

# **Understandings of ‘Teaching Excellence’ in Higher Education: A comparative study of English and Australian academics’ perspectives**

Key words: teaching excellence; higher education; pedagogy; Australia; staff perceptions

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## **Abstract**

In the current higher education (HE) environment, indicators of ‘teaching excellence’ (TE) are increasingly under the spotlight. The literature offers a wide range of models and perspectives, but also highlights the need for greater (comparative) scrutiny of the perceptions of those at the centre – staff teaching across the disciplines in different countries. This article aims to contribute to ongoing debates by investigating and comparing the views of 120 academic staff teaching in one of two countries – England and Australia – in an attempt to deepen our appreciation of their definitions and understandings. The findings from this two-stage enquiry using online questionnaires and interviews indicate broad commonalities in the ways academics define TE, centred on facilitative, interactive pedagogy related to individual professional aspirations; they also reveal widely shared reservations about the term’s legitimacy and institutional/marketized (ab)use. As such, the findings offer policy-makers and institutions useful insights at a time where TE definitions and metrics are growing global pre-occupations.

## **Introduction**

In a context of global HE consumerization and growing neo-liberal influence (Naidoo et al. 2011), the notion of teaching excellence (TE) has become a prominent focus of attention in recent years. This is particularly so in England, where much has been made of the government’s recent introduction of a national Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in an attempt to improve ‘consumer choice’. The TEF, operating for the first time in 2016/17, has attracted commentary from a wide range of educational, political and media angles, all of which has intensified the spotlight on the nature of TE. It is also being closely monitored in Australia (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017) where attempts initiated by the former Australian Learning and Teaching Council to monitor and support HE teaching quality have become the subject of ongoing reform interest within the Australian government (Department of

Education and Training 2018). This article aims to contribute to ongoing debates on the topic by investigating and comparing the views of university teachers located in two different (largely) English-speaking countries – England and Australia – in an attempt to provide insights from what appears to be a surprisingly under-explored angle. As Greatbatch and Holland (2016, 5) reveal, ‘there are few empirical studies of academics’ views about teaching excellence and what they regard as good indicators of excellent teaching.’ The same authors go on to highlight the need specifically for ‘comparative research looking at perceptions of teachers across different disciplines, universities and countries’ (7). Providing new and original insights in this respect is of course worthwhile for reasons ‘of intrinsic intellectual interest’ as Phillips and Schweisfurth (2008, 16) suggest, and providing such perspectives is one of this study’s distinctive contributions to the literature. But it is also important to capture and compare thinking on current and – in the case of Australia, for example - potential policy directions from those arguably most affected by such policies. For one, ‘buy-in’ to such interventions may need careful marshalling and management – and a better understanding of perspectives is surely a key tool in this endeavour. As the authors above highlight, looking at experience in various countries ‘can serve to support and to warn against potential policy decisions’ (16). Furthermore, examining commonalities and differences in definitions and understandings across a broader range of disciplines, institutions and nations arguably facilitates more trustworthy conclusions. It is hoped that the paper will thus go some way towards addressing these areas by drawing on selected data from a larger survey of English and Australian academics’ views on the nature, measurement and institutional incentivisation of TE to explore the participants’ understandings of ‘teaching excellence.’ To provide a context to the study, in the next section we explore how the notion of TE has been defined, understood and measured thus far, together with the reasons for its increasing prominence in the current educational climate.

## Literature review

Perhaps the first thing to note from the literature is a widely reported lack of consensus on a commonly agreed definition of TE (Greatbatch and Holland 2016; Gunn and Fisk 2013).

This fluidity of definition is matched by a degree of terminological flux in how the construct is also expressed, with competing coinages such as ‘*teaching* excellence,’ ‘*teacher* excellence’ and ‘*excellent teaching*.’ Again, the nuanced differences implied by these terms are not universally consistent, reinforcing the ‘ambiguity and ambivalence across the sector as to what constitutes excellence’ (Gunn and Fisk 2013,19). Despite the contested nature of the concept, educationists have of course long been concerned with definitions of TE, and a number of these will now be examined.

Ramsden (2003) has devoted considerable research attention to the topic, and has identified a number of central features in relation to TE in HE. These include a wide range of qualities, skills and dispositions, such as expert subject knowledge, communication and information technology skills, having a good sense of humour, being reflective, approachable, passionate and supportive, and providing timely feedback, among others. Fried (2001) singles out the important role of passion in this respect, while Handy (1990) identifies six personal ‘e-factors’ – energy, excitement, enthusiasm, effort, effervescence and enterprise. Sherman et al.’s study from 1987 suggests five characteristics of excellence – enthusiasm, clarity, organization, stimulation and a love of knowledge, qualities largely echoed more recently in Bradley et al.’s (2015) UK study of student perceptions of excellence. Parker (2015) offers a tri-partite model, based on personal attributes (enthusiasm, creativity); role performance (providing authentic engagement and relevance); and positive student-teacher relationships. Su and Wood (2012) acknowledge the large number of models revealed in the reading, and add that though there are often clear differences of emphasis between them, they all highlight the interplay of techniques, personal qualities and emotions. Greatbatch and Holland (2016)

suggest in fact that the majority of studies on TE broadly highlight the importance of two inter-related areas – the teacher’s personal attributes, alongside their ability to manage the practical organisation of teaching and learning encounters.

