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MONITORING AND MEASURING TEACHING EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: FROM CONTRIVED COMPETITION TO COLLECTIVE COLLABORATION

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016 the British government introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). In the lead up to the TEF, the quality of teaching in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had come in for criticism by some in government circles, notably David Willetts the Minister of State for Universities and Science from 2010 to 2014, who claimed that teaching was 'by far the weakest aspect of English higher education' and was an area in urgent need of monitoring and improvement (Gill, 2015). Both Willetts and his incumbent Jo

1 Johnson asserted the need for HE teaching to adopt a more
2 evidence-based approach to practice akin to that associated
3 with research. Yet, ironically, neither drew on any such evi-
4 dence to support their critiques, relying instead on unsubstan-
5 tiated assumptions and anecdotes.

6 As further justification for the introduction of the TEF, the
7 government argued that it would help to identify, encourage
8 and reward excellence in teaching and as such become a key
9 lever in driving up standards across HEIs (BIS, 2016). A key
10 premise underpinning the government's argument was that if
11 teaching were to be considered of equal value to research,
12 then an equivalent scheme to the Research Excellence
13 Framework (REF) would need to be established to enable the **AU:2**
14 monitoring and measurement of the quality of teaching
15 across individual HEIs. In keeping with its adherence to neo-
16 liberal policy making, the government thus decided that for
17 the TEF to achieve its desired outcomes, it was important to
18 create the conditions for free market competition amongst
19 providers, which would, in the government's eyes, naturally
20 result in each HEI striving for excellence in teaching.

21 It is fair to say that the reaction to the TEF of those work-
22 ing in the sector has been mixed to date. Whilst some wel-
23 come it as overdue acknowledgement of the importance of
24 teaching and its perceived undervaluing compared to research
25 in universities, others are more sceptical of the rationale for
26 its creation and its underlying purpose(s). On the one hand,
27 some see the TEF as an opportunity for a greater focus and
28 investment in teaching. On the other hand, there are those
29 who regard it as yet another example of the marketisation of
30 HE and a continuing neoliberal agenda to impose free market
31 principles and practices on the sector. The reliance on the use
32 of a core set of metrics (see below for further discussion) that
33 have contested and tenuous links to teaching quality has been
the target of criticism of many commentators, not to mention

1 the adoption of a one-size-fits-all framework that seems ill-
2 equipped to consider HEIs' differing contexts and cultures. In
3 discussing the current obsession with national and interna-
4 tional league tables and the wider role of universities, Collini
5 (2012) is critical of the rationale for the creation of schemes
6 like the TEF, along with the overreliance on reductive statisti-
7 cal data valued by so many senior leaders and policy makers:

8 *The second force is the growing distrust of reasoned*
9 *argument, now often seen as a cloak for special*
10 *interests or a form of elitist arrogance, and the sub-*
11 *stitution in its place of any kind of indicator that can*
12 *plausibly be reduced to numerical terms. The latter*
13 *possess the aura of both precision and objectivity*
14 *and so, when joined with the assumption about com-*
15 *petition, can generate a definitive ranking. (p. 17)*

16 Collini raises important questions about the role and
17 impact of marketised competition in the work of universities
18 and how they are judged and valued by others in society.
19 Added to this is the nature of the evidence relied upon to
20 assess the quality and/or effectiveness of their work, what it
21 actually reveals about the work in question and its impact on
22 institutions and individuals alike. These are issues that will be
23 explored throughout this chapter.

24 DEFINING TEACHING EXCELLENCE

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29 Is it possible to talk about teaching excellence in HE in a
30 generic sense? Excellent for whom, for what purpose and
31 when? Excellence is a ubiquitous term that permeates the dis-
32 course of education policy and practice. There is no shortage
33 of speeches and publications in which politicians and policy
makers proclaim the importance of creating, capturing and

1 championing excellence in education, but rarely is the term
interrogated or defined. As Collini (2012, p. 109) argues,
3 there is a 'vacuity' associated with the term when used in the
context of policy debates about raising standards and
5 improving quality:

7 *... there is no such thing as excellence in the abstract,*
and it only makes sense as a descriptive term when
9 *there is a) agreement about the character and worth*
of the relevant activity in the first place, and b) some
11 *agreed means of arriving at comparative judgements*
of how far any one instance embodies more of that
13 *worth.*

15 Despite the differing perspectives and focus of each of the
chapters in this book, the difficulty of defining excellence in
17 teaching is something that is acknowledged by each author.
Yet given the diversity and complexity of the sector, it should
19 come as no surprise to anyone involved in HE that agreeing
on a standardised definition of teaching excellence should be
21 so problematic. It is precisely because teaching is a complex,
multi-faceted and contextually dependent process that reach-
23 ing a consensus on a common definition in a specified context
is an incredibly difficult task, let alone extending this to a
25 country's education system or even more widely internation-
ally. As stated in the previous chapter, the best we can then
27 therefore hope to achieve is to establish a general set of princi-
ples that might act as a central reference point. But what might
29 these principles look like? Here is where it can be useful to
draw on relevant education research. And what could be more
31 appropriate to start with than cognate work in the field by the
chair of the TEF assessment panel, Professor Chris Husbands?

