

No One Has Bothered to Know: Understanding the Constructions of Teaching Excellence in Higher Education Institutions of Zambia: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to understand from the teaching life world of quality assurance and education actors in the higher education institutions, their construction of teaching excellence. **Design:** Charmazian constructivist Grounded Theory Method was employed. Hermeneutic constructivist philosophy guided this study and 29 participants were interviewed using criterion i sampling. **Findings:** Eleven categories of teaching excellence emerged from the data and the constructions of teaching excellence were multifaceted. Based on the participants' voices, there is no universally accepted definition of teaching excellence. There is no consensus of opinion on what constitutes teaching excellence in all higher education environments. However, research suggests that Teaching Excellence practices were beginning to be applied on an institutional level as a management tool though not recognised by the term teaching excellence. Nevertheless, it was not being practiced extensively, and was implemented in pockets, with emphasis on quality teaching more than teaching excellence, and not generally implemented in a systemic way. **Practical implications:** The teaching excellence categories that we have generated in this study could be one source of elements our policy makers could consider when developing teaching excellence policy instruments such as Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Such Instruments could support the enhancement of educational provision across our higher education system. Therefore, rather than focusing on developing metrics of teaching excellence, it is could be more effective to focus also on how these institutions could enhance their educational provision. **Originality:** The study provides empirical contextual individualised constructed constructs of teaching excellence. **Conclusion:** We stated in the title "No one has bothered to know". Now we have

known that the constructions of teaching excellence are multifaceted. The implication of the findings is that phenomenology is a powerful research strategy that is well suited for exploring challenging problems in quality assurance research. By building a better understanding of the nature of phenomenology and working to ensure proper alignment between the specific research question and the researcher's underlying philosophy, we hope to encourage quality assurance and teaching excellence scholars to consider the utility of phenomenology when addressing their research questions.

Keywords

Constructions, Teaching Excellence, Hermeneutic, Higher Education Institution

1. Introduction

There has been an increase in countries where teaching excellence is being explored, with teaching excellence identified in policies and practices in Europe, North and South America, Africa, and Asia (for example, see Courtney, 2014; Land & Gordon, 2015; Saunders & Blanco Ramirez, 2017; Broughan, Steventon & Clouder, 2018). Teaching excellence is having a growing impact on university lecturers globally and needs to be discussed from different angles. Teaching excellence is of critical concern among academics and tertiary level education providers (Dixon & Pilkington, 2017) and, as such, research on the concept of teaching excellence in a higher education context is important.

The application of the concept of teaching excellence has been receiving increased attention in higher education in Zambia, without any body of scholarship to inform the development of teaching excellence framework, inspire practice, and national rewards to recognize it. Elsewhere, rewarding of institutions in form of accreditation and licensure in the domain of teaching excellence, has taken several forms (Chism, 2006; Broughan, Steventon, & Clouder, 2018; Stockley et al., 2019) and yet in Zambia, teaching excellence is in its infancy. Further than this, the concept of teaching excellence is replete with definitions as it is a multi-dimensional construct that is wide in scope (Bain, 2004; Macfarlane, 2007; Sawatzky et al., 2009). Researchers have developed lists of characteristics, practices, and modalities that define teaching excellence (Bain, 2004; Macfarlane, 2007; Gunn & Fisk, 2013) and this has helped in some jurisdictions in terms of measurement of teaching excellence. A perfunctory look at these lists shows many similarities and some differences.

From the local front, Zambia has not yet profiled what the constructions of teaching excellence are among quality assurance and education actors. For instance, dimensions and indicators of quality teaching remain unknown. Perhaps the lack of such constructions could be responsible for the lack of a teaching excellence framework since no one knows what the constructions of teaching excellence are in Zambia's higher education sector. The authors are arguing that

the responsibility for defining and promoting teaching excellence resides in the culture of a people. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to understand from the teaching life world of quality assurance and education actors in the higher education institutions (HEI), their construction of teaching excellence. This aim is aligned with Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology as an appropriate methodological framework for inquiry. In so doing, the paper will explore conceptions of teaching excellence, distil and interpret the shared notions of teaching excellence among quality assurance and education actors; and synthesise credible and meaningful insights and suggestions for promoting teaching excellence in the higher education institutions we studied. This study may add some value in the practice of teaching excellence in the following dimensions: designing and planning learning activities, teaching and supporting student learning, assessing and giving feedback to students on their learning, developing effective learning environments, integrating scholarship, research and professional activities, evaluation of practice and continuing professional development, and professional and personal effectiveness (Chalmers et al., 2014).

2. Research Project Background

This paper is based on the qualitative findings of larger PhD exploratory research project on teaching excellence in the context that was completed in December 2021. This paper is focused solely on the experiences of quality assurance and education actors.

3. Methodology

Grounded theory see (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Glaser, 1998) was the preferred design for this study, it was selected because of the scarcity of research looking at constructions of teaching excellence. A grounded theory approach as such was considered appropriate because it offers a systematic method to study human experiences and to understand the contextual reality of phenomena under inquiry (Glaser, 1999) especially when this study used hermeneutic constructivism because it stresses the possibility of questioning any knowledge by underlining the linguistic nature of reality and the shared understanding we can achieve through dialogue (Gadamer, 1975; Gadamer, 1976; Heidegger, 2010; Howell, 2013). Such a stance highlights the principle that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000).

3.1. Eligibility and Recruitment

We drew respondents from four higher learning institutions using criterion i sampling. We set pre-established criteria to allow us conduct in depth-interviews. The sampling frame was comprised of senior level academics (a dean, a member of senate or academic board, a senior lecturer or a head of department) with a remit for teaching and quality assurance. These were deemed as appropriate to

provide commentary on the research topic. This type of purposive sampling technique was ideal as it guaranteed credibility of findings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2012). We identified potential respondents by visiting university websites. Using criterion i sampling, we ensured that theoretical sampling became the main stay of data collection and analyses. In the end, we enlisted 29 participants for this study

3.2. Data Collection

We invited potential participants who agreed, in principle, to participate in the project. We invited by email and we sent a participant information sheet outlining the remit of the research project and a consent form to record their consent to participate in the research as attachments. A date and time was subsequently arranged that would be convenient for participants to be interviewed once they had returned their signed consent forms indicating that they had read the participant information sheet, agreed to be audio recorded and agreed that their comments could be used in outputs from the research project.

