Hampering teaching excellence? Academics making decisions in the face of contradictions

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Universities might aspire to teaching excellence, but do they enable academic teachers to make good teaching decisions? Using a critical realist perspective, a qualitative interview study in England and Australia explored academics' experiences of teaching decisions and their responses to strategic, institutional and departmental teaching policy and planning. Complex and contradictory conditions that challenged academics experiences of teaching and prevented effective decision-making were found. The paper identifies aspects of university functioning that act to prevent the achievement of teaching excellence. It argues that excellence in teaching requires coherent and integrated approaches and commitment right across the institution. For this to happen, universities need to consider how stated strategic learning and teaching ambitions are communicated, implemented, supported and, importantly, how they are understood and enacted throughout all levels and areas of the organisation, including many that hitherto do not consider they have a role in learning and teaching.
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Keywords: academic work; university teaching; decision-making; conceptions of teaching; policies

Introduction

Widespread concerns about the quality of higher education teaching and student learning have spread from simply being the concern of individual universities to becoming matters of national and indeed international significance. Institutions may be required to meet the performance targets of their government, such as defined, for example, by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England, or the Australian Higher Education Standards Framework. However, it has been recognised that such initiatives frequently are based on over-simplistic assumptions about how to improve teaching. The English TEF, for example, has been criticised for its emphasis on a neo-liberal agenda (O'Leary & Cui, 2020), and for failing to take account of research evidence on what makes higher education teaching excellent (Ashwin, 2017). Universities may generate policies and processes to meet national targets, but does that result in excellent teaching? Skelton, (2004) argues that teaching excellence cannot simply be deduced from measures of student satisfaction, nor from neo-liberalist ideals. Teaching excellence at the institutional level resides in the material conditions that underpin it (Skelton, 2009). It is about, "generating pluralistic deliberative cultures where not only methods of teaching but also pedagogical theories, values and policies can be shared. Most importantly, "teaching excellence needs to be seen as a part of a whole: excellence involves integrating different aspects of our academic practice so that they are mutually reinforcing" (Skelton, 2009, p.110).

If these more nuanced conceptions of teaching excellence are to be achieved, the complexities of teaching in the lives of universities and in the lives and imaginings of academics need to be better understood. There is a need to understand the interaction between material, and structural conditions, teachers' own internal needs and desires and what they imagine is happening in regard to university functioning. Yet very little is known about how decisions about teaching are made within university departments and programmes. So how do academic teachers make decisions about teaching in higher education, what are the conditions under which they do so, and what factors act to bring about the achievement of excellence in teaching?

Our concern in this paper is to address these questions. Using a critical realist framework, we are concerned to access the 'internal conversations' that Archer (2003) talks about in order to highlight, through an interview study, some of the ways in which academics think about their teaching and enact their teaching decisions in relation to the structural conditions in which they find themselves. In presenting our findings, we focus on how academics deal with contradictions, how they respond to accountability measures and the institutional factors that combine to hamper teaching excellence.

Background

A good deal is already known about how academic teachers perceive and think about teaching in higher education and this has been helpful in drawing attention to how it can be improved. Three distinct traditions of existing research are of interest. Firstly, studies focused on the changes in higher education that have taken place over the past 30-40 years or so, have drawn attention to the challenges that a neoliberal agenda with its attendant focus on measurement, accountability, marketisation and consumerism has presented to academics and examined how they respond. Secondly, aspects of how academics perceive teaching emerge from the more general literature on the change nature of academic work and in research focused on the role and identity of academics. Thirdly, phenomenographic studies have focused on academics' conceptions of teaching and how they relate to the subject matter being taught.

Responses to neo-liberalism

In the early 2000s, the introduction of performativity measures in higher education and an over-reliance on accountability was viewed as a shock to academics unused to such a neoliberal agenda (see e.g., Ball 2000, 2003; Davies and Petersen, 2005; Sims, 2019). Ball (2000, p.2), for example, argued that accountability measures lead to inauthentic practices where work and presentations of self become fabrications as individuals act to "escape from the gaze". However, more recent research has suggested ambiguity in academics' responses to neoliberal conditions. O'Leary and Cui (2020, p.144) argue that neo-liberalism results in reductive measures that are "ill-equipped" to capture the complexity of teaching and learning in higher education.

