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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Teaching ‘Excellence’ and Pedagogic Stratification in Higher Education

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This paper discusses how dominant discourses of neoliberalism intersect with teaching and learning practices, and considers the implications of this for both widening participation goals and for social equity agendas in higher education. Drawing on the concept of ‘pedagogic stratification’, we examine the discourses of ‘teaching excellence’ as these are enacted in interviews with senior academics across 11 universities in England. We describe how the pervasive discourses of neoliberalism prioritise market-oriented objectives, inciting university leaders to evidence ‘world-class’ teaching through rigid assessment frameworks. Engaging a Foucauldian analysis, we discuss how a discourse of ‘teaching excellence’ can function as a ‘regime of truth’ that operates to discipline (institutional and individual) practices and subjectivities, restricting conceptions of teaching, and limiting opportunities for critical pedagogies. We argue that the neoliberal discourses of teaching excellence identified in our analysis resonate across an increasingly globalised and marketised international higher education landscape and are enacted in tension with widening participation and equity goals, not only in England but also more widely.

*Keywords:* teaching excellence; pedagogic stratification; critical pedagogy; Foucault; equity

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#### Pedagogic Stratification, Equity and Excellence

Higher education is in a state of flux and uncertainty, with profound changes taking place, driven largely by the forces of global neoliberalism. These changes include a shift in the very understanding of the purpose of higher education, from a commitment to a broader notion of the public good<sup>1</sup> to a ‘relentless promotion of employability’ effecting student expectations of teaching and learning (Williams, 2013, p. 89). The intensification of individualism, connected to ‘the neoliberal assault’ (Rhoads & Szelenyi, 2011, p. 28), further reinforces discourses that the beneficiaries of higher education are mainly self-interested individuals, who are consumers of a market and are thus free from the social constraints of gender, class and race. Across Australia, New Zealand, the US and much of Europe, higher education pedagogy has become linked to private interests rather than the contribution to students’ ‘ability to negotiate the political, economic and social dimensions of human experience’ (ibid, 2011, p. 20). The discourses and technologies of neoliberal globalisation have placed pressure on institutions to strive towards becoming ‘global universities’ and to position themselves as ‘world-class’, competing for the ‘best students’ in a stratified market driven by discourses of ‘excellence’ and league table rankings. Against this highly competitive and increasingly commercialised landscape, contradictory policy concerns to

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of the ‘public’ good’ is contested and there is not fixed meaning; however, we suggest that it is concerned with a notion of social improvement and justice that has reach beyond individual participation in higher education (for a fuller discussion of higher education and the public good, see Chambers and Gopaul (2008)).

widen participation (WP) have become well-established across many national contexts, which place expectation on universities to illustrate their value through their diverse student body.

Our research examining ‘pedagogic stratification’ in UK higher education has revealed that discourses of teaching ‘excellence’ have become hegemonic and are couched largely in a performative framework (Stevenson, Burke & Whelan, 2014). In this framework, higher education is considered as ‘amenable to performance measures’ (Skelton, 2007, p. 18) and is ‘symptomatic of an ever-present contemporary desire to measure higher education performance by means of systematic criteria and standardised practices’ (Little & Lock, 2006, p. 3). Our research evidences the ways in which ‘performative modes of assessing teaching excellence potentially preclude deeper consideration of pedagogical issues, while the absence of meaningful engagement with issues of pedagogy in institutional documentation sidelines core issues of teaching, and detaches pedagogy from issues of equity and inclusion’ (Stevenson, Burke & Whelan, 2014, p. 5). There has been a lack of attention then to the challenges of pedagogical participation<sup>2</sup>, and the ways that universities might support the participation of diverse groups through developing inclusive cultures and frameworks, or how current practices might be exclusive through standardising and homogenising practices, which aim to fit the student into the dominant culture and framework.

In this paper we use this concept of ‘pedagogic stratification’ (Stevenson, Burke & Whelan, 2014), to provide a contextual analysis of 11 English universities in relation to the broader policy and political frameworks that shape teaching and learning. Although the analysis is specific to the national and institutional contexts in which the universities studied are situated, wider themes that relate to globalisation have resonance across international HE contexts related to widening participation and equity concerns. A major critique emerging from the international field of higher education studies is that HE is being profoundly reshaped by global neoliberalism, driven by economic imperatives to develop ‘global, entrepreneurial, corporate, commercialized universities’ (Morley, 2011, p. 224). Neoliberal imperatives have justified moves to marketise higher education, with league tables, branding, discourses of ‘excellence’ and competition for students framing such moves. Neoliberalism assumes the political superiority of non-interventionist states and individualism, with specific implications for teaching in higher education. Carlos Alberto Torres explains that ‘Neoliberalism has created ‘a new common sense’ that has percolated into all public and private institutions and, by implication, despite their own autonomy, into institutions of higher education’ (Torres, 2013). This has seen the:

‘increasing penetration of market forces into higher education and the reorganization of university governance around ‘playing the game’ of academic capitalism .... In this context the market becomes the Trojan horse for undermining academic autonomy by ostensibly nonideological and noncoercive means based on the interest of the ‘consumers’ of education and research’ (Morrow, 2006 cited in Torres, 2013)

This neoliberal commonsense increasingly overshadows the ‘social and cultural objectives of higher education generally encompassed in the conception of higher education as a ‘public good’ (Naidoo, 2010, p. 71). Connected to this, increasing levels of managerialism, performativity and marketisation are eroding the potential of higher

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<sup>2</sup> In using the term ‘pedagogical participation’, we are signaling a broader concern with equity issues in higher education that include attention to equity in teaching and learning.

education to contribute to equity and social justice (ibid., p. 74). Equity and quality are bound up and both have the potential for erosion in the new marketed order (ibid., p 75). Highly stratified systems are being crafted, with market mechanisms deployed to 'exert pressure on universities to comply with consumer demand' (Naidoo 2003, p. 250). Teaching in higher education is reduced to the language of the market, including 'delivery', 'style' and 'distinctiveness' and to notions of consumer demand and satisfaction. Learning is 'delivered' through different educational packages provided by institutions that are positioned as competitors in the business of higher education (Williams, 2013).

University leaders face increasing levels of pressure to produce evidence that their institution provides 'world-class' teaching, competing in a stratified field driven by aspirations for 'excellence' and to be ranked at the top of the global and national league tables. Part of the pressure is to demonstrate their contribution to widening participation through developing explicit equity agendas. Yet simultaneously, the process of widening participation to social groups who have been historically under-represented are often perceived as posing a direct threat to the quality and standards of teaching and learning (Shaw et al., 2007). These imperatives, pressures and expectations place considerable dilemmas for university leaders who are negotiating multiple demands, pressures and expectations, not least to demonstrate their 'excellence' through restrictive technologies of discipline and control. One of the few areas of consensus among commentators on this recent reconfiguration of the higher education landscape is that the current intensification of marketisation will lead to greater institutional stratification (Brown & Carasso, 2013). Our own research (Burke, 2012; Whelan 2013) indicates how such stratification has informed widening participation policy and practice, changed the student profile and impacted on the student experience. Within this stratified marketplace, and among an expanding diversity of higher education providers, little attention has, however, been paid to how processes of institutional stratification may intersect with teaching and equity practices. Through the concept of 'pedagogic stratification' we aimed to consider the diversity of teaching and learning approaches across the sector, while simultaneously exploring how particular pedagogical approaches might be enabled or constrained by institutional 'type'. Paying close attention to the intersection of institutional stratification with teaching and equity through the concept of 'pedagogic stratification' enabled us to analyse how particular types of institutions may relate to different conceptions of 'teaching excellence' and 'the student experience' adopted across the sector. In this way, we address the gap noted by Gunn and Fisk (2013) in exploring how 'teaching excellence' is discursively enacted across a differentiated and stratified HE sector. Through this focus on 'pedagogic stratification' we aim to attend to the diversity of teaching and learning approaches across the sector, while simultaneously exploring how particular pedagogical approaches might be enabled or constrained by institutional 'type', as well as differentiation/ stratification in terms of subject/disciplinary area.

### **Discourses of 'teaching excellence'**

In the contemporary shifting landscape of higher education policy reform, the rise of marketisation and its league table culture is profoundly impacted upon academic practice and subjectivity, including teaching. This has led to an (over)emphasis on (particular forms of) student evaluation, with evaluation practices and discourses largely shaped by performance management technologies. Student evaluation has become part of a wider set of technologies of regulation in which individuals and institutions become ranked and stratified through marketisation techniques, including through a range of evaluation and assessment measures. Evaluation and assessment regimes have become a normative and taken-for-granted part of

academic life and are a primary tool of embedding a culture of performativity (Ball, 2001), rather than a way of developing deeper and richer pedagogical understanding and praxis (Freire, 1972).