Recognising that sharing lived experience with participants is usual in (Converse, 2012), we opted to use phenomenological interviewing which embraces descriptive phenomenology as a total method for research. We employed individual face-to-face interviews to explore and describe the lived experiences or life worlds of participants as these relate to elucidating the openness to the lifeworld. We adopted an open stance with sensitivity to the meaning of the lived experiences and meaning of teaching excellence as the focus. Participants were asked to provide commentary on their experiences, opinions, reflections and viewpoints on various aspects of teaching excellence. We made sure that the interview allowed openness. Openness involved being observant, attentive and sensitive to the expression of experiences (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nystrom, 2008). It also included questioning the understanding of data (Dahlberg & Dahlberg, 2003). Thus, we had to strive to maintain an attitude that included the assumption that hitherto, as we did not know the participants' experiences and we wanted to understand the studied phenomenon in a new light to make invisible aspects of the experience become visible.

In this study, interview questions were non-directive in order to meet the main aim of the study and to learn more about teaching excellence from the perspectives of our participants. The participants' perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and values were central to the understanding of teaching excellence from their perspective.

During each interview, with the participant, we collectively experienced Gadamer's fusion of horizons, or a state of mutual understanding and harmony as teachers. The fusion of horizons also allowed us to encapsulate our ability to use our own lived experiences to make new meanings and extend our thinking throughout the analysis ensuring that we were also close to meeting Heidegger's assumptions of Dasein. We cannot say that there is no pure, external vantage

point from which we can be disinterested, we can have a presupposition less angle on things we heard from our participants. This constructivist grounded theory method allowed a two-way mutual co-construction and it allowed us to proactively engage in the research process.

3.3. Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with all names and identifying features removed. We employed a comparative analysis between each interview using Charmazian three step grounded theory process (Charmaz, 2014). The steps were initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding. This method allowed analysis throughout whereby data were compared continuously. Analysis occurred inductively by comparing incident for incident in the data and establishing categories that emerged from the data.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

We got approval of this study from the University of Zambia Human Research Ethics Committee. The approval number is HSSREC 2021 Jul 001. We made every effort to ensure the safety of participants and their data. Key issues identified include, but are not limited to: Data handling, protection of participant identities, and supporting participants who become distressed during interviews. Data was electronically stored in re-identifiable format using Research Electronic Data Capture [REDCap] as a secure database. Access was granted only to the two authors

4. Findings

We had participant diversity in this study. This ensured a range of experiences and insights were represented within the data, which was appropriate given the broad scope of the research questions. Our participants had considerable years of tertiary level teaching experience that ranged from 9 to 30 years. They were holding their current senior level academic position for between 3 years and 8 years at the time of being interviewed.

Recognising that Gadamer disliked the expression ‘collecting data’ or ‘gaining information’ and preferred to use the term ‘gaining understanding’ (Fleming et al., 2003), we got to understand teaching excellence through dialogue, by ensuring that we were open to the opinion of our participants (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall, 2004). Dialogue means not only a conversation between two people, but also a dialogue between reader and text. In both cases, we used language as the means and it is through language that understanding of what we were studying became potential (Gadamer, Weinsheimer, & Marshall, 2004; McCaffrey, Raffin-Bouchal, & Moules, 2012).

The findings that we present below relate to the research question “What are the quality assurance and education actors’ construction of teaching excellence?” To begin with, constructions are individualised and appear as multiple realities.

In this study, 489 codes accounted for constructions of teaching excellence. These codes were later categorised into 11 categories or elements of teaching excellence as shown below:

- Establishment of centres of excellence as teaching excellence
- Infrastructure as an aspect of teaching excellence
- Teaching excellence is about industry linkage
- Teaching excellence is about leadership
- Teaching excellence is about organisational culture
- Teaching excellence is about research
- Teaching excellence viewed as addressing lecturer-student ratio
- Teaching excellence viewed as having competent effective teaching staff
- Teaching excellence viewed as quality
- Teaching excellence viewed as the quest for ranking of an institution
- Teaching excellence viewed in form of having a well-crafted curriculum

4.1. Establishment of Centres of Excellence as Teaching Excellence

It is also evident from literature that quality was core to teaching excellence and has been investigated by numerous researchers (Bobby, 2014). Literature has demonstrated that quality is fundamental in higher education and linked to excellence. Consequently, one of the key points emerging from the interviews was that university staff do not use the terminology Teaching Excellence; however, it was understood that they were desirous of quality teaching within their discipline which pointed to teaching excellence. In one university it was clear that quality in training was a priority and a centre for excellence called Centre for Academic Development was created for this purpose and a Senior Executive was assigned the responsibility of quality assurance Director. However, there was no terminology for Teaching Excellence within this institution and Teaching Excellence activities were not always labelled as such.

A Professor at this university confirms this by saying:

“...as a concept it is really something that I haven’t really thought about... in terms of the activities that we do within the University, I see that they fall within the components of teaching excellence. Obviously the packaging of teaching excellence is a new concept, you can be doing certain things without knowing the way they are packaged. So from my own understanding teaching excellence means that we are providing the highest of the quality in terms of the teaching and learning”.

The professor went on to add:

“At our university we have a center we call it a center for excellence, it’s called CAD, Centre for Academic Development. So they have a responsibility of ensuring that we have quality control. We have tools for quality control, again like student assessment forms and things like that are done.”

(Head of Department 1).

It was evident from this excerpt that there was a strong desire for quality delivery in higher learning institutions and that teaching excellence needed to be promoted within this context with the packaging of teaching excellence and recognised as such.

