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CONCEPTIONS OF EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Within a diverse and expanding system of higher education (HE), such as in the UK, discourse on teaching and student learning highlights tensions between different notions of excellence. For example, excellence as a positional good for students, an aspirational target for continuous quality enhancement, a form of reputational advantage for HE institutions or a means of achieving governmental economic and social goals. Concepts of excellence such as these also operate differently at the level of the individual, the academic unit, the institution and an HE system. Discussion about excellence usually focuses on teaching, and there is much less attention given to excellence in student learning, or even students' perceptions of excellent teaching. The emphasis tends to be on *process* and *form* rather than *content*; so, what is being taught and learned has become increasingly obscured by concerns over whether teaching and learning are performed excellently.

In the literature on pedagogy, there is a large body of writing that employs psychologised understandings of teaching and learning processes and which focuses on micro-level transactions between teachers and students. Though there is some conflicting evidence surrounding the idea of a hierarchy of approaches to learning and teaching – surface, deep and strategic – there seems to be consensus that excellence in pedagogy is associated with more sophisticated conceptions of learning and even, perhaps, of knowledge and its construction. However, it is clear that the dynamics of the relationship between teaching and learning are mediated by students' perceptions of their environment and by their own motivations to study: excellence in student learning may or may not require excellent teaching.

Concepts of teaching excellence are linked to two other notions, viz. the scholarship of teaching and the expert teacher, with some suggestion that excellence should be an attribute of any professional teacher – perhaps confusing excellence with notions of good (enough) teaching or even 'fitness for purpose'. Much has also been written about institutional

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mechanisms for recognising and rewarding excellent teaching and the need for these to reflect an institution's values, missions and culture.

A recurring critical theme within the literature contends that the current focus on teaching (and to a lesser extent learning) excellence is symptomatic of a ubiquitous contemporary desire to measure HE performance by means of standardised criteria and quasi-scientific practices. Reinforced by the marketisation of HE and the repositioning of students as consumers, commercial publishers draw on these performance measures to compile institutional rankings, which construct broader notions of 'excellence' and 'world class' qualities in particular ways. These aggregations of available data appear to be biased towards research reputation and academic prestige, and reduce teaching 'excellence' to the numerical ratios between students and academic faculty, and learning to the results of student satisfaction surveys. The biases in favour of particular notions of 'excellence' are even more apparent in the increasingly influential world rankings of institutions: with Western, English language and 'big science' values predominating.

This paper draws on two recent research studies undertaken by the UK Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information: a review of literature on teaching and learning to elicit conceptions of excellence; and research on league tables (rankings) and their impacts on HE institutions in England. It looks at how the term 'excellence' is used in the context of teaching and the student learning experience in: policy documents, research literatures, guidance material and the publicity surrounding commercially published institutional rankings. It examines the key concepts underlying such usage and considers the implications of these for future policies for developing and promoting excellence in a diverse system as it moves beyond mass to universal HE.

Introduction

To 'excel' means to surpass, to be pre-eminent, and hence 'excellence' in teaching and learning implies being pre-eminent in these activities. The term connotes a sense of certain distinguishing features, such that those exhibiting excellence stand-out from the rest. As Elton notes, 'excellence, by definition, is a normative concept' (Elton, 1998, p. 4).

As higher education has expanded from a rather small and elite activity experienced by a minority of the population into a mass system in which it is expected that a majority of the population will, at some point in their lives, gain a higher education experience, the range of learners engaging in higher learning has grown and diversified as has the range of provision on offer. Whereas previously, difference and diversity might have been delineated using horizontal classifications (between disciplines, between fields of research) some commentators note an increasing emphasis on vertical stratifications which seek an 'aura of exceptionality' (Teichler, 2003, p. 34) but which cannot easily be measured. Though higher education institutions may well be valued for both 'the excellence and the accessibility of their knowledge' (Calhoun, 2006, p. 22), it can be argued that tensions exist between the two ideals, and that the pursuit of recognition and positional good for its own sake is now detracting from broader notions of higher education and the public good (Calhoun, 2006).

