4

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

Matt O'Leary

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
     evidence-based approach to practice akin to that associated
3   with research. Yet, ironically, neither drew on any such evi-
     dence to support their critiques, relying instead on unsubstan-
5   tiated assumptions and anecdotes.

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

21   It is fair to say that the reaction to the TEF of those work-
     ing in the sector has been mixed to date. Whilst some wel-
23   come it as overdue acknowledgement of the importance of
     teaching and its perceived undervaluing compared to research
25   in universities, others are more sceptical of the rationale for
     its creation and its underlying purpose(s). On the one hand,
27   some see the TEF as an opportunity for a greater focus and
     investment in teaching. On the other hand, there are those
29   who regard it as yet another example of the marketisation of
     HE and a continuing neoliberal agenda to impose free market
31   principles and practices on the sector. The reliance on the use
     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

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

> *The second force is the growing distrust of reasoned argument, now often seen as a cloak for special interests or a form of elitist arrogance, and the substitution in its place of any kind of indicator that can plausibly be reduced to numerical terms. The latter possess the aura of both precision and objectivity and so, when joined with the assumption about competition, can generate a definitive ranking. (p. 17)*

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

DEFINING TEACHING EXCELLENCE

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

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

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

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

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

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

> *Highly successful pedagogies develop when teachers make outstanding use of their understanding of the research and knowledge-base for teaching in order to support high-quality planning and practice. The very best teaching arises when this research base is supplemented by a personal passion for what is to be taught and for the aspirations of learners. (p. 12)*

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

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

1. Effective pedagogies give serious consideration to pupil voice.

2. Effective pedagogies depend on behaviour (what teachers do), knowledge and understanding (what teachers know) and beliefs (why teachers act as they do).

3. Effective pedagogies involve clear thinking about longer term learning outcomes as well as short-term goals.

4. Effective pedagogies build on pupils' prior learning and experience.

5. Effective pedagogies involve scaffolding pupil learning.

6. Effective pedagogies involve a range of techniques, including whole-class and structured group work, guided learning and individual activity.

7. Effective pedagogies focus on developing higher order thinking and metacognition, and make good use of dialogue and questioning in order to do so.

8. Effective pedagogies embed assessment for learning.

9. Effective pedagogies are inclusive and take the diverse needs of a range of learners, as well as matters of student equity, into account.

It is interesting to note the similarities between the nine claims listed above and the seven aspects of teaching excellence identified by Skelton (2004) in his work, as outlined by Phil Wood in the previous chapter. The similarities between these two taxonomies are made all the more interesting when we consider that Skelton's work centred on the teaching of adults in the HE environment, whereas Husbands and

Pearce's study focused on the teaching of children in the schools' sector. Thus despite these two very differing contexts, commonalities clearly exist, which would suggest a core set of principles of effective teaching that may even transcend contextual boundaries. For example, both taxonomies emphasise the importance of inclusivity and the centrality of considering students when it comes to making decisions about the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Equally, the importance of dialogue and communication is highlighted as a crucial element of teacher–student interaction, which itself needs to be underpinned by the teacher having a sound understanding of pedagogy and theories of learning. Furthermore, this common core of principles is echoed in the findings of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP), the largest and lengthiest study ever conducted into teaching and learning in the United Kingdom (see James & Pollard, 2011).

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

An alternative term suggested by some education and health practitioners was that of teaching being 'fit for purpose'. In other words, the extent to which the teaching

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

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

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

A further confounding variable in defining excellence in
23 teaching that has received little attention in recent debates is
identifying what actually constitutes teaching in the HE envi-
25 ronment. Teaching in HE has moved a substantial way from
the traditional lecturing mode that has been associated with
27 the sector for so long. Yet as the following chapter in this
book points out in drawing on the work of Gunn and Fisk
29 (2013), there is a 'lack of sophistication in the conceptualisa-
tion of university teaching excellence' (p. 7). Nowadays HE
31 teaching typically involves a multitude of differing scenarios,
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

