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Isolation, insecurity, incomprehension: Teacher agency and teaching excellence on a British transnational campus

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Abstract

Drawing on Roy Bhaskar's notions of causal powers and individual position-practice system (praxis), this research explores the teaching agency that academics on a British branch campus in China identify for themselves when trying to implement their idea of teaching excellence. The two foci of this study are teaching excellence and teacher's agency as they are shaped by the internationalisation and 'neoliberalisation' of higher education. In particular, the debate on the nature of 'teaching excellence' in contemporary higher education emphasizes its neoliberal origins and its confusion with the concept of 'teaching quality', while the debate on teachers' agency focusses on the external resources and personality traits that allow teachers to devise strategies to achieve their goals, or not.

Qualitative content analysis of interviews with ten academics shows that their definition of teaching excellence is not related to the ongoing debate, but to their own position-practice system. The participants insist on what I have termed the 'dignity of the role', which ultimately requires them to *earn* and *deserve* students' respect. Teachers try to gain this respect through 'purposeful benevolence', which is a friendly and caring attitude informing their pedagogy. Furthermore, the participants identify two distinct spaces for teaching excellence, the campus and the classroom. At campus level, they see the impact of marketisation and customerization of higher education but not of internationalization of pedagogies or curriculum, and do not feel academics' agency has an impact. The second space is the classroom, for them their only agentic space for implementing what they consider excellent teaching. Classroom agency can be constrained, however, as teachers fear students might misunderstand and report them to 'the authorities', and teaching resources are not always accessible.

In conclusion, the perceived impossibility of agency at campus level, paired with the perceived opacity of the socio-cultural context, leads to feelings of insecurity inside and outside the classroom. These feelings seem related to the participants' perceptions of the limited range of opportunities they have within their position-practice systems and might constitute a 'plausible explanation' of what they describe as their limited teaching agency.

In memory of Vittorio Brucoli (1967-2021)

For Lucia: ‘matutina stella e giglio d’oro e rosa de verzieri’

(Boiardo, *Orlando innamorato*)

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Introduction

The core of this research was devised in 2017 in the context of debates on the content, criteria and purposes of the Teaching Excellence Framework in Great Britain. The discussion on excellence and teaching excellence particularly drew my interest. I wondered what its definition in a British branch campus would be, where the teaching staff may not be familiar with the British Higher Education system, and where most students are Chinese. As a language teacher, I conducted research on student learning autonomy based on the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Flaste, 1996) and self-regulation (Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001), so I decided to explore teachers' ideas of teaching excellence and the possibilities of agency they perceive on a branch campus.

Reading about teaching excellence led me to think about the internationalisation of the university, and the socio-cultural-economic forces shaping it. I felt overwhelmed by the multiplicity of factors and structures implied, and I realized that my initial approach to reality did not allow me to understand how to explore the connections between a branch campus, teachers' agency and the concept of teaching excellence. When reading about agency, I came across Margaret Archer's work. I appreciated her efforts to situate agency within social conditions without having it completely absorbed by those conditions. However, I found that her more recent work highlights the individual's knowledge and understanding of social relations as essential features of their agency, and I became interested in exploring the conditions of that understanding. I turned to Bhaskar's Critical Realism, which acknowledges the complexity of the social world as shaped by multiple layers of social structures and systems, and objects and individuals. His concept of *social cube* (Bhaskar, 1993/2008, p. 150) provided a lens for me to think about the social structures influencing internationalisation, the branch campus, teaching excellence and teachers'agency.

For my ontological and epistemological positioning, I found Critical Realism helpful to reframe and understand the internationalisation of HE and of

teachers' agency. Critical Realism is complex and multifaceted, so the first chapter explains those concepts that are relevant to this thesis.

The second chapter outlines the context of this study, conducted on a British branch campus in China, the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC). I first describe the main phases of the development of Chinese higher education after 1978. I then examine the University of Nottingham's vision and strategy in teaching and learning, as they are related to the campus' internationalisation.

The main features of the UNNC narrative— 'Britishness', international outlook, and local roots—constitute the skeleton of my literature review. I start the third chapter by examining the macro-social structures of internationalisation, that is globalisation as Latouche (1989/1992), Giddens (1990/1998), Genovese (1995), Bauman (1998) and Robertson (2014) discuss it. I then turn to neoliberalism (Amin, 1997/2014) and the neoliberalisation of higher education (Busch, 2014/2017; Ritzer, 2011), then a narrowing of focus to the institution level. Here I discuss the internationalisation of higher education and the building of branch campuses (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bartell, 2003; Knight, 2004; Knight & de Wit, 1995), and the concepts of teaching quality and teaching excellence as discursive structures of these institutions. Finally, I focus on teaching the internationalisation of curriculum and pedagogies and the 'international' teachers themselves, and how they (re)define their identities. The analysis of teaching excellence contextualised within the internationalisation of the university education and of teachers' practices and values led me to ask the following overarching research questions:

1. How is the concept of teaching excellence constructed by teachers working on a British university campus in China?
2. What spaces of agency do those teachers identify for themselves when they try to implement their idea of teaching excellence?

To operationalize these, I devised four secondary research questions:

- What are teachers' definitions of teaching excellence?
- What are teachers' definitions of teacher agency?
- What enablers and/or constrainers do they perceive in their practice of teaching excellence?

- What is their definition of international education?

In the fourth chapter I discuss my methodology. I define my study as a meaning-centred enquiry, i.e. in the meanings that the interviewees *intentionally* give to their experience (Merton, Friske & Kendall, 1956/1990). I am interested in their cognitive causal powers (Bhaskar, 1979/1998), and I conducted ten semi-structured interviews that I analysed with Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier, 2012, 2014). In this chapter, I discuss in detail the coding process, the modifications I made, and the interpretation procedure. The fifth chapter is devoted to a discussion of my results towards answering the four secondary questions. In the sixth chapter, I answer the two main research questions, proposing plausible explanations for the phenomena observed, and discussing the limitations of this study. In the seventh chapter, I draw my conclusions and make recommendations for further research.

Chapter 1
Philosophical framework

1.1 Why Critical Realism?

The philosophical framework of this study is Critical Realism (CR) which views reality as existing independently from our perception or knowledge of it. To me, perception and knowledge depend on our possibilities of perceiving and knowing due (among other factors) to our dispositions, interests, position, and relation with the objects, which *per se* do not affect the reality of their *being* (Bhaskar, 1975/2008). CR takes the position of o*ntological realism* , that is reality of *being* exists independently from humans' knowing. This means that we can only have a situated knowledge of reality, depending on our activities and systems of beliefs (Scott, 2010, p. 36). Critical Realism then is a form of *epistemological relativism*, as knowledge changes and is temporary. The bridge between enduring reality and changeable knowledge is what Bhaskar (1978/1998) terms *judgmental rationalism*. Knowledge is a social product as it stems from our interactions with each other and with objects, as well as an individual product: the product of the knower's understanding and awareness of it (Bhaskar, 1978/1998). Therefore, he defines judgmental rationality as a 'plausible explanation' that needs to be refined and justified continuously (Scott, D. & Bhaskar, 2015).

A critical realist approach to education helps us to understand the educational processes and relations in ways that a critical theorist approach, a positivist or an interpretivist approach does not allow. Critical Theory as applied in critical pedagogy, considers the focus on power and empowering the learner in his/her relations with the social and political context (Freire, 1968/2000; Giroux, 1988, 2011, 2016). It allows agents to act on social practices, and in so doing changes these practices along with their system of knowledge. However, power is just one agents' property. In my view, more properties should be taken into consideration, such as an actor's *internal tendencies*,

that is, their ways of knowing, values, motivation or goals, as well as the ways they relate to other agents. However, these properties, are not immediately and directly visible, thus are not considered by the current positivist approach to education. David Scott (2000) argues that the positivist approach is based on a 'mathematical model' of education highlighting efficacy, looking at the educational reality as *homogeneous* and consequently neglecting individual experiences. Finally, as far as interpretivism is concerned, I would argue that it theorizes epistemology but not ontology. By conceiving acts of knowing as part of the reality to be known, interpretivism creates *models of reality* (Shipway, 2011, p. 164) rather than possible explanations of the social world. Conversely, CR allows us to focus both on social structures and individual causal powers as they influence each other at multiple levels and produce the reality we experience in specific times and places.

1.2 Social reality

Bhaskar (1975/2008) theorizes that physical objects exist in time and space independently of our knowledge of them. They are characterized by properties (enabling features) and liabilities that combine in and are activated by generative mechanisms or causal powers, i.e. 'a potential that may be exercised or not' (Hartwig, 2007, p. 458). Once they are activated, mechanisms/causal powers work as *tendencies* or laws, powers and liabilities that make objects "behave" in certain ways. Tendencies make physical structures emerge, which we experience as physical objects.

Bhaskar thoughtfully applies these definitions to the social world. Social structures are the causal powers (i.e. generative mechanisms) of a social object 'which, when exercised, manifest themselves as tendencies' (1993/2008, p. 381). However, structures coincide with generative mechanisms only when we consider social objects as they *are*. Conversely, when we consider social objects as they *emerge*, structures are tendencies, their ways of acting (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 187). Structure can be manifest or not, exercised or not. Structures as laws are independent, enduring, but not

immutable. They are *laminated*, that is stratified, and, according to Bhasker (1993/2008), emerge from the material level to the non-material, conceptual level.

Like physical reality, social reality consists of three domains configured within time-space coordinates. The *empirical* domain is the domain of observable phenomena (what *happens)*. In the *actual* domain, the level of happenings, of which we may or may not be aware, structures and agents both have properties (i.e. the tendencies/laws of the natural world), causal powers and liabilities. Finally, the domain of *real* is the deepest one, of the generative mechanisms, which we cannot know directly. As social reality is inhabited by human agents, it is an *open* system, thus we cannot accurately predict how the generative mechanisms will relate to social objects.

1.3 Structures and society

The social world is organized in societies, made of individuals and their actions determining the relations between people and groups, as well as inter-individual and inter-group relations. For Bhaskar (1979/1998), society and agents are ontologically different and separated, and society is relational, while 'collective phenomena are seen primarily as the expression of enduring relationships' (p. 33). Society is made of the relations between laminated agents. Bhaskar (1979/1998) analyses structures as causal powers separated from and external to agents. He critiques Weber's voluntarism (as the basis of individualism), Durkheim's reification (as the basis of sociological positivism), and Berger's identification (as the basis of interpretivism). Bhaskar's critique of voluntarism/individualism lies in the observation that it has a limited understanding of individuals' actions since it merely defines *how* they do things, not what they do. To him, the action itself is not examined and understood, which causes the impossibility to comprehend the society. Archer (1995) expands this reasoning and critiques *methodological individualism* as upwards conflation, considering individual agency (dispositions, intentions, actions) as the 'maker' of society. Bhaskar also critiques Durkheim's sociological theory based on groups' relations. For him,

the limit of Durkheim's theory lies in considering the society a collective phenomenon, external to agents, and as an *objectivation*, an 'embodiment of human subjectivity' (Bhaskar, 1979/1998, p. 36). Archer (1995) develops this critique and defines it as *methodological collectivism,* a downwards conflation whereby individual agency is determined and defined by society. Finally, Bhaskar (1979/1998) critiques Berger because he joins reification and individualism; individuals' actions as subjectification, or 'internalisation' of society (Durkheim) and society as an objectivisation ('externalisation') of human beings' actions (Weber). For Bhaskar, in Berger's interpretation, 'society forms the individuals who create society' (p. 35). Archer (1995, chapter 4) develops this argument by a further critique of Giddens' structuration theory, defining it a *central conflation*, because its places agent and society on the same level, influencing and shaping each other as they exist simultaneously.

For Bhaskar, a society is 'an articulated ensemble' of social laws, tendencies and structures, in which agents usually reproduce but rarely transform (1979/1998, p. 41)[1]. Social structures are different from natural laws in that they do not exist independently of human activities, they need to be enacted to be perceived and understood. At the same time, social structures are similar to natural mechanisms their existence is not related to the knowledge that agents have of them when they are operating them. Additionally, social structures are only 'relatively enduring', meaning that their causal powers occasionally can be transformed by agents. Bhaskar (1979/1998, p. 43) is convinced that structures do not only restrict and coerce human action, they can also enable it as a transformation of structures and, ultimately, of society. The question arises as to how agents reproduce or transform society. Bhaskar (1979/1998) observes that individuals occupy positions (roles, functions) that somehow dictate certain practices (tasks, duties, rights) according to the social laws that characterize the society. He calls this point of contact 'position-practice system', and he remarks that positions and practices can be only identified 'relationally', by examining how they are intertwined (Bhaskar, 1979/1998, p. 44). Bhaskar states that position-practice relations

[1] For Bhaskar, the agents' possibility of transforming society is limited, because it depends on their social roles and connected causal power.

will be built according to how powers and tendencies are exercised by agents but are also influenced by space and time (p. 42). Position-practice relations are the fabric of society, and can be between individuals, functions and practices.

1.4 Social transformation

As explained above, for Bhaskar (1979/1998), social relations constitute the fabric of society. They are enacted by agents, situated in specific systems of position-practices according to the social laws/structures, and situated in space and time coordinates. Agents have properties and causal powers that are conditioned and rooted in, but not determined by, such social structures. The various conjunctions between properties of the different strata of agents make possible the emergence of social objects and social reproduction and change. Bhaskar (1993/2008) devised the Transformational Model of Social Activity (TMSA)[2], to explain how reproduction and transformation of societies happen.

Over the years, Bhaska r(1993/2008) refined the graphical representation of the TMSA to develop the model on social change to incorporate other aspects of the dynamics between structure and agency such as social relations and individual subjectivity located in changing space-time through the cosial cube (see Fig. 1.1, p. 19). The TMSA is rooted in the space between social structures and human agency because social structures exist before and independently of human awareness of them, and they can enable or constrain individual intentional agency. This happens thanks to how processes of structural powers are enacted.

[2] Archer develops it into the Morphogenetic cycle (1995), that cannot be discussed here because of space limitations.

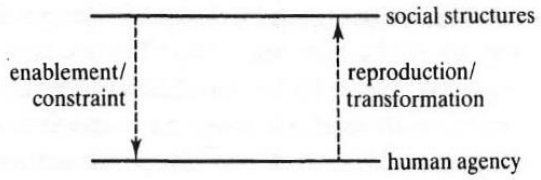


Fig 1.1 Bhaskar's Transformational Model of Social Activity (1993/2008, p. 145).

Human agency, through these same processes, reproduces or transforms the social structures. To deepen his model, Bhaskar integrated the 'social cube' into the TMSA (see Fig. 1.2 below) as a *Four Planar Social Being*.

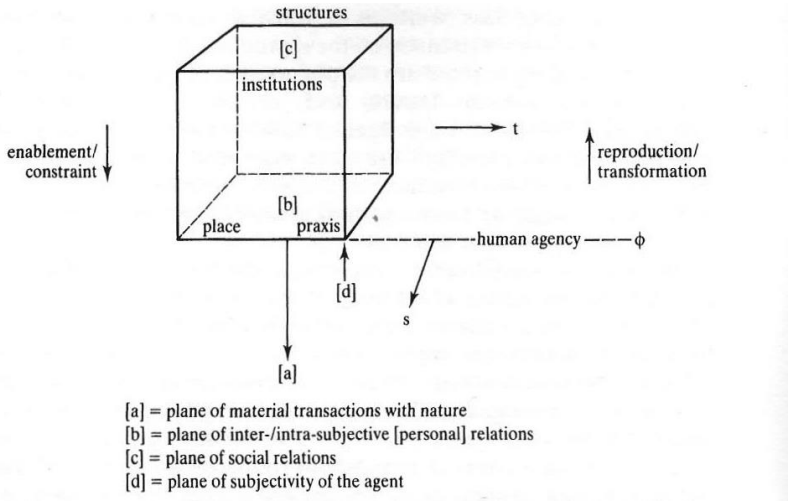


Fig. 1.2 Bhaskar's Four-Planar Social Being Encompassing the 'Social Cube' (1993/2008, p. 150).

In Figure 1.2, *s* stands for space and *t* for time. In this newer model, Bhaskar (1993/2008) embeds time and space, and clarifies that their separation in the figure is 'artificial' (p. 149). In the social cube, structures enable or constrain human agency which in turn reproduces or transforms social structures through three dimensions: institutions (plane c), place and praxis (plane b), and the conjunction of agents and praxis (plane d). The cube allows us to understand how relations create society, because it connects agent's position and praxis with institutions and ultimately with social structures. In this model, emerging powers, that is, agentic causality, are not depicted because they are included in the plans [b] (inter-intra subjective relations) and [c] (social relations).

1.5 Cultural transformation

Internationalisation of university education can be defined and a cultural transformation. While Bhaskar discusses social systems, he dopts a social approach which does not discuss culture. Cultural context is key to understanding itnernationalsiation of HE, so I turn to Margaret Archer's (1988/1996) definition of culture as 'the corpus of existing intelligibilia' (p. 104), that is, everything that can be understood. This definition has two consequences. Firstly, that *intelligibilia* need to be expressed in a language that can be shared by the knowers, and secondly, something is part of the cultural system only if people can potentially understand it. This does not necessarily mean that for being part of the cultural system it *must* be understood. For Archer (1988/1996), the cultural system has causal powers that influence the socio-cultural level whereby individuals and groups have causal relationships that allow cultural elaboration. Looking again at Bhaskar's social cube (Fig. 1.3), and focusing on relations, I identify a further plane [e] of cultural relations making up the cultural structures composing the cultural system. This new plane [e] would connect agents' praxis and social structures. I establish this connection because praxis includes a system of ideas (a cultural system) defining position and practice, and social structures are influenced by those and by other cultural structures, but these were not visible in the 'social cube'.

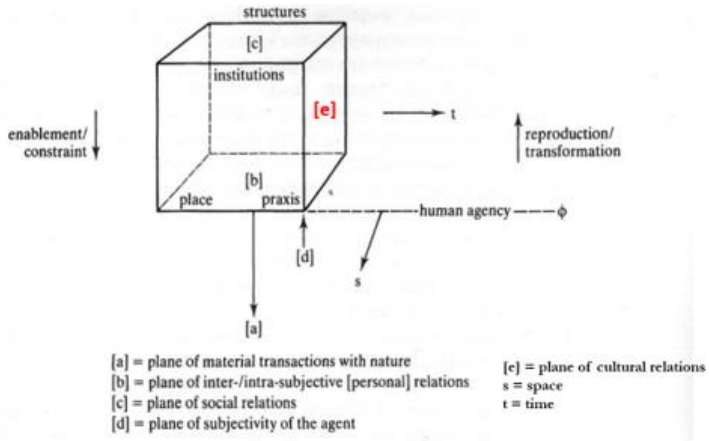


Fig. 1.3 Bhaskar's Four-Planar Social Being Encompassing the 'Social Cube' revised

1.6 Agency and causal powers

Agentic praxis is not only constituted of cultural and social structures, but also of individuals' understanding of those. Bhaskar (1979/1998) thinks that human beings consist of matter with an emergent power—the mind and its causal capabilities. The mind as *self* or *subjectivity*, includes causal powers, that is dispositions (personality traits)[3], abilities (skills and talents) and properties (knowledge, expertise, values). Individual awareness is also a causal power, which is the awareness of one's power within both the position-practice system and the socio-cultural structures. Causal powers can either be exerted or not exerted, or exerted but not manifest. Causal powers trigger agency and Bhaskar (1979/1998) grounds it in intentionality, because agents do what they want unless they are stopped from doing so (p. 100). To analyse agency, it is important then, to understand 1) what individuals want to do (their intentions); 2) whether they are aware of their intentions; 3) whether what they intend is in their power to realize; 4) whether what they intend is then realized; and 5) whether the effects of that realization were intended. To him, agency is stratified and includes a biological layer, a psychological layer (unconscious and preconscious layers), a layer of conative and cognitive intentionality (individual tendencies as causal powers), a layer of reflection before engaging in social practice, and the level of meta-reflexivity, i.e. reflection on our own reflection (as articulation of our own interpretations).

Agency is enacted in time and space, so that space, time and causality are in a relation, but Bhaskar does not clarify the features of *space*. To understand the relation between space, time and agentic causality, we can examine what different social space-time(s) agents identify in their praxis within a specific institution, and what relationships (if any) they recognize. We can then analyse agents' understanding of how their causality shapes their positions respectively in social spaces and in social time(s). Looking at a branch campus of an internationalised university and at academics' teaching praxis,

[3] In this study I am not considering 'personality' and 'dispositions' from a psychological point of view, but from a sociological point of view.

is one way to try to answer this question. In the next chapter, I focus on some of the internationalised university social and cultural structures: globalisation and internationalisation, the idea of teaching excellence and the internationalised curriculum. I will then concentrate on agents, and some of their causal powers, i.e. on pedagogy and teaching strategies.

Chapter 2

The context

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the context of this research. I firs present the development of transnational higher education (TNE) and then focus on the creation of the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) as a branch campus of the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom (UNUK), and its vision and initiatives to support both teaching and learning excellence and internationalisation.

2.1 An overview of internationalisation of Chinese higher education

The internationalisation of Chinese higher education is part of the change started in the 1980s after the launch of Deng Xiapoing's 'Four Modernisations' Reform (1978), through which the opening of China to the world was a necessary condition. Since then, China has been moving from a planned and centralised economy to the so-called 'socialist market economy' (Mok & Chan, 2012). In terms of education, this meant a shift from a centralised system to partial devolution at provincial levels, with the state only attending to structural laws and the centrality of socialist values. The enacted structural reforms aimed at widening access to universities and tertiary vocational institutions, modernising the curriculum, creating HE private sector and developing world-class universities for China to become an actor in knowledge production for the world.

Since the 1980s, Chinese universities collaborated with foreign entities, but these were often not accredited institutions. In 1995 China issued the *Education Law of the People's Republic of China*, to regulate these

collaborations[4]. The law was complemented in the same year by the *Interim Provisions for Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* and the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools*. The first document states that foreign providers can run schools only in partnership with Chinese institutions that do not cover the compulsory stages of education and are not for profit. International collaborations in research and teaching, and the creation of partnerships and joint programmes were promoted by other initiatives. Project 211 (launched in 1995) aimed at strengthening the research profile of 112 universities and colleges for the 21st century with a focus on technologies and research. Project 985 (May 1998) aimed at supporting the strongest universities taking part in Project 211 to become world-class universities by, among other activities, funding international conferences, visiting scholarships, and collaborations with foreign universities. Although they did not especially target THE, these two projects enabled the establishment of relations with strong foreign universities. When China joined the WTO in 2001, part of the regulations on China-Foreign educational cooperation changed, because those restrictions contradicted the trade agreements. In 2003, the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* built a framework promoting THE by addressing topics such as leadership (50% Chinese, 50% foreign), organisation, legal responsibilities, administration, and teaching by transnational institutions (Huang, 2006). These projects established two types of collaboration: joint degrees and the possibility for a university to provide a foreign curriculum (Mok & Chan, 2012).

In 2010, the *National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020* further boosted TNE through different forms of joint programmes and research collaborations, and by importing foreign books and attracting foreign scholars. For China to become an actor on the international stage and create 'soft power', it was important for it to be open

[4] For this section, I relied on Mok and Chan (2012) and consulted the websites of the China Education Centre (https://www.chinaeducenter.com/en/), the Ministry of Education (http://en.moe.gov.cn/), Planipolis, the UNESCO-funded portal of education plans and policies (https://planipolis.iiep.unesco.org/) and Statista.com.

to external influence and find ways to influence other countries. The document shows this double goal: to continue to enhance collaborations with well-known foreign institutions and suggest ways for Chinese institutions to become exporters of Chinese education by setting up campuses abroad, establishing collaborations, supporting the development of Confucius Institutes, and attracting foreign students. The plan set the goal of enrolling 500,000 international students in 2020 and in 2018 492,185 international students were studying in China (Statista.com). In 2013, the launch of the Belt & Road initiative strengthened this approach to internationalisation, with China setting up collaborations and scholarships for students from Africa and south Asian countries. In 2013, China still considered TNE a way to solve the national lack of university capacity and retain students in the country, as it encouraged Chinese students to enroll in local THE to stay in China instead of going abroad at a young age (i.e. 17-18 years old) (Hu, Montgomery, & McDowell, 2014).

In 2017 two policies regarding Higher Education were issued. China launched the *Double First-Class Plan*, which replaced Projects 211 and 985. According to this document, China aims at becoming a world leader in higher education and research by 2050. This will be achieved with the creation of first-class universities and disciplines that are innovative from both the research and teaching perspectives, and should happen while preserving and developing the socialist values and ideals of the 'China dream'. Consequently, China established a list of 42 universities and around 100 disciplines from 95 institutions that were given the goal to compete at the international level. In the same year, China issued the *Opinions on Strengthening and Improving Ideological and Political Work in Higher Education Institutions under New Circumstances*[5]. These emphasise the role of higher education in building the future China and its prominent role through the *Double First Class Plan*, and the universities' responsibilities of educating students on the Marxist and socialist values under the direction of the Communist Party.

[5] http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201801/t20180130_326023.html

It is important to critically read the history of TNE in China. Wang (2013) observes that the opening-up to the global market (and, I would add, the consequent intensification of cultural and political interactions) together with the simultaneous emergence of the knowledge economy at the global level, has forced Chinese higher education to compete globally in terms of reputation, recruitment, and research. This is termed in Chinese policy as 'developing world-class universities' (defined according to Western standards), encouraging the learning of English at every level, the use of high-quality foreign books, and in general the development of various forms of research and teaching collaborations. At the same time, China does not want to lose its own values, culture, or language, but to promote them abroad. Therefore, China launched policies to support the dissemination of Chinese culture and language, and to this end founded the Confucius Institutes (2004), supported universities to export their programmes abroad, and put in place financial aid plans to attract international students. However, the recent reduction of English teaching in compulsory education, and of access to foreign textbooks and academic journals (Mok & Han, 2017), shows the tension between the push to internationalise to learn enough from foreign institutions and culture while not losing national identity, as shaped by socialist thought, patriotism and nationalism (Zheng & Kapoor, 2020).

The development of Chinese TNE can be seen as a movement of decentralisation (from 1980s-1990s) followed by gradual re-centralisation in the 21st century (Mok & Han, 2017), or from an unstructured (until 1995) to a gradually more regulated phase after 1995 (Huang, 2006). This double movement shows the tension internal to the development of THE in China. China has global ambitions, such as leading global research and knowledge production, which explains the existence of various forms of academic collaborations and partnerships. However, it is also concerned with the potential threat that international education can pose to the socialist education that constitutes the foundation of its national identity (Huang, 2006). Within this complex context operate the foreign institutions (mainly British and American) that either establish joint programmes and schools or open branch campuses. In the next section I will examine how the University of

Nottingham (UoN) defined its internationalision strategy in China and its branch campus in Ningbo (UNNC).

2.2 The University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC)

2.2.1 The general picture

Enabled by China joining the WTO and the law of 2003, UNNC was established in 2004 in the city of Ningbo as a branch campus of UNUK. From the legal point of view UNNC is not an international branch campus, which would be legally dependent on its home universities, but a formally independent university. However, UNNC is managed as a branch campus of the UoN, it aims to be 'a fully integrated campus of the main University of Nottingham' (QAA, 2013, p. 35), and it fits Altbach's definition of an international branch campus (2011):

> an entity pertaining to a university whose primary location is in one country, which operates in another and offers its own degree in that country. Upon successful completion of the course program, fully undertaken at the unit abroad, students are awarded a degree from the foreign institution (para 3).

This definition is consistent with definitions offered by Ziguras and McBurnie (2011), the OBHE (2016), and Knight and McNamara (2017). Unlike other partnerships involving agreements with Chinese universities, UNNC[6] is the result of a joint venture with the privately owned Zhejiang Wanli Education Group, which provides land and physical infrastructure. Management powers at UNNC are carefully balanced. The president, chancellor and chair of the board positions are selected from the Chinese group, while the provost is a member of UoN and is the UNNC CEO. As an international partnership, UNNC was not required to appoint a Communist Party Secretary, but the decision was made to have one to ensure adherence to Chinese law, along with keeping relationships with the community, and to deal with conflicts on campus. UNNC includes three faculties, the faculty of

[6] All information about UNNC is drawn from the University of Nottingham (UK) and UNNC websites (www.nottingham.ac.uk and www.nottingham.edu.cn).

Business, the faculty of Science and Engineering and the faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, a Graduate School, and the Centre for English Language Education. UNNC has master's level courses (since 2006) and PhD programmes (since 2008). The University has currently around 8,000 students, 10% of which are international students either on exchange or enrolled full time. All courses are taught in English. Therefore, undergraduate students whose native language is not English will study on a preliminary year programme to acquire the necessary academic language and study skills. As for research, UNNC aims at strengthening its profile, and in its website reports that 51% of the papers written by its staff are published in the top 10% of journals in their field.

At the time of this research (2017-2019) at UNNC there are around 800 academic staff, half coming from the UK and the rest from another 40 countries, including China. A minority of them are seconded from Nottingham UK, while the majority are on fixed or permanent contracts, local or UK based.

2.2.2 Teaching and learning

When this study was conducted (2017-2019), the UNNC narrative, as described on its website, focused on three elements: teacher-student relationship, multicultural dimension, and 'Britishness'. On the Humanities and Social Sciences page, for instance, it stated that students appreciate staff as approachable, inspiring, and enthusiastic. On the 'Study with us' page, the narrative placed emphasis on UNNC's multicultural environment, its coupling with Nottingham UK (UNUK) curriculum and standards, and a British teaching style defined as 'engaging, empowering, research informed, internationally oriented, but locally grounded'. The site also mentioned the UNUK's gold ranking in the Teaching Excellence Framework.

What were the internal systems and policies that shape teaching according to this narrative? To answer this question, I searched on the University of Nottingham website to find the systems and policies that present not only at UNUK, but also at UNNC. In the section *Professional Development*,

qualifications were offered for staff to improve their teaching skills, such as the Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and a programme to become a fellow of Advance Higher Education, via the so-called Nottingham Recognition Scheme (NRS). The section on *Continuing Professional Development* included short courses, face-to-face or online, which were not available to staff on the Ningbo campus, except in a few cases. At UNNC, a mentoring scheme was available for both academics and administrators, focusing on career development. This might be completed by school-based buddy systems supporting new members of staff for up to a year. In terms of peer-learning, the Teaching and Learning Peer Observation College offered confidential class observation and feedback on teaching. This system included peer-observation at school level and across schools for professional development and fulfils the observation requirements for the NRS and the Lord Dearing Award. The NRS allows staff to claim recognition for 'their contributions to the University's educational objectives'[7] and consists of giving evidence of their engagement with the UK Professional Standards Framework. The Lord Dearing Award recognises the 'outstanding achievements (…) in enhancing the student learning experience'[8] . Finally, at the end of each semester, students are asked to fill in the Student Evaluation of Module online questionnaire and, at least once a year, a Student Evaluation of Teaching. The former allows schools and staff to collect feedback about their modules, the latter enables staff to reflect on their teaching, to plan for professional development, and is discussed in yearly appraisal meetings and reviewed in applications for promotion.

