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TEACHING EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Challenges, Changes and the Teaching Excellence Framework

Edited by

AMANDA FRENCH

School of Education and Social Work, Birmingham City University, UK

MATT O'LEARY

School of Education and Social Work, Birmingham City University, UK

With

SUE ROBSON

*School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences,
Newcastle University, UK*

PHIL WOOD

School of Education, University of Leicester, UK



United Kingdom — North America — Japan
India — Malaysia — China

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Amanda French is the Head of Professional Development, Research and Enterprise at Birmingham City University's School of Education. She has worked in higher, further, adult education and the voluntary sector in the West Midlands for 30 years.

Matt O'Leary is a Reader in Education at Birmingham City University. He has worked as a teacher, teacher educator, head of department and educational researcher in colleges, schools and universities in England, Mexico and Spain for over 25 years.

Sue Robson is a Professor of Education at Newcastle University. She is a member of the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching (CfLAT) and leads the Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (HE) Research Group.

Phil Wood is an Associate Professor in Education at the University of Leicester where he is the Co-Director of RISE (Research, Impact Scholarship and Enterprise). He teaches on a number of both campus-base and distance postgraduate courses, predominantly working with international students. His research interests focus on pedagogic innovation and organisational change, understood through the lens of complex theory and process philosophy.

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INTRODUCTION

Amanda French and Matt O'Leary

It was arguably in the late 1990s and early 2000s that the notion of 'teaching excellence' became a common phrase to identify and celebrate 'high-quality' teaching in higher education institutions (HEIs). This focus on teaching excellence has led to a prolonged period where teaching has slowly grown in importance in HEIs. Key drivers for this slow development have resulted in the creation of formal frameworks for recognising 'teaching excellence', the increasing need to focus on teaching as the main income generator for some HEIs, the rise of student satisfaction data, particularly through the creation of the National Student Survey, and the organisational imperative to capture positive performance indicators around programme and module evaluations. In turn, these factors have become increasingly important due to the rise of the 'marketised' higher education (HE) system. In the transition from a civic to a market sector, establishing market position

and unique selling points has become increasingly important business for HEIs in the UK.

As a result of these developments, universities have become more concerned with publicly demonstrating the teaching expertise of their academic staff with a view to increasing student recruitment for their programmes of study. Now, as part of the Higher Education and Research Bill (HERB) passed with unseemly haste in April 2017,¹ HEIs have witnessed the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), heralding an era of unprecedented scrutiny and focus on the quality of teaching in England.

The concept of 'teaching excellence' has, however, all too often been shaped by political criteria which has played a pivotal role in structuring debate around it. These debates have also reflected how academic work has changed significantly in recent decades, as universities worldwide respond to globalisation, the massification of HE and the increasing demands placed upon them by their national governments. The so-called 'new public management' and neo-liberalism have become powerful political drivers of a quality culture in HE across the world as governments have sought to exercise greater control over universities' activities, not least, by introducing initiatives to evaluate the quality of their 'investments' in the HE sector.

Given the complexity around the concept of teaching excellence and the concomitant difficulties in capturing it, this book seeks to offer an inter-disciplinary, evidence-informed discussion around notions of excellence in HE teaching. Each chapter adds to the existing literature on teaching excellence, much of which is characterised by an acknowledgment that teaching is a multifaceted and complex process. Moreover, throughout the book we aim to show how the term 'teaching excellence' is itself not generalisable

and is continuously subject to shifts in context and through time.

Drawing on the authentic, grounded experiences of practising HE professionals, we hope this book will offer an insight into some of the specific factors relating to the pursuit of capturing excellence in the complex and wide-ranging context of HE teaching as well as considering the repercussions of TEF for those involved in learning and teaching and how this might impact institutional policy and practice. We also hope that it will act as a key stimulus for institutional and sector-wide debates and a reference point for initiatives, both personal and institutional, around the TEF and the wider agenda of teaching excellence.

NOTE

1. At the time of going to press, the Higher Education and Research Bill was passed through parliament. MPs and peers in the House of Lords agreed on a number of amendments to ensure that the bill became law before the dissolution of parliament on May 3, 2017. While peers in the House of Lords were highly critical of the TEF, particularly the bronze–silver–gold medal rating system and its link to the setting of differentiated tuition fees, the government ultimately rejected the Lords amendment preventing the TEF being used to set universities' fees. A compromise of sorts was reached inasmuch as ministers agreed to delay the introduction of measures linking TEF to differentiated tuition fees until 2020 by which time an independent review of the exercise's metrics would be completed.

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