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## 6

### **Supportive woman, engaging man: gendered differences in student perceptions of teaching excellence**

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The pursuit of expertise in teaching in the guise of teaching excellence has become a sector-wide concern in the UK in recent years, in part due to the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (O'Leary & Wood 2019). Critics of teaching excellence as a concept have pointed out that as excellence is contextually dependent, commitments simply to teaching excellence are meaningless (Saunders & Ramírez, 2017; Skelton, 2005). At the same time, there has been much research attempting to describe and characterise teaching excellence in practice (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). The increasing trend of metrication in UK higher education (Bamber, 2020) makes it necessary to take a critical view of teaching excellence and how it actually relates to what students perceive as high quality teaching. The study described in this chapter questions implicit assumptions present in recent research into teaching excellence that students perceive excellent teaching in an objective, gender-neutral way.

#### **The myth of objectivity in teaching excellence: why gender matters**

Practical research into teaching excellence has focused on identifying the characteristics and behaviours of 'excellent' higher education teachers, with more recent studies shifting attention from what teachers themselves think to the student perspective (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). The characteristics of teaching excellence as identified by students have largely been similar across these studies, with common characteristics including the ability to teach engagingly, being passionate and knowledgeable about one's discipline area, being friendly, having a sense of humour, and being organised (Bradley et al. 2015; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019; Moore & Kuol, 2007; Revell & Wainwright, 2009; Su & Wood, 2012). One limitation of these studies however is that they do not take into account the subjectivity of student judgments. As evaluative processes are relational, they are subject to sociocultural biases and prejudice (O'Connor et al, 2017). The criteria that students use to judge teaching excellence thus can vary between and within individuals in a way that systematically adheres to and perpetuates stereotypes, such as those relating to gender (Biernat, 2003).

Certainly, evidence from research into gender and student evaluations of teaching has shown that gender can influence what students notice and value in their higher education teachers. For instance, women are often viewed in terms of female-typed emotional competencies, such as being caring or nurturing (Basow et al, 2006; Nesdoly et al, 2020; Sprague & Massoni, 2005), and tend to be rated lower than men in male-typed cognitive traits, such as instructional and scholarly competence (Boring, 2017; MacNell et al, 2015; Mitchell & Martin, 2018). A recent study by Babin et al (2020) found that greater perceived attractiveness was associated with higher teaching evaluation ratings—but only for female teachers. This finding suggests that a female teacher's perceived level of competence is partly determined by how attractive she is seen to be. This is consistent with the observation that women in the workplace can be evaluated more harshly if they do not meet social expectations of what and how women should be (Eagly & Karau, 2002). It is perhaps worth noting that the discussion in Babin et al (2020) somewhat downplays this problematic implication. For instance, a number of explanations are offered which frame their finding as an advantage for women rather than a disadvantage. As one explanation goes, women, aware that others are likely to judge them by their appearance, put more effort into their self-presentation. This leads to them feeling and behaving in a more confident manner, which students in turn respond to positively. Similarly, another explanation considers that students may simply be more motivated to engage in their studies for female teachers they find attractive (Babin et al, 2020 p.12). The authors additionally suggest that gender inequalities in the professional outcomes of academics have largely disappeared (p.12). The framing of this so-called beauty premium as an

advantage enjoyed by women, rather than being indicative of harmful expectations around the role of women in society, highlights that beyond the boundaries of (mostly female) gender and feminist scholars, there is relatively little recognition of how gender can influence student perceptions of teaching. As the study described in this chapter will hopefully illustrate, it is important that gender is recognised in any consideration of how students perceive and respond to teaching.

