

Editorial

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TEACHING EXCELLENCE: WHERE ARE THE GOALPOSTS?

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The idea for a special issue of *Scope (Learning and Teaching)* focusing on 'Teaching Excellence' came about as an indirect result of my doctoral research, investigating the stories of national Tertiary Teaching Excellence awardees (Goode, 2021). One outcome of that research was my drive to organise a Teaching Excellence Symposium, which was subsequently hosted by Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin, in June 2023. The interest in teaching excellence suggested that fellow educators, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, want to contribute to the discussion on this complex topic, and this special issue was born.

Why complex? The literature agrees that there is no widely accepted definition of 'teaching excellence,' yet it has been at the heart of conversations around multiple elements of education, including quality assurance, governmental and policy discourse, teacher development, and the student experience, for around three decades (Bartram et al., 2019; Horrod, 2023; Skelton, 2005). One challenge of the multi-faceted concept of excellence is "the ease with which politicians use the word and the idea that excellence can be quickly and easily achieved" (Brusoni et al., 2014, p. 5). This is one problem which has been tied to the introduction of league tables, ranking institutions according to purported measurements of quality, and pitting educational organisations one against another in "an increasingly competitive and turbulent higher education landscape" (Lundberg, 2022, p. 1). The political focus on excellence inflicts a regime of key performance indicators and other metrics: "Since excellence is a measure of a thing, and since everything in post-secondary education is committed to excellence, everything must be measured" (Saunders & Ramírez, 2017, p. 399). Is excellence, then, "a mark of distinction, describing something that is exceptional, meritocratic, outstanding and exceeding normal expectations" (Brusoni et al., 2014, p. 20)? Surely it is relative, contextual, and depends on the criteria being used. In other words, as educators, we find ourselves in a competition in which it is not clear where the goalposts are.

If the goal is teaching excellence, what does that look like, and whose goal is it? Is it the same as 'good' or 'best' practice, or perhaps 'research-informed' practice? While the much-used concept of 'best practice' may suggest that there is only one way of doing something well, 'excellence' implies that different approaches and strategies in learning and teaching may be alive and well in countless areas, disciplines, and contexts. Nevertheless, we still come back to wondering who decides what is considered excellent. Should it be governments or ministerial departments, organisational leaders, teachers, or learners? Their views are all likely to be quite different (Goode, 2023; Lundberg, 2022). Politicians and chief executives, for instance, would probably refer to targets such as course completion rates, student retention levels, or destination surveys, while for learners, teaching excellence may relate to improved confidence, increased motivation, or new opportunities.

For the authors in this special issue, teaching excellence might be as much about educators' values, skills, and communities as it is about student outcomes. Flexibility is needed for digital transformation in higher education, as Delouche, Viselli, and Woodside highlight when reflecting on the success of eCampus Ontario's 'Empowered Educator' programme, and Quadling-Miernik also considers excellence in the context of online learning. Crawford introduces us to his "pedagogic palette," enabling educators to scaffold and tailor learning experiences through their choices and blends of different pedagogic styles and approaches. Teaching excellence may also be founded on giving learners nourishment and opportunities to grow (Crawley), building relationships and

fostering connections (Byars and Hayes), or embracing the affective aspects of mentoring in moving towards authentic excellence (Andrew). Jones and Cowie, too, emphasise authentic relationships as being key to learner engagement and enjoyment, and champion the integration of mātauranga Māori into our teaching environments. Ker and van Gorp shine a light on effective facilitation for neurodiverse learners, while Rasheed sets out how culturally responsive pedagogy, which honours cultural identities, languages, and lived experiences, has contributed to the academic success of Pasifika learners. I am grateful to all of the authors for their contributions, and know that they provide further food for thought on how we, as educators, educational developers, or programme leaders, can work towards teaching excellence in different contexts.

My thanks, too, go to the Editorial Board for this special issue: Professor Liz Ditzel, Dr Peter Gossman, Dr David Porter, and Professor Yvonne Thomas. I am incredibly grateful for your input and support. To our wonderful editorial assistant, Megan Kitching, thank you for everything that you do, and for keeping us on track! Thank you also to the Otago Polytechnic Publications Committee for the opportunity to see this special issue come to life.

At the time of writing, the 2024 Summer Olympics and Paralympics are drawing to a close in Paris; our television screens, news bulletins, and social media pages have been filled with commentary and reflections on athletes competing for gold, for new world records, or to beat their own personal best. We, the spectators, recognise that *all* Olympic athletes are exceptional at what they do, regardless of whether they stand on the winners' podium or not; they have dedicated time and effort to become better and better in their respective fields. We often hear medal holders humbly suggesting that 'luck' was on their side, or that it could have been any of the competitors who won on that particular day – in other words, excellence abounds.

This seems a positive note to close on. As Bartram et al. (2019, p. 1295) conclude, through their study comparing the views of 120 Australian and English academics, teaching excellence in higher education is "an accessible aspiration for us all." Our Olympic athletes are a reminder of the power of establishing good habits, regardless of the field in which we work; repeated choices to do simple yet meaningful things with discipline every day. For me, this is what lies at the heart of excellence for our learners and colleagues: striving to do the best we can, to make a difference.

Claire Goode is a Principal Lecturer in Otago Polytechnic's Learning and Teaching Development team, and works alongside academic staff to build their capabilities in multiple aspects of pedagogical practice. This role brings together skills, knowledge, and practice acquired throughout more than 27 years in a variety of education contexts in New Zealand, France, and the UK. Claire is particularly interested in teacher development and the scholarship of teaching and learning. She also enjoys seeing how educational technology can enhance the learning experience of different students, while opening many teachers' eyes to new opportunities. Claire is a 2024 recipient of a national Te Whatu Kairangi Aotearoa Tertiary Educator Award.

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