

D9 Conwy 2 Wednesday 5 December 15.00-15.30

Exploring undergraduate students' conceptions of "teaching excellence" (0544)

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Long before the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the debate on the purpose that it serves (e.g. Scott, 2015; Aswhin, 2016), the understanding and implementation of 'teaching excellence' in the academy has been a contested territory. Complexity and contestation referred, but were not confined to, the relationship between: (i.) excellence in teaching and excellence in learning in general, and (ii.) the criteria of teacher excellence and the changing nature/diversification of academic roles (Gunn & Frisk, 2013).

The relationship between teaching and excellence and a wide range of factors has been also been widely contested: the assumption that teaching excellence derives from, or is automatically associated with, excellent research, has been contradicted (Hattie and Marsh, 1996) as well as the association between excellence and schemes for promoting teachers' excellence (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 2002; McLean, 2001). While teacher conceptions' of teaching have been systematically investigated (e.g. Pratt, 1992; Gonzalez, 2011), studies exploring students' conceptions of teaching are mostly absent (for exceptions: Kember et al., 2003; Virtanen & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2010).

Conceptions of learning and teaching are defined as beliefs which form the background for approaches, meaning the sets of practises and strategies which will be implemented in the different contexts of learning and teaching (Entwistle and Walker, 2000). Most studies have focused on either students' conceptions of learning or teachers' conceptions of teaching; Kember et al. (2003), however, also examined students' beliefs about teaching in conjunction with their beliefs about learning and knowledge. Their study concluded that these beliefs form a consistent and logically inter-related set. Multiple studies suggested that teachers' and students' approaches to teaching and learning are evidently connected with their conceptions of these activities (e.g. Kember et al. 2003; Trigwell and Prosser 1996). The current study aimed to extend conclusions of these studies by exploring undergraduate students' conceptions of 'teaching excellence' and the following three under-researched areas:

i. The absence of the student perspective in the TEF agenda

- ii. The lack of research in students' conceptions of teaching.
- iii. The absence of students' perspective in the research literature on 'teaching excellence'

Accordingly, the central research question can be formulated as: what are the qualitatively different ways undergraduate students experience 'teaching excellence' in higher education?

Methodology

Trigwell (2010) asserts that good teaching is the convergence of a combination of elements: student-centred focus, drawing on teacher's strategies, planning, knowledge, conceptions and reflection, as well as their interaction with the learning and teaching context. Historically, phenomenographic approaches (Marton & Booth, 1997) have been credited with identifying variation and, more importantly, highlighting implications for academic practice, curriculum design and the enhancement of teaching and learning environments. Purposive sampling aimed to maximise variation in the experiences of participants from one access, teaching-focussed university and a research-focussed university, while semi-structured phenomenographic interviews focused on an instance of teaching excellence and invited participants to share their experiences. Prompts during the interviews aimed to reveal the structure of students' conception (i.e. discern the referential and structural aspect of the conception).

Preliminary results

343 students from the teaching-focussed institution responded to a brief, 'screening' questionnaire. Purposive sampling aimed at maximising variation in students' experiences of excellent teaching by selecting individuals based on their responses: year of study, full-time or part-time study mode, 'self-declare' item on gender, reported experience(s) of excellent teaching while at university. One pilot interview was conducted to test the interview questions. Twenty (20) students accepted invitations to attend a semi-structured interview; these lasted between 25-40 minutes. Satisfactory range of disciplinary backgrounds supported the sampling strategy (Law, Business studies, Medicine, Education, Social Work, English, Media, Biosciences etc.) A £15 voucher was given in recognition of their contribution. 89%

of students responded that they have experienced at least one instance of 'excellent teaching' since they joined the university (N=343). Following the interviews at the teaching-focussed university, 172 questionnaire responses from undergraduate students of the second, research-intensive institution were collected and interviews are currently being undertaken. Students' accounts during the interviews point to two dimensions of 'teaching excellence': 'teaching excellence' is understood in terms of *qualities* of the teacher (e.g. enthusiastic, resourceful, attentive, well-organised) and what the teacher *does* (mainly how they present the subject matter, what are the teaching techniques employed and how is the learning environment managed/designed). So far, conceptions of 'development' and 'change' (e.g. Ashwin, Abbas & McLean, 2016) appeared less prominently. Finally, the emerging results will be discussed in relation to the TEF debate as well as existing literature on conceptions of teaching.

References

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