In addition to the many factors described above, Gibbs (2008) identifies the importance of including the wider institutional learning environment in definitions of excellence, as well as an individual commitment to both teaching development and the scholarship of teaching and learning. The current UK government’s own definition appears to share this broader element that Gibbs suggests:

We take a broad view of teaching excellence, including the teaching itself, the learning environments in which it takes place and the outcomes it delivers. (DBIS 2016, 43)

Understandings of excellence may of course also vary across different academic disciplines, and among the students and teaching staff attached to them (Greatbatch and Holland 2016, 3 – though this aspect has received little academic attention to date).

Notwithstanding certain differences in emphasis then, it could be argued that the definitional divergence around TE referred to above is perhaps not quite as pronounced as claimed; though there is - understandably - no single, catch-all formula, there is nonetheless a fair degree of commonality across the above models with regard to the important ingredients and flavours associated with excellent or high-quality teaching. The more problematic and contested feature may specifically relate to the ‘excellence’ element. As long ago as 1985, Strike noted the tension between individual notions of excellence as against understandings based more on system-wide concerns, and perhaps an even greater tension between elitist and egalitarian conceptualisations of excellence. For Strike, an elitist interpretation is based on a

competitive, norm-referenced understanding that implies exclusivity. Brusoni et al. (2014, 20) provide a summary of this view:

A common understanding of the term is as a mark of distinction, describing something that is exceptional, meritocratic, outstanding and exceeding normal expectations...If some provision is recognised as excellent, it implies that the majority of other providers are simply satisfying standards. The concept has no meaning if all are excellent and there is no way of distinguishing the performance of individual institutions and departments.

This view contrasts starkly with an egalitarian view, based more on an inclusive, criterion-referenced understanding, which in theory all may be capable of achieving. Though this version perhaps appears to represent a more palatable understanding, Readings (1997, 32-3) suggested over twenty years ago that the consumerist preoccupation with the rhetoric of excellence in HE may ultimately lead to a hollow redundancy:

The point is not that no one knows what excellence is but that *everyone* has his or her own idea of what it is. And once excellence has been generally accepted as an organising principle, there is no need to argue about differing definitions. Everyone is excellent, in their own way.

Gunn and Fisk (2013, 20) pick up on these ideas, noting the existence of two co-existing discourses around TE: on the one hand, a positively focused pragmatic view concerned with recognising, incentivising and rewarding excellent practice, as against what they see as a discourse of cynicism and derision, associated again with a culture of measurement and ‘part of an agenda to move towards a consumerist model of higher education.’

Many commentators suggest in fact that current concerns with ‘measuring’ TE relate to what Neary describes as ‘a paradigm shift in the approach to teaching and learning in higher education in England’ (2016, 690), as universities succumb further to the neo-liberal turn. Though Neary refers to England, many argue this interest is much wider. Little and Locke (2011) refer to a global preoccupation with TE, and Brusoni et al (2014) cite a number of ‘excellence initiatives’ focussed on teaching in EU universities, though as Klemencic and Ashworth (2015) point out, few countries have as yet developed fully fledged national strategies. Gunn and Fisk (2013) argue that the interest in assessing TE has become particularly acute in parts of the world affected by the post-2008 economic crisis, and make particular mention of Australia, the USA and the EU. Froumin and Lisyutkin (2015) describe this growing preoccupation as a clear manifestation of neo-liberal policy responses which place higher education firmly within an economic framing:

Some countries, for example Australia and the UK, consider their higher education systems not just as innovation-based economic growth drivers, but also as direct economic agents that produce a significant part of the national GDP by selling educational services (254).

Layton and Brown (2011, 164), echoing Readings (1997), see such developments as ‘a problematic aspect of a neo-liberal agenda’ and are uneasy about the ways in which excellence measures are becoming attached to market ideologies, consumerist discourse and tuition fees. Such thinking is strongly evident in England, where current government policy is openly couched in these terms. The rationale for the introduction of the TEF is based on the intention ‘to deliver value to students and taxpayers’ (BIS 2016, 6). This thinking is developed further later on in the government report (8):

Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at a lower cost. Higher Education is no exception.

