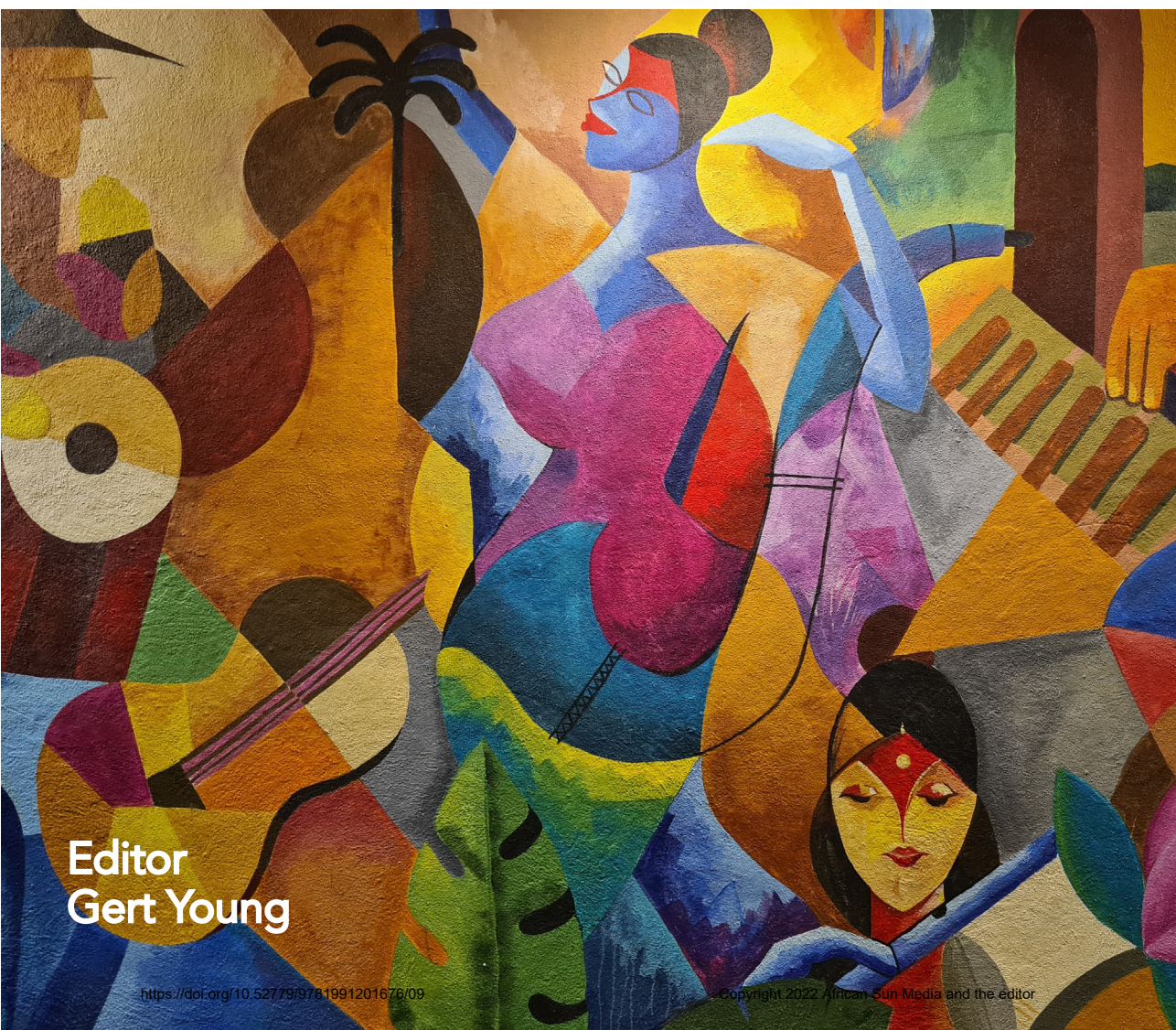


Academic Development and its Practitioners

A View from the Inside



Editor
Gert Young

Abbreviations

APQ	Academic planning and Quality Assurance
BLC	Blended learning coordinator
CHE	Council for Higher Education
CHEC	Cape Higher Education Consortium
CLT	Centre for Learning Technologies
CoP	Community of practice
CTL	Centre for Teaching and Learning
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DLTE	Division for Learning and Teaching Enhancement
DRD	Division for Research Development
ECA s	Early Career Academics
FIG s	Focused Interest Groups
FIRLT	Fund for Innovation and Research in Learning and Teaching
FMF	Fees Must Fall
FYA	First-Year Academy
GAs	Graduate Attributes
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HELTASA	Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HoD	Head of Department
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
LC	Language Centre
LCT	Legitimation Code Theory
NAA	Newly appointed academics
NRF	National Research Foundation
PASS	Professional and Administrative Support Services

PGDip	Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education
PL	Professional learning
PREDAC	Professional Educational Development for Academics
REEP	Recommended Engineering Education Practices
SAHEI	South African Higher Education Institution
SAS	Student Academic Support Services
SoEL	Scholarship of Educational Leadership
SOTL	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics
SU	Stellenbosch University
T&L	Teaching and Learning
UBC	University of British Columbia
UniEd	Division of University Education

“ENLARGING THE SPACE OF THE POSSIBLE”¹

Re-conceptualising teaching excellence awards for the public good

Karin Cattell-Holden

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

1 Introduction

In their introduction to the first issue of *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education* (2004), Davis and Phelps posit a link between complexity theory and education, describing the connection as “an enlarging of the space of the possible around what it means to educate and to be educated” (2004:4). Within the same relational context, Davis and Sumara (2008:38) emphasise the value of understanding education as being oriented toward the “as-yet unimagined”, the “currently unimaginable”, and state that education therefore explores current spaces of possibility. Should education and educational research then be conceived within the context of expanding the space of the possible, its main concern should be to create the conditions in which the “as-yet unimagined” could emerge (Davis & Sumara, 2008:38).

