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**CHERI**

Centre for Higher Education  
Research and Information

**Excellence in teaching and  
learning: a review of the  
literature for the Higher  
Education Academy**

**Centre for Higher Education Research and Information  
The Open University**

July 2007

Brenda Little, William Locke,  
Jan Parker and John Richardson

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# Excellence in teaching and learning: a review of the literature for the Higher Education Academy

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## 1. Executive summary

1. To 'excel' means to surpass, to be pre-eminent, hence 'excellence' in teaching and learning implies being pre-eminent and connotes a sense of certain distinguishing features such that those exhibiting excellence stand out from the rest.
2. However, within a diverse system of higher education (as now exists within the UK) debates about concepts of excellence in teaching and learning highlight underlying tensions between notions of excellence as a positional good (with attendant concerns for reputational hierarchies) and excellence relating to higher education's role in broader societal terms.
3. The literature review set out to address three main questions: how is the term 'excellence' used in the context of teaching and the student learning experience? What are the key conceptualisations of excellence? What are the implications of usage and conceptualisations for future policy in relation to promoting or developing excellence?
4. In UK policy documents, excellence in teaching at a system-wide level is often associated with international standards, rankings and meeting national economic goals, but it also used to enhance the status of certain institutional functions (for example, teaching) in relation to others, in particular research. Some critics have noted that when such a use of teaching excellence is considered alongside more explicit policies for stimulating system performance through diversity and competition, different understandings of excellence can arise. Few literatures refer explicitly to excellence in student learning at a system-wide level, though some suggest that the management of learning is central to achieving excellence.
5. Since the late 1990s, more explicit attention has been given to higher education teaching and learning through the development of institutional teaching and learning strategies, linked to broader underlying mission statements. Analysis of such strategies shows the term 'excellence' being used in both an aspirational sense as well as being bound up with claims of enhancing students' learning experience and providing an experience of high quality. Critics claim that such an emphasis on teaching and learning strategies (and on learning outcomes) leads to discussion of *process* and *form* taking precedence over *content*; 'what' is being taught and learned becomes less important than whether it is done excellently.
6. Debates on concepts of teaching excellence are linked to two other notions, viz. the scholarship of teaching and the expert teacher, with some suggestion that

excellence should be an attribute of any professional teacher, which may be confusing excellence with notions of good (enough) teaching. Much has been written about institutional mechanisms for recognising and rewarding excellent teaching and the need for such mechanisms to reflect an institution's values, missions and culture. However, there are fewer publications focusing specifically on excellence in student learning at the institutional level.

7. Further, the discourse of scholarship is tied to concepts of disciplines and disciplinary cultures. Some critics note that disciplinary boundaries can act as a barrier to change, impeding students' approaches to learning and learning outcomes, and call for a new form of disciplinarity that emphasises reflection on existing practice and critical dialogue about the discipline.
8. Alongside literatures relating to understandings of teaching excellence in the context of rankings and performance sits another large body of literature, which refers to psychologised understandings of teaching and learning processes and focuses on micro-level transactions between teachers and students. Much of this research literature takes 'excellent teaching' to be synonymous with 'effective teaching' (as do some policy documents). Although there is some conflicting evidence surrounding the hierarchical nature of approaches to teaching and learning, there seems to be consensus that excellence in learning would be reflected in more sophisticated conceptions of learning and perhaps more generally in more sophisticated conceptions of knowledge and its construction. However, it is clear that the dynamics of the relationship between teaching and learning are mediated by students' own perceptions of their environment and by their own motivations to learning: excellence in student learning may or may not require excellent teaching.
9. External reviews of higher education provision (conducted under the auspices of the Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE) originally used the term 'excellent' (along with 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory') to categorise judgements of provision, and characteristics associated with excellent higher education were identified. Following revisions to national systems of assessing the quality of higher education, 'excellent' provision was no longer identified; rather, characteristics of 'high quality' higher education within an overall context of diversity and differentiation between subjects and institutions were distinguished. With the advent of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and a single unified approach to assuring the quality of UK higher education, characteristics of excellent or high quality education were no longer identified; rather, the outcomes of external subject reviews were reported with regard to improving and/or enhancing the quality of the student learning experience.
10. However, in England and Northern Ireland, notions of excellence in teaching and learning continue at least in the form of the HEFCE initiative to fund over 70 Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). This has been seen as one way of demonstrating Government's continuing commitment to raising the profile and quality of teaching and learning. In Scotland and Wales there has been deliberate move towards supporting all institutions in a process of continuous quality enhancement (rather than using specific initiatives to promote excellence).

11. In several policy documents there is an implicit acknowledgement that excellence in student learning may not require excellent teaching, and that the former can be managed. There is also some acknowledgement that excellence in student learning is likely to arise from a combination of different dimensions, including support for learning from players other than teachers, but there is little in the literature exploring this aspect of excellence.
12. Subject benchmark statements form part of the QAA's academic infrastructure and are intended to make more explicit the nature and level of academic standards in UK higher education. All such statements provide a point of reference for expressing minimum standards, specified as intended learning outcomes, but a number go further and set out how excellent learning outcomes might be demonstrated and recognised. Notions of creativity, originality, innovation, as well as critical evaluation feature strongly in the stated characteristics of excellent student learning outcomes (and as such, chime to an extent with some of the ideas around scholarship).
13. The introduction (in 2000) of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS) in England and Northern Ireland sought to recognise and reward excellent individual teachers. One detailed investigation of the scheme's operation concluded that there was a shift away from traditional understandings of teaching excellence towards concepts better suited to a mass system of higher education.
14. Though much has been written about recognising and rewarding excellent teaching, there is little in the research literature about students' perceptions of excellence in teaching and what might constitute an excellent learning experience. Further, the policy literature rarely seems to address the individual student and excellence in learning. While rather limited, the literature on student learning is suggestive of notions of excellence that move towards ideas of personalised learning that will enable students to deal with difficult concepts, contested knowledge bases and the complexities inherent in 'uncertain situations'.
15. In conclusion, the review notes that a recurring critical theme within the literature argues that the current focus on teaching (and to a lesser extent learning) excellence is symptomatic of an ever-present contemporary desire to measure higher education performance by means of systematic criteria and standardised practices, wherein 'form' and 'process' predominate and the 'what' is in the background; arguably it is the 'what' that forms the essence of what is being valued and recognised as distinctive about higher education, and within that, what might constitute an excellent learning experience.
16. The 'trick' seems to be to find ways of meeting both the needs for greater articulation of form and process (in relation to excellence in teaching and learning) to go some way to ensuring transparency of operations and equitable treatment of all learners (and addressing questions of fitness *for* purpose), while at the same time being ready and willing to ask the difficult questions about the fitness *of* the purpose itself.
17. A number of broad implications for policy are identified as follows:

- At a national level, there needs to be much clearer explication of the precise meaning being attached to the term 'excellence' to ensure that given the UK's diverse higher education system, certain (more traditional) notions of excellence are not implicitly privileged over others.
- Government-driven initiatives that purport to foster excellence in teaching and learning should be critically appraised to ascertain the extent to which they are meeting their objectives. The findings of any such independent evaluations should be disseminated widely for discussion among practitioners and stakeholders alike.
- Policy documents should acknowledge that teaching and student learning are distinct, although related, phenomena; notions of teaching and student learning could usefully be disentangled, particularly in the context of more distributed sites of learning and sources of learning support, the increasing range of (access) to learning resources and, arguably more importantly, continuing debates about forms of knowledge and knowledge construction.

18. At a practical level, three specific implications arise from the review:

- In a higher education system that continues to be steered towards meeting the needs of the economy while at the same time nurturing conditions that will create a more inclusive society, it is likely that higher education will increasingly be engaging with curricula based in or derived from individuals' workplace experiences and professional practices as well as drawing on a range of discipline-based knowledge. As such, there will need to be dialogues between different stakeholders about what constitutes excellent teaching and excellent learning beyond the acquisition of excellent discipline-based knowledge.
- A more comprehensive approach to the management of student learning processes and dimensions of learning provision could usefully broaden the debate to include academic-related and support staff and their roles in supporting institutional drives towards enhancing the quality of students' learning experiences.
- A more holistic view of the student-learning environment needs to be employed in trying to develop more sophisticated understandings of student learning and of what might constitute excellence in learning from students' perspectives.

## 2. Introduction

To 'excel' means to surpass, to be pre-eminent, and hence 'excellence' in teaching and learning implies being pre-eminent in teaching and learning. The term connotes a sense of certain distinguishing features such that those exhibiting excellence stand out from the rest. As Elton notes, "excellence, by definition, is a normative concept" (Elton, 1998, p. 4).

As higher education has expanded from a rather small and elite activity experienced by a minority of the population into a mass system (Trow, 1973), whereby it is expected that a majority of the population will, at some point in their lives, gain a higher education experience, the range of learners engaging in higher education learning has grown and diversified as has the range of provision on offer. Whereas difference and diversity might previously have been delineated using horizontal classifications (between disciplines, between areas of research), some commentators note that increasingly the emphasis is on vertical stratifications that seek an "aura of exceptionality" (Teichler, 2003, p. 34) but cannot easily be measured. Although higher education institutions may well be valued for both "the excellence and the accessibility of their knowledge" (Calhoun, 2006, p. 22), it can be argued that tensions exist between the two ideals and that the pursuit of recognition and positional good for its own sake is now detracting from broader notions of higher education and the public good (Calhoun, 2006). Others suggest that debates about excellence in (higher) education need not be couched in such stark reputational and 'positional good' terms; rather, the question is "what sort of social and personal conditions promote excellence ... what sort of actions can educators take to assure that students will learn to be excellent in ways that both they and society value?" and not "who is gifted or exceptional" (Ferrari, 2002, p. viii).

At a functional level, excellence of knowledge might be seen as linked to a higher education institution's research mission, whereas access to (excellent) knowledge can be seen as linked to the institution's teaching mission (Calhoun, 2006). A teaching mission necessarily embraces both a concern for teaching and a concern for the end-product of the teaching process; that is, the student learning experience. Alongside these two missions, there is (in the UK at least) increasing emphasis given to a 'third' mission, that of higher education reaching out to business and local and regional communities, which might beg the question: how does regional engagement fit with the pursuit of academic excellence? The Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England recently suggested this notion of a separate 'third' mission be dropped; rather, reaching out to local and regional communities should be seen as a central part of any modern university (HEFCE, 2007).



This review of the literature was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy to enhance the sector's understanding of the varied conceptualisations and usages of the term 'excellence' in relation to teaching and student learning experiences, and to consider the implications for future policy and practice in relation to promoting and developing excellence.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Scope of the review**

The review set out to address three main questions:

- How is the term 'excellence' used in the context of teaching and the student learning experience within current higher education policy and practice, and how does its usage vary?
- What are the key conceptualisations of excellence in the relevant literature?
- What are the implications of usage and conceptualisations for future policy in relation to promoting or developing excellence?

It focuses on exploring the available literature covering the period from the mid-1990s onwards (as opposed to undertaking a comprehensive and systematic review). Such a period roughly coincides with the point at which the UK started to move beyond mass towards universal higher education, and it was anticipated that this range of literature would ensure that the diverse, and increasingly distributed, nature of higher education would be taken into account. The date range was taken as a guide only, rather than being applied rigidly (especially in the case of relevant international literatures).

Expansion of higher education has in large part been justified as a means of improving economic competitiveness within a growing global knowledge economy, and such growth has provided a human capital argument for widening participation in higher education. With such agendas shaping developments, and continuing drives towards the marketisation of higher education, it is not surprising that there are a number of stakeholders whose views on excellence in teaching and learning (both usage and conceptualisations) need to be taken into account, in addition to academic staff themselves.

The literature searched included published research (in the form of journal articles, books and reports emanating from UK policy bodies and other agencies), as well as 'grey' literature (in the form of information not formally published but accessible through

websites; for example, higher education institutions' own mission statements and teaching and learning strategies). The literature covered conceptual studies, academic critiques and research studies on teaching and learning, as well as policy documents, but did not cover those literatures focusing on the teaching-research nexus. This latter aspect was the subject of a separate activity commissioned by the Higher Education Academy at the same time as the review of literature presented here.

### **3.2 The search process**

At the outset, some initial searches of three bibliographic databases of education literature were undertaken – viz. the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), the British Education Index and the Australian Index – for the specified date range. A search for entries with both 'excellence' and 'teaching' in the title or abstract resulted in 2,047 hits. A search for entries with both 'excellence' and 'learning' in the title or abstract resulted in 2,056 hits. Adding 'higher education' as a keyword reduced the number of hits to 650 and 514 respectively, and an examination of these latter entries revealed that a number were in fact the same publication.

A more refined search was then undertaken using the same bibliographic databases to identify publications that: (i) had 'excellence' in the title or abstract; (ii) had 'teaching', 'learning' or 'scholarship' in the title or abstract; (iii) had 'higher education' as a keyword. The search resulted in more than 900 entries, of which 419 had been published since the beginning of 1995. A close examination of these 400+ entries revealed that the majority did not, in fact, address in any substantive manner either conceptualisations of excellence in relation to teaching and learning, or considerations of use in practice as evidenced through empirical studies. Rather, the term 'excellence' was more often used as an alternative to the term 'quality', or in conjunction with notions of equity and the equitable treatment of students. Moreover, a significant number of items found through the search process focused on issues to do with the implementation of teaching excellence awards per se, without any substantive consideration of conceptualisations in relation to teaching and learning.

In addition to searches of bibliographic databases (including CHERI's own Higher Education Empirical Research database), hand searches were made of relevant documents emanating from UK policy bodies and other agencies dealing with issues relating to teaching and learning in higher education.

### 3.3 Categorisation

From the materials identified, it was evident that considerations of what excellence in higher education teaching and learning might mean were being developed along a set of (interlinked) dimensions, viz. institutional, departmental and individual levels (see, for example, Elton, 1998; Skelton, 2005); a further dimension, viz. system-wide, was added to ease categorisation.

The materials were then categorised according to: which ‘level’ within the system they engaged with considerations of excellence (system-wide; institution; department/discipline; individual); whether they focused on teaching/individual teachers, or on students/their learning experiences (either as process or outcome); and the extent to which they engaged with concepts or aspects of usage. The grid below describes this categorisation in diagrammatic form.

**Table 1: Map of literatures on excellence in teaching and learning**

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Aspect</i>			
	Individual teacher/ teaching		Student/their learning experiences*	
	<b>Concept</b>	<b>Usage</b>	<b>Concept</b>	<b>Usage</b>
1. System-wide				
2. Institution				
3. Department				
4. Individual				

\* can be viewed as ‘process’ and ‘outcomes’

The grid proved a useful device for ‘sorting’ the materials in preparation for review and analysis, but does not provide a precise ‘map’ of the literature in that very many materials cover more than one aspect. Further, for one or two aspects few materials were found.