An important feature of teaching and learning at UNNC was the use of technology. In 2015, the Moodle Everywhere Mandate had required staff across the three campuses to use the Moodle online learning platform to support teaching and communicate with students. All learning resources were (and still are) to be located there, and staff was encouraged to use the different functionalities to create on-line activities for students to do individually (e.g. quizzes) or together (e.g. wikis, forums). Over the years, a range of tools have

[7] https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/hr/aboutus/lma-and-professional-development/lma-and-professional-development.aspx
[8] https://pd-systems.nottingham.ac.uk/lord-dearing/

become available for lecture capturing, learning object creation, and e-assessment.

2.2.3 Internationalisation and teaching

According to its UK website, the University of Nottingham defines itself as 'one University in many countries', which is consistent with the QAA (2013) observation that UNNC is a campus integral to the University of Nottingham. The university is characterised also as a 'university without borders' offering British higher education to students who would not otherwise be able to access it. The international strategy is based on four principles: 1) reciprocity in the university-host community relationship; 2) social and environmental responsibility, including the imperative to always be sensitive to the local context; 3) commitment to students and partners; and 4) quality in all activities. The University has launched a 'Grand Challenge' to internationalise the curriculum and affirm the global dimension of the Nottingham experience. An important part of the curriculum is the opportunity for all students to spend either one semester or a year abroad. Finally, with the aim of preparing global citizens and enhancing students' employability, the university intends to internationalise the existing curricula, increase students' language skills, and develop 'international programmes' (though not precisely defined).

2.2.4 The university strategy

The internationalisation and teaching and learning initiatives at the time of this study were grounded in *Strategy 2020*, launched in 2016[9]. The stated mission was to deliver a British-style education, 'but also localised in the Chinese context' (p. 7). In the section regarding learning experience, British education is articulated as being both internationally orientated *and* 'always locally grounded' (p. 7). However, the latter represents a change in

[9] In December 2019, a new University Strategy was launched.

comparison to the internationalisation strategy discussed above. On the website, in the 'Global' section, there is no reference to the local context.

The core principles of the Strategy are 'student-centeredness' and 'global citizenship'. The document states that one of its guiding principles is to 'put students at the heart of the University and configure our delivery to enhance the student experience' (UNNC, 2016, p. 5). This principle is then connected to the student experience and the development of their sense of belonging to the university community. Learning is envisaged as a whole experience, which transforms students' perspectives and lives (p. 7). The general aim of creating global citizens is reached by focusing on the British and the international dimensions of the university, to which a new attention to the local context is added.

To conclude, the University strategy focuses on student-centeredness and three dimensions of global citizenship: British origins, international outlook, and local roots. Teaching excellence is defined and evaluated according to British sources: the UK Professional Standards Framework informs the professional development activities and the definition of teachers' professionalism. Internationalisation seems to be more a matter of a global, 'physical' dimension of the university ('borderless university', 'one university in many countries') and of the curriculum (moving across campuses), while teaching and learning is mainly based on the integration of the British curriculum and pedagogy grounded in the local context, without further elaborating on its specific features.

The British-focused conceptualisation of teaching excellence, the stress on the global dimension and the local context sparked my interest in understanding more about the relationship between globalisation, internationalisation of the university, and pedagogies and teaching strategies on a transnational campus. These are the foci of the literature I reviewed for this study, presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Literature review

This study focuses on the teachers' idea of teaching excellence as promoted on an international branch campus. Therefore, it situates the concepts of teaching and teaching excellence in the context of internationalisation of higher education and the socio-economic and cultural structures involved in its shaping, i.e. globalisation and neoliberalism (Altbach, 2016; Bamberger et al., 2019; Busch, 2014/2017).

3.1 The internationalization of higher education

University internationalisation has been defined in what can be considered humanistic terms as the effort to integrate cultural, intellectual, social and political inputs coming from distant institutions in a given university's teaching, learning and researching activities (Knight & de Wit, 1995, Knight, 2004). It was primarily seen as a *collaboration* between universities located in different nation-states to promote solidarity and peace (Byram, 2018, p. 150; Knight & de Wit, 1995). However, in this sense, the concept of internationalization can be criticized as mere ideal (Fabricius, Mortensen & Haberland, 2016) or associated with an idea of the world based on national powers—and because the majority of universities have been created by and within nation-states in the 19th and 20th centuries, then the humanistic definition of internationalization of HE could be interpreted as strategic move to support nation-states' political interests (Scott, P., 2000).

In 2004, Knight provided a definition of contemporary internationalization of HE both from a theoretical and a practical point of view. From a theoretical

point of view, she defined it as 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education (2004, p. 11). As Knight precises, this definition intends to foster a broad definition of internationalization, as pertaining the relationships between countries and their cultures in a context of world-level relationships. Knight's definition has been recalibrated in a study for the European Parliament in 2015 (de Wit et al., 2015), to include aspects of intentionality and specific goals to international education, i.e. inclusive and society-oriented education:

> the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society (de Wit et al, 2015, p. 29).

This definition of internationalization emphasizes its role as a public good, and internationalized universities as possible value-oriented institutions (Gacel-Ávila, 2005) that could return to those values of collaboration considered their original features.

From a practical point of view, Knight (2004) defines internationalization as the tendency to attract international students and/or, institutionally, create campuses or joint degrees programmes abroad. She discusses five rationales for internationalization (academic, cultural, social, political and economic) that overlap and are present to varying degrees in different locations and at different times.

Internationalisation takes place in different ways, with different explanatory models (Adams & de Wit, 2011; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Bartell, 2003; de Wit & Hunter, 2014; Hudzik, 2011; Knight, 2004; Knight & de Wit, 1995; Tayar & Jack, 2016). Internationalisation does not only happen at the local level—in attracting foreign individuals and partnerships to their campuses and programmes—but also at the international level, with universities creating branch campuses or joint degrees.

The debate about internationalization of higher education highlights its multifaceted and complex nature–it includes humanistic approaches and aims but is also shaped by globalization.

In this chapter, I analyse internationalisation of higher education and how it has been influenced by neoliberal globalization. I then turn to teaching quality and teaching excellence and conclude the chapter by analysing academic agency in connection with teaching practices and professional values in the international university.

3.2 Globalisation and neoliberalism

Defining globalisation has been under debate for at least forty years. Robertson (2014) claims to have been the first scholar to use this term. He defines globalisation as the way how 'modernisation' happens at world scale (Robertson, 2014, p. 448). For him, globalisation is characterized by both 'increasing connectivity' due to technological development and the 'awareness' of such global connectivity. Robertson insists on the *links* between societies, the fact that these links are tight and waived in different ways, and that through them societies create new networks of economic, social, and cultural exchanges. Other sociologists identify other aspects of globalisation. Held and McGrew (2000/2003) highlight the change in the temporal-spatial organisation of those exchanges as 'the local become embedded' within a large network of social relations between far away countries where time 'shrinks' (pp. 3-4). Bauman (1998) insists on the dimension of perpetual mobility, physical or imagined, for inhabitants of the 'First World' (or reduced, for those of the 'Second World'), that erases the idea of time and space, and where everything is present in the here and now. Mittelman (2000), linking globalisation and capitalist competition, emphasizes the key role of time, as instantaneous exchange of information, which both strengthens the social and economic (capitalist) ties at world level, and accompanies the emergence of regional *loci* of power and resistance.

I argue that globalisation is a social structure within which internationalisation of the university happens. In critical realist terms, it is a tendency with causal powers, a structure characterized by rapid *change* that increases and broadens previously limited (in number and intensity) interconnections between societies, institutions, individuals.

One important structure of globalisation's cultural layer is the presence of neoliberal discourses related to globalisations' origins in the capitalistic West (Amin, 1997/2014). Latouche (1989/1992) defines globalisation in terms of Westernisation, which deprives cultures of their own definitions of themselves, by imposing Western cultural categories, based on measurability (or quantification) of any social action and relation, and their evaluation in terms of economic gain[10]. Furthermore, globalisation is neoliberal in that it carries and disseminates technical and economic discourses that inform social and cultural structures, and are related to individualism and consumerism (Fotopoulos, 2001).

Given these premises, we could identify three *discourse structures* (as causal powers) of the cultural layer of globalization that can influence the internationalization of HE. The first is the 'standardisation of the collective imagination' (Latouche, 1989/1992), whereby social agents look at themselves, define themselves, and act, as Latouche expresses it, with the 'eyes, words, and arms' of the Western *other* (p. 73). Such a standardisation causes deculturalisation which transforms communities and individuals, living according to neoliberal values of consumerism and successful performance (p. 51, pp. 66-67). Conversely, it has been argued that globalisation can support cultural differentiation and that at least it can coexist with local cultures without totally replacing them (Prasad & Prasad, 2006). Globalisation, by enabling the exchange of information across places and communities, also consists in cross-borrowing of cultural elements that

[10] Measurability is connected to rationalisation too, and in CR terms they can both be considered causal powers of bureaucratisation as theorized by Weber (1930/2005, 1946). Bureaucratisation is considered a feature of capitalism (Weber, 1946) and of neoliberal capitalism, related to people and institutions' accountability and 'governability' (Foucault, 1978-1979/2008; Sennett, 2006; Strathern, 2000). Bureaucratisation influences contemporary global neoliberal HE institutions (Barnett, 2011, 2016; Collini, 2012; Davies & Bansel, 2007) and should be discussed here. Due to space limitations, however, it is not possible to do so.

are incorporated in different ways (Appadurai, 1996). Canevacci (2005) talks about multiple identities and syncretism, the tendency of integrating cultural inputs and acknowledging the complexity and nuances generated by their combination. In his view, this allows communities to go *beyond* the local or global, and avoids simplifying cultural differences in order to either reject or passively accept them.

A second discourse structure created by globalisation is the use (and manipulation) of the local differences at global level to support 'mass, narcissistic individualism' of both individuals and institutions (Genovese, 1995, p. 186). The mass, homogenized culture, where the same objects and values become part of everyone's structural layers, co-exists with the use of Western individualism at the global level. The local, i.e. different, is not always expelled by the standardized culture; on the contrary, it is kept so as to fulfil the new, globalized need for individuals and institutions to be different and 'stand out from the crowd' (Genovese, 1995, pp. 190 ff.).

Finally, the refinements of technology and the consequent possibilities of exchange and communication contribute to the shaping of a third cultural layer of globalisation—the relentless quest for modernisation defined in evolutionistic terms as 'improvement' or 'advancement' (Bauman, 2000; Goody, 2004), as a pressure to adopt ideas, values, and desires from other societies in the name of advancement that can alter local values and practices.

Globalisation does not always happen or involve all individuals and communities in the same ways. However, one of the main features of its cultural layer seems to be neoliberalism, that include, among others, three tendencies which influence differently the communities which are 'globalising': the homogenisation of ideas and values, the manipulation of local values and practices to foster massified individualism, and the relentless quest for modernisation.

3.3 Internationalisation of the university and neoliberal globalisation

Contemporary globalisation has accelerated HE internationalization by facilitating contacts and collaboration, but it also has complicated and highlighted its multifaceted nature (Altbach, 2004; Tarc, 2012). Internationalisation of HE has been considered as a response to or an agent of globalization (Altbach, 2004) or its prey (Jiang, 2008), but also declined differently in different contexts (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Larsen, 2016). Knight (2013) states that globalization has directed international universities towards the market and emphasised competitiveness between institutions along with the commercialisation of knowledge. According to Knight and de Wit, (2018), neoliberal globalisation has changed the balance between the five rationales identified previously by Knight (2004) for those universities to internationalize. In many cases, the economic rationale would have overridden the political[11], social, cultural, and academic rationales. In particular, because universities in the English-speaking West have gradually lost much of governments' financial and institutional support, some argue that they have turned from public institutions into corporations–they compete on state-regulated markets to generate profit through student recruitment, research and teaching partnerships, private funding (Knight, 2002; Tayar & Jack, 2016; Teichler, 2004). Engwall (2016) even argues that internationalization as 'import of ideas' aims at increasing universities' reputation at local level to attract more students locally, rather than at international level. Consequently, universities and decision-makers at the national level in those countries (e.g. Australia or UK) have been accused of having commodified the broader purpose of university education— citizenship and care for the public good (Altbach, 2002; Barcan, 2013; Collini, 2012). Bamberger, Morris and Yemini (2019) argue that neoliberalism has in some instances remodeled humanistic values of internationalization—cosmopolitanism, mobility and multiculturalism are characterised in terms of employability and 'capitals' mainly owned by those

[11] It should be noted that in China, the political rationale for internationalisation is still a priority (Li, 2017; Wang, 2013; Welch & Cai, 2011).

belonging to social élites and can study abroad. However, the same authors argue that neoliberalism cannot be considered as the main feature of internationalization. In fact, some countries internationalise their HE systems for different reasons, for example China (for political reasons), Israel (focusing only on academics' international collaborations) or Cuba (to promote socialism).

Universities need to demonstrate that they are truly international, so they have to measure the level of internationalisation of their educational provision[12], be it internationalisation at home by receiving foreign students, or the creation of transnational structures (e.g. branch campuses, joint degrees). In any case, Knight (2011) argues that merely observing student mobility or cross-university degrees does not help understand the depth of internationalisation. Her critique is relevant here because it helps identify some of the neoliberal features of the universities' definitions of their own internationalisation.

The first commonly used criterion to define a university as internationalized is the number of international students. Simply put, a university is considered international insofar as it has a number of students from abroad seeking their degree. Another commonly used parameter is the university global reputation, which is measured by league tables. A third criterion is the number of international institutional agreements. These are considered indicators of a university close relationship with institutions abroad, which would provide an ideal context for an exchange of ideas and methods. A fourth criterion examined and critiqued by Knight (2011) is the international accreditation of programmes and how they fit into the requirements of international(ised) professional bodies. Finally, Knight critiques the criterion of global branding, i.e. how a university is marketed abroad. In sum, Knight's critical analysis to definitions of internationalization of HE reveals how current operationalisation of internationalisation fall short of an accurate representation of what happens within internationalized universities.

[12] Another typology is the risk-based typology that identifies TNHE institutions by the risk of market failure according to six dimensions. This typology is based on transaction cost theory and partnership theory (Healey, 2015b).

However, I would argue that these same criteria indicate the neoliberal nature of contemporary internationalized universities. Attracting fee-paying students, creating international teaching and researching partnerships to create an international reputation —customers, global market, branding are essential features of neoliberal capitalism.

Brandeburg and de Wit (2011), in taking stock of the negatives involved in internationalisation, identify signals of a possible post-internationalised age, where internationalisation is not defined by means, instruments, and activities, but by meanings and values. Instead of stigmatising globalisation per se, they believe it is possible to understand it as the growth of a global community, 'embracing the concepts of sustainability—equity of rights and access, advancement of education and research' (p. 16). Despite managerialist approaches to internationalisation, that concentrate on activities and means (e.g. Stafford & Taylor, 2016), internationalisation can be a transformative process for universities (S. Robson, 2011). Internationalisation calls for more inclusiveness, and a focus on the 'cosmopolitan capital' (Yemini, 2014), which supports students and institutions dealing with the 'other' at economic, relational, and cultural levels during the internationalisation process itself. The question then becomes how to develop the cosmopolitan capital without imposing on, levelling, or deleting the local community's own social capital.

3.4 From accountability to quality assessment

A feature of neoliberal universities is also their public accountability (Busch, 2014/2017). Universities need to demonstrate quantitatively that their performance reaches the declared standards, which they *sell* to students. However, Ritzer (2011) maintains all areas of university work are rated and ranked without regard for the quality of people hired or enrolled, or the work produced. Certainly, the issue here is the difference in the definition of quality of teaching, which in neoliberal terms is defined as the successful

performance of students in exams and/or their employment rates. This leads universities to orient teaching and research into specific, 'useful' areas, but in doing so they become agents of cultural homogenisation (Naidoo & Williams, 2015).

One of the more recent models of internationalisation, by Knight and McNamara (2017), proposes that universities become 'transnational' when they 'mov[e] across national borders to deliver higher education programmes and credentials to students in their home or neighbouring country' (p. 1). Providers can establish their transnational institution abroad either as an independent one, or as collaboration with a local institution. This is a significant difference, because it has consequences in terms of accountability. In other words, who is responsible for the quality of the curriculum and the research, and what are the policies that regulate quality assurance and the awarding of degrees? In the case of independent programmes, accountability is mainly regulated by the national standards and policies of the sending provider, while for collaborative institutions, the programmes are accountable to both the sender and host country national policies (Knight & McNamara, 2017). Universities are also accountable at the international level as countries sign international treaties and agreements. For example, universities in Europe are bound by the Lisbon Recognition Convention (1997), the Bologna Process (1999), and related agreements, while the UNESCO 'Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education' (2019) aims at providing a framework for the recognition of university credentials at global level. How discourses on teaching quality and excellence engendered by these policies are articulated may vary in different countries and HE systems. In the next section I will focus on the UK and its Higher Education system.

3.5 Teaching quality and teaching excellence

Since the 1990s, attempts by British universities to assess their teaching quality have been influenced by multiple factors. For instance, universities need to be able to attract funding, whether external or governmental. They also need to support students' informed choices following the massification of higher education, as well as set up schedules of tuition fees. Additionally, student mobility drives the competition for quality between universities. The assessment of quality has become one of the ways for universities to be accountable to stakeholders, in demonstrating compliance with expectations and stated regulations. However, as others have noted (e.g. Chu & Westerheijden, 2018; Harvey & Newton, 2014), assessing quality seems more a matter of control rather than a way to improve current practices.

In this section, following Ellis (2019b), I examine the notion of *quality* in teaching. I also consider the concept of *teaching excellence* and how it has stemmed from the current discourse on teaching quality. Finally, I relate the definition of teaching quality and excellence to teaching and curriculum in internationalized universities.

3.5.1 What is teaching quality?

The most common definitions of quality are 'fit for purpose', or 'value for money', but Ellis (2019b) suggests starting from a simpler meaning: 'the quality of teaching is the standards it must meet' (p. 6). In Ellis' (2019b) view, the first problem involves defining those standards and who specifically should define them. Brown and Edmunds (2019) reflect on the link between quality and 'effective' teaching to conclude that while they could be related, they are not synonymous. Ellis (2019b) himself does not define quality standards, but leaves this responsibility to the university. He creates a model for quality assurance by aligning the steps and identifying the individuals responsible for setting and monitoring standards, indicating remedial solutions, and putting in place systems of feedback and self-evaluation. At issue here is the focus on accountability, rather than on quality in action.

Measuring standards does not tell us much about standards themselves, it only provides mechanisms for a university to declare a high-quality teaching.

In the UK, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) emphasizes *consequences*, i.e. outcomes, that the government expects from good teaching as 'proxy' products (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015, p. 34). These outcomes appear linked to Ellis' (2019b) definition of quality in terms of achieving agreed standards rather than processes leading up to those standards. Furthermore, those standards are not related to knowledge, skills, or particular mind-sets (see Brown & Edmunds, 2019). Rather, they are written in terms of satisfaction of external standards: student satisfaction of teaching serving recruitment and retention; and employer/public satisfaction of graduate employment. These are coupled to the institutional narrative about the quality of teaching. Two of the components relate to *customer* satisfaction of teaching (i.e. as a commodity).

According to Ellis (2019b), any discussion about the quality of teaching involves the quality of a process. Focusing on quality assurance then means making sure that standards are met at every step of that process through continuous feedback and monitoring of quality, itself involving the staff performing and evaluating the process. It is therefore important to identify those actors who impose their standards on university teachers.

3.5.2 Who defines teaching quality?

Ellis (2019b) points out that standards in services are not set by customers, as they are for products, where the standards are decided in terms of 'fit for purpose' and consequently of customer satisfaction. For services, usually 'customers' do not know much about the activities themselves, they focus on the expected results and on how they want to be treated by the service providers, e.g. doctors in hospitals, or teachers at school. In HE, standards are set by several groups: students, families, prospective employers, the community, the national government, and international political, economic, and cultural organisations. Standards can differ or even oppose each other, and often need to be negotiated (Alzafari & Kratzer 2019). As Naidoo &

Williams (2015) observe, students might have short term purposes contradicting employers' or the community's medium- and long-term expectations for flexibility, life-long learning skills, or citizenship. Furthermore, unlike other service providers, such as doctors or accountants, Elton (2019) comments that university teachers do not constitute a professional body, i.e. they are not 'registered' as teachers, nor perceived as 'professional teachers' by politicians and lay members of the society. For Elton (2019), this is the main cause of university teachers' 'vulnerability' and lack of power within the contemporary neoliberal society. Academics become lecturers via their research, but academic work involves teaching, for which they had not been formally trained. Additionally, teachers have not agreed on standards for teaching, which would give them status and negotiating power in society. Consequently, they lack the neoliberal vocabulary necessary to acquire legitimacy within contemporary society (BERA-RSA, 2014) to define the standards of their own practice, which are instead defined by others (Ward & Eden, 2009).

In the UK, to address the lack of so-called 'professional standards' of HE teaching practice, in 1997 Dearing recommended the establishment of training programmes at institutional and national levels. In subsequent years, universities created post-graduate courses for their staff. The Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) established the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF), which funded a national fellowship scheme to reward innovation in teaching. In 2003, Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) were created to reward universities. In 2006, the UK Professional Standards Framework was launched by the Higher Education Academy[13] to grant fellowships based on teaching practices and values.

3.5.3 From teaching quality to teaching excellence

Since the early 1990s debates around teaching quality, the term *excellence* has often appeared as a synonym for quality. The use of this term has been

[13] Now Advance Higher Education

criticized by many, and notably by Readings (1996). The question raised is: What is excellence? It is *a* quality, not 'quality'. Rather than being a standard, excellence is a characteristic, and indicates that something or somebody is outstanding, the best possible in comparison to others. Excellence results from continuous improvement. Those involved in quality assurance and management must ensure that pre-defined standards are met, those involved in excellence need to continuously improve in order to become not only good, but the best in a relentless competition with others, and with themselves. They need to become flexible and proclaim the new values; they need to be able to manage themselves and their professional image by constructing narratives that are congruent to the neoliberal, market-oriented vocabulary, in opposition to autonomy, cooperation, critique, and knowledge (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Sennett, 1998, 2008). The emphasis is not on practices and behaviors, but on the individual (or corporate) agents and their internal rationality (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 223). In HE, agents must demonstrate that they are the best at attracting customers in the form of employers, funding bodies, students, and must be willing to go 'beyond' excellence itself (Collini, 2012, pp. 109-110). Assimilating teaching quality to teaching excellence reveals the neoliberal reshaping of teachers' selves and values. Adapting Foucault's (1979/2008) reflection on the neoliberal self (pp. 229 ff.), neoliberal teachers educate students to become entrepreneurs of themselves, for which learning is not about forming their humanity, but an investment that will produce their human capital, the ability to be the 'source of [their] earning' (Foucault, 1979/2008, p. 226). In this sense, universities', teachers' and students' selves will be assessed according to their remuneration.

The UK Teaching Excellence Framework measures exactly that: how universities and teachers are able to attract and retain students' money, and the extent to which graduate students will become sources of their earnings thanks to the jobs they can find because of their degrees. However, it should be noted that academics' definitions of excellence are different from those defended by the TEF and suggest a much more relational and ethical approach, one that is respectful of learners.

Skelton (2004) analyses how the concept of excellence was defined by the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, in his view one of the primary influences on the UK concept of excellence. The Scheme considered evidence of excellence as the ability to reflect on one's own professional practice and to show how individual teachers have inspired students, colleagues, and the community. Building a narrative about one's ability in influencing others can be interpreted in terms of the neoliberal ability of self-branding. However, in Skelton's interviews, the award winners defined their excellence in other terms, defending a pedagogy based on students' autonomy, needs and priorities, and on learning as personal active engagement. Ramsden (2003) identifies some of the characteristics of excellent teachers, e.g. being knowledgeable, approachable, supportive, and reflective. Gibbs (2008) broadens these definitions of excellence taking into consideration the learning environment teachers create through the development of programmes and curricula. More recently, Wood and Su (2017) found that academics define excellent teachers as knowledgeable and able to communicate their knowledge and skills to both students and colleagues, along with engaging in scholarship on teaching. Bartram et al. (2019) compare British and Australian academics' views on excellence and the TEF. They found that both groups define excellence in terms of personal engagement with students, promotion of participatory pedagogies and knowledge co-construction, and consider teaching as a dialogic practice. Bartram et al. (2019) also found that academics make the difference between good and excellent, as excellence is indicated by the ability to motivate the students to go beyond learning requirements.

In summary, teaching quality and teaching excellence are not synonymous although they have been used as such. Quality in teaching is defined as the alignment of behaviors and steps taken to reach standards that are not defined by the concept of quality in teaching itself. Conversely, the concept of teaching excellence attempts to give a definition of teaching, but the definitions given by institutions seem different from those given by academics. British institutions focus more on inspiring or leading others' behaviors, with an emphasis on making sure that universities and teachers

attract students, and students attract employers thanks to their academic achievements. On the other hand, academics emphasize knowledge, dialogic pedagogies and the ability to inspire individuals to pursue their own transformation as indicators of teaching excellence. There exists a gap between the definitions of excellence by certifying bodies and those of academics. How academics perceive and experience excellence in an international campus is the research object of the current study, therefore it is important to understand what their definition of curriculum and pedagogies are in their particular contexts.

3.6 Internationalising curriculum and pedagogies

When universities open campuses overseas, where most students are usually from the host country, both teachers and institutions may begin questioning the relevance of their curriculum and pedagogies and propose solutions to 'internationalise' them and make them more relevant for students with a different cultural background from their own. Before discussing those solutions, however, it is crucial to reflect on how there might be an inherent contradiction when trying to internationalize curriculum and pedagogies. For the curriculum, the contradiction resides between the ideal of internationalising the curriculum, and the reality of globalisation. Internationalisation is the attempt to broaden students' mindset by embedding cultural difference (Knight, 2004; de Wit et al., 2015) while a *globalized* curriculum appears to defend the standardisation of worker skills and attitudes (Jean Francois, 2015). Internationalization may also appear imperialistic because domination by Western cultural paradigms downplays regional and local cultures (Pyvis, 2011). Finally, it may be homogenising because it proposes a uniform culture (Latouche, 1989/1992). In the following sections I explore possible ways out this contradictory impasse by examining Zou et al. (2020) and Leask (2015) on curriculum, and Jean Francois (2015) on pedagogy.

3.6.1 Internationalising the curriculum

If in the first phase of the life of a branch campus it is common practice to 'export' the curriculum from the home country into the branch campus (Bartell, 2003), it quickly becomes apparent that the risks of cultural imperialism (Pyvis, 2011) and irrelevance for students are real (Waterval et al., 2015). Internationalising the curriculum then becomes a sought for solution to internationalize universities as it 'is the backbone of the internationalisation process' (Knight, 1994, p. 6). Universities have different rationales for internationalising the curriculum. Leask et al. (2013) identify three rationales: developing employability and citizenship in the globalized world, growing students' intercultural competence, and supporting internationalisation at home. In their detailed study, Zou et al. (2020) identify five university practices for internationalising the curriculum that includes learning about other cultures, study abroad programmes, organizing extra-curricular activities bringing together local and international students, support the development of students' awareness of their position in the globalised world, and of a mindset open to change.

However, Leask's (2015) experience with the internationalisation of curriculum in Australia shows that the staff's active involvement is essential to its success (see also Kirk et al., 2018). It is staff who create the disciplinary curriculum; therefore, they need to understand how general 'international' skills and attitudes, such as intercultural communication skills, inquiry, openness, and respect, can be articulated within their own disciplines. Of course, in doing so, staff need to also become aware of the limits of the dominant discourses and paradigms of their discipline and of their Western nature. Leask (2015) proposes a curriculum framework created with the many academics with whom she has worked. The framework (see Fig. 3.1, p. 48) holds the discipline at its core, but requires academics to also consult members of the various 'stakeholder' societies[14] to make sure their discipline

[14] Leask (2015) seems to imply that only the society local to the university should be consulted, but I would insist that for 'true' internationalisation of the curriculum, the various societies in which the students will ultimately be living also have a stake in such consultation.

will reflect the needs of the local, national, and global ones in which their students will live and work (Leask & Bridge, 2013, p. 85).

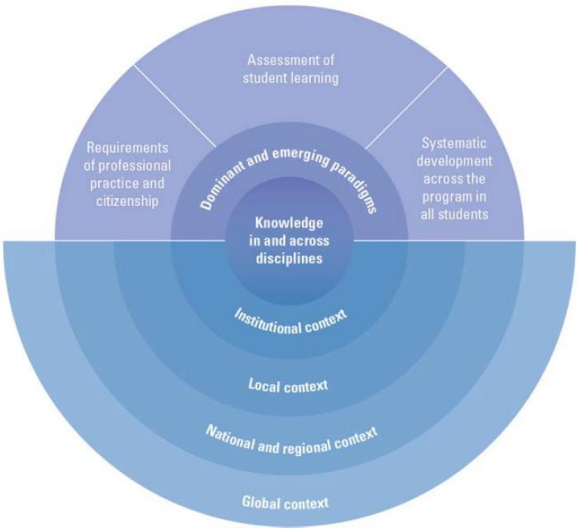


Fig. 3.1 A conceptual framework of internationalisation of the curriculum (Leask, 2015, p. 28).

The framework includes four layers identifying the different contextual dimensions in which the curriculum is located: the institutional, the local, the national and regional and the global layers, which are interdependent. Academics working at internationalising their curriculum should also consider the dominant disciplinary paradigms as well as the emergent ones in order to go beyond the current discourses and limits.

Because of its generality, in my view the framework might also be applied in a branch campus. However, there would be two points to consider carefully. The first one is collegiality, which could be difficult to reach and maintain because of the lack of staff experience with intercultural/international teaching, turn-over, and willingness to engage. The second point of concern involves the 'institutional layer' which for a branch campus includes the 'home campus', and the 'national layer', which would include at least two countries (those of the home university and the branch campus). At the moment, there does not seem to be research using this framework on a branch campus.

A final aspect to consider when internationalising the curriculum is assessment., Brown and Joughin (2007), Tian and Lowe (2013) and Fan et al. (2015) show that for students from other cultures, some forms of assessment typical of the West (such as self or peer-assessment) can cause anxiety and failure. Therefore, an internationalized curriculum should include opportunities for students to become familiar with these forms of assessment, and, more generally, provide various forms of 'support and guidance' to understand their rationales, purposes and formats (Carroll & Appleton, 2007).

To conclude, the research on internationalisation of the curriculum suggests that it should be the result of staff decisions made in collaboration with students and with members of the different layers of the society (institutional, local, national, and global). This is all the more pertinent in considering the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and staff and their approaches to teaching and learning.

3.6.2 Internationalising the pedagogies

Staff who teach students of other cultures realize that sometimes the content of their curriculum or their teaching resources (such as case studies) might not only be irrelevant to their students, but also hinder their understanding (Marr & Forsyth, 2010). Academics may also realize that some of their usual teaching strategies are ineffective and have difficulties in connecting with their students (Benitez, 2014). To resolve these issues, they may—and certainly should—try different strategies and approaches, and even reconsider their pedagogies.

Pedagogies are related to the multiplicity of learning styles, which are individual, but also culturally influenced and reinforced by the school systems. The literature is rich with studies on Asian learner difficulties in adapting to Western pedagogies (Vansteenkiste et al., 2005; Zhou et al. 2012), or the misunderstandings about the differences between Asian and Western cultures of learning (e.g. Watkins & Biggs, 1996). There is also reflection on

the Western education principles hindering a development of attitudes needed in the globalised society (Hamedani et al., 2013). Jean Francois (2015) suggests making use of a *Glocally Informed Pedagogy*, i.e. the result of an integration of Locally Informed Pedagogical (LIP) principles and practices in learning to a Glocal Instructional Context (GIC) to accommodate a transformative experience of the learner, which may contribute to glocal awareness, glocal knowledge, and glocal competence (p. 131).

