What do undergraduate students understand by excellent teaching?

Mike Mimirinis

School of Human and Social Sciences, University of West London, London, United Kingdom

Mike. Mimirinis@uwl.ac.uk

Mike Mimirinis is an Associate Professor of Education in the School of Human and Social Sciences at the University of West London, where he leads the Professional Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.).

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This paper explores undergraduate students’ conceptions of what constitutes excellent teaching. The analysis of semi-structured interviews with students at two English universities yields five qualitatively different conceptions of excellent teaching. In contrast to the current intense policy focus on outcome factors (e.g. graduate employability), students predominantly discern process factors as conducive to excellent teaching: how the subject matter is presented, what the lecturer brings to the teaching process, how students’ personal understanding is supported, and to what extent the questioning and transformation of disciplinary knowledge is facilitated. More importantly, this study demonstrates that an expansion of students’ awareness of the nature of teaching is internally related to the expansion of their awareness of the nature of disciplinary knowledge.

Keywords: teaching excellence; conceptions; phenomenography; teaching; higher education

**Introduction**

‘Teaching excellence’ has become a focus of higher-education policy in recent years, across a range of countries that occupy diverse positions in the global distribution of capital and knowledge (Department of Education and Training, 2018; Land & Gordon, 2015; Yin & Wang, 2015;). While this focus has appeared in various higher-education settings, critics contend that teaching excellence is an ambiguous concept whose goals and effects may not be entirely benign (Skelton, 2009). This critique has mostly been expressed on two counts: first, teaching excellence is critiqued as an ideology; second, it is critiqued as an acontextual discourse of higher-education teaching and (to a lesser extent) learning. The core of these critiques is presented in the subsection below.

However, while the critiques in question offer frameworks to interpret teaching excellence in higher education, they place limited emphasis on what students experience and understand as excellent teaching, and more importantly on how this relates to the recent prevalence and intensification of teaching excellence initiatives. The contribution of this article is to extend empirical work in the area by focusing closely on students’ perspectives and explore variation in their experiences of excellent teaching.

***Critiques of teaching excellence***

The first critique – that teaching excellence is a matter of ideology – suggests that teaching excellence is symptomatic of the contemporary demand to measure higher-education performance by means of standardised criteria and quasi-scientific practices. Consequently, excellence tends to derive from institutional rankings and student satisfaction surveys, which construct broader notions of the ‘excellent’ and ‘world class’ in particular ways (Little & Locke, 2011). Discourses and practices related to teaching excellence avowedly form part of a broader educational restructuring project which is underpinned by neoliberal ideology (Ball, 2003) or ‘a normative technology of neoliberalism in higher education’ (Saunders & Ramírez, 2017, p. 401). While these claims have been extended with more nuanced critiques of teaching excellence (O’Leary & Cui, 2020), they offer little in terms of how teaching excellence discourses can be contested within teaching and institutional practices or the policy domain, or what role students might occupy in any such contestation.

The second critique is that teaching excellence has become an acontextual discourse. In this regard, contributions have highlighted that teaching excellence should be a contextual, multi-layered matter, and that the meanings assigned to it are negotiable. Elton (1998) rejected unidimensional notions of teaching excellence that deprive it of its contextual parameters; instead, he distinguished classificatory dimensions of teaching excellence (excellence at institutional, departmental and individual levels) as well as substantive excellence (the different ways in which each of these three levels can exhibit excellence). Elton’s work, however, lacked empirical focus and did not emphasise students’ understanding of teaching, although he offered some recommendations regarding conditions that might maintain and enhance teaching quality.

***Students’ conceptions of teaching***

The conditions that might promote teaching enhancement have been the focus of a body of research that conceptualises student learning in higher education as a relational matter. Such studies have found that academic teachers demonstrate a continuum of conceptions, ranging from content-oriented and teacher-focused to learning-oriented and student-focused conceptions of teaching (González, 2011). This line of work has been extended to explore variations in teachers’ conceptions of their subject matter, arguing that how teachers approach their teaching is related to what they want their students to know (Martin et al., 2000). Such work explored how academics’ understanding of their own subject changes (Trigwell et al., 2005), and associated a higher-level understanding of the subject matter with a student-focused understanding of teaching (Prosser et al., 2005).

