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Defining high-quality teaching: Perceptions of students and academics

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Context

Higher education is increasingly driven by a thirst for metrics as the sector decides on those most appropriate for defining and measuring the quality of teaching (Bamber, 2020). This is further set against the backdrop of creating successful and equitable graduate outcomes for all students (HEFCE, 2018), the widening participation agenda (Thomas, 2020) and the teaching excellence framework (TEF, 2017). However, there can be issues and variations with using metrics as a measure of teaching excellence including in their definition and interpretation. Defining excellence remains a challenge, as highlighted by the plethora of academic definitions found in the literature (reviewed in Greatbatch and Holland, 2016). Nonetheless, most definitions remain from an academics' perspective and there is a continuing paucity of information to show how these compare and align directly with those perceived by students (Strang *et al.*, 2016). Overall, there does need to be greater understanding of how what is being measured is perceived by different groups – students, academics, and other stakeholders – to bring closer alignment in expectations.

The introduction of tuition fees and concomitant removal of public funding has focused attention on the competitive nature of teaching excellence (Gourlay and Stevenson, 2017) and shifted more onus on students determining what high-quality teaching looks like (BIS, 2011). Mechanisms such as the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) and the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Subject Review, used to determine teaching excellence scores, have been replaced by greater student evaluation. Surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) are nowadays used, where these scores feed into the more recently

formulated Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF, 2017). Nonetheless, the NSS is far from a perfect quality metric (DfE, 2021) being used as a proxy (that provides correlation but not a direct measure/ understanding) of teaching quality at the end of students' courses (Pearce, 2019). Subsequently, the UK government is reviewing the NSS along with the future direction of TEF (DfE, 2021) with the expectation there will be even greater emphasis on student feedback through redeveloped surveys and more robust student contributions to the TEF (Pearce, 2019; DfE, 2021). Therefore, with the growing focus on student perceptions of teaching excellence, we set out to explore and compare perceptions of what high-quality teaching means between different groups of academics and students.

The project

In our approach, we established a staff/ undergraduate student partnership project to explore, capture and compare these perceptions across our institution. We held a series of workshops across the University with colleagues and undergraduate students together in the disciplines of science, engineering, computing, business, arts, and music, that included around 20 participants in each. We encouraged academics and students to first work independently in small groups to assimilate and present their opinions (using whiteboards and post-its – highlighting their top indicators). Once opinions had been consolidated, we cross-pollinated the groups so they could share thoughts together.

Workshops were particularly productive in debating the open-ended question – 'What does high-quality teaching look like to you?', and placing in the broader national context. They also enabled us to explore opinions not so easily interpreted from metric-

only quantitative data or interpreted (sometimes contradictorily) in open-text responses. The workshops generated powerful discussion and debate and the opportunity for students to have open and direct conversations with academics, which for many, there had been no previous channel to do so. For students, the workshops provided insight, 'this group was a real eye-opener for me – even being aware of some of the difficulties in teaching at a university level, I learned many new things about what it's like behind the scenes at Kingston.' This signifies the importance of students having knowledge on the teaching approaches and structures being utilised at their institutions and the role it can have in their evaluation of high-quality teaching.

High-quality teaching – Developing taxonomies from staff and student perspectives

We found academics and students were generally in agreement when articulating their overall perceptions of what high-quality teaching meant to them, and we consolidated the following common definitions from the workshop discussions, post-its and whiteboards, by thematic analysis:

- Clear expectations
- Structure
- Activities
- Engagement
- Contextualised and applied learning
- Clear communication
- Confidence
- Passion and enthusiasm
- Compassion and empathy.

In addition, distinctions in opinions and definitions between those studying and teaching across different disciplines/ subject areas were recorded (Table 1). This led us to speculate that teaching quality may be perceived

differently depending on discipline/subject area. This is something that Greatbatch and Holland (2016) have also previously alluded to, although they acknowledged this concept has

not been thoroughly explored in the literature. Nonetheless, earlier consideration by Shulman (2005) has categorised such potential differences as signature pedagogies that can

teach us a lot about the personalities, dispositions, and cultures of the different disciplines/subject areas.

<p><i>Science, Engineering and Computing</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured • Well-articulated • Uses technology • Uses relevant examples • Accessible language 	<p><i>Business</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory to practice • It tells a ‘story’ • Provides a ‘take away’ • Relevant • Creative
<p><i>Arts/Humanities</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive flexibility and responsiveness • Drawing and building the confidence • Facilitation of compassionate learning (affective) • Creation of space safe for all • Dialogical practice 	<p><i>Music</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied learning • Creative practice – test/apply/theory • Co-creative/collaborative practice • Opportunity for performance

Table 1 Different definitions given across the disciplines/subject areas

From our collective findings from both academic and student perceptions, we were able to define taxonomies, which could be broadly categorised into three distinctive parts: attitudes and values, methods, skills and technologies (Figure 1 and 2). Although, we found differences between the academic and student taxonomies, there was also much commonality. Academic perceptions were often more logical and structural perhaps based on their academic training, whilst for students, theirs were threaded with personal persona (i.e. respect and approachability). Staff raised empowerment and confidence building, theory to practice, critical enquiry and stretching outside the comfort zone and setting of expectations, that were not raised in any detail by students. These themes particularly relate to those of students taking ownership and responsibility for their learning. Students placed high value on the affective aspects of teaching including the need for establishing a connection and mutual respect, for example ‘it would be good if the lecturers remembered what it is like to be a student’. This was supported by an accompanying Wordle (Figure 3) that pulled out prominent positive expressions of being ‘supportive’ and ‘helpful’, when students were asked what they felt

was good or not so good about their teaching. These experiences likely affect whether students establish a connection (sense of belonging) or not and the level of respect and compassion they feel they receive from their institution. The demonstration of empathy to commuting students is an example that plays a role in institutions such as our own, which have high numbers of commuting students, where commuting has been linked to much lower perceptions of teaching

quality (Page et al. 2021). Conversely, students identified ‘disorganised’ and ‘unsupportive’ as prominent negative qualities of their teaching experience; and saw the taxonomy beyond the ‘four walls of a classroom’ with an emphasis on infrastructure that had access to the latest technology and external expertise. Mulrooney and Kelly (2020) have highlighted the importance of belonging, to both students and staff, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

