaviours. It is due to managerialist and market orientated policy approaches that the sector has developed to follow suit and formal characterisations of teaching excellence have become part of that shift accordingly.

In the recent past, there has, however, been a reaction to these managerial, positivist ways of understanding change loosely based on more complexivist understandings of organisations (e.g. Stacey, 2001; McMillan, 2004; Mowles, 2015). Doyle and Brady (2018, p. 307) outline this alternative and identify it as an emergent model of organisational change, characterised as “organisations as emergent entities in a continuous state of change arising from day-to-day interactions between organisational members”. Unlike the dominant model of change in universities, this perspective characterises the organisation as being process driven and its activities non-linear and intertwined. As a result of this, no single model or framework is adopted to structure and develop change. Whereas the rational model favours hierarchies and leaders driving change directly, this alternative sees high quality change emerging from a more networked and flatter structure, with leaders facilitating deeper and more critical communication across the organisation and embracing paradox and contradiction (Streatfield, 2001). This gives the basis of a new model for growth and change in teaching, as Doyle and Brady (2018, p. 309) make the observation that, “instead of diagnosis followed by action planning, change leaders adopt a dialogic approach to strategic change and innovation” (italics in original). This approach to organisational change is reflected once again in the work of Bushe and Marshak (2014) who characterised dialogic change as being based on the need for meaning making across the organisation, which then becomes self-organising with opportunities for new practices to emerge. Here, the aim is not to shift behaviours, but to engage with and change mindsets and beliefs.

In changing behaviours, imposition and hierarchy might work as the change can be enforced through policy and threats of disciplinary action. However, this tends to lead to “zombie innovation” (Wood, 2017b) which is the process by which senior leaders dictate change agendas from a distance. Academics in departments may have to deal with a number of initiatives at the same time or may simply disagree with the initiatives handed to them. In either case, academics have become adept at characterising positive change in documentation whilst not altering day-to-day practice as a way of making their work sustainable whilst giving the illusion of engaging with and advancing organisational change agendas. As a result, leaders believe the change has been instigated, academics ignore the change and the change itself exists, undead, in the twilight of the organisational landscape. Hence, if individuals are forced to amend their pedagogies due to central diktat, there is a tendency to subvert and minimise change as those involved are not engaged with the rationales involved, the aims and philosophies driving the change can appear too remote (Newton, 2003). The rise of zombie innovation in organisations such as HE providers can also be linked to accelerated ways of working. Change is seen as a planned process with strict timelines and deadlines for “deliverables”. This is the accelerated, constrained temporal environment described by Vostal (2015) earlier in his paper as being a feature of modern “excellence”. Instead of “fast” change from the centre, teaching development should involve what Vostal (2015) characterised as “unhasty time” (explained further in the next section of the paper).

The above discussion outlines a different paradigm to pedagogic change in universities. A paradigm which not only engages with pedagogic dialogue at the micro-level but also engages with meso-level organisational processes. This is one of the main weaknesses of the
current use of teaching excellence as a concept, as it has splintered to have different meanings at different scales. At the micro-level it might still involve a formative, professional dialogue about great teaching, but at the meso- and macro-levels, its nature is very different.

Thus, we need organisational approaches built on networks of individuals and groups who are involved in ongoing dialogues, encountering and engaging with different views and which shift pedagogic practice through often small-scale changes, which develop and expand out over time. As an overarching set of principles, an approach to teaching practice and development which works at both micro- and meso-levels needs to be emergent, dialogic and sustainable.

**Creating a sustainable, emergent model for pedagogic practice and innovation**

An emergent model for pedagogic practice and innovation uses dialogue as a core process for developing better teaching. Whilst dialogue has always been a feature of local practice development amongst practitioners, it has not become a common process at organisational level. However, there is an increasing interest in its organisational potential as stated by Wals and Schwarzin (2012, p. 16):

Dialogue is seen as a catalyst for new understanding, insight and action (Martin, 2005), and for bringing about individual and collective shifts in mindset, behaviour and organisation.

Dialogue works through developing opportunities which bring individuals together to co-create new ideas and insights based on inquiry and reflection. Pilkington (2013, p. 254) uses the work of Bohm (1996) as a basis for stressing that:

[Dialogue] is noted for its potential for exploration of practice and theorising around practical knowledge to generate new, shared or professional knowledge.

In the case of teaching, such dialogues therefore need to be based on sharing ideas and issues found in classroom situations, before inquiring into some of these to begin to gain insights and build new or amended approaches. But as suggested above, these foci and insights need to be built over time and in a sustainable way or there is a real danger of a break down in organisational communication and the rise of zombie innovation. So in trying to build sustainable approaches to high quality teaching practices, what factors are important? Wals and Schwarzin (2012, p. 12) argued that there needs to be a shift in focus in organisations to develop sustainable activity. They state that “a transition towards sustainability will not be the result so much of ‘doing things better’ by optimising our current hegemonic systems but rather demands that we ‘do better things’”. So, if we are to change the focus from teaching excellence to emergent pedagogic practice, sustainable approaches to change need to be central. Embellishing Peter and Wals’ (2013) five factors supporting the development of organisational sustainability to consider sustainable pedagogic development:

1. Indeterminacy: we need to accept that we will not know the best solutions in advance. We need to engage in dialogue and inquiry to develop useable responses to pedagogic questions and problems.
2. Value-ladenness/normativity: we need to reflect on and enact our values as teachers and academics in the decisions we make about improving pedagogy.
3. Controversy: we need to accept that we will never reach consensus in developing pedagogic approaches. Different disciplines will see different approaches to teaching as being most appropriate to their needs. Likewise, some teachers will have personal preferences in the way they teach particular aspects of a curriculum. We must not strive to eradicate difference but should engage in dialogue to test and reflect on approaches to learn from each other. Any shifts in pedagogic approach then become based on genuine shifts in mindset.
Uncertainty: we cannot predict the exact impact of developments in pedagogic practice. This is one reason for defining such change as emergent in nature. It also suggests the need for ongoing change and iterative mindsets to pedagogic practice rather than planned notion of change popular in managerial models of innovation.

Complexity: in developing pedagogic change, we need to accept that there are very many variables at play. They also act at different scales. Therefore, when inquiring into pedagogic problems, and developing changes to practice, we need to be aware of the different scales and environments in which learning takes place (Wood and Warwick, 2018) and to which teaching needs to be aligned.

Given that these different factors are important in considering how to bring sustainable change, we also have to accept that they cannot be systematised into a single model, nor can they be constrained into pre-determined timeframes beloved of those who see innovation and change as a carefully pre-planned process. Vostal (2015) argued that the “accelerated” vs “slow” debate on time in academia is unhelpful. There are times when individuals want activities to operate at a fast pace, for example, when waiting to hear about the outcome of a submitted paper. At other times we might want to have time to reflect, to think and to act slowly. But to suggest that one or the other is preferable in all circumstances is unhelpful. In trying to find a way of harnessing the complexity of time to be more productive Vostal proposes the need to generate “unhasty” time when considering research activity. This is certainly the case in developing opportunities for the continued focus on developing pedagogic approaches. He suggests four elements to creating unhasty timescapes in which to work:

1. The need for focused time, unbroken periods which allow for the generation, execution and reflection on academic work. There also needs to be opportunity to step outside of normal activity to reflect and think originally.

2. A number of variables will impact on time experience for any individual, including factors such as gender, commitments beyond the academy, disciplinary expectations and in the case of teaching development, the variety of other responsibilities experienced by the individual.