Employing the above link between complexity theory and education, this chapter will engage with the conceptualisation and application of the term ‘excellence’ in higher education teaching. It will explore the rewarding of ‘teaching excellence’ as a complex system,² focusing on expanding the space of the possible around teaching excellence awards at Stellenbosch University (SU). Within the current context of a global neoliberal approach to higher education, this conceptual chapter will propose how ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education and the recognition of it could be re-contextualised for the public good in the post-colonial South Africa, and at SU, specifically. Engaging with Davis and Phelps (2004), who point out that the link between complexity theory and education might necessitate the challenging of “the tools and expectations of traditional academic discourse” (2004:4), the chapter will use critical complexity theory as an analytical tool, countering the traditional reductionist methods of

1 Davis & Phelps, 2004:4.

2 For the purposes of this chapter a “complex systems” is defined as a network of multiple components which function in relation to each other and the environment.

interpreting complex systems. The chapter is written from the point of view of an academic developer at the Centre for Teaching and Learning at SU who manages the Teaching Excellence Awards at the institution.

2 The discourse of excellence

During the past approximately 50 years conceptions of higher education have shifted from the widely held view of it as an institution both *of* and *for* society. The understanding of higher education as a vehicle for serving the public good has been replaced by a focus on its economic and private value, moving higher education from its traditionally humanistic role in society to a neoliberal, managerialist entity and a “public of private interests” (Hind in Nixon, 2015:165). This shift holds that all aspects of the concept are formulated “in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves.” (Brown in Saunders, 2015:398).

Within this audit culture of measurement and control (Shore & Wright, 1999, 2015), the concept of excellence has come to play a key role. Readings (1996:40) pits the traditional “University of Culture” against the contemporary “University of Excellence”, claiming that ‘excellence’ is becoming the “watchword of the University” (1996:21). Skelton (2004:453) refers to a growing worldwide “excellence movement” in higher education, while Saunders (2015:407) claims excellence to be “the unifying force of postsecondary education”. Labelling excellence “an organizing frame of the university” (391), Saunders (2015) and Saunders and Ramírez (2017) investigate the commitments to excellence in higher education and analyse their neoliberal foundation. Demonstrations of excellence are namely linked to practices that are underpinned by assumptions like learning, teaching and scholarship being quantifiable and commensurable, the necessity and legitimacy of assessment and accountability systems, and “the naturalness and universality of competition” in higher education (Saunders, 2015:394). As all aspects of higher education aim at being excellent, excellence appears “neutral, natural, universal, and a legitimate educational goal” (Saunders, 2015:393), however, which obscures the above assumptions and their links to neoliberal ideology.

The economic logic underpinning excellence in higher education also points to the broader context of social, economic and political changes within which the concept is situated. Skelton (2004:452) maintains that understandings of ‘excellence’ “are always intimately connected to the wider social, economic and political context and underpinned by broader discourses or ideologies of education (...) and models of the higher educator”. As a result, ‘excellence’ is a multifaceted concept with a contested and shifting meaning (Elton, 1998; Chism, 2006; Skelton, 2009; Collini, 2012; French & O’Leary, 2017; Wood, 2017; Charles, 2018). The fluidity of the concept is furthermore due to its global meaning of ‘outstanding merit’ in a wide range of applications: It is used in university visions, missions and strategy documents; it describes the quality of teaching and research; it qualifies the reputation and ranking of institutions; it describes student capabilities and the level of student achievement, and it is used for the management of higher education and the quality of service provided by an institution. Virtually all aspects of the current university are united through commitments to excellence (Saunders, 2015). In short, “excellence is valued by everyone, even if everyone has a different understanding of what constitutes excellence” (Charles, 2018:16). The concept is therefore increasingly viewed as devoid of meaning: It means “everything and nothing at the same time”

(Wood, 2017:47). The vacuity of the concept is emphasised by what Collini (2012:109) calls "the 'no standing still' conception" of 'excellence': "Whatever the activity is, it must, we are constantly told, improve at a certain rate. Standards must always be 'driven up'. Benchmarks exist to be surpassed." In other words, "vacuity is (...) rendered more vacuous still by the requirement that the 'excellent' must become 'yet more excellent' on pain of being exposed as complacent or backward-looking" (Collini, 2012:109). Collini also uses the example of an advertisement for a senior administrative post at a British university which states that the appointed person would be expected to take the institution "beyond excellence" (2012:109).

Like the generic concept of 'excellence', 'teaching excellence' in higher education has become an empty term, referring to, among other interpretations, teaching in an interactive rather than a didactic way, modelling interpersonal skills, developing a collaborative relationship with students, using a wide range of teaching skills, showing enthusiasm and energy, displaying creativity and innovativeness, demonstrating concern for 'weaker' and disadvantaged students, and being committed to one's own professional development (Macfarlane, 2007:48). It is a construct that can be understood differently from a policy, professional, institutional, disciplinary or personal perspective, and is re-defined in correlation with changes in the social, economic and political environment (Wood & Su, 2017:462). This chapter therefore agrees with Skelton (2004:452) that 'teaching excellence' – like 'excellence' – should be understood as "a contested concept which is historically and situationally contingent".