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

Many of the features discussed in Table 4.2 might be considered to come under the broad category of 'procedural' aspects of teaching. But another lens through which many

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

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

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

1   EVIDENCING TEACHING EXCELLENCE IN HE:
            TAKING STOCK AND LOOKING AHEAD
3

The four subsections that follow discuss key sources of data
5   used in HEIs to monitor and measure the quality of teaching
and critically reflect on what each source actually reveals
7   about teaching excellence. Some of these include the core
metrics used in the TEF, along with other benchmarking data
9   widely used across the sector. Whilst data from the
Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) are
11 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
13 reveal any discernible findings about the quality of HE teach-
ing, nor were they originally designed to serve this particular
15 purpose. As mentioned in the opening chapter, students
themselves remain sceptical about the inclusion of the DLHE
17 data in the TEF on the basis that 'graduate employability is
not a measure of teaching quality' (Greatbatch & Holland,
19 2016, p. 6). Arguably, however, the NSS and student feed-
back in general have a more credible contribution to make to
21 discussions about teaching excellence than the DLHE survey
as they provide a platform for students to articulate their
23 views on the perceived impact of teaching on their learning
experience, regardless of the flaws associated with data sets
25 like the NSS and the methods used to collect them.

27

            Student Voice and Teaching Quality
29

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

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

In the current marketised climate, the influence of student voice on HE policy and decision making continues to grow, which means that HEIs have to consider carefully how they engage with and respond to their students. Ever since the advent of the National Student Survey (NSS)[1] in 2005, its stock value has risen rapidly. With the subsequent introduction of higher tuition fees and the reduction in HEFCE funding, universities have come to attach greater importance to the results of the NSS. So concerned are some HEIs with maximising NSS response rates that they have created specific posts to reinforce its importance and the need for students to complete it. Furthermore, the current minister of state for universities and science, Jo Johnson, declared that one of the reasons for the need to introduce the TEF was because of the perceived decline in student satisfaction scores, continuing the prioritisation of student satisfaction above all else as a proxy for teaching quality epitomised in the Browne review of HE (2010) that identified student choice as the key driver for improvement. Yet HEFCE's own review of the NSS, which was carried out in 2016, contradicted the government's claims of a decline, instead revealing a steady increase in student satisfaction score with the overall satisfaction at 87% (HEFCE, 2016).

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

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

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

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

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

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

Professor Chris Husbands, the first chair of the TEF
assessment panel has openly stated that he '[does] not think
student satisfaction is an accurate proxy for teaching quality'
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

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

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

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

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

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

Student Outcomes and Teaching Quality

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

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

The dominant policy discourse in schools and colleges in recent years has been one that has sought to reinforce the link between teaching and educational outcomes, as though teaching were the only variable that matters and anything else is extraneous. Agencies aligned with the state, such as the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), have played a key role in driving this agenda, as indeed has the wider 'evidence-based' movement in education that has gained considerable traction in the schools' sector in the United Kingdom and the United States over the last decade. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss evidence-based education in any detail, it is important to recognise its influence on education policy and practice (see Biesta, 2007 for further discussion). The positivist positionality of evidence-based practice conceptualises teaching and learning as a scientific process with observable and measurable correlations between the input (teaching) and output (learning), but disregards the importance of other factors (e.g. cultural, economic, social) in understanding the relationship between the two. Yet this is despite the fact that a substantial body of research has identified social class and cultural capital as significant variables that impact on educational attainment (e.g. De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Sullivan, 2001).

In the case of student recruitment and retention, HEIs that are highly selective clearly have a distinct advantage over those that recruit from a wider community. The main reasons why students withdraw from courses are invariably related to matters other than the quality of teaching or other academic issues. Furthermore, students from working class backgrounds 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 extracurric-
   ular 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 participa-
   tion track record will inevitably suffer … [as they] face being
9 blamed for forces beyond their control'.