The key concept here is the transformative experience of changing an individual's 'local' personality into a *glocal* competence, a balanced integration of global and local views, interests and knowledge. For this to happen, Robson and Turner (2007) suggest that the pedagogical models should also change, as they are currently based on cognitivist, individualistic and participatory models that may not fit other cultures.

An internationalised curriculum informed by an emphasis on inter-cultural exchange and a *glocalist* attitude entails a pedagogy based on the recognition and appreciation of diversity and a critical reflection on one's own assumptions (Leask, 2007). Such awareness would allow teachers to co-learn with students, and students to explore alternative forms of knowledge and opinions (Fanghanel & Kreber, 2012). One of the main issues is the different cultural identities of students and academics, which on a branch campus is complicated by the different countries' ideas on the nature and purpose of higher education, and the priorities and practices of its internationalisation.

3. 7 Teaching on branch campuses

International higher education functions in a socio-economic system characterized by discursive and economic structural layers of globalisation and neoliberalism which are influenced by (and influence) different theories of internationalisation. These structures have been briefly sketched in the previous sections of this chapter, with some references to issues of homogeneity and cultural imperialism on the one hand, and university

marketisation and teacher accountability and quality assurance on the other[15]. In this section, I turn to the academics who teach in internationalized institutions. There is a lack of literature about academics teaching on branch campuses, therefore part of my discussion includes research on academics teaching international students in the UK and Australia.

Academics look for positions abroad for different reasons, whether personal or professional (Altbach et al., 2016; Altbach & Yudkevich 2017; Froese, 2012; Lee & Kuzhabekova, 2018; Richardson & McKenna, 2002). These reasons might involve a desire to know new cultures, or a professional interest in a specific country. Academics can also face difficulty in finding a position in their home country, or may wish to improve their salaries and/or socio-political circumstances, or seek institutions where they can experiment with new solutions. In general, however, academics do not have a personal experience of studying/working abroad (Locke, 2007) and are not trained before going overseas (Hoare, 2013). For teachers of international students, those students' lack of English skills, poor intercultural communication skills, and different expectations about learning and teaching are common issues (Daniels, 2013; O'Mahony, 2014; Trahar & Hyland, 2011), which may lead to feelings of 'professional isolation' (Daniels, 2013, p. 243). Similar issues are also identified by students who study abroad (Holmes, 2004; Wong et al., 2015) or by students and teachers on a branch campus (Yang et al., 2019) or the universities themselves (Hu et al., 2019) In this complex situation in which academics' experiences and expectations encounter global and institutional changes, academics struggle to (re)define their own professional values, along with trying to develop internationalized curricula. The purpose of this section is to analyse these themes.

[15] These structures co-exist with and are influenced by the socio-political structures of the countries the universities work in.

3.7.1 (Re)defining professional values

Vinther (2015) observes that Western definitions of university education are now endorsed by Higher Education (HE) in Asia, although for different reasons and to a different extent. Western academics generally agree that the basis of HE is students' and teachers' autonomy, and its purpose is to develop an enquiry mind-set, supported by critical thinking and communication skills, and an awareness of the need to protect individuals' freedom to critique the current social system (see also Barnett, 2016; Collini, 2012; Ramsden, 2003; Readings, 1996). However, in a globalized world in which students compete to find employment, these values are also endorsed as tools for enhancing productivity, innovation and accountability in universities that increasingly see themselves as 'businesses offering a commodity in an international marketplace' (Adamson, Nixon & Su, 2012, p. 29). Academics often do not agree with these neoliberal values (Fanghanel & Kreber, 2012). Slethaug (2015) found that some academics think they are supporting the traditional idea of the university against the emerging neoliberal idea of education, but are unable to articulate their own pedagogy. Many teachers, however, are indeed able to do this (Skelton, 2012), and studies about teachers' authenticity show that while sometimes distressing, dealing with neoliberal or simply foreign conceptions of learning and teaching can actually support personal and professional growth and the development of an international outlook of teaching (see Benitez, 2014; Thi Tran & Thi Nguyen, 2015; Trent 2012). These are the teachers of interest in this current study because they point at possible challenges and their solutions for teachers on branch campuses.

Teacher authenticity is based on their conceptions of 'good teaching'. Entwistle et al. (2000) note that academics' first idea of good teaching comes from their own experience as students rather than from an 'academic' reflection on teaching. In contrast, Stolz (2012) views good teaching from a holistic perspective of helping learners become (more) human by developing their own *Bildung*, defined as 'self-education and self-cultivation' (p. 154). To do so, teachers have to relate to what is outside themselves and their culture including going beyond self-held prejudice and their own limitations.

A transnational campus present particular challenges if the self-cultivation of *Bildung* can happen as knowledge and beliefs are not necessarily shared by academics and students.

Sanderson (2011) discusses 'the internationalization of the academic self' and suggests that teachers should work on their own self-education at both personal and professional levels. They first need to become aware, and then critical, of their own identities and assumptions. Teachers should reflect on concepts of cosmopolitan identity, globalisation, and internationalization as well as their own conceptions of good teaching. Bookman (2020) suggests a conscious attempt to develop a 'transnational identity', which goes beyond natijnal and the positionality of being in a non-place (as defined by Augé, 1992) and'in-between' their country and the host country and I, would add, by not focusing on the feeling that it will be a time-bounded experience. Leask (2007) insists on the need for teachers to become intercultural educators and 'intercultural learners' (p. 87).

The changes required at personal and professional levels may cause dilemmas (Singh & Doherty, 2004), and feelings of insecurity. Benitez (2014) proposes that academics can adopt and which they also teach and desire to see their students acquire: inquiry, respect, sympathetic understanding, fairness, intellectual humility, and openness. Transnational education requires teachers to (re)define their own values and adapt to teaching abroad while challenging their limits through self-cultivation.

On a transnational campus, teachers are often stuck between competing interests of the institution and students' learning needs or even professional profile that are contrary to the competitive, performative, efficiency-based culture that is currently dominant (Sachs, 2016). Skelton (2012) analyses the 'strategic compromise' of some British academics by showing they are aware of constraints at the micro-level (e.g. different learning cultures in the classroom), meso-level (e.g. institutional and departmental requests) and macro-level (e.g. dominance of different pedagogical discourses). These constraints provide challenges at both professional and personal levels, and can be distressing. The study found the academics addressed this by developing spaces of agency and taking a 'deliberative approach', i.e. a

purposeful collaboration among colleagues. ‘deliberative approach’, i.e. a purposeful collaboration among colleagues. Creating communities of practices allows staff to develop cross-disciplinary methodologies and practices (Huijser et al., 2016; Keay et al., 2014; Lamers-Reeuwijk et al., 2020; O’Mahony, 2014) and alleviate emotional challenges.

The literature shows that academics on transnational campuses are challenged but with self-learning they can *internationalise* their personal and professional identities and define and practice *internationalized* pedagogies.

3.8 The research questions

In this review I have outlined debates around teaching quality and internationalization in HE. On the one hand, definitions are related to a neoliberal conception of education as a product to be purchased on an international market, guaranteed by national or international quality assurance bodies. Internationalisation is therefore part of universities’ effort to strive at succeeding in a global market, and teaching quality is the educational translation of the need to guarantee standards expected by the prospective customers. On the other hand, international education is defined as a true university education, available internationally to wider categories of students from the developing and developed world, aiming at offering an education based on the concepts of global and multicultural citizenship. These different conceptions are intertwined and are related to national objectives for keeping—in the case of the UK—or gaining—in the case of China—a strong position not only in the education market, but also in the fields of research and innovation.

This study considers at a transnational campus construct the nature and purpose of education as related to their idea of internationalization and international education. I examine this through the lens of individual agency, and how they feel enabled or constrained by the institutional and/or socio-

cultural context. Therefore, the overarching research questions of this study are the following:

1. How is the concept of teaching excellence constructed by teachers working on a British university campus in China?
2. What spaces of agency do those teachers identify for themselves when they try to implement their idea of teaching excellence?

Secondary research questions that emerge relate to the specific dimensions stated in the main research questionsand attempt to penetrate teacher understanding on international education as it pertains to their specific context and assumptions (teaching excellence, agency, agency enablers/contrainers). The last secondary research question explores the idea of international education in order to contextualise their idea of teaching excellence within their conception of international education with the assumption that interviewees' ideas on teaching would be related to a (personal) theory of international education:

- What are teachers' definitions of teaching excellence?
- What are teachers' definitions of teacher agency?
- What enablers and/or constrainers do they perceive in their practice of teaching excellence?
- What is their definition of international education?

Chapter 4

Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design of my study, that I conducted at my workplace of UNNC[16]. It discusses the choices and changes I made, the issues I met and how I solved them. As I will explain, participant recruitment did not go as I expected based on informal chats with prospective volunteers. This led me to reconsider my research questions and design. Constant in the research design was holding to a qualitative approach; conducting my research at UNNC; collecting data through semi-structured interviews; doing insider's research but rejecting participant observation as a method of triangulation because of the connected ethical issues (see section 4.2.2., p. 61). What changed was: the intention of conducting a single case-study on a School, to research academics' teaching agency in relation to teaching excellence and their teaching practices, and how this changed over time. I wanted to triangulate the semi-structured interviews with participant's observation, analyse them with discourse analysis and interpret them within Archer's morphogenic/stasis cycle (1995). I could not do that.

In October 2017, after gaining the Head of School (HoS)[17] and the University Ethics Committee's approval, the HoS emailed his staff inviting them to participate in my research. The email included a presentation of the project and the guarantee of confidentiality and right to withdraw. I also emailed my colleagues at UNNC's Language Centre to ask if any were willing to participate in the piloting phase of the study.

Only three colleagues (out of the possible[18] sixteen volunteers) of the School volunteered, and they had all joined the school in the two/three years prior

[16] I have been working at the Language Centre for fourteen years. The Language Center is part of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS).
[17] The School is part of FHSS. I will not precise which School it is to protect the anonymity of the interviewees.
[18] Not all staff members were considered 'possible' volunteers: e.g., colleagues in research or sick leave.

the research, so they did not seem to be able to help gain an historical perspective on the School's life.

However, eight colleagues out of the possible[11] twenty-four participants from the Language Centre volunteered. I decided to include all volunteers in my research for two reasons. As a member of the Language Centre, I did not want to disappoint any of the volunteers by choosing only two of them; secondly, I noticed that I had one or two members for each language team, there was a nice differentiation of service length at UNNC, of cultural background (Asian and European), and teaching. I decided to conduct a comparative case study research, including the Language Centre and the School and obtained the participants' agreement and revised Ethics approval to include the Language Centre. However, during the process of data analysis, I realised that my approach to data was not case study-based, which led to further changes in the research design, to be discussed later (p. 68 ff.).

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss my qualitative approach to research, my insider role, and the related considerations about ethics, credibility and trustworthiness of data. I then examine the method of data collection, and the profile of the participants. Finally, I account my coding strategies and testing of codes for trustworthiness.

4.1 A qualitative approach

As a critical realist I am convinced that reality exists 'out there' and individuals make sense of it according to the emerging social and cultural structures, the position they have in the social system, the emerging causal powers they have and can use, and the agency they can express in their everyday practice. Reality is layered: the *empirical* layer is made of the observable events, the *actual* layer is made of the structures that generate the observable events, the *real* layer is made of the mechanisms that generate the

structures, but that can only be inferred logically via *retroduction*[19] (Bhaskar, 1979/1998; Collier, 1994). Structures and agents are themselves layered, and how these layers combine and are affected by phenomena generates the events that transform or reproduce society, and/or empower individual agency. The goal of critical realist research is to describe and understand the complexity of reality and explain why social events happen the way they do (Clark, 2008). With such an understanding, individuals can shape their agency, transform structures, and self-emancipate (Scott, D. & Bhaskar, 2015).

Qualitative research is conducted in *natural settings*, where variables and conditions cannot be controlled or manipulated by the researchers as it would happen in a laboratory (Morse, 1994a). It is *local* because it focuses on the meanings that events hold for those who belong to the context studied (Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2007). The researcher aims to represent them accurately (Yin, 2011), in order to explain how individuals construct their own identities and reality (Neuman, 2014, p. 176). In a critical realist perspective, the *local* knowledge produced aids understanding of how individual agency interacts with structures locally at play, and to identify the underlying mechanisms generating that specific reality as it is. The objective of my research practice is to make the different layers of this *local* reality 'visible' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 43) so that as a practitioner in education I can understand it better and make recommendations that have a positive impact. Because structures may enable and/or constrain individuals' causal powers and agency, I am interested in making visible teaching excellence and internationalisation through what teachers think they do and can do in their teaching. What interests me is to explore the link between the meaning individuals give to their actions and how it relates to the meaning they give to their reality, and how this contributes to shaping the social reality of teaching.

[19] Retroduction: '[B]uilding of a model, utilizing such cognitive materials and operating under the control of something like a logic of analogy and metaphor of a mechanism, which if it were to exist and act in the postulated way would account for the phenomenon in question' (Bhaskar, 1979/1998, p. 12).

Since qualitative research is local and focuses on specific portions of reality, the findings cannot be used to make 'universal' generalisations, with the pretence that they apply to all realities, even though they may seem similar. This research is an effort to disclose what is distinctive of a particular reality and follows Yin (2011) in examining analytic generalisations. These generalisations relate findings with key elements of theory, which in this study involves agency, teaching excellence and internationalisation of the university, read through a critical realist philosophical framework, and guide practitioners' action. Certainly, analytical generalisations are fallible because they are rooted in individuals' views of the world, and partial because they are about a *local* reality. However, at least they have the merit of encouraging other researchers' work, which will help refine those generalisations.

Finally, especially in qualitative research, the act of exploring reality makes researchers a part of it. The understanding and explanation of reality depends on our ways at selecting what to observe and how to organise it according to our research interests and philosophical framework. As Yin (2011) indicates, we look at reality with our own lenses, and therefore I have been very much concerned by the problem of insider research, that in my view can influence both the validity of the design and the ethics of this current study.

4.2 Insider research, ethics, trustworthiness and credibility

Researchers themselves have been defined as 'research instruments' (Creswell, 2007), and as instruments, they are situated and determine the nature of the data they collect (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This requires them to monitor themselves, reflect on their own biases and their relationships with the subjects of their research, reflect on their own interpretations and on the processes originating them (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Cohen et al., 2007). At the same time, researchers become part of the participants' social environment, and consequently of the field they study, modifying it for the very reason that they are studying it (Creswell, 2007). This is even more

evident when one conducts research in their own social setting, as an insider researcher. Two main issues are involved: the ethical relationship between researcher/participant and researcher/organisation, and the validity and reliability of the data collected. The main features of insider research, and the related ethical and data quality issues, are discussed in the following sections.

4.2.1 Insider research

This research is based in my own workplace. The fact that I am a member of staff obliged me to be more reflexive and cautious in terms of ethics and validity of my research methodology. In this section I focus on the role of the insider researcher, and in the subsequent two sections on the related ethical and validity issues.

The insider researcher is a researcher who is 'an actor' in the research setting (C. Robson, 2011), and knows both the formal and informal life of the organisation (Teusner, 2015). To me, the status of the insider researcher is like the one of participant observer, with some features of the 'covert' researcher. As a participant observer, the insider researcher has an easy access to materials (documents, conversations, observations, and participants' lived experience); they take part in the life of the system they are researching, participates in decision-making processes and have access to documents that might be if not confidential at least not public. As a 'covert' researcher, the insider researcher witnesses situations involving individuals who did not consent to be part of the research. Finally, participants are never sure whether they are being observed or not, and this may cause psychological pressure. For them, being part of the research might be like the foucauldian Panopticon, where individuals did not know whether they were observed or not. These features of the insider researcher role were the reasons why I decided not to triangulate the interviews with participant observations. Furthermore, observations complicated the considerations about ethics and validity of data collection.

4.2.2 Ethics

The researcher is the instrument of data collection, and because they become part of the field they study, research in social sciences and in education is sensitive (Cohen et al., 2007). Research might indeed cause in the participants feelings of exposure or a fear of being misconstrued, stigmatised, or misjudged. Furthermore, social research may have reputational, legal, social, political negative consequences for the participants or individuals related to them, and cause stress when it involves people with whom the researcher is (or is perceived to be) in a power position (e.g. students-teacher). Also, by focusing on sensitive or personal issues, research can cause psychological pressure (Farrimond, 2013; Wiles, 2013). From the Nuremberg code (1947) to the declaration of Helsinki (2001), to the New Brunswick declaration (2013) and the Ethics guidelines outlined by the European Commission (2013), it seems to me that there are two main ethical questions. First, does this project/question cause harm to any participants? Second, does it protect their dignity and wellbeing? These questions lead to other considerations, such as the respect of participant privacy, their understanding of the research aims, and their real and perceived freedom of consenting to the research (Flick, 2018: Yin, 2011). Creswell (2009) states that '[a]n ethical issue arises when there is not reciprocity between the researcher and the participants' (p. 90). It is challenging then to bring reciprocity to the core of the research. While the four basic rules—anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, right to withdraw—are necessary, they are, in fact, just basic. For ethics to inform the whole research and not be merely a regulatory compliance (Israel, 2015), it needs to be based on principles and related consistently to our own role as researchers (Hammersley, 2015). The principle of reciprocity led me to reflect on the participants' causal powers, agency and their own *sense* of agency. I grounded my ethical approach in a concept of reciprocity that includes the concept of *care*. Gilligan (1982/2003) and Held (2006) define care as compassion, attending to others' emotions and needs, and taking responsibility *for* someone (Held, 2006, p. 11). I think that there is the risk (grounded in Held's many references to care for children and the elderly) of seeing participants as vulnerable, with a diminished

agency, and the researcher as the one who shapes the relationship, albeit in a care-oriented way. However, if the concept of care is incorporated into the concept of reciprocity, the participant becomes a peer who takes care of and is taken care by the researcher, and their sense of agency is preserved. This way, ethical research becomes 'reciprocal', based on the researcher's full engagement with the participants. The researcher will promote their ownership of the relationship, and give space to their reflexivity together with their emotions and psychological needs. I tried to promote participants' ownership by letting them decide on the time and place of the interviews, which for some was essential to protect their anonymity. Participants were also invited to read the interview transcriptions. Only one read it, asked for changes and deleted parts they feared would identify them. We also agreed on the ways they would be made non-identifiable, such as by allowing them to choose their pseudonyms, and alter professional details and examples. Finally, as Flick (2018) discusses, I think it is important to do justice to the participants, and make sure they are not embarrassed or feel misunderstood. Therefore, the analysis was shared with each of them for their comments.

The concept of reciprocity also supported me when dealing with the specific ethical issues related to insider research. An important ethical issue is that colleagues might feel obligated to participate in the research. My strategy was to take a step back, and see what participants would do. An example is in how I managed the beginning phase. To avoid colleagues feeling obligated, once I had received the expression of interest in participating in the study, I sent them a thank-you email and did not request their availability or try to arrange the meeting. After several days, colleagues came back with emails where they indicated when they wanted to meet me, where, how (e.g. by Skype interview), with one participant choosing to withdraw. I also felt that it was important that she have ownership of the relationship.

Another ethical issue related to being an insider researcher is the formal role that one could have in the context they are studying. In my case, at that time, I did not have any particular position or role, so I was not particularly concerned. However, three of the volunteers do consider me as their 'mentor'. In their case, I had to be very careful to make sure my questions did not put

them under pressure to ‘demonstrate’ they knew the university and behave as ‘expected’. For instance, this was the case involving questions about the policies that influence their teaching, for which I was concerned they would feel ‘examined’ by me. Finally, in a few cases, I had to restrain myself in asking probing questions about some events because I had the doubt that I was probably driven more by the curiosity of knowing more about the backdrop of some events, than by something relevant to the research. I think that this is the reason why in the end I resolved not to conduct participant observation, as I felt it could be too difficult to draw a clear line between workplace curiosity and researcher’s drive. On the other hand, I must also say that in four cases, during the interview, participants reflected with me on important projects they started later, information which I protected and kept to myself. Those parts have been cut from the interviews because they would make participants identifiable. The principle of reciprocity and care has proved to be helpful in this research for two other reasons. Firstly, because it included both the affective and rational dimensions of personality; secondly because it is very ‘concrete’—it requires the researcher to ask themselves whether they are wielding any power over the participants, instead of sharing it with them.

Ethical issues refer also to the protection of the wellbeing of the researcher. When conducting insider research, pressure can come from the institution itself. I must say that this did not happen to me. The heads neither of the School or of the Language Centre, nor any of the participants ever asked about the research findings.

4.2.3 Trustworthiness and credibility of data

Conducting insider research not only requires reflecting on specific ethical issues, but also on issues related to the trustworthiness and credibility of the data collected. Before discussing these, however, it is necessary to discuss what trustworthiness and credibility means for this study.

To assess the *quality* of qualitative research, in 1985 Lincoln and Guba (2018) put forward the concept of trustworthiness to replace the concept of validity as defined and used in quantitative research. Following Neuman (2014), an instrument is valid to the extent it measures the construct it intends to measure (construct validity). Validity has many dimensions, but it needs to make sense to others (face validity), pertain to all aspects of the construct (content validity), and should agree with other measures of the same variables (criterion validity). According to Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln et al., 2018), trustworthiness is composed of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Findings and subsequent interpretations need to have credibility—be sound for the audience; and have dependability—be convincing of decisions based on findings. In some circumstances, findings are likely to be confirmed and transferred in similar contexts (confirmability and transferability, respectively). A fifth dimension is authenticity, which refers to the nature of the findings as sufficiently 'isomorphic to reality' (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 238). If the researcher is the instrument that collects the data, then I would say that trustworthiness depends on their rigour when collecting data. Maxwell (2012) states that, to be considered accurate (trustworthy), data should then be collected via a 'prolonged engagement' in the field, which would help the researcher to become more knowledgeable. However, this does not consider the fact that exactly the involvement in the field could lead to trustworthiness issues during the process of data collection. In the case of insider research, the researcher themselves can be influenced by their subjective (positive or negative) experience of the workplace and inadvertently privilege data that fit their own views. Furthermore, when data are collected via interviews as in the present research, staff might hide or misrepresent reality to give a certain impression of themselves and their practice, which may or may not be intentional. Because of this complexity of factors that can affect validity or trustworthiness, I consider Maxwell's (1992) concept of validity in terms of understanding. In my view, a researcher still needs to demonstrate the validity of the grounds of their understanding, which involves rigour in the data collection and analytical processes.

As far as credibility is concerned, this concept has been proposed as a replacement for reliability, defined as consistency of measurements 'over time and over similar instruments' (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 146), and as a form of stability across groups (Neuman, 2014). However, to me, stability is not relevant for qualitative research that focuses on the complex dimensions of human life. Credibility, then, becomes the 'fit' between the data and the social world (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 14). According to Yin (2011) credibility is grounded in the researcher's reflexivity when collecting data, and a strategy to guarantee credibility is to involve participants in the analysis. However, to me, this involvement happens too late in the research process, and I wanted to ensure that the data themselves were reliable. After the first two interviews, I began to share with the participants the interview questions in advance, so that they could focus on the topic, and I could be reasonably sure that the interview focused on participants' intentional reflection on their experience and opinions. Certainly, this involved risks of 'image management', but I was hopeful that because they are all academics, while they could have more experience in 'managing' their image, they would also be more aware of this danger and try to be as transparent as possible.

In such circumstances, triangulation to check trustworthiness and credibility was essential (Yin, 2011), and verification strategies as outlined by Morse et al. (2002) proved useful. For triangulation of data, I either compared the interviews among themselves (when possible) and/or related them to publicly available information about the university's internationalisation and/or teaching excellence. The participants focused on themselves and their own practices, but in some cases, they referred to policies or events also mentioned by other participants, and this served to check the accuracy of the event description. I triangulated some sections of the interviews with information and documents publicly available on the university website, in both the British and Chinese campus pages. In five of the cases, other colleagues who did not participate in the research mentioned (even two years after the interviews) facts discussed by the participants, which represents a type of triangulation.

Morse et al. (2002), while critiquing the loss of the term validity to trustworthiness, also offered an analysis of five useful strategies to make data more valid and reliable. These strategies are: aiming for methodological coherence, appropriateness of the sample, concurrent collection and analysis of data, thinking theoretically, and theory development. These strategies intend to boosting researcher's 'responsiveness' to their qualitative data so as to enhance the quality of their collection and interpretation. I will return to methodological coherence and appropriateness of the sample in Section 4.4.1 (p. 72).

In this section I focus on concurrent collection and analysis of data. This strategy is based on the iteration of analysis and collection, and I tried to use the principle of practical adequacy (Sayer, 2010), recognising that my activity of data collection was led by partial knowledge that in turn would deepen thanks to the practice of analysis. Listening to the interviews as soon as they had been conducted helped me make some changes in the interview questions, which then led to a different understanding of the mechanisms operating in them. For example, I began asking more questions about 'expertise', a concept I had not anticipated, and brought out by an early participant. Another aspect about which I asked more questions was what I later coded as 'authenticity'. Authenticity consists of the individual cultural/personal traits and feelings that the participants considered important to understand their idea and practice of teaching excellence on an international campus. After consideration, I realised this strategy is what led me to change my approach to data collection and conclude that a case-study approach would not be appropriate for this study. I discuss these considerations in the next section.

4.3 The research method

4.3.1 A meaning-centred inquiry

When I started this research, my plan was to conduct an embedded case study, that is, to consider one case (the School) with individual participants as 'sub-units'. After adding the Language Centre, I worked on case comparison. However, because I started analysing the interviews *while* interviewing them, I gradually began to focus on the meaning that the participants attributed to their knowledge and experience. The study then moved away from case-study to become a qualitative inquiry holding at its core the concept of 'meaning' as a phenomenon of reality. Therefore, it is a *meaning-centred* inquiry.

Swanborn (2010) defines a case the 'manifestation of a phenomenon' (p. 6), and case-study the study of one/more social system(s), in their natural context and over a certain period (p. 13). I found it difficult to consider those individuals as 'manifestations' of the social systems (their schools) since they tended to refer to themselves as individuals, not as members of their departments. I, a member of staff, interviewed them, so our interaction did not happen in a natural setting. The question of 'boundaries' is also crucial. Yin (2018) defines case-study a research method investigating a phenomenon in the contemporary world whose boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (p. 45), but Creswell (2007) and Silverman (2013) underline the 'bounded' nature of systems defined as cases. My understanding of cases is that their selection depends on the researcher's voluntary mental act of 'slicing' a portion of reality whose embodiment we think we clearly perceive (such as an individual or a social system) and focus on that. Therefore, to me, 'casing' (Neumann, 2014, p. 211) is not just identifying a case, but building one out of the empirical level of reality. Instead, to research the mechanisms that generate the events at the actual and empirical level, I concentrated on the interviewees' cognitive causal powers, i.e. the ability to evaluate and monitor their own experiences, as expressed

by the *meanings* they give them (Bhaskar, 1979/1998, p. 103 ff.). Meanings are participants' first-order interpretations (Neumann, 2014), and as causal powers they have consequences on the physical /social world and are affected by it. Similarly, as far as the social world is concerned, 'actors' perspectives and their situations [are] real phenomena that causally interact with one another' (Maxwell, 2012, p. 21). Furthermore, meanings, to be communicated and have a social function, should be materially objectified (Sayer, 2010, pp. 21-30). Interviews are the material forms that meaning took within this research. I therefore came to focus on the meanings themselves, rather than on the individuals, or their experience bounded as cases, for two reasons. First, as a way to 'make visible' participants' causal powers through the analysis of the meanings they expressed in the interviews, and second, as a way to find the conjunction between their causal powers and the idea of teaching excellence on an IBC.

4.3.2 The interviews

I decided to conduct semi-structured interviews because I believe that talking with people is the only way to know what meanings they give to their life experience, as far as they wish to share and are aware of. I do not think that everything is communicable, nor that we want to communicate everything, so I am aware that interviews are a limited tool for knowledge. However, if the participants are motivated, and if we accept the limits inherent to human communication, interviews allow researchers to gain knowledge about a specific (local) situation and its 'distinctiveness' (Arksey & Knight, 1999), to problematise reality (Borer & Fontana, 2012), and find the meaning we give to our experiences.

I considered my semi-structured interviews 'focused interviews', although they do not revolve around a specific social event or experience (Merton & Kendall,1946; Merton et al. 1990) nor did I have a hypothesis-testing approach. What I appreciate and used in the concept of 'focused interview' are the five criteria Merton and colleagues discuss that I would call 'approaches to interviewing'. They allowed me to nurture the relationship

with the participants, to make conscious efforts to overcome social distance and to create trust. This is not only important from an ethical point of view, but also from the point of view of quality/trustworthiness. Mutual trust may motivate participants in getting more involved in the research, give their feedback to the researcher's interpretations, and during the interview lower their need to manage their own image.

The first approach is *non-directivity*. Certainly, the interview is a professional conversation with a specific purpose (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018), but non-directivity is essential to allow participants to occupy the space of the interview and develop their own point of view, explain their experience in full. Compiling the Interview Guide and articulating it during the interview are distinct, and in the pilot interview, a few of my questions became leading questions. Luckily, one of my participants, Zoe, detected them, rephrased them and answered accordingly. The second approach is *specificity*. This was difficult to put in practice during the flow of the interview. Perhaps because the participants are academics, some of them tended to give abstract answers, discussing principles rather than their own experiences. In these cases, I asked detailed questions about a fact to encourage 'retrospective introspection' (or *retrospection*), the reflection on feelings and thoughts related to details of the experience studied (Merton & Kendall, 1946, p. 549). For example, when William (another participant), emphasised the need to understand students' way of reasoning to support their deep learning, I asked about his request to students to put the exam papers into the exam booklets, instead of collecting them separately and throw them away. This question allowed William to explain in detail how he detects and addresses students' misunderstandings in his teaching. Related to specificity is *range*, which means making sure that participants cover all topics needed, but with minimal interviewer's intrusion to let them able to develop their own ideas. To do this, transition questions are crucial. The transition from the notions of excellence to internationalisation was problematic because I had to always pose (except in William's case) the question about internationalisation as a rupture from the previous topic of excellence. I solved this issue by politely reminding participants that the research covered internationalisation too. The

fourth approach is *depth*, for which Merton and Kendall (1946) write: "The interviewer seeks to obtain a maximum of *self-revelatory comments concerning how the stimulus material was experienced*' (pp. 554-555, italics in original). In my interview, the self-revelatory comments were less about feelings and sentiments, and more the conceptualisations, ideas, and explanations that participants offered about their own experience and their context. I tried to elicit depth in two ways: by using s*pecificity* strategies to obtain reflections about causality and goals, agency and structures; and by encouraging exploration of possible explanations, causes, or intervening factors. In 1990, Merton and colleagues added a fifth dimension, *personal context:* the interviewees' personal experience influencing the meanings they attribute to the experience studied. Therefore, some questions are about previous teaching experience and its influence on the current teaching philosophy and practices.

