

The Concept of Teaching Excellence in Higher Education

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Abstract

The institutions of higher education are in a period of substantial change. They are under constant pressure to reveal their accomplishments while facing cumulative levels of economic limitations, modified responsibility structures, and demands to promoting excellence in teaching and learning capabilities.

The issue of excellence in teaching and learning has become a significant topic for higher education strategies around the world.

This chapter reports on the challenges faced by higher education institutions in advancing the excellence of teaching and learning through educational development programs.

It explores how academics adopt and promote excellence in their teaching and how they react to university quality programs.

Keywords: Research, Higher Education, Academic Research

1. Introduction

The term of teaching excellence has previously been one of the key values of higher education. Today, however, it is observing the substantial changes in its subjects, implications, principles, goals, and devices. Particularly, the issue of excellence in teaching and learning has become a significant topic for higher education strategies around the world.

A key challenge for the excellence of institutions in higher education is how the teaching and learning approaches are applied in the development of enhancing student learning.

Both the complexity and diversity of the programs provided and the variety and vagueness of the society economy will all make institutions have to constantly adapt to high standards of teaching excellence. HEIs need to learn how to excellently serve the student community. Institutions must consider the students as the core of the learning method.

With the accelerated handling of the knowledge society and international competition in higher education, the discussion about teaching excellence has become an urgent need (Teichler, 2003). Usually, excellence was principally activated internally by faculty members; today, excellence is one of the most significant issues that are of interest to most educational institutions around the world, as it is a main part of the evaluation process and progressively tied with the academic performance assessment of higher education institutions (Clegg, 2007). Skelton (2007) revealed that the concentration on teaching excellence can control the system leading to avoid other obstacles in higher education performance.

HEIs worldwide are challenged by a variety of national and international institutional quality assurance regulations and advancement procedures. Teaching and learning quality assurance progressions are as vital for faculty as they are for students. For students they confirm the quality of learning, but for faculty they identify all the goals that need to be reached in order to confirm that a quality education is being distributed proficiently.

Quality assurance models and performance indicators are planned to be the essential elements in enhancing the standard of higher education. At the international level, OECD/UNESCO has increasingly obtained quantitative performance indicators to offer global comparisons of higher education systems

(OECD, 2007).

Quality assurance agencies address the two main factors of quality teaching. First, agencies frequently urge internal quality systems to assure the best results for teaching excellence or to redesign the appropriate plan for enhancing teaching quality. Second, HEIs might be subject to the performance control process to check the consistency of their programs and syllabuses, as well as its implications for providing the highest quality standards. Although the majority of HEIs have addressed quality assurance for their teaching excellence enhancements in different ways, common acceptance was given to the high standards of teaching as a clear indication of their efficiency. On the other hand, with regards to other influences, for instance the increased size of the institutions of higher education, the large variety of provided courses, and the different range of teaching and assessment approaches, there is an urgent need to approve a more systematic and synchronized method to quality assurance than what has been previously applied.

Promoting teaching excellence is a multi-level effort that consists of three main plans. The first is the institutional stage, which involves designing short and long-term strategic plans and encourages enhancing internal quality assurance systems.

The second is the program stage, which covers all of the activities needed to evaluate and update the plan, design, structure, and delivery of the university's programs. The third stage is the individual stage, which comprises of projects that assist lecturers to achieving their goals, to innovate modern methods that will enhance teaching excellence and student learning, and encourage the adoption of learner-centric teaching. Strengthening teaching excellence at the program stage is crucial in order to guarantee the strengthening of teaching excellence at the regulation level and throughout college and university.

Educational research reveals that students are becoming more affiliated to the idea of equality in dealing with the need to be treated with equal teaching and learning approaches, to be evaluated justly, and to obtain the required and sufficient learning outcomes in order to qualify for significant employment opportunities. The growth of educational programs together with the variation of student modes refocuses educational research on the issue of equity in teaching, learning, and assessment at the very center of teaching excellence. Students needs to be involved in progressions of knowledge construction to make them ready for the upcoming vocation illustrated by open-ended cases, moving towards teamwork and new claims for proficiency.

Accordingly, the responsibility of higher education lecturers in an innovative educational system is by adopting advanced methods of transforming knowledge to students.

Lecturers are currently needed to have efficient teaching skills for producing student learning results. They also require the need to work as a team with students, co-workers from the same institute, and with other participants as members of dynamic learning communities (DLCs) in order to provide innovative and creative approaches to the traditional format for teaching excellence and learning.

Teaching excellence development programs are needed to help produce learning environments that improve teaching quality. Universities that do not regularly provide such programs will negatively affect the teaching methods followed. The teachers will then rely on the personal experience they acquired as students. Consequently, old teaching styles based on teacher's experience rather than on the students' requirements, and on the subject-centered approach rather than on the transformational student-centered approach, (knowledge) will carried out from time to time.