The neoliberal foundations of 'teaching excellence' situate the concept in a corporatising context, governed by a managerialist approach that prioritises performativity and the quantifying of productivity or output (Shore & Wright, 1999, 2015; Morley, 2003; Saunders, 2015; Saunders & Ramírez, 2017). Morley (2003:48) describes this "new managerialism" as a culture of measurement and control where individuals and institutions compete with each other according to externally prescribed criteria and goals. In this culture, performance is used as a measure of productivity or output or displays of quality. As such, performance represents "the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement" (Ball, 2003:216). The concept 'quality', which is closely linked to 'excellence', is frequently used together with the terms 'enhancement', 'development' and 'improvement'. According to Morley (2003:49), this imbues 'quality' with a moral element that is universally accepted. In correspondence with the functioning of the generic concept 'excellence', this embedded morality disguises the underlying neoliberal ideology as well as the power related to it.

3 The "University of Excellence":³ Higher education in the service of humanity?

From an economic perspective, the traditional view of higher education was that it functions to serve society. The adoption of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 reinforced this view, adding the humanistic component that education is a human right (Blessinger & Makhanya, 2018). A humanistic perspective on higher education highlights its social justice foundation, and, in particular, the key components of equality, equity and inclusion. According to Blessinger and Makhanya (2018), it also emphasises the benefits

3 Readings, 1996:40.

(other than economic) that society derives from higher education, such as the strengthening of democracy, the development of civil society, and advancing the sharing of culture. Blessinger and Makhanya (2018) claim that “[i]n the final analysis, the main justification for the existence of a higher education institution is that it fulfils its mission by adequately serving the contemporary needs of its constituents.” Higher education is thus grounded in service to the broader community, “a good for all” (Pasquerella, 2016).

The understanding of the concept ‘public good’ in relation to higher education varies according to the ideological perspective taken on higher education. In general, however, it is interpreted on a continuum ranging from a close connection between private and public economic gain (for example, the possibility of increased income for individuals and higher national levels of technological development)⁴ to an exclusive concern with enhancing equity and equality. This chapter uses Nixon’s (2011) view of the ‘public good’ as its point of departure: “To claim higher education as a public good is ... to claim for ourselves – and others – membership of an active and inclusive public: To claim not only that higher education is ‘good’ (i.e. valuable and worthwhile), but that its ‘goodness’ resides in it being valuable and worthwhile to a public for which we share responsibility” (in Brew, 2015:99). In this chapter, furthermore, Nixon’s (2011) perspective on “higher education as a public good” (author’s italics) is regarded as complemented by Leibowitz’s (2012:xxiii) notion of “higher education *for* the public good” (author’s italics), that is, focusing the three roles of higher education – teaching, research, and community interaction – on who higher education is for, who it can serve, and in which way. The mutual emphasis on the service role of higher education in these two perspectives implies, as Leibowitz (2012:xxiii) argues in respect of “higher education *for* the public good”, “that the institution as a whole be predisposed – via its mission, culture and practices both within the institution and in its dealings with the outside world – towards social justice, inclusion and care for the other.” The values advocated by an institution should therefore be borne out internally as well as in its dealings with society, using the point of departure that human beings are not “instruments of economic well-being”, but rather that “the flourishing of human beings [is] a valuable end” (Leibowitz, 2012:xxii).

Despite the humanistic roots of higher education and the external and internal pressure on higher education institutions to contribute to social justice and democratic citizenship, the functioning of these institutions in a neoliberal culture often results in the enhancing of social exclusion, inequity and inequality instead of inclusion and parity on all levels. The related focus on individual responsibility and economic progress transcends the historical public service purpose of higher education, turning its conceptualisation from a public good into a private benefit (Pasquerella, 2016). In this context, social justice exists in a state of tension with the concept of ‘excellence’.

Employing excellence as a value in university teaching positions the concept in a conflicting space with values linked to social justice, such as equality, equity and social responsibility. These values are relegated to the fringe of the teaching excellence discourse, as the latter prioritises the individual good rather than the public good. This results from the corporatising

4 Brew (2015:99) points out the underlying paradox in higher education that “the more the focus is on individuals the more the community directly benefits”.

and 'new managerialist' approach to higher education, described in (1) above. Vally (2019) states that the neoliberal culture challenges "the very notion of the university as a mechanism for addressing social inequality" and encourages a critical approach towards the commercial and corporate values that shape the purpose and mission of higher education institutions. Nixon (2007) suggests that a different approach to excellence, recognising it as a moral category, is necessary. He claims that excellence "should be conceptualised in terms, not of private choice, but of the public good" (2007:16). Skelton (2009:110) agrees, claiming that "it is not sufficient to think of what 'works' in our teaching and support of learning, but rather what is 'good' – what is morally defensible and contributes to good in the world." Wood and Su (2017:452) correspondingly propose a reconceptualisation of 'teaching excellence' from a moral perspective to counter the measurement and performativity associated with the concept and draw attention to its ethical and relational aspects instead.

Nixon's (2007) understanding of teaching excellence as a moral category focuses on the values of truthfulness, respect and authenticity. These values ascribe a sense of moral purpose to the central academic practices of teaching, scholarly activity and research. According to Nixon (2007:20), "the only way to aspire to excellence" within these three practices is for academics to learn to become accurate, sincere, attentive, honest, brave and compassionate. These values also pertain to professional relationships at academic institutions: Relationships among academics and between academics and students need to recognise the equal worth of the other in order for the three central academic practices to be truly relational. In correspondence with Nixon (2007), Wood and Su (2017) argue that a moral perspective on teaching excellence would fill the vacuity of the concept with new meaning.