33 In a report entitled *What makes great pedagogy? Nine*
claims from research, Husbands and Pearce (2012) examined

1 the literature on teacher effectiveness and set out nine claims
2 about what makes for great pedagogic practices drawing on
3 a range of research evidence. They concluded that:

5 *Highly successful pedagogies develop when tea-*
6 *chers make outstanding use of their understanding*
7 *of the research and knowledge-base for teaching in*
8 *order to support high-quality planning and prac-*
9 *tice. The very best teaching arises when this*
10 *research base is supplemented by a personal pas-*
11 *sion for what is to be taught and for the aspira-*
12 *tions of learners. (p. 12)*

13 Husbands and Pearce's conceptualisation of 'highly suc-
14 cessful pedagogies' accentuates the central role of research,
15 reinforcing the notion of a symbiotic relationship between
16 teaching and research. But to what extent is this borne out in
17 practice? Is what teachers do underpinned by pedagogic
18 research and if so, how is this manifested in their decision
19 making at the stages of planning, delivery and assessment? In
20 the schools' sector, the emergence of virtual (e.g. Twitter) and
21 actual (e.g. TeachMeet) teacher communities in recent years
22 with a focus and interest in pedagogy has certainly triggered
23 a growth in teachers' exposure to and engagement with peda-
24 gogic research and knowledge exchange. This is ostensibly
25 because what was once reserved for members of a small,
26 restricted community (i.e. those with access to academic jour-
27 nals, conferences, etc.) has since been opened up to include
28 audiences that are much more inclusive and representative of
29 the teaching profession as a whole. However, the extent to
30 which academic staff in HE actively make use of education
31 research to inform and support their teaching practice is an
32 area of inquiry itself that would benefit from further research
33 as it is not yet fully understood.

1 The nine claims identified by Husbands and Pearce (2012)
2 in their study were as follows:

- 3 1. Effective pedagogies give serious consideration to pupil
4 voice.
- 5 2. Effective pedagogies depend on behaviour (what teachers
6 do), knowledge and understanding (what teachers know)
7 and beliefs (why teachers act as they do).
- 8 3. Effective pedagogies involve clear thinking about longer
9 term learning outcomes as well as short-term goals.
- 10 4. Effective pedagogies build on pupils' prior learning and
11 experience.
- 12 5. Effective pedagogies involve scaffolding pupil learning.
- 13 6. Effective pedagogies involve a range of techniques, includ-
14 ing whole-class and structured group work, guided learn-
15 ing and individual activity.
- 16 7. Effective pedagogies focus on developing higher order
17 thinking and metacognition, and make good use of dia-
18 logue and questioning in order to do so.
- 19 8. Effective pedagogies embed assessment for learning.
- 20 9. Effective pedagogies are inclusive and take the diverse
21 needs of a range of learners, as well as matters of student
22 equity, into account.

23 It is interesting to note the similarities between the nine
24 claims listed above and the seven aspects of teaching excel-
25 lence identified by Skelton (2004) in his work, as outlined by
26 Phil Wood in the previous chapter. The similarities between
27 these two taxonomies are made all the more interesting when
28 we consider that Skelton's work centred on the teaching of
29 adults in the HE environment, whereas Husbands and
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1 Pearce's study focused on the teaching of children in the
2 schools' sector. Thus despite these two very differing con-
3 texts, commonalities clearly exist, which would suggest a
4 core set of principles of effective teaching that may even tran-
5 scend contextual boundaries. For example, both taxonomies
6 emphasise the importance of inclusivity and the centrality of
7 considering students when it comes to making decisions
8 about the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Equally, the
9 importance of dialogue and communication is highlighted as
10 a crucial element of teacher–student interaction, which itself
11 needs to be underpinned by the teacher having a sound
12 understanding of pedagogy and theories of learning.
13 Furthermore, this common core of principles is echoed in the
14 findings of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme
15 (TLRP), the largest and lengthiest study ever conducted into
16 teaching and learning in the United Kingdom (see James &
17 Pollard, 2011).

18 When asked to discuss *What is excellent teaching?* as part
19 of a 2016 conference workshop, members of university teach-
20 ing staff from a range of different disciplines and faculties
21 commented that the key starting point for their group discus-
22 sion was how excellence was often perceived as a challenging
23 and contested term amongst academics. Especially for those
24 working in or with a background in education, where it is a
25 term that has become part of a colonised discourse associated
26 with external agencies such as Ofsted; a marketised term that
27 lacks clarity and shifts according to the role and purpose of
28 its user. At the same time, it is one that projects a particular
29 conceptualisation of the role of academic teaching staff and
30 what is expected of them by those involved and with an inter-
31 est in the teaching–learning interface.

32 An alternative term suggested by some education and
33 health practitioners was that of teaching being 'fit for pur-
34 pose'. In other words, the extent to which the teaching

1 approach adopted by academic staff best meets the needs of
2 their students and what they are required or expected to do
3 with what they are taught.

4 The identities and backgrounds of students emerged as a
5 key driver for making decisions about excellence in teaching
6 as there was a consensus around the notion that 'excellent
7 teachers' shape and adapt their teaching according to their
8 students' needs, once again echoing some of the research find-
9 ings. It was also acknowledged that external agents such as
10 examiners and moderators have an important role to play in
11 terms of stimulating discussion on the 'best practice' that they
12 have identified in their capacity as independent assessors.

13 Table 4.1 captures an indicative sample of the partici-
14 pants' comments. Overall, it was interesting to note that
15 many of the key discussion points to emerge from this inter-
16 disciplinary workshop on teaching excellence resonated with
17 findings from recent cognate literature and research in HE
18 (e.g. Greatbatch & Holland, 2016; Skelton, 2004). In particu-
19 lar, the importance of engaging with and responding to
20 students' needs, as well as the changing nature of conceptuali-
21 sations of excellence, contextually and temporally.

