

# SEEKING EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION TEACHING: CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*While fully understanding the multi-faceted role of universities and other higher education institutions, Professor Edwards advocates for the status and value of teaching, particularly in times of emphasis on research outputs and league tables. He draws on his reflections from more than four decades of experience of teaching at university level plus involvement in teaching development, including his views on what makes a good teacher and a set of principles of good teaching. His views are shared on culture and evaluation as key parts of successful teaching. The final section of the paper presents a case study of his support of teaching in the past nine years as President of a privately owned international tertiary institution in New Zealand. The paper concludes with a battery of questions for conference participants' own reflections on teaching. Of course, he recognises the importance (and competing pressures) of teaching, research, service and administration in the lives of today's academics.*

**Keywords:** excellence in higher education, teaching, challenges, reflections

## INTRODUCTION

In today's climate of higher education – and, particularly in the modern university – we are very familiar with the requirement to successfully be active in research, often with emphasis on publications, citations and contracts plus the important role of such outputs and activities when applications for promotion and appointment are considered. Of course, the priority of such an emphasis is understandable, given the university's important role in generating knowledge, examining and testing ideas and producing graduates with knowledge and ability to be inquiring and able to synthesise information and think for themselves. Research, therefore, is without doubt a crucial aspect of academic excellence. Terminology like, “higher education,” “tertiary institutions” and “universities”

are used rather interchangeably in order to include the range of such institutions to which my challenges are addressed in common.

It is not uncommon, however, for the activity of teaching to take a lower priority in the academic world; yet, a large amount of an academic's time and effort goes into the teaching of students while significant funding is provided for this work. To substantially raise the status of teaching, in my view, is a significant challenge in order to support and recognise efforts and success in this important area of academic life.

Ranking systems or league tables exert significant influence on the reputations of universities, in particular. The well-known Times Higher Education rankings take into consideration teaching excellence with a focus on resources available to support teaching, ratio of academic staff-to-student numbers, reputation for teaching and diversity of the student population. On the other hand, research excellence is linked to citation numbers, productivity and quality of research, income generated, quality of faculty and reputation of research.

In New Zealand, there is a national system, "***Performance Based Research Funding***" that is vitally important in the large university sector and increasingly gaining participation by polytechnics and private tertiary providers. "***PBRF***" requires institutions to put forward most academic's research records in the form of portfolios, for the previous four years, that are assessed by relevant subject panels. Each academic is graded and research funding is linked to those grades – "A" being highest and most prestigious. It is easy to understand the prominence given to PBRF by institutions and the significance of grades for individual staff members. IPU New Zealand nominated its first group of the seven most research-active staff members this year.

## **What Are the Challenges?**

While raising the status of teaching in higher education is more of an ultimate challenge, a number of other challenges are really precursors to the achievement of this goal. They are:

- promoting teaching as a field of academic excellence
- providing suitable resources for raising teaching standards
- ensuring staff access to relevant teaching knowledge & skills training
- fostering research-driven teaching
- accurately assessing teaching performance
- giving due recognition to teaching performance as a key area of promotion
- involving all levels of academic and leadership staff in awareness, understanding and fostering of teaching excellence.

In noting the above points, this is not at all to deny the work of many tertiary teachers who have acquired extensive teaching experience and success with their students' learning. On the other hand, training, support, recognition and

opportunities for further improvement, innovation and the widening of teacher horizons are important in producing what might be termed even better “*scholar teachers*.” In addition, there exist challenges in assessing teaching performance in a way that is fair, supportive and valid; with a need for understanding, advocating and fostering the overall challenge throughout all levels of the tertiary institution.

## **The Style, Purpose and Presentation of the Paper**

A reasonably informal approach together with a strong personal dimension was used in presenting the ideas that are drawn largely from my own experience and reflection over some decades of teaching in universities and other higher education environments. In this sense, the paper is more of an opinion piece that, hopefully, will raise thought provoking ideas and questions that teachers and their colleagues will find reason to address.

At Massey University, many years ago (1998) I spoke on “Developing the Culture of Learning and Teaching” in the Vice-Chancellor’s Leadership Programme and later (in the 2000s) heavily involved in developing our Student Evaluation of Teaching system. In addition to my own thinking, my first serious presentation on university teaching was presented in an address and workshop to Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence, Ako Aotearoa in New Zealand (see later) in 2008; then followed nine years at IPU New Zealand with interests including, of course, tertiary teaching. More recently, preparing two presentations in Malaysia in 2017 were very useful in developing my thinking – about “Leadership and Teaching” at AKEPT and UiTM where I was grateful for such opportunities that underlie this keynote address.

