A critical commentary on Ray Land and George Gordon 'Teaching excellence initiatives: modalities and operational factors'

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Introduction

Land and Gordon's report on Teaching excellence initiatives is a welcome intervention in what has now become quite a complex and contested field as more higher education (HE) systems and transnational bodies (European Commission High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education 2013) around the world are becoming interested in encouraging and rewarding excellence in teaching. Indeed, excellence initiatives of all kinds, whether concerned with research or teaching, are becoming more widespread in higher education (Pruvot and Estermann 2014). The authors have clearly tried hard to include a wide range of international initiatives in their review, though perhaps as the UK is a signatory to Bologna and a member of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), developments within the EHEA are of particular interest for the UK.

Land and Gordon also try to move beyond the interminable and certainly insoluble debates about how teaching excellence can be defined and by whom. Indeed excellence, along with meritocracy, is an emotive, if familiar, word in higher education, but its pursuit is permeated by socio-cultural characteristics such as gender and ethnicity and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, excellence is not invoked in every aspect of HE activity (Deem 2009c). Land and Gordon avoid some of the pitfalls of focusing on excellence as a concept by directing attention towards an emphasis on a framework which examines different modalities of excellence initiatives and takes into account a range of operational factors which affect the implementation of teaching excellence initiatives. Looking to the future, they also offer a 'framing tool' for initiatives that can be designed for and operationalised at a variety of levels, from a whole HE system to individual academic departments. The tool enables some of the key findings and conclusions from the review to be turned into action. Land and Gordon recognise that current debates about teaching excellence are not confined to teachers themselves and the programmes on which they teach but also encompass professional services staff and whole institutions, so that teachers, administrators and their organisations may all be potential recipients of excellence initiatives.

It is worth reminding ourselves that policy initiatives of any kind, not just those concerned with teaching excellence, rarely turn out as expected by their architects. Not only are there implementation gaps (Toole 2000) but also unintended consequences, both negative and positive, for policy developments in general, and in this instance, for higher education in particular (Merton 1936, Krücken 2014, Deem, Barnes *et al.* 2015). In addition, policy is also constructed and implemented in a relational way, so that policy networks are critical to what happens to particular initiatives (Ball 2012), particularly in a world where even public services are infused with neo-liberalism. So as well as exploring teaching excellence initiatives and higher education institutions, it is also important to examine who is trying to implement change and why. It is one thing for institutions to develop their own excellence initiatives but when the 'evaluative state' (Neave 2012) does it too, then that is when some less positive unintended consequences may arise, as they have with other higher educational initiatives (Deem *et al.* 2015).

Modalities and linear conceptions of teaching excellence

The first section of the report deals with modalities of teaching excellence, ranging from competence and proficiency levels to expertise and high recognition level, and also considers the how and why of these modalities. While this is a very useful way to conceptualise the multi-dimensional nature of teaching excellence and how it is dealt with in different kinds of initiative, in some ways, it is also unhelpful in that there is more than a hint that teaching excellence is positioned as points on a continuum; from starting as a competent teacher to becoming an excellent teacher. Indeed Land and Gordon explicitly recognise this in their use of Dreyfus and

Dreyfus's (1986) categories of transition from novice to expert. In reality, achieving teaching excellence is not a linear process; the context really does matter; excellence is not a threshold which once reached cannot be reversed and even supposedly excellent teachers will not always perform at this level every time they teach (Ashwin 2015a, Ashwin 2015b). Interestingly this variability is recognised in the field of research excellence initiatives, where academics are often allowed some choice over the selection of research outputs to be assessed (as has happened in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)/Research Excellence Framework (REF) for some time) or where it is accepted that citations will vary by output, even though an overall rating may be given for a particular academic.

So far as the modalities that Land and Gordon outline are concerned, I find it hard to accept that a course of teacher training for academics constitutes an excellence initiative (or even the basis for it) and cannot believe that most of those who teach on those courses think that either. Equally, I have reservations too about the inclusion of some student-led teaching awards and prizes as excellence initiatives; not because students cannot recognise excellence but because often student-led schemes do not even have explicit criteria and may be more about whether the course involved was enjoyable than about whether it was excellent. In the same vein, rewards for innovation may be recognising something other than excellence, as, for example, in relation to innovative teaching, which is often a high-risk activity and may not be excellent at all in its initial form. In addition, collaboration in teaching may also be about all kinds of other things than simply how well students are taught. Land and Gordon do take into account that it may be hard to distinguish between satisfactory and excellent (this would be particularly true of initiatives that recognise support staff as well as academics, since if we are unsure how to recognise and measure teaching excellence, recognising excellence in support services or in relation to management and leadership of teaching is even harder) but then go on, nevertheless, to work through their list of different modalities. I understand only too well the limitations of space in writing reports such as these but more detail about how different schemes work would be welcome. Pruvot and Esterman's (2014) point that lots of research and teaching excellence schemes are not systematically evaluated, to which Land and Gordon refer to elsewhere in their piece, comes to mind here as something which might have been mentioned in relation to the different modalities considered. It would be helpful to know more about why particular initiatives were established, while the range of initiatives considered is so vast, from student-led prizes to the formation of whole institutions, that it is difficult to know if all of them are part of the same set of phenomena, or not.