Recognition that the performative neoliberal agenda challenged the identity of academics and questioned their professionalism (Nixon 1996) has led to numerous studies focused on academic identity. Clegg (2008), for example, found that despite the pressures of accountability, neither personal dissatisfaction nor nostalgia for a freer golden age in universities was in evidence. Indeed, a review of articles on academic teacher identity published between 2005 and 2015 (van Lankveld et al., 2017) found both positive and negative effects on academics of the neoliberal agenda within universities. While academics' identity as teachers was challenged by conflicts between teaching and research, it was strengthened by professional development, contact with students, and psychological processes such as a sense of competence and commitment to teaching. Van Lankveld and colleagues concluded that it is important to develop strategies to enable academics to take control over the situations in which they find themselves.

Changing academic work

Studies of the changing nature of academic work and careers have highlighted conditions for teaching in higher education. Although many academics still have both

teaching and research responsibilities, there has been an increase in teaching-only positions (Henkel, 2016). The pressures of academic work and time constraints and the measures taken to achieve equitable workloads have been a particular cause for concern (e.g. Gibbs, et al. 2015; Teichler & Höhle, 2013, Papadopoulos, 2017). New managerialist practices have been associated with increases in administrative work (Szekeres, 2004). There is a growing literature exploring new types of academic and quasi-academic roles with people on "professional staff" contracts increasingly performing teaching functions (Locke, et al. 2016; Macfarlane 2011; Whitchurch, 2008; Brew, Boud, Lucas & Crawford, 2016). In addition, commentators have noted increases in casualisation, and the adoption of non-standard, part-time, temporary, and fixed term contracts. (Courtney, 2013; Leathwood & Read, 2020; Ryan, et al. 2013). All of these developments affect the quality of teaching in higher education.

Approaches to teaching

The tradition that dominated discussions of learning and teaching in the 1980s to 2000s, was designed to understand how academics specifically perceive teaching. Such research took a phenomenographic approach which did not, in the main, consider the broader context. Phenomenography, also now known as variation theory, describes the variation in how a given group conceptualise a particular phenomenon. While much of this work has focused on conceptions of student learning, (e.g. Marton & Saljo, 1976; Marton & Booth,1997), some studies focus specifically on how academics conceptualise teaching (e.g., Prosser & Trigwell, 1999).

The phenomenographic approach requires researchers to consider teaching (or learning) in a relational way; i.e. on conceptions of teaching a particular subject or a particular group of students. However, as Haggis (2003) argues, it results in an abstraction from the specific situations which are the focus of attention. So, for example, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) found that academics' approaches to teaching focused either on information transmission, or on conceptual change. In this approach, the resulting set of ideas do not take account of the "messy and complex realities of [teachers'] individual teaching and learning situations" (Haggis, 2003, p.95). Haggis further argues that by not considering wider social perspectives on learning, the phenomenographic approach has created a narrow idea of what the problems of the field are. It has been useful in providing a way for teachers to understand variation in their students' understanding, but it does not take account of the context of teaching, the pressures that teachers might be under, nor how they perceive teaching within the exigencies of contemporary university structures and initiatives. Teaching involves a set of practices (e.g. marking, monitoring students' progress, organising tutors and demonstrators) some of which may not be related to how a teacher perceives teaching, but which need to be completed whatever conception of teaching a particular teacher holds.

Teaching decisions

We are concerned here with how teachers make decisions about teaching and the conditions under which they do this. In order to understand (and improve) teaching in higher education there is a need to focus on teachers as agents in a contradictory and confusing multi-structured context. For as Clegg (2008) points out, the university is a deeply ambiguous place that is more richly complex than most studies recognise. It is likely that broad trends may be discernible, but much more needs to be known about how teachers make decisions about teaching and the structural conditions and norms

under which they do so. Malcolm and Zukas, (2009, p.504) argue that the relationship of individuals to the structures and systems in which they find themselves is more complex than most previous work in this space has suggested. They refer to the 'messy experience of academic work' arguing that academics find ways to manage the realities of practice despite a disparity between different versions of academic work. Thus, the way in which academics experience their work and perceive their concerns, influences how they navigate their way through the complexities of their role, because their concerns are subjectively defined as they mediate the structural influences. Acts of teaching are thus likely to be varied and multi-faceted, and teachers' responses to departmental and structural conditions of the workplace are likely to be paradoxical.

