Fostering Excellence in Teaching and Learning at the University Level

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Abstract: This paper begins by examining the key concepts in the title, breaking these into finer components, and seeking responses to the following questions (a) what is Teaching? (b) What characterizes EXCELLENT TEACHING? (c) What is Learning? (d) What would qualify as Excellence in Learning given the world for which we are preparing today's university students? The answers to these preliminary questions then provide the guide to the development of an appropriate strategy for fostering excellence in teaching and learning at the university level. The paper is not to be seen as a mere catalogue of instructions on how to teach. It has instead considered the concepts of excellence as appli[1]ed to Teaching (more of *guiding* and less of *telling*) and Learning (*more of how effectively you have learnt how to learn and less of how much you have learnt*). It has also placed the subject under discussion on the pedestal of <u>entrenching</u> (not just <u>promoting</u>) excellence in teaching and learning in the broader context of enabling institutional policy guidelines that should recognise excellence in teaching as a strong element of the development of the academic needed for the knowledge economy of the 21st century.

Keywords: teaching, learning, University, excellence in teaching and learning,

Introduction

Persons trained and untrained who have found themselves in the classroom claim they are conscientious teachers just because they are regular in the classrooms and have firm control of their classrooms and the learners. In as much as these are good elements in the teaching profession, they do not however constitute excellence in the teaching-learning process. If Nigeria is to be reconned within the committee of nations, he must ensure that teaching and learning in the school system especially the ivory tower is characterized by flexibility/diversity in activities and organization of classwork with challenging activities leading to learning by discovery and linking classroom work with the world out there. This paper will therefore be discussed under the following subheadings:

(a). What is teaching?

(b). Concept of teaching excellence

©. Concept of learning and learning excellence

(d). Institutionalizing excellence in teaching and learning at the university level

(e). The academic excellence tripod and the tripartite skills

(f). What is service learning?

How to Cite

(g). All round development and widening of students' horizons

(h). Conclusions and suggestions

(a) What is Teaching?

There are three well-known acceptations of the term 'Teaching'.

1. a profession in the Education 'industry'.

2. ideas propagated by an authority figure ('the teaching (s) of some well-known philosopher, political leader, a Holy Book, a religion, etc.)

3. a set of systematic activities aimed at facilitating learning.

This discussion is specifically concerned with the third acceptance that sees Teaching as less of Telling and more of Guiding. Table 1 below presents the contrasting characteristics of Teaching seen as merely telling with the process as effectively guiding.

The major outcome of Teaching is TRANSFORMATION--- a positive, permanent, regenerative change in values, attitudes, horizons, behaviour and outlook. This the teacher can achieve through systematic activities that fall roughly into the following eleven categories,

1. instructing...........enriching the knowledge base
2. directing............awakening talent
3. questioning .... broadening perspectives through reasoning
4. organising....... ...promoting self-management
5. caring.................coping with challenges
6. setting tasks........developing problem-solving skills
7. advising and guiding.......developing decision-making skills
8. following through .... ensuring seamless growth
9. motivating...... building self-confidence
10. inspiring.........provides role modelling experience
11. engaging.......building communication and interpersonal skills

In summary, Teaching is not simply acting as a conduit of knowledge. The activities of teachers do make positive differences in student lives. It can very well be said that after you have engaged with a teacher, you will never be the same again.

