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Who Decides?: A Review of Challenges of the Discourse around Teaching Excellence

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Abstract

The notion of 'teaching excellence' is complex and multi-faceted, and this raises questions around what 'excellent' teaching looks like. Similarly, the criteria for teaching excellence awards in different countries and contexts seem to be particularly vague. This paper draws on the existing literature from over thirty years (1992–2024) on the political and organisational discourse around excellence in higher education, the impact of attempting to measure excellence, and how related award schemes recognise teaching excellence. It aims to highlight some of the challenges of this topic, while also encouraging policy makers, leaders, and educational practitioners to reflect on how different terms are used, to consider whose view of excellence is being applied, and to collaborate on a move towards greater clarity around defining and developing excellence in practice.

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Practitioner Notes

1. Many terms – including excellence and good/best practice – are used in contemporary higher education without stakeholders and practitioners agreeing on their meaning.
2. There is no consensus in the existing literature on a framework for 'teaching excellence'; there are multiple moving parts involved, and different parties are likely to view the concept differently.
3. Many tertiary educators are grappling with different frameworks, policies, and evaluation tools, without asking whether the assumptions sitting behind such tools serve learning and/or teaching well.
4. The lack of clarity around award criteria is potentially perpetuating the problem, when awarding bodies could instead be collaborating to propose agreed elements of teaching excellence based on evidence.
5. There are opportunities for leaders, educators, and awarding bodies to develop policy, practice, and continuing professional development which empowers teachers on their journey towards excellence.

Keywords

teaching excellence, higher education, award schemes, teacher development, scholarship of teaching and learning

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Introduction: Good, Better, Best?

Contemporary practice in higher education is filled with terms that policy makers, stakeholders, and practitioners are all expected to comprehend and agree on. However, does this shared understanding really exist? Citing examples such as 'excellence', 'impact', 'reach', 'accountability', 'benchmarking', and 'transparency', O'Regan and Gray (2018) lament "the mind-numbing incessancy with which stock phrases… are repeated and reproduced in the discourse" (p.537) and argue that these terms render the text empty of any meaning. Coffield and Edward (2009) question how politicians can claim to be looking at examples of 'good', 'effective' and/or 'best' practice (and using these words interchangeably in official documents) when there are no clear definitions available. Hargreaves (2004) concurs:

> The term ['good practice'] itself is ambiguous and flabby. Often 'good practice' and 'best practice' are treated as synonyms, although clearly 'best practice' suggests a practice that has been compared with others and has proved itself better than other 'good' practices. (p.72)

Coffield and Edward (2009, p.375) also contend that 'best practice' "implies that there is only one approach which, if used, will solve any difficulties". Their interviews with educators across 24 different institutions, inquiring into their understanding of 'good practice', revealed that views ranged from personality traits (including, for instance, commitment, empathy, flexibility…), to team characteristics and cultures, managerial factors, organisational culture, responsiveness, innovation, and even compliance (Coffield & Edward, 2009). These authors berate the work of policy makers and politicians who "constantly increase the pressure on practitioners to move from 'good' to 'best' practice and now on to 'excellence for all'" (2009, p.385), and ask whether the "demand for ubiquitous perfection" (p.380) will be next.

The terms 'excellent' and 'excellence' are similarly challenging, with some literature proposing that their use is meaningless (Arendale, 2024; Polkinghorne et al., 2017; Saunders & Ramírez, 2017). A definition of 'excellence' is elusive (Bweupe & Mwanza, 2022), and, as "a multi-faceted concept, …it is not surprising that the term operates ambiguously, contradictorily, and contentiously" (Stevenson et al., 2017, p.63). Sanders et al. (2020, p.72) suggest that "schemas rarely seek to differentiate excellent from merely good, effective or successful teaching". It would, however, seem reasonable to assert, as Coffield and Edward (2009, p.375) suggest, that "'excellent' practice could be interpreted as a more liberal term than 'best' practice, since excellent practices could be flourishing… across the country". Indeed, through a study comparing the views of 120 Australian and English academics, Bartram et al. (2019, p.1295) propose that teaching excellence in higher education is "an accessible aspiration for us all". Yet, in policies and documents, the word 'excellent' is "clearly meant to be an improvement on 'best'" (Coffield & Edward, 2009, pp.375-376), and implies a rather Tolkienesque 'one model to rule them all'. However, it would be impossible to conceptualise excellence as one thing (Gunn & Fisk, 2013). Brusoni et al. (2014, p.20) explain that "excellence in higher education … depends on the person defining the term and their motivation for doing so", which implies that one clear definition of excellence is an impossible goal. Similarly, as far back as 1997, Alexander (p.287) was reminding us that "good practice, created as it is in the unique setting of the classroom by the ideas and

actions of teachers and pupils, can never be singular, fixed or absolute, a specification handed down or imposed from above". While Alexander's work focuses on Primary Education, I would contend that his argument could apply across all educational contexts, regardless of level.