This chapter aims to explore how academics adopt and promote excellence in their teaching and how they react to university quality programs. The focus of this chapter is on the relationship between the concept of teaching excellence and the quality of higher education performance.

2. The concept of teaching excellence

Teaching excellence is a challenging idea. Definitions of teaching excellence have been inspired by the psychological principles of teaching and learning that represent the social, political, and economic setting of higher education.

Excellence has an important role in providing a clear meaning of research and teaching in higher education. The prevalence of the knowledge society, global competition, and student-centered approach regarding excellence in teaching has taken a variety of trends in interpretation and discussion. Accordingly, any modification to the meaning of the term “excellence” can be effective.

Excellence was heavily debated by academics; however, it is the magic wand that is needed for the assessment process of higher education institutions (Clegg, 2007). The debates have been expanded to include broader dimensions, such as the association between teaching excellence and their influences on student learning.

Trigwell (2010) reveals that reliable and deep methods of teaching have a severe influence on students, helping to drive students towards the lesson, but this is dependent on qualitative methods and is not without its critics (Haggis, 2004).

Globally, the term “excellence” in teaching is extensively used by most countries, particularly in developed countries. Yet, there is little contrast about the meaning of teaching excellence, and no country has provided a unanimous definition of excellence in teaching. Skelton (2009) also revealed that the definition and assessment of excellence concerning higher education teaching and learning still lacks unanimity.

Skelton (2005) assured that as there is no unanimous understanding of the concept of teaching excellence, there are different manners of quality cultures. Skelton presented four different understandings of teaching excellence in higher education: traditional, performativity, psychologized, and critical. A HEI may want to adapt to a new type of quality culture, or change it later as “in any given culture, understandings of teaching excellence may change over time” (Skelton, 2005). However, HEIs, before starting the process of change, should revise what it presently believes to be teaching excellence and re-evaluate how the institution works with new proposed understanding (Skelton, 2005).

Grifoll (2014) observed that definitions of teaching excellence in higher education may well rely on the individual using the concept and their purpose for such a case, whereas Brusoni et al. (2014) assessed some features of teaching excellence, such as management, research, teaching, and student accomplishment. Their review of teaching excellence is related to several of the influences that have been reviewed by other authors, such as Gibbs (2008) and Gunn and Fiske (2013), and a number of significant topics regarding the definition of teaching excellence. Brusoni et al. (2014) commented that, “Excellent teaching is determined by factors such as the inspirational nature of individual lecturers, the organization of presentations, the interaction with students as participants and how well the information provided meets the learning objectives of the course. Excellence can be identified both in terms of student satisfaction and also in terms of the performance of students in assessment. There are differences between deep and surface learning. Excellent teaching may be seen as the efficient presentation of information which maximizes the students’ opportunities to gain the highest marks from the course. Alternatively, excellence could be recognized as the stimulus for students to engage with the subject and to enhance their understanding and knowledge.”

Brusoni et al. (2014) declared that teaching excellence is more intricate due to the fact that it is not only confined by the skills of lecturers, but also the upholding of resources, materials, and systems that facilitate the outcome of educational learning (Gunn and Fiske 2013).

Carr (2003) declared, “While it would be foolhardy to deny any significant professional role to technical notions of skill in good educational practice, notions of skill and technique cannot even begin to capture what is involved in the complex interplay of cognition and affect, judgment and sensibility, which largely characterizes teachers’ responses to the complex practical challenges of education and teaching.” Brighouse and Woods (1999), inspired by Handy (1990), presented the perception of personal factors raising the concept of teachers who are “energy creators.” The factors proposed by Handy (1990) include energy, excitement, enthusiasm, effort, effervescence, and enterprise. Handy informs us that “Everyone is full of ‘E’, in all its forms. The trick is to release that ‘E’ – the excitement as well as the effort, the enthusiasm as well as the energy.”

Bain (2004), on the other hand, revealed that the excellent teachers should be able to create a “natural critical learning environment” in which the environments are both academically challenging and supportive.

Fried (2001) introduced the concept of passion in teaching, which denotes that teachers in higher education are supposed to promote, encourage, inspire, and enable those whom they teach. The feature of passionate teachers is referring to the fact that they proceed as colleagues in a learning environment instead of “experts in the field,” thus engaging students to enthusiastically discuss and exchange information to gain the required knowledge. Passionate teaching involves learners to be consistent with Fried, “A key to such engagement is the learning partnership that passionate teachers create with students.”