In the following sections, each ‘level’ of the higher education system is taken in turn. For each level, first the conceptualisations of excellence in teaching and in learning found in the literature are considered, then usages and the relationship between concepts and usage are examined.

Much of the material reviewed referred to the notion of excellence in ‘teaching and learning’, the implication being that teaching and learning are automatically complementary aspects of a single phenomenon. However, in what follows teaching and learning are, where possible, addressed as distinct (but interlinked) phenomena,

such that the literature about excellence in teaching is considered separately from the literature on excellence in student learning.

As noted above, rather a lot of materials related to the implementation of reward schemes for teaching excellence were found, but very many lacked substantive consideration of the concepts underpinning such schemes. An exception to this is Skelton's book, *Understanding Teaching Excellence in Higher Education* (2005), which, building on a study (funded by an ESRC grant) of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme for teachers in higher education in England and Northern Ireland takes a critical approach towards understanding teaching excellence in higher education. This work is referred to throughout this review.

## **4. System-wide level**

### **4.1 Teaching at the system-wide level**

Alongside expanded and more diverse systems of higher education have come moves towards seeking ways of differentiating systems, and establishing hierarchies within them. As Calhoun (2006, p.19) commented "it is a striking characteristic of universities that their excellence is often measured in terms of their exclusivity". Furthermore, from reviewing recent journal articles, it is evident that the term 'excellence' is used not only in the sense of claiming a position within a hierarchy, but also as a way of giving prominence to particular initiatives geared towards enhancing international competitiveness. The term is also used to reinforce the worth and merit of aspects of higher education not traditionally linked to excellence (for example, articles in the journals *Equity and Excellence*; *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*; *Chronicle of Higher Education*). In this sense, it could be argued that the term 'excellent' has kept only the loosest connection with notions of 'excelling'; rather, it is used to position an institution or an initiative in some real or imaginary league table.

In much of the literature, discussions of excellence are linked to universities' traditional functions of creating and transmitting knowledge and ways of enhancing the quality of those functions. Arguably, the 'sorts' of knowledge being created and transmitted are becoming more diverse, as distinctions between academic and professional ways of knowing are becoming blurred. Barnett went further (Barnett, 2000) and contended that in the current age of supercomplexity, the university has new knowledge functions. He called for a new epistemology for the university, viz. an epistemology "for living amid uncertainty", and asserted that in this age of supercomplexity, the university has some new functions: to add to supercomplexity by offering completely new frames of

understanding; to help us comprehend and make sense of the resulting knowledge mayhem; and to enable us to live purposefully amid supercomplexity.

While Barnett looked to new knowledge functions for the university, others have explored the roles of other 'actors' in the production of knowledge, outside of universities. For example, Gibbons *et al.* (1994) differentiated between Mode 1 and Mode 2 types of knowledge production, with the former being produced by academics and scientists working within discrete disciplines in academic and research-based institutions, and the latter being socially constructed by many actors in specific and multiple local contexts. Debates about increasing employer engagement with higher education are currently prevalent in the UK. In this context, discussions about work-based learning and higher education that draw on the ideas around the distributed nature of Mode 2 knowledge production are highly relevant (see, for example, Harris, 2006, for further exploration of this).

Alongside debates about the contested nature of knowledge, its locus of production, and the challenges these may pose for the role of the university in pursuit of excellence, a different concept of excellence is expounded by Readings (1996). Writing from an American perspective, Readings argued that excellence has been adopted (in policy documents) in opposition to quality. Whereas quality implies that a university is (just) like a business (with all the attitudes and values that this implies), Readings contended that excellence has no content and hence no ideological baggage. He argued that the interest in the pursuit of excellence reflected a change in the university's function. With universities no longer having to safeguard national culture (because the nation state is no longer the major site at which capital reproduces itself) the idea of national culture no longer serves as an external referent toward which all of the efforts of research and teaching are directed. Hence, 'what' gets taught or researched matters less than the fact that it be excellently taught or researched (Readings, 1996, pp. 13-14). In the era of globalisation, the link between the university and the nation state is no longer in place, and the university shifts from being an ideological apparatus of the nation state to being a relatively independent bureaucratic system. Some of the ideas espoused by Readings can be seen to resonate with other critiques of the rise in emphasis in the process and form of learning per se assuming dominance over content (see, for example, Morley, 2003; Temple, 2005).

However, current UK policy documents clearly have notions of nation state to the fore in promulgating ideas of excellence in higher education and ways of pursuing it.

#### 4.1.1 Excellence as performance

In the UK policy documents there is an association of excellence with international standards and even 'world-class' performance (NCIHE, 1997; DfES, 2003), which seems to be partly the result of a concern to raise the status of teaching vis-à-vis research (and to employ the terms used by the Research Assessment Exercise to rank research outputs) and partly because of the emerging dominance of the economic purposes of higher education in policy discourse during this period (related to debates around raising tuition fees and graduate repayments). Thus, excellence is not just about competition between teachers or even institutions, but between national systems or economies.

The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), in particular, equated excellence with 'world class' and 'international standards':

We believe that the country must have higher education which, through excellence in its diverse purposes, can justifiably claim to be world class. As institutions will increasingly have to operate within an international market for education, they will all be judged by international standards. (NCIHE, 1997, para 1.4)

This is later closely tied to national economic prosperity:

The education and skills of our people will be our greatest natural resource in the global economy of tomorrow. They must be developed to internationally excellent standards if we are to prosper. (NCIHE, 1997, para 5.28)

Thus, as has been noted elsewhere (Skelton, 2005, pp. 167-78), teaching excellence can be seen as being used in a 'performative' sense: increasing the efficiency of the higher education system and using higher education teaching and learning to meet national economic goals.

The Dearing Report also referred specifically to excellence in learning and teaching at a sector-wide level:

In pursuit of a national strategy of excellence, we are convinced that the enhancement and promotion of learning and teaching must be a priority for all of higher education. (NCIHE, 1997, para 8.8)

In talking about challenges for teaching and learning in the next 20 years, the Report argued that:

One current barrier is that staff perceive national and institutional policies as actively encouraging and recognising excellence in research, but not in teaching. (NCIHE, 1997, para 8.9)

We recognise the scale of the challenge to institutions in our prescription of national excellence in teaching and the management of learning. (NCIHE, 1997, para 8.11)

#### 4.1.2 Recognition of teaching

The Dearing Report noted the importance of recognising and rewarding teaching:

... our survey of academic staff indicates that only three per cent believe that the present system rewards excellence in teaching. We agree that there is currently inadequate recognition of teaching excellence, and make proposals to help change this ... (NCIHE, 1997, para 14.6)

However, these system-wide proposals were very limited:

The Institute [for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education] would provide the basis for a nationally recognised system of professional qualifications for higher education teachers based on a probationary period, and followed up with appropriate continuing professional development at later career stages. Differing levels of expertise would be recognised by different forms of membership of the Institute, from associate member through to Fellowship for those attaining the highest levels of excellence in teaching. (NCIHE, 1997, para 14.29)

In his short polemic, *Against Excellence* (Evans, 2000), Evans argued that, despite having the strap-line *Supporting excellence in learning and teaching*, the Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT) should have been in favour of *high standards*. Focusing on the excellence of the *best* and tokenising it through teaching awards can appear to absolve us of responsibility for the *rest*. He argued that, as in other areas of human activity, we want standards to be high *and* wide, especially in a mass higher education system. “If anything there should be prizes for institutions which demonstrate that *all* their teachers have a high standard ...” (In practice, however, Evans acknowledged this was the ILT and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) policy at the time.)

It is *more* not less likely that those individuals who are competitive, challenging and perfectionist will innovate and be outstanding if the emphasis is on widespread high standards. You have to be very bright to shine in broad daylight; it is easier to be a

beacon on a darkling plain. In a world of high standards, excellence, in the form of a star, the uncategorisable wonderful, will look after itself. (Evans, 2000, p. 7)

The White Paper (DfES, 2003, p. 9) stated that the Government would “improve and reward teaching excellence”, but the authors did not indicate how they conceived of this (nor did they explain what *improving* excellent teaching might mean). At several points (for example, DfES, 2003, para 1.37) there are references to international and national levels of excellence, following the RAE distinctions but applying them to the range of higher education institutions’ activities, including teaching. Nevertheless, according to this ‘vision’, *all* institutions are supposed to excel in teaching and reaching out to low participation groups (DfES, 2003, para 1.45). Presumably, if all institutions were excelling in ‘teaching and reaching out’ then it was other aspects of their functions (research; knowledge transfer; links to local and regional economies; opportunities for progression) that would allow them to stand out from the rest.

Skelton suggested that this performative use of teaching excellence is an implicit policy goal rather than “something that is explicit and subject to serious critical scrutiny” (Skelton, 2005, p. 169). His ‘performative’ model of teaching excellence comprises three aspects: the contribution teaching makes to national economic performance; the ability to attract students on courses that compete in a global higher education market place; a lever to regulate, measure and maximise individual, institutional and system performance. He suggested that when such an implicit policy goal is set alongside other more explicit policies of stimulating system performance through diversity and competition, it can give rise to different understandings of teaching excellence. However, as discussed below, the Government-funded initiative on Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) in England and Northern Ireland *explicitly* sought to encourage bidders to define their own understandings of excellence (and make evidence-based claims to support their bids for funds).

#### **4.2 Student learning at the system-wide level**

Elton (1998, p. 3) suggested that the basic unification to all the dimensions of teaching excellence was that “the purpose of teaching is to engender learning ... looked at from the learner’s point of view, only such teaching as can produce excellent learning can lay claims to excellence”.

The survey of the published literature found very few sources referring specifically at the system-wide level to the notion of excellence in learning per se. However, see later discussion of learning outcomes for more on excellence at system-wide level.



The Dearing Report took a pluralist view on the means by which institutions should achieve excellence, but clearly regarded *the management of learning* – by staff and by students themselves – as being central to this:

It is not for us to offer institutions a compendium of learning strategies to enable them to achieve excellence in a world in which it is unrealistic to expect a return to former staff to student ratios. But it seems plain that an effective strategy will involve guiding and enabling students to be effective learners, to understand their own learning styles, and to manage their own learning. We see this as not only directly relevant to enhancing the quality of their learning while in higher education, but also to equipping them to be effective lifelong learners. Staff will increasingly be engaged in the management of students' learning, using a range of appropriate strategies. (NCIHE, 1997, para 8.15)

It is noteworthy that Dearing's reference to "former staff to student ratios" can be seen to betray (yet again) an underlying concept of excellence aligned to exclusivity, and an almost wistful glance back to earlier times when such conditions prevailed. Arguably, the references to "guiding and enabling students to be effective learners, to understand their learning styles, and to manage their own learning ..." also hints at some aspects of learning that needed to be taken into account (by institutions) to enable them to achieve excellence in the 'new' world of mass higher education. Further, the reference to equipping students to be effective lifelong learners clearly engages with contemporary concerns about the need for continuing personal and professional development outside formal learning situations.

## **5. Institutional level**

### **5.1 Teaching at the institutional level**

Debates about excellence in university teaching have been gaining prominence since the late 1990s. Following the publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), the Government openly endorsed the need for institutions to place an increasing emphasis on learning and teaching strategies, and in particular on what students were actually learning through higher education.

#### **5.1.1 Strategies for learning and teaching**

Skelton (2005) suggested that the production of learning and teaching strategies and institutional cultures that support teaching excellence are basically associated with

system efficiency and attempts to raise overall teaching standards. Further, whereas “traditional understandings of teaching excellence emphasised the importance of the institution” (with regard to its role in processes of socialisation and character formation), the current focus on teaching excellence within a mass higher education system is measured by operational systems, procedures and policies and a drive to “standardise practice across different departments” (Skelton, 2005, p. 74).

Gibbs and Habeshaw’s (2002) practical guide, *Recognising and Rewarding Excellent Teaching*, linked definitions of excellence with a university’s mission or learning and teaching strategy and explored how ‘traditional’ concepts and methods might no longer suffice:

For example there may be a considerable emphasis on widening participation, student retention and supporting students from diverse backgrounds. In this context a generic definition of excellent teaching might inappropriately encourage teachers to use traditional methods better suited to a well qualified and homogeneous student body. However expertly such traditional methods might be used they might not help the institution or the students much. There are an increasing number of examples of defining what teaching excellence means so as to re-orient teachers in their efforts. There is no mention of lecturing or indeed of any classroom teaching, as ‘performance’, in the definitions below. Instead they include institutional concerns (such as efficient use of resources) and preferences for the process of teaching improvement involved (for example ‘scholarship of teaching’ and ‘team working’). (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002, p. 5)

A cursory look at (just) three current institutional strategies for learning and teaching (and assessment) shows that institutions do indeed try to link their strategies to the broader underlying mission of the institution. Thus:

- For Institution A, the primary aim (of the LTA strategy) is the enhancement of the learning experience through a well-designed, inclusive and accessible curriculum that promotes student success. For this institution, the underpinning rationale for the strategy reflects its mission, purpose and values of being “learner-centred, on widening participation in higher education, on employability and on personal and professional development”. The LTA refers to *enhancement* of learning (not *excellence* per se), but one of this institution’s core values is “to aspire to excellence in all areas of activity”.
- For Institution B, the underlying strategic objective is the institution’s commitment to provide a high quality educational experience for all its students and to promote excellence in teaching and learning through encouraging (among other things) critical intellectual development through guided learning in a research

environment, personal reflection and the acquisition of subject-specific and broad-based skills to enable graduates to achieve success in their career paths and make a valuable contribution to society. In promoting its teaching and learning strategy, this institution acknowledges its key role in *enhancing the experience* of its students.

- For Institution C, the teaching and learning strategy comprises a number of key objectives set out as 'high-level aspirations', which include aspects not only of student learning per se (e.g. "improve learning and teaching *effectiveness*"), but also of institutional positioning ("improve competitive position").

The foregoing shows, at an institutional level, notions of excellence being used in both an aspirational sense as well as being bound up with claims to enhancing the students' learning experience and providing an experience of high quality.

The outcomes of a more thorough and systematic analysis of institutional strategies can be found in a review of Welsh institutional learning and teaching strategies (Higher Education Academy, 2005). The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales promotes excellent teaching by supporting institutions' learning and teaching strategies through a learning and teaching fund. The Higher Education Academy's analysis noted that reference to institutional cultures and climates was extremely helpful in setting the context for learning and teaching strategies, and "another excellent feature was where institutions have missions and aspirations to provide a particular ethos" (Higher Education Academy, 2005, p.2). However, the report noted that providing evidence of success in this area may be more difficult to achieve.

Such an emphasis on teaching and learning strategies (and learning outcomes) is not without its critics. In her book, *Quality and Power in Higher Education*, Morley (2003, pp. 27-8) noted that the concept of learning has largely taken over from the sociology of education, and that the socioeconomic context of teaching is ignored and the process is atomised. She referred to other critics who argue that the *form* of teaching has assumed dominance over *content*, and that *what* is being taught has become less important than that it should be done 'excellently' (cf. Readings, 1996). She argued that excellence, in these terms, is regarded as value free, and that the 'culture of excellence' (quality, audit, performance indicators, managerialism, professionalisation, consumerism etc) has resulted in mediocrity (Morley, 2003, p. 130).

