

Excellence: a new keyword for education?

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Excellence is a term that stands out in modern educational discourse, and one that has attracted ridicule from some education commentators. In his critical commentary on how the notion of a university has changed, Bill Readings claims that excellence acts as a 'non-referential unit of value entirely internal to the system' and an 'empty notion'¹. Similar observations have become commonplace. One ironically humorous example of the kind of contempt shown towards the use of *excellence* as a technical term in educational discourse is presented as Appendix 3, drawn from a website written by an academic. Here it is suggested that the frequency with which *excellence* and *excellent* are used by a university in printed materials is an indicator of whether that institution is third-rate. The implication is clear: *excellence* and *excellent* have become effectively meaningless terms in such contexts. While such an assertion seems naïve from a linguist's perspective, it certainly appears that the word has been subject to a process of semantic change, and this process can be traced through its increased use in mission statements, governmental initiatives and education journals. In this article I suggest that an examination of the history and present-day use of *excellence* can illuminate key developments in higher education in recent years. The word's semantic ambiguity makes it a keyword, in the sense that it offers access to current perspectives in this important area of culture and society.

Higher Education in the UK

In recent years, the education sector in the UK has undergone huge changes. More particularly, the higher education system has been transformed. According to HERO figures, there are 43 institutions in England that had university status before the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 (including the various University of London institutions)²; in 2006, according to HEFCE figures, there are 87 universities³. Participation in higher education has risen on an unprecedented scale, and government targets aim to increase students numbers further by 2010.

The changes that have accompanied this shift to mass participation are well documented, and some of these are discussed further below. Notably, many academics have expressed bewilderment and unhappiness at the reforms taking place. For example, in an earlier special issue of *Critical Quarterly* which considers the move to mass education, Gillian Howie begins her introduction by asking simply 'What has happened to higher education in the United Kingdom?'⁴; later in the same issue, Charlton and Andras note that

¹ B. Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 39.

² http://www.hero.ac.uk/uk/reference_and_subject_resources/groups_and_organisations/pre_1992_universities3705.cfm

³ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/unicoll/>

⁴ G. Howie, 'Introduction', in *Critical Quarterly* 47:1-2 (2005), 1.

The UK university system does not make much sense at the moment, and has for two decades been characterised by profound professional and institutional malaise. We assume that the system is in transition...⁵

This unease can only have been compounded by the new discourse that has grown up around 'new HE', reflecting in turn a broader cultural shift affecting wider society. There are parallels here with the situation Raymond Williams describes in the introduction to *Keywords*, where he relates his own experiences of higher education after the end of the Second World War: on returning to university in Cambridge, he and a fellow veteran discuss their impressions of their 'new' environment:

We were ... much preoccupied with this new and strange world around us. Then we both said, in effect simultaneously: 'the fact is, they just don't speak the same language'... What is really happening... is a process quite central in the development of a language when, in certain words, tones and rhythms, meanings are offered, felt for, tested, confirmed, asserted, qualified, changed. In some situations, this is a very slow process indeed; it needs the passage of centuries to show itself actively, by results, at anything like its full weight. In other situations the process can be rapid, especially in key areas.⁶

In contemporary education, I suggest, and specifically in higher education, a rapid change of this order has taken place. Many academics have commented on how the language of business and management has been imported into the sector, as the internal structure and organisation of universities have moved towards a business model. Paul Trowler notes that what he terms 'New Higher Education' (NHE) is 'based in the main on managerialist assumptions and practices, seen as an appropriate response to the combination of a constrained resource environment and large and recently expanded student numbers'⁷. In a market where universities no longer constitute a small prestigious group which caters only for the elite, it is unavoidable that the higher education system has become more competitive and market-led. This shift has created a new pressure on universities to set and meet targets, related both to the quantity of the 'product' they are delivering (in terms of student numbers and research output), and to the quality of that product. In recent years, as governmental funding has been linked more and more closely to universities' ability to 'deliver' in various ways and to provide evidence that they are doing so, internal and external verification practices have become increasingly elaborate. At the same time, a rapidly expanding and increasingly diverse student body has inevitably driven changes in teaching practice and assessment which many believe have not upheld the level of quality that was previously the norm in universities. Martin Trow characterises this situation as a cycle, in which increasingly stringent verification procedures and rising student numbers both put pressure on established standards:

Increased enrollments... strain traditional forms of quality control and the confidence of governmental authorities in institution-based quality control

⁵ B.G. Charlton and P. Andras, 'Universities and social progress in modernising societies: how educational expansion has replaced socialism as an instrument of political reform', in *Critical Quarterly* 47:1-2 (2005), 37.

