

Can 'excellence' turn? Rethinking teaching excellence awards for the public good

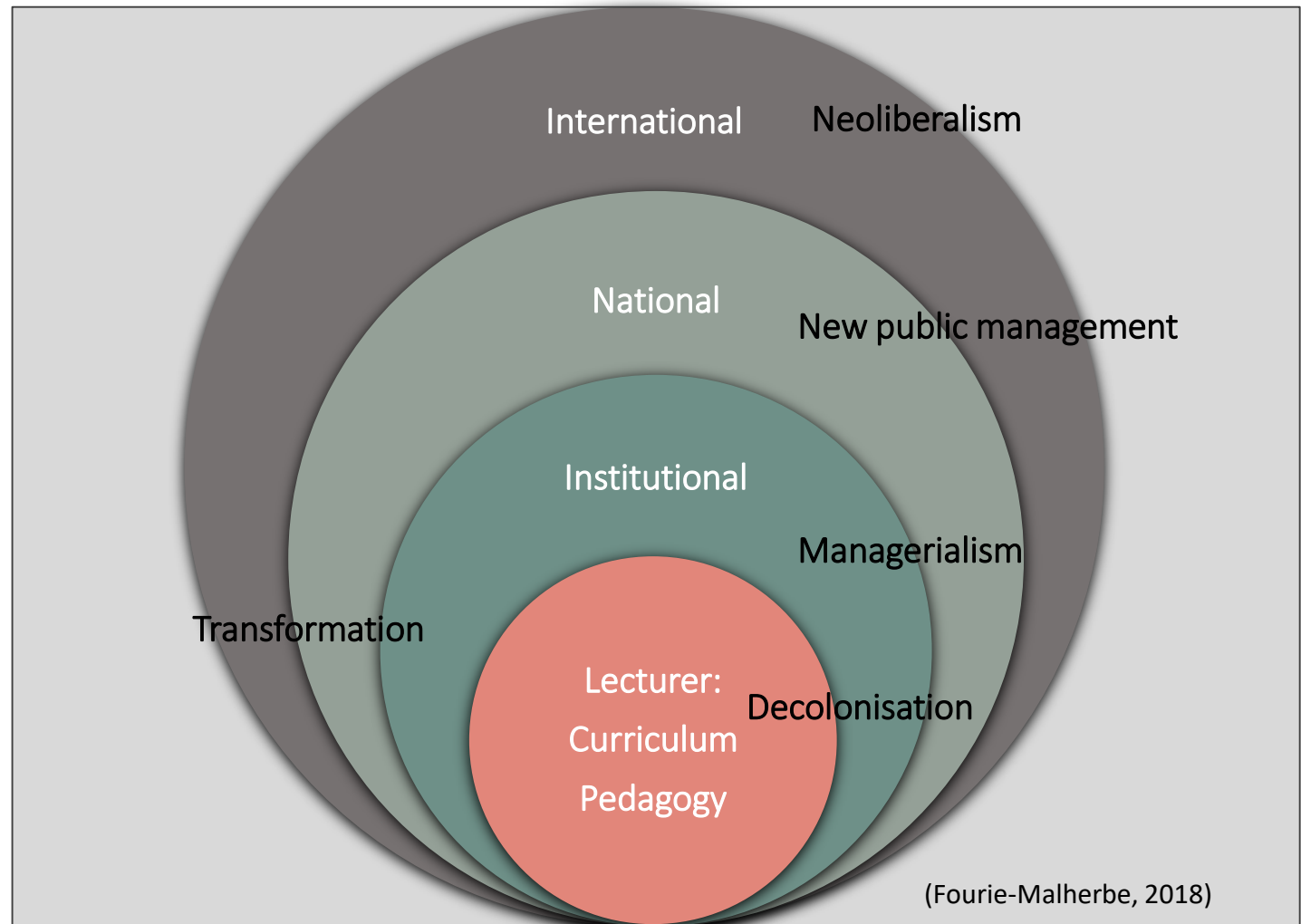
“Education and educational research conceived in terms of expanding the space of the possible rather than perpetuating entrenched habits of interpretation, then, must be principally concerned with ensuring the conditions for the emergence of the as-yet unimagined.”