## **The study**

The study's context was a mid-sized research-focused university in England. Nominations for teaching staff submitted by students for an annual institution-wide excellence award were thematically analysed to determine if there were gendered differences in what students most often mentioned about their excellent teachers. Nominations were taken from the 2015/16 and 2016/17 rounds of the excellence award. A number of inclusion criteria were applied to the initial dataset ( $n = 586$ ) in preparation for analysis. First, nominations had to be submitted by a student and be for a single teacher. Second, nominations had to be from a student not already represented in the dataset. Where an individual made repeated submissions, only the first valid nomination (i.e. which met all the other inclusion criteria) was accepted into the dataset. Where the same individual made submissions over multiple years, only the first valid nomination from the more recent year (2016/17) was accepted. Third, nominations had to be able to be coded for student and teacher gender. Gender was inferred from various sources of information provided with the submissions. Most often, gender was able to be determined by the names provided with the nominations (noting that ambiguous names for which no certain judgments on gender could be made were excluded from analysis). Gender could also be inferred from the use of personal pronouns in the nominations themselves. In all, 168 nominations were excluded after these criteria were applied, leaving a final dataset of 418 nominations.

A thematic analysis of the content of the nominations was then conducted. Themes were identified and coded on nVivo software. A grounded line-by-line approach was employed, which enabled a thorough identification of the themes in the nominations. Student and teacher gender were hidden from view during the coding process in order to minimise potential researcher bias, of course noting that the presence of personal pronouns nevertheless meant that teacher gender was able to be identified for some nominations. Once the identification of themes was complete, frequency tables were generated which showed, for all the themes identified in the data, the frequency at which each theme was mentioned in each of the four student-by-teacher gender categories—that is, female student nominations for female teachers (FF), female student nominations for male teachers (FM), male student nominations for female teachers (MF), and male student nominations for male teachers (MM). The proportion of mentions (i.e. the number of nominations of a particular gender category which mentioned a theme over the total number of nominations in that gender category, expressed as a percentage) was then calculated for all the themes in all the gender categories, and subsequently arranged in descending order. The 10 most frequently mentioned themes for each gender category (in terms of proportions of mentions) were then identified for analysis. As there were multiple instances of tied ranks, it should be noted that the selection process prioritised the number of themes, rather than the number of filled ranks, such that as far as possible, only 10 themes were analysed for each gender category. This meant that additional themes were not added to make up for tied ranks; two tied themes would be treated as occupying two rank positions. This enabled a fair comparison with the same number of themes examined per gender category. One exception to this was for the MF category, which had multiple themes tied for the final rank spot. Thus, 13 themes had to be included in the analysis for this category.

## **Who was excellent and why?**

The gender distribution of the overall sample will first be described to provide some context for the thematic findings. In total, there were 418 nominations in the dataset, of which 132 (31.6%) were in the FF category, 128 (30.6%) in the FM category, 39 (9.3%) in the MF category, and 119 (28.5%) in the MM category. The gender distribution of the dataset was found to be significantly uneven in a separate analysis (Kwok & Potter 2021). It was noted that same-gender nominations (FF and MM) were overrepresented and opposite-gender nominations (FM and MF) were underrepresented. While the same-gender nominations were overrepresented to similar extents, nominations by male students were only about a third as likely to be for a female teacher as nominations by female students were to be for a male teacher. These differences could not be explained by the gender distribution of the University's teaching staff, which was roughly evenly distributed between male and female staff, even within individual faculties. The uneven gender distribution of the nominations suggests that gender can influence the extent to which students recognise teaching excellence, where teaching excellence may be more readily recognised in teachers of the same gender as the student. The

disproportionately low frequency of MF nominations additionally suggests that male students may be disproportionately unlikely to recognise teaching excellence in female teachers (ibid.).

