

## Effective Teaching in Higher Education: Perceptions of First Year Undergraduate Students

Jo Allan, Karen Clarke, and Michael Jopling  
*University of Wolverhampton*

This article reports on a piece of research designed to explore students' perceptions of what constitutes effective teaching in a modern UK university. Definitions of effectiveness, based on work in both the schools and university sectors, are explored and summarized into four domains: providing a supportive learning environment; having high expectations; scaffolding learning; and providing clear explanations. The research was undertaken with first year undergraduates studying education-related non-teacher training programs. Data gathered from three focus group interviews were developed into a 32 item Likert scale questionnaire completed by a sample of 80 students, 65 of whom participated in further focus group discussions. Consensus regarding ten factors that describe effective university teachers is posited. The article concludes by suggesting that notions of effectiveness are predicated less on university teachers having high academic expectations and more on the provision of a supportive environment in which teachers scaffold learning effectively and promote effective interaction with their students.

The climate of accountability in higher education in the UK is gradually shifting in emphasis from quality assurance to quality enhancement, an evolution that has resulted in a movement away from discipline-specific audit trails to institutional audits and a concomitant "explicit focus on institutional strategies for improving the quality of learning opportunities" (QAA, 2007, p. 3). An example of one of these strategies is the establishment by the Government of 74 Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, their purpose being "to recognise and reward specific areas of excellence in higher education institutions and to promote its further development to benefit students, teachers and universities and colleges" (HEFCE, 2006, p.18).

At an individual level, the national teaching fellowship scheme, first launched in the UK in 2000, was expanded in 2004 to provide rewards to 50 HE teachers annually for excellence in promoting learning. As the authors have argued elsewhere, "this strong interventionist stance is serving to harness significant resources to enhance student learning and to promote and provide the opportunity for successful participation in HE to everyone who can benefit from it" (Allan & Clarke, 2007, p. 64).

Whilst quality assurance processes have long taken into account students' perceptions of the teaching they receive, their views have not been as influential in the UK as, for example, in the United States where, according to Shevlin *et al* (2000, p. 38), information from student evaluations of teaching "can be used for faculty decisions about conditions of employment such as salary and promotion." The introduction in England and Wales of a national student survey in 2005, modeled on the survey developed in Australia in the 1990s, seeks final year undergraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the teaching they

received against prescribed criteria, thus underlining the increasing influence of the student voice in HE.

Paradoxically, while a number of recent studies (Vielba & Hillier, 2000, Hillier & Vielba, 2002, Skelton, 2004) focus primarily on teachers' perceptions of high quality university teaching, the dearth of research relating to HE students' perceptions of effective teaching as reported by Reid and Johnston (1999) still applies almost a decade later. Muijs (2008) claims that his research shows that evidence gleaned from students is highly reliable, while research into teacher effectiveness implies "that the primary indicator of effective teaching is located at the level of the student, rather than the teacher" (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005 p. 687). In this article, we thus report on a case study exploring first year undergraduate education students' perceptions of what constitutes effective teaching in a modern English university in the West Midlands.

### Definitions of Effectiveness

A study of extant literature on effectiveness in teaching in both schools and higher education reveals that defining effectiveness is inherently contentious. Evans and Abbott (1998) maintained that there can be no consensus about what characterizes effective teaching until the aims of higher education are agreed upon. Debates about the purpose of higher education proliferate, and the emphasis placed by teachers on the rapid acquisition of evolving knowledge or the development of high level cognitive and personal skills colors diverse notions of the aims of HE and hence of effectiveness.

Biggs (2003) posits that the purpose of higher education teaching is to promote the development of high order learning processes, which he suggests appear

to come naturally to high-achieving undergraduates but not necessarily to all students. Taking a constructivist view of education, Biggs (p.27) sees the secret of high quality teaching as ensuring that there is “alignment between what we want, how we teach and how we assess” in a system where all components address the same agenda. Thus “the students are entrapped in the web of consistency, optimizing the likelihood that they will engage in the appropriate learning activities, but paradoxically leaving them free to construct knowledge in their own way” (p. 26). This suggests that any measure of effectiveness should take into account contextual issues, a point reflected in studies (Mortimore, 1998; Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001; Campbell *et al*, 2004) that recognize that social, economic and political factors all have an impact on notions of effectiveness.

In order to avoid becoming embroiled in complex debates and analysis about the purpose of education, much of the teacher effectiveness literature, with some notable exceptions (e.g. Dunne & Wragg, 1994; Kyriacou, 1997; Campbell *et al* 2004; Berliner, 2005), posits a model that is assumed to be value-free. Effectiveness is measured through student achievement *outcomes*, which are maximized by establishing the most efficient institution and classroom processes. Campbell *et al* (2004, p. 456) argue that an output model:

Despite appearances, [it] is not value-free so much as based in a value system of instrumental pragmatism, in which ends are taken for granted and means pursued without reference to them. The consequence has been that the literature has insulated effectiveness research from both the larger moral frame of education, and from the need to see this reflected in more specific values underlying the teaching process.