Student evaluation sits in a narrow and rigid framework of 'quality' of teaching and learning and creates mechanisms for the regulation of academic labour and identity. It could be seen as a panoptic device, disciplining academic behaviour, subjectivity and sensibility. For example, Rosalind Gill (2014) cites the example of one HE institution in which any academic who is rated poorly by her or his students will be subjected to a series of formalised disciplinary procedures, marking that individual academic out as requiring correction and registering that person as a potential threat to the standards upheld by the institution and ultimately to the institution's standing in the market. Taken on face value, this might appear a wholly rational way of ensuring that students receive good quality education for their money, as fee-paying consumers who are entitled to expect certain standards in exchange for their investment. However, the evaluation instrument is crucial in terms of the kinds of 'results' produced, including how 'quality' and 'standards' are being conceptualised in relation to 'teaching' and 'learning'. A decontextualised, homogenised, performative and skill-based conceptualisation of teaching and learning translates into particular forms of 'quality' and 'standards'. As Lorenz (2012) comments, under current neoliberal modes of quality assessment 'someone can be an excellent teacher and researcher and at the same time be assessed as poor by the QA [Quality Assurance] system" (p.619). Indeed, what counts as a 'quality' education will differ significantly across any one student's perception (although perceptions are formed through social discourses, identities, values and perspectives) as well as the ways the evaluation tool is structured and framed.

In relation to this, pedagogical experience is dynamic, relational and complex and is dis/continuous across space/time<sup>3</sup>. The same person might simultaneously experience a particular pedagogical moment in a range of ways. It could be experienced as a struggle, as unfamiliar, as exciting, as rewarding, as dis/connected or as transformative and compelling. Learning is a deeply relational process and quite often a pedagogical moment might become significant for the student long after the moment took place<sup>4</sup>. It often takes time to make sense of new ideas, or to begin to feel a 'mastery' of a body of knowledge, and the process of learning might feel un/comfortable or un/settling. In other words, pedagogical experience cannot be straightforwardly measured not least because it is entangled with subjectivities, processes of becoming, discursive formations and is necessarily emotional (Clegg & Rowland, 2010; Leathwood & Hey, 2009). Learning is a process of trans/formation, (en)count(er)ing new and challenging ideas, thinking about complex problems and issues, making connections between experience and subject/disciplinary knowledge. Learning can be painful as well as pleasurable and is enmeshed with desire and aspiration (McWilliam, 1996). Pedagogical experiences are not only personal or individual; they are connected to social differences, auto/biographies, subjectivities and cultural expectations and are shaped by earlier pedagogical (his)stories and memories, which include residues of emotion. Pedagogical experiences are also connected to power, with power 'generated, exercised and struggled over within lived social spaces such as classrooms and lecture theatres' (Burke, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Pedagogical experience refers to the relational and discursive experience of teaching and learning.

<sup>4</sup> By 'pedagogical moment' we are referring to the temporal experiences of teaching and learning and suggesting that experiences are not fixed and static 'truths' or 'facts' that can be easily measured at a particular moment in time. Rather experiences are discursively produced and fluid, so that our memories and narratives of that 'moment' in time might change over time.

## **Pedagogic Stratification, Regulation and Power**

Foucault offers a framework for conceptualising power across multiple contexts and positions and spaces, for example the person (subject), the institution and the wider trans/national contexts. Power is exercised within institutional spaces through technologies of regulation, discipline and control. Power and knowledge are always connected through discourse; the ways in which meaning is given to contested perspectives of social worlds and to sensibilities of the self. Discourse is ‘a structuring of meaning-making whose major characteristic is its disciplinary and hence regulatory power’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 22). Discourse defines what can be included and is constitutive of knowledge, rather than a reflection of a pre-existing ‘truth’. Discourse (power/knowledge) produces ‘regimes of truth’, which profoundly shapes the meanings and understandings we give to concepts such as ‘widening participation’, ‘teaching’ and ‘excellence’. Indeed, these discourses themselves have exclusionary practices as part of their effects (Nicoll & Feje, 2008, p. 5). Regimes of truth regulate subjects and their actions, which are then reproductive of those same regimes of truth. ‘All knowledge, once co-implicated with action, has real effects, and in that sense becomes true, or more accurately counts as true’ (Edwards, 2008, p. 23). As Burke and Jackson have argued:

It is the constitution of knowledge claims as ‘truth’ that is linked to systems of power: those who have the power – institutionally as well as individually – to determine and legitimise ‘truth’ also have the power to determine dominant discourses. This exercising of power happens so thoroughly, so powerfully, and so ideologically, that the political nature of discourses becomes hidden (Burke & Jackson, 2007, p. 6).