## **Developing My Thinking About Teaching**

As a long-time teacher, first with children in schools for a dozen years followed by university and tertiary education (47 years), the challenge for my presentation was to ask, “What might be learned from this experience?” The university environment always had competing demands and pressures for research, service, administration ... and teaching. A significant amount of my energies went into teaching, with the important learning that students and their needs should be greatly valued in the classroom, whether young children or mature students at university level. Effective teaching is an important factor in helping learners to not only develop skills and attitudes but also increase their chances of enhancing their futures in all sorts of ways, whether young people or older students. There is a long journey of reflecting on teaching – across decades until today, however, the journey always had its rewards but it also had its hiccups. Today, higher education institutions have various areas for excellent performance but teaching is consistently one that students’ desire.

A persistent question often exercised my mind, “What new ideas and skills could help me to better capture the interest of learners and to inspire their thinking? Teaching was also very, very enjoyable! Although a little wary about the influence of research

demands and outputs on a university academic career, post-graduate studies (particularly at PhD level) provided valuable awareness of what's called *the nexus of research and teaching* - the important linkage between both aspects of academic work. As I found at that time, there seemed to be more and more learnings to use in teaching! In my experience, it is true that the findings and ideas encountered in research do bring heightened interest, moment and significance to one's teaching.

But teaching always seemed to bring more questions:

*“Could I do better for my students and more effectively address their issues and concerns? How could I be sure that I actually made a difference to their learning?”*

Success in teaching continues to be as important to me today with appreciation of such terms as the *“thinking practitioner”* and the *“scholar teacher”* that are current in today's debates about teaching and teachers. Even as a Head of School, teaching (and supervision) continued to be a major commitment. And, of course, students deserve high quality teaching! So, who are “good teachers”?

Good teachers are good leaders! They take their learners to new heights and succeed in pushing them further than the learner might have thought possible. We all know the excitement of students doing better than we and they anticipated; the glint in the eye when someone “gets it;” the excitement of animated discussion, the discovery of a new idea; or meeting someone years later who recalls the influence of our teaching. Each involves *influence* that is attained by:

- ✓ Being excited about what we are doing in the learning situation,
- ✓ Passing that sense of excitement to the students we teach,
- ✓ Helping teachers and learners to do interesting, useful and exciting things,
- ✓ Thinking beyond today and about strategies for better teaching,
- ✓ Reflecting on what we actually do in our teaching and the effect on learners as well as our own practice,
- ✓ Challenging and developing the thinking of our learners and
- ✓ Contributing to their students' knowledge and actions.

Therefore, a good teacher is someone who

- understands effective teaching
- is well prepared
- focuses on student learning and sets high expectations
- is firm and fair, analytical and reflective
- cares for and supports each student
- listens to and provides useful feedback

But more importantly, a good teacher needs to have the “X-factor”, meaning to say the teacher has excitement about learning, the ability to inspire and motivate students.

## **My Principles of Good Teaching**

The effective teacher, as a *“facilitator of learning”*, asks the right questions and promotes thinking. They share what they know, are sensitive to what they do not know, and they knowingly link teaching and learning. Here are some ideas that proved important for me in university teaching. With each item, there is a simple question – some which might be asked by learners, some by me as teacher. How do you respond to the items? Have I missed any that are important to you?

- My responsibility is to ensure learning! *“Good teachers facilitate learning!”*
- Setting goals is important! *“We need to know where we are going!”*
- New ideas, challenges & approaches are important! *“I learned something today!”*
- Adults learn differently! *“Please value my experience & ideas!”*
- They want to express their ideas & views! *“I need to have my say!”*
- A variety of activities is used! *“Let’s do this differently today!”*
- Teachers often talk too much! *“Know when to keep quiet!”*
- Learners should be pushed to think! *“To ask WHY???”*
- Teacher & learner reflection is important! *“We need time to think!”*
- There is balance of theory-practice, thinking-application *“What’s the reality/use?”*
- Having fun helps! *“Keep it interesting!”*
- Research & teaching are often closely linked. *“See what I’ve found?”*
- The teacher’s enthusiasm is vital! *“Enjoy it! Talk about it! Sell it!”*
- I don’t know everything! *“I’m really the Head Learner!”*

I recently found very similar ideas in an article about Professor Jessica Palmer, first woman to be appointed Dean of the Faculty of Law at Otago University, Dunedin, teaching contract and commercial law. (I quote from “Jessica Palmer’s pragmatic approach to the classroom and being Dean of Law,” Nick Butcher in Law Talk, July 2018, pages 6-7.)