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

   A further shortcoming in using student attainment as a
23 measurement of teaching quality is that it can run the risk of
   shifting responsibility for the final outcome from students to
25 lecturers, thus reinforcing the conceptualisation of students as
   passive consumers rather than as active partners in their
27 learning experience. In turn this can reconfigure notions of
   accountability in such a way that student failure can be
29 attributed to academic staff rather than the students them-
   selves. This goes against the grain of the ethos and mission of
31 HE insomuch as it is underpinned by collaborative and recip-
   rocal relationships between academic staff and students, both
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
    meets the established criteria, with the final decision ratified
3   by a confirmation panel. Thus the decision to award fellow-
    ship is ostensibly based on the ability of the applicant to pres-
5   ent a convincing written case of their professional practice,
    knowledge, skills and values. In this sense it could be argued
7   that the process is as much about the applicant's proficiency
    in literary expression as it is about demonstrating tangible
9   evidence of excellence in teaching.

    From an assessment perspective, there are also questions
11 to consider concerning the validity and reliability of the pro-
    cess. Validity refers to the notion of an assessment actually
13 assessing what it purports to assess. Reliability refers to the
    consistency and replicability of the assessment results. Thus
15 in relation to the HEA fellowship scheme, the most obvious
    question concerning validity centres on the extent to which a
17 written form of assessment can be regarded as a suitable and
    credible representation of one's teaching expertise. Or to
19 think of it another way, if we wanted to assess a student
    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-
    priate method of assessment?

23 Secondly, given that the HEA fellowship scheme was origi-
    nally created with a focus on learning and teaching and the
25 accreditation of HE teachers, it is interesting to note that the
    most senior level of recognition (principal fellow) is saved for
27 those who invariably occupy the roles of senior leadership
    and management in HE. In the previous chapter, Phil Wood
29 used the term 'codification of excellence' to refer to the fel-
    lowship scheme. What is clear about the HEA's scheme is
31 that it enshrines a hierarchy of excellence in which strategic
    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

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

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

Observations and Teaching Quality

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

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

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

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

33   Emergent findings from an ongoing HEFCE-funded proj-
   ect at Birmingham City University[2] reinforce the value of

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

The primary aim of the project has been to create an authentic and sustainable collaboration between academic staff and students using observation as a central reference point and a tool for critical inquiry into learning and teaching, empowering students to play an active role in shaping their learning experience. The project reconceptualises and reconfigures the use of observation as a method to enhance learning and teaching. It repositions it from being a performance management mechanism to a collaborative method of inquiry in which students and lecturers co-interrogate and co-reflect on their own and each other's learning and teaching values and practices, with a view to reciprocally enhancing their shared experiences. Crucially, the involvement of students as co-observers, co-reflectors and co-researchers reconceptualises their identity from consumers and evaluators of their learning experience to co-enquirers and co-producers of knowledge about HE learning and teaching.

In contrast to conventional models of observation that focus on the performance of the individual lecturer, the project adopts a holistic, case study approach, drawing on different sources of evidence and methods to create a richer, more triangulated understanding of practice. By involving students and staff as co-researchers and co-reflectors, a greater awareness and transparency about the effectiveness of current practices have emerged. Involving students and staff co-observing and discussing pedagogical practices have also opened up the opportunity to build a community where students and staff collaborate on programme planning, delivery and evaluation.