4 Recognising teaching excellence

Teaching excellence awards came into existence in 1957 in the USA and have since made a significant contribution to raising the status of teaching at higher education institutions worldwide (Leibowitz, Farmer & Franklin, 2012; Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017). Chism (2006:589) posits that teaching excellence awards are initiated for three main reasons: A symbolic acknowledgment by institutions of their support for teaching, recognition of the achievements of outstanding teachers, and encouragement of other teachers to reach similar levels of inspirational teaching. According to Halse, Deane, Hobson and Jones (2007:730), the official purpose of these awards is to celebrate and reward excellence in university teaching. The prestige bestowed on the recipients is powerful as it not only conveys recognition by the institution but also by colleagues, students and the disciplinary community. Teaching awards may validate the teaching identities of academics (Skelton, 2004:464) or construct new professional (teaching) identities among them "as an emerging cadre of academics become teaching and learning experts within their own discipline" (454). Some recipients may also be encouraged to consider changing their professional identity to that of an educational developer within their disciplines (Skelton, 2004:464). However, Halse et al. (2007:731) claim that the unofficial purpose of teaching awards is to contest the privileged position of research, especially at research-intensive universities, by enhancing the importance and stature of teaching at higher education institutions. Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017) agree, pointing out that the awards "emphasise and position quality teaching as an imperative" in research-led environments (6) and are "a means of foregrounding pedagogical work" (2).

The above benefits of teaching awards notwithstanding, this form of recognition could also present recipients with a so-called “poisoned chalice” (Skelton, 2004:461). Skelton (2004) indicates that constructing or intensifying award-winners’ teaching identity could prompt a negative response from peers and lead to a feeling of isolation within their disciplinary or institutional community (461). It could also create a dilemma for them regarding whether to pursue a teaching-focused career or a career in educational development, or whether to remain a subject specialist. Furthermore, there is a perception that recognition for teaching at a research-intensive university could be to the detriment of the recipient’s research profile and promotion (Skelton, 2004:465).

The criteria for judging the awarding of teaching excellence generally reflect the neoliberal context that higher education functions in. Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017:3) contend that teaching excellence awards emphasise “the competitive arena of excellence at the expense of attending to unequal social and economic relations”. Erikson (2015) maintains that the main effect of teaching awards seems to be affirmation of individual teachers rather than inspiring others to follow their example, while Skelton (2004:461) refers to awards in terms of measuring teaching performance. Indicating the managerialist and competitive sphere in which excellence functions as an individualist measure, Wood (2017:48) claims that teaching excellence has become “a competitive tool rather than a collaborative signifier”. Evaluation criteria for the awarding of teaching excellence are accordingly often de-contextualised and focused on the private good of the individual (the teacher) and the institution, not taking into account the complexity and diversity within which teaching and learning are situated (Chism, 2006; Leibowitz, Farmer & Franklin, 2012; Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017). A focal point of this multi-faceted environment is the close link between teaching and learning. In correspondence with Elton (1998), Wood and Su (2017), Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017), and others, this chapter argues that the conceptualisation, recognition and awarding of ‘excellent teaching’ should include a focus on ‘excellent learning’, with both discourses emphasising the ideological and unequal contexts in which students and teachers function. Agreeing with Chism (2006:604) that student learning is generally seen as “the ultimate indicator of teaching excellence”, Wood and Su (2017:462) contend that teaching excellence should be located in the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student as it comes into being through student learning. Chalmers (2018) and Elton (1998) underscore the link between the quality of teaching and the quality of student learning and engagement: “Looked at from the learner’s point of view, only such teaching as can produce excellent learning can lay claims to excellence” (Elton, 1998:3). From the perspective of excellence as a moral category, Nixon (2007) asserts that excellent teachers should approach their professional relationships with students with truthfulness, respect and authenticity. According to Nixon (2007:25), this is “a duty of care and compassion” performed for the public good. Leibowitz (2012:xxiv) agrees: “One cannot simply teach about the public good, or for the public good, if one does not provide the opportunity for students to practise these values and attributes and observe them being modelled by others.”

Up to this point, the discussion in this chapter has detailed the current understandings of ‘excellence’ and ‘teaching excellence’ in higher education and the awards related to the latter. It has also indicated the challenges associated with employing the concept of ‘teaching excellence’, the new managerialist higher education environment, and the resultant emphasis on the private good rather than the public good. Within this context, the subsequent discussion

focuses on "the space of the possible" (Davis & Phelps, 2004:4), exploring the awarding of teaching excellence as a complex system and indicating how teaching excellence awards at Stellenbosch University (SU) could be re-conceptualised for the public good.

5 Critical complexity theory: "Radical relationality"^{5, 6}

This chapter employs critical complexity theory as theoretical lens on the interpretation of the teaching excellence awards system at SU. This theory not only opens up new possibilities regarding understanding and adapting complex systems, but is also based on criticality and normativity (and thus ethics). It is therefore eminently suitable to underpin self-critical reflections on theoretical and practical approaches to complex phenomena (Preiser & Woermann, 2016) and the values they are informed by as well as the critical consequences of extending knowledge of a complex system (Woermann, 2016). The application of this theory also demonstrates an alternative to the traditional reductionist approach to complex systems.⁷ Denzin (2017:8) claims that, "[i]n the current 'audit cultures of global neoliberalism' '[t]here is a need to unsettle traditional concepts of what counts as research, as evidence, as legitimate inquiry'."

Woermann, Human and Preiser (2018:2) maintain that the understanding of complex phenomena is based on general philosophical issues, and specifically, criticism and norms. A critical approach, in the sense of self-critical reflection on theoretical and practical perspectives on complex phenomena, defines complexity as a critical undertaking, according to Preiser and Woermann (2016:13). The concept 'critical complexity' arose from the later work of Paul Cilliers (2012 and further) (see Woermann, et al., 2018:2). Cilliers (2001 and further) initially refers to "a critical understanding of complexity", but gradually expands it into a postmodern theory with input from deconstruction and post-structuralism. Critical complexity introduces 'complexity' as a primarily reflective and philosophical (rather than scientific) concept,⁸ but also focuses on the norms and critical consequences that complexity holds (Woermann, 2016:3).