Table 1: Telling Versus Guiding as Teaching-Learning Strategies

KEY ELEMENT	TELLING	GUIDING
Material	Prescribed textbook, followed logically from A to Z	A wider variety of materials (text and non-text) Out-of-class activities to complement classroom work
Teacher	Does most of the talking A quiet classroom as evidence of learning	Sets the scene and engages learners in challenging activities Makes maximum use of learners' prior knowledge and special skills Maximizes learner involvement
Learner	Listens, takes teacher-dictated notes, Talks only when so directed by the teacher	Contributes to classroom organisation to suit different purposes Also initiates activities and challenges the Teacher Takes notes in an analytical manner
Teaching-learning process	Frontal teaching, memorisation and rote learning, Emphasis on mere facts, figures, recitation	Wider variety in the classroom Flexible classroom organisation Analytical and creative thinking promoted
Outcomes	Regurgitation is considered Knowledge Teacher 'coverage' of the syllabus	Improved love for learning More likelihood of hands-on experience Creativity often rewarded

(b). Concept of Teaching Excellence

Observations and experience show that Teaching can be done at different levels, as follows**:**

- <u>Level 1</u> Teacher (Dictatorial) –the all-knowing, stuffing the empty heads of students
- <u>Level 2</u> Teacher (Didactic): has learnt the formal pedagogical rules and follows them blindly
- <u>Level 3</u> Teacher (Demonstrative): Allows student input but only of the 'say/do after me' type
- <u>Level 4</u> Teacher (Interactive): encourages student participation, but still in-the-box thinking' bound
- <u>Level 5</u> Teacher (Creative): creates responsiveness to specific teaching-learning challenges

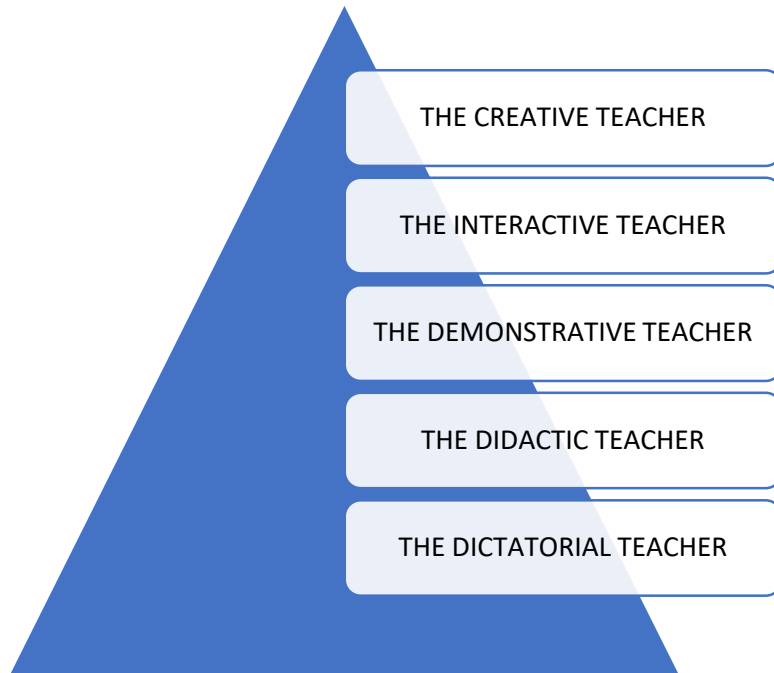These five levels form a pedagogic profile pyramid, as illustrated in Figure 1 below

THE CREATIVE TEACHER

THE INTERACTIVE TEACHER

THE DEMONSTRATIVE TEACHER

THE DIDACTIC TEACHER

THE DICTATORIAL TEACHER

Fig. 1: Teacher Pedagogical Profile Pyramid

The application and predominance of each of these levels of teaching exert specific types of influence on the student.

- level one-passivity and consequent boredom
- level two-short-span attention
- level three-repetitive/routine activities of no interest to the bright student
- level four varied activity but still dull, induces restlessness in children
- level five-flexibility/diversity in activities and organisation of classwork with challenging activities leading to learning by discovery and linking classroom work with the world out there

Excellence in teaching involves functioning at level five falls in the realm of TRANSFORMATIONAL PEDAGOGY, entailing a multi-stage paradigm shift, as follows:

a.   From the 'know all' to the 'seeking to know how to know'
b.   From the talker to the listener
c.   From the purveyor of knowledge and information to the co-seeker of awareness and insight
d.   From the conductor of learning to the joint organiser of learning
e.   From 'this is the answer' to 'there are multiple ways of looking at the issue at hand'
f.   ways of looking at the issue at hand
g.   From dictating to encouraging the search for solutions
h.   From promoting the solo learner to building up the team-player

We have earlier seen that the ultimate goal of Teaching is to transform lives. Excellence in Teaching therefore employs transformational pedagogy as a tool for the attainment of this goal.