Methodology

At its core, this paper is about the relationship between individual academics' subjectivity and agency and the institutional social structures in which they work. In the context of teaching, Sharar (2016, p.2) defines structures as 'materials, social or cultural patterns' giving examples such as 'the physical environment; resources; institutional, social and work norms; legislation; and discourses,' whilst academics' agency, in this context, relates to the way in which 'conscious human activity … results in, or resists, changes to environments, resources and relationships' (Sharar, 2016, 2).

The theoretical lens of critical realism argues that the real world exists independently of both the social world and individuals' ideas. The social world is dependent upon human action for its existence but it exists prior to any one individual. The knowledge that individuals have of the world (natural and social) does not mirror these worlds. Individuals and groups may have partial, confused, contradictory or mistaken ideas about the worlds they inhabit (Fairclough, 2005). Thus, structures may mediate, but they do not determine individuals' actions (Sayer 1992). Social situations are ambiguous and present many conflicting opportunities for growth, development and the pursuit of personal objectives (Archer 2000). This perspective enables us to explore the ambiguity that Clegg (2008) highlighted.

Archer (2007) suggests that people develop an 'internal conversation' and use this to interpret the situations they are in. Her explication of the perpetual interaction between structure and agency and the mediating mechanisms that link them focuses attention in this paper on academics' perceptions of the relationships between their own agential concerns and their experiences of departmental or institutional mechanisms for the development, planning and management of teaching. We explore what academic teachers said they experienced. We do not, in this paper, explore why they experienced phenomena in a particular way nor what that means for individuals' 'identity'.

In an earlier paper (Brew et al. 2018), we argued that academics navigate the complexities of their role by selectively focusing attention and evaluating what they notice through reflexivity. Archer defines reflexivity as '…the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to the (social) contexts and vice versa' (Archer 2007, p.4). The critical realist perspective is used here to argue that it is not simply a question of what academics choose to focus their attention on, their teaching decision-making is a function of what they see and respond to as well as what they may not notice.

Method

This paper draws upon semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 27 mid-career teaching and research academics (within 5-10 years' post-doc or first

appointment) from three Australian and five English universities, chosen to provide a balance of country, institution, and disciplinary area. Whilst the universities reflected different types of institutions in the two countries, they all exhibited research-intensive environments. Three discipline clusters were represented: Science, Engineering and Technology (SET), Social Sciences and Humanities (SS & H), Medical and Health Sciences (M&HS). Selected quotations from the interviews (including the participant pseudonym, country, discipline cluster and line numbers from the original transcript) are used to summarise key ideas in the text.

The interviews which lasted approximately an hour were designed to gather in-depth data about individual experiences and perceptions of academic practice. Questions asked participants to articulate their experiences of teaching as part of a discipline, department, and institution. Following transcription, an interpretivist, thematic analysis, underpinned by a critical realist lens was initially undertaken by members of the team to explore academics' perceptions of their role and how they interpret, reflect on and respond to institutional strategy, policy, procedures and processes in their context. Following this, the team discussed linkages between the themes. Then summaries of each transcript were created according to the themes. The team then undertook a second level of analysis comparing and contrasting themes and relationships and clarifying variations across transcripts and exploring three levels of activity: the individual teacher's experience of teaching; experiences of departmental, programme or school level influences; and experiences of strategic, institutional level of teaching planning. The important point here is that the emphasis is placed on recognising that each level impacts and influences the other levels. In this way, the interplay between structure and agency and the ways in which academics experience the contradictions or 'dislocation between the official and academic versions of academic work' (Malcolm and Zukas, 2009, p.503) were explored.

Findings

Making decisions in conditions of uncertainty
Whilst, as would be expected, academics interpret, reflect on and respond to their experience of teaching in different ways, many interviewees articulate taking great pride in their teaching and really enjoy the teaching elements of their day-to-day work. However, it is also evident that they often find it necessary to make local decisions and exercise agency within what they see as, contradictory, uncoordinated, ill-defined structural conditions that many do not understand the reasons for, nor agree with.