For me, the 'specificity' and 'depth' approaches were challenging because I tended to not ask for details. I had to reflect on the concept of 'methodological consciousness' (Finley, 2012, p. 319) to remind myself that I had to make the judgement of when to allow the participant to digress, and when to 'pull' them back to the main topic. Sennett (2003), commenting on his experience as an interviewer, states that 'the craft consists in calibrating social distances without making the subject feel like an insect under the microscope' (p. 37). My 'craft' of the interview was the opposite, to try not to look at participants as distant stars observed with a telescope, but to find a balance between the needs of my research, and my participants' interests.

4.3.3 Interviews' setting

The interviews were conducted between November 2017 and February 2018, towards the end of the semester and exam time, when staff were less busy. I designed the interviews to last no more than an hour, and this was true in seven cases. In three cases, the interviews lasted up to one and a half hour. We either met in the participants' offices (2), my office (2), an empty classroom (1), or the Language Centre meeting room (4), however they

preferred. In one case, we had a video-call interview, and we were lucky to have a very stable connection. We met at different times of the day, in some cases very late to make sure that participants' anonymity was protected. Three interviews were interrupted by a telephone call or a colleague coming in, and in one case we postponed the interview to the following day.

4.4 The participants

4.4.1 The participants' profile

The ten participants of this research volunteered to be interviewed, therefore they were self-selected. In a sense, they are representative of different profiles in our faculty, some have a teaching qualification, others do not; some were at their first teaching experience, others had a long and diversified experience; some had already taught students in China, others had not; some had a previous learning or teaching experience in a British university, others had not. I was fortunate enough that the participants are known for being good teachers among students and/or staff. One of them won a teaching award, three regularly receive excellent SETs[20], one was involved in small research grants for teaching and learning innovation, and two led projects involving students in extra-curricular learning experiences which have a great educational value (development of intercultural skills, reflexive skills, autonomy and teamwork). These characteristics explain why, in my view, these participants are *relevant* for the research (Neumann, 2014), although they might not be representative of all the UNNC academics. For example, neither one of the participants was a professor, nor do they lecture big numbers of students (some other staff teach 250+ students). They do not use alternative methods of assessment (such as craft production), nor are their modules dependent on the home school curriculum or any accrediting body, as in other faculties. The diversity of their experience, of their professional

[20] Student Evaluation of Teacher survey. Each teaching staff should have one at least once a year.

profile, and of their practices makes the group complex, rather than homogenous or representative. To me it is precisely their heterogeneity which counts because it allows me to study different types of causal powers and meanings.

Two participants are lecturers, one a teaching fellow, and seven are language tutors. Six are women and four men, all of them in an age range between 30 and 45. Among them, five participants have a doctoral degree, and the others a masters' degree. Four have a British teaching qualification and two were completing their course. Five had previous experience of teaching in a Chinese university. Seven had been teaching at UNNC for a period of one to three years, while the others for a time of five or more years (see Table 4.1 below).

Pseudonymous	**Gender**	**Highest degree**	**Teaching qualification**	**Previous teaching experience in China**	**Department**	**Years at UNNC**
Emma	F	MA	yes	yes	LC	1-3
Tania	F	MA	doing	no	LC	> 5
Zoe	F	MA	doing	yes	LC	1-3
Ken	M	MA	yes	no	LC	1-3
Elly	F	PhD	yes	no	LC	1-3
Lucy	F	MA	doing	no	LC	>5
Michael	M	PhD	no	yes	LC	>5
Tiffany	F	PhD	no	yes	School	1-3
Samuel	M	PhD	yes	yes	School	1-3
William	M	PhD	yes	no	School	1-3

Table 4.1 Participants' profile

4.4.2 The relationship with the participants

As I am an insider researcher, it is important to briefly examine my relationship with the participants. I already knew the participants of the School, but I had no experience of working with them. For the colleagues of the Language Centre, my relationship to them was a bit more complex. Three volunteers had a declared feeling of respect for me and considered me a 'mentor' or an 'example' in teaching and for my commitment to students' wellbeing. They wanted to help me in my project and support me 'for once that you ask for help', as one explained. I was mindful of the potential risk that they would want to please me, and I resolved to 'challenge' them a bit, to encourage them to better articulate their thoughts and make sure they were expressing opinions they 'truly' believed in. One colleague explicitly volunteered to support me going through doctoral studies and to continue our discussions on 'nice things'. The risk I saw was that I might intervene, and ask leading questions. Another issue was a colleague who volunteered, with whom I did not have a good 'history'. I was extremely cautious in my questions, afraid that the interview was an excuse for a 'showdown'. As it turned out, the interview was enjoyable, and the participant was very upfront in discussing her (sometimes unpleasant) experiences and her opinions.

When I included the Language Centre colleagues in my research, I decided to monitor my own subjectivity and use Maxwell's (2005/2013) idea of *identity memo* (p. 42, p. 54). Maxwell encourages researchers to monitor their own subjectivity because it influences the research goals and the theoretical framework. I used identity memos to monitor my relationship with the participants. Because the research is grounded in meaning inquiry, I needed to be as sure as possible that my data collection and analysis were not tarnished by my subjectivity.

4.5 Analysing data

The method I used for data analysis is Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA), as outlined by Schreier (2012). QCA is a development of *Quantitative* Content Analysis, based on the analysis of frequencies to understand the 'manifest content of communication' (Berelson, 1952, cit. in Schreier, 2012, p. 13). QCA emerged out of an interest in *latent* meanings and the awareness that they may be crucial for understanding an event even though they do not have high recurrence. QCA focuses on both latent and manifest meanings. It does not take into consideration frequencies, but the 'role' of meaning in the explanation of the social event. Finally, it does take into consideration the context surrounding the meaning, for example the type of text analysed (political, satirical, etc.) and its communicative purposes[21]. What QCA keeps from Quantitative Content Analysis is its realist approach (although Schreier clarifies that this is not an essential feature), and the vocabulary of validity and reliability rather than trustworthiness/credibility. I chose QCA because I value the participants' voices and interpretations rather than trying to interpret them as *signified* or *signifiers* of the wider social/cultural context. This is not to say that the context does not have any relevance in what they say, but for me what counts is understanding what they say and how it is related to the context, rather than understanding how what they say is influenced, shaped, or formed by the context, or shapes and influences that context. QCA's main goal is to 'describe the meaning of qualitative material in a systematic way' (Schreier, 2012, p. 4). It does so by reducing data and selecting those more relevant to the aim of the research, rather than analysing all data to 'open up' to new information and interpretation (e.g. Grounded Theory), or to show and critique how social discourses are produced and reproduced by different social actors (e.g. Discourse Analysis).

QCA aims to be systematic to be valid and reliable. Validity is ensured by the required close preliminary analysis of the interviews (in my case) and by double coding to avoid researcher's bias. Double coding means that either

[21] Due to space limitations, it is not possible here to discuss the development and changes of QCA. The interested reader is referred to chapter 1 of Schreier (2012) and to Schreier (2014).

two researchers code the same materials and then compare their coding, or the same researcher codes the same material twice. Schreier suggests that the two coding sessions happen at a two-week distance, but in my case, I had to wait at least a month, because I remembered the codes I attributed to some parts of the interviews. To ensure credibility, QCA includes a series of fixed steps to build and use the coding framework. Figure 4.1 below shows Schreier's steps (1 to 8, from Schreier, 2014, p. 174) integrated with what I did (in italics), which I explain in the next sections. The results will be analysed in chapter 5 and discussed in chapter 6.

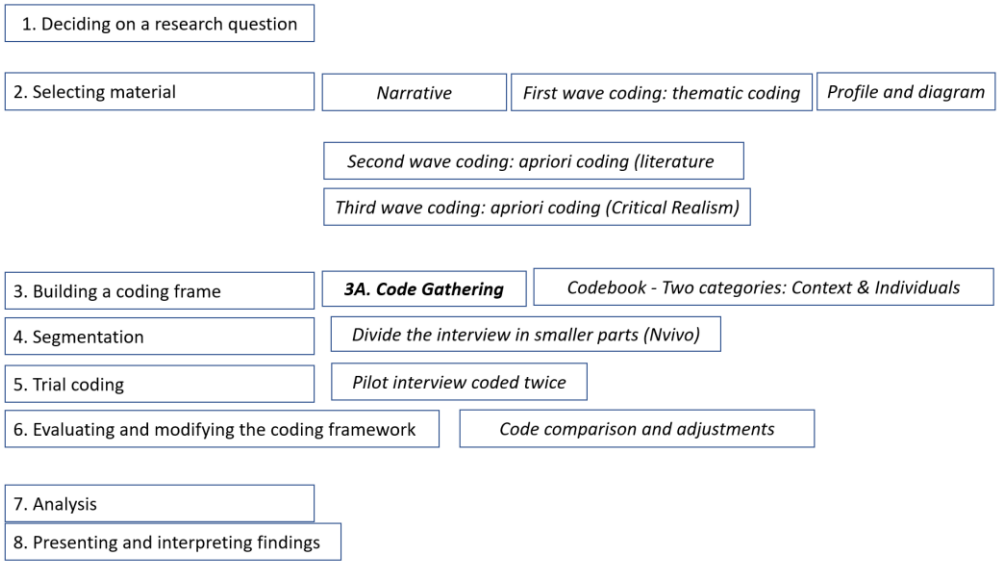


Fig. 4.1 Steps of my analysis molded on Schreier's (2014, p. 174)

First and second steps: *Deciding on a research question* and *Selecting material (and storing it)*

As stated in the previous chapter, the research questions were the following:

1. How is the concept of teaching excellence constructed by teachers working on a British university campus in China?
2. What spaces of agency do those teachers identify for themselves when they try to implement their idea of teaching excellence?

The secondary research questions are:

- What are teachers' definitions of teaching excellence?
- What are teachers' definitions of teacher agency?
- What enablers and/or constrainers do they perceive in their practice of teaching excellence?
- What is their definition of international education?

The interviews were all recorded with my mobile phone and transcribed by a commercial software (Trint) that signals pauses. The transcriptions were not always accurate, so I hired a professional English native speaker transcriber to recheck them. I then checked each transcription by listening to them again and correcting occasional misspellings or misunderstandings. For each interview I deleted/changed the details that would reveal the participant's identity. In one case the participant checked the 'anonymised' version.

I created an e-folder (stored in a cloud and on my portable hard-disc) and a physical folder for each participant. The e-folder includes: the recording, the original transcription, the edited (for anonymity) transcription and all the copies coded with NVivo. The physical folder includes a printed copy of the original transcriptions, the edited transcriptions, and the transcriptions I coded manually to create the final codebook. I have always worked on the edited transcriptions only.

Third step: *Building the coding framework*

Schreier's procedure

Schreier defines the coding framework (or codebook) as the heart of the method, because if it is valid and reliable, then the data selected will be valid and reliable too. The coding framework is made of categories that are the main dimensions of the research and are related to the research questions, as well as the subcategories, which articulate what is said about the main categories; these are data-driven and/or concept-driven. Schreier identifies

four steps to generate the coding framework—*selecting*, i.e. breaking down the materials according to the source, *structuring* (creating the main structure by identifying the main categories) and *generating* the subcategories. This can be done by paraphrasing, summarising, and contrasting themes. The way to proceed is to start creating a first coding framework by analysing an interview and then adapting it to following interviews.

For Schreier (2012), the next step consists in *defining* the categories by labelling the codes with a clear title, an accurate description to make sure it is exhaustive and does not overlap with other categories (mutual exclusiveness). An example drawn from the interviews themselves is also labelled, and if possible, decision rules to include/exclude materials. These steps help *revise* and expand the framework to make sure that categories and subcategories are well differentiated. At this point the coding framework is ready to be piloted, either by two coders or by the same coder coding the same material 14 days apart. This will allow codes to be refined.

My own procedure: three coding waves for each interview

Schreier's procedure to identify codes is akin to a 'code-piling' process, where the coder starts from the first interview, then uses the codes found in the first interview in the second interview and adds further codes until saturation. At this point, the codes are analysed and refined.

I did not find that this code-piling procedure helped me. I realized that because I remembered the previous interviews, I tended to reproduce the same codes, risking overlooking the new dimensions that the following participant would bring to the topic. My solution was to code each interview ex-novo, without using the previously found codes.

Another problem was that I found myself unable to use both the a-priori codes (related to my theoretical framework) and the emerging codes at the same time (although this improved towards the end, when I often ended up coding a-priori and emerging codes together).

To address these two issues, and create my coding framework, I went through three coding waves and a code-gathering process.

Step One: Three waves of coding

The first wave was meant to preserve the participants' voices and was descriptive. The second wave was an a-priori coding based on the main concepts identified in the literature about teaching excellence, teachers' agency and internationalization of education. The third wave was an a-priori coding based on some critical realist concepts.

First wave: Letting the participants portray themselves

I started analysing the interviews as soon as they were transcribed and edited for anonymity. I analysed the first pilot interview to check its relevance and validity, and started analysing the second interview while interviewing the final participant.

While I very much agree with the overall approach and procedure of QCA as proposed by Schreier (2012), I found the first two steps of selecting and structuring/generating difficult. For selecting, I felt that to be able to understand latent meanings via the analytic process of coding, it was necessary to have a holistic picture of the participant. Meanings exist in context, and the first 'context' is the individuals' approach to the topic discussed. Another issue was that, while reading the interviews to code them, I was constantly distracted by my own questions and *voice*. Therefore, inspired by Seidman (2006), I started by creating a narrative out of the interviews. Using Word, I cut off all my questions and interjections connected to answers and cut parts that did not seem relevant (indicated by three dots in the brackets). I did not change the order of the topics, even if sometimes it would have improved the internal coherence, because I wanted to preserve the participant's reasoning process. The narrative immediately changed my perspective, as I could now hear the participants' voices and their stories. At this point I was able to work on the main categories, related to the research questions, and try to generate subcategories. I analysed the Narrative (*First wave of Coding*) and identified three main categories according to the research questions: Structure, Teacher agency, and Teacher excellence, with each of these representing a section of the document under which the most relevant parts of the Narrative were arranged. I also identified

subcategories by using topic-centred descriptive coding to obtain a more detailed inventory of the matters discussed (Saldaña, 2009/2013, pp. 87-91).

I was then able to write a profile of the participant, in some cases very detailed, but in others rather 'monochrome', because the participant repeated a single message about themselves throughout the interview.

Second wave: A-priori coding from the literature

To perform this coding, I first went through my literature review chapter and identified key topics and concepts related to my research questions, which I wanted to explore and understand in light of my participants' experience. Naturally, some of these topics/concepts had already shaped my interview questions, but they were broad enough to let the participants express themselves. Many dimensions corresponded to what Saldaña (2009/2013) would consider different codes (affective coding, axial coding, versus coding, causation coding). However, since I became aware of these dimensions through the literature, I consider them all categories of a-priori coding.

The participants are individuals with their own feelings, values, and social and cultural backgrounds, but they also have positions in multiple social systems, and in our case, the university as their workplace. This position is defined by the role and the practices connected to it, as expected by the other members inside and outside the system and as defined and 'lived' by the individuals themselves (Bhaskar, 1979/1998). Position, role, and practices are related to different aspects of teachers' experience, as they are explored in the literature. Table 4.2 (p. 81) shows how they are connected and it defines different layers of *Being*, which are separated analytically, though not in the individuals' lived experiences where they often influence each other and are intertwined. In Table 4.2, starting from the bottom, there is the layer of *Being an individual*, which is in grey because some of its features influence role, position, and practices, but rather defines more specifically the personhood than their social personae. The dimension of personhood includes Saldaña's axial and affective coding (2009/2013, p. 105 and p. 110). The second layer is *Being an academic*. The participants have a definition of their academic roles and values, are members of a research community, and

perform academic labour in certain ways. The third layer is *Being a member of staff*. The participants have a role defined by the career system, a position within the university and among their colleagues. Their work is shaped by university and departmental policies and practices. This dimension opens to causation- and versus-coding, that I also conducted. Finally, *Being a teacher* includes teaching philosophies, conceptions of international education, pedagogy and curriculum on an IBC, an idea of what relationships with students ought to be, preferred teaching practices, and types of resources. The participants live in time and space, and their personhood and social personae change according to those. I considered these dimensions anticipating they might emerge in the interviews. Other important dimensions identified in the literature were teaching in relation to globalisation and the neoliberalisation of the university.

		Role			IBC	Position		Practices			
S P A C E - T I M E	*Being a teacher*	Teaching philosophy (values)	(Intercultural) pedagogy	Excellence	International education	Teaching Strategies	Students	Activities	(Internationalised) Curriculum	Resources	Globalisation Neoliberalism
	Being an academic	Definition	Values (Freedom Autonomy Purpose)		International outlook of research	Research community			Academic labour		
	Being a member of staff	Career			International community	Department	University	Colleagues		Policies	
	Being an individual	Feelings	Values		Being abroad	Cultural positioning	Previous experience	Social class			

Table 4.2 Second wave: A-priori coding from the literature

Third wave: A-priori coding based on Critical Realism

The third round of coding focused on the following critical realist concepts, all considered from the perspective of time and space:

1. *causal powers*, exerted or not exerted[22].
2. *system*, a unit of social relationships (e.g. department);
3. *relationship*, between individuals and between individuals and social systems;
4. *context*, contingent or necessary conditioning (Archer, 1995);
5. *enablers or constrainers*, to be attributed to individuals, policies, practices etc.

1. Causal powers (changes in time/space?)
   - Exerted
   - Not exerted
2. Agency (changes in time/space?)
3. Social system (changes in time/space?)
4. Relationship (changes in time/space?)
5. Socio-cultural conditioning (changes in time/space?)
   - Contingent
   - Necessary
6. Enablers (changes in time/space?)
7. Constrainers (changes in time/space?)

Fig. 4.2 Third wave: A-priori coding based on Critical Realism

After completing this wave of coding, I began building the coding frame.

Adding one step in Schreier's procedure: Code-gathering

Because I went through three waves of coding, I added a step to Schreier's (2012) guideline. After coding all the interviews through the three waves, I collected all the codes for each interview in a file, compared them and colour-coded them in order to categorize them. Then for each category I created a file, where I collected all the codes of that category for the ten interviews. The main categories were Agency, Context, Colleagues, Excellence, Expertise, International University, Relationship with the students, Systems and Policies, Students' voices, and

[22] I did not break them down in their different varieties because I did not want to be too prescriptive and preferred to let them emerge from the participants.

Authenticity. At this point I was able to revise the categories. I eliminated the doubles and refined the definitions. My purpose was to build a file for each category and then create subcategories. In some cases, I moved subcategories from one category to another, reorganized a category, or created a different category out of the existing categories. This way, I was able to include in the categories all the codes I had created in the three waves.

One important decision was to not have a category about students, but to merge the related subcategories into other categories. I did so because I do not focus on how teachers describe students and interpret their behaviours, but on how those descriptions and interpretations influence their pedagogies and practices, and ultimately their ideas of excellence on an international campus.

The framework went through six revisions as I strove to refine the categories, codes and subcodes and their definitions. It is made of the two standpoints from which it is possible to look at excellence and internationalisation and how they are implemented by teacher agency.

1. Individuals, made of two layers (categories): a) a layer related to the individual that is *Causal powers*; b) a layer related to position-practice system of *Being a Teacher*, where the position is expressed by the two categories of *Authenticity* and *Expectations vs. reality*, and the practice by the categories of *Agency*, *Excellence* and *Relationships*.
2. Context, made of the three categories of *System*, *Policy* and *Discourses* so to narrow down the focus on discourses about university education, different types of international education, and the socio-cultural background of students.

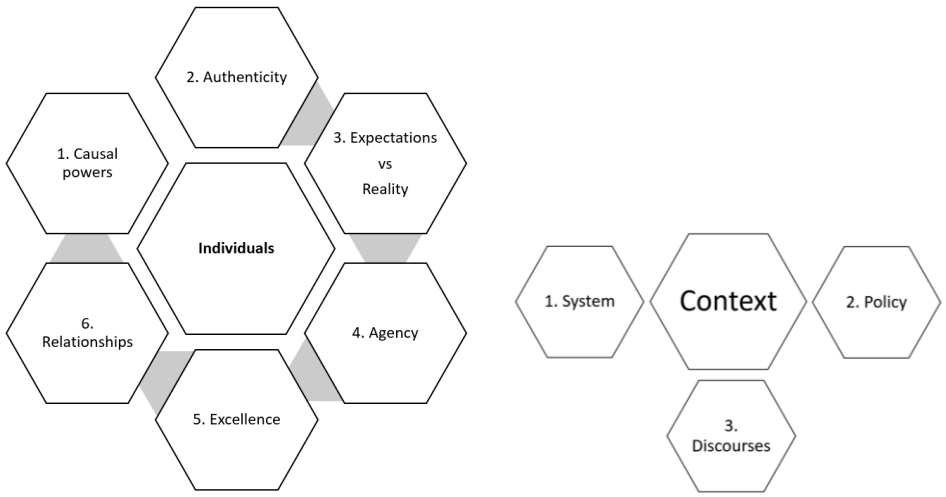


Fig. 4.3 The coding framework

At this point I was able to create a codebook (see Appendix 1, p. 166) with definitions and examples.

Fourth, Fifth and Sixth steps: *Segmentation, Trial coding and Evaluating and modifying the coding frame*

After revising the coding framework, I piloted it by coding twice one participant, Emma, because she was the first interviewee. My coding waves of Emma were conducted a month apart. Both times I tended to code the same text sections in the same ways. However, I had some issues using the category *Discourses*, because in my fifth version of the coding framework, I had mixed discourses about education in those systems and discourses on the functioning of those systems. I opted to focus Discourses on different types of education to reflect on the education gained in different cultural systems.

4.6 Using the coding framework with NVivo 12

All the coding done so far to create the codebook had been done on paper. However, I decided to use NVivo because I wanted to be able to compare efficiently the codes across the participants. I had already learnt its logic and main features when working with the pilot interview in 2018. I used NVivo instead of other CAQDAS[23] because of the university's licence, and I was curious to learn to use a technological tool to do something that I used to do on paper. One positive impact NVivo had on my practice is that I had to read more slowly and therefore coded more carefully. The reason is that I am still not so comfortable when reading long texts on the computer. Something that might be a weakness turned out to be a strength for my analysis.

[23] Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software

4.7 Analysing the interviews

I used the codebook to code the ten interviews with Nvivo. Once I had finished, I grouped the texts from each interview according to the categories and the codes/subcodes used. Gathering excerpts from different interviews according to their shared categories and code/subcodes helped me identify similarities and differences across the participants' responses and decide which categories and codes/subcodes would help to answer each of the four secondary questions. This process is part of the process of ensuring the validity of my analysis. For each question I then created a table including the categories and codes/subcodes I intended to use. These tables were refined as I analysed the excerpts and wrote the Results. The final tables are included in the next chapter, as a roadmap to the journey of answering each secondary question.

Chapter 5

Results

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I report on the results of the qualitative content analysis from the ten interviews. I examine the results related to the secondary research questions and in the next chapter synthetize them with the discussion on the main research questions[24].

It is important to clarify how I quoted the participants' words. While the interview transcriptions show the answers' point in time, and follow the transcription conventions about pauses, emphasis, overlapping words/sentences, for the ease of reading, in this chapter I decided to follow standard publishing practices. Therefore, I deleted the time, I signaled short pauses (up to 2 seconds) with punctuation such as commas and semicolon, and the pauses longer than 2 seconds with …, underlining the emphasised words. When I deleted part of the sentences, I used (…), and I used square brackets [] when I added my own words for clarification. I kept the interjections, repetitions, verbal tics (e.g. *yeah*), grammar and occasional inaccuracies. I also kept the use of the male pronouns instead of the gender neutral 'they', because in some languages, the male form is used as a neutral pronoun. Although my analysis focuses on the content, it was an ethical choice for me to keep some features of their personal communication style instead of homogenising them according to mine.

[24] See the questions at p. 54.

5.2 Secondary question 1: What are teachers' definitions of teaching excellence?

Definitions of teaching excellence appear multi-layered, as the participants answered this question by 'personalising' it, as if it were 'What is an excellent teacher?'. They then referred to their own best practices, or shared and commented on their own mistakes. According to Bhaskar (1979/1998), social position is formed by being and practice, in which both personal and social dimensions are intertwined and influence each other. Similarly, for the participants, being an excellent teacher involves personal traits and values as well as professional values and experiences with students, while putting excellent teaching into practice implies a reflection on the meaning of university education in the contemporary world and the local socio-cultural context.

Table 5.1 below shows in detail the categories and the codes/subcodes that helped me identify the relevant parts of the interviews and answer the first secondary question.

What are teachers' definitions of teaching excellence?					
Categories	*Discourses about different types of education*	*Authenticity*	*Teachers' expectations vs Reality*	*Excellence*	*Relationships*
Codes and subcodes	1. University education 2. Related to students' background	1. Own values about teaching	1. About curriculum 2. About students 3. Own adjustment 4. As causes	1. Core concept 2. Being a teacher 3. Teacher position to students 4. As a cause	1. Students - Who are they? - Managing the relationship

Table 5.1 Categories and Codes/subcodes for answering the secondary research question 1

5.2.1 Being an excellent teacher

For the participants, being an excellent teacher is a matter of personality and ethics which shape their professional values and skills acquired on the job. Conversely, experience molds and changes the teacher's personality and ethics.

Personal traits and values

A teacher's essential personal trait appeared to be 'people who like people' (Zoe). A positive attitude towards students as a group and their potential as individuals is crucial because it builds trust. This positive attitude is shown through respect, patience and calm (Samuel, Michael, Emma, Elly, Zoe). It involves the ability to accept that students may want and say something different from what their teacher wanted or expected, and consider students' different learning strategies.

> Teaching is not about the teacher. Teaching is about the learner. Which means it's never really you. It's about what students need. So I think you need to be flexible. (…) This adaptability in character, in thinking, in reacting to people… this is what I find most important. (Zoe)

According to Zoe, a second important personal trait is responsiveness: being able to manage uncertainties in the classroom. This involves acknowledging differences of opinions and values between teachers and students, rather than being 'detached' from what students say/do. Teachers should not undermine students' trust by aspiring to an impossible objectivity that only makes students feel uncertain about the 'real' personality of the teacher. As Tania and Ken elaborate, responsiveness entails a degree of sensitivity that allows teachers to understand that learners are not 'just' students, but human beings with a whole life beyond the classroom.

> That you have the sensitivity for the students, you know, that you have an understanding for how they are (…) I mean not just in terms of the learning of your subject but just in terms of their own life. I think it's important to be open and to have the sensors up for whether… whether they… feel fine generally, I think that also it's part of your job. (Tania)

Samuel prefers talking about empathy, the ability to understand students' difficulties. However, he emphasizes that empathy cannot lead to any form of friendship, as a distance is needed to ensure students respect teachers' authority.

> I don't think a teacher should necessarily be a friend. I think you can be very supportive very empathetic, but I don't want to be their friend. I'm up there, yeah. (Samuel)

A third quality shaping the relationship with the learners is transparent and well organised communication of institutional expectations. Emma emphasizes that the teaching plan, marking criteria, and assessment format, when precise and well-organised, demonstrate the teacher's and university's willingness to be transparent, and this ultimately builds trust.

> How can I trust this teacher? If he's not well organized? How can I trust this module, what I need is not there, the first thing I need is not there? Maybe the content is excellent but the first, the first impression is not positive. (Emma)

Having personal skills such as time management and adaptability (Tania), and good communication skills is not only necessary for teaching the discipline, but also for establishing a caring relationship with students (Tania, Lucy).

Openness, responsiveness, effective and caring communication are personal traits allowing the teacher to show that they value respect, and therefore build the trust necessary for a teacher-learner relationship.

> You have to respect them because if you don't respect them, they'll see it [the relationship] diminished. (Samuel)

Professional values

In the interviews, personal traits and values are interrelated with the discussion of values and experience with the students that constitute teaching excellence. Respect is one of the essential features of the two main professional values discussed: the dignity of the teacher's role and student autonomy.

The dignity of the teacher role

According to the participants, a student should not only be respected, but must also respect the teacher. In their view, respect needs to be earned and deserved, especially in China, where the culture gives a special place to teachers.

> [When I arrived in China] what I found was surprising… surprising in the way that students are very willing to learn… they are rather respectful as to the personality of the teacher. (William)

> [When I arrived in China] I found very interesting the immediate respect [that you get]. But I also found it stressful to some extent, because you get a lot of respect without actually having earned it. And this put pressure on me, because I wanted to really do a good job because they trusted me so much. (…) Respect is something you need to earn on the daily basis by your behavior. (Zoe)

Not everyone, however, started teaching in China by giving priority to respect. For example, at the beginning of his teaching at UNNC, Ken was mostly concerned with 'being liked' by students, which for him, as well as for Elly and Lucy, was the basis of the relationship.

> Probably, in the first year, I wanted to be a teacher who is approachable, of course approachable is always good, but approachable in a way that … to be liked by the students. So in a way that… I was successful in being liked. (…) I don't think that now I want this anymore. So, being liked isn't an important thing to me anymore. Now it's more that: 'You apply what you have learn[ed] and you try to understand [by yourself]'. (Ken)

Their priority was a conflation of being approachable with being liked. However, with time and experience, the three of them (Elly, Lucy and Ken) realised that being liked would lead them more towards pleasing the students rather than teaching them well, so they gradually moved away from that priority. Lucy analyses how the change happened for her:

> I really cared what they comment about me. (…). But now … I more focus on students … so it's a big change. (…) It is not a sudden change, it changed little by little. One reason is I'm an experienced person now so I feel more confident, and the other one is I changed my mind of how like a good teacher is and how should I teach my students. So I think, yeah, I think… [I] teach them language, to help them become a good speaker. That is good. But now I think [I should focus] not only [on] language but also [on] student's personality. (Lucy)

For Lucy, teaching is not only about her subject, but also about educating. For this reason, she thinks that it is important to be an example for students and defend her educational principles, she says, for example, 'I don't want to be only nice, I want to be also strict' (Lucy). In her opinion, principled behaviors such as keeping her

word, improving her teaching and educational skills, attending to weaker and less motivated students, enhance students' respect and trust for their teacher.

The teacher's role also has an intrinsic 'authority' of which teachers must be aware. They have a power that gives them a certain position. To be conducive to learning, this power must become wise and respectful authority.

> I guess, I'm kind of old fashion[ed] in that way… (…) I think this is important… the need for respect and some kind of distance, and a certain role of authority. I think the teacher does have a lot of authority and they have to use that wisely and carefully and respectfully, but they do have it. (Samuel)

Teacher authority is a moral authority, a 'privilege', grounded in the awareness that both society and students put the university teacher 'on a pedestal' because of their disciplinary knowledge and their role as educators. Teachers should live up to these expectations by upholding their own responsibility in terms of knowledge and pedagogical choices.

> I think there needs to be a bit of a gap there. Because a teacher has to have authority. I do believe authority is important. They have to be… have to feel a sense that you know what you're talking about… that you are… you know, you have to have… if you can't stand in front of a class without [it]… You don't deserve to be standing there because it's a very, very privileged position to stand in front of a class of 20, 30, hundred people and lecture them on a topic. And if you don't give the impression or if you don't feel yourself that you are able to deal with anything they might ask, you then probably don't have the right to be there. (Samuel)

> I don't like this term "hierarchy" but even though I always listen… listen to students' voices, and their ideas and their sharing and they discuss together… but for some parts of it I try to keep my authority. Yes, because I know what the culture… I am Asian so it is important in class so even though I said 'I'll help here',' I'm ready to help you'… there are always… so, of course, some parts of it, 'please follow me', and I thought, some areas where I have to show my authority otherwise they cannot follow, they don't have any trust in me. (Elly)

Because of this authority and special role, a teacher cannot be a student's friend:

> I think they need to <u>respect</u> you. And I think if you are a buddy buddy you know… everybody's… we're all friends here … they might not respect you. (Samuel)

Finally, teaching excellence is also related to the habit of reflecting on one's own teaching strategies and 'performance'. Samuel analyses this point and discusses the performative aspect of teaching—presentation skills, body language, response to the audience, presence 'on stage'—that influences the way teaching strategies are perceived by students, and therefore their engagement with the class and the discipline. This topic will be developed further in 5.3.1 when discussing teachers' dispositions, abilities and other properties such as causal powers (p. 106).

