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 (2015) provided a detailed survey and an analysis of the teaching excellence (TE) initiatives currently in operation in higher education and what purpose they serve. They then outlined the operational factors that need to be taken into consideration for institutions wishing to introduce TE initiatives. Finally, they raised a number of thought provoking questions which serve as a framing tool for TE initiatives. Those questions systematically outlined the dimensions that should be taken into consideration and are very useful not only to institutions wishing to introduce TE initiatives but also those which already have such initiatives in place.

In my response to their paper, because of the limit of space, I shall just focus on two issues which I was particularly concerned about when I was the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) during 2007-2014, when I revamped our existing teaching award. First, what kind of teaching excellence should be rewarded and who should be rewarded? Second, how can TE awards have an impact on the quality of teaching beyond the individual, and can we really raise the status of teaching vis-à-vis research through teaching awards?

Multidimensionality of Teaching Excellence

What kind of teaching excellence should be rewarded and who should be rewarded?

Land and Gordon (2015) (hereafter Land and Gordon), as well as many other scholars, have pointed out that teaching excellence is a contested concept; it is located in social, economic and political contexts which are shifting. Consequently definitions of teaching excellence remain nebulous and even conflicting (Skelton, 2007; Gunn and Fisk, 2013; Brusoni et al., 2014). Indeed there seems to have been no agreement on what constitutes teaching excellence amongst institutions. A number of studies have outlined the different ways in which teaching excellence has been characterized, the most comprehensive of which was the twelve conceptions of teaching excellence in Gibbs (2008), which fall mainly into the following patterns: a focus on student support and learning rather than on formal teaching; a focus on the wider learning environment and the curriculum rather than just on teaching; an emphasis on teacher performance, with little focus on students; an emphasis on teaching innovation and leadership of teaching; and the emphasis on scholarship of teaching as highly valued, and finally a focus on teaching and learning to meet economic goals (Brusoni et al., 2014).

As we can see, these conceptions pertain to multiple dimensions of teaching. This, as Land and Gordon (p.3) pointed out, contributes to the lack of clarity or agreement regarding what constitutes teaching excellence (see also Elton, 1998). The synopsis of the modalities of teaching excellence initiatives in the HE sector outlined by Land and Gordon (p. 5-6) provides a helpful overview of the multiple aspects of teaching that are considered important by institutions. The adaptation of the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) model to the description of the nature of the criteria or indicators proposed by Land and Gordon provides a way of differentiating levels of excellence. What is perhaps debatable is the mapping of these modalities against levels of excellence. (Here I am taking the modalities outlined at face value with no knowledge of the actual description of what was being recognized in these modalities.) For example, it is difficult to see why awards for teaching innovation and those for great ideas in teaching should be considered different levels of excellence, and how one can distinguish impact from leadership as one often presupposes the other. In some of the modalities, it seems that it is the prestige of the award, rather than what is being awarded, that implies a high level of excellence, such as the Prime Minister’s/President’s Award, and the National Teaching Fellowship Schemes.

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From a pragmatic perspective of introducing teaching awards or reviewing existing teaching awards, I wonder if it would be helpful, on the basis of the Land and Gordon’s survey, to address the following questions:

1. Who/what is being recognized?
The first question relates to the level of operation. A number of researchers have criticized the focus on individual teachers for being too narrowly focused and that there should be wider involvement through the recognition of excellence at programme level and beyond (Land and Gordon, p. 32; see also Gunn and Fisk, 2013). From the modalities listed, it is clear that teaching excellence at all levels can or should be recognized, including individual teacher, team, programme, departmental, faculty and institutional levels. The criteria of excellence for each level would be different.

2. What facet(s) of teaching is/are being recognized?
This requires a definition of what teaching encompasses. A distinction has been made between “teacher excellence” and “teaching excellence”, and the need to go beyond teaching performance in the classroom and include pre- and post-teaching work (Gunn and Fisk, 2013; Macfarlane, 2007). It is clear that while classroom teaching still constitutes the major form of teaching, the focus should be student learning experience. Hence the facets of teaching reflected in the modalities range from disciplinary teaching, interdisciplinary teaching, scholarship of teaching and learning, innovation, great teaching ideas to student learning experience, including internationalization and contribution to student learning. One would also add experiential learning, e-learning and knowledge exchange. Excellence in any of these facets could be at individual, team, programme, departmental, faculty or institutional levels.

3. What is the level of recognition?
The level of recognition is related to the extent of the impact, ranging from own students, to programme, department, faculty, cross-faculty, whole institution, cross-institution, and sector wide. As mentioned previously, impact is often inseparable from leadership. It would be difficult to imagine how a programme can achieve excellence if there were no excellent curriculum leaders. In Land and Gordon’s survey of modalities, it would be helpful if there is a more explicit link between impact and the level of recognition.