As Campbell *et al* (2004) point out, most studies in teacher effectiveness take achievement against standardized tests as the benchmark for an outcome measure, with the implication that these tests stand “as a proxy for other kinds of learning” (p. 457). In a contemporary HE context, these other kinds of learning may be defined as:

- becoming an independent learner;
- developing meta-cognitive skills;
- solving problems;
- acting on feedback;
- assessing one’s strengths and weaknesses;
- acquiring generic study skills, e.g. communicating effectively, making effective use of technology to promote one’s own learning;
- working effectively with others and;
- efficient time-management (Allan & Clarke, 2007).

The promotion of these skills is as difficult for

university teachers to assess as it is for school teachers, but if such learning is embodied in the expected learning outcomes, a valid model of an effective university teacher must logically include this assessment.

In teasing out what might be meant by an effective university teacher, Yates (2005, p. 687) suggests that it is “crucial to differentiate between the notion of the “effective” teacher (indexed by student learning criteria) and that of the “good teacher” (indexed by professional respect and humanistic criteria)”. Berliner (2005) perceives these as conceptually separate parts – he suggests that good is normative, representing what is expected of a professional in a teaching post, while “in contrast, effective teaching is about reaching achievement goals, it is about students learning what they are supposed to in a particular context, grade or subject” (p. 207). The implication of this is that assessment of teaching effectiveness should derive more from the extent of student engagement and positive achievement outcomes than from overt measures of teacher behaviour or performativity, the latter relating more to teacher evaluation or appraisal than any evaluation of their effectiveness.

Perversely, while this stance is logical from an educationalist’s perspective, policies and discourses that inform higher education policy and governmental notions of high quality provision are heavily associated with performativity, managerialism and marketization (Ball, 2003). These three contextual factors are posited by Skelton (2005) as providing a useful framework to consider notions of excellence in higher education teaching. New managerialism emphasises the 3 Es of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness, which together comprise crucial criteria for judging excellence from the perspective of governments and senior managers in higher education and also provide the basis for greater accountability, the salient feature of structures and systems dependent on market forces and competition. High rankings in public league tables render institutions more attractive to potential students who, increasingly, expect high quality teaching.

The third factor of performativity is defined by Ball (2003, p. 215) as requiring teachers “to organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluation.” Seen through this lens, high quality teaching is evidenced, *inter alia*, by student completion rates, external audits, evaluation feedback, and responses to national student surveys. While not exclusively predicated on students’ perceptions, measures of student achievement draw increasingly heavily on judgements *made* by students but *reported* by government and senior managers, for example in the annual National Student Survey.

Discourse relating to effective teaching increasingly refers to teaching excellence rather than

teaching effectiveness. Accordingly, superlatives such as best practice and best value have become more and more prevalent in descriptions of HE practice. Akin to effectiveness, the slippery and contested concept of excellence is used inconsistently in the literature. In this article we are defining effective teaching in terms of the impact that strategies to promote learning, teacher characteristics, teacher expectations, and the learning environment created by teachers have on students' achievement.

### Dimensions of Teaching Effectiveness

Although Patrick and Smart (1998) claim that there appears to be little agreement on the nature and number of dimensions that represent teaching effectiveness, their view is not shared by most researchers in the field. For example, working in the context of schools, Harris (1998, p.169) asserts that "despite the diversity of approach, there is a degree of consensus about the generic features of effective teaching." Focusing on HE, Ramsden (1991) comments, "although good teaching is undoubtedly a complicated matter, there is a substantial measure of agreement among these empirical studies about its essential characteristics" (p.131).

Similarly comprehensive critiques of effective teaching research undertaken in Australia by Yates (2005) and in the UK by Harris (1998) support the existence of some consensus. Although some of these studies focus on school teaching, their findings both inform and have resonance with the developing body of knowledge relating specifically to teaching in HE. Hopkins *et al* (1997) posit three broad dimensions of effective teaching. The first is teaching effects, a concept which embraces both teaching skills and teaching behaviours, e.g. management of time, promoting independent working, establishing clear routines, and being well organized. The second relates to the acquisition of effective teaching models and describes particular types of learning environments that a teacher establishes in his/her classroom. The third dimension is teacher artistry, which "emphasizes the personal responsibility for creating the conditions for effective learning undertaken by the teacher. While effective learning can take place in the absence of effective teaching, optimum results will occur when there is a good match of the two" (Harris, 1998, p. 179).

