

## **Pedagogic stratification and the shifting landscape of higher education**

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# Pedagogic Stratification and the Shifting Landscape of Higher Education

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With thanks to Dr Paula Sealey and Dr Josef Ploner



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# I. Executive summary

This report presents research funded by the Higher Education Academy as part of its open call that looks at ‘The impact of the shifting UK HE landscape on learning and teaching’.

## I.1. Context

A major critique emerging across higher education studies is that higher education is being profoundly reshaped by its marketisation, with league tables, branding, discourses of ‘excellence’ and competition for students framing such moves. In the contemporary context of English higher education there is increasing pressure for universities to position themselves as ‘world-class’, to compete in a highly stratified field driven by discourses of ‘excellence’ and league tables. Against this highly competitive and hierarchical landscape, policy concerns to widen access to, and participation in, higher education have (re)emerged, with a further emphasis on employability, development of skills and competencies for an efficient and competitive workforce in the context of global knowledge economies. Within this increasingly stratified higher education 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 approaches to teaching and learning.

## I.2. Methodology

This research uses the term ‘pedagogic stratification’ to analyse how institutional type may relate to different conceptions of ‘teaching excellence’ and ‘the student experience’ adopted across the sector. Through the focus on ‘pedagogic stratification’ it aims 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’. The research questions were, therefore:

1. How do diverse universities position themselves in terms of their institutional self-identity and their market position?
2. How do these same universities conceptualise notions of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’?
3. How (if at all) do institutional self-identity(ies) impact on institutional pedagogic approaches?
4. What, if any, dis/continuities are there (or do there appear to be) between institutional approaches and pedagogic practices?
5. What are the implications for the sector?

The research also examines how widening participation policies may have informed teaching and learning across different institutions.

Eleven English universities were selected against an innovative sampling matrix for institutional type. 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, and their approaches to ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with three senior academics in each of the 11 institutions. The interviews allowed the exploration of how universities conceptualise notions of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’ and how institutional self-identity(ies) impacts on pedagogic approaches. Also over 350 ‘front-line’ teaching staff were surveyed to explore how such institutional positioning and conceptualisations are being played out at ‘grassroots’ level, as well as to identify any dis/continuities between institutional approaches and pedagogic practices.

## I.3. Overall findings

**Positioning:** The discourse analysis of website and institutional strategies evidences a strong and consistent reliance on, and valorisation of, league tables, rankings and neoliberal modes of institutional performative assessment, as well as a foregrounding of the dominant, contemporary discourses of competitiveness, status, reputation and the globalisation of higher education. Furthermore, the dominance of league tables and rankings reinforces sector stratification, further entrenching long-standing institutional hierarchies, while the pressures of

marketisation appear to be cultivating competition between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) rather than encouraging collaboration.

**Excellence:** The institutional documentation evidences a performative approach to excellence, which views teaching excellence as something that can be quantified, codified and thus rewarded. The discourses of 'teaching excellence' and 'the student experience' are typically incorporated as unelaborated/uncontested buzzwords across these institutional discourses, also reflected in many of the interviews with senior staff.

For senior academics, as evidenced in the website discourses, the struggles over achieving excellence in teaching focuses on being competitive in the market of higher education, which involves branding the institution in some way that marks it out as distinctive. In contrast, within the lecturers' accounts, excellence is frequently related to the micro-practices of enabling individual students, through critical pedagogies, to achieve their potential. Thus excellence in teaching is inward-facing, achieved through a focus on the individual student and away from outward-facing discourses of distinctiveness, with an associated rejection of league tables and market positioning. For these academics the drive to be distinct and to attain a particular market positioning has little currency; indeed there was a strong resistance against league tables and market positioning. It is unsurprising, therefore, that many lecturers also reject outright the concept of 'excellence', which they frequently describe as a term that had been co-opted and evacuated of pedagogical meaning.

**Widening participation:** the institutional documentation reveals a relative absence of references to widening participation, even in those institutions traditionally regarded as very committed to such activity. This is concerning since it appears to confirm the view amongst some of those academics surveyed that the institutional 'appetite for' widening participation has waned.

**Discontinuities:** the 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. Conversely, in the lecturers' accounts, issues of equality and equity are at the forefront of discussions around teaching excellence, and excellence in terms of the student experience. It is notable, however, that the term 'excellence' was frequently rejected or contested by some staff, whilst others claimed that 'teaching excellence' had become synonymous with 'student satisfaction' in ways which rendered both terms vague and ambiguous. In addition, a strong theme across the survey data was that the status of teaching had not improved, particularly given the recent focus on the Research Excellence Framework. Indeed, there were claims that the status of teaching had actually fallen.

**Stratification:** the overall picture relating to 'pedagogic stratification' is, therefore, a complex one with institutions both striving to distinguish themselves as distinct while, at times, homogenising their approaches to teaching excellence, pedagogic practices and the overall student experience. In contrast teaching staff appear less concerned about institutional market positioning whilst striving to offer distinct pedagogic approaches to enable their own students to achieve positive outcomes and postgraduate success.

#### 1.4. Implications for the sector and for students

1. The espousal of performative modes of assessing teaching excellence, by some senior academics, potentially precludes deeper consideration of pedagogical issues so that teaching risks becomes technicist and performative rather than critical and transformative.
2. The ways in which 'excellence' is, at times, regarded as something that can be quantified or codified runs the risk of standardising teaching and assessment practices and, potentially, suppressing diversity and innovation of pedagogic approaches.
3. The dominance of league tables and rankings in institutional discourses may reinforce sector stratification, and thus risk benefitting the best resourced institutions and further entrenching long-standing institutional hierarchies.
4. The lack of clarity around what 'teaching excellence' is and whether it is desirable may render the term largely redundant and meaningless for both staff and students.

5. The articulation of relatively superficial accounts of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student experience’ risks a lack of meaningful information being made available for prospective students around pedagogical practices at HEIs.
6. The absence of meaningful engagement with issues of pedagogy in institutional documentation risks sidelining core issues of teaching and learning.
7. The pressures of marketisation risk leading HEIs to compete against each other rather than encouraging collaboration across HEIs. As institutions are motivated to be individual ‘winners’ in a competitive sector, this, in turn may hamper collaboration in terms of developing pedagogical innovation.
8. Whilst the processes of marketisation may lead to investment in high-class facilities (new buildings, libraries, digital technologies), they also, potentially, may deflect resources from widening participation and related social justice activities.
9. The dominant performative modes of assessing institutional excellence (via league tables and institutional rankings) risk neglecting consideration of institutional widening participation achievements and goals.
10. Accounts of pedagogy detached from considerations of social in/equalities, may cause widening participation issues to be further sidelined.

## 1.5. Recommendations

English higher education institutions are diverse and the sector benefits from a certain level of diversity across and between institutions. Nonetheless we suggest that the sector as a whole should adopt the following recommendations:

1. Institutions should think beyond the buzzwords of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student experience’ to engage with deeper issues of pedagogy; this necessitates genuine engagement and dialogue with teaching staff.
2. Senior academics need to create opportunities in higher education for all academic staff (including themselves) to engage in critical reflections on teaching, in order to critique and deconstruct neoliberal discourses and to develop richer, more inclusive and critical pedagogical understanding.
3. Institutional widening participation commitments should connect more fully/meaningfully with issues of pedagogy (teaching and learning practices, including curriculum development and more equitable modes of engagement); similarly issues of pedagogy and curriculum should be supported by national-level widening participation policies.
4. Senior academics and institutional policy makers should engage teaching staff to create and produce institutional documentation that aligns with, and reflects, their pedagogical values and practices.
5. Institutional policy and practice should foster greater institutional consideration of the heterogeneity of ‘the student learning experience’.
6. Senior managers should consider how institutional widening participation commitments can be showcased in institutional documentation and marketing materials, and/or incorporated into markers of institutional ‘excellence’.
7. Institutions should ensure that managerialism and/or marketisation practices do not inhibit the aspirations and commitments of staff working to provide empowering, transformative pedagogical spaces.
8. Institutions should adopt policies to promote collaborative engagement across HEIs to develop pedagogical approaches and share best practices.

We also suggest that further analysis is needed of other forms of institutional marketing to explore how institutional identities are enacted across various media. Moreover, research exploring the perspectives and experiences of students in relation to ‘pedagogic stratification’ and its implications would usefully expand the analysis presented in this study. In addition, it would be beneficial if the research was expanded to explore how the

recent changes to the HE landscape have impacted Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and to compare shifting changes in UK higher education against the international higher education context as well as the impact of private higher education providers on the UK higher education sector.

## 2. Background and context

This project explores the notion of ‘pedagogic stratification’ in the wider context of the changing landscape of higher education (HE) in England. In order to understand questions of pedagogic stratification it is crucial to contextualise any analysis within the broader policy and political frameworks that shape teaching and learning in HE. A major critique emerging across higher education studies is that HE is being profoundly reshaped by global neoliberalism, which is driven by economic imperatives to develop ‘global, entrepreneurial, corporate, commercialised universities’ (Morley, 2011, p.224). Neoliberal imperatives have led to the marketisation of 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 higher education policy and practice. 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 reorganisation 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).

Rajani Naidoo considers how the ‘industry of HE’ has overshadowed ‘social and cultural objectives of higher education generally encompassed in the conception of higher education as a ‘public good’” (Naidoo, 2010: 71). Connected to this, new managerialist and marketised frameworks are ‘likely to erode the potential of higher education to contribute to equity’ (ibid.: 74) and also have implications for quality (ibid.: 75). Neoliberal frameworks favour a highly stratified system, and deploy market mechanisms such as league tables to ‘exert pressure on universities to comply with consumer demand’ (Naidoo 2003: 250). Pedagogies in higher education, in such frameworks, are reduced to the language of the market, including ‘delivery’, ‘style’ and ‘distinctiveness’ and to notions of consumer demand and satisfaction in what becomes an educational package provided by universities competing in the business of higher education.

In this neoliberal context, there is increasing pressure for universities to position themselves as ‘world-class’, to compete in a highly stratified field driven by discourses of ‘excellence’ and league tables. Quality is often in tension with equality and is reduced to measurable outputs. Against this highly competitive and hierarchical landscape, policy concerns to widen access to and participation in higher education have emerged, reinforced by an emphasis on employability, development of skills and competencies for an efficient and competitive workforce in the context of global knowledge economies.

Contemporary widening participation (WP) policy and practice, we would argue, has similarly been (re)developed through the perspectives of neoliberalism (Burke, 2012). Research by Jones and Thomas (2005) identifies ‘utilitarianism’ as the dominant approach to WP across different English higher education institutions, which they call the ‘double deficit model’, which strongly emphasises the relationship between higher education and the economy (Jones and Thomas, 2005: 618). The purpose of HE in the utilitarian framework is reduced to enhancing employability, entrepreneurialism, economic competitiveness and flexibility (Morley, 1999; Thompson, 2000; Burke, 2002; Archer, Hutchings et al, 2003; Bowl, 2003). Broader debates about the purposes of higher education and the public good have largely been overshadowed by the apparent ‘common sense’ of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, however, erases questions of power and the processes by which certain ‘truth’ dominates the development of policy and practice.

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, 2012). Our own research (Burke, 2013; Whelan 2013) indicates how much such stratification has informed widening participation policy and practice, changed the student profile and impacted on the student experience. It remains to be seen how the new BIS National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education (2014) may (re)shape institutional policy and practice. Within this increasingly 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 approaches to teaching and learning. Our research uses the term ‘pedagogic stratification’ to explore this relationship, to analyse how institutional type may relate to different conceptions of ‘teaching excellence’ and ‘the student experience’ adopted across the sector. Through this focus on

'pedagogic stratification' we aimed 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.

The aims of our research were, therefore, to:

1. Explore how institutional type may relate to different conceptions of 'teaching excellence' and 'the student experience'.
2. Explore how particular pedagogical approaches might be enabled or constrained by institutional 'type', as well as differentiation/ stratification in terms of subject/disciplinary area.
3. Explore how pedagogic approaches have been impacted by recent changes to the sector.