22 A further confounding variable in defining excellence in
23 teaching that has received little attention in recent debates is
24 identifying what actually constitutes teaching in the HE envi-
25 ronment. Teaching in HE has moved a substantial way from
26 the traditional lecturing mode that has been associated with
27 the sector for so long. Yet as the following chapter in this
28 book points out in drawing on the work of Gunn and Fisk
29 (2013), there is a 'lack of sophistication in the conceptualisa-
30 tion of university teaching excellence' (p. 7). Nowadays HE
31 teaching typically involves a multitude of differing scenarios,
32 sites, interactions and agents, particularly in the case of
33 practice-based courses that incorporate work-based place-
ments and are invariably influenced by the requirements of

Table 4.1. Academic Staff Perceptions of Teaching Excellence.

- *Excellence is subjective and inevitably influenced by students' contributions*
 - *'Excellence' involves differentiation and assessment variation*
 - *At the heart of excellence is the value of subject knowledge and experience*
 - *An excellent teacher should engender excellent learning and engage students' attention*
 - *A variety of styles; mindful of students' preferred ways to learn/engage*
 - *Passionate about your subject and being able to transmit that passion to students*
 - *Listening to what students want to learn and incorporating this into the course, whilst managing their expectations*
 - *'Excellent teaching' uses engaging models such as flipped classroom, Practice-Based Learning and simulation*
 - *'Excellent teaching' includes multidisciplinary teams such as inter-professional learning*
 - *Students feel that although education may challenge them, they feel supported and safe during that process*
 - *Praxis: theory and practice*
 - *Excellence changes over time!*
 - *Inspiring and transformative*
 - *Passion and enthusiasm coupled with a sound grounding of knowledge and a good evidence base*
-

professional regulatory bodies. Whilst environments and roles inevitably differ across subject specific courses and institutions, it is possible to identify some of the common features

1 of teaching across a range of disciplines and programmes.
 2 Table 4.2 seeks to capture some of these indicative features
 3 of HE teaching.

4 Many of the features discussed in Table 4.2 might be con-
 5 sidered to come under the broad category of 'procedural'
 6 aspects of teaching. But another lens through which many
 7

8 **Table 4.2. Indicative Features of HE Teaching.**

Indicative features of HE teaching	Examples/illustrations
Multiple staff-student teaching dynamics	Tutorials, one-to-one support meetings, small groups, seminar groups, lectures
Multiple sites	On site/campus (e.g. lecture theatres, classrooms, IT suites, laboratories, studios); off-site (e.g. colleges, schools, community, work-based placements) and digital/online (e.g. webinars, VLEs, Skype calls)
Multiple educators	University tutors, work-based mentors, community educators, learning support staff, peer support
Multiple learning events	Lectures, seminars, tutorials, conferences, supervisions, work-based placements, research cafes, group study
Multiple relationships	Staff-students, staff-staff, students-students, students-employers
Contextualising knowledge and skills	Application of subject specific knowledge and skills to the practice-based contexts; linking theory and practice
Critical reflection	Critical reflection on practice, professional learning and self-learning
Updating professional knowledge and skills	Keeping abreast of pedagogical, subject and technological developments

1 teachers view their work is that of the purpose or function of
teaching. Over the course of the last two years, I have worked
3 with hundreds of teachers across different sectors (primary
and secondary schools, further and adult education colleges
5 and universities). In our discussions about their perceptions
of their role as teachers, patterns have emerged that overlap
7 different contexts, yet equally individual interpretations have
differed greatly not just within one sector but a single institu-
9 tion. At one end of the continuum there are those who view
teaching from a subject-/content-specific perspective and talk
11 about it as being about explaining, communicating and trans-
mitting (subject) knowledge and skills. At the other end of
13 the continuum are those who view it through a more human-
istic lens with the personal development of the student as the
15 key focus and thus see their role as more about nurturing and
inspiring an inquisitiveness amongst their students. But, of
17 course, many practitioners position themselves somewhere in
the middle of that continuum.

19 In short, whatever particular focus we choose to adopt
when discussing teaching, it is clear that we are dealing with
21 a process that is incredibly complex; a process that does not
naturally lend itself to being neatly categorised according to
23 an inherently reductive term like ‘excellence’, as it can only
serve to dilute and simplify that complexity rather than
25 attempt to capture or understand it. Although the discussion
above has highlighted that there are some core principles or
27 features of effective teaching that may be pertinent to differ-
ent sites and contexts, creating systems or frameworks to cap-
29 ture evidence of this for the purposes of monitoring and/or
measuring this activity is a different matter altogether. This
31 brings us on to discussing current approaches to evidencing
teaching excellence in HE, considering how fit for purpose
33 they are and how we might make better use of them to fur-
ther our understanding.