In contrast to the wealth of studies on academic teachers’ conceptions, less attention has been given to how students conceive of teaching. Kember et al. (2003), Bradbeer et al. (2004) and Cheng et al. (2016), who investigated distance education students, geography undergraduates and student teachers respectively, found that students’ conceptions of teaching are aligned with particular conceptions of and approaches to learning. Kember et al. (2003) in particular reported that students with reproductive conceptions of learning prefer didactic teaching, whereas ‘self-determining’ students prefer facilitative forms of teaching.

A second cluster of studies has focused on understandings of ‘good teaching’ in particular rather than ‘teaching’ in general. Entwistle et al.’s (2000) study of student teachers revealed that more complex conceptions of teaching emerge when experience is integrated with knowledge. Song and Chen’s (2012) study of physical education student teachers concluded that students’ views combine traditional Chinese ideas about excellent teachers with more recent ideas about student-centred approaches. Päuler-Kuppinger and Jucks (2017) found less sophisticated epistemological beliefs associated with conceptions of good teaching that focus on the teacher and information transmission. Finally, Virtanen and Lindblom-Ylänne (2010) and Parpala et al. (2011) explored conceptions of good teaching among first-year bioscience students and reported categories that centre on knowledge, the teacher and the student. While they elaborated these categories, Virtanen and Lindblom-Ylänne also acknowledged limitations arising from the use of questionnaires in terms of eliciting meaningful responses from students. Moreover, with the exception of Päuler-Kuppinger and Jucks (2017), all of the studies in this second cluster sampled particular groups of students (distance students, student teachers, first years) within a single discipline. The earlier studies in this cluster were also developed at a time when the discourse of teaching excellence was less ubiquitous than is now the case.

In light of the above, this article aims to address limitations of previous studies on students’ conceptions of teaching by:

1. seeking to elicit students’ conceptions of excellent teaching in particular, rather than teaching in general;
2. gathering accounts from students across a range of disciplines, rather than within a single discipline;
3. offering an empirical account of students’ conceptions in the context of the increasing ubiquity of the teaching excellence discourse in higher education today.

***Rationale and aim of the study***

In summary, both of the aforementioned critiques contest the neutrality of the teaching excellence discourse and frame teaching excellence as a ‘normative’ notion which often disregards context. The current study takes these contestations into account and aims to explore undergraduate students’ conceptions of excellent teaching. Such an investigation is important, since earlier work contended that teachers’ and students’ approaches to teaching and learning were connected to their respective conceptions of those activities, and were associated with the quality of students’ learning outcomes (Kember et al., 2003). By aiming to explore the different ways in which undergraduate students understand teaching excellence, this article therefore aims to offer an account of what students understand as ‘excellent teaching’, beyond a priori categorisations, metrics-based assessment exercises and policy declarations.

**Methodology**

***Context***

In one of the most concrete examples of the implementation of teaching excellence initiatives, the UK government has introduced a national Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in an attempt to improve prospective students’ ‘consumer choice’ (DBIS, 2016). The TEF has attracted comment from several angles, all of which have increased the scrutiny of the nature and purposes of teaching excellence (Ashwin, 2017). At the time when the current study was being conducted (2018), the TEF was in its second iteration. The first TEF results (June 2017) classified universities into three tiers, with a further round of assessments released in June 2018. The exercise measured ‘teaching quality’ (consisting of ‘student engagement’, ‘valuing teaching’, ‘rigour and stretch’ and ‘feedback’), ‘learning environment’ (consisting of ‘scholarship, research and professional practice’ and ‘personalised learning’) and ‘student outcomes and learning gain’ (consisting of ‘employment and further study’, ‘employability and transferable skills’ and ‘positive outcomes for all’) (Department of Education, 2017).