Foucault also emphasises the power of processes of subjectification, which take place within institutional contexts. He says:

If I tell the truth about myself, as I am doing now, it is in part that I am constituted as a subject across a number of power relations which are exerted over me and which I exert over others (Foucault, 1988).

Foucault illuminates the complex processes in which the subject is both subjected to and subject of relations of power/knowledge. He highlights that a range of insidious technologies of subjectification are at play within institutions, in which the subject is individualised, categorised, classified, hierarchised, normalised and provoked to self-surveillance and discipline/ing.

The metaphor of the panopticon provides a powerful illustration of this process. Foucault draws on Bentham’s architectural device, the panopticon, to shed light on the complex operations of power within institutions that are no longer tied to an individual authority figure but rather ‘a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relations in which individuals are caught up’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 202). Foucault explains that ‘whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 205). The panopticon is a useful theoretical tool to shed light on the ways that subjects are caught up in complex relations of power both within and beyond institutional spaces. Here we draw on research funded by the UK’s Higher Education Academy to explore the how these technologies of power are shaping pedagogical practices as well as the implications for those individuals on

whom such behaviors are being imposed. We focus on the diversity of teaching and learning approaches across the sector, while simultaneously examining how particular pedagogical approaches might be enabled or constrained by institutional 'type' (Stevenson, Burke & Whelan, 2014).

## Methodology

An overarching aim of our research was to collect the different, and competing, understandings that individuals bring to discourses of 'excellence' in order to deconstruct and problematise the ways that discourses are constraining, shaping and making possible different forms of pedagogic practice in the context of a stratified HE landscape. We operationalised institutional type within an increasingly diversified English higher education sector through a novel typology, which incorporates a range of relevant factors. These factors were developed through an extensive literature review of higher education research and policy documents. Factors which comprised the typology, and which are relevant to this paper<sup>5</sup>, included: institutional self-identity (for example, institutions self-identifying as either 'teaching' or 'research' institutions); market position; size of institution; mission group alliance; national teaching funding allocations as a proportion of the overall recurrent grant allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England; location; undergraduate student demographics (notably including the proportion of undergraduate students from 'widening participation' target groups); and National Student Survey (NSS) scores.

Eleven universities were purposefully selected against our typology for institutional type. The 11 case study institutions were chosen to reflect the diversity of higher education institutions in England across the range of factors used in the typology described above. The vice-chancellors, or equivalents, of each institution gave permission for the research to be undertaken and ethical approval for the research was given by both the Higher Education Academy and the host institution of the principal investigator via their institutional procedures for research ethics. The institutions that took part were provided with an information sheet and consent form which provided ethical guidelines. We have given each institution a pseudonym to further protect its identity<sup>6</sup>.

A critical discourse analysis of the websites and key teaching-related documentation of each of the 11 universities was undertaken, enabling the identification of how universities position themselves in terms of their institutional self-identity and their market position; over 350 'front-line' teaching staff were surveyed to explore how such institutional positioning and conceptualisations are being played out at 'grassroots' level. These findings will be reported in more detail elsewhere. Here we present an analysis of 33 semi-structured interviews undertaken with three senior academics in each of the 11 universities. The senior academics interviewed were responsible for institutional strategy relating to teaching and learning. All of the interviews were transcribed and anonymised and these were then read and re-read across the 11 case studies to identify emergent themes. The themes were identified in relation to the project's aims and research questions, as well as key literature in the field. These were then categorised under sets of overarching themes, including for example 'purpose of HE', 'quality', 'responsibility and positioning', and 'institutional identity'. To preserve anonymity 'Senior Academic' is used to refer to all those interviewed.

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<sup>5</sup> Further details about the typology developed for this project are provided in another publication (see Stevenson, Burke & Whelan, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> A detailed description of how the 11 case study institutions were selected for this project using the typology is provided elsewhere (see Stevenson, Burke & Whelan, 2014); this includes a description of the pseudonym used for each institution.

