

# Pedagogy or Personal Qualities? University Students' Perceptions of Teaching Quality

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## ABSTRACT

Teaching quality is a term used to express the level of teaching practices, methods, content and delivery but can also be understood subjectively by the audiences involved, the students. The aim of this phenomenographic study was to explore international master's students' (N=15) perceptions of teaching quality while studying at university in Finland. The students were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of teaching quality according to a phenomenographic research approach. Three main themes arose from the interview data: teaching quality as pedagogical professionalism, teaching quality as the personal qualities of the teacher, and teaching quality as the overall learning environment. These themes included eight distinctive categories: knowledge and expertise of the teacher, engaging and inspiring, clarity of purpose and delivery, connection with students, approachability, relevant course contents, physical learning environment and role of the students. The results support previous studies on higher education teaching quality through the significance of expertise, connection with students and activating teaching methods. While the results mainly mirror previous studies on this subject, new perceptions such as the role of research and the role of the learning environment introduce new aspects to the phenomenon. Teaching quality was also perceived through negative experiences which indicates a need to further develop university teaching practices and to increase pedagogical training for university teaching staff.

**Keywords:** Higher education, University teaching; Teaching quality, Pedagogy, Phenomenography, Student perceptions.

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### Highlights of this paper

- The purpose of this phenomenographic study was to explore international master's students' (N=15) perceptions of teaching quality while studying at university in Finland.
- Teaching quality was also perceived through negative experiences which indicates a need to further develop university teaching practices and to increase pedagogical training for university teaching staff.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching quality can be an elusive, subjective concept dependent on a number of factors and the role and motivation of the stakeholder (Hénard and Rosev, 2012; Hill and Christian, 2012). Research on teaching quality, especially in the higher education (HE) context, also remains limited as a subject of serious investigation since much of the research on teaching quality or teacher quality focuses on primary education (Skelton, 2005; Gitomer, 2009). In fact, if we argue, as Collini (2012) has done, that schoolchildren are taught but university students study, do we need effective teaching at universities or research on the subject?

Still, university students have been seen to value quality teachers and the quality of their overall educational experience is strongly influenced by the teacher experience (Hill *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, it can be argued that the audience or recipients of university teaching, the students, may be the primary focus group to determine what manner of teaching can be considered effective or high-quality. In previous studies, students have particularly appeared to value and appreciate teachers' interpersonal skills (Delucchi, 2000; Wright *et al.*, 2013; Larkin *et al.*, 2016) which poses the question, do students tend to value the personal qualities of teachers over the pedagogical competence when assessing teaching quality in the university setting?

### 1.1. Teaching Quality at Universities

Ellis (1993) has defined quality as "the standards that must be met to achieve specified purposes to the satisfaction of customers". Attempts to develop these kinds of standards for teaching in HE began formally in the 1990s (Robson, 2006). However, uniquely there is still no formal training requirement to teach at universities but rather it is assumed that knowledge of and research in the academic subject ensure a suitable predilection for teaching (Dallat and Rae, 1993; Ellis, 2018). Arguably, this is not always the case, and Ellis (2018) has argued that students in fact strongly expect their teachers to be trained to teach.

However, it can be argued that good quality in teaching does not necessarily require formal pedagogical training and scholars and academics can inherently possess qualities of good and effective teachers. In fact, Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) have defined good teachers as having enthusiasm for their teaching and concern for their students as people, which again emphasises the significance of interpersonal skills in teaching. In addition to these qualities, the core skills of teaching, according to Brown (1993) and Brown and Edmunds (2018) can be seen as possessing the interactive skills of explaining, listening, questioning, responding to questions, providing guidance and feedback and monitoring one's own teaching. Arguably, if all these all performed well, i.e. to the satisfaction of the customers/stakeholders (Ellis, 1993) quality in teaching can be achieved.

In other previous studies regarding teaching quality in the HE setting, Lewis (1993) has listed qualities pertinent to effective teaching: goal setting, preparation, enthusiasm, humour and performance. In a more comprehensive listing, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) view good teaching as involving continuous awareness of students' learning situations, awareness of contextual dependency of learning and teaching, awareness of students' perceptions of teaching technologies used in teaching, awareness of the student diversity in classrooms, and continuing efforts to evaluate teaching for improved learning. These qualities can be seen to reflect the teacher's

continuous professional development but may also be seen to again highlight the importance of the students and connections created with the students and their learning processes. A similar trend can be seen in Ramsden (2003) list of six principles of effective teaching in HE:

- (1) Interest and explanation;
- (2) Concern and respect for students and their learning;
- (3) Appropriate assessment and feedback;
- (4) Clear goals and intellectual challenge;
- (5) Independence, control and engagement; and
- (6) Learning from students.

