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# **Student perspectives on good university teachers: Communication, clarity, commitment, care**

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## **Abstract**

Using findings from a 2-year mixed methods study, this paper explores undergraduate engineering student perspectives on good university teachers. Findings from open survey questions and semi-structured interviews were analysed using principles of grounded theory, resulting in four themes identified by students as key to good university teaching: communication, clarity, commitment, and care. These findings are discussed in relation to recent international debates on teaching excellence. The basic argument of the paper is that the discourse of teaching excellence needs to be critically reconsidered and would benefit from inclusion of the actual perspectives of students rather than student voice discourses framed by others.

## **Keywords**

Student perspectives, good university teaching, teaching excellence, student voice, engineering education

## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to explore undergraduate student perspectives on what makes a good university teacher, and examine how this relates to current debates about teaching excellence in higher education. The paper starts with a discussion of relevant literature on good teaching and teaching excellence. After a brief explanation of methods, some of the qualitative findings of a 2-year study conducted with undergraduate engineering students in a university in New Zealand are then presented. Using a grounded theory approach, four characteristics that emerged as key to being a good university teacher were clarity, communication, commitment and care. The paper discusses these qualities in relation to relevant literature on higher education teaching and learning, with a particular focus on what “teaching excellence” means from the perspectives of students.

## **2. Research Literature**

There has been a steady trickle of literature on good university teaching over the past 50 years, but the floodgates have really opened over the past decade with the debates over teaching excellence and the introduction of national benchmarking, quality assurance and measurement initiatives in a competitive global higher education arena of rankings. It goes without saying that everyone involved in university education would agree that good teaching is a good thing, although many raise issues with the (over)use and meaning of the term “excellence”. The questions and debates arise at the next level. How do we define good teaching and teaching excellence? Who decides what teaching excellence is? Whose opinions matter? How do we measure it? Are we measuring the right things? The first section of this literature review summarises some of the key points in debates around definitions and measurement of teaching excellence, and its relation to good teaching. The second section turns to the issue of student perspectives on teaching and

teacher excellence. Overall, this review sets the scene for the subsequent discussion of findings on good teaching from the perspectives of undergraduate students.

## **2.1 What is teaching excellence and how do we measure it?**

There is no commonly agreed definition of teaching excellence or teacher excellence (Gunn & Fisk, 2013). Given the cultural diversity and vast range of purposes of the field of higher education, this is hardly surprising. In recent years, however, the term has acquired new connotations associated with neoliberal trends in the global marketplace of higher education, forming part of the suite of rankings that can be used as “an institutional marketing/management tool in a consumerised HE context” (Bartram, Hathaway & Rao, 2019, p.1296). This has been particularly apparent and hotly debated with the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in the UK, but is also becoming part of the discourse and policy in other countries (Skelton, 2007, Wilcox, 2021). The appropriation of the term for a narrowly focused employability agenda, using proxy metrics of “teaching excellence”, threatens to skew the field, as institutional efforts to game the system and improve rankings gradually become norms of practice (Wilcox, 2021). For example, the proxy metrics of graduate employment in the TEF (which is so far the most thoroughly researched example of teaching excellence initiatives) are likely to lead to the washback effect of increased monitoring and measurement of the inclusion of employability skills in the discourse of teaching quality and in the content of programmes and individual courses. Corpus-assisted discourse analysis of provider statements in TEF submissions by Matthews and Kotzee (2019) shows that this trend is already underway, with the themes driving success in the TEF being employment, employability, outcomes and research. These may all be worthwhile goals, but whether any of this has anything to do with teaching excellence is debatable. As Matthews and Kotzee (2019, 19) conclude, “in future, the discourse around “quality” learning and teaching in UK Higher Education will become ever more similar as institutions realise that the only way to achieve a gold TEF rating is to adopt the “approved” discourse that sees quality in teaching and learning in higher education as metric driven progress towards greater employment outcomes for students”. That is, the rules governing performance of “teaching excellence” are gradually being forged and adopted, just as performativity rules governing “research excellence” have heightened the power of metric-driven global rankings and pressure to publish in Q1 academic journals over the past two decades. The problem with this, as Biesta (2017) argues, is that we are left wondering whether “what is going on in our age of measurement is getting us any closer to an understanding of what makes education good” (p. 316)