©. **Learning and Learning Excellence**

Learning is best described as *a total and qualitative positive transformation of knowledge, skills, competencies, values and attitudes resulting from an A'HA experience.* There are four points worth noting about Learning in our specific context of promoting quality learning through quality teaching.

First, <u>Learning Excellence means going beyond mere surface learning to deep learning.</u> The latter occurs when learning has the effect represented in the apex of the learning competence taxonomy, illustrated in Figure 2 below.

• Mastering entails absorbing from different sources (including the teacher) information, rules and principles. At this level, the student can memorise and recall

• Applying involves using the 'stuff' mastered in life situations like the student masters the rules of reporting and s/he goes into the field to practise reporting an event. At this level, the student is drawing inferences from what has been mastered and s/he is making choices, exercising some degree of independent thinking

• Innovating is the highest point in the process of learning making a positive impact on the student, who can now think out of the box, exuding originality and creativity in thought and action.

• There is yet a higher point at the point of innovating, at which the person attains <u>wisdom,</u> as a result of sustained learning quality practice and diversified experience, and so becomes an authority figure.
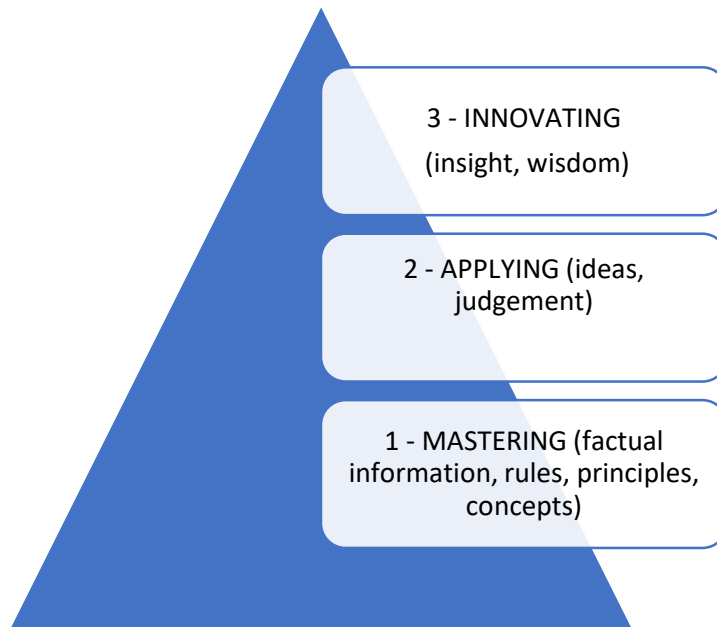

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Fig. 2: *A Taxonomy of Learning Competences*

Second, <u>the person matters a lot more than the substance</u>. Thus, the emphasis has shifted from how much you have learnt to a combination of:

▪ What you have learnt
▪ Who you have become (the extent to which learning has transformed you)
▪ What you can do with what you have learnt in who you have become

Third, <u>successful learning is NOT simply success in examinations</u>. It is a combination of transformational and qualitative improvement in the intellectual and non-dimensional dimensions of human development. In more precise terms, we would consider successful learning as having three inter-related dimensions:

i. Cognitive learning: intellectual skills developing
ii. Life-coping skills: adaptation to life conditions and enhanced social intelligence
iii. Life-long learning skills: a longing-to-know attitude and an enhanced capacity for self-directed learning for continuous, all-around self-improvement:

The three dimensions combined (see elaboration in table two) are most likely to enhance a person's potential for positive contribution to society. Successful learning will manifest in various ways in the life and actions of the

person who has benefited from Education. We have tended to focus (imperfectly) on cognitive learning and the result has been our questioning of the added value that educated persons bring into society.