In essence, teaching quality here also connects strongly to the teacher-student relationship and to the interest the teacher has for the students and cooperating with them, rather than necessarily on the pedagogical quality of the teaching, although they can also be seen in the clarity of the teaching content. A summary of more recent definitions on teaching quality, as seen in Table 1, appear to highlight many of the same qualities as previous literature, i.e. knowledge, passion/enthusiasm and a personal connection with the students.

Table-1. Characteristics of good/effective teaching in recent literature.

Kreber (2009)	Toomey (2009)	Ashwin (2015)
· Depth of knowledge	· Intellectual depth	· Support for diverse learners
· Knowledgeable and interested in the subject	· Communicative competence	· Recognising prior and informal learning
· Passionate about the subject	· Empathic character	· Promoting lifelong learning
· Students made to feel equal	· Capacity for reflection	· Promoting the active engagement of students
· More time given to students	· Self-management	
	· Self-knowledge	

Source: Ashwin (2015); Kreber (2009); Toomey (2009).

Ashwin (2015) qualities of good teachers can be seen to particularly reflect the variety in today's student communities in HE, whereby social issues such as inclusiveness, the role of lifelong and lifewide learning, diversity and social activism are recognised and valued in the teaching and learning experience perhaps more readily than in earlier decades.

### 1.2. Student Perceptions of Teaching Quality

Student views on teaching quality in universities have been studied primarily in English-speaking countries such as the UK, the US, Canada and Australia. In the 1970s and 1980s studies found students to appreciate particularly a professional approach and an engaging personality from teachers. In Sheffield (1974) study Canadian students viewed good teachers as masters of their subject matter and who prepared lectures well, related study materials to practical issues and were enthusiastic. In the American context, with Waters *et al.* (1988) teaching quality was connected mostly to positive personal and motivational characteristics, and with Sherman *et al.* (1987) enthusiasm, clarity, preparation, organization and stimulation were the main defining factors of teaching quality. A similar result was also seen by Jones (1989) in New Zealand where students most valued teaching competence and the teachers' personality with regard to good or effective teaching.

Arguably university teaching practices and methods in universities have developed since then but similar elements can be detected in studies on teaching quality also in the 2000s. Thompson (2002) studied Chinese MBA students whose views on very good teachers on their subject included the ability to inspire interest in the students

while operating in an open and friendly class atmosphere. Teachers were also expected to be enthusiastic and show a sense of concern towards the students, while demonstrating field-specific and academic credentials and effective class administration and practices.

Further, [Hill et al. \(2003\)](#) used focus groups to determine the characteristics of quality education (not teaching) in the UK, with four main themes emerging: quality of the lecturer, student engagement with learning, social/emotional support systems and resources of library and IT. The first two themes relating to teaching included specifics such as appreciation for teachers who “knew their subject, were well organised and were interesting to listen to” (p. 16). Also, feedback provided to students was seen as significant, as well as the overall relationship with the students in the classroom.

In most recent studies, [Rowan and Townend \(2017\)](#) determined five comprehensive main components of teaching quality as perceived by Australian university students:

- (1) Teachers’ interpersonal and communication skills, i.e. approachability, respect, friendliness and knowledge of students as individuals;
- (2) Variety in course-delivery techniques and pedagogical creativity;
- (3) Excellent understanding of course content;
- (4) Clarity and consistency in the expectations, especially in assessment requirements; and
- (5) One-on-one relationships with faculty.

An almost identical list of qualities was obtained by [Kandiko Howson \(2018\)](#) with UK university students who viewed ‘good’ teachers as passionate about their teaching subject, knowledgeable, approachable and willing to dedicate their time to students. All in all, most studies regarding student perceptions of teaching quality can perhaps be summarised as expertise and enthusiasm ([Crumbley et al., 2001](#); [Greimel-Fuhrmann and Geyer, 2003](#); [Hill et al., 2003](#); [Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007](#); [Vulcano, 2007](#); [Hill and Christian, 2012](#); [Rowan and Townend, 2017](#)).

### *1.3. The Finnish Context*

The quality of teaching in Finnish education has been highlighted in media and research in recent years through high PISA scores, highly educated teachers and the country’s overall dedication to education ([Sahlberg, 2011](#)). Student performance, teacher appreciation and general respect for teaching have been imbedded into Finnish society but are most visible in the comprehensive school level. While universities can be argued to be the pinnacle of education, the pedagogical training of the staff providing this education can vary greatly in Finland. While classroom and subject teachers are required to have a master’s degree and accompanying extensive pedagogical teacher training, most universities in Finland do not require pedagogical training from their professors, senior lecturers or university teachers ([Sahlberg, 2015](#)). Further, unlike in many countries such as the UK, Australia and US, Finland does not apply national teaching quality monitoring in HE, rather teachers have autonomy to plan and execute their teaching in the manner they choose but naturally based on the curriculum ([Toom and Husu, 2012](#)).