3. The need for temporal autonomy for all academics for at least some of their time. This relates to the first point above. If individuals are to engage critically with pedagogic work and inquiry they need the autonomy and professional discretion to make time for pedagogic work.

4. Whilst much of the focus of inquiring into pedagogic work will tend to require slow, reflective work, there always has to be the possibility for accelerated activity where it occurs naturally, the sparks of invention, of rapid testing of ideas. Unhasty should not be mistaken for slow.

By bringing together sustainability and unhasty timescapes, we are redefining pedagogic work as focusing on collaborative work, driven from the bottom of the organisation, allowed to emerge in timeframes suitable to the activities themselves rather than to a pre-determined project timeline. Development of pedagogic practice will always be an uncertain process based on dialogue and inquiry, testing ideas and building discursive communities interested in bringing positive change to teaching.

This alternative view of change and pedagogic development puts the creative and critical work of academics back at the centre of processes relating to teaching in HE. But in an English context, it would be a major culture shift for HE providers, due to the systemic acceptance of the reductive managerial and accountability systems outlined above in this paper. By creating a more sustainable, practice-driven approach at the institutional level, criticism may follow posing questions such as, how can quality be tracked and assured if a...
system is not metrics based? How can we be sure that academics will engage with pedagogic activity if they are not being monitored? How can institutions set strategic directions if senior leaders are not in control?

All too often alternatives which are not based on widespread use of metrics, outcome measures and strict frameworks are positioned as being deficient, characterised as a “laissez-faire” retreat which allows academics to act without accountability. The consequence of this is then argued to be a fall in standards and ultimately to a poor investment by students. Here, we will briefly reposition this argument, first, by arguing that it is the current hierarchical and metrics-driven system which leads to a counter-productive accountability system, and then by suggesting that it is an alternative model such as the one we propose here which leads to a more critical and ultimately more positive system for defining and engendering responsibility in pedagogic work.

HE providers have increasingly created accountability systems driven by targets, monitoring systems, evaluations and numerically driven strategic plans. Shore and Wright (2000, p. 77) argued that such a conceptualisation of accountability causes individuals to become complicit, “caught in a disciplinary system whose negative characteristics they are actively reproducing and yet over which they feel increasingly powerless”. Whilst individuals become complicit in these approaches to ensure their continued employment, it restricts their opportunities to work outside of the frameworks imposed. This means that there is less time for authentic reflection, experimentation and emergence of new practice, indeed some practice may become peripheral if it does not align with strategic aims. As a consequence, there is a real danger that innovative practice becomes stymied. As the institution decides on the main areas for development, there is also the added possibility that innovation is seen to be occurring whilst it is actually stalling (see the comments on zombie innovation above (Wood, 2017b)), leading to a dangerous situation where perceptions at the centre of the institution begin to diverge from the practice in the subjects. This recasts the problem with accountability actually arising from a centrally driven, reductive approach which is so often argued to be an organisational imperative within the HE sector.

Instead of focusing on accountability, we instead need to focus on responsibility. Vetterlein (2018, p. 1) adopts an understanding of responsibility that transcends accountability:

Adopting a broader understanding of responsibility as going beyond accountability will shift our focus from rights and regulations, enforcement and compliance to the study of the processes of negotiating these rules and regulations and their normative underpinnings.

Here, responsibility is underpinned by ethical practice. It becomes an accepted part of the institutional culture that academics will be involved in critical pedagogic activity. Where this does not occur, there is still the opportunity for censure, but it is a censure which comes from colleagues and subject-leaders rather than from the centre of the institution. The other main advantage of a responsibility-led system is the vertical relationships within the organisation. Accountability is an essentially “top-down” system which holds those lower down the power structure to account. Targets are set, and progress is monitored, but there is little accountability operating in the opposite direction. If an academic is unable to meet a target due to a lack of funding or training, then rarely are senior leaders held to account for not providing the required resources; at best the target is just recorded as not being fulfilled before moving on. In contrast, responsibility-led systems require everyone to be responsible for their role within the system, as the direction of change is negotiated and normative in nature. In the event that resources are not made available for agreed work, the more senior colleague at fault can be identified as not having fulfilled their responsibilities to those with whom they work.

Responsibility-led systems, being normative in nature, align with the more dialogic approach we are advocating here. Hence, it is through consistent engagement with pedagogic practice and change that responsibilities can be assigned, and pedagogic communities can
develop. Leaders no longer play an “overseeing” role, but become engaged with the pedagogic dialogues, facilitating instead of directing, learning to work with the paradox of being in control and not being in control at the same time (Streatfield, 2001). Wood (2017b, p. 34) characterises Streatfield’s notion of the paradox of control within an educational context as meaning:

[...] leaders are in the paradoxical position of being in control and not being in control at the same time. In such situations, to bring about real and sustained organisational change, leaders need to be willing to overcome many of the barriers set out above by including teachers in ongoing dialogue and activities which allow them to play a central role not only in implementing but forming the change agenda, as well as providing concomitant resources and time.

The final reflection on a responsibility-led approach to pedagogic practice and change is that it is an emergent process. This means that there are no top-down strategic plans which characterise pedagogic development as occurring in discrete, time-limited projects. Because accountability systems rely on target-setting, artificial timeframes are imposed on developmental work. As discussed earlier, Vostal (2015) saw the language of excellence as being associated with accelerated processes; leaders need to show how “ahead of the curve” they are. But a responsibility-led system can position pedagogic change as complex and ongoing, and in need of “unhasty” time to create the dialogic and sustainable features expressed by Wals and Schwarzin (2012) as discussed earlier in this section.

The creation of more emergent systems also requires a fundamental realignment of macro-level involvement in pedagogic development, i.e. the national policy level. There should not be direct management and direction from a macro-level as this will stall and constrain work at the meso- and micro-level. Instead those working at the macro-level need to trust the work of those below, only interjecting where there is obvious and clear evidence of malpractice or incompetence.

How we begin to make the shift from the present reductive, performative system to one which embraces our sustainable, emergent model has no easy answer. As with any emergent model, there is no “5 steps to success” style framework which all can follow to bring sure success. There needs to be a simultaneous shift in organisational sensibilities, with lecturers deciding that it is through dialogue that they can connect with each other to effect change which makes their own local contexts more critical and positive, which leaders accept that they need to facilitate such a shift. This requires both groups to take risks, even if this is through the use of small-scale piloting to aid in building prototypes and eventually more robust change. But ultimately, it is the acceptance by those with power that dialogue facilitates change and innovation which is central. If dialogue is seen as undermining and subverting those above, then it will not be allowed to emerge as a force for change. However, if dialogue begins to be embraced, it will allow opportunities for those across the organisation to begin to explore and find novel solutions to local problems, allowing both micro- and meso-level change processes to work together.