## 2.1. The English context

While aspects of our discussion may be applicable to pedagogic issues across the UK, our focus throughout this research has been on England. Higher education is devolved in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and there are significant differences between higher education policies adopted and enacted in the devolved countries compared with those adopted in England. While English higher education policy has been substantially driven by market-oriented policies, Bruce (2012) argues that the 'devolved countries have shown little appetite for the market-based reforms adopted in England' (p.99). Although some commentators suggest that policy convergence between England and the devolved countries will occur in the future (Gallacher & Raffe, 2012), the current differences across countries, (particularly in terms of funding and fees structures, and the social and economic goals driving policy creation) rendered it beyond the scope of this project to examine a cross-national sample. Moreover, as a key focus of our research has been on the rise of marketisation within the English higher education sector and on the implications of marketisation on pedagogy, only English HEIs have been included in our research sample.

## 2.2. Defining Excellence

Gunn and Fisk's recent literature review for the Higher Education Academy (2013) evidences that the concept of 'teaching excellence' remains contested, with the term operating both ambiguously, contradictorily and contentiously.

For their review, however, Gunn and Fisk (2013) drew provisional definitions relating to, and distinguishing between, teaching excellence, teacher excellence, and excellent learning. These are:

- teaching excellence – overall, system-wide conceptions of excellence (with the systems relating to sector, institutions, and disciplines);
- teacher excellence – conceptions of excellence related to individual philosophies and practices that are rewarded and recognised as excellent teaching;
- excellent learning – qualitatively higher levels of understanding and meaning-making from forms of abstract, contextual, and situational knowledge intrinsically linked to both the disciplines studied and the environments in which they are studied.

As Gunn and Fisk note, however, the definitions remain provisional because *'there is actually little consensus in the literature concerning whether the focus is on teaching excellence or teacher excellence and what is meant by excellent learning when considering teaching/er excellence'* (2013, p.19).

In our research, therefore, we intentionally avoided imposing our constructions of concepts such as 'excellence' since we believed that, from a critical sociological perspective, 'excellence' is a discourse (in Foucauldian terms) and is thus, necessarily, subjective, contested and contextual. Our aim, therefore, was to collect the different, and competing, understandings that individuals bring to discourses such as 'excellence' so that we can deconstruct and problematise the ways that discourses are constraining, shaping and making possible different forms of pedagogic practice in the context of a changing HE landscape.

### 3. Methodology

We chose to concentrate on three key focus points of current teaching and learning discourses: accounts of ‘teaching excellence’; accounts of the ‘student learning experience’; and accounts of how recent changes to the higher education landscape have impacted institutional pedagogic approaches. Our research questions were, therefore:

1. How do diverse universities position themselves in terms of their institutional self-identity and their market position?
2. How do these same universities conceptualise notions of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’?
3. How (if at all) do institutional self-identity(ies) impact on institutional pedagogic approaches?
4. What, if any, dis/continuities are there (or do there appear to be) between institutional approaches and pedagogic practices?
5. What are the implications for the sector?

We operationalised institutional type within an increasingly diversified English higher education sector through a novel typological matrix, which incorporates a range of relevant factors, including 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 innovative matrix for institutional type (see Table 1). 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.

Institutional websites and institutional documentation of the 11 case study HEIs were analysed to explore how institutional stratification inflected and shaped approaches to teaching and learning across the sampled institutions. Institutional documentation examined included the Access Agreements of all HEIs for the academic year 2013/14 (11/11)<sup>1</sup> and the Teaching and Learning Strategies where these were available from the institutional websites (7/11). A hybrid approach to discourse analysis was employed, drawing on elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001) and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993; Holt, 2011; Parker, 1992), to explore how discourses of institutional identity, ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student experience’ were negotiated through the documentation examined. This hybrid approach to discourse analysis enabled a critical examination of the language used in the institutional discourses, and attention to the ways in which the language used both reflected and bolstered broader socio-political shifts in the contemporary higher education landscape. To preserve institutional anonymity, direct quotes from the institutional documentation are not used in this report.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with three senior academics in each university responsible for institutional strategy relating to teaching and learning (see Appendix One). These 33 interviews allowed us to explore how universities conceptualise notions of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’ and how institutional self-identity(ies) impacts on pedagogic approaches. 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

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<sup>1</sup> An Access Agreement is an official institutional document that must be submitted by HEIs to the Office for Fair Access, if they wish to charge tuition fees that are above the basic fee level set by the government. An Access Agreement describes how an institution will use the additional fee income to further widening participation agendas. In 2009 institutions funded by HEFCE were required to produce Widening Participation Strategic Assessment outlining what they hoped to achieve in the next three years. From 2012-13 these were changed to ‘Strategic Statements’.

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’. The overarching themes were related back to the project’s key questions and for the purpose of this report these were the first of our three research questions (as described above). To preserve anonymity ‘Senior Academic’ is used to refer to all those interviewed.

Finally, all 11 institutions were requested to send an online survey to all their teaching staff (see Appendix Two). The survey was developed using SurveyMonkey® and administered via email through the institution’s HR departments. There was some difficulty in getting HR departments to agree to administer the email and response rates were relatively low and also patchy across the different institutions. Although 385 responses were received it is not possible to know the response rate as we did not send the survey out directly to staff.

The survey was deliberately qualitative and explored how institutional positioning and conceptualisations of excellence were being played out at ‘grassroots’ level, as well as identifying any dis/continuities between institutional approaches and pedagogic practices. The 358 responses provided over 175,000 words; the 358 responses were read and re-read and utilised as data.

The survey questions were used as the key analytical concepts to analyse the data; this elicited initial discourse strands (or themes) with additional discourse strands arising from this first level analysis; once the strands had been elicited on a macro level, discourse fragments (individual statements) were examined to understand what individual lecturers had to say on a specific discourse strand. The analysis drew on definitions of ‘teaching excellence’, ‘student experience’, ‘excellence in terms of student experience’, what teaching staff regarded as the internal and external drivers shaping the recognition of and achievement of ‘excellence’ and the tensions and challenges that were shaping their pedagogic practices.

Where individual responses have been drawn on, staff have been referred to according to institutional affiliation, position, disciplinary area (drawing on the HEA overarching areas of Arts and Humanities, Health and Social Care, STEM subjects and Social Sciences) and length of time in HE (under five years; between five and ten years; and over ten years).

Table 1: Institutional pseudonyms and demographics

	Pseudonym	Typography
1.	Historic University	Research intensive; very high ranking in league tables <sup>2</sup> and NSS; high ranking in Research Assessment Exercise (RAE); 25% privately educated <sup>3</sup> ; less than 1% former free school meals; one of the highest completion rates; scores very high for ‘good honours’; over 80% ‘graduate prospects’ <sup>4</sup> ; suburban campus; middle third for size.
2.	North Western University	Teaching-led, campus-based, new university; mixed NSS results; mid-league table ranking; low ranking in RAE; over 60% ‘graduate prospects’; almost 10% former free school meals; less than 2% privately educated; scores low for ‘good honours’.
3.	Coastal University	Research intensive; very high ranking in league tables and NSS; high ranking in RAE; over 25% privately educated; less than 1% former free school meals; scores very high for ‘good honours’; over 70% ‘graduate prospects’; in middle third for size; more than one campus.

<sup>2</sup> From The Guardian University rankings

<sup>3</sup> From the Sutton Trust

<sup>4</sup> From the Complete University Guide

Table 1: Institutional pseudonyms and demographics (continued)

4.	Industrial City University	Research-led; high ranking in league tables and NSS; high ranking in RAE; over 10% privately educated; 3% former free school meals; scores high for 'good honours'; under 70% 'graduate prospects; in middle third for size; city campus.
5.	Cosmopolitan University	Teaching-led ; very low ranking in league tables; low NSS results; mid-low ranking in RAE; less than 3% privately educated; over 20% former free school meals; scores very low for 'good honours'; just over 50% 'graduate prospects; in top third for size; multiple campuses.
6.	Specialist University	Specialist teaching-led provider; mid-high NSS; high ranking in RAE; high-level completion rates; scores low-medium for 'good honours'; under 60% graduate prospects; in bottom third for size; single campus.
7.	Modern University	Very high results in NSS; Mid- high ranking in RAE; scores very low for 'good honours'; in top third for size.
8.	Southern City University	Teaching-led; in top third ranking in league tables; mid-point in NSS; almost 30% privately educated; less than 3% former free school meals; scores medium-high for 'good honours'; under 70% graduate prospects; multiple campuses; in middle third for size.
9.	Suburban University	In bottom 20% ranking in league tables; low NSS results; mid-high ranking in RAE; less than 5% privately educated; almost 10%; former free school meals; scores low-medium for 'good honours'; under 60% graduate prospects; suburban campus; in bottom third for size.
10.	South Western University	Teaching-led; very high results in NSS; low ranking in RAE; under 50% graduate prospects; scores low for 'good honours'; in bottom third for size; single campus.
11.	Cathedral University	Mid-high ranking in NSS: Mid-low ranking in RAE; mid-point in league tables; scores medium for 'good honours'; less than 4% privately educated; less than 3% former free school meals; under 60% graduate prospects; bottom third for size.

## 4. Critical Discourse Analysis of Institutional Documentation

### 4.1. Introduction

Institutional websites and institutional documentation of the 11 case study HEIs were examined in depth, focusing on the three key themes of the project: institutional identity, teaching excellence and the student learning experience. Using a hybrid approach to discourse analysis and drawing on critical theoretical debates in contemporary higher education research, institutional discourses were analysed, particularly in relation to processes of marketisation, globalisation and the incursion of neoliberal modes of performativity into the higher education sector. The pedagogical discourses enacted by the HEIs were examined to explore how institutional stratification relates to teaching and learning approaches.

The aims of this phase of the project were to unpack institutional pedagogic discourses, to respond to the key research questions:

1. How do diverse universities position themselves in terms of their institutional self-identity and their market position?
2. How do these same universities conceptualise notions of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience'?
3. How (if at all) do institutional self-identity(ies) impact on institutional pedagogic approaches?

The high level analytical framework detailed below (Table 2) was designed to facilitate an exploration of the overarching research question of how pedagogical approaches are stratified by institutional type. Analytical attention was centred on how accounts of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience' intersected with the presentation and preservation of institutional self-identity. Critical theoretical debates in contemporary higher education research were drawn upon in the analysis, to explore how institutional discourses related to marketisation, globalisation and the incursion of neoliberal modes of performativity into the higher education sector.

Table 2 describes the high level analytical framework adopted for this analysis, detailing the documentation analysed for each key theme and identifying the questions asked of the data. Specific word searches used across the institutional websites are also detailed in Table 2. These word searches were used to provide a relevant set of institutional web pages to discursively analyse the findings. The framework was designed to explore how institutional discourses were textured by, and constructed around, the recent changes to the contemporary landscape of English higher education. Although they are described as distinct categories in Table 2, in analytic practice, the discursive enactments of 'teaching excellence', the 'student experience' and 'institutional identity' were also collectively considered in exploring how pedagogy is stratified by institutional type in the sample analysed. This analysis was used to inform the broader sets of conclusions and recommendations documented in this report. To preserve the anonymity of the case study institutions, direct quotes from the institutional documentation examined are not attributed to the pseudonymised institutions in the presentation of this analysis.

