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Exploring Good Teaching Practices and Needs for Improvement: Implications for Staff Development*

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ESPLORARE LE BUONE PRATICHE DIDATTICHE
ALL'UNIVERSITÀ E I BISOGNI DI MIGLIORAMENTO:
IMPLICAZIONI PER LO SVILUPPO DELLA FORMAZIONE
DEI DOCENTI

ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a study that mapped academics' teaching excellences, needs and areas for improvement to tailor educational staff development initiatives. Academics from seven Italian universities (Bari, Camerino, Catania, Florence, Foggia, Genoa, Turin)

* The authors collegially contributed to the research as well as to the preparation of the paper, however E. Felisatti wrote the Introduction; D. Aquario wrote the paragraph 1 and 4.1; A. Serbati is author of the paragraph 2; O. Paccagnella wrote the paragraph 3.3 and 5; L. Da Re is author of the paragraph 3.1 and 3.2. The paragraph 4.2 was written by D. Aquario, A. Serbati and L. Da Re; the paragraph 6 was written by E. Felisatti and A. Serbati.

completed a survey that included three open-ended questions, aimed at exploring innovative practices, critical aspects and types of desired support. The study involved 7.278 professors who received the survey; 4.289 completed the main questionnaire, with a response rate of about 59%. Academics' answers were analyzed by content analysis through the software Atlas.ti. For each question, results offer a wide picture of main elements mentioned by respondents. This experience represents an integrated systemic initiative using research to inform practices, promoting a shared culture of teaching and learning in higher education, that is critical for the vitality of the academic environment, as well as a scholarly approach aimed at valuing teaching and identifying tailored strategies to improve it. In fact, content analysis allowed researchers to design a multi-level action plan, taking into account three different stages: an institutional level, an inter-institutional one, and a national one.

Keywords: Content analysis; Higher education; Staff development; Teaching excellences; Teaching needs.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions around the world are being called to re-think their educational approaches to promote quality in teaching and learning. In the document *Fostering quality teaching in higher education: Policies and practices* (Henard & Roseveare, 2012), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) urges support for quality teaching through the total commitment of countries and universities. The High Level Group on the Modernization of Higher Education (2013) emphasizes the need of a strategy aimed at enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. In the recent *Paris communiqué* (EHEA, 2018) European Ministers confirmed a formal commitment for pedagogical training and continuous professional development of university teachers.

In the Italian context, academic community and careers are still mainly research oriented, whereas teaching is often considered as a duty that does not require specific preparation, in contrast to research training in doctoral and post-doctoral programs. Despite this, in recent years there is increased attention and interest in teaching and staff development. This is due mainly to two phenomena. Firstly, the use of new indicators established by the National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) in the evaluation and periodic accreditation of the courses and institutions. Secondly, the 635/2016 Ministerial Decree instituted for the first time a three-year planning process with funds for institutions to improve staff development and quality of teaching.

Besides these two «top-down» initiatives, a few «bottom-up» initiatives emerged in recent years. The University of Padua was a pioneer in implementing a first pilot project, aimed at analyzing teachers' beliefs, practices and needs, then followed by the development of a network of seven Italian Universities with the aim of establishing a national systemic approach to educational development, sustained by research and scholarship, as explained in detail below.

1. THE DEBATE AROUND GOOD TEACHING PRACTICES: AN OVERVIEW

What is meant by «teaching» and/or «teacher» *excellence*? What is *good* or *effective* teaching? How *quality* in higher education could be defined? An extensive literature exists around these questions trying to develop frameworks or taxonomies for a shared understanding of what constitutes good, excellent, effective or quality teaching in higher education. Although widely found in most countries' policy documents, concepts of *excellence*, as well as the ones of *quality*, are subject to debate: a clear and agreed consensus still lacks on the way these concepts are defined and operationalized.

In fact, different understandings of *teaching excellence* abound and the literature suggests it is an ambiguous term (Gunn & Fisk, 2013). Also *quality* is a broader term with different meanings, referring to individual student performance, the output of an educational program, the student learning experience or teaching. Moreover, some researchers argue that quality can never be fully grasped and appraised, since their conceptions are «stakeholder relative»: students, teachers or evaluation agencies do not share the definition of «quality» (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008).