Many said they experienced a culture for teaching that appeared to lack overall coherence and logic, leaving people to work without clarity, essentially 'making it up as they go along' or 'making the best of a bad job'. Some described doing a 'balancing act' as they prioritised their work. Others described how teaching commitments commonly had to be given precedence over administration and research, not necessarily because they were given more value, but because of the immediacy of the teaching task and the non-negotiable deadlines inherent in the work.

> *We get told off when we don't get our work marked and turned*
> *around in time and it always seems to me that the teaching and the*
> *admin is always higher priority, Teaching and admin has always got*
> *the shortest deadline, so when you're looking at time management*

> *and planning ... the research can always wait. (Natalie, England, SET, L157-161)*

Our data suggest that whilst institutions commonly have learning and teaching, or education strategy documents, strategic teaching decisions may often be taken by senior personnel or within committees without clear alignment, a coherent, agreed discourse, buy-in from colleagues, or structures to underpin planning. Sometimes critical decisions are taken by high-level committees that can impact on the minutiae of classroom teaching, such as, for example, a directive that all courses should include graduate attributes. Indeed, our interviewees talked about how teaching decisions and planning for teaching at institutional level can fail to take account of the practicalities and realities of teaching in departments and programs. A lack of coherence between levels of activity in an institution can result in the creation of many practical, logistical and sometime bureaucratic hurdles being put in place, which academics consider impede creative, innovative, timely, responsive curriculum and teaching practice developments.

> *All the time that we spend filling out forms is not spent on designing teaching materials, or curriculum designing, essential things that actually really matter. (Geert, UK, SS, L391-393)*

There is evidence that some academics are content with the way that teaching is organised across their department and feel that the allocation of teaching is fair to them. The perceived lack of overt, comprehensive, transparent planning processes which recognise the actual demands of different kinds of activity in departments and for programmes, and the consequential potential for teaching to be under-resourced, can result in confusion, a lack of trust and significant loss of academics' time.

This all highlights the context of complexity, uncertainty and ambiguity that characterises contemporary universities. Many concerns can be linked back to the overarching issue of lack of explicit coherence between the stated strategy and ambitions of institutions with different parts of universities taking decisions independently, and the reality of how the practice of teaching allocation, planning and delivery is experienced by those who undertake it.

We should not be surprised by these findings. The data from this study, reveals that clear alignment, a coherent discourse, or agreed structures to underpin teaching planning, development and delivery are elusive both in England and in Australia. It is a reminder that university functioning is not a rational unidirectional system. Rather teaching decisions lie at the confluence of individual and collective aims, aspirations and desires and at intersections between different values.

Conflicting accountability measures

Numerous studies have pointed to the context of measurement and accountability that dominates universities. Ball (2003) sums this up:

> *The teacher, researcher, academic are subject to a myriad of judgements, measures, comparisons and targets ... ... A sense of being constantly judged in different ways, by different means, according to different criteria, through different agents and agencies. There is a flow of changing demands, expectations and indicators that makes one continually accountable and constantly recorded. (Ball, 2003, p. 220).*

Our data highlighted heavy administrative responsibilities, many of which were aligned with quality assurance measures, as significantly affecting teachers' decision-making. Often academics did not understand the reasons for what they saw as 'bureaucracy'. Some interviewees described dilemmas in meeting the expectations of both excellence in teaching and curriculum design, and administrative requirements.

> *The constraints, I feel, are in terms of the teaching because there are always so many hoops and so many checking mechanisms that it's difficult to be spontaneous and creative on a larger scale. ... The tick-boxing ... does inhibit a lot of good teaching more than it facilitates tracking down the bad teaching, to be honest. (Heidi, England, SET, L.774-784)*

The bureaucratic burden of teaching compounds what many describe as excessively heavy teaching loads and, for some, this sheer quantity of teaching and preparation for teaching is felt to sit in tension with their ability to develop in the wider academic role, for example in relation to research.

> *You constantly ... battle the pressures of the work; your teaching, and preparation for teaching, the administration and ... research.*
> *(Declan, Aus, SS, L.89-93)*

Indeed, bureaucracy is a common concern amongst academics who have an impression that senior managers attempt to implement new teaching initiatives often through the creation of forms and templates. Academics say they receive these and are required to do the necessary administrative work, but without understanding the initiative and rationale that lays behind it. As a result, the perception is that additional bureaucracy has been created without purpose.

