ICED 2020 proceedings:

An "excellence turn"? Rethinking teaching excellence awards for a future-ready South African university

Karin Cattell-Holden[1]

Centre for Teaching and Learning, Stellenbosch University
Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa

Abstract

This paper examines the teaching excellence awards at a research-led South African university, a post-colonial institution which functions in both a neo-liberal higher education environment and a society characterised by inequity and inequality. The awards demonstrate an understanding of teaching excellence in terms of de-contextualised and performative values focused on the individual good. The paper proposes a social re-contextualisation of the awards, based on collaboration among all role-players, in order to reclaim teaching at the institution as a public good.

1 Introduction

Traditionally higher education was viewed as an institution both *of* and *for* society[2]. However, during the past approximately 50 years, this humanistic understanding has been replaced by a focus on the economic and private value of higher education, turning it into a neoliberal entity and a "'public of private interests'" (Hind in Nixon, 2015:165).

Within the neoliberal culture the concept of excellence has become "an organizing frame of the university" (Saunders, 2015:391). Generally understood as "of outstanding merit", it qualifies a broad spectrum of university strategies, functions and role-players, adapted for different contexts and perspectives. "Excellence" can therefore be described as a multifaceted concept with a contested and shifting meaning (Skelton, 2009).

"Teaching excellence" is likewise a fluid concept, interpreted differently from an institutional, disciplinary or personal perspective and re-defined according to changes in the social, economic and political environment (Wood & Su, 2017:462). In the neoliberal higher education environment "teaching excellence" is governed by a managerialist approach that prioritises individuals' performativity and the quantifying of productivity or output (Shore & Wright, 1999, 2015; Saunders & Ramírez, 2017). Morley (2003:48) describes this "new managerialism" as a culture of measurement and control where individuals and institutions compete according to externally prescribed criteria and goals. In this culture, performance is used as a measure of productivity, output or displays of quality, thus representing "the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement" (Ball, 2003:216).

2 The "University of Excellence"[3]

Despite the humanistic roots of higher education and the pressure on institutions to contribute to social justice and democratic citizenship, the neoliberal higher education environment often results in the enhancing of social exclusion and inequity instead of inclusion and parity on all

[1] kcattell@sun.ac.za
[2] The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) reinforced this view, adding the humanistic component that education is a human right (Blessinger & Makhanya, 2018).
[3] Readings, 1996:40.

levels. The related focus on individual responsibility and economic progress transcends the historical public service purpose of higher education, turning it from a public good into a private benefit (Pasquerella, 2016). In this context, social justice exists in a state of tension with "excellence" and "teaching excellence".

Values linked to social justice, such as equality, equity and social responsibility, are relegated to the fringe of the teaching excellence discourse, as the latter prioritises the individual good rather than the public good. Wood and Su (2017:452) correspondingly propose reconceptualising "teaching excellence" from a moral perspective to counter the measurement and performativity associated with the concept and draw attention to its ethical and relational aspects instead.

3 Awarding teaching excellence

Teaching excellence awards have contributed significantly to raising the status of teaching at higher education institutions (Leibowitz, Farmer & Franklin, 2012). These awards are initiated as an institutional acknowledgment of support to teaching, a recognition of the achievements of outstanding teachers, and an encouragement to other teachers to reach similar levels of inspirational teaching (Chism, 2006:589). The prestige bestowed on the recipients is powerful as it not only conveys recognition by the institution but also by peers and students.

The evaluation of "teaching excellence" generally reflects the neoliberal higher education context. Criteria are focused on the performance of the individual, excluding the complexity and diversity within which teaching and learning are situated (Chism, 2006; Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017). A key element in this multi-faceted environment is the close link between teaching and learning. In correlation with Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017) and others, this paper argues that conceptualising and rewarding "excellent teaching" should include a focus on "excellent learning", with both discourses emphasising the ideological and unequal contexts in which students and teachers function.