Temple (2005) provided a specific example of the dominance of form over content and a value-free concept of excellence in a paper on the European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model. He argued that the EFQM Model is a classic management fad as analysed by Birnbaum (in *Management Fads in Higher Education*:

*Where they come from, What they do, Why they fail*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001). He drew on the example of the introduction of the Excellence Model in Sheffield Hallam University in 2003. In a particularly telling paragraph, that is relevant to this review, he wrote:

The Excellence Model, while giving a particular reading of the university's relationship with its students, and despite its claims for a holistic approach, does not ask questions about what might lie at the heart of the organisation: about what it does, what it believes in, what gives it its special character. 'Excellence', rather, is seen as a neutral feature, being equally applicable across institutional types and disciplines: the same approach to, say, leadership is appropriate for every type of institution in every setting. Can in higher education the cultures and values of different disciplines and institutions really be passed over in this way? (Temple, 2005, p. 269)

#### 5.1.2 'Delivery' and recognition of excellence at an institutional level

Chapter 4 of the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), was entitled *Teaching and learning – delivering excellence*. The notion of 'delivering excellence', while curious, does seem to acknowledge a distinction between teaching – even teachers – that may be excellent, or merely effective, and the 'outcomes' that may result (for example, excellent student learning):

Effective teaching and learning is essential if we are to promote excellence and opportunity in higher education. High quality teaching must be recognised and rewarded, and best practice shared. (DfES, 2003, p. 11)

The White Paper announced (DfES, 2003, p.11) that Centres of Excellence in teaching would be established to reward *good* teaching at departmental level and to promote best practice. It reaffirmed the need to recognise individual excellence, and then linked this with student choice and cultural change:

As well as having their good practice spread to others, it is right that those who teach outstandingly well should be rewarded. Their excellence should also be celebrated and made visible, which will both help students make choices and help drive cultural change in the value attached to good teaching in higher education. (DfES, 2003, para 4.26)

The nature of excellence in teaching was also linked with changes to the criteria for university title, albeit in negative terms:

It is clear that good scholarship, in the sense of remaining aware of the latest research and thinking within a subject, is essential for good teaching, but not that it is necessary to be active in cutting-edge research to be an excellent teacher. (DfES, 2003, para 4.31)

Consequently, in order to:

... recognise excellent teaching as a university mission in its own right, University title will be made dependent on teaching degree awarding powers – from 2004-05 it will no longer be necessary to have research degree awarding powers to become a university. (DfES, 2003, p. 51)

### 5.1.3 Notions of scholarship linked to excellent teaching

As noted in the methodology section of this report, the search strategy of bibliographic databases was refined to include the term 'scholarship', in addition to the terms 'teaching' and 'learning'. Ideas around the notion that scholarship should mean more than (just) the discovery of new knowledge and should be extended to embrace the integration, application and transmission of knowledge, referred to by Boyer (and others) as the 'scholarship of teaching', have been developing since the late 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Gordon *et al.*, 2003, pp. 15-19; Kreber, 2002). Kreber noted that in the UK and Australia there has been a tendency to think of the scholarship of teaching as a "campus activity ... an endeavour aimed at promoting an institutional environment that is supportive of teaching and learning" (Kreber, 2002, p. 6), whereas in the United States it is conceived of as both a campus and an individual activity (geared towards a career path). Whatever the focus, it is generally considered that such moves were part of a deliberate attempt to address the undervaluing of teaching (in relation to research) that was (and arguably still is) prevalent in most higher education systems.

The discourse on the scholarship of teaching is often linked, in the literature, to two other notions, viz. teaching excellence and the expert teacher. For Shulman (2004), the expert teacher was one who not only 'knows' the subject matter being taught and knows 'how' to teach, but also knows how to transform the particular subject being taught into terms that students can understand (Shulman, 2004). Kreber contended that scholars of teaching are both excellent teachers and expert teachers, but what distinguishes them as scholars of teaching is the fact that they "share their knowledge and advance the knowledge of teaching and learning in the discipline in a way that can be peer-reviewed" (Kreber, 2002, p. 18). However, she provided neither argument nor evidence for concluding that scholars of teaching are excellent teachers (which could be a

dangerous assumption; a bit like saying that all car mechanics are good drivers!). As Gordon *et al.* (2003) note:

... whereas some have argued that scholarship of teaching is the obligation of all teaching staff and have equated it with excellence in teaching, others have argued that there is a distinction between competence in teaching (expected of all) and scholarship of teaching, which will only be achieved by those who apply themselves to particular forms of enquiry into their teaching practice. (Gordon *et al.*, 2003, p. 17)

In similar fashion, some commentators conclude that excellence should be the attribute of any professional teacher (perhaps akin to baseline of professional excellence in medical fields), perhaps confusing excellent with good (enough) teaching (for example, Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002; Glasner, 2003).

#### 5.1.4 Recognition and rewards for excellent teachers

At the institutional level there has been a growing expectation that excellent teachers who have been recognised and rewarded will take on wider roles than just teaching (HEFCE, 1999) and, for example, seek to innovate, initiate change, mentor and even provide leadership (SCOP *et al.*, 2006). Gibbs and Habeshaw (2002) took this further and recommended that, in each institutional context, the recognition and rewarding (and therefore the definition) of excellence ought to be tied to strategic institutional goals, such as widening participation, student retention and engagement with employers. Zubrick *et al.* (2001) encapsulated this line of reasoning well:

The rewards go beyond one-time acknowledgement of excellence. 'Master' teachers, like distinguished researchers, provide a valuable resource to the university in addressing the educational needs of the university, and become an integral part of the university's strategic planning efforts to shape learning. (Zubrick *et al.*, 2001, p. 88)

Gibbs and Habeshaw's (2002) practical guide was mainly about institutional mechanisms for recognising and rewarding excellent teaching (perhaps considered as distinct from individual teachers), but it did include a few pointers on conceptions of excellence in teaching and learning. For example, although the following extract from the University of Technology, Sydney, is a definition of *good*, rather than excellent, teaching, it links this with measures of the quality of student learning:

Good teaching is teaching which helps students to learn ... it encourages high quality student learning. It discourages the superficial approach to learning and encourages active engagement with the subject matter. This does not imply that good teaching always results in high quality student learning but that it is designed to do so and that it is practiced in a way likely to lead to high quality learning .... Good teaching is that which encourages in the learner, no matter what the subject content, motivation to learn, desire to understand, perseverance, independence, a respect for the truth and a desire to pursue learning. (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002, p. 5)

Likewise, the University of Edinburgh was praised for having, since 1994:

... defined excellent teaching not in terms of what teachers do, but in terms of the consequences for student learning. This acknowledges the wide range of possibly successful approaches to teaching that can achieve successful outcomes and does not privilege any particular approach. A student-focussed definition also relies on evidence that is more reliable and valid than features of teacher performance. (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002, p. 5)

Examples of criteria for teaching awards and for promotion were given (in Section 1 of Gibbs and Habeshaw's guide). Promotion criteria raise the issue of distinguishing between the kinds of teaching excellence that are being sought for different levels of promotion. Are different 'levels of excellence' required for promotion to senior lecturer, principal lecturer and professor? (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002, p. 6).

The final section distinguished between *competence* in conducting basic tasks, *excellence* at new and more demanding tasks and *leadership* of the development of teaching at departmental, national and even international levels, together with formal scholarship leading to published outcomes (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002, p. 29). This appears to shift excellence away from teaching and learning towards leading change, but it is what many teaching award holders have been persuaded to do in their institutions and more widely.

A key claim in Gibbs and Habeshaw's guide is that excellent teaching is more likely to be encouraged if individual mechanisms for recognition and reward (for example, teaching awards and fellowships, promotion, development funds, payment of ILT membership) are integrated within a system that reflects an institution's values, goals and culture, and linked with the institution's strategies on learning and teaching, staffing and even research. This suggests that attempts to produce generic criteria for teaching excellence or promotion will tend to emphasise traditional forms of pedagogy and, in particular, readily recognisable forms of classroom practice:

Institutions need to decide what kind of teaching behaviour they want to reward. It may be more effective to take individuals' orientation to teaching excellence for granted as an attribute of any professional teacher, and to use reward mechanisms to orient teachers towards those additional competencies and commitments that are required in order to deliver institutional goals and which might otherwise not be especially valued or likely to be developed. (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002, p. 30)

This claim concerning an emphasis on traditional forms of pedagogy arising from processes geared towards establishing generic criteria finds some resonance in a study in Israel of 'pre-tenured' academic staff and their difficulties in determining to what extent their own individual professional conduct met institutional standards of excellence that would make them eligible for tenure (Nir and Zilberstein-Levy, 2006). Nir and Zilberstein-Levy found 'pre-tenured' staff had a tendency to 'play safe' whereas tenured staff (less worried about their professional future) were more willing to take risks and become involved in more profound and speculative ventures.

Another commentator argues that reward schemes will always be selective (Allen, 2003). Referring to the results of a NATFHE consultation, Allen noted a strong consensus among academics that teaching as a professional activity needs to be seen as being equally challenging and rigorous as research and not entirely separated from it. She reported that respondents also felt that the emphasis on excellence could be a significant barrier to establishing a positive reward culture, especially "if it is a signal that individuals are to be competitively judged on their performance in order to give short-term pay supplements to a few, then it is an unhelpful and divisive concept" (Allen, 2003, p. 10).

Glasner (2003) noted the lack of clarity about the term 'excellence'. She commended HEFCE's circular on CETLs (2003/36) for its message that teaching excellence is about "demonstrably good learning outcomes for students", involving a variety of activities, and "is associated with purposiveness – with conceptualising, organising, designing, goal-directing, and critical thinking".

There is no clear, universally accepted or agreed definition of what excellent teaching is, although we can probably identify some broadly consensual themes: it is learner-centred or learner-focused, it is informed, it is motivational, and possibly inspirational. Unambiguously every teacher should aspire to be excellent. (Glasner, 2003, p. 12)



However, she noted that the factors that determine excellence are both individual and institutional, although the evidence for this is not provided:

At the individual level, excellence is not possible without both work and intelligence. It requires learning from others as well as learning about oneself. It requires an understanding of the institutional context within which one works so that students are engaged, inspired and motivated, and the resources and opportunities provided by the institution are captured and effectively utilised. Being an effective and excellent teacher requires reflection and an active and imaginative engagement with the mission of the institution and with individual students. The outstanding teacher is passionate in the pursuit of enabling others to learn. But the best, the most outstanding of teachers cannot and does not operate in a vacuum, and an institution that is unfocused or confused about its mission can make an outstanding teacher ineffective. Excellent teachers are not born, they develop and grow in a supportive environment. (Glasner, 2003, p. 13)

Skelton also suggested that “however excellent an individual teacher appears to be, their work is always located in a broader institutional context” (Skelton, 2005, p. 73). He noted that two mechanisms seem strongly linked to the development of an institutional culture of excellence: the availability of professional development courses for lecturers; and the formal recognition of teaching in promotions procedures and the introduction of teaching-related promotions to new posts.

## **5.2 Student learning at the institutional level**

There were few publications focusing specifically on excellence in student learning at the institutional level.

In *Excellent teaching or excellent learning? Are we asking the right question?*, Matthew (2003) argued that recent developments (PowerPoint presentations, study skills courses and quality assurance reviews) have created a generation of dependent learners, and that:

Good, or even excellent, teaching is not the main issue: it is the *learning* that should be at the heart of our concerns. My own reading of the literature on good and excellent teaching leads me to believe that while the two terms are not exactly interchangeable, the differences are not well articulated. (Matthew, 2003, p. 30)

So where does all this lead us with regard to good/excellent teaching? In a sense to a dead end. We need to focus on what education is about, and that is learning. So I

would want to stop rewarding 'excellence in teaching' and start rewarding 'those who promote excellence in student learning'. It's a subtle difference but the former is about a process, and increasingly a highly mechanical process that encourages dependency in learners, while the latter is about the outputs (more difficult to measure or quantify) that should be at the heart of education. (Matthew, 2003, p. 31)

Institutional strategies for learning, teaching and assessment have been referred to above. Of course, an institution is likely to have developed a number of other institution-wide strategies related to different aspects of its overall mission, though as Wend (2006), Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at Oxford Brookes University noted "joined-up strategic planning" is hard to achieve. However, Wend also reported that as Oxford Brookes University's notion of excellence includes "striving for an outstanding student experience", a student learning experience strategy is being devised to replace the existing teaching, learning and assessment strategy. The student learning experience strategy will be at the centre of its overall strategic plan and all its (other) strategies will be based around that strategy. A limited number of strategic outcomes for the student learning experience strategy have been agreed. None refers specifically to excellence itself, rather the intended outcomes are: to provide learning experiences and opportunities of the *highest quality*; to provide learning environments that (among other things) facilitate *effective* participation; to provide *effective* support for all students; to ensure staff achieve the *highest professional* standards; and to ensure all services, processes and facilities with which students engage are appropriate to their needs and expectations, and are of the *highest quality*.

In contrast to this specific English institutional example, the recent analysis of Welsh institutions' learning and teaching strategies found a trend towards a more integrated approach to strategies, which was seen as clearly beneficial to students and "ensuring more joined-up thinking across an institution" (Higher Education Academy, 2005, p. 5).

## **6. Departmental level**

### **6.1 Teaching at the departmental level**

Elton (1998) argued that it is course teams (rather than individual teachers) that should be considered the "unit of teaching" that leads to the student learning experience. Thus it is the dimensions of excellence as they apply to course teams that should provide the main criteria for excellence at departmental level. It should be noted that course teams may not be departmentally based.

For some commentators, notions of excellent teaching are linked to notions of scholarship (see Section 4.1.3 above). Further, the discourse of scholarship is tied to notions of disciplines and disciplinary cultures. The differences between disciplines' views and conceptions of teaching excellence will reflect the different epistemological, cultural and pedagogical assumptions of various subject communities. Neumann *et al.* (2002) explored different aspects of teaching and learning and highlighted contrasts between the four disciplinary groupings originally identified by Becher (1989). Their findings suggest that a 'hard pure' subject, such as Physics, will emphasise cumulative knowledge acquisition rather than integration or application, and the separation of research from undergraduate teaching, which largely remains the transmission of codified knowledge. A 'soft pure' subject like History, on the other hand, may prize integration over acquisition and application, incorporate independent research projects in the final undergraduate year of study and engage students in discussions about the contested nature of the discipline. A 'hard applied' discipline, such as Engineering, geared towards the application of techniques will incorporate problem-solving in undergraduate teaching, but within fixed empirical boundaries. Finally, a 'soft applied' social science might focus on the application of knowledge, the relevance of professional and consultancy work, and students' familiarity with specific protocols and procedures.