## **Excellence as regime of truth**

The interview data illuminates the disciplinary technologies, which regulate and govern subjects and their practices, as a form of panopticon. Our analysis suggests that 'excellence' operates as a 'regime of truth' to profoundly regulate ways of thinking about teaching and widening participation in contemporary universities and as a panopticon to regulate the discursive positions, subjectivities and practices available to senior leaders. For example, one senior academic talks about the 'belief' in providing an 'excellent student experience' through developing an institutional ethos. He explains that this supports university lecturers to 'deliver' teaching in ways that address current policy demands while avoiding too much individual and institutional investment. Within this regime of truth, there appears to be an imperative to manage emotions – for example making sure that change is not 'too scary for staff'. The management of emotion is seen as being facilitated through putting in place certain mechanisms, such as virtual learning environments and library resources. He explains:

It's the ethos of the institution so there is an expectation that teaching will be good and that we will provide a good, excellent sort of student experience so there's that element...There's the commitment of individuals who are operating at different levels within the institution so it's making sure that everyone's aware of things that are changing, of how you can deliver teaching, thinking up different ways of getting the message through to all the academic staff and that they can develop their teaching without necessarily a huge upfront investment which is always the scary bit for staff, they think 'oh, I've got to do a lot more work', it's thinking about the, supporting it as I said with the physical resources so making sure things like the VLE and thinking of learning through their learning through the library and so on. So, again, it's institution ethos is the easy way of encapsulating it but that sort of does in a way, it's, the institution has to believe in it. (Industrial University, Male Senior Academic).

The concept of 'belonging' has been central in critical research on widening participation (Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003) and this seems to have bled into the discourses of management, but by reframing 'belonging' in utilitarian ways. Creating a sense of belonging could be argued to function as a mode of market manipulation; manipulating the desire to belong to a particular university, or 'brand', and this might be connected to the expressions of pride often articulated in the Senior Academics' accounts. Managing excellence in teaching was often described as about managing a sense of belonging to the institution, both for students and for staff, and this was seen as important in gaining positive student evaluation responses.

It's also making sure that the students are engaged much more widely with the institution for your part of it, feel they belong (Industrial University, Male Senior Academic).

And I suppose what we're finding, much like everyone else, is that where staff and students interact well and there's a sense of academic community and a sense of belonging and the staff and students are all in it together then you get much, much, better student satisfaction ratings (Southern University, Female Senior Academic).



Quality is a central discourse in constructing an institutional identity in a stratified higher education market. Concerns with quality are related to positioning in league tables, so that teaching is viewed as a marketable good for the university positioned at the top. This is a performative view of quality, which prioritises outputs, rates and measurements above detailed attention to what quality in higher education pedagogy might mean, for example in relation to wider questions about the purposes of higher education and its relation to knowledge construction, equity and the public good. The ultimate aspiration is to exceed satisfactory levels of quality and to be positioned as 'excellent'. Yet the precise articulation of what might be seen as 'quality' and 'excellence' in teaching was absent in the interview data.

Interviewer: What do you think are the challenges that Industrial faces in relation to teaching and learning?

Senior Academic: First and foremost I would say it's to maintain the high quality. The way in which students have reacted to teaching and learning at Industrial is well demonstrated in the NSS results where every year since 2005 we've come in the top ten universities...so I think it's quite a tough call to say 'you've got to do as well as your records suggest and go even better in terms of the work that you're doing' so I do think that becomes really important (Industrial University, Male Senior Academic).

Although there was a lack of clarity about what teaching quality or excellence might mean, Industrial University strongly constructed its identity as related to the synergy between research and teaching, in which maintaining a top position in the National Student Survey was seen as an important part of their market positioning and of equal significance in terms of their research profile.

Being 'research intensive' was central to some university self-identities, not least in terms of their market position. For example, at Historic University, research intensity was identified as a key strength, providing 'intellectual liveliness'. This was seen to enable the University to recruit 'good students' described as 'keen', 'bright', 'quick learners', 'ambitious' and 'hard workers'. Similarly, this attracted 'high quality, research active staff' providing the institution with high levels of 'intellectual capital'. The implications of this for widening participation were not recognised by the Senior Academics interviewed. However, research shows that the privileging of particular kinds of attributes, and the ways that this is recognised in relation to embodied identities (connected to age, class, gender, ethnicity and race), often leads to the exclusion of those who come from socially excluded groups (both in terms of students and staff)(Southgate & Bennett, 2012; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003).

For universities aspiring to raise their research profile, teaching takes on a particularly crucial role in market positioning and in forming institutional identity. Suburban and South Western, for example, have a history of teacher education, which for Suburban has become a foundation for the development of a distinctive market position. South Western, on the other hand, is concerned with the label of being a 'teacher education' institution. South Western emphasises its commitment to employment-based routes as a means of facilitating access to higher education and Suburban positions itself explicitly as characterised by its diverse student body and its achievements in widening participation. Some universities such as Modern position themselves in relation to their innovative teaching approaches, including using digital technologies and being on the cutting edge of distance learning. North Western prides itself as a 'teaching-intensive university' and carves out an identity in relation to their

virtual learning environments and their commitment to student employability and their 'vocationally-oriented' departments. However, this again points to the limitations of neoliberal accounts of both teaching and widening participation, in which institutional stratification shapes the different kinds of higher education available to different 'kinds' of students, thus perpetuating institutional, as well as wider forms of social, stratification. Those who come from more privileged social backgrounds are more likely to participate in those institutions that are positioned and position themselves as 'research-intensive', whilst those from traditionally under-represented social backgrounds are more likely to participate in those institutions that are regarded as 'teaching-led' (Reay, David & Ball, 2005).