Table 2: Manifestations of Successful Learning

Cognitive Learning	Life-coping skills	Lifelong Learning Skills
• Critical/Analytical/logical thinking-reasoning • communicative competence in language • broad general knowledge • conceptual prowess • quantitative/graphical literacy	• Intra-personal awareness • Inter-personal propensity • street/social sense • positive self-concept • ICT versatility	• spirit of enquiry • propensity for knowledge-information search • capacity for self-directed learning • burning thirst for continuous self-improvement

It is possible to be successful in examinations (if examinations remain as they are) and still be an unsuccessful learner. Examination success is not always an educational success, and one of the greatest challenges to educational systems is to develop assessment methodologies that bring examination success closer to educational success.

Fourth, <u>learning should lead to more and more learning (cumulative positive transformation of personality).</u> There is a distinction between CODIFIED and REGENERATIVE knowledge. The former implies acceptance of what comes to you without question, while the latter involves using what comes to you, as a starting point for further search, further reasoning and questioning, and further steps to broaden and widen the scope of what is learned.

The mere acquisition of knowledge leads to the dead-end stage of codified knowledge, while the questioning process of knowledge exploration would create a process of regenerative knowledge. Excellence in Learning is manifested in the attainment of regenerative knowledge through a process of knowledge exploration

(d). Institutionalising excellence in teaching and learning at the university level

Institutionalising excellence in teaching and learning at the university level would require not simply a to-do list, but a strategy in the true sense of the term of a

thought out, systematically mapped out directions and game-changing actions for

• Getting from HERE (a situation in which teaching leaves much to be desired) to THERE (one in which excellence in teaching and learning would be promoted)

• Bringing about a desired future in which the University would be known for promoting quality learning through quality lecturers

• Achieving a long-term overall goal—that of producing graduates who would readily fit into today's knowledge society because they have learned how to learn.

STRATEGISING, not being a casual affair, would accordingly involve:

▪ Seeing the larger picture
▪ Guided by evidence, not by emotion
▪ Contextualising in a broad/holistic sense
▪ Taking a long-term perspective
▪ Applying high-impact/best-fit solutions

▪   Not kicking with both legs in a single go

▪   Every intervention is a learning process

Taking all this into consideration, an appropriate strategy for institutionalising excellence in teaching and learning at the university level would have as a goal

Enhancing student learning through Transformational Pedagogy, while the practical interventions will be anchored on six pillars and twelve enablers, as detailed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: *A Strategy for Institutionalising Excellence in Teaching — University Level*

PILLARS	ENABLERS
1. Adherence to the Academic Excellence Tripod	. Recognition of Teaching Excellence as a key academic function . Teaching Excellence Counting for Academic Advancement
2. Career-long Pedagogical Skills Development of Lecturers	. Institutional mechanism for career-long pedagogical skills development . Systematic assessment of lecturers' pedagogical skills gap
3. Curriculum Process Re-engineering	. Promotion of Transverse (21st century) skills set
4. Institutional Culture of TEACHING FOR LEARNING	. Self/peer/student assessment of teaching effectiveness . Continuous Assessment in its true form . ICT backup and support
5. Student Psycho-Social Support	. Formal mechanisms for student counselling . Systematic teacher-led responses to student learning/adjustment challenges
6. Service-Learning	. Implicit Curriculum . Experiential-Learning

Table three has situated excellence in teaching and learning in the broader holistic context of the mission of higher education, a university-wide policy framework on the subject, teaching and learning in the broader context of the curriculum, teacher and student development challenges, and a futuristic perspective of fitting today's student (through transformational pedagogy) into the emerging world of the 21st century.

