



**SRHE 2017 Newer Researchers Award**

**Final Report**

**Exploring Undergraduate Students' Conceptions of 'Teaching Excellence': a Phenomenographic Study**

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## Executive summary

- A genealogy of literature on 'teaching excellence' in higher education indicates that the notion has been contested and problematised well before the introduction of the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). However, what the students understand and experience as 'excellent teaching' has only been sporadically present in research studies as well as the discourses articulated in response to the TEF.
- The study therefore aimed at thematising undergraduate students' conceptions of teaching excellence in a research-intensive and a teaching-focused higher education institution in England.
- Phenomenography was deemed appropriate due to the heuristic value of the approach and the focus on variation in students' experiences.
- A screening questionnaire was completed by 515 undergraduate students in the two universities; 89% of the students reported they experienced excellent teaching in the teaching-focussed and 96% in the research-intensive institution. Through purposive sampling, 32 volunteering students attended semi-structured interviews aiming at revealing similarities and differences in their understanding of excellent teaching.
- Through iterative analysis, five logically-related, hierarchically inclusive categories of description were identified. Thereby, teaching was perceived as 'excellent' when the subject matter was presented in an optimal way (Category A), teaching was performed by an excellent teacher (Category B), enabled personal understanding (Category C), was conducive to questioning knowledge (Category D) and brought about change in the discipline and beyond (Category E).
- The study concludes that, despite the intense policy focus on 'product' factors including student satisfaction and graduate employability, students' accounts prioritise 'process' factors: how the subject matter is presented, what the lecture brings to the teaching process, how personal understanding is supported and to what extent questioning knowledge and change are facilitated.

## **1. Summary of project aims and objectives**

Long before the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the debate on the purpose that it serves (e.g. Scott, 2015; Ashwin, 2016), the understanding and implementation of 'teaching excellence' in higher education has been a contested territory. Complexity and contestation referred, but were not confined to, the relationship between: (i.) excellence in teaching and excellence in learning in general, and (ii.) the criteria of teacher excellence and the changing nature/diversification of academic roles (Gunn & Frisk, 2013). The relationship between teaching excellence and a plethora of factors has been also been widely contested: the assumption that teaching excellence derives from, or is associated with, excellent research, has been contradicted (Hattie & Marsh, 1996) as well as the association between excellence and professional schemes for promoting teachers' excellence (Gibbs & Habeshaw, 2002; McLean, 2001). While teacher conceptions of teaching have been systematically investigated (e.g. Pratt, 1992; Gonzalez, 2011), studies exploring students' conceptions of teaching are mostly absent (for exceptions: Kember et al., 2003; Virtanen & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2010). Most studies have focused on either students' conceptions of learning or teachers' conceptions of teaching; Kember et al. (2003), however, also examined students' beliefs about teaching in conjunction with their beliefs about learning and knowledge. Their study concluded that these beliefs form a consistent and logically inter-related set. Multiple studies suggested that teachers' and students' approaches to teaching and learning are evidently connected with their conceptions of these activities (e.g. Kember et al. 2003; Trigwell and Prosser 1996). The current study aimed to extend conclusions of these studies by exploring undergraduate students' conceptions of 'teaching excellence' and shed light in the under-researched areas of students' conceptions of teaching and students' perspective on 'teaching excellence'. Accordingly, the central research question was formulated as: what are the qualitatively different ways undergraduate students experience and understand 'teaching excellence' in higher education?

## **2. Outline of methodology and project timetable**

Trigwell (2010) asserts that good teaching is the convergence of a combination of elements: student-centred focus, drawing on teacher's strategies, planning, knowledge, conceptions and reflection, as well as their interaction with the learning and teaching context. Historically, phenomenographic approaches (Marton & Booth, 1997) have been credited with identifying variation in students' experiences of higher education and,

more importantly, highlighting implications for academic practice, curriculum design and the enhancement of teaching and learning environments. Purposive sampling in the selection of participants was intended to maximise variation in their experiences of students from one access, teaching-focused university and a research-focused university, while semi-structured interviews centred on an instance of teaching excellence and invited students to share their experiences. Prompts during the interviews aimed to reveal the structure of students' conceptions and underlying intentions (e.g. *what do you think your lecturer did that? what makes you say that? what were they trying to achieve there?*).