**Final thoughts**

The above discussion is an attempt to consider how we can re-establish a strong symbiosis between institution and practitioner-level processes for generating critical, challenging and contextually relevant pedagogies. Such an approach needs to be sustainable, allowing for continued dialogue as a basis for constructing change, being driven from the bottom-up rather than top-down. But we also need to accept that 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. At a broader level, however, there are core requirements if the organisation is to move forward. There need to be regular fora for sharing of practice insights gained through both professional work and research, there needs
to be internal funding for pedagogic work to drive change and there needs to be a recognition of the parity between pedagogic work and research work carried out in academic disciplines. Dialogic change of this form could then lead to emergent institutional foci and plans so that the organisation as a whole has an understanding of some of the major strands of development. These ideas to account of the fact that teaching and learning are socially situated, intellectual activities. How we understand them in an HE context requires the creation of knowledge and meaning to be grounded in these complex contexts. Lave’s work (Lave, 1988; Lave and Chaiklin, 1993) demonstrates that meaning has a relational character, and thus in the context of teaching and so-called “excellence”, new practice is generated in dialogic interactions between peers, i.e., academics and their students, in the context of the courses they are teaching/studying. Such situated activities might naturally lead to the emergence of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) occurring both within and across disciplines, informed not only by pedagogic research, but also from cognitive science, computer science and anthropology to name but a few. The academic practice and e-learning units which currently exist in most HE providers would have an important part to play in this model of pedagogic development. But rather than being accountable for disseminating central plans, they would instead help to build networks, support research and practitioner inquiry and help establish institution-wide networks, all in an environment of unhasty exploration and development. In a complex system of pedagogic development, they would help ensure that there is constant opportunity to move beyond local networks, thereby minimising the danger of “group-think”. Here, the focus would not be on teaching excellence, identified in externally sanctioned centres, or individuals capable of proving they have moved beyond a set of self-referential threshold statements. Instead the focus would be to align the organisational structures of the institution to the complex, sometimes contradictory, views and expertise of those in the organisation. In this sense, we would not be advocating a return to “teaching excellence” so much as encouraging “emergent pedagogies” to support the ongoing communal drive towards providing students with a critical and challenging experience worthy of studying at HE level.

References


Corresponding author
Phil Wood can be contacted at: philip.wood@bishopg.ac.uk

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm
Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
Academic excellence as “competitiveness enhancement” in Russian higher education

Elena Tsvetkova
Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology, Skolkovo, Russian Federation, and
Sylvie Lomer
School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to analyse critically the Russian Academic Excellence Initiative (the Project 5-100), designed to propel five leading Russian universities into world university rankings (WURs) by 2020, and research it through the lens of neoliberalism. The paper seeks to reveal recurrent discourses and dominant orders of discourse constituting the overall concept of “excellence” in Russian higher education (HE) policy.

Design/methodology/approach – Since the Project 5-100 has been designed in line with a neoliberal model of academic excellence initiatives, emphasising “competition as a driver of excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2009), Fairclough’s approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been adopted as a qualitative research method. There is no universally accepted definition of “excellence” in HE policy; therefore, this CDA also aims at revealing the Russian government’s vision of the concept and its voice in HE policy.

Findings – The paper concludes that the government reinforces neoliberal discourse on the HE agenda and transforms the 5-100 Universities’ identities through emphasising the role of WURs in modernising the HE system. Consequently, within the neoliberal paradigm, the Project 5-100 can be regarded as a manifestation of the commodification of “excellence” in Russian HE policy.

Originality/value – This research intends to broaden knowledge of excellence initiatives in HE policy and reveal their features and neoliberal natures. It also seeks to contribute in terms of showcasing a qualitative study of the Project 5-100 for future comparative analyses of similar HE policies.

Keywords Neoliberalism, Excellence, Rankings, CDA, Russian higher education policy

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In many countries around the globe, the university as a crucial part of tertiary education has become a key instrument for boosting social and economic growth and developing a knowledge-based society to compete effectively in global knowledge economies (Altbach, 2013; Mohrman et al., 2008; Salmi, 2003). The production of scientific knowledge, research and innovation has transformed into a driver or alternative engine of economic growth alongside the traditional sources of wealth, including land, labour and capital (Etzkowitz, 2003; Salmi, 2003). Furthermore, the university acts as a crucial pillar of human capital development since it provides not only highly skilled workforce for labour market, but also it trains postgraduate students and equips young researchers and scientists with knowledge and skills essential for producing and fostering research and innovations (Salmi, 2003).

In the global knowledge-based economy, world university rankings (WURs) have triggered numerous education policies and initiatives worldwide to develop high-ranking research universities within national systems as engines of socio-economic growth and as a symbol of achievements and prestige of countries’ higher education (HE) systems (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). It can be explained by the fact that WURs appear to gauge world-class status and prestige, provide university accountability and measure national competitiveness (Hazelkorn, 2009).
Both developed and developing countries have designed and implemented HE policies aimed to attain world-class quality and status and enhance "excellence" of their leading universities. Rostan and Vaira (2011, p. viii) explains that "excellence as a policy issue reflects the institutional and competitive pressures exerted by the global rankings movement on national systems and institutions". Although historically this type of initiatives has been the purview of developed and ex-imperial countries, for developing countries such policies appear to be important in terms of joining the global race for top positions in WURs and retaining/attracting talent, as well as gaining their political weight worldwide and expanding their presence in the international HE market.

This paper sets out to analyse critically the Project 5-100 aiming at establishing a small group of leading Russian universities which have been subsidised by the Russian government to bolster their global competitive advantages and consequently enter the top 100 WURs by 2020.

**Excellence and WURs in HE policies**

HE has turned to be "the focus of intense policy and geo-political interest" (Hazelkorn, 2009, p. 1) since its significance for economic development and innovation growth has been increasingly well recognised. HE has also become crucial to international competitiveness, and its global quality and status have turned to be vital performance indicators of a nation’s HE system (Hazelkorn, 2009). Therefore, governments’ interests in the global status and performance of their national HE systems have reinforced the importance of WURs in terms of being "a proxy for competitiveness" (Hazelkorn, 2014). Despite their contested nature and numerous methodological flaws (Hazelkorn, 2009; Rostan and Vaira, 2011; Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007; Blanco-Ramírez and Berger, 2014), WURs have transformed into "a policy instrument" (Hazelkorn, 2014) and had a significant impact on HE policies worldwide:

The instantaneous global response to the publication of the first global rankings and its imitators has had a significant impact and influence on higher education – accelerating the modernization agenda, providing some public accountability and transparency, emphasizing institutional performance to improve quality, and promoting a global "reputation race" system. (Hazelkorn, 2009, p. 8)

Consequently, WURs have become "the de facto gauge of excellence" (Hazelkorn, 2014) or "the main carriers of excellence" (Rostan and Vaira, 2011) in global HE.

Nevertheless, "excellence" is an ambiguous and vague concept in HE, and it is often implemented with no clear explanation of its meaning. What is more, it has a number of understandings which can be privileged or marginalised by different stakeholders in certain contexts. For example, Little and Locke (2011) explain that “excellence” can be interpreted as a positional good for students, as an aspirational goal for educational leaders or policymakers to improve quality, as a form of reputational advantage for HEIs or as a means of achieving governmental economic and social goals. This contested concept is “historically and situationally contingent, [since] the definitions of excellence are located within shifting social, economic and political contexts and are underpinned by broader discourses or ideologies of higher education” (Brusoni et al., 2014, p. 23). Moreover, its meanings tend to change according to the global competitive environment which nowadays is dominated by “the new managerialist practices, as the state seeks to increase the economic return from HE; [by] the general shift from elite to mass HE systems; and [by] the rankings” (Brusoni et al., 2014, p. 23). Thus, “excellence” is defined by proxy indicators rather than by intrinsic characteristics.

