Developing criteria and guidance for assessing teaching excellence

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This article arose from a workshop provided at the 18th annual SEDA conference in November 2013 and the interest I and others at my institution have in teaching excellence. The article will outline a project that has been undertaken, some of the findings we shared with participants in the workshop, and the criteria and guidance for assessing teaching excellence that have been developed as a result of drawing all the findings together. The article concludes with reference to future plans to continue the work now the initial project has finished.

There are many approaches to gathering data about the quality of teaching which are used for departments, schools and institutions to evaluate students' satisfaction with teaching, monitor teaching performance and recognise those who are excellent teachers. However, despite these approaches and, discussions that have taken place in the literature over a number of years, common agreement around a set of criteria that can be universally used has still not been reached. In fact as both Gibbs (2008) and Skelton (2004) have found previously there is often a lack of clear and transparent criteria in schemes and where they do exist they are not well publicised.

A scheme of learning and teaching awards have been running at City University London for more than a decade, but on occasion staff have commented upon the lack of transparent criteria in the scheme and that the evidence used when judging who should gain awards is not well publicised. The institution published a new strategy in 2012 which included in the education theme the following statement as one of the key activities "*recognising excellent staff performance in education and capturing and sharing models of good practice*". It seemed timely to undertake a project focused on teaching excellence in the institution and coincidently in the summer of 2012 the Higher Education Academy advertised their latest change academy projects focused on Recognising Teaching Excellence.

Teaching Excellence Project

I led the project with a team of four colleagues from across the institution (listed in the acknowledgments) and we developed a project plan which was accepted for the change academy and so from December 2012 until December 2013 we undertook a range of activities to meet the aims of the project. The aims for the project shown in table 1 were on reflection too ambitious for one year and so we have started some work around the third and fourth aim but have not been able to complete this whilst the others were achieved.

1. Explore the current recognition and award processes and analyse the criteria used within this scheme for teaching excellence

2. Examine individual discipline criteria for teaching excellence and draw out core teaching excellence principles for the whole University

3. Define a development and recognition process that is aligned to the UKPSF for Teaching Excellence

4.	Facilitate the individual's development and progression through the scheme to National Teaching Fellow or equivalent
5.	Outline and enhance the student voice within the scheme
6.	Enhance our current process for disseminating good practice

Table 1 Aims of the project

In order to progress the aims there was a need to use a range of approaches which would enable data from various sources to be collected and engage a broader range of students and staff. Through the approaches listed in table 2 we were able to collect data from our own scheme and those beyond the institution and, from our undergraduate, postgraduate and research students as well as internal and external teaching staff and educational developers. Ethical approval was sought for the project through the University processes which was important given the diverse range of data we were able to draw on but also so those participating consented to their data being used and the findings being disseminated across the sector.

Opportunistic data collection at a promotional stand
Workshops that used rich pictures and world café approaches
Online surveys
Analysis of nomination data for the Student Voice Award
Analysis of criteria used in the various award schemes
Literature Review

Table 2 Data collection tools

The data collected was predominantly qualitative because rich descriptions of teaching excellence were needed to explore views and criteria that might already be used. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) naturalistic inquiry approach was the methodology chosen which enables the context to be acknowledged as well as the need to use a range of data collection tools. The data was analysed thematically and iteratively so each stage informed the next.

Findings from the Project
The project generated a wide range of data including quotes, visual descriptions and pictures. Through the iterative nature of the project we have been able to share the findings with participants as the project developed thus enabling us to refine some data at each stage. Outlined here are examples of the data that was gathered from staff and students and which was shared in the conference workshop. However included as part of the findings are the criteria that were developed as a result of the analysis and some guidance that was produced for assessing nominations and applications for awards.

It had been hoped that it would be possible to develop a definition of teaching excellence for the institution however as Devlin & Samarawickrema (2010) found despite the prevalence of teaching award schemes gaining agreement on one definition is problematic. This was illustrated at the conference workshop where there was some debate about whether we should define teaching excellence or good teaching which others such as Lilly et al (2013) have explored in projects to share good practice. Throughout the project a similar debate took place and this remains unresolved in terms of a definition for either good teaching or teaching excellence but further work on this will continue.

Students had provided data in various ways but most of this data provided rich quotes about things that they feel characterise teaching excellence. Some examples of these are indicated below.

'Makes the subject more exciting instead of just reading through the slides'

'Creates a stable and truthful relationship'

'Makes herself available beyond set learning times to assist in module work as well as a career advice'

'keeps us engaged by using contemporary examples that relate to us!'

'Maintains engagement with students easily and uses innovative teaching methods'.

'Her enthusiasm and warmth about her subjects of interest and her role as a teacher are always obvious'

Much of the data was focused on what could be considered personal attributes as others have found but students also felt that investing time in them and getting to know them was important. From a teaching perspective students cited examples of teachers who used examples from the real world that they could relate to and which engaged them in the session. Much of this has been found by others but with the change in teaching approaches and the increased use of technology there was a view that students would cite teachers who used more innovative approaches in classes as those who were excellent whereas, the findings indicate that it is the communication and relationship issues that students value most.