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

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

CONCLUDING REMARKS

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

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

Teaching is not a mechanical process involving the application of a prescribed set of approaches or techniques in order to achieve predetermined outcomes; it is a complex art that is constantly evolving. The reason for that is simple and rooted in the complexity of human beings and the sometimes 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 improving 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

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

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

It is too early yet to know whether the TEF and the current focus on the quality of teaching will have a tangible and/or lasting impact on learning and teaching across HE or simply turn out to be a reform that results in the creation of new layers of accountability initiatives and QA mechanisms. What we do know, however, is that there are valuable lessons for the HE sector to learn from the schools' improvement agenda about the counterproductive effects of relying too heavily on the use of metrics to assess and performance manage educational provision. We need to focus less on publicly identifying excellence and more on understanding and developing effective and authentic practice. Whilst recognition and reward schemes may act as short-term incentives, there is little evidence that they lead to long-term, sustainable improvement either individually or institutionally. This is something that comes from supporting not sorting staff. Ultimately, the most meaningful and sustainable indicators of the quality of teaching do not come from external inspection of validation, but through the nurturing of an institution's staff, along with

a commitment on the part of those staff to want to continuously reflect and improve on what they do.

NOTES

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

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

REFERENCES

Barnett, R. (1990). *The idea of higher education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Biesta, G. (2007). Why 'what works' won't work: Evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research. *Educational Theory*, *57*(1), 1−22.

Browne, J. (2010). Securing a sustainable future in higher education. Department of Business Innovation and Skills, London. Retrieved from www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/docs/s/10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-brownereport.pdf. Accessed on November 21, 2016.

Collini, S. (2012). *What are universities for?* London: Penguin.

De Graaf, N. D., De Graaf, P. M., & Kraaykamp, G. (2000). Parental cultural capital and educational attainment in the Netherlands: A refinement of the cultural capital perspective. *Sociology of Education*, *73*, 92–111.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2016). *Success as a knowledge economy: Teaching excellence, social mobility and student choice*. Higher Education White Paper.

Gibbs, G. (2015). Graduate employability data no way to measure teaching quality. *Times Higher Education*, Article published online July 7, 2015. Retrieved from https://www. timeshighereducation.com/blog/graduate-employability-data-no-way-measure-teaching-quality. Accessed on May 21, 2017.

Gill, J. (2015). David Willetts interview: 'What I did was in the interests of young people'. *Times Higher Education*, Article published online June 18, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/david-willetts-what-i-did-was-in-the-interests-of-young-people. Accessed on May 4, 2017.

Greatbatch, D., & Holland, J. (2016, May). *Teaching quality in higher education: Literature review and qualitative research*. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Green, J. (2011). *Education, professionalism and the quest for accountability*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Grove, J. (2017). TEF to limit use of 'flawed' NSS scores. *Times Higher Education*, Article published online January 25, 2017. Retrieved from https://www.timeshighereducation.

com/news/tef-limit-use-flawed-nss-scores#node-comments. Accessed on May 14, 2017.

Gunn, V., & Fisk, A. (2013). *Considering teaching excellence in higher education 2007-2013: A Literature Review since the CHERI Report 2007*. Higher Education Academy, York, UK.

(HEA) Higher Education Academy Fellowship – Online (2017). Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/indivi-duals/fellowship?utm_source=Google%20(Grant)&utm_medium=PPC&utm_campaign=Professional%20Practice%20-%20Fellowship&gclid=CjwKEAjw2qzHBRChloWxgoXDpyASJAB01Io0dTZ2hpqHIkdqi57rNjseituKMzr-oOu5bzOoL9Z_FRoCpJrw_wcB. Accessed on April 6, 2017.

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. York: HEA. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/engagement-through-partner-ship-students-partners-learningand-teaching-higher-educa-tion. Accessed on May 21, 2017.

HEFCE (2016). *National Student Survey*. Retrieved from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss. Accessed on May 14, 2017.

Holmwood, J., Hickey, T., Cohen, R., & Wallis, S. (2016). In defence of public higher education: Knowledge for a suc-cessful society. A response to 'Success as a Knowledge Economy', BIS (2016). *Convention for Higher Education*.

Husbands, C., & Pearce, J. (2012). *What makes great peda-gogy? Nine claims from research*. Nottingham, NCSL. Retrieved from https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/sys-tem/uploads/attachment_data/file/329746/what-makes-great-pedagogy-nine-claims-from-research.pdf. Accessed on May 11, 2017.

