

Changes in the higher education sector

A book review of Khan, K., Gurbutt, G. and Cragg, R. (2022) *Changes in the higher education sector: contemporary drivers and the pursuit of excellence*. London: Anthem Press.

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Overview

Reflecting on their experiences of change within the English higher education sector, the authors provide several essays that relate to the slippery concept of ‘teaching excellence’ and its achievement. The discussion builds on narratives engendered by the contemporary political and regulatory landscape, emphasising the role of the Office for Students (OfS), the UK Department of Education, and the impact of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). HE practitioners may find some close parallels between the discourses presented across the five chapters of this slim volume and those they encounter day-to-day with colleagues.

The book was written prior to the launch of the most recent TEF consultation (January 2022), and before the publication of the government’s long-awaited response to the Augar Report (February 2022). In a follow-up blog post, co-author Rachel Cragg notes that ‘[t]he current consultation on the new TEF clarifies the relationship between OfS Registration as meeting baseline standards and TEF excellence above the baseline’ (Cragg, 2022). This latest TEF definition underlines the pejoration of ‘excellence’ in regulatory discourse where it has become an educational buzzword, bleached of connotations of exceptionality (Allan, 2007). As the authors note, conceptualising ‘excellence’ in HE remains a highly contested matter.

There are some caveats that need to be noted. Several times the authors refer to the 'UK' HE environment with a broad brush, but in practice their focus is very much on England. This becomes problematic when statements are made about the changes affecting student fees in the twenty-first century, without acknowledgement that the four nations have operated different policies and both student and practitioner experiences have differed as a result. It is simply not accurate to say that '[h]ome students currently pay £9,250 in fees per year' (p.14) without clarifying that this applies in England only. The situation is different in each of the four nations, for example with fees currently capped at £4,530 (2021-22) for Northern Irish students studying in Northern Ireland (nidirect, 2022). If we further recognise that 'of the four systems, England's is the outsider' (Shattock and Horvath, 2020, p.66), it becomes axiomatic that casual references to 'UK' HE require careful reinterpretation by the reader.

The book is very much a series of personal reflections. The three authorial voices generally work well together but are still discernible at times, most notably where the first person breaks through briefly in chapter two—it is not clear who is describing, amongst other things, their 'own academic role' and their completion of a PgCert in HE in the 1990s (p.24).

Structure and content

At 78 pages, the book is considerably shorter than most recent volumes on the subject of governance and change in HE (e.g., Austin and Jones, 2016; Byrne and Clarke, 2020; Shattock and Hovarth, 2020; Grant, 2021; Scott, 2021). Each chapter of the book focuses on a different theme relating to the evaluation of teaching 'excellence', its definition, evaluation, and achievement. There is some degree of overlap between chapters, perhaps inevitably given the contested nature of 'excellence' and 'value' in HE, which is a recurring theme.

Chapter one provides a light introduction to the regulatory context for HE in England, noting the repositioning of the student as 'customer' who evaluates their experience through the National Student Survey (NSS). The TEF and REF (Research Excellence Framework) are contextualised in terms of their historical evolution. It is unclear if the

statement that assessment practices are typically reliant on ‘individual universities [ensuring] criteria are met through their own assessment processes’ (p.10) is intended as a criticism of the External Examination (EE) system; the latter is not mentioned but remains one of the means by which universities ensure independent oversight of their practice.

Chapter two explores the concept of ‘teaching excellence’. On reading that ‘[e]xcellence in Higher Education (HE) has more often become *the* expectation of all’ (p.13), it is difficult not to recall Allan’s paper (2007) for its (prophetic) commentary; excellence is clearly the new normal. The authors further discuss the TEF and NSS, the influence of HE league tables, and the recognition and attempts to address specific awarding gaps by student demographic. HE ‘value’ is increasingly seen by the UK government as measurable in terms of graduate employability, with graduate outcomes and student progression data forming the focus of the ‘Proceed’ metrics introduced by OfS (Dandridge, 2021). The chapter does not comment on the Graduate Outcomes survey, or Proceed, but provides some discussion of graduate earnings across different industry sectors (p.22) and the role of newer qualifications such as degree apprenticeships (pp.23-24). The authors tacitly align their positionality with the ‘well-intended approaches embedded in legislation, policy and cultural norms’, only making anonymous reference to ‘those who contest the approaches and definitions’ (p.25).