Others suggest that debates about excellence in (higher) education need not be couched in such stark reputational and economic terms: rather the question is ‘what sort of social and personal conditions promote excellence...what sort of actions can educators take to assure that students will learn to be excellent in ways that both they and society value?’ and not ‘who is gifted or exceptional’ (Ferrari, 2002, p viii).

At a functional level, excellence in the creation of knowledge might be seen as linked to a higher education institution’s *research* mission whereas access to (excellent) knowledge can be seen as linked to the institution’s *teaching* mission (Calhoun, 2006). A teaching mission necessarily embraces both a concern for teaching and a concern for the end-product of the teaching process, that is, the student learning experience. Alongside these two missions, there is (in the UK at least) increasing emphasis given to a ‘third’ mission, that of higher education reaching out to business and local and regional communities, which might beg the question of how local and regional engagement fits with the pursuit of academic excellence. Certainly, distinguishing separate missions for institutions of higher education, which they may combine in different ways and emphasise to different degrees, raises further questions about the meaning of excellence in universal, diversified and globalised higher education systems.

The research basis for the paper

This paper is based on two separate research projects with linked findings, both undertaken by the authors at the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University in the United Kingdom, in collaboration with colleagues from the University and, in the case of the research on university rankings, with an external partner, Hobsons Research. The projects were a review of the literature on excellence in teaching and learning, with particular reference to the UK, commissioned by the UK Higher Education Academy (Little *et al*, forthcoming, 2008) and research on ‘league tables’ and their impact on higher education institutions in England, commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (Locke *et al*, 2008).

A literature review of excellence in teaching and learning

This was a wide-ranging review of the policy and research literatures (primarily emanating from the UK) which have a bearing on notions of excellence in teaching and learning from the mid-1990s onwards, which roughly coincided with the point at which the UK started to move beyond mass towards universal higher education. The research literature used in the review was a mix of critical analyses of theoretical concepts and reported findings from empirical studies. The literature covered conceptual studies, academic critiques and research studies on teaching and learning as well as policy documents.

The review set out to address three main questions:

- How is the term ‘excellence’ used in the context of teaching and the student learning experience within current higher education policy and practice, and how does its usage vary?
- What are the key conceptualisations of excellence in the relevant literature?

- What are the implications of usage and conceptualisations for future policy in relation to promoting or developing excellence?

For the purposes of analysis, the literature was then categorised according to which 'level' within the system it engaged with considerations of excellence (system-wide; institution; department/discipline; individual); whether it focused on teaching/individual teachers, or on students/their learning experiences (either as process or outcome); and the extent to which it engaged with concepts or aspects of usage.

Research on 'league tables' and their impact on higher education institutions

Statistical analyses of five published league tables were undertaken (three national tables and two world rankings). This was complemented by semi-structured interviews with the publishers and compilers of these rankings. An online survey of all HEIs in England was undertaken (with a 68% response rate) to investigate the impact of league tables on their decision-making. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were held in six case study institutions to follow up issues raised by a literature review and the online survey. Finally, a draft version of the final report was discussed with representatives from a number of 'intermediary' bodies in the HE sector to gather feedback on the findings and how they could best be communicated.

The analyses of the national and international rankings of higher education institutions and of their publishers' narratives revealed the underlying constructs that explained most of the overall scores and outcomes of the rankings. These outcomes largely reflected reputational factors rather than the quality or performance of the institutions, and they reinforced and refined existing hierarchies of prestige within the higher education sector in the UK. The investigation of the impact of ranking systems uncovered a significant influence on higher education institutions' actions and decision-making. The league tables' apparently simple messages were more and more influential among some prospective students and increasingly being taken up by members of institutional governing bodies mainly drawn from outside higher education. But there were tensions with other institutional and governmental priorities and concerns.