## Thinking About “Key Drivers”

What does a new arrival at your place need to know in order to feel “at home?” What would that person soon learn about the place of teaching in your place? Do some of these “key drivers” underlie and exert influence on the culture of your work place? Could you rank them? Are any key drivers missing? How are such “key drivers” important in higher education today? Other issues that need to be considered are:

- promoting image and reputation
- attracting students (numbers)
- attracting money and contracts
- maintaining research productivity and profile
- service to the community and professions
- improving ranking on league tables
- attracting skilled researchers
- ensuring successful teaching

## What is an appropriate “atmosphere” for teaching?

We need to reflect on what is appropriate “atmosphere” for teaching in our current contexts. Do consider the following questions:

- Who are the champions or advocates for teaching?
- What is the standing of teaching in your place?
- What percentages of your time and effort go into administration, research, service and teaching? Which gives you greatest joy/reward?
- Which areas are supported by training/development, conferences/publications?
- To what extent are you recognised for your teaching?
- What is the status of teaching?

In fact, a large body of literature links such items as “atmosphere” and “drivers” with the concept of “*organisational culture*” that will be familiar to many people.

## Promoting a Culture That Values Teaching

*Culture* can be explained in simple terms as, “*What’s important around here*” or “*the way we do things.*” It includes the shared pattern of values, norms and meanings that bind a group together, often manifested as:

- Our values (the beliefs that underpin what is regarded as really important),
- Our routines and rituals (the norms and practices that are given prominence),
- Our people and networks (the way ideas, successes and challenges are handled and by whom),
- The stories we tell (that illustrate our key values and beliefs),
- Our shared history and language (how and what we talk about the past and future).

What is the status and priority of teaching in your department, your programme and your institution? Indeed, we must understand that cultures do not stand still; they are organic and can be changed. Teachers can influence values, beliefs and “*the way things are done*” around teaching. For example, are stories of successful or innovative teaching given prominence? Here are some ideas to exert influence on cultural change about teaching – requiring time, effort and commitment:

- Talk about teaching – especially effective teaching making a difference to student learning – in offices, staff meetings, staffroom. even in the corridor – foster stories of successful teaching
- Seek & encourage teaching partnerships – team/shared teaching, mentoring – read literature about teaching & share readings
- Encourage teachers to share teaching experiences with others – at meetings, professional development events, conferences & write for teaching journals/magazines
- Do plenty of teaching – try new ideas & aim to improve practice

- Move staff thinking beyond the simple measures of teaching to robust proof of success
- Ensure teaching is effectively evaluated & results are shared
- Be a “scholar teacher” who conquers the nexus between research and teaching
- Get teaching on the agenda for – recognition & promotion, professional development, for colleagues to be speakers & to visit other teachers

This is actually what’s happening with these ideas is that people are:

- Identifying the gap between what’s said and what’s done,
- Actively promoting key values,
- Celebrating and publicising success,
- Telling stories that promote values,
- Challenging outdated or dominating values,
- Bringing people together to follow shared goals and understandings,
- Speaking in language that expresses those goals and understandings,
- Making meetings and similar occasions into key events that give prominence to successful teaching.

## Promoting a Culture That Values Evaluation

What is “evaluation”? It is robust assessment of teaching performance and outcomes, including impact on student learning and areas for improvement. Amongst others, it could be challenging, exciting and influential. It involves reflection and evaluation which could lead to action and improvement (“*Kaizen*”) when acted upon. It has barriers like time/cost, poor understanding and experience, convoluted process, use of findings, questionable purpose and anxiety. When it is effective, it could aid professional development and promote professional responsibility.

In my view, “evaluation”, and commitment to it, is a defining characteristic of teaching excellence. It addresses the question I have asked my colleagues at IPU New Zealand: “*What evidence can you put on the table that clearly demonstrates your teaching has improved student learning?*” The question lifts teaching above unsubstantiated claims like, “So-and-so is a good teacher,” and an answer requires evidence in support of such claims. Here are some ideas to exert influence on cultural change about evaluation – again, requiring time, effort and commitment:

- Focus on learning and teaching activities, and outcomes/impact
- Undertake regularly – formally and informally
- Approach the task with a research mindset & use those skills
- Seek quantitative AND qualitative data as evidence of teaching
- Ensure reliability and validity (trustworthiness of process and believability of results)
- Ensure clear purpose of each task – improved effectiveness in teaching!
- Use varied, relevant and tailored instruments – some simple and short, others more formal – examine/analyse each one, and reflect on findings
- Provide feedback to students, e.g. identified changes in teaching and content
  - Discuss results with appropriate people – colleagues

- Be a “scholar teacher” using evidence as the basis for improved teaching

What is the status and priority of teaching and evaluation in your department, your programme, your institution? Remember, cultures do not stand still; they are organic and can be changed. Teachers can influence values, beliefs and “*the way things are done*” around teaching and evaluation. For example, are stories of successful or innovative teaching given prominence? Are strategies for effective evaluation of student learning shared within and beyond the institution?