This opens up the next question of whether measuring production of employment-ready graduates is the only future for teaching quality and teaching excellence. To answer this question, it is necessary to take a step back and reconsider the fundamental idea and purpose of the university. Barnett (2013, p. 2) argues that the currently dominant idea of the university is ideologically, spatially and ethically impoverished, but imagines a “feasible utopia” beyond the present, where the university reclaims a greater purpose and role in society. In such a widened vision, teaching excellence becomes more nuanced and offers many more possibilities. If the purposes of higher education include self-realisation, contribution to global wellbeing and equity, or critical engagement with society, as so many university vision and mission statements still claim, teaching excellence assumes many more layers of meaning. Following this argument, this paper takes teaching excellence, teacher excellence and good teaching to be socially constructed concepts that are created and interpreted in different ways by different groups and individuals (Gakhal, 2018). The focus in this paper is specifically on students’ interpretations of good teaching and teacher excellence as they are the group most directly impacted by teaching quality (or lack thereof).

## 2.2 How do students see teaching excellence?

Although the Teaching Excellence Framework and most similar initiatives around measurement of teaching excellence purport to adopt a student-centred view of teaching, and do indeed promote the use of student evidence, it is notable that criteria for evidence obtained from students, usually in the form of course and programme evaluations or survey responses, are not actually designed by students. In other words, students are being asked to evaluate somebody else's framing of their experience. This has obvious pitfalls, given that numerous studies in different parts of the world have found consistently that student perspectives on good teaching are inconsistent with the perspectives of other stakeholders engaged in the process, including university teachers and university leaders. This was emphasized over half a century ago, in a study conducted in the USA on student, faculty and administrator perceptions on good university teaching, which concluded that:

It would seem that the university teacher is faced with an almost insurmountable problem if he tries to please his students and at the same time be judged favourably by his associates. To add to his distress, administrators and deans... are looking at the beleaguered professor from even another perspective. Should the teacher be all things to all men, or should he appeal to a specific segment of the group in the academic world? (Crawford & Bradshaw, 1968, p. 1084)

Although the language considered appropriate in academic publishing has changed noticeably since 1968, the findings of this study have held true ever since. A 1978 study of students' perspectives on the good university teacher conducted in Israel noted that research achievements and academic status were of little importance to students, suggesting that the traditional measures of a "successful" university teacher held little weight in terms of student perspectives (Miron & Segal, 1978). Almost two decades later, in the United Arab Emirates, Das & El-Sabban (1996) also found that there were significant discrepancies between faculty and student views of a good teacher, concluding that "differences in perceptions between students and faculty will influence the learning process" (para. 29). They also point out that awareness of these differences is crucial in situations where teaching evaluations by students play a role in faculty promotion decisions. Based on similar findings in a university in South Africa, McLean (2001) emphasises that many of the qualities judged important by students, such as the effect an educator has on the lives, learning and attitudes of individual students, are very difficult to evaluate. This leads to her posing the important questions: "Who should decide on whether an educator is an 'excellent' teacher – faculty, the students, colleagues or the final 'consumer' of the product of the institution (the community)? Who is sufficiently qualified to decide on the criteria against which 'excellence' is to be measured?" (p. 10) These questions are still very much open for debate two decades later.

So what are student perspectives on teaching excellence? Morrison & Evans (2018) provide a useful summary of a number of studies on this topic, highlighting teacher knowledge, teacher-student interaction and teacher skills as the three core categories of an effective teacher (p. 354). Teacher knowledge includes content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Teacher-student interaction includes enthusiasm, ability to motivate students, sensitivity, respect and availability. Teacher skills include teaching methods, planning, clarity of explanations, and classroom management. In the studies reviewed by Morrison & Evans, and in their own study, teacher-student interaction and teacher skills were more highly emphasised than teacher knowledge in descriptions of good teachers and good teaching.