⁶ R. Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (London: Fontana, 1983), 11-12.

⁷ P. Trowler, 'Captured by the Discourse? The Socially Constitutive Power of New Higher Education Discourse in the UK', in *Organization* 8:2 (2001), 185.

procedures, in turn leading to demands for external assessments and control – a trend carried to its greatest lengths in the United Kingdom. The constraints on state support for higher education drive up student-staff ratios, in the face of broad consensus among teachers almost everywhere that students enter university more poorly prepared and less inclined to read than previously – a natural consequence of broadening access, and of changes in secondary education and its graduation requirements which have made that broadening possible. Both these tendencies make traditional academic standards more problematic...⁸

University Mission Statements

One of the symptoms of these changes in the culture and language of the sector is use of mission statements by higher education institutions. Traditionally, the mission statement – an explicit statement of an organisation’s goals – was something found in business. As early as the 1930s, American universities began to publish mission statements. Although it was not until much more recently that British universities adopted the same practice⁹, it has now become standard and universal. Mission statements fulfil more than one function: they act as targets against which performance can be evaluated (internally and externally), and they are also used by universities to make explicit their aims and to signal how they are distinctive and different from other universities.

Despite this emphasis on distinctiveness, it is striking how similar the language of mission statements is. Appendix 1 presents a list of 21 randomly selected British universities (a mixture of pre- and post-1992 institutions, including both Russell Group members and ex-polytechnics only recently granted university status), along with the current mission statement of each institution from their webpage. There are a number of words and phrases that appear several times in the relatively small sample collected here, and one word that stands out is *excellence*, which occurs in 12 out of 21 examples. The etymologically related word *excellent* occurs in a further four statements (and three contain both *excellence* and *excellent*), and *excel* occurs once. Only four of the institutions in the sample do not use any of these words in their mission statements, and in one of those four the word *excellence* occurs slightly later, in the ‘Values’ section of its website statement.

Excellence as an educational buzzword

Even without examining a larger body of data, it is clear that this group of words is significant in the current discourse of education, and that *excellence* is particularly frequent. Further evidence of this frequency can be found in the use of the word in governmental initiatives, such as HEFCE-funded Centres for Excellence of Teaching

⁸ M. Trow, ‘From mass higher education to universal access: the American advantage’ (paper for the Centre for Studies in Higher Education, University of California, Berkeley), <http://repositories.cdlib.org/cshe/CSHE1-00>, 4.

⁹ J.C. Scott, ‘The mission of the university: medieval to post-modern transformation’, in the *Journal of Higher Education* 77:1 (2006), 2.

and Learning (CETLs) and the DfES Excellence in Cities schools project. In fact, it seems likely that *excellence* has become particularly associated with education. A general search for *excellence* on Google retrieves approximately 182,000,000 instances, while a search for *excellence* and *education* together retrieves 85,200,000 instances, i.e. 46.8% of the total data. This can only be taken as a crude measure, and a more careful look at the websites might lower the totals substantially. It nonetheless demonstrates that the two terms are often connected, and that *excellence* is some kind of keyword or buzzword within education.

In this context it is interesting to note Morley's comment (quoting Peters) that 'in the age of global capitalism universities have been reduced to a technical ideal of performance within a contemporary discourse of 'excellence''¹⁰. This observation draws attention to the relationship between the language used within education and current agendas related to 'quality control' and verification. There are several other words semantically related to *excellence* that are also noticeable in recent educational literature, both for their frequency and the way they have become embedded in educational policies and procedures (at various levels). Again, use of such words can be taken as an indicator of pressure on the sector to maintain and prove high standards. The words *standards*, *benchmark*, *best practice* and *quality*, for example, are all familiar to academics and teachers in any discipline.

Although there are numerous articles and conferences focusing on the meaning of each of these words, these tend to deal with how teachers and lecturers can attain higher levels of achievement in practical terms, and assume that the terms themselves are uncontentious. As Howie comments in an article discussing the term *quality* and how it is interpreted, '...auditors and auditing processes presume that there is a 'something', a property or attribute that can be measured'¹¹. In other words, little attention is paid to the fact that terms like *quality* are highly subjective and difficult to measure in relation to academic activity, or that, because of this, the 'discourse of excellence' is highly problematic.