Biggs (2003) revealed that excellent teaching involves one to become a “reflective practitioner,” and this concept is open-ended, progressively increasing the teacher’s knowledge of themselves and their students while enhancing their own philosophy of teaching. The excellent lecturer should involve students in discussion and be encouraged by the desire to obtain knowledge.

Excellent teachers have always added something to the classroom that is indescribable. However, our opinion is that excellent teachers are on-going process and teachers still need to practice more and get up to date on the latest methods and techniques, which is exactly what we will discuss in the upcoming sections.

3. What characterizes teaching excellence?

Bain (2004) stated that teaching excellence is more than “just a matter of technique.” Liston and Garrison (2004) indicate that it is a state of passion and fascination that “binds us to the abode of life and everything in it we call good or beautiful. Those who feel the call to teaching, whose sense of teaching is a profoundly meaningful part of their life, have a passion for teaching.” In addition to being an academic practice, teaching is an extremely emotional practice and passion is vital to doing it. Barnett (2007) claims that the teachers’ excellence, character, and power “will be a matter of sheer show unless connections are made with the students.”

Excellent teachers seek to create climates in which education is enjoyable, and what it helps is when excellent teachers stimulate others by using the two most important tools: knowledge and a love of the topic.

Skelton (2005) revealed three main characteristics which are related to the concept of teaching excellence.

1. Teaching excellence should have the competence to promote the performance of a nationwide economy.
2. Teaching excellence is supposed to increase the chances of universities competing for students on a market.
3. Excellence in teaching must be presented in such a way as to be measured and rewarded.

Upon closer review, the educational literature provides additional characteristics of teaching

excellence. Bradley et al. (2015) observed that the excellence recognized by the students in their study map is summarized as follows:

- “• Enthusiasm for subject and desire to share with students
- Modifying teaching to suit the students, subject matter, and environment
- Encourage learning for understanding and concern about the development of students’ critical thinking
- Ability to transform and extend knowledge
- Show respect for their students, interest in professional and personal growth with sustained high expectations.”

Gunn and Fiske (2013) said that alumni present a valuable resource when reviewing what created excellent teaching, such as “approachability, interest in students, helpfulness and patience were the most recollected traits of academics considered as excellent teachers.”

Other characteristics of teaching excellence are illustrated as followed:

3.1. Preparation and planning

Preparation and planning are significant components to excellence in teaching. Teachers should be in a permanent state of preparation and planning. They should always think about the upcoming lesson (Danielson, C. 2007; Lewis 2002; Fernandez & Yoshida, 2004). Teachers will be able to reveal their skills of teaching in the classroom when they are planning and preparing lessons that assist the sharing of knowledge to improve excellence of teaching.

3.2. Reliable and professional skills and knowledge

All teachers must have a complete knowledge of the content they are planning to teach, along with the most valuable approach to teaching. Hattie (2003) stated that such knowledge is essential to developing excellent teachers. However, by itself, this knowledge is not adequate to creating excellent teachers. It is about the teachers themselves, and how to apply such knowledge. Excellent teachers should assist students to move from the surface knowledge to meaningful levels of perception. Consistent with Pasternak and Bailey (2004), teachers require two types of knowledge - declarative and procedural – in order to serve excellently in their teaching space. Declarative knowledge describes knowledge of the topics which they are teaching, and procedural knowledge describes the skills of the lecturer in the class.

3.3. Excellent communicator

One of the key skills that contribute to creating an excellent lecturer is strong communication skills in order to attract students in the class.

Skelton (2007a) revealed that teaching excellence requires thinking, preparedness, and communicating with the individual needs of students; observing and estimating a student’s capabilities. An excellent teacher must start developing from the student’s starting point, inspiring them to choose the appropriate method to learning.

3.4. Excellent methods of representations

Another primary characteristic of an excellent teacher is their ability to give deep representations

about teaching resources. Excellent teachers are characterized by skills, knowledge, and experience (Beizhuizen et al., 2001). Accordingly, they are identified by the ability to manage, guide, and clearly clarify tasks to students (Murphy et al., 2004).

An excellent teacher should present teaching resources in a manageable and attractive way while using excellent teaching approaches (Duarte, 2013).

Most of the lecturers are alike in the nature and quantity of the knowledge prepared for their students; however, excellent teachers have various methods in how they manage and represent content knowledge. Knowledge, skills, and approaches are the main characteristics of excellent teachers.

3.5. Passionate and inspiring

Excellent lecturers are mostly passionate about the topics they teach. Consequently, they turn the lesson into a state of inspiration and stimulation for a high level of interaction. Passion is what stimulates excellent teachers to deliver great efforts into teaching. It prevents them from abandonment, especially when things become complicated, and it inspires teachers to acquire new methods to improve their teaching approaches, regardless of current potential.

