

Developing System-Wide Approaches to Teaching Excellence

Paul Ashwin

There are two approaches to promoting system-wide teaching excellence: “exemplar” and “mapping” approaches. Exemplar approaches focus on identifying particular cases of individual teachers or centers of teaching excellence at a national level, and have operated, for example, in Finland, Germany, Norway, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Mapping approaches seek to assess teaching across the whole system, which can be national or international in scope. The two main examples of mapping approaches are the OECD’s unsuccessful piloting of the AHELO (Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England.

This article assesses existing exemplar and mapping approaches in relation to three questions: How is teaching excellence defined? How is teaching excellence measured? How does the teaching excellence scheme lead to the enhancement of teaching and learning? Based on this, principles are identified for developing more effective approaches to system-wide teaching excellence.

How Is Teaching Excellence Defined?

Under exemplar approaches, teaching excellence is defined by those who are applying to be awarded the status of “excellence.” The logic of such approaches is that applicants develop an evidence-based account of the ways in which they are excellent. This allows space for a variety of different definitions of teaching excellence to flourish.

In contrast, mapping approaches identify the expected outcomes of excellent teaching and assess these across the system. For example, in the TEF, universities were assessed on a series of metrics based on students’ views of teaching, student dropout rates, and employment outcomes. Assessors initially assessed institutions’ performance on the metrics before considering an institutional submission outlining their claim to excellence, with performance on the metrics being the most important contributor to institutions’ TEF outcome.

Neither approach offers an explicit definition of teaching excellence, which highlights a central contradiction. How can system-wide schemes claim to have identified incidences of teaching excellence if they do not know what teaching excellence is? The answer is that they are based on implicit views of what constitutes teaching excellence, which are not subject to public scrutiny. Approaches would be more effective if they developed explicit definitions of teaching excellence, explicitly aligned with the educational purposes of higher education, and showed how teaching contributes to the successful education of students. This suggests that the first principle for system-wide teaching excellence

Abstract

This article discusses the challenges of developing system-wide approaches to teaching excellence and offers three principles that can support the development of more effective approaches.

schemes is defined as: *System-wide schemes of teaching excellence need to offer a definition of teaching excellence that reflects the educational purposes of higher education.*

How Is Teaching Excellence Measured?

Under exemplar approaches, applicants develop their own accounts of teaching excellence and provide evidence to support these accounts. There may be particular types of evidence that are requested, such as the outcomes of student evaluations of teaching, but these tend to be tailored to the account of the applicant who selects which measures to focus on and explains the ways in which they are significant.

Mapping approaches tend to focus on common measures of student outcomes, whether these are the ones selected in the TEF or students' performance in common tests such as in AHELO. The problem that these schemes face is encapsulated in Goodhart's law that once a measure becomes a performance indicator, it ceases to be a good measure. Though a measure may have covaried with quality in the past, as institutions seek to maximize their performance, its relationship to quality is lost. This can be addressed by focusing on measures of processes as well as outcomes, because this creates a situation where the simplest way to "fix" the system is to actually engage in processes that will enhance the quality of teaching and learning. This is not to argue that outcome measures should not be included, but rather that they need to be underpinned by measures that provide evidence about how these outcomes have been achieved.

Overall, a range of separate measures of teaching excellence are needed that focus on both the processes and outcomes of high quality teaching. Given principle 1, these need to offer evidence about the extent to which the definition of teaching excellence has been achieved. Thus the definition of the second principle is: *Measures of system-wide teaching excellence need to be aligned to the definition of teaching excellence and focus on educational processes as well as educational outcomes.*

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How Does Teaching Excellence Lead to Enhancement?

Exemplar and mapping approaches are based on different views of how they lead to the enhancement of teaching. Exemplar approaches are based on a contagion model of change, which assumes that if the best individuals, departments, or institutions can be identified and rewarded, then they will share their excellent practices and help to encourage others to become excellent. While these schemes can play a role in signaling the importance of teaching and provide significant benefits to individuals and departments, they do not enhance every day teaching and learning across the whole system.

Mapping approaches are based on a competition model of change, in which the best institutions are rewarded and the others will improve their practices or lose students and cease to offer degree programs. The problem with such an approach is that for enhancement to occur, it relies both on the measures of teaching excellence being valid, precise, and accurate; and on applicants using these measures to inform their choice of degree program. Neither of these appear to be the case. The problems with measurements of teaching excellence were examined in the previous section, and studies consistently show that students tend not to use information in this way to make their choices.

This suggests that both exemplar and mapping approaches are based on flawed theories of change. An alternative approach can be developed based on Goodhart's law. If we include in our measures of teaching excellence an indication of the extent to which institutions are engaged in practices that research has shown support high quality teaching and learning, then this is likely to lead to institutions improving their practices. Based on this review of how system-wide teaching excellence can lead to enhancement, the definition of the third principle is: *Improving performance on measures of teaching excellence should only be possible due to improvements in teaching practices.* ▲

Paul Ashwin is professor of higher education and head of the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University, UK. Email: paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk.

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