Thus discourses of excellence impact differently on universities in relation to their institutional identities and market positions. The struggles over achieving excellence in teaching is often articulated in terms of being competitive in the market of higher education, and this involves branding the institution in some way that marks it out as 'distinctive'. As all universities are competing over the same forms of measures of excellence, though, the drive to be positioned as standing out and offering students something unique or different is presented as almost impossible. An academic explains the way that 'excellence' is an impossibility as everyone strives for it and it becomes meaningless and reduced simply to a standard:

...excellence is one of those words which, I think probably needs a context so if excellence is used by everyone for everything, it becomes nothing. And if it's nothing it's just standard (Cathedral University, Male Senior Academic).

There is an inherent tension in the drive to be distinctive, because ultimately neoliberal discourses operate to standardise and homogenise the measurement of excellence – being an Other kind of institution might mean therefore not being recognised as excellent and indeed being positioned as sub-standard. There are hegemonic measures of excellence at play and the recognition of excellence depends on the citation of these: for example, producing global citizens with graduate attributes.

Every university wants to be distinctive, at the moment, it's quite hard to be distinctive (laughs) against other post-92, you know, top of the post-92 pile I suppose is where we would put ourselves. And things that were distinctive, so we would say very confidently a decade ago we were a student centred institution and that meant something different and now everyone's a student centred institution so that doesn't mean so much now. I think, what else makes us distinctive, apart from being reasonably good, I think, I think the global citizenship. I mean the official answer is our graduate attributes, that's what we're supposed to say and the development of the graduate attributes which took place over a year or more was our conversation about what made us distinctive, that was where we had that big conversation, right, now some of those graduate attributes looked fairly similar to anyone else, you know, academic literacy, critical personal self-awareness, you might expect to find those anywhere. I think we were really pleased to get global citizenship in there, I think that's quite an ambitious thing about being distinctive and the research literacy graduate attribute, we have five, came from a lot of work that we'd done previously on linking teaching and research and that, I think, makes us quite distinctive (Southern University, Female Senior Academic).

## Notions of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’

Through our analysis of the discourses of ‘teaching excellence’ and ‘student learning experience’ emerging from the case studies, we identified a wide range of words and phrases that were re-cited in the accounts of senior leaders. These included for example ‘holistic learning’, ‘creating independent learners’, ‘providing opportunities for extra-curricular activities’, ‘employability’, ‘developing skills’, ‘student engagement’ and ‘student-centred teaching’.

However, the Senior Academics struggled to explain the meanings behind these words and phrases, which were re-cited as part of the everyday discourses and practices used in universities. In other words, these words and phrases were largely taken-for-granted rather than signifying an interest in the complex processes of intellectual, pedagogical, identity and emotional work of learning and teaching. The discourses circulating ‘teaching excellence’ operate as a panopticon to regulate senior academics’ relation to pedagogical concerns in the institutional space. For example hegemonic discourses at play in the wider discursive field emphasising ‘effective teaching’ and ‘student engagement’ as signifiers of ‘excellence’ regulated the possibilities of articulating the kinds of pedagogical concerns available. This is highlighted by the restrictive accounts of what might count as ‘effective’ teaching.

...taking care with the teaching, making sure that your teaching is effective and that the students are responding to it and are engaged with it and thinking about different ways of delivering material (Industrial University, Male Senior Academic).

