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Attributes of effective business teachers: perceptions of students enrolled in highly rated units

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This study employs a widely used attributes of effective teachers framework to guide the coding of written feedback of students (n = 169) enrolled in highly rated (top 25 per cent) business units at a large Australian University. This framework also underpins the theoretical interpretation of the data. By focusing on student feedback about effective business teachers, the aim of this study is to identify the most important attributes of these teachers from the perspective of satisfied student. The data is part of a larger survey of student evaluations of teaching and units. Findings from the analysis of feedback from highly-satisfied students reveals that the top five attributes of effective business teachers are related to classroom performance – creative and interesting, knowledgeable, effective communicator, sensitive and persistent, and enthusiastic. The findings provide insights to teachers, students and university administrators. A recommendation for future research is provided.

Keywords: teacher attributes; business units; student feedback; higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

The qualities of effective university teaching and teachers are of interest to diverse groups including students, lecturers, academic administrators, and government education agencies. For example, less effective teachers and teachers new to the profession can learn from accomplished teachers about the attributes that make teachers effective. Administrators can use these attributes to identify and institutionalise ‘good practice’ regarding classroom performance and relationships with students inside and outside classrooms.

A common way of measuring and monitoring effectiveness of higher education teaching and teachers is through student evaluation. Such evaluation is regularly conducted in all Australian universities and the results are used for rankings of teaching quality by the Australian Government (Slade & McConville 2006) in addition to other staff recruitment and promotion uses within the universities. Despite this common practice, there is no universal agreement on what an "excellent teacher" means (Johnson & Ryan 2000; Skelton 2004). However, it seems that there is a consensus among educators and educational institutions that an effective teacher “is oriented to and focused on students and their learning” (Devlin & Samarawickrema 2010, p. 112). As such, asking students directly or analysing their views documented in student evaluations are very logical and important means of learning about the attributes of effective teachers.

The primary aim of this study is to identify the most important effective teacher attributes from the highly-satisfied student’s perspectives. To achieve this aim, the written feedback of 169 students enrolled in eight highly-rated (top 25 per cent) undergraduate and postgraduate units at a large Australian multi-campus university are examined. As such, the current study draws teacher attributes from the written feedback of student evaluations, rather than asking directly what the respondents (i.e., students or teachers) think the attributes of an effective teacher are (e.g., Simendinger et al. 2009). This methodological approach has an...
added value of gathering the research evidence from recent, actual and fresh experiences of students as the student evaluations are conducted within the teaching periods.

The findings of this research have theoretical and practical implications. On a theoretical level, the study contributes to the learning and teaching literature by identifying the most important attributes of effective business teachers from highly satisfied student perspectives. At the practical level, the study aims to highlight the most important attributes of effective teachers (formative value), so that business lecturers can develop strategies that will improve their teaching. This also helps students experience quality learning and achieve high results and be better prepared for their profession after graduation (Simendinger et al. 2009). The study is also of interest to university and academic school administrators in the employment, monitoring, performance evaluation, and rewarding of staff (summative value) and also in the designing of staff development programs.

FOCAL LITERATURE

A number of studies have investigated the attributes of effective teachers from the students’ perspective (see Table 1 for a summary of selected studies). Refer to Carnell (2007, p. 27) for a summary of the literature on how university teachers approach teaching. Close examinations of the most important attributes of effective teachers (ranked as most important by students) identified in the studies summarised in Table 1 reveal that they are a mix of technical and student-teacher relationship attributes or as Simendinger et al. (2009, p. 116) describes them ‘what we teach and who we are’. The technical attributes refer to attributes that focus more on class performance such as mastery of the subject matter, presenting an interesting and engaging class and effective communication. On the other hand, the student-teacher relationship attributes emphasise the personal characteristics of the teachers towards
students both in and outside the classroom such as being helpful, accessible, and approachable.

The effective teacher attributes do not seem to be necessarily influenced by field of education. For example, Chonko, Tanner and Davis (2002), Faranda and Clarke (2004), and Hooper and Page (1986) all studied the attributes of effective business teachers. However, while the findings of Faranda and Clarke (2004) suggest that students have more regard for the teacher-learner relationships, the findings of Hooper and Page (1986) suggest more interest in technical attributes. On the other hand, Chonko, Tanner and Davis (2002) find a mix of attributes, i.e., the teacher-learner relationship and technical attributes of effective teachers. In regard to the non-business context studies, McLean’s (2001) findings from medical students’ perspective suggest that the teacher-learner attributes are more important while Vulcano’s (2007) study of psychology students emphasises technical attributes.

All of the studies summarised in Table 1 have analysed the opinions of students from specific field of education. Other studies have explored the issue from a specific group of students’ perspective (e.g., Devlin & O’Shea 2011 from low socio-economic status background student’s perspectives). However, no prior study has focused on the perspective of students who are highly satisfied with their lecturers. It is argued in this study that students enrolled in highly-rated units perceive the attributes of their teachers differently than students enrolled in units that are not so highly-rated. The former are expected to provide the attributes that specifically contributed to their satisfaction with the teaching/teacher. By focusing only on highly-rated units (i.e., satisfied students), better insights are expected about the attributes of effective teachers as the evidence is drawn from only the positive comments of the student.