This is also supported by other studies on student perspectives of good teaching. For example, in their study of geography academic and student perspectives on teaching excellence, Revell & Wainwright (2009) found that active learning, a clear structure and a passionate, enthusiastic lecturer were the key factors identified by both teachers and students as important. In a similar study conducted in Germany, Pauler-Kuppinger & Jucks (2017) found significant differences between perceptions of teachers and students, with lecturers assigning higher importance to active learning than students, leading them to conclude that “university teachers should make their expectations and understanding of effective teaching and learning more explicit to their students” (p.74). While teaching skills are key in defining good teaching, the teacher-student interaction is also frequently highlighted in studies on student perspectives of good teaching. For example, in addition to teaching skills, students in Tam, Heng, & Jiang’s (2009) study in China highlighted the importance of affective relationships with teachers who care and have heart. Similarly, a study of definitions of teaching excellence in a student-led award nomination scheme at a university in Scotland found a strong emphasis on teacher-student interaction in the four key themes that emerged, which were concerted, visible effort, commitment to engaging students, breaking down student-teacher barriers, and stability of support (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019).

What is clear even from this brief overview is that the discourses of teaching excellence in initiatives such as TEF find little resonance with research studies on student perspectives on teaching excellence. When asked about good teaching or teaching excellence, students emphasise the process and the experience of learning. Proxy indicators in the TEF and other similar initiatives do not and probably cannot measure what students consider to be important in good teaching. This discrepancy sits within the wider context of student and teacher roles. If the student is a consumer and the lecturer’s role is to provide the student with the knowledge and skills required to contribute efficiently and effectively to the knowledge economy, then teaching excellence can be defined through outcomes, employment and employability. However, most students do not see themselves as consumers (Saunders, 2015, Tomlinson, 2017, MacFarlane, 2020), and therefore do not see the lecturer’s role in the terms above, which explains why the teaching excellence indicators used in initiatives such as TEF do not align with student perspectives on good teaching even though they make much of using student voice. Ultimately, this goes back to the discussion of the purposes of higher education above, and suggests that the currently dominant, impoverished idea of the entrepreneurial university (Barnett, 2013) has not yet extinguished older or newer ideas of what the university is or could be.

Set against this background of alternative perspectives on good teaching and teaching excellence in higher education, this study set out to explore the perspectives of undergraduate engineering students in New Zealand.

### **3. Methodology**

The study providing data for this paper was a two-year mixed methods study with undergraduate engineering students in a university in New Zealand. The study had two phases, each comprising a survey of all undergraduate students and follow-up semi-structured interviews, conducted one year apart. The study was approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Science and Engineering Human Research ethics sub-committee in September 2018 (Approval no.: FSEN-2018-13). A survey request was sent to all undergraduate engineering students by email, with a link to a Qualtrics survey. The first page of the online survey included an explanation of the study and an informed consent statement, with students confirming that they had read the information and agreed to

participate in order to proceed further. Using a mix of open and closed questions, the anonymous survey covered experiences of teaching and learning, opinions about a range of issues including assessment, programme structure, learning support and workload, and suggestions for improvement of teaching and learning in the School. A total of 229 valid survey responses were received from 650 students in 2018, and 104 valid responses were received in 2019. Individual semi-structured interviews covered similar topics in greater depth. Interview participants were self-selected through a link at the end of the survey asking students whether they would be willing to participate in an interview. In the 2019 round of interviews, there was also some additional purposeful sampling, where an email was sent to all female students, international students and Māori and Pacific students asking whether they would be willing to share their opinions and experiences, to ensure that the perspectives of these minority groups were included in the data. Students who expressed interest in participating in an interview were provided with further information about the project and an informed consent form before arranging an interview date and time. Interviews were conducted by a Research Assistant with experience of qualitative interviewing. A total of 29 students took part in semi-structured interviews, which were then transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory approach (Urquhart, 2012). This paper draws on part of the qualitative data obtained through open-ended questions in the survey and through interviews. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Waikato, and care has been taken to ensure that participant confidentiality is maintained and that data are not reported in any way that could have negative impact for individual students or staff in the School.

#### **4. Findings**

Data from the two surveys and 29 semi-structured interviews showed that there were four main characteristics associated with teaching excellence by students. These characteristics appeared repeatedly across survey and interview responses, both when students were asked directly about good teaching, and when they were asked to make general comments on their experiences of learning and on their suggestions for improvements in teaching and learning. These four characteristics, which will be explored in turn below, were (1) communication, (2) clarity, (3) commitment, and (4) care.