Over the past 30 years, a remarkable portrait of an effective HE teacher from *teachers'* perspectives has emerged from a range of research studies. The summary of these dimensions, depicted in Table 1, is based on the work of Marsh, 1987; Swartz *et al*, 1990; Entwistle & Tait 1990; Ramsden, 1991;

Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Brown and Atkins, 1993; Porter and Brophy, 1988; Patrick & Smart 1998; Vielba & Hillier 2000; Hillier, 2002; ILT 2002; Biggs, 2003; Skelton 2004; & Yates 2005.

Table 1  
Findings from Effectiveness Research:  
Dimensions of Effective Teaching.

Table 1 incorporates dimensions which are principally grounded in the views of teachers.

---

#### Supportive Learning Environment

- provision of intellectual excitement, enthusiasm and a stimulating & creative environment;
- high degree of subject knowledge;
- respect for, and interest in, students;
- climate of approachability; provision of a motivating environment;
- recognition of student diversity.

#### Academic Expectations

- high level of expected output;
- expected outcomes expressed directly in academic terms—explaining to students what they are to learn and why;
- clarity in standards and assessment criteria;
- appropriate workload and level of difficulty;
- development of critical thought..

#### Scaffolding Learning

- varied ways to teach content;
- anticipation of misconceptions in students' existing knowledge;
- appropriate pace for the group being taught;
- high level of engagement;
- excellent management of student behaviour;
- systematic, well organised and well structured sessions;
- students work collaboratively with both their peers and their teachers;
- effective and timely feedback;
- encouragement of independent learning;
- encouragement of active learning;
- effective & sympathetic guidance.

#### Clarity

- strong, unambiguous presentation skills
  - high quality explanation.
- 

Unusually, the study undertaken by Reid and Johnston (1999) adopted a phenomenographic approach (see Methods section of this article) to explore variance in how notions of effective teaching were understood by teachers and students in a HE context. Their findings suggest that students showed no appreciation of the role that teachers' research played in enhancing teaching and that teachers demonstrated little or no awareness of the importance students place on teachers' approachability. In addition, students are "three times as likely as their teachers to identify interest as a characteristic of good teaching, while teachers are, by about the same margin, more likely to emphasize participation and active involvement of students in the teaching process" (p. 277).

### Method

This case study was also undertaken from a phenomenographic perspective (Marton, 1981; Marton & Booth 1997) to examine students' perceptions of, and insights into, effective undergraduate teaching in the first year of their study. Phenomenography explores how concepts, principles, and phenomena are perceived, experienced, and understood in specific contexts and is thus concerned with the direct exploration of experiences (Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984). The study follows a phenomenographic approach in its quest to describe, analyse, and understand (Marton, 1981) how students construe effective teaching. However, our approach is limited to the examination of perceptions and does not explore in depth variations between them as would be expected from a more purist phenomenographic study.

In total, 195 students studied education-related, non teacher-training programs in the academic year 2007/8. All students were invited to take part in the study; no coercion was exercised, and there were no penalties for non-participation. 16 students participated in the initial pilot focus group interviews and 65 in the principal focus groups. 80 students responded to the Likert-scale questionnaire.

The study explored two interrelated questions: (1) What do students perceive to be effective teaching in their first year in HE? (2) What are the qualities of teachers that first year students perceive to promote their learning?

Data were gathered from three focus groups: a pilot group consisting of four students and two groups each made up of six students. Of the total 16 students, six students were male and ten female. The interviews were conducted on a semi-structured basis, which enabled the group to enter into and extend the discussion (Lichtman, 2006).

Participants' opinions were recorded on a flip-chart and amended throughout the interviews. In this way, conversation and discussion were facilitated (Holliday, 2007), and using an iterative approach enabled a degree of consensus relating to students' perceptions to be built up. The function of the focus groups was thus to provide a grounded perspective of students' beliefs. The facilitator for each of the initial focus groups was a teacher/researcher who taught some but not all of the students. Students were given an outline of the research before the interviews took place and prior to choosing whether to participate. They were assured of the anonymity of any of their comments and were asked not to name specific teachers but rather to identify the characteristics that effective teachers displayed that they felt were beneficial to their learning.

The data collected in the first phase were analysed and grouped into four broad categories:

- teaching skills;

- subject knowledge of teachers;
- personal qualities of teachers; and
- aspects of teaching that may hinder students' learning.

These were then presented to a further five focus groups, each comprising between 10 and 12 students, which were intended to refine, develop, and validate the initial ideas. The focus groups were asked (a) to discuss and modify the original statements and (b) to add any additional statements as appropriate and record their responses on flipcharts. They were led by a final year student who had been given some support in interview techniques.

