

## Towards a Framework for Evaluating Quality Teaching in Higher Education

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### Abstract

*The three main functions in Higher Education (HE) are teaching, research and community engagement (Vardi and Quin 2011). These three are equally important. However, recognition of teaching and community engagement currently seem to enjoy less prominence than research. This may be due to a lack of a proper framework in evaluating the other two. The aim of this article is to initiate a discourse on the development of a framework teaching evaluation in HE. We present: 1) a rationale for the development of a framework for the evaluation of teaching in higher education; 2) a design for a framework for evaluating teaching and 3) an exemplar for such a framework.*

**Keywords:** *higher education, teaching, evaluation framework, exemplar*

### 1. Introduction

The main functions in Higher Education (HE) are teaching, research and community engagement (Vardi and Quin 2011). These three are equally important. However, recognition of teaching and community engagement currently seem to enjoy less prominence than research (Garbett 2013). In the last ten years there has been a renewed interest in the intrinsic value of teaching in Higher Education (HE) (Goldstein, Gary and Victor 2006; Harrison, Douglas and Burdsal 2006). This interest has stimulated debates about the place of teaching in HE. Traditionally, teaching has been accepted by university academic staff as less important (Boyer 1990; Webbstock, 1999). As a result of this there has been a tendency to subordinate it to research (Vardi and Quin 2011). However, with the shift of focus to students' throughputs and the need for public accountability on how funds are used, more and more attention is being given to the value of teaching (Kwiek 2012; Cochran-Smith 2003; Hazelkorn 2013). Despite this change of focus on the value of teaching, there appears to be no discourse on the criteria to be used to judge quality teaching, both within and across universities, at least in South Africa. Academic staff appear to react with scepticism, mistrust and anxiety when their teaching competencies are based exclusively on ratings of their classroom actions or certain technical skills, whether by their students or by their peers (Stes, De Maeyer, Gijbels and Van Petegem 2012). It is this reaction that has motivated us to propose a discourse on the development of an evaluation of quality teaching framework. We have designed this article as follows: first, we look at the rationale for the development of a framework for an evaluation of quality teaching. Second, we propose the design such a framework should follow. Third, we set out an exemplar for such a framework.

## **2. Rationale for a Framework for Evaluating Quality Teaching**

In South Africa, and probably elsewhere in the developing countries, the current experience is that institutions have crafted themselves individualised approaches to recognising excellence in teaching (Boshier 2009). Unlike with research, where there is fairly a common and an established mechanism for rewarding excellence, there is no common ground with regard to the evaluation of teaching (Vardi and Quin 2011). Research has established bodies like the National Research Fund (NRF) which among other things sets standards upon which quality research is established and can be benchmarked (Hardland, Hussain and Bakar 2013). This type of arrangement seems to be lacking in the evaluation of quality teaching. This lack of commonly agreed criteria to assess equality teaching raises issues of credibility if it is to be compared to research and its portability remains largely unknown whenever teaching is to be evaluated.

As indicated earlier, the growing concern over demonstrating public accountability on how funds are spent (Boshier 2009) which is normally measured through student success, has led to increased focus towards assessing the value of teaching in HE, especially at the undergraduate level (Blackburn, and Lawrence. 1995). Quality teaching to ensure student success is therefore no longer an option but a must. Also, there is a growing realisation of the need to recognise teaching as a scholarly activity and therefore an alternative route to staff promotion (Webbstock 1999; Curtin University of Technology 2009). If this route is to gain any credence there is a need for a framework on the evaluation of what quality teaching entails. Pursuance of this route is already established elsewhere (Blackburn and Lawrence 1995; Biggs 2003). Where this route is still resisted could be as a result of an agreed upon framework for the evaluation of quality teaching. These and other reasons have persuaded us to initiate a discourse on a possible framework for the evaluation of quality teaching. We argue that there is a need to develop a framework to guide universities to evaluate what quality teaching entails.

## **3. Teaching Evaluation Framework in the South African Setting**

In this section, we focus on the proposed development of a teaching evaluation framework for higher education institutions within a South African setting. First, we provide a snapshot of the complexity of teaching and thus demonstrate the need for a framework that is largely flexible. Secondly, we present the model itself and to provide details of its components.