This paper reports on semi-structured, phenomenographic interviews with full-time undergraduate students at two English universities. The two institutions were deliberately chosen to reflect differing missions and statuses within the UK’s hierarchised higher-education structure: one was a research-focused selective institution (RFS), and the other a teaching-focused access institution (TFA). The RFS was characterised by a research-intensive environment and a mission to ‘excel’ in research internationally while offering a research-based curriculum. The TFA, on the other hand, embraced a ‘teaching-focused’ mission with clearly delimited scope for research activities. Teaching quality indices classified the two institutions at opposite ends of various league tables, with the RFS benefiting in these classifications from selective admissions at entry. The economic resources of the RFS vastly exceeded those of the TFA, with a subsequent impact on the type of student support and opportunities afforded by each institution. The RFS recruited predominantly from White, more privileged social class backgrounds, while the TFA mostly recruited students from lower-middle and working-class backgrounds, with a significant proportion from ethnically/racially minoritised communities.

Within these local contexts the methodological design of the study took account of objections to frameworks such as the TEF which often view student satisfaction surveys and employability-related outcomes as poor proxies for teaching excellence (Matheson, 2019).Consequently, it was crucial to choose a methodology that prioritised how students described excellent teaching. The role of the author was then to interpret the students’ interpretations, i.e. to interpret accounts of excellent teaching from a second-order perspective (Marton & Booth, 1997). Trigwell (2010) asserts that good teaching is the convergence of a combination of elements: a student-centred focus, drawing on teacher’s strategies, planning, knowledge, conceptions and reflections, and their interaction with the learning and teaching context. An awareness of variation within the parameters set by Trigwell could therefore be used to illuminate critical aspects of teaching and learning environments. Purposive sampling was thus intended to maximise the variation in the experiences of students from the two different contexts. Ethical approval was gained through local approval processes. Individuals were anonymised prior to data analysis and identified by a letter and a number (P01, P02 etc.). A £15 voucher was given to each participant in recognition of their time.

A screening questionnaire was completed by 515 students (343 from the TFA and 172 from the RFS). Individual students were then invited for interview based on their responses to questions about their year of study, full-time or part-time study mode, gender, and whether/how often they had experienced excellent teaching during their time at university. Participants were selected by eliminating responses from students who reported that they had not experienced excellent teaching or were not full-time students, or who did not provide an email address for invitation to an interview. Students with no experience of excellent teaching were excluded because phenomenographic interviews require participants to have immediate experience of the phenomenon at hand. Eligible student volunteers were invited to describe an instance of excellent teaching, and asked questions to elicit the intentions and meanings that underlay their descriptions (e.g. *what does excellent teaching mean to you? What do you think is achieved by excellent teaching?*). Thirty-two students (20 from the TFA and 12 from the RFS) attended interviews, which lasted between 25 and 50 minutes. A satisfactory range of disciplinary backgrounds reflected the sampling strategy: law, business studies, medicine, education, social work, English, media and biosciences students from the TFA; accounting, philosophy, biology and languages from the RFS. Table 1 presents an overview of responses collected from the questionnaire, as well as the interview participants.

The analysis began by reading the transcripts so that ‘meaningful utterances’ were marked out. These extracts were separated from the individual transcripts and collated to form a ‘pool of meanings’ (Marton, 1986). An iterative reading of the extracts focused on similarities and differences between and within relevant sections. Extracts that revealed aspects of students’ conceptions (Harris, 2011) were annotated, and preliminary descriptions were drafted. The iterative readings continued, and extracts were moved across categories where this was essential to establish the categories of description. The provisional results and ‘pool of meanings’ were independently examined by an external reviewer with experience of conducting phenomenographic research. This reviewer was asked to examine whether the data from the pool of meanings supported the formation of the categories of description. The reviewer produced a report on the validity of the categories of description and the structure of the outcome space. The report formed the basis of a discussion of the findings, and amendments were made to the initial results where necessary.

[Table 1 near here]

**Table 1. Participants: screening questionnaires and interviews**

**Results**

The analysis produced a hierarchical set of five categories of description, ranging from less (category A) to more advanced conceptions (category E). Students understood excellent teaching in five qualitatively different ways:

1. Excellent teaching is about the optimal presentation of the subject matter.
2. Excellent teaching is about being taught by an excellent teacher.
3. Excellent teaching is about enabling and achieving an understanding of the principles of the subject matter.
4. Excellent teaching is about questioning knowledge.
5. Excellent teaching is about bringing about change in the discipline.