3.6. Supportive:

Excellent lecturers must be aware of the obstacles that students may face in learning, and they should provide all types of help and assistance when students need it, inside the class or even outside, when the opportunity and time is made available. The important step here is to create time for students in order to provide the required assistance and support.

Allan, Clarke, and Jopling (2009) revealed that the main factors of a supportive learning setting comprise of academic enthusiasm, topic awareness, attention to all students, approachability, and recognition of diversity.

3.7. Commitment to lifelong learning:

Excellent teachers are always interested in their academic development and should frequently engage in leadership academic planning (LAP), which means preparing for a leadership title.

3.8. Self-reflection

Excellent teachers should observe and evaluate their own performance regularly. They should participate in a process of discuss their knowledge with others, and ask others to evaluate their accomplishment and their knowledge through teaching practices (Wygat and Stout, 2011).

3.9. Conscientiousness

The teaching profession is not always fun or comfortable, and it can be stressful work. Although excellent teachers need to work hard, however, they must learn the balance between effort and excellence. Conscientious teachers are highly reliable, determined, and persevering. They work hard and go the extra mile in order to do the very best job they possibly can. Locke (2011) reveals that conscientious teachers perform more creatively and of with higher quality than other teachers.

3.10. Personality

The personality highlights stabilization and settlement of an effective teacher's personality with features like compassion, sympathy, and enthusiasm (Beizhuizen et al., 2001). Excellent teachers are distinguished as affectionate, friendly, and supportive (Arnon & Reichel, 2007). The personality viewpoint defines excellent teachers in regards to characteristics and behaviors instead of knowledge and skills.

It is important to mention that most teachers show these characteristics at some level. Only excellent teachers show them at a higher level.

4. Critical thinking

During the past three decades, many research titles, discussions, forums, seminars, and conferences are concentrated on the needs of higher education to assist students in acquiring critical thinking skills in order to predict several critical events in the future and make accurate decisions regarding them.

Critical thinking is a significant learning outcome which brought the attention of most HEIs around the world. Therefore the definitions used are varied and still very much needed as several authors have used it repeatedly to refer to different meanings, and as a result, the word has lost its accurate meaning of assessing or determining outcomes. A scan of the literature shows that the term "critical thinking" in higher education has been defined as "another concept whose value is diminished by terminological disarray" (Gabannesch, 2006).

Lipman (1991) asserted that "critical thinking is a form of skilful serious thinking based on criteria so that it facilitates judgment and decision making, self-assessment, and considers the characteristics of the context."

Facione (1990) stated in his report to the American Philosophical Association that the critical thinker has some characteristics and cognitive abilities that surpasses others in terms of reading, interpreting, analyzing, and assessing.

The Critical Thinking Cooperation introduced critical thinking as a skill which is beyond the process of committal to memory. Means, with critical thinking, students will be stimulated to think, to propose hypotheses, to examine and synthesize the results, and they may go further to propose a new theories and examine them against other information.

Developing students' critical thinking talents is one of the most important goals of higher education institutions around the world. Most lecturers assure that this is crucial for students to obtain such proficiency during the study period. It provides students with a wide array of certain methodical, evaluative, and problem-solving skills. It assists students to participate in decisive, self-regulatory decisions. Students' critical thinking is curious and has a passion for knowledge, is open to reason, progressive, receptive, gives opinions wisely, and is eager to reassess his or opinions, as well as excellently setting priorities, and showing much interest in research.

The interrogative is the key element for gaining critical thinking, and it is the source of knowledge that should be taught as a background for all types of learning. Higher education institutions with an advanced ranking always aim to put forth great effort into shifting their teaching approach from "what to think" into "how to think." This kind of mental shift necessitates lecturers to consider new teaching methods that assist in sharpening students' critical thinking talents.

To develop critical thinking, students should have basic skills such as superior reasoning, critical reading comprehension and evaluation, and excellent writing skills.

5. Conclusion

There is a wide range of references in regards to excellent teaching. The term “excellence” was frequently utilized as a synonym to the term “quality.”

Teachers’ excellence is the key factor for guaranteeing the quality of HEIs, which have been identified in this chapter by a number of characteristics.

Without proficient and experienced teachers, it would be quite difficult to build qualified educational institutions. In contrast, such excellent teachers are not able to accomplish their mission competently without a conducive environment that sustains their performances. Thus, the institutions of higher education cannot persist to enhance teachers’ quality without providing an encouraging environment.

To build excellent teachers, strategists and educational experts must clearly determine what university lecturers should know in order to practice teaching, and they should also figure out what type of training is needed in order to create excellent teachers.

Official, assessable skills are essential but not enough; they must be accompanied by the incorporeal abilities that are difficult to measure, such as motivation and self-efficacy. These abilities can be improved through teaching development programs.

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