4.2. Infrastructure as an Aspect of Teaching Excellence

As regards infrastructure, the evidence from Participants in this study suggests that infrastructure was core to teaching excellence, it was fundamental and therefore, an institution with good, adequate and state of the art infrastructure support teaching excellence. Accordingly, reviewed literature has demonstrated that infrastructure is core to teaching excellence and according to (Buhr, 2003), infrastructure is a set of fundamental facilities and systems that support the sustainable functionality of an organisation or society at large. Infrastructure in this sense include: buildings, power supplies, equipment, roads among others needed for the operation of a society or enterprise. In the following words, a senior lecturer had this to say:

“When we are talking about infrastructure, obviously we are talking about the environment where that teaching is taking place. The traditional brick and mortar comes to mind where you have the teacher or lecturer, in front of his students so the environment itself has to be good enough to create that atmosphere whereby students would concentrate and focus on the learning process. Meaning that the environment itself has to be excellent, it has to be good. The required facilities, laboratories, lecture theatres, workshops and the rest have to be available. There should be no unnecessary disruptions meaning the ambient environment we are talking about, whether the temperature, or other external conditions have to be excellent”. (Senator 1)

Participants in the sample showed consensus on the need for appropriate and adequate infrastructure, both physical and soft infrastructure. They explained that when you have larger numbers of students, you need to consider increasing infrastructure.

To this effect, HEA gives a condition of surface area and number of students and even when it comes to accrediting an institution they look at infrastructure so that is why people adhere to infrastructure as an indicator of quality.

Another Participant had this to say:

“...Teaching excellence also has to do with having the right infrastructure, both physical infrastructure which you can look at and soft software infrastructure and many other things, as well as buildings. So we are talking of laboratories as well for those of us who are in Sciences, as well as smart classrooms (Manager Accreditation)

While material infrastructures are goods and services able to satisfy those wants of economic agents originating from physical and social requirements of human beings (OECD, 2021), infrastructure was cited as key to teaching excellence, some participants within the sample lamented the lack of appropriate and sufficient infrastructure in Higher Learning Institutions (HLIs) that support excellence in teaching.

A Head of Department had this to share:

.... we talk about the infrastructure within the environment which has to be conducive to the learners. Here we are talking about the size of the building. It has to be big enough to accommodate the right number of people so that there is no unnecessary congestion. The seating arrangement has to be good enough. State of the art equipment has to be available to support training but these things are lacking (Head of Department 4).

4.3. Teaching Excellence is about Industry Linkage

In terms of industry linkages with higher learning institutions, this study has revealed among Participants that Industry linkage and related practices has a critical role to play in influencing teaching excellence within higher learning institutions. Given that the linkage between training and industry is critical to teaching excellence, Literature has demonstrated the critical role of industry linkage and training institutions. Skilled training methods combined with technical implementation for the instructor and learner, account for excellence as the strategy has proven to produce successful learning outcomes.

One participant made this observation:

“...By working more closely with the industry, our University has not only been able to produce graduates who are more appropriately skilled, but also professionals who are more likely to fit in the workforce in the industry. (Senator 2)

Institutional linkage was as a catalyst to knowledge and skill requisition emphasised as this was needed both during training and after training. A quality assurance manager made the following remark in this area.

We are organising our training programmes to ensure that there are linkages... assuming Industrial practicals are used as a platform for technology transfer, knowledge sharing. We have been seeking support from industry to get resources as well as foster research. There are some institutions of higher learning that are behind and have innovated or adopted the new and emerging technologies applicable in industry; thereby creating links between industry and training institutions (Quality Assurance Manager 2)

Thus, participants saw the need of enhancing teaching excellence by embracing Industry Oriented Education (IOE) which is an approach to learning from an industry perspective advocated by many researchers (Garrison & Vaughan, 2011; Stewart, 2012; Hager, Lee, & Reich, 2012; Ball, William, & Peterson, 2015).

This linkage has profound effect on employment, education and training of technical labour force, and training of teachers.

From these categories, we have observed that teaching excellence involves multiple realities.

4.4. Teaching Excellence is about Leadership

Leadership in this study was seen by Participants as one of those aspects that has a strong role to play in influencing teaching excellence within higher learning institutions. Given that leadership creates and sets the culture, mindset, structure and priorities for an institution, leaders have a very strong role to play in the decisions around priorities for any given academic year. Through leadership development, internalizing beliefs, values, and attitudes toward teaching is championed, promoting formation of leaders as excellent academics (Cannaby et al., 2016). However, there are different views about how much influence they actually have within an institution. It was evident in this study at one learning institution where teaching excellence was a priority that its priority and implementation was largely due to a strong leadership push to elevate the importance of managing all things considered as excellent.

Consequently, the views of participants are backed by what literature has demonstrated. In this regard, a participant had this to say:

“... if leadership is not committed to excellence there won't be excellence in an institution. So leadership has to set the tone in terms of policies and processes that they put in place. They set the tone, map out the vision and mission of the institution of course with the input from everyone but at the end of the day the buck stops at management. There should be that belief in excellence down the line in the organizational hierarchy. So basically that is what I meant that it has to start with leadership” (Head of Department 5).

This construct of leadership as being core to teaching excellence is supported by literature which has demonstrated that leadership is linked to excellence in education. As such, Callahan et al. (2015) assert that leadership is key to establishing collaborative cultures linked to teaching excellence, especially in teams and communities within institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, Becher and Trowler (2015) contend that academics are pressured to “do more with less” and need to include scholarships of “leadership, management, administration, and entrepreneurialism, which now form an inescapable part of the modern academics' agenda”. Shattock (2003) argues that, as universities increasingly diversify their funding base, they take on responsibilities and management tasks which are very distinct from their core business. Furthermore, The Inukshuk model derived from The Knowledge Torii, uncovered by Professor John Girard's research, is a model that also presents five elements (Leadership, Technology, Culture, Measurement, and Process), as core to Teaching Excellence (Girard, 2005).