However, over the past three decades, a great deal has been written on what constitutes «good teaching» in higher education. The literature (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003) stresses that «good teachers» or «best teachers» have empathy for students, they are generally experienced teachers and most of them are organized and expressive. They expect «more» from their students and they favor objectives that *embody the kind of thinking and acting expected for life* (Bain, 2004, p. 17). «Excellent teachers» have passions: for learning, for their field, for teaching and for their students. «Effective teaching» is understood as teaching that is oriented to and focused on students and their learning. Moreover, there are two broadly accepted components of highly effective university teaching: on one side, it requires a set of particular skills for cultivating

relationships based on openness and trust in students. On the other side, the effective teaching is *never completely satisfied*: these teachers evaluate their own efforts and make appropriate changes, they are learners and *constantly trying to improve their efforts to foster students' development, and never completely satisfied with what they had already achieved* (Bain, 2004, p. 20).

As a result of their wide review of empirical evidence, Chickering and Gamson concluded that successful teachers includes the following pedagogical principles in their work: (i) encouraging contacts between students and faculty; (ii) developing reciprocity and cooperation among students; (iii) using active learning techniques; (iv) giving prompt feedback; (v) emphasizing time on task; (vi) communicating high expectations; (vii) respecting diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Nevertheless, research also demonstrates that good teaching depends on what is being taught and other situational factors (Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008; Young & Shaw, 1999). Consensus in a definition of good teaching may not be possible because it depends on characteristics such as type of subject, class size, student ability and assessment practices. All university teaching takes place in a context and such contexts vary enormously across departments, faculties and institutions, with consequential influence on what might be understood as good teaching.

Moreover, the literature shows also that teaching in higher education is a complex endeavor, because it involves much more than what happens in a classroom or on-line. For instance, it includes planning, attention for the context, content knowledge, being a learner, and above all, reflective approach towards teaching and learning (Trigwell, 2001). The teacher must ensure that course design, selection of teaching and learning opportunities and assessment processes foster students' learning and critical and creative thinking. As stated in the Report to the European Commission (High Level Group on the Modernization of Higher Education, 2013), the best teaching helps students to challenge their preconceptions, by putting them in a situation in which their preconceived ideas do not work and in which they come to see themselves as authors of answers, as agents of responsibility for change.

In addition, some authors point that, although all these elements are relevant for a good practice, what seems to identify excellent teachers is that this process continues throughout their career: they never stop thinking about how to be better teachers, and listening and responding to their students (Trigwell, 2001). Brew (2007) adds that teaching excellence is about importance of progressively integrating research and teaching and encouraging a culture of inquiry to improve learning experience.

As showed, numerous attempts have been made, but there is no universally accepted definition of effective university teaching, so that Skelton

(2005, p. 11) affirm that it is a *contested concept*. This is due mostly to the complex nature of teaching and to the heterogeneity of approaches, together with the need to take context into account and discuss the role of the university in the society when defining excellence (*excellence is at the heart of debates about what the contemporary university stands for and what it is attempting to achieve*, Skelton, 2007, p. 257). The idea of «teaching excellence» as a monolithic concept capable of being reduced to a set of outcome indicators is questionable. We suggest a need for a more nuanced understanding (Skelton, 2005; Wood & Su, 2017) which recognizes the ethical and relational aspects of the concept viewed through different lenses and understood and enacted in different ways by different individuals. This understanding is at the basis of fostering change process: before trying to foster change, a higher education institution should previously consider what it currently regards as teaching excellence and review how the institution works (Skelton, 2005). More pedagogical research needs to be undertaken to support teaching and learning in higher education (Yorke, 2000).

Based on these premises and in accordance with Nixon (2007, p. 22) when he says that *excellence is a process of growth, development and flourishing; it is not just an endpoint*, our study has focused on the professional academics' perspectives about what is *good* in their own experience and practice (and what deserves attention and improvement) in order to sustain staff development initiatives.

2. NEEDS ANALYSIS AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Higher education institutions face challenging transformation in the age of network, such as changing roles in academia, growing focus on student success, changing nature of teaching and learning. In this changing landscape, it becomes crucial for higher education institutions to equip their employees with knowledge and skills required to be competent in their job roles (Dierdorff & Surface, 2008). Therefore, staff development initiatives are important strategies to support teachers' continuous growth and learning, not only in United Kingdom, Australia and United States, where there is a long faculty development tradition, but all over the world. These programs not only contribute to institutional strategic initiatives (Austin, 2011) and public institutions accountability, but also offer concrete and relevant support for teaching quality improvement.

