

## **Academic voices on outstanding teaching and exceptional learning in current contexts (0157)**

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This paper builds on previous research into teachers' perceptions of teaching excellence (Dunkin and Precians 1992; Barr and Tagg 1995; Biggs 2002) and an earlier investigation by two of the authors which compared students expectations of excellent teaching with teachers' understanding of the delivery of excellence in teaching (Clarke and Watson 2009). The current study set out to investigate what makes outstanding teaching and exceptional learning in different contexts. The research was predicated upon the coalition government's call for the maintenance and improvement of the quality of teaching at a time of decreasing resources (Cable 2010). Moreover in a political climate of constant change and it becomes increasingly important to find ways of delivering high quality teaching and support for learning which are effective, efficient and appropriate to both the needs of students and the curriculum, and are adaptable to a wide range of learning contexts.

Initially focus groups of programme leaders and University Teacher Fellows were utilised to identify and refine a set of research questions. These in turn formed the basis of semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 21 members of staff across all five faculties of one post 1992 institution. The sample included new and experienced academics, and some with management responsibility.

Responses to each of the six questions were analysed separately in two stages so that themes emerged and were then refined. The findings of this research demonstrate that outstanding teaching is not simply concerned with being able to tell students about cutting-edge research. While research is important to teaching and informs it in a number of ways, on its own it is not sufficient to ensure excellent teaching. There is a discernible move away from teachers telling students what they know and then testing them on that, to teaching that is derived from an analysis of what students need to know, that builds on what they have already learned and demonstrated and what will equip them best for the next stage of their careers. For their part, the students need to be able to understand, evaluate, synthesise and apply these skills and knowledge.

Our findings show there is no single blueprint for excellence but more a series of interlocking activities, arrangements and trends that in combination contribute to high standards of teaching and learning. These can be summarised in no order of priority under five themes: assessment for learning, curriculum continuity and development, innovation and application of technology, teacher flexibility and resourcefulness, institutional support.

**Assessment.** Students' learning is enhanced through assessment by helping them better understand the skills and knowledge required in their subject and how to use them. Students are encouraged to learn through formative feedback and various

measures are adopted by teaching staff and by students themselves to look beyond the grade to the reasons for them achieving it.

Teachers also use different forms of assessment to enhance the learning process, including self-assessment and peer assessment. These skills contribute to student employability because they are increasingly being called upon in different professions. In addition students learn how to identify and then apply criteria in grading work. When combined with safeguards such as moderation, they also bring pragmatic benefits, for example the reduction in the increasingly heavy assessment load. Teachers are also using assessment to make the learning 'real' whereby students are being assessed increasingly on how they use their knowledge and skills in a professional setting. This also serves to act as a counter to plagiarism.

**Curriculum continuity and development** ensures that there are progression, relevance and coherence in the learning experience. This means not repeating material that the student may have encountered elsewhere; providing a gradient of increasing challenge and autonomy in the learning as students progress through the different modules of their courses; and securing continuous interplay between ideas and their application in the world of work. The latter requires teachers to be in continuous negotiation with professional bodies and employers about the curriculum, to ensure that it is relevant and responsive to the particular sector's needs and requirements, yet not totally subservient to them.

There are several examples in our findings of how **technology** and its applications are used to disseminate information, ideas and intelligence to a dispersed student body; to create a learning community among students and between students, teachers, researchers and employers; and to create learning resources and materials that can be quickly and easily accessed. However education is essentially a social experience which entails communication between and among students and between students and teachers. Technology assists this process and enhances it. But students and teachers still value and benefit from face-to-face contact.

In order to achieve and maintain high standards both teachers and students sometimes need extra **support** beyond the classroom, workshop or laboratory in order to meet the challenges of larger numbers and increasing diversity of backgrounds and abilities. Faculty and university-wide initiatives are add considerable value to the learning experience and contributing to improvements in quality. The sharing of effective teaching practices also helps to improve standards of work and to create a community of learning within and across the institution. Fanghanel (2007) also cites the significance of the institutional context on teaching.

**Teacher flexibility and resourcefulness** feature strongly in excellent learning. These are characteristics that teachers are having to adopt as they adapt to changing and challenging circumstances. There are examples of teaching becoming something of a performance art as a means of engaging large numbers of students at one time and making the learning process interactive and dynamic. Cunnane (2010) echoes this reporting on research which emphasises the importance of the 'edutainer'.

This study has yielded valuable insights drawing on the experience and reflexive understanding of teachers. This will be followed by an equivalent study into the views and experiences of students in order to illuminate in which respects teachers and students share common viewpoints and in which they differ.

## References

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