> How you sort of project yourself and your voice and things like that. And I think, (…) I mean, I'm big and I've a loud voice and all these things make a difference. (Samuel)

In particular, 'listening to your inner self' (Samuel), the reflection on how teaching was conducted and how students responded, is a way to improve teaching and reaching students' minds.

> There is a performance obviously (…) I am into acting. You know when it works, and you know when it doesn't work. And you know from the audience response, and you know from your own sense of the flow, (…) you know by listening to yourself your little inner self … you know, you just know, you're placing it right. (Samuel)

For the participants, the fundamental professional values lie in understanding the special authority teachers have because of their role and the ability to express it carefully and respectfully. For them, these values shape the teaching practice as well as the relationship with the students, and support students' motivation to learn.

Student autonomy

Being aware of the teachers' special position and responsibilities makes participants reflect on students, how they seem to position themselves in their relationship with teachers, and what their expectations seem to be[25]. This relates to a reflection on their own expectations as teachers, and as foreign teachers of Chinese students.

No participant mentions 'student autonomy/independence', although they discuss concepts and practices that are typically referred to it. For them, students must be

[25] In some cases, participants expressed uncertainty on what students' expectation of their relationship with teachers are. This will be touched upon on p. 106 ff.

willing to overcome boredom and fatigue, to reflect seriously on what they learn, and to engage in their studies. For Tania, students should make the effort to learn, 'they have to put [in] some work'. Zoe likewise points out that students need to come up with their own ideas, and articulate their understanding of what they learn. They should view the teacher as a guide rather than a 'mother' who provides them with everything.

> The idea that learning is their territory, I am the guide. Yeah. I show them the way, I ask them to question everything, but I'm not… their mother. (…) I give the ideas how to organise things. I tell them where we need to go, what is the direction. (…) It's just they need to be pushed: 'Listen, you don't make it, if you don't know these'. (Zoe)

The problem is that deciding what to do to learn something presupposes having the necessary strategies and habits, but this is not always the case. As Samuel explains for language learning, for example, students are not used to thinking of language as something 'alive' that they need to become able to *use* in personal ways. He comments on his previous experience as a language teacher:

> And it [the foreign language] is taught as a dead language, not as a living language. It's taught as you would memorize grammatical rules and vocabulary, and that is very difficult for them to then overcome that because they're used to, and often with teachers who really don't speak the language themselves, and that would be quite common in China. (Samuel)

For the participants, the whole of their teaching is based on applying knowledge, rather than just gaining it; students need to make the decision on how to use it, which will be evaluated: 'Not only does the student know it, but also does as a student know what to do' (William).

Michael perceives student autonomy as related to student-centeredness but says that students are not eager to be at the centre, they prefer to see teachers as 'bicycles' transporting them around, instead of them using their own feet and making their own journey.

> In China sometimes the students, they prefer to… prefer to see you as a structure, right, like a bicycle, and they are on it. (Michael)

In the classroom, this lack of autonomy might appear as a lack of engagement, in

which students seek safety in silence, making the teacher's job harder, as Emma, Michael, Zoe and Samuel comment. Student silence creates embarrassing situations, where no-one reacts to the teacher activity, and teachers feel like '[they] are always hitting like a wall' (Michael).

> Chinese students… they look very nice. Very friendly. But the thing is, you know, the more you start to interact with them, the more you start to realize that it's going to be very, very tough job (…) because when you start to ask questions, and you see there is no reaction... I think that was one of the first things… it shocked me how difficult it was to [have them answer]. (Michael)

All participants agree on three main strategies to solve this situation and enhance students' autonomy. The first strategy is to avoid making students feel uncomfortable, not putting them 'on the spot' (Tania) but reassuring them that eventually they are going to understand and learn (Michael, Samuel). The second strategy is for the teachers to work on themselves, and not take it 'personal': 'I have to accept it so [as] not to overreact then. I try not to make them feel. You know … So I tried to act as natural as I could' (Michael), 'I never get mad, I don't even get agitated' (Zoe). The third strategy is to be open to personal contacts with the students, in one-to-one or in small group activities either in class (Lucia, Emma) or in their office (William). This way, students get to know their teachers, to work with peers, gradually becoming more autonomous and more engaged with their learning.

The lack of autonomy is also reflected in the students' inability to manage difference of opinion. In these cases, students may engage in arguments in class, become aggressive, even load the argument with political connotations. Tiffany recounted episodes that made her uncomfortable because of the students' aggression against each other and the political connotations those arguments assumed.

> There was this student presenting and there was another student sitting down, both Chinese students, and I really can't remember how it changed, but then they started talking about ethnic minorities in China and it just got nasty. Because they started shouting at each other in English (…) and I was blown away and I was thinking, oh my god, from where did they come from? Anyways, because it started getting really nasty and they really were getting both heated up, I kind of intervened and thought I had to stop this now. (Tiffany)

She admits having been unable to reshape it as an academic debate, and that, because of her fear, she just 'talked over it' using her power as a teacher to close the argument and restore calm. Principles of autonomy were in this situation overridden by the need to keep the classroom a safe place for everyone, and the fear of touching a sensitive political topic.

Student autonomy and related centeredness also become problematic when students seem to be taking advantage of their new student-centred position. Students may become demanding and voice complaints about the difficulties of the class. This happens because they do not understand that a

> University degree is meant to be hard. It is meant to be challenging, and they are meant to get stressed, and they are meant to find it difficult, and all of these things and thinking increasingly in this university we're spending more time on trying to, you know, make us about fun, and make us about enjoyment. (Samuel)

Teachers resist the shift from *engaging* to *fun*, from *interesting* to *enjoyment* because they think that such a shift robs students of personal growth into adulthood. However, teachers find that the university does not take this stance, but it seems that everything students say is to be taken and acted upon, even if it does not make much sense form an educational point of view (Samuel). Teachers consequently feel afraid of students' potential complaints for not being adequately supported (Ken), or resentful that assessment format and learning outcomes were changed in response to a student's complaint (Lucy). Finally, they may think that the university is merely pleasing students and neglecting its mission (Samuel).

As the participants reflected on the challenges of the teacher's role—promoting autonomy, managing student-centeredness—they discussed the marketisation and customerisation of university education in the contemporary world. The next section examines these participants' worries regarding neoliberal education.

5.2.2 The practice of teaching excellence

Teachers bring to the classroom a range of strategies they have developed from their experience. One primary strategy is to involve students in discussion, in pair or group activities, for practical handling of topics and concepts. These activities may

be scaffolded to allow students to gradually use the new content. Pair/group activities are generally used for avoiding the silence that accompanies whole-class activities. The preferred method is to allow students to discover the new concepts by themselves, by exposing them to some original material and accompanying them in its analysis (Tiffany). In some cases, role-play and games are used to help students 'absorb' the new content, and experience that '[my discipline] is alive' (William). Lucy prefers a task-based approach, producing videos or news articles, where the students take ownership of their own learning. Finally, Michael and Elly often ask students about their interests to make contact with them and accommodate them into teaching content. These strategies do not seem to differ from the usual strategies aimed at promoting 'active learning'. However, some participants locate them within a reflection on higher education as characterised by marketisation of the university and 'customerisation' of the students, while others prefer to focus on the students' culture.

Analysing the marketisation of the university

All the participants agree that university should be for students to engage in their own personal growth within a safe learning space created by teachers. Being an excellent teacher involves being able to establish a caring, personal connection with the students, as well as create learning opportunities that challenge and engender change.

For the participants, teachers are responsible for the education they offer, and these are 'distilled' in the modules they teach. Modules define teachers' excellence as they show their disciplinary expertise (the content), their engagement with academic expectations (learning outcomes) and their teaching excellence via the resources and strategies chosen.

> You see, the focus is not much on the mainstream culture, but in this subculture as well. (…) The culture [of the country] is common enough, it is something that they know so somehow…. But the subculture… this is what I am interested and want them to know. (Ken)

> No. I wouldn't say more culture, I would say more grammar and vocabulary and to put all these skills to the reading, to the listening, to the writing. At the end, they need to speak, right? (Emma)

> I tried to make [it] a bit more interesting, it was really boring. (…) But I find it interesting the stories that are, you know, essential to politics. (…) [The] module has always been well received, you know, we always get good SETs and SEMs[26]. So I think, I think it is, yeah, it always needs to be freshened up a bit. And even now, I think it's getting a little bit stale, so next year I might inject something new into it. (Samuel)

A module reflects the teacher's personality, expertise and educational values, so William criticises the university's attempts to micro-manage module design for standardisation and accountability to external agencies. In his view, these purposes respond to a general marketisation of the university.

> The more you marketise the university, the way we treat education as a financial investment rather than a public good, or something which is a product (…). I'm not quite sure that we are going to… but, at the end, we might actually go down a very, very strict road of developing mechanisms where… we might then also end up with maybe less inspired students… and maybe something which is then reproducible to other students… other universities can reproduce, yeah, which doesn't need engaged… to some extent… outstanding teachers, they just need administrators. (William)

William suggests that this may take away 'educational agency' from academics, impacting heavily on their excellence, and their ability to inspire students.

For William, creating multidisciplinary modules does not lead to excellence because they do not respect teachers' ownership of teaching. Furthermore, specialised modules based on staff particular expertise are replaced by a reduced number of modules that gather more staff and therefore help save money. At the end, they create more general and generic knowledge which was not the original educational aim of the university.

As William clarified after reading this chapter:

> Certainly, the danger is there that the more multidisciplinary modules are applied across degrees, the less specialised expert knowledge the students get – and that in the end devaluates their degree that come with future employer or PGT expectations. Some interdisciplinary modules are good, though – just too many might dilute the required knowledge too much. (William)

[26] SET stands for Student Evaluation of Teacher. It is a survey held at least once per year. SEM stands for Student Evaluation of the Module and is held at the end of each semester.

The theme of marketisation of the university is related to the concept of student-as-a-customer, discussed by Samuel and Tania. While both stress the importance of inclusion and support in promoting learning, in their view, university education cannot be about pleasing, entertaining, and making things easy for students. For Samuel, university is meant to challenge individuals and make them mature as adults. Students need to learn to face challenges, stress and uncertainty because up to a certain level, these are normal.

> When a student says to you it's too hard… you shouldn't be making it easier. No, no, it's meant to be hard. It's meant to be hard (…) The counsellor is really important… and stress can be a really debilitating thing, but also exam stress is normal. (…). (Samuel)

Samuel is also critical of the university's enthusiasm for teaching with technologies because this is what students ask for and enjoy, but without reflection on their pedagogical value.

> Why exactly is [technology] quality… and do we think that just because the students ask (…) because they are increasingly using their phones for everything... does that actually mean that [is] quality? (…) When I think about teachers who have really impacted me the most... There was never ever anything to do with technology. (Samuel)

Finally, Lucy explicitly rejects as 'ridiculous' the university's attempts to please students, specifically by reducing the complexity of the intended learning outcomes of an assessment format in response to a complaint. She thinks that education is about learning self-discipline, patience, responsibility—all qualities necessary not only for maturity and personal growth, but also to reach a higher appreciation of a culture. Pleasing students' requests for fewer learning challenges to attract more of them ultimately undermines the value of education.

While participants show awareness and ability in identifying examples of a marketized university, they do not seem to be reacting to these tendencies beyond the classroom. This will be examined in sections 6.3.2 (p. 144) and 6.3.3. (p. 146) on teacher agency. The next section, however, focuses on how the cultural and socio-political expectation of the local context influences and shapes the excellence of teaching practice.

Localising excellent teaching

An important aspect of the creation of campuses abroad is the encounter between different cultures and values of teaching and learning. This includes different expectations about the roles and positions of teachers and students. When reflecting on how teaching excellence is constructed on a branch campus, in my view these differences become an important feature of a possible conceptualisation of an 'internationalised teaching excellence'.

My results show that the participants express two distinct attitudes. One consists in the desire to change the learning culture of the Chinese students. This includes attempting to circumvent Chinese socio-political constraints in teaching according to so-called 'British' educational values. The second attitude is to reflect on the encounter, including clashes, between the different cultures of teaching and learning, and characterise excellent teaching in relation to the students' culture and Asian discourses about education. In this case, socio-political constraints are not circumvented, but 'embedded' into teaching[27].

The first group of teachers explicitly discuss the 'British' way of teaching:

> I'm actually following, to some extent, the kind of British University styles that I know from my own teaching experience. (William)
>
> The British universities, I realized that something great they have is that they teach the students how to write and to do self-reflection. (Emma)
>
> I think they really struggle with the type of critical engagement that a British or European university, American university expects them to be able to do. I don't think that when they come here first they're prepared for it. (Samuel)
>
> In England… You know everybody easily participates; we [students] were very active (…). You were always polite too. You know try to answer it but… (Michael)

William thinks that it is important to lead students out of their comfort zone, to 'embrace their learning experience' and develop their own understanding of events and people rather than memorising what others think. Tiffany exposes students to controversial materials to spark discussion and deeper analysis of social

[27] Interestingly, all three Asian participants, with only one European, shared the attitudes of the second group.

phenomena. William, Tiffany, Michael and Emma aim for students to apply their knowledge to different problems. For William, ownership of knowledge is important—that students are able to take ownership of their ideas and values. With Emma, students should be able to present and defend ideas and use them for the good of the community.

Excellence is also about making sure that students understand they have acquired special skills and abilities, they become 'advocators' (Ken) of a certain type of knowledge and way of being in society. As William points out, this is not what their families and the Chinese society necessarily teach them. But, in his opinion, with a British education they develop the courage to be themselves:

> They do discover that they actually have skills to do something different, yeah, and they also have the kind of courage to do it, to go there to pursue their aims. (William)

The participants also express the limits of their educational practice, challenged by the current socio-political environment that restricts the choice of resources and labels several topics as 'sensitive'. This makes them afraid of talking about topics that could generate critical discussions not welcomed by the authorities. These limitations also generate feelings of anxiety and uncertainty in the staff, who may find themselves in awkward situations.

> It's not just a British University… again, for us it's a big issue to have access to material. In this respect, it's not just a British University… we have to cope with the context that is here. (Tiffany)

> Could be considered to be sensitive topics. Yeah and indeed are sensitive topics such as [the one I teach] So you do to have to be very careful in terms of how things are portrayed and how they [are] described. (Samuel)

> Sad to say this one… because of the policy, yeah, I cannot use the textbook. [because it is printed in a country that is not 'a friend']. (Elly)

> I tried to go through that question [when they asked it during a seminar]. I was thinking 'God, how am I supposed to answer this question?' and I tried to answer it the best way. (Tiffany)

The second group of teachers (one European and the three Asian participants), while embracing the British style of education (as they see it), aims at integrating

the ‘Western and Asian style’. Zoe points out that Chinese students request respect for themselves and their culture, to make sure that teachers do not try to tell them how they should think about their country, and she identifies historical reasons for that:

> I think, historically speaking, Chinese are very sensitive to being told what to do and how to think. (Zoe)

> I'm very careful about expressing, you know that… I don’t talk… you know… I mean foreigners standing up talking about China. (Samuel)

For this reasons, according to Zoe, the first important feature of an excellent teacher in China is to be able to communicate to the students their respect for the country’s culture, history, and politics, and educating them on avoiding politics in their discipline. To her, this is a difficult balance to achieve, as foreign teachers are not clear on where the ‘redlines’ are drawn.

According to the interviewees, in Chinese culture, and Asian cultures more generally, education involves direction by the teacher, without asking questions. Conversely, to them, in British culture, education is about the centrality of self and the ability to critically examine our own assumptions to become an active member of the society (I will examine how this perception of British education is extended to UNNC on p. 129 ff.). Asian teachers think that it is important to accept the Chinese students’ respect for teacher guidance, and integrate it with assumptions about the British need to promote active and critical learning.

> In the end, my cultural background… (…) You know, probably the Asian style, of being passive in the classrooms, maybe I understand maybe it's just the same thing. So (…) you know, that's something that I was used to. (Ken)

> So, I had to learn and also… I felt that I had to change my teaching style based on my Asian context and the British context [where I taught previously] but now I’m in the Chinese context. So I am learning the context of China. (…) I try to keep my authority as a too… too… is important. Yes, because I know what the culture … (…) as Asian I cannot say this style is good or this style is bad. I try to do both. So for some part just make them be independent. But for this one, [I] try to make them active. (Elly)

For Lucy, being Asian and working in a British/Western environment is also part of a personal and professional journey:

> We know they are totally different, the Asian education and the Western education are totally different and we think the West is, or some point [of it] I mean, it developed before us, so I really want to find the differences (…)to improve my teaching. So, I have the Asian way now, and I am learning the British way. So, I'm thinking, can I merge them to get the benefit from each other (…) for my students? Yeah, so this is kind of self… professional development. (Lucy)

For these interviewees, the main feature of Asian education is to be principled, to aim at educating students in social values of collaboration and reciprocal respect, to which, in different measure, is added respect for an authority deserving of that respect. Lucy criticises the university when it does not fulfil its educational aims by accepting 'unreasonable' requests of students (e.g. going back home for a wedding or attending university for half of the semester). Likewise, Elly criticises the university for not defending the entitlement of academics to obtain the required textbooks.

In the mind of these teachers, respect for the teacher is the cause of student passivity in class, evident by their lack of questions and/or exchange of. Zoe stresses that once the teacher shows respect for students' opinions, they will become active.

> You know, they can ask whatever they want, they can say whatever they want because they have a right to anything, they even have a right to anything I don't agree with. (Zoe)

The same will happen when teachers are transparent about their teaching philosophy, and rationale behind activities and materials. Students will engage with their own learning because they understand the reasons for the teachers' requirements:

> They needed information because it was not as obvious to them why things were done in a certain way… But with the information they needed so they liked it. (Zoe)

> I explain [to] them what is behind the rules they have to learn, the culture, that for me is more important… and why they need to work together, as a team, not a group of people doing their own thing. It's difficult, but then some understand. (Lucy)

As a result, the teachers of this group do something that the teachers of the first group never mention: they share the rationale for their teaching because, as they explain, they want to make sure that students understand teachers' requests. In doing so, they treat students as individuals who can evaluate a teachers' style and strategies. They reject an 'authoritarian' definition of teachers' roles and they embed that rejection within teaching strategies that they qualify as excellent.

The last feature of a localised teaching excellence consists in creating structured classes, where nothing is unexpected and 'the teacher seems in control of everything' (Zoe). The teacher's ability lies in integrating the expectation of student independence with critical thinking into their teaching structures.

> The good teaching here would be making sure that… creating structures where they can develop their own independent [learning skills]. For example, I let my students develop their own session plan. One thing that I can do is to check their plan. And then they do assess for themselves [whether it was an efficient revision]. (Elly)

In conclusion, for the participants, excellence is based on a basic personal trait of openness shaped by a deep respect for student personalities, needs, cultures, and autonomy. On the other hand, a teacher must show students their respect for the teaching role and professional values. In this sense, teaching excellence is defined in terms of a reciprocity between peers, where one of is educated by the other. However, the definition of excellence is also shaped by what a participant defines as 'the marketisation' of the university. Accountability, profitability and branding influence teacher practices and choices, and in some cases the university accepts and defends practices that run contrary to teachers' notion of excellent education. For the interviewees, compromises such as making modules easier to attract more students, using technologies to entertain and appeal to them, or replacing specialised modules with generic ones, undermine what they perceive to be the educational aims of higher education. Ultimately, marketisation of higher education constitutes a limitation on teaching excellence.

A second limitation on teacher excellence is its definition and possibility within the local context and within the perceived students' culture of learning (based on authority, agreement and 'passivity'). The approach of one group of teachers is to stick to definitions of learning that for them are typical of British higher education.

By contrast, the second group, of mainly Asian teachers, outlines features of excellence that try to integrate the local culture of learning, such as defense of a principled education, integration of Western values of critical thinking, transparency of methods, and respect for the local learning culture and in turn earning the respect of the students.

5.3 Secondary question 2: What are teachers' definitions of teacher agency?

Bhaskar (1979/1998) defines agency as individual intentionality, constituted by individual awareness of desires and goals. For him, the exercise of agency is made possible by the emergence of causal powers, which are personal traits intentionally used to trigger actions (see section 1.6, p. 21).

Since causal powers are potential triggers of agency, in this section I analyse participants' reflections on their own causal powers and their definitions of agency. I then examine the limitations they perceive of their agency and the relationship they identify between agency and excellence as they would like it to be realised.

Table 5.2 below shows the categories and codes/subcodes I used for analysing the interviews, and which support the answer to this question.

What are teachers' definitions of teacher agency?				
Categories	*Causal powers*	*Agency*	*Excellence*	*Authenticity*
Codes and subcodes	1. Dispositions 2. Abilities 3. Properties 4. Exerted	1. Definition 2. Change in definition 3. Enabled 4. Constrained 5. Outcomes	1. Teacher practices 2. As a cause	1. Feelings 2. As a cause

Table 5.2 Categories and Codes/subcodes for answering the secondary research question 2

5.3.1 Causal powers

When examining participants' definitions and experience of agency, I realised that they reflected on their own personalities, skills, knowledge, and external conditions. This was especially evident in their introductions where they recalled their arrival to UNNC. When talking about their teaching strategies, they analysed their own personalities, disciplinary knowledge and expertise as conditions and justifications of their agentic choices. These causal powers play a crucial role. As we have seen in the previous section, the first feature discussed in relation to being an excellent teacher is personality, and when talking about their agency they reflect on their personal traits (or dispositions) as one of the possible triggers of their teaching agency. For one of the interviewees, William, personality and expertise together influence a teacher's relationship with their students and their modules:

> There's also the kind of personal connection as to… it's not the subject only that matters it's the personality of the teacher (…) you always bring expertise, your own expertise, your own personality to your module. (William)

For Ken and Tania, teachers' willingness to take the challenge of exploring different ways of teaching provides understanding of students' expectations and needs. For Ken and Elly having a certain type of 'passivity' in common with the students is equally important.

> I was [a] quiet student in my high school student [life] (…) The good teaching here would be making sure that… creating structures where they can develop…Their own independent [skills]. (Elly)

Furthermore, being and becoming more tolerant toward students' different personalities and motivations also influence teaching:

> Now I'm more like… tolerant. They have different personalities (…) so I need to understand different person[s] they have different way[s] to learn. I need to respect this kind of differences. (Lucy)

> I always listen to… listen to students' voices, and their ideas and their sharing (…) so I think it's important to listen first, and this is my personality too. Yeah, I always listen first, before I make a decision. (Elly)

Causal powers are also the specific abilities that a teacher has. Tania discusses her ability to use technologies to create on-line learning activities to complement or

support students' personal study. Samuel mentions the teaching strategies he learnt while teaching middle school children to keep their attention, which allows him to understand university students' leaning processes 'in a way that a lot of university lecturers never learned… [and] how the classroom dynamic works'.

Finally, causal powers also include properties—physical, economic, cultural, or intellectual features—that make it possible for teachers to think about their teaching as a modifiable domain.

Samuel reflects on teaching as a type of performance, where teachers appeal to and retains students' interest not only with their knowledge, but also with their 'presence' on the 'teaching stage'. Rarely do university classrooms now have a 'stage', but teachers' physical presence is an indicator to students of how comfortable they are in their role:

> How you… sort of… project yourself, and your voice, and things like that. (…) I'm big and I've a loud voice and all these things makes a difference. (Samuel)

An important causal power is also having economic opportunity for teachers to take courses on teaching (Emma, Ken, and Zoe), or to commit to the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education made compulsory by the University (Lucy, Samuel, and Zoe). According to the participants, these courses not only gave them the necessary knowledge to reflect on their own teaching, but also to come up with their own ideas, to communicate them to colleagues and line managers, and implement them in their teaching[28]. These courses also allowed teachers to put themselves in the students' shoes:

> For example, I was doing a master, and it really shocked me that the marking criteria… they don't have the marking criteria. I mean… (…) you know how you will be assessed, but you don't know what will be the criteria to be… that you will be qualified (…). (Emma)

As academics, the main 'property' of causal power is their disciplinary expertise, and the participants identified themselves with their discipline. Their expertise defines their identities, their teaching philosophies, and how they work with

[28] It is difficult to give examples because participants' anonymity would be compromised.

colleagues. William, reflects on expertise and what it does or does not allow him to do:

> We also need, as teachers, to think about how we can earn and own the teaching, and [that] what we actually present is also part of our expertise and personality (…) [we cannot teach] as a team of teachers where one is the module convener, because that means that the convener and his idea of teaching is dominant, and therefore everybody else who is teaching under the module convener might find that it's not really your own work and therefore your teaching (…) And then [exam] moderation is normally done by somebody who also has an expertise in that area. (William)

5.3.2 Agency: The space in-between

In this section, I analyse participants' definitions of their agency within the classroom and in their department, and the main limitations the participants experienced in their agency. Agency is stronger in the classroom, although limited by socio-political factors, and weaker at department/institutional level where it is often limited by line managers' decisions and university policies. However, the teachers do feel they can enact their teaching excellence. I examine these feelings in the final part of this section.

Agency in the classroom

The primary space for agency is the classroom.

> I think that the idea of being a teacher [is that] you have agency, you have control (…). I mean, the whole point of becoming a teacher is you act, you know, as the person [in the classroom]. (Ken)

Ken's reflection appears to be a very teacher-centred statement, but it needs to be contextualised in terms of the concepts of the 'dignity of the teacher role' and 'student autonomy' previously analysed (p. 89 and p. 92 respectively). For the participants, teachers can be 'the' person in the classroom because theirs is a moral authority, based on respect for the students and on a special openness/tolerance for their expectations and needs. For teachers, respect and openness do not only consist in cultivating their autonomy (or 'autonomies', because students may define

autonomy differently), but also in accepting unexpected and sometimes unwanted outcomes of these autonomies. In this context, teacher agency means that teachers can decide what to teach and how to teach it and implement those decisions in the classroom. Not being able to make such educational and instructional decisions means being denied the role of a teacher. In general, all participants agree that the maximum level of agency they experience is in the classroom. How they teach is usually their choice, and rarely called into question. In some cases, the generic language of module handbooks is one of the tools to enact or preserve that agency.

> I have, you know, lots of agency for that (…) because I've always had good feedback [on my teaching] from the students, and I think in our university and probably in most universities [that] feedback really matters (…), [the line managers] … if they look at your [students'] feedback, and it's all fine, they probably not involve in it [your teaching] very much. (Samuel)

> I would say a lot of agency, however, for the content and for the strategy… teaching strategies. (Tiffany)

> I decide how I deliver this content. So I feel I have a lot of agency there. (Tania)

> I mean, the thing I think where we can express our agency the best is in the class. I think in the class is where, you know, we can really be what we want, and we can really permeate all the strategies. (Michael)

> There is lots of flexibility inside the classroom, lots of flexibility as to how I would like the module handbooks to be interpreted. (William)

Some external conditions support teachers' agency in the classroom. One is being the only teacher in a module, which allows the teachers to 'improvise' (William) and introduce different content. Another is being the convener of modules taught at different levels, but aligned because of the content (Elly, Zoe); this allows the teacher to build students' progression according to their judgement.

For the participants, being the convener and only teacher is the 'perfect' facilitator of teaching agency. For example, Lucy used task-based teaching; Elly introduced movies; Ken focused on specific subcultures; Tania introduced authentic materials in class and on-line; William used role-plays and introduced small group tutorials 'to provide a British-style educational experience'. Finally, Tiffany, unlike other colleagues, introduced unassessed presentations aimed at developing public

speaking skills. Participants considered these acts of agency. However, as we have seen, participants' agency in this area is sometimes hindered by students' in-class attitude toward disagreements (p. 95).

There are also some limitations to module-based agency. Language modules need to be aligned by skills progression, while content modules need to be linked to other core or optional ones. It is the programme design and ultimately the disciplinary benchmarks that determine those alignments, but teachers rarely refer to them. For example, for languages, only Michael and Lucy comment on the need to align the modules among themselves to ensure students' progression, and only Michael refers to the Common European Framework of Languages as an external benchmark. For the content modules, only Samuel reflects on the links that modules have within a given programme and on their connection with the curriculum of the 'home school' in the UK. Another limitation may be represented by the exam format, that can influence the type of activities done in class. For example, if quizzes are part of the assessment format, then other activities such as self-study need to be proposed in the form of quizzes so that students become familiar with them. Teachers are also required to teach the content of the quizzes by the date they will take place, which for Emma, Ken, Tania and Zoe constrains teacher's creativity and responses to students' needs:

> That every week you have to teach what the weekly plan says. So maybe you wanted to do another activity, or (…) a little game, (…), or do something else or to show a video, and then you realise that you don't have the time. (Emma)

Another possible limitation to agency is given by the emphasis on multidisciplinary teaching, that undermines academics' specialisation, and by standardisation of programs, for William both a consequence of British university's utilitarian choices.

> The more we go on that road [of creating multidisciplinary modules], the more we might actually lose also educational agency from the side of teachers, from the side of how we design modules. In essence also how we design programs, (…) by putting in more and more… more structures. (William)

William, however, explains that, compared to European universities, it is not a matter of having more or less agency, but perhaps of different 'agencies', different types of agencies that allow teachers to teach, assess and establish relationships with students in different ways.

Agency in the departments

Agency is also enabled or constrained by the schools or departments as social systems, in which the decision-making process is shaped by the type of leadership that the participants describe as either open and democratic or centralised and authoritarian. Certainly, participants of the same school define the leadership of the same department differently[29]. Crucially, the participants did not reflect on their functions at the departmental level. Among them there were senior tutors, exam officers, language coordinators and their role could have provided other perspectives on teaching excellence and teaching agency, beyond the classroom. However, they only analysed those regulations and policies impacting directly on their in-classroom teaching. The perceptions about teacher agency at departmental level are constructed between two extremes. At one end, Samuel comments that staffing issues determine teaching allocation more than individual expertise, which was felt as an imposition. At the other end, Tania thinks that:

> Then it was up to me if I would, or to what extent I would take the opportunity [of being part of the decision-making processes] (…). I think that there are opportunities to… to be involved in all sorts of decisions, and it comes down to what you make of that. (Tania)

Emma, Tiffany, Elly and Ken position themselves in the middle. Emma tries to accept the reality as it is:

> I have also to say that inside… that I have also the freedom to be the teacher that I want to be, and that I think the students need. So… I feel like in-between. I don't feel really frustrated because I cannot do things by myself. It's true I would like to do more things by myself, but it doesn't mean I can't do anything. (Emma)

Ken tries not merely to accept limitations of his agency, but to justify it as something positive. He then wonders whether staff should find alternatives by themselves:

[29] I did not explore this because it would have shifted my focus from teaching agency to perceptions of power structures within the workplace.