EVIDENCING TEACHING EXCELLENCE IN HE: TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING AHEAD

The four subsections that follow discuss key sources of data used in HEIs to monitor and measure the quality of teaching and critically reflect on what each source actually reveals about teaching excellence. Some of these include the core metrics used in the TEF, along with other benchmarking data widely used across the sector. Whilst data from the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) are listed as one of the core metrics of the TEF, I have decided not to include them in this discussion as I do not believe they reveal any discernible findings about the quality of HE teaching, nor were they originally designed to serve this particular purpose. As mentioned in the opening chapter, students themselves remain sceptical about the inclusion of the DLHE data in the TEF on the basis that 'graduate employability is not a measure of teaching quality' (Greatbatch & Holland, 2016, p. 6). Arguably, however, the NSS and student feedback in general have a more credible contribution to make to discussions about teaching excellence than the DLHE survey as they provide a platform for students to articulate their views on the perceived impact of teaching on their learning experience, regardless of the flaws associated with data sets like the NSS and the methods used to collect them.

Student Voice and Teaching Quality

Student voice has become a powerful force in HE. Although government policy has increasingly conceptualised and branded students as consumers in recent years, there is a growing bank of research across education sectors that highlights the important contribution that student consultation

1 can make to bringing about improvements to teaching qual-
2 ity. For example, Niemi, Heikkinen, and Kannas (2010)
3 argue that ‘involving students ... in educational decision-
4 making, and listening seriously to ... their stories of experiences
5 as learners [are] essential first steps in developing education’
6 (2010, p. 139). Similarly, Healey, Flint, and Harrington
7 (2014) put forward a strong case for student engagement and
8 building partnerships between staff and students where both
9 parties stand to gain from reciprocal learning.

10 In the current marketised climate, the influence of student
11 voice on HE policy and decision making continues to grow,
12 which means that HEIs have to consider carefully how they
13 engage with and respond to their students. Ever since the
14 advent of the National Student Survey (NSS)¹ in 2005, its
15 stock value has risen rapidly. With the subsequent introduc-
16 tion of higher tuition fees and the reduction in HEFCE fund-
17 ing, universities have come to attach greater importance to
18 the results of the NSS. So concerned are some HEIs with
19 maximising NSS response rates that they have created specific
20 posts to reinforce its importance and the need for students to
21 complete it. Furthermore, the current minister of state for
22 universities and science, Jo Johnson, declared that one of the
23 reasons for the need to introduce the TEF was because of the
24 perceived decline in student satisfaction scores, continuing
25 the prioritisation of student satisfaction above all else as a
26 proxy for teaching quality epitomised in the Browne review
27 of HE (2010) that identified student choice as the key driver
28 for improvement. Yet HEFCE’s own review of the NSS,
29 which was carried out in 2016, contradicted the govern-
30 ment’s claims of a decline, instead revealing a steady increase
31 in student satisfaction score with the overall satisfaction at
32 87% (HEFCE, 2016).

33 Whilst universities and student bodies have focused a lot
of attention on marketing and promoting the NSS to date,

1 less attention has been given to how best to engage students
with the process of evaluation and the evidence they draw on
3 to ensure that their responses are suitably informed and rep-
resent a balanced and accurate reflection of their university
5 experiences. The National Union of Students (NUS) has
acknowledged that many students neglect the survey, largely
7 because they do not realise the significance and impact of
their responses. Student leaders have therefore concentrated
9 on raising awareness, with a view to maximising response
rates as results are only published for those courses where the
11 response rate hits the minimum threshold of 50%. But, in the
context of the TEF, it inevitably raises the question of how
13 well-equipped students are to comment on aspects of peda-
gogic and subject knowledge expertise. How do we know,
15 for example, that their responses are not based on superficial
and arbitrary criteria such as the lecturer's personality and
17 whether or not they like them rather than an informed under-
standing of subject knowledge or learning and teaching as a
19 whole?

One of the criticisms of the NSS is that it stifles and even
21 penalises innovative and challenging teaching, with some
studies suggesting that students report greater satisfaction
23 rates on courses where they are less likely to be taken out of
their comfort zone and exposed to teaching and assessments
25 that challenge them or get them to take risks (e.g. Poropat,
2014). In an increasingly competitive market and given the
27 financial commitment associated with university study nowa-
days, it is perhaps unsurprising that students may seek to
29 minimise risk to the outcome of what has undoubtedly
become a high-stakes assessment, i.e. their final degree classi-
31 fication. Yet ironically, when it comes to teaching excellence,
innovation and experimentation are commonly acknowl-
33 edged as key features (e.g. Gunn and Fisk, 2013). Besides,
being challenged and unsettled in one's thinking has

1 traditionally been a distinctive quality of university educa-
2 tion, as Barnett (1990) reminds us:

3 *A genuine higher learning is subversive in the sense*
4 *of subverting the student's taken-for-granted world,*
5 *including the world of endeavour, scholarship, cal-*
6 *culatation or creativity, into which he or she has been*
7 *initiated. A genuine higher education is unsettling; it*
8 *is not meant to be a cosy experience. It is disturbing*
9 *because, ultimately, the student comes to see that*
10 *things could always be other than they are. (p. 155)*

11
12 Understandably students are key agents in the learning
13 and teaching process and as such have an important contri-
14 bution to make in sharing their views about their learning
15 experiences, but the extent to which they can be expected to
16 produce a fair, valid and reliable assessment of the quality of
17 teaching is an important issue that needs to be unearthed
18 more thoroughly in HEIs. Recent research into the use of
19 classroom observation in post-compulsory education settings,
20 for example, has highlighted how difficult it is even for the
21 most highly experienced observers working with tried and
22 tested assessment criteria over a sustained period of time to
23 make valid and reliable assessments of teaching
24 (e.g. O'Leary, 2013; O'Leary & Wood, 2016). This is an
25 area that is discussed in greater detail below but suffice to say
26 that there are interesting parallels between the role of stu-
27 dents as respondents of their learning experience and that of
28 academic staff evaluating teaching.