Operationalisation (and diversity?)

Section two examines some very important considerations about how teaching excellence initiatives are operationalised (which is also where the previously mentioned unintended consequences of policy initiatives creep in). It looks at, among other things, matters of scale, criteria and evidence; low and high fidelity schemes (the former allowing respondents and/or nominators a lot of freedom to decide how a case is presented or argued for, the latter operating with stricter criteria and evidencing of cases); how recipients of excellence awards are rewarded; whether the impact of the 'discovery' of excellence on students, other parts of an institution or academic career trajectory is or is not included in initiatives (so any advance or spreading of good practice is not lost or buried); the (sometimes hidden) costs of initiatives; their integration with other aspects of academic development; and the effects of excellence initiatives on those who are considered for awards and are ultimately unsuccessful. The last experience though is hardly something unknown to academics, since it equally applies to grant applications, promotion, journal papers and book proposal submissions. Also considered is how people react to those who receive awards for innovation, which some may consider more disruptive than praiseworthy. A number of

these factors raise the possibility that the existence of teaching excellence initiatives is not always viewed as a force for good. Furthermore, while the question asked by the Lund (Sweden) Pedagogical Academy initiative about whether there is a questioning of broader research-dominated academic cultures by those who win awards for teaching is a good one, it is hard to see how excellence initiatives on their own could possibly expect to achieve this, given that teaching versus research tensions are experienced by higher education institutions all over the world.

Further research might usefully include some consideration of the possible effects of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability on the likelihood of getting a teaching excellence award, and about how such factors affect the judgments of those who assess or nominate for such awards. Though research on some of these aspects is sometimes equivocal, based on small samples or specific to a particular country (MacNell, Driscoll *et al.* 2014, Subtirelu 2015), I wonder how many teaching excellence awards have had an equality impact assessment carried out on them? Is there a UK teaching excellence initiative parallel to the recent report on equality and diversity published for the 2014 Research Excellence Exercise (Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel 2105)? I think not. But perhaps there should be.

There is also another issue not considered directly in section two of the report, which is relevant to the broader question of sustaining and rewarding teaching excellence. That is, how do you encourage third party referees in high fidelity schemes to comment on teaching excellence, especially if the criteria for awards are complex? In the context of academic promotion, while many academics are happy to comment on research performance and achievement, it is often much more difficult to get people to comment sensibly and usefully on the quality of teaching. Though, for example, in some high fidelity schemes, referees or assessors do agree to comment, the former may use large chunks of the original application in constructing their comments, which means that questions can be asked about added value and the capacity to make a truly evidence-based assessment. While reference to something like the UK Professional Standards Framework (UK PSF) may help in constructing what is said about an applicant for an excellence initiative, this can only go so far. Furthermore, as someone who is regularly involved in research as well as teaching evaluations at all kinds of levels, I feel that the latter is often more burdensome and feels less satisfactory when completed. I know I am not alone in thinking this. Interestingly, the question of peer review in general (not peer observation, which is rather different and is much discussed in relation to teaching) is much more often written about and referred to in connection with research than teaching, although there is a distinct literature on the latter (Thomas and Chie 2013). The objectives of peer review per se, in relation to teaching excellence, also need to be explored as this is a vital mechanism of implementation.

Futures – making things more equal and a TEF to join REF?

In the final section of the report, Land and Gordon turn their attention to how future teaching excellence initiatives might be framed and how we deal with the challenges of setting up, legitimating, running and funding such initiatives and trying to ensure that there is a contribution to academic cultures. In this last part of the report, I wondered if the broader context was that we might be heading towards a UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) or some nationally-ranked survey involving teaching excellence (possibly via the National Student Survey or the pilot Student Engagement Survey, though these currently exclude postgraduate students of all kinds). If a TEF is on the agenda, do we really want to add another huge area of expenditure comparable to the REF, whose cost estimates (outwith the actual funding derived from it) vary from £47 million to over £1 billion (Jump 2015)?

