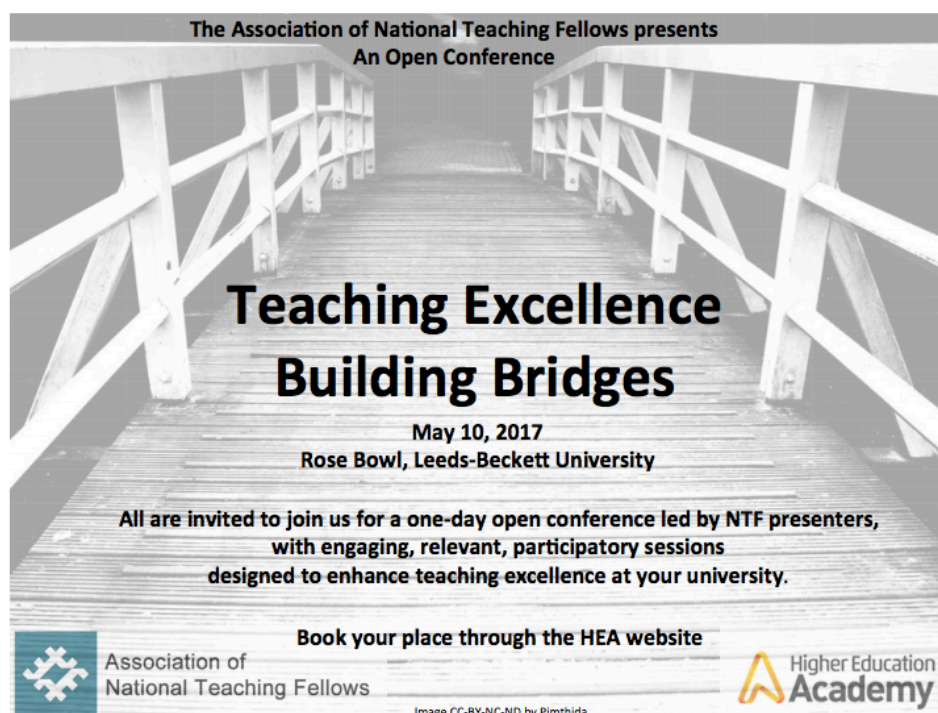


Association of National Teaching Fellows, ANTF Open Conference
Teaching Excellence: Building Bridges
Keynote, 10 May 2017

Professor Catherine Harper, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Chichester



It's a pleasure to be here at the Association of National Teaching Fellows' Conference, and to be considering both 'teaching excellence' and 'building bridges' in this context. I was asked to prepare a keynote for this conference by my University of Chichester colleague, Professor Laura Ritchie, and having been at Chichester for only six months, I was aware that Laura's formal and direct experience of me was fairly narrow.

I attended a student-led evening event on campus in January, on the date that the current President of the United States was inaugurated. There, I encountered Laura's musicianship, her warmth towards student initiatives, and a mutual interest in inclusion, diversity and liberality. I shortly afterwards came across Laura again, when I delivered a speech at the Student Union's Female Empowerment Society Awards, and my initial impressions held good!

So, I believe it's on the basis of the latter event, that I received this invite to kick off a conference that promises informative and inspiring discussion, a rich and flavorsome diet for today, delivered and digested by experts in the noble profession of education.

So, my provenance. My mother and father were secondary teachers in the Northern Irish state education system, operating at primary, secondary and further education levels, in the mainstream and in special needs education. It was my father who used that term 'the noble profession', and I think perhaps he used it most often when – for him – it felt anything but! And

my mother would answer, 'Dessie, sure you're in it for the love of it!' and they'd laugh conspiratorially...

And it was 'for the love of it' that I stumbled into Higher Education, first as a part-time hourly paid lecturer, supplementing my creative arts practice, and thence through fractional to full-time teaching contracts, from fixed term to permanent employment status, and through teacher-managing into leader-manager roles. It is in these latter places – as Head, Dean and now Deputy Vice-Chancellor – that I now find fulfilment as an advocate for 'the noble profession', that of excellent educators, those who widen access, provide motivational opportunity, and impact their students' lives every day in the most profound of ways.