The main assumption on which critical complexity is founded, is that complex phenomena cannot be simplified. The only way in which complexity could be understood (and then only partially and provisionally), is, ironically, by modelling,⁹ which necessarily implies a simplification (and thus a distortion) of the particular system. According to Woermann et al. (2018), any objective and complete knowledge of complex systems is therefore impossible. However, Woermann (2016:4) contends that the limitations of the knowledge of complex phenomena and the related provisionality of meaning create a gap for the criticism of models and practices – beyond the limits of knowledge and models lies the so-called "space of

5 Dillon, 2000:8.

6 The insights in this section have been adapted from Cattell-Holden (2020).

7 According to Heylighen, Cilliers and Gershenson (2007), the traditional scientific method, based on analysis, isolation and the collection of so-called complete information about a phenomenon, is insufficient to understand the mutually dependent relationships that comprise complex systems.

8 Complexity theory is grounded in the physical sciences; critical complexity theory has a philosophical foundation.

9 In correspondence with Cilliers (2001:2), the concepts 'model' and 'modelling' in this discussion are used in a broad sense, including theories, sets of rules, scientific statements, laws and descriptions of phenomena.

emergence" (Osberg & Biesta, 2008:323) which contains unknown possibilities of further knowledge (Preiser, Cilliers & Human, 2013:271). Critical actions thus possess the potential to expand knowledge of a complex system and to engage responsibly with the complexities of the world. "[A]n engagement with complexity allows for new ways of thinking that challenge us to explore alternative possibilities of knowing and being, which may very well influence the manner in which we act and live in the world" (Preiser & Woermann, 2016:12).

Critical complexity theory avoids reductionist scientific analyses by not only examining the individual components that contribute to the whole of a complex system, but also the structure of the system. "The focus is not upon isolated actors and objects foregrounded against some contextual backdrop, but on the dynamic, nonlinear actions and connections flowing between all these parts" (Fenwick, 2009:107). The structure of a complex system is formed by the patterns of interaction among the elements of the system and between the system and its environment. These patterns are non-linear and form a network. Dillon (2000:8) calls this interaction "radical relationality" – in a complex system "nothing is without being in relation". The elements of a complex system only have meaning within their relationships. This also explains why complex systems should ideally be investigated without simplification: "to analyse the elements without engaging with their interactions within the network is senseless because the interactions are precisely what gives the elements meaning" (Cilliers, 2010:59). Due to the constant interaction within the system as well as between the system and its context, complex systems are described as open.

The interaction in a complex system leads to ongoing change in the relationships among the elements and unpredictability regarding the appearance of previously unforeseen possibilities of meaning. New relationship patterns and the adaptation or eradication of existing patterns become necessary because of new elements or phenomena becoming visible and, as a result, previously unknown meaning possibilities becoming a reality (Mason, 2008:43). Complex systems are therefore characterised by a lack of equilibrium: As "living" entities (Cilliers, 1998:3) there should be a continuous flow of energy, physical material and information between the system and its environment to maintain the organisation of the system and ensure its survival (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014:26). "Equilibrium is another word for death", says Cilliers (1998:4). Within these "space[s] of emergence" (Osberg & Biesta, 2008:323) systems often change their structures internally, in other words, without the influence of an external agent. This process is known as self-organisation.

The following section explores the teaching excellence awards at SU as a complex system, focusing on "the space of emergence" beyond the perceived limitations of the current practice. It considers how the awards could be re-contextualised for the public good within the context of the neoliberal approach to post-colonial higher education in South Africa.

6 'Teaching excellence' at SU

The concept 'excellence' has been interpreted and applied in SU policy and guideline documents across a spectrum of strategies, frameworks and action plans. 'Excellence' appears to be used as "an organizing frame of the university" (Saunders, 2015:391) in these directives, bringing all aspects of the institution together in a joint commitment to 'excellence' in its global application

of 'outstanding merit'. The concept has been integral to SU's visions, missions and strategy documents over years: It has described the quality of teaching, learning and research; it qualifies the institution's management and reputation, and it indicates the quality of service the institution provides. In the *Institutional Plan 2017-2022* (a directional document to realise SU's strategic priorities), for example, 'excellence' is used 61 times in different contexts,¹⁰ qualifying learning (as student success through diversity (10)), teaching, research, the institution ('excellence' equals student success rates, research output, specialised (niche) scientific fields and staff expertise (11)), governance (repositioning the institutional secretariat function as an enabler (11)), social impact, strategies and operations, etc. Apart from the qualifiers mentioned, there is no reference to the University's understanding of 'excellence' in the body of the document. However, where the concept is stated as a strategic objective per responsibility centre ("Excellence in learning and teaching", Addendum B), it is unpacked in the action plans for each responsibility centre per Faculty. For the responsibility centre of the Vice-Rector (Learning and Teaching), for example, the Faculty action plans for 'excellence in learning and teaching' comprise the following:

- ▶ Ensure quality and delivery efficacy of academic programmes.
- ▶ Advance academic staff's L&T skills & give them appropriate recognition.
- ▶ Introduce measures in every module to ensure that students are well prepared for contact sessions.¹¹
- ▶ Extend student learning in faculties to the living and co-curricular environments. (Stellenbosch University, 2017:39)

The diverse interpretations of 'excellence' in the *Institutional Plan 2017-2022* are also visible in other SU frameworks, strategies and plans. In the *Institutional Intent and Strategy 2013-2018* one of the three overarching strategic priorities is to "sustain momentum on excellence" (14), the themes and goals of which are formulated in terms of the contexts of the institution's knowledge base, systemic sustainability and student success. 'Excellence' also forms part of SU's *Vision 2030*:

Stellenbosch University is **inclusive, innovative, and future focused**: A place of discovery and excellence where both staff and students are thought leaders in advancing knowledge in the service of all stakeholders. (Stellenbosch University, 2013:7)

'Excellence' is the only key term in *Vision 2030* which is not unpacked in the definition following the Vision statement,¹² possibly in line with the generic understanding of the concept as of 'outstanding merit'. It is also not included in the related Mission statement, but is listed

10 Out of the total of 61 times, the concept is repeated 35 times as a matter of course in the listing of strategic objectives and action plans in responsibility centres and across faculties.