***Category A: optimal presentation of the subject matter***

Students’ accounts within this category of description point to an understanding of excellent teaching that centres on the presentation of the subject matter. During interviews, students at both universities highlight the importance of breaking down the taught material and delivering the right amount of content at the right pace, and place emphasis on the structure of teaching presentations. Teaching is perceived to be excellent when content is tailored to the students’ needs and enriched with material outside the prescribed curriculum, as one student’s account indicates:

Perhaps having different tasks throughout the lesson, so it’s not all that we have to focus on stuff that’s being lectured to us, but sessions are perhaps broken up into different parts and that might lead onto another discussion, but not letting us go too far off the subject. In some ways the presentation just seems perhaps more engaging somehow. (P07, social work, year 3, female)

Nevertheless, there is no explicit consideration of how the presentation of taught topics relates to students’ learning or understanding.

***Category B: being taught by an excellent teacher***

Within this category, ‘excellent teaching’ and ‘excellent teacher’ are conceived as coterminous. Interviewees consider an excellent teacher to be a teacher who is knowledgeable, engaging and able to create a climate of equity in the classroom. Such teachers are enthusiastic, diagnose students’ needs, motivate them, and facilitate their growth and development. While there are consistent references to how important it is for a teacher to be knowledgeable and abreast of recent developments in their discipline, this understanding is not explicitly linked to the research status of the lecturer or the recognition of the importance of a research-led curriculum. The strong link between ‘teaching’ and ‘teacher’ is exemplified in this response from a medical student:

Excellent teaching happened actually towards the end of first semester, where we had a new teacher. She was so different to what we had before. What she did was, she teaches from her knowledge, which still means that she’s covering what the topic is about, but then you think, okay, this person knows what she’s talking about. (P08, medicine, year 2, female)

A distinct quality of such a teacher is the ability to engage with students, and to allow discussion and interaction. A philosophy student illustrates this aspect of the category:

Seeing someone else who is also very engaged with it, so that I am able to be engaged with it as well, by having a lecturer with whom I can discuss, because I could have just read books on metaphysics, watched videos, but instead I chose to take a course, because I didn’t want this to be a thing on my own, which would also have been more difficult without support. Not only the support and teaching aspect, but also the discussion, being able to discuss with the lecturer, being able to extract knowledge from him, tell him my ideas and have them processed and then have feedback given back. (P32, philosophy, year 2, male)

It is also evident in the response above that the teacher is seen as the source from which knowledge is ‘extracted’. However, what that knowledge is and how it is imparted to students do not appear to be negotiable.

***Category C: enabling and achieving an understanding of the principles of the subject matter***

Category C represents a view of excellent teaching as a means of enabling and achieving personal understanding. Expanding from the previous category, the focus of these students’ awareness is on how knowledge can be applied, and how it relates to the real world. In contrast to category B, students seem to assume a more active role in the process of gaining knowledge. Excellent teaching is understood to be conducive to rearranging elements of the taught material so that it can be understood by the students. The emphasis, however, is not on content per se, as in category A; rather, the emphasis shifts from the taught material to the students’ personal understanding, and to how comprehensively they understand the subject matter. It is only through such an understanding that they will be able to discover the principles behind the facts, and to learn how these principles relate to each other.

Their role in the session is to engage the students, and to at least teach the students how and what goes on within the cardiovascular system. And make them aware of how and the causes and effects and what harms and how it works, because it’s important to understand how things work, and it’s important to understand what happens if this happens or if this goes wrong. (P05, medicine, year 2, male)

Another account more explicitly states the importance of demonstrating an understanding of the principles of the subject matter in law:

You’ve got notes, you’ve got a very vague understanding, you then have, I guess, the tools to go home, pin it all up on a wall, and you can piece it together and rearrange and build a foundation [of] understanding. Like I said before, facts are wholly irrelevant in the grand scheme of it. You can’t just say, ‘Oh yes, X happened, that’s why it happened’. You have to be able to demonstrate an understanding of principle. (P10, law, year 1, male)

***Category D: questioning knowledge***

Accounts in this category point to the importance of questioning existing knowledge. Students’ accounts underline the relative nature of knowledge, and demonstrate an awareness of the existence of different perspectives on the taught subject matter. Excellent teaching is seen as a means of critically exploring relationships within the taught content and questioning the origins of the knowledge sources. The role of the teacher is perceived to be limited in this category. Accounts consistent with this conception are evident in disciplines where students are expected to question knowledge as part of the curriculum and professional practice. These perspectives emerged during interviews with law and humanities students, as the following description illustrates:

Then she showed us some article extracts and what different critics had said, and was like, ‘Do you agree with this?’, and we were like, ‘I don’t know. I mean in some ways maybe, but also no, but hmmm, oh this is so difficult’, and she was like, ‘Good, it’s supposed to make you ask questions’. (P12, English, year 3, female)

Nevertheless, participants studying for degrees in more applied fields of study also offer evidence of this understanding of teaching excellence. This social work student discerns the importance of ‘different ways of thinking’ and associates it with professional practice:

Well, in social work, it’s a very grey area, and there’s not always a black and a white. It’s about thinking about things in different ways, thinking about different possible solutions for people. And it’s about questioning things. It’s not just taking something on face value and saying, well, that’s how it is. It’s about being able to recognise and challenge discrimination and things that might be fed to us as ‘this is the answer’ when in fact it’s not always. (P16, social work, year 3, female)

Similar responses are given by students in more applied fields at the selective university too:

So, if it’s something more concrete or something more absolute, like an accounting module, most things are quite clear whether this is right, because it’s more to do with maths. But on a concept, such as ethical frameworks and ethics, there are always conflicting thoughts, and people have their own opinions. So, I guess these two things might come in conflict with what was originally intended to be taught and then this is different. So, having excellence as a whole would be the ability to understand that there are many schools of thought, not just what you are teaching, but at the same time how these discussions facilitated to be learning, and to recognise both schools of thought. (P25, accounting, year 2, male)

***Category E: bringing about change in the discipline***

Change is foregrounded in students’ accounts in this category of description. Excellent teaching is understood to bring about conceptual change and contribute to the rediscovery of existing ideas and processes of disciplinary thinking. This process can be seen as an expansion of awareness from the previous category, which was about questioning taught content and knowledge. However, while there is a strong focus on the importance of changing disciplinary knowledge, in this category it also leads to changes in individual students’ lives. The process may entail intellectual or professional change, and is often associated with reflective accounts of the outcomes of perceived excellent teaching, and in more general terms of the effects of education.

Yes, because what is the point of a teaching that does not change? If it’s a continuous chain of concepts that have already been discovered and you’re just, like a parrot, keep on repeating it. So that will be like the base then, everyone will achieve that, but then what is everyone going to do with it? There will be no progress in the field. (P11, English, year 3, female)

In one of the most vivid student accounts in this category of description, the same student – a final-year student studying English in the TFA institution – further elaborates on her thoughts regarding the importance of bringing about change. The italicised words in the extract below highlight her awareness of the less advanced conception:

*To me, excellent teaching is a complete understanding of the student, based on which the lecture or the seminar is taken, based on the level of understanding*. But at the same time, the lecture or the seminar isn’t supposed to be any kind of discussion or one-way teaching, without coming to any conclusions or without drawing out any conclusions that weren’t made before. Because sometimes students mention or draw links to other things that the lecturer never thought of, so it’s like a productive discussion. *So, for excellent teaching, there should be understanding,* and there should be something new, like you should be able to draw a conclusion. The conclusion doesn’t have to be different every single time, but it just is that new concept, any kind of new concepts or a new idea. (P11, English, year 3, female)

Congruent accounts of the importance of change emerge across disciplines, as the following perspective from a biosciences student demonstrates:

Because it’s not just about ABC, it’s about what is between and how it actually works in life. Because now, what we do is just logging some information into our brains, just increasing the amount we have, but we don’t actually learn about how this information was obtained in the first place. Because what we’re supposed to do as scientists is to create something new, and you can’t create something new unless you are standing against someone else who was before. (P18, biosciences, year 3, female)

The outcome space (Table 2) depicts the structural relationships between the five qualitatively different ways of understanding excellent teaching, i.e. the structure of the conceptions. Categories are represented in an order which is hierarchical and inclusive. The highest-order category represents the most advanced understanding of the phenomenon, and it therefore includes the other four categories.