The data from the first phase of the study were summarized into 32 statements incorporated into a Likert questionnaire (see Appendix A). As the respondents were all first year undergraduates, the term "university teacher" rather than "teacher" was used in the questionnaire to signal to the respondents that the locus of the study was their current experience in university and not their perceptions of their teachers in school. Despite this, a number of students referred to "effective lecturers" in their response to the open-ended question included in the survey. The questionnaire was piloted, modified, and then distributed to 121 first year undergraduate students. A five-point Likert scale was used, which allowed respondents to express strong disagreement (1), disagreement (2), neutrality (3), agreement (4) or strong agreement (5) in response to each of the statements included. 80 responses were received, giving a return rate of 66%. 36 of the respondents answered the open question inviting them to comment further on effective teaching.

The cohorts recruited in these subjects are predominantly young female undergraduates; this is reflected in our sample, among which 65 (81%) of respondents were female and 57 (71%) aged between 18 and 25. Only 21 (26%) were 26-40 and two were aged over 40. The latter two groups were combined for the analysis. All respondents were studying either a specialist or a joint degree in Early Childhood Studies, Education Studies, or Special Needs and Inclusion Studies. Other demographic data were not collected on the respondents. The questionnaire data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 12.0. In order to build a more detailed profile of students' perceptions of effective teaching, we undertook both factor and correlational analysis of the data.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the study sought the perspective of students on what constituted effective teaching by ordinary university teachers. Ordinary is not used as a pejorative term; rather, it signifies "those teachers who have not been singled out through awards for excellence" (Skelton, 2005, p.89) and thus serves to differentiate this study from those

that focus on analyzing the characteristics of excellence as defined by national award schemes.

### Results and Discussion

Details of the statements included in the questionnaire, along with the mean responses and standards deviations for each statement, are included in Appendix A. Analysis of the responses to the Likert questionnaire in Table 2 shows the five responses with the highest proportion of strongly agree and agree responses.

Table 2  
The Top 5 Statements Describing  
Effective University Teachers the Most Positively

Effective university teachers....	% of Strongly Agree and Agree Responses
demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject	99
include group activities during sessions	95
encourage discussion	94
are approachable	91
start sessions on time	91

The first item, effective university teachers demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject, was reinforced by respondents in the focus groups who expressed a strong belief that excellent subject knowledge was a necessary attribute of an effective teacher. What emerges from this research is not, as Reid and Johnston (1999) suggest, that students have little appreciation of teachers' research but rather that they value the rigour this can bring to teaching. One student stated that "research definitely gives a deeper understanding, relevance, and meaning to the subject," while another felt "research encourages students to have wide subject knowledge."

Nevertheless, our research suggests that, at least in their first year in HE, students only value research that is relevant to their studies: "it is useful but only if it is applicable to the topic," and comprehensible: "you can get bored and easily switch off if the research examples are irrelevant to your understanding."

These perceptions align strongly with the analysis presented in Table 1 in relation to the importance of creating a supportive learning environment and scaffolding learning, and notably with Biggs' (2003) work on constructive alignment. It is not unexpected that first year undergraduates in a modern university rate highly teachers who ensure the relevance of their sessions to the module being studied; indeed, this facet of effective teaching also features highly in

Table 3. It is also wholly consistent with an achieving (Biggs, 1987,) or strategic (Tait *et al*, 1998) approach and, given the political influence on education discussed in this article, with enhancing achievement.

The high value placed by students on including group activities and encouraging discussion in sessions chimes with the consensus of teachers' views on the contribution that varying ways of teaching content, promoting active learning, and assuring a high level of engagement make to effective learning. Given the ranking of both of these items, it was somewhat surprising that respondents did not add any further comments relating to them in either the focus group discussion or the open ended section of the questionnaire.

Conversely, the fourth ranking item, being approachable, was accorded a strong emphasis by the students. For some students the notion of approachability was linked to promoting self-efficacy and to a climate of trust: "effective university teachers are approachable and understanding. They make, or rather give you a sense that you can achieve what you are striving for." Others stated that "they need to be approachable and offer guidance – otherwise students become lost on the course and lose their focus," and that "if they aren't approachable the students become afraid to ask questions." For some students, approachability was associated with teachers' time management: "some lecturers are more approachable than others who are rushed;" "an effective lecturer has the time to listen to doubts on an area of discussion or an assignment and aims to help their students achieve the best they can." Another emphasized the value placed on teachers who "spend more in-depth time discussing assignments and ensuring the student is clear on what they are doing."

The explicit references to lecturers' clarifying assignment requirements finds resonance in a study undertaken by Bloxham and West (2007, p. 84), who reported that students value those teachers who provide verbal clarification or "almost a translation into language that they could understand," which prompted them to posit that "effective teachers, at least in students' initial engagement with HE are those that can slip effortlessly from subject to everyday discourse and back again" (p.85). The strength of this assertion is further supported by the positive responses reported in connection with teachers' preparedness to explain.

