

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0201

**SYMPOSIUM G7** | Denbigh 2

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Teaching excellence as 'institutional polishing'?

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract:**

This paper proposes that the performativity of 'excellence' in frameworks such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) may bear comparison with what Ahmed describes as 'institutional polishing': the labour of creating shiny surfaces (Ahmed 2017 p102). The TEF explicitly states its concern with the way teaching provision reflects the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and how this is reflected in the learning gain and student outcomes of 'disadvantaged' students. Yet Ahmed has also described the enacting of equality and diversity within higher education institutions as 'institutional speech acts' which 'do not go beyond pluralist understandings of diversity and are non-performative in the sense that they fail to deliver what they have promised' (Ahmed 2006, p.764). The paper therefore also proposes that excellence in the context of the TEF is problematised by its association with 'diversity'.

### **Paper:**

#### **Introduction**

This paper considers whether the performativity of 'excellence' in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) bears comparison to Ahmed's concept of 'institutional polishing': the labour of creating shiny surfaces (Ahmed 2017 p102). Drawing on analyses predating the TEF: of performativity (Ball 2003) and quality assurance (Morley 2010), the paper highlights microprocesses and power structures involved in performing excellence through the TEF. It argues that while explicitly stating a concern with teaching provision, learning gain and student outcomes for 'disadvantaged' students, the relationship between diversity and excellence in TEF rings hollow in relation to staff diversity and this association therefore risks being an 'institutional speech act' ie: corporate statements which do 'not go beyond pluralist understandings of diversity and are non-performative in the sense that they fail to deliver what they have promised' (Ahmed 2006, p.764).

#### **An excellent performance**

Excellence – a word with lofty origins - has become ubiquitous in the sector. Academics and institutional managers are continuously under pressure to demonstrate excellence of research and

teaching within the 'competitive, marketized arena' (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017 p392) of UK higher education (HE). The grading of excellence: 1- 4 star for REF, Bronze, Silver, Gold for TEF, recognises to an extent, the relational character of excellence (deriving from the Latin *excellētia* meaning superior; from *excellētum* meaning towering, distinguished; from *excellere*, meaning to surpass, be superior (Etymonline 2019)). Yet the frameworks demand excellence from everyone; that everyone perform excellence through them.

Ball views performativity 'as one of three interrelated policy technologies of the UK education reform 'package'' (2003: 216), the other two being the market and managerialism:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions both material and symbolic'

(ibid.).

The performativity of excellence in the TEF fulfils three key functions included in Ball's definition. Firstly, it invites reward or sanction in a moment of promotion or inspection. From 2020, TEF awards will determine whether or not providers are permitted to raise tuition fees – pertaining to the material 'worth' of the institution. Meanwhile, the colour of the award (bronze, silver, gold) has significant reputational – symbolic - implications for individual institutions. Secondly, the TEF process abstracts complex social processes into categories and metrics which theoretically facilitates comparison between institutions. Thirdly, the TEF requires every institution to 'fabricate a formal textual account' (p225) of its performance of teaching excellence. This is 'displayed' in return for a rating.

Morley's pre-TEF perspective on quality assurance as 'a process of reform or modernisation of public services ... which has created considerable pressure to produce and perform' (2010 p465) echoes Ball in the claim that 'the results of audit provide a reified reading, which becomes a truth... encoded in league tables' (p476). The binary of reward and sanction is visible in her argument that while 'for those at the top there is an artificial halo effect for universities at the bottom of the league tables, identity is a form of negative equity' (p472). However, Morley also pays attention to the effects of the quality assurance process at the micro level, arguing that any damage to institutional reputation as a result of a quality assurance judgement becomes an attack on the competence of every organisational member. She identifies the way quality assurance creates its own structures and systems of power and exposes the micropolitics of gendered power in organisations.

### **Institutional polishing**

Ahmed directs her critique of performativity within HE institutions at diversity:

A diversity policy can come into existence without coming into use ... such policies can be "institutional speech acts" which do not go beyond pluralist understandings of diversity and non-performative in the sense that they fail to deliver what they have promised.

(2006, p764).

Institutional polishing, the labour of creating shiny surfaces results in the fabrication of a 'textual account' of excellence (Ball) and the 'reified reading which becomes a truth' (Morley). The feat of

polishing itself creates an institutional speech act of 'excellence':

When the labor is successful, the image is shiny. The labor removes the very traces of labor ... The creation of a shiny surface is how an organisation can reflect back a good image to itself.'

(Ahmed 2017, p102)

However, Ahmed warns of 'what those shiny surfaces allow us not to see ... When something is shiny, so much is not reflected' (ibid). What is *not* shown in the performance of teaching excellence?

What of the lived experience of diversity? Diversity in HE is not confined to students; HE staff are of all genders, of diverse class, ethnic and national background, age, faith and sexual orientation. Yet it is more difficult for certain staff to perform excellence equally through the evaluation surveys integral to TEF metrics; these are biased against female and minority ethnic staff (Boring 2016). Already over-represented in lower grades and more precarious roles within the sector with career progression entwined with TEF (and REF), sanctions and controls as a result of an inadequate performance of excellence are likely to weigh heavier on such staff. 'We have to be careful not to lose ourselves in the reflection,' Ahmed says (2017 p102). The reflected glory of 'excellence' obscures a dissonance between the performativity of teaching excellence and the lived experience of diversity.

## References

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