Rostan and Vaira (2011) and Brusoni et al. (2014) suggest that WURs are considered as one of the main carriers of excellence reflecting various governments’ power and their political interests (e.g. in terms of driving up countries’ international prestige and maximising the visibility of their HE systems worldwide) and as tools to adopt a traditional
view on excellence which mainly favours the research activity rather than the teaching and learning one. Marginson and Van der Wende (2007) argue that some global ranking companies (such as Shanghai Ranking Consultancy and QS Quacquarelli Symonds) tend to focus deliberately more on research performance and less on teaching and learning activities, which may be provoked by difficulties inherent in assessing and comparing “teaching excellence” on a worldwide basis and generating data based on the measures of “value added” during the educational process. Whilst other ranking companies such as the Times Higher Education magazine tend to reward more higher education institutions’ (HEIs) internationalisation and presence in global education markets and favour less research (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). Therefore, the emphasis on research and its dominant position in defining “excellence” can be attributed to the fact that “the hegemonic rhetoric of knowledge society and economy stresses the role of scientific and technological research as the main lever for innovation-based competitiveness” (Rostan and Vaira, 2011).

Furthermore, global comparisons and competition are possible only in relation to one certain type of HEIs the world-class research university, which due to its features has become dominant in WURs (Marginson and Van der Wende, 2007). There is no universally accepted definition of world-class universities (WCUs), but what is known is that they represent a small proportion of global HE, have diversified sources of income, concentrate top talents from overseas, generate ground-breaking research output and enforce governance policies favouring high-quality research and teaching (Salmi, 2009; Mohrman et al., 2008).

However, Brusoni et al. (2014) explains that “excellence” has no meaning if every university is excellent and therefore this discourse offers no way of distinguishing the performance of individual institutions. This also implies that the concept of “excellence” is necessarily exclusive, carrying connotations of distinction in the Bourdieusian sense.

**Policies for excellence in Russian HE**

Many countries worldwide, including China, Singapore, Canada, the USA, South Korea, Russia have already implemented excellence initiatives (Salmi, 2009) to boost research productivity and enhance overall competitiveness of their national HE systems globally, as indicated in WURs. According to Froumin and Lisyutkin (2015), the expression “excellence initiative” has been borrowed from the German HE policy texts which define it as an initiative aimed at promoting world-class research and improving the quality of universities and research HEIs overall transforming Germany in a widely recognised research location and making it more globally competitive.

One of the major features of various policies for excellence is that they seek to drive differentiation and segmentation of a national HE system along the model of the WCU, by selecting a group of elite universities to concentrate resources into more efficient, productive and visible HEIs (Hazelkorn, 2009). This helps to raise the international reputation and prestige of a country’s research HEIs, as well as the sector overall, and attracts international and domestic researchers, students and additional funds (OECD, 2014).

In terms of the Russian Federation, there have already been adopted three Excellence Initiatives, including “Federal University Programme”, “Innovative University Programme”, “National Research University Programme”, with the core mission to boost and strengthen world-class research productivity of Russian universities.

In May 2013, the Russian Academic Excellence Project was launched in accordance with the Presidential Decree of the Russian Federation No. 599. On measures to realise state policy in the sphere of education and science, the Project 5-100 “wants to tap into the full academic and research potential of Russian Universities while bolstering their positions in the global education market” (RAEI, 2018). This constitutes a significant historical shift in understanding of the purpose of HEIs, as Russian HEIs used to specialise in teaching exclusively, since the leading role in publications-centred research previously belonged to the
Russian Academy of Sciences (Froumin and Lisyutkin, 2015). The name of the Project 5-100 reflects the expected outcome of this initiative – to propel at least five of Russia’s universities into the top 100 WURs by 2020. On a competitive basis, 21 Russian universities have been selected to receive additional state subsidies to “maximise [their] competitive position [...] in the global research and education market” (RAEI, 2018), as well as improve their positioning in the top 100 WURs and Rankings by Subjects, including the Times Higher Education World University Ranking, QS World University Rankings, and Academic Rankings of World Universities. Thus, the crucial difference between the Project 5-100 and the other three Excellence Initiatives is that it implements WURs as a policy instrument to drive changes in Russian HE and transform a small number of Russian universities into WCUs.

Interestingly, Hazelkorn (2009) singles out two major models of excellence-driven policies and initiatives, such as the neoliberal and social-democratic models. The neoliberal model intends to produce reputational (vertical) differentiation by introducing “rankings as a free market mechanism to drive the concentration of excellence in a small number of research-intensive universities” for competing globally (Hazelkorn, 2009, p. 7). A number of Excellence Initiatives based on this neoliberal model have been implemented in China, France, Germany, and Korea with the aim to create a small number of WCUs focusing on research performance (Hazelkorn, 2009; Salmi, 2009). Within this model, competition or competitiveness enhancement serves as a driver for excellence which highlights its neoliberal nature.

In contrast, the social-democratic model aims at establishing a system of horizontally differentiated student experiences and HEIs with high performance and globally oriented missions (Hazelkorn, 2009). Rather than funding and transforming a small group of elite institutions into WCUs, the governments (including Australia, Ireland and Norway) strive for fostering “excellence wherever it occurs” by supporting high-quality HEIs throughout the country (Hazelkorn, 2009).

Methodology
To examine the Project 5-100 through the prism of neoliberalism and identify the Russian government’s voice in shaping “excellence” in Russian HE policy, Fairclough’s approach to critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been adopted as a form of a text-oriented analysis. This approach is significant for this research as it seeks “to develop ways of analysing language which address its involvement in the workings of contemporary capitalist societies” (Fairclough, 2013, p. 1) since capitalism, or its widely recognised “neoliberal” version, has triggered and entailed a number of serious changes in politics and economies, in education and healthcare, in the working environment and lifestyle.

The study applies Fairclough’s (1993, 2013) three-dimensional model which draws on an analytical framework aimed at combining three different stages of analysis, including text analysis for describing spoken or written language texts, processing analysis for producing and interpreting texts and social analysis for explaining discourses embedded in socio-historical contexts. It also adopts Fairclough’s (2013) understanding of discourse which is regarded as “a complex set of relations”, including the relations of communication (between people who speak, write, and communicate with each other in other ways), the relations between certain communicative events (newspaper article, policy documents, etc.), and the relations of complex discursive “objects” (language, discourses and genres). Furthermore, discourse can be understood as “a way of signifying experience from a particular perspective” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138), in other words, it is seen as some representations of social practices from a specific perspective.

As the object of CDA, the “emergence and constitution of the discourses” (Fairclough, 2012) of “excellence” in Russian HE has been chosen in this research. To identify the discourses of “excellence” within the field of prior discourses and specify the relations between various discourses drawn together to constitute various orders of discourse, a genealogical
approach has been implemented (Fairclough, 2012). According to Fairclough (2003, p. 206), discourses can be revealed and networked in a “relatively durable social structuring of language”, order of discourse, which is “a particular social ordering of relationships amongst different ways of making meaning, i.e. different discourses and genres and styles”. For instance, it can be the marketisation order or managerial order of discourse which have spread around public organisations and institutions, including universities.

The text data set for this CDA is based on different resources of various genres, including governmental policy documents, official texts from the governmental website pages both in English and Russian, news articles published on the website, the transcripts of the videos released on the official website and YouTube. In total, 42 resources were identified through searching the internet, later imported and analysed with the help of NVivo (a qualitative data analysis software). In the process of rereading thoroughly and tracking recurrent ideas and dominant discourses, 21 key texts (in the following list) were identified and coded following inductively oriented approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The texts coded earlier were recoded and used to design a table with dominant discourses based on recurrent codes and numerous citations from documents for eliminating minor codes and developing an analytical framework.

