

# 9

## EXCELLENCE

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‘Excellence’ is a word we hear – and probably use – often, but rarely do we stop to think about what it actually means. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘excellence’ as ‘the quality of being outstanding or extremely good’, and it is telling that it gives the example ‘a centre of academic excellence’.<sup>1</sup> In academic discourses, the word is often used in contexts of competition and monitoring, such as the UK’s ‘Research Excellence Framework’ (the REF), a national research quality assessment system, or for awarding prestigious research funding, such as the European Research Council’s first criterion for assessing applications, entitled ‘excellence’.

Everyone wants to be and should be good, and we can all always get better, right? That is the basic – and probably ‘mostly harmless’ (to quote Douglas Adams and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide*) – premise behind the use of ‘excellence’ in academic environments. In an arena that is not only competitive, but in which there are many extremely good people/projects/institutions, the concept of ‘excellence’ quickly caught on politically and economically as a value marker for separating the ‘truly excellent’ from the merely ‘very good’. Together with the much disputed idea of research metrics (and, to a lesser extent, teaching quality), as well as reduced funding for research in many countries, higher education institutions and different disciplines find themselves pitted against each other (and often against themselves) in the desire for them and their work to be considered, or officially recognised as, ‘excellent’. This is an apparently neutral term that nevertheless tends to both favour prevailing norms in academia (and thus impede diversity), and benefit STEM disciplines to a greater extent than the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

This chapter makes no particular claim to excellence. This, in fact, is one way of countering the ubiquity of the paradigm, and, to a certain degree, combatting it from the inside. It is also written from a position of privilege: this is not an application for funding or tenure, nor does it need to fulfil any metrics criteria. Moreover, while the necessary amount of quality and professionalism is both desirable

and aimed for, and peer review requirements must be met, it has proved impossible to keep either the tone or the contents entirely neutral. Although I do not go as far or into as much detail as Moore et al. (2017), I nevertheless follow their lead in treating a topic that has real and serious consequences (funding, hiring, promotion, metrics, diversity) with a certain light-heartedness that my privileged employment position allows. My basic premise in writing this chapter is that we, as people working and studying in academia, should use our critical thinking skills to question both the foundations and consequences of the concept of ‘excellence’. It is my opinion that those of us in a position to do so should speak up so that a debate around the term can start and continue. ‘Excellence’ is not going to go away, and neither should our questioning of it; and if it did go away it would be replaced by something else, and we would question that too. Such is the nature of the ‘killjoy’: to cause disturbance, to challenge norms.<sup>2</sup>

## Context and problematisation

‘Excellence’ plays an important part in international academic discourses surrounding peer review, research and teaching evaluation, research policy, public value, impact, metrics, hiring and promotion decisions, and novelty. It is therefore all the more surprising that, as a concept, ‘excellence’ is neither clearly defined nor universally understood. Even more importantly, the term ‘excellence’ is so ubiquitous as to be virtually meaningless,<sup>3</sup> and ‘excellence’ has been shown to limit both diversity and risk in research, rewarding – at least in the short term – research, academics, and institutions who perpetuate existing norms.<sup>4</sup> Stephan, Veugelers, and Wang argue that bibliometrics are ‘imperfect measures’ and ‘engrained processes working against cherished goals’,<sup>5</sup> and Chambers et al. demonstrate that a climate of metrics and ‘excellence’ perpetuates systematic barriers to diversity in research (discussed below).<sup>6</sup> ‘Excellence’ therefore poses a tangible danger for the creation of a diverse and equal academic community that can respond to the so-called ‘Grand Challenges’ (the challenges that society must overcome in the 21st century if it is to survive into the 22nd).