What appears to be happening (or to have already happened) is that the discourse of education is becoming standardised, so that a fairly small set of stock words and phrases – the jargon of the field – occur with great frequency. Such standardisation is a common process and, to a certain extent, occurs within any area of discourse. However, many academics have expressed concern that the discourse of 'new HE' has been imported wholesale from the business sector, along with a set of values that have not traditionally been associated with education; the process has not been 'owned' or controlled by educators, but imposed by managers, and this causes unease.

As Williams notes in his *Keywords* entry for *jargon*, 'the use of a new term or the new definition of a concept is often... an indication of new and alternative ways'¹². As such, this kind of language can be seen as a symptom of more significant change. In one study of academics' reactions to the language of educational development, comments were recorded that show the kind of reactions change of this kind can provoke: one respondent commented on 'pure corporate university speak... a shared

¹⁰ L. Morley, 'The micropolitics of quality', in *Critical Quarterly* 47:1-2 (2005), 84.

¹¹ G. Howie, 'A reflection of quality: instrumental reason, quality audits and the knowledge economy', in *Critical Quarterly* 44:4 (2002), 143.

¹² Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, 176.

(if stylistically and ideologically repellent) discourse'. Another talked about how one document 'uses all the usual jargon often not defined'¹³. Such comments highlight a further source of unease among many academics encountering this kind of discourse. As part of the process of standardisation, particular terms such as *excellence* appear to become 'buzzwords'¹⁴, and these are then used so frequently that their use is rarely interrogated. As Readings observes in his discussion of a survey ranking the universities of Canada in terms of excellence:

..."excellence" serves as the unit of currency within a closed field. The survey allows the a priori exclusion of all referential issues, that is, any questions about what excellence in the University might *be*, what the term might *mean*...¹⁵

Oxford English Dictionary (OED) evidence

The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*¹⁶ gives the following definition for the core current sense of *excellence* (the full list of definitions for all senses, as well as definitions for *excellent* and *excel* and the earliest and latest date ranges for each word, can be found in Appendix 2a):

1. The state or fact of excelling; the possession chiefly of good qualities in an eminent or unusual degree; surpassing merit, skill, virtue, worth etc.; dignity, eminence. ...

Etymologically, *excellence*, *excellent* and *excel* are closely related, and are derived from similarly related French models. All three words appear to be found earliest in written English at about the same time, around the end of the fourteenth century. The immediate donor language for all three words is French, but ultimately they can be traced back to the Latin verb *excellere*, which is glossed in the *OED* as 'to rise above others, be eminent'.

In terms of their earliest meanings in English, *excel*, *excellent* and *excellence* are also related closely semantically, but *OED* evidence shows that they have diverged over time. The definitions of both the transitive and intransitive senses of *excel* show that it implies comparison: something can only excel relative to something else, which must therefore be inferior in some way. The earliest senses of the corresponding noun and adjective *excellence* and *excellent* also imply comparison, but the entries show that in the case of *excellent*, a significant semantic change has taken place: some kind of 'weakening' or 'bleaching' has occurred over time, through which an element of the meaning has been lost. This is a common process of semantic change, and occurs frequently with positive terms, which often shift from having a fairly specialised meaning to a greatly weakened one. Adjectives such as *brilliant*, *super* and *fantastic*,

¹³ S. Wareing, 'It ain't what you say, it's the way that you say it: an analysis of the language of educational development, in the Higher Education Academy English Subject Centre Newsletter, Issue 7 (November 2004),

<http://english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletters/newsissue7/wareing.htm>, 3

¹⁴ *Buzzword* is defined in the *OED* as '(orig. and chiefly U.S.), a keyword; a catchword or expression currently fashionable; a term used more to impress than to inform, esp. a technical or jargon term'.

¹⁵ Readings, *The University in Ruins*, 27.

¹⁶ For full bibliographical details, see Durkin (this volume).

some of which have very specific meanings when they are first found in English, have generalised to mean something like ‘outstanding’ or ‘pre-eminent’, and then bleached or weakened to simply ‘very good’ or ‘good’. *Great* typifies this kind of change. In its earliest uses it has a physical sense ‘large’ or ‘thick’, and it then appears to develop figurative meanings. The *OED* records a second ‘branch’ of meanings related to ‘having a high position in a scale of measurement or quantitative estimation’ (evidenced from the late 13th century onwards), and then a third branch of meanings which appear to develop around a century later. The meanings in this third branch develop ‘in figurative extensions of branch II’, and are defined as ‘important, elevated, distinguished’. The common current sense of *great* develops from this, and although it is still used in a positive sense it is significantly weakened. Similarly, the most common sense of *excellent* has shifted from ‘better than others’ to ‘very good’ (*OED* sense 3); this is still positive, but the implication of comparison has been lost or ‘bleached’ out. According to the *OED*, the same process has not occurred for the noun *excellence*, and no bleached sense is recorded.