The key texts have been selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- published by the Russian governmental bodies or released on the official 5–100 website;
- mentioned and referred in the main 5–100 policy documents; and
- and publicly available on the internet.

The key texts of CDA to examine the Project 5-100 and their in-text citations:

1. Government policy documents:
   - President Decree 599 (2012) On Measures to Implement the State Policy in Education and Science.
This framework has been designed only for analysing the policy from a government’s perspective, thus it might be difficult to apply it to examine a policy, for instance, from academics’ or students’ viewpoints. Moreover, due to the nature of CDA, the analysis has adopted mainly a critical stance, and it does not aim to conduct a policy evaluation of the Project 5-100.

The historic background and rationales behind the policy for excellence in Russia

The policy texts position the initiative for “excellence” in a particular historical context. Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and following economic crises, the texts suggest the country “has fallen out from the global historical context for 20 years’ and consequently has been “lagging behind” the developed economies (Video 1, 2013). Like many other countries exporting natural resources, Russia has strived to tackle its “backwardness” and foster its transition from the resource-based economy to the knowledge-based economy. That “will allow to expand drastically the competitive potential of Russian economy through enhancing its comparative advantages in science, education, and high technologies, and on this basis, it will allow to implement new resources for economic growth and well-being improvement” (Government, 1662, 2008, p. 7). These claims evoke key neoliberal tenets associated with globalisation.

Moreover, the strategic document Russian Government 1662 (2008) explains that the new economic model will be drawn on Russia’s “competitive advantages” in the form of traditional sectors (energy industry, transport and agriculture sectors) alongside science-intensive industries implying the breakthrough of “human capital advancement”, the development of cutting edge high-tech production and the transformation of innovation output into a key revenue for the country’s “economic growth”.

A critical condition for the development of innovation economy [as a type of knowledge-based economy] appears to be modernisation of the [Russian] education system which is a foundation of
In the example above, the discourses of “modernisation” of the Russian HE system is formulated and constructed on the discourse of “knowledge-based society”. For instance, “modernisation” can be identified as one of the solutions to overcome numerous hurdles posed by Russia’s underperforming economy. Notably, the overall discourse of “Russian education” is shaped and constructed through numerous economic terms which may be explained by “colonisation” (Fairclough, 1993) of “education discourse” by “knowledge-based economy” (the latter turns out to be a dominant order of discourse).

Interestingly, Fairclough (2002) describes the New Capitalism (or neoliberalism) as “knowledge-” or “information-based”, since it appears to be dependent on “knowledge”, “new technologies” and “innovation”. In fact, the restructuring of capitalism (and its latest form of neoliberalism) is knowledge-driven and discourse-led. Neoliberal discourse is not limited to the economic field, “it also embraces the ramifications of economic transformation in other fields including culture, education, national politics, international relations and international security” (Fairclough, 2002, p. 164).

The role of the 5-100 Universities in the modernisation process can be regarded as building up “competitive advantages” in order to catch up with highly performing countries in the international research and education services markets. The discourse of “modernisation” can also be identified in the intended outcomes of the initiative, in other words the implementation of the Project 5-100 “sent a new satellite into orbit to assist in the process of revamping Russian higher education and make and giving it a contemporary” (RAEI, 2018):

Since the year 2000 one of the key directions of the structural change in the professional education system has been the selection of a cluster of leading universities for accelerating the development of higher education system (the drivers of modernisation). Lomonosov’s Moscow State University, Saint Petersburg State University[1], federal and national research universities have designed and implemented development programmes approved by the government. (Government 792, 2013, p. 22)

Thus, one of the targets of “modernisation” in Russian HE is to drive vertical differentiation and segmentation of HEIs to select “a cluster” of high-performing Russian universities with a special mission to be the “drivers of modernisation” and “agents of innovation”.

From the government’s perspective, “the formation of a cluster of leading universities fostering modernisation of the [Russian] HE system as a whole” (Government 792, 2013, p. 31) will accelerate growth and sustain the country’s economy capacity and competitiveness. It shows that instead of modernising and reforming all Russian universities as a whole, the government concentrates large resources to “design real Russian cases recognised by the world academic community of successful examples of effective university development” (Government 792, 2013, p. 105).

By its nature, the discourse of “excellence” in HE implies some hierarchies required to single out and label “outstanding quality” and a “special status” which should be recognised and awarded accordingly. Consequently, “competition” and “competitiveness” appear to be essential for promoting “excellence”, since these two concepts imply the production of hierarchies in HE (Hazelkorn, 2009).

CDA of excellence discourse
The word “excellence” is frequently observed in the names of similar educational initiatives (e.g. the German Excellence Initiative “Die Excellence Initiative”, The French Excellence Initiative “Initiatives d’excellence”, the Spanish International campus of Excellence “Campus de Excelencia Internacional”). Nevertheless, the name of the Project “the Russian Academic Excellence Initiative Project 5-100” has been rendered differently in Russian – “Competitiveness
Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities among Global Research and Education Centers[2]. Therefore, the name reveals that “excellence” in Russian HE policy is interpreted and recontextualised as “competitiveness” which links back to the neoliberal model and the nature of this initiative emphasising “competition as a driver of excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2009).

A linguistic reason behind it might be straightforward: there is not any widely accepted expression which will be a word by word translation of “Academic Excellence” in Russian. However, due to the rise and popularity of initiatives for excellence worldwide, it has become possible to track the emergence of a new term in Russian akademicheskoye prevoskhodstvo (which is a loan translation of “academic excellence”) in Russian HE policy, in particular in mass media articles and governmental website documents, but not in official policy documentation yet.

In the analysed data set, the concept “excellence” has been tightly related to the concept of “competitiveness” (konkurentosposobnost) and has acquired a new meaning which emphasises the need to build up and enhance Russia’s “capacity” and “international competitiveness” in order “to maximise the competitive position of a group of leading Russian universities in the global research and education market” (RAEI, 2018). Blackmore (2016) explains that academic excellence is inherently competitive, and consequently “competitiveness” appears to be encouraged deliberately through government policy, changes in communication technologies and the globalisation of HE. Thus, it is crucial to examine the relations between “excellence” and “competitiveness” as a key starting point of the analysis.

**Competitiveness in the national education market**

In the era of neoliberal globalisation, the Russian government like many others worldwide tends to reduce its funding to public sectors (including HE) which encourages numerous Russian HEIs to compete for scarce state funds and generate their own revenue (Altbach et al., 2009).

The Project 5-100 provides an example of the Russian government’s attempt to strengthen state control in HE through “the implementation of mechanisms aimed at ensuring transparent funding and promoting competition among higher professional education institutions” (Government 792, 2013, p. 102). Speaking about various Excellence Initiatives, Isaac Froumin points out that “university development becomes increasingly driven by the state, whereas previously universities challenged governments and were their own engines for development. What we see now is that governments challenge universities to evolve in a particular direction. Academic excellence initiatives are paving the way to a model where state control is higher” (RAEI, 2018).

Consequently, through implementing different education policies based on providing state subsidies, the Russian government intends to stimulate the national education market by encouraging competition among Russian universities. This provision of subsidies also serves as a tool to rationalise the government’s more active role in reshaping, modernising, transforming the 5-100 Universities which as a result appear to lose their autonomy through the agreements signed to receive the state funding.