11 The action plan for the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences replaces this point with "Initiate student-centred learning to ensure optimal use of main contact sessions" (50).

12 "**Vision 2030 is defined as follows**: The University, as a 21st-century institution, plays a leading role in the creation of an advanced society; **inclusivity** focuses on the talents and contributions of individuals; **innovation** deals with the need specifically to address the challenges of a more sustainable future creatively; the energy of students and academics is directed at creating the **future** imaginatively from courageous efforts to tackle current problems and issues actively; theory and practice are interwoven in the education process (**discovery**); the Stellenbosch experience entails a better insight into world issues, an innovative unlocking of creative abilities to solve problems, and an encouragement of meaningful action to serve society through knowledge. (**thought leaders**). This all happens in a context of transforming SU to be future fit and globally competitive". (Stellenbosch University, 2013:7)

as a value, again without reference to the institutional interpretation of the concept: “We are characterised by excellence in everything we do” (Stellenbosch University, 2013:8).

In *Vision 2040* ‘excellence’ occupies a more prominent position:

Stellenbosch University will be Africa’s leading research-intensive university, globally recognised as excellent, inclusive and innovative, where we advance knowledge in service of society. (Stellenbosch University, 2018a:14)

The concept is not expanded on in the Mission statement, apart from references to “outstanding students”, “talented staff” and “a world-class environment” which could be understood as an interpretation of ‘excellence’ (Stellenbosch University, 2018b:15). However, ‘excellence’ serves as a value in *Vision 2040*, as in *Vision 2030*, but is now explained as “[a]cademic freedom to pursue knowledge that adheres to the highest standards of integrity, renewal and relevance” (Stellenbosch University, 2018b:16).

The different understandings of ‘excellence’ demonstrated in the above documents indicate not only the sustained lack of agreement on a definition of the concept and its resultant fluidity, but also the changes in interpretations of ‘excellence’ in response to shifts in national and international higher education and the social, economic and political contexts (national and international) SU is situated in (compare Skelton, 2004:452). In correspondence with Saunders (2015), Wood and Su (2017), Skelton (2004, 2009) and Chism (2006), among others, it could therefore be argued that ‘excellence’ in the SU institutional context is a multifaceted concept with a contested and shifting meaning. In addition, the fluidity of the concept leads to a loss of meaning (Wood, 2017:47), which is emphasised by the application of ‘excellence’ as a benchmark, in other words, a standard that exists to be surpassed. *The Institutional Plan 2017-2022* (13) refers to taking the University “towards higher levels of excellence”, for example. In the words of Collini (2012:109), “vacuity is (...) rendered more vacuous still by the requirement that the ‘excellent’ must become ‘yet more excellent’ on pain of being exposed as complacent or backward-looking.”

The above interpretations of ‘excellence’ in the SU policy and guideline documents are reinforced in the institutional directives for teaching and learning. *The Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014-2018*, for example, aligns the first teaching and learning strategy plan (2002) and the University’s ongoing commitment to good teaching with the changing world and revised university strategic goals in order to “further enhance teaching excellence” at the institution (2). Although ‘teaching excellence’ is not defined, the document does refer to the use of “quality teaching” (2) in the 2002 strategy.¹³ A strategic priority of enhancing teaching excellence was the professionalisation of the scholarly teaching role, which was articulated in the following strategic objective, among others: “To define ‘good teaching’ within different contexts so that it can be defined, promoted and rewarded at all levels” (9) [author’s italics]. One recommended activity for reaching this objective was “an institution-wide *teaching excellence* award that will allow for a systematic preparation for participation in the Heltasa/CHE Annual National Teaching Excellence Awards System” (14) [author’s italics]. In this *Strategy* ‘good teaching’ and ‘teaching excellence’ are therefore conflated.

13 The Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2017-2021 uses the same reference as basis for the revised strategy. The Teaching and Learning Policy (2018) also refers to the promotion of quality teaching and learning (2).

The *Teaching and Learning Policy* (2018) introduces a clear distinction between 'good' and 'excellent' teaching at SU in terms of the standing of the two qualifiers: *Good* teaching is acknowledged, but *excellent* teaching is recognised, rewarded and promoted across all systems of the University (5). 'Good teaching' is the expected norm at the institution: "Good teaching is expected of all academics at any stage of their careers" (5). Apart from stating that the approach to teaching and learning in the *Policy* is aligned with SU envisioning itself as being "the best for the world" (2), and linking 'excellence' to context and responsiveness, there is no clarification of the meaning of 'good' versus 'excellent' teaching.

The implicit and different meanings assigned to 'teaching excellence' in the above documents confirm the emptiness of the term described by Macfarlane (2007) and Wood and Su (2017), among others. 'Teaching excellence' is a construct, the meaning of which changes according to the perspective it is viewed from, as well as shifts in the social, economic and political environment (Wood & Su, 2017:462). Attempts to provide clarity about the use of 'teaching excellence' in the SU environment were made in the *Recommendations of the Task Team for the Promotion and Recognition of Teaching* (2015) and the guidelines to the subsequent SU Teaching Excellence Awards (2017-2020).