Female students				Male students			
Female teacher (FF) n = 132		Male teacher (FM) n = 128		Female teacher (MF) n = 39		Male teacher (MM) n = 119	
Theme	%	Theme	%	Theme	%	Theme	%
Supportive	49.2	Supportive	53.0	Supportive	41.0	Engaging	33.6
Available	32.6	Engaging	33.6	Available	30.8	Supportive	27.7
=Engaging	29.5	Available	28.1	Engaging	28.2	Passionate	20.2
=Passionate	29.5	Passionate	19.5	=Approachable	20.5	Available	19.3
Inspiring	28.0	Inspiring	17.2	=Passionate	20.5	Teaching Techniques (Generic)	16.8
Approachable	20.5	Clear Teaching	16.4	Knowledgeable	17.9	Inspiring	15.1
Exceptional	16.7	=Approachable	14.8	=Good Feedback	15.4	Exceptional	13.4
TT(G) <sup>1</sup>	15.2	= Teaching Techniques (Generic)	14.8	=Caring	15.4	Approachable	12.6
Encouragement (Emotional)	12.1	Good Explanations	14.1	=Friendly	12.8	=Good Feedback	10.9
Knowledgeable	11.4	Humorous	12.5	=Humorous	12.8	=Clear Teaching	10.9
				=Patient	12.8		
				=TT(G) <sup>1</sup>	12.8		
				=Values Students	12.8		

**Table 6.1:** Most frequently mentioned themes by gender category

Table 6.1 lists the 10 most frequently mentioned themes for each gender category (note: 13 themes are listed for MF due to a tie in the final rank). In the interest of space, these themes will not be detailed in full, though it is worth noting that they are largely self-explanatory. For instance, *Supportive* teachers were willing to offer help and guidance (“Provides incredible amounts of support”), while *Available* teachers “always” made time for students, often beyond what students perceived to be their professional or personal obligations (“always finding time in his busy schedule to help students”; “She has offered to help outside of her hours of work”). A few themes worth clarifying include *Encouragement (Emotional)*, which pertained to descriptions of emotionally encouraging teachers who boosted their students’ confidence and helped them overcome self-doubt (“without her encouragement I would have given up”). This was in contrast to descriptions of academic encouragement (e.g. encouraging students to participate in conferences or to “think critically”). The theme *Exceptional* pertained to the use of high intensity (see Stewart 2015) descriptors, such as “exceptional”, “brilliant” and “amazing” (“down right AMAZING, [Name] is an exemplary lecturer”), while *Teaching Techniques (Generic)* pertained to generic mentions of high quality teaching (“excellent teaching strategies and methods”; “very good teaching style”).

Overall, the top most themes were very similar across the gender categories: *Supportive*, *Available*, *Engaging* and *Passionate* all appear within the top five themes of each category. Additionally, *Approachable* was notable as it generally featured highly across the gender categories (with perhaps the exception of MM). These themes, as well as those in the relatively lower ranks, are consistent with student characterisations of teaching excellence as reported in other studies (e.g. Bradley et al, 2015; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019). However, a closer examination of the themes and their relative proportions of mentions within and across the gender categories reveals a number of interesting differences in how students described their male and female teachers.

To start, while female student nominations for teachers of both genders (FF and FM) were similar in terms of the themes mentioned and their ranks, gendered differences can be seen in the male student nominations for female and male teachers (MF and MM). For the female student nominations, many of the same themes

appear in both the FF and FM categories in a very similar order, particularly for the topmost themes. By contrast, a number of gendered distinctions can be seen between the male student categories. Male students most often mentioned that their male teachers were *Engaging*, whereas they most often mentioned that their female teachers were *Supportive*. It should be noted that while *Engaging* was mentioned at somewhat similar proportions in the MM and MF nominations (at 33.6% for MM and 28.2% for MF), *Engaging* nevertheless ranked only third in the MF category, and further at some distance away from the topmost theme *Supportive*, which was mentioned by 41.0% of MF nominations. Gendered patterns in the male student nominations can be also seen for the themes *Available* and *Approachable*, which both relate to communal, self-sacrificing behaviours often expected in women in a way they are not for men (Eagly & Karau, 2002). *Available* was ranked second for MF nominations and was mentioned 30.8% of the time, whereas it ranked fourth for MM nominations where it was mentioned only 19.3% of the time. Similarly, *Approachable* was ranked (tied) fourth for MF nominations and mentioned 20.5% of the time, whereas it ranked eighth for MM nominations, being mentioned 12.6% of the time. On the whole, there was a greater emphasis on pastoral traits (e.g. *Supportive*, *Friendly*, *Caring*, *Values students*) in the MF nominations compared to MM nominations, which tended to prioritise traits reflecting a high quality of instruction. This suggests that male students perceive teaching excellence in gendered ways, preferring male-typed cognitive competencies in their male teachers and female-typed emotional competencies in their female teachers.