To join the global race for “excellence”, the 5-100 Universities have to compete for the government’s funding which brings not only some additional resources, but also entails a significant change in the university management, in particular the imposition of the New Public Management (NPM) and the introduction of highly managerial discourse onto the agenda of the 5-100 Universities (Government 792, 2013; RAEI, 2018; Video 1, 2013). The Project 5-100 seeks to develop and promote an effective model of university management aimed at the achievement of competitiveness and implementation of Russia’s socio-economic development programmes:

The main directions of university management development are accountability for results, professionalism and autonomy in term of identifying a strategic development goal, ability to find creative approaches to university activities. (Government 792, 2013, p. 92)
For example, one of the ways to impose NPM on the 5-100 Universities is to stress the importance of enhancing “competitiveness”, increasing “efficiency” of the state subsidies, improving the “performance” of the Universities, and consequently, tightening “financial control” and improving “quality assurance” of the Project. As a result, the Council on Competitiveness Enhancement of Leading Russian Universities among Global Research and Education Centres (the Council) “has been designed to enjoy long-term service as a permanent interdepartmental advisory body” and act as “the main governance body of the Project 5-100” (RAEI, 2018).

One of the key policy documents (Government 211, 2013) articulates and prescribes in detail a new type of relation between the 5-100 Universities and the Council, including all the set of responsibilities and duties. For instance, the latter has to assist in the selection of the 5–100 Universities (on a competitive basis), review and evaluate the Universities’ reports for recommending the Ministry of Education and Science whether to provide certain 5-100 Universities with state subsidies or not. The Council is also responsible for advising the Universities on WURs to choose to match “performance indicators” of action plans or road maps (the strategic plans to rebrand the Universities to move them into the top 100 WURs). The Universities’ road maps tend to be formulated and based “on the metrics of the WURs (including Subject Rankings) recommended by the Council” (Government 211, 2013, p. 5).

The textual analysis reveals that the Council plays a significant role in the Excellence Initiative in terms of introducing numerous discourses of the audit culture. The Council is represented as an external quality assurance body responsible for “evaluating”, “monitoring” and “measuring” the “performance” of the 5–100 Universities. What is more, this audit culture is legitimised and rationalised in the texts through the need to boost global competitiveness, control the state funding, improve quality and eventually propel the Universities into the top 100 WURs.

Another means to develop “an efficient management structure” in the 5-100 Universities is “to implement measures to establish a succession pool for senior university management and attract specialists with experience in international and Russian Universities and research organisations to leadership positions” (Government 211, 2013, p. 4). To provide internal quality assurance and make the management more “transparent” and “publicly accountable” within the 5-100 Universities, Boards of Trustees have been formed on the basis of “employers” and other “stakeholders”, which appears to be “an important criterion to improve quality and relevance of academic and research activities” (Government 792, 2013, p. 92). As a result, a new class of education managers emerges who are not necessarily academics or researchers but trained to make the 5-100 Universities more efficient, higher performing in WURs and more globally recognised.

Therefore, NPM rhetoric can be represented through the various discourses blended and hybridised to embed and reinforce the “performativity culture” in the 5-100 Universities, such as “efficient management”, “road maps”, “performance indicators”, “metrics of rankings” and “positions in WURs”.

The strategic development plans comprise numerous performance indicators which are formulated and drawn on various metrics of WURs. Thus, the size of the state subsidies is calculated through a formula measuring the performance of 5-100 Universities against the indicators and their positions in WURs and the best scorers receive higher subsidies than the rest of the participants (Government 211, 2013).

Moreover, within this “performance-based funding” structure or culture, subsidies can also be terminated to underperforming 5-100 Universities which “fail to demonstrate improved performance and planned growth in the world ranking within a two-year period” (Government 792, 2013, p. 104). It exemplifies how the discourses of “competition” and “ranking” intertwine with the managerial order of discourse. It also
reveals one of the main features of this kind of initiatives which tend to award “excellence” and fund accordingly those HEIs which are already advantaged in the ranking game (Rostan and Vaira, 2011; Brusoni et al., 2014). Rostan and Vaira (2011) argue that excellence initiatives are likely to produce formal and informal hierarchies in national education systems through disregarding the HE system as a whole and targeting only individual HEIs which are already regarded as “elite institutions” and which appear to be strong enough to compete globally. Inevitably, policies for excellence lead to a Matthew’s logic, that is to say, the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker (Rostan and Vaira, 2011).

**Competitiveness in the global education market**

In the late 2000s, the global financial and economic crisis urged the Russian government to reconsider its economic model, due to its being highly dependent on natural resources, and to turn its attention to a more sustainable “knowledge- and innovation-driven economy” (Government 1662, 2008). The world crisis exacerbated “global competition” between developed countries highly affected by the economic and financial crisis and developing countries, including China and India (which appear to be transforming into major locomotives of the world’s economic growth) and new emerging centres of economic development in Asia and Latin America (Government 1662, 2008).

The world crisis and the following growing “global competition” have posed another challenge to Russia – the need to accelerate the economic growth and enhance its competitiveness to increase its economic and political weight in the world and secure its leading position in the region (Government 1662, 2008). This accelerated “economic competition” has been accompanied by increasing “geopolitical competition” for the control over “resources” and “markets”. Indeed, the government highlights that the transformation of the world economic order opens up new opportunities for Russia’s global economic integration, strengthening and expanding its positions in the global markets to import new technologies and capital, as well as to export innovative products and educational services (Government 1662, 2008):

> At the same time, the underdevelopment of new cutting-edge technologies can reduce the competitiveness of the Russian economy and increase its vulnerability in the growing geopolitical competition. (Government 1662, 2008, p. 4)

The discourse of “global competition” is constructed not only based on the competition among economies, but also among education systems worldwide. The policy documents reinforce a certain discourse stressing that only innovative products and services will allow to compete effectively in the global markets, while “getting access to international markets is always like an acquisition of others’ territory” (Government 1662, 2008; Video 1, 2013).

Moreover, there is a strong relation between “competitiveness” and various discourses of “education quality” in the data set: for example, one of the documents reveals that “the competitiveness enhancement of Russian education will be a criterion of its high quality, as well as will secure Russia’s positions as one of the leaders in exporting educational services” (Government 1662, 2008, p. 45) in the global market. Thus, the concepts of “competition”, “competitiveness” and “quality” are intermingled and interconnected within the neoliberal order of discourse which implies that “increased competition represents improved quality within neoliberalism” (Olssen and Peters, 2005, p. 326).

The “global identity” of the Universities is essential for increasing “export of educational services” which can be achieved by updating educational programmes and bringing them in line with the best international examples, by the production improvement of postgraduate activities, and by the implementation of joint educational programmes with leading international/Russian Universities and research organisations (Government 211, 2013;
RAEI, 2018). Consequently, the 5-100 Universities attempt to integrate into the global education services market and increase their export of educational services:

There is a continuing decline in the global competitiveness of Russian universities, as well as decrease in Russia’s role as an exporter of education services. The decision to join the Bologna Process has become a breakthrough amid the isolation of the Russian higher education from the global talent market, knowledge, and technology. (Government 792, 2013, p. 72)

This citation exemplifies the recurrent discourses of “marketisation” in Russian HE that emphasise the role of the Universities as the producers of “education services” that the country can provide and export to the global education market. The discourses of “commodification of teaching” and “commercialisation of education programmes” also emerge in the analysed texts which are shaped and reinforced by repeated discourses of “export”, “exporter of education services” and “internationalised curriculum”.