29
30 Professor Chris Husbands, the first chair of the TEF
31 assessment panel has openly stated that he '[does] not think
32 student satisfaction is an accurate proxy for teaching quality'
33 and that NSS scores 'will have only a limited impact' on the
overall assessment and subsequent grading of institutions,

1 although he refused to discount them from the assessment
framework (Grove, 2017). I agree with Husbands to the
3 extent that student satisfaction per se cannot and should not
be regarded as an 'accurate proxy for teaching quality' but at
5 the same time student voice is integral to developing a more
enlightened understanding of the learning–teaching interface,
7 regardless of policy agendas like the TEF and the political
motives for such initiatives. Thus it is not a case of *should*
9 students play a part in informing current thinking and prac-
tice but *how* they should do so and how best academics
11 might work in partnership with them.

There is a need for more transparent dialogue amongst
13 HEI staff and students as to what the nature and purpose of
the NSS are, why it is important to gather feedback on their
15 experiences and the impact of that data on the experiences of
future students. Both parties need to approach the process as
17 a catalyst for generating meaningful, reciprocal discussion
about wider issues relating to the students' engagement with
19 and reaction to their teaching and how this impacts on the
student learning experience as a whole.

21 The first part of the NSS asks students about the quality of
teaching, assessment and feedback. Surely these are aspects of
23 practice that students and staff need to be engaged in ongoing
discussions about throughout the course? Starting a dialogue
25 with students from the beginning of their course about teach-
ing, assessment and feedback is crucial to developing an
27 understanding of their learning experiences and in turn build-
ing a partnership between the two key protagonists involved
29 in the interrelated processes of learning and teaching.

To stimulate initial discussion, lecturers could start by giv-
31 ing their students an insight into why they choose to employ
particular teaching styles or what they consider to be the
33 most effective ways of providing feedback. This should not
be presented in a vacuum purely to prepare students for the

1 NSS, but should be embedded into live courses so that the
discussion is put into context and resonates with students.
3 For example, we could ask students what they think about
the assessment methods used on their course. Are they an
5 effective means of testing and developing their knowledge,
understanding and skills? What do they think about the qual-
7 ity of the feedback they receive? What do they do with that
feedback and does it help to further their understanding? As
9 part of such discussion, students should be given the opportu-
nity to put forward their opinions, ask questions and seek
11 clarification with a view to them feeling a genuine sense of
inclusion in the ongoing development of the curriculum.

13 This type of open, reciprocal dialogue between staff and
students is fundamental. Without it universities risk students
15 basing their responses to the NSS or any other survey on
teaching not on an informed understanding of the complex
17 decision-making processes that teaching staff invariably
undergo when planning, delivering and assessing a pro-
19 gramme of study, but on a hunch or an individual preference.
As we shall see below when discussing teaching observations,
21 this can equally be used for lecturers to reflect on their own
practice both with their peers and students. For example, do
23 they have a particular philosophy of learning and teaching?
How does this impact on the way they plan, deliver and eval-
25 uate their own teaching? Are they aware of how effective
their teaching is? How do they monitor this?

27 Students undoubtedly have a vital role to play in contrib-
uting to a greater understanding of and helping to bring
29 about improvements in the quality of HE teaching. Whether
it be the representation of their voices collectively as part of
31 large data sets such as the NSS or their individual feedback to
staff, students are key agents in the teaching–learning rela-
33 tionship. Nevertheless, it is important to make sure that opi-
nions about the student experience as a whole are not

1 confused and/or conflated with the quality of teaching as a
particular element of their wider HE experience, which is a
3 criticism levelled at generic surveys like the NSS.

5 Students' HE experience extends much further than simply
the teaching they experience on their course. Wider institu-
7 tional services, support systems, communities, cultures and
indeed ethos all contribute to students' perceptions of their
9 HE experience. Besides, most students are taught by a multi-
11 tude of different academic staff during their course, which
makes it very difficult to separate out and evaluate the impact
13 that individual staff or specific modules may have had on
their overall outcomes and/or their learning experience.
15 Although the NSS is not sophisticated enough to capture
information at programme and modular level, it can act as a
17 catalyst for conversations between students and staff within
individual HEIs about their shared experiences of learning
19 and teaching. Rather than seeing it as an exercise in which
students respond as passive consumers, engaging students in
21 critical reflection and active dialogue with their peers and lec-
23 turers from early on in their courses has the potential to
transform their views of how valuable and meaningful stu-
dent voice can be to both parties.

25 Student Outcomes and Teaching Quality

27 Student record data collected by the Higher Education
Statistics Agency (HESA) form one of the core metrics of the
29 TEF. This is hardly surprising as data relating to recruitment,
retention, progression and attainment have been used for
31 monitoring and measuring the quality of educational provi-
sion across sectors for some time. But the extent to which the
33 quality of teaching in particular can be seen to impact directly
on these outcomes remains highly contestable and

1 controversial. As Gibbs (2015) has commented, ‘outcome
2 measures are strongly influenced by a raft of variables that
3 tell us nothing about institutional quality’.