Teaching excellence is about organisational culture

Organisational culture in this study was considered as one of the critical constructs of teaching excellence. Organizational culture was described as that unseen hand in organizations. It was observed as a critical component in achieving sustainable success in teaching excellence along with other factors such as infrastructure, technology and information technology (O'Dell & Grayson, 1998). Respondents shared the view of organisation culture as an aspect of teaching excellence as it embraced several elements. The notable ones included the combination of shared history, expectations, unwritten rules, and social mores that affects the behaviour of everyone, shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sense making. Participants had expressed many concerns and responsibilities related to organizational culture in support of excellence. Participants argued unless one's leadership role is divorced from beliefs and the need for positive attitudes towards quality, there will be very little that would be attained to ensure teaching excellence.

One Professor and Director Standards had this to say:

... "Culture starts with belief. If you do not work on the culture, on the belief, on the attitude, nothing is going to work. So the culture has to start with attitude of excellence. You can't bully people in structures if you are professional. Unless right from the basis of the attitude people know that this is our institution, it's our property. Do not destroy it. Let's use it. Because you might see facilities that people are using...? So in short culture carries people along. Right from the belief level going up to structures" (Director Standards)

A quality assurance officer spoke about its values and the rules it creates for its members as well as the shared ways of thinking and acting. They claimed that in it enhanced quality assurance. This is exemplified below.

Every society's way of acting originates in their beliefs and values that follow an analogous behaviour pattern or a collective mental programme. You see this in the language, tools it uses, its values and the rules it creates for its members. (Quality Assurance Officer).

Each HEI has its own organisational culture. While this was the case, there seemed to be some similarities in some elements of culture. They spoke about what they embraced such beliefs, values, rituals and language as very critical in teaching excellence and raising awareness about teaching excellence. Some emphasised the need for responsibility and professionalism. The following excerpts point to what counts.

"The culture at our institution is more oriented towards the internalisation of values, beliefs, language, the need for responsibility and professionalism as very critical in teaching excellence and raising awareness about teaching excellence. You need to use the language inherent of the institution for you to communicate institutional values and beliefs lest you fail to entrench ex-

cellence” (Director Quality Assurance)

Respondents spoke about institution has some history feelings of staff combined with policies. Organizational culture seems to play a crucial role in the integration of people and relationships. One dean had this to say.

“I just want to point out that the organizational culture you see in our institution has some history to it. What we do is informed by the feelings of our staff combined with policies, and expected practices and prescribed procedures. There are things we worship like qualifications, promotion or positions...and they make us one” (Dean 2).

Research elsewhere like this one has shown that organisational culture has been investigated in numerous countries (Schein, 1990; Jantti, 2000; Saltmarsh & Saltmarsh, 2008; Hofstede, 1999; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Sharir & Lindesay, 2015). These studies, also bring out the following as elements of organisation culture; values, beliefs, language, the need for responsibility and professionalism have been found to be very critical in teaching excellence and raising awareness about teaching excellence (Andrade, 1996; Hofstede, 1999; Schein, 2004; Schein, 2010). Pelekais and Rivadeneria (2008) have considered cultural elements such as beliefs, values, rituals, language as very critical in teaching excellence. Just like this study, Bermúdez-Aponte, Pedraza Ortiz and Rincón Rivera (2015) did show that the university environment in six universities of Bogotá considered the experiences, beliefs and values specific to each institution as characterising elements of teaching excellence.

4.5. Teaching Excellence Is about Organisational Culture

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cellence. Just like this study, Bermúdez-Aponte, Pedraza Ortiz and Rincón Rivera (2015) did show that the university environment in six universities of Bogotá considered the experiences, beliefs and values specific to each institution as characterising elements of teaching excellence.

4.6. Teaching Excellence Is about Research

Participants clearly expressed the need for research to feed into ones teaching and remain current. In the words of a dean, this is what could be noted.

“...research is top, I think in all the considerations because if what you are teaching as a lecturer especially when you start going into the upper years, masters, postgraduate levels and all that what you are doing, your research should be able to feed into your teaching and then vice versa. So what you are teaching then you go out and see whether you do research on that. So there should be this link between the teaching, or the curriculum and the research otherwise there is a saying that “if there is no research happening you end up teaching your students a flat earth”. Meaning that you will be teaching students old information when things have actually moved on so there is a very direct link between doing research and the quality of material that you are delivering to your students. So, yes it is an important aspect that is why I think even in our promotions and all the Universities if there is no research, there is no promotion on that because it is considered as one of the key issue or component that you have to have as an Educator, as a trainer, you need to be doing your research” (Dean 1)

However, as important as research is to teaching excellence, some participants expressed dissatisfaction on the kind of research going on in their institutions. A professor of natural sciences and mathematics had this to say:

“... We are diversifying now, we are going into research, and we have a number of post graduate programs running. But again from the science point of view, because of our weaknesses in lab structures I am not impressed. The provider of resources, Government of the Republic of Zambia (GRZ) that is, should look into beefing up our laboratory structures so that we can increase on the number of Post Graduate students and that’s the way in which everybody does research everywhere...” (Manager Quality Assurance and Accreditation)

Some participants opined that the kind of research needed to have a bearing on society, the research output should be directly related to providing solutions for society out there. One participant expressed the following sentiments:

“If the research that you are doing has no bearing has no impact on society then I do not see any excellence in that kind of research. But if the research that you are doing and the output of that research is able to transform the society in which you are operating from and so is able to speak to the needs

of industry and also the economy and so on and so forth, then we would say that research has some excellence in it and output that comes out of that research is the output that is able to help the country develop... unfortunately, I know the kind of research most of us do is just for academic purposes and its packed and no one wants to look at it because it has no bearing on the society that we are living in” (Senator 2)

Research was seen core to teaching excellence in university education as an aspect of teaching excellence (Boyer, 1990; Kreber, 2002; Healey & Roberts, 2004). Griffiths, argues that there is a link between Research Informed-Topology (RIT) and university teaching which enhances teaching excellence as it reinforces the synergies between teaching and research with a focus on learning for the student and teaching for teachers referred to as Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Thus, Participants in this study opined that Research is a key component of teaching excellence in university education. As such, without research and publication it was not possible to consider such an institution as adhering to the tenets of excellence in education.