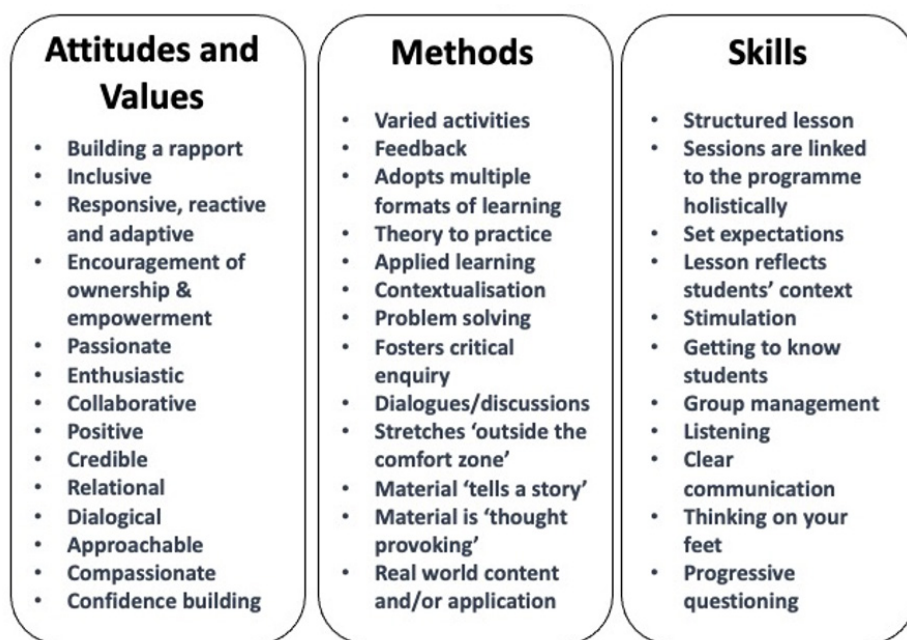


Figure 1 Taxonomy of ‘High Quality Teaching’: the academics’ perspective

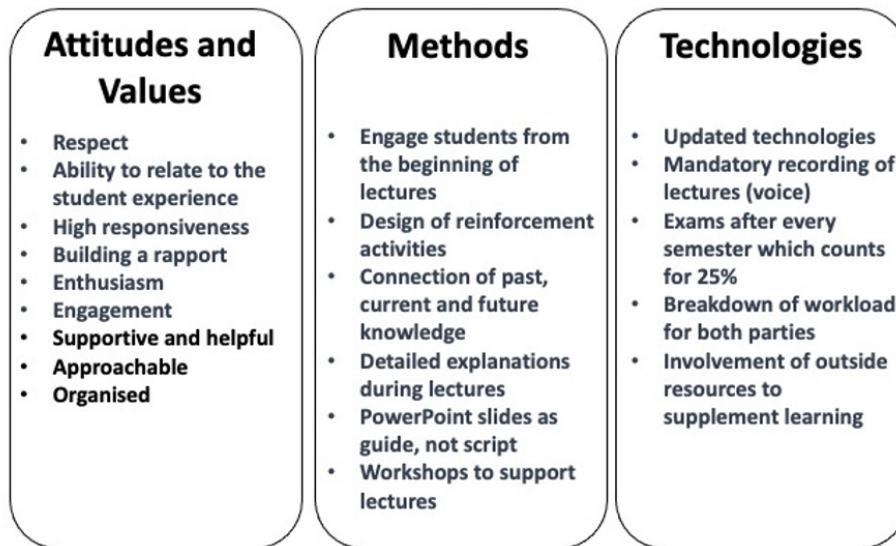


Figure 2 Taxonomy of ‘High Quality Teaching’: the students’ perspective



Figure 3 Wordle of prominent positive and negative expressions associated with high-quality teaching

What next?

Overall, we have identified distinct differences and commonalities in perceptions and expectations of ‘what high-quality teaching means’ between academics and students through engaging in shared dialogue. Through partnership, we have enabled a more in-depth understanding of the teaching and learning needs of our students through augmented interconnectivities that have brought a fresh culture of joint co-creational development based on mutual respect and viewpoints. The distinct perceptions within each taxonomy have implications for our

teaching and learning approaches, in terms of evolving the necessary infrastructures and processes and clarifying the boundaries as well as developing our affective teaching. Beyond the classroom, our thoughts are not only on the impact on future TEF submissions, but in how best to develop our academic professional programmes, course improvement programmes and teaching observation schemes to meet these needs. Post-COVID-19, there will be renewed vigour to any lessons that can be learnt or revisited, the impact of digital learning (as we move towards a greater digital estate),

new definitions of learning spaces (beyond the simple analogy of the four walls), and how we better learn and cultivate our emotional personas. In summary, we found some common and some quite distinct perceptions between academics and students in defining high-quality teaching, where empathic understanding and closer learning relationships will have key future roles in bringing closer alignment in expectations in creating mutually positive metrics.

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