That said, the importance that students accord to teachers specifically having *time* for their students does not find resonance in current literature. This perception perhaps arises from the increasingly high staff-student ratios, which are prevalent in modern universities together with the ever widening demands that are being placed on university teachers both to

undertake research and generate income through external projects. Furthermore, the unexpected presence of the fifth item in Table 2 relating to starting sessions on time suggests that students do indeed regard in high esteem those teachers who prioritize their teaching. This echoes the marketisation/performativity argument, which threatens to change the teacher-student relationship.

The second notable tranche of items cluster around those that received no strongly disagree and disagree ratings in the questionnaire. These items are indicated in Table 3.

Table 3  
The Statements Describing Effective University  
Teachers and Attracting No Disagreement

Effective university teachers....
demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject
ensure the relevance of information within sessions
are patient
respect students' opinions
are enthusiastic about learning

The only item to appear both here and in Table 2 above (which contains items with the most “agree” and “strongly agree” responses) was “demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject,” making it the most highly regarded factor.

Focusing on the personal attributes identified in Table 3 that are highly valued by new undergraduates, patience does not feature in any of the literature reviewed. One student associated it with the recognition of individual difference: “effective lecturers need to be patient – everyone is different, we all learn in different ways – some get things, others don’t.” It was further developed in one of the focus groups by a number of students who regarded the recognition of, and appropriate responses to, different learning styles among students as an important attribute of an effective teacher who “takes into account different learning styles and attempts to incorporate this into their teaching,” and “incorporates different learning styles to adapt to the background of the variety of students.” Differentiation does not feature in extant research on teacher effectiveness in HE, but, given the diversification of students that has resulted from the widening participation agenda, it begs the question as to the extent to which 21<sup>st</sup> university undergraduate curricula should be predicated on a pedagogy modelled on the principle of differentiation.

The second personal attribute that students agreed upon was the role that respect plays in effective teaching. Two facets that qualified respect emerged. The first, its importance in promoting motivation (“if there’s no respect, it discourages student motivation”), was congruent with the perceptions of all the students in the focus group where it was discussed. This stance

is also explicit in Table 1 and is supported by Biggs, (2003, p. 13), who argues that “motivation is a product of good teaching, not its prerequisite” and that effective teachers create learning environments where students experience the need to learn. A clear implication of respect is that “effective lecturers listen to students’ opinions and make students feel comfortable and confident to speak out and do not put them on the spot in front of a large group making them feel uncomfortable.” Another student emphasized, “they listen to you without singling you out. They do not highlight your weaknesses but do give clear constructive criticism.” These comments illustrate the consensus relating to the importance of respect that was prevalent in both our study and the corpus of research embodying teachers’ perceptions, summarized in Table 1.

The final personal attribute identified in Table 3 is that of enthusiasm, which respondents associated with engendering a high level of engagement: “effective lecturers are passionate about what they teach and make sessions fun and engaging for the students to learn more effectively.” Passion was also identified by another student who valued teachers who “are very passionate about their topic and engage students fully.” Research undertaken by Bauer (2002) in the States with 130 first year college chemistry students placed strong emphasis on enthusiasm, which was the category in this study with the most positive responses. Furthermore, the link with engaging students in learning finds support in the literature summarized in Table 1, which recognizes the centrality of engagement in scaffolding learning.

### Analyses

Having focused the initial analysis on the most commonly approved characteristics of effective teachers, parametric analysis of the questionnaire data was also undertaken using SPSS. Firstly, a relatively simple factor analysis and a component matrix test were run on the statements using SPSS, which did not reveal any striking results. Following this, they were grouped into three sections (1-7, 8-23, and 24-32) to reduce the problem of the narrow spread of responses to most of the statements. To avoid losing data, seven missing answers were replaced by the median response (Agree) in the knowledge that this would slightly reduce the amount of variation. Factor analysis revealed that there were no significant differences between the three degree groupings. All the p values were much greater than 0.05 (which indicates significance) and 0.1 (sometimes described as “suggestive”). Significant differences were found by age, however, with respondents over 26 giving consistently higher scores when ANOVAs were run of the statement means in each of the groupings

Table 4  
Correlations Between Respect and Enthusiasm and Other Variables

	Are Enthusiastic About Learning	Relate Their Research Directly to Modules	Give Examples Drawn from their Own Experience	Do Not Put Students On the Spot
Respect Students' Opinions	0.829**	0.800**	0.799**	0.516**
	Give Examples Drawn from their Own Experiences	Explain Any New Language or Concepts Clearly	Allow Adequate Time for Discussion	Are Approachable
Are Enthusiastic About Learning	0.813**	0.788**	0.762**	0.068

\*\* p<.01

(see Appendix B). Finally, tests were run on the scores using the first two statements (“demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject” and “demonstrate the research they undertake in their subject area”) as factors. There was no evidence of differences between degree groups or sexes, but a difference that is just significant ( $p=0.049$ ) was found between the age groups for the first factor (see Appendix B). In the absence of more compelling evidence, this could reflect generally higher scores allocated by older students, or it may be a chance effect.

