Defining, delivering and measuring effective and excellent teaching

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Abstract

The importance of teaching is increasingly being recognised globally. In the UK there are plans to measure teaching excellence. This an opportunity to redress the teaching - research imbalance. How to define, deliver and measure excellent teaching is a challenge which medical education needs to address.

Keywords: Teaching; Excellence

Personal view

The debate about about what constitutes excellence in university profiles has increased over the last two decades particularly as global competition between institutions have emerged. Teaching excellence as part of this profile is now a significant part of higher education policies and institutional strategies (Teichler 2003; Skelton 2005, 2007). In summer 2015 two of the most prestigious science journals, Nature and Scientific America, produced a joint special edition on the teaching of STEM subjects and how education in this area needed to be improved so that attrition rates were reduced and graduating students were better prepared for post graduate study and research. An editorial in the same issue by Mitchell Waldrop suggested that, “scientists need to approach teaching with the same rigour and appreciation for evidence that they exercise in the laboratory”. In the same edition Bradforth and colleagues (2015) argued the need to improve the quality of university STEM education by providing adequate incentives and rewards and that faculty members should be encouraged to demonstrate scholarship in their teaching.

In the UK the Secretary for State for Education, Jo Johnson has introduced the plan to measure teaching excellence alongside the present system used to judge the quality of research the Research Excellence Framework or REF). The details of this Teaching Excellence Framework or TEF for the next year have were published in September 2016 (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-excellence-framework-year-2-specification). Already there
is considerable consternation amongst educators around how teaching excellence will be measured. So it was with interest that I recently read a report commissioned by the Royal Academy of Engineering entitled 'Does teaching advance your academic career: interim on the development of a template for evaluating teaching achievement'.

This interim report written by Ruth Graham documents the midpoint of a two phase study. Phase one of the study drew on international knowledge and current best practice to develop a provisional evidence-informed template for the evaluation of teaching achievement. As outline in the appendix of the report the template was informed by four evidence sources:

- benchmarking of the evidence of teaching achievement requested during academic promotion to full professorship (or equivalent) at the world’s top-ranked engineering universities, involving desktop examination of promotion criteria and consultations with and feedback from representatives of many of the universities concerned;
- interviews with key experts in the field of pedagogical competence, the measurement of teaching achievement and university promotion procedures;
- reviews of the research literature on existing and proposed measures of teaching achievement, from within and outside higher education;
- analysis and review of international good practice in the evidencing and evaluation of university teaching achievement, involving interviews with those engaged in designing, implementing and using these systems. The review included the compilation of a number of illustrative case studies of good practice at the institutional level, including Chalmers University of Technology, the National University of Singapore, and the University of Edinburgh.

Phase two of the study (launched in September 2015) aims to evaluate how well the template works in practice. Globally ten universities will trial this tool and a subset of these will pilot using the template in their promotions systems.

The initiatives described above come at time of increasing interest in education and teaching. AMEE itself has developed the Aspire initiative to reward excellence in various aspects of medical, dental and veterinary education. The original idea was to reward excellence in overall medical education. However, when the group tried to describe the criteria for overall excellence they found it extremely challenging and subsequently took areas such as assessment of students, student engagement, social accountability of medical schools and more recently faculty development and drew up criteria for excellence in these areas. The area of teaching excellence has yet to be adopted as an Aspire theme but given the interest in this area perhaps it should.

In 2005 Ron Berk outlined 12 strategies to measure teaching effectiveness. He listed these as:

- Student ratings, peer ratings, self evaluation, videos, student interviews, alumni ratings, employer ratings, administrator ratings, teaching scholarship, teaching awards, learning outcomes measures and teaching portfolio.

At the conclusion of the paper he suggests the following approach to start such measurements:

- start with student ratings and one or more other sources that your faculty can embrace which reflect best practices in teaching;
- weigh the pluses and minuses of the different sources (don’t bite off too much, but pick as many as possible);
- decide which combination of sources should be used for both formative and summative decisions and those that should be used for one type of decision but not the other, such as peer ratings.
In 2007 Harden presented his model of teaching excellence

Excellence in the Scholarship of Teaching = Technical competence x approach to teaching x personal development

Of course the point where effective teaching becomes excellent teaching has not been investigated or defined but given the global interest in this area perhaps now is the time for us to use what is known about effective teachers and develop our own framework to identify excellent teaching and excellent teachers.

Take Home Messages

Notes On Contributors

Trudie Roberts is Professor of Medical Education and Director, Leeds Institute of Medical Education. She is also the current AMEE President.

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Appendices

Declarations

The author has declared the conflicts of interest below.

I have been appointed as an assessor for the UK Teaching Excellence Framework.

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