Better, or just good?

Bleaching of meaning of this kind is problematic when examining mission statements (and other kinds of educational discourse), given the frequency with which *excellence* is found and the way it is used. Self-evidently, not all of the institutions represented in the sample can be better than all others, or have realistic aims to become better than all the others. In fact there *are* a few universities represented in the full sample who explicitly state their aim to be superior to others (in particular respects). Keele’s mission (statement 21), for example, is “to be recognised as the UK’s leading example of an open, integrated intellectual community”, and similarly Warwick aims to be “widely recognised... as a world-leader in teaching and research” (statement 15; note the emphasis in both statements on recognition of superiority by external parties). However, this clearly stated aim to be better than other universities is unusual in the sample, since few of the other institutions that use the term say anything comparable in their statements.

In many of the statements, *excellence* appears to be equated with a particular (high) standard of performance, rather than one which is relatively better than others. In other words, in the majority of statements the term seems to be used as a nominalized form of *excellent* with its semantically bleached sense, rather than as the noun form *excellence* as defined in the *OED*. Rather than using an adjective to modify a following noun, e.g. *excellent teaching*, it has become common to use the noun form with a following prepositional phrase, e.g. *excellence in teaching*. This is regarded as more formal in style, but semantically it is less precise. *Excellent teaching* is specific and implies an overall high standard, whereas *excellence in teaching* is vaguer; while it suggests a relationship between a high standard and teaching, it does not specify precisely what this relationship is. It does not necessarily claim an overall high standard, and could reasonably mean that one aspect of teaching is of a high standard but other aspects are not. In this context it is interesting to note the increase in frequency that *excellence* appears to show in educational discourse of the past three decades. Searches of educational journals included in the JSTOR collection for the periods 1976-1980 and 1996-2000 show a significant increase in the number of occurrences of the word: there are 865 matches for *excellence* in 1976-1980, and 1612

matches in 1996-2000. This is an increase of over 86% in the use of the term. By contrast, the frequency of *excellent* appears relatively stable, with 2364 matches in the 1976-1980 sample and 2351 matches in the 1996-2000 sample¹⁷.

Beyond the *OED*

In considering the current meaning of *excellence*, it is important to be aware of the limitations of the *OED* as a source. In the preface to *Keywords*, Williams discusses problems with using the *OED* to investigate semantic change, commenting that ‘in some important words the evidence for developed twentieth-century usage is not really available’¹⁸. The *OED* definition for *excellence* quoted above is from a 2nd edition entry. As Durkin (this volume) notes, the 2nd edition is essentially an integrated version of the 1st edition and subsequent supplements, and therefore it does not take account of lexical change after 1880 consistently. The fully revised 3rd edition is currently in preparation, but at the time of writing only the range M-POMAK has been completed, so *excellence* is not among the revised entries.

More recent evidence of usage is available from the *New Oxford Dictionary of English (NODE)*¹⁹, published in 1998. This is a descriptive synchronic dictionary that uses the British National Corpus (BNC) as evidence of current usage, and, like the *OED*, includes supplementary quotations to support its definitions. The *NODE* definition for *excellence* lists the sense recorded in the *OED*, but also includes a second sense that appears to show bleaching of the type that *excellent* exhibits earlier, i.e. without the implication of comparison with something inferior (and interestingly one of the supporting quotations is from educational discourse):

excellence: the quality of being outstanding or extremely good
“awards for excellence”, “a centre of academic excellence”

As Appendix 2b shows, the definition for *excel* also records two comparable senses (again in contrast to the senses recorded in the *OED*); the reflexive form of the verb *excel oneself* retains the earlier meaning only, so remains closer to the etymological sense.