(e). The academic excellence tripod and the tripartite skills

1.   Adherence to the Academic Excellence Tripod: Beginning from the very beginning, a University aiming at institutionalising excellence in teaching and learning would have to internalize the academic excellence tripod concept.

Academic excellence –in its contemporary conception-sees the academic who is seeking excellence as sitting on a firm stool that is supported by three legs of equal strength. One leg serves as a nerve for the academic trait of being a consummate researcher (generating knowledge); the second leg drives the trait of creative teaching, while the third drives the trait of responsive social engagement (figure 4)

Fig 4: *The Academic Excellence Tripod*

The beauty of the academic excellence tripod is its close accord with the tripartite mission of universities:

Knowledge Generation (Research)

Knowledge Transmission (Teaching)

Knowledge Sharing(Social Engagement)

The ENABLERS (concrete steps to actualise this goal) are a recognition by universities of Teaching Excellence as a key academic function (ensuring that lecturers realise this as of equal importance, as prime duty, as the two other legs of the Tripod). A further step in the actualization process is a policy on Teaching Excellence counting for academic advancement.

2. **Career-long Pedagogical Skills Development of Lecturers**: This is becoming an in-thing in universities, except that most of the pedagogy courses are conducted at the entry-level, and in most cases, the courses have been ad-hoc in nature. Actualising this goal requires that lecturers' pedagogical learning needs be systematically assessed so that training programmes become more responsive. It is also necessary to provide for ALL categories of lecturers (all grades and all specialisations). Lecturers at different levels of the academic career would have specific pedagogy-related responsibilities for which specialized preparation would be necessary, as outlined in Table 4 below.

Table 4: An Indicative Framework for Career-long Pedagogical Skills Development for Academics

STAGE OF CAREER	PEDAGOGICAL SKILLS	RELATED SKILLS AND COMPETENCES
Early Career (Lecturer/Assistant)	• Basic pedagogic principles • Discipline-specific pedagogy • ICT Support for Teaching and Learning	• Course and lesson planning • Student-centred teaching and learning • Coping with large classes
Mid-Career Senior Lecturer)	• Issues and challenges in higher education • Curriculum development in higher education	• Student Counselling • Material adaptation and development • Learning Assessment
Top Career (Associate-Full Professor))	• Leadership and Management in Higher Education	• Leading curriculum, instructional and research teams

3.   Curriculum Process Re-engineering: Discussions on Curriculum have tended to over-emphasize the package (or Content), forgetting that it is the PROCESS (how the content is interpreted and transmitted) that makes the difference. With particular reference to universities, the productive sector of the economy has been complaining of a skills gap syndrome in graduates. This has very little to do with subject matter knowledge but more with a lack of readiness for the emerging world of work. These are best inculcated through transformational pedagogy, as transverse skills that can be acquired through any subject discipline. Table 5 below summarises these as tripartite skills set.

The Hard Skills are of the purely intellectual type, while the Soft Skills deal with personal qualities that are today more highly valued than mere qualifications. The Go-getting Skills are more concerned with the development of creativity and innovation competencies that are highly valued in today's world of work.

The inculcation of these skills through Teaching Excellence that emphasises guiding instead of telling (as has already been said) would more likely produce students who have been transformed by what they have learnt and can therefore be judged by what they can do with what they know, given who they have become.