Postareff and Lindblom-Ylänne (2008) identified four broad categories of teaching, namely the teaching process, the learning environment,

the conception of learning and the pedagogical development. It is interesting to notice that professional development was mentioned by teachers involved in the study as one key point in their description of teaching; a pedagogical reflection and awareness seemed to represent an important element to better foster students' learning.

Sorcinielli *et al.* (2006) argued that one model of educational development would not be appropriate across all institutions because local needs, factors and priorities should be taken into account. Authors provided broad recommendations for educational developers: promoting professional preparation and development; informing practice with scholarship; aligning training action with institutional missions; linking individual and institutional needs; considering carefully context matters and organisational culture; recognising faculty diversity and involving everyone in developmental initiatives.

As in industrial training world, one key element in designing educational development activities is to address both organisational needs, consistently with the academic vision, and individual needs, avoiding offering the same solution to diverse needs (Naris & Ukper, 2009).

The recent report by The Higher Education Academy (Locke *et al.*, 2016) investigated motivations, careers, and staff development needs of academics in relation to their career progression and the balance of teaching, learning support, research and other university duties. Using case studies of different universities across UK, authors draw some common emerging themes. With regard to needs assessment and analysis, it was clear the importance to carefully tailor faculty development programs on individual needs, with targeted support at appropriate time, rather than proposing formal in-house or external initiatives. Interviewees highlighted that opportunities to receive constructive specific feedback or support for the portfolio preparation are very relevant as they offer concrete support for personal improvement. Sharing current good practices and discussion with peers was also seen as a crucial activity by participants. One key finding of this HEA report is that staff development should be a partnership between institutions and individuals, because if staff perceives it as a requirement, the risk of resistance or low attendance will increase (Di Napoli, 2014). The importance of rigor and accountability of teaching and learning calls for training activities aligned with institutional strategies. However, a culture of teaching excellence as growing and continuous process, as described above, requires a direct involvement of academics' voices.

Despite a large amount of literature regarding staff development, the phase of needs assessment and analysis is relatively under-theorised.

As Rae (1997) stated, development needs analysis is required in many diverse situations, such as for new staff hired in the institution, for current

staff when new tasks are introduced or when specific problems have to be solved, for specific teachers in a perspective of continuous improvement of their practices and methodologies. Wisker (2003) highlights also that a needs analysis can focus on different elements. Indeed, the aims of carrying out this assessment can be gathering a description of job specific requirements; understanding what the employees think they need to improve; understanding the skills needed to undertake the job. Often the objective of the needs analysis can be to acknowledge the gap between professors' skills and those required by the job as well as to gain an idea of the activities that can be implemented to fill this gap (i.e. Roberts, 2018).

According to Wisker (2003), intuitive analyses that educational developers used to carry out in the past before designing programs are not anymore sufficient: more structured strategies to gather teachers' needs should be implemented. In this way, the priority of the university could be matched with perceptions, beliefs, needs expressed by staff and the program could really be integrated in staff daily life and perceived like part of a shared culture and strategy.

As Neal and Peed-Neal (2010) stated, the most used method of needs analysis is needs assessment or interest assessment survey. Authors recommend using on-line survey with two to five questions in order to have good and reliable response rates, using simple language, asking only for information relevant for program goals setting, avoiding tendentious sentences and including always open-ended questions. Other possible forms to gather information about staff needs are workshop evaluations, where participants can express their preferences, and focus group, useful to collect more in depth-information possibly at school or departmental level. Individual interviews and observations are also useful tools for detailed information, although they are more time-consuming.

Surveys and other needs assessment instruments offer important insights in teachers wants and needs, however, it is unlikely that they can fully represent the institutional culture. The suggestion is therefore to combine quantitative and qualitative data, as well as to collect informal information about interactions, conversations, gather comments from individuals and groups to integrate data collected from formal needs analysis.

Accurate gathering of staff needs helps to setting appropriate objectives of training actions; once precise objectives are set, appropriate formats and methodologies are chosen. Workshops, individual consultations, classroom observations, orientations, grants, faculty fellows, teaching circles, faculty learning communities can be offered to staff (Lee, 2010). Formal and informal forms of development can be combined (Thomson, 2015) in a holistic strategy, which embraces all possible actions that can improve teaching and learning.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. *Research context*

As previously mentioned, in 2013-2015 the University of Padua carried out a pilot project and during the initial research phase a questionnaire was administered to all academics. The instrument included also a final section with three open-ended questions aimed at exploring:

- the *excellence and innovation* in teaching activity;
- the *critical* aspects encountered in daily practices;
- the *type of support perceived as necessary* to enhance teaching and learning.