4.7. Teaching Excellence Viewed as Addressing Lecturer-Student Ratio

As regards teacher-student ration, a study by OECD (2021), found that within HEIs there were specific practices consistent with teaching excellence principles, with specific reference to the ratio of students to teaching staff as an important indicator of the resources devoted to education along with students’ total instruction time, teachers’ average working time, and the division of teachers’ time between teaching and other duties and class size. This research did also reveal that participants were of the opinion that smaller classes are often perceived as allowing teachers to focus more on the needs of individual students and reducing the amount of class time needed to deal with disruptions. Thus, participants were of the view that the Teacher-Student ratio aspect was a requirement by the higher education authority and critical to teaching excellence as demonstrated in this excerpt from a Head of Department:

“...there are some factors that can enable excellence. For example, the learning environment, has to be conducive for the learners. Here we are talking about the ratio of teacher-pupil if you go to primary schools and secondary schools, but in university you can talk about lecturer-student ratio. How many students are in your class, we know that if we have too many students then forget about excellence in that learning environment. This is the kind of environment we are talking about the number of students; it must be manageable (Head of Department 3).

However, evidence on the effects of reduced class size on student performance is not clear as there is no consensus among participants on what the best ratio of students to teachers should be in institutions but there is wide agreement among

participants that there is some evidence from their lived experiences showing that smaller classes may benefit students from disadvantaged backgrounds who require more time and interaction with teachers for a quality education, supporting a lower ratio of students per teacher. Thus literature supports a positive association of smaller class size and higher teacher satisfaction (OECD, 2021) in line with participants' views. It is therefore important to note that in spite of the importance of lecturer-student ratio, there was an impression created of dissatisfaction among participants on the current situation in their HEIs in particular public universities. The following sentiments were expressed by one Professor of science:

“... there are some programs which are oversubscribed, which have a lot of students for us and these programs are difficult to deal with the ratios... unfortunately, due to lack of resources, I will give an example, the first years in my school, the school does the foundation courses for medicine, mining engineering. So our first year classes are usually 2,000 students now you can imagine how one person can teach that kind of class. Just think of how do you provide a tutorial to 250 people? It is proving to be very difficult and this is frustrating.” (Manager Quality Assurance and Accreditation)

Participants generally, were of the view that manageable ratios were difficult to achieve especially in public universities. However, one college demonstrated that it was possible to keep teacher-student ration to a minimum as expressed in these words:

“... is part of our training standard for the teacher-learner ratio. We keep it at a minimum and I will explain. May be our set up might be unique. During in service training in the energy sector, the room for error in the industry is just zero. So most of our training is 75% - 85% practicals, i.e., demonstrations, actual operations, true simulators or real processes. ... So we try to keep, the learner to trainer ratio as low as possible. We begin at one and the maximum in the set-up of our facility is for most technical courses would be at around twelve. We have twelve, fifteen participants. We are really on our neck. We would want to keep it as low as possible then they would understand” (Head of Department 1).

4.8. Teaching Excellence Viewed as Having Competent Effective Teaching Staff

When probed about teacher competencies in relation to the construct of teaching excellence, there were numerous constructions of this. One participant belabored to render the meaning of competence and argued that competency was a term that was used extensively by different people in different contexts.

Any way teacher competency is one aspect we consider in discussing teaching excellence. You need to remember that competency is a term we have used in different contexts and it is defined by people contextually in varying ways....

Competencies are the requirements of a “competency-based” teacher education and include the knowledge, skills and values a teacher-trainee must demonstrate for successful completion of a teacher education programme.

Respondents went further to describe what they considered within the realm of teaching excellence as seen from the excerpts below.

One had this to say

In our institution, we pay so much attention to teacher competencies...we make sure that our staff have “competencies” being a combination of knowledge, skills and behaviour that they possess to improve performance.

Another but stressed the need to be qualified.

Competency has to do with the state or quality of being adequately qualified and capable of performing a given role.... Of course we are also talking about qualifications of the lecturer. They have to be qualified, they have to have that experience in the subject matter that they are delivering to their students”.

Others pointed at the need for teachers to be competent as they determined the quality of the product.

The competencies of a teacher relate to her ability to implement the obligations in a responsible and viable way.... Of course the teacher must have credible qualifications. You will see everywhere that a competent teacher is critical in improving student’s achievement and the success in an industry after competing university. Therefore, one of the most important influences on students learning is the quality of teaching brought about by the competent teacher....

Furthermore, teaching excellence was attributed to modelling learners, another participant stated:

“... A teacher is a role model and is the first person learners come to meet so the teacher is a trusted person to the point where if he does not have the good attributes, here we are talking about mannerism, enthusiasm, a heart for learners. How does he handle himself before the students? How are his emotions? How does he understand the different social life of the learners where they are coming from?

It was evident therefore from this study that participants were of the opinion that the abilities of members of staff, in particular teaching staff, in the learning institution, were core to teaching excellence. The competencies of teaching staff provided an institution with the competitive advantage. There was this perception of teaching excellence that knowledge and skill that was to be shared to learners resides with the trainers. Literature too has demonstrated the importance of teacher competencies (*European Guide to Good Practice in Knowledge Management—Part 2: Organisational Culture, 2004*). Hessami and Moore (2009) contend that a competent person requires a number of requisite qualities and capabilities that fall into three broad areas—behavioural, evidential, and contextual. Furthermore, Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) claim that effective teaching requires teacher competencies.