I am an advocate for teaching excellence in Higher Education precisely because I am passionate about playing a part in equipping the next generation of UK and international citizens with the skills, knowledge, confidence and enthusiasm to make a contribution to society and to their fields of enquiry, and to finding fulfillment in their lives. And at a time of very great change in higher education, when policy challenges become more and more complex, when education that expands inclusivity and respect for equality and diversity is so vitally necessary, it is now more important than ever that leaders and managers of HEIs work proactively to support those advancing the teaching profession.

We are in an historical global period when differences – of ability, creed, colour, status, sexuality, culture – are met with growing suspicion and hostility, and where – in quarters near and far – exclusion rather than inclusion is becoming increasingly normalised. Our world, challenged by huge economic, social and political shifts, is forming a habit – a habit that is about asking 'why would we' more than asking 'why would we not?' A world where, sadly, concepts and practices related to justice, honesty, resilience and integrity are being eroded by falsehood, instability and ignorance. The family of humanity seems dysfunctional and in disarray, and it seems to me to not overstate the critical impact that teachers in that 'noble profession' I spoke of are revered and acclaimed.

Now, more than ever, we need those who are willing to look beyond their own experience and field of vision, and embrace – with curiosity, enthusiasm, and compelling freshness – the narrative threads woven by the complexities, compulsions and contradictions of diverse and equal people. These complex, compelled and contradictory necessities sit firmly within the environment of education, where the etymology of the word 'education' itself conjures leading forth, raising up, taking out...

And so, we need you, noble professionals. Higher Education needs the energy and focus of empowered and enabled teachers – experts in educational content, pedagogy and impact – to manifest the intellectual and practical transformations necessary to restore the health and well-being of humanity. Teachers – manifesting cultural, religious, sexual and ability diversity, who have skins of all hues, beliefs of all shades, experiences that are manifold. Teachers, who are the traditional protectors of the stories and actions and dreams of humanity, inspiring and innovating, making differences every day, keeping the faith for enquiry, intellect, imagination, enablement, enthusiasm, transformation, and education.

My background informs my belief system, values and leadership. As the product of a cross-sectarian marriage in Northern Ireland, with the familial and societal prejudice that engendered, my commitment to equality and diversity is embedded in my personal politics. I am bound to the practice of positive action on discrimination, and work proactively to ensure all students in my sphere of influence are open – through their educational experience – to the power of their own potential, and empowered to make positive and courageous choices to realize that potential.

Equipping students with confidence, agency and the ability to make a living after graduation is as much a part of Higher Education, I believe, as providing them with the intellectual and practical components of their discipline. Not merely to survive, although who would criticize that. But, additionally to thrive, as people more able to make choices and discern differences as a result of the refinement of their skills, including the skills of intellect, judgement and self-efficacy.

My father was a Grammar School scholarship boy. From a poor rural background, he was the only member of his family to be educated past the age of 14, and his valuing of educational opportunity, his love of scholarship, and the imperative for him of applying his precious learning immediately in a professional capacity as a teacher impacted considerably on my development as a leader of transformational education.

I am conscious today of students, like my father, for whom the journey to university was/is an unfamiliar and fearful one, and I draw on Rosabeth M. Kanter's action leadership to inform guidance for those students¹. Kanter's mantra – show up, speak up, look up, team up, never give up, and lift others up – affirms presence, vision and value, authentic voice, collaboration and tenacity, imagination and persistence, flexibility, contribution, generosity and celebration. Similarly, in thinking about educational excellence, I channel Mary Robinson, first female President of Ireland, who championed the 'fifth province...of the imagination' as much as the here and now², and propelled my deep belief in the power and transformative influence of education – at micro-level for an individual student, and at the macro-level of regions, nations, conventions and economies.

I believe that teaching excellence is best achieved through a 'whole institution' approach where individuals across all levels of academic, technical and professional leadership value teaching as a central priority for institutional success. At University of Chichester, for example, we seek to enshrine that approach, reflecting firstly our institution's 150-year history of teacher training, next our original nineteenth century mission to train the educators of the world's first industrial working class, and then our later 'emergency college' contribution to the economic, social and cultural regeneration of British society post-WW2.

