



# The appearance of equity in understandings of academic excellence



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this empirical study was to deepen understandings of academic excellence as it is conceptualized by high achieving secondary school students ( $n = 22$ ), their parents ( $n = 20$ ) and teachers ( $n = 19$ ). Two primary themes emerged from the interviews. Unsurprisingly for this group of participants, one of these was the traditional understanding of outstanding scholastic achievement. Less expected was another strong theme, of academic excellence as personal best achievement. The latter finding, with implications for equity, is an understanding of academic excellence accessible to all students.

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## 1. Introduction

The research reported in this paper began with a simple premise, that recently graduated, high achieving students together with supportive parents and teachers are in a unique position to offer potentially valuable insights into the process of academic talent development that would be of use to researchers and educators. Because empirical research into the experience of academic excellence is limited, decisions at all levels of education have been made to promote excellence in schooling without reference to key players, students, parents and teachers (Miretzky, 2007). This study was an attempt to redress this oversight by providing new information and a new lens with which to view the subject.

Reported in this paper are the findings to a question guiding the research, “How do participants understand academic excellence?” This question was triggered by pervasive references to *academic excellence* in mainstream descriptions of high achieving students (Edwards, 2008; Mathews, 1999; Mukombozi, 2010) and in self-promotional literature of schools (Greenhaigh, 1995). Despite its import for education, and prevalence, an extensive search of empirical literature revealed very little on the meaning of the term. The central aim underpinning the study was to contribute inductively derived findings about academic excellence and new understandings grounded in participants’ experience (Williams, 2010).

*Academic excellence* is an umbrella term often used to describe high achievement (Ferrari, 2002c; H. Gardner, 2002; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2003). Certain achievements can only be deemed excellent in relation to others which results in the

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'others' being labelled as less than excellent. This traditional understanding of academic excellence is therefore, inequitable and exclusionary; only one person in any group can ever be 'the best'. This paper offers an alternative definition of excellence generated from semi-structured interviews with academically excellent students and their parents and teachers.

### 1.1. The appearance of academic excellence in the literature

References to *academic excellence* are frequent in educational discourse, suggesting this term is a prime descriptor of a sought after level of achievement. While acknowledging the need for nuanced understandings of academic excellence which are suited to the diverse contexts in which the term is used, it has been argued that the centrality of the construct to education and the need to maximize the resources of schooling compel further investigation (Ferrari, 2002c). This study sought to answer this call for empirical research to address this gap in the literature.

References to *academic excellence* are ubiquitous so the following discussion is by no means comprehensive; rather it aims to contextualize understandings of excellence that emerged from the findings within the existing literature. In the area of *gifted and talented* literature for example, academic excellence is commonly constructed as the outcome of a talent development process, "Talent development is the systematic pursuit over a significant period of time, of a structured programme of activities aimed at a specific excellence goal" (Gagne, 2011, p. 12). Another reference to academic excellence is in terms of supportive external resources, for example successful school environments provide, "opportunities to learn how to think and solve problems, and models of academic excellence" (Feldhusen, 2005, p. 74). Freeman (2005) concludes a discussion about what is known to foster academic excellence by saying, "What we do have is very clear information about what the gifted and talented need by way of support for excellence—a challenging education, high-level opportunities, and someone who believes in them." (2005, p. 94). It has been said that, "Giftedness is, ultimately, expertise in development" (Sternberg, 2003, p. 109) therefore further references to excellence, academic included, are to be found in *expertise* research (Ericsson, 2002, 2005; Ericsson, 2006). Expert performance is seen to be the result of an extended process of skill acquisition (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993). Speaking more to the research reported in this paper and perhaps as a response to the "significant challenges of the field" (Robinson & Clinkenbeard, 1998, p. 117), Ziegler (2005) proposed that "a theoretical regeneration of the actual object of giftedness research should be undertaken, that of excellence in various areas" (p. 413).

Another lens through which academic excellence may be viewed is in terms of the quality of the educational institution in question (Ferrari, 2002a; Simon, 2002). Although academic excellence is often understood to mean individual attainment, most individuals spend a large portion of their formative years in educational institutions which notionally promote fulfilment of individual potential. This extensive field of enquiry has a strong history in higher education, school improvement and management literature (J.W.Gardner, 1961).

Any discussion of excellence by necessity raises the question of *standards*, traditionally strongly contested territory (Aldrich, 2006). According to Ziegler and Heller (2002) an absolute standard, or norm referenced standard<sup>3</sup> (Strike, 1985) is the attainment of a high standard of performance or achievement described in terms of a state, national or world class standard of performance. Achievement of an absolute standard is not taken to mean the fullest extent of a person's potential.

Another relative standard of excellence is the comparison of an individual's present achievements with their earlier achievements, also known as the ipsative viewpoint (Messick, 1989). This standard is based on intrapersonal or intra-individual norms (Ziegler & Heller, 2002), also considered to be criterion referenced standards. An analogous term is the popular *personal best*, measuring oneself against oneself. These standards of excellence align with exhortations to *do one's best*, the concept of doing one's best was another representation of John Gardner's (1961) notion of doing ordinary things exceptionally well. A further dimension to the notion of personal standards is with regard to creative individuals. Those introducing novelty into a domain are recognized to have developed internal criteria of excellence with respect to that domain (Csikszentmihalyi & Wolfe, 2000, p. 88).

Perhaps it is not surprising in light of the discussion above, that few definitions of academic excellence are recorded in the research literature. In fact, a number of researchers have acknowledged both the complexity of the term and the absence of definitions, asserting, that the pursuit of academic excellence is "what matters the most" (Duke, 1985, p. 1; Ferrari, 2002b). Trost (2000) noted the lack of an accepted definition and posits that the common factor in definitions of excellence is *outstanding achievement* or *achievement far above average*. More generally, excellence has been defined as "consistently superior achievement in the core activities of a domain" (Ericsson, 2002, p. 22). How *academic excellence* is constructed by those directly involved in schooling is a topic that receives little attention in the literature.

However, VanTassel-Baska (1997) has discussed excellence in education as "both the process of working towards an ideal standard and attainment of a consistently high standard of performance in a socially valued endeavour" (p. 9). Working towards an ideal standard represents an "attainment that is respected, it indicates accomplishment of the task at hand; and it is a predictor of success at the next level of that task" (Baldus et al., 2009). The notion of respected

<sup>3</sup> Talent development programmes traditionally use norm-referenced standards in selection criteria. These standards are routinely employed to determine selection for advanced placement in college programmes. Their long history and national respect as markers of academic excellence have ensured their on-going use and predictive power according to some (Baldus, Assouline, Croft, & Colangelo, 2009).

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