1   James, M., & Pollard, A. (2011). TLRP's ten principles for
     effective pedagogy: Rationale, development, evidence, argu-
3   ment and impact. *Research Papers in Education*, *26*(3),
     275−328.

5   Marshall, S. (2015). Proposing a sustainable Teaching
     Excellence Framework. *WONKHE*, Published online
7   October 5, 2015. Retrieved from http://wonkhe.com/blogs/
     proposing-a-sustainable-teaching-excellence-framework/.
9   Accessed on April 12, 2017.

11   Niemi, R., Heikkinen, H. L. T., & Kannas, L. (2010).
     Polyphony in the classroom: Reporting narrative action
13   research reflexively. *Educational Action Research*, *18*(2),
     137−149.

15   O'Leary, M. (2013). Surveillance, performativity and normal-
     ised practice: The use and impact of graded lesson observa-
17   tions in Further Education Colleges. *Journal of Further and
     Higher Education*, *37*(5), 694−714.
19
     O'Leary, M. (2014). *Classroom observation: A guide to the
21   effective observation of teaching and learning*. London:
     Routledge.
23
     O'Leary, M., & Wood, P. (2016). Performance over profes-
25   sional learning and the complexity puzzle: Lesson observa-
     tion in England's further education sector. *Professional
27   Development in Education*. Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/
     10.1080/19415257.2016.1210665. Accessed on December
29   19, 2016.

     Poropat, A. (2014). Students don't know what's best for their
31   own learning. *The Conversation*, November 18. Retrieved
     from https://theconversation.com/students-dont-know-whats-
33   best-for-theirown-learning-33835. Accessed on May 20,
     2017.

1   Quinn, J. (2004). Understanding working-class 'drop-out'
        from higher education through a sociocultural lens: Cultural
3   narratives and local contexts. *International Studies in
        Sociology of Education*, *14*(1), 57−74.

5   Ramsden, P., & Callender, C. (2014). *Appendix A:
        Literature review*. Retrieved from http://www.hefce.ac.uk/
7   media/fb/content/pubs/indirreports/2014/Review,of,the,NSS/
        2014_nssreviewa.pdf. Accessed on October 23, 2016.
9

        Skelton, A. (2004). Understanding teaching excellence in
11   higher education: A critical evaluation of the national teach-
        ing fellowships scheme. *Studies in Higher Education*, *29*(4),
13   451−468.

15   Sullivan, A. (2001). Cultural capital and educational attain-
        ment. *Sociology*, *34*(4), 893−912.

17   University and College Union (UCU) (2013). *Developing a
        national framework for the effective use of lesson observation
19   in further education*. Project Report for University and
        College Union, November 2013. Retrieved from http://www.
21   ucu.org.uk/7105. Accessed on October 25, 2016.

23

25

27

29

31

33

AUTHOR QUERY FORM

Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for typesetting, some questions may have arisen. These are listed below. Please check your typeset proof carefully and mark any corrections in the margin of the proof or compile them as a separate list.

Disk use

Sometimes we are unable to process the electronic file of your article and/or artwork. If this is the case, we have proceeded by:

☐ Scanning (parts of) your article ☐ Rekeying (parts of) your article

☐ Scanning the artwork

Bibliography
If discrepancies were noted between the literature list and the text references, the following may apply:

☐ **The references listed below were noted in the text but appear to be missing from your literature list. Please complete the list or remove the references from the text.**

☐ *UNCITED REFERENCES:* **This section comprises references that occur in the reference list but not in the body of the text. Please position each reference in the text or delete it. Any reference not dealt with will be retained in this section.**

Queries and/or remarks

Location in Article	Query / remark	Response
AU:1	The right running head is amended to fit the space. Please check for correctness.	💬

| AU:2 | Please confirm whether the abbreviations "REF", "TLRP", "NUS", "HESA" can be deleted as they are not used anywhere in the text. As for now, we have retained the author's usage. | |