Table 2 High Level Analytical Framework for Analysis of Institutional Documentation

Discourse Dimension	Key documentary sources examined	Questions asked of the data
Teaching Excellence	<p>Institutional websites, specifically: homepage            pages returned by website searches for: 'teaching excellence' 'teaching' 'pedagogy' 'teaching strategy' 'student learning'.            Webpages relating to a dedicated 'teaching and learning unit' (if present).            Teaching and Learning Strategy Documentation            Access Agreement.</p>	<p>Which terms are collocated with teaching? (e.g. 'pedagogy', 'assessment', 'curriculum,' 'research-led', 'world-class', 'international').            How prominent/easily accessible are accounts of teaching strategies on the institutional website? (Where are they located? Are they clearly linked from the homepage?)            How does teaching intersect with descriptions of the 'student learning experience'?            How is institutional identity made relevant in accounts of teaching?            How are approaches to teaching described in relation to widening access and widening participation-related activities?</p>
Student Learning Experience	<p>Institutional websites, specifically: homepage            pages returned by website searches for: 'student learning experience' 'student experience' 'student life' 'learning'.            Webpages relating to a dedicated 'teaching and learning unit' (if present).            Teaching and Learning Strategy Documentation            Access Agreement.</p>	<p>Which terms are collocated with the 'student learning experience'? (e.g. 'customer service', 'service delivery', pedagogy, assessment, curriculum, 'world-class professionals', 'employability')            How prominent/easily accessible are accounts of teaching strategies on the institutional website? (Where are they located? Are they clearly linked from the homepage?)            How is the 'student learning experience' visually constructed through headline images on the institutional homepage?            How do accounts of teaching intersect with descriptions of the 'student experience'?            How is institutional identity made relevant in accounts of the 'student learning experience'?            How is the 'student learning experience' crafted through accounts of widening access and participation activities?</p>
Institutional Identity	<p>Institutional website, including homepage and key webpages describing institutional mission.            Teaching and Learning Strategy Documentation            Access Agreement.</p>	<p>Does pedagogy feature in headline positions in institutional mission statements or on the institutional homepage?            (How) does the institution craft its institutional identity within its Teaching and Learning Strategy and Access</p>

		<p>Agreement?</p> <p>What type of institution does it present itself as – implicitly and explicitly?</p> <p>What role (if any) do ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’ (or related terms) play in the crafting of institutional identity?</p> <p>Is there a collocation of terms which craft institutional identity (including reputation, prestige or status) in terms of pedagogic approaches (e.g. ‘research-led teaching’, ‘university for world-class professionals’).</p>
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## 4.2. Analysis

### 4.2.1. Institutional self-identity and market positions

The rise in the marketisation of UK higher education (Brown & Carasso, 2013) coexists with an intensification of the pressure on many universities to ‘sell themselves’ to potential students. A key promotional tool in such marketing campaigns is the institutional website (Bradley, 2013), which acts as one of the main ways through which prospective students can learn about higher education institutions. The ways in which institutions deliberately craft their identity through their website therefore affords some insight into the requirements of the higher education market, as well as the institutional position within this. The analysis conducted for this project focussed particularly on the institutional homepage and webpages describing the ‘mission’ of the university. As a main entry point for website visitors, the homepage serves a key role in crafting the online institutional identity, while descriptions of the institutional mission afforded a way to explore how institutions explicitly sought to construct and promote a core institutional identity. To examine how institutional identity related to widening participation aims, the Access Agreements of the HEIs were also explored and, where available, pedagogic accounts described in the Teaching and Learning Strategy documents of the HEIs were examined.

#### Rankings and League Tables

One of the key marketing techniques used across the institutional websites was the highlighting of institutional position within established league tables and rankings. Eight of the 11 HEIs in the sample highlighted their position within established university league tables and rankings. Statements about awards typically comprised a main feature on their website, usually highlighted in a prominent position on the institutional homepage. League tables commonly cited included The Times University Guide and The Complete University Guide, and scores from the National Student Survey (NSS) were also frequently invoked. Indeed, citing a league table or ranking position appeared almost to be a discursive inevitability, with institutions frequently showcasing their performance within a particular league table category, even if their overall position in the league table was considerably more modest. Highlighting the competitiveness of the sector, HEIs discursively strove to identify as leaders, frequently invoking terms such as ‘winner’, ‘leading’, ‘top-rated’, ‘highest quality’ and so on.

The prominence awarded to league tables and rankings on institutional websites does not reflect the critical debates occurring among the higher education research community. While higher education researchers have been locked in critical debate about the role and value of rankings, this did not emerge from the discourses presented on institutional websites, where high-ranking positions were proudly announced in prominent positions. There was no explicit contestation of league tables or rankings found across the website analysis conducted. This is particularly notable from a social justice perspective given the problems noted by higher education researchers, who have described how rankings perpetuate social exclusion:

Simply put, the practice of ranking universities can alternatively be theorised as a politico-ideological technology that serves not the educational needs of students or teachers, but rather the interests of the global elite, represented as equality of opportunity for all. (Amsler & Bolsmann, 2012, p. 288).

Moreover, extensive research into the impact of rankings on the higher education system globally by Hazelkorn (2011) has further identified a number of problems, particularly in terms of how rankings tend to entrench existing institutional hierarchies. She describes how rankings:

- tend to shift resources to areas that bolster and enhance institutional prestige;
- ‘amplify the growing gap between elite and mass education’ with negative consequences for social justice and equity agendas;
- perpetuate a very narrow view of excellence;
- make small differences between universities appear great because of the ordinal system they are presented in;
- fuel ‘a demand for elite educational credentials’.  
(Hazelkorn, 2011, p.28; p.78, p.80)

In stark contrast to the abundant attention paid on institutional websites to quantifiable measures of institutional performances in terms of league tables and rankings, there was a notable absence of quantifiable measures of widening participation performances highlighted on institutional websites. While league table rankings were highlighted on the institutional homepages, no such quantitative achievements of widening participation progress were emphasised, even by institutions which performed ahead of sector averages in terms of nationally set widening participation benchmarks (HESA, 2012). Although widening participation performance indicators were provided within the institutional Access Agreements, unlike reports of NSS scores and rankings, widening participation quantitative achievements were not publicly showcased on the institutional websites. This was the case across the sample analysed, despite the range of institutions explored, which included institutions with a history of commitment to widening participation goals and the inclusion of those typically considered ‘widening participation institutions’. In terms of sector stratification, this relative absence of widening participation achievements (compared with the near universal showcasing of positions within established league tables and rankings) is perhaps particularly noteworthy, as league tables further fuel stratification (in ways detrimental to social justice agendas) as described above.

### Carving out a market niche

Alongside displaying their achievements, many institutions actively strove to differentiate themselves in the marketplace, carving out their own particular market niche. While institutions typically positioned at the top of league tables (often problematically termed ‘higher status’ institutions) exhibited discursive homogeneity around notions of their ‘international reputation’ and ‘world-class’ approaches to teaching and research, greater discursive diversity was found across other institutions in the sample. This diversity of discourses adopted across the institutional websites, highlighted the need for some (particularly lower ranked, ‘lower status’) institutions to recruit students in a challenging marketplace.

In their institutional mission statements, ‘higher status’ institutions frequently invoked terms such as ‘world class’ and ‘international reputation’ in describing their teaching and research activities. This allusion to the world stage of higher education not only serves to highlight their institutional prestige, but also suggests how, for these institutions, higher education is now a global arena. These institutions also frequently emphasised their recent research achievements, often through large captioned linked images on the institutional homepage. While these ‘higher status’ institutions typically exhibited discursive similarities in terms of emphasising their international reach and reputation in their mission statements, there was greater heterogeneity between and across the other HEIs in our sample. One HEI highlighted the ‘affordability’ of the education on offer; another highlighted its ‘values-driven approach’; while yet another focused on the ‘distance learning’ it provided.

The stratification of the sector was therefore both discursively reflected and enacted in institutional mission descriptions. 'Higher status' institutions strove to exhibit and bolster their international reputation and research prestige, repeatedly underlining their research achievements and 'world-class' excellence, while 'lower status' institutions worked discursively to differentiate themselves from other HEIs.

#### 4.2.2. Notions of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience'

Focussing on issues of pedagogy, the institutional documentation of the 11 HEIs was examined to explore how institutions conceptualised 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience'. In analysing the key documentation, we examined institutional websites, particularly the institutional homepage and webpages relating specifically to 'teaching and learning' where these were present. These were analysed alongside pedagogic discourses identified within the Teaching and Learning Strategy documents and the Access Agreements of the HEIs.

##### 'Teaching Excellence'

Discourses of 'teaching excellence' invoked across institutional websites documentation were considered in terms of the four approaches to 'teaching excellence' identified by Skelton (2007), briefly summarised as:

- The 'traditional' approach to excellence, which is based on 'mastery of a discipline';
- The 'performative approach' to excellence, which considers education as 'amenable to performance measured';
- A 'psychologised' approach to excellence centres on the 'interaction between individual teacher and student';
- A 'critical' approach to excellence, which 'is inescapably political' and committed to social justice. (Skelton, 2007, p.18)

A 'performative' approach to excellence emerged as the dominant discourse invoked across the institutional documentation. Nine of the 11 top institutional website links returned for word searches on 'teaching excellence' involved awards of some kind. Search results for 'teaching excellence' typically returned links to individual staff teaching awards or award schemes. Rewarding staff for excellent teaching was a common theme throughout the learning and teaching strategies. In one teaching and learning strategy examined, the operational plan for staff was almost entirely comprised of awards-based recognition, focusing on quantitative measures of assessment (e.g. number of staff considered for university teaching awards, number of departments offering teaching awards, number of staff achieving external recognition). Moreover, several of the teaching and learning strategies described 'teaching excellence' in terms of staff reward, development and career progression. In terms of measures of teaching quality, and again with reference to quantified and performative accounts of 'teaching excellence', NSS scores were frequently presented, without recognition of critical debates around the methodological accuracy, utility or conceptual limitations of NSS scores.

Throughout the website descriptions, although it was invoked quite frequently, there was very little elaboration of what was actually meant by the term 'teaching excellence'. Similarly, no challenge was presented to the performative accounts of 'teaching excellence' or to established teaching reward or award schemes. The institutional document therefore thrust 'teaching excellence' firmly into a performative framework, evaluated through established scoring and awards mechanisms. While the term was never explicitly defined, the 'teaching excellence' that implicitly emerged from the institutional discourses was one that can be codified and quantified and for which individual staff and departments could be straightforwardly recognised and rewarded for.

Across the Access Agreements of the 11 HEIs drawn on for the research, there was little elaboration of pedagogical approaches in terms of explicit descriptions of teaching and learning approaches adopted. When the term 'teaching' was used, this was typically to highlight the provision of new teaching facilities (e.g. new teaching spaces, lecture halls, buildings or libraries). Only one institution provided an explicit account of structural changes to its teaching provision aimed at furthering widening participation goals, describing how it had updated the curriculum and tailored its teaching modules in Year One to enhance student progression. These discursive absences in the Access Agreements of the relevance of pedagogical considerations to widening participation goals echoes claims made by higher education researchers about the lack of engagement of widening participation policies with issues of teaching, learning and subject curricula (Burke, 2012).

## ‘Student learning experience’

There was a notable diversity of discourses invoked around the ‘student learning experience’, which intersected heavily with the institutional identities. Throughout the website claims, NSS scores were repeatedly cited as apparent ‘evidence’ of the quality of the student experience and placed in prominent locations on key web pages. Across the websites there was little recognition of how the NSS typically benefits the best-resourced universities with highly selective recruitment strategies, which has obvious implications for social equity in higher education; how the NSS inevitably focuses on what has happened in the past rather than what will be the case once these prospective students, go to university; how it ignores the different needs and characteristics of students; how it exhibits problems of creative reporting; how it is based on a transmission model of education in which students are passive recipients and how it is ultimately based on the flawed idea that students are rational consumers (Brown in Grove & Gibney, 2012). The ‘student experience’ promoted on the websites therefore appeared discursively tied to NSS scores rather than focusing on deeper commitments to pedagogy or social justice.

A diversity of discourses around the student experience was found across the HEIs, which constructed the student experience variously in terms of its international superiority, the diversity of the student body, the high quality of institutional resources and infrastructure, and in terms of the employability skills on offer. Exhibiting the contemporary importance of having a strong international presence on the global stage of higher education, one high status HEI linked the quality of the student experience to its aspiration to be ‘recognised nationally and internationally’. In terms of embracing a diverse student population, another HEI discussed how its student experience would ‘stand out’ because of its ‘socially diverse environment’. However, this celebration of diversity was immediately cast in terms of employability and lauded because it ‘will help launch your career’. Employability and graduate outcomes were a common theme across many HEIs in accounts of the ‘student experience’. Despite the diversity of discursive enactments used to construct ‘the student experience’ across institutions, within institutional accounts there was an assumed homogeneity of the ‘student experience’, which works to “simplify[ing] who students are, where they come from, and what their experiences are” (Sabri, 2011, p.667). This therefore reinforced a “a taken-for-granted abstract and disembodied [the] student experience” (Sabri, 2011, p.667).