4 The dominant policy discourse in schools and colleges in
5 recent years has been one that has sought to reinforce the
6 link between teaching and educational outcomes, as though
7 teaching were the only variable that matters and anything
8 else is extraneous. Agencies aligned with the state, such as the
9 Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), have played a key
10 role in driving this agenda, as indeed has the wider ‘evidence-
11 based’ movement in education that has gained considerable
12 traction in the schools’ sector in the United Kingdom and the
13 United States over the last decade. Although it is beyond the
14 scope of this chapter to discuss evidence-based education in
15 any detail, it is important to recognise its influence on educa-
16 tion policy and practice (see Biesta, 2007 for further discus-
17 sion). The positivist positionality of evidence-based practice
18 conceptualises teaching and learning as a scientific process
19 with observable and measurable correlations between the
20 input (teaching) and output (learning), but disregards the
21 importance of other factors (e.g. cultural, economic, social) in
22 understanding the relationship between the two. Yet this is
23 despite the fact that a substantial body of research has identi-
24 fied social class and cultural capital as significant variables
25 that impact on educational attainment (e.g. De Graaf, De
26 Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Sullivan, 2001).

27 In the case of student recruitment and retention, HEIs that
28 are highly selective clearly have a distinct advantage over
29 those that recruit from a wider community. The main reasons
30 why students withdraw from courses are invariably related to
31 matters other than the quality of teaching or other academic
32 issues. Furthermore, students from working class back-
33 grounds tend to be more affected by such matters than their
counterparts from (upper) middle class backgrounds, often

1 because they have to contend with a multitude of extracurricular commitments, pressures and the challenges of cultural
3 assimilation as well as their studies (e.g. Quinn, 2004). Thus, when it comes to these data being used for comparative sta-
5 tistical analyses across HEIs for the purpose of exercises like the TEF, as Holmwood, Hickey, Cohen, and Wallis (2016,
7 p. 29) assert, 'universities with a strong widening participation track record will inevitably suffer ... [as they] face being
9 blamed for forces beyond their control'.

11 In the case of student attainment, the raw completion data only capture achievement at the end point of the programme
13 of study, thus, once again, for HEIs with a significant widening participation student population, no account is taken of
15 the distance travelled from their point of entry or the value added. But surely this is a valuable variable to include in the
17 context of teaching excellence and the wider issue of student support? The transformational impact that a university edu-
19 cation can have on the lives of students from less affluent and privileged backgrounds may not necessarily be captured in
21 attainment data but that does not make it any less real or valuable for those students themselves.

23 A further shortcoming in using student attainment as a measurement of teaching quality is that it can run the risk of
25 shifting responsibility for the final outcome from students to lecturers, thus reinforcing the conceptualisation of students as
27 passive consumers rather than as active partners in their learning experience. In turn this can reconfigure notions of
29 accountability in such a way that student failure can be attributed to academic staff rather than the students them-
31 selves. This goes against the grain of the ethos and mission of HE inasmuch as it is underpinned by collaborative and recip-
33 of whom play their own vital role in shaping the outcomes of the teaching–learning relationship.

HEA Fellowship

One of the most popular and widely embraced means of recognising and accrediting excellence in professional practice and leadership in teaching and learning in UK universities in recent years is the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) fellowship scheme. The HEA was established in 2003 to provide an accreditation scheme for university teachers in the United Kingdom and in doing so it created its United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), 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.

According to its chief executive, the HEA is the 'HE sector champion of teaching quality' (Marshall, 2015), with its fellowship scheme aligned with the UKPSF, HEA fellowships offer four levels of accreditation: (1) associate fellow; (2) fellow; (3) senior fellow and (4) principal fellow. With over 86,000 individual fellows registered worldwide as of March 2017 (HEA, 2017), HEA fellowships have increasingly come to be seen by some as an important proxy for recognition of teaching competence and effectiveness. Yet the extent to which HEA fellowships can be considered a valid and/or reliable indicator of teaching quality is a matter of some debate.

Firstly, there is the issue of the methodology of the assessment and conferment of fellowship status to consider. In essence, HEA fellowships are a desk-based, paper exercise that are largely reliant on the self-narratives and supporting evidence provided by the applicants themselves. Individual applicants are required to complete a written application that demonstrates how they have achieved each of the descriptors for their respective level, along with a supporting statement(s) from other HE professionals. These applications are then evaluated by a group of accredited assessors who decide

1 whether the evidence presented in the application successfully
2 meets the established criteria, with the final decision ratified
3 by a confirmation panel. Thus the decision to award fellow-
4 ship is ostensibly based on the ability of the applicant to pres-
5 ent a convincing written case of their professional practice,
6 knowledge, skills and values. In this sense it could be argued
7 that the process is as much about the applicant's proficiency
8 in literary expression as it is about demonstrating tangible
9 evidence of excellence in teaching.

10 From an assessment perspective, there are also questions
11 to consider concerning the validity and reliability of the pro-
12 cess. Validity refers to the notion of an assessment actually
13 assessing what it purports to assess. Reliability refers to the
14 consistency and replicability of the assessment results. Thus
15 in relation to the HEA fellowship scheme, the most obvious
16 question concerning validity centres on the extent to which a
17 written form of assessment can be regarded as a suitable and
18 credible representation of one's teaching expertise. Or to
19 think of it another way, if we wanted to assess a student
20 nurse's ability to take a patient's blood pressure, would ask-
21 ing them to write an essay on the subject be the most appro-
22 priate method of assessment?