Methodologies for measuring excellence are thus becoming a key focus, as institutions are increasingly expected to provide evidence of the quality of their teaching. The literature offers a wide range of models and practices in this regard. Greatbatch and Holland (2016, 4) note a wide variety of international attempts to audit the quality of university teaching, though they acknowledge that currently there is 'limited research on the extent to which such audits have improved quality.' They highlight research undertaken in China and Germany which underscores the importance of applying a three-stage approach to assessing teaching quality, beginning with institutional self-evaluation, followed by evaluations from external peer reviewers, and a final stage whereby institutions attempt to implement the emergent recommendations.

The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC – closed down in 2011 in the wake of austerity cuts - see Lane 2011) was set up in 2004 to enhance teaching and learning quality in Australian HE. One key conclusion was their emphasis on ensuring that criteria and methods used to assess teaching quality would need constant review to ensure that they kept step with potentially shifting definitions of TE which may evolve in light of changing student demographics and societal expectations of HE. Chalmers (2008) notes how extensive work in Australia led to the establishment of nationally agreed teaching quality indicators. She also suggests it is important to apply a relatively small number of metrics which are easily understood across the sector and by other relevant stakeholders.

With regard to metrics, the literature reveals no shortage of measures. Greatbatch and Holland (2016) suggest that most systems draw on a basket of measures, often combining

quantitative and qualitative elements. Quantitative metrics include ‘in-put measures’ (prices, fees, staffing ratios) and ‘output measures’ (number of degrees awarded, student destination data, student satisfaction scores and rankings), while qualitative metrics are generally more focussed on process measures which capture the depth and detail of student engagement and experience. Berk (2005) offers a comprehensive package of 12 potential sources that could be used to assess TE. These include student, peer and self-evaluations, videos of teaching, student interviews, alumni, employer and administrative ratings, evidence of teaching scholarship, portfolios and staff awards, as well as learning outcome measures. Gibbs (2016), among many, is critical of quantitative measures based on degree outcomes and post-university employment, arguing that such metrics are more a reflection of student habitus than teaching quality. Greatbatch and Holland (2016) argue such reservations are widely shared among educationists, mindful of the ‘complex relationships between proxies for teaching quality and actual teaching quality’ (53) and aware of the ways in which quantitative measures and rankings can be ‘distorted, gamed and biased’ (41). Ashwin (2016) likewise acknowledges how many of ‘the current ways we have of measuring quality are deeply problematic’ (8), and though the UK government recognises the difficulty, political reservations would appear more restricted:

Measuring teaching quality is difficult. But it is not impossible...Students assess their satisfaction with their courses, retention rates are a good proxy for student engagement, contact hours can be measured, employers choose to sponsor some courses... and employment rates can be measured (BIS 2016, 46).

McGhee (2016) describes how the TEF draws on 3 central criteria: teaching quality (level of contact, stimulation and engagement, utilising National Student Survey data), the learning environment (facilities and resources), alongside student outcome data. He again echoes some caution about the thinking behind its introduction:



The TEF, rather than a licence to raise tuition fees, should be a method to locate the best public investment opportunities in the interests of students – be that bursaries, infrastructure, or better staffing and staff recognition.

Hazelkorn (2015) is also somewhat sceptical, and highlights how measures which on the face of it are aimed at facilitating student choice and information often end up as institutional positioning tools in the HE marketplace. Clearly, the reading indicates a broad range of concerns relating to different dimensions of TE. Reflecting on these raises further questions about the extent to which such a notion can be described as educationally useful. Gunn and Fisk (2013) have suggested, for example, that to date, research is still to demonstrate the precise impact of TE on student learning. As a rhetorical device used for marketing purposes, they also -like Readings (1997) - question how useful the concept is in a marketplace where potentially all providers may claim ‘excellence.’ Brusoni et al (2014, 5) go on to highlight further the dangers of the concept’s political abuse:

A negative effect of the concept of excellence is the ease with which politicians use the word and the idea that excellence can be quickly and easily achieved.

Given that the notion is considered by some to offer utilitarian benefits to student-consumers, it is interesting to note in Greatbatch and Holland’s (2016, 6) research that ‘teaching quality did not feature as a key issue that the students [in their study] explicitly considered when applying to university,’ though with further publicity and focus, this may of course become a more prominent consideration for students in the future. From a more positive angle, several commentators have suggested that a growing and continued focus on the concept should at least help to raise the status and quality of teaching (McGhee 2016; Hubble et al. 2016) and may therefore be useful in rebalancing its position and relationship with research. In this regard, it may prove to be additionally useful in supporting other efforts and initiatives aimed

at esteem raising, recognition and reward, such as the National Teaching Fellowships scheme in the UK, or the Australian teaching excellence awards (Beckmann 2016).