As the factor analysis had offered inconclusive results, correlational analysis was then undertaken of the questionnaire data, again using SPSS, to calculate correlation coefficients for the questionnaire responses using Spearman's rho. Analysis of correlations across the entire dataset supported the previous analysis, which found that responses were tightly clustered (see Tables 2 & 3). Significant correlations tended to be positive, with 20 statements having no negative coefficients and only one statistically significant negative correlation reported (see below). The strongest positive correlations clustered around two of the factors already identified in Table 3: “respect students' opinions” and “are enthusiastic about learning.”

As Table 4 indicates, these factors were strongly correlated with a number of variables. The strongest correlation was between the two variables themselves (0.829\*\*), with respect being strongly linked to “relate their research directly to modules” and “give examples drawn from their own experience” and, interestingly, less strongly linked to “do not put students on the spot.” Enthusiasm was also strongly correlated with “give examples drawn from their own experience” as well as with “explain any new language or concepts clearly” and “allow adequate time for discussion.” Enthusiasm was weakly correlated with approachability, although not significantly. Fairly strong positive correlations were also found between “recognise that students learn at different rates” and “acknowledge students' previous learning or work experience” (0.784\*\*) and between

“encourage questions” and “value student contributions” (0.777\*\*).

In summary, the correlation analysis confirmed the previous analysis in that responses tended to cluster together and be positively rather than negatively correlated. The stronger positive correlations were between respecting students' opinions, enthusiasm, and giving examples from teachers' own experience. There were slightly surprising outcomes associated with patience and approachability, and with variables such as recognizing that students learn at different rates and customizing information that warrant further examination.

### Conclusion

This study suggests that the context of a modern, post-1992, teaching-intensive university is providing a student-led profile of an effective higher education teacher that is not wholly consistent with extant literature. Students in this sample regarded the provision of a supportive learning environment in which teachers scaffold learning as a requisite of effective teaching. Each of the top-ranked items supports this assertion. In contrast, while there is evidence to suggest that teachers deem having high academic expectations for their learners to be important, students do not rank this item highly. None of the characteristics cited in Table 1 relating to academic expectations and clarity are valued highly by respondents. Rather, students favour actions that lead directly to the enhancement of their *own* learning, to teaching strategies, and the personal attributes of teachers that they believe improve the interaction *between* them and their teachers. The students selected factors that refer to the creation of an environment and processes that are conducive to developing their own understanding and achievement, and which demonstrate that their teachers are sympathetic to the challenges they face as first year undergraduates. This suggests that the students' notions of an effective teacher are predicated on their seeing themselves as



partners in learning, not recipients of knowledge. Students thus have a pivotal role in making teaching effective. The findings of this study present a challenge to university teachers to take on board this profile of effective teaching and to (re)conceptualize their role as a subject specialist-cum-teacher.

As a small-scale study with a sample of 80 participants, the potential for generalizing the findings is limited by its size and its foundation on a case study of the perceptions of students studying education and education-related subjects. Further research is now required to investigate the extent to which the ten characteristics that have emerged have equal resonance with first year students in a range of other disciplines.

