

What's not to like about teaching excellence? Some critical questions.

On the face of it, “teaching excellence” would seem to be something that we in higher education should all be in favour of, like motherhood and apple pie. But with the Coalition’s proposals for Australia to adopt performance-based funding back on the table following its recent election victory, we would do well to take a step back.

Whatever the merits of the concept of “teaching excellence”, its interpretation in policy discourses and its operationalisation in assessment and funding schemes is open to question in various parts of the world. In particular, its pursuit reinforces the separation of teaching from research and focuses attention on teaching and teachers, rather than on students and their learning – or their university experiences more broadly. It assumes that everyone knows and agrees what excellent teaching (and learning) looks like, regardless of context, when this is palpably not the case. And it implies that all teachers can (or should) attain excellence every time, which does not seem feasible to me.

System-wide efforts to evaluate and reward teaching excellence are often more about government policies and priorities than about actually measuring the quality of teaching or even evaluating the quality of students’ learning – let alone encouraging *improvements* in teaching and learning. They privilege outputs and outcomes at the expense of processes and latch onto existing metrics, such as retention or attrition, student satisfaction and graduate employment, offering us an oversimplified version of university education.

A case in point is the UK’s teaching excellence framework. It was introduced by the government in order to provide students with better information about the quality of universities and degree programmes so that they can make more informed choices about where to study. The aim was also to ensure that teaching is better recognised and rewarded by universities.

However, the TEF doesn’t achieve any of these aims. It isn’t sufficient to inform student choice. It denigrates as much teaching as it acclaims. It recognises whatever the metrics measure – which isn’t excellent teaching – and the financial reward for institutions has been removed. Nor is there much evidence that employers take any notice.

At least the Australian government’s proposals don’t refer to “excellence”. However, there are references to “high performance”, “high quality student experience” and “efficiency”. And the performance indicators floated are poor proxies for this, under anyone’s definition of such terms: they are simply what is available – or soon likely to be.

It’s not even clear what the problem is to which performance-based funding is the solution, apart from allocating additional funding from the Commonwealth Grants Scheme to support the growing numbers of school leavers over the coming years. Nor does anyone seem to have asked whether there might be better solutions to whatever the problem is.

The implementation failures in other countries highlight the importance of thinking through which indicators are to be used, how the benchmarking will work and the

likely consequences of their introduction. There is a need to carefully pilot any measures and evaluate their effectiveness. And, if it is implemented, the future development of performance-based funding needs to build on the knowledge gained from these pilots and evaluations, because there's a real danger of introducing unintended and potentially undesirable consequences.

In my view, it is time we moved on from “teaching excellence” to enhancing the learning opportunities we provide for our students – and, indeed, for ourselves as educators. We should see university education as transforming students and their understanding of their discipline and the world. Rather than *proclaiming* our excellence, a scholarly approach should prompt us to devise evidence-based, valid and reliable ways of evaluating the quality of teaching and learning and our students' experiences of their education.

These would offer a more sophisticated, contextualised, research-informed understanding and evaluation of quality, transforming and empowering forms of university education throughout our institutions. Failure to do this is to treat the education of future innovators, entrepreneurs and leaders as just another policy area where being seen to introduce greater accountability is more important than doing something that will genuinely transform students' lives and empower them.

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