In summary, then, a number of conclusions emerge from a review of the literature. Firstly, it appears that the diversity of definitions of TE suggested by some studies may not be quite so starkly divergent. Though there is without doubt a plethora of different models, each with its own particular emphases, the reading presents a broadly shared definition of TE at classroom level based on combinations of personal qualities, practical skills and professional commitment. Views on the extent to which TE goes beyond individual pedagogic prowess to include wider environmental factors as an expression of TE at institutional level differ to a degree, but much greater disagreements appear when it comes to elitist/egalitarian conceptualisations of excellence, and even more so when considering how the term is *understood and used*, particularly in connection with neo-liberal concerns in the marketing interests of institutional positioning. These aspects will be returned to in the findings section.

## **Research design**

This paper utilises data from a larger survey that explored a range of issues relating to TE. Given the essentially qualitative focus here on the ways in which academics conceptualised the notion, data has been selected from relevant sections of the survey, which was conducted at multiple universities in England and Australia in 2016-17. The findings presented are based on results from this two-stage enquiry which involved online questionnaires followed up by email interviews. The justification for the survey approach was based on our desire to capture a broad range of perspectives from academics working in different disciplines at various (types of) institution in different geographical locations in both countries. It was hoped that accessing breadth in this respect would generate more representative insights. To

identify respondents' working location, the academics are referred to in this paper as English and Australian respectively – we recognise that this may not necessarily reflect country of origin.

Stage one participants were recruited from the authors' existing professional networks, institutional contact lists and also via two cross-institutional email lists, once again in an attempt to access a wider range of academics. The questionnaire employed for this stage included open and closed questions that captured key demographic details and allowed participants to elaborate on their views, opinions and understandings of TE. The decision to use a questionnaire was again driven by a desire for an instrument that could capture data from across a range of geographical locations and institutional departments. To improve validity (Bradburn, Sudman and Wansink 2004), a pilot study which included soliciting peer feedback on the draft questionnaire was conducted with the researchers' colleagues.

Following minor revisions based on the 8 responses received from the pilot survey, the final version was distributed and attracted responses from 120 academics in the two countries.

Table 1 below presents an overview of sample characteristics.

Table 1: Sample composition

[place Table 1 here]

The second stage involved email interviews with participants who had declared their willingness to be contacted for further involvement in the study when completing the questionnaire by either including their email address or by emailing one of the researchers separately (if they preferred to maintain their anonymity in the questionnaire). The interview protocol included open and closed questions that invited academics to expand on their views on the defining features and characteristics of TE. Of the 54 questionnaire respondents who had agreed to participate in this stage, only 16 subsequently replied – 8 participants from

England and 8 from Australia. Email interviews were used for a number of reasons - firstly, in order to allow an opportunity for stage 1 data to be followed up and explored in further detail, and secondly to provide a means for corroborating/refining initial conclusions. Thirdly, given the wide distribution of respondents' locations, email interviews offered a number of practical advantages in terms of cost and time efficiency, access and reach (Meho 2006), though the central limitation of lower response rates is clearly evident here. This might be attributed to the lack of rapport afforded by electronic approaches, and potentially also to perceptions of greater effort requirements. Despite the fairly small number of participants, their teaching backgrounds represented a more balanced spread of 11 different subject areas.

## **Findings and discussion**

The following is based on an analysis of those questionnaire items (QU) which invited respondents from Australia (AU) and England (ENG) to comment and reflect on their *definitions and understandings* of TE. This analysis is further supplemented by findings from the email interviews (INT) where participants were again asked to elaborate on their views. The codes above are used below as a short-hand to denote the source of data and respondent origin. Following Watson's (1996) exploratory comparative method, analysis of questionnaire responses and interviews began by manually allocating preliminary codes to emerging elements and themes in each 'national' dataset, some of which were maintained, and others amended in the course of ongoing analysis. Once the data had been fully coded, the codes and labels applied were scrutinised to allow an inductive process of category building. The categories from each dataset were subsequently juxtaposed to facilitate comparison and questioning. Data were then further examined and re-considered in light of the categories identified to check for adequacy of thematic capture (Braun and Clarke 2012). The quotations used below were selected by the authors as representative responses from the

categories established, and throughout, an attempt has been made to include items from both national sub-sets to facilitate and exemplify comparison. An examination of the data will be presented here in two sections – firstly, by examining the ways in which the notion of TE was defined by the participants, before moving on to look more broadly at their understandings of the term.

As an exploratory starting-point, relevant questionnaire responses were subjected to a frequency analysis, focussing on the occurrence of key concepts and ideas. This was an attempt to establish a broad overview of the varied ways in which TE was defined, and in doing this, an initial basis for comparison was also created. The terms in the table below represent a mixture of both verbatim and paraphrased comments – for example, some respondents suggested TE was predicated on the basis of ‘having excellent subject expertise’; ‘subject knowledge’; or ‘being very knowledgeable’, etc. For the purposes of representing these understandings succinctly below, we have opted for the term ‘knowledgeable’ in the table. All three researchers acted as critical friends in carefully scrutinising decision-making here to preserve proximity to the data, though we acknowledge the potential limitations of this method. The numbers recorded must of course be treated with a degree of caution – they are provided here in an attempt to offer a tentative illustration of degrees of emphasis in the data. The numerical difference in the English and Australian sample sizes must also be noted. Responses have been ranked by frequency of mention for the English participants; to facilitate comparison, Australian response numbers are shown alongside, though this does of course detract from presenting Australian rankings in the same way.