A bleached sense of *excellence*, i.e. not implying comparison, is further supported by data recovered by Google, most of which is likely to be even more recent than that found in the BNC. Google searches for *excellence* collocated with the explicitly comparative terms *relative*, *comparative*, *high* and *highest* recover a significant number of tokens, as the (approximate) figures below show:

¹⁷ There are difficulties in using this kind of search to generate data, since it takes no account of whether journals may have increased in length or number of issues per year, but nevertheless the figures here seem significant as a general indicator of relative frequency. The periods 1976-1980 and 1996-2000 have been chosen because a comparable number of journals are included in the collections for each of these periods; counting only journals for which JSTOR offers a continuous run for the period, there are 38 journals in the 1976-1980 range, and 43 in the 1996-2000 range. In order to check whether data comparing frequencies is truly indicative of a more general trend, I have also run searches for *teaching* and *learning*, and found no such increase in the uses of these terms. This suggests that the data does indeed show a significant increase in the use of *excellence*.

¹⁸ Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, 18

¹⁹ J. Pearsall (ed.), *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

relative excellence: 10,500 matches
comparative excellence: 610 matches
high level(s) of excellence: 66,300 matches
highest level(s) of excellence: 76,700 matches

A similar example is found in Cambridge University's mission statement, which includes the phrase 'the highest international levels of excellence' (statement 5 in Appendix 1). If bleaching had not occurred for this term, and the bleached sense were not common, there would be no need to use other comparatives as modifiers, since these would be redundant. The non-comparative, bleached sense of *excellence* offers a more convincing explanation for its use in many of the mission statements in the sample. What is interesting is that there is nevertheless little or no direct acknowledgement that the word is ambiguous in any of the literature or in government discussions of educational policy. One might wonder if this ambiguity, and the fact that the comparative sense is also still current and will therefore be activated, is (consciously or unconsciously) exploited in the choice of this word over another semantically bleached word that is less ambiguous in current usage.

Constructions of *excellence*

In terms of grammatical construction, the choice of preposition following *excellence* is also significant. *Excellence* occurs with *in* and *of*, e.g. in phrases such as *excellence in teaching and research* and *the excellence of its research*. Historically, *excellence of* is earlier, and appears to be the more usual construction until relatively recently. In a search of all quotations in the *OED*, there are 117 quotations that include *excellence of*, with six of these from texts dating from earlier than 1400. By contrast, there are only 29 quotations including *excellence in* (not all of which show the relevant syntactic structure), and only one of these dates from pre-1500; chronologically the next quotation dates from 1680, and the construction only began to be more common in the eighteenth century. In contemporary usage, the newer construction *excellence in* appears to be becoming more frequent whilst *excellence of* may be in decline. Google searches (again, only useful as a rough indication) recover around 4,620,000 examples of *excellence of*, but over 18 times as many examples of *excellence in* (around 85,200,000). Specifically, *excellence in* appears to be increasingly frequent within educational discourse, as is again evidenced by figures from JSTOR: in the 1976-1980 journals range, there are 279 matches for this construction, but this leaps up to 708 matches in the 1996-2000 range.

What is interesting about the changing use of these constructions is the different syntactic and semantic value of each, and how the different constructions relate to the adjective *excellent*. Characteristically, *excellence of* is preceded by the determiner *the*, and carries at least an implicit comparative sense. If X is recognised for *the excellence of its performance* in a specified area, by implication it is doing better than some others. This is the case even if those others are not explicitly identified; it *excels* in the area, and not everyone can do that. As this paraphrase shows, *(the) excellence of* seems semantically similar to the way in which the verb *excel* tends to be used currently. By contrast, if X is recognised as showing *excellence in* a specified area, there is no implicit comparison with others, only with the definition of an abstract

noun. It is quite possible that everyone could show *excellence in* this area, since the measure is not comparison with others. In this respect *excellence in* can be usefully compared to the bleached sense of *excellent*, in which the element of comparison is either greatly reduced or entirely absent. As commented earlier, in this construction *excellence* can be seen as a nominalization of *excellent*. In the language of targets and objectives, the achievement of *excellence in* an area can easily be established as a target for which some measure can be identified; *excellence of* cannot easily be used in the same way. (It is possible to construct barely grammatical sentences such as **we aim at establishing the excellence of our research*, but it is hard to see how they could function as part of a realistic system of targets and measures.) At least theoretically, it is possible that everyone could achieve *excellence in* a particular area (if the measure is set sufficiently generously, it may be easily achievable), whereas *excellence of* performance in a particular area must be the achievement of only a subset. Furthermore, *excellence of* typically refers to something already realised. One can aim at recognition for the *excellence of* one's research, but it is not possible to talk about aiming at the *excellence of* one's research. Conversely, it is natural to speak of aiming at *excellence in* research, but also equally possible to have achieved this²⁰.