Concepts of excellence in teaching and learning

At the system-wide level

Alongside expanded and more diverse systems of higher education have come moves towards seeking ways of differentiating systems, and establishing hierarchies within them. As Calhoun (2006, p.19) commented 'it is a striking characteristic of universities that their excellence is often measured in terms of their exclusivity'. Furthermore, the term excellence is used not only in the sense of claiming a position within a hierarchy but also as a way of giving prominence to particular initiatives geared towards enhancing international competitiveness. It is also used to reinforce the worth and merit of aspects of higher education not traditionally linked to excellence. In this sense, it could be argued that the term 'excellent' has retained

only the loosest connection with notions of 'excelling'; rather it is used to position an institution or an initiative in some real or imaginary ranking.

A different conception of excellence is expounded by Readings (1996). Writing from an American perspective, Readings argued that excellence has been adopted (in policy documents) in opposition to quality. Whereas quality implies that a university is (just) like a business (with all the attitudes and values that this implies), Readings contended that excellence has no content and hence no ideological baggage. He argued that the interest in the pursuit of excellence reflected a change in the university's function. With universities no longer having to safeguard national culture (because the nation-state is no longer the major site at which capital reproduces itself) the idea of national culture no longer serves as an external referent toward which all of the efforts of research and teaching are directed. Hence, 'what' gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be *excellently* taught or investigated (Readings, 1996, pp. 13–14). In the era of globalisation, the link between the university and the nation-state is no longer so close, and the university shifts from being an ideological apparatus of the nation-state to being a relatively independent bureaucratic system. Some of the ideas espoused by Readings can be seen to resonate with other critiques of the increasing emphasis on *process* and *form* which take precedence over *content*; in other words, 'what' is being taught and learned and 'why' has become less important than whether it is done excellently (see for example, Morley, 2003; Temple, 2005).

However, recent key UK policy documents clearly have notions of nation-state to the fore in promulgating ideas of excellence in higher education and ways of pursuing it. There is an association of excellence with international standards and even 'world class' performance (NCIHE, 1997; DfES, 2003), which seems to be partly the result of a concern to raise the status of teaching *vis à vis* research (and to employ the terms used by the UK Research Assessment Exercise to rank research outputs), and partly because of the emerging dominance of the economic purposes of higher education in policy discourse during the period of debate around raising tuition fees and graduate repayments in England (2003/04). Thus, excellence is not just about competition between teachers or even institutions but between national systems or economies.

At the institutional level

Since the late 1990s, and especially in England, more explicit attention has been given to higher education teaching and learning through the development of institutional teaching and learning strategies, linked to broader underlying mission statements. Analysis of such strategies shows the term 'excellence' being used in both an aspirational sense as well as being bound-up with claims of enhancing students' learning and providing an experience of high quality.

Debates on concepts of teaching excellence are linked to two other notions, viz. the scholarship of teaching and the expert teacher, with some suggestion that excellence should be an attribute of any professional teacher - which may be confusing excellence with notions of good (enough) teaching. Much has been written about institutional mechanisms for recognising and rewarding excellent teachers and even teaching, and the need for such mechanisms to reflect an institution's values, mission and culture. Curiously, however, there

is less in the literature on rewarding those who promote excellence in student learning, and the role of institutions in developing a strategic approach to achieving excellent student learning outcomes.

At the departmental/discipline level

The discourse on the scholarship of teaching and learning – or the integration, application and transmission of knowledge as distinct from its discovery (Boyer, 1990) – is tied to concepts of disciplines and disciplinary cultures. The differences between disciplines' views and conceptions of teaching excellence will reflect the different epistemological, cultural and pedagogical assumptions of the various subject communities. There are deep-rooted disciplinary differences in the ways in which research, teaching and learning are conceptualised, organised and communicated. Within the UK, these differences may be overlaid by the influence of professional bodies and the extent to which the curriculum is externally accredited – potentially inhibiting innovation by teachers (and creativity among learners).

