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Pursuing teaching excellence in higher education: Towards a multi-stakeholder's perspective

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Part 2

This paper is framed in terms of a provocation intended to stimulate and provoke discussion and reflection on the rationale for a multi-perspective debate on teaching excellence in higher education. Albeit within an examination of provocation as a research tool in the social sciences, Pangrazio (2017:227) envisages an aim of the provocation to be as a means of encouraging critical reflection and in contemporary art usage for example:

‘artists will create a stimulus or situation that seeks to unsettle or disrupt the viewer’s perspective on the world. In doing this, the artwork encourages the audience to consider a different, more critical, perspective on the broader social, political or cultural issues that frame the work.’ (Pangrazio, 2017: 228).

This provocation draws its rationale from Berger (1972:8) and the idea that ‘the way we see things is affected by what we know of what we believe.’ We may live ‘in a world where things happen to us rather than a world where we make things happen’ (Nixon, 2011, 133), but, drawing on Berger, what we know and believe provokes us to imagine different ways of seeing things. Furthermore, the compelling nature of the issues for the sector suggests a pressing need to ‘make things happen’ by provoking a multiple stakeholder debate on teaching excellence in higher education which engages different perspectives and ways of seeing and different beliefs.

The beliefs of policy makers have shaped assumptions and the teaching excellence policy landscape but there are other perspectives of those differently situated in this landscape and therefore ‘our customary visible order is not the only one’ Berger (2002:5). We might question for example what teaching excellence may mean in a deeply stratified system with ‘deep codes of chronic structural inequality’ (Nixon, 2011:15).

In relation to the importance of the pluralistic dimension, we argue that greater emphasis should be given in the debate to the plurality of stakeholders’ perspectives in higher education and therefore that the dialogic space must be widened to become a multiple perspective debate on the matter of teaching excellence.

In relation to the importance of democratic dimensions, we argue for debate about teaching excellence in higher education to be reconceptualised in more democratic

terms as a space for learning together across these multiple stakeholder perspectives. 'Democracy itself is, after all, a commitment to a world of plurality and difference' (Biesta, 2006:151), and a deliberative space that prioritises the contributions of multiple voices to public debate about matters of purpose in education needs to be opened up for critical examination of issues of excellence, pedagogy, power and intent. This space for deliberation is where we hope to instigate an 'interruption', the sense of this which is drawn from Biesta (2006:150) of posing difficult questions with the potential to interrupt. Thereby we begin a process of relocation of the notion of teaching excellence and reinstatement of what is missing: a plurality of other voices in a discourse in which policy voices prevail.

Through deliberation the aim is development of democratic understandings, the reinstatement of the humanistic and relational dimensions to a debate in which measures and grades have dominated and to reconnect with the perspectives of different stakeholders. This is an inclusive approach which engages different voices in the development of a more complex, pluralistic argument. Our frame of reference and inspiration is the writing of Nixon (2008:20) who has argued that excellence has become 'the new currency of the higher education marketplace'. Nixon contends that 'Inside-out' change is more auspicious: 'The hope lies in the associative and civil structures that render academic practice durable and sustainable and that define it historically and in terms of its moral ends and purposes.' (Nixon, 2008:143).

Contributors to a multi-perspective debate

Included in a multi-perspective debate should be institutions' perspectives on teaching excellence. There are world rankings and universities now position and market themselves, with terms such as 'world class', 'high ranking' and 'excellent' becoming ubiquitous:

'Whatever the activity is, it must, we are constantly told, improve at a certain rate. Standards must always be 'driven up'. Benchmarks exist to be surpassed. It becomes difficult as these phrases insinuate themselves into our thinking, to insist that if something is already done very well, then the right thing may be to go on doing it like that.' (Collini 2012:109).

A multi-perspective debate also invokes academics' perspectives on teaching excellence. What meaning does teaching excellence hold for them and how is it to be recognised and developed? If individuals are rewarded for their teaching excellence, is collaboration and teamwork undermined?

As a stakeholder group, students incur a financial burden with the intensification of marketisation in higher education. How does this impact on their expectations of excellent teaching and their positioning as learners?

Employers' perspectives on teaching excellence have a contribution to offer to a multi-perspective debate. The expectations of employers and the response of government to employers' needs impact on university teaching in relation to the employability agenda. There is of course a risk in aligning students' education with the local employment market of today at the expense of the changing global needs of society in the future.

In opening up the dialogic spaces of higher education and creating the conditions to achieve a multi-perspective debate, we embrace theory, concepts, practice implications and future possibilities. Our contention is that debate about teaching excellence has been dominated by policy voices. We need to rebalance this by inviting other voices to be considered as contributors offering other ways of seeing what teaching excellence might mean in higher education.

A multi-perspective on teaching excellence in higher education will also help us approach the ultimate question about the purposes of higher education - what are universities trying to achieve? Is higher education a public good? If so, what capabilities should we equip our students with? These are significant questions and this paper provokes timely, refreshed thought about how teaching excellence in higher education is to be understood and enacted meaningfully.

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