However, while there are no explicit national or institutional teaching standards or monitoring, teaching quality in Finnish HE is monitored through various functions. Feedback on courses and teaching is typically collected from students through centralised, online and anonymous surveys where students rate the course and instructors on predetermined criteria and respond (if they wish) to a small number of open-ended questions. The results of student feedback are then analysed at least on a departmental level ([Aarrevaara et al., 2017](#)). Further, on an institutional level, if a newly recruited member of the teaching staff has no formal pedagogical training, he/she should be encouraged to participate in training to update their teaching skills, and this development of pedagogical skills should also be covered in the annual employee performance reviews ([Talvinen, 2012](#)).

#### *1.4. Phenomenographic Research*

Phenomenography as a research approach aims to discover the ways individuals experience and perceive phenomena particularly in an educational setting, to better understand learning and teaching through the conceptions of individuals (Sandberg, 1996; Marton, 2015). Phenomenography was defined by one of its main developers, Swedish educational psychologist Ference Marton as “the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspect of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended” (Marton, 1994). The rationale for phenomenographic research connected to student perceptions can emanate from wishing to explore students’ experiences of learning to understand variation in learning (Marton and Booth, 1997; Marton, 2000).

The most common method for phenomenographic study is individual interviews, as a result of which a researcher can produce a limited number of categories of description, each of which describes a distinct yet hierarchically related conception deduced from the interview transcripts (Sandberg, 1996). The researcher demonstrates the plausibility of the categories with the critical and valid use of extracts from the interview data (Cousin, 2009). The categories are comprised of the groupings of descriptions and their relationships, generating a hierarchical structure of layers of individual experiences, i.e. the outcome space (Marton and Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997).

Since the 1960s phenomenographic research has been conducted on a variety of HE subjects and approaches to learning yet little phenomenographic research on teaching quality exists. Overall phenomenography still continues to be a relatively uncommon method of HE research despite having been developed and originally applied most in the HE context (Tight, 2012).

#### *1.5. Study Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to explore university students’ perceptions of teaching quality through phenomenographic interviews to determine categories of description connected to teaching quality within Finland but in an international master’s level context. Internationalisation is one of the main focuses of Finnish universities today (Melin *et al.*, 2015) and currently Finland has one of the highest numbers of international English-taught programmes in European HE (Airey *et al.*, 2017).

As emerging themes and issues in today’s HE research increasingly include aspects of processes and persons, including teaching, learning and students (Brennan and Teichler, 2008) an international master’s student perspective – a customer perspective – on university teaching quality introduced by this study can assist in developing teaching practices at universities. After all, students often react to educational situations differently than teachers, administrators or researchers assume or predict since the students’ reactions are based on their perceptions rather than defined by policies or scholars (Ramsden, 1988). Therefore the research questions guiding the study were as follows:

- (1) How do international master’s level students perceive teaching quality in the higher education context?
- (2) Do the perceptions differ from or correlate with previous studies on perceptions of teaching quality or so-called good teaching?
- (3) Is the role of the teacher’s personality emphasised in this data as in various previous studies?

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 15 master's level university students from different degree programmes in a mid-sized Finnish science university. Nine were females and six males, with ages ranging from 21 to 32 years. All students had taken part in a required course on scientific writing and presentations in English, during which the research was explained, and volunteers were invited to participate in the phenomenographic interviews. The participants represented seven different master's degree programmes, i.e. Public Health, Medical Physics, International Business, Social Work, Translation studies, Law, and Environmental Change, and represented eight different nationalities (Finnish, Italian, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, German, Brazilian, Iraqi). This can be seen to demonstrate the international nature of university students in Finland (Melin *et al.*, 2015) and consequently provides an international and intercultural view on teaching quality in the university context.

In phenomenographic studies the sample size aims at representativeness rather than frequency (Akerlind, 2008; Collier-Reed and Ingerman, 2013) therefore few precise guidelines have been provided about the recommended number of interviews. 10 interviews have been suggested to be sufficient in providing the range of variation required (Dahlgren, 1995; Cousin, 2009) with Trigwell (2000) also citing 10 to 15 interviews at a minimum. Therefore, it can be argued that the 15 interviews accumulated provide a suitable range of variation for the phenomenon in the context of this study.

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants in the phenomenographic interviews all completed an informed consent form which included details about the study, emphasising that participation was voluntary and confidential, and that anyone could withdraw from the interview at any point without providing a reason. The interviews were conducted individually on the university campus and followed the principles for phenomenographic interviews (Marton, 1994) including minimal use of specific questions prepared in advance and engaging in empathic listening.