This problem is neither new nor discipline specific. It has been covered in health sciences, the humanities, science and engineering, peer review, funding, research assessment, and metrics, to name but a few,<sup>7</sup> and interest is increasing. As Chambers and co-authors put it:

Policies and initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion in the research system can be undermined if the indicators used to define and measure success (in terms of ‘quality’, ‘excellence’, ‘impact’) reinforce existing inequalities and hierarchies. *Diversity in the choice and use of indicators is itself a priority.*<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, understandings of ‘excellence’ are at one and the same time discipline-specific and contradictory, and this impedes efforts towards cross-disciplinary research and evaluation (e.g., of funding applications).<sup>9</sup>

One of the appeals of ‘excellence’ as a term is its very familiarity. It is a word in common use in the English language, and as such it is a far cry from the un-understandable jargon – or expensive, ‘unintelligible gibberish’ – sometimes associated with academic research, particularly humanities research.<sup>10</sup> It is, as a *Nature* Editorial puts it quite bluntly, ‘what politicians and policymakers expect from scientists’.<sup>11</sup> Yet a putdown to the ubiquity of excellence can be found in Moore et al.’s pithy critique of what they call the ‘fetishisation of excellence’, or, paraphrasing the name of a now defunct toy retailer (although its fate is unlikely to be an omen for the term in question), ‘Excellence R Us’.<sup>12</sup> As part of their multi-pronged attack, Moore et al. consider how the meaninglessness of the term as it is used in academic discourses contributes by its very nature to the ultra-competitive nature of the academic landscape:

Could ‘excellence’ be, to speak bluntly, a linguistic signifier without any agreed upon referent whose value lies in an ability to capture cross-disciplinary value judgements and demonstrate the political desirability of public investment in research and research institutions? [...] Because it lacks content, ‘excellence’ serves in the broadest sense solely as an (aspirational) claim of comparative success: that some thing, person, activity, or institution can be asserted in a hopefully convincing fashion to be ‘better’ or ‘more important’ than some other (often otherwise incomparable) thing, person, activity, or institution – and, crucially, that it is, as a result, more deserving of reward.<sup>13</sup>

This, of course, raises the question of what could be wrong with competition. Surely, in an area that uses so much public money, and where everyone is talented and hard-working, there needs to be some way of measuring success and rewarding – funding – those projects (or people, or institutions) that are the most deserving. Why not, then, use ‘excellence’ as a shorthand, an all-encompassing term to cover the myriad of possible ways of measuring and assessing research (and, increasingly, teaching)?

## Case discussion

### *Diversity*

In order to answer this, it is necessary to consider three specific examples. The first is that of diversity in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines. As readers of this guidebook will be aware, measuring diversity is a necessary step, even if it only provides part of the picture. A report commissioned and funded by The Wellcome Trust into diversity in health sciences research found that reviews of diversity, or interventions to promote diversity, tended to lack theoretical underpinnings and evaluation of their own effectiveness.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it found that such reviews and interventions that took place had a strong bias towards the USA, and towards gender and race/ethnicity. In other words, the

interventions were targeted to particular axes of diversity (e.g., race), rather than intersectionality (e.g., how race, gender, and disability interact together). It also found that, even within health sciences, the approaches were local and specific, rather than holistic and comparative, which also impedes general, transferable, diversity work.<sup>15</sup> What is particularly relevant for our purposes here, however, is the observation that most of the studies of diversity in the workforce relied on ‘largely conventional indicators of academic performance such as publications written, citations, grants secured and positions obtained’. In other words, studies into diversity measured diversity in terms of ‘excellence’. While Chambers et al. do not make the link explicit, the fact that their principal research question, ‘does a more diverse and inclusive research community produce better biomedical and health research?’<sup>16</sup> remains unanswerable at the end of the report strongly implies that the studies they reviewed were not considering diversity in ways that were meaningful beyond the local contexts, partly because they were based on given – and unchallenged – notions of what makes worthwhile academics and research, that is, the unspoken notion of ‘excellence’. Among its recommendations, the report calls for more comprehensive and comparable studies, a standardisation of indicators, and greater experimentation. These are precisely the kind of things that risky and collaborative cross-disciplinary research could provide, yet as we have already seen, the rhetoric of ‘excellence’ rewards low-risk research within established disciplines.<sup>17</sup> In this way, it contributes to closed-box thinking, reproducing the status quo, and impeding meaningful work on diversity.<sup>18</sup>

