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Let Teachers Know About The Perceptions of Undergraduate and Graduate Students on What Makes an Effective Instructor

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Abstract

This paper investigates the perceptions of students studying at a university in the Middle East regarding the characteristics of an effective university instructor. Anonymous survey data from 1,557 students from both graduate and undergraduate programs were collected. A discussion of the characteristics of an effective instructor, as outlined in the literature and review of some of the current views on teaching and learning in tertiary institutions, is followed by an analysis of the data collected to answer the research question, "What, according to the participating students, are the characteristics of an effective instructor?" The results reveal that an effective instructor is one who is not only an expert in their field of study but also one who is aware of teaching methods and the expectations of their students. In all, this study contributes to increasing the amount of empirical research on students' perceptions from this part of the world and provides information that may prove beneficial to those involved in education in this region. It concludes with recommendations for further research. One of these is, had this study been conducted during the present Coronavirus pandemic, would technical knowledge of online teaching have surfaced as an effective teacher requirement?

Keywords: Middle East, Effective Teaching, Teaching and Learning Practices, Characteristics, Effective Instructor

Lisans ve Yüksek Lisans Öğrencilerinin Bir Eğitmeni Etkili Yapan Unsurlar Konusundaki Algıları

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Öz

Bu Çalışmanın amacı, Ortadoğu’da bir üniversitede okuyan öğrencilerin etkili bir üniversite hocasının özelliklerine ilişkin algılarını incelemektir. Araştırma kapsamında, hem lisans hem de lisansüstü programlarında okuyan 1.557 öğrenciden anonim anket verileri toplanmıştır. Literatürün özetlendiği ve yüksek öğretim kurumlarında öğretme ve öğrenmeye ilişkin mevcut güncel görüşlerin bazılarının gözden geçirilmesinin üzerine yapılan etkili bir eğitmenin özelliklerinin tartışıldığı bölümü, “Katılımcı öğrencilere göre, etkili bir eğitmenin özellikleri nelerdir?” araştırma sorusuna cevap vermek için toplanan verilerin bir analizi izler. Sonuçlar, etkili bir eğitmenin sadece kendi alanında uzman değil, aynı zamanda öğretim yöntemlerinin ve öğrencilerinin beklentilerinin farkında olan biri olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, dünyanın bu kısmından öğrencilerin algılarına ilişkin deneysel araştırma miktarını artırmaya katkıda bulunmakta ve bu bölgede eğitime katılanlara yararlı olabilecek bilgiler sağlamaktadır. Çalışma daha fazla araştırma için önerilerle sona ermektedir. Bu önerilerden biri, bu çalışma şu anki Koronavirüs salgını sırasında yapılmış olsaydı, çevrimiçi öğretimin teknik bilgisi etkili bir öğretmen gereksinimi olarak ortaya çıkacak mıydı? sorusudur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ortadoğu, Etkili öğretim, etkili öğretim görevlisi

Introduction

Teaching does not automatically result in learning and indeed there are a number of factors that determine whether students will learn in class, or not. Such factors range from beliefs about learning and teaching (Dandy & Bendersky, 2014) to the need for students to take control of their learning (Yair, 2000). One of the important factors of discussion in this paper revolves around the teacher and the techniques, approaches and methods used in the classroom. The other factors revolve around the students' reaction to the teachers and their teaching.

Studies have shown that many teachers are often unaware of how students perceive their teaching (Appleby 1990; Gonzales, 2011) and may think that their teaching is good, though their students may not think so, and are often turned off by their teaching (Gentry, 2013). Teachers may also have misconceptions of what students perceive as effective teaching. Some studies have shown that while students want more equality and respect from their teachers (Syah, 2018), teachers often think that students want them to take control of the classroom, be entertaining, virtuous and treat them more like friends (see Miley & Gonsalves, 2005). Other researchers found that students are annoyed by teachers who are not empathetic and who do not know how to communicate with them, while teachers are annoyed with students who are immature and inattentive (Appleby, 1990). Research conducted on students' perceptions of teachers' annoying teaching habits found that students named behaviors, not teachers (Rallis, 1994). For instance, Kendall and Schussler (2014) examined instructional behaviors that caused students to use words such as boring, enthusiastic, and organized to describe their teachers. Their results "revealed that these behaviors include both the way instructors interact personally with students as well as how they convey the content to the class" showing that "what teachers do in their classrooms relates to student perception of their ability to foster learning" (p.200).