These are 'ideal types', but they serve to illustrate the deep-rooted disciplinary differences in the way aspects of research and teaching are conceptualised, organised and communicated (Becher and Trowler, 2001), which institutional managers must be aware of. These differences may be overlaid by the influence of professional bodies and the extent to which the curriculum is externally accredited – potentially inhibiting innovation by teachers.

In her book, *The Challenge to Scholarship*, Nicholls (2005) explored how such disciplinary boundaries can act as a barrier to change and impede students' own approaches to learning and learning outcomes, which in other contexts are seen as highly desirable (for example, exploration, imagination and creativity). However, as Nicholls noted, despite criticisms that specialisation and disciplinary divides can work against the best interests of learning and scholarship, specialisation continues to increase in higher education.

In similar fashion, Skelton reminded us that many discussions of academic disciplines do not explore how "power operates within disciplines" and how "power understood as normative practice and discourse operates to influence decisions about what counts as 'appropriate' disciplinary knowledge and methodology" (Skelton, 2005, p. 83). He called for a new form of disciplinarity that emphasises reflection on existing practice and

critical dialogue about the discipline: in this way notions of teaching excellence may develop that are “sensitive to the epistemological structure and pedagogical processes inherent within the discipline”, but may also develop as questions are asked about prevailing practice and alternatives considered (Skelton, 2005, p. 84).

### 6.1.1 Psychologised understandings of teaching excellence

Skelton referred to ‘psychologised’ understandings of teaching excellence as those that focus primarily on “the micro-level transaction between individual teacher and student ... they construct the educational process in a way that makes it possible to predict and control what will be learnt and how” (Skelton, 2005, p. 171). This next section focuses on these psychologised understandings of teaching and learning processes.

Much of the research literature reviewed seemed to take ‘excellent teaching’ to be synonymous with ‘effective teaching’ (which at least starts to make the connection between teaching and learning). In some policy documents, this usage is also evident. For example, HEFCE’s publication inviting bids from higher education institutions for funds (recurrent and capital) to establish CETLs made it clear that the prime aim of the initiative was that CETLs will “recognise, celebrate and promote excellence by rewarding teachers who have made a *demonstrable impact* on student learning and who enthuse, motivate and influence others to do the same” (HEFCE, 2004, p. 4 [italics added]). Further, one of the six objectives set for the CETL initiative was “to demonstrate collaboration and sharing of good practice and so enhance the standard of teaching and *effective* learning throughout the sector”. For HEFCE, “excellent teaching will lead to *successful* learning” (HEFCE, 2004, p. 4 [italics added]). Also in the same document, it was envisaged that CETLs, working in partnership with the Higher Education Academy, would form a powerful alliance to raise and sustain the profile of “*effective* teaching and learning throughout the sector” (HEFCE, 2004, p. 5 [italics added]).

Traditionally, the most common way of measuring effective learning (especially in North America) is to obtain students’ ratings of their teachers using standardised questionnaires such as Marsh’s (1982) ‘Students’ Evaluations of Educational Quality’. From a review of the available evidence, Marsh (1987, p. 369) came to the conclusion that “student ratings are clearly multidimensional, quite reliable, reasonably valid, relatively uncontaminated by many variables often seen as sources of potential bias, and are seen to be useful by students, faculty, and administrators”.

More effective teachers should presumably obtain better results from their students. There is certainly a positive relationship between students’ ratings of their teachers and

the students' grades, although this finding in itself is ambiguous. It might simply be the case that students reward teachers who are generous with their marks by giving them more positive evaluations. Nevertheless, there is still a clear relationship between students' ratings and their final grades even when the latter are assigned by an independent marker (Cohen, 1981; Marsh, 1987).

Even so, Andrews, Magnusson and Garrison (1996) argued that excellent teachers were not simply effective teachers, but also preferred a deep or meaningful approach to teaching rather than a surface or reproductive approach. Indeed, Trigwell and Prosser (1993) had identified five approaches to teaching that were differentiated by their intentions and teaching strategies. Some were teacher-focused and aimed at the transmission of knowledge, whereas others were student-focused and aimed at bringing about conceptual change in the students.

Teachers may be led to adopt different approaches to teaching in different contexts (Prosser and Trigwell, 1997). However, even when they are confronted with the same teaching context, different teachers still adopt different approaches to teaching. Andrews *et al.* (1996) argued that excellent teachers' commitment to a deep approach was underpinned by specific values, beliefs and characteristics. Indeed, interview-based investigations have identified a number of different conceptions of teaching in higher education, and Kember (1997) concluded that they converged upon five specific conceptions:

1. teaching as imparting information
2. teaching as transmitting structured knowledge
3. teaching as an interaction between the teacher and the student
4. teaching as facilitating understanding on the part of the student
5. teaching as bringing about conceptual change and intellectual development in the student.

Trigwell and Prosser (1996) found that teachers who held a particular conception of teaching tended to adopt a commensurate approach to teaching: teachers who hold a student-centred and learning-orientated conception of teaching are more likely to adopt a student-focused approach to teaching. In practice, however, teachers' approaches tend to be less orientated towards learning facilitation and more orientated towards knowledge transmission than their conceptions, because contextual factors frustrate teachers' intended approaches to teaching (Murray and Macdonald, 1997; Norton *et al.*, 2005).

Many researchers have assumed that conceptions of teaching change with experience, usually from being more teacher-centred and content-orientated to being more student-

centred and learning-orientated. Indeed, phenomenographic researchers might interpret Kember's five conceptions of teaching as representing a developmental hierarchy, so that "bringing about conceptual change and intellectual development" is the most sophisticated conception (and therefore, presumably, one to be found in excellent teachers). Entwistle and Walker (2000) described this kind of development in the retrospective reports of a single teacher who had received a teaching excellence award. However, retrospective accounts may not be valid, as they can be biased by people's implicit theories of personal change (Conway and Ross, 1984).

Dunkin (1990, 1991) found that new teachers tended to report a single conception of teaching, but Dunkin and Precians (1992) found that teachers who had been given teaching excellence awards reported more complex and flexible conceptions. Dunkin and Precians interpreted this result as reflecting a difference between novices and experts. Indeed (as noted above), others have suggested that the scholarship of teaching leads to a distinction between *excellent* teachers and *expert* teachers (Kreber, 2002). However, Dunkin and Precians' results might simply reflect the difference between good teachers and average teachers, quite independent of the amount of teaching experience they have.

Indeed, there is otherwise little evidence that conceptions of teaching evolve with increasing teaching experience. A questionnaire survey by Norton *et al.* (2005) found no differences in the conceptions of teaching held by new teachers (with one to three years' experience), experienced teachers (4 to 20 years' experience) and established teachers (21 to 45 years' experience). They also found no effect of formal training on teachers' conceptions of teaching. This, too, was consistent with previous research, although Ho (2000) found some promising results from a teaching development programme specifically aimed at bringing about conceptual change.

### 6.1.2 Excellence at programme level

There is a parallel literature concerning the notion of excellent teaching at the programme level. In this case, 'effective teaching' or 'excellent teaching' can be identified through ratings given by alumni or current students using instruments such as the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ: Ramsden, 1991) or the National Student Survey (NSS: Richardson, Slater and Wilson, in press). Both instruments include various scales that purport to measure different aspects of effective teaching in higher education. Generally, they show satisfactory levels of reliability and validity, although the CEQ has been more extensively evaluated than the NSS (see Richardson, 2005; Wilson, Lizzio and Ramsden, 1997). Both instruments include various scales that purport to measure different aspects of effective teaching in higher education. These might also be said to provide an indirect measure of effective learning in higher

education. Although respondents are told that they are evaluating their degree courses or programmes, both questionnaires also include a scale concerned with the extent to which they have acquired generic skills as a result of taking their course or programme, and this provides a direct measure of (one particular aspect of) effective learning.

The curricula adopted in different departments reflect different approaches to teaching, from a teacher-focused, subject-centred approach to a student-focused, learning-centred approach. Either tacitly or explicitly, these, too, will be underpinned by specific conceptions of teaching of the sort identified by Kember (1997). Students produce higher ratings of their programmes in departments that adopt more student-centred or experiential curricula through such models as problem-based learning (Eley, 1992; Sadlo, 1997). However, attempts to incorporate such curricula can be undermined by contextual factors (Gibbs, 1992; Newman, 2004).

Notwithstanding departmental differences, the literature shows that individual students' ratings of their programmes on the CEQ are positively correlated with their academic performance and their overall level of satisfaction (Wilson *et al.*, 1997), with their level of academic engagement (Richardson, Long and Woodley, 2003) and also with the amount of personal development they report as a result of taking those programmes (Lawless and Richardson, 2004). These are again correlational findings whose theoretical interpretation is ambiguous: excellent teaching might lead to more positive outcomes but, equally, more positive outcomes might encourage students to rate their programmes more favourably.

### 6.1.3 External reviews of programmes

The foregoing section explored students' ratings of teaching in higher education. In this next section, consideration is given to recent national processes for reviewing the quality of teaching and learning at course/programme level to ascertain 'whether' and 'in what ways' dimensions of excellence are used. Following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, HEFCE was responsible for 'securing' the assessment of the quality of education in institutions for whose activities it provided financial support. HEFCE had identified three purposes of quality assessment: public accountability for funds distributed through the teaching grants made to institutions; enhancing the quality of provision; and informing (subsequent) funding and rewarding excellence (QAA, 2003). At the same time, institutions were subject to a process of quality audit, whereby institutions' own systems and procedures for monitoring and assuring academic quality and standards were reviewed by teams of external peers (and undertaken, at that time, by the Higher Education Quality Council).

During the period 1992 to 1995, HEFCE's quality assessment method was based on peer review of provision at the subject level (measured against the aims and objectives set by the subject provider) and subject providers prepared a self-assessment, which formed the basis of the peer-review assessment. HEFCE used three assessment categories – excellent, satisfactory and unsatisfactory – and providers' self-assessments could include a claim to be providing excellent quality of education (HEFCE, 1995).

A summary report of the first cycle of 15 subjects assessed in England and Northern Ireland between 1993 and 1995 noted that, overall, assessors judged the quality of education to be excellent in 26 per cent of providers, and, with one exception, the proportion of excellent education by subject ranged from ten per cent to 49 per cent of providers. Subjects where excellent provision was found in fewer than 20 per cent of providers were science, engineering and technology disciplines, or where a substantial proportion of the provision was in further education colleges (HEFCE, 1995, p 2).

A number of characteristics associated with excellent education across the sector and across subjects were identified (HEFCE, 1995, p. 2) as follows:

- subject aims and objectives that are well understood by staff and students, and are achieved
- broad and flexible curricula that are well matched with aims and objectives and are informed by up-to-date scholarship and research and, where relevant, consultancy and professional practice
- programmes of study that enable students to develop a breadth of intellectual, subject-related and transferable skills
- well-qualified and committed staff, whose teaching is underpinned by scholarship and research, and engagement in professional practice where relevant
- clear commitment to good teaching; staff development that promotes good teaching and learning
- a range of teaching approaches and techniques that is relevant to the learning objectives
- academic and pastoral support arrangements for students that are well matched to course structures and to the size and the nature of the student intake



- clear and well-written course documentation for students, from induction to graduation
- methods for assessing student progress that relate to the learning objectives, and include the provision of timely and appropriately detailed feedback to students
- active systems for gathering and considering feedback from students, including student participation in course committees, and for taking action on that feedback
- means of gathering, considering and responding to external opinion from, for example, examiners, employers, professional bodies and subject associations
- established and effective arrangements for reviewing provision
- effective links with industry, commerce and the professional and subject bodies, which contribute positively to curriculum development, good teaching practice and the development of general, transferable skills and aptitudes as well as subject skills
- constructive relations and effective communications between staff and students
- well-stocked and managed libraries, with adequate study spaces, and generous opening hours
- access to, and effective use of, other learning resources, including information technology and equipment
- sufficient and suitable teaching and social accommodation.

Following extensive consultation with the higher education sector, and amid conflicting views about the overarching purposes of quality assessment and the underlying tensions about 'who' was essentially managing the higher education system (for further discussion of the main drivers behind these changes see, for example, Brown, 2004; Watson, 2006), a revised quality assessment method was introduced by HEFCE from April 1995. The main changes were:

- universal visiting to all subject providers (whereas previously only those providers claiming excellence had been visited)
- a core set of six aspects of provision was established to provide a more coherent structure to review activity: curriculum design, content and organisation; teaching, learning and assessment; student progression and achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; quality assurance and enhancement

- a four-point assessment scale and a graded profile (replacing the previous three-way categorisation of excellent, satisfactory and unsatisfactory) was used to report the outcomes of the process.

Given these changes, HEFCE no longer reported on *excellent* provision nor identified its characteristics; rather, in this next cycle of assessing the quality of teaching and learning, the quality assessment reports and subject overview reports, produced as a result of the revised teaching quality assessment method, identified characteristics of *high quality* education within an overall context of diversity and differentiation within and between subjects and between institutions (HEFCE, 1997). HEFCE's own summary of the outcomes of assessments (of eight subjects) undertaken between 1995 and 1996 noted that 42 per cent of all grades (across the six aspects of provision) were 4 (the highest grade). 'Student support and guidance' achieved the highest average grade overall, and 'quality assurance and enhancement' the lowest.

Further, although HEFCE did not make a direct link between funding and the outcomes of quality assessment, it did introduce a sector-wide developmental approach to linking quality assessment results to funding allocations through the establishment of a Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL), which it saw as a way of promoting quality enhancement. The fund was set up to support projects that aimed to stimulate developments in teaching and learning and to disseminate good practice across the sector, but *only* those subject providers that had demonstrated (through quality assessment) *high quality* in their educational provision were eligible to submit bids to the FDTL.

By the mid-1990s it was clear that the separate systems of quality assessment (undertaken by HEFCE) and quality audit (undertaken by the Higher Education Quality Council) involved elements of duplication and placed considerable administrative burdens on institutions. Consequently, the funding council-led process of teaching quality assessment and the HEQC agency-led approach to auditing institutions' quality assurance processes were reconfigured into a single unified approach for UK higher education (undertaken by the newly established Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) from 1998 onwards). Under the QAA, subject reviews continued until 2001. However, since that time there has been no system-wide process through which the characteristics of *excellent* or *high quality* educational provision have been identified.

Analyses of the outcomes of subject reviews undertaken since 1995 show that subject review reports would tend to refer to aspects of provision that *improve or enhance* the quality of the student learning experience, rather than referring to *excellence* as such

(see, for example, QAA, 2003). Clearly this sense of ‘improving and enhancing the quality’ of learning aligns to Ferrari’s notions of the sorts of personal and social conditions that promote excellence and that could be undertaken to ensure that students will learn “to be excellent in ways that both they and society value” (Ferrari, 2002, p. viii).

The Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997) recommended the replacement of universal teaching quality assessment with a ‘lighter touch’ approach and a focus on academic standards set within an academic infrastructure comprising (among other things) a code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, a framework for higher education qualifications and subject benchmark statements (see later).

As noted above, no direct links were made between the outcomes of subject review and the funds allocated for teaching and learning to individual institutions, although the FDTL initiative did encourage those providers with (recognised) high quality provision to bid for project work aimed at developing teaching and learning. Subsequently, HEFCE’s initiative to fund a large number of CETLs aimed to build directly on previous initiatives geared towards promoting excellence. The CETL initiative (covering England and Northern Ireland) aimed to both recognise and reward excellent teachers and enable institutions and departments to invest in staffing, buildings and equipment to support and enhance learning in new and challenging ways (HEFCE, 2004).

Although the CETL initiative may have been ostensibly one way of demonstrating the Government’s commitment to raising the profile and quality of learning and teaching and achieving a better balance in the relative status of teaching and research, it was not without its critics. Some interpreted the development as a way of compensating universities for the loss of research income resulting from the Government’s intention to concentrate research funding in a smaller number of institutions (Chalkley, 2004).

The 74 CETLs are currently the subject of a HEFCE-funded external evaluation, and there is as yet little in the literature to indicate the extent to which they have met their own objectives (and the overarching objectives of the CETL initiative). Given the range and diversity of the CETLs, the current evaluation is likely to provide insights into ‘how’ excellence is currently perceived across a wide range of student learning settings and intended learning outcomes.

Whereas in England and Northern Ireland, notions of excellence in teaching and learning continue (at least in the form of CETLs), in Scotland, debates and consultations on a national strategy for the continuing assurance and enhancement of quality and

standards in higher education during 2000-03 have led to (among other things) a deliberate focus on the continuous *quality enhancement* of learning and teaching (with no reference to excellence), an emphasis on the student learning experience and a focus on learning (and not solely on teaching). QAA Scotland manages a programme of themes designed to support institutions in a process of continuous improvement; recent themes have included assessment, responding to student needs, flexible delivery and employability. Likewise, in Wales, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales' mechanisms for supporting excellent teaching in higher education include a focus on thematic and subject enhancement, supporting sectoral collaboration through Wales-wide enhancement activities.

## **6.2 Student learning at the departmental level**

### **6.2.1 Psychologised conceptions of student learning**

Whereas (as noted above) there is a wealth of research literature on approaches to (excellent or effective) teaching, it is striking that there seems to be no parallel research literature on excellence in learning, given that the research into teachers' approaches to teaching directly exploited the concepts, methods and findings of the existing research into students' approaches to learning in higher education. Interview-based studies during the 1970s identified three predominant approaches to studying: a 'deep' approach aimed at understanding the meaning of course materials; a 'surface' approach aimed at memorising the course materials for the purposes of assessment; and a 'strategic approach' aimed at obtaining the highest marks or grades (Richardson, 2000). Whereas these original studies tended to characterise the three approaches to studying as mutually exclusive, subsequent questionnaire-based research has tended to find a positive correlation between the use of a deep approach and the use of a strategic approach, but typically no correlation between the use of these approaches and the use of a surface approach. These findings have two interesting implications. First, students who adopt a deep approach are also likely to adopt a strategic approach. Second, discouraging students' use of a surface approach may well have no effect on the extent to which they employ a deep approach or a strategic approach.

A deep approach and, to a lesser extent, a strategic approach could be regarded as desirable in that they are consistent with the avowed aims of higher education. A surface approach would be regarded as undesirable, although there might be occasions where it was necessary to learn unstructured lists of facts, such as names and dates in history or the periodic table in chemistry. On this basis, excellence in learning would consist in the predominant use of a deep approach or a strategic approach with little or no recourse to rote memorisation. Moreover, an excellent programme would be one that

induced desirable approaches in all or most of its students.

Subsequent work showed that the same students may adopt different approaches depending on their perceptions of the content, the context and the demands of particular tasks. This, in turn, suggests that one could induce desirable approaches to studying by appropriate course design, appropriate teaching methods or appropriate forms of assessment. This idea has been confirmed in research comparing problem-based and more traditional, subject-based curricula: students on problem-based curricula are more likely to adopt a deep approach to studying and less likely to adopt a surface approach (Newble and Clarke, 1986; Sadlo and Richardson, 2003). Moreover, students whose teachers adopt a student-focused approach to teaching are more likely to show a deep approach and are less likely to show a surface approach than students whose teachers adopt a teacher-focused approach (Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse, 1999).

In other research, however, interventions aimed at inducing desirable approaches to studying have proved to be largely ineffective (Gibbs, 1992; Hambleton, Foster and Richardson, 1998; Kember *et al.*, 1997). Eley (1992) found great variation in how different students perceived the requirements of the same courses. One possibility is that the effects of contextual factors are mediated by students' perceptions of their environment, and, therefore, educational interventions will not be effective in changing students' approaches to studying unless they also serve to bring about changes in the students' perceptions.

This idea has been supported by the extensive evidence of an intimate relationship between students' perceptions of the quality of their courses and the approaches to studying that they adopt on those courses. Students who produce higher ratings of their courses on the CEQ are more likely to adopt a deep approach and/or more likely to adopt a strategic approach, but less likely to adopt a surface approach (Richardson, 2006). However, students still vary significantly in their approaches to studying, even when variations in their perceptions of their courses have been taken into account (Sadlo and Richardson, 2003). One possibility is that students adopt one approach rather than another, depending upon their conceptions of learning.

Marton (1976) argued that students who adopt a deep approach take an active role and see learning as something that they themselves do, whereas those who adopt a surface approach take a passive role and see learning as something that just happens to them. However, other researchers identified a greater diversity in students' conceptions of learning. On the basis of interviews with 90 students at institutions of further and higher education in Sweden, Säljö (1979) found five different conceptions:

1. learning as the increase of knowledge
2. learning as memorising
3. learning as the acquisition of facts or procedures
4. learning as the abstraction of meaning
5. learning as an interpretative process aimed at the understanding of reality.

Van Rossum and Schenk (1984) asked 69 students at a university in the Netherlands to read a short text and then to describe how they had approached the task of reading the text and how they approached their studies in general. They found that the students could be classified into Säljö's five conceptions of learning. Most of the students who showed Conceptions 1 to 3 had used a surface approach to read the text, but most of the students who showed Conceptions 4 and 5 had used a deep approach. This confirms that students who hold a particular conception of learning tend to adopt a commensurate approach to learning in particular academic tasks.

Van Rossum and Taylor (1987) asked 91 students at a university in the Netherlands to write about what learning meant to them. They confirmed the existence of Säljö's five conceptions but also found a sixth conception, which they characterised as:

6. a conscious process, fuelled by personal interests and directed at obtaining harmony and happiness or changing society.

Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty (1993) found essentially the same conceptions of learning in a longitudinal study of students taking courses by distance learning with the Open University in the UK. Marton *et al.* (1993) argued that these six conceptions constituted a developmental hierarchy through which students proceed during the course of their studies. However, other researchers have argued that they simply reflect different 'learning patterns' (Vermunt, 2005). Van Rossum, Deijkers and Hamer (1985) nevertheless suggested that the conceptions of learning found by Säljö (1979) showed the development of the student from a novice to an expert.

Students who hold a reproductive conception of learning (in Säljö's terms, Conceptions 1 to 3) as a result of their exposure to a subject-centred curriculum may well find it hard to adapt to a student-centred curriculum. For example, the teachers in the study by Andrews *et al.* (1996) had been nominated by senior staff as exemplifying 'excellence' in instructional activities. Nevertheless, many students persisted in the use of a surface approach to learning in the face of the student-centred approaches to teaching that were exhibited by their teachers. Moreover, students in the study by Newman (2004) undermined attempts to implement a problem-based curriculum. As he remarked, problem-based learning "did not meet the students' normative expectations of 'teaching and learning'" (Newman, 2004, p. 6). Elsewhere, he added: "Students appeared to

expect to be passive recipients of knowledge, taught to them by an expert, instead of having to make their own way through difficult material” (Utlely, 2004, p. 13). In contrast, Bennett and Barkensjo’s comparative study of business studies undergraduates in a post-1992 university (all of whom had entered the department with the minimum entry requirements) found differences between the academically excellent students (defined by the researchers as destined to achieve at least a ‘high’ upper second-class honours) and the ordinary students (Bennett and Barkensjo, 2005). The former group had high intrinsic motivations to study and believed their ability to succeed depended on their personal hard work and other outputs, not on external circumstances. In some ways, this finding seems to echo Marton’s view of students who adopt a deep approach taking an active role in their own learning, whereas those taking a surface approach see learning as something that “just happens to them” (Marton, 1976).

On the basis of much of the above, excellence in learning would be reflected in more sophisticated conceptions of learning and perhaps more generally in more sophisticated conceptions of knowledge of the sort described by Perry (1971) and many subsequent researchers. Säljö implied that this development could result from participation in higher education. However, van Rossum and Taylor (1987) found that more sophisticated conceptions of learning were more common in older students than in younger students. Baxter Magolda (2001) argued that the conditions for intellectual development could be met in academia, in the workplace or even in daily life. This line of argument suggests that excellence in learning can be attained simply as the result of life experience itself. However, Ferrari (2002, p. 228) noted that many commentators emphasise the need for individuals to engage in “socially structured practice” (at least initially) to achieve the highest levels of excellence.

## 6.2.2 Excellence in managing and supporting learning

In several of the policy documents, there is an implicit acknowledgement that excellence in student learning may not require excellent teaching and that this can be managed. (However, see the NSS results for the influence of ‘teaching and learning’ on overall ratings (SurrIDGE, 2006) and the high demand for face-to-face contact with academic staff that is a feature of so much student feedback (HEPI, 2006)). The inference is that there could be ‘excellence in managing student learning’ or even ‘excellence in achieving learning outcomes’.

Elton (2001, p. 50) has argued something similar in the context of linking teaching and research:

... the focus has been shifted from the excellence of the teacher to the excellence of the learning experience, i.e. if the conditions for learning are right and there is an

input of scholarship then the positive link becomes the norm. Thus, the nature of the student learning experience and, indeed, the nature of the link, have been changed as, nearly 200 years after Humboldt, his ideas have been built into curriculum design and extended by Boyer to all kinds of learning. The research aspect of the learning experience is now more a natural outcome of the teaching–learning system and depends less on the quality of the teacher, while the nature of the link may no longer depend on the research excellence of teachers, but rather on their ability to encourage and facilitate in their students a problematic approach to learning.

Elton's reference to teachers' ability to encourage and facilitate in their students a problematic approach to learning 'fits' rather well with Perkins' discussions of proactive knowledge (see later) and notions of threshold concepts. It starts to open up questions about what might be the 'key' characteristics of such a teacher and whether this might be a rather different facet of teaching excellence, embracing rather different notions in addition to/rather than (just) a transmitter of 'excellent' knowledge (as suggested by Calhoun, 2006).

As noted above, excellence in the student learning experience is likely to arise from a combination of different dimensions, including support for learning from players other than teachers per se. While the HEFCE initiative on CETLs may have stressed the role of support staff in delivering excellence, there is little in the literature exploring this aspect of excellence. One exception is Roberts' (2004) report of a conference 'Supporting the supporters: encouraging continuing professional development of support staff' organised by the Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences (GEES) Subject Centre. Further, the review of Welsh institutions' strategies for learning and teaching noted a positive trend of integrating the support work of academic and support services, with a number of institutions reviewing central support services with a view to enhancing their role and working more collaboratively across the institution (Higher Education Academy, 2005).

### **6.3 Excellent learning outcomes and standards of achievement**

While the foregoing has explored teachers and students' approaches to learning, a further aspect to consider is the outcomes of that learning and the standards of achievement.

Significant increases in the size and diversity of UK higher education, especially during the early 1990s brought into focus questions about the nature of UK degree courses. Government-funded curriculum development initiatives through the late 1980s to the late 1990s (in particular the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative) that sought to



steer an emphasis towards 'personal transferable' skills development within higher education were bound up with more general moves towards identifying more clearly, and to a range of stakeholders, just what a learner emerging from a period of higher education knew and was able to do (and away from the traditional emphasis on course aims and objectives and inputs to higher education). Proponents of these moves highlighted the potential benefits, including enhanced accessibility and flexibility for the learner; facilitating the protection of standards (by ensuring comparable outcomes are achieved, regardless of changes in course structures or processes); and increased learner motivation by dint of learners concentrating on demonstrating achievement per se, rather than (mere) attendance on a programme of studies.

By the late 1990s, and following publication of the Dearing Report (NCIHE, 1997), the Government was openly endorsing the need for institutions to place increasing emphasis on learning and teaching strategies and, in particular, on what was actually learned through higher education. The Dearing Committee's call for institutions to develop programme specifications was accepted by the Government, as was the need to define and articulate 'threshold' standards of achievement.

In consequence, the QAA, set up in 1997, undertook a fundamental review of quality assurance methods across the UK, which resulted in the design of a new framework placing an emphasis on the assurance of academic standards as well as quality. The new framework comprised the development of subject benchmark information, programme specifications, codes of practice and a framework for higher education qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland; a separate framework for qualifications in higher education institutions in Scotland was developed (to be an integral part of a wider Scottish credit and qualifications framework). QAA was charged with the task of working with the sector to develop subject benchmark statements. Wide consultation across the different subject constituencies throughout the sector was undertaken during the process of developing benchmark statements for each of the major subject areas. The initial premise was that benchmark statements would be UK-wide and would apply to Honours degree programmes.

The first set of statements was published in 2000, and there are currently Honours degree benchmark statements for 46 subjects. Many of the statements published in 2000 are currently being reviewed. There are also three benchmark statements for Masters programmes (Business and Management, Engineering and Pharmacy), five Scottish benchmark statements and a foundation degree qualification benchmark (QAA, 2007). Where there are specific professional and statutory regulations aligned to possession of an Honours degree in a particular subject area, the benchmark statements have been developed in consultation with the relevant bodies and delineate

both academic and practitioner standards expected of graduates in those subjects. Currently there are 16 academic and practitioner standards in health care subjects.

Further, although the Dearing Report called for 'threshold' or minimum standards to be articulated, QAA notes that the majority of groups involved in drafting benchmark statements have also sought to provide statements on 'typical' or 'modal' standards and a number have sought to describe excellence.

Such a focus on subjects per se is not without its critics. Parker (2002) suggested that the shift from disciplines to narrowly conceived subjects led to skills-based, training-derived models of university education (Parker, 2002, cited in Skelton, 2005). Such a 'training model' is associated with moves towards performativity leading to a situation where knowledge is commodified and valued not for its own sake but for its functionality. In this model, the teacher's role is simplified to focus on "the efficient delivery of the course and the achievement of the specified competencies or skills" (Skelton, 2005, p. 81).