## **National and Institutional Teaching Development Organisations**

National and institutional teaching development organisations must be recognised for their important part in seeking excellence in higher education teaching. Here are two examples with which most of us will be familiar with. In New Zealand, *Akko Aotearoa – The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence*, based at Massey University’s Wellington campus, very actively promotes better teaching nationwide, including their Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence whose membership consists of all winners of the annual national tertiary teaching awards and who are committed to the overall mission. Malaysia has the similarly active *Higher Education Leadership Academy, Akademi Kepimpinan Pendidikan Tinggi (AKEPT)* with similar goals of better teaching and leadership. Many universities have teaching centres, regular workshops where participants can further their development, awards for teaching, serious opportunities for teacher self-reflection on their teaching as well as student evaluation of teaching. Our host, *Universiti Teknologi MARA’s Asian Centre for Research on University Learning and Teaching* is one such example of an active centre within a faculty that seeks to improve the work of university teachers and the learning of their students.

Of course, recognition of good teaching is a factor in promotion processes in many higher education institutions. However, there is always more to be done – as is the case with research, leadership and management as well as other areas of academic life. At this point, perhaps I can be a little more reflective about teaching and its enhancement within my own experience of the past decade or so?

## **A Case Study in Brief: Teaching, Teaching, Teaching!**

In the most recent part of my career, I have been fortunate to be associated with the privately owned tertiary institution IPU New Zealand. The student body is largely international, students coming from around 24 countries and teaching is afforded major value in the prevailing culture together with the care and support of students. On arriving, I was readily impressed with the teaching of our students; ironically, the challenging issue was to strengthen research activity! I’m proud of IPU’s teaching! In 2015, retention rates reached 81% (compared with other such organisations averaging 60%) while completion rates were 92% for bachelor’s degrees and 97% for post-graduate programmes.

At the same time, an important task was to further build on improving teaching amongst a committed and capable teaching staff. The above question of “evidence-based” teaching performance was an important challenge here. Brief descriptions of six



activities illustrate the place and value of teaching and learning in this tertiary institution.

## **1. Moderation of teaching**

The components of diploma, bachelor's and post-graduate programmes are rigorously moderated with, for example:

- External pre-teaching moderation of new tasks and assessment, peer observation and Dean's classroom visits, self-reflection on teaching, internal and external moderation of assessments, internal moderation of each paper once per term and external moderation of papers on a rotational basis and evaluation of each taught paper by each teacher submitted to the Assistant Dean.
- End-of-term final results of all students are scrutinised by the Moderation Committee for presentation and further scrutinised by Academic Board.
- Master's theses are examined both internally and externally.

The constant goal is to improve teaching and learning; to use the evidence to highlight challenges and identify what to do differently next time while ensuring that quality is maintained.

## **2. Student evaluation of teaching**

Student evaluations provide opportunities to obtain feedback on students' experiences of content, teaching-learning and lecturers in each paper of their programmes. The anonymous judgements and comments are valuable in achieving continuous improvement of content and delivery, to achieve maximum learning outcomes for the students.

The formal evaluation is provided on-line at the end of term. Evaluations use a four-point scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" with provision to add personal comments. The analysed data are presented in statistical and anecdotal form as well as aggregated tables, etc. Students are also encouraged to informally provide comments and raise issues or concerns while summaries of statistical and anecdotal comments are provided to individual teachers, Deans and President. A sample of questions includes:

- The lecturer encouraged me to participate in class.
- The lecturer answered all my questions clearly.
- The contents of this class matched the paper outline.
- The lecturer was enthusiastic about teaching this paper.
- I gained useful knowledge and skills in this paper.
- Why did you enrol in this paper?
- The content of the paper matched my interest.
- It is compulsory for my qualification/major.
- It is a prerequisite for another paper I want to take.

- To improve skills/knowledge in this area.
- It was recommended by staff.
- It seemed less difficult than other papers.
- The class time suited me.
- To be in the same class as my friend(s).
- I heard good things about the paper.
- I heard good things about the lecturer.
- To help get the job I want after graduating.

Teachers are required to regularly undertake their own less formal student evaluations during each semester; also maintaining portfolios of student assessments of their teaching. The results of evaluations provide useful information for lecturers to reflect on their teaching styles and delivery, and give direction for their personal teaching development. The evaluations also provide material for annual papers and programme reviews and the continuing development and improvement of programmes.