There is a particular stress on improving a postgraduate level at the 5-100 Universities and attracting top overseas students through joint Master’s and PhD programmes with leading international universities, since the concentration of “postgraduate students” or “talent” enhances world-class research and fosters innovation productivity.

On the other hand, it reflects a problem remaining in Russian HE, such as “low innovative activity of [Russian] universities and inadequate contribution of HE to the development of the national economy in line with the innovation scenario” of knowledge-based economy (Government 792, 2013, p. 72). Consequently, by expanding its share in the global education services market, Russia seeks to transform the country into “the world’s leading study destination” (RAEI, 2018) and boost its world competitiveness in the global education market.

Competitiveness in the research or innovation market
Numerous initiatives for excellence tend to be constantly pressed for time and funding, and consequently they transform into an “intellectual challenge” set by a government or a president to the university administrations and academic staff to achieve “a big impact quickly”. Speaking about the thirteen 5-100 Universities which appeared in the THE ranking in 2013, Alexander Povalko (Former Deputy Minister of Education and Science) mentions:

This is probably the quickest progress among all the countries whose universities are ranked. […] These most incredible results (which reveal the speed of their growth) have been demonstrated by the following universities: St. Petersburg Polytechnic, TPU and KFU […] We [people related to the Project 5-100] realize that this result has been achieved thanks to things which can be done quickly. But the universities systematically invest into the development of their research bases, consistently strive to attract people, and, as a result, this initial rise in the rankings is the product of tireless efforts of the administration, scientists and students of the university. (News 5-100, 2015)

The textual analysis identifies that there is an emphasis on the performativity and efficiency in numerous texts of the data set, in other words, this constant push from the government to achieve “the quickest progress” and “incredible results” “quickly”. Furthermore, there is a clear stress on improving and developing mainly STEM programmes in Russian universities, boosting basic and applied research and strengthening science to modernise the HE system in Russia.

Thus, through fostering research activity and favouring a WCU model, the government seeks to modernise Russian HE and promote a vertically differentiated system, in other words, produce a hierarchy with Russian research-intensive universities at the pinnacle.

Another priority [of the State Education Policy till 2020] is a quality, quantity and territory optimisation of universities which will lead to the formation of clusters of universities targeting specified goals and missions, and achieving high quality of education. Among them, there is
expected to be a group of world-class research universities which provide leadership in basic and applied research and integrate Russia into the system of knowledge and technology commercialisation. (Government 792, 2013, p. 76)

To rise and dominate in WURs, the government encourages the 5-100 Universities to modify their missions, identify their “priority areas”, and “integrate two university models, the research-intensive and entrepreneurial models of universities with strong departments of research and innovation commercialisation” (Video 2, 2014).

This research-oriented transformation of the 5-100 Universities has also been boosted by WUR movement, since “research and its traditional outputs is the primary and easiest measurement, acting as a proxy for excellence” (Hazelkorn, 2009, p. 3). Consequently, the Universities transform or “rebrand” their identities through the lens of WURs to marketise their strengths for competing in the research and innovation market, the technological services market and in WURs. Therefore, the discourse of “excellence” in the Russian context is predominantly built on “research excellence” discourses which draw on the interplay of the concepts “commodification of research” and “marketisation”. In other words, highly market-oriented discourses reveal the nature of the universities behaving like real businesses competing to sell their products. For example, there are many discourses, such as “enhancement of research and innovation productivity”, the linkages and cooperation with “business and industry”, the “commercialisation” of “world-class intellectual products”, where HE is represented as “the academic sector” (RAEI, 2018).

Competitiveness in the global talent market

Talent recruitment may be regarded as another shortcut to the top 100 WURs along the enhancement of research outputs. Commenting on the strategic objectives of the Project 5-100, Vladimir Knyaginin (the CEO of the Centre for Strategic Research “North-West”) explains:

We [the people related to the Project 5-100] join the race for ideas, money, top professors, but also we join the competition for the most mobile, fast, intelligent, flexible, and capable of self-development people, for talents (Video 2, 2014).

It is important to examine how the discourses of “research enhancement” overlap this concept of “talent” and investigate what kind of talent might benefit most to universities’ reputation and why it is highly valuable.

Talent attraction is considered as one of the strategic goals of the Project 5-100 which stresses the need for the “internationalisation in all spheres, development of infrastructure to recruit the best scientists, faculty, managers and students” (RAEI, 2018). In terms of the expected outcomes of the Russian initiative, the 5-100 Universities are also supposed to ensure at least 10 per cent of international faculty members and 15 per cent of overseas students in each University, apart from entering into the top 100 WURs (RAEI, 2018). Although “university managers” and “international students” are evaluated within the concept of “talent”, the main emphasis of the Project 5-100 is on recruiting “the world’s leading scientists to develop an outstanding academic reputation by doing breakthrough research” (RAEI, 2018). It also targets “more youthful faculty members and researchers with time spent and know-how gained in academic and research spheres, in leading international and Russian Universities and research organizations” (RAEI, 2018).

Within the data set, internal and international “academic mobility” programmes for faculty and researchers are considered as a means of bolstering internationalisation and talent recruitment in the form of internships, advanced training, professional retraining and exchange programs. Apart from boosting “academic mobility” and developing the “infrastructure” to attract talent, the 5-100 Universities seek to improve “international recruitment outlook” and, generally speaking, “global outlook” of Russian universities, since
it is highly weighted in WURs. The overall number of international students is also regarded as an indicator of the world’s recognition of the Russian professional education and the share in the global education market held by the Russian professional education (Government 792, 2013).

Thus, the recurrent discourse of “competition” colonises numerous fields of HE, in particular the realm of HE internationalisation, which can be regarded as “competition for talent” within a neoliberal paradigm or in more economic terms – competition for “human resources” or “human capital” in the “global talent market”. One of the crucial aspects of this “race for talent” is that it stresses the importance of attracting “young talent”, since “young people are the most important component of human resources in the country’s economy” (Government 792, 2013, p. 256).

Notably, HE can also be regarded as a major provider of “human capital” which is essential for WCU and a country’s socio-economic growth and development. In other words, “academic mobility” as global human capital flow is crucial for scientific discovery and “helps to form the long-run international linkages that foster innovation and knowledge creation at the international level” (OECD, 2014, p. 15).

**Competitiveness in the reputation market**

CDA has revealed that the need for modernisation of Russian education may be justified by the government’s aspiration to gain wider recognition of its HE system among developed countries and drive up its “international prestige” as a country in the global arena. From the government’s perspective, the discourse of the national education system is commonly described as “a crucial factor for Russia’s positioning among the world’s leading countries, for its international prestige as a country possessing a high level of culture, science and education” (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 264).