The late Sir David Watson stated that Higher Education leaders did well to manage the future effectively only when they were serious and successful about extrapolating from a well understood institutional history³. As one of the UK's smaller universities, we sought – through the institutional narrative of the Teaching Excellence Framework – to make a clear, differentiated and compelling articulation of our teaching's distinctiveness, relevance and authority in the

¹ Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School <http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/profile.aspx?faclid=6486>

² Inaugural Speech, Dublin Castle, 3 December, 1990 <https://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/robinson/inaugural.html>

³ Watson, D. (2007) *Managing Civic and Community Engagement*, McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.

accelerated, feverish and competitive HE environment⁴. In that way, we used the TEF process to reflect on our teaching practices, delivery and effect, reminding ourselves of the principles and values our workforce and organization live every day.

The challenge – and opportunity – of course, and for all of us in our own distinctive organisations, is to articulate positively, and not waver from, our sense of purpose and vision. We must not be dissuaded of the impact that our teachers make, their social, educational and citizenship contribution through the work they do, and the commitment they make – individually and collectively – to informed educational enquiry, intelligent discourse and debate, and the endeavor and enterprise they nourish, for the greater good of this country's communities, professions, and cultures...

Our mission at University of Chichester, for instance, is to support widening participation and economic growth in the areas of considerable deprivation along coastal and inland West Sussex that form our immediate region. You will have your own organizational sense of purpose, but in Bognor Regis, for example, where we are in the process of launching a £30 million technology and engineering provision, the town and immediate area are characterized by slowing investment, poor digital infrastructure, weak supply chains, and low skills levels, and lower aspirations amongst young people. Our impact is, and will multiply as, most significant.

Our University – with its leafy-green Chichester campus and its salty-sea Bognor Regis campus, draws over a third of its students from households with income of less than £25k and from low participation neighbourhoods. Over half of our undergraduates are the first in their extended families to access Higher Education, and here – and in socially challenged places throughout the land that look different but feel the same – I believe excellent teaching and professional nobility is at its most piquant and its most vital. As an indicator of what University of Chichester values, our teachers (and I say that deliberately), our *teachers* – through their *teaching* practice – exceeded the sector average on the 'teaching on our course' NSS metric by between 3 and 6 percentage points each year for the last ten years.

Wooldridge and Newcomb's report on *Distinctiveness and Identity* highlights Chichester's culture of great pastoral support⁵. In current consideration of what students want – an expectation of value for money in terms of educational quality, employability and facilities that match increased tuition fees – there does need to be a balancing drive that highlights the positive effect of a *relational* rather than *transactional* interchange between a university, animated by its staff, and the student body, equally animated by the needs (and desires) of individual students – in all their glorious diversity.

We take our cue for great pastoral support from an interesting source. That of our Research Strategy, a document that makes explicit the synergy and connection between Learning & Teaching & Research. Our teachers research, our researchers teach, and we recognize in our academic staff teams the dual professional role of expert and educator. This approach imprints the student learning experience with added value – that is, stimulated and challenged staff in turn stimulate and challenge their students, and furthermore create stimulating and challenging curricula and pedagogic practices.

⁴ University of Chichester was awarded Silver in TEF2, 2017.

⁵ Wooldridge, E., Newcomb, E. *Distinctiveness and Identity in a Challenging HE Environment*, The Cathedrals Group, 2011.

It is explicit in our professorial promotions criteria, for example, that the University of Chichester “wishes its students to benefit from being taught by the professoriate”, and all our Professors therefore contribute visibly to teaching and the student experience. Indeed, we positively enable professorial promotion along a distinctive learning and teaching practice route, through demonstration of outstanding contribution to advancement of pedagogic research and innovation, and explicit and progressive leadership, scholarship, influence, esteem and reputation.

This ‘for the love of it’ flavour is where we see our staff cohorts actualize a tangible willingness to engage with a ‘whole education’ pipeline, promoting and engaging in collegial activities with primary and secondary level educators, that *may* enhance recruitment in due course, *may* support transitions to higher education, but *actually* is as valuable in its own right as part of a holistic philosophy ‘for the common good’.