Certainly, subject benchmark statements are intended to "provide academic staff and institutions with a point of reference in the design and development of degree programmes and a framework for specifying intended learning outcomes", and as a way of making more explicit the nature and level of academic standards in UK higher education (QAA, 2004, pp. 2-3), but arguably there is no compulsion to follow such points of reference in a slavish manner.

Given the purpose of national benchmark statements and the process by which they have been produced, it is safe to assume that such statements can provide an insight into how excellence in learning is perceived (and, to an extent, used) in UK higher education.

A sample of benchmark statements (16 in all) relating to Honours degree programmes have been analysed as part of this review, to ascertain the extent to which such statements refer to excellence, and if so, in what ways. (See Annex A to C for details). (As noted above, separate benchmark statements for qualifying awards for professions in Scotland have also been developed by QAA, but these are not included in the sample.)

As noted above, some statements make no reference to excellence at all but concentrate on the expected differences in students' learning outcomes, and hence achievements, between 'threshold' (or minimum) standards and 'typical' (or modal) standards (Annex A gives six examples).

Included in these examples are the academic and practitioner standards for pre-registration nursing programmes, wherein distinctions are made between different awards (which are at different levels in the national framework for higher education qualifications), viz. standards for a Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE) and for an Honours degree. On the face of it, some of the distinctions between the DipHE and the Honours degree appear similar to distinctions made in other benchmark statements between threshold and typical standards for Honours degree programmes.

For example, the Accounting benchmark statement notes that "... typical graduates can distinguish themselves from threshold graduates by displaying a *more thorough* knowledge and understanding ... demonstrate an *enhanced capacity to develop and apply critical, analytical and problem-solving abilities* and skills" (Accounting, 2000, 6.7, [italics added]). At the same time, the Nursing academic and practitioner standards state that the DipHE holder should "demonstrate *sound clinical judgement*", whereas the Honours graduate should "demonstrate *sound clinical judgement ... and critically evaluate the effectiveness* of clinical judgement"; the DipHE holder needs to "*demonstrate understanding of the roles of others*", whereas the Honours graduate should be able to "*critically analyse roles ... and propose ways to strengthen patient-centred care*" (Nursing, 2004, p. 15]). So in both Accounting and Nursing, critical abilities, evaluation and problem-solving skills are used to characterise differences, but whereas in Accounting such differences distinguish the typical graduate from the threshold graduate, in Nursing these same differences are used to distinguish the Honours graduate from the DipHE holder.

There is another group of statements that do refer to what might be expected of an excellent standard of achievement, but do not articulate such expectations through detailed levels of performance for specific abilities and skills (Annex B provides five examples in relation to academic standards, and one in relation to academic and practitioner standards).

Some of these descriptions of excellence are somewhat tautologous; for example, "the best graduates will have accumulated a body of work that demonstrates excellence in most if not all areas ..." (Art and Design, 2002). However, some subject benchmark statements go further and start to explore 'how' excellent learning outcomes might be demonstrated and recognised. For example:

... we confidently expect that excellent students will surprise us, will find ways of doing and saying things that we had not imagined ... (History of Art, Architecture and Design, 2002)

... excellent students will transcend the ... learning outcomes and will display originality, insight and a selection ... of the qualities of artistic profundity, technical excellence, and the highest standards of achievement ... (Dance, Drama and Performance, 2002)

... such students will be creative and innovative ... may relish the opportunity to engage in entrepreneurial activity ... exercise critical evaluation and review of their own work and the work of others. (Computing, draft, 2006)

It can be seen that notions of creativity, originality, innovation, as well as critical evaluation (including of the work of others), come to the fore in these characteristics of excellence (which chimes to an extent with some of the ideas around scholarship). The reference (above) to students 'surprising' their tutors brings with it notions of surpassing expectations of what should happen in particular normative circumstances (and also moving beyond or outside the 'intended learning outcomes' set for the programme). Thus, there are some parallels with more general considerations of excellence and normative expectations and understandings of accepted practice in different social contexts (for fuller discussion, see Ferrari, 2002, p. 229).

The example of academic and practitioner standards in health care subjects (Speech and Language Therapy) provided in Annex B exhibits a somewhat different concern with attainment beyond threshold levels. Here, the term 'exemplary' is used along with modal, and is used to refer to notions of efficiency. Thus, while all Honours graduates will be clinically effective most of the time, the 'threshold' graduate may not be as efficient (as the modal or exemplary graduate) "at reaching therapy goals within a timeframe" (Speech and Language Therapy, 2004, p. 13).

The final cluster of benchmark statements for Honours degree programmes are those that provide detailed characterisations of threshold, typical and excellent standards of achievement (four examples given in Annex C). Although there are occasional 'circular' references – for example, "conceptual understanding is excellent" (Landscape Architecture, 2000, 5.4.1) – there are also clear distinctions made and differences drawn between the three levels of achievement across the relevant knowledge, skills and attributes described for the specific subject area. The following are used to distinguish between typical and excellent:

- levels of analysis, evaluation and synthesis
- creativity; innovation
- adaptability; judgements and challenge

- originality and insight
- reflective abilities.

In one example (Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural Science, Food Science, Consumer Science, 2003) distinctions are made between effectiveness (for the typical graduate) and efficiency (for the excellent graduate) – albeit in a slightly different context from that used in Speech and Language Therapy.

This rather simple analysis of subject benchmark statements seems to provide some evidence of a consensus between the benchmark statements for different subject areas in relation to the terminology used to differentiate ‘excellent’ student attainment from ‘typical’ student attainment. However, what is also clear from these statements is that judgements about appropriate levels of attainment are taken in a holistic manner. Thus, viewing excellence of student learning outcomes and student attainment involves more than a ‘tick-box’ exercise of identifying differing levels of, for example, critical analysis, evaluation, independent thought, capacity to ‘surprise’ in a disaggregated manner; rather, the excellent student will have demonstrated such abilities and skills across a range of different dimensions of performance, and may well have ‘transcended’ the stated learning outcomes for any particular programme.

Focusing on just a (very) few aspects of particular benchmark statements does not convey the full picture of expectations in relation to output standards. Nevertheless, such observations serve to remind us that benchmark statements are not necessarily universal and absolute statements of levels of attainment, but are also referenced against expectations within the norms of a particular subject area and are couched in those terms. That said, analysis of such statements can provide some understanding of how different subject groupings conceive of standards of output.

It should also be noted that in certain disciplines, the usage of the term ‘excellence’ does vary in some rather fundamental ways, such that rather than being used to identify “distinguishing features such that those exhibiting excellence stand out from the rest”, the term is used to imply a *baseline* competence. Thus the term ‘clinical excellence’ is used to indicate baseline competence for professional practice, wherein six standards of excellence have been derived, viz. clear goals, adequate preparation, appropriate methodology, outstanding results, effective communication and reflective self-criticism (see, for example, Glassick, 2000). Notions of clinical excellence are part of much wider debates in the medical arena relating to the essential tension between replication and innovation (Pinkus and Saunder, cited by Ferrari, 2002, p. 226). Although the former may exemplify baseline competence for professional practice, research by Benner, Taune and Chelsa (1996, cited by Ferrari, 2002) shows that ethical judgement

(alongside technical expertise) is very much part of 'excellent' nursing practice. Further, these references to tensions between replication and innovation in a medical context can be seen to have resonance with considerations of criteria for teaching excellence awards, wherein award holders needed to demonstrate competencies in teaching and in 'leading change'.

Although benchmark statements (as currently used within the UK) may provide reference points for identifying excellent learning outcomes aligned to specific programmes, such a focus on 'performative excellence' is not without its critics. In his exploration of the meaning of knowledge and understandings of possessive, performative and proactive knowledge, Perkins argued against the pursuit of excellence per se, which he saw as typically characterised through possessive and performative knowledge (Perkins, forthcoming). In contrast, proactive knowledge (according to Perkins) is characterised by the ability to apply knowledge with understanding, by serious energetic engagement with the knowledge and by alertness to where it applies. He argued that proactive knowledge (requiring as it does an "active, alert questing mindset") of a few threshold concepts (see below) would better prepare students "for encounters with a complicated and challenging world that does not reliably tell them what they should do" (Perkins, forthcoming, p. 24).

Although Perkins argues against excellence, it could be argued that some of his sentiments about the need to shift away from possessive and performative knowledge and towards proactive knowledge do in fact 'chime' with certain dimensions of excellence included in some of the QAA subject benchmark statements cited above; for example, demonstrating originality and insight, the capacity to surprise and reflective abilities.

#### **6.4 Classifications as an indicator of excellence**

Before leaving this discussion of benchmark statements and learning outcomes, it should be noted that those benchmark statements relevant to Honours degree programmes invariably equate 'excellent' standards of achievement to a first-class Honours degree (although in the case of Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Science, degrees qualifying students to practise are not classified).

It is now widely acknowledged within UK higher education that the current system of classification is no longer fit for purpose. A (second) consultation paper, *The UK honours degree: provision of information*, prepared by a steering group (chaired by Professor Robert Burgess, and supported by Universities UK, GuildHE, HEFCE and other funding councils, and higher education agencies) is currently under consideration

(Universities UK and GuildHE, 2006). An earlier proposal for a pass/fail/distinction was not popular and the steering group is now recommending the adoption of a simple pass/fail degree classification system combined with a Diploma Supplement/transcript that provides greater detail of student achievement. It is not yet known what the outcome of this consultation will be, but it is likely that, whatever provision is made for reporting greater detail of student achievement, it will include scope for identifying excellent achievement however defined.

## 7. Individual level

### 7.1 Teaching at the individual level

The National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS), introduced in 2000 by HEFCE, sought to recognise and reward excellent *individual* teachers in England and Northern Ireland. From his in-depth ESRC-funded study of the NTFS, Skelton identified a particular understanding of teaching excellence, located within current higher education policy concerns, with a number of characteristics (Skelton, 2005, pp. 58-59):

- individualised: little sense of a collective identity had developed among the award winners (although it should be noted that the subsequent HEFCE-funded CETL initiative was predicated on notions of a 'collective' endeavour)
- underpinned by reflective practice
- 'psychologised' in the sense that the reflections being undertaken by the individual excellent teachers focused on interactions between individual teachers and students, and drew on psychological theories of learning
- practical: solutions were sought for problems (e.g. delivery methods)
- performative in the sense that NTFS perpetuated the view that excellence in teaching can be measured and controlled.

In many of the policy documents, there seems to be an expectation that individual excellent teachers should take on a wider role than just teaching and, for example, seek to innovate, initiate change, mentor and even provide leadership (Gibbs and Habeshaw, 2002). Notions of excellence at the institutional, subject, national and even international levels are implied. Add to this scholarship and pedagogic research, and there is a nice reinforcement of the research-teaching *status quo*; that is, teaching is OK as long as it is research-based! The Higher Education Academy's professional teaching standards underline this view. The highest level in the *UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and learning in higher education* has the following standard descriptor:

Supports and promotes student learning in all areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values through mentoring and leading individuals and/or teams;

incorporates research, scholarship and/or professional practice into those activities. (SCOP *et al.*, 2006)

However, as Yorke noted:

...many teachers deemed 'excellent' may have only a sketchy knowledge of the literature of pedagogical research, which is a matter of concern in that they may provide models of teaching activity which are ignorant of, or run counter to, the evidence from research. Whilst they themselves may be very successful whilst apparently not 'doing things according to the book', their success may well not transfer ... (Yorke, 2000, p. 113)

Writing when he was Vice-President of the NUS, Weavers described good teachers and *the very best* teachers thus:

First, such teachers will recognise that each student will have developed his or her own preferred learning style. To maximise each student's learning, good teachers will utilise a wide range of delivery methods and supporting materials. They will also encourage students to experiment with different learning methods in order to develop their ability to use methods with which they are less familiar. A good teacher will also be aware of students' specific needs. These may include disabilities such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and other hidden disabilities. There may be other requirements for students whose first language is not English. Finally, a good teacher is one who actively seeks feedback from students, uses this to analyse critically their teaching styles and methodology and seeks to make improvements on an ongoing basis. Equally importantly, the results of such feedback are given back to students and positive changes are also communicated not just to students but also to peers in the teaching community of that institution and beyond. The very best teachers seek not only to improve their own techniques but also to improve those of their colleagues through mentoring and similar schemes. (Weavers, 2003, p. 29)

From his study of the NTFS, Skelton concluded that a performative and psychologised understanding of teaching excellence was taking shape. The emphasis on reflective practice rather than lecturing performance per se demonstrated a shift away from traditional understandings of teaching excellence and towards understandings better suited to a mass system of higher education, with award holders finding "innovative ways of making teaching more accessible to non-traditional students" (Skelton, 2005, p. 60). He also suggested that such a scheme, located in contemporary policy contexts and focusing on innovatory delivery methods was diverting attention away from more fundamental questions about the purpose of teaching in higher education.



## 7.2 Student learning at the individual level

There is little in the research literature about student perceptions of excellence in teaching and what might constitute an excellent student learning experience.

Burden, Bond and Hall (2006) report the findings of a small-scale study (in a single institution) in which staff and students identified dimensions of excellent teaching. For teachers, the top five characteristics were:

- enthusiasm/inspiration
- subject-specific knowledge
- communication/interpersonal skills
- knowing how people learn/how teaching works
- organised/reliable/good at routine.

For students, the top four characteristics were:

- range of strategies/techniques
- enthusiasm/inspiration
- teaching for 'learning that lasts'
- knowing how people learn/how teaching works.

Two other small-scale qualitative studies (undertaken by Hillier and Vielba, 2001) are cited by Skelton (2005, p. 94). Both studies found teachers' and students' perceptions of teaching excellence emphasised the personal qualities of the teacher (enthusiastic, creative and imaginative) and their abilities to manage complex interactions. Hillier and Vielba noted a mismatch between these understandings and official discourses prevalent in the UK at the time. They suggested that such a mismatch could be explained by the fact that such 'softer' expressions are not susceptible to the "readily quantifiable and measurable indicators of performance required by the quality assurance and enhancement movements" (Hillier and Vielba, 2001, quoted in Skelton, 2005).

Furthermore, the policy literature rarely seems to address the *individual* student and excellence in learning, although (as noted in Section 5.3 above), some exploration of what might characterise excellent student learning outcomes (as opposed to excellent learning processes) are provided through the QAA benchmark statements.

However, such benchmark statements are elaborated in relation to norm-referenced expectations and articulate the ways in which particular (excellent) students might stand out from the rest (of their cohort). From an individual student experience, it is likely that

what one individual might claim to be an excellent learning experience might be rather different from another's perspective. Although the learning experience might be perceived as excellent (by that individual) the resultant learning outcomes might nevertheless not be conceived as excellent in benchmark standard terms.

Before leaving these considerations of students' perceptions, two of the 'top' characteristics of excellent teaching identified by students in the small-scale study reported by Burden *et al.* (2006) are worthy of a little further exploration, viz. teaching for 'learning that lasts' and knowing how people learn/how teaching works.