Table 2: Definitions of ‘teaching excellence’

[place Table 2 here]

### ***Broad definitional alignment***

As argued above, the table does not reflect a sense of widely diverging definitions of TE that Greatbatch and Holland (2016) and Gunn and Fisk (2013) have noted. On the contrary, it reveals rather striking commonalities in the ways in which TE is defined by the English and Australian academics. This is reflected in the choice of similar terminology which, in many cases, is used with similar frequency. The terminology volunteered can largely be divided into two broad categories – many of the terms given are clearly associated with personal characteristics, qualities and dispositions on the one hand, and with specific teaching skills on the other, echoing thus many of the previous studies discussed in the literature review (Ramsden 2003; Parker 2015).

This broad alignment in definitions could be interpreted in a number of ways. Potentially it is suggestive of the shared outlooks and educational traditions pertaining to both countries, given their largely Anglophone nature and the extent of their common culture heritage. Competing definitions of TE certainly appear absent – there is no evidence here of, for example, a more traditional, didactic view of TE that might once have been considered a more common HE view. This uniform orthodoxy might also – tentatively - be a reflection of the extent to which lecturers have internalised current hegemonic views that characterise Western HE policy landscapes, and teacher training approaches that promote a vision of teaching based on desires to develop the independent, active, engaged 21st Century HE learner (Irvine, Code and Richards 2013). A re-analysis of the data by age group and gender in each country served only to re-assert the above findings in fact, emphasising once again the degree of commonality in views shared across and within the sample. Though an aspiration had been to compare the views of staff teaching across different subject disciplines,

questionnaire respondents from the social sciences and humanities outnumbered others (see Table 1), making comparisons with smaller numbers of staff views from other areas more challenging – a recommendation for future research. The interviews did, however, present an opportunity to explore staff perspectives specifically on this angle. Though some staff were open to the possibility of differing definitions, only one interviewee who taught Education Studies speculated that this would definitely be the case. The majority of both Australian and English interviewees (10/16) expressed views typified by the following Australian engineering academic, underlining again a more ‘universalist’ view that supports Gibbs (2010):

I think it maybe does vary on the surface – the day-to-day interactions in the classroom may look different – labs versus discussions, etc – but I’d probably say the underlying attributes are somewhat universal – capacity to relate to learners, deep understanding of the topic, passion for continuous improvement, etc.

Further key similarities in themes will now be examined, before looking at certain differences.

### ***A multi-faceted amalgam***

Perhaps the first point to note is that many of the respondents in both countries were keen to underscore the multi-faceted nature of TE (cf. Ramsden 2003). Table 2 presents an overview of atomised elements, but in reality, the concept was seen by many to operate as a complex and diverse amalgam, as the following example (ENG QU) deftly illustrates:

Teaching excellence involves many things - sound knowledge base of what we teach and continuing desire to review, enhance and extend this knowledge; [...] how to build curriculum and to relate learning resources, assessment and evaluation as

appropriate; self-knowledge and reflexivity about self as learner; realistic knowledge of learners, their contexts, interests, capacities and needs, plus capacity to see things from students' perspective; political 'nous' in securing the 'vote' of attention, exercising influence, managing group dynamics; [...] flexibility and adaptability in response to rapidly changing and unpredictable situations in classroom; kindness; [...] capacity to be bifocal: to see both where students are now and where they could be, with your help; commitment to and competence in contributing to wider educational environment and professional development of self and colleagues.

This is an important point which highlights the need to be wary of reductive conceptualisations. That said, it is worth mentioning a number of elements that were prominently noted in the responses.

### ***Facilitative, interactive pedagogy***

As the table indicates, subject knowledge and expertise emerged as a fundamental part of TE, though as stated, in no cases was this suggestive of privileging a knowledge-centric, didactic view of teaching. In fact, the overwhelming majority of respondents were at pains to highlight the importance of employing facilitative and participative pedagogy and co-constructive learning, involving high levels of interaction, discussion and communication (cf, Gibbs 2010, Parker 2015). Enacting this understanding of TE therefore highlights the importance of many of the interpersonal skills identified in the table, as the following quotation from a Modern Languages academic (AU INT) reveals:

Teaching excellence for me manifests itself through a high level of student engagement and participation in class: whether I require students to be listening to me or interacting with each other. It's also knowing one's subject thoroughly and imparting it with confidence and passion. Humour goes a long way too. It also



requires empathy and understanding of how intimidated students are....This requires some extra skill on the part of the teacher around putting students at ease, making a fool of themselves so that students don't mind making mistakes, and being sensitive...