Higher Education teaching is indeed a ‘noble profession’. It does attract those for whom ‘the love of it’ is an essential truth. It is also under enormous pressure: changing policy; febrile politics; shifts in practice; volatile public perception; drives towards consumerism, and the allure of marketization. All of that we know. The greatest threat though, is less tangible, it is invidious and it is a triple threat. It is the ascendancy of the non-expert, it is the arrival of the age of narcissism, and it is the governance of post-truth politics. These we know, these we see, these we experience.

But let’s consider how the excellent teacher is positioned: as the guardian of complexity, of expertise, of truthful doubt. Essential in consideration of the spectrum of our disciplines, of observation, enquiry and reflection. At the vanguard of engendering resilience, of bolstering collaboration, of promoting evaluation. In our practices, we actively develop the antidote – in the students we nourish – to the cynicism, selfishness and ennui festering around us. That, I am convinced, is the core nobility of the teaching profession.

So when I meet, as I did two weeks ago, an ex-student, now a teacher, and she tells me she’s had her first *thank you* note from one of *her* graduates who has secured the dream job, I know that we are on the right track. Not because my ex-student, now a teacher, has been instrumental in shaping and skilling that student towards employment, but because she has instilled in that student values that are incredibly transferable – gratitude, respectfulness, joy in advancement, and pleasure in sharing the moment. That is what great teachers do – educate, but they also celebrate.

And the positive energy of celebration is exactly what I was referring to earlier – we teach our students to be there, to look forward, to speak their truth, to form their position, and take their stance. We teach them to share and risk, to work with purpose and in teams, to stick at it, dig in and do it, to be delighted with success, and to deal gracefully with failure. We ask them to roam outside their zones of comfort, experience newness, otherness, difference, and to bend and bow and flex, without breaking. We teach them to both lead and be led, to have humility and also audacity. We teach them to be their own excellence.

As a senior manager, I see students directly less than I used to, but I commit daily – within the senior management team of my University – to enabling great teaching from our great teachers. Through helping realise my institution’s strategy, keeping a calm eye on our horizon and a firm hand on our wheel, I see my role as continuing – in collaboration – to create the circumstances in which great teachers and great teaching thrive, nourished and respected.

So, University of Chichester continues to value the conservatoire traditions of 1:1 and small group tuition where we can justify that, while adopting other more ‘efficient’ large cohort formats where these works well. We perpetuate the traditions of mentoring, observation, reflection and professional teaching certification, and we invest time and funding in events like these to ensure teaching practices are up-to-date, that our colleagues demonstrate best practice and development, and that they are supported to deliver pedagogic novelty to their students. As much as we seek positive student experiences, to empowered and enhance learning, and to generate a sense of belonging for individual students, we seek the same for our teachers, allowing them time to unpack, review and develop their research, their pedagogies, and their expertise.

And we make choices institutionally to create a uniformly enabling learning environment for students and their teachers, adopting a student-responsive ‘design and implementation’ approach, that includes routine use of lecture capture facilities, embedding of video content, captioning, speech capture, assistive subtitling, lecture transcription, online submission and e-assessment. This means that our teaching staff can have meaningful, high quality and more personal encounters with manageable groups of students, and the outcomes of this technology enhanced learning and the powerful human-to-human interfacing that it supports, is celebrated by our teaching staff in development, dissemination and publication of their pedagogic research.

Systematic investment in our learning environment has helped us collectively achieve the priorities of our Learning & Teaching Strategy, a strategy that identifies the importance of flexible and adaptable learning spaces to facilitate student engagement and creativity, and to empower and enable excellent teaching practices that emphasize interaction, connection, responsibility and self-management in students and staff alike. And as you *all* will, our teaching staff aim to develop graduates who are inspired, engaged and intellectually curious, confident in understanding of their discipline, able to support their own continued learning and professional development, digitally literate, enterprising and employable, responsible as a global citizen, and equipped for effective participation in the changing global environment.

To manage that, they – you – are extraordinary people – noble professionals, operating with love and pride and joy, excellent teachers and enablers of learning. You – the extraordinary ones – embody the most important and impactful of vocations, teaching – and I am proud and humbled to be in your company.