Some critics note that disciplinary boundaries can act as a barrier to change, impeding students' approaches to learning and learning outcomes, and they have called for a new form of disciplinarity that emphasises reflection on existing practice and critical dialogue about the discipline (Nicholls, 2005). Others have focused on broad conceptions of teaching that may be more or less linked with notions of excellence, and to a greater or lesser degree associated with particular disciplines. Students' ratings of their programmes in satisfaction surveys can often be influenced by these conceptual and disciplinary differences.

External reviews of higher education provision (conducted under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE) originally used the term excellent (along with satisfactory and unsatisfactory) to categorise judgements of provision, and characteristics associated with excellent higher education were identified. Following revisions to national systems of assessing the quality of higher education, 'excellent' provision was no longer identified; rather, characteristics of 'high quality' higher education within an overall context of diversity and differentiation between disciplines and institutions were distinguished. With the advent of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 1997 and a single unified approach to assuring the quality of UK higher education, characteristics of excellent or high quality education were no longer identified; rather, the outcomes of external discipline-based reviews were reported in terms of the quality of teaching and the infrastructure supporting this. Such reviews were eventually abandoned in favour of audits of institutional quality assurance systems.

However, in England and Northern Ireland notions of excellence in teaching and learning continue, at least in the form of the HEFCE initiative to fund more than seventy Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (which has been seen as one way of demonstrating the Government's continuing commitment to raising the profile and quality of teaching and learning). In Scotland and Wales there has been deliberate move towards supporting all institutions in a process of continuous quality enhancement (rather than using specific initiatives to promote excellence). But this does not imply that debates about excellence in learning and teaching in an enhancement-led culture are thereby stifled.

In several recent UK policy documents there is an implicit acknowledgement that excellence in student learning may not require excellent teaching, and that the former can be managed. There is also some acknowledgement that excellence in student learning is likely to arise from a combination of different dimensions, including support for learning from professionals other than teachers, such as learning advisers, librarians and technicians, but there is little in the literature exploring in detail this aspect of excellence.

Subject benchmark statements form part of the QAA's academic infrastructure and are intended to make more explicit the nature and level of academic standards in UK higher education. All such statements provide a point of reference for expressing minimum standards, specified in terms of intended learning outcomes, but a number go further and set out how excellent learning outcomes might be demonstrated and recognised. Notions of creativity, originality, innovation, as well as critical evaluation of their own and others' work feature strongly in the stated characteristics of excellent student learning outcomes (and, as such, chime to an extent with the discourse on the scholarship of teaching and learning).

At the individual level

Alongside literatures relating to conceptions of teaching excellence in the context of disciplines and evaluative mechanisms sits another large body of literature which refers to psychologised understandings of teaching and learning processes and focuses on micro-level transactions between teachers and students. Much of this research literature takes 'excellent teaching' to be synonymous with 'effective teaching' (as do some policy documents). Though there is some conflicting evidence surrounding hierarchies of approaches to teaching and learning (from 'surface' to 'deep' to 'strategic' approaches), there seems to be consensus that excellence in learning would be characterised by more sophisticated conceptions of learning and, perhaps more broadly, by more sophisticated conceptions of knowledge and its construction. However, it is clear that the dynamics of the relationship between teaching and learning are mediated by students' own perceptions of their environment and by their own motivations to learning: excellence in student learning may or may not require excellent teaching.

The introduction (in 2000) of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in England and Northern Ireland sought to recognise and reward excellent individual teachers. One detailed investigation of the scheme's operation concluded that there was a shift away from traditional understandings of teaching excellence towards concepts better suited to a mass system of higher education (Skelton, 2005).

Though much has been written about recognising, supporting and rewarding excellent teaching, there is little in the research literature about students' perceptions of excellence in teaching, and what might constitute an excellent learning experience. Further, the policy literature rarely seems to address the individual student and excellence in learning. Whilst rather limited, the literature on student learning is suggestive of notions of excellence that suggest forms of personalised learning that will enable students to deal with difficult concepts, contested knowledge bases and the (super)complexities inherent in 'uncertain situations'.