Table 5: *A Tripartite Skills Set to be Promoted through Curriculum Process Re-engineering*

HARD SKILLS	SOFT SKILLS	GO-GETTING SKILLS
Cognitive Intelligence	**Emotional Intelligence**	**Imaginative Intelligence**
• Self- Expression Skills • Logical Reasoning Skills • Computational Skills • Design/Manipulative Skills • Conceptual Skills	• Character formation skills • Intra-personal Skills • Inter-personal skills • Lifelong Learning Skills • Perseverance Skills	• Creative thinking skills • Ideational fluency skills • Opportunity-seizing skills • Experiential learning skills • Idea-to-product (or ideas conversion) skills

4. <u>**Institutional Culture of TEACHING FOR LEARNING**</u>**:** The point here is that teaching has not taken place until students have learnt (in the form of positive transformation via an A'HA experience). For this to be firmly entrenched in a university, concrete action would be needed on three fronts

i. Self/peer/student assessment of teaching effectiveness (to guide lecturer continuing pedagogy education)

ii. Continuous Assessment in its true form (going beyond mere continuous testing to learning both ways from student learning efforts)

iii. ICT back-up and support (emphasizing ICT as support (not as teacher replacement) as well ICT mastery/versatility (not enslavement by ICT)

5. <u>**Student Psycho-Social Support**</u>**:** Every learner comes to a learning task with some form of challenges, and sometimes with multiple challenges, manifesting in different forms:

a. Social (home background concerns, fitting-in issues)

b. Psychological (shyness, timidity, hyper-activity, adolescence crisis, self-concept, talkative/reticent/taciturn)

c. Physical (illness, disabilities of all types)

d. Intellectual (state of learning readiness, high/low academic performance, high/low intellectual ability)

Since teaching for learning should be a behaviour modification engagement, virtually every student (even the dutiful, intelligent, sociable, etc) would need psycho-social support. Group and individual counselling activities must therefore be built into university life, as a step towards ensuring the full blossoming of the talents of all students.

6. <u>**Service Learning (LEARNING BY SERVING)**</u>**:** The characteristics and the benefits of this long-known method of bringing theoretical knowledge to life through exposure to life realities are highlighted in box 1 below

(f). What is service learning?

Service-learning is a teaching strategy, a learning activity and an educational philosophy that fosters active and engaged learning by integrating experiential learning and **student research** with classroom learning through community service.

In short, service-learning is a curricula-based approach to teaching and learning that allows students to directly put academic theory into real-world practice. The specifics of a service-learning project will depend on the institutional mission, the academic discipline and programme, the grade level and course type and the specific learning objectives.

Service-learning projects can be integrated into any course at any academic level. Service-learning projects help students achieve the learning objectives of the course. They can be interdisciplinary, and they can span more than one course. A defining characteristic of a service-learning project is that it is a community-based component of a credit-bearing academic course. (Patrick Blessinger & Tasir Yamin (2019). *University World News*, no 214, July 2019)

In our specific case, Service Learning can be used to enhance excellence in teaching and learning both explicitly (through Experiential Learning) and implicitly (through the implicit curriculum).

