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What makes an outstanding university teacher? Quantifying and classifying student descriptions of excellence in teaching (0017)

Excellence in teaching, and the ways in which it is recognised and rewarded, is an area of some debate within higher education. This paper looks at how students describe excellence in teaching through the statements that they make in nominating members of staff for an Excellence in Teaching Awards scheme over four years of the scheme which is carried out annually at a research-led institution in London.

There has not been very much similar research carried out which looks at the ways in which students describe excellence in teaching (Moore and Kuol, 2007, Symbaluk and Howell, 2010 and the work of Russell and Barefoot, described by Cunnane, 2010, are the most similar studies). This paper undertakes an in-depth analysis of the ways in which students describe excellence, using a quantitative content analysis approach based on the techniques outlined by Weber (1990). All the nomination statements for four consecutive years of the Excellence Awards have been collected and analysed, making 2051 statements in total for analysis. Word and phrase frequency tables for all statements were compiled, which are then given an initial sweep to eliminate those words and phrases which are not helpful for analysis purposes. This excludes very low frequency words and phrases, as well as those very common words which are not helpful analysis. Certain terms or types of term were identified and the analysis focuses on these. This process was carried out on the data set as a whole, to gain an overview of the results at the College level, as well as

looking at the three faculties to see the ways in which students in different disciplines describe excellence in teaching.

This paper focuses on the traits, skills and approaches that students identify as being 'excellent', and defines four classifications which can be used to define the ways in which students describe excellence.

The most common classification of the four, *Influential*, includes those terms which students have used to describe excellence which has an influence on the way in which they learn or approach their studies. None of these terms are directly concerned with methods of teaching, but are ways in which staff drive and stimulate learning. Terms such as 'inspiring', 362 occurrences; 'interesting', 353 occurrences; 'passionate', 204 occurrences; 'engaging', 162 occurrences and 'motivating', 149 occurrences.

The second commonest was the *Personal* classification. In this classification are grouped all those terms which are more to do with supporting student learning and making it easier for students to study. There is some overlap between this classification and the third, since their constituent terms may all be seen as being tangential to the direct teaching process, but assisting in the learning processes of students. This classification focuses on those traits which staff display which support learning. Included in this classification are terms such as 'helpful', which occurs 286 times; 'encouraging' 256 occurrences; 'supportive', 251 occurrences; and 'approachable' with 190 occurrences.

The third classification in the sample is *Demeanour*. This classification is focused on traits which make the student experience easier and more enjoyable, as opposed to the activities focus of the previous classification. This classification is concerned more with the personality and nature of staff than anything else, and includes terms such as 'enthusiasm', with 209 occurrences; 'enjoyable', 191 occurrences; 'friendly', 166 occurrences; and 'fun', 143 occurrences. Other less common terms here include 'humour', 'exciting', 'energetic', and 'entertaining'

The final classification, *Standing*, is the least common of the four. Under this classification are three terms which refer to the status and approach of staff, 'dedicated', with 102 occurrences; 'professional' 68 occurrences and 'committed' 48 occurrences. This classification shows that students comment in notable numbers on the dedication and professionalism of those staff, as well as commenting on the ways in which they are taught and the influences and personal approaches of staff.

It is clear from the results at all levels that students value inspiration, encouragement, guidance, support and humour over subject or method related concepts when nominating excellent teachers. By analysing the use of phrases within the sample it becomes clear that students focus on nominating what they see as their 'best' teacher, showing that excellence for students may well be a case of who is the most impressive member of staff that they have encountered. This phrasal analysis also shows that students value those members of staff who 'go the extra mile', and are prepared to put in more effort or to go over and above what students would normally expect. Looking at the results at a disciplinary level, the Science and Engineering (S&E) sector is more likely to value those personal traits and approaches which I classified above than the other two sectors of the College, with students

from the School of Medicine and Dentistry (SMD) much less likely to use these terms in their nominations.

Apart from defining the classifications, there are three interesting conclusions. Firstly, there are differences in the ways that students from different faculties define excellence in teaching. Secondly, it is clear that excellence for students is focussed on the ways in which staff interact with students, rather than the way in which staff interact with their subject. The ability to inspire, motivate and challenge students, as well as to be approachable, helpful and friendly, are more important to students in making them see excellence in their teachers than subject knowledge. Finally, students tend to focus on more performative elements of the academic role (lecturing, as opposed to assessment), which may mean that staff who do not excel in performance may be overlooked when nominations are sought for the Awards. Whilst it is clear that approachability and support are also important factors, the most performance type of teaching, the lecture, is by far the most commonly cited activity in the sample. Institutions may wish to look at ways to encourage students to value other activities as highly as this very high-profile but, arguably, high-risk type of teaching.

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