The interviews lasted c. 12 minutes on average. The participants were asked one main question, "What does teaching quality mean to you, if you think about the university context?" Neutral, open-ended questions such as "How does that show in practice?", "Could you describe that in more detail?" or "Anything else about this subject you would like to share?" were used to elicit more responses and allow each participant to elaborate and clarify his/her reflection on the phenomenon under discussion. All interviews were conducted in English, audiotaped and transcribed verbatim to capture the participants' reflection and to ensure accuracy of the data for subsequent analysis.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The transcribed data were not subjected to any analysis until all the interviews were completed as in phenomenography no data analysis should be conducted before all the interviews have been completed to ensure the later interviews are not tainted or altered, consciously or unconsciously (Bowden, 2005). The interview transcript data were analysed manually according to the guidelines for phenomenographic interview data analysis as described by e.g. Andersson (2006); Marton (1994); Marton and Booth (1997) and Akerlind (2008) with the interview transcripts analysed repeatedly with the research question to identify utterances and quotes that relate to the conceptions and perceptions. Through the repeated readings in search of similarities and differences, structural relationships between the conceptions began to emerge, and through revisiting the transcripts the emerging themes



underwent a process of confirmation, contradiction and refinement, to ultimately result in the categories of description and the outcome space.

### 3. RESULTS

Based on the interview data, three distinct perceptions of teaching quality can be distinguished. These three categories of description and their sub-categories are described next, after which these three perspectives are summarised and discussed as the outcome space regarding three proposed relationships between the participants and their perceptions of teaching quality. The study participants are identified in the interview data extracts with codes W1-9 for the females (n=9) and M1-6 for the males (n=6).

#### 3.1. Teaching Quality as Pedagogical Professionalism

The first perception indicates that master's level students appear associate teaching quality with pedagogical professionalism demonstrated by the teaching staff. This perception can be divided into three categories.

- (1) Knowledge and expertise
- (2) Engaging and inspiring
- (3) Clarity of purpose and delivery

##### 3.1.1. Knowledge and Expertise

In the first category, the concept of teaching quality is connected to the knowledge and expertise of the teaching staff, including their pedagogical expertise and experience. Considering that the participants were master's level students, with previous experience of university-level studies while completing their bachelor's degrees, the role of the knowledge both possessed and shared by the teachers was a significant indicator of teaching quality.

*There are a lot of aspects I guess that go into teaching quality. Not only the qualifications of the teacher so being a knowledgeable source of information for the students and, you know, expertise in the subject that they're teaching. (W1)*

*There is the expertise of the teacher, you can have an academic teacher or teachers coming from the working life, well either way the expertise should in a good level. (W4)*

The main function of teaching was viewed in connection with knowledge and the transfer of new knowledge from one who has it, i.e. the teacher, to those who may not yet have it, i.e. the students. This transfer of knowledge appears to take place primarily orally in the teaching situation, such as in lectures or in other instances with an audience.

*Teaching means to pass specific information that the teacher is familiar with, to an audience that's not supposed to know. (W5)*

*Teaching quality means the capability to transfer the knowledge to the person who is actually listening to, that probably is the main thing because it is literally transferring the information. (W3)*

Another element of knowledge and professional expertise in this category is the connection to knowledge based on the latest research, which was perceived as connected to teaching quality in the university context. Research is seen as an integral part of university teaching and information and the basis of developing new ideas.

*Quality in teaching means how near to the latest research we are. If I compare Pakistan and Finland, I can see a major difference, there is no research going on there but here teachers are involved in the latest research so they can give us the best ideas they are getting, and new ideas and new work. (M1)*

However, one participant referred to research in a negative light by indicating the focus on research can in fact diminish teaching quality.

*Yes we're adults and we're supposed to learn by ourselves but many [professors] just focus on their research and it's like we're a nuisance. Sorry. (W9)*

In terms of knowledge sharing and professional expertise, teaching quality was also associated with a respectful way of talking to the students so that students would be seen as equals rather than being undermined or underestimated. Teaching quality therefore appears to be connected to sharing the expertise and knowledge while recognising the audience are not necessarily at the same level of expertise.

*So the teacher has to be formal, respectful and use adequate vocabulary but at the same time it's really necessary to understand that the audience will not really know all the content so the teacher has to be adaptable in that sense and patient and never, how can I say, underestimate the student and make the student feel they are stupid and that they cannot learn the content. (M2)*

*Also not undermining the students... I have had experience with a professor who's returned a student's text saying that, 'this is so bad that you shouldn't even be at university' and then she went home crying. And I think that definitely doesn't encourage you to learn more, for me that would make me want to quit altogether so... I mean critique is always good but it has to be... a bit of a softer blow. (W9)*

While some participants expressed negative experiences of professionalism or lack thereof, teaching quality was also connected to using the knowledge shared by the teacher as guidance to learn more and to develop. In this view someone with teaching quality was seen as a bridge between the expert knowledge and the learner's willingness to learn and develop their own knowledge and thinking.