### **Metrics**

This then leads to the second example, that of metrics, for it could reasonably be argued that the problems highlighted by Chambers et al. are caused by metrics rather than ‘excellence’. The debate over research metrics is vigorous, and there is no space to do more than simply touch upon relevant aspects of it here. It is also important to point out that while metrics and ‘excellence’ are not one and the same thing, since metrics are often justified as means of measuring ‘excellence’, they are an important example of the rhetoric in action. A UK report from 2015 found that many researchers were suspicious of the use of metrics in research assessment and management.<sup>19</sup> Various criticisms of metrics note the ease with which they can be manipulated or ‘gamed’, misunderstood, and used for publicity purposes.<sup>20</sup> In addition, metrics have been shown to stifle cross-disciplinary research.<sup>21</sup> Alternative quantitative systems to assess research ‘excellence’ have been promoted, including altimetric and responsible metrics, all of which follow Wilsdon et al.’s recommendation that metrics be used to support, not supplant, qualitative evaluation. As a result, efforts have been made to divide metrics from assessment. (One of the most important of these is the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, or DORA, that states that publishing metrics will not be taken into account in hiring decisions, only the contents of the publications themselves. I return to DORA below.) If ‘excellence’ is to be used as a criterion to

rank and reward research, then it must be measurable. While it is clear from reports such as that by Wilsdon et al. e/n that one size doesn't fit anybody, as long as there is 'so much science, so little time',<sup>22</sup> with 'excellence' taken unquestioningly as a yardstick, then the use and abuse of metrics will remain a fact of research life.

### ***Cross-disciplinary research***

My third and final example is cross-disciplinary research, and in particular engendering and funding the kind of cross-disciplinary research needed to overcome the so-called Grand Challenges and meet the UN sustainable development goals.<sup>23</sup> The fact that identifying and pursuing these goals and challenges is necessary is evidence that the system for generating and funding academic research, that has followed broadly mono-disciplinary norms and pathways for centuries, has so far not been up to one of its most fundamental jobs: ensuring the survival of the planet and the species that inhabit it. Most of us are trained from school age to think along and within disciplinary boundaries: maths is taught in the afternoon, music in the morning, and so on. Universities, research centres, and funding systems are structured along the same lines – often with good reason. After all, it would be difficult for a reviewer trained in health care to assess the feasibility of a project in linguistics. However, if the Grand Challenges and sustainable development goals are to be met, projects geared towards research questions such as how to educate people from oral cultures in culturally appropriate first aid techniques would potentially require collaboration between linguists, health care experts, and anthropologists.<sup>24</sup> Despite this, various studies have shown that the rhetoric of 'excellence', as well as research evaluation metrics, rewards mono-disciplinary research along established lines.<sup>25</sup> The solutions to the Grand Challenges and sustainable development goals, assuming that there are any, need to be flexible, and they will be neither cheap nor quick. This stands in direct opposition to short-term, metrics-driven, 'excellence'-based methods of assessment. In other words, to instigate – and then fund – research geared towards the goals and challenges, funders, institutions, and researchers need to take steps to act against prevailing norms of 'excellence' and across disciplinary boundaries. Some steps have been taken in this direction already, such as the Nexus initiative in the UK and the idélab scheme in Norway (now discontinued in Norway but still in use in Poland).<sup>26</sup> What assessments of the projects generated by these initiatives have shown is that cross-disciplinary work requires willingness from individual researchers, flexibility, and time – time to generate projects with people from different areas, time to explain complex ideas to partners from unrelated disciplines, time to re-evaluate and sometimes entirely re-write research objectives, time to write and publish results that have themselves taken more time than mono-disciplinary research to produce.<sup>27</sup> While the resulting research might well stand up to measures of 'excellence', such research nevertheless carries a higher degree of risk than mono-disciplinary research. In an environment where the competition for 'excellence' is fast, fierce, and sometimes all-consuming, particularly for junior researchers, potentially sacrificing the careers of

untenued colleagues on the altar of cross-disciplinary research is obviously too high a price to pay.