(Davis & Sumara, 2008:38)



“There has been ‘a subtle pendulum swing in the role of South African universities away from socio-economic transformation towards becoming a producer of resources for national competitiveness and economic growth.’”

(Searle & McKenna, 2007 in Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017:8)



“Neoliberalism does not merely privatize (...) what was formerly publicly supported and valued. Rather, it formulates everything, everywhere, in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves.” (Brown in Saunders, 2015:398)



1. The discourse of 'excellence'

- 'Excellence' plays a key role in the neoliberal HE culture: it has become "an organizing frame of the university." (Saunders, 2015:391)
- Demonstrations of excellence in HE are underpinned by assumptions such as learning, teaching and scholarship being quantifiable and commensurable, the necessity and legitimacy of assessment and accountability systems, and "the naturalness and universality of competition" in HE. (Saunders, 2015:394)
- Understandings of 'excellence' "are always intimately connected to the wider social, economic and political context and underpinned by broader discourses or ideologies of education (...) and models of the higher educator." (Skelton, 2004:452)
- 'Excellence' is a multifaceted concept with a contested and shifting meaning and, hence, no fixed definition. (Elton, 1998; Chism, 2006; Skelton, 2004, 2009; French & O'Leary, 2017; Wood, 2017)

“The University of Portsmouth achieved the highest ‘Gold’ rating in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the UK government’s first assessment of teaching excellence in higher education. Portsmouth Business School has a track record of sustained excellence in teaching and research as evidenced by the consistently very high student satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey, the excellent employability record of our graduates, and the results of the Research Excellence Framework (REF2014) submission. The breadth and depth of our research was viewed by the REF2014 panel as having an outstanding and very significant impact in economic, social and policy-making terms, placing us in the top 10% for impact; 87.5% of our research environment was rated as internationally excellent; and 62% of our research as world-leading or internationally excellent.”



'Teaching excellence'

- 'Teaching excellence' is a construct that can be understood differently from a policy, professional, institutional, disciplinary or personal perspective, and is re-defined in correlation with changes in the social, economic and political environment. (Wood & Su, 2017:462)
- *"A contested concept which is historically and situationally contingent"* (Skelton, 2004:452)
- 'Teaching excellence' is situated in a culture of measurement and control where individuals and institutions compete with each other according to externally prescribed criteria and goals.
- Performance represents "the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement." (Ball, 2003:216)
- "Not everything that counts can be counted." (Collini, 2012:120)

2. Higher education: a service to humanity



- “We serve humanity first and foremost.”
(Eshleman, 2018)
- ““To claim higher education as a public good is (...) to claim for ourselves – and others – membership of an active and inclusive public: to claim not only that higher education is ‘good’ (i.e. valuable and worthwhile), but that its ‘goodness’ resides in it being valuable and worthwhile to a public for which we share responsibility.””
(Nixon, 2011 in Brew, 2015:99)



Teaching excellence – a value for the public good?

- ❑ In a neoliberal context, “social justice, transformation and decolonisation are seen as being in tension with academic excellence.” (Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017:3)
- ❑ “There is the need to change the values that govern the way our higher education system functions – and hence the values that students themselves are being taught – so as to put the common good ahead of all other considerations.” (Marginson, 2020)



3. Teaching excellence awards

- Teaching excellence awards:
 - acknowledge institutional support for teaching
 - recognise the achievements of outstanding teachers
 - encourage other teachers to reach similar levels of inspirational teaching.
- Teaching excellence awards emphasise “the competitive arena of excellence at the expense of attending to unequal social and economic relations.” (Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017:3)
- The conceptualization, recognition and awarding of ‘excellent teaching’ should include a focus on ‘excellent learning’, with both discourses emphasising the ideological and unequal contexts in which students and teachers function.