Measuring and ranking excellence of institutions

University rankings are an established element of the higher education landscape and a regular feature in newspapers and magazines. They are part of a wider urge to list and order the elite in any field, be they successful companies, sports teams or wealthy individuals. They sell large numbers of daily and weekly publications and guidebooks, and attract many visitors to their web sites. University guides featuring league tables are aimed at prospective students and their families and seek to champion the consumer faced with an increasingly diverse and complex array of choices and to help them identify the best options. In what has become a highly competitive environment, a higher education institution is rarely able to resist the temptation to refer to a high ranking position in its promotional material, even when its academics and senior managers are sceptical of the methodologies employed to produce the ranking, and critical of the whole enterprise.

The commercial publishers of university rankings have pre-conceived notions of which are the “best” universities, but generally do not have clear and coherent conceptions of ‘excellence’ or ‘a world class university’. The measures included by compilers are largely determined by the data available rather than being selected as close proxies for the qualities the publishers seek to value. Indeed, in the UK, the bulk of the data used by the national league tables are submitted by institutions and supplied by an agency to compilers on their behalf. The resulting rankings largely reflect reputational factors and academic prestige and only in a limited way the quality or performance of institutions (Locke *et al*, 2008).

The five national league tables and international rankings selected for the HEFCE-commissioned study are among the best known in the UK, and each has its own particular characteristics. The three national league tables concentrate on undergraduate education with a focus on teaching and learning. In contrast, the emphasis of the two international rankings is almost entirely on research, so these are less relevant for our purposes in this paper. The publishers of each ranking also have their own criteria for determining which institutions are included in – or excluded from – the table. They tend to favour those with university status, that teach a broad range of disciplines and where the provision is predominantly full-time undergraduate education. Small, specialist and predominately postgraduate or part-time institutions tend to be excluded from these national tables, regardless of their quality or performance.

Although the conceptions of ‘excellence’ are seldom made explicit, the measures included, the weightings applied and the methodologies employed to produce national league tables assume that the ‘best’ universities:

- *have high entry standards*
They select the applicants with the highest academic qualifications. Compilers are seldom explicit about the reasons why the qualifications of incoming students should reflect on the quality of the institution. Dill and Soo (2005) suggest three reasons: that the quality of incoming students is closely correlated with the quality of graduates; that students are enriched by the input of their peers; and, tautologically, if an institution can attract the best

students, it must be a good university. However, Clarke (2002) argues that a university is not responsible for the abilities of students before they are admitted and so should not be credited with their achievements.

- *have low drop out rates*
This measure is predicated on a model of full-time higher education study (Yorke and Longden, 2005). There are various ways of calculating 'drop out', such as the proportion of those entering that completes the programme they were originally registered on, or the proportion of the final-year cohort. Some non-completers, however, may be 'lost', depending on the institutional method of calculation (Yorke, 1997). In any case, this variable is affected by (and should be controlled for) a number of factors, including entry qualifications, discipline mix, type of accommodation available to students and institutional location (Johnes, 1996, cited in Yorke, 1997). However, compilers rarely take these factors into account.
- *spend a lot on facilities*
This normally refers to library and computing services, but may also include laboratory and other technical facilities. Such spending needs to be controlled for the size and discipline profile of an institution; otherwise it will tend to favour those with large science-based teaching and research provision. However, even if these are taken into account, it is fair to ask how much of this spending actually impacts on teaching and student learning, directly or indirectly, and whether the outcomes amount to value for money.
- *undertake extensive research in a wide range of fields*
It is assumed by some publishers and compilers of league tables that research informs and benefits teaching and that the extent and quality of research is a measure of the ability of an institution to attract the best quality staff. However, one of the publishers claimed that the impact of research on teaching quality is unclear and that, if there is benefit, this should be reflected in the measures of teaching quality. Indeed, it appears from studies that research and teaching can exist in a range of relationships with each other: positive or negative, integrated or independent (Coate *et al*, 2001). Quantitative evidence available (Hattie and Marsh, 1996) suggests they are currently independent constructs that are nearly uncorrelated. So, it may not necessarily benefit teaching or student learning to have high-quality research undertaken in an institution. In any case, the measures used by league table compilers are taken from the UK Research Assessment Exercise, which is carried out infrequently and the results become increasingly dated as the following exercise draws near.
- *have a low students-to-staff ratio*
The students-to-staff ratio is supposed to reflect the amount of contact time with academics that students might expect, although the relationship with the quality or effectiveness of teaching or its impact on students' learning is not clear. 'Star' academic researchers may have little or no contact whatsoever with students. Nor does this measure accommodate virtual learning environments, or distinguish between subject expert teachers and learning support specialists. The basis for calculating the ratio is often unstated; for example, whether part-time staff (especially sessional teachers) are