As Johnson (2019, p. 253) highlights, "teachers are *the most significant variable* in determining the quality of education students receive and the amount of learning that occurs" (emphasis added). If we, as educators, are this significant, what can we do to better understand what teaching excellence looks like in practice and how we can work towards it? Within the higher education environment, particularly one which could be described as "an increasingly competitive and turbulent… landscape" (Lundberg, 2022, p. 1), this is highly relevant to the core of learning and teaching practice, with institutions facing increasing pressures around accountability, quality assurance, policy interventions, national and international market forces, and student expectations. Many tertiary educators are grappling with different frameworks, policies, and evaluation tools, without necessarily asking whether the assumptions sitting behind such tools serve learning and/or teaching well. Although the current literature might examine different perspectives on excellence, consider the characteristics, behaviours, or identities of award-winning educators, explore teaching award schemes, or interrogate policies and frameworks, the discourse remains problematic.

This paper draws together some of the complexities, focusing specifically on notions of metrics and measurement, teaching excellence, and how excellence is rewarded. It stresses the importance of understanding whose view of excellence is being applied, and why appropriate definitions are currently out of reach, asking the question who decides who (or what) is 'excellent'. I end with a call for educators/educational developers, institutions, and awarding bodies to work together on moving towards a clearer definition of what teaching excellence looks like in practice.

Literature

Metrics, Measurements, and Management

Although views on excellence may vary across regions, cultures, organisations, and disciplines, several authors agree that it has been at the core of higher education policy discourse, nationally and internationally, for around three decades (Bartram et al., 2019; Horrod, 2023; Skelton, 2005), and many question the philosophies or political thinking behind today's prominence of the term (Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Simbürger & Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2020). Wilcox (2021, p.44) identifies "a shift in the meaning, value and goals of the competition for quality, with an increasing emphasis on the pursuit of excellence", while O'Connor and O'Hagan's 2016 research, drawing on qualitative interviews with 23 academic staff, concluded that the concept of excellence has an "uneasy relationship with [Key Performance Indicators]" (p.1953). Saunders and Ramírez (2017, p.399) would agree: "Since excellence is a measure of a thing, and since everything in post-secondary education is committed to excellence, everything must be measured". This can be tied back to the introduction of league tables, under Thatcher's government in the United Kingdom (UK), to rank institutions according to (measured) quality (Beauvallet, 2015; Lorenz, 2012). Organisations are no longer judged by their own successes, but instead by their relative position to other organisations (Deem & Baird, 2020; Mintz, 2021; Race, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2020). This leads to what Dixon and Pilkington (2017) call a "competitive culture of measurement" (p.440), with managers who are "constantly amend[ing] their definition of what being an excellent

teacher involves" (p.438) and how it is measured, due to the significant political emphasis on excellence and the pursuit of increased organisational prosperity in which "any definition of excellence… is led by government policy, which is subject to constant modification" (p.439). The higher education system in the Netherlands, for instance, is described by Joosten (2015, p.1517) as understanding excellence "in terms of 'ranking'", with a focus on ensuring "the 'best' students" excel. It is not clear, though, what this means for students who are not considered 'the best'. Donald (2025, p.131) highlights the University of Zurich's headline-making decision in March 2024 to withdraw from the Times Higher Education rankings, on the basis that "such rankings disproportionally prioritise quantifiable outputs, thereby failing to accurately capture universities' diverse spectrum of teaching and research activities". Any educational institution's range of activities should logically contribute to its reputation, but, as Deem and Baird (2020), Morrish (2019), and Fairclough (2015) underline, even research and scholarship are understood through quantifiable outputs and rankings.

If the increased emphasis on quality in higher education is attributed primarily to more intense competition across the global market (AlMarwani, 2023; Cooper, 2019; de Wit, 2020), this fits with Saunders and Ramírez's (2017, p.399) claim that the pursuit of 'excellence' in teaching is an attempt "to commodify post-secondary education". It would seem, then, that whatever good, best, or excellent practice may be, or whoever determines its use, it leads to educators being tested, quantified, rated, and measured.