After this experience, the interest at national level grew and seven Italian Universities (Bari, Camerino, Catania, Florence, Foggia, Genoa, Turin), located in different geographical areas and having various dimensions (according to the number of students and teachers), administered the questionnaire to their own staff with the aim of guiding institutional decisions on continuing professional development actions.

This paper focuses on academics' answers of the seven universities to the above-mentioned open-ended questions of the national *Computer Assisted Web Interviewing* (CAWI) survey¹.

3.2. *Research questions*

The research aimed at gathering staff voices regarding their perspectives about what is *good* in their own teaching experience and practice, the kind of problems they face and what deserves improvements as well as the type of support they would like to receive for further development. As stated above, researchers interpreted excellence as a process of growth aimed at making tacit good practices explicit and collected information about the major criticalities that represent an obstacle to achieve this excellence and the kind of support that professors are likely to receive in order to improve the quality of their teaching.

Therefore, the research questions of this study may be summarized as:

- What good practices do professors declare to implement in class?
- What are the major problems that staff faces in daily teaching experience?
- Which kind of support do professors need to improve their teaching?

¹ The authors are very grateful to colleagues belonging to the seven Universities participating to the study for their precious support in carrying out the research.

3.3. Participants

The study involved 7,278 professors who received the survey; 4,289 completed the main questionnaire, with a response rate of about 59% (min 46%, max 74%).

Respondents considered in study were 3,250, because 1,039 teachers provided very general comments (often unrelated to dimensions investigated). *Table 1* reports the main demographic and institutional characteristics of the final sample.

Women were more likely to answer than men, and a clear negative gradient by age appeared (the younger, the higher): the response rate moves to 68% for respondents aged from 30 to 45 years, to 31% for teachers older than 70 years. Data show that mainly assistant professors and professors with temporary positions responded, while associate professors and full professors responded to a lesser extent.

Table 1. – Summary of the main characteristics of the teachers, both in the whole population and in the final sample.

TEACHERS' CHARACTERISTIC	% IN THE POPULATION	% IN THE FINAL SAMPLE	TOTAL RESPONSE RATE
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	40.0	43.7	64.3
Male	60.0	56.3	55.3
<i>Academic role</i>			
Temporary positions	9.1	9.7	62.9
Assistant professor	29.5	32.2	64.4
Associate professor	36.8	36.9	59.1
Full professor	24.6	21.2	50.7
<i>Age class</i>			
30-45	22.5	26.1	68.4
46-60	49.9	51.1	60.4
61-70	26.6	22.2	49.3
over 70	1.0	0.5	31.0
<i>Institutional role</i>			
Yes	89.0	88.9	57.9
No	11.0	11.1	58.7
Total	100.0	100.0	58.9

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Content analysis

Academics' answers were analyzed by content analysis through the software *Atlas.ti* (Friese, 2014). The process begins with the selection of text quotations considered relevant to the research and with the creation of a «code», a label that is linked to selected pieces of data. In the present research this process was carried out both inductively and deductively following a recursive and iterative path. Then the «Family Manager» function was used to group the codes under themes through the creation of Pre-codes and Code Families that could be defined as object containers, allowing to include the codes belonging to the same wider theme into categories (Pre-codes) and wider dimensions (Code Families: excellences, critical aspects and needs).

In the next step, the Network building function was used to explore the complex phenomena, creating the linkages and assigning relationships between the identified themes/codes/quotations. This process was realized by the researchers' team in each involved University and coordinated and supervised by the Padua research unit. Inter-rater reliability was guaranteed by independent analysis carried out by researchers and coding comparison towards agreement.

4.2. Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of the Pre-codes (categories grouping codes) into the three Code Families (wider dimensions corresponding to the three investigated themes, namely excellences, critical aspects and needs). Compared to the total number of mapped codes (N = 12,078) the proportion of reported excellences is 42%, of critical aspects is 32%, of needs is 26%. Investigating the Code Family grouping all «Excellences» reported by the respondents, *Figure 1* presents a map that disaggregates the Pre-codes in the related codes, reporting the frequency for each code in brackets.