##### **4.1 Communication: Facilitating learning and being willing to interact**

One aspect students value highly is communication. From the perspective of students, communication involves both the ability to facilitate learning, and the willingness for interaction required to create a positive learning environment.

First, the ability to facilitate learning includes ability to explain content in an engaging way. This 1<sup>st</sup> year Mechanical Engineering student explains his experience of a lecture he enjoyed:

... she knew how to engage with us. It was a topic that I just never thought I'd find interesting, and it was actually really enjoyable, and it's just the way she was really engaging with us. She wasn't trying to make jokes, but she was, you know, actually getting our attention. She was really friendly. And so, what would make a good teacher would probably be trying to engage with us, trying to not force things down our throats. Just make it enjoyable. (S18-9)

Students also appreciate two-way rather than one-way communication, and the effectiveness of lecturers asking questions rather than just talking was frequently mentioned, for example:

... actually asking questions, because if they're asking questions, that's when we realise, have we retained what we learned last time or have we kind of just been writing down notes and not really actually letting anything seep in. (S18-6)

Going beyond simply asking questions, the most common theme that emerged in the area of communication was responsiveness, and the skill of communicating with students at an appropriate level. This involves much more than engaging lecture style, as it requires the ability to constantly modify communication based on understanding of students' current knowledge and understanding.

A 3<sup>rd</sup> year Mechanical Engineering student explains how this plays out in practice:

It's when they care about knowing whether or not the students are getting the questions and they're not just reading off the lecture slide and hoping that you're getting what they're saying. Yeah, it's the interaction between talking about what you're trying to teach and actually applying it, so "Hey, look, we'll do this example, but I want you to try it first", "OK, well, this is how you do it, this is where you might have gone wrong, this is how you correct it. (S18-8)

Talking about a different lecturer, this 3<sup>rd</sup> year Chemical Engineering student reiterates the point:

He always makes sure that [every student] totally understands the question, and then he moves on to the other. He gives us lots of practice and he's always available at his office. (Q19-2)

In parallel with this ability to communicate, the second major theme that emerged within communication was lecturers' willingness to interact and the role of this willingness in facilitating learning. At an individual level, communication challenges due to different language backgrounds are compensated for by this willingness to communicate with students, as this 3<sup>rd</sup> year Mechanical Engineering student explains when asked about the qualities that make a good teacher:

Someone who's approachable, easy to understand when they speak. It's a bit of a hard ask for engineering because a lot of the lecturers are... their first language isn't English. They do a good job, though... there's a lecturer [name of lecturer for whom English is a second language] – whenever you need to ask him a question, you can almost always find him in his office, which is really helpful, so he's really easy to talk to. (S18-11)

This aspect is taken up again in the section on care below.

#### **4.2 Clarity: Being explicit, being able to explain content and its relevance**

One theme that repeatedly emerged from the data was clarity as a characteristic of good teaching and good teachers. This involved several elements, such as being explicit about what students need to learn, being able to explain content and concepts clearly, and being able to explain the relevance of the learning, or why something was important. Each of these is illustrated in turn below.

At the most immediate level, students appreciate clarity about what they need to focus on and what they will be tested on. As this 1<sup>st</sup> year Electronic Engineering student notes,

"...a lot of papers, they tell you exactly, you have to do this and this and this; very structured. So you know what to study and when to study and how much effort you have to put in. (S19-1)"

This 2<sup>nd</sup> year Mechanical Engineering student concurs:

Yeah, so for me, a good lecturer is a lecturer that outlines clearly what he wants you to learn and what he doesn't, because sometimes there's content they may not test on as much as others, or there may be content that's just information only, and it's really good if they're

really clear about what they're expecting you to get out of a lecture. ...some of them will have a slide at the beginning of every lecture saying, "This is what we're going to learn in this lecture", and they might stop at a certain point and say, "If I was to ask you this in a test...".