It is not that metrics and measurements are inherently negative. Understanding teaching effectiveness is "an important but complex task" in education (Poproski & Greene, 2018, p.1), and robust measures, used discerningly, can help us understand practice, progress, and change. Conversations, developments, and decisions about 'quality' or 'excellence' need to be evidence-informed (Darwin, 2017; Gibbs, 2010), including through judicious design, application, and interpretation of a *blend* of tools and types of data, rather than the implementation of any single measurement in isolation (Poproski & Greene, 2018; Woosnam et al., 2020). Well-developed metrics can help educators, stakeholders, and potential learners better understand expectations around standards, but agreement across the sector would still be beneficial for all concerned (Gunn & Fisk, 2013) and help avoid primarily quantitative data being seen as a proxy for excellence (Ashwin, 2017; Massie, 2018).

How does measuring excellence impact on education? One result is what Wilsdon (2016) calls "the metric tide", with "the rise of a regime of bureaucrats… and experts" (Shore, 2008, p.282) undermining professional autonomy and values (Enders & Naidoo, 2022; Owens et al., 2021), increasing work-related stress levels (Andrew, 2023; Skinner et al., 2021), and impacting on self-image and teacher identity (Hendrikx, 2020; Perkins, 2019), as well as on career development (Su, 2022). Higher Education might be seen as an "anxiety machine… [in which] audit and metrics dominate the working lives of academics" (Morrish, 2019, p.9). Stevenson et al. (2017, p.64) would agree, reflecting on the "frailty" of academic staff in the tertiary sector, given the focus on measurement of individual performance against "a concept that is so problematic to define". For Lorenz (2012, p.619), one "paradoxical and disastrous effect of [neoliberal policies]… is that someone can be an excellent teacher and researcher and at the same time be assessed as poor by the [Quality Assurance] system", should they not emerge in a positive light from whatever

metrics are being implemented at the time. Seeing excellence as part of performance management and quality measurement can "trivialise excellent teaching" (Layton & Brown, 2011, p.164). Furthermore, as several authors assert (including O'Regan & Gray, 2018; Shephard et al., 2011; Verma, 2022), the current focus on recognising excellence may ironically lead, in fact, to excellence being stifled. It "naturalizes and legitimizes the reduction of teaching and learning to crude quantitative indicators… [and] extracts teaching and learning from the processes of education" (Saunders & Ramírez, 2017, p.401). In case you missed that, it "extracts teaching and learning from the processes of education". Do educators ever join the profession not aiming to teach, and to inspire and enable others (and themselves) to learn? One would hope not.

With all of this in mind, who should decide who (or what) is 'excellent'? Should it be Ministries of Education and politicians who decide what 'excellence' is, or perhaps executive leaders, governing councils, and managers in individual institutions? Would their top-down views of excellence match the thoughts and experiences of teaching practitioners or those of learners? Unlikely.

Teaching Excellence

Considerations around the notion of 'teaching excellence' are equally varied and complex (Bartram et al., 2019; Kuiper & Stein, 2019; Land & Gordon, 2015), and "academics cannot agree on how it should be measured" (Deem & Baird, 2020, p.227). For Wilcox (2021, p.55), 'teaching excellence' is "a buzzword too readily accepted by institutions but poorly defined by policymakers", and "should be treated with caution". Skelton describes it as a "contested, value-laden concept" (2005, p.4), and Madriaga and Morley (2016, p.166) question the "steady effort to make an intangible, ambiguous, multifaceted notion of teaching excellence incarnate". We could indeed argue, then, that "conceptions of teaching excellence are due a reimagining" (Gravett & Kinchin, 2020, p.1033). A key issue here is that, as Dixon and Pilkington (2017) justifiably highlight, unless 'teaching excellence' is clearly defined, how can we say for sure whether or not it is being demonstrated?