Table 2. – Distribution of the Code Families: Excellences, Critical aspects and Needs.

	N	PROPORTION
Excellences	5,130	42%
Critical aspects	3,812	32%
Needs	3,136	26%
Total	12,078	100%

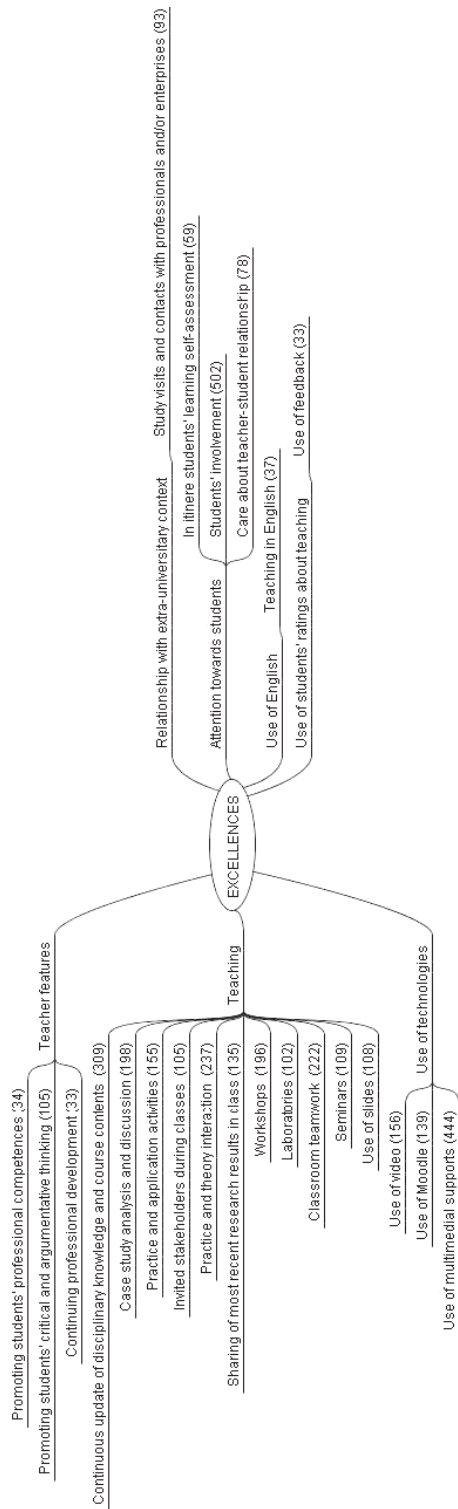


Figure 1. – Map of the codes and the Pre-codes belonging to the family Excellences.

The largest Pre-code identified was «Teaching in class», which referred to a variety of methodological and instructional choices undertaken by professors while practicing their daily activity in class. For instance, the most frequent excellence reported by participants was «the continuous update of disciplinary knowledge and course contents». An example of quotation is:

Course syllabus has to be more and more in line with those taught at foreign universities. Every year, I try to change the lessons by introducing new topics and new links with everyday life to convey basic concepts of the subject I teach, to avoid getting bored and boring my students.

As for the Pre-code «Relationship with extra-university context», quotations were grouped into a main code, named «study visits and contacts with professionals and/or enterprises». For example, a participant said that:

I always try to interact with subject experts in order to foster students' ability to apply theoretical notions to real-life situations.

Another important Pre-code identified was related to the «Use of technologies» (a key element, as stated in the Recommendation nr. 11 by the High Level Group on the Modernization of Higher Education, 2013). As an example, a sentence is quoted below:

I make extensive use of the Studium online platform to share not only study materials (especially about multimedia supports) but also to use distance learning activities and provide a service to students and students who cannot attend classes.

Researchers created a Pre-code named «Attention towards students», which indicated answers with a specific focus on teacher-students relationship, with the aim of engaging students in the teaching activity as well as caring about their learning experience. The large majority of codes in this family referred to the students' active involvement, as showed by the next quotation:

I usually promote constructive and critical interaction with the students aimed at stimulating them to develop a personal way of reasoning and thinking, on the basis of which they can discuss each other and with the teacher.

Another frequent Pre-code regarded the «Teacher's features», namely his/her personal skills and attitudes, as in the next quote:

I have a specific attitude towards empirical teaching, that is teaching through research, reflection and small groups activities to develop the ability to work in a team.