### References

- Allan, J., & Clarke, K. (2007). Nurturing supportive learning environments in HE through the teaching of study skills: To embed or not to embed? *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in HE*, 19(1), 64-76.
- Ball, S. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215-28.
- Bauer, C. (2002). What students think: College students describe their high school chemistry class. *The Science Teacher*, 69, 52-55.
- Berliner, D. (2005). The near impossibility of testing for teacher quality. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(3), 205 – 214.
- Biggs, J. (1987). *Student approaches to learning and studying*. Hawthorn, AU: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Biggs, J. (2003). *Learning to teach in higher education*. Maidenhead, ENG: Society for Research into Higher Education.
- Bloxham, S., & West, A. (2007). Learning to write in higher education: Students' perceptions of an intervention in developing understanding of assessment criteria. *Teaching in Higher Education* 12(1), 77-89.
- Brown, G., & Atkins, M. (1993). *Effective teaching in higher education*. London, ENG: Routledge.
- Campbell, R., Kyriakides, L., Muijs, D., & Robinson, W. (2004). Effective teaching and values: Some implications for research and teacher appraisal. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(4), 451-465.
- Dunne, R., & Wragg, T. (1994). *Effective teaching*. London, ENG: Routledge.
- Entwistle, N., & Tait, H. (1998). Approaches to learning, evaluations of teaching, and preferences for contrasting academic environments. *Higher Education*, 197, 169-194.
- Evans, L., & Abbott, I. (1998). *Teaching and learning in higher education*. London, ENG: Cassell.
- Fenstermacher, G., & Richardson, V. (2005). On making determinations of quality in teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 107(1), 186-215.
- Harris, A. (1998). Effective teaching: A review of the literature. *School Leadership and Management*, 18(20), 169-183.
- HEfCE. (2006). *HEfCE strategic plan 2006-2011*. London, ENG: HEfCE.
- Hillier, Y., & Vielba, C., (2001). *Perceptions of excellence: Personal constructs of excellence in teaching and learning*. Institute of Learning and Teaching Annual Conference: University of York.
- Hillier, Y. (2002). *The quest for competence, good practice and excellence*. Retrieved from [www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/id494/question\\_for\\_competence](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/id494/question_for_competence).
- Holliday, H. (2007). *Doing and writing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London, ENG: Sage Publishers.
- Hopkins, D., & Reynolds, D. (2001). The past, present, and future of school improvement: Towards the third age. *British Educational Research Journal*, 27(4), 459-475.
- Hopkins, D., Ainscow, M., West, M., Harris, A., & Beresford, J. (1997). *Creating the conditions for classroom improvement*. London, ENG: David Fulton.
- Institute of Learning and Teaching (2001). Retrieved from [www.ilt.ac.uk/criteria\\_2001.html](http://www.ilt.ac.uk/criteria_2001.html).
- Kyriacou, C. (1997). *Effective teaching in schools*. London, ENG: Stanley Thornes.
- Lichtman, L. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: A user's guide*. London, ENG: Sage Publishers.
- Lowman, J., & Mathie, V. (1993). What should graduate teaching assistants know about teaching? *Teaching of Psychology*, 20(2), 84-88.
- Marsh, H. (1997). Students' evaluations of university teaching: Research findings, methodological issues, and directions for future research. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 11.
- Marton, F. (1981). Phenomenography— describing conceptions of the world about us. *Instructional Science*, 10, 177-200.
- Marton, F., & Booth, S. (1997). *Learning and awareness*. New York, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Marton, F., Hounsell, D., & Entwistle, N. (Eds.). (1984). *The experience of learning*. Edinburgh, SCT: Scottish Educational Press.
- Mortimore, P. (1998). *The road to improvement: Reflections on school effectiveness*. The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger.
- Muijs, D. (2008). *Researching teacher effectiveness: Problems and possibilities*. Centre for Developmental and Applied Research in Education Annual Conference. University of Wolverhampton, ENG.



- Patrick, J., & Smart, R. (1998). An empirical evaluation of teacher effectiveness: The emergence of three critical factors. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 23*(2), 165-178.
- Porter, A., & Brophy, J. (1998). Synthesis of research on good teaching: Insights from the work of the institute for research on teaching. *Educational Leadership, 46*, 74-85.
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. (2007). *Higher Quality (24)*.
- Ramsden, P. (1991). A performance indicator of teaching quality in higher education: The course experience questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education, 16*(2), 129-150.
- Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to teach in higher education*. London, ENG: Routledge.
- Reid, D., & Johnston, M. (1999). Improving teaching in higher education: Student and teacher perspectives. *Educational Studies, 25*(3), 269-281.
- Shevlin, M. P., Banyard, P., Davies, M., & Griffiths, M. (2000). The validity of student evaluation of teaching in higher education: Love me, love my lectures. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 25*(4), 397-405.
- Skelton, A. (2004). Understanding teaching excellence in higher education: A critical evaluation of the national teaching fellowships scheme. *Studies in Higher Education 29*, 451-468.
- Skelton, A. (2005). *Understanding teaching excellence in higher education: Towards a critical approach*. Abingdon, ENG: Routledge.
- Swartz, C., White, K., & Stuck, G. (1990). The factorial structure of the North Carolina teacher performance appraisal instrument. *Educational Psychology Measurement, 50* (1), 175-185.
- Tait, H., Entwistle, N., & McCunne, V. (1998). ASSIST: A reconceptualisation of the approaches to study inventory. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving students as learners*. Oxford, CT: Oxford Brookes University.
- Vielba, C., & Hillier, Y. (2000). Defining excellence in teaching and learning in postgraduate professional programmes. British Academy of Management Conference, Edinburgh, SCT.
- Yates, G. (2005). How obvious: Personal reflections on the database of educational psychological and effective teaching research. *Educational Psychology, 25*(6), 681-700.

and is currently researching perspectives on effective teaching in higher education.

MICHAEL JOPLING is Senior Research Fellow in the Centre for Developmental and Applied Research and Education at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. His current research includes explorations of collaborative leadership; schools' approaches to food and health; and effective teaching in higher education.

KAREN CLARKE is Associate Dean for Learning and Teaching in the School of Education, University of Wolverhampton. She taught in schools, colleges and higher education. Her doctoral research focuses on perceptions of effective teaching from lecturers', students' and university managers' perspectives.