> I could interpret positively, to come to good terms with the policy and make myself understand that "Oh this a good thing so I take it". And probably this policy is just too … so I maybe should try to go around… I think we should take our spaces. (Ken)

Not having agency at department level may also be a personal choice, like for Michael, who wanted first to adapt to the new environment and then to contribute to decision making, but only to a certain extent:

> I just had to adapt myself and start to become, like, from a minor player in the department to become a regular player, I think. That's how I saw myself. (Michael)

However, there is a difference between real and formal agency, which is more related to the management style of heads of department rather than regulations and policies.

> I would say it is strongly related to the line manager, to the kind of atmosphere they create. (…) If you have someone who handles the school like a general, then of course the agency is very much affected because your opinions actually are not taken into consideration or even wanted in any way. (Zoe)

While Tania feels consulted, owning the possibility of acting as an agent, Lucy's experience is one of possessing only a *fragile agency*. She described how an important personal-agentic decision was first allowed and then suddenly denied, without explanation or possibility of negotiation, which caused her to feel that her agency is only apparent: 'You have some kind of formal freedom, but then this freedom was taken away'.

Michael points at the importance of teachers trusting the institution. Teachers may not believe that they can exert agency because they have seen colleagues' agency frustrated, and prefer not to take the chance.

> You are not always confident… (…) maybe something happened to one of us that… you know, we like to use more our agency, but we always think maybe that we are going to be frustrated in that way. (Michael)

For the participants, the opportunities to exert agency changed over the years. It is not only related to the evolution of departments or the change of line managers. The development of individuals' causal powers makes some of them—Lucy, Samuel,

Tiffany, and Ken—note how their own agency changed over the years because of their increased professional expertise.

> Agency also changes over the years, and I think experience has a huge difference, a huge part to play with it. (…) as many years you teach a specific topic, of course, you changed a lot more because it becomes more your own. (Tiffany)

Limitations on agency

The analysis of the results of this question shows that for the participants, marking criteria (at university level) and the socio-political environment (at macro level) limit their agency.

Before discussing these limitations, however, it is important to note that in general, restrictions to professional agency are accepted, justified and even perceived as beneficial to the individual. Ken and Tania comment that having limitations in agency, caused for example by the attendance policy or Moodle mandate, is not necessarily something negative. These restrictions allow teachers to focus on teaching, to devote less time and mental energy to decision-making, and give participants a reassuring sense of direction.

> So, all these things are kind of restricting or regulating maybe restricting is the wrong word… Strongly regulating the… teaching… So that's the one thing. So in that way quite… rigid maybe. But on the other, (…) it is not so bad that something is set in the stone … its' not all bad if you have frameworks given to you. (Tania)

> I need to go through procedures to do the right thing. (Ken)

The first area in which participants find it particularly difficult to accept limitations in their agency is in the marking criteria. In both departments, marking criteria are heavily criticised as undermining teachers' expertise and evaluation of students' knowledge/expertise. Part of the criticism relates to the numerical marks, partly to the marking criteria. All participants from the Language Centre criticise the definitions of 'pass' and 'first-class'. They find that a pass mark allowing a student to have less than 50% answers correct does not promote student excellence. Even worse, marking criteria that define students' first-class performance as virtually

flawless establish impossible goals for students, and makes the teacher feel they are not honest when pushing students to an excellence level that in the exams they will not be able to reward.

> And I find it immensely frustrating for students in level three who are really not doing well because in their second year [beginner level], they were simply not far enough in their development process to see that what they didn't learn then would cause them problems later. (Zoe)

> So, you teach and as long as students are doing, their kind of expected effort and doing their job, they should be able to get 90 to 100%, but here we cannot allow that. (…)I feel I cannot teach to the point [they can have a first class] … [I have to] make things more difficult than what I have been able to teach… honestly. (Ken)

A second important limitation of teacher agency is constituted by the socio-political context. Most participants mention restrictions on every-day teaching such as not having access to certain on-line resources, or not being able to mention specific features of their discipline (or as language teachers, the cultural context of subject language).

> I find the students here may not necessarily have the same access to information. (Tiffany)

> So, things like that, where it seems to be always a very grey area. What what is currently applied, is this the British system or is it Chinese law? (Tania)

> I felt that, because of the political issue, because it is also affecting this and other topics. (Elly).

Not understanding the areas in which censorship can be exerted creates practical and psychological difficulties. Participants say they need to always be careful and watch their words and reactions. This self-monitoring provokes a feeling of perpetual alertness that causes restrictions in what they feel 'free' to teach.

> I wouldn't want something to… kind of spin out of control completely. (…) I was a little bit careful, cause I'm not quite sure what the political kind of context is. (Tiffany)

> Somewhat differently here than I would if I was home(…)careful not to give the impression that I'm saying something... My biggest concern is to be taken out of context. (Samuel)

These constraints cannot be avoided, because they are at every level of teaching, for example when a convener decides on the content, reading materials, and exam questions of the module, and promotes critical discussions or suggests extra-study materials (Tiffany, Elly, Samuel, Michael, Zoe, Tania). These issues can also show themselves suddenly, during a 'normal' teaching activity, when students speak about sensitive topics and the teacher, perhaps overwhelmed by panic, is not able to invent a coping strategy.

> In a course they were talking about (…) and I had to grip my chair and it was very uncomfortable because (…) they were talking, you know, about (…) . I was holding myself to the seat. I was thinking, 'oh dear me. This is a little bit damning. I want to go…. goodness …' (…) I wasn't thinking about the Chinese students so much, but I was thinking about the whole environment and thinking (…) I think 'how do I put this slide on Moodle? Does anybody got a question or say anything [controversial]?'. (Tiffany)

5.3.3 Teaching agency and excellence

Participants' dispositions, abilities and skills combined with the opportunities and constraints present in the university and the local environment give them different options to realise their ideas of excellence in practice. Teacher practices were often discussed in relation to participants' causal powers. I will discuss here the causal powers participants identified as the source of their 'excellent' practices: reflexivity, belief in individualised education, ability to clarify expectations, 'being Asian', and the belief in the power of praise.

Causal powers and excellent practices

In the interview, William discusses how he transformed his teaching practice after receiving feedback about how fast he spoke. As a teacher, William feels he needs to pay particular attention to communication and being understood. When he began teaching at UNNC, some students told him he spoke too rapidly. This made him reflect on the reasons for his speed, and he realised that it was his

preoccupation with delivering as much content as possible. Speaking slower would mean delivering less content, thus requiring him to make selections about what to teach. This led him to reflect on what knowledge was most essential, and to critically re-consider his discipline and its foundations.

> So, they really forced me to reconsider and rethink what is the takeaway message. How can I make it kind of… quite clear within 50 minutes (…) and instead of putting more content with a faster voice in lectures (…) to consider what I really want to put in the teaching. (William)

He also realised he needed to change his teaching style, and regularly check students' understanding. This resulted in increased teacher-student interactions which changed the format of his seminars. He learnt to 'talk less', to not 'ask questions and answer them' but to use students' questions in student-centred tasks. Seminars became more interactive and students more involved, his role changed from the traditional lecturer to the one of 'walking expert' (as he said) among students engaged in building knowledge. For William, these changes are examples of his agency, while the consequent interaction and student involvement exemplify excellent teaching because students became owners of their learning.

William also discussed a related causal power, his belief in British education as focused on each individual student's development and transformation. He not only receives his students in fixed 'office hours', but also makes himself available for small groups or one-to-one tutorials on topics of students' interest. He notes that this practice is not accounted for in his 'official' workload, but he deems it necessary to inspire students in finding their own interests and direction.

A third causal power is the ability to clarify expectations. Emma's personal experience as a master's student while teaching made her reflect on her students' experiences. As a student, she was 'shocked' by the fact her teachers did not publish and discuss the marking criteria used for assessment. Not knowing how she would be assessed shook her trust in the programme. This made her reflect on the importance of organisation and transparency as the main facilitator of students' trust in their teachers. She began to explain students 'the rules of the game' to include them in the university community, make sure they take responsibility for their learning and feel able to complete their tasks.

Another important causal power is the awareness of what 'being Asian' means. Ken, Lucy and Elly are aware of the so-called Chinese student 'passivity' because they had a similar educational experience. They know from personal experience that only curiosity can 'make us do something different, or new' (Elly). Consequently, they tried to engage students in task-based projects in which they could engage actively with the target foreign language and culture. Watching movies and discussing their understanding of the language, making video-clips, writing articles are all creative ways to merge the Asian reluctance to 'shine as individuals' (Ken) and the Western focus on individual originality and creativity. As Samuel explains, appealing to students' personal experience and offering them opportunities to relate with the subject sustain their motivation. Another way to combine Asian and Western pedagogies is through Asian dispositions and Western objectives. Elly explains that, as an Asian, she 'tri[es] to keep my authority… as an Asian I know it is important in class' (Elly), but because of her British background, she supports 'that they have their own voices' and take ownership of their studies. Therefore, she asks them to develop their own learning plans and discuss them with her, so they can use the self-study hour to learn by themselves, either individually or in groups. By encouraging student-teacher discussion of their own learning process, Elly thinks she reaches two goals. The first is developing students' self-regulation, the second is adjusting her teaching strategies according to her students' needs as they express them. For example, she realised that she has 'to be not visible' so her students would stop considering her as the sole source of knowledge. Every year, she invites native speaker students to support her when she organises the oral practice, which gives students the opportunity to expand their linguistic and cultural learning experience by engaging with pronunciation, vocabulary and ideas different from hers.

Finally, Samuel examines his belief in a strategic use of praise to enhance students' self-confidence and motivation in engaging with new learning that challenges previous knowledge and convictions. Having extensive experience with Chinese teenagers, knowing how they have been educated, Samuel thinks that praise is important because it validates their efforts in learning and adapting to a new environment, not only because university is different from high school, but also because the British educational system is different from the Chinese one.

5.4 Secondary question 3: What enablers and/or constrainers do they perceive in their practice of teaching excellence?

Participants identify their departments mainly as enabling their teaching excellence and the policies as being partly enabling and partly constraining their ideas of excellence. This is a development of the above discussion on limitations on agency. Before limiting agency, policies may constrain some causal powers. These limitations will be analysed in this section. I also analyse the connection participants establish between the limitation of their causal power and their relationship with the students. Table 5.3 below shows the categories, codes and subcodes that support the answer to this research question.

What enablers and/or constrainers do they perceive in their practice of teaching excellence?					
Categories	*System*	*Policy*	*Causal powers*	*Teachers' expectations vs. reality*	*Relationships*
Codes and subcodes	1. Level - Team/Stream - Department - Faculty - Campus - UoN 2. Features of the system 3. Life of the system 4. Discourses about the system - Enabling - Constraining - Mixed	1. Level - Department - Faculty - Campus 2. Perceived consequences - Enabling teaching Excellence - Constraining Teaching Excellence 3. Mixed	Not exerted	General attitude	1. Colleagues - Managing the relationship 2. Students - Their cultural conditioning 3. As causes

Table 5.3 Categories and Codes/subcodes for answering the secondary research question 3

5.4.1 Systems and policies

The university system includes different decisional levels to which the participants contribute to different extents and that they perceive as variously influencing their agency.

Language Centre and School participants discuss decisional levels closer to them. For language tutors, the first level of decision-making is the language team, in which conveners and teachers standardise their curriculum and marking criteria. Negotiation and individual openness are indispensable in making the team work together and respecting individual teaching values and priorities.

> We need to talk! we need to discuss about, about that and maybe because when someone doesn't agree, so you have to come to … to make an agreement. (…) Maybe I cannot do all the changes but maybe I can do half of the changes. So it is positive. (…), but I feel we have a very respectful attitude with the colleagues and I think this is very important. (Emma)

At the same time, teachers and conveners share teaching materials and resources, but each one is free to re-use or discard these if the requirements for the module are fulfilled.

> I think, in the culture of our team normally we can share the material within China. Because in the end there… there are our ways. (…). We could share if it's a good material. Conveners make materials which have to be shared to the other members to maintain the same level of [teaching, but] other than that… we do [our] own things. (Ken)

Teamwork is shaped by the decisions taken at Language Centre level, such as the assessment framework or the Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) based on the Common European Framework of Reference. Some of the interviewees participated in discussions leading to the ILOs and the assessment framework, while others did not because they were on leave; but the general view is that, although not always ideal, the decisions at departmental level were taken collegially.

At department level, language tutors acknowledge the effort to work collaboratively (Zoe) and to meet regularly to make sure that everyone is up-to-date. According to the participants, Chinese universities, and even other departments at UNNC, do not make participation in the decision-making process a priority. Regular meetings and

shared decisions not only create a clear work organisation, but promote shared and clear expectations related to individual roles:

> Our department is very well organized (…) everything is well explained. I think mostly everybody has their own role and I think everybody tries to do his best to fulfil his role. (Emma)

Furthermore, the participants think that although these policies may affect their individual agency, they also enhance the Language Centre profile and individual teachers' excellence. In the participants' view, policies help them to reflect on their teaching practices and define their teaching philosophies, and ultimately engage with their own professional development.

> We talk a lot at meetings and sometimes there are things that come out that are about teaching. These comments… I know that [they are] not very deep, but they influence your teaching. (Ken)

> (…) making sure that people were aware of these [policies and decision], that this is very important, right… and all of these meetings is not because you go there and you waste your time. (…) it help[s] us to achieve them [the ILOs and] some, certain, yeah, level of excellence. Yeah because imagine if everyone is doing different things. (…) It raises the profile of us as a group of people who are able to be excellent to our students yeah. (Michael)

Collegial decision making is appreciated, and meetings are the place 'where you could raise your voice and you could hear from all the colleagues' (Michael). However, to reach a decision, each one must compromise and 'of course, this also limit[s] your freedom' (Emma) and individual agency. Michael indicates two possible reasons for the difference between Language Centre and School collegiality. The first is that the language modules need to be aligned because of the progressive nature of language learning, therefore the teachers need to work in teams.

> The way they [academics] operate… they are just more individual in that sense, in the individualistic [sense] (…) the Language Centre is more collective, it is more like a collective. (Michael)

> Here… everything… you need to be aligned with other modules in other languages and you can't decide. (Lucy)

The second reason for the difference between School and Language Centre collegiality is the participants' belief that a school is based on each individual's academic expertise. The school academic profile is made of the interplay between the different types of disciplinary expertise (Samuel). For Michael, the emphasis on such a difference contradicts the concept of standardisation of practices and makes it difficult to convince academics that students need some sort of coherence in teaching strategies and practices. For Michael, academics in humanities and social sciences are professionalised through research conducted either alone or in small teams, and this is why they protect their agency and want to realise it 'in a much more free way' (Michael).

After team and departmental level decisions, the interviews focused on the faculty, campus, and the whole tri-campus university (UoN) level decision making processes and policies. As far as the faculty level processes and policies are concerned, the participants were not able to name any examples. At faculty level, only the attendance policy has been debated, requiring seminar teachers to report student attendance. However, when it was mentioned (Tania, Lucy) it was always identified as a departmental policy. This silence seems to indicate that the faculty as a system is not perceived neither as an enabler nor a constrainer of teaching agency.

The participants' view of departmental policies contrasts with their view of what they called campus policies, to which they gave more attention. Furthermore, what they define as *campus policies*[30] actually are issued at university level and therefore affect all three campuses. The only campus policy accurately identified as such is the contractual obligation of obtaining a certain number of credits of the Postgraduate Certificate for Higher Education (PGCHE). Similarly, the only university policy accurately acknowledged as whole university policy is the one regarding SEMs and SETs.

Two questions I asked were, 'What policy is influencing the most your teaching? Why?'. Except in one case, it was difficult to obtain answers from the participants. To provoke answers, I had to take an example, the Moodle Mandate, about which the participants generally agreed was useful because it provides a place where all the learning resources are available. Aside from Tania, the participants did not

[30] E.g. The Peer-observation College, the Moodle Mandate, or the Learning Community Forum.

elaborate on how Moodle functionalities influence their teaching, although as an insider, I know that all participants of the Language Centre are using them. The Learning Community Forum is a policy Elly commented on, stating that the feedback she received helps her revise practices and improve teaching. The only participant who answered the question without my prompt was Samuel, who commented on three policies. For him, the peer-observation college and PGCHE provide an opportunity to (re)think what he was doing in class and engage in a dialogue with colleagues about teaching. Samuel considers a good practice also the Learning Community Forum, but he criticises the response usually made by management:

> If the students say [something], then we have to address it, but a lot of times the students are not right. And there is in it, there is a sort of a view amongst among the management that if the students say something, then we have to (…) you know, respond to it in a way that usually means: do what they ask us. (Samuel)

UNNC is one campus of a tri-campus university, but as stated, participants do not mention the University as a whole. Similarly, they seldom mention relationships with the other two campuses. For members of the Language Centre, the rare contact with the other campuses is mainly about aligning the curricula for students on exchange, so syllabi and textbooks are the foci of discussion (Lucy, Emma, Ken). There is no reflection on the curriculum itself, which is similar on the three campuses only to the extent that it refers to the CEFR, or the internationalisation of linguistic and educational learning outcomes or pedagogies.

The participants seem either to relate with their immediate team of colleagues (if they have one) and their department, or to overstate the power of the campus by attributing to it policies that are university policies. They do not seem to clearly distinguish the levels of power beyond their school, at faculty level, campus level and whole university level.

5.4.2 Teachers' 'unexerted causal powers' and teacher-student relationships

In this section I discuss 'unexerted causal powers' and how they influence the participants' relationship with their students. The first is not feeling allowed to express their own judgement when assessing student work; the second one is feeling unable to gain an adequate understanding of the country's socio-political situation and background on student knowledge/culture.

All participants express their frustration at not being able to change the marking criteria. They feel that having to follow university-imposed marking criteria means that their expertise and judgement are underestimated or unacknowledged.

> I feel my judgment is not valid, and then I'm really restricted. Yeah, that I am very unhappy about… I'm a bit annoyed thinking about marking criteria. (Tiffany)

The second unexerted power is the possibility to learn the local language and understand Chinese culture and events in China. Learning Chinese requires an enormous investment in time and energy, and the participants are too busy with the development of their careers to be able to make such an investment. The negative consequence is that they remain excluded from the local culture. Coupled with the language issue is the control exerted by the authorities. These two factors give participants a sense of insecurity, as they are unsure of what is or is not appreciated or allowed. This lack of understanding of the context influences their teaching in various ways. For Tiffany it is not knowing what type of information students had and currently have access to (e.g. in secondary school or on the Internet), and therefore being unable to tailor her classes on their existing knowledge. For William, it is about the need to deconstruct some of the knowledge or understanding students have of both their own and Western culture. This means going beyond what they have been taught and using their own judgement and critical thinking skills. For Elly and Tania, it is about choosing teaching resources accessible for students on the Internet. Also, participants who may have a deeper understanding of China feel insecure in their relationship with the students; that their teaching and the expertise that grounds it, is limited and always subjected to a self-imposed discipline that is in turn derived from a sense of always being observed and monitored.

> I would teach the class…The classes I teach... Somewhat differently here than I would if I was in another country because I am so, so careful…Not to give

> the impression that I'm saying... Something…My biggest concern is to be taken out of context, yeah and to have somebody say… Or record 'cause they record us (…). I'm very careful about expressing [myself]. And that's probably somewhat restrictive on the agency. (Samuel)

Students become the cause of a perpetual state of alertness, where teachers feel they need to stay on their guards not because of the possible negative feedback students can give on their teaching or expertise, but because what they teach might be perceived as a criticism of the country's political or cultural values.

5.5 Secondary question 4: What is their definition of international education?

A discussion on teaching excellence on a foreign campus involves a reflection on the type of education that teachers try to give their students, and its relationship not only with the university as a social system but also with the cultural structures shaping it.

In this section I first examine participants' understanding of the British Higher Education system based on their reflections on one of the most discussed university policies: the marking criteria. I then turn to the participants' reflections on the educational experience of Chinese students on the foreign branch campus and on the exchange abroad experience. I then conclude with an analysis of the education the participants believe they are giving to students based on their responses on the type of education they identify on campus and how their causal powers (both dispositions and properties) allow them to realise it.

Table 5.4 (next page) provides an overview of the categories and codes/subcodes that supported answering this question.

What is their definition of international education?					
Categories	*System*	*Policy*	*Discourses about different types of education*	*Causal powers*	*Teachers' expectations vs reality*
Codes and subcodes	1. Level - UoN - National - International 2. Features of the system 3. Life of the system 4. Discourses about the system - Enabling - Constraining - Mixed	1. Level - Uon - National - International 2. Perceived consequences - Enabling teaching Excellence - Constraining Teaching Excellence - Mixed	1. International education 2. IBC 3. British education 4. Students' cultural background	1. Disposition 2. Properties	General attitude

Table 5.4 Categories and Codes/subcodes for answering the secondary research question 4

5.5.1 Policies and systems

Marking criteria and British Higher Education

As we have seen (p. 112), a university policy criticised by Tiffany, William, Ken, Emma, Zoe, and Elly is the definition of the marking criteria. This criticism involves two aspects of the criteria: 1) the definition of 'first class' and the 'pass' degree categories, and 2) the numerical values that define each class. According to the QAA (2018), the marking criteria evaluate whether the intended learning outcomes of a module have been achieved, aligned to the Subject Benchmark Statements published by the QAA itself. At UoN, both at undergraduate and graduate levels, first class (90-100) is awarded to work that achieves the highest standards of the discipline in terms of knowledge, critical judgement, and

originality. It is participants' shared opinion that is impossible for students to attain this level because it is based on an unfair comparison with the sophisticated understanding of an academic.

> Why we have a… a range of marking criteria up to 100… and then the students get 100 in Engineering. Why not us? (…). Because if a student gets 100%, 100 marks it is considered as a level of professor (laugh). (Elly)

Similarly, the pass mark is criticised as too easy to achieve and giving students the illusion of having acquired a sufficient level of knowledge and understanding. For participants, this undermines the principles of a pedagogy aimed at developing individual strengths.

> The first year doesn't count grade wise… [so] that they progress even though they don't have the proper level. (Zoe)

> I sometimes [think that] the content is a little bit light. And the marking criteria… well I think that it is easy to pass but it is difficult to get a high mark. And in my country, it is difficult to pass, and it is also difficult to get a high mark. (Emma)

The department marking criteria are designed based on a university-wide definition of the degree classes, which comes from the national standard of the discipline and its assessment criteria. However, the link between UoN and the national standards is not examined by participants. They only generalise from Nottingham level to the British Higher Education level as it is perceived by staff who have had limited or no direct contact with it. This creates a comparison between the British and European systems. While the British system is criticised for the standard of excellence defined by the marking criteria, it is praised for its educational values based on critical thinking, civic engagement, fairness and transparency.

> [The British universities, teach] to… argue their opinions. I think they are great, (…) a skill that every single citizen should have it (…) they [the British universities] have many societies, and they can get so many skills in the societies. (Emma)

> I would say… [the British universities teach] the distance between people but also being on the same foot, so they want fairness. (Zoe)

The second criticism is related to the numerical values of the marking criteria. These values are formally on a 0-100 scale, but not all numbers can be awarded. They correspond to a 0-20 non-linear ordinal scale, which means that the marks cannot just be multiplied by 5, they are adjusted. This system has been widely used in the UK, since 2008, but staff feel it as not sophisticated enough, and does not allow them to give a precise evaluation of students' understanding of the discipline. In this respect, both the university and national standards seem to downplay academic expertise, which results in a feeling of frustration.

> About marking, this is my broad contention to the marking. (…) in fact, it's taking some of my own expertise out of my hands (…) And for me, I think it's absolutely ridiculous. Because for me it's a big difference. The 64 to the 68 or the 65 because for me a 64 means it's not good enough to go towards 70. (Tiffany)

Chinese students on a foreign branch campus

The issue of marks and standards of knowledge becomes intertwined with their uptake by students. As a starting point, Samuel points out that, for financial reasons, the branch campus seems to accept students that have a lower content knowledge and language proficiency than those in the UK.

> We probably should be stricter in who we take in. But on the other hand, you know… we do have... It's a new institution, and it has to develop the numbers. (Samuel)

Chinese students not only have a limited basic knowledge of Western and Asian culture, as William states, their understanding is also shaped by a materialist orthodoxy that needs to be deconstructed.

> I had to slow down on the expectations of what can I teach which kind of… level year two students especially (…) deconstructing what they learned in high school and constructing what's the bigger (…) they always tend to write the same note all over again, and I'm trying to reconstruct them (…) yes, we have ideologies, but ideology [needs to be defined, not everything is an ideology]. (William)

Furthermore, Samuel comments that their English proficiency level is low, so even when they understand concepts, they are unable to articulate them in a sophisticated way, which results either in a higher rate of failures, or in teachers adopting criteria less strictly than in the UK.

> Because I find that the students here, because this is not the first language, I have to be a little bit more lenient in the way that they express themselves, in the way that they write. Yes… But when I was back in England I was a lot more… strict. (Tiffany)

> I think in the UK they'd be failing a lot more than they fail here (…) Definitely language... I think we are very tolerant of… (…) I think there are major problems with our students' English level. (Samuel)

Samuel also underlines how the commonly used Chinese pedagogical methods do not favor critical evaluation of reality, which constitute the major difficulty for Chinese students on a foreign campus. Offering Chinese students multiple and more open perspectives is not only a challenge from the pedagogical point of view, but also challenging from the political point of view.

> They are worried that they [are] going to say the wrong thing, because it just this idea of saying the wrong thing and it's not just critical engagement, you know, there are issues around political sensitivity. (Samuel)

Key Performance Indicators and student exchange abroad experience

At university level, one of the most important structures is the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which measures to what extent the overall goals have been achieved, consequently influencing the decisions of the different systems and their practices. William comments that KPIs are set at university level by the management, without much consultation with the academics involved. He focuses on the KPIs related to student exchange, which in his view are based on a generic understanding of the study programme offered by the schools and abroad by the universities. The result is that the experience of exchange abroad, which should be at the core of an 'internationalised' student learning experience, and therefore carefully tailored to each student, is instead governed by professional departments which think in terms of profit and ranking rather than education.

For example, while the university system asks academics to be involved in the organisation of student exchange, it does not make use of their expertise and prefers to rely on professional services that will comply with the logic of rentability. These managerial practices weaken academic agency because they do not consider academic expertise of what other universities teach. On the other hand, students also fall prey to this quantitative, rankings-based system in only considering the university's ranking and reputation and discarding potentially good quality programs. William makes use of his academic expertise at a micro-level to explain these mechanisms and to suggest alternatives that in his view can truly be useful to students; however, he knows that his causal powers and, consequently his agency, cannot influence the system on a larger scale.

> Some people might say that it's a wise standard of excellence by looking at the numbers… only, not by looking at students, at their personality… yeah, and their interest and also whether the student and the university are actually going to match. Sometimes, I try to kind of use influence with my students (…) I mean, there are constraints where I, sometime, think, like, I wish I had a bit more of an insight… The university system of distributing exchange study abroad places is a competitive system, and it's never quite clear to me how that's actually calculated, it's also sometimes gibberish. (William)

5.5.2 International education?

The branch campus is defined as a place where curriculum and teaching are administered by the home campus, in compliance with the quality standards of both home and host countries (Knight & McNamara, 2017). Leask (2015) stresses that a curriculum is not only constituted by its disciplinary content, but also shaped by disciplinary paradigms and the knowledge traditions of the society/societies in which it is generated. Furthermore, the curriculum also implies the educational values and teaching strategies considered worthy by that society (e.g., learning as discovery vs. learning from an authority). Zoe discusses the British style of teaching as emphasizing innovation and knowledge production. For her, the key is independent learning, where students are expected to learn by themselves through independent research in and outside the classroom. On the other hand, she notes that these students come from a completely different educational system, based on repetition of models and teacher's guidance.

> This entire structure, the idea of teaching and learning, is something which is super imposed and which… It is forced into a different culture, you could say and it doesn't really take in to consideration the surroundings… so we are being set goals, we are being set guidelines, we are being set ideas, for example that the language learning takes part outside of class, which don't necessarily work yeah. (Zoe)

Her point here is that importing a curriculum on a branch campus means also importing systems of knowledge and pedagogies requiring students to participate in learning activities that may not fit their culture of learning. More precisely, she feels that foreign curriculum and pedagogies are enforced upon them, without any consideration for their original culture.

The values of international education have been partly shaped by the idea of global citizenship—the idea that individuals should be educated to be open, tolerant, inclusive—in order to intervene on the socio-economical inequalities at local and global levels. However, Michael and William discuss the educational values taught at UNNC as *British* educational values of a responsible, democratic and tolerant citizen.

> A kind of expectation of what a British University system should provide, excellence and expertise in a subject. As much as adding to a certain kind of personality, adding to a certain idea of how to act as an educated citizen, how to act with a perspective towards something bigger. (…) your responsibility towards not only [the] academic community, but also the wider community, and it's as developing certain social skills [such as] to be able to understand arguments, also to be able to hold dissent if there is dissent that cannot be solved, and how to negotiate and solve problems by discussing the argument, by convincing people, and by pretty much focusing on discussion and debates as one way to solve problems that come up… common solutions I would say… this is, rather than learning outcomes, one way to identify what I would say it's the British education. (William)

> In that kind of idea that, you know, they are going to become much more international… to become much more broad … Citizens. I think that all this knowledge is (…) our kids know to be successful in their lives professionally (…), but also [should] be successful to understand the world better and try to be more tolerant with all the cultures and be much more aware [of difference]. (Michael)

Furthermore, at issue is the teachers' awareness that such a definition of citizenship is not the same as in China, and that students who have not been educated according to it can resist it or even interpret it as an attack on their own beliefs. Therefore, it is important for teachers to make it clear that they are not trying to indoctrinate them, only to make them reflect on other countries' cultural discourses. However, the participants also note the different emphasis that students put on rights and obligations and the fact that they enable students to decide on rules, a novel experience for them.

> I was teaching them something which was important [in order] to understand my country culture, [democracy] you know, and then (…) they had to imagine their own country, and they had to think about what rules would apply, so what would what rights would people have. (…). It was interesting that they found it more easy to find stuff which is forbidden then to think about rights. But once they got going, they were very open, modern about the ideas that you could, you know, what could be allowed even something like gay marriage (…) without any difficulties… they just needed to separate it from wanting to influence them. (Zoe)

> I'm very careful about saying, well this is one perspective and this is another perspective, and you know, I'm not telling you which one is right which one is wrong. (Samuel)

> My students setting up rules by forcing them to do role plays, to adopt certain perspectives or positions that are out of discussing a document. (William)

The paradox is that the UNNC campus is not considered as 'international'. At UNNC, the student body is overwhelmingly Chinese, while the educational values are considered 'British' because they stem from a British university curriculum and standards.

> But the fact that we are not in Britain, but we are this case in China. (…) here I don't think it is the same feeling that you will have teaching in the UK, yeah, I mean (…) here they have much more Chinese, so I think… yeah… that makes you feel that they are completely narrow. With this university you are supposed to have much more… Much…Much higher rate of people… people from different backgrounds. (Michael)

The participants define the campus not as international, but as a 'hybrid', because what is taught is not (only) 'localised', but more exactly *limited* according to the British standards and the Chinese socio-cultural expectations.