Part of the challenge is that, as already suggested, teaching and learning has multiple moving parts, and that "individual teaching excellence, however articulated, is not achieved in a vacuum" (Sanders et al., 2020, p.73). For Gunn and Fisk (2013, p.37), "the relationship between the individual and their institution is intrinsically linked in any discussion of teaching excellence". In Taiwan, for example, the Ministry of Education launched its 'Teaching Excellence' initiative in 2004, with universities competing for funding "in order to encourage them to upgrade teaching quality" (Ministry of Education, Republic of China (Taiwan), 2008). The UK's Teaching Excellence Framework, introduced in 2017 (Barkas et al., 2019), is described by Massie as using "student satisfaction, retention rates and destination of leavers as a proxy for teaching excellence" (2018, p.332), and by Shattock (2018, p.21) as a framework which "does not actually assess teaching but only the imperfectly recorded reactions to it". Land and Gordon (2015, p.5) cite the Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) categories for transition from novice to expert, to propose four "levels of excellence": Competence (a pre-condition of excellence), proficiency, advanced proficiency, and expertise/high recognition. The idea of a flexible and developmental framework of teaching excellence criteria seems sound (Cashmore et al., 2013). , Polkinghorne et al. (2017, p.214)

urge institutions to ensure they are “evaluating teaching excellence in the same way so that realistic comparisons can be made”, and Land and Gordon (2015, p.21) propose three “sets of operational questions [as] a means of framing issues… at sectoral, institutional, and faculty/departmental levels”. In reality, however, looking at the literature, a single framework or system, no matter how flexible, is still some way off.

Some of the complexities of teaching excellence in higher education can be seen in this description from the National University of Singapore:

> Teachers can and do achieve excellence in different ways. In [this] context, ...‘excellence’ is understood as achieving, and sustaining over time, high levels of positive educational impact... achieved through new or existing pedagogies, including the thoughtful integration of new or existing technology, that advance the learning of students, colleagues, and the wider university community. (Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology, n.d.)

The California Institute of Technology’s definition of excellence in teaching sets out seven groups of “manners and practices” (Caltech: Center for Teaching, Learning, & Outreach, 2025, para. 4), each of which comprises up to seven elements, making a total of 35 ‘descriptors’ of teaching excellence. I could cite examples from multiple other institutions, all of which would be different; an emphasis on research here, a focus on innovation there. Day et al. (2007) assert that it is colleagues, leadership, workload, and commitment that are the primary influences on teacher effectiveness. For Skelton (2009), the reflexive development of a personal philosophy of teaching is key to teaching excellence, whereas for Smith and Lygo-Baker (2017), it is the ability to create optimal learning conditions that is fundamental to teaching excellence. It is also an opportunity to maximise “ongoing enhancement [of] and engagement with professional learning” (Floyd, 2020), and to foster a culture of excellence (Woosnam et al., 2020). Although Johnson-Farmer and Frenn (2009, p.7) suggest that teachers and learners are both involved in “dynamic engagement” within the teaching excellence process, again it is unlikely that both parties view excellence in the same way (Bradley et al., 2015; Greatbatch & Holland, 2016; Miller-Young et al., 2020). For the learner, impact might be about confidence, motivation, behaviour, creating opportunities, and empowering individuals and groups through learning. Is it, then, these things which demonstrate teaching excellence, and, if so, how might they be measured? McLean (2001) summarises differences between student and staff perceptions of ‘teaching excellence’ and, perhaps more importantly, asks whose opinions we should value, and against what criteria excellence is measured. In other words, once again, we ask the question who decides who (or what) is ‘excellent’?

Rewarding Excellence

Despite the challenges of the discourse, there is certainly enthusiasm in higher education for recognising excellence. Some institutions, for instance, include teaching excellence as part of their promotion processes (Sanders et al., 2020), and many reward teaching excellence (even if, in most cases, their criteria are poorly defined (Bethel et al., 2021; Gibbs, 2008a; Ka Yuk Chan & Chen, 2023). Similar awards also exist at a national level in several countries, including New Zealand, Australia, the UK, Malaysia, South Africa, Canada, and the United States. Existing

literature looks at various aspects of teaching awards and their impact, including those highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1