Moreover, participants highlighted some of their most important professional skills, such as:

First of all, it is important the scientific update on the topics I teach, and then enhancing the knowledge of the recent developments and perspectives about the teaching methodologies and strategies.

Finally, two minor Pre-codes created concerned the «Use of English» in lessons and the «Use of students' evaluation of teaching» in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning process.

Table 3 describes the Pre-codes and their frequencies, offering an overview of the above-mentioned codes.

Table 3. – Distribution of the Pre-codes for the Code Family Excellences.

	N	PROPORTION
Relationship with extra-university context	137	3%
Attention towards students	946	18%
Teachers' features	264	5%
Teaching in class	2,753	54%
Use of English	39	1%
Use of students' ratings about teaching	39	1%
Use of technologies	952	18%
Total	5,130	100%

Figure 2 shows a map of codes and the corresponding Pre-codes belonging to the family of reported Critical aspects.

As highlighted by *Figure 2*, most codes belonging to the Pre-code «Organizational aspects», that includes difficulties linked to inadequate spaces and equipment, high number of students in the classrooms and lack of a real interaction among course units. For instance, a teacher said that:

The inadequacy of computer and technical equipment in the classroom and the lack of maintenance of the classrooms do not facilitate and do not contribute to promote positive conditions for learning.

while another said:

The heterogeneity of the students' population (especially in relation to their knowledge and skills) would require differentiated paths that unfortunately cannot be implemented due to the great number of students.

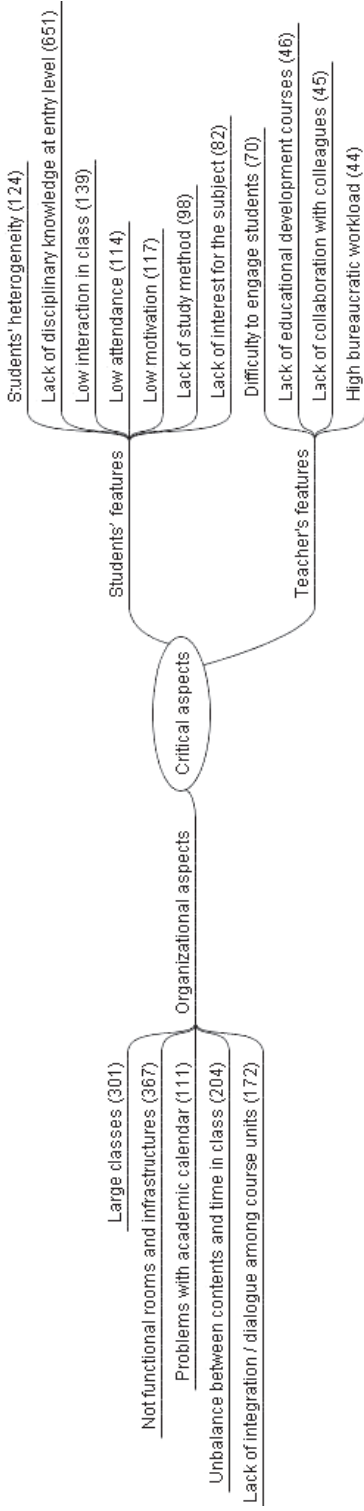


Figure 2. – Map of the codes and the Pre-codes belonging to the family Critical aspects.

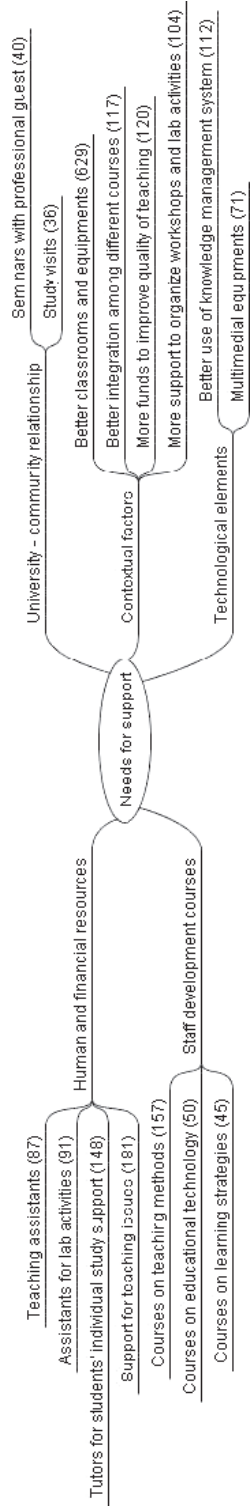


Figure 3. – Map of the codes and the Pre-codes belonging to the family Needs.