[Table 2 near here]

**Table 2. Outcome space: referential and structural aspects of undergraduate students’ conceptions of teaching excellence**

The most advanced conceptions demonstrate an awareness of the less advanced conceptions. The reverse, however, is not evidenced: there is no discernment of more advanced aspects of the phenomenon in accounts consistent with less advanced accounts. For example, the fifth category (compared with other categories) includes and expands upon the previous categories. Awareness that an excellent teaching environment may facilitate change prerequires an awareness that it may also facilitate the optimal presentation of the subject matter (category A), the presence of the teacher as an agent of excellence (category B), the individual students’ understandings of what is taught (category C), and the questioning of what is taught (category D). The same applies to category D: the questioning of knowledge can only be facilitated after comprehension of the principles of the subject matter has been achieved and so on. Conversely, the least advanced understanding of the phenomenon (category A) demonstrates the limitations of students’ experiences of excellent teaching. While it is recognised that the presentation of the subject matter is an important aspect of excellent teaching, this recognition is not associated with the teacher’s role as an agent in the process, or with understanding, questioning and changing the subject matter (categories B, C, D and E).

There are thus categories *unrelated to understanding* (A and B), categories *related to understanding* (C and D), and a fifth category *related to change* (E). A conception of excellent teaching that is unrelated to understanding focuses on aspects of the teaching and learning environment, such as the methods of presenting the taught content, or the methods and qualities of the teacher; but these are not seen in conjunction with the advancement of personal understanding of the taught material.

On the other hand, conceptions that are related to understanding are aware of aspects of the environment that are conducive to excellent teaching, but they shift the focus onto whether those aspects are conducive to students’ own understanding of the subject matter. Grasping the principles of the taught material may lead to the development of a relativistic view of knowledge, as well an epistemological curiosity about how forms of knowledge are acquired and represented. Lastly, a conception that is related to change denotes an understanding of excellent teaching as a matter of change. Comprehension of the subject matter is deemed to be important only insofar as it enables the transformation of established ways of thinking about the discipline, and to a lesser extent of established ways of producing disciplinary knowledge.

**Discussion**

This study has identified variation in how undergraduate students experience excellent teaching in the context of two higher-education institutions in England. The data was generated during a period of policy focus on teaching excellence and the introduction of government metrics to measure selected aspects of teaching and student outcomes. Similar initiatives are under way in several national higher-education systems, and the results of this study might offer them useful insights into what students understand as excellent teaching. This section of the paper discusses the contribution of the study in terms of empirical findings and practical implications.

In terms of the empirical results, students’ accounts represent a hierarchical expansion of awareness: from a focus on ways of representing the subject matter, to how such representations are mediated by the teacher, and thence to how understanding might be achieved. More complex conceptions expand this focus to include the questioning of received disciplinary knowledge, and by extension the transformation of knowledge structures and perspectives. In relation to previous literature, the results show some agreement with previously reported students’ conceptions of *learning* (Marton, Dall’Alba & Beaty, 1993) and *teachers’* conceptions of teaching (González, 2011). However, contrary to previous work on students’ conceptions of teaching (Entwistle et al., 2000; Kember et al., 2003; Virtanen & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2010), this study does not see students’ conceptions of teaching as merely a function of their conceptions of learning. Rather, the findings present an opportunity to explore the congruence between students’ and teachers’ conceptions of teaching.

While there is a substantial body of literature on the association between conceptions of and approaches to learning and the quality of learning outcomes, there is no empirical work on whether a congruence between students’ and teachers’ conceptions of learning and teaching contributes to the achievement of high-quality learning outcomes. It is reasonable to assume, however, that a mismatch between the two is not conducive to the achievement of such outcomes. Kember and Kwan (2000) argued that changes in teaching were unlikely to happen without changes in how teachers conceived of their own teaching. The current study highlights the potential for such changes to occur in tandem with changes in students’ conceptions – an effort that will require the intentional design of teaching strategies. This presents opportunities for students to be involved in the constitution of the subject matter, rather than simply playing their part in ‘student-centred’ learning. It also calls for an approach to academic development that encourages academics to explore what they teach, and how they can reorganise and interpret disciplinary knowledge, rather than simply acquire pedagogical skills.