> *I was at the discipline meeting the other day and ... we have to map ... to some other graduate outcome, there was a whole new set – everyone's absolutely sick of this surfeit of continually mapping and red tape. And course outlines that go on forever, that no one reads, that the students don't care about, all this kind of stuff. (William, Aus, A&H, L.223-229)*

Our data suggest that academics experience confusing and mixed messages about strategic decisions and priorities in relation to different aspects of their role which frequently arise through conflicting accountability measures.

Nowhere are such mixed messages more evident than in relation to the value placed on research as opposed to teaching. Such conflicts are already well documented (see e.g., van Lankveld, et al. 2017). Responses in our study show that the institution can be experienced as valuing research considerably more than teaching. This means that experiences of teaching could not be separated from experiences of research.

> *I hear about how important teaching is and teaching is important for the income, but when the university speaks, at the institutional level, it only speaks of research. (Declan, Aus, SS, L.344-349)*

Interviewees described tensions between teaching practice and research work, with efforts in teaching and supporting learners not being rewarded or appreciated in the same way as research; teaching is experienced and perceived as being of a lower status.

I think there are tensions for lots of people ... They feel torn between delivering the day job, if you like, and, actually, doing the stuff that is valued. And it's really difficult, because people can do brilliant jobs in terms of teaching but, at the end of the day, don't feel valued by the university because they haven't published anything, or brought in any money or contributed to research agenda. (Rosemary, England, M&HS, L.452-457)

Even within the teaching domain itself, academics experience conflicting measures. For example, there are growing institutional requirements to meet standards in teaching by gaining teaching qualifications. Some of these require academics to demonstrate innovation in teaching and attention to the scholarship of learning and learning. Alongside this, academics experience competing pressures from student satisfaction surveys and metrics which tend to favour transmission approaches to teaching (Kolitch & Dean, 1999; Richardson, 2005).

We're striving to have most of our units getting a score of four or more out of five on student satisfaction and no items under 3.5, which is quite a difficult ask in any of the 12 items on the survey ... I also realised that if I wanted to progress when I finished my PhD and get promoted then I needed to also have a higher degree in teaching, higher education qualifications. (John, Aus, M&HS, L247-251)

Some accountability measures appear to bring about the opposite of what is intended. When asked about planning teaching at departmental or programme level, respondents were most exercised and vocal about the paradoxes inherent in the allocation of teaching responsibilities. The picture is one of significant variability, confusion and inconsistency in the way such decisions that try to achieve parity across a team of academic staff, are made. Different types of academic workload management models or tools are implemented in different ways. Echoing the literature, our participants' experiences suggest variability in effectiveness of these tools with little evidence that transparency, equity and reasonableness (Papadopoulos, 2017, p. 523) is achieved.

It's all done with fantastic spreadsheets which no one understands. But you put the number in here and your allocated hours fall out there. (Sidney, Aus, A&H, L49-53)

Malcolm and Zukas (2009, p.496) argue that 'by allocating 'notional hours' to each activity' they are a 'fabrication' of academic work (2009, p.500). The allocation of teaching, both in terms of workload (amount of teaching) and type of teaching responsibilities (aspect of the curriculum, level of learning, number and type of students) is experienced by many of our interviewees as a highly structured, systematic, top-down, managerialist process; which is often poorly understood and lacks transparency. For others the process feels unsystematic, chaotic, ill-defined and, at times, unfair. Little wonder that for some academics there appears to be agreement that often these processes do not enable teaching allocation to be aligned to the academic's teaching and research interests and expertise.

I think now it is much more bureaucratic, you fill in a form saying you have a preference for option X, Y or Z, then it's a lottery which of those options you're getting. (Arjen, England, SET, L.637-638)

However, such strategies enable universities to account to the wider community for what the staff are doing. Each university has to find ways to be accountable to government, to the wider community and/or to funding sources and for this they need to find ways to account for how academics are spending their time. Ball (2003, p. 224) argues that both individuals and institutions engage in fabrications. These are versions of the truth of an organisation or person that are "produced in order to be accountable". Our data suggests that academics do not deliberately fabricate their working hours, rather they appear to be trying to do the best they can under difficult circumstances.