So being specific about what they're wanting from you. (S18-10)

The next point, which is connected to the communication aspect discussed above, is clarity in explaining content and concepts clearly. This is closely linked to the point above about communicating at an appropriate level, as the clarity comes largely from teaching responsively at the students' level. This 3<sup>rd</sup> year Mechanical Engineering student, who is a mature student, gives a vivid description of this concept in practice:

...don't bamboozle us, talk to me like I'm a five-year-old, and then if it's going too slow, I'll tell you speed up, but don't just assume that we all get it and that we're all A+ students, because we're not... Too many of them talk to us like we already know it, instead of that whole teaching part... [The good teachers] explain it in simpler terms, and go at a pace that you can digest it at. When it goes too fast and it turns into just dictation, there's no time to sit and digest and ponder it, you know. It's just, 'Oh I've got to hurry up, he's going to move the page in a minute, I've got to hurry up and write the next bit down', and that's not learning... A potentially interesting topic has had all the joy and the life sucked out of it, and now it's just this punishment. It feels like you're in after-school detention just writing out lines and lines and lines. (S18-4)

The final element of the clarity theme was clarity about relevance, or why it is important to learn a particular concept or content. This was dominant across all year groups and all areas of specialization. Links that might seem obvious to the lecturer may not be clear to students, and the simple act of clarifying the relevance of learning content to the real world can be very helpful, as this 1<sup>st</sup> year Civil Engineering student explains:

Maybe teachers could explain more often how what we're learning applies to the real world so that we know we're not just learning something for the sake of it. It wouldn't have to be a long explanation, just a brief one. e.g. "Today we're learning about differential equations. In engineering this is used for blah blah blah". (Q18-211)

Making clear the relevance of maths content was particularly highlighted by many students in this study, but this may be because maths courses were being taught by lecturers from the maths department rather than engineering lecturers in the School. The following quote illustrates a common theme:

Maths lecturers don't seem to connect to engineering students very well. We need to know WHY we are doing this and WHEN we will need to use it, HOW is this related to engineering at all. Otherwise, it is just a whirlwind of meaningless numbers, letters, symbols and equations. I wish there was more of a focus on understanding... (Q18-25)

#### **4.3 Commitment: To the subject, to teaching**

Another theme that was important to students in their discussion of teaching excellence was the lecturer's commitment, both to their subject and to teaching itself. Students recognize that a lecturer's passion for the subject has a direct impact on their learning experience, as this 4<sup>th</sup> year Mechanical Engineering student explains:

"It [teaching] varies greatly from person to person. But for me, a lot of the times in the lectures, it's like, "Well this is boring". You just find yourself drifting away or dozing off, checking your phone. ... It comes down to the teaching style. In an ideal world you would obviously have all your lecturers that are passionate about their subjects and are able to



convey that passion and knowledge in an interesting and interacting way, but a lot of the time it's kind of like you're just reading notes." (Q18-1)

Or as this 2<sup>nd</sup> year Civil Engineering student says, "It is very easy to be engaged with content when the lecturers are passionate" (Q18-85).

Students are also acutely aware of the extent to which lecturers are committed to their teaching, and most students in this study agreed that many of their lecturers were committed teachers. At the same time, they recognize the pressure on lecturers to achieve research goals as well, as this 1<sup>st</sup> year Chemical and Materials Engineering student recounts, after commenting that most lecturers were very approachable and enthusiastic about teaching:

"Like, one of them just straight out has told the class, "I'm really tired, I don't really want to stand here and lecture to you guys, here's a worksheet to do," and then we'd sit there and do the worksheet. So, I think, yeah, that lecturer especially was just a little bit busy with all the research that they were doing at the time. Occasionally lecturers seem to be like lecturing is pretty far down their list of priorities and they've got all their other actual research that they're trying to do, getting in the way a bit. But, yeah, usually lecturers are pretty good with it..." (S18-3)

Although students recognize the conflicting demands on their lecturers, they do not accept that research is an excuse for lack of commitment to teaching, as this 4<sup>th</sup> year Chemical and Materials Engineering student clearly states:

"Some lecturers are fantastic, knowledgeable, practical thinkers and just passionate to teach students. No offence, but some lecturers only care about their research and just "teach" for the sake of it. I do not consider this teaching. This is not fair on the students. Anyone can read off slides. In saying so, some Engineering lecturers are so student friendly and that totally makes it up for those who are not. Mostly it's their humble attitude towards students and willingness to help after class hours." (Q18-12)