**July-October 2017:** Extended initial literature review, applied for ethics approval, prepared interview protocol.

**October 2017-March 2018:** Administered questionnaires and conducted interviews (including one pilot interview) in the first institution.

**April- August 2018:** Iterative analysis of the first set of transcripts; transcripts were collated and analysed as one transcript. Administered questionnaires and conducted interviews in the second institution. Second set of transcripts were subsequently collated and iteratively analysed. Drafted categories of description and constructed outcome space.

**September-December 2018:** Dissemination phase of the project. Full paper presentations at the European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI) SIG9 conference Birmingham (Phenomenography) and SRHE conference 2018.

### 3. Analysis of results

Three hundred and forty-three (343) students from the teaching-focused institution responded to a brief, 'screening' questionnaire. Individual students were invited based on their responses to the following questionnaire items: year of study, full-time or part-time study mode, 'self-declare' item on gender and, finally, reported experience(s) of excellent teaching while at university. One pilot interview was conducted to ensure that the interview questions were clear and elicited meaningful responses. Twenty (20) students accepted invitations to attend a semi-structured interview; these lasted between 25-50 minutes. Satisfactory range of disciplinary backgrounds supported the sampling strategy (Law, Business studies, Medicine, Education, Social Work, English, Media, Biosciences etc.). A £15 voucher was given in recognition of their contribution. 89% of students responded that they have experienced at least one instance of 'excellent teaching' since they joined the teaching-focused university (N=343). Following the interviews at the first university, one hundred and seventy-two (172) questionnaire responses from undergraduate students of the second, research-intensive institution were collected. Consistently with the sampling strategy, these students represented

experiences of teaching across a range of disciplines and fields of study (Accounting, Philosophy, Management, Biosciences etc.). Analysis of the first set of twenty (20) transcripts was supplemented by iterative analysis of the twelve (12) transcripts from students of the second institution- for a more detailed account of the procedure and the underpinning rationale, see Prosser (2000) and Mimirinis (2019). The analysis produced a hierarchical set of five categories of description, ranging from less (Category A) to more advanced conceptions (Category B).

*Category A: Excellent teaching is about optimal presentation of the subject matter*

Students' accounts within this category of description pointed to an understanding of excellent teaching which centred on the ways the subject matter was presented. Students highlighted the importance of breaking down the taught material, delivering the right amount of content at the right pace and placed emphasis on the structure of teaching presentations. Content is tailored to the students' needs and enriched with material outside the prescribed curriculum, yet there is no explicit consideration of how presentation of the taught topics relates to their learning.

*Category B: Excellent teaching is about having an 'excellent' teacher*

Within this category, 'excellent teaching' and 'excellent teacher' were tautologically conceived. The teacher was perceived to be knowledgeable, engaging, personable and able to create a climate of equity in the classroom. They are enthusiastic, diagnose student needs, motivate students and facilitate their growth and development. While there was a consistent reference to how important it was for their teacher to be knowledgeable and cognisant of recent developments in their discipline, such an understanding was not explicitly linked to the research status of their lecturer, awareness of a research-based curriculum or being part of a wider research community.

*Category C: Excellent teaching is about enabling and achieving personal understanding of the subject matter*

Category C represented a view of excellent teaching as a means of enabling and achieving personal understanding. The focus of students' awareness was located on application of knowledge and how such knowledge relates to the real world. Excellent teaching was understood to be conducive to re-arranging elements of the taught material so that this can be understood by the students. The emphasis, however, is not on content as in the first category of description; rather it shifts on the students' personal understanding and how well they understand the subject matter. It is through such an understanding

that the student is able to reveal the principles behind the facts and learn how these relate to each other.