4 "Excellence" at SU

At Stellenbosch University (SU) "excellence" features in a range of institutional policies and frameworks. It functions as "an organizing frame of the university" (Saunders, 2015:391), incorporating all aspects of the institution in a commitment to "excellence", which is interpreted differently in different contexts. In the *Institutional Plan 2017–2022*, for example, "excellence" appears 61 times[4], qualifying learning (as student success through diversity), teaching, research, the institution ("excellence" equals student success rates, high research output, specialised (niche) scientific fields and staff expertise), governance (repositioning the institutional secretariat function as an enabler), and social impact.

The above interpretations of "excellence" are reinforced in teaching and learning directives. In the *Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014-2018* "good" and "excellent" teaching are conflated, only described as "quality teaching" (2). The *Teaching and Learning Policy* (2018:5) distinguishes between the two concepts in terms of their institutional standing: *good* teaching is acknowledged, but *excellent* teaching is recognised, rewarded and promoted across all systems of the University. Apart from linking "excellence" to context and responsiveness, this distinction is not clarified.

The implicit and different meanings assigned to "teaching excellence" confirm its fluidity and resultant vacuity (Macfarlane, 2007; Wood & Su, 2017). The guidelines to the SU Teaching Excellence Awards attempt to infuse the concept with definite meaning.

[4] Out of the total of 61 times, the concept is repeated 35 times as a matter of course in the listing of strategic objectives and action plans in responsibility centres and across faculties.

4.1 The SU Teaching Excellence Awards

The SU Teaching Excellence Awards (TEAs) were initiated in 2017, defining "teaching excellence" in relation to contextual awareness[5], critical reflection, student engagement, innovative practices, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. Despite the references to context and collaboration with regard to students, society and the academic community, the TEAs reflect the neoliberal higher education environment. Not only is the individual prioritised by the exclusion of team applications, but "teaching excellence" is also determined by individualist and performance-driven criteria. The financial reward successful candidates receive furthermore quantifies their "quality", academic identity and professional "worth". In addition, applications are judged by a selection panel which represents SU's faculties, senior management and academic developers, but excludes students. The TEAs therefore undervalue the relationship between excellent teaching and excellent learning (Elton, 1998). In this environment individual academics compete not to be "*the best **for** the world*" but "*the best **in** the world*", overturning the re-envisioning of SU in the *Teaching and Learning Policy* (2018:2). The individual (private) good therefore transcends teaching and learning for the social (public) good – the TEAs emphasise "the competitive arena of excellence at the expense of attending to unequal social and economic relations" (Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017:3).

4.2 Re-envisioning the SU TEAs

"The space of the possible" (Davis & Phelps, 2004:4) in the relation between the TEAs and the public good could be enlarged in five ways. Firstly, "excellent learning" should be incorporated into the discourse of "excellent teaching", focusing on the inequity and inequality in teaching and learning contexts. The student voice should therefore be included in the TEA selection panel, emphasising the value of collaboration between academics, management and students in recognising "teaching excellence".

Secondly, shifting the present individualist value of "excellence" into the above-mentioned moral context should add truthfulness, respect and authenticity (Nixon, 2007) to "excellent" teachers' approach to students. Nixon (2007:25) calls this "a duty of care and compassion" exercised for the public good. It would also provide students with the opportunity to observe and practice the modelling of these values (Leibowitz, 2012:xxiv). This leads into the third possible change: adapting the managerialist TEAs narrative as a more inclusive and collaborative system, engaging all role-players on what "teaching excellence" means [at that time] to ensure that everyone is represented and catered for, as far as possible (Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017:13).

Fourthly, the TEAs as a private good could be broadened by introducing disciplinary/interdisciplinary teams and projects. This would require academics (and students) to collaborate for the benefit of overall improved learning (Leibowitz et al., 2012:17) and would stimulate the co-construction of professional knowledge and growth. A collaborative approach to excellence, countering performativity, individualism and the implied competition and othering, would contribute to reclaiming teaching as a public good. In addition, lastly, the current individualist performative criteria could be replaced by more inclusive domains, for example, how academics construct knowledge in their disciplines, create an inclusive learning environment, enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and foster lifelong learning.