While students recognize the importance of research for their lecturers, they do not believe it should impact on lecturer commitment to teaching:

"Teaching needs to be a priority for lecturers. It often feels like some lecturers only want to do their research and the teaching they do is an annoyance. While this is probably very true, it shouldn't be passed on to students." (Q18-85, 4<sup>th</sup> year Mechanical Engineering)

In addition to passion for and commitment to the subject, then, students value commitment to teaching on the part of their lecturers, and seem to be very aware of their lecturers' attitudes to teaching and the difference this makes to their own experience of learning.

#### **4.4 Care: Openness and willingness to connect and help**

A final theme that came through very strongly was care as a fundamental element of teaching excellence. Students across all year groups and areas of specialization frequently mentioned how much they appreciated the approachability and helpfulness of teaching staff, and how much this enhanced their learning. As this 4<sup>th</sup> year student responded when asked what he had most enjoyed about studying Engineering:

"You get a lot of help, especially from the faculty. ... Just the lecturers helping you... they're quite approachable as well, so it's easy to get more help." (S18-12, 4<sup>th</sup> year Electronic Engineering)

Another 4<sup>th</sup> year student expands on this idea, again with recognition of the competing demands on teaching time:

“The biggest thing is just being friendly and open ...not turning you away. It’s like a friendly, relationship building sort of thing. It’s not closing your door on someone, I guess. Yeah, that’s an amazing quality. And, I can understand that some lecturers and technicians and stuff don’t have the time, they’re busy, and they have this other deadline that they have to meet or else they’ll get in trouble with whoever, and sometimes you get turned away and that’s alright, I can understand that.” (S18-5, 4<sup>th</sup> year Materials Engineering)

The same student makes the point that this is an aspect of good teaching that is unrecognized and unrewarded:

“I wish that lecturers would get more credit for randomly a student knocking on their door asking for their help. Because 10% of students do course evaluations, or something like that. The amount of times I’ve just gone to a lecturer’s office and just knocked and said, “Hello, can you help me with this?” and it’s just been, “Yeah, sure”. That doesn’t get recorded. That doesn’t get noted down as effort that you’ve put in.” (S18-5, 4<sup>th</sup> year Materials Engineering)

Lecturers’ openness and willingness to help are the key components of care as a characteristic of teaching excellence, but the attitude of lecturers when they interact with students is also important, as this 1<sup>st</sup> year Electronic Engineering student explains, talking about a specific lecturer:

“He has a good energy when he talks to people. He’s cheerful, he’s not like... he doesn’t feel above us, he just tries to come to our level and listens to any request. He will listen to any request but of course he will flag up what’s important. But he – I never saw him turn down any question, regardless of how complicated or not it was.” (S19-1).

This idea of how lecturers see themselves in relation to students and how they interact with students relates back to quotes in the previous sections as well, suggesting that this is a core theme in student perceptions of teaching excellence.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this study support previous studies on what students see as teaching excellence. There is quite clearly a disjuncture between student perspectives and what is being and can be measured in teaching excellence metrics. Students expect their teachers to be able to teach. They expect to develop knowledge and skills. They expect to be employed after graduation. Those are basic thresholds, not teaching excellence. The tension is that:

“The emphasis has been on creating systems and standardized approaches to teaching that are ‘teacher-proof’: capable of replication across time and space. This attempt to de-professionalize teachers shifts our attention from thinking about teaching as value-laden, creative and embodied; something which cannot be reduced to a technical act.” (Skelton, 2007, p. 6)

Standardization has some value, in that it helps to assure a certain minimum threshold of quality. It creates a shared language and shared expectations, so that university teachers with limited experience or training in teaching at least have some guidance on what to do, and students have some idea of what they are signing up for when they register for courses. It contributes to the clarity aspect of good teaching, insofar as standardization usually requires information about learning outcomes, content and assessment to be provided to students before they select courses. Standardization is a way of addressing and often assuring basic thresholds. However, standardization does not assure, or even encourage, most of the features of teaching excellence identified by the students in this study. Standardization partly addresses clarity, but does not guarantee the communication, commitment and care aspects of teaching excellence. It is these value-laden,

creative and embodied aspects that make teaching and teachers excellent in the eyes of students. This aligns with the findings of Morrison & Evans (2018), Tam, Heng, & Jiang (2009) and Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting (2019) on student perspectives on teaching excellence, but questions the finding of Nasser-Abu Alhija that students in the hard sciences assign less importance to teacher-student interaction aspects than students in social sciences and humanities (Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2017). The findings of this study also support Barnett's (2013) assertion that the current dominant discourse of education is impoverished, with students offering a much richer view of good teaching.