In a highly competitive market, Brown describes how new high-quality facilities can become an important selling point for universities (Brown & Carasso, 2013). Institutional discourses exhibited this trend, with many HEIs describing the quality of their facilities and resources (new buildings, ‘first-class’ sports facilities, state of the art laboratory facilities, and so on) in connection with the quality of the student experience on offer. The discourse of providing high-calibre facilities, also featured in the HEI Access Agreements where, in one of the few explicit descriptions of ‘the student experience’, the recent addition of ‘new learning and teaching spaces’ were cited as evidence of widening participation commitment, alongside ‘enhanced leisure and retail spaces’.

### 4.2.3. Impact of institutional self-identities on institutional pedagogic approaches

The identities crafted through institutional documentation exhibited the pressures of the market, highlighting the largely performative approach adopted towards ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’, and showed how the globalisation of higher education intersects with institutional pedagogic discourses. In terms of pedagogical stratification, ‘higher status’ institutions frequently drew on accounts of their prestigious research activities and enacted discursive claims about their ‘world-class’ teaching to signal and bolster their position as key players in a globalised marketplace. This reflected the competitiveness of the globalised higher education marketplace. ‘Lower status’ institutions (those not ranked highly in league tables) enacted a diversity of approaches to differentiate themselves within the marketplace, with some emphasising the ‘affordability’ of the education on offer, while others highlighted the rewards awaiting their graduates. This diversification of provision offered reflected the shifts in market pressures and the requirements for institutions to differentiate themselves from other institutions.

The general endorsement of performative notions of ‘excellence’ was notable across the institutional documentation examined, sitting in stark contrast to debates within higher education research, which contest concepts of excellence derived from a ‘culture of performance management and measurement’ (Gunn & Fisk, 2013, p. 19). Moreover, the focus of recognition and rewarding of teaching staff deemed to deliver ‘high quality’ teaching can be critiqued as individualist, rather than encouraging more collective modes of engagement. There was no acknowledgement of the need to reward teaching teams.

The ‘student learning experience’ was used by HEIs as a key way to promote themselves and differentiate themselves from other higher education providers, and to carve out a space in the marketplace of higher

education. HEIs invoked a diversity of discourses, including discourses of awards, resources, reputation, diversity, employability and frequently highlighting the high quality facilities and resources provided by the institution rather than elaborating or exploring issues of pedagogical approaches. However, as noted above, within institutional accounts there was a presumed homogeneity of student experience, which worked to diminish potential differences between and across (prospective and current) students. This resonates with problematic discourses of 'the student experience' previously identified by higher education researchers (Sabri, 2011).

Discursive silences around pedagogical issues relating to widening participation, notably absent from the learning and teaching strategies analysed, signalled a disjuncture between institutional accounts of teaching and learning, and institutional policies and documentation pledging commitments to social justice goals. Throughout the discourses examined, institutional stratification inflected and shaped conceptions of pedagogy, which emerged in discourses of teaching excellence and the student experience in the documentation and websites examined.

## 5. Interviews with senior academics

### 5.1. Introduction

This section presents an analysis of the semi-structured interviews with senior academic staff (see Appendix 1). Three key themes are explored: 1) institutional identity and market positions; 2) notions of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience' and 3) impact of institutional self-identities on institutional pedagogic approaches. The analysis draws on a Foucauldian framework to conceptualise power at both the level of the person (the individual senior academic) and the institution. 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 the social world and to the self. Discourse is 'a structuring of meaning-making whose major characteristic is its disciplinary and hence regulatory power' (Edwards, 2008: 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 'learning', 'teaching' and 'excellence'. Foucault illuminates the complex processes in which the subject is both subjected to, and subject of, the relations of power. The metaphor of Bentham's architectural device, the panopticon, provides a powerful illustration of this process. Foucault draws on the device 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: 202). 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. The analysis of the senior academics' accounts of the three key themes illuminates such processes by which they are made subject to the regimes of truth that circulate from discourses of 'excellence'. The analysis also shows that there are temporary moments in which senior academics contest neoliberal and performative modes of 'excellence' in their reflections on, and account of, pedagogies in higher education.

#### 5.1.1. Institutional self-identity and market positions

The accounts of academics illuminate the disciplinary technologies of global neoliberalism, which operate as a panopticon to manage, regulate and govern subjects and their practices. A regime of truth, underpinned by hegemonic discourses of 'excellence', profoundly regulates ways of thinking about teaching and learning. For example, in the following quote, a middle manager who is responsible for all the taught programmes in his school, talks about institutional ethos in terms of a 'belief' in providing an 'excellent student experience'. This belief supports teachers to 'deliver' teaching in ways that conform to current policy changes and avoid taking up 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.

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 teaching, supporting it as I said with the physical resources so making sure things like the virtual learning environment (VLE) and thinking of learning through their learning through the library and so on. So, again, its 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 City University, Academic 1, male).

Questions of belonging have been central in research on widening participation (e.g. Crozier, Reay et al, 2008) to redress social inequalities and exclusion and this seems to have bled into the discourses of management, but by reframing belonging in utilitarian ways. Developing a sense of belonging could also be argued 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 academics' accounts. Managing excellence in teaching is, thus,

sometimes described as about managing people's sense of belonging to the institution, both for students and for staff.

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 City University, Academic 1, male).

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 City University, Academic 2, female).

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 pedagogic stratification 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. For example, at no point in the interview did the Senior Academic interviewed at Industrial City University address questions about what 'teaching excellence' or 'high quality teaching' actually might mean.

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

Industrial City University, Senior Academic 3, male: 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.

Although there was little articulation about what teaching quality might mean, Industrial City 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 the same significance as their research profile.

Being 'research intensive' was more important to some universities' self-identities than being 'teaching excellent', 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 senior academics, although 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) (Burke, 2012; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003).

For those other universities aspiring to raise their research profile, teaching excellence and an 'excellent student experience' takes on a particularly crucial role in market positioning and in forming institutional identity. Suburban and South Western Universities, for example, have a history of teacher education, which for Suburban has become a foundation for the development of a distinctive market position, reflected in the academics' accounts. South Western, on the other hand, is concerned with the label of being a 'teacher education' institution. Thus academics at South Western emphasise the institution's commitment to employment-based routes as a means of facilitating access to higher education, and those at Suburban position the institution explicitly as being characterised by its diverse student body and achievements in teaching excellence being related to widening participation. Other senior academics such as those at Modern University position their institution in relation to innovative teaching approaches, including using digital technologies and being on the cutting edge of distance learning, while academics at North Western University describe the institution as a 'teaching-intensive university' carving out an institutional identity in relation to their virtual learning environments and their commitment to student employability and their 'vocationally-oriented' departments. However, these accounts, again, point 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 running the risk of perpetuating institutional, as well as wider

forms of social, stratification. As research evidences, 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', while those from traditionally under-represented social backgrounds are more likely to participate in those institutions that are positioned as 'teaching-led' (Reay, David and Ball, 2005).

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 impossible 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, Academic 1, Male).

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 different 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 City University, Academic 2, female).

### 5.1.2. Notions of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student learning experience'

The discourses of 'teaching excellence' and 'student learning experience' emerging from the case studies include the following key words and phrases:

Holistic view of learning  
Disciplinary differences  
Contributing to national agenda  
Teaching awards  
Creating independent learners  
Providing opportunities for extra-curricular activities  
Employability  
Developing skills  
Small groups  
Creating conditions for excellent learning  
Inspiring  
About discovery  
Passion  
Compelling  
About curriculum and assessment

Graduate attributes  
Assessment for Learning/Feedback  
Student engagement/engaging students  
Student-centred teaching  
Peer and self-assessment  
Developing global citizenship  
Developing students with research literacy  
Team based approaches  
Developing programme/course coherence (moving away from modularity)  
Concerned with/supporting student progression  
As participative (not didactic)  
Promoting independent learning/learners  
Internationalisation  
Good practice  
Reflective practice

However, the meanings behind these discourses are unclear; they almost become buzzwords that are part of everyday commonsense language in universities, rather than words that engage the struggles and intellectual and emotional work of learning and teaching, as well as the processes of constructing legitimate pedagogic identities in a highly competitive and stratified HE market. Questions about the relationship between identity and meaning-making are largely absent in the accounts. Replacing this, are concerns with 'effectiveness', although what might count as effective teaching is not explored beyond references to student engagement.

...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, Academic I, male).

At Historic and Suburban Universities, the notion of 'consistency' of the highest possible standards is one important way that academics articulate their understanding of ways to strive towards excellence. Historic expresses this in terms of providing mentoring so that the 'superstars' support 'the apprentices'. For Suburban, consistency is about ensuring that high standards are consistent across the whole of the institution, and this is supported through the work of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit.

Student engagement emerges as a hegemonic discourse in shaping understanding of excellence in teaching, but again when this discourse is reflected upon, a rather thin notion is presented, which involves engaging with the VLE and using available resources. Working in groups and interacting with staff are seen as learning tools but the value of collaboration for developing richer levels of understanding across difference is not a part of this utilitarian-centred discourse of teaching and learning in higher education. More complicated questions, for example in relation to processes of meaning-making, authority and power and identity and inequality, did not come into the accounts, with some brief exceptions.

Some accounts of teaching suggested a challenge to such hegemonic discourses. For example, an academic from Southern University discusses teaching excellence in ways that suggest richer, more critical views of pedagogical experience and transformation.

An excellent teacher might actually create situations where people discover things, powerfully and learn them and never forget them so it's a much bigger topic than what happens in a classroom, that's just one part of it. We see the drama of the classroom, what we don't see is the curriculum design and the other choreography around it, so excellence in teaching is teaching which inspires learning and maybe which inspires students to just reach a place a bit higher than they thought they could get to when they began (Southern City University, Academic I, male).

It is unsurprising that, given their role, managers are more likely to re-produce the institutional 'party line'; however, there are moments when the complexities of pedagogical practices emerge 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 academic acknowledges that teaching excellence is a 'tricky' concept that involves questions of student agency in relation to the structures imposed, 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 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, we see experience as a kind of active thing, 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 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 City University, Academic 2, female).

In terms of the 'student learning experience', notions of holistic approaches are often cited as the 'range of activities' that are available to students. This might include for example, delivery of teaching, relevance of curriculum, extra-curricular activities and modes of assessment and feedback.

Importantly, it is seen as including but also beyond, the formal classroom experience.

So the student learning experience, I think, needs to be orientated towards the entire experience of the student at university rather than just de-compartmentalising it into one small aspect of their time at university  
(Cathedral University, Academic 2, male).

However, the student learning experience is largely considered at the level of individual student development and thus tended to reinforce 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.

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 University, Senior Academic 3, male).

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

The extent to which institutional self-identities impact on pedagogic approaches is largely constrained by the dominant 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 dominant 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.

A key difference perhaps is that institutional self-identity is largely shaped by market positioning, which 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, 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, Academic 1, male).

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, Senior Academic 2, Female).

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 expected to demonstrate their excellence as teachers. At Coastal and Historic Universities 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 University, 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, Academic 3, female).

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 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, Academic Developer 3, female).

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. Such discourses as stated above include student engagement, e-learning, use of digital technologies, innovation in assessment and being cutting-edge.

## 6. Surveys with teaching staff

### 6.1. Introduction

This section presents an analysis of the responses to the survey sent out to teaching staff in each of the 11 institutions (see Appendix Two). The responses were initially analysed by institution and then the discourse strands and discourse fragments were analysed across institutions to draw out key discourses which are presented below. In addition, where discourse strands were strong in some institutions but not in others, the absence of discourse has also been noted. The analysis focuses on notions of ‘teaching excellence’ and the ‘student learning experience’, excellence as ‘practice’, institutional self-identity and market positions and how lecturers were balancing competing demands (of research excellence, league table positioning, meeting widening participation agendas and implementing new digital technologies). The analysis concludes with a section on how lecturers consider how, if at all, the status of teaching has changed/is changing as a result of institutional response to recent reforms in HE.

#### 6.1.1. Institutional self-identity and market positions

A discourse of distinctiveness was evident across many accounts of excellence in practice; however lecturers were more likely to identify distinctiveness about their specific course or departments than their overall institutions (in part because of the framing of the question (see Appendix Two)). Across the different institutions there were distinct ways in which teaching staff sought to identify the distinctiveness of their own institution.