There was thus some consensus on the construction among participants re-

garding teaching excellence. The constructions therefore, among participants were that teacher credentials, competencies, qualifications and personal attributes were critical to teaching excellence in the HEI context. It was further noted that Lecturer credentials in the Higher education sector, do not need to be registered with the Teaching Council as with the teacher qualifications in the general education sector. However, one must have a minimum of a Master's degree in order for them to effectively deliver the materials to students. This assertion is in keeping with what literature has demonstrated that teacher credential in HEIs do have a significant role in teaching excellence.

4.9. Teaching Excellence Viewed as Quality

In terms of quality, participants in this study have shown that quality assurance as an aspect of teaching excellence is extremely important. Participants identified the elements that are used to construct quality in describing or achieving teaching excellence. Five elements were considered to be part of the construct of teaching excellence and these are exception, perfection: fitness for purpose, value for money and transformation. The definitions for quality are shown by attributes in **Figure 1**.

Respondents had the following to say about quality.

Exception as an aspect of quality

Relating to exception, the service ought to be distinctive and this is symbolised in excellence whereby learners, teachers as well as the institution passes a minimum set of standards. We have to reward at times exceptional distinctive learners. In order to have such distinctive learners, we have to set high standards.

Perfection as an aspect of quality

Considering perfection, our educational institution places emphasis on measuring quality in terms of students' academic achievement. The assumption we have is that if the results are improving, we take it that we are on the road to perfection. We take it that our quality must be good and we are getting things right....

Fitness for purpose as an aspect of quality

'Fitness for purpose' is a phrase that was not spoken about so much. Those who brought it out in the conversation used to describe it to show that goods or services must be capable of being used for the intended purpose for which they were purchased or designed. A dean had this to say.

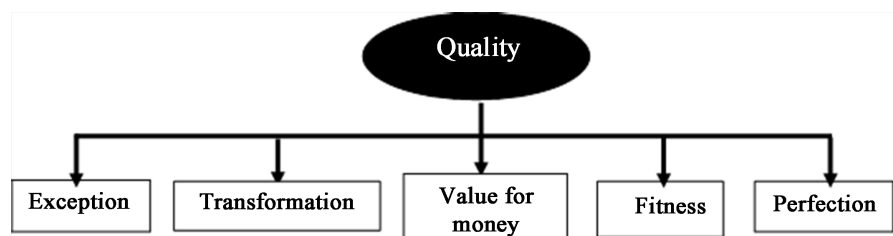


Figure 1. The definitions for quality attributes.

What we believe is that once quality is assured by regular monitoring and quality is attained at reasonable level, it needs to be controlled from deviations to ensure quality and for us to have guarantees that the teacher or the tool or the student is fit for the purpose...In total quality management, goods or services are expected to be with zero defects....

Value for money as an aspect of quality

One senator spoke highly of the need to sustain quality and singled out among quality attributes the aspect of value for money.

We are trying as much as possible to ensure that our teachers are delivering value for money for students. Value for money is one of our four priorities.

Participants spoke about transformation as an attribute of quality. They emphasized qualitative change.

Transformation as an aspect of quality

There is an urge to increased focus on change in the manner the current higher education sector functions. There was emphasis on bringing about change and that students should have a meaningful, relevant, engaging learning experience that challenges their preconceptions.

Education is about doing something, bringing about change. If we have to say we are embracing teaching excellence in our institutions, ideally, students should have a meaningful, relevant, engaging learning experience that challenges their preconceptions, encourages critical thinking and equips them to initiate change in their communities. This means that we have to keep on changing how we engage them.... Today's students learn better in innovative institutions....and are engaged more effectively by directly participating rather than passively receiving information. The teacher's role is shifting from a lecturer to a facilitator of credible public internet resources and dynamic group discussion and activities. This is part of a larger shift in education from a teacher-centred to a more student-centred approach.

For all this to be realised, it calls for accreditation. Accreditation is an activity in the higher education sector in Zambia that is believed to guarantee teaching excellence in as far as quality is concerned. Accreditation is an evaluation of whether an institution or programme meets a threshold standard and qualifies for a certain status. Obtaining accreditation may have positive implications for the HEI itself (e.g. permission to operate) and/or its students (e.g. eligibility for grants). The focus of accreditation is comprehensive, examining the mission, resources, and procedures of a HEI or programme.

One quality assurance director made the following observation about accreditation.

For us, we have come to see the role of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) as an instrument to enhance quality. We are all required to ensure that our institutions and programmes are evaluated to meet a threshold of some quality to be accredited, you see.

Obtaining an accreditation status stood out as an aspect of quality and the ex-

cerpt below affirms this.

If you have to be considered by HEA as a credible institution, you have to obtain an accreditation status. Obtaining an accreditation status may have positive implications. HEA will grant permission to operate your institution and/or its students (e.g. eligibility for grants). The focus of accreditation is comprehensive, examining the mission, resources, and procedures of a HEI or programme. The output of an accreditation is a yes/no decision, though graduations are also possible.

4.10. Teaching Excellence Viewed as the Quest for Ranking of an Institution

While it is well known that university ranking tend to point to teaching excellence as an element of quality, Participants had varying positions on this construct with some advocating for it and others not. The researcher presents two contrary views on Ranking. The first present views of those participants who advocate that university ranking points to excellence in learning institutions. One Head of Department advocating for this construct stated:

“... ranking is very important. It is important because it tells you where you are. For example, if there are twenty universities and you are number one then it gives you that confidence that you are performing better compared to others. If you are number twenty all the time, then you know that there is something wrong with your institution somewhere. You need to do much better. So it is a way to actually weigh you up. Are we doing well or not? So, ranking is quiet important because it is a measure. It is a way to tell you where you are. Whether you are doing well or not in various aspects. So it is actually very important to me” (Head of Department 4)

One senator stated:

“I think we do need a framework that will help us to be able to even rank the universities depending on how, we do our teaching excellence as Universities. We may be ranked in that order so that at the end of the day, we give an opportunity to the would be students to choose the university that they would want to go to base on that framework. So the University that does better should be able to attract more students, quality students than the universities that are not doing as much as the other universities. And also in terms of the fees, the fees should be determined by the kind of excellence that is provided by a particular university. So in a nutshell, I think we need a framework. For your own information I think I went through some of the frameworks that are there, let’s say in the UK, where you know, they will rank universities based on teaching excellence and then now universities will be graded, based on how they are able to respond to those aspects they apply in the frame work and then universities will be given ranks such as gold universities, silver, Bronze and so on and so forth. So gold universi-

ties are the ones that will be charging more than these other universities that are ranked as silver and bronze. So I think we need a frame work as a country that will help in ranking these universities” (Senator 2).