As noted above (Section 5.3), there are currently debates around notions of threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge. Meyer's notion of a threshold concept was developed as part of an ESRC-funded research project on enhancing teaching and learning environments in undergraduate courses (Meyer and Land, 2003). It was introduced into discussions on learning outcomes as a "particular basis for differentiating between core learning outcomes that represent 'seeing things in a new way' and those that do not. A threshold concept is thus seen as something distinct within what university teachers would typically describe as 'core concepts'" (Meyer and Land, 2003, p.1). Meyer and Land noted that such threshold concepts may represent or lead to knowledge that is conceptually difficult, counter-intuitive or alien – "what Perkins describes as troublesome knowledge" (Meyer and Land, 2003, p. 1). In her *Introduction to Threshold Concepts*, Cousin (2006) cites Meyer and Land's (2005) five key characteristics of threshold concepts:

- grasping such a concept is transformative for the individual concerned, because it involves an ontological as well as a conceptual shift
- once understood, a learner is unlikely to forget a threshold concept
- mastery of a threshold concept often allows the learner to make connections that were previously 'hidden' to them – it is integrative
- it is likely to be bounded (though Cousin notes there should be space for questioning the concept itself)
- it is likely to involve forms of 'troublesome knowledge', the mastery of which can be inhibited by a student's 'common sense' understanding of it.

Cousin suggests that academic staff have a tendency to try and transmit vast amounts of 'knowledge bulk' for students to absorb and reproduce 'in bulk' (and students may substitute learning for a "permanent strategy of mimicry"). A consideration of threshold concepts could go some way towards ensuring curricula focus on what is fundamental to a grasp of the subject and, arguably, student learning would become the product of integrated understandings rather than ritualised performances.

Certainly, from Meyer and Land's characterisation of threshold concepts, one aspect of a threshold concept, namely that it is often irreversible, seems to resonate with one of the characteristics of 'excellent' teaching identified by students (in one of the small-scale study reported above), viz. teaching for 'learning that lasts'. Further, if teachers are to help students gain mastery of threshold concepts and engage with troublesome knowledge, they will need to know how people learn/how teaching works: another of the characteristics of 'excellent' teaching identified by the students.

More generally, Skelton noted that students (and 'ordinary' teachers) adopt a discourse on excellence that celebrates 'soft' skills and personal qualities of the tutor, their communication skills and their abilities to manage "complex human interactions and relationships" – which he suggests is rather different from the "planned systems ... standardized processes, and pre-planned learning outcomes that feature in official discourses ..." (Skelton, 2005, p. 170).

While the research evidence cited in the foregoing discussions of student learning is rather limited, it is nevertheless suggestive of notions of excellence that move away from (just) the acquisition of excellent knowledge and towards notions of personalised learning that will enable students to deal with troublesome knowledge, contested knowledge bases and the complexities inherent in 'uncertain situations'. There are currently a number of moves towards the personalisation of learning across the range of education sectors within the UK (Leadbetter, 2004, cited in Ward *et al.*, 2007). Further, more general drives towards the marketisation of higher education can be seen as heightening notions of students (and others) as consumers making informed choices about whether, when and how to engage with higher education. Taken together, these suggest that a refocusing of attention on notions of excellent learning from an individual student perspective would indeed be timely.

## 8. Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

The review has set out to address three main questions:

- How is the term 'excellence' used in the context of teaching and the student learning experience within current higher education policy and practice and how does its usage vary?
- What are the key conceptualisations of excellence?
- What are the implications of usage and conceptualisations in relation to promoting or developing excellence?

The review addressed the first two questions relating to usage and concepts at different (but interlinked) levels – system-wide, institutional, departmental and individual – and from two different perspectives – teaching and student learning.

There are extensive references to excellent teaching but far fewer to excellent learning. However, much of the literature did not engage in any substantive manner with concepts, nor considerations of use in practice as evidenced through empirical studies. The term 'excellence' was often used as an alternative to the term 'quality', or in conjunction with notions of equity in the sense of giving prominence to specific initiatives aligned to aspects of higher education not traditionally linked to excellence. Though, in a literal sense, 'excellence' is a normative concept, used in pursuit of positional good within a hierarchy, it seems also to be used increasingly to give prominence and recognition to particular initiatives, such as, the HEFCE-funded Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

At the system level, concepts of excellence tend to be bound up with notions of exceptionality (and arguably exclusivity, which do not necessarily 'fit' with concepts of inclusion and diversity in higher education meeting the needs and aspirations of a wide range of learners). In policy documents, teaching excellence is used in a performative sense, linked to both reputational concerns on the 'world' stage and enhancing national economic prosperity, and raising the status of teaching (in comparison with research) on the 'national' stage. There is less said about notions of excellence in learning per se, although the Dearing Report did hint at notions of excellent learning when referring to the management of students' learning (by staff and students alike).

At the institutional level, and in particular within institutions' teaching, learning and assessment strategies, notions of excellence are used in an aspirational sense as well as being bound up with ideas of enhancing students' learning experiences and

providing high quality experiences. For some commentators, debates on the scholarship of teaching, linked to notions of teaching excellence and expert teachers are part of attempts to promote institutional environments that give prominence to teaching and learning. Certainly there are claims that excellent teaching is more likely to be encouraged if institutional mechanisms for recognising and rewarding excellent teaching are integrated within a system that reflects an institution's values, goals and cultures, although a focus on meeting generic criteria for awards and the like might emphasise traditional forms of pedagogy at the expense of innovation. It is also unclear whether notions of varying levels of teaching excellence are used for promotion purposes (say from senior lecturer to principal lecturer).

At the department level, it is evident that the well-known disciplinary cultures and the different epistemological, cultural and pedagogical assumptions will be reflected in different conceptions of excellence in teaching and in student learning. However, some suggest that such disciplinary differences (which along with specialisation continue to thrive and arguably increase) can act as a barrier and impede students' own approaches to learning (for example, exploration and creativity), which in other contexts may be seen as highly desirable. Nevertheless, from the brief analysis of subject benchmark statements (which provide some indication of how different subject groupings conceive of excellent student learning outcomes) some similarities in the ways different subject areas characterised excellence were discerned. Such characteristics related to students' creativity and innovation; originality and insight; adaptability, judgements and challenge; levels of analysis, evaluation and synthesis; and reflective abilities.

There is a large research literature on approaches to effective teaching (which is often taken as synonymous with excellent teaching). Although there is some conflicting evidence surrounding the hierarchical nature of approaches to teaching and learning, there seems to be consensus that excellence in learning would be reflected in more sophisticated conceptions of learning and perhaps generally in more sophisticated conceptions of knowledge and its construction. However, it is clear that the dynamics of the relationship between teaching and learning are mediated by students' own perceptions of their environment and their own motivations to learning: excellence in student learning may or may not be predicated on excellent teaching.

Moreover, when system-wide mechanisms were in place (through QAA's programme of subject reviews) to undertake external reviews of higher education, 'excellent' or 'high quality' provision was identified across a number of inter-related dimensions (which included teaching, learning and assessment, but much more besides). These additional dimensions of curriculum design, content and organisation; student progression and

achievement; student support and guidance; learning resources; quality management and enhancement are different, constituent elements of the overall provision underlying students' learning experiences. As such, these elements are likely to need managing, but there is little in the research literature exploring 'managing' such elements and resultant claims for excellence in student learning.

At the individual level, there is an expectation in many of the policy documents that excellent individual teachers should take on a wider role than 'just' teaching: for example, they should seek to innovate and initiate change, mentor colleagues and provide leadership. Skelton's in-depth study of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (which sought to recognise and reward excellent individual teachers in higher education) concluded that the scheme, located in contemporary policies and focusing on innovatory delivery methods, was diverting attention away from more fundamental questions about the purpose of teaching in higher education. Since Skelton's study, it should be noted that the NTFS has been developed into two separate strands (viz. individual awards and a project strand) and is now administered by the Higher Education Academy.

There was little research about students' own perceptions of excellence in teaching and what might constitute an excellent learning experience for students. The few studies that have been undertaken seem to indicate that students (and 'ordinary' teachers) engage in a rather different discourse on excellence than that which appears in official policy documents. Further, some of the debates now emerging about the nature of higher education students' learning experiences and ideas about troublesome knowledge and threshold concepts are suggestive of notions of excellence that move away from (just) the acquisition of excellent knowledge and towards notions of personalised learning that will enable students to deal with troublesome knowledge, contested knowledge bases and the complexities inherent in 'uncertain situations'. There are currently some moves towards the personalisation of learning across the range of education sectors within the UK. Further, more general drives towards the marketisation of higher education can be seen as heightening notions of students (and others) as consumers making informed choices about whether, when and how to engage with higher education. Taken together, these suggest that a refocusing of attention on notions of excellent learning from an individual student perspective would indeed be timely.

The foregoing analysis of the policy and research literature into these discrete levels is rather artificial; many commentators stress the importance of seeing the 'whole' as interlinked and practices at one level informed and (possibly constrained) by understandings and norms at other levels. However, it has served to highlight where

there are 'gaps' in the literature, particularly with respect to notions of excellence in the student learning experience and students' own perceptions of excellence.

Further, across all such levels, a recurring critique is that the current focus on teaching (and to a lesser extent learning) excellence is symptomatic of an ever-present contemporary desire to measure higher education performance by means of systematic criteria and standardised practices, wherein 'form and process' are to the fore and the 'what' (of higher education) is in the background, and which may lead to teachers performing to baseline standards and may encourage dependency in learners. Arguably, it is the 'what' that forms the essence of what is being valued and recognised as a distinctively higher education learning experience, and within that, what might constitute an excellent learning experience. Some critics argue that there is now an over-emphasis on 'fitness for purpose' (and hence on processes and systems to ensure 'fitness') to the detriment of constructive debate about 'fitness of purpose', which would draw in discussion about concepts and values underlying higher education learning, the social and economic conditions underpinning such values, and about the nature of knowledge. A diverse system of higher education self-evidently needs to be able to accommodate a diversity of views about teaching and learning, and these need to be made explicit on grounds of transparency and equity and open to interrogation by different communities of practice on grounds that no one particular set of values or concepts should implicitly be privileged over another. There are some concerns that the continuing pursuit of greater articulation and delineation of what excellent teaching and excellent learning should look like might actually stifle and constrain some essential, but less tangible and less convergent, dimensions of excellence (for example, ingenuity and creativity).

The 'trick' seems to be to find ways of meeting both the needs for greater articulation of form and process (in relation to excellence in teaching and learning) to go some way to ensuring transparency of operations and equitable treatment of all learners (and addressing questions of fitness *for* purpose), while at the same time being ready and willing to ask the difficult question of 'fitness of the purpose' itself, which may bring into play more uncomfortable and challenging questions about power and values – whose power and whose values?

## **8.1 Broader implications for policy and practice**

At the national level, it is likely that the term 'excellence' will continue to be used, but there needs to be much clearer explication of the precise meaning being attached to its use and for what purpose. Such explications might usefully ensure that, given the UK's

diverse higher education system, certain (more traditional) notions of excellence are not (implicitly) privileged over others.

Government-driven initiatives that purport to foster excellence in teaching and learning (e.g. CETLs, NTFS) should be critically appraised to ascertain to what extent they are meeting their objectives. Further, as it is likely that the outcomes of such independent evaluations could well shed further light on how and in what ways concepts of excellence are being developed in different and diverse higher education contexts, the findings of the evaluations should be disseminated widely for discussion among practitioners and stakeholders alike. Such evaluations should also reflect on the socioeconomic and policy contexts in which the initiatives are being developed and operationalised in practice.

It would also be useful to disentangle notions of teaching and of student learning, particularly in the context of more distributed sites of learning and sources of learning support, the increasing range of (access to) learning resources and, arguably more importantly, continuing debates about forms of knowledge and knowledge construction. Policy documents should acknowledge that teaching and student learning are distinct phenomena, rather than complementary aspects of a single phenomenon. They should also demonstrate more sophisticated understandings of student learning experiences and acknowledge that teaching is only one of a number of factors likely to impact on student learning. Further, such documents should recognise that different stakeholders may have quite legitimate and acceptable differences in perceptions of what constitutes excellence. Currently, the learner perspective seems to be given relatively little attention in discussions about excellence.

At a practical level, three specific implications arise from the review. First, in a higher education system that continues to be steered towards meeting the needs of the economy while at the same time nurturing conditions that will create a more inclusive society, it is likely that higher education will increasingly be engaging with curricula based in or derived from individuals' workplace experiences as well as drawing on discipline-based knowledge. As such, higher education may be more likely to draw on ideas, knowledge and techniques emanating from a range of different disciplines and indeed professional practice. It is also likely to need to take more seriously notions of personalised learning that will enable students to deal with troublesome knowledge, contested knowledge bases and the complexities inherent in 'uncertain situations'. If students' resultant learning experiences are to be excellent, there will need to be dialogue between disciplines about what constitutes excellent teaching and excellent learning that beyond the acquisition of excellent discipline-based knowledge. Such dialogues might start to address questions about: what the 'key' characteristics of a



teacher might be; what their role should be; and whether these characteristics and roles might start to engage with rather different aspects of teaching excellence, embracing rather different notions in addition to/rather than (?) (just) a transmitter of 'excellent' knowledge.

Second, and linked to the above, is the aspect of the management of students' learning processes and what might constitute 'excellence' in that context. While much of the literature and debate focuses attention on academic teaching staff, a more holistic approach to the management of student learning processes and dimensions of learning provision could usefully broaden the debate to academic-related and support staff and their roles in supporting institutional drives towards enhancing the quality of students' learning experiences.

Third, a more holistic view of the student learning environment needs to be taken into account in trying to develop more sophisticated understandings of student learning, and of what might constitute excellence in learning from the student perspective.