Teaching staff at Southern City University, for example, frequently described their distinctiveness as being related to the ‘care’ they felt for their students and what they perceived as good staff-student relationships – in particular because they knew their students ‘individually’; Staff at Industrial City University described their institution as being ‘friendly and intimate’, with a strong team atmosphere and a commitment to ‘caring’ for their students; whilst teaching staff at Suburban University highlighted their ‘friendliness’, effective student support mechanisms and good staff and staff-student relationships.

Unlike the interviews with senior academics, however, these discourses of distinctiveness were not particularly related to desires to position the institution within a congested higher education market; rather the discourses reflected more a level of pride that staff felt about their institution, their department or their own (or colleagues’) teaching practices.

I don't think there is anything necessarily distinctive at the university level; I think it comes down to individual courses and even particular members of staff. Really caring about the student experience and doing everything we can to help support this (especially in terms of distance learning) is very important in our department.

(Industrial City University, female, teaching fellow, disciplinary area unknown, over ten years in HE).

These narratives were, unsurprisingly therefore, dominated by discourses relating to care, kindness, consideration and commitment and, through these values and practices, to developing a sense of belonging for students.

Students have told us that they find staff in our department caring and supportive. I know that everyone in our team cares about their students and works hard beyond the seminar room to provide support for them. The students that get the most out of the learning experience tend to be those who take part in extra activities, because it gives them a sense of belonging.

(Suburban University, female, principal lecturer, disciplinary area unknown, over ten years in HE).

The survey data revealed academics’ extremely high level of commitment to their students and their passion and desire to help them develop as learners. Many staff indicated a strong commitment to empowerment and transformation. However these commitments were often said to be constrained by the wider structures and frameworks (‘quality marks’, league tables, market positions etc.) as well as drivers such as widening participation benchmarks and the need to incorporate new digital technologies to meet student demands, that were (or appeared to be) privileging the market.

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

The notion of 'excellence' was rejected by some academics as being too multi-faceted to be reduced to simple 'soundbite' descriptions: *'I cannot give a short answer to this complex agenda!'; 'the answer could fill a whole thesis, I am not sure it is possible to do the question justice in such a small box'; 'I would try not to describe it because it is different in different settings. One size doesn't fit all and teaching is often a collaborative venture - the word 'excellence' doesn't really fit for me'.*

Other academics rejected the concept outright as being a 'meaningless term'; *'an overused and virtually worthless descriptor which is often applied inappropriately'; 'I would not use such a meaningless term'*, which has been 'appropriated by managers' as a way of constraining intellectual freedom and academic practices ('it has become one of those meaningless expressions that is bandied about in staff meetings. See Orwell's critique of such terms used in politics. "Inside the Whale and Other Essays" (1940)'). Notions of teaching excellence were, for some, such as this lecturer, therefore, deemed to be part of a performative 'techno-bureaucratic managerialism' (Readings, 1996; Apple, 2000) and as such had little or no real meaning:

There is no such thing as 'excellence'. Everything is excellent these days so the term is stripped of meaning. The ordinary has become excellent. Where one sees the term excellence, be aware of management inspired mediocrity.

(Coastal University, gender unknown, senior lecturer, Arts and Humanities, over five years in HE).

In contrast, a minority of lecturers felt they needed us to define criteria against which the attainment of excellence could be judged, regarding 'excellence' in effect as having an absolute, shared and agreed set of criteria (*'I can't answer that question unless I know what you mean by excellence'; 'what criteria are you using to determine what is excellence?'*). As referred to above, however, we intentionally avoided imposing our constructions of the concept of 'excellence' wanting instead for individual lecturers to bring to the discourse their own understandings. Within the survey responses the ways in which excellence as a concept was both contested and rejected were played out alongside lecturers' own creation, re-conceptualisation or reclaiming of the term:

The phrase itself is jargon - empty words that seem to have more to do with paperwork than teaching. Genuinely excellent teaching is about knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff helping motivated students to develop their own knowledge and skills.

(Industrial City University, gender unknown, senior lecturer, Arts and Humanities, over ten years in HE).

This was also true, though to a much lesser extent, of the ways in which some staff contested the idea of the student 'experience' (excellent or not):

[this] is a classic example of the jargon of pedagogical theorists who a) need a better command of the English language; b) end up channelling in their vocabulary pop-psycho perceptions that could be challenged. I have no quarrel with students learning. But the term 'experience' implies attention to what they as individual subjects are going through, in a way that suggests they're entitled to or should receive a quality 'experience'. I'm a Stoic from a Lutheran background. Ultimately truly good learning is damned hard and difficult: the more so, the more rewarding it is. It's not meant to be an 'experience' like a ride at Alton Towers, with gratification as its outcome.

(Historic University, female, lecturer, Arts and Humanities, less than five years in HE).

Regarding the link between excellence in terms of teaching and excellence in terms of the student experience, a minority of lecturers saw the concepts as only being partly aligned, with the two concepts having conceptual and practical differences between them. For example one lecturer (North Western, male, Senior lecturer in Social Sciences; more than five years in HE) described excellence in teaching as ensuring that lecturers *'instil enthusiasm and interest in subject for students [and] deliver material in a variety of fashions to meet different learning strategies'* with the focus being on face-to-face classroom practice. However excellence in terms of the student learning experience was regarded as being broader and more holistic, encompassing the whole student experience: *'It's about everything to do with university...Basically, university life'*, he said.

Across the majority of responses, however, teaching excellence was regarded as fundamental to, and synonymous with, the student experience and could not be separated.

Q. 1 How would you describe 'excellence in teaching'?

Answer: Experiential, interactive, aligned to excellent achievement

Q. 2 : What do you think would comprise 'excellence' in terms of the student learning experience here at XXX?

Answer: See number 1

(Southern City University, lecturer, Social Sciences, more than ten years in HE).

'It is everything that the student encounters, learns or feels through his or her involvement with the university, whether intended or incidental and whether related to subject content or personal development'

(Historic University, female, lecturer, STEM subjects, more than ten years in HE).

Therefore this analysis explores the two concepts together.

### 6.1.3. Excellence as practice

A close reading of the responses elicited four distinct ways in which excellence (in teaching alone or aligned with excellence in terms of the student experience) was regarded as a set of practices which would, variably:

1. Meet standards and achieve quality thresholds
2. Enable students to access jobs and careers
3. Develop students as lifelong learners
4. Provide students with access to theoretical knowledge

#### Excellence as meeting standards and achieving quality thresholds

A strong discourse from the teaching-led universities (North Western, Cosmopolitan, Suburban, Modern) was the alignment of excellence, in terms of the student learning experience, with *quality* and *standards*, with excellence being operationalised as a means for achieving quality enhancement and meeting targets. Thus excellence was seen to be provision of 'conveniently scheduled classes', with teaching based on the detailed learning outcomes, and timely assessment feedback offered in an 'optimal environment', by 'quality' staff, administered 'efficiently and effectively'.

The discourse of 'efficiency' was a particularly strong discourse from teaching staff at North Western with academics describing the need to 'streamline', 'align', 'focus', 'attend' and 'improve practice'. This operationalisation of excellence through efficient practice leads in turn to high scores on evaluation forms and to 'satisfied customers' learning 'what they should'. Thus excellence in teaching was judged to be '*when you get a pass rate of N (N being the level at which nobody asks what is happening with your module)*'. Excellence, for teaching staff at North Western University emphasises regulation and compliance.

It is important to note, however, that many accounts of teaching at North Western did challenge such hegemonic managerial discourses with staff describing 'excellence' as being the provision of transformative opportunities for students to develop as critical thinkers, and of:

Enabling students to be autonomous and reflective and empowering them so that they are able to assimilate and apply the information and knowledge imparted in each and every session they attend.  
(North Western University, male, senior lecturer, Social Sciences; less than five years in HE).

Nonetheless such resistance was challenged by what staff considered to be a 'relentless' pressure to climb higher in the NSS league tables and achieve greater excellence in research.

There is a widespread focus on NSS, leading to frequent audits and reviews. The main impact has been on ensuring that students understand timescales for return of grades and feedback on their work; and a consciousness that feedback needs to be not just timely but also of a high quality to be of any use to students, preferably with a strong 'feed forward' element.  
(North Western University, female, senior lecturer, Health and Social Care; more than ten years in HE).

In addition, teaching staff at North Western were frustrated by what they saw as a managerially-driven requirement that teaching should be 'entertaining, engaging and inspiring' whilst, at the same time ensuring that students did not 'experience the anxiety of failure', and have the right to complain if their expectations are not met. In other words, 'good learning occurs when the students are content':

Sometimes it does feel that the students do have too much control - i.e. if one student out of a cohort makes a complaint (not serious but maybe requests for teaching day to be changed) this is often jumped to even if the rest of the cohort were happy.  
(North Western University, female, lecturer, Health and Social Care; less than five years in HE).

Whilst these discourses were strongest at North Western, they were present across all the other institutions and were, almost without exception, seen to be detrimental to both the student experience and to teaching excellence. Whilst there was some sense that staff were pushing back against top-down approaches to 'raising' standards a stronger narrative was that lecturers were becoming 'worn down by relentless pressures' in the drive to attain ever-higher standards:

There is a great deal of pressure to meet 'standards' and 'satisfaction' that takes a great deal of energy away from thinking about the important issues of learning and engaging minds. While I contest standards, as such, there is energy wasted in trying to justify myself. Further, there has been an over-recruitment of students. Students are my priority, and I will pour my soul into working with them. At times (many times), my soul feels drained. I know this is not the right way to feel. At times I hear myself telling my students to look after themselves, nourish their spirit and their minds...and I feel I should be heeding my own advice, but I cannot, because there are so many students, and each of them should have what they need in order to engage their minds. I do my best to make their concerns my priority, but I often feel stretched.  
(Suburban University, Female, senior lecturer, Social Sciences, more than ten years in HE).

### Excellence as access to jobs and careers

Teaching staff across all the I I universities recognised the need for higher education to facilitate access to employment. This was not, however, a strong narrative across the more research-intensive universities, perhaps arising from a belief that the students would find postgraduate employment simply because they had studied at a specific institution. It was, however, prevalent across those institutions that were more focussed on widening participation. Teaching staff at Cosmopolitan and Modern Universities were the most concerned about enabling students to access employment post-graduation. Thus teaching excellence and an excellent student experience were, collaboratively, conceptualised as those activities which would facilitate access to jobs, with pedagogic practices focussing on '*practical learning for employability*' so that excellence in teaching was about developing students '*to become mature, critical, analytical and ready to face others in the world of work*' and enabling in them the:

Ability to engage in more vocational study, meeting/engaging and collaborating with different cultures - this creates an open mind which is very valuable in the HE context and for the world of work. Also knowing that the university brand won't necessarily help people get immediate/exciting/fulfilling jobs, students are pushed to build skills/experiences. This creates many 'all rounders' with very good personal brands!!  
(Cosmopolitan University, female, Principal lecturer, Social Sciences, over ten years in HE).

These two institutions (along with North Western) were the most vocal about the need to recognise the individual backgrounds and support requirements of their diverse student bodies. Staff talked about 'Putting students at the centre of all that we do' (Modern), and:

Understanding how students learn and focussing on the quality and coherence of their experience. Recognising there is not just one experience but subgroups of students may have many different experiences depending of a variety of factors e.g. socio-economic, cultural etc.  
(Modern University, male, lecturer, Health and Social Care, between five and ten years in HE).

Here access to employment was seen as fundamental not only to the purposes of higher education but also to enhancing social justice. These discourses - of student diversity and of teaching excellence as a route to social justice - were seen significantly less commonly in the accounts from staff at other institutions, and rarely, if at all in accounts from the more research-intensive universities. However, whilst the discourse focussed on pedagogical practices that might contribute to socially just outcomes, there was little mention of higher education as being a site for socially just pedagogies. As Burke found in earlier work for the HEA (Burke et al, 2013) students'

gendered, classed and racialised antagonisms remain unchallenged by their university pedagogic experience and there is a need to provide support and resources at the institutional level for academics and students to develop a critical understanding of the ways pedagogical relations are profoundly shaped by inequalities of gender, class and race. This data from this project supports Burke et al's (2013) argument that such frameworks are not readily evident in UK higher education.

### Excellence as developing students as lifelong learners

Across all institutions, academic staff conceptualised teaching excellence in relation to the development of students as critically-thinking, independent, lifelong learners. This was particularly evident across the responses from staff teaching at Modern University. For these academics teaching excellence and an excellent student experience was one that 'leaves a student curious enough not to stop learning', and that which 'liberates them to carry on learning within their own professional and personal context'.