However, there was a contrary view with some Participants who opined that Ranking was not a pointer to teaching excellence. As such, one Professor of Science who disagreed had this to say:

“Well, I don’t believe in ranking. It creates competition of unequal parties. You see, if you were to compare this university to another university say at some corner of the street. They do not have the infrastructure, they don’t have space, and they don’t have experts. They don’t have so many things which are required for learning as a university. They don’t even have a library. So you’re going to find, if you compare UNZA, CBU and Mulungushi to these other smaller universities and then you rank order them. We will just be happy to say that we are ranked number one or number two. But what does that mean in terms of university standard? It means nothing. We still have students who are overcrowded, ratios which are improper, equipment which is not available, classroom spaces which are not there, laboratory equipment which is missing. Overcrowded engineering and science laboratories inadequate sitting spaces in the library but you are number one! You see that is the problem with ranking” (Professor of Science)

While some participants disagreed with ranking as demonstrated above, they expressed the desire for benchmarking as stated in the following excerpt:

“What I tend to believe in is benchmarking. When you do benchmarking, you look at those universities which are performing well and you say how do we benchmark ourselves against this well performing university. So that you strive towards achieving the same benchmark rather than trying to achieve a position. You can get a position and if you put people to run outside there they may be number one but can they go to the Olympics? Can they go and beat Usain Bolt? They can’t. But they are number one where they are. So I think in terms of excellence we should try to benchmark ourselves against the best. So that we strive for those clear cut standards of attainment rather than trying to rank ourselves with those serial numbers. Ranking is unfair by its nature. Everybody wants us to be like Cambridge. They want you to be like Oxford. They want you to be like Harvard. Harvard is how many years old? Maybe 160 years? Oxford is how many? Maybe 400 years old? So if you take your 30 years of life as a university which is transforming. For example, ours from being an institute of technology into a fully-fledged university, how then do we peg ourselves against such and then say we are competing? It is like tying your leg and then saying run like Bolts. You cannot because you are handicap. So this is why I think ranking is an unfair mechanism” (Manager Accreditation)

Thus, Participants expressed mixed feelings regarding ranking. While others felt ranking pointed to teaching excellence, others felt with ranking you have to be clear in terms of how you measure it. How do you compare one University to the other? That is the challenge that was expressed with those disagreeing. A participant opined that in ranking what you are trying to say is that in fact this University is better in terms of teaching Excellence meaning that you are talking about subjects, skills people have, the learning between students, the ratios, the communication between students and lecturers, the facilities and all that.

4.11. Teaching Excellence Viewed in Form of Having a Curriculum

Interview shows how curriculum development is an attribute of teaching excellence in the higher education sector. Though there is some conflicting evidence surrounding the idea of a hierarchy of approaches to organizing learning and teaching—surface, deep and strategic—there seems to be consensus that excellence in the area of curriculum development is associated with teaching excellence.

The evidence from participants suggests that a curriculum was core as it was fundamental. A well-crafted curriculum supports teaching excellence practices and principles. There was common consensus among participants that a curriculum was predominately critical to teaching excellence. It was also evident from the participants that how to develop a curricular that ensures that you achieve the teaching excellence you are looking for was cardinal, because it's one thing to have the lecturers and the students, but it's another thing to ensure that the curriculum that is being given out actually addresses the things you are looking at.

One dean expressed development of a curriculum as a component of teaching excellence.

“...the development of the curriculum which I don't know at national level how that is being done, I know at our university, through our center for academic development we have had some programs, may be not everybody has gone through them in terms of how to develop a curricular that ensures that you achieve the teaching excellence.... So it's also something that has to may be emphasized in terms of how do you weigh this curriculum in terms of achieving learning outcomes...as such a well-crafted curriculum and its implementation will add to teaching excellence”

Another had this say about curriculum:

“In my institution, a good curriculum is key. You have a curricular for each and every course that is developed and this curricular is developed in a department, a department will look at it then discuss, when they are satisfied it is taken to the board of studies, the board of studies, will scrutinize that curriculum if they are satisfied, the school will submit it to the academic development committee of the Senate. Then the academic development of Senate will look at it and once it is approved it is then approved by Senate

and then that program will then be taught. So in terms of coming up, looking at ways of developing programs, I think that is fine, there is excellence in that”

Participants therefore were of the opinion that a well-crafted curriculum was essential to teaching excellence and that was the reason the higher education authority placed emphasis on program accreditation to ensure an approved curriculum delivered on its premise.

Literature has demonstrated that curriculum is key to teaching excellence. According to (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010), the criteria of teaching excellence in higher education is understood to comprise particular skills and practices applied within particular contexts. These include aspects such as: 1) Teaching and Curriculum design which need to be focused on meeting students’ future needs, implying the development in students of generic capabilities such as critical thinking, teamwork and communication skills, amongst others 2) The Curriculum design should ensure that aims, concepts, learning activities and assessment are consistent with achieving learning outcomes related to future student needs. Grundy (1987) describes a curriculum as a structured linear hierarchical organisation of knowledge and is based on the insulation of the disciplines; it is understood as a given body of knowledge based on canonical texts.