> I think it's probably a hybrid. I want to say a British university but it… (…) I think the curriculum is kind of like British because, you know, everything we teach comes from the UK, it has to have the seal of approval of UK and all the marks… everything goes back to the UK. So, the final decision is with the UK. But no, it's not… It's not just a British University. So, for example, my textbook is censored. You see what I mean? so in that respect it's not just a British University… we have to ride with the context that is here. (Tiffany)

> Perhaps, an exported British form… (…) the quality manual that also has to be localized and (…) in the end, it's not exactly the same as it was on the UK campus, so somehow we adapt, UNNC needs to adapt, be different [from the UK campus]. (Ken)

> I do think that they [the regulations] are being adjusted to Chinese students. Yeah, the starting point is the British system, but we do things to what Chinese students and Chinese parents expect. (…) It seems to be always a very grey area. (Tania)

> Of course, it is another campus! And it's a... it's a UK campus… it's a Chinese campus, (…) The question is: Should we follow the home university? (Lucy)

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I answered the four secondary questions of this research by analysing the interviews as I matched the codebook with the secondary research questions.

The participants defined the concept of teaching excellence in terms of role and position. Excellence is based on personal traits and ethics, and on professional values defined against the backdrop of the marketisation of the university and the educational choices to be made when teaching students of a different culture. Openness and respect for the students, as well as an awareness of the dignity of the position of the teacher (based on their expertise and power in the classroom), are related to student autonomy, though not as a teaching strategy but as an educational

value. Excellent teachers are therefore aware and respectful of students and their own position in the classroom. They also carefully consider issues related to the changing role of the students in a marketised university, along with the socio-cultural context in which the foreign campus is located.

When considering their agency, the participants carefully define their causal powers, i.e. their own personal traits, dispositions, abilities and expertise that in their opinion enable their agency. Openness, flexibility, social skills, knowledge of technologies, and expertise allow teachers to exert their agency mainly in two contexts: the classroom and, to a minor extent, the department. The primary domains of teacher agency are the modules taught and in the classroom. The main limitations to individual agency are the policy on marking criteria which 'hurts' a particularly important causal power, their expertise, and the restrictions derived from the political context. Like teaching excellence, also teaching agency is mainly confined to the classroom and the strategies used by teachers that they have learnt in postgraduate courses in the UK, the US or in Europe; as with teaching excellence, also for teaching agency the main difficulties come from the teachers' pedagogical values that do not align with the priorities of the marketised university and the socio-political context.

Digging a bit deeper, it is possible to detail the features of the enablers and constrainers of teachers' agency, as the participants define them. In general, the departments are considered as enablers, besides of issues that happened because of what the participants qualified as poor leadership/management. There is a fundamental difference between the Language Centre and the School in that the former is perceived more as a 'collective' based on collaboration and negotiation, and the latter as a group of individuals with different expertise who are unwilling to teach together on the basis of their similarities. In general, the policies are felt as something to which individuals must adapt, or to find a way 'to go around' them, but in general have a positive influence on teachers' professional development and practices. The only policy that causes frustration is the marking criteria. Finally, the political context causes either the pedagogical need for intervening on students' background knowledge, or a constant feeling of insecurity that undermines teachers' tranquility in class.

The final question aimed at understanding participants' definition of international education and whether they would link it with their teaching at UNNC. Their answer is that the campus is a 'hybrid', as different discourses about education are superimposed. While the main educational values—curriculum, autonomy, critical thinking skills, responsible citizenship—remain British, respondents feel that they have been adapted and 'diluted'. In their view, two would be the reasons for that: local context and neoliberalisation of higher education. Firstly, the British educational values have been adapted to what the participants perceive to be the limited understanding and experience of the Chinese students in those values and, more generally, to the local socio-political restrictions. Secondly, the British educational values have been reshaped by the global phenomenon of the marketisation of higher education. Consequently, these interviewees believe that students are mainly seen as customers who bring revenues and so are catered to (e.g. by lowering enrolment criteria or accepting their every request).

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings reported in chapter 5. The two main research questions of this study were:

1. How is the concept of teaching excellence constructed by teachers working on a British university campus in China?
2. What spaces of agency do those teachers identify for themselves when they try to implement their idea of teaching excellence?

My theoretical framework is Critical Realism, and I use Bhaskar's (1979/2008) notion of agency as an intentional act that happens in specific geo-historical coordinates. Agency is possible thanks to individual causal powers (personality traits, individual properties) triggered in specific socio-cultural conditions. Causal powers are triggered, and agentic acts are realised in the individual praxis that is the conjunction of individuals' position in society and their practice as outcome of their values. Baskar's (1993/2008) social cube represents the social/cultural[31] structures shaping society and its institutions, and socio-cultural human praxis as it is located in a specific time and place in relation to those institutions. The answers to my research questions provide discussion on the relation between several important structures:

- teachers' causal powers and agency
- cultural structures such as teaching quality and teaching excellence as constructed in the UK
- cultural globalisation and marketisation of the university

[31] The cultural dimension was added by me.

- the socio-cultural local context in which the branch campus is located

After discussing my interpretation of the findings, I examine some of the limitations of this research.

6.2 Research question 1: How is the concept of teaching excellence constructed by teachers working on a British university campus in China?

In the analysis of the participants' answers, I identified three concepts that helped answer this question. The first is the concept of 'dignity of the role', on which teachers ground a two-folded conception of excellence, defined at both a personal level and a practical one (i.e., teaching strategies). Finally, an important dimension of the participants is the virtual absence of awareness of the origins of policies (either the whole university or the home campus).

6.2.1 The foundation of teacher praxis: the 'dignity of the role'

With respect to excellence, I found that when the participants were asked to give their definition, they immediately turned the question into 'what is an excellent teacher?'. This prompted them to examine their own or their colleagues' practices and values. By trying to define the excellent teacher, the participants focused on the teachers' self and their causal powers. They talked about individual motivation, beliefs, and values; they 'leaped over' and ignored the concept of quality as defined in the literature, i.e. as efficiency, standards, or accountability (Ellis, 2019b). None of the participants ever discussed those concepts or talked about teaching *quality*, though it is part of current debates on teaching in Higher Education. They never cited the Teaching Excellence Framework, for example, even though the branch campus had been involved in the celebration of the 'gold medal' received by the University. Among the participants, only Samuel discusses institutional practices aimed at ensuring quality.

The participants did define excellent teachers as those who believe in student potential, and who are interested in their growth both in terms of personal

transformation and knowledge development. For them, the main qualities of excellent teachers are openness, patience, and respect. Respect is something that must be earned because as teachers they are in a privileged position of authority, and they should use their power responsibly. The participants, however, did not critically examine their power, and I was not able to find reference to the power of 'disciplin[ing] and punish[ing]' that teachers hold in virtue of the assessment practices that are part of institutional teaching.

Probably because the focus of this study was on teachers and not on learners—on praxis as a relation between position and practice—the participants all concentrated on what I call the 'dignity of the role'. The dignity of the role is different from the 'pride of the job' in that it is less about a sense of pride of holding a job, and more a *reverence* for the role one has, in this case reverence for the role of the teacher. Teachers have a privileged position due to the inherently unequal relation between them (owning the knowledge) and learners (wanting the knowledge). Being aware of their privileged position, the participants emphasize the dignity and the responsibility of their role, rather than the power of the asymmetrical relation. One possible explanation of this conviction might be the traditional respect for the role of teachers they developed in their youth and the parallel socialisation in more symmetrical relations with academics. As Entwistle et al. (2000) observe, university teachers are not socialised to teaching but to researching. Therefore, they tend to replicate the teaching models to which they have been exposed. This would also apply to language teachers. In fact, their teacher education frequently happens via master's programmes for teaching a foreign language, which usually focus on teaching strategies and learners' roles, rather than on teacher roles. Thus, the explanation could be that the participants are reproducing the teaching models they experienced, in particular the less authoritarian models from their school life, likely in the 1980s-2000s (see pp. 71-72).

An alternative explanation of 'dignity of the role' focuses instead on the students themselves. As soon as they started teaching, the participants noted with surprise that students regard them as guides and authorities. This put teachers in a 'dignified' position that made them think differently about their roles, and the need to 'earn' students' respect. An example are those participants' initial attempts at being 'liked' by students. They abandoned this approach when they understood that students'

respect was based not on an emotional appreciation, but on being actively guided, at a cost of possible complaints. If this is true, the 'dignity of the role' would be enforced by students onto teachers, thus extending the local culture onto the branch institution. Notably, the group of three Asian teachers (and one European), underscore the Asian components of their definition of excellence as *principled*, embedding the Asian notions of care and respect for authority in with the British focus on individual transformation. An interesting question is whether this 'dignified' position would be given to university teachers in other countries, by students of other cultures. This would open exploration on whether the feeling of 'dignity of the role' is generated by the local culture as it is expressed by students, or by the relationship itself coupled to the teachers' background; or by a mixture of the two.

6.2.2. Shaping students' causal powers and future praxis: Excellence as 'purposeful benevolence'

Another important finding is that, for the participants, excellence as 'dignity of the job' is not based on the teaching performed. I found there was no discussion about teaching strategies or practices, nor of their rationales. Only practical matters such as specific activities and tasks (discussions, debates) were brought up. The participants did not examine the pedagogical grounds of their teaching nor did they relate it to excellence.

Given the possible explanations of the 'dignity of the role' outlined above, and the lack of reflection on pedagogies and teaching strategies, it seems that for the participants, excellence is a matter of what I will call 'purposeful benevolence'. I realise that the term 'benevolence' might be controversial, as it is charged with possible patronising and perhaps authoritarian connotations (Chapman & Withers, 2019). However, I would like to separate the definition of the concept from its social use. According to Livnat (2004):

> [A] benevolent person is a person who tends to care about other human beings, is generally concerned about other people's well-being, and is motivated to perform acts which are aimed at doing good (easing people's suffering, promoting their welfare, etc.). Moreover, the general disposition to perform

> benevolent acts entails going beyond the performance of such acts when opportunities to perform them are obvious (p. 305).

Since the 1990s, Schwarz and colleagues has studied human values from a psychological perspective. In a more recent article, Schwarz et al. (2012) defined benevolence as based on care: the '[p]reservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact' (p. 664).

As this study is about teachers, I prefer to define the term 'benevolence' as a positive attitude towards others, paying attention to others' causal powers as attitudes and properties. Teachers' benevolence is 'purposeful', because it aims at developing students' properties, such as critical thinking and communication skills, self-confidence, and sense of belonging to a community. Consistent with the literature (Barnett, 2016; Collini, 2012; Ramsden, 2003), the participants indicate that the main goal of higher education is to form responsible citizens who will engage in society's betterment.

This includes engendering autonomy in the students, but the participants acknowledged that this is a difficult process, because students do not always feel comfortable or willing to engage. After all, to become autonomous, students need to make the effort of changing themselves, leaving their comfort zones, and producing their own knowledge instead of being delivered one.

To this end, 'purposeful benevolence' is also the result of teachers' work on their own selves. To inspire and support students on this personal journey, teachers must learn how to express their benevolence, and participants discussed three strategies. Firstly, in their view, teachers should avoid putting students under the spot, and learn how to ease embarrassing situations. Secondly, and relatedly, teachers should learn not to take students' silence in class as lack of engagement with them personally but should keep their 'cool' and move swiftly to another student or question. Finally, teachers should establish a personal contact with students so as to gain their attention and trust.

Some of the participants explain these strategies on the grounds of caring for Chinese students' vulnerability in a British teaching system where they are expected to behave differently from how they were taught in their previous school years. Others identify the same needs and use these same strategies with international students, whether Asian or European (Lucy, Samuel). Consequently, purposeful

benevolence does not seem related to the specific students' cultural background. Indeed, teaching/learning is certainly not only a transfer of knowledge but a personal and intellectual relation, and Maslow (1954/1970) demonstrated how emotional safety is one of the foundations of human cognitive development and self-actualisation.

However, the experience of my participants seems to indicate an imbalance towards emotional care. On the one hand, teachers want to form autonomous, responsible and critical citizens while on the other, their focus on the personal dimension of the relationship may form individuals lacking resilience. This not only infantilises the university (Furedi, 2017), but the entire society. Purposeful benevolence may also be used as a social mechanism that creates infantile but skilled citizens. Once graduated, university students will concentrate on their emotional wellbeing, protect their comfort zones, and privilege harmony and agreement over debate and conflict, guaranteeing a peaceful society. At the same time, they will become skilled and competent enough to fulfil an active role on the global market that flourishes in such a peaceful society. To summarise, purposeful benevolence does not match up with the marketised university's definitions of quality and excellence as based on standards and accountability, permitting teachers to ignore any definition of good teaching based on pedagogies and teaching strategies. However, it may also be used to appease today's student-customers, support the financial interests of neoliberal and marketised higher education, and enable the shaping of future docile citizens and productive workers.

6.2.3 Doing excellence without thinking excellence

As observed in the previous section, the participants did not deeply examine their teaching practices or their pedagogical rationales. What they describe are practices based on group work and dialogues, but there is no discussion of learning theories such as discovery learning, interactive learning, or concepts such as student autonomy or centeredness, which are widely debated in Higher Education (Becker & Denicolo, 2013; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Campbell & Norton, 2007; Light & Cox, 2001). Furthermore, they do not discuss how they help students become familiar with their teaching strategies, although they are aware that for Chinese students, they represent a novelty (Zoe, Michael). In the literature about teaching in Higher

Education, those strategies are considered excellent tools to develop students' independent and critical thinking (Ramsden, 2003). Except for Zoe, Lucy, and in part Elly, the participants show no reflection on their pedagogical assumptions. They also do not consider their origins and their purposes, nor analyse how their teaching strategies relate to the educational goals they want to reach. Furthermore, they do not interrogate themselves on the perceptions and understandings of students from different cultural backgrounds and with different previous learning experience. To an extent, their teaching is highly standardised as the practices of all participants are the same and have the same rationales and objectives. This standardisation is not discussed but endorsed as an expression of Western culture that is supposed to be taught on their campus.

A further issue is that the Western culture is not as homogenous as it seems, and the university pedagogies and ideas of excellence differ, as Emma, Zoe, Ken and William briefly mention. There are differences between the British skill-based teaching and the continental Europe knowledge-based teaching. Only William discusses those and tries to integrate them; the other participants use teaching strategies originated in skill-based contexts (such as the communicative or the task-based approaches) and criticise the lack of knowledge-based requirements. In a university that claims to be global, and on a campus that wants to be international, a homogeneous pedagogical culture is not only imposed on students, but also on teachers.

Similarly, participants did not discuss the curricula and syllabi they teach. They teach curricula imported directly from the home School in the UK (as Samuel explains) or shaped by the Common European Framework of Languages. They teach these to students who have a different background, knowledge and expectations from students in the Western paradigm. Certainly, it is exactly the goal of a branch campus to bring foreign curricula into another cultural system, and students who enrolled in a branch campus signed on to learn in this system. However, as teachers demonstrated awareness of the students' specific cultural background, I thought they might discuss matters such as cultural imperialism, localisation/decolonisation or internationalisation of the curriculum.

I did not ask questions on those topics because, as an insider and colleague of the participants, I wanted to avoid the risk of ritual answers. The questions I asked about

department, campus, university, and/or national policies influencing their teaching aimed at introducing these themes and exploring their reflections on these policies. However, almost all participants showed a limited knowledge of or interest in those policies, less so in their rationales and purposes. It was difficult for them to name policies, discuss their objectives, and the possible changes they would bring in their teaching. Aside from Samuel, they were in general unable to pinpoint policy origins (from university or faculty). Finally, when a policy was considered, such as the marking criteria, it was considered only from the personal point of view: a constraint on the teacher. The participants did not critically examine policies, or see them from the perspective of either students or the university's goals[32]. In a general sense, they did not seem aware of the discursive structures that, by way of rules and laws (policies) shape the social structures in which their teaching is located.

Similarly, participants were also consistent in only discussing their role as classroom teachers or individual academic tutorials. However, most of them also have administrative roles within the university. Notably, they made no connections among their various roles, even though these may impact their teaching through assessment, pastoral care, curriculum alignment, or available technology.

To sum up, the literature about academics abroad explores how teaching selves are challenged and led to change through a work of critical self-reflection. Becoming transnational (Bookman, 2020), cosmopolitan (Sanderson, 2011), or intercultural learners (Leask, 2007) challenges identities (Britez, 2014), and demands questioning of one's own pedagogy. However, the participants of this study only focused on micro-dimensions of their experience, such as student behavior, omitting relation to the institution and the macro-social structures.

Perhaps given the isolation of the branch campus, from both the local context and its Western 'home', the participants are not aware of the criticism received by internationalised institutions as potentially neo-imperialist or disrespectful of cultural difference. Instead, they retained their practices as they had developed them in other contexts. The similarity of their teaching practices and their perceived rationales indicate a two-layered homogenisation of teaching culture. On one layer, students are exposed to similar teaching practices across disciplines, but different

[32] Bloxham (2009; Bloxham et al., 2016) has shown how assessment criteria are (not) used by markers to assess work, and other scholars (e.g. Rust et al., 2003, Bloxam & West, 2004) demonstrated how their use actually helps students understand university expectations.

from those they have experienced in the past; on another, teachers use teaching strategies that reveal a homogenisation of pedagogy, which does not consider the different pedagogies of academics from different cultures. The result is silence on pedagogy and homogenisation of teaching.

6.3 Research question 2: What spaces of agency do those teachers identify for themselves when they try to implement their idea of teaching excellence?

Bhaskar (1979/1998) defines agency as intentionality and details its main features: what individuals intend to do, whether they are aware of that, and have the power to realise it, whether the intended outcomes become reality and their consequences were intended by the subjects. According to this definition, I argue that the participants discussed not only the activities through which they realised their agency, but also their causal powers that made their agency possible. Hence, the answer to this question will include a reflection on the causal powers the participants identify as contributing to their agency, on the geo-temporal position of their agency, and its relational dimension.

6.3.1 Static causal powers

Participants' reflection on their own agency in implementing their ideas of teaching excellence always started from analysing those features of their personalities or experiences that in their view make such agency possible. These causal powers are mainly related to personal traits: being open, tolerant, respectful, caring, responsive and transparent; having skills such as being well organised, able to manage time, use technologies for learning, and make a good use of physical 'presence' such as voice or body language.

Intellectual traits and practical skills are also important. Language tutors mention curiosity and the willingness to continue learning to support students' independent learning. They also stress the importance of having the financial possibility to afford a master's degree in teaching a foreign language, thanks either to family support or to their own savings. The School participants mention their academic expertise as

the first causal power triggering their agency in implementing teaching excellence. In their view, learning to teach their area expertise allows them to take some initiatives in teaching, not only by modifying a module syllabus or changing the learning resources, but also by organising learning activities that will specifically allow students to own the discipline, such as role plays or debates.

Interestingly, except for Tania and Samuel, the other participants do not discuss the experience and mind-set acquired during their previous experiences of teaching (and even doing part of their studies) abroad. Tania clearly states that having lived and studied abroad probably gave her the enthusiasm to move to China when she was offered the job. Samuel discusses his teaching experience in a Chinese secondary school which shaped his teaching philosophy as one based on mutual respect. As for the present experience, none of the participants mention those features discussed by other scholars when reflecting on teachers' identities in international settings, such as the development of multicultural skills or a sensitivity for cultural differences, of a more cosmopolitan or globalised identity or even, following Bookman (2020), a transnational identity.

Participants' perceptions of their own causal powers were linked either to their personality or their experience before they came to China. There was no reflection on whether or how other causal powers came to the fore because of being a teacher on a branch campus and in a foreign country. The literature on teaching abroad stresses how teachers feel challenged in their beliefs and come to question themselves (Benitez, 2014). However, most of my participants did not seem to have yet reached this phase. In brief, they seemed aware only of the causal powers that inherent to their own personality; they did not discuss the possible emergence of new or different causal powers in the current experience, or the socio-cultural structures they are immersed in, whether those of the host country or the branch campus.

6.3.2 The agency for excellence in teaching: A 'here-and-now' agency

The participants in this study have a situated agency in implementing teaching excellence. Teachers can make their agentic choices in their classroom regarding both syllabus and teaching strategies, or in their offices, when students consult them about their future choices or inquire about the discipline. When teaching in the

classroom, the participants feel they have agency, and this agency matches up with, for instance, Bhaskar's definition. Teachers do have intentions of including their own expert knowledge in syllabi, and they have been able to do so. While the case of Lucy shows that agency is fragile, in general teachers retain some level of agentic power in syllabus design and teaching strategies. In the classroom, they can use those strategies that for them evince excellence, e.g. task-based teaching and role play, for reaching their educational goals. The participants do not, however, identify other spaces of agency for themselves.

Their ideas of teaching being somehow narrowly limited to the classroom, the teachers do not see possible spaces of agency outside of it. William mentions the idea that there might be different areas of agency, but he identifies only discussing students' exchange abroad experience. There is little or no awareness of other possible areas of teaching outside of the classroom and/or the office. Topics such as learning support, uses of learning technologies, assessment, or curriculum development were not critiqued nor acted upon as the exercise of individual agency. The only policy discussed and criticised (the one about marking criteria) did not spark a reflection or possible agentic action for changing it, except for Emma.

Furthermore, the confusion between university and campus policies suggests that participants have only a superficial knowledge of the details and processes that brought about policies. Perhaps the lack of participation in policy building is related to a lack of knowledge of the structural context and the different goals that drive the university system, and of the actual possibilities of exerting individual agency and having a real impact on them. Alternatively, it could be that as they do not feel they might have agency outside the immediate teaching practices, the participants do not develop an interest in these structures, and do not learn how they function and can be changed.

Participants' agency is not only limited spatially, but also temporally. Their reflection on their agency is in the 'present tense'. Except for Tania and Lucy, and despite a specific question on that, there is no reflection on a possible 'history' of participants' agency. Tania mentions growing agency as related to her professionalization, Lucy discusses her changing agency as broadening its focus from the classroom to pedagogy and assessment of the language, to the Language Centre. The other participants, however, do not seem interested in reflecting on

whether and how their agency might have changed since arriving to campus. Similarly, there is no discussion of possible futures. Perhaps given the lack of awareness of the existence of multiple potential areas of agency outside the classroom, they do not identify possible changes they can implement in the educational socio-cultural structures of the branch campus. In this study, only the present was acknowledged by the participants. To conclude, while the literature emphasises the opportunities for experimentation and creation on branch campuses, the participants in this study seem to identify spaces of agency that are limited in space, time, and scope.

For Archer (2003), a self becomes agent when the causal powers emerge from their relationship with the material, cultural, and social structures. This, in her view, happens via internal conversations that allow the self to engage with these structures (Archer, 2003). However, for my participants, their agency is limited to the physical space they inhabit (classroom, office) and the present time. This limits their possibility to articulate their relationship with the social and cultural structures with which they are in contact, or different tenses of action, in particular the future. Altbach and Yudkevich (2017) note that staff working in countries of which they do not speak the language, have difficulties in understanding the local *and* university culture, which affects their engagement in the university. This could be truer for staff who not only work in a country where they do not speak the language and know the culture, but also who did not know the university academic culture, having no previous experience in a British university. When they arrived at the branch campus, they were exposed for the first time to both British and Chinese educational systems, and the complexity of this combination could have been confusing and frustrating. As Tania says: '[it is] a very grey area. What is currently applied, is this the British system or is it Chinese law [?]'. Engaging with two different systems, both unknown and one of them even opaque because of the language and the cultural distance, could just be too difficult or even intimidating.

6.3.3. One-person agency

Individual agency is exerted within social structures and according to one's own praxis. Bhaskar's definition of agency also includes an evaluation of the outcomes

of agentic actions and of their intended consequences. In other words, one's own agency is also in relation with other individuals' praxis, and shaped by social structures. When social structures and systems change, individual praxis also changes (Bhaskar, 1979/1998). Therefore, when speaking about classroom teaching, student praxis is also involved: to what extent and how did it change? The answer to this question is that while the participants clearly identify a focus, a space, and a time for their agentic action, they do not evaluate the impact of their agency.

The participants expressed explicit educational goals. For example, Ken, as a foreign language teacher, wants his students to become ambassadors for their language of study. Lucy wants her students to appreciate the beauty of the culture, while Emma wants them to be able speak the language. William wants his students to develop a specific analytical mindset. However, the teachers do not evaluate the impact of their agentic action on their students, they do not reflect much on whether their agency produced the outcomes they pursued with their teaching. Only Samuel refers to students whose marks rose because of an improvement in their language and critical thinking skills.

As we saw in the previous section, the participants define teaching excellence in terms of the relationship they have with students. However, when analysing those relationships, students are not mentioned as agents or co-agents in the classroom, except by Zoe and Lucy, and partly by Elly. Even when students manifest their agency openly and explicitly, their behavior is not interpreted in those terms. Tiffany, in whose class students twisted the topic of a debate into totally different matter, did not read the sudden change in these terms. She admits that she was only able to 'talk over' students because of her surprise and fear, and that she was unable to integrate that agency into her teaching. On the other hand, Zoe and Lucy explicitly discuss the role of students' agency in their classroom, the need to accept that students may engage with their studies in ways which are unexpected, or even not approved, and that need to be accepted. Elly thinks that her agentic role must become less prominent. Therefore, she involves native speaker students in her classes, to allow her students to express themselves more freely with peers. Zoe and Lucy try to integrate their agency with students' agency not only in terms of 'acceptance' but also more actively. They explain their teaching philosophy and the rationale of their decisions to students, and ask for their feedback so as to integrate

students' interests with their own. Certainly, they specify that cultural differences and personality traits between students and teachers cannot be neglected. Neither can it be the modules' aims and the individual students *over* the student group's priorities. Zoe, Lucy and Elly are exceptions, as they are the only participants who try to take into account students' agency and praxis in their teaching in order to improve the learning experience.

As participants do not recognise spaces of agency outside the classroom at campus/university level, they identify neither other individuals' agency nor their praxis. Samuel and Lucy mention their line managers as possible (Samuel) or real (Lucy) constraints on their agency as they exert their own praxis. William cites his colleagues, whose expertise and praxis are different from his own, and with whom he does not wish to engage. Michael states that the more one wants to do, the more one's agency will be limited by others' agency, while Emma is the only one who gives her agency a relational dimension, when she states that colleagues should accept that sometimes they do not 'win' but need to compromise. Students and staff build a network of praxis—the social structure of the university as a community of learners and teachers. Each of these praxes express intentional agency, and this is how students and staff agencies build a network of mutually influencing agencies. Except for Zoe, Lucy and Elly (inside the classroom) and for Emma (outside the classroom), it seems that the participants rarely consider others as agents. Consequently, they do not seem aware of how their own agency could (or does) influence others' praxes and agencies.

Archer's (2003) discussion of reflexivity on social structures and one's own position within them may help explain the reduced space for agency the participants see for themselves as related to (or consequent of) their lack of knowledge on the university's functions. Not knowing the social structures and their different layers, the participants may not be able to position themselves, articulate their goals, or think strategically about their actions.

Another consequence of the unawareness of praxis is the *a-relational* nature of participants' agency. Teachers do not consider how their praxis is connected to others' (students, colleagues, other staff). It seems they regard their agency mainly as an individual feature rather than a 'social' one influencing others' agency and praxes, with potential to change social structures.

6.4 The missing piece: The branch campus culture

When examining Bhaskar's social cube (pp. 18-20), I was surprised to notice that the social structures, the institutions and the individual praxes were not linked by the cultural structures—the meanings and discourses that shape individual praxis within specific/local structures. By contrast, the participants in this study are indeed aware of the cultural structures shaping the contemporary university and this campus; internationalisation, marketisation and customerisation of the university were all discussed in the interviews. However, they did not discuss the cultural discourses of the branch campus as institutional policies. Policies are the norms that regulate the roles and practices of individuals, and as such, in David Scott's (2010) terms, they are *institutional and systemic structures*. Participants' ignorance of and lack of engagement with these show their ignorance about the culture of the institution. Such ignorance may explain the lack of awareness of their own position in the system (and expected practice), and their limited conception of agency in implementing teaching excellence. Even the participants' conception of excellence as an individual trait of teachers can be related to an ignorance of the institutional and systemic structures characterising this university. This is evident in their limited reference to disciplinary knowledge and skill requirements, as well as lack of discussion of pedagogical theories or ideological choices.

When I prepared the questions for interview, I thought that the participants would have discussed the policies at length, and that by doing so they would have positioned themselves in relation to the concept of teaching excellence and the characteristics of the campus. My final interview question asked about how international this campus was meant to offer an opportunity to summarize their views of the nature of a branch campus and its correlation with the home campus, and perhaps even provide a definition of internationalisation. However, perhaps because the participants did not acknowledge the policies nor reflected on pedagogies as situate specific cultural space of the branch campus, the question about the campus became an explorative one, an opportunity for them to reflect on the branch campus itself. In this reflection, they connected back to their answers about the limitations of their agency as related to the socio-political context. This was surprising for me as I had never reflected on the extent of self-censorship on teaching (even my own), and its impact on the design and delivery of classes.

The culture of a campus is not only built on institutional and systemic structures, it is also made up of coherent discourses about education and pedagogy that in this case could possibly consider the transnational nature of a branch campus. However, this dimension is also missing from the participants' discussion.

For them, the branch campus is a 'hybrid'; it does not provide a British education, nor a Chinese education, nor even an international education. It provides some British education, whose main features are critical thinking skills, emphasis on the application of knowledge rather than knowledge itself, and active citizenship as engagement in the common good through debate. However, it is not completely a British education[33] because of the limitations to information and of free criticism. Equally, the education provided is not purely Chinese because of the emphasis on personal and critical engagement in class and with the teacher. On the other hand, the branch campus is not international mainly for two reasons. The curriculum is essentially British, and possibly difficult to implement other cultures; the composition of the staff body is quite diverse, but the student body is almost homogeneously Chinese.

The participants also explain how they feel pressured to simplify and dilute the British curriculum to make sure that students understand at least the basic knowledge. The branch campus is therefore not creating a *new* type of education but providing an abridged version of British educational values and content; this to students whose cultural background is not only very different in terms of actual knowledge and skills, but also of learning expectations and attitudes towards teachers. In this context, it seems difficult for teaching excellence, as defined as innovation, active learning, life-long learning, and development of critical thinking skills (Ramsden, 2003), to find its own footing.

A specific dimension of this campus is also the uncertainty regarding students' attitudes towards teachers. The participants point out two opposite features. They think that although Chinese students see their teachers as guides in an authoritative position, they also 'watch' their teachers, by recording their words, and teachers feel vulnerable when what they say may seem 'going against' China. The issue the participants underline is that what is considered to be 'going against' China is

[33] This study also raises questions of what a 'true' British education would be and how it could be taught and by whom, that could not be addressed here.

unpredictable, and this keeps them in a state of alarmed vigilance and self-consciousness.

In conclusion, the branch campus is perceived as an educational hybrid, in which policies and institutional discourses are not spelled out, and educational values and pedagogical approaches are neither defined as 'international' nor adapted to the students' background. Additionally, it is perceived as an unpredictable if not a dangerous place, wherein a teacher's position is unstable. These two characteristics may also be a reason why teachers do not understand (or even consider and engage with) the policies shaping their positions and practices, and consequently limit their idea of teaching excellence and their agency when trying to implement it.

Certainly, there might be other possible explanations of the fact that teachers on this branch campus seem to have a limited conception of 'teaching' and a limited perception of their agency. I am not certain whether they are alternatives to those I have discussed above, or if they complement them. As noted in Chapter 5, for example, the participants are enthusiastic to come to China, but did not reflect on the transnational nature of this campus, which they characterised as a British campus (Elly, Ken, Michael, William, Tiffany, Emma). Their interest was in China, not in the educational setting in which they were going to teach. Another factor that could have played a role in the interviews' limited agentic engagement with the campus educational and social structures could be that they plan to stay only temporarily, and not build their career here[34].