Focus of Existing Literature on Teaching Excellence Awards

Focus	Source
Conceptions of teaching excellence underlying different award schemes	Cattell-Holden, 2020; Chism, 2006; Dinham & Scott, 2002; Gibbs, 2007, 2008a; Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Jackson, 2006; Ka Yuk Chan & Chen, 2023; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019; Miller-Young et al., 2020; Pusateri, 2020; Warren & Plumb, 1999
Advantages and limitations of different types of award scheme	Efimenko et al., 2018; Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Warren & Plumb, 1999
Measuring teaching excellence	Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Little et al., 2007; Mackenzie, 2007; Madriaga & Morley, 2016; McLean, 2001; Miller-Young et al., 2020; Stripling et al., 2020
Tensions between teaching excellence and research activity (e.g. Are teaching excellence award winners also research active? Are winners happy to share their expertise? Is teaching as valued as research by institutions?)	Aron et al., 2000; Aucott et al., 1999; Canning, 2019; Cashmore et al., 2013; Charles, 2018; Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015; Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Halse et al., 2007; Mitten & Ross, 2018
Critical review of 'teaching excellence' in HE	Brusoni et al., 2014; Gravett & Kinchin, 2020; O'Leary & Wood, 2019; Sanders et al., 2020; Skelton, 2004, 2005, 2009
Connections between excellence awards and processes of teaching evaluation	Carusetta, 2001; Efimenko et al., 2018; Gunn & Fisk, 2013
Impact on winners of national teaching awards	Aucott et al., 1999; Bethel et al., 2021; Brawer et al., 2006; Dinham & Scott, 2002; Efimenko et al., 2018; Frame et al., 2006; Obeidat & Al-Hassan, 2009; Ravago & Mapa, 2020; Seppala & Smith, 2020; Warnes, 2019; Woosnam et al., 2020; Zhu & Turcic, 2018
Award winners' conceptualisations of academic work and/or teaching effectiveness	Brew & Ginns, 2008; Carless, 2015; Dunkin & Precians, 1992; Huber, 2018; Kreber, 2000; Matheson, 2020; Milliron & Miles, 1998; Morris & Usher, 2011; Popp et al., 2011; Shephard et al., 2011; Warnes, 2019; Zou et al., 2020
Preparing an application for a teaching award	Schönwetter et al., 2018; Shephard et al., 2011
Institutions' views on teaching awards, their benefits and drawbacks	Aucott et al., 1999; Mackenzie, 2007; Madriaga & Morley, 2016; McNaught & Anwyl, 1993; Seppala & Smith, 2020; Woosnam et al., 2020
Self-efficacy in award winners	Bethel et al., 2021; Morris & Usher, 2011

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The intended purposes of teaching excellence awards are diverse. Examples include them being used to "assure stakeholders of the quality of teaching in universities" (Ka Yuk Chan & Chen, 2023, p.1), build teachers' reflective practice (Machingambi, 2017), encourage faculty development (Scott, 2019), boost staff confidence (Bethel et al., 2021; Van Lankveld et al., 2021), highlight innovative practice (Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015), or to "support the production of more publications about teaching" (Gibbs, 2008b, p.18). Chism (2006) asserts that teaching awards exist for three main reasons:

i. To acknowledge institutional and/or national support for teaching in higher education (as separate from research)
ii. To recognise teachers' accomplishments, and
iii. To encourage other staff to attain similar levels in their teaching.

All of these underlying rationales for awards present as positive, but some literature is not as convinced about potential outcomes. Mackenzie (2007, p.200), for instance, compares teaching excellence awards to "an apple for the teacher", but wonders if the apple is "ripe and juicy or does it hide a worm?". Similarly, Collins and Palmer (2005, para. 10) ask whether rewarding teaching excellence is the metaphorical carrot or stick, arguing that, although awards can lead to promotion, they can "paradoxically take the recipients further away from teaching" into management or leadership roles. They may even push awardees to leave the institution altogether, as a result of not gaining tenured positions, for instance, and/or due to the realisation that, in their institution, excellent teaching is not viewed as highly as research activity (Aron et al., 2000; Seppala & Smith, 2020), something that Woosnam et al. (2020, pp.405-406) describe as "a zero-sum game in which excellence in teaching comes at a cost to research or… is treated as a detriment to academic career advancement". Brawer et al. (2006) found that awards were valued more by Heads of Department than by awardees themselves, and others have found awards to be viewed as divisive, demeaning, or even manipulative (Collins & Palmer, 2005; Dinham & Scott, 2002; Madriaga & Morley, 2016). Seppala and Smith (2020, p.1398) outline "cynicism about the purpose and effectiveness of teaching awards in recognising high-quality teaching" and suggest that awards may also have "dysfunctional consequences" by singling out individuals and having an adverse impact on non-recipients. West (2022) touches on some of the backlash she herself experienced as a teaching awardee, within what she calls "the profession that eats itself", and Mackenzie (2007) highlights how "one award recipient… accepted nomination for an award only after receiving assurance… that there would be no publicity and the new school he was moving to would not be informed" (p.201), with other awardees describing "increased pressure, discomfort, jealousy and resentment" (p.200). Although student-led teaching awards could be seen as "an example of the power students have to celebrate and influence excellent teaching practice" (Varwell, 2022, p.6), Davies et al. (2012), reporting on a Scottish initiative to introduce such student-led awards, highlight that there was some "dissent and scepticism" amongst staff, and "friction with senior management" (p.12); some staff went so far as to withdraw "from the scheme after being shortlisted or nominated... Reasons given focused either upon concerns about the awards amounting to a 'popularity contest', or stemmed from objections to students being responsible for the identification and reward of best practice" (p.12). Indeed, it could be argued that, for student-led awards, there is a risk of "'crowd pleasing' as opposed to challenging students" in their learning (Gourlay & Stevenson, 2017, p.392), which again demeans the value of quality teaching.