Barriers to excellence in teaching

Academics' teaching decisions, then, are at the confluence of a number of personal, professional and institutional dilemmas which cannot be separated out. Nevertheless, there are institutional conditions that we found in both the English and Australian data that suggest a model of teaching and teaching development that may have worked well in small institutions and in conditions of stability but which is unsuited in large institutions and in the conditions of turbulence and complexity in universities today. Academics decisions were, it seemed, frequently compromised. Structural conditions and strategic decisions appeared to be limiting capacity of institutions to achieve excellence. So, it is important to ask what our data tells us about what needs to change if excellence in teaching is to be realised.

Planning for teaching is experienced by academics as coming from a variety of sources and in an atomistic way. This is perhaps not surprising as different activities are involved. Teaching includes the ways in which it is organised, prepared and assessed, but it also includes various administrative tasks such as the recording of marks and grades, student pastoral care, including dealing with students' queries, and referring students to appropriate agencies. It also includes work in marketing courses to appropriate potential students, committee work, setting up classrooms and ensuring appropriate resources (including technology) are ready for use, printing course documentation, financial planning, staff development, etc. Many of these activities, are made possible by people working in sections of the institution that may not be subject to its strategic teaching goals and initiatives. Timetabling, examinations, IT support, laboratories, classroom layout, examinations, marketing and finance, for example, are organised by different sections of the university with different policies, different imperatives and ways of operating which, as our data shows, can be experienced by teachers as confusing and contradictory. Indeed, academics experience systems in place that rarely take a holistic account of what is involved in teaching. Aspects of curriculum planning, teaching delivery, and providing responsive student support are, for example, often not included in workload modelling. Classroom architecture including furniture arrangements may not be considered in, for example, moves to implement flipped classrooms. It is a rational assumption that where there is an overall policy decision to do something, e.g. move to blended learning, that all relevant areas of the university will adapt policy and procedures to achieve it. However, our data shows that this may not be the case, and this can be problematic for academics and for effective teaching.

Our data suggests that the rationales of senior managers and others who make strategic decisions may be unclear, and that strategic decisions can confuse, may not be well understood, and simply considered to cause unnecessary paperwork. As noted earlier, different quality measures may conflict. The status of decisions made by university committees may be obscure. University committees may make decisions leading to requirements for documentation for which the rationale may be unclear but can lead to teachers' overwork through heavy administration and documentation

requirements. For example, the timetable for new course proposals and changes to courses may be inflexible.

Many of our interviewees had concerns that there was not enough money and/or resources to teach effectively. This was expressed in concerns about how money was being spent on buildings rather than teaching and learning. An inadequate number of suitable teaching rooms means that classes need to be repeated a number of times and this was considered to add to teachers' workloads.

Our data also suggested that decisions made in faculties, schools and departments (including management, committees, policies, workload strategy, teaching allocation, course teams etc.) may conflict with university policies and with each other. Departmental policies may contradict faculty and university policies resulting in mixed messages and confusion. In addition, inefficient committee meetings can include discussions going nowhere, and, as noted above, many workload mechanisms appear to be unfit for purpose.

Many interviewees were taking teaching decisions in a context of overwork, lack of clarity about what they were supposed to be doing, unclear sense of overall university structures and how they operate, sometimes a lack of collegiality, and conflicts between research and teaching. Although professional and sessional staff (e.g., lab technicians, admin staff) work closely alongside academics in supporting teaching and need to be factored in, our data suggested that they were rarely involved in teaching decision-making but have the capacity to hinder excellence in teaching. Casual staff may also be unconnected to decision-making of any kind.

Campus environment and architecture, facilities planning (incl. room, labs, timetabling, cleaning, printing etc.) are critical to successful teaching and learning. Yet, universities work with teaching rooms and lecture halls that were built for outdated pedagogy and fewer students and may be unsuitable for academics' preferred types of teaching. Timetabling may be based on out-dated pedagogy (e.g. 1. Hour lectures). Time of day may also be a problem. All of this affects the teaching decisions academics make and the extent to which teaching excellence can be achieved.

Our data showed that teaching staff are generally committed to students. However, fee paying students can be perceived as demanding to be taught rather than focusing on independent learning and this can lead to perceived requirements to over-teach. But in addition, students may be used as a scapegoat for lack of innovation. If student support services (incl. financial, counselling, study skills etc.) are not readily available, academics may need to spend considerable amount of time simply dealing with students' problems.