7 'Excellence' in the SU Teaching Excellence Awards

The SU Teaching Excellence Awards were initiated in 2017 in response to a report entitled *Recommendations of the Task Team for the Promotion and Recognition of Teaching* which was adopted by the University's Senate in June 2015. The report recommended that teaching excellence be recognised at institutional level by "a number of (...) dedicated internal institutional and external awards that specifically acknowledge teaching achievements" (*Recommendations of the Task Team for the Promotion and Recognition of Teaching*, 2015:15).¹⁴

The *Recommendations* (2015:4) provided a definition of 'good teaching' that has been included in the guidelines for the Teaching Excellence Awards since 2019: 'good teaching' "facilitates effective, active learning, i.e. learning that leads to high student success rates and achieving outcomes (of modules and programmes) at a high standard", requires an affordable level of resources, and takes the requirements of research and community interaction into account (*Stellenbosch University*, 2019:2). 'Excellent' teaching was defined in the *Recommendations* and adapted and included in the *Awards* since 2017, using the detailed definition of 'teaching excellence' from the HELTASA National Excellence in Teaching and Learning Awards:

An excellent teacher is aware of their context (beyond the immediate environment) and reflects on the ways in which their discipline, institution, own history and students' lived experiences affect teaching and learning. An excellent teacher is a reflective practitioner who has grown more effective over a number of years in relation to increasing knowledge of teaching and learning, experience in teaching and the facilitation of learning, and systematic observations of what happens in the classroom (including how outside factors affect students) with a view to improving student engagement and learning outcomes. An excellent teacher demonstrates a willingness to experiment in their teaching with new means at their disposal and integrates

14 This recommendation also appears in the earlier *Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014-2018* and was included in the *Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2017-2021* and the *Teaching and Learning Policy* (2018).

innovative practices into their teaching.¹⁵ An excellent teacher has a clearly articulated teaching philosophy, informed by educational theory, and appropriate for a university teaching context. Teaching experience can include both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. 'Teaching' can be interpreted broadly to include curriculum design and delivery, the latter in class, online or through materials development. (Stellenbosch University, 2020:2)

The emphasis on context and responsiveness in the above definition links with a similar approach to 'excellence' in the *Teaching and Learning Policy* (2018). The *Policy* aligns teaching and learning with the repositioning of SU from perceiving itself as "the best in the world" to being "the best for the world" (2018:2). This approach stresses the social and relational dimensions of teaching and learning as well as the effect of the social context on teaching and learning. It acknowledges the close link between society and individual in teaching and learning, but states that the social context "potentially has a more profound effect on teaching and learning than any individual characteristics of students or academics" (2). In accordance with the *Policy*, the six aims of the Awards (since 2018) include four that relate directly to the situating of the institution in a social community and collaboration with academics across the institution in a community of practice:

- ▶ to generate a cadre of academics who are able to provide inspiration and leadership in teaching and learning in their disciplines and across the institution;
- ▶ to generate debate and public awareness about what constitutes teaching excellence for the world rather than in the world;
- ▶ to advance the scholarship of teaching and learning; and
- ▶ to stimulate the growth of professional teachers. (Stellenbosch University, 2020:3)

Similarly, the *Awards* criteria (as from 2018) stress the importance of contextual awareness with regard to the institutional, students' professional, national and international issues that affect the applicant's teaching and learning context. The *Awards 2020* criteria define 'context' as "what it means to teach in higher education at this time on the African continent, in South Africa, and at SU, for example, teaching in a transformative, socially just manner in one's discipline or programme" (Stellenbosch University, 2020:7).¹⁶ 'Contextual awareness' then involves the demonstration of knowledge of and insight into social and individual contexts (of both the academic and students) within which teaching and learning take place and the impact of these contexts on teaching and learning, an awareness of students' needs and catering for those needs with regard to teaching methods, engaging students actively in their own learning, contributing to teaching and learning beyond the classroom, and providing leadership in teaching and learning institutionally, nationally and internationally.¹⁷

Despite the strong emphasis in the *Awards* on context and collaboration with regard to students, society and the academic community of practice, the awards system reflects the global neoliberal approach to higher education and the accompanying corporatising context and managerialist approach to teaching and learning in particular (Shore & Wright, 1999,

15 This sentence has been included in the *Awards* since 2018.

16 For 2020, 'context' also includes the effects of Covid-19 on academics' teaching and students' learning, such as the move to emergency remote teaching.

17 The last aspect refers specifically to applicants in the *Distinguished Teacher* category. SU has two categories for applications: *Developing Teacher* and *Distinguished Teacher*.

2015; Morley, 2003; Saunders, 2015; Saunders & Ramírez, 2017). The system prioritises the individual in the sense that only applications from individual academics are accepted.¹⁸ The excellence of the individual's teaching is determined by criteria that use their performance to measure their productivity, outputs, and, finally, their worth (Ball, 2003). The financial reward successful candidates receive not only quantifies their 'quality' and professional/academic identity but also demonstrates their 'worth' as teachers – in terms of the 'excellence' benchmark they are 'commendable' or 'evolving' teachers in comparison to peers who might still be 'promising'. Furthermore, applications are judged by a selection panel which is representative of the University's faculties, senior management and professional developers, but does not include the student voice. In this respect the teaching awards system overlooks the relationship between excellent teaching and excellent learning (Elton, 1998; Wood & Su, 2017; Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017). In this "culture of measurement and control" (Morley, 2003:48) individual academics compete with each other not to be "the best for the world" but "the best in the world", ironically, overturning the re-envisioning of the University in the *Teaching and Learning Policy* (2018:2). The private (individual) good therefore transcends teaching and learning for the public (social) good; in other words, the teaching excellence awards emphasise "the competitive arena of excellence at the expense of attending to unequal social and economic relations" (Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017:3).