included, and how part-time students are treated. In some rankings, this is not weighted according to discipline type, even though there are consistent differences between subjects (e.g. Medicine, and Arts and Humanities).

- *award a high proportion of 'good' degrees*
Usually, this refers to the proportion of graduates who obtain first and upper second class honours degrees in the UK classification system. Several commentators have noted the close correlation between this measure and the qualifications held by students on entry (for example, Eccles, 2002). However, this proportion can be increased both by more effective teaching and student learning, and by lowering academic standards (Dill and Soo, 2005). Institutions award and classify qualifications themselves and the chances of getting 'a good honours degree' vary by discipline area and institution. Therefore, the subject mix of an institution needs to be taken into account (Yorke and Longden, 2005).
- *have a good reputation among academics, employers and head teachers*
Although a survey may adhere to scientific methodology, the opinions collected are still subjective observations. Opinion is more likely to be influenced by the existing reputation of an institution (the 'halo effect') than by actual knowledge of programme or research quality (Dill, 2006). Respondents may have little or no knowledge of many of the programmes and aspects of an institution's performance they are being asked to evaluate (Clarke, 2002). Nevertheless, opinion surveys can provide useful information for students about the perceived value of degrees obtained from different institutions (Usher and Savino, 2006).
- *achieve good results in student surveys*
National league tables produced in the UK are beginning to place greater emphasis on the results of the National Student Survey (NSS), introduced by three of the four funding councils in the UK in 2005. The NSS is a survey of final year students covering six 'areas': teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources and personal development. There is also an 'overall satisfaction' question about how satisfied the respondent is with the quality of their course. As with surveys of other interested parties, it is clear that student perceptions should not be accepted uncritically (Yorke and Longden, 2005). The results may simply reflect the capacity of a university to achieve the other characteristics of the 'best' universities described above, or the location of an institution as opposed to the study experience: i.e. whether it is city-based, or a campus or regional institution. Prosser (2005) argues that the NSS results are more meaningful at the unit or module level than the programme level, as students' experiences of the whole have been found to be less than the sum of its parts. Hanbury (2007) suggests that aggregated institutional data will introduce biases unless like-with-like comparisons are made between the same disciplines and account is taken of gender differences.

When selecting indicators, few, if any, of the league table compilers distinguish between measures of inputs, processes and outputs:

- **inputs** include entry standards, students-to-staff ratios and expenditure on facilities

- **processes** include quality assessments of teaching
- **outputs** include completion rates, the proportion of good honours degrees and graduate employment levels, for example.

Rather, they simply aggregate them to give a pseudo-scientific impression of overall 'quality' of 'performance'.

It may be argued that processes and outputs are more valid indicators of the excellence of an institution than inputs, because inputs merely reflect the resources at its disposal, not how effectively – or efficiently – it utilises them. But process indicators are more difficult to identify, and more complex and costly to measure, than inputs or outputs. Our analysis found few instances of what might be classified as process indicators – only (now rather dated) QAA review scores and some aspects of the NSS – and there are many caveats that should be applied to even these. However, there are real difficulties in evaluating the quality – let alone the excellence – of teaching and student learning processes in a consistent and thorough way, and input measures are only distant proxies for these aspects. The latter point is supported by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) who, in a wide-ranging review of largely US research literature on the impact of college education, found that inputs such as expenditure per student, students-to-staff ratios, research quality, admission selectivity or reputation have only an inconsistent or trivial relationship with student learning and achievement. This brings into serious question the validity of several of the measures used by compilers of league tables.