Other elements that affect teachers' decisions that were outside the scope of our data include staff development which the literature shows can be helpful for encouraging discussion of teaching issues and learning about alternative pedagogies. Also important to excellence in teaching is the social context (eg., food outlets, shops, halls of residence etc.). for good coffee and nourishing food are important to excellence in teaching and engaged student learning!

Discussion

This paper has examined how, within the changing context of higher education, academics experience their decision-making as teachers and under what conditions. The discussion has highlighted factors that act to hamper the achievement of excellence in teaching. Archer's (2003, 2007) theoretical lens explaining the interaction between structure and agency and the mediating mechanisms that link them, has focused attention in our study on academics' experiences of departmental and institutional

mechanisms for the development, planning and management of teaching. Analysis of qualitative data from mid-career academics in England and Australia has highlighted tensions and contradictions about teaching decisions in their institutions at all levels. Whilst there are differences in context between England and Australia, the same issues emerged from the data in different institutions in both countries.

We have argued that whilst many universities espouse particular intentions to bring about excellence in learning and teaching, this is not always evident in the enacted approaches to developing, managing and allocating teaching work. Academics' decisions about teaching highlight the fact that universities are complex organisations, where teaching can be experienced as taking place without holistic planning or strategic design, with unclear expectations, often with excessive bureaucracy, and broadly, a lack of coherent structures to inform and influence practice across the different levels and sections of the institution. The paper has highlighted how teachers are making decisions in conditions of uncertainty and in the face of contradictions.

Academics talk about encounters with students as the aspect of teaching that they tend to enjoy. However, their experiences of accountability measures that conflict or bring about the opposite of what was intended appear to require them to make decisions about teaching on their own, in isolation of coordinated, wider systematic planning, processes or structures. Moreover, the decisions taken in some structural entities, e.g., workload allocation, timetabling, and audit procedures are often experienced as appearing to work against strategic intentions. Our findings suggest that if excellence is to be achieved, more attention needs to be placed on aligning all the areas of the university to this goal including some that hitherto may not have been considered. It is clear that as academics respond to, make decisions about, negotiate and carry out their work within the complex structures in which they are situated, their individual actions and agential powers can in turn influence, reshape or preserve the structures and wider environment. This needs to be harnessed to improve university functioning.

The idea of teaching excellence pursued in this paper involves integrating different aspects of academic practice to align common objectives, values and practices. This goes beyond simplistic notions of quality embedded in nationally defined measures such as the English TEF. It would be naïve to assume that in a large complex organisation such as a university, that there would be agreement throughout the institution on all the elements of a strategic framework necessary to achieve coherence across the board, and that understandings of such a framework would be agreed throughout the institution. However, it would not be unrealistic to expect universities to do more to work towards such a goal, particularly in regard to raising awareness in all areas of the need for a collective effort in this regard. A concerted effort to remove apparent policy inconsistencies is desirable. Collegial discussions towards establishing a set of shared values and encouraging collaboration (cf. Newell & Bain, 2020), would also be helpful. We have noted that academics often seem unaware of which area of the university creates which policy, initiative or practice. This underscores the importance of academics understanding more about the ways in which universities function and why, so that they are more able to contribute to strategic directions.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated how academics' teaching decisions are taken in the context of mixed messages and conflicting performance measures, but has highlighted the need for clear alignment, coherent, agreed discourses, buy-in from colleagues, and structures

that allow for stronger agentic involvement in planning for development and delivery of teaching and student learning.

As such, this research suggests a reframing of how we think about what needs to change if excellence in teaching is to be achieved. It suggests that at the institutional level there is a need for universities to be much more sophisticated in how they deal with the challenges of teaching and learning. They need to consider how stated strategic ambitions around learning and teaching are communicated, implemented, supported and, importantly, how they are understood, and enacted throughout all levels and areas of the organisation including many that hitherto do not consider they have a role in learning and teaching. For unless structures and systems that prevent or make difficult compliance with strategic teaching intentions are reconfigured and unless professional learning opportunities for staff are implemented so that their concerns are realistically addressed, achieving excellence in teaching is an unachievable goal.

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