*I think teacher is not only to teach the subject, it's many things connected to that. The teacher is a kind of a bridge, to make the students from this one to another one. The teacher should not tell you all this, they should tell you how to get there, how to know that, he tells you the way, to connect the life and the knowledge. (M3)*

### 3.1.2. Engaging and Inspiring

The second category develops on the concept of transferring knowledge and highlights the methods in which that can be successfully completed. The interview participants reflected on various creative and engaging teaching methods as a signal of teaching quality and also acknowledged that variety in activities would be more labour-intensive for the teachers but ultimately appreciated by the students.

*Someone who has teaching quality is one who can help me in engage in the topic, you know? I should not be bored. In a lot of my classes I feel bored and in a good class I feel so lively, you know? It all depends on the teacher and how they can make the topic interesting to the students, and it's a lot of work for the teacher, to make the subject interesting, especially if it's academically related, you know, but teachers should try to identify the ways in which he can help the students to engage in the topic. (W3)*

Participants appeared to highlight the role of various activities in engaging and activating the learning situation so that group discussions, a variety of exercises or activities or variety through teaching technology were seen as implementing teaching quality.

*It's very nice if the teacher could use extra gadgets to help, for example, TV or, just make some different activity, like putting the students in a group to discuss whether they learned the content. (M4)*

*I enjoyed that there were different methods that were used and just being active all the time, I think you can learn things more easily when you have to do it on your own and not just being told everything. (W2)*

On the other hand, teaching quality was also viewed in connection with the variety in course modes, i.e. the variation from classroom teaching to online and blended learning, and the variety and flexibility introduced by the



various modes, especially for master's level students who may be older and with various family and work responsibilities.

*Here [in Finland] we use different modes of teaching, for instance online and distance learning, face-to-face learning and then home assignments. In Pakistan it's mostly face-to-face learning so you have to be there most of the time, it affects sometimes your social life for instance if you are with a family and if you have kids. (M5)*

Another level of teaching quality in this category was the manner in which teaching or the teacher was inspiring, in terms of the teaching content and sharing knowledge but also on a more comprehensive level, even to the point where the teaching was considered more significant than the topic.

*I think teaching quality is just that, it's quality, good quality in the teaching in all possible ways, how the person teaches, how they talk to the students, what the topic is about and what kinds of exercises we are doing. (W1)*

*The quality of teaching is more important than the topic. I go to every course where there's a good teacher, I took them all, whatever he is going to say but if the teacher is not good it's the same to be at home. If the professor is very good, I will become very good in that subject. (W6)*

### 3.1.3. Clarity of Purpose and Delivery

A category related to expertise and professionalism was also the notion of clarity in the manner in which knowledge and information were shared with the students. For the participants teaching quality was associated with obtaining clear information and clear instructions on the course work and the taught classes. Additionally, the participants perceived teaching quality as understanding the purpose of the class and its content.

*Teaching quality means that I have a very clear environment of getting knowledge. In China maybe the process of delivering the course is not that effective, I could not get the really important points and the knowledge efficiently from the class. (M6)*

*It's important that I understand clearly what the teacher wants us to understand, at the beginning the teacher did some research to collect our needs, it's very good. (W3)*

The latter interview extract refers to a needs analysis performed by the instructor at the beginning of the course so the concept of collecting and recognising students' needs and their suggestions appears to be an important element in teaching quality. Vice versa, also the suggestions and feedback provided by the teacher, especially individual and detailed feedback on course work and assignments was characteristic of teaching quality. This perception was also explored through negative experiences of not having received enough feedback or even sufficient contact with the instructor.

*Individual feedback is important to me, instead of just saying, 'ok you passed the class' and moving on. To me learning comes from detailed feedback, not just sitting in lectures and going home. (W9)*

*The instructions are the most important thing. If they just say 'do this' and if we never get feedback or if they don't ever give our exams back, essays back, nothing, never, we don't get any feedback. (W2)*

Another characteristic of student engagement in teaching quality, especially for more traditional lecture-based teaching was the notion of the engaging delivery. Therefore, even if the teaching mode is a lecture, the engagement of the audience can be attained with a lively delivery of the content. The message at its best is directed at the audience in a dialogue, instead of a monotonous monologue performed by the teacher.