The actual teachers' position-practice systems and related agency thus appears multi-layered. The fact that institutional and educational structures on the branch campus are perceived as ill-defined and students' culture as unpredictable might be only one layer of the possible explanation of the limited staff's agency in thinking and implementing teaching excellence on the branch campus.

[34] Three years after the interviews, five out of ten participants have left, and their decision was made prior to Covid-19.

6.5 Limitations of this study

In this study there are three methodological limitations and one conceptual limitation.

The first methodological limitation is related to the reliability of the study. The sample was an opportunity sample. There were not enough participants from one school/department to research its transformation on a branch campus, so I decided to include the participants from the Language Centre. In my view the sample I collected is sufficient because it comprises only language tutors and lecturers. These are individuals who perhaps could articulating their agency, but had not demonstrated their success in using it. Had I opened the sample to all staff of the faculty, I possibly would have had associate professors or professors, individuals who are at a different stage in their academic agency. I could have opened the study only to associate professors and professors that had been promoted while working on this campus, and this would have allowed me to identify what specific mechanisms allow for agentic action on a branch campus. However, as I was interested in the conditions that allowed agency to emerge, language tutors and lecturers seemed to me a suitable choice.

A second methodological limitation is related to the significance of the data gathered through the interviews. I could have followed Seidman's (2006) three-interview series logic, but on the one hand, I do not think that three interviews would have been achievable; academics live busy lives and can be protective of their time. On the other hand, as with longitudinal studies, it is likely that some individuals might withdraw. This would make comparisons of the three sets with a small group problematic. Social research is always a compromise between the ideal and the practical. Because the choice of interviewing is due to my attempt at capturing the 'meaning' that participants attach to their experience, I also think that the best data validation is the one given by the participants themselves. I tried to validate the interviews firstly by offering participants the opportunity to re-read their interview, but only one did so and confirmed. Consequently, I asked all participants to read the Results chapter and confirm the contextualisations and interpretations I had made. All participants were happy with how I contextualised and interpreted their words; two participants asked for changes in the word choice

of the sentences from their interviews I quoted, and one participant added further thoughts on a paragraph I quoted from his interview.

A third methodological limitation is that, being myself part of the staff, my presence influenced both my interviewing style at the beginning of the project, and in some cases the topics the participants discussed with me. Mostly in the first two interviews (Zoe and Emma) I was afraid of exploring what Seidman (2006) calls the 'troubled waters' (p. 108), because I did not want to put colleagues in what could be an awkward or uncertain situation. However, during the interviews, Zoe and Emma actually insisted in analysing difficult experiences. At that moment I interpreted that decision as a way to send *me* a particular message. However, when analysing the participants, I realised that those episodes were crucial for understanding their experience on campus. The point is that I had thought that my being an insider would have caused issues for the participants, I did not think that it would be an issue for me as an interviewer. During the process I learnt to ask more challenging questions and to support the participants during their analysis of some difficult episodes. Certainly, in some interviews there were attempts to meet my perceived expectations in matters of teaching with direct references to my various roles. I had expected this to happen, and I just let the participants complete their reasoning and then redirect their reflection onto the main topic of my study.

The second type of limitations are conceptual. In this research I have made explicit the relationship between social structures such as internationalisation, marketisation and customerisation of the university, the (lack of) knowledge of the branch campus cultural structure, and individual agency and position-practice, i.e. the elements of Bhaskar's (1993/2008) social cube that are at play on a branch campus. However, I was not able to make explicit the *lamina* that constitute the individual position-practice as *structuratum.* With the help of the existing literature, I was able to speculate on the existence of other levels of possible explanation for the lack of extra-classroom agency, such as the lack of reflection on the pedagogical implication of moving to a transnational campus rather than merely a foreign country. To explore this dimension further, I should have examined participants' understanding of internationalisation and transnational institutions rather than their experience of those. Furthermore, I could have also looked at what is taught about transnational education in taught postgraduate courses (Master's courses, PhD

training) that academics may have accessed. The other level of explanation, the role of teaching abroad in modern academic career trajectories, is an even broader topic, as it is linked to the globalisation of labor and the development of knowledge economy.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed answers to my primary research questions of this study, with some discussion on the limitations of their validity.

The ten participants of this research do not construct the concept of teaching excellence in terms of pedagogy or policies that have been affecting contemporary higher education institutions. Student centeredness, interactive teaching, learning as discovery or knowledge construction, assessment for learning—in a single phrase, the current theories of teaching—are not owned or criticised by them. The same applies to the policies that might influence their teaching practices. The British Teaching Excellence Framework is not mentioned, and the Common European Framework of Languages is mentioned only once. University policies such as the 'Moodle mandate' (on the use of technology for teaching), the Extenuating Circumstances policy (for assessment), or the Peer observation policy (for teachers' professional development), are not a matter of discussion or deep analysis. The concept of excellence, and the excellent practices participants discuss are not positioned in a theoretical or socio-cultural landscape; they are conceptualised as *personal*, in terms of their individual praxis, as a position-practice system. The position, the role the participants perform, is shaped by the concept of the 'dignity of the role'. Being respected as a teacher is an honor and a privilege to be earned on a daily basis. Practice, as acts of teaching, is characterised by what I termed 'purposeful benevolence'—a tolerant and open attitude embraced by the teacher. While the teachers' praxis is related to the students' cultural background and conceptions of learning, the participants (except for Samuel and William), do not articulate those as related to macro-social structures such as internationalisation of the university, or the consequences of globalisation on Higher Education.

This circumscribed conception of their individual praxis is accompanied by a limited sense of agency in teaching. Although the participants analyse their causal powers, and are aware of how these influence their agency, they see their agentic action limited in terms of space (the classroom) and time (the present). The participants have a *personal* conception of agency, as expressed in the students' and teacher's actions in the classroom. The participants' position-practice does not seem situated in university socio-cultural structures that they can clearly analyse and which they can influence and transform with their agentic actions, either at branch campus or university (tri-campus) level. However, two dimensions that I had not considered did emerge from the interviews. The first is the lack of clarity about the origins—whether British, Chinese, both—of the current policies enacted at campus level. The second one is the participants' own feeling of insecurity due to both the socio-political context and the perceived ambivalence of the students towards the teachers.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This research focused on how teachers who work on a British university branch campus identify agency for themselves when trying to implement their idea of teaching excellence. The ten teachers I interviewed (three lecturers and seven language tutors) discussed their ideas and practices of excellence in teaching, the spaces for agency they identify for themselves, and their understanding of education as it is provided on the branch campus. The semi-structured interviews were conducted between the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018. I focused on the meaning that participants gave to their teaching experiences, and on their explanations of their experiences and feelings. The interviews were transcribed with a software, checked by a professional transcriber, and reviewed by me. I then followed the coding procedure outlined by Schreier (2012 and 2014) in her work on Qualitative Content Analysis and added one step to her procedure. The Results chapter of this thesis was reviewed by the interviewees to strengthen the validity of my interpretation.

The philosophical framework of this study is Critical Realism, as it has been theorized by Bhaskar in the *Possibility of naturalism* (1979/1998) and *Dialectic. The pulse of freedom* (1993/2008); it also takes into consideration Archer's work on agency and the works by David Scott and Bhaskar (2015) on education and by Sharar (2016) on pedagogy in Higher Education. Bhaskar (1979/1998) defines agency as an intentional action executed by subjects whose causal powers (dispositions, traits, properties) have been triggered by and during their interactions with social structures. Subjects' relationships with each other constitute the society in which interactions occur, and they are implemented through their praxis, i.e. their position (role and functions and related values) and practices, as they are realized within social systems. The social world is layered and comprises the *empirical* layer (the social events we perceive), the *actual* layer (the social structures) and the *real*

layer (with the mechanisms that we cannot perceive directly). Society, specific structures and social objects such as a university, as well individuals are also layered. They are made of a physical layer, psychological layers (the individuals), social layers, cultural layers, normative layers (Scott, D. & Bhaskar, 2015).

Bhaskar's (1979/1998) individual praxis is relational because it interacts with other praxes, and both Bhaskar (1979/1998) and Archer (2005) insist on its temporal dimension. Although time and space are coordinates of social events, the academics interviewed in this study did not discuss the temporal dimension of their experience, and rarely did they sketch the transformation of their agentic practice through time. Thus, their reflection about agency is limited to the here-and-now. Instead, they discuss 'space' as a crucial dimension of their experience — the campus as social space, and classrooms and offices as physical spaces.

7.2 The campus as a cultural space

Discussing teaching on a branch campus brought about an analysis of different socio-cultural structures whose interplay influences the understanding of the campus as a cultural space. Globalisation as the expansion of markets at world level, and neoliberalism as an ideological driver of the marketisation of education are two of the structures shaping the internationalisation of higher education, and the creation of branch campuses abroad. Latouche (1989/1992) and Genovese (1995) discuss three cultural layers of globalization as a structure: the homogenization of culture, the relentless drive of modernization and innovation, and what Genovese (1995) calls 'massified individualism'. The influence and imposition of neoliberalism in education has led to demands for accountability of universities and the customerisation of education (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). They have also introduced the concepts of quality and excellence into the realm of education. In neoliberal terms, quality consists in meeting standards expected by customers, while excellence means being able to relentlessly improve to be and keep being the 'best'. Quality and excellence have been conflated and merged, and what is expected is that teachers and universities deliver excellence as a standard, are able

to demonstrate they do so and 'win' in the competition with other universities and teachers. However, this idea of excellence is not shared by all academics. Research shows that many of them continue to define excellence in pedagogical terms. Academics' ideal of an excellent teacher is someone knowledgeable and able to engage and inspire students, so they become able to understand themselves and the world through critical self-understanding (Scott, D. & Bhaskar, 2015). The purpose of such educators would be to help students become able to make their own choices, to communicate with others, and solve problems; in a word, to become responsible citizens (Collini, 2012; Ramsden, 2003; Wood & Su, 2017).

Globalisation has also brought about the creation of branch campuses: the offering of curricula and programmes created in a university to students living in another country. The pedagogies and ideas of excellence implied in those curricula and programmes are usually shaped by Western values (Leask, 2015), but the students who learn at those campuses have a cultural background, and different expectations about excellent learning and teaching. How this 'bifurcated' concept of excellence, as it is defined by Western universities and academics one the one hand, and by their students on the other, is then elaborated and practiced by teachers working on campuses in which the student body has a different culture?

In her work on the conditions that let new pedagogies emerge in Higher Education, Sharar (2016) shows how academics' awareness of the nature and complexity of socio-cultural structures allows them to exert their teaching agency and implement new pedagogies. Perhaps the main result of my own study is that academics on this branch campus were not able to articulate the complexity of the socio-cultural structures that might be at work on campus. However, they revealed the existence of a specific reason for this inability: the converging 'grey area' of the university- and campus-level decisions, and the British and Chinese educational policies and expectations. Policies and decisions that are related to British national requirements in Higher Education (such as disciplinary benchmarks or marking criteria), that are devised and validated at tri-campus level (such as the Moodle mandate), or that are requirements of Chinese laws are unknown to the teachers in this study. Additionally, the participants share a sense of personal insecurity, arising from Chinese law, that may influence what can and cannot be taught.

In Bhaskar's (1979/1998) praxis as position-practice system, *position* is the role individuals have in the society (e.g. university teacher) and its attributes, largely determined by the cultural structures; *practice* defines the actions enacted. Participants in this research define excellent teaching not as a practice, but as a role, as being excellent teachers. In their views, excellent teachers are those who firmly believe in the 'dignity of their role' and outline that dignity in terms of both respecting the students and deserving their respect. The second dimension of the role is 'purposeful benevolence', having a positive and caring attitude towards students so to be able to inspire them and educate them according to those values that they believe are distinctive of British education.

The participants define the campus as a 'hybrid' wherein teaching is related to its British origins, and mainly consists in implementing a British curriculum entailing 'British' pedagogies. The participants think that it is precisely their job to teach this curriculum to Chinese students who do not yet have the cultural background, the intellectual tools, and the language skills to absorb these pedagogies *critically*. The *international* outlook and roots in the Chinese context mentioned in the university strategy are not discussed in depth by the participants, although questions on university policies had been asked. Only one European participant and the three Asian participants explicitly examine their attempt to merge British and Asian approaches to student-centeredness, and to teaching to adapt the British curriculum and pedagogical practices to the culture of their students.

In conclusion, the participants do not define the branch campus as a specific, international cultural space, since they do not distinguish the policies and the pedagogies that could characterize teaching in such a space.

7.3 The physical spaces: Classrooms and offices

The participants offer only a weak definition of branch campus culture, focusing on teaching excellence as it happens in the classroom and in their offices. Teaching is only explained in terms of practices performed in the classrooms or in academic tutorials in offices. These practices are quite similar, independently of the discipline

taught, and centred on communication skills, critical thinking, and application of knowledge. However, the participants do not establish precise connections between their specific practices and pedagogical approaches or ideas about education. Similarly, they do not explore the nexus between their own and students' cultures of learning and expectations as they might emerge from student participation and behavior in class.

Teachers' relationship with their students is ambivalent. On the one hand, teachers want to engage with them in a relationship shaped by openness, trust and respect, but on the other, they are afraid of them, as they may misunderstand or misconstrue their teaching and report them to the authorities. Teachers in the classroom are therefore very cautious and self-conscious. When conflicts arouse between students which risked entering in political disagreements, their 'instinctive' course of action was to use the power inherent their role to stop the discussion.

Classroom teaching is shaped by curriculum, the content taught and the discipline-specific/transferable skills developed, the educational and disciplinary aims, and the assessment format and expected performance. More generally, the curriculum is influenced by extra-curricular activities and by society's and experts' expectations about the discipline (Leask, 2015). None of these elements are discussed by the participants, and although they have responsibilities in these areas, they do not discuss them as areas related to teaching or in which they could have agency. In a word, the participants only feel that their position and practice as teachers are located in the classrooms and their offices, and that these are the only physical spaces in which they have enough agency to implement their idea of teaching excellence.

7.4 Recommendations: Becoming transnational

Despite the limitations highlighted in the previous chapter, this research has shown that questions about teaching excellence (whatever its definition might be) and teaching agency on a branch campus reveal a position-based definition of excellence and a perception of a limited agency.

A position-based definition of excellence allows teachers to relate their work as educators with the self-transformation that learning requires of students. The question then is whether teachers on a transnational campus could have the same educational expectations that they would have elsewhere. If the answer is no, then the question becomes one of how teaching excellence can become *transnational* teaching excellence, and what a transnational praxis would be like. Further research is thus needed to explore whether there are definitions and practices of transnational position-practice systems already articulated by teachers on branch campuses, and how and whether they can be taught to teachers new to the transnational experience. Perhaps selecting teachers who have longer experience of teaching on a branch campus could be a first step, as well as exposing them to definitions of transnational teacher identities and transnational teaching pedagogies to encourage their reflection specifically on the transnational component of their roles and practices.

Important layers of social structures are the institutional and systemic structures (Scott, D., 2010), the laws, policies and rules that ultimately shape the social objects (such as a campus), the events and praxes of agents. There are precise definitions of branch campuses in terms of who is responsible for the curriculum and the teaching (see Knight & McNamara, 2017), but I argue that it could help better understand the teaching experience on a branch campus if we used a critical realist framework and consider its *empirical* and *actual* domains[35]. The *empirical* layer of the branch campus consists of the curriculum, all the learning activities, and the policies. The *actual* are the structures: the local society's expectations and laws, the campus' home country expectations and values about education, the disciplinary and pedagogical values underlying the curriculum, and the student and teacher cultures.

In critical realist terms, these are all layers of the socio-cultural structures shaping the campus as overlapping and sometimes conflicting discourses. As I am interested in teaching, I would like to deepen my understanding of how the university's home country and host country's pedagogical aims and values intersect on a branch campus and whether they merely overlap or in fact become entangled in precise ways. I am convinced that studying how this happens or does not happen can help

[35] Empirical is the domain of the phenomena we perceive, actual is the domain of the structures that produce them (see p. 18 of this study).

justify the existence of the branch campus from an educational point of view, as an embodiment of the internationalisation of higher education.

Another strand of potential research is given by the two dimensions I have identified in the teacher position, namely the 'dignity of the role' and the 'purposeful benevolence'. These two concepts will need further elaboration. For instance, how is the dignity of the role related to the ethical responsibility of leading students to self-transformation? And how is it related to the power inherent to the teacher's position and its possible uses and misuses? Regarding the 'purposeful benevolence' I am wondering how the concept of benevolence is related to the rise of so-called therapeutic culture (Furedi, 2004, 2017, 2021; Lasch, 1979, 1984), and the decline of resilience and tolerance for failure (Sennett, 1998) in the West, and its potential consequences on students' development of their own praxes as active adult members of the society. These two concepts are relevant for an elaboration of a transnational pedagogy as they imply definitions of the teachers' roles, practices, and purposes that can conflict or accord with the educational values of the countries in which Western branch campuses are located.

7.5 Contribution to the field

I would like to conclude this study with a reflection on the contributions that I think it makes to the academic community. These contributions are three, and they are in the topics of internationalisation of Higher Education, Critical Realism, and Qualitative Content Analysis.

My reflection on the internationalisation of Higher Education has focused on its aims, its institutional components, and the individuals involved, mainly staff. Some researchers have also focused on the so-called internationalisation of the curriculum, discussing practices and foci of much-needed changes. However, apart from Jean Francois' work (2015), there seems to be little reflection on the pedagogical transformation that might be happening in transnational institutions.

As far as branch campuses are concerned, there seems to be an absence of research on the *educational culture* of these transnational institutions. Beyond policies and

mission statements, which educational and pedagogical values inform teachers' practices? What teaching strategies do they use, and why? This study focuses on pedagogical discourses as possible sites of emergence of a specific branch campus culture. It does so by looking at staff as possible agents of a transnational pedagogy. The results of this study, emphasising the absence of a clearly articulated transnational pedagogical culture on this branch campus, contribute to the expansion of studies on internationalisation by shifting the focus from organisation or individuals' experiences into two new directions. The first one is in the field of sociology of education and its focus on cultural structures and discourses; the second is pedagogy, and its possible attempt to create a philosophy of transnational education.

A second contribution of this study is to Critical Realism (CR). Bhaskar's (1993/2008) social cube distinguishes four planes for the social being: [a] the plane of the materiality, [b] personal relations, [c] social relations, and [d] agents' subjectivity (see p. 20). At the conjunctions of these planes lie the structures, the institutions and the individuals' praxis from which stem the possibilities of human agency. Praxis is made of individuals' positions in a society and practices related to those positions, and for Bhaskar (1979/1998) it is a social relation. However, I would claim that since he defines positions as 'places, functions, rules, tasks, duties, rights, etc.' (Bhaskar, 1979/1998, p. 44), they are also dependent on the cultural structures as discourses that contribute to their definition. Therefore, I have added a plane of cultural relations from which discourses emerge as part of the social being. Adding this plane has allowed me to analyse the campus not in terms of social relations, but as a cultural space made (or not) by discourses on transnational pedagogy shaping and shaped by the participants. I do believe that this should be further explored to evaluate whether this plane could help in expanding CR approaches to research in education.

The third contribution of this study is in the methodology of Qualitative Content Analysis. Schreier's (2014, p. 174) steps to build the Coding Frame (the codebook) do not take into consideration the fact that a researcher could be doing multiple cycles ('waves') of coding to create the codebook. There is a moment in which the codes could then be selected to finalise the codebook. The way to do that is in my view to compare the different sets of codes, grouping the similar ones in categories

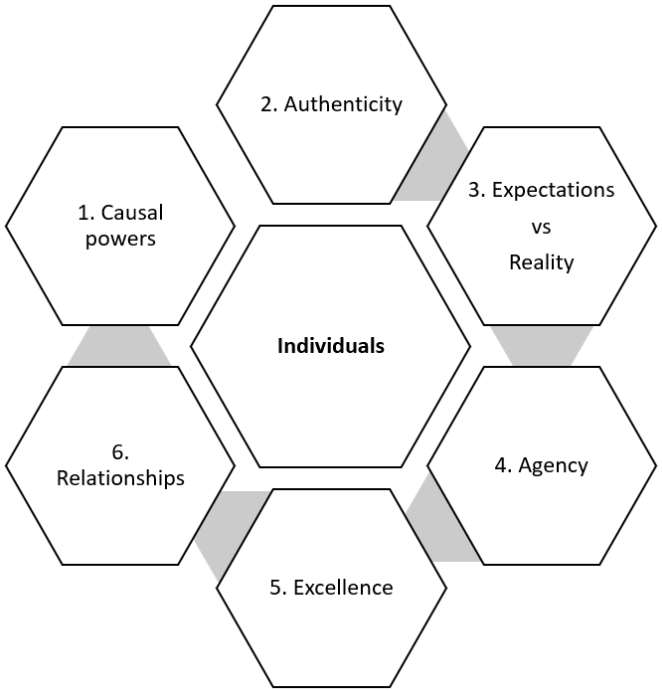
and reshape the categories in order to include the ‘outliers’. Schreier’s (2014) approach is data-driven and focuses on meaning, and I think that this comparative approach enables the researcher to preserve this feature while using multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2009/2013) to understand the text from multiple point of view.

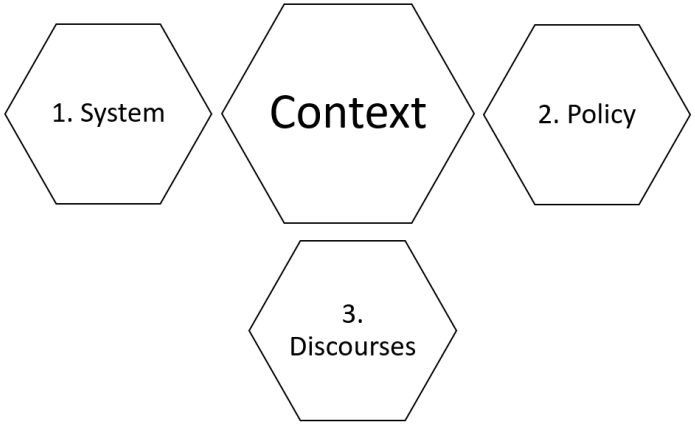
There is no space here to examine further my claims about these contributions. Certainly, there is room for more research to better ground these claims, and share them with colleagues to evaluate whether they are really helpful and fruitful contributions to the fields of sociology of education, Critical Realism and Qualitative Content Analysis.

Appendix

Appendix 1 The coding framework and the codebook

1. The Coding Framework (including the main categories and subcodes)





2. The Codebook

Individuals

The category of *Causal Powers* is defined by the types of causal powers (Dispositions, Abilities, Properties), their outcomes as behaviors that are justified by participants as due to their causal powers, and whether the causal powers are exerted or not.

Category	Subcategories	Description	Example
Causal Powers	Dispositions	A tendency of the personality	Being patient (Lucy, Ken)
	Abilities	Having a skill	Drawing – time management (Tania)
	Properties	Feature of somebody that make it possible for them to act in a certain way	Expertise (William)
	Outcomes	Behaviors justified on the grounds of a causal power	Rejecting team-teaching (based on own/others' expertise) (William)
	Exerted	A causal power that is owned and exerted by the individual (and becomes sign of agency)	Acting skills that enable to 'spice up' classes (Tania)
	Not exerted	A causal power that is owned by an individual but they are not enabled to make use of it.	An expertise in a discipline that the individual does not teach (Michael, Samuel, Elly))

Table 5.1 INDIVIDUALS – Main category: Causal Powers

The category of *Authenticity* is defined by the participants' values about teaching, the feelings experienced in different moments of their teaching career (at the beginning of their job on campus or in China, in class, with colleagues, etc.) and what behaviors they caused.

Category	**Subcategories**	**Description**	**Example**
Authenticity	Own values about teaching	What is right and wrong to do in the job of teaching	Challenging the students is necessary (Tiffany)
	Feelings	The feelings experienced in different situations related to teaching	Fear (Tiffany)
	As cause	When own values, opinion, feelings are constructed as causes of teaching behaviors	Shock→mediating conflict (Tiffany)

Table 5.2 INDIVIDUALS – Main category: Authenticity

The category of *Teachers' expectations/reality* at the beginning of their life on an IBC are coded as a general attitude, usually before arrival, and then the specific expectations and reality about curriculum and students, their own adjustments to the new system and how those expectations and reality acted as caused of specific actions.

Category	Subcategories	Description	Example
Teachers' Expectations/ Reality	General attitude	Anticipation about going/teaching abroad and the reality of it	Curiosity for being abroad (Tania)
	About curriculum	Anticipation about content of teaching, and the reality of it	[Expectation] Same curriculum as in the UK (Elly); [Reality] less cultural topic (Tania)
	About students	Anticipation (and reality) about weaknesses and strengths of students	[Expectation] Being active (Tania)
	Own adjustment	Anticipation and reality about being able to function in the new context	[Reality] Difficulties in creating a new syllabus (Elly, William)
	As causes	The events/behaviors that expectations originated	

Table 5.3 INDIVIDUALS – Main category: Teachers' Expectations/Reality

The category of *Agency* includes participants' definition and possible perception of its change; the participants perceive their agency as enabled or constrained and by whom; what agency's outcomes are, and finally whether it is expressed openly or is concealed.

Category	Subcategories	Codes	Description	Example
Agency	Definition	Present	What is teacher's agency made of	Taking opportunities or not
		Absent		
	Change in definition	Present	Whether or not teacher's agency changed over the years	At the beginning I was following others because I didn't feel I had the competencies
		Absent		
	Enabled (causes)	By system	Whether agency was enabled by an external factor/person	My convener gave me all the materials but also encouraged me to make any changes I wanted
		By policy		
		By people		
	Constrained (versus)	By policy	Whether agency was constrained by an external factor/person	My line manager blocked the project of multiple summative tests
		By system		
		By people		
	Outcomes of agency/lack of		The 'object' that was realized as outcome of constrained/enabled agency	Videos were created
	Manifestation	Open	Whether the 'object' realized is publicly known (or could be) or it is hidden	Open → videos Concealed → videos from Youtube
		Concealed		

Table 5.4 INDIVIDUALS – Main category: Agency

The category of *Excellence* regroups concepts that in the previous waves were disconnected. Participants' idea of excellence is coded as their teaching philosophy and their teacher practice, but also includes the definition of what being a teacher means and what is the teacher's position in their relationship with students. The last subcategory explores teaching excellence as cause of events or teachers' behaviors.

Category	**Subcategories**	**Description**	**Example**
Excellence	Core concept of teaching philosophy	The principles on which their teaching philosophy or the concept of excellence is based (this because they personalize their definition of teaching excellence)	Being inspiring
	Being a teacher	The meaning attributed to being a teacher	Responsibility of deserving the authority given
	Teacher practices	Strategies used to teach	In-office tutorials; discussion groups
	Teacher position to students	What should be/are the main features of the relationship with students	Respect
	As a cause	Events and behaviors that their excellence originated	Making the difference between weak and strong students and addressing that with different teaching strategies

Table 5.5 INDIVIDUALS – Main category: Excellence

The category *Relationships* situates the participants in a relational network with their colleagues and students. The relationship with colleagues is only defined as how the relationship is managed, because its nature and features are already explored in *System* (Team/Stream, Department, Life of the System) and (partially) in *Authenticity* as values and feelings. The relationship with students is explored as far as the definition given of students is related with the explanation of how the relationships are managed, the students cultural conditioning. Relationships with students are also investigated as causes of certain features or practices of teaching.

Category	**Subcategories**	**Codes**	**Description**	**Example (participant mentioning it)**
Relationships	Colleagues	Managing the relationship	How the relationships with colleagues and managers are handled	Negotiating with colleagues (Emma)
	Students	Who are they? (Causal powers)	How students are described as individuals	Passivity (Samuel) Nice kids (Tiffany)
		Managing the relationship	What strategies teachers use to handle the relationship with students	Being liked (Ken, Lucy)
		Their cultural conditioning	What are the perceived cultural structures students are subject to?	Authoritarian models (Samuel)
		As causes	When students' behavior is perceived as cause of teacher/teaching decisions	Students ask for task-based (videos) (Michael)

Table 5.6 INDIVIDUALS – Main category: Relationships

Context

The category of *System* is defined by codes indicating the level of the system (from team level to International), its main features and possible development (changes in time and space), and the discourses bout the system as enabling, constraining or having a mix effect on what for participants constitutes excellence.

Category	Subcategories	Codes	Description	Example
System	Level	Team/Stream	A system as an organized body of which the participant is a member	Language team
		Department		School
		Faculty		FHSS
		Campus		
		UoN		Home campus / Tri-campus
		National		China, UK
		International		Europe
	Features of the system		How it is organized (work, decision making)	Collegial decision making (Michael)
	Life of the system		Who manages it; how it changes;	Line manager (Lucy) Meetings (Michael)
	Discourses about the system	S=Enabling teaching excellence	Systems that are perceived as supporting teaching excellence	Peer observation (Samuel)
		S=Constraining teaching excellence	Systems that are perceived as obstacles to teaching excellence	Censorship (Tiffany, Elly, Tania), KPI (William)
		S=Mixed effect on teaching excellence	Systems that are perceived as both enablers and obstacles to teaching excellence	Student as a customer (Samuel)

Table 5.7 CONTEXT – Main category: System

The category of *Policy* is defined by subcategories indicating the levels to which they are relevant, and the perceived enabling, constraining, mixed effects they have on teaching excellence.

Category	Subcategories	Codes	Description	Example
Policy	Level	Department level	A set of regulations that are to be followed by people in a certain level of an organization to make sure that things are done in a certain way.	Progress Quiz (Ken, Emma)
		Faculty level		Attendance Policy (Lucy, Tania)
		Campus level		SEM, SET (Lucy, Michael)
		UoN level		Marking, Moodle mandate (Tiffany, Ken)
		National level		Textbooks in China (Elly)
		International level		CEFR (Michael)
	Perceived consequences	Enabling teaching excellence	Regulations perceived as fostering teaching excellence	Attendance policy (Lucy, Tania)
		Constraining teaching excellence	Regulations perceived as obstacles to excellence in teaching	Textbook (Elly, Michael) Marking criteria (Tiffany, Emma)
		Mixed	Regulations perceived as having both positive and negative effects on teaching excellence	LCF (Samuel)

Table 5.8 CONTEXT – Main category: Policy

The category of *Discourses about the different types of education* was built by gathering some subcategories previously coded under the category of Students, Excellence or Internationalization (in the second wave). This new category allows to gather all discourses about higher education and to highlight its relationship with interviews' opinions about students' cultural background.

Category	Subcategories	Description	Example
Discourses about different types of education	University education	Nature and purpose of education at university level	Educating for citizenship (William)
	International education	Nature and goals of international teaching, curriculum etc.	To create global citizens (Michael)
	International Branch Campus	Nature and purpose of offering international education in students' home country	
	British education	Nature and goals of British education	Becoming a critical thinker (Elly)
	Related to students' cultural background	The perceived external discourses related to HE and its goals according to the cultural background of the students or the institution	Asia: passive (Ken, Elly) Eu: strict (Emma) UK: all pass (Emma, Zoe)

Table 5.9 CONTEXT – Main category: Discourses about different types of education

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