5 Conclusions

A focus on the spaces of possibility beyond the boundaries of the TEAs could shift the system into a broader network of relations and thus enhance its meaning to SU and its social community. Moving "teaching excellence" from individualisation to collaboration would help

[5] For 2020, "context" also includes the effects of COVID-19 on academics' teaching and students' learning, for example the move to emergency remote teaching.

foster an enabling environment for teachers and students to contribute to transforming South African society and, ultimately, to reclaiming teaching at SU as a public good. If higher education is not merely an interested observer but a "strategic actor looking to influence the world in which it operates (…) the area where it can, and should, make an impact is on inequality" (Atherton, 2018).

References

Bell, Atherton, G. (2018). Higher education can take a lead in fighting inequity. *University World News*. *23 November. Issue No: 530*. http://www.universityworldnews.com/. Accessed 25 November 2018.

Ball, S.J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, *18(2)*, 215-228.

Behari-Leak, K. & McKenna, S. (2017). Generic gold standard or contextualised public good? Teaching excellence awards in post-colonial South Africa. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1-15. doi:10.1080/13562517.2017.1301910

Blessinger, P. & Makhanya, M. (2018). Towards higher education in service of humanity. *University World News*. *2 February 2018. Issue No: 491*.

http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20180130100345559#. Accessed 25 November 2018.

Chism, N.V.N. (2006). Teaching awards: What do they award? *The Journal of Higher Education*, *77(4)*, 589-617.

Davis, B. & Phelps, R. (2004). Complicity: An introduction and a welcome. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, *1(1)*, 1-7.

Elton, L. (1998). Dimensions of excellence in university teaching. *The International Journal for Academic Development*, *3(1)*, 3-11.

Leibowitz, B. (2012). Introduction: Reflections on higher education and the public good. In: Leibowitz, B. (Ed.). *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South*. Stellenbosch, Stoke on Trent, UK and Sterling, USA: Sun Press, Trentham Books.

Leibowitz, B., Farmer, J. & Franklin, M. (2012). *Teaching Excellence Awards in South Africa: A National Study*. *HE Monitor* No. 13. Pretoria: The Council on Higher Education.

Macfarlane, B. (2007). Beyond performance in teaching excellence. In Skelton, A.M. (Ed.). *International Perspectives on Teaching Excellence in Higher Education. Improving knowledge and practice*. London, New York: Routledge. Pp. 48-59.

Morley, L. (2003). *Quality and Power in Higher Education*. Berkshire, Philadelphia: McGraw-Hill.

Nixon, J. (2007). Excellence and the good society. In Skelton, A.M. (Ed.). *International Perspectives on Teaching Excellence in Higher Education. Improving knowledge and practice*. London, New York: Routledge.

Nixon, J. (2015). Inequality and the erosion of the public good. In Filippakou, O. & Williams, G. *Higher Education as a Public Good. Critical Perspectives on Theory, Policy and Practice*. New York: Peter Lang.

Pasquerella, L. (2016). Higher education should be a public good, not a private commodity. *The Washington Post, 25 October*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/10/20/ . Accessed 25 September 2019.

Readings, B. (1996). *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Saunders, D.B. (2015). Resisting excellence: Challenging neoliberal ideology in postsecondary education. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, *13*(2), 391-413.

Saunders, D.B. & Ramírez, G.B. (2017). Against 'teaching excellence': Ideology, commodification, and enabling the neoliberalization of postsecondary education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *22(4)*, 396-407.

Shore, C. & Wright, S. (1999). Audit culture and Anthropology: Neo-liberalism in British Higher Education. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *5(4)*, 557-575.

Shore, C. & Wright, S. (2015). Audit culture revisited: Rankings, ratings, and the reassembling of society. *Current Anthropology*, *56(3)*, 421-444.

Skelton, A.M. (2009). A 'teaching excellence' for the times we live in? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 107-112. doi:10.1080/13562510802602723

Stellenbosch University. (2014). Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014-2018.

Stellenbosch University. (2017). Stellenbosch University Institutional Plan 2017-2022.

Stellenbosch University. (2018). Teaching and Learning Policy.

Wood, M. & Su, F. (2017). What makes an excellent lecturer? Academics' perspectives on the discourse of 'teaching excellence' in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *22(4)*, 451-466.