23 Secondly, given that the HEA fellowship scheme was origi-
24 nally created with a focus on learning and teaching and the
25 accreditation of HE teachers, it is interesting to note that the
26 most senior level of recognition (principal fellow) is saved for
27 those who invariably occupy the roles of senior leadership
28 and management in HE. In the previous chapter, Phil Wood
29 used the term 'codification of excellence' to refer to the fel-
30 lowship scheme. What is clear about the HEA's scheme is
31 that it enshrines a hierarchy of excellence in which strategic
32 leadership is valued more highly over teaching, at least in
33 terms of its recognition and accompanying status. This may
also explain then the HEA's role in shaping the TEF

1 framework and the decision to create an accreditation model
2 based on a gold, silver, bronze award system, which seems to
3 have originated from a proposal by the HEA itself as its chief
4 executive reported in October 2015 (Marshall, 2015) prior to
5 the publication of the HE White Paper in May of 2016.

6 The HEA fellowship may very well have been conceived
7 and created with the best intentions of raising the profile and
8 ensuring greater recognition of learning and teaching in the
9 sector. The reality is, however, that it has increasingly been
10 appropriated as a competency-based, tick-box exercise with
11 many HEIs adopting a blanket policy to push all academic
12 staff to acquire their fellowship in light of the TEF. The
13 extent to which participation in the process and the award of
14 fellowship status to individuals captures teaching excellence
15 or indeed has a tangible impact on the quality of learning and
16 teaching and the student learning experience in the institution
17 as a whole remains unclear. Another contributory factor to
18 this may be the individualistic conceptualisation of teaching
19 encapsulated in the scheme. To echo Phil Wood's thoughts in
20 the previous chapter, focusing on the 'I' rather than the 'we'
21 results in excellence becoming a competitive tool rather than
22 a collaborative signifier.

25 Observations and Teaching Quality

26 Classroom observation has long occupied a prominent place
27 in the formal assessment and development of teachers in col-
28 leges and schools in the United Kingdom. In contrast, its use
29 in HE has been less commonplace, with practice much more
30 sporadic across the sector. However, with teaching excellence
31 now firmly in the policy spotlight with the TEF, observation
32 is increasingly being employed as a quality assurance tool to
33 gather information on teaching standards and to evidence

1 staff performance across HE. But what lessons can be learnt
2 about its use elsewhere?

3 In colleges and schools, observation has come to be relied
4 upon as the main source of evidence for judging the profes-
5 sional capabilities of teachers in recent years, both internally
6 for employers and externally for government agencies. Its use
7 has largely been driven by a performance management
8 agenda, which has culminated in the creation and overreli-
9 ance on a set of reductive metrics and practices to judge the
10 overall quality of teaching and learning, typified by the cate-
11 gorisation of teachers' performance in observations against
12 some form of ranking scale (see, e.g. O'Leary, 2014).

13 Recent research on the use and impact of observation in
14 further education in England has called into question the effi-
15 cacy of using it as a performance indicator, arguing that such
16 models are invariably underpinned by a managerialist, mar-
17 ketised agenda that fails to create an authentic, meaningful
18 learning and teaching environment for students and staff
19 alike (e.g. O'Leary, 2013; O'Leary & Wood, 2016). The find-
20 ings from a large-scale study revealed that teachers regarded
21 performance management, assessment-based models of obser-
22 vation as of little relevance to their professional needs. There
23 was a consensus that such models of observation failed to
24 improve their teaching and were often a deterrent to develop-
25 ing innovations in practice. In contrast, the overwhelming
26 majority of participants agreed that low-stakes, peer-based
27 models of observation were most conducive to sustainable
28 change and professional learning and thus should be at the
29 forefront of providers' use of observation and wider profes-
30 sional development strategy (UCU, 2013). Thus there are
31 valuable lessons for HE to learn from colleges and schools
32 regarding the effective use of observation.

33 Emergent findings from an ongoing HEFCE-funded proj-
ect at Birmingham City University² reinforce the value of

1 removing observation from the context of assessment, reveal-
2 ing how it can create a safe, low-stakes environment for
3 reflection and dialogue between academic staff and students.
4 At the same time, this has also opened up new opportunities
5 for the way in which observation can be used as a lens for
6 informing understanding of effective learning and teaching.

7 The primary aim of the project has been to create an
8 authentic and sustainable collaboration between academic
9 staff and students using observation as a central reference
10 point and a tool for critical inquiry into learning and teach-
11 ing, empowering students to play an active role in shaping
12 their learning experience. The project reconceptualises and
13 reconfigures the use of observation as a method to enhance
14 learning and teaching. It repositions it from being a perfor-
15 mance management mechanism to a collaborative method of
16 inquiry in which students and lecturers co-interrogate and co-
17 reflect on their own and each other's learning and teaching
18 values and practices, with a view to reciprocally enhancing
19 their shared experiences. Crucially, the involvement of stu-
20 dents as co-observers, co-reflectors and co-researchers recon-
21 ceptualises their identity from consumers and evaluators of
22 their learning experience to co-enquirers and co-producers of
23 knowledge about HE learning and teaching.

24 In contrast to conventional models of observation that
25 focus on the performance of the individual lecturer, the proj-
26 ect adopts a holistic, case study approach, drawing on differ-
27 ent sources of evidence and methods to create a richer, more
28 triangulated understanding of practice. By involving students
29 and staff as co-researchers and co-reflectors, a greater aware-
30 ness and transparency about the effectiveness of current prac-
31 tices have emerged. Involving students and staff co-observing
32 and discussing pedagogical practices have also opened up the
33 opportunity to build a community where students and staff
collaborate on programme planning, delivery and evaluation.