## Conclusion

What all the theories and examples put forward so far have in common is the so-called Matthew effect. Based on the conclusion of the parable of the talents in the Gospel of Matthew,<sup>28</sup> the Matthew effect states that whoever has more shall receive more, and whoever has little will see that little taken away: the rich get richer, and power becomes centred on a few. As mentioned earlier, one important effort to combat this is the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, or DORA. This declaration, which at the time of writing boasts over 20,000 signatories, comprises 18 recommendations geared at researchers, institutions, funders, publishers, and metrics agencies. The first and overarching recommendation is to not use metrics ‘as a surrogate for quality’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the word ‘excellence’ is entirely missing from the declaration, and the alternative ‘quality’ appears only in the first recommendation. Yet, a decade after the conference that gave rise to the DORA declaration, the debates and recommendations it entailed are still in the process of implementation, and as worthy as DORA may be, as long as it is not universally accepted as an alternative to metrics, it impedes researcher mobility.

‘It matters what thoughts think thoughts’.<sup>30</sup> The term ‘excellence’, even when used as an intentionally meaningless shorthand, shapes the thoughts – including fields, industries, governments, and funding policies – that emerge from its basis. In particular, the rhetoric of ‘excellence’ and the metrics used to measure it are biased towards STEM disciplines. In this way, ‘excellence’ and metrics combine all too easily as a stick with which to beat the humanities, fine arts, and social sciences, the so-called ‘soft’ disciplines that do not always rely on accepted STEM norms such as experimentation, empiricism, and reproducibility of results, and that are already under pressure to prove their worth in an increasingly competitive, pressure-filled, and ‘excellence’-based research environment. (Attentive readers will note that I have consistently used the inclusive term ‘research’ rather than the more exclusive ‘science’.) Yet it is precisely these disciplines that can provide the tools for rethinking ‘excellence’. Can we rescue ‘excellence’ from the clutches of metrics and capitalism, and reclaim it for a diverse and open research environment? It is, after all, a term that is easy to understand,<sup>31</sup> and it describes what researchers should be doing.<sup>32</sup> Given the recommendations, reports, and initiatives I have discussed (including DORA, Nexus, responsible metrics, as well as open research), there is perhaps reason to believe that the notion of ‘excellence’ can also be changed from within. Personally, however, I am not hopeful.

‘If not excellence, then what?’, asked a *Nature* editorial entitled ‘Science needs to redefine excellence’ in 2018. I would argue, however, this is not the right question. It is not a case of simply replacing one term with another. ‘Excellence’, together with the unquestioned yet inconsistent notions of what it constitutes, is part of a system that is designed in favour of English-language research that appeals

to expensive and high-profit (capitalist) publishers and institutions. ‘Excellence’ as a term is dangerous specifically because it cannot easily be argued with: it is, after all, what academics are supposed to do. Nevertheless, it is both a branding tool for marketing, selling, ranking, and rewarding; it can stand in the way of diversity initiatives, local research, and stop the very conception of potentially ground-breaking research, or research that could benefit the communities that need it most (e.g., local initiatives to combat illnesses that are largely under control in the West but still widespread in developing countries). Perhaps evaluations currently based on ‘excellence’ should take it as given that researchers are almost always good at what they do, and instead look at more holistic indicators of performance that are relevant to the research and the researcher, and demonstrate, for example, outreach work, societal benefit, diversity, risk taking, creativity, mentoring activities, support for junior colleagues, open access and open data, and so on. Initiatives such as DORA and the Leiden Manifesto are a start,<sup>33</sup> but until their recommendations are implemented internationally, and recognised and acted upon by stakeholders, including funding bodies and hiring/promotion committees, use of the term ‘excellence’ needs to be nuanced and aware of the signals it sends out. After all, to paraphrase and update the claim made by Stilgoe, ‘excellence’ still tells us far more about the *who* that decides what is ‘excellent’ and uses the term than about the *research* it is supposed to describe.<sup>34</sup>