### *3.1 Complexity of teaching in higher education*

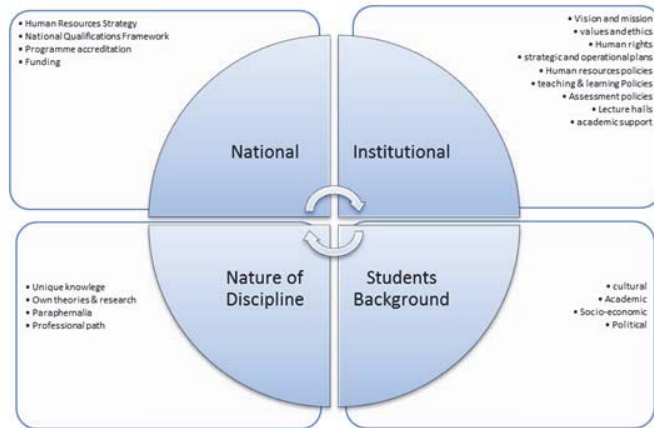
Teaching is a complex activity influenced by many factors (Cochran-Smith 2003). Its complexity is reflected by among others things a myriad literature, diverse nature of disciplines (subjects), physical and psychosocial learning environments, students' backgrounds. Primarily different philosophical positions have their own views on what constitutes quality-teaching outcomes (Garbett 2013). Thus, criterion developed in one paradigm is not necessarily applicable in another. The challenge, therefore, is to come up with a framework that should be sensitive to these diverse views.

The nature of a discipline places different demands on teaching and learning skills, hence differentiated performance levels by students with different aptitudes. Language learning, for example, demands certain skills like extensive reading and writing skills different from those required for mathematics learning (Truong 2013) Teaching and learning evaluation embedded in subject content contexts should be flexible enough to cater for the differences in other situations whilst still coherent enough to reflect a common framework.

Teaching staff within and across institutions experience imbalances in the distribution of learning spaces and resources. This distribution depends on geographical location of their institutions (Cochran-Smith 2003), the socio-economic factors around an institution (Garbett 2013) and the students it attracts, etcetera (Hardland, Hussain and Bakar 2013). Thus, it will be unjust to subject teaching staff to research ability without considering other activities like teaching that are part of academics. In addition, one need to consider diverse qualities of institutions: their challenges and their strong focus when dealing with challenges. Therefore, there is a need for a versatile evaluation framework that may accommodate these diversities.

Teaching has both short term and long-term impact on students' learning. What students learn from interaction with one lecturer might benefit interactions with the other (Komarraju, Sergey and Gargi 2010). For instance, attitudes that emanate from experiences in one encounter continue to affect how students engage in subsequent encounters such how to react to questions, when to keep silent and how to participate in discussions. All these make it a challenge to evaluate an individual staff's impact on teaching.

In the midst of these diverse contexts, it becomes a challenge to pin down neutral criteria, which is not dogmatic, for the evaluation of teaching. However, our contention is that all teaching, regardless of their complexities and diversities, considers three factors: inputs, processes and outputs. It is against this backdrop that we propose a teaching evaluation framework (TEF) that takes into account of these factors. In turn, these factors derive from three areas: national and institutional policies; the nature of the discipline taught; and the students' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. These areas are illustrated in Figure 1 hereunder.



**Figure 1.** Illustrating the four factors  
**Source:** Designed by Kwena Masha

The three factors have specific areas that define them as shown in table 1

FACTORS	COMPONENTS		Examples
Input Factors	National	Provide contexts within which curriculum is designed and experienced	National qualifications framework Human Resources Development Strategy National Development Plan
	Institutional		Strategic Plans Teaching and Learning Policies Assessment Policies Library and ICT environments
	Nature of the discipline		Key concepts of the discipline Discipline theories Professional formations
	Students' background		Cultural backgrounds Academic aptitudes Socio-economic factors
Process Factors	National	Provide contexts for curriculum implementation (scheduling, instructional decisions, assessment, and support)	National Qualifications Framework HR Strategy National development plan
	Institutional		Institution's Mission and vision Strategic plans Resources Institutional policies
	Nature of the discipline		Instructional approaches Material selection/design Assessment activities
	Students' background		Cultural norms and values Students' academic support Socio-economic constraints

Output Factors	National	Provide contexts for judging quality of outputs	National Qualifications Framework (level descriptors) Human Resource Development (Employability of Graduates) National Development Plan
	Institutional		Student retention and throughput rates Module/programme impact (acknowledgements) Graduate attributes in relation to institution's strategic plans and identity
	Nature of the discipline		Students discipline knowledge levels Progression within the discipline Contribution to professional activities
	Students' background		Enhanced students' experiences Adding value to students communities

### 3.2 Input factors

Input factors relate to all areas and systems that characterise the context within which teaching takes place. Some of these factors emanate from national in the form of legislation, policies, funding frameworks, and other directives from national bodies such as Council for Higher Education. We argue that there is a need for standardisation and accountability warrants that Higher Education institutions in the country operate from shared frameworks.