The third chapter responds to its titular provocation, ‘What constitutes teaching excellence?’, by discussing the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), describing the categories of Higher Education Academy (HEA) Fellowship as they relate to professional recognition through Advance HE. Other qualifications such as Postgraduate Certificates in Higher Education are also contextualised, although there is no discussion of the relationships between the uptake of such qualifications across the sector and their impact. Some elements of educational and pedagogical theory are briefly mentioned, such as Kolb’s well-known Experiential Learning Cycle (1984), and reflective approaches to teaching (p.33). Fanghanel et al. (2016) is offered as providing a ‘general agreement’ on what is meant by the ‘scholarship of teaching’, but the study’s findings are not explored in depth (p.34), and the authors underline that there is ‘no consensus on what is meant by the different categories of teaching excellence, teaching expertise, or the scholarship of teaching’ (p.33).

Chapter four considers the key attributes of the 'excellent teacher', drawing from previous research, e.g., Wood and Su (2017), and suggests some tools and approaches that may be used to enhance teaching practices. The chapter provides a brief history of educational theory and the shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, noting the increased use of Problem-Based Learning (PBL), particularly in subjects such as Medicine. Flipped classrooms and technologies to enhance learning such as Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) are contextualised historically and there is some discussion of additional software such as Kahoot, Socrative, and simulation technologies used to gamify learning and provide more immersive experiences. Several studies of individual approaches are referenced here and would be further complemented by consideration of the chapters in e.g., Branch et al. (2017). Further discussion of the relative strengths and weaknesses of different software or platforms would have been helpful here; on VLEs see e.g., Browne, Jenkins and Walker (2006) and Costello (2013). The authors note that Work-Based Learning (WBL) 'has not yet been fully embraced' (p.54) across the UK HE sector, but note its increasing importance, given the growing focus on employability as a measure of the success and value of degree outcomes.

In chapter five the authors recap their overall concerns with the uses and definitions of 'excellence' against the changed and changing landscape of HE, noting the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic as a further driver of a rapid macgyvering of course provision online. They summarise the internal and external factors guiding the current areas of change, returning to the TEF, the NSS, staff professional development and the investment required to maintain the hardware and software necessary for quality blended-learning experiences. In closing, they also draw attention to the challenges they perceive are presented by non-traditional students, arguing that the successful widening of participation in HE has resulted in 'significant number[s] of students who may not be initially able to cope with the academic tasks that are required of them' (p.62). While beyond the scope of the book, this assertion deserves much closer scrutiny, and indeed an assessment of available evidence; readers may find Peter Scott's analysis of 'mass higher education' (2021) insightful here. A further point deserving serious consideration, not mentioned in the book, is the challenge faced by HE institutions over the next decade (and perhaps beyond) as they attempt to address the support needs of young people coming into HE

with their earlier educational experiences fractured and eroded by their often traumatic and disrupted Covid-19 years.

Summary

It is difficult to be certain exactly whom this text is aimed at. It is unlikely to prove revelatory to current HE practitioners already familiar with the TEF, the OfS, and the vexatious rhetoric of 'excellence'. The book does provide a gentle introduction to these subjects through personal reflections on the instruments employed used to measure 'excellence' and 'value' in HE, so to some extent it may provide affirmation of existing views relating to the evolving regulatory framework, and to approaches to teaching and learning in this context. Anyone new to the politics of English HE should therefore find this text informative, if reserved in its coverage of the challenges that continue to be posed against the regulatory positions of the OfS and the UK government. The University and College Union (UCU), for example, remains opposed to the TEF (UCU, 2017), but there is no mention of UCU, or its views, anywhere in the book. Whatever one's personal stance, it is important that the academic community remain an informed community, and critical analyses should include all relevant voices.

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Scott

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