[it] is also about the process of the student becoming enculturated into the community of practice so that they are able to reflect on their learning and apply it in unfamiliar circumstances.

(Modern University, female, senior lecturer, STEM subjects, more than ten years in HE).

The development of the student as a lifelong learner was, to some extent conceptualised as being concerned with developing the skills and competences necessary for capabilities and performance in the workplace:

Teaching that engages students, enables them to interact with their teachers, take control of their own learning and moves their understanding and skills forward

(Modern University, female, lecturer, STEM subjects, over ten years in HE).

In the main however, becoming a lifelong learner was seen as a desired outcome of an excellent higher education experience in its own right. Nonetheless the focus was, in part, on the development of a particular mindset ('critical', 'enquiring', 'independent') but also, and similar to the development of 'employability' skills, on the acquisition of a set of technical competencies; the ability to problem-solve, effective time-management.

### Excellence as providing students with access to theoretical knowledge

Across the research there were significant differences in the ways in which teaching staff saw the need for access to knowledge to be central to pedagogic practices. The more 'research-intensive', selective universities such as Industrial City and Coastal were most likely to regard excellence in teaching as enabling access to theoretical knowledge:

Excellence in teaching provides opportunities for students to critique upon and reflect upon the best that has been written and said in relation to a particular curriculum/set of questions. The critique and reflection underpins a change in identity that moves the student towards self-actualisation. Further excellence in teaching is where the teacher is humble and gives away platforms of power to enable the student to develop the thinking tools to continue to learn independently with the potential to exceed the teacher.

(Industrial City University, female, lecturer, Social Sciences, over ten years in HE).

The teaching and learning that occurs within our department is problem-led, collaborative, research-driven, demanding, critical. There are lots of moments when staff and students meet one to one or in small groups to tussle over ideas, issues, research, critical or creative problems.

(Coastal University, female, disciplinary area unknown, over ten years in HE).

For academics, therefore, their role as teachers was to engage students in 'cutting edge debate', enabling students 'to obtain knowledge, skills, and experience from individuals at the forefront of the development of their discipline [and] have the opportunity to apply and develop skills in their chosen area of enquiry using the best facilities' (Industrial City University, Male, senior lecturer, disciplinary area unknown, more than 10 years in HE). Such practice produces 'excellent outcomes in terms of what students learn and end up being able to do' (Coastal University, male, STEM subjects, over ten years in HE) and thus students are subsequently able to contribute to 'society', 'academia', and to 'the best jobs'.

Access to theoretical knowledge is fundamental in enabling social justice (Wheelahan, 2010). Only through such access can individuals contribute to society's dynamics, to participate in its debates and controversies, to take part in what Wheelahan calls 'society's conversation'. Thus, theoretical knowledge is socially powerful knowledge and enabling access is an issue of justice and equity. It is for this reason that both Wheelahan (2010) and Bernstein (2000) assert the importance of access to abstract theoretical knowledge in the curriculum.

For Wheelahan (2010) the purpose of academic qualifications is to induct students into a field of knowledge rather than a field of practice. However, the discourse of teaching excellence as being that which provides students with access to theoretical knowledge was significantly less apparent in recruiting institutions, in particular those with a strong focus on widening participation – such as North Western. Selective institutions, such as Industrial City and Coastal Universities, recruit students from familial contexts where there is already existent 'access to powerful knowledge'; these same students already have the highest levels of prior academic attainment and are most likely, therefore, to access graduate-level jobs and in turn to participate in 'society's conversations'. The absence of a focus on access to theoretical knowledge in the less selective institutions, therefore, raises significant concerns for issues of widening participation and social justice.

#### 6.1.4. Inhibiting the attainment of excellence

Regardless of how staff defined excellence in teaching and/or the student learning experience the same discourses were evident in terms of those factors that were deemed to militate against excellence with only some differences between institutions and disciplinary areas:

Time constraints, including lack of time for planning and in particular for joint planning, meaning that 'flawed' initiatives quickly fail or become obsolete.

Lack of consultation with front-line teaching staff when new initiatives are being considered; consequently such new initiatives also quickly fail or become obsolete.

Lack of time to develop new resources and to prepare for teaching or to 'reflect and then improve materials, resources, time to build collaboration and integration across an evolving HE landscape'.

Class sizes too large: inhibit forming of effective relationships between students and between staff and students, and reduces opportunities to 'share or explore feelings, values and attitudes'.

Staff having to operate as 'generic' teachers and having to teach outside their research or teaching expertise.

Structural issues such as rooms that are too small, inadequate heating/lighting, poor or failing IT equipment.

Excessive administration and bureaucracy including too many meetings which deliver the same information.

Lack of time to engage in research  
Lack of institutional valorisation of good teaching as opposed to research.

Constant restructuring and reorganisation.  
Financial constraints.

Wide disparities and gaps in prior learning and/or experience.

Marking turnaround times.  
Standardisation (assessment practices, module handbooks etc).

'Fads' and new ideas promulgated by 'those 'specialists' who get evangelical about latest 'thing' in teaching at expense of what works'.

Staff who are defensive to incorporation of new ideas and initiatives.

#### 6.1.5. Balancing competing demands

The multiple and complex demands on time, commitment and prioritisation being faced by lecturers was highly evident across all the survey data with all staff evidencing the difficulties of juggling multiple, competing (and sometimes contradictory) demands.

## The need to be excellent in both research and teaching

All institutions, not just the historically research-intensive ones, were feeling the pressure of having to combine excellence in teaching with excellence in research. Staff in historically teaching-only institutions spoke of how the drive to achieve a high ranking in the Research Excellence Framework (2014) was affecting the time and commitment they could give to teaching. This was, in turn, impacting negatively on academic identity and sense of well-being:

The double pressure of being required to achieve outstanding results in both teaching AND research; exhaustion of too many 60 hour weeks, and the stress involved in never feeling that what I do is good enough.  
(Historic University, female, senior lecturer, Arts and Humanities, over ten years in HE).

Whilst teaching was progressively being more valorised in the research-intensive institutions, however, participation in research, and achieving research excellence was being ever-prioritized in the traditionally teaching-led institutions. The relentless pressure on staff to perform well in terms of teaching and research, as well as undertake additional and growing administration and service provision were also both exhausting and devaluing academics.

Teaching goes down and down and down the scale. My own treatment is an example of this - professional rewards are all based on research. Only today one of my full-time colleagues complained by email that being expected to move teaching room furniture at the end of a very long teaching day was just another demand being made on us. I often wondered why I bothered studying for eight years to gain a BA, MA and PhD when I end up moving furniture at 9pm. It is just one example among many of the low esteem awarded to a highly skilled worker. I could literally earn more money, hour for hour, working for McDonalds.  
(Southern City University, gender unknown, lecturer, Arts and Humanities, over ten years in HE).

The pressure placed on staff to perform well in the Research Excellence Framework was compounded by the more significant pressure on them to attain high National Student Survey (NSS) results. For some institutions such pressures led them to be selective about which league tables they wished to feature in to ensure that they appear high up:

League tables are increasingly significant as drivers of institutional policies. The NSS is important but the green league is emerging as significant alongside the teaching excellence tables in The Times and The Guardian. A concern that [institution] would not do well in the research 'league' meant that we did not enter the competition.  
(Cathedral City University, male, senior lecturer, disciplinary area unknown, over ten years in HE).

## The National Student Survey

The drive for institutions to feature well in the NSS was a strong discourse amongst all lecturers, most particularly from those who worked in institutions who were currently low down on the league table. The NSS was considered as having some benefits as 'it has pushed staff into addressing poor practice'.

League tables have provided an important benchmark to re-evaluate and where necessary re-align aspects of teaching methodology and approach.  
(Specialist University, female, lecturer, Arts and Humanities, over five years in HE).

However, a stronger discourse amongst teaching staff was that the need to continually move up the rankings was in itself 'driving practice', 'dictating agendas' and 'shifting priorities' almost without regard to what good pedagogic practice might be.

This drive to increase student satisfaction was deemed by respondents to be permeating every aspect of academic life with lecturers required to change practice directly in response to results regardless of whether they themselves regarded such changes as being needed or desirable. This was deemed to be highly damaging to staff, rendering them little more than 'servants' of their students, prone to disciplinary action if they transgressed the rules or crossed the boundaries of this new relationship.

The NSS has rendered students customers, and academics service-providers. This has created both a student body and an institution that is more prone to challenging and reprimanding - and even bullying - lecturers.

(Historic University, female, Professor, Arts and Humanities, more than ten years in HE).

The constant demand to meet students' needs and provide satisfaction was deemed to have become 'an obsession' amongst some institutions ('I was unaware the institution cared about anything else'), which was in turn creating significant pressures on staff:

Management is driven by them all the way down. There is a positive side to this in that the NSS especially tells us what we could improve, and module questionnaires devised on its template likewise. The negative side to this is that interpreting the information is difficult. League table positions are useful rewards/punishments for what's going right or wrong but of course you can't aim at a relative score, only an absolute one, so they don't play a part in actual practices so much as in the pressure felt by managers and placed on teachers (if rankings go down, the pressure increases; the availability of a solution does not). (Historic University, female, lecturer, Arts and Humanities, less than five years in HE).

A further, concerning, discourse was that, in the drive to achieve ever higher standards, 'teaching excellence' and 'student satisfaction' had been rendered synonymous by 'management'. This in turn, it was argued, had a detrimental effect on students since, through fear of rendering students 'dissatisfied', pedagogic practices were in danger of 'dumbing down', moving away from challenging and enabling students to be critical, independent thinkers.

Concern with league tables and student satisfaction, coupled with huge fees, create in students a sense that they are consuming a product or service, rather than undertaking the next step of self-crafting into adulthood as a self-determining, critical citizen.

(Historic University, female, lecturer, disciplinary area unknown, more than ten years in HE).

Such practices were deeply disturbing for lecturers as they impinged on academic integrity and threatened staffs' ability to practice what they considered to be good pedagogy rather than meet student's desires for satisfaction. Thus, as Frank Furedi writes:

Unlike previous auditing measures, the NSS does not merely demand accountability but directly challenges the identity of a scholar. It possesses a corrosive immediacy that encourages the subordination of education and scholarship to the arbitrary imperative of student satisfaction.

(Times Higher, 2012).

It is unsurprising therefore that many academics rejected such league tables as having any relevance in terms of enhancing teaching excellence and/or providing an excellent student experiences.

## Widening participation

Discourses relating to widening participation were probably the most contradictory, and contested across all the survey data. Many lecturers questioned whether widening participation initiatives had made much change to institutional policy and practice with a substantial number of lecturers commenting that their institutions seemed to have 'lost appetite' to widen participation – even within the teaching-led institutions:

Seriously? Is this question serious? It's an open secret no-one gives a toss about WP. University obligations have been consistently watered down on this every time the institution has failed to make progress. Do the research. Look at the ridiculous requirements of the Office of Fair Access Agreement.

(Coastal University, gender unknown, senior lecturer, Arts and Humanities, between five and ten years in HE).

A strong counter-narrative, however, was that widening participation initiatives had wrought fundamental changes to institutions, particularly in terms of enhancing pedagogic diversity. The positive benefits of widening participation included the implementation of a greater diversity of teaching approaches, anonymous marking, incorporating confidence building activities into classroom practices, being more explicit about support structures, and offering more flexible modes of delivery including through online platforms. The introduction of new media and digital technologies were broadly applauded as they offered greater opportunities for staff to reach out and support

students - particularly through the use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) such as Blackboard as well as the use of wikis, discussion boards and so forth – which enhanced access and participation:

For many years we have allowed a culture to flourish that the better support and tuition rested on face to face models of delivery. Yet we know that many students, due to geographical dispersion, were not able to attend these easily. I also know that many departments report on a significant drop in students attending tutorials as modules progress. This advantages some but definitely does not allow us to fulfil the mission of being available to all. The use of synchronous tuition engagement promotes whole cohort involvement, the potential for learning and discovery across the entire module and an opportunity for us as teachers to identify students or issues that require further attention

(Modern University, female, manager, Health and Social Care, over ten years in HE).