‘Student engagement’ emerged as a hegemonic discourse in shaping understanding of excellence in teaching, but when Senior Academics were asked what this entailed, a rather thin notion of ‘student engagement’ was presented. Typically, this was described as about involving students in engaging with the virtual learning environment and available resources. Working in groups and interacting with staff were seen as learning tools but the value of student collaboration for developing richer levels of understanding across cultural and social differences was not a key feature of their accounts of ‘student engagement’. More complicated pedagogical questions connected to equity and widening participation, for example in relation to epistemic access, challenging exclusionary practices and perspectives, and recognising the experiences, values and perspectives of students from historically under-represented backgrounds were largely absent from the accounts, with some momentary exceptions. For example, there were moments when the complexities of pedagogical practices emerged in the accounts, against performative, neoliberal forms of teaching as ‘delivery’. There are resonances in the following account with Freirean critiques of mainstream educational practice, and what he named ‘banking education’ (Freire, 1972). The female senior academic below acknowledges that teaching excellence is a tricky concept that involves complex questions of student agency in relation to imposed structures, such as learning outcomes and programme handbooks. Learning, she explains, is an active process. However, in the context of the privileging of neoliberal forms of quality, which regulate practices and identities, it is difficult for a critical discourse of teaching to be sustained. Inevitably, her account returns to the prominence of quality assurance frameworks for thinking about what counts as teaching excellence.

In terms of provision of it because, I mean, we see experience as a kind of active thing, you know, that the student is an agent in that, not just a passive receiver of an experience and part of the problem with this issue was whether you can just say you are providing, you know, you can say ‘well, my handbooks are clear and my lectures are coherent’ and, you know, and therefore we must be providing a

student learning experience whereas I think we would see the student as a much more active agent in, it's a two way thing, and the student has to be engaged as well in order to experience. So excellence is tricky with something that involves at least two actors, so I mean you could look at the QA procedures and you could say 'oh, that's an excellent course', yes, but that's not necessarily an excellent experience because the students are also influenced by their peers and their accommodation and all sorts of things which are nothing to do with our provision so, yeah, tricky. We've been working much more closely, I have to say, with our Quality Unit over the last couple of years to make sure that every course through our normal quality assurance procedures tries to get some way towards excellent (Southern University, Female Senior Academic).

The data reveal that the student learning experience is largely considered at the level of individual student development, reinforcing neoliberal individualising discourses. Broader concerns that might move beyond personal or individual development and employability, to also consider, for example, the contribution of higher education to the public good and/or social justice and equity, are largely ignored (Naidoo, 2015).

So I think the principle, I'd come back to, we're after developing the individual and we're aiming to develop individuals not who get a specific job but who will be employable and who will enjoy work and achieve great things in work or research (Historic, Male Senior Academic).

### **Impact of institutional self-identities on institutional pedagogic approaches**

The extent to which institutional subjectivities impact on pedagogic approaches is largely constrained by the hegemonic discourses of the changing higher education landscape, which are embedded in neoliberal perspectives that emphasise competitiveness, status and reputation in a global HE market. Examples of such discourses include 'quality' and 'standards', related to the National Student Survey, 'student experience', emphasising individual and personal development, and 'employability', reinforcing the expectation that the major role of universities is to prepare students for work and respond to the needs of industry.

In the hegemonic order, market positioning makes a difference in terms of the resources available to universities. This in turn contributes to the ways that universities might be able to build or sustain a competitive position. Resources emerged in most of the accounts as a major issue in a changing HE landscape, where competition for students depends on the ability to expand buildings, resources, staffing and infrastructure.

There's probably a resources issue in terms of physical resource, you know, rooms, technology and all that. I mean we're busy spending money like crazy of course down that end of the campus which is all good news. You know, we're just building a massive new teaching block so that's probably a bit of a challenge to get hold of the money, get the planning, get it up and running as quickly as possible but the university's been going with it like crazy. I mean that building was only started about nine months ago and it's due to be ready in October so we're going for it (Historic University, Male Senior Academic).

So I think probably the challenges are less in how you could do things, more in having the time and the resources to really develop the provision (Industrial City University, Female Senior Academic).

Additionally, institutional identity and positioning in terms of ‘research-intensive’, ‘teaching-led’ and ranking in the league tables makes a difference in terms of pedagogical relations and practices to some extent. For those institutions positioned at the top of the league tables, pedagogical relations seem to be founded on certain assumptions about and expectations of the staff and the student body; that staff and students alike are ‘high achievers’ and are ‘highly motivated’. Academics, who are expected to be highly established researchers in their fields, are also supposed to demonstrate their excellence as teachers. At both Coastal and Historic this is seen as involving mentoring of early career academics, who might have very little or no teaching experience, by senior academics with extensive pedagogical experience. At Coastal, there is a sense in which balancing research and teaching in the changing funding framework is a major challenge not least with an expectation to demonstrate ‘cutting edge’ approaches, with students as partners in this process:

I think there are tensions for the whole sector particularly for research intensive institutions about the balance between teaching and research and in a sense the research intensive institutions some of the additional fee money is inevitably going to be predicated against research so there is an issue for those institutions for keeping up the quality of education. And for me, it’s how to actually keep education and the student experience as really as good as it can be and as cutting-edge as it can be and to involve students in that so they are not only at the cutting-edge but they’re helping to drive it (Coastal University, Female Senior Academic).