Excellence and concepts of education

In general terms, the use of *excellence* and semantically related terms in educational discourse can be linked to wider perspectives on the current culture in the higher education sector. That is why I would argue for the status of *excellence* as a modern keyword. In *Critical Quarterly* 47:1-2, Charlton and Andras discuss the values that underpin views of education, and contrast a system that focuses on the relative merit of the elite with a more 'democratic' system in which everyone can benefit and the general level of education can be raised:

In a zero-sum game one person can only benefit at the expense of another losing-out – for example in a status competition there must be losers as well as winners... The traditional view of education tends to be a zero-sum game of winners and losers, in which people are sorted into jobs and other functions of varying prestige... But in a positive-sum game... individuals can benefit from change without others necessarily losing – in principle 'everyone' may benefit... The modernising view therefore sees formal education as most importantly a positive-sum game, based on enhancement of the cognitive aptitudes of many individuals. More education for more people implies a higher sum of cognitive aptitude in society.²¹

In a sense, the ambiguous nature of the word *excellence* provides a parallel with these conflicting conceptualisations of education. The earlier etymological meaning given

²⁰ It is interesting to compare how the Department for Education and Skills 'Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning' initiative are frequently mistakenly referred to as 'Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning'. Google searches for the two phrases show that this is a common error: *Centre(s) for Excellence in Teaching and Learning* (the correct phrase) recovers **48,600** matches, but *Centre(s) of Excellence in Teaching and Learning* recovers **13,900** matches. In other words, the mistake is made around one fifth of the time, and this figure would be even higher if all the official uses (by government agencies etc) could be excluded from the search.

²¹ Charlton and Andras, 'Universities and social progress in modernising societies: how educational expansion has replaced socialism as an instrument of political reform', 33-34

in the *OED*, which implies comparison, is consistent with the view of education that Charlton and Andras label ‘zero-sum’. *Excellence* in this sense is only attainable by an elite (of institutions or of individuals), whose status depends on the identification of inferior others. By definition, in that case, *excellence* can only be achieved by the few; since educational achievement depends on ability, there will be a small number of high achievers and a much greater number of relatively lower achievers. The best institutions will be those that attract the high achievers, and vice-versa. Concern that standards must be slipping if a higher number of students achieve first class honours degrees (or a higher number of better A-levels) is based on this view. It is also at the root of fears expressed recently by some academics that the current system of mass-higher education cannot cater effectively for the brightest students. On the other hand, the shifted, bleached sense of *excellence* can be associated with the ‘positive-sum’ view, in which overall improvement is the focus of the educational system; everyone can achieve *excellence*, since this is not dependent on relative merit but on recognised and predetermined levels of achievement. Arguably this is the view that has characterised UK educational policy in recent decades. For the individual, marks are allocated at various levels of education on the basis of set criteria, so that theoretically a whole cohort might be awarded the highest grade. In terms of the ‘structure’ of the education system as a whole, university status has been awarded to a greater number of institutions, so that a university education in itself is no longer restricted to an elite.

Although these are conflicting views of education, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, a point made by Diana Green, again in a discussion of quality:

Definitions of quality vary and, to some extent, reflect different perspectives of the individual and society... Indeed, we may catch ourselves switching from one perspective to another without being conscious of any conflict. Even if we opt for one definition of quality, say ‘fitness for purpose’, the conclusions that we reach when interpreting this notion for higher education would depend on our values and our priorities.²²

In my view, this area of debate is illuminated by tracing the semantic shift that has occurred in relation to *excellence*, and the resulting ambiguity in its meaning. Perhaps the most interesting feature of such an analysis is that it shows how the ambiguity may be being played on either consciously or unconsciously by people on all sides of the educational debate, without explicit acknowledgement.

Excellence is undoubtedly a buzzword within an emerging standardised vocabulary of a changing field. More than that, though, it is a term through which the current controversy about standards and ideals in education is enacted, and so embodies in its patterns of use a cultural shift that is currently underway. For that reason, it is precisely the kind of word I believe Williams would have been interested in today, as his own definition of a ‘keyword’ suggests:

I called these words *Keywords* in two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative forms in certain forms of thought.²³

²² D. Green, ‘What is quality in higher education? Concepts, policy and practice. In D. Green (ed.) *What is Quality in Higher Education?* (Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press, 1994), 17.

²³ Williams, *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society*, 15.