Lecturers did not always feel, however, that they had sufficient skills, or had sufficient time to become skilled, to utilise such technology-based resources effectively. This was no wholesale rejection of digital technology *per se*, rather there was a rejection of rapid implementation of new technologies with insufficient resources in place to ensure staff were able to incorporate them effectively. Consequently the incorporation of new digital technology was deemed to operate against, rather than for, effective pedagogy. In addition, the implementation of certain practices, for example institutions 'texting updates to students' was seen as simply 'pandering to students' demands to be spoon-fed'.

More worryingly, across the data, there were a few examples of classroom-based and online pedagogic practices which appear to be enhancing internal pedagogic stratification rather than reducing it. These included streaming students on modules depending on their previous educational attainment, expanding certain highly popular courses to keep numbers high whilst maintaining small class sizes in other disciplinary areas to 'maintain quality', and introducing new technologies too rapidly to be inclusive of all students:

We have pressed this change incrementally and quite cautiously (dealing with more mature students). As a result the courses have been well-received by students but have latterly been criticised by a line manager as not changing learning fast enough. The formal postgraduate agenda of the university is to press electronic learning agendas faster and this will excite/suit the more able students and perhaps penalise the less adaptable students

(Modern University, male, senior manager, Health and Social Care, over ten years in HE).

In effect widening participation, rather than simply increasing numbers of students, was seen to be a further pressure on staff time and emotional resources.

The WVP agenda has created huge stress as it is associated with the massification of HE and large volumes of students with non-traditional backgrounds requires more support for students etc.

(Cosmopolitan University, male, senior lecturer, Business Management, over ten years in HE).

Moreover, alongside the negative implications for staff coping with widening participation initiatives, there was a high level of individual concern about the implications for WVP students themselves. A strong discourse was an increasing concern that lecturers no longer had the time to get to know individual students sufficiently to be aware of their learning and support needs, so that the more vulnerable students were slipping through support networks and were in danger of not achieving their potential. The distance between lecturer and student was enhanced by the incorporation of digital technologies so that such initiatives, alongside strategies to widen participation were regarded as having had some benefits but also having impacted negatively on pedagogic approaches:

We have always had a commitment to widening participation. The inclusion of many non-traditional students has been a double edged sword. On the one hand it gives us security. On the other, a number of our students do not have the cultural capital that other unis take for granted. To accommodate this layer of students we tend to dumb down our teaching to the lowest common denominator

(Modern University, male, lecturer, Social Sciences, over ten years in HE).

#### **6.1.6. The changing status of teaching**

A strong and persistent theme across the data was that research was significantly valorised above teaching and that the recent Research Excellence Framework (REF) had sharpened this division rather than minimised it (*there is no*

real change. Research is still king'; 'research excellence is all that really matters'). This was the case across all different types of institution:

Teaching and teaching staff are simply an afterthought here; research is the only valued activity. There are a few bones thrown to the teaching fraternity when the good NSS scores come out, but most advances claimed are hollow and from those with loud voices and ambition but no power. Instead of supporting teaching, all effort is directed to research and the non-academic aspects of student life that keep us in the top 20 of the league tables.

(Industrial City University, male, lecturer, STEM subjects, over ten years in HE).

There's a curious paradox: teaching is important but not valued. There seems to be a division between those staff who teach and those who write, particularly those who contribute to the REF.

(Suburban University, female, principal lecturer, STEM subjects, between five and ten years in HE).

The marketisation and commodification of higher education was also primarily viewed as negative; concern was raised about ways in which both students and parents were now regarded as the 'expert' purchasers of the commodity of higher education, and that *'market forces, which are blind, will further support this trend'*. However, a counter-narrative, although not widely articulated, was that this increasing marketisation might result in teaching being more highly valorised *'since national rankings depend on it and students are now paying customers'*. However, such possibilities were still seen to be part of a hopeful, but distant future, with the reality being that research remained the more highly valued form of activity and that there was currently:

Even less emphasis on teaching. Yes, we must all pass through a PGCert for a few months, and there's a probationary period etc. But nobody fails these, regardless of how badly they teach or how little time they devote to it. Instead, the drive to improve research income, REF scores and league table rankings (which also often have a strong research element), has focussed incentives on research in preference to teaching. Meanwhile, the change in the way students are funded (i.e. introduction of higher fees) means students expect more from the teaching, while universities expect more research from their staff.

(Industrial City University, male, lecturer, STEM subjects, over ten years in HE).

Institutional responses to recent reforms in HE (fees, commodification/marketisation, as well as widening participation initiatives) were deemed to have led to further negative changes to the status of teaching (from the perspective of the lecturers):

1. Increasing top-down demand for changes to practice, rather than effective pedagogy being driven by desire to meet the needs of individual students. This level of *'faceless managerialism'* was deemed to permeate not just pedagogy but also all relationships with students (and their parents) and was also deemed to be a mechanism of 'controlling' academic staff (*'the excessive bureaucratic workload suggests that academic staff are not to be trusted'*).
2. The standardisation and consistency of teaching approaches, in response to teaching being *'driven by the need to receive good feedback'*, especially via the NSS. Many lecturers felt strongly that the NSS was driving a form of pedagogy which was *'highly damaging to innovation and creativity'*.
3. The inclusion of students with grades/qualifications regarded as too low to enable them to cope with higher education; this was resulting in changes to course content and mode and level of assessment in order to *'accommodate'* such students and thus ensure that they remained *'satisfied customers'*.
4. The desire to 'please' students and ensure they feel that they *'have gained value for money'* was seen as leading to the incorporation of *'gimmicks'* into teaching practice, such as polling clickers and other audience response systems and the use of social media, such as Twitter (although such innovations were also regarded as positive).
5. The desire to ensure student satisfaction also meant that employability strategies were incorporated into all aspects of provision, so that lecturers were also required to be *de facto* 'recruitment consultants', facilitating access to work placements, internships, and volunteering opportunities, although, again, this was also regarded as a positive initiative.

6. Increased administration which meant that there was less time to develop and provide effective teaching. This was a direct consequence of 1-4, with staff having to: meet and respond to prospective students (and parents) queries, face to face and online; provide on-going and continuous induction and student support; undertake increasing (and replicating) reviews of provision, offer greater amounts of feedback to students in a faster time; administer and evaluate module and course evaluations (as well as encourage participation in the NSS).

The status of teaching has declined. We feel we are viewed as cogs in a wheel, while innovation is said to be encouraged the levels of administrative tasks have increased on teaching staff. With less administrative support there is less time to see and engage with students, less time to reflect on and improve teaching. The summer period which used to be a time to reflect, adjust and improve teaching no longer exists as this time is taken up with adjusting existing teaching to 'new' initiatives directed from above without regard to the teachers' individual and personal agendas to improve their own teaching. Autonomy in teaching has been lost, for the most part.

(Southern City University, principal lecturer, Arts and Humanities, over ten years in HE).

Such changes were regarded, by the majority of lecturers, as having had a direct and significant effect on pedagogy.

Academic teaching has changed. We now have teachers with no MAs working on programmes with limited induction and critical thinking or familiarity with the literature base. This could lead to a watering down effect [with] senior staff having to take more time with colleagues, and a more technicist approach... as the theoretical underpinning and rich deep knowledge is limited to only a few - older/aging colleagues. Their professional/ and sound pedagogical knowledge will be soon lost to be replace with a new breed, less familiar with the literature.

(Suburban University, female, senior lecturer, Social Sciences, more than ten years in HE).

Despite these pressures, however, a recurrent theme arising from the survey data was that teaching staff continued to have a strong commitment to the value of what they were doing,

[Excellence is when] your students know you love them, believe in them, and have given them tools for learning/thinking as well as actual knowledge with a range of applications in their lives.

(Coastal University, no demographic data given).

This commitment led staff to working round and through systems and bureaucracy to enable them to remain effective in their teaching facilitating an environment where:

Where students are engaged in the learning process and excited about it... enabling students to grow holistically as people as well as gaining positive self-esteem, knowledge and specific expertise  
(Cosmopolitan University, female, senior lecturer, Social Sciences, over ten years in HE).

## 7. Conclusions

### 7.1. Positioning

The discourse analysis of website and institutional strategies evidences a strong, and consistent, reliance on, and valorisation of, league tables, rankings and neoliberal modes of institutional performative assessment, as well as a foregrounding of dominant neoliberal discourses of competitiveness, status, reputation and the globalisation of higher education.

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

Within the lecturers' accounts, however, a strong discourse was a level resistance against leagues tables and market positioning.

Many categories in the league tables have had a very negative impact. For example, entry tariff scores and the completely misnamed 'value added' category mean that universities are effectively penalised for taking students with low A-level grades and training them up to be productive members of society with decent degrees. The NSS scores are very hit and miss - what are students meant to compare against?  
(Industrial City University, male, lecturer, STEM subjects, over ten years in HE).

### 7.2. Excellence

The institutional documentation evidences a performative approach to excellence, which views teaching excellence as something that can be quantified, codified and thus rewarded. The discourses of 'teaching excellence' and 'the student experience' are, however, incorporated as unelaborated/uncontested buzzwords across the institutional discourses, reflected in many of the interviews with senior staff.

For senior academics, and as evidenced in the website discourses, the struggles over achieving excellence in teaching is returned to a focus on being competitive in the market of higher education, which 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. However, counter-hegemonic discourses associated with critical pedagogies were also, on occasion, evoked in the accounts given by senior academics, suggesting a richer and more complex view of pedagogies, excellence and quality. Such discourses were connected to aims of transforming subjectivities, lives and practices and were implicitly connected to notions of higher education as a public good. The discourses though were limited by the processes of subjectification imposed through the panopticon of neoliberal forms of higher education. Most marked was the absence of any sense of connection between pedagogies and inequalities and any explicit discussion of the potential contribution of higher education to social justice and equity concerns. This was in complete contrast to the ways in which teaching staff thought about the purpose of higher education which, across all institutions, was explicitly focussed on the individual and their potential to contribute to society.

Within the lecturers' accounts, in contrast, excellence is related to the micro-practices of enabling individual students, through critical pedagogies, to achieve their potential, *'to become confident, inquiring and knowledgeable adults'* and *'to become mature, critical, analytical and ready to face others in the world of work'*. Thus excellence in teaching is inward-facing, achieved through a focus on the individual student and away from outward-facing and hegemonic discourses of distinctiveness, with a concomitant rejection of league tables and market positioning. For these academics the drive to be distinct and to attain a particular market positioning has little currency since the practice of higher education relates to the:

Communication of knowledge and ideas to students in a way that contributes to their intellectual development and expertise, engages their interest and enthusiasm for the subject and fosters a desire to explore further  
(Coastal University, male, lecturer, Arts and Humanities, less than five years in HE).

It is also notable, however, that the term 'excellence' was frequently rejected or contested by some staff, whilst others claimed that 'teaching excellence' had become synonymous with 'student satisfaction' in ways which rendered both terms vague and ambiguous.

### 7.3. Widening participation

The analysis of the institutional documentation reveals a relative absence of references to widening participation within institutional documentation, even in those institutions known to be very committed to such activity. This is concerning since it appears to reinforce the view amongst some of those academics surveyed that the institutional 'appetite for' widening participation has waned. However whilst there are discursive silences in institutional accounts around how pedagogical practices relate to widening participation policies, in the lecturers' accounts issues of equality and equity are at the forefront of discussions around teaching excellence and excellence in terms of the student experience.

### 7.4. Discontinuities

The accounts of the senior academics at the case study institutions reinforces the critique made by many scholars in the field of higher education studies that HE policy and practice is regulated by the disciplinary discourses of global neoliberalism. This shapes and constrains the ways that teaching in higher education is understood; with 'excellence' becoming a regime of truth that reduces pedagogies to utilitarian notions of 'delivery', 'styles' and 'quality' and embraces moves towards the marketisation of HE. The accounts of these senior academics illuminate the disciplinary technologies of neoliberalism, that is the frameworks of structural and behavioural power(s), which operate as a panopticon to manage, regulate and govern subjects and their practices. A regime of truth, underpinned by hegemonic discourses of 'excellence', profoundly regulates ways of doing and thinking about teaching and learning.