*The teacher should not be very... there should be an engagement with the students, it's not like monotonous, you talk and we listen, it's boring. (M1)*

*For me teaching quality means clarity, that the message delivered by the teacher is clear, understandable, relatable and innovative. Often at university professors and lecturers speak like in a vacuum, for themselves, like a little monologue, you know? It shouldn't be like that in 2018, should it? (W9)*

### 3.2. Teaching Quality as Personal Qualities of the Teacher

The second theme and its subsequent sub-categories in connection with teaching quality refer to the personal qualities of the teacher. While the question in the phenomenographic interviews was about teaching quality, many participants associated the question with teachers and positive personal experiences they had had with teachers in the university setting. The personal qualities of the teaching staff in connection with teaching quality can be divided into two categories.

- (1) Connection with students
- (2) Approachability

#### 3.2.1. Connection with Students

In addition to the pedagogical professionalism implemented by teaching staff that the participants associated with teaching quality, a significant quality appeared to be the connection with the students. A good student-teacher relationship was mentioned frequently in the interview data, especially in connection with support and motivation.

*Being able to have a good student-teacher relationship and teachers being the appropriate support that students need for learning the subject so they can get to whatever the goal of that course is at the end. (W1)*

*And being able to motivate and connect with the students, even though it's difficult with in lecture halls but at least somewhere during the course. (M2)*

The connection with the students was also reflected through recognising and understanding individual needs and levels of knowledge so that so that diversity in the student body and being understanding of students' different life situations were connected to teaching quality.

*All needs of all students are taken into account because there might be some different knowledge levels and I think it's very important to not just focus on those who are at an upper level so that's important and makes teaching having a good quality. Take everybody into account and everybody's needs. (W7)*

*I think that here also teachers are much more understanding, they're very accommodating to life situations. (M4)*

#### 3.2.2. Approachability

While the first category within this theme, connection with students, refers mainly to teaching situations, participants in this study also specified the approachability of the teaching staff, informally within the teaching context and also outside of the classroom as a significant indicator of teaching quality. The level of informality present in most Finnish universities was also mentioned, especially if the international participant had had different experiences in their home country.

*I think in Finland there's not so much of a barrier between the professor-student relationship, I think that in the US it's much more formal... but here you're using very informal language with professors and you're using their first names, and it already kind of eliminates any sort of wall between you. (W1)*

*I also like to see quality in the person, that they are someone I can look up to, that I respect because they seem smart and knowledgeable but they're still a normal person I can talk to. (M6)*

In the previous extract, while participants primarily appreciated the professional qualities of the teaching staff, the level of informality was considered part of the teaching quality. Additionally, teachers who were willing to be

available to students also outside of classes and connect and communicate with students on a more personal level were associated with teaching quality. The personal relationship was also seen as a component of motivation and engaging students to learning.

*If you get to know someone, if you see me often, then we can have some relationship, if you meet me outside, if you talk to me nicely, then I'll think this guy is cool so OK, I'll try to listen better, you know? It will make the students listen better I think. (M2)*

*They're quite informal with us, making jokes sometimes, not all stiff and official, I like it when we can talk about football or you ask how was the party last night, like you know what we're doing outside of classes and then you groan about how much we party but I know you don't really mind as long as we do the job. (M4)*

In approachability the personality of the teacher was also an indicator of teaching quality, with particularly humour and niceness as important elements, however only in connection with other pedagogical qualities.

*Yes I mean if I like the teacher, she's nice, or he, is nice and funny and I like the course and it seems like we're doing useful things in many different ways, it's the best kind I guess. (M6)*

### 3.3. Teaching Quality as the General Learning Environment

In addition to perceiving teaching quality through teachers, teaching quality was also perceived as a component of the general university learning environment which consisted of three main categories.

- (1) Relevant course contents
- (2) Physical learning environment
- (3) Role of students

#### 3.3.1. Relevant Course Contents

In this category participants viewed the taught subject and the course contents as a part of teaching quality in the university setting. The approach taken by the teaching staff for the course was considered important, particularly that the course name and expressed learning outcomes would match the practical implementation of the course.

*The title of the course should be connected to the content because I have one experience, we have this course called [redacted] but the whole course was about the social entrepreneurship, which is, I think they are different issues but the content should be relevant and it should have some connection to the real working life. (W8)*

As the preceding interview extract indicates, working life relevance and connections to professional careers were also a significant part of the course contents in connection with teaching quality; this was particularly evident with student majoring in programmes related to Business and Economics.

*So to me teaching quality means I like coming to classes or I don't mind reading a message from the teacher because it's about the course tasks and why we're doing it and how we should stick to the deadlines because I know it's preparing us for working life, and that's important. (M3)*

*I like studies to be a learning experience and here [teachers are] making sure you are focusing on things that actually matter towards future and not so much of a grade point average. (W8)*

In addition to the contents of a course, testing and assessment were also relevant for teaching quality in connection with the course contents and learning process during the course. However, traditional examinations were not necessarily part of the teaching quality aspect, rather options and flexible alternatives were referred to over traditional testing practices.