5. Discussion

This study explored notions of what constitutes teaching excellence in the context of education and quality assurance actors based on individual face-to-face interviews with 29 participants. We have shown 11 categories of teaching excellence constructs that are shaped by how senior education management and quality assurance managers (leadership) lead, interpret, promote, articulate and support their own positions of teaching excellence, and the faculty subculture and wider institutional culture within which they operate.

Findings from this research present new evidence regarding the construction of teaching excellence from a phenomenological point of view. The paper has voiced personal constructions and experiences of educational and quality assurance actors in the Zambian context. These findings highlight the importance of context specific meaningful expression of the term teaching excellence. There were notable differences in most instances in the manner respondents rendered their constructions. In spite of the differences among participants, our study over scores a truism of multiple realities that are the cornerstone of qualitative constructive studies the local context matters. We note that simple transference of constructs that have enjoyed repeated use could be the basis or sources of measurements of constructs in conceptual frameworks particularly for nomothetic researchers.

We are arguing based on our findings that previous studies could yield unexpected (or even disastrous) consequences if the constructions were to be adopted as universal and were then applied in our study context. There is credence in this

argument as this position is supported by literature that has argued that teaching excellence is a multidimensional and highly contested concept among stakeholders in higher education environments (see Skelton, 2009; Land & Gordon, 2015; Wood & Su, 2017). Thus, we argue to add further that based on the participants' voices, there is no universally accepted definition of teaching excellence. There is no consensus of opinion on what constitutes teaching excellence in all higher education environments.

While multiple stakeholders within higher education environments; such as HEIs, government agencies, students, employers, alumni, donors, funding agencies, professional associations, accreditation agencies and academic staff have some influence on the provision and quality of teaching (Skolnik, 2010; Hager, Lee, & Reich, 2012; Peary, 2014; Ball, William, & Peterson, 2015), they also invariably disagree on the relative importance of certain elements that they perceive to constitute teaching excellence.

6. Limitations and Significance of this Study

All research approaches have strengths and limitations. This is a matter of difference rather than a depreciation. We begin by outlining the significances of the study. A key strength of this research is the methodological framework used to inform the enquiry. Gadamerian hermeneutic phenomenology is in essence philosophically driven. It requires a reflexive and rigorous approach to conducting research, and is associated with an increased depth of understanding multiple realities. While hermeneutic phenomenology does not proffer theories, the considered and purposeful ongoing conversations that we have shown between the researcher and participants' texts are undertaken with a clear intent to present findings in a way that resonate with the reader. In the case of this research, the findings are intended to be presented in such a way that wonder is created. Our hope is that readers wonder how teaching excellence is demonstrated and modelled, in their everyday activities. Additionally, this paper is one of the first to specifically address teaching excellence from a phenomenological perspective.

Now we turn to limitations. The current study findings were limited by requesting to consent using e-mail. Varnhagen et al. (2005) found that e-mail consenting to be part of the study may have caused anxiety even when it was not different from paper and-pencil consent. However, the approach used was acceptable as e-mailed consents and participant recruitment are increasingly being used as pandemic safe guards (e.g., Calder, Balasubramanian, & Stiell, 2004; Ellett, Schuff, & Davis, 2005). The other limitation is related to the phenomenological philosophical approach we used for this study. Typically, criticism of hermeneutic phenomenology as a research method might be found in relation to 29 participants whom we enlisted in this study. This is a small number of participants, and the context covered a maximum variated sample of institution of higher learning which was not adequate to allow gathering and interpreting sto-

ries, and the analysis of stories being towards phenomenological themes rather than emergent themes about a participant. We accept these differences and suggest that limitations are always prefaced upon a frame of thinking that is not part of the phenomenological method and this limitation cannot be considered but only with a pinch of salt. Finally, arguably and most importantly, hermeneutic phenomenological researchers need to become comfortable with the uncomfortable and for this reason this method is not for the faint hearted see (Stephenson, Giles, & Bissaker, 2018).

7. Implications for Practice

The implications of the study provide credible and meaningful suggestions for promoting teaching excellence in the provision of tertiary level business and management education based on the 11 constructions of teaching excellence presented in this paper. The research contributes to, and furthers, our understanding of teaching excellence in higher education pertaining to the local context in Zambia. The results could assist to advance the understanding of the construction of teaching excellence among education actors within Higher Education in Zambia and provide significant input into the epistemology of teaching excellence within Zambia's Higher Education context. Furthermore, the findings may be useful to new and experienced educators as well as quality assurance practitioners seeking to improve teaching.

Our study has generated context specific constructions of teaching excellence and the application of the construct need to be focused on rebalancing the relationship between teaching and research in institutions of higher learning and putting all that relates to teaching and the learner at the heart of the higher education institution's system. The results show that universities in Zambia are teaching intensive as opposed to research intensive, therefore in order to rebalance the relationship between teaching and research, higher learning institution need to also focus on research as major component of teaching excellence.

The present research addressed unknown issues regarding the construction of teaching excellence in the higher education sector. Therefore, the teaching excellence categories that we have generated in this study could be one source of elements our policy makers could consider when developing teaching excellence policy instruments. Policy instruments such as Teaching Excellence Frameworks that could provide guidelines on enhancing high performance in higher learning institutions of Zambia. Instruments could support the enhancement of educational provision across our higher education system. Therefore, rather than focusing on developing metrics of teaching excellence, it could be more effective to focus also on how these institutions could enhance their educational provision.

8. Conclusion

The general ambition of practitioners of teaching excellence has been expressed as rebalancing the relationship between teaching and research in institutions of

higher learning and putting all that relates to teaching and the learner at the heart of the higher education institution's system. We stated in the title "No one has bothered to Know". Now we have known what the constructions of teaching excellence are. They are multifaceted. The implication of the findings is that phenomenology is a powerful research strategy that is well suited for exploring challenging problems in quality assurance research. By building a better understanding of the nature of phenomenology and working to ensure proper alignment between the specific research question and the researcher's underlying philosophy, we hope to encourage quality assurance and teaching excellence scholars to consider the utility of phenomenology when addressing their research questions.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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