The authors do draw attention to the financial disparity in the UK between research and teaching excellence, which presumably refers to the considerable research funding derived from the Research Excellence Framework (formerly the Research Assessment Exercise) compared with the tiny amounts available for teaching excellence. However, this is not a straightforward like-for-like comparison, since UK higher education research is only funded in two main ways, through research grants for projects and through REF, plus tuition fees from research students (QR also flows to home and EU research students through the Research Degree Programme supervision fund). With research, it is research activity as well as excellence that is being funded, and if you are in an academic unit where you are not excellent but your colleagues are, the money still flows, though it depends on the internal funding model whether you get access to it or not. Research grants may go both to those who are potentially excellent or who have been excellent in the past but any new evidence of excellence only becomes known when project outcomes are available, not at the time of award. Research grants also vary greatly in size by discipline, as does the likelihood of their availability and the 'need' for them (which is high in most STEM subjects but less in arts/humanities, with social sciences somewhere in between). By contrast, UK teaching activity is largely funded by a mix of tuition fees, or their equivalent, and by public funding. Excellence funding for teaching, which is a different facet of funding, generally has to draw on these two sources as well, and it is true that this tends to involve relatively small sums, if any at all (indeed some awards rely on status, peer recognition or non-monetary awards). But there is one sense in which both research and teaching excellence initiatives do share something, which is that both either currently or potentially can be seen as analogous to a game (Lucas 2006). Land and Gordon talk of zero-sum games for resources within institutions but the idea of a 'game' can also refers to Bourdieu's (1988) notion of contested territories or fields within academe, including the search for cultural, social and economic capital and the unwritten 'rules' of the games played in contesting these fields.

Just as academics play and contest 'games' in their research activity, so this also happens in teaching and we need to be aware of this if we are considering moving towards a broader excellence initiative for HE teaching in the UK or if we are attempting to change the existing pattern of excellence initiatives.

As well as the financial challenge posed by teaching excellence awards, Land and Gordon also talk about the balance between rewarding continuous teaching improvement and episodic improvement, between individual and programme, department or institutional excellence and how to allow for diverse definitions of teaching excellence without the concept becoming so elastic that it loses all meaning. There is also a mention of how it might be possible to form ranking tables for teaching excellence, though given how controversial league tables and rankings are in the research field and in the UK, in relation to the existing National Student Survey, it is not clear that this would be welcomed by academics or institutions. Nevertheless, it might be worth looking at the European Commission's MultiRank project (Van Vught and Ziegele 2012), which allows criteria relevant to teaching and student outcomes, as well as research, to be compared across institutions and allows users to determine which factors they are interested in, as such a model could potentially be adopted as an approach to teaching excellence. Finally, Land and Gordon talk about the importance of showcasing teaching excellence which is not yet done on the same scale as showcasing research excellence.

Their series of questions that need to be asked at system level (and the UK does contain four separate HE systems), institutional level and faculty and department level are very helpful and there would certainly be a benefit in making these questions widely available (not just in the report). And it is worth noting that Land and Gordon also emphasise the extent to which both internal and external factors shape both the possible answers to questions and the contexts of teaching excellence. In the final section, Land and Gordon also make reference to contexts of

excellence, which they define as high fidelity (with evidence and/or carefully argued and tested rationales), low fidelity (where the nominator is trusted to make a judgment with minimal reference to the evidence), managerial (which may make efficient use of resources but produce unintended negative consequences) and consumerist, with the latter emphasising the role of the market and students or potential students using evidence about teaching to inform their higher education choices. While agreeing that marketisation of higher education is a significant factor in many contemporary HE systems (Teixeira and Dill 2011), it is not universal even in Europe, as Budd's comparison of English and UK undergraduates reveals (Budd 2014).

Concluding comments

In conclusion, Land and Gordon's report discusses many important aspects of how teaching excellence initiatives work and also asks key questions about how we might develop such initiatives further. In doing so, fresh questions also arise, not least about the utility and scope of teaching excellence as a concept; factors affecting policy implementation and unintended consequences of teaching excellence initiatives including 'game' playing; how people approach writing references and conducting peer review in the field of teaching, equality and diversity considerations; how teaching and research excellence initiatives differ from or are similar to each other; wider cultural change in UK higher education institutions; how to deal with rankings and future steps in relation to new or enhanced teaching excellence initiatives.

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