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## **“Not everything that counts can be counted”: Transforming teaching excellence awards at a post-colonial South African university**

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### **Research Domains**

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

### **Abstract**

Neoliberalism has led to higher education serving the private good instead of the public good. ‘Excellence’ is a key concept in this corporatized space. Teaching excellence awards privilege individual performance, conflicting with the values of higher education for the public good such as equality, equity and social responsibility. These values are essential in transforming post-colonial universities in the global South. This conceptual paper tracks the transitioning of teaching excellence awards at a South African post-colonial university from a de-contextualized, individualist system to an emerging collaborative space emphasizing values linked to social justice. Using critical complexity theory as a theoretical lens, the paper analyses the awards as a complex system which reflects the constantly shifting and interdependent individual, collective and relational dimensions of teaching and learning in higher education in the global South. It examines four potential ways to move the system further towards the public good and a transformed university.

### **Full paper**

Traditionally, in both the global North and South, higher education was viewed as an institution of as well as for society, serving the needs of the public for whom it was created. However, due to the rise of neoliberalism during the last approximately 50 years, the

conception of higher education as serving the public good has shifted. Global higher education is governed by neoliberalist policies and practices, changing the purpose of education from the learning and sharing of knowledge for the betterment of society to the production of individuals who can survive and thrive in a performance-driven and competitive world. Neoliberal educational institutions are characterized by managerialism, the quantification of outputs and a corresponding view of academics and students as “human capital”. The concept ‘excellence’ plays a key role in this educational space, indicating the ever-upward drive in performativity and elitism in all aspects of a higher education institution.

Demonstrations of excellence in higher education are underpinned by, inter alia, the beliefs that teaching and learning are economic instruments which are commensurable and enhanced by the competitiveness of the educational arena. The concept ‘teaching excellence’ accordingly privileges the performance and output of individual academics and, as a result, conflicts with the values of higher education for the public good such as equality, equity and social responsibility. Evaluation criteria for excellence in teaching are correspondingly de-contextualized, not taking into account the complexity and diversity within which teaching and learning are situated. The awarding of teaching excellence is therefore problematic, especially at higher education institutions in previously colonized countries in the global South: teaching excellence awards focus on the private good of the individual academic, whereas the transformation of higher education institutions and an accompanying emphasis on social justice and matters of collective responsibility should be of paramount importance.

This conceptual paper tracks the transitioning of a teaching excellence awards system at a neoliberal, post-colonial, research-led university in South Africa from a de-contextualized, individualist system to an emerging collaborative space where values linked to social justice are increasingly emphasized. At its inception in 2017 the aim of the system was to award individual academics who could demonstrate a sustained outstanding teaching performance, successful student learning, and a reflective practice (in the category ‘Developing Teacher’) as well as educational leadership and the scholarship of teaching and learning (in the category ‘Distinguished

Teacher’). From 2018 to 2022, however, the university has been gradually changing the system, reconceptualizing its two categories from a single focus on the private good to a shared focus on the individual academic, peer collaboration, critical citizenship, and the public good. In 2021 a teaching team award was introduced which was amended in 2022 to become a third category, ‘Teaching Collaboration’. This paper examines the change process by using critical complexity theory as a theoretical lens. It analyses the teaching excellence awards at the university as a ‘complex system’, interpreting ‘complexity’ through a primarily reflective and philosophical lens and foregrounding the values and critical consequences of the awards system.

The paper demonstrates that the changing awards system during the last five years is an emergent complex entity which reflects the constantly shifting and interdependent individual, collective and relational dimensions of teaching and learning at a post-colonial higher education institution in South Africa. It discusses the effect of the social, economic and political contexts of the university on academics and their teaching, and students and their learning, and investigates the enabling and hindering roles of these contexts in the transitioning of the awards. The paper also examines four potential ways to move the system further towards the public good: 1) adapting the conceptualization and rewarding of ‘excellent teaching’ to include a focus on ‘excellent learning’ with both discourses emphasizing the ideological contexts in which students and teachers function, 2) replacing the performative evaluation criteria by more inclusive domains such as the fostering of critical thinking and mental flexibility, 3) introducing the student voice into the awards selection process, and 4) removing the personal financial reward which entrenches the neoliberal quantification of ‘excellent’ teaching.

The paper ultimately aims to contribute to the body of research on teaching excellence awards as well as practices regarding the regard and reward of academics (individually and collectively) at neoliberal, post-colonial universities. It will also contribute to the research on and applications of critical complexity theory to different disciplines – to date little work has been done on complexity theory and higher education.

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