### **3. Professional Practice Workshops**

These are held regularly, on a variety of mainly practical topics and presented by staff members to their colleagues. Attendance is voluntary.

### **4. Lecturer's Self-Assessment and "Key Results Areas"**

A formal continuous programme of self-assessment (the "KRA") occurs for each academic staff member, aimed at promoting sustained high-quality performance. The system uses qualitative and quantitative data to assess performance in summative fashion and formative ways to help in making decisions about further development. The system is on-going and requires staff to plan, in conjunction with their Dean, goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-lined. These are finally approved by the President. The process involves self-evaluation and self-reflection, as the initial step by teachers, on their work throughout the year (without simply ticking boxes or adding brief comments). Deans discuss the documents with individual staff members and provide written comments. Although emphasising teaching and student learning, the document also includes student support/pastoral care, research/professional development, international perspective and various kinds of service within the institution and externally.

Robust observation and evaluation of teaching is required. Criteria for the key evaluative area, "Facilitating Teaching and Learning," should be demonstrated by:

- A sound and clear philosophy of teaching and learning,
- Effective self-evaluation and reflection as a basis for continuously improving teaching,
- Effective knowledge and skills for classroom management, planning, communication and teaching,

- Suitable assessment techniques that use qualitative and quantitative data to demonstrate learning,
- Innovative and sound teaching strategies that engage and motivate students while being aligned with IPU New Zealand’s goals and curriculum and
- Recognition as an effective teacher by colleagues and students.

## 5. Teaching Excellence Award

This annual award, of a certificate and cash sum, presented at Graduation to a teaching staff member in recognition of teaching effectiveness, is part of the enhancement and promotion of excellent teaching. The criteria are:

- A sound philosophy of teaching and learning within a diverse cultural context.
- Awareness of student needs.
- Sound content knowledge, effective planning and teaching skills.
- High levels of student motivation, interest and engagement in learning.
- Effective communication in class situations.
- Suitable assessment techniques that demonstrate learning.
- Recognition by students and colleagues of “good” teaching, as well as self-evaluation of teaching and active involvement in professional development.
- Effective teaching, reflecting the use of research in planning, implementation and assessment.

Nominated portfolios should include evidence of three examples of formative evaluations, moderations, peer observations, management observations (i.e. by a Dean), annual self-assessment forms, student feedback or videos of practice and involvement in programme development and improvement.

## 6. External Evaluation

In their most recent compulsory four-yearly evaluation, New Zealand Qualifications Authority’s comprehensive report (“External Evaluation Review Report”), in 2015, awarded the Institute their highest rating of “Highly Confident” in both Educational Performance and Self-Assessment. The report noted:

*“Teaching is highly effective. Students consider the delivery techniques to be appropriate in meeting their needs and consider staff to be very supportive. Oversight, appraisal and development of teaching is very robust.”*

*“... has invested heavily in its student guidance and support services, which are used at all stages of students’ experiences, from initial interest in enrolment to employment on graduation. These services are highly valued by students and have contributed to the significant increase in retention rates.”*

In 2015, retention rates reached 81% (compared with other such organisations averaging 60%) while completion rates were 92% for bachelor’s degrees and 97% for post-graduate programmes. I share with you some thoughts on teaching of one teacher whose approach and work I value: James Lourie, an English language teacher to

speakers of other languages – Excellence in Teaching Award winner in 2017. He concludes:

*“But what is teaching? Beyond the planning, assessment, resources, theory and philosophising, teaching is simple. It’s about walking into a classroom and turning it on. I can. I do. I am a teacher.”*

## **Reflecting on University and Higher Education Teaching**

The intent of this presentation is to draw attention to questions and ideas for reflection and discussion about our own teaching and ways in which teaching can be promoted and enhanced in higher education with such questions as:

- What stories about teaching illustrate your beliefs about teaching and the challenges, joys and rewards gained from teaching?
- In your teaching context: What do students need? What works? How can teaching be more successful?
- What status does teaching have in your institution? Who are the champions of teaching? How can more influence be attained –both tomorrow and in the longer term?
- What further influence those in key positions can have on teaching? How can they be influenced themselves?

As with all aspects of university and other forms of higher education, the challenge, to improve teaching and produce thinking, capable graduates, is ongoing. However, while advocating with some passion for excellence in teaching, this is not at all to the exclusion of research, in particular. I am fully aware of the importance of research performance plus the other duties that are significant in academic life. My case is more one of ensuring balance so that excellence is achieved in all areas of engagement in higher education institutions. Here’s to a wonderful and challenging conference and very best wishes in your efforts to improve and seek excellence in your teaching endeavours!