This emphasis on interactive and personal engagement was seen by many as an important prerequisite for 'understanding your audience, tailoring your message in a way you believe best suits them and continually reflecting on the success of your strategies to inform your practice moving forward' (AU QU). This theme was reiterated throughout the data, as was the idea of actively seeking feedback on teaching performance. A commitment to ongoing improvement (cf. Gibbs 2008) was also evident in the high number of responses that suggested an important part of TE lay in being and remaining familiar with 'the evidence-based continuum of methods which span the art and science of educational pedagogy to ensure constructive alignment of learning' (ENG QU). The table shows multiple mentions of research-informed teaching, which for many staff involved combining subject research with 'maintaining currency through ongoing scholarship in teaching and learning' (AU QU).

Questionnaire and interview data thus repeatedly highlighted the profoundly relational and dialogic dimension of TE, reliant on empathy, creativity, openness, enthusiasm and communicative engagement. Though some individuals may naturally possess such qualities more than others, only one respondent located their understanding of TE exclusively within the 'personality paradigm' – when reflecting on a colleague that could be described as an excellent teacher, one Business Studies lecturer (AU INT) commented:

I have thought a lot about this, but depressingly, I think it's their personality that makes for excellence. They do everything everyone else does, but they are relentlessly positive and always cheerful.

Similarly, relatively few respondents overall referred explicitly to the importance of technology in teaching excellence, though this may of course have been implied in the repeated mentions of varied and student-centred learning approaches. One English lecturer (QU), however, was keen to point out that ‘if the relationship is good enough, the methods and technologies are almost immaterial.’

Despite the predominance of definitions which drew on individual qualities, some responses reflected an understanding of excellence defined by the outcomes of student learning, seeing the concept perhaps more as an instrumental matter of ‘assisting students to attain quality learning outcomes’ (AU QU) or ‘delivering teaching that meets relevant statutory criteria’ (ENG QU), though such comments were few. There were others, however, who located TE within a more humanistic perspective of learning gain (cf. HEFCE 2017) that ‘influences the way they think, feel and behave in future in a way that enhances their lived experience’ (ENG QU).

### ***The learning environment***

A more noticeable difference relates to the numbers of Australian staff who highlighted the importance of the whole learning environment (22) in contributing to TE (echoing Gibbs 2008), compared to the English staff (5). Again, these questionnaire numbers must be treated with some caution, and it would be difficult to claim on this basis that the Australian staff are more inclined to a view of TE as a greater collective endeavour than are the English staff, particularly given that all interviews reiterated individually-based classroom level understandings of excellence. One Australian interviewee was, however, keen to stress how the reality of the modern-day HE learning environment was something which often compromised TE, rather than supported it, however much it may be aimed for:

We are stretched more and more thinly and our time taken up managing what seems to be rapidly increasing numbers of students with disabilities and special circumstances requiring additional support, catch up sessions, special treatment, test and exam resits and alternative or extended assessments. (Added to the ever increasing number of plagiarism and academic misconduct cases such as cheating in class tests etc.)

### ***Critical understandings***

The definitions of TE expressed above clearly reflect a broadly shared vision of individuals' idealizations of what constitutes excellent teaching, largely at classroom level. In this sense, as Readings (1997, 28) argues, "who could be against excellence" when thinking about our own behaviour and aspirations in the classroom? However, the findings revealed more negatively inflected understandings when respondents considered how the notion was currently being put to work institutionally. These perspectives centred on a number of common themes which will now be examined in more detail.

### ***Legitimacy and usefulness***

Firstly, there were numerous sceptical voices in both national subsets which questioned the very legitimacy and usefulness of TE (cf. Gunn and Fisk 2013). For some, this was because 'as a term, it just seems too indeterminate, too reductive, I don't know what it means' (ENG INT) or because 'to me teaching excellence is not a readily measurable variable' and it may even 'be dangerous to make generalisations about what constitutes it because one characteristic may be key in one context but may have the opposite effect in another' (AU INT). For some, the term was 'an example of edubabble' (AU INT) or simply too subjective to be useful:

The concept is way too subjective to be very meaningful, e.g. how could a student indicate the transformatory (sic) effect good teaching might have had on their life? Another student might experience no such transformation, although attending exactly the same classes/learning activities. (ENG INT)

Another interviewee (ENG, education) was particularly dismissive of the term for this reason:

I think no genuine teacher cares a jot about 'excellence'. Even without the specific ideological implications, 'teaching' is not compatible in my mind with such fancy. It is always a function of a collective act, a multiplicity, in MacNeice's phrase 'incurably plural'. Any attempt to turn it into a singularity, performance/ ego show is counter-productive.