## Annex A: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: Academic Infrastructure – Benchmark Statements

Examples of references to excellence: type A - differentiation between 'threshold' and 'typical' but no specific reference to excellence

<p><b>Accounting, 2000</b></p>	<p>Threshold</p> <p>“... threshold standards ... intended to represent the minimum standards of achievement consistent with the award of an honours degree ...” (6.6)</p>	<p>Typical</p> <p>“Typical graduates can distinguish themselves from threshold graduates by displaying a more thorough knowledge and understanding and enhanced technical abilities ... also demonstrate an enhanced capacity to develop and apply critical, analytical and problem-solving abilities and skills ... typical graduates are not expected to distinguish themselves from threshold graduates on all the dimensions of performance ...” (6.7)</p>
<p><b>Anthropology, 2002</b></p>	<p>Threshold</p> <p>“... 'threshold' represents the minimally acceptable knowledge and capabilities of an honours graduate (third class) with students able to demonstrate a degree of proficiency in a majority of these” (7)</p>	<p>Typical</p> <p>“Students achieving 'typical' outcomes (here envisaged as the modal performance of undergraduates - for many anthropology programmes the top of the II(2) and lower part of the II(1) class bands) or better will generally have been able to demonstrate a greater breadth and depth of knowledge and capability ... usually be evident in the demonstration of qualities such as analytical ability, perceptiveness, intellectual rigour, creativity and independence of thought.” (7)</p>
<p><b>Architecture, 2000</b></p>	<p>Threshold</p> <p>“The threshold standard for a student in architecture will be demonstrated through their performance under ... five headings [design; cultural context; environments and technologies; communication; professional studies and management]” (5.1)</p>	<p>Typical</p> <p>“... the typical student will meet not only the threshold standards, but will also demonstrate an integration and understanding of the relationships among most of the specified headings ... will be expected to produce well-resolved design projects, as demonstrated through an articulate and coherent portfolio of work.” (5.2)</p>

<p><b>Engineering, 2006</b></p> <p>“The defined learning outcomes are those published by the Engineering Council UK in the UK Standard for Professional Competence (UK-SPEC) ...”</p> <p>“The learning outcomes are expressed for the threshold level ... It is anticipated there will be many programmes where this threshold level will be exceeded.” (p.2)</p>	Threshold	<p>(No specific statements)</p> <p>“It is recognised ... that most students will reach a higher level of attainment [than threshold] ...”</p>
<p><b>Mathematics, Statistics and Operational Research, 2002</b></p> <p>“Benchmark statements for MSOR are defined at threshold and modal levels.” (5.1.2)</p> <p>“... the distinction between the two levels lies largely in the depth of the student’s understanding of concepts or techniques, the breadth of the student’s knowledge, the amount of support and guidance the student requires to undertake an extended task, the complexity of the problems that the student can solve or model, the student’s ability to construct and present a reasoned argument or proof and how far the student can progress through it, and the facility with which the student performs calculations or manipulations.” (5.1.3)</p>	Threshold	Modal
<p><b>Health Visiting, 2001</b> [academic and practitioner standards in health care subjects]</p>	<p>Threshold</p> <p>“Threshold is taken to mean the standard of achievement demonstrated at the end of the educational experience at the point of qualification for registration (i.e. at the lowest level of a third class honours award). All students graduating with an honours degree in health visiting must meet the requirements for professional registration.”</p>	<p>“It is recognised that the threshold standards indicate the minimum requirements for safe and competent practice as a health visitor. It is, however, acknowledged that most students will reach a higher level of attainment.”</p>

<p><b>Nursing, 2004</b> [academic and practitioner standards in health care subjects]</p> <p>“The ... standards ... reflect the Nursing and Midwifery Council (which replaced the UK Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting) competence requirements for pre-registration nursing programmes ...” (p.15)</p>	<p><b>Diploma in Higher Education</b></p> <p>“... statements are commensurate with the ... academic award and are the threshold standard for entry to the professional register.”</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “demonstrate sound clinical judgement across a range of situations”</li> <li>• “demonstrate understanding of the roles of others, by participating in multi-professional care”</li> <li>• “demonstrate accountability for nursing care delivered ...”</li> <li>• “provide safe and sensitive care through the use of practical skills and knowledge of current best practice”.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Honours degree</b></p> <p>“... statements are commensurate with the ... academic award and enhance the threshold standard for entry to the professional register.”</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “demonstrate sound clinical judgement across a range of situations and critically evaluate the effectiveness of clinical judgement across a range of professional care contexts”</li> <li>• “critically analyse roles within the multi-professional team and propose ways to strengthen patient-centred care”</li> <li>• “demonstrate an ability to critically challenge the nursing care delivered ...”</li> <li>• “use practical skills and knowledge with confidence and creativity to enhance the quality of care”.</li> </ul>
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## Annex B: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: Academic Infrastructure – Benchmark Statements

Examples of references to excellence: type B - characterisation of difference between ‘threshold’ and ‘typical’ and some definition of ‘excellent’ standard of achievement

<p><b>Art and Design, 2002</b></p>	<p><b>Threshold</b></p> <p>“... threshold standards i.e. the minimum acceptable levels of achievement which student must demonstrate to be eligible for the award of an Honours degree in art and design discipline(s)” (6.1)</p> <p>“... these threshold standards are deliberately phrased in broad terms ...” (6.2)</p> <p>“... articulated as learning outcomes which provide a reference point that will enable providers ... to continue to develop diverse and innovative programmes.” (6.2)</p>	<p>No reference to ‘Typical’</p>	<p><b>Excellent</b></p> <p>“The best graduates will have accumulated a body of work that demonstrates excellence in most if not all areas of the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, the development of personal attributes, and the mastery of skills described in...” (6.1)</p>
<p><b>History of Art, Architecture and Design, 2002</b></p>	<p><b>Threshold</b></p> <p>“All graduates ... will have shown a minimally acceptable repertoire of achievement across these areas of performance ...” (6.1.1)</p> <p>Threshold level of attainment set out with regard to: subject-specific knowledge and understanding; visual and critical skills; generic intellectual skills; transferable skills.</p>	<p><b>Typical/ Modal</b></p> <p>“... most students will demonstrate considerably greater sophistication and depth and a wider range of achievements, making evident the great variety of intellectual strengths (and comparative weaknesses) which students graduating with ‘typical’ or ‘modal’ results will display.” (6.1.1)</p> <p>Modal level of attainment set out with regard to: subject-specific knowledge and understanding; visual and critical</p>	<p><b>Excellent</b></p> <p>“We have not attempted a characterisation of ‘excellent’ achievement. We confidently expect that excellent students will surprise us, will find ways of doing and saying things that we had not imagined; some of the best performances will be based on or result in productive critiques of established characterisations.” (6.1.1)</p>

		skills; generic intellectual skills; transferable skills.	
<p><b>Building/Surveying, 2002</b></p> <p>“Two levels of achievement are specified, namely threshold and modal.” (22)</p> <p>“A common set of benchmark statements has been identified for each level with regard to subject knowledge and understanding, subject and cognitive skills.” (24)</p>	<p>Threshold</p> <p>“... describes the minimum level of attainment ...”</p>	<p>Modal</p> <p>“... the modal standard describes the typical graduate.”</p>	<p>Excellent</p> <p>“... those students who exceed the modal level will be judged for excellence.”</p>
<p><b>Computing (draft), 2006</b></p>	<p>Threshold</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “demonstrate a requisite understanding of the main body of knowledge ...”</li> <li>• “understand and apply essential concepts, principles and practice of the subject in the context of well-defined scenarios ...”</li> </ul>	<p>Typical</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “demonstrate a sound understanding ... with an ability to exercise critical judgement across a range of issues”</li> <li>• “critically analyse and apply a range of concepts, principles and practice ... in the context of loosely defined scenarios ...”</li> </ul>	<p>Excellent</p> <p>“... it is nevertheless expected that programmes ... will provide opportunities for students of the highest calibre to achieve their full potential. Such students will be creative and innovative ... may relish the opportunity to engage in entrepreneurial activity ... contribute significantly to the analysis, design and development of systems which are complex ... exercise critical evaluation and review of both their own work and the work of others.” (6.6)</p>
<p><b>Dance, Drama and Performance, 2002</b></p> <p>“Threshold standards are set alongside levels of attainment that are the focus or goal for students on DDP programmes” (10.0)</p> <p>“It is important that students are</p>	<p>Threshold</p> <p>“Students may graduate at the threshold level if they have achieved ... knowledge, performance ability, creativity, skills and understanding sufficient to provide a basic presentation of performance ...”</p>	<p>Focal</p> <p>“The focus or goal of dance, drama and performance ... is to produce students capable of independently evaluating and engaging creatively and critically with performance ...”</p> <p>Focal levels of achievement set out</p>	<p>Excellent</p> <p>“Excellent students will tend to transcend the tabulated learning outcomes and will display originality, insight and a selection ... of the qualities of artistic profundity, technical excellence and the highest standards of achievement and</p>

<p>made aware [of distinction between threshold and focus] and inspired and guided to reach beyond the threshold to the focal level.” (10.0)</p>	<p>Threshold levels of achievement set out with regard to knowledge, understanding and abilities; subject skills; generic and graduate skills.</p>	<p>with regard to knowledge, understanding and abilities; subject skills; generic and graduate skills.</p>	<p>research proper to the field of study.” (10.0)</p>
<p><b>Speech and Language Therapy, 2004</b> [academic and practitioner standards in health care subjects]</p> <p>“Students emerge with different profiles of strengths and areas requiring attention. It is the review of such a profile that forms the judgement as to the student’s readiness to practise as a speech and language therapist.”</p>	<p><b>Threshold</b></p> <p>“Although only threshold level has been articulated, many graduates attain a level well above threshold.” (p. 13)</p> <p>“The profile takes into account ... ability to understand, critically evaluate and apply relevant theoretical knowledge to clinical practice; technical skills such as the manipulation of assessment and therapy tools ... interpersonal and communication abilities ...” (p. 13)</p> <p>“Judgement is also made along the parameter of effectiveness of the resultant management plan. A graduate will not be effective in all clinical situations, but should, at threshold, be aware of limitations in effectiveness and be able to execute plans to improve effectiveness.”</p>	<p><b>Modal</b></p> <p>“... another parameter, which impacts more at modal and exemplary levels, is efficiency. It may be that whilst the award holder, at the point of award, should be clinically effective most of the time, he/she may not be as efficient at reaching therapy goals within a timeframe.” (p. 13)</p>	<p><b>Exemplary</b></p> <p>“another parameter, which impacts more at modal and exemplary levels, is efficiency. It may be that whilst the award holder, at the point of award, should be clinically effective most of the time, he/she may not be as efficient at reaching therapy goals within a timeframe.” (p. 13)</p>

## Annex C: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: Academic Infrastructure – Benchmark Statements

Examples of references to excellence: type C - detailed characterisation of difference between ‘threshold’, ‘typical’ and ‘excellent’ standard of achievement

<p><b>Agriculture, Forestry, Agricultural Science, Food Science, Consumer Science, 2003</b></p> <p>Very detailed performance levels defined for seven main categories of abilities and skills (intellectual; practical; communication; ICT; interpersonal and teamwork; self management and professional development) and for subject-specific skills.</p>	<p><b>Threshold</b></p> <p>“... is the minimum required ... Students at this level will be able to demonstrate an acceptable level of ability and skills.’ (6.2)</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “appraise academic literature and other sources of information”</li> <li>• “define a sampling procedure”</li> <li>• “be able to assist in the application and communication of knowledge of food to meet the needs of society, industry and the consumer for sustainable food quality, safety and security of supply”.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Typical</b></p> <p>“... is that expected of students at the lower/upper second class boundary. Such students will demonstrate definite competence and skills.”</p> <p>“Students awarded a ‘good Honours degree’ will have achieved or exceeded a typical performance.” (6.2)</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “critically appraise academic literature and other sources ...”</li> <li>• “define a suitable and effective sampling procedure”</li> <li>• “have a well-grounded ability to apply and communicate knowledge of food ...”.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Excellent</b></p> <p>“... is demonstrated by students gaining first class honours. These students will have a range of competencies and skills at an enhanced level.” (6.2)</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “demonstrate a highly developed ability for critical appraisal of academic literature ...”</li> <li>• “define a suitable and efficient sampling procedure”</li> <li>• “have a well-grounded ability to apply and communicate knowledge of food ... They will demonstrate excellent knowledge of the literature, creative application of the material and a capacity for synthesis”.</li> </ul>



<p><b>Architectural Technology, 2000</b></p> <p>Detailed benchmark standards for 'threshold', 'average' and 'excellent'</p>	<p><b>Threshold</b></p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “identify, collate and present findings on construction and development factors ...”</li> <li>• “distinguish appropriate methods of construction and installation”</li> <li>• “establish client and user requirements”</li> <li>• “communicate with clients and identify conflict of interest”.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Average</b></p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “analyse findings on construction and development factors ...”</li> <li>• “analyse work methods against project requirements”</li> <li>• “investigate and analyse client and user requirements”</li> <li>• “offer balanced advice and protect client interests”.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Excellent</b></p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “evaluate critical construction and development factors ...”</li> <li>• “evaluate work methods against technical and project criteria”</li> <li>• “challenge client and user requirements”</li> <li>• “make balanced judgements”.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Business and Management (General), 2000</b></p> <p>“Three categories which differentiate graduate achievement have been identified ... threshold, modal and top. These are based on perceived norms ... It is expected that the proportion of graduates in each of the three achievement categories may vary over time ...” (6.2)</p>	<p><b>Threshold</b></p> <p>“... describes the baseline to be exceeded by all graduates.”</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “have knowledge and understanding ...”</li> <li>• “have demonstrated competence within a range of area specific and intellectual skills”</li> <li>• “have a view of business and management which is predominantly influenced by guided learning with a bounded critical perspective”.</li> </ul> <p>(6.7)</p>	<p><b>Modal</b></p> <p>“... is set at a standard which is currently achieved by the majority ... It seeks to describe ... the capabilities that can be expected of typical graduates.”</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “have a wide knowledge and understanding ...”</li> <li>• “consistently demonstrate a command of area specific skills ...”</li> <li>• “are distinguished from the threshold ... by their enhanced capacity to develop and apply their own grounded and informed perspective ...”</li> </ul> <p>(6.8)</p>	<p><b>Top</b></p> <p>“... is characterised by excellence.”</p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “have comprehensive knowledge and understanding across a wide range and in depth ...”</li> <li>• “consistently demonstrate excellence in area specific skills and intellectual skills”</li> <li>• “are distinguished from the modal category by their additional creativity and adaptability. They bring originality, insight and superior critical and reflective abilities ...”.</li> </ul> <p>(6.9)</p>
<p><b>Landscape Architecture, 2000</b></p> <p>“It is assumed that numerous students will exceed threshold standards in various aspects of their</p>	<p><b>Threshold</b></p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “knowledge and understanding ... are basic but without significant omissions”</li> </ul>	<p><b>Typical</b></p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “knowledge base covers all aspects ... and, at the higher end, evidence of enquiry and</li> </ul>	<p><b>Excellent</b></p> <p>For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “knowledge base is extensive and extends well beyond ...”</li> <li>• “conceptual understanding is</li> </ul>

<p>work such that arrangements will characterise different cohorts. The benchmarks identify threshold, typical and excellent performance. Individual institutions will need to relate these to the conventional classification of awards at honours level.” (5.2)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “problems of a familiar and routine nature are responded to adequately but with limitations in terms of creativity, analysis and reflection”</li> <li>• “skills are demonstrated ... of competent standard”. (5.4.3)</li> </ul>	<p>understanding beyond this ...”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “problems of a familiar and unfamiliar nature are responded to with a good level of creativity and logic ...”</li> <li>• “skills are demonstrated ... from sound to good ...”. (5.4.2)</li> </ul>	<p>excellent”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “problems and opportunities of a familiar and unfamiliar nature are responded to with a high level of creativity and innovation ...”</li> <li>• “skills are exemplary ...”. (5.4.1)</li> </ul>
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