Fig.5: The Experiential Learning Cycle
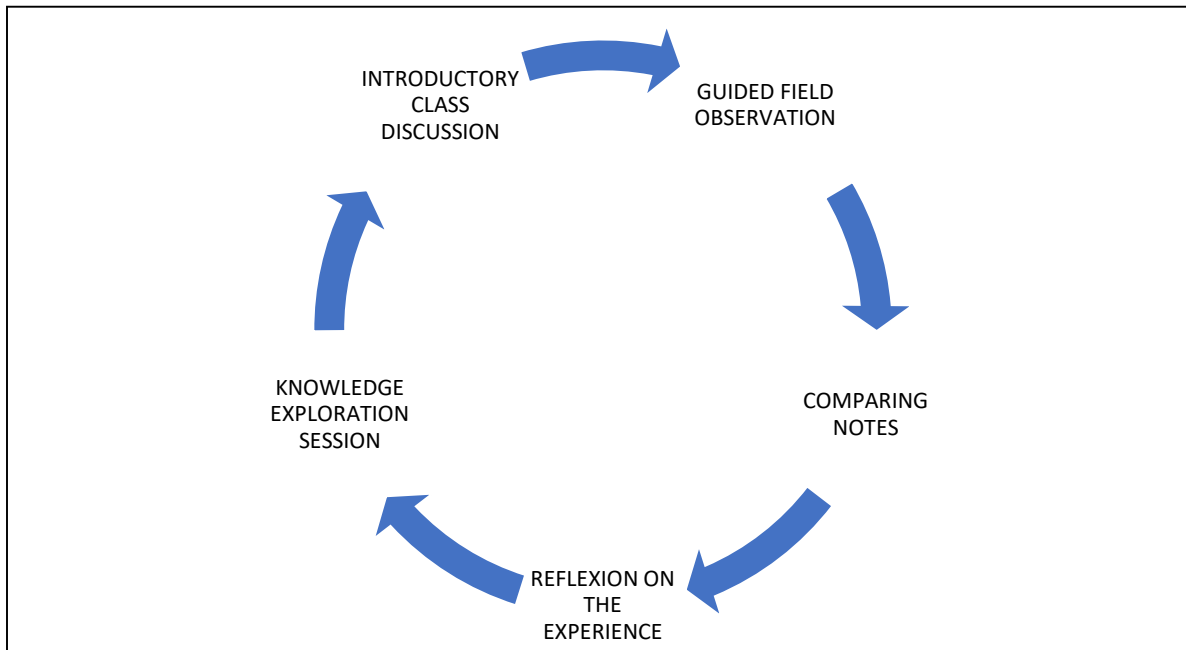
Experiential Learning is best promoted through participatory curriculum development processes in which the world out there has input into curriculum packages and processes. It is a cyclic process (see Figure 6) that weaves field experience into lecture-room-initiated principles in a guided outside-world exposure mechanism resulting in ploughing practical experience lessons into a fuller grasp of lecture-room-initiated concepts. The effect becomes deep learning that helps students to rise beyond mere adapting to the higher levels of adapting and innovating. It is also usually a team effort that promotes mutual learning.

The Implicit Curriculum is made up of all non-codified, non-examinable, relatively unstructured, institutionally engineered, relatively non-formal learning opportunities offered to the student and the entire community of an educational institution's goal is to   complement the development of general knowledge and personality development through guided social inter-learning

(g). All round development and widening of students behaviour

In coverage, there is a wide variety of choices, to address all-round development and widening of students' horizons

- Academic/intellectual support activities (e.g. subject-based clubs and societies)
- Enhancing physical/psycho-social development (e.g. sports and games)
- Promoting civic responsibility and community service (e.g. voluntary service organisations)
- Enhancing creativity (art/drama/dance/music/, etc.)

▪ Spiritual concerns and pastoral care (religious activities)

▪ Leadership development and character formation (e.g. student active involvement in institutional governance)

▪ Culture promotion

▪ Entrepreneurial activities (closely related to some formal curriculum areas or elements of community service)

▪ Regulatory issues (e.g. dress codes, general code of conduct guides, etc.)

Excellence in learning thus requires a strong dose of out-of-class and unstructured learning opportunities that focus on total personality development. Universities and lecturers should therefore regard the promotion of out-of-class activities as a fully integral element in university teaching and learning.

(h). Conclusions and suggestions

This paper has considered the concepts of excellence as applied to Teaching (more of guiding and less of telling) and learning (more of how effectively you have learnt how to learn and less of how much you have learnt). It has also placed the subject under discussion on the pedestal of entrenching (not just promoting) excellence in teaching and learning in the broader context of enabling institutional policy guidelines, with the overall goal of recognising excellence in teaching as a strong anchor of the academic excellence tripod and excellence in learning as preparation for 21st knowledge economy and the future of work. Based on the appropriate concepts of teaching and learning in the university system, it becomes imperative that there should be flexibility/diversity in activities and organisation of classwork with challenging activities leading to learning by discovery and linking classroom work with the world out there. In addition, University management and their lecturers should therefore regard the promotion of out-of-class activities as a fully integral element in university teaching and learning.

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