Even output measures need to be controlled for relevant inputs, yet only one UK league table (*The Guardian*) attempts to include a measure of 'value-added', i.e. how far a student has 'travelled' from entry to graduation. It will be seen from the provisos applied to the individual measures above, that disciplinary differences are relevant in most of the indicators employed by compilers. Indeed, *The Guardian* also places much more emphasis on its discipline tables of academic departments than its institutional ranking, arguing that the former are more relevant to university applicants looking to study a particular subject. This chimes with the importance of disciplines to the scholarship of teaching and learning in the earlier literature review, and brings into question attempts to aggregate data for whole institutions (Dill and Soo, 2005).

In practice, ranking systems employ a deficit model of a university: in other words, they seek to quantify the degree of inferiority to Oxford and Cambridge in the UK (and to Harvard in the international rankings). They do this by giving the 'best' institution in the aggregated measures a maximum score of, say, 100 and calculating the lower scores according to how close they are to this maximum. Differences in overall scores tend to be greater near the top of a league table and narrow considerably further down the ranking. There tend to be marked differences in scores between a handful of universities at the top of the ranking. Below that, the differences among successively ranked institutions are much smaller but fairly consistent across the entire range. This reinforces the notion that the 'excellent' universities 'stand out from the rest', that there is excellence at the top and a deficiency of excellence among those below (Teichler, 2003). But, as we have argued, this is largely a reflection of the resources

and reputation of the institutions at the top, and their attractiveness to well-qualified students, particular kinds of academic researchers and increasingly selective research funders.

The international rankings similarly reflect reputational hierarchies and academic prestige, portraying notions of 'world class' institutions based much more on traditional models of the research university than on pre-eminence in teaching. Of the two international tables investigated, the Shanghai Jiao Tong University's *Academic Ranking* focuses more on measures of research output, and the Times Higher *World University Rankings* on reputational surveys. Nevertheless, they both nominally include proxy measures of the quality of teaching, such as students-to-staff ratios, the proportion of international academics and students and the numbers of Nobel laureates among staff and alumni. Few commentators regard the resultant rankings as reflecting the educational component of universities' activities; rather they express their wealth, size, longevity, social capital, prestige and global ambitions. It is notable that, almost as soon as the annual rankings are published each year, national commentators will analyse the numbers of institutions in individual countries that appear in the top 50 or 100, almost compiling a meta-ranking of national higher education systems. The governments of some emerging economies have even set targets for the number of their universities that should make it into the 'big league', and are investing to achieve this (Deem *et al*, 2008).

Squaring the circle of diversity of institutions and of students - can excellence help?

We noted above that some notions of excellence are suggestive of moves away from (just) the acquisition of excellent knowledge, and towards notions of personalised learning that will enable students to deal with troublesome knowledge, contested knowledge bases and the complexities inherent in 'uncertain situations'. Such moves towards greater personalisation, together with drives towards the marketisation of higher education which can be seen as heightening notions of students as consumers making informed choices about whether, when and how to engage with higher education, suggest that a re-focussing of attention towards notions of excellent learning from individual students' perspectives would be timely. Currently there seems to have been little research on students' conceptions of what might constitute excellent learning and how this might be characterised. This seeming 'gap' is all the more remarkable given that other (UK) government policies are increasingly emphasising the need to listen to the student voice (DIUS, 2007).