Within the above context, employing 'excellence' as a value in *Vision 2040* (Stellenbosch University, 2019) positions the concept in a conflicting space with values linked to social justice and the public good, such as equality, equity and social responsibility. As the teaching excellence awards privilege the individual good, the values linked to the public good are relegated to the fringe of the 'excellence' discourse at SU. In accordance with Vally (2019), Nixon (2007) and Skelton (2009), a critical and morally defensible approach should be taken towards the commercial and corporate values that shape the institutional context in which this discourse is situated and negate the notion of the university "as a mechanism for addressing social inequality" (Vally, 2019). A reconceptualisation of 'teaching excellence' from a moral perspective would counter the measurement and performativity associated with the concept and emphasise its ethical and relational aspects instead (Wood & Su, 2017:452). In the words of Leibowitz (2012:xxiii), "[the institution as a whole should] be predisposed – via its mission, culture and practices both within the institution and in its dealings with the outside world – towards social justice, inclusion and care for the other."

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

From the point of view of critical complexity theory, any knowledge of a complex phenomenon is necessarily limited (Woermann, 2016). However, the related provisionality of meaning makes the criticism and change of models and practices possible – beyond the limits of knowledge and meaning lies the so-called "space of emergence" (Osberg & Biesta, 2008:323) which contains unknown possibilities of further knowledge (Preiser, Cilliers & Human, 2013), the

18 The individual emphasis in the awards contradicts the *Recommendations of the Task Team for the Promotion and Recognition of Teaching* (2015:15) which stated that, "[w]herever possible, teams of teaching staff also should be considered when recognising teaching excellence".

"as-yet unimagined" (Davis & Sumara, 2008:38). This holds true for the re-envisioning of the SU Teaching Excellence Awards for the public good.

A critical complexity approach to the Teaching Excellence Awards system entails not only examining the individual components that contribute to the whole of the complex system, but also the structure of the system – "the dynamic, nonlinear actions and connections flowing between all these parts" (Fenwick, 2009:107). The patterns of constant interaction among the elements of the system and between the system and its institutional and social environments are non-linear and form a network. This "radical relationality" (Dillon, 2000:8) holds that the elements of the complex system only have meaning as a result of their relationships and interaction (Cilliers, 2010).

The interaction between 'teaching' excellence' and the other elements and agents that form the Teaching Excellence Awards system has been demonstrated in Sections 5 and 6 by the overview of the relationships between the concept, the different institutional contexts and the documents the concept emerged from. From the overview it emerged that this interaction has led to ongoing change in the relationships among the elements and a resultant unpredictability regarding the appearance of previously unforeseen possibilities of meaning. The strengthening emphasis on the relationship between 'teaching excellence' and contextual awareness described in the overview was not a reality when the awards were instituted in 2017, for example, but emerged from the increasing necessity for higher education to enhance equality, equity and social responsibility in its institutional and social contexts. The constant changes to the system are necessary to maintain the organisation of the system and ensure not only its survival (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014) but also its continued relevance at the University.

In order to "enlarge the space of the possible" (Davis & Phelps, 2004:4) in the present awards system, with specific reference to the public good, there are five emergent factors that could be considered. Firstly, in correlation with Wood and Su (2017), Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017), and Chalmers (2018), the conceptualisation, recognition and rewarding of 'excellent teaching' should include a focus on 'excellent learning', with both discourses emphasising the ideological and unequal contexts in which students and teachers function. "Looked at from the learner's point of view, only such teaching as can produce excellent learning can lay claims to excellence", Elton (1998:3) contends. The student voice should therefore be introduced to the faculty and institutional selection panels and the value of collaboration between academics and students in this regard emphasised.

Secondly, shifting the present corporate and individualist value of 'excellence' into a moral context would lead to 'excellent' teachers approaching their professional relationships with students with truthfulness, respect and authenticity. Nixon (2007:25) calls this "a duty of care and compassion" performed for the public good. Leibowitz (2012:xxiv) agrees: "One cannot simply teach about the public good, or for the public good, if one does not provide the opportunity for students to practise these values and attributes and observe them being modelled by others." This leads into the third possible change: Adapting the managerialist narratives about 'excellence' and the rewarding of it in a more inclusive and collaborative system. This would entail engaging the various agents in the system – academics, students, management, and society – on what 'teaching excellence' means [at that time] to ensure

that everyone is represented and catered for, as far as possible (Behari-Leak & McKenna, 2017:13). A collaborative approach to excellence, countering performativity, individualism and the implied competition, should contribute to reclaiming teaching as a public good.

In the fourth instance, the awards as a private good could be broadened by introducing disciplinary/interdisciplinary teams and projects. This would require academics (and students) to collaborate for the benefit of overall improved learning (Leibowitz, et al., 2012:17), as well as enhanced professional growth. In addition, and in the fifth instance, the current individualist performative criteria could be replaced by more inclusive domains. Candidates could for example be required to show how knowledge is constructed in their discipline and how they create an inclusive learning environment, enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and foster lifelong learning. They could also be asked to show how they promote multilingualism to enable graduates to fit into society and the workplace.

9 Conclusion

Returning to Davis and Phelps' (2004) link between complexity theory and education – enlarging the space of the possible around education and moving into a sphere of emergence beyond the limits of the current knowledge of it – the main concern of higher education should be to create the conditions in which "as-yet unimagined" knowledge could emerge (Davis & Sumara, 2008:38). This would include the possibility of unforeseen knowledge emerging beyond the boundaries of the present SU Teaching Excellence Awards system. Expanding these boundaries would move the system into a broader network of relations, enhancing its meaning to SU as well as to the larger academic and social communities the institution is linked to. A shift from individualism to collaboration in the Teaching Excellence Awards would contribute to the enhancement of equality, equity and social responsibility at SU and in its publics. Ultimately it would also contribute to reclaiming teaching at SU and in South African higher education as a whole as a public good.

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

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