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Understanding teaching is more useful than measuring it

Whether they like it or not, academics are fully paid-up members of the audit society. Performance is monitored and evaluated like never before.

Most recently, that meant the Research Excellence Framework. But what's next? According to the manifesto of the Conservative government, a "framework to recognise universities offering the highest teaching quality"—and, presumably, penalise those offering the lowest—might be on the cards.

Teaching has invariably been the poor cousin of research, especially in universities that tend to perform well in global rankings. So initiatives that might raise the status of teaching are to be welcomed.

But what might a Teaching Excellence Framework look like, and what are the impacts of quality teaching? The most obvious starting point is student learning outcomes. What knowledge, skills and dispositions have been developed through undergraduate study?

The role of course assessment is important here. A diet of end-of-year exams leads to familiar cycles of memorising, regurgitating and forgetting. More complex tasks such as projects, simulations, exhibitions and the creation of web-based materials rehearse skills in identifying and solving messy, ill-defined problems.

The outcomes of these complex assignments provide a range of direct evidence of student learning. From these, universities around the world are becoming increasingly sophisticated at benchmarking standards.

The UK has a well-established system of external examining, where academics from comparable institutions appraise and benchmark degree standards. There are also employability statistics and employer ratings of student performance in internships.

Governments and ministers, however, usually prefer more easily quantifiable evidence. In educational evaluation, policymakers and administrators are attracted to the promise of mechanical objectivity. Numerical data are beguiling, seeming to lend authority to officials who have little of their own.

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For these reasons, the government may find a test of graduate competence most politically attractive. The Americans, for example, have the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a standardised test of generic skills such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning and problem solving.

The OECD worked for some years on a feasibility study for an international comparison of graduate learning outcomes. This project, the Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes, has collected findings from 23,000 students in 17 countries, not including the UK.

Ahelo assesses both generic and, unlike the Collegiate Learning Assessment, subject-specific skills. However, testing across multiple university contexts has been deemed costly and time-consuming.

With the feasibility study completed, OECD members are now invited to take part in a "main study". Presumably, the UK government will join in the fun.

The OECD director Andreas Schleicher says that east Asian universities have the most to gain from measures of student attainment beyond exams. Students in the post-Confucian states have great motivation for good test performance and have honed their test-taking skills from kindergarten onwards. The value-added dimension—the improvement in student performance between entry and exit points—is also important. Tests of graduating students may not fully capture this.

The psychometricians have an answer, in the form of pre-test and post-test design. The same or a parallel test is administered twice, giving results on entry performance, graduate performance and improvement between the two.

But trying to evaluate teaching quality and learning outcomes in great detail may be a costly and unwanted distraction. Goodhart's law raises its head: when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

It may be more productive to focus on improving learning environments. Good university teaching generally comprises most of the following: setting challenging goals to engage students; improving students as learners so they study in more sophisticated ways; improving students' understanding of standards to stimulate their ability to self-monitor; engaging students in more time on task and at a deeper level; and designing sequences of increasingly challenging assignments so that students develop higher-order learning outcomes.

As the education researcher John Hattie says, one of the best ways to improve teaching is to listen more to students as they reveal their progress, and adjust teaching to this understanding of students' development.

Experience suggests that test-based strategies for evaluating and enhancing university teaching quality are probably an expensive pipe dream. Goodbye Ahelo?

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