4. The discourse of 'excellence' at SU

- ***Institutional Plan 2017–2022***: 'Excellence' qualifies learning, teaching, research, the institution (student success rates, research output, specialised (niche) scientific fields and staff expertise), governance, social impact, and strategies and operations.
- ***Institutional Intent and Strategy 2013-2018***: "sustain momentum on excellence" (14): knowledge base, systemic sustainability, student success
- ***Vision 2030***:
 - "Stellenbosch University is ***inclusive, innovative, and future focused***: a place of discovery and excellence where both staff and students are thought leaders in advancing knowledge in the service of all stakeholders." (*Institutional Intent and Strategy 2013-2018*:7)
 - "We are characterised by excellence in everything we do." (ibid.:8)
- ***Vision 2040***:
 - "Stellenbosch University will be Africa's leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society." (*Vision 2040 and Strategic Framework 2019-2024*:14)
 - "Outstanding students", "talented staff", "a world-class environment" (ibid.:15)
 - "Academic freedom to pursue knowledge that adheres to the highest standards of integrity, renewal and relevance" (ibid.:16)

'Teaching excellence' at SU


- 'Excellence' in the SU institutional context is a multifaceted concept with a contested and shifting meaning.
- The *Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014-2018* aligns the first teaching and learning strategy plan (2002) and the University's ongoing commitment to good teaching with the changing world and revised university strategic goals in order to "further enhance teaching excellence" at the institution (2).
- The *Teaching and Learning Policy (2018)* introduces a clear distinction between 'good' and 'excellent' teaching at SU: *good* teaching is expected and acknowledged, but *excellent* teaching is recognised, rewarded and promoted across all systems of the University (5).



5. The SU Teaching Excellence Awards

“An excellent teacher is aware of their context (beyond the immediate environment) and reflects on the ways in which their discipline, institution, own history and students’ lived experiences affect teaching and learning. An excellent teacher is a reflective practitioner who has grown more effective over a number of years in relation to increasing knowledge of teaching and learning, experience in teaching and the facilitation of learning, and systematic observations of what happens in the classroom (including how outside factors affect students) with a view to improving student engagement and learning outcomes. An excellent teacher demonstrates a willingness to experiment in their teaching with new means at their disposal and integrates innovative practices into their teaching. An excellent teacher has a clearly articulated teaching philosophy, informed by educational theory, and appropriate for a university teaching context. Teaching experience can include both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. ‘Teaching’ can be interpreted broadly to include curriculum design and delivery, the latter in class, online or through materials development.”

(The Stellenbosch University Teaching Excellence Awards 2020:2)



The SU Teaching Excellence Awards: for the private good

- ❑ The awards prioritise the individual (in contradiction to the *Recommendations* (2015))
- ❑ Teaching excellence is determined by criteria that use the individual's performance to measure their productivity, outputs, and worth. (Ball, 2003)
- ❑ The financial reward successful candidates receive quantifies their 'quality' and academic identity and demonstrates their 'worth' as teachers – in terms of the 'excellence' benchmark they are 'commendable' or 'evolving' teachers in comparison to peers who might still be 'promising'.
- ❑ Applications are judged by a selection panel which is representative of the University's faculties, senior management and professional developers, but does not include the student voice.
- ❑ Academics compete not to be "*the best **for** the world*" but "*the best **in** the world*", overturning the re-envisioning of SU in the *Teaching and Learning Policy* (2018:2).



The institution as a whole should “be predisposed – via its mission, culture and practices both within the institution and in its dealings with the outside world – towards social justice, inclusion and care for the other.” (Leibowitz, 2012:xxiii)


The best “*in the world*” or “*for the world*”?

6. Re-envisioning the SU Teaching Excellence Awards for the public good

- Introduce the student voice



- “Looked at from the learner's point of view, only such teaching as can produce excellent learning can lay claims to excellence.” (Elton, 1998:3)
- “One cannot simply teach about the public good, or for the public good, if one does not provide the opportunity for students to practice these values and attributes and observe them being modelled by others.”
(Leibowitz, 2012:xxiv)



Re-envisioning the SU Teaching Excellence Awards for the public good

- Shift the present corporate and individualist value of 'excellence' into a moral context

"A duty of care and compassion" performed for the public good (Nixon, 2007:25)


- Adapt the managerialist narratives about 'excellence' and the rewarding of it into a more inclusive and collaborative system

A collaborative approach to excellence, countering performativity, individualism, competition and othering, should contribute to reclaiming teaching as a public good.

Re-envisioning the SU Teaching Excellence Awards for the public good

- Broaden the awards as a private good by introducing disciplinary/interdisciplinary teams and projects
- Replace the current individualist performative criteria by more inclusive domains





“Is [higher education] an interested observer or strategic actor looking to influence the world in which it operates? If it is the latter, then the area where it can, and should, make an impact is on inequality.” (Atherton, 2018)

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