## Summary

- ‘Excellence’ is a term that is used widely, yet in practice is virtually meaningless.
- ‘Excellence’ impedes diversity.
- The desire to perform well in academic metrics – measurements of ‘excellence’ – encourages research that conforms to these metrics, that is, mono-disciplinary and safe research. ‘Excellence’ is thus a barrier to cross-disciplinary risky research, particularly the kind of research that is needed to meet the UN sustainable development goals and the Grand Challenges.
- There is no simple alternative to ‘excellence’. It is the author’s opinion that a more holistic approach to research assessment that includes a broader range of criteria would be more appropriate than basing judgments on ‘excellence’.

## Questions for discussion

- How does your institution/faculty/discipline use the term ‘excellence’?
- Can ‘excellence’ be reclaimed?
- What is the role of societal impact in discourses of ‘excellence’?
- Open access publications are often ranked lower in metrics-based assessments of ‘excellence’. Will ‘Plan S’ have a marked effect on this on an international level, or is the dominance of North American and English-language publishing too great?
- The competitive rhetoric of ‘excellence’ contributes to pressure on researchers. What does this mean for diversity in research and academia?

## Suggestions for further reading

(Full citations in the reference list.)

- The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA 2012)
- The Leiden Manifesto (Hicks et al. 2015)
- “‘Excellence R Us’”: University Research and the Fetishisation of Excellence’ (Moore et al. 2017)
- *The Diversity Dividend* (Chambers et al. 2017)
- ‘The Changing Role of Funders in Responsible Research Assessment’ (Curry et al. 2020)
- *The Metric Tide* (Wilsdon et al. 2015)
- *The Impact and Future of Arts and Humanities Research* (Benneworth, Gulbrandsen, and Hazelcorn 2016)
- *How Professors Think* (Lamont 2009)

## Notes

- 1 OED 2010
- 2 Ahmed 2010, 2017, 2021
- 3 Moore et al. 2017 ask at the very start of their article, ‘does “excellence” actually mean anything?’
- 4 Chambers et al. 2017
- 5 Stephan, Veugelers, and Wang 2017
- 6 Chambers et al. 2017
- 7 Chambers et al. 2017; Benneworth, Gulbrandsen, and Hazelcorn 2016; Haine-Bennett et al. 2020; Lamont 2009; Couch and Whitting 2021; Curry et al. 2020; Wilsdon et al. 2015
- 8 Chambers et al. 2017, p. 2, my emphasis
- 9 Stephan, Veugelers, and Wang 2017
- 10 Benneworth, Gulbrandsen, and Hazelcorn 2016, p. 4
- 11 Nature Editorial 2018
- 12 Moore et al. 2017
- 13 Moore et al. 2017, p. 3
- 14 Chambers et al. 2017
- 15 Chambers et al. 2017, p. 4
- 16 Chambers et al. 2017, p. 1
- 17 Stephan, Veugelers, and Wang 2017
- 18 Haine-Bennett et al. 2020
- 19 Wilsdon et al. 2015
- 20 See, among others, Macilwain 2013, Martin 2016, and Nature Editorial 2013
- 21 Rafols et al. 2012
- 22 Wilsdon et al. 2015; Nature Editorial 2013
- 23 United Nations 2015
- 24 Although I made up this particular example, it was inspired by Wildfeuer 2021
- 25 See, among others, Lamont 2009, Rafols et al. 2012, Stephan, Veugelers, and Wang 2017
- 26 National Science Centre Poland 2022
- 27 Maxwell and Benneworth 2018; Wilsdon, Cairns, and O’Donovan 2017
- 28 Matthew 25:29
- 29 DORA 2012



- 30 Haraway 2016
- 31 Benneworth, Gulbrandsen, and Hazelcorn 2016
- 32 Nature Editorial 2018
- 33 Hicks et al. 2015
- 34 Stilgoe 2014

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