Reservations about how the concept can be assessed or captured by institutions were often at the heart of the respondents' concerns, as shown by the following sentiments:

These things cannot be quantified in my view. Even if I were to list the qualities I think an excellent teacher should have, this does not guarantee teaching excellence. You might have a great teacher, but as much depends on the dynamism, enthusiasm and openness of the students as it does on the teacher, unless the teacher is teaching an empty room. (AU INT)

### ***Managerialism and 'unsavoury games'***

Other criticisms focussed more strongly on the way in which the term was seen to have been co-opted by managerialist and marketing agendas, echoing the resentment towards neo-liberal policy encroachment identified in several studies in the literature review (e.g. Layton and Brown 2011, Froumin and Lisyutkin 2015). For some of the English participants, these

criticisms suggested rather critical views of the recently introduced TEF policy, as evident in the following extracts:

I'm loathe to talk about teaching excellence in any way but resistantly. Our focus should be to critique these so-called models of excellence and expose them for what they are – manifestations of nihilistic neo-liberal policies. All of our work in partnership, in our commitment to reflective practice and the full quality of praxis - action which embodies certain qualities which include a commitment to human wellbeing and the search for truth, and respect for others - must situate itself in unconditional opposition to these 'initiatives', even if they begin with invitations to engage in interesting conversations. (ENG INT)

I see it as essentially a 'counter' in a rather unsavoury game, a contrivance that will feign calibration – I mistrust it. (ENG QU)

Beyond the obvious, my understanding is that this term is being used as a way of further marketizing education by trying to quantify things which are not measurable and then introducing a crude system of rewards and punishments based on those measures. (ENG QU)

Such views were also present among many of the Australian respondents, who echoed similar reservations. Their comments are also suggestive of the term's increasing reach into Australian HE territory:

I am pretty sceptical about it - at my university it's a term that is used to describe an award or recognition that is mostly used for academic promotion. (AU INT)

Ticking the right boxes is what 'educational excellence' is about. It bears scant relationship to actual learning. (AU QU)

Pragmatically it means anything that results in high scores on the teaching evaluation survey. However I don't believe this actually measures good teaching but it is what is rewarded. (AU INT)

It is important to point out that respondents who expressed these reservations were not opposed to the educational notion of TE – the vast majority of participants commented on the positive educational dimensions of the concept, but many had equally strong concerns about what they saw as the political/managerialist (ab)use of the term, as the following respondent makes clear:

I know what good teaching is - even outstanding teaching - but as a term it feels like a bat to beat us with, rather than something we aspire to. We are always interested in teaching well, and in educating our students. (ENG INT)

## **Conclusions**

Before discussing any conclusions, it is important to acknowledge some of the study's limitations. Firstly, the self-selective nature of the sample may have introduced a degree of bias – those who elected not to participate may have held very different views which we have been unable to represent in the above discussion. Furthermore, as stated, though we had hoped to receive a balance of responses from across the entire subject range, the sample is more weighted towards participants from education and the social sciences. This has made it difficult to produce more detailed comparisons of understandings across teaching disciplines; a recommendation for further research would therefore be to attempt to achieve a more even subject balance to this end. Inevitably, there is also the potential of the participants involved reproducing the dominant discourse in a climate where the quality of university teaching is much debated, particularly in England since the introduction of the TEF (HEFCE 2017). However, it is hoped that the anonymity of the survey approach adopted may have mitigated

some of the effects of impression management, though clearly the interviews may not have been exempt from such influence. Nonetheless, the survey approach was still successful in attracting a large and diverse set of respondents with regard to age, gender, institution, discipline and teaching experience, and as such, the breadth achieved here will hopefully serve to offer a broader set of resonances.

Notwithstanding the declared limitations, a number of conclusions can be observed. Firstly, with regard to definitions of TE, the study offers original insights into academics' views on the nature of TE and thus contributes useful evidence to this under-researched area (Greatbatch and Holland 2016). Specifically, it suggests strong commonalities across both sample sub-sets. These similarities persist across age, gender, subject divides and indeed nationality, though the sample limitations must again be noted. This finding is nonetheless worth highlighting, however, especially since the Australian participants have not directly experienced the TEF, potentially suggesting that their expressed views are less 'stock responses' but perhaps part of a global/Western repetition of a contemporary version of TE, and as suggested, the extent to which they have internalised this view based on exposure to government policy and current teacher training orthodoxy. Participants repeatedly emphasize the multi-faceted nature of the concept, and the complex composition of personal attributes and teaching skills it involves. The views expressed define a vision of excellence based on high levels of staff-student interaction, engagement and personal involvement, supported by a commitment to subject knowledge and HE teaching/professional development, offering thus support for models identified in previous studies (e.g. Ramsden, 2003, Gibbs, 2008). As noted, this commonality does not appear to support the ambiguity of definitions found by some of the studies referred to in the literature, though it may again reflect compositional similarities in relation to the sample. These points also strongly align with Gibbs' findings (2010), and invite consideration of the extent to which the TEF in England, particularly with

its reliance on National Student Survey data, currently reflects and utilises similar definitions of excellence.

