

Book Review by Peter Klappa

***Global Perspectives on Teaching Excellence: a new era for higher education.* (2018) by C. Broughan, G. Steventon and L. Clouder. C Broughan**

Ok - here is a confession..... I don't like reading academic books. Firstly, many of them are like the Amazonas rainforest - pretty to look at, but totally impenetrable. Why do so many academics write in a way that only other academics with an IQ in the four-figure range and an enormous amount of willpower and dedication will ever read beyond the first chapter? And even worse - why do they have to dissect even the most intuitive topic and place the such deconstructed leftovers into a wrapper of theoretical and most abstract concepts? So, when I received my review copy of **Global Perspectives On Teaching Excellence (2018)** edited by Christine Broughan, Graham Steventon and Lynn Clouder and published by Routledge, I opened it with a considerable amount of trepidation and anxiety. On the other hand, as someone, who is passionate about teaching in an international context, I was curious to see, if there is anything I could learn, once I wrestled with the beast of academic writing. And oh boy - did I learn. Hardly ever have I come across another book that covers such a plethora of aspects on teaching and teaching excellence in such an engaging and easy-to-read and accessible way, with plenty of insights into what is important to so many academics, from a national as well as international perspective. The only time you need to put the book down is to think about the individual chapters. Or, like me, when you get told off by your partner to contain your excitement and stop shouting, 'yes, yes, yes!' every time you start a new page.

What makes these close to 200 pages so special, at least in my eyes, is the thoughtful combination of chapters by a variety of contributors with a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. The editors also used a very clever trick - each chapter is commented by a 'critical friend'. This is almost like a peer-review of the chapter, but this time from a slightly different angle, giving new and relevant insights.

So, let's dive into it a bit deeper and have a look at what this book offers:

As per usual, the *introduction*, written by Christine Broughan, Graham Steventon and Lynn Clouder, gives an overview of the motivation for this book and an outline of its structure. So far, so good - nothing terribly exciting. But then the book really takes off with Sandeep Gakhal's question, '*What is teaching excellence?*'. Of course, any attempts of unambiguously defining what teaching excellence actually is must remain unsuccessful - it's a bit like chasing the proverbial unicorn: you know it exists, but what it looks like or where to find it, let alone how to catch it - no idea. What comes out very nicely in this first chapter is the introduction of different concepts and definitions of teaching excellence, which inevitably lead to the unicorn being so elusive. And the author demonstrates this through a case study of the UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

In the second chapter, Caroline Wilson picks up on this mythical concept of teaching excellence from the first chapter and asks, '*What outcomes are we trying to achieve from excellent teaching and why are they so difficult to measure?*'. The author shows very convincingly that there cannot be a simple answer to the question of benchmarking teaching excellence or a unified approach that will result in a good and robust tool to measure it, although she makes the point that some models are better suited than others. Great - not only don't we know what we are looking for, but now we don't even know, how we can measure teaching excellence. And it gets even worse.....

Lynne Hunt and Owen Hicks, in their chapter entitled, '*Bounded Excellence*', make a very compelling case that what teaching excellence is to one university is not necessarily the same for another university. It always depends on the context, both locally and globally. They underpin their findings with case studies of three HEIs from very different cultural and local backgrounds, i.e China, Vietnam and Timor-Leste. What I particularly loved about this chapter was that we are too often only concentrating on the top 500 universities, when we speak about teaching excellence, and yet - there are so many more places of higher learning out there; and each one has probably a different perception on what teaching excellence should look like.

The international theme is continued in the following chapter by Glenda Crosling, but this time woven into a transnational context. In the chapter '*Teaching Excellence and transnational education: Enhancement through a focus on student diversity and context*' I dawned on me that different perceptions from home and host country students and teachers can lead to tension and challenges when it comes to the delivery of teaching excellence. The point is made very well that for a successful collaboration between two universities from different backgrounds a lot of cultural awareness must be exchanged. And yet - I have no doubt that transnational education with universities collaborating not only in research but also in teaching is the future of Higher Education.

Of course, this development requires strong governance and robust policies - and this is exactly what Mary Runté and Robert Runté explore in the next chapter. In '*Excellence of what? Policy development and the discourse on the purpose of higher education*' they present four discourses on the purpose of Higher Education, human capital, manpower and consumerism (yes - it is this dreaded word) and the expectations of students within these topics. One of the questions of this chapter particularly resonated with me - 'What is the purpose of striving for teaching excellence?'. Or in other words - why should I get up from the sofa and even think about catching the unicorn (and almost as important - what am I going to do with it, after I caught it?).