At universities that are not research-intensive, teaching takes on even greater significance in terms of market positioning.

Well I’ve always thought a university like Suburban which has its kind of roots in teacher education should be excellent at teaching. And we have pockets of world class research and obviously we’re aiming to, you know, improve that in the next REF [Research Excellence Framework] but our teaching’s got to be excellent because of our history and because of the fact that we’re, you know, we’re not a Russell Group university and all that kind of thing (Suburban University, Female Senior Academic).

However, how this might translate into different forms of pedagogic practice is difficult to ascertain from the accounts, not least because of the hegemonic discourses that are drawn on to describe and discuss excellence in teaching across all of the accounts.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have argued that the disciplinary discourses of global neoliberalism, which intersect with multiple political forces and policy formations, tightly regulate teaching in higher education. This shapes and constrains the ways that ‘teaching’ is understood; with ‘excellence’ becoming a regime of truth that reduces pedagogies to market-oriented imperatives and frameworks. Excellence also forms a kind of panopticon in which senior

academic subjectivities are formed, restricting their relationship with pedagogic concerns. Our analysis reflects earlier reviews of higher education policies, which found that teaching excellence was strongly linked to performative frameworks and tightly bound to “reputational concerns on the ‘world’ stage” of higher education (Little & Locke, 2006,

p.49). Our analysis also evidences the discursive enactment of the ‘dark side’ of ‘teaching excellence’, which Layton and Brown (2011) describe as:

the masking of the material conditions that can only allow excellence to emerge unequally across increasingly differentiated institutions; atomising academic practice through fostering rival teaching/research ideologies; and trivialising excellent teaching as something that has easily identifiable dimensions, which it does not (Layton & Brown, 2011, p. 164)

However, counter-hegemonic discourses associated with critical pedagogies were momentarily evoked in the academics’ narratives, suggesting a richer and more complex view of teaching, excellence and quality. Such discourses were connected to aims of transforming subjectivities, lives and practices and were implicitly connected to counter-hegemonic discourses of higher education as a public good. Yet there was a marked absence of any connection between teaching and widening participation or the potential contribution of higher education to social justice and transformation, with a strong emphasis in the data on individual transformation with a focus on employability.

We know that in an age of performativity and accountability, university lecturers are often overwhelmed by the multiple demands on their time. Our research has further illuminated how individualism together with excellence as a regime of truth operates as a powerful mechanism to regulate practices and block pedagogic imagination. It is thus important that we find ways to engage those in more powerful institutional positions, such as senior academics, in processes of developing inclusive pedagogical spaces to challenge enduring inequalities. However, such inequalities are not simply about creating opportunities for the ‘brightest’ students to gain access to higher education, regardless of social background. Rather redressing inequalities in higher education requires creating pedagogical spaces that recognise difference and ensure that all HE participants experience parity of participation. Pedagogies might be reconceptualised as the breadth and depth of relations we engage in, which include formations of power/knowledge and meaning-making processes as well as processes of becoming and remaking. Such frameworks are not restricted to the logics of the market but are concerned with the relationship between knowledge production and wider questions of global well-being (Naidoo, 2015). This requires participants not only to analyse and critique hegemonic discourses of ‘teaching excellence’ but to create possibilities for re/imagining ‘excellence’ in ways that support social justice agendas. Amartya Sen (1998) points out that:

it is important to understand the complex connection between academic excellence and social equity. Rather than seeing the two as being in deep tension, we have to appreciate more fully how academic excellence promotes social equality, and how the advancement of social equity in turn may help the cause of academic excellence. (Sen, 1998)

Excellence is not necessarily in tension with equity. Indeed, a critical re/conceptualisation of ‘teaching excellence’, which addresses that pedagogies are always relational and tied to the power/knowledge nexus, would emphasise that excellence and

equity are bound together. Teaching excellence demands deep connections to be made with equity, explored through the lens of difference, reflexivity and relationality. Teaching in higher education is relational, tied to the dis/continuities of difference and power and situated within complex histories and dynamic spaces. A re/worked framework of ‘teaching excellence’ connects participants to a collective process of (re)imagining through engaging

difference and drawing on methodologies that foreground meaning as relational process, always tied to dynamic, generative and productive formations of power. Aspirations for pedagogical forms of 'excellence' must attend to the complexities that diversity and difference pose as part of any project for equity in higher education.

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