1 In this sense, observation has provided a shared reference
point, which has acted as a catalyst for academic staff and
3 students to engage in dialogic interaction about their percep-
tions of learning and teaching and in so doing, reinforcing
5 the importance of collaborative inquiry. As Greatbatch and
Holland (2016) found in their recent study:

7 *Research shows the importance of considering the*
9 *micro-processes surrounding teaching and learning*
11 *such as lecturers' teaching strategies and the charac-*
teristics of university students' learning. (2016, p. 4)

13 CONCLUDING REMARKS

15 The ever-increasing marketisation and commodification of
17 HE have given rise to a dominant discourse or what Green
(2011) refers to as 'managerialese'. It is a neoliberal discourse
19 of the market underpinned by an ideology that sees businesses
(i.e. HEIs) as the providers of a service to their customers/
21 service users (i.e. students). The very term 'teaching excellence'
is an extension of that managerialist discourse, a marketised
23 misconception of the complex reality of the reciprocal
relationship between teaching and learning, and between
25 staff and students; a relationship that is characterised by
collective collaboration not individualistic one-upmanship. As
27 remarked in the previous chapter, one of the consequences of
competitive schemes like the TEF is that they accentuate the
29 importance of the individual over the collective, thus eschewing
the value of collegiality and collaboration in teaching.
31 However, the collaborative observation project discussed in
this chapter highlights the importance of seeing students as
33 partners not products in a reciprocal endeavour and the gains
that can be made for both parties in doing so.

1 Conceptualising education as a process of ‘production’ in
3 which students are the ‘products’ inevitably results in the
5 adoption of a reductionist lens, where the complexity of the
7 iterative relationships of teaching and learning is ignored.
9 Furthermore, this reductionist approach sees teaching and
11 learning as a form of instrumentalist technology in which the
13 means can be controlled and manipulated to bring about the
15 desired ends. Or in this case, establish what needs to be
17 taught (the curriculum), identify the most effective means of
19 teaching (pedagogy) and learning (theories of learning) and
21 the desired outcomes will be achieved.

23 Teaching is not a mechanical process involving the appli-
25 cation of a prescribed set of approaches or techniques in
27 order to achieve predetermined outcomes; it is a complex art
29 that is constantly evolving. The reason for that is simple and
31 rooted in the complexity of human beings and the some-
33 times unpredictable and uncontrollable way in which they
 behave and interact. As Ramsden and Callender (2014)
 point out:

*Students on a course experience the same teaching
 and the same course, but they experience them in
 different ways. Becoming aware of those differences,
 and trying to understand them, is the key to improv-
 ing students’ experiences of learning. (p. 41)*

 How any given student interprets information presented
 to them by a teacher and what they then choose to do with
 that information is largely dependent on: (1) how the teacher
 chooses to present and communicate the information and (2)
 how each learner makes sense of the experience. Thus there is
 a reciprocal filter at play in the relationship between teaching
 (input) and learning (output) which makes it very difficult for
 either party to anticipate and to prepare for with a high

1 degree of certainty, despite what evidence-based approaches
2 to education might have us believe.

3 Regardless of where and what students choose to study,
4 their HE learning experience is inevitably determined by a
5 range of factors, of which the quality of teaching is only one.
6 There are many other economic, social and cultural factors
7 that impact on their experience so any tool for assessing qual-
8 ity and identifying excellence needs to take account of these
9 different and complex variables before an authentic and
10 meaningful judgement can be made about the quality of
11 teaching in any HEI. Whether the current TEF is designed or
12 indeed is capable of doing this remains a moot point, but this
13 should not stop everyone with an interest in HE from con-
14 tinuing to strive for a framework that is fair and equitable.

15 It is too early yet to know whether the TEF and the cur-
16 rent focus on the quality of teaching will have a tangible and/
17 or lasting impact on learning and teaching across HE or sim-
18 ply turn out to be a reform that results in the creation of new
19 layers of accountability initiatives and QA mechanisms.
20 What we do know, however, is that there are valuable lessons
21 for the HE sector to learn from the schools' improvement
22 agenda about the counterproductive effects of relying too
23 heavily on the use of metrics to assess and performance man-
24 age educational provision. We need to focus less on publicly
25 identifying excellence and more on understanding and devel-
26 oping effective and authentic practice. Whilst recognition and
27 reward schemes may act as short-term incentives, there is lit-
28 tle evidence that they lead to long-term, sustainable improve-
29 ment either individually or institutionally. This is something
30 that comes from supporting not sorting staff. Ultimately, the
31 most meaningful and sustainable indicators of the quality of
32 teaching do not come from external inspection of validation,
33 but through the nurturing of an institution's staff, along with

1 a commitment on the part of those staff to want to continu-
3 ously reflect and improve on what they do.

5 NOTES

7 1. The NSS is a survey of all final-year degree students at
9 institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The
11 survey is designed to assess students' opinions of the qual-
13 ity of their degree programmes, with seven different scores
15 published including an 'overall satisfaction' mark.

17 2. *Improving learning and teaching through collaborative*
19 *observation* is an 18-month project funded by the Higher
21 Education Funding Council for England taking place in
23 the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences at
25 Birmingham City University from November 2016 to
27 April 2018. The project consists of five case studies from
29 different subject areas across the faculty.

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