Overall, the definitions provided by the respondents are more suggestive of an egalitarian view of excellence (cf. Strike 1985) than of an elitist understanding – as such, TE appears to be considered an accessible aspiration for us all. The definitions also recognise the importance of the wider institutional context in enabling (and at times constraining) TE; the egalitarian dimension of excellence is likewise acknowledged in the references to the collective nature of the endeavour – as one of the respondents points out, TE is ‘incurrigibly plural’.

Despite these positive framings, the findings also clearly reveal more sceptical views throughout the sample. It is important to acknowledge that these perspectives do not represent a simple binary division – they do not separate the respondents into opposite camps of ‘supporters and challengers’ – most of the participants with positive definitions of TE also identified negative dimensions, echoing thus the two conflicting discourses around TE noted by Gunn and Fisk (2013). The pivotal and dividing point appears to be where TE moves from being a matter of individual aspiration embedded within a sense of collective professionalism, to an institutional marketing/management tool in a consumerized HE context, and this finding constitutes one of the study’s key findings. Though some were keen to question the legitimacy and adequacy of the term, many expressing negative understandings were resentful of the ways in which the concept can be used – managerially – to push towards a less inclusive, more divisive, competitively focused instrument in the marketized interests of individual and institutional promotion (Hazelkorn, 2015). It was anticipated that a greater degree of scepticism in this respect might be expressed by the English respondents in light of the recent introduction of the TEF referred to above, and to a degree, this is borne out by the findings, though it is clear from the responses that many



Australian participants share similar reservations, perhaps because of increased Australian publicity surrounding the TEF and greater familiarity with discussion on TE as a result.

Reflecting on the findings, one final conclusion that emerges might be best encapsulated by a ‘master/servant’ analogy. On the one hand, participants acknowledge that operationalising a notion of TE in HE can be of service institutionally, helping universities to position themselves and be visible in the market-place, though in the respondents’ own words, this was considered ‘an unsavoury game,’ ‘a contrivance to feign calibration’ and ‘a way to achieve high scores in surveys’, for example. And at the same time, alongside its role as somewhat unseemly servant, it is also seen to operate as ‘master’ – at times offering the benign incentives of ‘rewards and recognition’ and ‘awards’ but at others representing ‘punishments’ and ‘a bat to beat us with’. This analysis inevitably brings Foucault (1991) to mind - TE is constituted as a way of becoming visible to the panoptic gaze of the market, and simultaneously a disciplinary practice, ensuring compliance with the rules of the market game.

Bartram (2010, 187) argues that commonalities identified through comparative investigation allow greater weight to be attached to research findings – with this in mind, and at a time where the focus on TE in HE is expanding globally, we would argue it is vital that institutions and policy-makers be both mindful of these expressed concerns, and also aware of the ways in which staff teaching in universities define and understand TE, particularly when recent studies (e.g. Coin 2017) report on low morale and value conflicts prompting a growing academic exodus. Disparities between staff and management/government views in this regard run the risk of severely undermining authentic individual and collective efforts to support and improve teaching and learning, and of achieving meaningful, motivating and credible means of judgement.

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Table 1 – sample composition

Characteristic	Description	Value
Participant distribution	English respondents	77 (64.17%)
	Australian respondents	43 (35.83%)
Gender distribution	Male	45 (37.5%) (33 English and 12 Australian)
	Female	75 (62.5%) (44 English and 31 Australian)
Age	Age range	25 – 65 years
	Modal age group	45 – 55 years
Teaching experience	Length of teaching experience	Range: 5 – 20+ years Mode: 20 years plus (28.3%)
Subject areas	Education	36 respondents
	Humanities	19 respondents
	Social Sciences	15 respondents
	Health Sciences	15 respondents
	Others (Pure Sciences, Mathematics, Sports, Languages, Arts, Business Studies, Accountancy, Dentistry, Engineering, Music, Tourism, Theology)	35 respondents

Table 2: Definitions of teaching excellence

Term	Frequency of mentions	
	ENG	AU
knowledgeable	55	30
research-informed teaching	41	15
engaging	38	29
enthusiasm	27	7
supportive	19	10
enables high-quality/deep learning	18	14
inspiring	17	12
communication	16	18
relevance	11	10
inclusive	10	4
innovative/'cutting edge'	9	11
self-critical	9	8
variety	9	7
differentiating	9	-
accessible/approachable	9	4
adaptable teaching	9	3
stimulating	9	1
outcomes focussed	8	11
motivating	8	9
seeks feedback on practice	8	8
commitment	7	3
empathy	7	5
involves the whole learning environment	5	22
creativity	5	15
personal	5	8
'going beyond'	5	4
makes learning enjoyable	5	-
develops student autonomy	4	2
uses technology in learning	3	6
reflective	2	18
transformative	-	6