*Category D: Excellent teaching is about questioning knowledge*

Accounts in this category pointed to the importance of questioning disciplinary knowledge. Students' accounts underlined the relative nature of knowledge and demonstrated awareness of different perspectives on the taught subject matter. Excellent teaching was seen as a means of critically exploring relationships within the taught content and questioning the origin of knowledge sources. The role of the teacher is perceived to be limited in this category. Teaching serves the epistemological development of students as they progress to more nuanced, relativistic conceptions of disciplinary knowledge, the teaching process and their role in such processes.

*Category E: Excellent teaching is about bringing about change (in the field/discipline, intellectual, personal)*

Within this conception, change is foregrounded in the students' accounts. Excellent teaching is understood to bring about conceptual change and rediscovering existing ideas and processes of disciplinary thinking. While there is a strong focus on the importance of changing disciplinary knowledge, this also leads to changes in individual students' lives; this entailed intellectual or professional change and was often associated with reflective accounts on the outcomes of perceived excellent teaching and, in more general terms, education. Societal change has also been implied in several of the students' accounts, although it wasn't clearly and consistently articulated.

#### **4. Project conclusions/outcomes**

The project reports variation in the ways undergraduate students experience and understand 'excellent teaching'. The study was not designed to address ontological aspects of the phenomenon (i.e. *is there such a thing as excellent teaching?*) nor was it intended to qualitatively capture perceptions of student 'satisfaction' or preferences to certain teaching styles or teacher attributes.

In summary, students' accounts of their experiences moved from ways of representation of the subject matter to how such representation is mediated by an excellent teacher and, from there, how personal understanding might be achieved. More advanced conceptions, focused on questioning the nature of disciplinary knowledge and, by extension, bringing about conceptual change. Several other points are noteworthy:

- There was no clear, consistent relationship between perceived research and teaching excellence.

- Category D was strongly, but not exclusively, associated with students' accounts in the Humanities and Law. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the expectations of the curriculum in these subject areas.
- There has been no significant variation in the understanding of the phenomenon across the two institutions.
- Despite the intense policy focus on 'product' (Biggs, 1993) factors (student satisfaction, graduate employability etc.), students understanding of teaching excellence overwhelmingly pointed to the importance of 'process' factors (how the subject matter is presented, what the lecture brings to the teaching process, how personal understanding is supported and to what extent questioning knowledge and is facilitated).
- Getting better grades as a result of excellent teaching was evident across students' accounts supporting all categories of description; there was no association between less advanced conceptions and wanting to get higher grades.
- The reported conceptions present some level of agreement with previously reported student conceptions of *learning* (e.g. Marton, Dall'Alba & Beaty, 1993) and teacher conceptions of teaching.

## **5. Summary of next steps planned**

### **5.1 Presentation of work**

Results were initially presented at the Anglia Ruskin University Annual Learning and Teaching conference (Chelmsford, 26 June 2018). Following from this presentation, I presented at the European Association for Research in Learning and Instruction (EARLI) SIG9 Phenomenography and Variation Theory biennial conference at the University of Birmingham (16 September 2018). The discussion about the study focused on methodological aspects of the work. Finally, results of this work were presented at the SRHE Newer Researcher's conferences as well as the main SRHE International conference (6-9 December 2018). Feedback centred on the relationship of similar studies with policy and implications for the quality of teaching and learning.

### **5.2 Publication of work**

A research paper is currently being prepared for a journal submission in March 2019. It is intended that the entire study will be reported in this submission.

### **5.3 Any plans to continue with the work or proposals for further research which might compliment this project.**

I supervise a doctoral project on teaching excellence and perceptions of academic staff; it is therefore envisaged that the current work will inform this process. I also explore appropriate channels for making public the findings of this study.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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