It could, however, be countered that such issues exist with *any* award scheme. Feys et al. (2013), for instance, while conducting research in a large health care organisation, found that recognising individual employees can lead to harmful attitudes and behaviours amongst other staff, though they do acknowledge that this can depend on the quality of the relationships within the team. Gallus and Frey (2016, p.1707) consider how awards are used in the corporate sector, reporting that they can increase "the intensity of social comparisons among team members" and result in employees seeking to make the 'desired' behaviours visible to managers, rather than genuinely wanting to perform well at all times.

There can, of course, be positive outcomes of teaching awards. Willingham-McLain (2015, p.68) found "overwhelmingly, recipients agreed that the award had a positive impact", including increased confidence, greater motivation to innovate or take risks in their teaching to create a better student experience, and more engagement with scholarship of teaching and learning projects and communities. In Woosnam et al's study (2020, p.409), one head of department described winning an award as "the kiss of enlightenment", with multiple awardees reporting not just a sense of validation, but also increased visibility, networking, and productivity, echoing Kreber's (2000) findings of more collaborative interaction and scholarship among award recipients and their peers.

There are cultural factors at play here too. In some organisational cultures, it may be that applicants nominate themselves for an award, "bestow[ing] a different dynamic on the process" (Fitzpatrick & Moore, 2015, p.628), while in others this would be frowned upon, and nominations would come from colleagues, leaders, and/or students. One could surmise from this that there are many educators who are examples of teaching excellence but may not have been recognised as such (by themselves or by their peers) or may not have the opportunity to apply for awards which recognise their practice. Moreover, if an applicant does not achieve an award on their first attempt, for instance, but then succeeds at a later date, is it their teaching excellence that has improved, or is it their ability to *represent* their excellence through a portfolio of evidence in line with the award criteria? Do such criteria help us move toward a better understanding of teaching excellence?

Award Criteria

Gunn and Fisk (2013, p.25) claim that, wherever it may be in the world, teaching excellence award criteria are essentially built around four central themes: Planning and delivery, assessment, evaluating and reflecting, and contributing to the profession. Other literature, however, would suggest that it is not that simple. In their article which compares applying for a teaching excellence award to finding the shoe which fits Cinderella, Shephard et al. (2011) describe themselves as "hesitant about the prescriptive nature of some of the criteria used to define excellence" in national teaching award contexts (p.48), and express concern that such award processes "may potentially limit higher education's exploration of teaching excellence rather than expand it" (p.55). Having said this, they still found, as one might expect, that awardees saw the concept of 'teaching excellence' in many ways, including innovation, student retention, variety of learning activities, or authenticity and honesty (Shephard et al., 2011). Sanders et al. (2020, p.64) highlight that, in teaching excellence portfolios, "inventive course designs, novel approaches to teaching, and the

use of new technology tend to be overrepresented, whilst quotidian quality is sometimes overlooked". These examples echo the earlier argument that teaching excellence is not one easily definable skill or value. Interestingly, some awardees did not consider themselves as "excellent" until they read the criteria for the award, and "rel[ied] on the award process to define or at least illustrate teaching excellence as it might apply to them" (Shephard et al., 2011, pp.50-51). This could also be a result of educators at different institutions and in different contexts being accustomed to different performance appraisal and teaching evaluation criteria, depending on the strategic goals and/or priorities of their respective organisations.