Torgny Roxå and Katarina Mårtensson follow these important questions by exploring different leadership models with a case study from a research-intensive Swedish university. In their chapter on '*The Impact of governance on teaching excellence in academic microcultures*' they provide compelling evidence that there is not one 'best' leadership model to achieve teaching excellence in a university - the best model is context-dependent and also relies on a number of sometimes even contradicting factors.

In 'A national strategy for teaching excellence - one university at a time' by Denise Chalmers and Beatrice Tucker a very pertinent approach for teaching excellence and a standards framework relevant to a national strategy in Australia, but also other parts of the world is explored. I really enjoyed the 'bottom-up' approach the authors presented, showing that not always governmental intervention is required (or even desirable). I felt inspired to write to my MP and ask them to have a look at this chapter. And I still wonder, whether I should do it....

In the next chapter, entitled '*National teaching awards and the pursuit of teaching excellence*' Mark Israel and Dawn Bennett examine, how national teaching awards can (and cannot) contribute to teaching excellence. They focus on teaching awards currently in operation in Australia, New Zealand and the UK and it is fascinating to see the communalities and differences of the different schemes.

But wait a moment - we are talking already about awards and recognition for great teaching. Have we not forgotten something? Something crucially important? Namely '*Training and development needs for a 21st century academic*'? Strangely enough, this is also the title of the chapter by Siara Isaac, Ingrid Le Duc, Cécile Hardebolle and Roland Tormey. Here they ask how we actually prepare teachers to deliver teaching excellence and what data do we need to develop this training. They argue that to develop academics with the skills to deliver excellent teaching we need to adopt a teacher-led, data-driven and evidence-informed framework. But then, I started to wonder, whether every academic will be happy to engage in such training. Have we not all heard at least of one high-flying researcher commenting that 'teaching is only for the those, who don't achieve a successful research career'? Luckily, I haven't heard anything like that for a few years now, but it DID happen.

Johan Geertsema, Chng Huang Hoon, Mark Ghan and Alan Soong discuss exactly this topic in their chapter on '*Teaching Excellence and the rise of education-focused employment tracks*'. Using a wonderful case study from the National University Singapore they show how teaching excellence can be encouraged through a funding scheme, which is not too dissimilar to research funding. Can I please sign up? They also warn that fragmentation of the academic workforce (eg teaching versus research focused faculty) can have a considerable adverse effect to the aforementioned governance of universities.

Another teaching excellence recognition scheme (TERS) in an 'Australian' context is presented by Michael Berry and Ross Guest in their chapter on '*Excellence for all: inclusive teaching with a passion - a teaching excellence recognition scheme*'. This scheme, apparently, is a very useful and flexible tool to reward teaching excellence, thus highlighting that 'education-focused' faculty are NOT just the poor relations of high-profile researchers.

In the next chapter on '*I had excellent teachers - look at my fabulous career! Perspectives on teaching excellence in the performing arts*' Scott Harrison gives a wonderful personal account of teaching excellence and its impact on the careers of performing artists. He presents four short cases of teaching excellence, all with different approaches, but every one of them leading to an

important outcome, - happiness through successful careers in a profession you are passionate about.

It would be very difficult to pick the chapter that resonated the most with me - simply because every one of them raised so many interesting points. However, if I have to pick one, it would be '*The thrill of the unexpected*' by James Derounian. Not just because another mythical creature makes an appearance, this time the elusive 'snark' from Lewis Carroll's 1876 poem 'The Hunting of the Snark' or one of my all-time favourite songs by the Talking Heads, the 1985 version of 'Road to Nowhere'. For me the main reason why I so loved this chapter is that the author makes the strong case for including fun, enjoyment and 'disruption' into teaching and with it into learning (and assessment). And isn't it one of the most enjoyable things in life to learn new stuff?

In the final chapter, '*Global perspectives on teaching excellence*' Caroline Wilson and Christine Broughan close the circle that started with the question of 'What is teaching excellence?'. Through a series of interviews with global HEI leaders they again focus on the theme of teaching excellence in an international context and the aim of preparing students for the jobs that have not yet been invented, amongst other, similar fascinating topics.

So, here you have it - a brief summary of what is covered in this wonderful and incredibly insightful book. If I had to make a slight criticism (and a reviewer is always requested to say what should/could be done better or differently, so I was told) would be yet another chapter or two about teaching excellence from the perspective of 'outsiders'. Let's face it - there ARE people, who are not working in the Higher Education sector (I know, unlikely as it sounds, but it is true) and they also might have an idea of what constitutes teaching excellence. And let's not forget - there is a whole profession out there that is also confronted with the problem of teaching excellence - teachers in our primary and secondary schools. Surely, they must have some thoughts about teaching excellence. And perhaps they can help with finding, catching and taming this mysterious and elusive and yet so precious and fantastic beast, teaching excellence, as shown below.



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