At institutional level, input factors come in the form of policies, strategic plans, resource allocations, learning spaces, and all other issues that contribute to staff and students' overall academic wellbeing (Boshier 2009). Staff offices and students' accommodation for example, have impact on their academic work. The value that an institution places on teaching, reward systems, development support mechanisms and monitoring plans have influences on the efforts that teaching staff places on improving their teaching (Vardi and Quin 2011).

The nature of the discipline also contributes to input factors. Other disciplines require practical work as a major component of teaching, other require work integrated learning whilst others can do without these components. Different disciplines have different concepts, methodologies and theories that place different requirements on teaching and learning (Truong 2013). Professional bodies such as Pharmaceutical Board, Social Work too, have direct influences on what to teach in a discipline (Ceulemans, Maartrn and Struyf 2012). In many instances, an individual lecturer does not have control over these areas. Some of these, mentioned earlier, include the national legislation; Institutional policy environment; the nature of the discipline and the students' socio-economic background as shown in table 1.

### 3.3 Process factors

Competence in the teaching process requires provision of comprehensive evidence of teaching activities and accomplishments (Seeleman, Suurmond and Stronks 2009). Provision of evidence developed to make conclusions about one's own teaching requires a careful study of the unique elements of one is teaching roles. For example, one has to consider the size and the level of modules (Ceulemans, Maartrn and Struyf 2012); outcomes content and the learning environment (Truong 2013) One needs to consider the philosophy (Truong 2013) that underpins one's efforts to help students learn and plan (Ceulemans, Maartrn and Struyf 2012), facilitate learning and assess the students (Ceulemans, Maartrn and Struyf 2012). In addition, one must provide evidence to show that the module outcomes have been met and demonstrate one's involvement in all teaching-related activities, including curricula revision and teaching evaluation. All these aspects collectively constitute the process factor

The components in TEF are not mutually exclusive entities; they are nested circles to provide a backdrop for each other. All of them provide shape, character, breadth, depth and attitude against which teaching evaluation judgements could be made in the proposed framework. The shape, nature and depth of teaching which will allow one to identify it

## 4. Exemplar

Input factors are beyond a lecturer's control, but affect the quality of teaching as they dictate context in which teaching occurs (Garbett 2013). Currently providing access and success to candidates in science related programmes is encouraged (Ceulemans, Maartrn and Struyf 2012). This legislated need if drafted into institutional policy may result in overcrowded classrooms. Suggestions for teaching in overcrowded classrooms require state of the art technology for it to be efficient (Vardi and Quin 2011). While some universities enjoy such luxuries, environments throttle other (Garbett 2013). In such instances, quality teaching should consider these. A score of 50% in one institution may mean different

value and that interpretations are dictated to by different contexts. For example, in institutions where academic support offices are present and functional, students support is dealt with at that level and students achieve deeper insights in the content base of study. In institutions where academic support is invisible, the responsibility of dealing with students at risk is left to the lecturer and students achieve less in terms of content base. Evaluation of quality teaching may, thus, be compromised in the latter and consequently quality may be overshadowed by the need for compliance.

#### 4.1 Output factors

The ultimate goal of teaching is the success of student learning (Gibbs and Tang 2011). Every form of teaching is characterised by the roles the teachers play in order for the students to succeed (Gibbs and Coffey 2004). Thus, all good teaching should seek to inspire students to reach their full potential (Vardi and Quin 2011). At the university, the effect will be measurable through output factors and these will range from students' results (Vardi and Quin 2011). To how students fit into the real world of work. They may include student results, examiners' reports, students' attrition and completion rates and graduate destinations (Boshier 2009). These and other output factors are influenced by national legislation; institutional policies; the nature of the discipline and students' backgrounds

### 5. Conclusion

With teaching becoming more and more important in the agenda of HE, there is need for clarity as to how it is to be evaluated. It needs to be carefully conceived and represented if it is to acquire the same value and effort in promoting scholarship in a university. In this paper, we have argued for a discourse if that is to happen. We have presented framework that can be used for that purpose. More work is invited to engage our framework.

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