

A book review of Khan, K., Gurbutt, D. 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

Teaching excellence is becoming increasingly important in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world. In a more competitive environment, where students have the power to research and choose the institution they want to attend, proven teaching excellence can be a powerful draw. In many of these institutions it has also necessitated a gradual shift from an emphasis on research excellence, to accommodate career progression paths based on teaching excellence.

In this book various aspects of teaching excellence are discussed, from common measurements thereof to what exactly it constitutes and how to improve on it. Even though the focus is mainly on the United Kingdom context, it is an informative text that can be valuable in any setting.

Structure and content

The authors contextualise the topic in the preface by referring to the importance of life-long learning, and the role of higher education (HE) therein. The term 'teaching excellence' is

introduced as a vital element in encouraging continued learning through fulfilling learning experiences of students in HE. It is defined as the way in which the aspects of learning and learner experience are combined, leading to more effective teaching. This idea forms the premise for the rest of the book, which is a dual-purpose exploration of the origin and development of the field of teaching excellence on the one side, and an explanation of some of the key metrics through which teaching is commonly measured and evaluated on the other. Lastly, there is a focus on innovative methodologies that can be utilised to develop/enhance teaching excellence.

The first chapter starts by emphasising the need for teaching excellence in HE, as a way for institutions to be more attractive to students in a competitive environment. The matter of what exactly is meant by teaching excellence is raised, as it can mean different things for different HEIs, and even for students as beneficiaries, depending on the context. Following this contextualisation, a comprehensive overview of the HE environment in the UK is provided with specific reference to funding, policy, the impact of teaching excellence, student experience, and academic progression.

The second chapter focuses on the premise that teaching excellence is an expectation, and not necessarily a definition of what defines teaching excellence. This premise ties into the concept of face validity, as students are increasingly viewed as customers. Within this framework it is then essential to ensure customer satisfaction, which is what HEIs aim for with teaching excellence. Thereafter a critical overview is given of the different instruments which may be used as part of the value assessment of HE in the UK, including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), National Student Survey (NSS), and league tables. The significance of inclusivity as part of teaching excellence is discussed, highlighting the importance of increasing access and participation of underrepresented groups, and stating the broader importance of encouraging learning participation among all students.

Chapter three attempts to define what constitutes teaching excellence and provides an overview of the Advance HE (2011) framework of core knowledge and professional values in terms of teaching areas of activity. Although a section is provided on how teachers become effective at teaching, readers would be better served by going directly to chapter four where

these aspects are discussed in a more detailed and nuanced manner. After this section the distinctions between teaching excellence, teaching expertise and scholarship of teaching are investigated. Although it is found that no clear distinction can be drawn between these categories, the authors do present an argument for continued engagement with educational theory and reflective practice in advancing personal teaching excellence. The chapter ends by highlighting the importance of educators being familiar and comfortable with e-learning and technology use in today's environment.

Chapter four expands on the previous chapter by exploring specific methodologies for improving teaching excellence, including continued engagement with educational theory, the importance of student-centred learning approaches, and the value that can be added through the use of flipped classrooms, technology-enabled learning, and gamification techniques. This discussion constitutes a refreshingly realistic look at what can be accomplished with these methodologies, while creating awareness of the limitations of each.

In the last chapter the significance of teaching excellence is emphasised, while the inherent problematic nature thereof is also noted with specific reference to the seemingly unacknowledged role of learning in the equation. The book ends with some final thoughts on the importance of improving digital technology in HEIs, and the role of the student.

Summary

The text provides a valuable overview of the notion of teaching excellence. The strength of this exploration lies in the detailed description of the tensions and influences within the field of teaching excellence, especially concerning what is measured, by whom, and why. The importance of teaching excellence is explained, and some key methodologies that can lead to the improvement of teaching excellence are highlighted.

However, there is also some terminology that is used very loosely in this exploration. One example is the cursory references to 'learning styles', which are linked to teacher-centred and student-centred approaches. This illustrates a simplistic approach to the concept, without

regard for the complexities related to it as discussed by Coffield et al. (2004, p.118-125), Santo (2006, p.73), Zajacova (2013, p.1790), and Zarrabi (2020, p.23).

Since this book is intended to provide a broad understanding of the field, the aforementioned should not be regarded as problematic. The book is still a great resource for anyone looking to gain a broad understanding of the field of teaching excellence and can be used as a starting point for further exploration.

References

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