The discontinuity between the standardised neoliberal modes of regulation and quality assurance demanded by institutional policies and the critical, transformative pedagogical aspirations enacted in staff accounts is evident across all teaching staff accounts. They are also evoked in some, though few, senior academics' accounts of pedagogical discourses of in/equalities. However, in the main senior staff persistently lapsed back into promoting a drive for standardisation which was almost wholly rejected by teaching staff. This meant that despite the commitments of staff towards their teaching and their students, they were struggling against, what they regarded as the stifling structures of top-down managerialism and marketisation. Thus, although many teaching staff were pushing back against such managerialism and instrumentalism where they could, they were also becoming increasingly 'worn down by relentless pressures'.

The differences in thinking, including the contestations over pedagogical meaning and the kinds of frameworks that are available to staff to make sense of excellence, pedagogy and the purpose of higher education may in part be explained by the differences in institutional positioning and role between senior academics and teaching staff. Senior academics, because of their role within the institution, are more likely to use prevailing institutional rhetoric relating to 'excellence' than teaching staff perhaps because they are responsible for the financial stability of the institution.

This 'distancing', connected with institutional position and role, may also account for the ways in which senior academics do not (appear to) understand questions of equity and widening participation in relation to pedagogy, and/or understand how the drive for particular forms of 'excellence' might be destructive to meeting the needs of diverse students with different sets of experiences and pedagogical expectations. It may also be related to the particular (neoliberal) ways that widening participation is constructed as primarily about 'lifting barriers' of access rather than being seen as about questions of 'epistemic access'.

The accounts of the lecturers, however, illuminate the ways in which such methods are driving, forming and shaping pedagogic practices. Within the lecturers' accounts managerialism is increasingly pushing pedagogic practice away from that which:

Provides opportunities for students to critique upon and reflect upon the best that has been written and said in relation to a particular curriculum/set of questions. The critique and reflection underpins a change in identity that moves the student towards self-actualisation. Further excellence in teaching is where the

teacher is humble and gives away platforms of power to enable the student to develop the thinking tools to continue to learn independently with the potential to exceed the teacher  
(Industrial City University, female, lecturer, Social Sciences, over ten years in HE).

Rather, pedagogic practice has become, as expressed by other academics surveyed, '*boxes and blocks of teaching... standardised, accountable*' with the '*rhetoric of customer choice creat[ing] an unhelpful number of fantasies for students about what education is for*'.

## 7.5. Stratification

The overall picture relating to 'pedagogic stratification' is a complex one, with institutions striving to distinguish themselves as distinct while, at times, homogenising their approaches to teaching excellence, pedagogic practices and the overall student experience. In contrast teaching staff appear less concerned about institutional market positioning whilst striving to offer distinct pedagogic approaches to enable their own students to achieve positive outcomes and post-graduate success. The teaching staff accounts, however, highlight concerns that the status of teaching has not improved, particularly given the recent focus on the REF; more concerning, within the post-92 institutions in particular, there was concern that the status of teaching had actually fallen rather than improved. Thus there was a sense that the pedagogic practices that may have previously distinguished the post-92s from their more research intensive counterparts (offering critical, transformative teaching empowering and enabling a diverse student body) were being eroded by a drive to valorise research activity above teaching. The consequences of such a focus on research rather than teaching could, potentially, be an erosion of the distinctiveness, and thus importance, of the post-92s.

## 8. Implications for the sector and for students

The survey data highlights the ways in which teaching staff are caught in tension between the demands of institutional quality assurance frameworks and their personal commitments to creating critical pedagogical spaces. However, while this tension has led to a widespread sense of frustration amongst staff it, potentially, has deeper and more significant implications for the sector and for students:

1. The espousal of performative modes of assessing teaching excellence, by some senior academics, potentially precludes deeper consideration of pedagogical issues so that teaching risks becomes technicist and performative rather than critical and transformative.
2. The ways in which 'excellence' is, at times, regarded as something that can be quantified or codified runs the risk of standardising teaching and assessment practices and, potentially, suppressing diversity and innovation of pedagogic approaches.
3. The dominance of league tables and rankings in institutional discourses may reinforce sector stratification, and thus risk benefitting the best resourced institutions and further entrenching long-standing institutional hierarchies.
4. The lack of clarity around what 'teaching excellence' is and whether it is desirable may render the term largely redundant and meaningless for both staff and students.
5. The articulation of relatively superficial accounts of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student experience' risks a lack of meaningful information being made available for prospective students around pedagogical practices at HEIs.
6. The absence of meaningful engagement with issues of pedagogy in institutional documentation risks sidelining core issues of teaching and learning.
7. The pressures of marketisation risk leading HEIs to compete against each other rather than encouraging collaboration across HEIs. As institutions are motivated to be individual 'winners' in a competitive sector, this, in turn may hamper collaboration in terms of developing pedagogical innovation.
8. Whilst the processes of marketisation may lead to investment in high class facilities (new buildings, libraries, digital technologies), they also, potentially, may deflect resources from widening participation and related social justice activities.
9. The dominant performative modes of assessing institutional excellence (via league tables and institutional rankings) risk neglecting consideration of institutional widening participation achievements and goals.
10. Accounts of pedagogy detached from considerations of social in/equalities, may cause widening participation issues to be further sidelined.

## 9. Recommendations

English higher education institutions are diverse and the sector benefits from a certain level of diversity across and between institutions. Nonetheless we suggest that the sector as a whole should adopt the following recommendations:

1. Institutions should think beyond the buzzwords of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student experience' to engage with deeper issues of pedagogy; this necessitates genuine engagement and dialogue with teaching staff.
2. Senior academics need to create opportunities in higher education for all academic staff (including themselves) to engage in critical reflections on teaching, in order to critique and deconstruct neoliberal discourses and to develop richer, more inclusive and critical pedagogical understanding.
3. Institutional widening participation commitments should connect more fully/meaningfully with issues of pedagogy (teaching and learning practices, including curriculum development and more equitable modes of engagement); similarly issues of pedagogy and curriculum should be supported by national-level widening participation policies.
4. Senior academics and institutional policy makers should engage teaching staff to create and produce institutional documentation that aligns with, and reflects, their pedagogical values and practices.
5. Institutional policy and practice should foster greater institutional consideration of the heterogeneity of 'the student learning experience'.
6. Senior managers should consider how institutional widening participation commitments can be showcased in institutional documentation and marketing materials, and/or incorporated into markers of institutional 'excellence'.
7. Institutions should ensure that managerialism and/or marketisation practices do not inhibit the aspirations and commitments of staff working to provide empowering, transformative pedagogical spaces.
8. Institutions should adopt policies to promote collaborative engagement across HEIs to develop pedagogical approaches and share best practices.

## 10. Final reflections

This research drew on data from just 11 English higher education institutions and drew on only some publicly available material. Further analysis is needed of other forms of institutional marketing to explore how institutional identities are enacted across various media. Further research exploring the perspectives and experiences of students in relation to 'pedagogic stratification' and its implications would usefully expand the analysis presented in this study.

In addition, whilst the findings are suggestive of emerging findings from other research (see [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/funding/detail/Current\\_research-projects](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/funding/detail/Current_research-projects)), it would be beneficial if the research was expanded to explore how the recent changes to the HE landscape have impacted Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, particularly in light of claims that these countries have resisted some of the market-oriented policies adopted in England. In addition, given the globalisation of higher education, further research is required to compare shifting changes in UK higher education against the international higher education context. Finally, further research is required to explore the impact of private higher education providers on the UK higher education sector and particularly how conceptions of 'teaching excellence' and the 'student experience' vary (or not) with notions adopted by the institutions explored in this project.

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## 12. Appendices

### Appendix One: interview questions used with senior academics

#### Interview Questions

##### I. Institutional identity/role/position

First of all please tell me about your role in the university.

What is your particular role in relation to teaching and learning?

Who do you work with in this role?

What challenges do you face in this role?

What do you see as key opportunities in your role for enhancing teaching and learning?

How does this relate to the university's teaching and learning strategy?

What particular strengths does your university contribute to teaching and learning? What are the challenges that your university faces in relation to teaching and learning? How do you see the university's wider standing in relation to teaching and learning?

##### II. Accounts of 'teaching excellence'

Does the institution have any teaching awards? If so, please can you briefly describe

How would you describe excellence in teaching?

What contributes to excellence? What undermines excellence?

Do your perspectives of excellence in teaching differ in any ways from the perspectives of your colleagues?

From the formal and public representation of teaching in the university?

What kinds of strategies and practices are most helpful in developing excellence in teaching? (For example formal or informal staff development training; awards for teaching excellence; membership of the Higher Education Academy; recognition and promotion for effective teaching; small class sizes and good staff: student ratios)

Are there any strategies or practices that hinder excellence? (For example: overly large class sizes; focus of getting research outputs; research seen as more worthy than teaching for career progression).

In what ways does the aim to develop excellence in teaching support or impede widening participation at the university? Can you give examples of this?

What are the particular challenges your university faces in developing excellence in teaching?

##### III. Accounts of the 'student learning experience'

How would you describe the concept of 'the student learning experience'?

What do you think would comprise 'excellence' in terms of the student learning experience here at xxx?

What is distinctive about the student learning experience at your university?

What are the university's aims in terms of enhancing the student learning experience?

What are the key principles that underpin the university's aims in terms of enhancing the student learning experience? (For example: student centeredness; student satisfaction including achieving good National Student Survey results; continued recruitment; high level degree attainment especially numbers of firsts and 2:1s; graduate employability)

What kinds of learning experiences are provided to students at the University? Are there differences across the University in terms of the kinds of learning experiences available (e.g. in terms of department or subject area)? Are there differences in terms of different groups of students? (For example, part-time, international, mature, first generation...)? Do some kinds of learning experiences meet the needs of some students more than others?

##### IV. Accounts of how recent changes to the higher education landscape have impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches

Do you think that any recent changes to policy in higher education have affected teaching and learning at your university? What policies have had a particular effect? Give some examples of how those policies have affected teaching and learning?

In what ways, if any, have changes to the funding of higher education had an effect on teaching? On the student learning experience? What has been positive about this? What are your concerns? How does that relate to wider concerns within the University senior management? How does that relate to wider concerns within the University community (e.g. academic staff, professional and support staff, students...)?

In what ways, if any, have concerns to widen participation impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches? Can you give specific examples? (For example, earlier assessments to check understanding/capabilities and so can intervene to support; more inclusive curriculum; shorter assignments; more varied assessment methods to meet different needs; provision of additional study skills sessions)

In what ways, if any, have digital technologies impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches? Can you give specific examples? (For example - less face to face contact with students and more online provision via VLEs; incorporation of social media such as Facebook as a way of enabling staff-student contact; online submission of assignment including via Turnitin or other plagiarism detecting software; provision of on-line library resources)

In what ways, if any, have concerns about league tables (such as the NSS or world university rankings) impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches? Can you give specific examples?

What positive changes, if any, has the university taken to develop institutional pedagogic approaches?

What particular constraints does your university face, in the context of a rapidly changing HE landscape, in developing institutional pedagogic approaches?

## Appendix Two: survey to teaching staff

### Teacher excellence

How would you describe 'excellence in teaching'?

What institutional strategies and practices are most helpful in developing 'excellence' in your teaching?

What resources and/or opportunities, if any, are provided by the university to support your teaching?

Are they useful? In what ways?

What if anything prevents or hinders you from developing 'excellence' in your teaching?

### Student learning experience

How would you describe the concept of 'the student learning experience'?

What do you feel is distinctive about the student learning experience at your University and/or your school/department?

What do you think would comprise 'excellence' in terms of the student learning experience here at XXX?

What are the university's aims in terms of enhancing the student learning experience?

How does this relate to and/or support your teaching?

### Institutional changes

How do you think others outside your university perceive the University of XXX in relation to:

Teaching and learning?

The student learning experience?

Have any recent changes to policy in HE affected teaching and learning at the university?

If so, in what ways and with what impact on your teaching/practice?

In what ways, if any, have concerns to widen participation impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches? Please give specific examples.

In what ways, if any, have digital technologies impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches?

In what ways, if any, have concerns about league tables (such as world university rankings or those derived from the NSS) impacted on institutional pedagogic approaches?

To what extent, if at all, do you feel the status of teaching has changed/is changing as a result of your institutions response to the recent reforms in HE?