The study also opens up possible paths for challenging the dominant discourse around teaching excellence, really engaging in dialogue with students and "student voice", and imagining other ways of defining and encouraging good university teaching. Three important and connected points that emerged from this study, and that will be discussed in turn below, are that (a) the casting of students into a "consumer" role is inadequate and a deeper discussion is needed to reflect what students value most about university education, (b) there is a need for students to be at the table and genuinely part of the discussions about teaching excellence, rather than assigning their "voice" using surveys and evaluations designed and framed by others, and (c) serious consideration of (a) and (b) open up possibilities for richer ways of thinking about and engaging in higher education teaching and learning.

First, it is clear from the data in this study that students do not see themselves merely as "consumers" of education. There are occasional references to paying for education, especially in connection to expecting lecturers to be committed to teaching, but these were heavily outweighed by references to engagement with learning, relationships with peers and lecturers, and the challenges and satisfactions of studying. This aligns with the findings of MacFarlane (2020), Tomlinson (2017), and Saunders (2015) on the myths about students as consumers, and it reinforces the point made above that students do not see teaching as a "technical act" (Skelton, 2007, p. 6). Reducing teaching to a technical act and the student role to that of consumer does a disservice to students, to teachers and to education itself.

This leads to the second point. It was not students who put themselves into the consumer role, and the whole discourse around "student voice" has been framed by others. Student surveys and student evaluations are very rarely designed by students, and often do not provide much useful information on what students actually think is valuable and important for their learning, although they may be useful for monitoring the basic minimum thresholds of teaching in practice. The basic issue here is epistemic and axiological sidelining of students, with student perspectives and values being framed by others in a discourse that – ironically – emphasizes student voice and uses this to shape institutional policies and the wider higher education area. The related epistemic insensitivity (Forstenzer, 2018) and epistemic inequality (Hayes & Cheng, 2020) of the TEF in particular have been already been critiqued, but the broader question to be asked here is: How we can create systems and processes to enable students to contribute fully to the discourses on teaching excellence, rather than being limited to the role of evaluators in somebody else's framing of their experience?

This opens up the field for a whole range of possibilities that could help us to imagine and do education otherwise. It could involve authentic discussions between academic leaders and academic staff with students about good teaching at all levels of the university, and concomitant actions to recognize and value good teaching more highly. Echoing the student above, the open office door and willingness to help students and answer questions are rarely part of a promotion package or rankings, but are crucial to student definitions of teaching excellence. It could involve the creation of richer counter narratives of teaching excellence, supported by practices such as co-

creation of learning (Bovill, 2020, Cook-Sather, 2020), or collaborative observation between academic staff and students (O’Leary & Cui, 2020). It could involve more research into integrating the elements of commitment, care, clarity and communication valued by students into teaching, and especially into online teaching in a post-Covid world. It has to involve a clear distinction between basic minimum standards on the one hand, and genuine teaching and teacher excellence on the other. Both are important, but they need to be recognized, addressed and valued in different ways, as they are not synonymous.

### Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore undergraduate student perspectives on what makes a good university teacher, and examine how this relates to current debates about teaching excellence in higher education. What is clear from the findings of this particular study is that students value communication, clarity, commitment and care as the characteristics of their best university teachers. These are characteristics that are not easily measured quantitatively and are difficult to capture in rankings or metrics, so they are unlikely to be reflected in any comparison of teaching quality, but that does not mean that they are not important. On the contrary, it is these kinds of qualities and characteristics that need to be recognized, encouraged and valued in university teachers, and finding ways of doing this is one way to reclaim and enrich the discourse of teaching excellence.

### Declaration of Interest

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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