Further, our exploration of the bases and use of national league tables and international ranking systems does bring into question the validity of several of the measures used by compilers, and their fitness for purpose within increasingly diverse higher education systems. Currently, such rankings seem to privilege certain (more traditional) notions of excellence and may only serve the purpose of informing a 'certain' type of potential student/consumer, namely the young applicant, with high entry grades, seeking to study full-time away from home. As such, they can be seen as uneasy bedfellows when set alongside notions of diversity. Higher education student populations (at least in the UK) are much more diverse than the compilers indicate and, arguably, most students require alternative sources of

information about higher education on the basis of which to make informed choices relevant to their own needs and aspirations. The current concentration on quality and performance at institutional rather than discipline level, and the exclusion (within the UK tables) of small, non-university, part-time and postgraduate higher education providers from most rankings limits student choice.

At a national and global level, it remains questionable whether a 'world class' higher education system actually needs any 'world class' universities. Where a higher education system clearly meets the needs of the society, polity and economy that sustains it, does it have to concentrate its resources in a small number of 'elite' institutions, or could it fare better by maintaining diversity and equity between different institutions and their varied missions?

The research studies on which this paper is drawn set-out a number of implications for policy and practice. We suggest that, within an expanding and increasingly diverse higher education system, there needs to be much clearer explication of the precise meaning being attached to the term 'excellence' in teaching and learning, so as to ensure that certain (more traditional) notions of excellence are not implicitly privileged over others. Greater articulation and delineation of what excellent teaching and learning should look like might be desirable on the grounds of transparency and the equitable treatment of learners. Nevertheless, we note the concerns that such greater articulation might actually stifle and constrain some essential, but less tangible and less convergent, dimensions of excellence, for example, ingenuity and creativity.

We also suggest that policy-making at all levels should acknowledge that teaching and student learning are distinct, although related, phenomena. Notions of teaching and student learning could usefully be disentangled, particularly in the context of more distributed sites of learning and sources of learning support; the increasing range of (access) to learning resources; and arguably more importantly, continuing debates about forms of knowledge and knowledge construction, and the increasing recognition being given to learners' own roles in knowledge production (and particularly work-based learners).

We suggest there is an onus on policy makers and higher education institutions to promote greater public understanding of league tables and alternative sources of information about higher education. There is also an argument for codifying good practice in the compilation of rankings as a reference point for both compilers and users of league tables. Further, rankings aimed at prospective students to inform them about programme choice need to find better indicators of the degree and depth of learning. The ratios of students to teachers, and even the number of contact hours, give little clue to this. Satisfaction and opinion surveys offer little more, because those asked are rarely perfectly informed experts on what they are being invited to judge and cannot compare all academic departments. Moreover, current rankings do not feature many of the socially valued outcomes of higher education that may concern students and other stakeholders. For example, the environmental impact of institutions, how they interact with their local communities, and their contributions to sport, wellbeing and accessibility.

Conclusions

Excellence in teaching and learning is not a meaningless concept, for it is employed by a wide range of actors and for many different purposes. Indeed, we might say it is bursting with too much meaning. But these meanings are various and contested, and should be clarified by those who employ the term and analysed by critics and sceptics. Claims for excellence must be supported by evidence, and not made simply on the basis of perceived reputation and status. However, such notions have become dominant in many countries, including the UK. There should be no monopoly on notions of excellence, derived from government policy statements, guides to university rankings or universities' own promotional material. Judgements of excellence need to be more closely related to purpose, mission and even, perhaps, values. Where the purpose is learning and the stimulation of creativity and originality, our notions of excellence should seek to reflect this, and not confine us to conceptions more associated with elite and exclusive forms of higher education.

Ideas about the knowledge society might suggest that, rather than concentrating excellence in knowledge creation and learning in a few 'elite' centres, it ought to be dispersed among many institutions and networked, and embrace notions of learners as co-producers of knowledge, so that the majority of the population can gain access to it, whether or not they are privileged enough to attend in person.

In fact, rather than pursuing excellence (however it is differently defined to suit a diversity of institutional and student purposes) by narrowing down conceptions which, by their very nature, can only be attained by a few learners, a better approach to enhancing learning and teaching in a diverse and expanded system might be one that ensures that it is 'good enough' **for all** who choose to participate.

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