Data collected from staff reflected many of the above views, but often the staff cited a more holistic view of teaching excellence which took account of the varied roles teachers undertake. This was particularly noticeably in workshops where staff were asked to provide a picture of what teaching excellence would look like. There were a range of drawings as well as descriptions which conjured up a picture. Some of the drawings included gardeners sowing seeds and nurturing growth, a person wearing a belt with lots of pockets of tools all needed at different times for the range of issues teachers encounter, a beautiful woven tapestry of knowledge, skills, behaviours and ideas and, a picture which showed a range of environments from the office, class and then a field/professional work place site. Some of the descriptions provided that enabled pictures to be built up included:

'It looks a tool belt, adapted to the task/material to be learned, makes the task simple when you use it properly, leads to a successful conclusion – useable product, builds a framework'

'it looks like a completed jigsaw involving interaction, effective teamwork and empowered people'

'it looks like an opal ring expensive, glittering, fascinating, colourful, deep. Iterative, clear and owned'

This difference between the students and staff can in part be explained by students being aware of their teachers' responsibilities for their classes, online learning, assessment activity and personal tutor role whereas staff have the broader insight into the whole academic role and expect someone who is excellent at teaching to also excel at other areas of their role. This did lead to some debate in workshops about teaching and research and how these complement each other but exploring this in further detail was beyond the scope of this project. However, whilst students did mention teachers having up to date knowledge and sharing research staff focused on a range of areas around scholarly activity which were seen as important. These included teachers undertaking professional development, examining their teaching practice, disseminating practice within the institution and beyond through conferences and publishing and being recognised with awards or through undertaking leadership roles.

As the end of the project drew near and the start of the new academic year, it was felt that there was a need to develop something from the data which could be used across the institution for the learning and teaching awards for this year. Two key actions resulted from this:

1. some of the categories of teaching awards were changed to reflect the themes from the data, and
2. the criteria for the awards were developed around four key themes (see table 3).

Both these actions were discussed and approved by the Learning Development Advisory Board which oversees the award scheme and has amongst its membership Senior Staff from LEaD, Associate Deans of Education from all Schools, all National Teaching Fellows from across the University and other key staff from areas such as Information Services and Student and Academic Services.

Personal Attributes	Promoting Learning Success
Students cite this person as inspiring and motivating them to learn and achieve	Uses innovative and creative approaches to teaching, assessing and/or supporting learning.
Passion and enthusiasm for their discipline/role and support of learning is obvious to all	Provides up to date knowledge and relates this to the "real world" recognising the need for relevance to the students

Good communications skills with all students demonstrating knowledge of student individual needs and how these can be met for individuals	Consistently uses activities to promote student engagement and challenges them to develop their knowledge
Demonstrates flexibility and adaptability to support students' needs and learning recognising individual differences	Individual excellence: evidence of enhancing and transforming the student learning experience (NTFS)
Relationship with Student	**Scholarship and professional development**
Provides a supportive, challenging but non-threatening environment for students to learn	Raising the profile of excellence: evidence of supporting colleagues and influencing support for student learning; demonstrating impact and engagement (NTFS)
Engages with students to provide effective feedback and advice to encourage growth	Ability to influence positively the wider community in higher education through dissemination of activities
Demonstrates interest in students as individuals and promotes their confidence as a learner	Demonstrates a critical reflective approach to own professional practice and the use of scholarship to support practice
Is approachable and responsive to communication from students in a timely and appropriate manner ensuring students feel valued as individual	Demonstrates leadership within department, school, University or nationally
Is student centred in their role listening to their feedback and acting upon where appropriate	Developing excellence: evidence of commitment to ongoing professional development with regard to teaching and learning and/or learning support (NTFS)
	Has gained recognition for excellence through awards and funds where able to do this

Table 3 Themes and criteria

A further area that had arisen in the many sessions with staff was the issue of what sorts of evidence could be used to demonstrate teaching excellence and to assess nominations and applications. Clearly there is the range of student feedback collected throughout the year that can be used but in line with Brown's (2003) view this is only one part of the evaluation and other sources should be used such as peer reviews and personal reflection which are also cited by Hammer et al (2010). The staff involved in workshops believed that there were additional forms of evidence such as documents produced for education purposes like curricula, assessment tasks and student guidance that could be used alongside evidence of professional development and dissemination of practice such as conference presentations. One of the key issues about the evidence was that staff wanted the evidence to be seen as robust and rigorous. The team took account of all the comments and developed some types of evidence that could be used this year to support panels making decisions about awards. The guidance below in table 4 does not mean that staff do have to provide evidence in all types but should have evidence of at least three. This again was approved by the Learning Advisory Board.

Peer review and esteem Peer review and feedback, mentoring others, membership of University Committees/working groups, nominations for awards, invitations to give key notes/plenaries, external examiner role, reviewer for programmes externally, peer reviewer/editorial role with a journal/feedback from presentation	
Student Feedback Student staff liaison committees, Module evaluations, NSS, PTES, PRES, Student Voice Award nominations	
Education Documentation Student information leaflets and guidance, Session plans, curriculum documents, assessment tasks, teaching portfolio, teaching philosophy	
Evidence of impact Student feedback from above, Students results, employer feedback, implementation of processes or systems that enhance student activities, dissemination of innovative practice at conferences, journal articles and case studies	
Evidence Based Practice Changes in process linked to evidence of good practice and enhancement, use of techniques linked to research/theory, evidence of CPD	

Table 4 guidance of types of evidence

Conclusion

Whilst the one year project has finished the work in many ways is just beginning. This year's award scheme will use the new categories for the Student Voice Award and, the themes, criteria and guidance for evidence. It is intended to evaluate the use of all these this year and to revise and refine particularly the criteria following this year's awards. Those leading panels have been asked to keep all documentation around decisions and they have agreed to be interviewed following the panels. It is recognised that each year there may be some nuances in the approach taken to both the criteria and the evidence but the aim is to be able to provide clear, transparent guidance to staff about the criteria and evidence used to judge excellence. It is hoped that during this next year the two aims that we were unable to complete will also be met through the continued work in this area.

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