The introduction to this paper highlighted the contribution of previous studies that have explored the relationship between teachers’ conceptions of teaching and how they understand their subject matter (Martin et al., 2000). This study opens up a potentially fruitful new line of enquiry by focusing on *students’* understanding of the subject matter. Most importantly, the hierarchy of categories of description found in this study shows that an incremental expansion of students’ awareness of the nature of teaching is internally related to the expansion of their understanding of the nature of disciplinary knowledge. This paper has not explored any causal relationship between the two, but there does appear to be an internal relationship between students’ understanding of teaching and how they understand the (re)presentation (category A), problematisation (category D) and change (category E) of the taught subject matter. Thus, students’ conceptions of excellent teaching focus not only on *how* they are taught (pedagogy) but also on *what* they are taught (curriculum, subject matter, disciplinary knowledge). Crucially, their focus on the representation, questioning and change of the subject matter emerges in the context of what they perceive as conditions for excellent teaching. Academic teachers should therefore be aware not only that they (re)constitute their subject matter as they teach it (Prosser et al., 2005), but also that similar processes occur on the students’ side too. Arguably, if students are simultaneously aware of the nature of the teaching *and* of the subject matter, it is reasonable to expect that an advance in the understanding of one will lead to an advance in the understanding of the other.

This might also be an area where teaching excellence discourses can be more effectively contested. This contestation will be of interest to those who critique teaching excellence as a set of operationalised neoliberal discourses and practices. Any efforts to improve teaching must address improvements in the processes through which the subject matter is chosen, presented and reconfigured in dialogue with diverse bodies of students. There can be no teaching excellence without an intentional appreciation of these aspects of students’ understanding of the subject matter. In this regard, initiatives such as those to decolonialise curricula (Luckett, 2016) and link teaching excellence with ‘epistemic equality’ (Hayes & Cheng, 2019) are timely and relevant. Fostering these links warrants a holistic reconsideration of aspects of curriculum design and validation, teaching evaluation, teacher/teaching excellence awards and academic development.

Another important practical implication of these findings is that current institutional metrics do not equally take account of all aspects which undergraduate students perceive as excellent teaching. Student evaluations currently form a core dimension of teaching excellence metrics. However, out of 28 items in the 2020 UK National Student Survey (Office for Students, 2020), only two concern what students believe about the presentation of the subject matter (i.e. ‘making subject interesting’ and ‘exploring ideas and concepts’). This requires revisions to account for a wider set of dimensions that students perceive as conducive to excellent teaching.

Finally, it is worth noting that this study was not designed to address ontological aspects of the phenomenon (*is there such a thing as excellent teaching?*). The study was premised on the assertion that the phenomenon exists or can be realised, and this premise was validated through a screening questionnaire where students were able to report whether they had experienced excellent teaching. It is important to acknowledge a strength and a limitation of the above premises. The choice to mirror policy terms such as ‘teaching excellence’ in the research risked shifting the focus away from language and interventions that might lead to meaningful learning experiences for students. However, it can be argued that it was only by adopting this language that the deficiencies and contradictions of the discourse could be exposed, and the focus turned towards aspects of teaching and learning that verifiably matter to students, teachers and academic communities. In particular, policy discourses regarding university teaching are preoccupied with *outcomes* (e.g. student satisfaction or employability), but students’ accounts in this study of what constitutes excellent teaching point to the significance of *processes*: how the subject matter is chosen and represented, what the lecturer brings to the teaching process, how a student’s understanding is supported, and to what extent the questioning and transformation of knowledge is facilitated. Students’ expectations of desirable outcomes are closely connected to their desire to improve their engagement with the taught material and the potential contribution of that engagement to their personal understanding.

**Conclusion**

Two mains critiques of the teaching excellence discourse were presented in the introduction to this article: an ideological and a contextual critique. Both critiques consider teaching excellence to be a normative concept. Normative expectations are evident in the accounts of the students interviewed for this study. The results present an internal hierarchy of conceptions of teaching excellence that institutions might draw upon if they wish to engage their students in meaningful learning experiences. While some of these conceptions are widely acknowledged as crucial (e.g. enabling understanding), others are less prominent in institutional interventions and policy discourses (e.g. teaching is excellent when it leads to the questioning of existing knowledge). The conclusions of this study therefore underline the importance of taking such conceptions into account as educationally useful and essential markers for students to achieve higher-order learning outcomes and redefine the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge.

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