Another aspect reported by participants concerns some «Students' features» that, according to the respondents, contribute to define a critical situation, like poor motivation, attendance, interest and interaction in class, and, most important, the lack of basic disciplinary knowledge at entry level. Two teachers said:

Partial engagement of students. I would like to be able to motivate a larger number of students.

In a large number of cases, the students don't show interest towards the discipline contents.

Table 4 describes the above-mentioned Pre-codes and their frequencies grouped in the code Family «Critical aspects». The total of critical aspects' codes was 3,812 and four Pre-codes were created.

Table 4. – Distribution of the Pre-codes for the Code Family Critical aspects.

	N	PROPORTION
Students' features	1,530	40%
Teacher' features	393	10%
Organizational aspects	1,875	49%
Teaching evaluation	14	1%
Total	3,812	100%

The last investigated Family focused on faculty' needs for support and improvement.

Figure 3 summarizes the needs reported by participants. It appears that academics highlighted needs that could represent an answer to critical aspects already identified (such as contextual factors and human and financial resources). Needs related to personal and professional development (such as staff development courses) emerged less frequently, possibly due to lack of full awareness of possibilities of seeking support to improve teaching practices.

The highest number of answers was coded as a «Contextual factor»: participants reported that the most relevant aspects that drive attention are those associated with the physical context like better classrooms and equipment.

Another aspect which appeared as a relevant element for improvement consists in having more funds and resources for teaching activities. According to some professors, there is not enough support staff, therefore they often face alone the challenges above mentioned. For instance, they ask for:

More tutors in the classroom for laboratory activities. Training activities with older and more experienced students.

Team sharing and work with other colleagues and with experts in teaching methodologies.

This latter aspect is also confirmed by codes belonging to the «Training/educational courses» Pre-code. Some professors explicitly declare that they would like to participate to staff development programs to learn how to teach better and to deal with issues related to teaching and learning. The area of teaching and assessment methods seems the most desired, as shown below:

I'd like to participate to training seminars about teaching topics (design instructional methods, classroom management, learning assessment, teaching activities, technologies, etc.).

Training courses to make teaching more effective.

It would be interesting to listen to the opinion of experts in communication issues.

I think the frontiers of learning and teaching are endless and we have the right/duty to explore them to combine traditional teaching methods with innovative ways of learning [...] and viceversa.

A second area perceived as crucial is the efficient use of educational technologies, as, for example:

Technical support in the use of e-learning advices and support for the use of multimedia platforms. Support for online management of student learning assessment and self- assessment questions.

Minor relevance was given to the aspects concerning the «University-community relationship»: some faculty hope to have the chance to increase study visits, as well as more seminars with professional guests.

Table 5 describes the Pre-codes with their frequencies about this matter. The total of codes is 3,136 distributed into 5 Pre-codes.

Table 5. – Distribution of the Pre-codes for the Code Family Needs.

	N	PROPORTION
University-community relationship	99	3%
Training/educational courses	407	13%
Contextual factors	1,703	54%
Technological aspects	232	8%
Human and financial resources	695	22%
Total	3,136	100%

5. LIMITATIONS

Although the response rates were rather good, the total number of collected questionnaires in each university is not so large. Then, the sample may suffer from some forms of self-selection: first, teachers agreed (or not) to participate to the survey; second, they agreed (or not) to answer to the qualitative section of the questionnaire. Yet, data are based on self-reported answers: teachers describe excellences, needs and critical aspects according to their personal view and feeling, even if this is crucial in the participatory approach that characterizes the research design.

Moreover, as possible further research, data are suitable to be processed within each institution, by focusing on answers from local academics and by investigating possible correlations with demographic/contextual variables. Thus, in depth-interviews and focus groups could integrate the collected data, investigating specific issues and allowing to clarify and detail codes and categories. Moreover, a latent class analysis will be carried out in order to identify academics' subgroups to tailor staff development activities.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As mentioned, it is hard to universally define the concept of «teaching excellence», due mostly to the complex nature of teaching. This research offered some insights on the key elements of this multidimensional concept, identifying a kaleidoscope of aspects that academics declare to be drivers for excellent teaching practices. In order to do that, the participatory approach represented an important opportunity to get academics points of view.