While the MM nominations were generally less concerned with emotional aspects of teaching relative to the other gender categories, emotion nevertheless appeared to be an important part of how students experienced excellent teaching. Examining the themes across the four gender categories, it is clear that the emotional and pastoral aspects of teaching constitute a crucial part of the student experience, regardless of student and teacher gender. *Supportive* was the most frequently mentioned theme for FF, FM and MF nominations, and the second most mentioned theme for MM nominations. This suggests that above all, what many students value most about excellent teaching is the sense of emotional security that a teacher is able to provide. Two other emotional themes that ranked highly across the four gender categories were *Passionate* and *Inspiring*. This suggests that excellent teaching goes beyond the efficient imparting of content or skills—more than that, excellent teaching involves strong, positive emotional responses towards one's subject. The prominence of emotional themes in the nominations across the four gender categories highlights the crucial role of emotion in how students experience teaching excellence.

Moving on, there are two findings pertaining to specific themes worth mentioning here. First, it was notable that the masculine *Knowledgeable* appeared only in the female teacher categories, ranking sixth for MF and tenth for FF, while not appearing in either of the male teacher categories (i.e. it was not one of the ten most mentioned themes). The appearance of *Knowledgeable* in the MF category was an interesting exception to the general trend of MF nominations prioritising stereotypically feminine characteristics. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this may be explained by lowered expectations of the scholarly capacities of female teachers (Biernat 2003). This will be discussed further in the next section. Second, another notable theme was *Values Students*, which appeared only in the MF category where it was ranked (tied) last. As will be discussed in the next section, this was consistent with previous evidence that one consideration that male students make when evaluating teaching is the preservation of their status relative to their teacher (Basow et al, 2006).

### **Different but not equal: The implications of a gendered teaching excellence**

This study thematically analysed the content of student nominations for a university excellence award to investigate whether there were gendered differences in how students described their excellent teachers. While the themes mentioned were consistent with what previous research has identified as characteristics of teaching excellence (e.g. Bradley et al, 2015; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019), comparing the themes' relative ranks and frequency of mentions across the four student-by-teacher gender categories revealed gendered differences in how students described their teachers. Female students described male and female teachers in similar ways; however, male student descriptions of female teachers tended to emphasise stereotypically feminine (pastoral) competencies, relative to their descriptions of male teachers.

It should be noted that male and female teachers being valued for different reasons is not problematic in and of itself; however, female-typed competencies are usually ascribed lower values in academia compared to male-typed competencies—for instance emotional labour versus cognitive labour (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019; Heijstra et al, 2017; Moore & Kuol, 2007; Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) and indeed, teaching versus research (Crabtree & Shiel, 2019; O'Connor et al, 2017). The lower values ascribed to feminine competencies and