4. What criteria do we use to determine the level of excellence? Is it possible to have universal criteria?
The question of the criteria for excellence has been raised by a number of scholars. Some have pointed out that TE awards are inevitably normative, and Land and Gordon cautioned their tendency to be divisive or alienating (p. 31; see also Ramsden and Martin, 1996). Others have argued for criterion referenced approach so that different needs are catered for (Gunn and Fisk, 2013). Land and Gordon suggested that flexibility should be exercised and I fully concur. They outlined the pros and cons of high fidelity and low fidelity approaches to the interpretation of criteria. Given the multi-dimensionality of TE, given that different institutions have different missions, different sociopolitical and cultural contexts and are at different stages of development, a low fidelity approach, with some core principles that are common to all (Skelton, 2007), seems to be more feasible and desirable. A low fidelity approach, as Land and Gordon (p. 24) observed, recognizes the importance of context and caters for variability within and between contexts, and allows institutions to express their own institutional characteristics. As Brusoni et al. (2014) suggested, “instead of perceiving excellence as an univocal concept, one might conceptualise ‘excellences’, not as a polysemic or ambiguous concept, but as a concept that incorporates different modalities according to the type of institutions, their different contexts, purposes and missions.” (p. 26) The imposition of a “culturally universalizing” set of criteria (Gunn and Fisk, 2013, p. 22) regardless of context can be counter-productive. The challenge, as Land and Gordon
(p. 32) pointed out, is how to allow diversity without the concept becoming too diffused and hence not operationalizable.

**Impact of Teaching Excellence Awards**

How can TE awards have an impact on the quality of teaching beyond the individual? Can we really raise the status of teaching vis-à-vis research through TE awards?

It has been pointed out by a number of scholars that there is little empirical evidence that TE awards have raised the standards of teaching beyond raising the status of individual award winners (Skelton, 2007; D’Andrea, 2007). Land and Gordon (p. 27) raised the important issues of scalability of TE initiatives so that they will not be restricted to enclaves within departments or faculties, and sustainability when categorical funding runs out. As they rightly pointed out, without other supporting measures, the extent to which individual TE award winners can have an impact beyond their own context is questionable.

To address this issue, attempts have been made, such as establishing communities of practice amongst TE award winners, requiring in award applications forward looking projects and not just retrospective teaching performance (as in the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme in the UK) and dissemination of good practice, and so on. Land and Gordon (p. 30) emphasized the importance of a coordinated approach to professional development programmes, scholarship of teaching and dissemination. All of these are very worthwhile and will no doubt increase the impact but they may not be far-reaching enough. What is needed, in addition, is a synergy between a bottom-up process of encouraging practitioner-based TE initiatives and a top-down process in which TE initiative(s) that are strategically important are identified by senior management for adoption at departmental, faculty or institutional levels so that they become embedded as part of the institutional fabric, and be funded accordingly. While tension inevitably exists between practitioner-initiated practice and institutionally determined policy and practice, they do not have to be dichotomized. Rather, achieving the synergy between the two requires great political skill in striking a balance between a “high fidelity” and a “low fidelity” approach so that an initiative can be scaled up “without corroding the trust that was necessary to its original development” (Land and Gordon, p. 26) and without creating resentment and resistance (Land and Gordon, p. 38). One possible way forward is to invite the TE initiators to take on a leadership role in the scaling up process. At the same time, great care must be taken by institutional leaders to fine-tune the implementation at different levels by taking into consideration contextual variations and allowing for flexibility of adoption at local levels without compromising the principles that are germane to the initiative.

Increasing the impact of TE initiatives/awards does not necessarily raise the status of teaching vis-à-vis research, however. As pointed out by a number of scholars, the priority given to research by most, if not all, institutions, relegates teaching award winners to second class citizens, and teaching is given at best a “decent second place” (Gunn and Fisk, 2013, p. 15). Skelton (2004) described teaching awards as a “poisoned chalice” (p. 454) which resonates with the description of a “kiss of death” used by academics in an HE institution in Hong Kong, as it implies that the winner is no good at research. While attempts have been made to deal with this problem, such as equating the value of teaching and research awards, encouraging disciplinary based pedagogical research, none of them seemed to have had any real impact, apart from raising the status of individual award winners (Skelton, 2007).

The human resources policy of HE institutions on the whole, especially research-intensive universities or those aspiring to be one, is dictated by the research performance of staff, given the it is one of the major indicators in international university ranking systems. Hence, while the
pursuit of research excellence is the goal of every single staff (since it is the basis for getting tenure and promotion), the pursuit of teaching excellence is not. At best, it is a shared pursuit of teaching at a level of competence considered acceptable by their institution, even when teaching performance is stated as a criterion for promotion. Attempts have been made by the OECD to complement research ranking by assessment of learning outcomes across the sector (OCED, 2013). Attempts have also been made by HE institutions to introduce different career tracks for promotion, up to professorial level. However, as Cashmore, Cane and Cane (2013) noted, there is a gap in the policy rhetoric and implementation. They called for a change in institutional culture and mentoring of senior management and promotion panels. Given the dominance of international ranking on the agenda of most, if not all, HE institutions, and given that institutional excellence as reflected by the reputational rankings of universities has little to do with the quality of student learning experience (Brennan and Patel, 2013), unless there is a fundamental change in the metrics of international ranking systems, as Land and Gordon (p. 33) observed, teaching will continue to be the “junior partner” to research (Mahoney, 2013, p.4).

References


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