---

JO ALLEN was the founding director of the Centre for Developmental and Applied Research in Education at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK. Now semi-retired, Jo is an emeritus professor of education

## Appendix A Questionnaire and Responses

Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning: Research Questionnaire:  
Students' perceptions of effective teaching in higher education.

### Introduction

This questionnaire is designed to collect your perceptions about effective teaching in higher education. All responses will be treated anonymously.

The questionnaire should take you less than 5 minutes to complete.

### Background

Which degree are you studying?

Are you	Male	or	Female
Please indicate your age group	18-25	26-40	41+

Q	Statement - Effective university teachers:	Valid	Mean	Std. Dev	Range
1	demonstrate excellent knowledge of their subject	79	5.519	0.503	1
2	demonstrate the research they undertake in their subject area	79	5.025	0.698	3
3	relate their research directly to module sessions	80	4.563	1.135	4
4	relate theory to work-based practice	80	4.538	1.147	4
5	encourage discussion	80	5.175	0.708	4
6	enable students to understand the content of each session	79	4.696	0.822	3
7	create a safe climate for all students to participate in discussion	80	4.838	0.818	3
8	convey knowledge in a way that is accessible to students.	80	4.700	0.736	3
9	ensure the relevance of information within sessions	80	5.013	0.515	2
10	do not put students on the spot when questioning	80	4.600	0.894	3
11	are patient	80	5.013	0.490	2
12	recognise that students learn at different rates	80	4.275	1.113	4
13	are prepared to explain	80	5.150	0.618	3
14	encourage students to ask questions	80	5.063	0.700	4
15	are enthusiastic about learning	80	4.888	0.779	2
16	explain any new language or concepts clearly	80	4.575	0.991	4
17	acknowledge previous learning/work experiences of students	79	4.380	1.066	3
18	are approachable	80	5.313	0.805	3
19	respect students' opinions	79	4.924	0.747	2
20	give clear guidance when asked for help	80	4.888	0.795	3
21	value students' contributions	80	5.063	0.700	3
22	give examples drawn from their own experiences	80	4.863	0.882	3
23	start sessions on time	80	5.088	0.640	3
24	use Powerpoint as prompts only	80	4.338	1.102	4
25	limit the information given in any one session	80	3.925	1.065	4
26	allow adequate time for discussion	80	4.613	0.684	4
27	give full citation for any references given	80	4.788	0.669	3
28	customise information for their students	79	4.316	0.968	3
29	explain inconsistencies clearly	79	4.494	0.696	3
30	provide clear assessment briefs	80	4.863	0.689	3
31	include group activities during sessions	80	5.038	0.625	4
32	recap at end of sessions	80	4.550	0.884	4

### Appendix B T-Tests by age

Statement groupings

Group Statistics

	Age 2gps	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Sum of Q1 to Q7	18-25	57	33.7895	4.03882	.53495
	26+	23	35.7391	4.93795	1.02963
Sum of Q8 to Q23	18-25	57	76.4561	8.66452	1.14764
	26+	23	80.8261	10.48225	2.18570
Sum of Q24 to Q33	18-25	57	45.0526	4.82338	.63887
	26+	23	48.4348	5.57450	1.16236
Sum all Q1 to Q33	18-25	57	155.2982	16.29084	2.15778
	26+	23	165.0000	19.90203	4.14986

Indep Test ...

	Levene Test ...		t-test for Equality...						
	F	Significance	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Diff...	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Sum of Q1 to Q7	.613	.436	-1.831	78	.071	-1.94966	1.06504	4.06999	.17068
			Not Equal variances	-1.680	34.493	.102	-1.94966	1.16031	4.30645
Sum of Q8 to Q23	1.520	.221	-1.920	78	.059	-4.36995	2.27600	8.90112	.16123
			Not Equal variances	-1.770	34.765	.085	-4.36995	2.46868	9.38284
Sum of Q24 to Q33	.000	.993	-2.713	78	.008	-3.38215	1.24664	5.86401	-.90029
			Not Equal variances	-2.550	36.009	.015	-3.38215	1.32637	6.07213
Sum all Q1 to Q33	.450	.504	-2.259	78	.027	-9.70175	4.29468	8.25180	-1.15170
			Not Equal variances	-2.074	34.513	.046	-9.70175	4.67732	9.20201

Factor analysis using statement 1

Group Statistics

	Age 2gps	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
REGR factor score 1 for analysis 1	18-25	57	-.1349422	1.01047277	.13384039
	26+	23	.3344219	.90981265	.18970905
REGR factor score 2 for analysis 1	18-25	57	-.0068381	.92705242	.12279109
	26+	23	.0169466	1.18442281	.24696923