'responsibilities' can result in tangible disadvantages faced by women in formal recognition processes (O'Connor et al, 2017; O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016). For example, student evaluations of teaching on modules and programmes gathered by universities tend to focus on cognitive aspects of teaching and less so on interpersonal or emotional aspects. An example of this at the national level in the UK can be seen in the 2020 National Student Survey (NSS)<sup>i</sup>, where the first seven core items (of 28 total) directly concern cognitive aspects of teaching (e.g. "The course is intellectually stimulating" and "My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth"). By contrast, only two items pertain to emotional dimensions of teaching ("I feel part of a community of staff and students" and "Staff value students' views and opinions about the course"). The remaining items concern assessment guidance and various administrative and organisational aspects of the course (Office for Students, n.d.). As the NSS and similar evaluative metrics are commonly used in recognition schemes at the institutional and national level (Bamber, 2020; O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016), structural inequalities which particularly disadvantage women are reinforced in higher education. Crucially, it is not that women are necessarily more adept (and men more inept) at female-typed competencies; rather, the issue is that women are associated with and perceived to be naturally skilful in areas regarded as relatively unimportant in higher education (Heijstra et al, 2017). Indeed, while it was not the focus of this discussion, the disproportionate infrequency of MF nominations in the overall sample—a finding that cannot be explained by the gender distribution of teaching staff—offers a striking illustration of the devaluing of women's labour in higher education.

A related effect of the devaluing of female labour is that students' emotional responses to teaching are overlooked. A number of commentators have observed that emotion is not afforded the same legitimacy as cognitive and other non-emotional aspects of higher education teaching (Moore & Kuol, 2007; Obgonna & Harris, 2004; Quinlan, 2016). This is also reflected in the foci of teaching evaluations such as the NSS, as described above. The findings here suggest that in fact, students' emotional responses are a key part of how students experience high quality teaching. Recall that, for instance, *Supportive* was the most frequently mentioned theme for all but one of the gender categories, where it nevertheless ranked second. There is thus an apparent mismatch between what formal recognition structures prioritise and what students actually value about teaching. The findings here suggest that at least when it comes to recognising excellence in teaching, emotional competencies are relatively valued over cognitive ones.

One notable finding was the appearance of *Knowledgeable* in the female teacher categories (FF and MF) but not the male teacher categories (FM and MM). This was particularly unusual for the MF nominations, considering an otherwise clear preference for female-typed traits. It is possible that due to lower expectations of women's scholarly capacities relative to men (Basow et al, 2006; Miller & Chamberlin, 2000), any evidence that students had of this would have been particularly salient. This interpretation would be consistent with the shifting standards theory, which posits that subjective evaluations (such as the open-ended descriptions of teachers examined here) can contradict stereotyped expectations (Biernat, 2003). This is because subjective measures allow standards to be shifted such that judgments are made with reference to group stereotypes. For instance, a woman described as knowledgeable may nevertheless be estimated to have a lower IQ score than a man also considered to be knowledgeable. Hence, the finding that *Knowledgeable* only appeared in the female teacher categories may rather counterintuitively be indicative of lower student expectations of female scholarly competence.

Next, recall that the theme *Values Students* was ranked (tied) tenth in the MF category, while not appearing (i.e. not being one of the most frequently mentioned themes) in any other gender category. This finding is similar to an observation made in Basow et al's (2006) examination of students' descriptions of their best and worst professors. They noted that when evaluating professors of either gender, male students were at least partly influenced by whether or not a professor infringed upon their sense of status. For example, male students tended to describe their best female professors as accommodating and their worst male professors as condescending. As Basow et al (2006 p.32) note:

Perhaps because male students challenge female professors more than male professors (Statham et al, 1991), male students may be especially appreciative when they are allowed to do so. The finding here that MF nominations frequently mentioned *Values Students* could thus also be indicative that the preservation of personal status is a consideration for male students when it comes to evaluating teaching. In this case, perhaps due to expectations that women in positions of relative power nevertheless

behave in an agreeable way (Eagly & Karau, 2002), male students were particularly positive when female teachers made the effort to make them feel valued.

A number of limitations should be noted about the study. The first concerns the descriptive analytical approach employed here. While it enabled the thematic makeup of nominations across the four gender categories to be directly compared, it was unclear whether the differences between themes' frequencies of mentions were statistically meaningful. Inferential testing was done in a separate analysis (Kwok & Potter, 2021), though this came with a different set of limitations on what it could reveal about the data (for instance as only a relatively small number of themes qualified for statistical testing). What the analytical approach described in this chapter offers is an overall perspective of what nominations across the gender categories most often mentioned, even if it is unclear at what point differences become statistically meaningful.