Content analysis allowed researchers to design a multi-level action plan, taking into account three different stages: an institutional level, an inter-institutional one, and a national one. In fact, staff development programs might benefit of information provided by this research, which offers reach data on teachers' needs, current practices and main constraints.

The discussion among researchers leads first of all to the following activities to be implemented at *micro-level* in each institution:

- providing university management with a specific report on emerged elements to address criticalities on organizational aspects highlighted by professors;
- in a similar way, providing students' services with a report with specific information about major students' problems underlined by professors

might help services to plan actions such as: increase first year support and guidance, improve integration among modules and avoid contents overlapping, develop tutoring initiatives (Zabalza, 2002);

- establishing formal and informal opportunities (i.e. face-to-face meetings and/or online repositories) for sharing good practices through faculty learning communities (Cox, 2004) and mentoring initiatives and networks (Yun & Sorcinelli, 2007);
- designing and implementing local staff development programs to address emerged key needs (i.e. entry-level programs for developing key teaching skills or orientation programs devoted to present resources, organizational aspects, services and to clarify responsibility and duties) and establishing centers devoted to this purpose.

At a *meso-level*, joint initiatives organized by two or more universities could be promoted:

- formal and informal opportunities for sharing discussion in the same subjects or at interdisciplinary level: a sharing of opinions in different contexts can allow further reflection as well as the identification of possible solutions not considered before;
- designing and implementing inter-institutional training, workshops and peer observation sessions (Race *et al.*, 2009) on emerged key needs and topics which encounter common interest in more than one institution.

At a *macro-level*, the research already achieved important results such as:

- raising awareness about the teaching role, related competences and how they can be developed and improved;
- developing a shared language among all professors, from different disciplines. A document also contributed to this achievement: the «Guidelines for teachers' professional development and strategies for the evaluation of teaching quality in the University» produced by the working group «QUARC Docente» (ANVUR, 2017)²;
- developing a common instrument to map academics' excellences, critical aspects and needs using a bottom-up approach;
- establishing a national university network (Sorcinelli *et al.*, 2006) for educational development: ASDUNI (Italian Association for the promotion and development of teaching and learning at the University) aimed at organizing, promoting and supporting research, seminars, internships, courses, pilot projects, conferences, publications for the dissemination of educational development.

² <https://www.anvur.it/archivio-documenti-ufficiali/linee-di-indirizzo-per-lo-sviluppo-professionale-del-docente-e-strategie-di-valutazione-della-didattica-in-universita-quarc/>

This experience represents a bottom-up attempt to highlight hidden key needs for improvement as well as implicit good practices. It constitutes a systemic initiative using research to inform practices and promoting a scholarly approach with the aim of valuing teaching and identifying appropriate tailored strategies to improve it.

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RIASSUNTO

L'articolo presenta i risultati di uno studio che ha inteso mappare eccellenze, bisogni e aspetti critici incontrati nella pratica didattica allo scopo di progettare appropriate iniziative di formazione dei docenti universitari. Docenti di sette università italiane (Bari, Camerino, Catania, Firenze, Foggia, Genova, Torino) hanno risposto ad un questionario che includeva tre domande aperte riguardanti pratiche innovative, criticità e tipologie di supporto desiderate. Rispetto al totale dei docenti coinvolti nell'indagine (7.278), 4.289 hanno accolto l'invito alla compilazione, con una percentuale di risposta del 59%. Le risposte degli accademici sono state sottoposte ad una analisi del contenuto con il software Atlas.ti, che ha permesso di ottenere un quadro ampio dei principali elementi emersi in relazione alle questioni di ricerca indagate. Quest'iniziativa rappresenta un'esperienza sistemica di utilizzo della ricerca per orientare la pratica formativa, promuovere una cultura condivisa dell'insegnamento e apprendimento nell'istruzione superiore e sviluppare un approccio scientifico di valorizzazione della didattica e di identificazione di strategie mirate per migliorarla. L'analisi delle risposte ha infatti permesso ai ricercatori di ipotizzare un possibile piano di azione multi-livello, proponendo interventi a livello istituzionale, inter-istituzionale e nazionale.

Parole chiave: Analisi del contenuto; Bisogni di miglioramento; Eccellenze didattiche; Formazione dei docenti universitari; Istruzione superiore.

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