*Part of the quality is also testing or some kind of assessment about the real knowledge level of the students. It doesn't have to be like a traditional test, it can be something else but somehow assess the knowledge level and do they understand this theoretical base. (W7)*

### 3.3.2. Physical Learning Environment

In this category the classrooms, furnishings and equipment used at the university were considered an integral part of teaching quality. Modern and adjustable classrooms were referred to along with a health physical indoor environment for studying and learning.

*First of all, there would be this physical learning environment, like facilities, like in a classroom the tables can be moved and the ventilation and air conditioning is really good so the physical learning environment is really important to me. (W6)*

Another element in this category was the number of students in the classes and how that would affect the notion of teaching quality. Smaller class sizes were viewed as a positive aspect of teaching quality, allowing the teacher more time to focus on all individuals instead of mass lectures where the connection would be diminished.

*Another thing is the resources. In my class we were 123, sometimes it's difficult for the teacher to focus on the students, instead of when it's 10 or 20. (M3)*

### 3.3.3. Role of Students

The final category in connection with teaching quality was the role of the students in the teaching and learning of new information. Active students were seen as a benefit to the teaching practices and activities and particularly master's level students were viewed as an asset to knowledge development and teaching because of their work experience and ability to share information, experiences and support the teacher in with the content and activities.

*Of course the students are part of the quality because if you have a group that is really enthusiastic about the team, really participating, talkative, really reflecting, it increases the level of the teaching because it gives so much to the teacher. I can see the difference between the bachelor's students and the master's level student because usually master's level students, they have working experience so they are giving so much to the content. (W6)*

Some participants also reflected on teaching quality through their own development so that individually recognisable development in their own knowledge would equal good quality in the teaching.

*The quality really means the result. If I can get real improvement of my study, my knowledge, then I think this is good quality. (W5)*

### 3.4. Teaching Quality as an Experience

Processing the three main themes connected to teaching quality in the university context and the subsequent eight categories of description listed above through a contextual analysis reveals the internal relations between the categories. Therefore, three varying characteristics relating to teaching quality can be distinguished: conceptual understanding, personal experience and negative experience. The types of relation are summarised in [Table 2](#).

Table-2. Themes and categories of relating to teaching quality (TQ).

Themes	Conceptual understanding	Personal experience	Negative experience
<b>TQ as pedagogical professionalism</b>	Knowledge and expertise	Knowledge and expertise	Knowledge and expertise
	▪ knowledge transfer	▪ teacher as a mentor/bridge	▪ research over teaching
	▪ based on latest research		▪ undermining
	▪ respectful	Engaging and inspiring	
		▪ different methods/modes	Clarity of purpose and delivery
			▪ lack of clarity
<b>TQ as personal qualities of the teacher</b>		Clarity of purpose and delivery	▪ lack of feedback
		▪ instructions, feedback	
	Connection with students	Approachability	None
	▪ good student-teacher relationship	▪ informality	
	▪ understanding	▪ availability	
		▪ personality	
<b>TQ as the general learning environment</b>	Relevant course contents	Role of students	Relevant course contents
	▪ working life relevance	▪ own role in learning	▪ irrelevant, misleading
	▪ assessment		
			Physical learning environment
	Physical learning environment		▪ large class sizes
	▪ modern facilities		
	Role of students		
	▪ active participants		

Source: Summary of the research findings.

*Conceptual understanding.* Conceptual understanding refers to viewing teaching quality as an educational and learning-related concept, removed from the person but instead processed as the sum of the elements connected to university study under professor/teacher/instructor guidance or supervision. Teaching quality is connected to the transfer of knowledge during the teaching situation and the knowledge should be based on the latest research. The approach of the teacher during the knowledge transfer should be respectful. In conceptual understanding the notion of a good student-teacher relationship is also present yet teaching quality is also perceived as an amalgam of the overall learning environment which includes relevant course content, a suitable physical learning environment and an active role taken by the students themselves.

*Personal experience.* In this type of relation, the perception of teaching quality is mainly based on the participant's collection of recent or long-term personal experiences of studying and learning at university. Participants can connect teaching quality to specific teachers or experiences on various courses and their reference to differing elements of teaching quality are mainly based on personal memories, experiences or recollections. These are primarily positive ones, which can be seen in the mentions of so-called good teachers in the participants' pasts.