A related limitation is that, as the analysis concerned the proportions of mentions across gender categories, nominations in smaller gender categories carried relatively more weight. Particularly, as there were only 39 MF nominations in the sample, each MF nomination had substantially more influence in determining a theme's proportion of mention—consider, for example, that 65 FF nominations mentioned *Supportive*, whereas only 16 MF nominations did (noting that *Supportive* was the most frequently mentioned theme for both these categories). Less uneven gender category sizes would have allowed more balanced comparisons to be made.

A third limitation was that the analysis could only represent individual characteristics with a single binary variable representing gender. The analysis was thus unable to investigate other characteristics that could have influenced students' judgments of teaching, such as race (Fan et al, 2019) and attitudes towards gender (Nesdoly et al, 2020). Additionally, gender itself was represented simplistically, even though it is a complex construct able to be expressed and performed in different, socioculturally meaningful ways (Burke et al, 2013; Garvey et al, 2019). This said, the gendered patterns in what students mentioned most about their excellent teachers were largely consistent with findings from previous research (e.g. Basow et al, 2006), as well as the gendered biases and expectations present in higher education and wider society (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Laube et al, 2007; Rosa et al, 2021).

### **Concluding notes and the way forward**

Gender bias can shape how HE teachers are perceived, whether in the classroom (as illustrated here) or in professional contexts (O'Connor & O'Hagan, 2016). It is important to be aware that evaluations of teaching quality, as with any sort of evaluative behaviour, are subject to sociocultural biases and expectations (O'Connor et al, 2017). At the individual level, an awareness of one's own assumptions or preconceptions, as well as the preparedness to accept evidence contrary to these expectations, are critical. By being comfortable with—and even expectant of—contrary evidence, it becomes easier to consider individuals on their own terms, rather than by their most superficially apparent traits.

With regards to the implications for educational development, moving away from a model of teaching excellence to one of expertise would help shift evaluative foci onto practices and competencies that are within an individual's control. For instance, the three aspects of expertise proposed in King's (2020) model—pedagogical content knowledge, artistry of teaching, and self-determined and purposeful approaches to learning and development—emphasise individual practices and applications of experience, in contrast to broad notions of excellence that leave judgments of teaching quality much more susceptible to subjective biases. For educational developers and the staff they work with, a model of teaching expertise which locates 'good' teaching practice within the agency of individuals would enable clear and attainable goals of development. This said, the risk of sociocultural bias would still be present even under a model of expertise. To illustrate using King's model, the male bias found for the theme Engaging suggests that teaching artistry would be more easily recognisable in male teachers than in female teachers. More generally, as scholarly competence tends to be seen as a masculine rather than a feminine trait (e.g. Basow et al, 2006), women may be evaluated more harshly on pedagogical content knowledge. Similarly, women's efforts towards purposeful learning and development risk being undervalued or seen as trivial relative to men's. Certainly, van den Brink & Benschop's (2012) observation that academic excellence is a male-typed quality can also be applied to the notion of expertise. In all, this study illustrated that gender bias can shape perceptions of teaching. It is important that HE practitioners and educational developers cultivate an awareness of gender and other biases, starting at the individual level, so that the normalisation of these attitudes can be more effectively

challenged. A model of expertise which locates high quality teaching practice within the control of individual academics (e.g. King 2020) would help to mitigate against sociocultural biases in teaching evaluations.

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<sup>i</sup> The NSS is an annual survey of student satisfaction open to all final year HE students in the UK and its results contribute towards the calculation of a HE provider's TEF rating (Office for Students 2020). The NSS comprises a core set of questions which all HE providers must include in their survey, though providers can additionally draw from a bank of optional questions.