The criteria for teaching excellence awards in different countries seem to be particularly vague. For the Canadian *National Teaching Fellowship Awards*, for instance, nominees must "demonstrate excellence in three equally weighted categories" (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2023): educational leadership, teaching excellence, and educational innovation, with the selection committee looking for applications which "demonstrate impact on students and institutions: those that tell a story, that "jump off the page"" (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 2023). In Australia, the national awards for teaching excellence recognise the "most outstanding university teachers who have demonstrated excellent leadership through sustained commitment to innovation, delivery of quality teaching and sustained dedication to improving the student experience and learning outcomes" (Universities Australia, 2025), with awards available under seven discipline categories, including Society and Culture, Creative Arts, and Health (Universities Australia, 2025). The South African *National University Teaching Awards* ask applicants to submit a "reflective narrative", with content in four areas - reflection on students, context, knowledge, and growth" (South African University Teachers, 2022). In New Zealand, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence, Ako Aotearoa, hosts the *Aotearoa Tertiary Educator Awards*. Their guidelines for applicants (2025) state that the portfolio "should provide narratives and evidence about the overall quality of practice... In what ways is the practice outstanding? How is it differentiated from business-as-usual? To what degree does it utilise innovative practices and achieve exceptional outcomes?" (Ako Aotearoa, 2024, p.11). The UK's *National Teaching Fellowship Scheme* requires nominees to provide evidence against three equally weighted criteria: "Individual excellence…, raising the profile of excellence…, [and] developing excellence" (Advance HE, 2025), with reviewers "looking for evidence of value, reach and impact" (Advance HE, 2024, p.10). A small selection of illustrative examples is given to help guide applicants, and a reviewer's rubric shows how applications are scored, but, as with all of these criteria, one is still left wondering exactly what teaching excellence looks like. Taking all of these examples into account, it could be argued that the lack of clarity around award criteria is perpetuating the problematic discourse, when awarding bodies could instead be collaborating to draw on the raft of successful applications to propose agreed elements of teaching excellence based on evidence.

Implications for Practice and Policy

It is clear that there are currently no widely accepted definitions of 'good' or 'best' practice, or of 'teaching excellence', despite the prevalence of these terms in higher education. Contextual factors play a part in this, with 'excellence' in a research-intensive university, for example, potentially framed quite differently to 'excellence' in a vocational context. In addition, any institutional framework of excellence is likely to be underpinned by its mission statement, values,

strategic priorities, and/or its target student profile. Regardless of the setting, a wide range of evidence should be drawn on to build a picture of what teaching excellence looks like in practice; this may include student and peer feedback, teaching observations, programme outcomes, and practitioner reflections. Whatever blend is used, this needs to be mirrored in the organisation's policies and practices, including for professional development, teaching observations, mentoring, promotion, and celebrations of success, to ensure clear alignment and transparency, so that leaders, educators, academic developers, and other stakeholders can all 'walk the talk' in working towards excellence.

Further Research

Given the complexities and multiple facets of 'teaching excellence', there are significant opportunities for further research. These include considering culturally responsive models and discipline-specific frameworks of excellence. Capturing the student voice could provide valuable insights, and contrast with the heavily quantitative metrics typically encouraged by policy makers and managers. Exploring the impact of teaching excellence models on staff development, teacher identity, practice, innovation, and/or organisational culture could drive diverse longitudinal studies, as could investigating how early career educators work towards excellence. Awarding bodies, the 'academies' of national awardees/teaching fellows, and/or international communities of practice (such as the International Federation of National Teaching Fellows) could significantly contribute to this research and to the development of more widely accepted models of excellence.

Conclusion

The purpose of this review was to explore the literature on teaching excellence and institutional and national teaching excellence awards. I have drawn on a total of 133 sources, including 85 journal articles, 7 book chapters, 9 books, and 32 other items (institution/organisation websites and reports, government documents, conference presentations, and websites), published between 1992 and 2025, with at least 80 sources published in the last decade. This paper draws attention to some of the complexities of the discourse around teaching excellence and related award schemes. It highlights the political and organisational emphasis on excellence within higher education internationally, and challenges us – as educators, leaders, and/or policy makers – to reflect on how the term 'excellence' (and others like it) is used and what it represents. The current field of knowledge suggests that we have not yet reached a consensus on what 'best practice' or 'excellence' in teaching actually looks like, or whose experience of excellence should be most valued. Nevertheless, if government bodies or institutions are advocating for a teaching excellence framework and/or award, they would do well to consider whose view of excellence they are implementing. There are opportunities here for leaders, educators, and awarding bodies to work together on policy, practice, and on continuing professional development which empowers teachers on their journey towards excellence.

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