*Negative experience.* Some of the perceptions of teaching quality were built from negative experiences, ranging from the approach of the teaching to a lack of clarity in the teaching or lack of feedback provided to students. Negative experiences, however, do not connect to a teacher's personal qualities, rather the criticism is directed toward challenges posed by the general learning environment, ranging from course contents to class sizes.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Students' views on their HE experiences are increasingly valued in the development and monitoring of quality in universities (Hill *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, the study of students' perceptions of teaching quality within their

university context is also a valuable way to increase awareness of effective teaching practices and the variety of ways students learn in today's modern educational environments.

The findings of this study can be seen to mainly support previous studies on teaching quality. Associating teaching quality at university level with knowledge and pedagogical expertise mirrors recent studies ([Kreber, 2009](#); [Toomey, 2009](#); [Rowan and Townend, 2017](#); [Kandiko Howson, 2018](#)). This perception also reflects ([Thompson, 2002](#)) study with master's level students where the teacher's field-specific knowledge and academic credentials were emphasised. In this study with master's level students, university teaching was also viewed in connection the involvement of field-specific working life professionals who may be invited to be involved in teaching alongside the academic teaching staff. This phenomenon is common in many universities of applied sciences and has also increased in many science universities, particularly in fields that educate students for specific professions, such as Economics, Social Work and Law ([Granlund, 2018](#)).

However, a new perspective within the expertise of teaching staff and teaching quality provided by this study was the notion of basing the teaching on latest research. The concept of research-based teaching is fundamental in universities so that the content is relevant, current and provides the latest developments upon which to build new information ([Mitten and Ross, 2018](#)). However, this has not been explicitly highlighted in previous studies on university teaching quality whereas in this study with master's level students it was more prevalent.

Other elements of pedagogical teaching quality frequently seen in previous studies were also reflected in this study. Students' appreciation of engaging teaching methods and activities have been previously seen with [David \(2010\)](#); [Gilakjani \(2012\)](#) and [Ramsden \(2003\)](#) and the clarity of delivery and the expressed goals and purposes of the classes have also been raised in previous studies ([Lewis, 1993](#); [Ramsden, 2003](#)). Clarity is also connected to students obtaining detailed, individual feedback on their tasks and assignments, which was an important component of teaching quality within this study and seen also in previous research ([Brown, 1993](#); [Hill et al., 2003](#); [Ramsden, 2003](#); [Brown and Edmunds, 2018](#)).

In addition to the pedagogical expertise and professionalism of the teaching, somewhat predictably the participants in this study also connected teaching quality to the personal qualities of the teacher. Important categories such as the teacher-student relationship and approachability have been prevalent in previous literature ([Skelton, 2005](#); [Rowan and Townend, 2017](#); [Kandiko Howson, 2018](#)) together with the notions of personal concern and empathy towards the students ([Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981](#); [Ramsden, 2003](#); [Toomey, 2009](#)). In this study, teaching quality, as in some previous studies ([Prosser and Trigwell, 1999](#); [Skelton, 2005](#); [Kreber, 2009](#); [Ashwin, 2015](#)) was also connected to recognising diversity among the students and considering especially weaker students whose knowledge or skill levels may require more effort. Additionally, the more personal the connection with the teacher appeared to be, the better was the notion of teaching quality so that teachers who would dedicate time also outside of classes to students and their personal lives were appreciated ([David, 2010](#)).

However, another novel finding in this study within the field of teaching quality was the notion of the overall learning environment as a main component of teaching quality. While many previous studies have emphasised enthusiasm and other personal qualities of the teacher, in this data the role of the learning environment, including course contents, classrooms and facilities, class sizes and even the self-directed role of the students themselves as factors of teaching quality were distinct from previous studies. This may be due to the participants' international master's level approach to learning. The variation of the perceptions regarding teaching quality may arise from the variety of learning experiences and teaching cultures in the students' home countries instead of merely the Finnish university context in which they were presently studying. Additionally, the views of master's level students,



typically older and more experienced than bachelor's level students, may vary from those expressed by students in their undergraduate studies.

Overall, this study provides one view on teaching quality in the university context but to assess teaching quality student perceptions, while very valuable, are not the only option. Peer review or peer evaluation as a method of assessing teaching quality has been adopted by many universities globally (Krause, 2013; Bright *et al.*, 2016) and can function as a valuable indicator of teaching quality and professional development for teaching staff in HE. However, since university teaching is primarily directed towards a specific audience, the students, their views and perceptions of teaching quality are crucial in recognising good practices and excellent teachers and how the learning process of each individual student can be supported and developed through effective teaching. Not all teachers, in any educational level, are perfect, as one participant mentioned in their interview: *'But I know not everyone can teach like that and realistically I don't think any university can have all great teachers, you know, that would be utopia.'* Yet rather than reaching for a utopia, research and development in teaching quality can assist in implementing more student-friendly, effective, flexible and understanding teaching and learning environments.

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