There are some discourses around the Russian HE system which signal that despite its “world recognition, obvious achievements as an education system” (Video 1, 2013), it has not been fully represented in the global education market. Thus, there is a certain emphasis on the country’s system-wide socio-economic crisis which happened in the 1990s, hindered all the positive changes in HE and resulted in Russia’s falling out of the global HE agenda (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Nowadays, the government strives to “maximise” Russia’s visibility within the global research and education markets and “gain back” its leading position in the world elite with the help of the Project 5-100 or better saying WURs (Video 1, 2013; RAEI, 2018):

The implementation of the set measures will allow at least five Russian universities to pave their way to the top 100 world university rankings by 2020 which will foster the restoration of dignified reputation of the Russian higher education system in the international arena, as well as will boost the attractiveness of leading Russian universities in the market of highly intellectual and elite academic workforce. Moreover, these measures will be a catalyst in the process of enhancing international competitiveness and attractiveness of Russian universities as a whole. (Government 792, 2013, p. 105)

This policy document reinforces the discourse of “rankings” as a key indicator of “reputation” and “carrier of excellence” (Rostan and Vaira, 2011) in the global education market. Notably, by overarching the discourses of “dignified reputation”, “attractiveness”, “elite academic force”, the discourse of “rankings” acquires indirectly an additional meaning, high “quality” of the 5-100 Universities. This meaning of “quality” is built up through “foreign academics, staff, and students” who bring with them “prestige” and the recognition of “global reputation”. Furthermore, it is possible to trace an intention to rationalise the position of the Russian HE system among the “world elite” and its right to expand its share in the “global education market” by stating that “our [Russian] education system has worldwide recognition and obvious achievements as a system” (Video 1, 2013).
Apart from being carriers of “reputation” and “excellence”, WURs function as a “proxy for competitiveness” (Hazelkorn, 2014) and an indicator of a country’s “visibility”. For instance, the number of Russian universities in the world’s top 100 universities is represented as an indicator of the competitiveness of the Russian professional education and the development of the Centres of Excellence in Russia (Government 792, 2013).

Interestingly, WURs appear to measure not only a country’s academic reputation or research excellence, but also shed light on its standing in the world and reflect “a nation’s status in geopolitical terms” (Hazelkorn, 2015). Competing for their new positioning in the geopolitical system, many countries are likely to make use of WURs as a “soft power” (Hazelkorn, 2014).

Consequently, WURs happen to be an accelerator of the “reputation race” (Hazelkorn, 2015) in Russian HE which leads to the commodification of academic reputation of universities in the global education market. For example, the 5-100 Universities “that combine a rich heritage and promising future” are portrayed as holders of Russian “famous scientific heritage” and “deep-rooted academic traditions” which can give them a crucial competitive advantage in the research market (THE, 2015). Due to WURs, this academic reputation can be easily identified and measured, in particular through analysing and evaluating various quantitative data in the form of research output and research-related activity (including citations, the number of researchers, academics and postgraduate students).

The analysis also concludes that the Russian government seeks to gain both the internal legitimacy (in terms of fostering “economic growth” and “modernising” the Russian academia to “compete” in the international arena) and global legitimacy (in form of boosting Russia’s “reputation” and “attractiveness” of the HE system abroad and improving its “leading position” worldwide) to rationalise the implementation of the Project 5-100.

Conclusions and implications for policymakers

A number of scholars (Froumin and Lisyutkin, 2015; Hazelkorn, 2009) conclude that initiatives and policies for excellence implemented worldwide reveal a common trend among many governments which intend to expand their control over HE systems and increase their role in shaping and modernising HEIs through introducing WURs to the HE agenda.

CDA has identified that rationales behind the implementation of the Project 5-100 are predominately political and socio-economic which could be explained by the historical events entailing numerous social and economic issues in the country (e.g. the collapse of the Soviet Union and following the global economic and financial crisis in Russia in the late 2000s). Over the last two decades, the modernisation agenda of the Russian HE system has been inspired by the government’s aspiration to foster the transition to the knowledge-driven economy and accelerate a socio-economic growth. Rostan and Vaira (2011) suggest that WURs under policies for excellence tend to be used as powerful rhetoric devices to legitimise systems’ modernisation reform rather than as real instruments to improve systems’ and institutions’ performance. Furthermore, Excellence Initiatives happen to be a “legitimising argument” to rationalise and steer the state finding to a small group of universities and as a result to reshape HE systems in terms of producing formalized vertical stratification or reproducing previous hierarchies in national HE (Rostan and Vaira, 2011).

The analytical framework designed to research “excellence” in Russian HE has been drawn on the concept of “competitiveness” which is essential from the government’s perspective for achieving global “excellence”. In other words, in the Russian context “excellence” in HE may be interpreted as “competitiveness enhancement”.

Consequently, CDA discloses that the discourse of “excellence” in Russian HE has been constructed and shaped through hybridising three dominant orders of discourse. First, the “knowledge-based society” order of discourse emphasises the importance of the 5-100 Universities through the discourse of “modernisation” of Russian HE, through the
promotion of a “research culture” among other universities, and also through the production of “innovation” for accelerating the transition to the knowledge-based economy. Second, the “marketisation” order of discourse in HE become evident through the commodification of research and teaching produced by the 5-100 Universities to supply Russian intellectual production and educational programmes to the global innovation and education services markets. Third, the “managerialism” order of discourse emerge through the introduction of NPM techniques and discourses of performance-based funding in the 5-100 Universities to encourage greater competition among Russian universities and as a result to drive up quality improvement and competitiveness enhancement.

The findings reveal that the Russian government adopts a narrow understanding of “excellence” which privileges the research dimension over the teaching and learning activities, and emphasises it primarily as a tool to achieve Russia’s aspirations for economic and social development rather than a target for enhancing and improving quality of research and teaching in the country’s HEIs. From the government’s perspective, “excellence” is something which can emerge and get developed only through the metrics and performance indicators of WURs and through the tight control of a special council, various boards of trustees or educational managers, which limits even further the definition of this concept.

WURs have also proven to be “a policy instrument” (Hazelkorn, 2014), in the form of guidelines for university transformation, benchmarks for progress evaluation and tools for measuring universities’ accountability and the outcomes of the Excellence Initiative implementation. Furthermore, the discourse of “excellence” with its neoliberal nature appears to become very powerful and productive in Russian HE in terms of having impact on the government’s funding decisions. Commenting on the prospective of the Project 5-100, the former Minister of Education and Science, Olga Vasilieva proposed “to select only up to four most effective universities and invest the rest of the subsidies into the development of these universities […] The other universities will report on the work performed and money spent” (TASS, 2017). It reflects the essence of “excellence” revealed through awarding only high-performing universities which contributes to inequality in the sector in terms of singling out the most “effective” and “efficient” HEIs for investment.

This study seeks to raise awareness of the discourse of “excellence” in the realm of HE policy and question whether neoliberal forces in terms of free markets, competition, and NPM are the only premises to modernise education systems and nurture “excellence”. In western democracies, the neoliberal culture of individualism and competition in HE, as well as the emphasis on managerialism and performativity within HEIs have already undermined the professionalism of teachers in the sense of transforming them into managed professionals who are required to operate efficiently and effectively within global educational markets (Olssen et al., 2004). Consequently, it is essential to reconsider the extent to which tangible benefits to a country’s HE system development are due to emphasising “competitiveness enhancement” and “quality assurance” instead of fostering, for example, “teaching excellence” along the social-democratic lines, “quality improvement” or “academic freedom and autonomy”. Since the Project 5-100 is still under way, the findings of this study may encourage education researchers and policymakers to investigate the transformation of the 5-100 Universities’ identities and analyse the outcomes of the Excellence Initiative.

Notes

1. The two Russian universities, Lomonosov’s Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University, which have a special status and funded separately from other Russian HEIs, have already entered WURs and are not participating in the Project 5-100.
2. “Proyekt Povysheniya Konkurentosposobnosti Vedushchikh Rossiyskikh Univesritetov Sredi Vedushchikh Mirovykh Nauchno-Obrazovatel’nykh Tsentrov”. 

Russian higher education
References


**Further reading**


**Corresponding author**

Elena Tsvetkova can be contacted at: e.tsvetkova@skoltech.ru