Seemingly, there are misconceptions on both ends of the spectrum and research shows that the relationship between teaching and learning is not clear cut. What may be perceived by teachers as effective teaching may not be perceived so by the students, and what the students may be looking for in a teacher may not be what the teacher feels is important to the students.

Effective Teaching and Effective Teachers

What is effective teaching and/or an effective teacher? This may be an interesting question, but one which is not easy to answer. In fact, as Bell (2005) explains:

In the last 50 years, many researchers and professionals responsible for teacher development and evaluation have sought to establish criteria for assessing effective teaching. While there is little agreement regarding which specific behaviors constitute effective teaching, researchers agree at least on some dimensions that describe effective teaching in general, regardless of subject matter. These include enthusiasm/ expressiveness, clarity of explanation, and rapport/interaction (p.259).

Coe, Aloisi, Higgins and Major (2015) define effective teaching "as that which leads to improved student achievement using outcomes that matter to their future success" (p.2). They offer six attributes that good quality teaching will involve: content knowledge, quality of instruction, classroom climate, classroom management, teacher beliefs, and professional behavior. Clark and Walsh (2009) present components that make up an effective teacher which consist of knowledge on content, pedagogy, curriculum, and learners, as well as knowledge pertaining to the end results of education, its purpose, values and contexts. Clark and Walsh (2009) cite the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the United States that maintain that good teachers "are committed to students and their learning...know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students...are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning...think systematically about their practice and learn from experience" and "are members of learning communities" (p. 3).

Bress (2000), in a study with 40 adult learners from a variety of nationalities and 20 experienced teachers, found that the two groups, learners and teachers, had different opinions on the characteristics of a good teacher. For students, the top six most common characteristics of a good teacher are: Has caring qualities; shows interests and is motivating; uses varied and new materials, topics and methods; is fair and treats students equally; is patient; and is funny. For teachers, the top six most common characteristics of a good teacher are: Treats students as individuals; is enthusiastic and inspiring; has

caring qualities; creates a rich learning environment; is funny; and is spontaneous and flexible. In a study conducted by Delaney, Johnson, Johnson & Treslan (2010), “students identified nine behaviors that are characteristics of effective teaching in both on-campus and distance courses,” which are, “respectful of students, knowledgeable, approachable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and humorous” (p.iii). Zhang and Watkins (2007) note that, “it is not surprising that conceptions of good teachers reported in the literature combine both personal and teaching characteristics” (p. 782).

Today we may not only need to measure students’ perceptions in regards to factors such as “teacher credibility, immediacy, and content relevance” but include the teacher’s media use, which may have an impact on “student perceptions of teacher behaviors” (McArthur and Bostedo-Conway, 2012, p.286). Research suggests that the “Learning-teaching approaches that students prefer” and the “reactions they give to instructional applications vary according to personal properties” that students have (Sen and Yilmaz, 2012, p. 1482). Factors that come into play include “ability self-perceptions, perceptions of domain-difficulty, value beliefs, experienced emotions in lectures and performance in the courses taught by the perceived as extremely effective and ineffective teachers” (Stephanou and Kyridis, 2012, p.58). Research proposes that how teachers “think about teaching and, consequently, how they teach” may be determined by factors such as “what they think their students should learn, how their students should develop, and the kind of reflective judgment-making they expect to see in their students (Calkins and Seidler, 2011, p. 215). Research also suggests the use of new models of teaching, such as “co-teaching,” may aid in “developing teaching effectiveness” (Chanmugam and Gerlach, 2013, p.110).

Despite the many attempts, no consensus has been reached and the search for improvement, reevaluation and reassessment of effective teaching and what makes effective teachers continues. However, the majority agree that some of the most important factors that need to be considered are incorporating teaching techniques that discuss the relationship between teaching and learning through the use of student perspectives and utilizing student feedback when reflecting on teaching (Anderson, Hunt, Powell, and Dollar, 2013).

Reflective Teaching and Student Feedback

Reflective teaching is defined in Sirutis and Massi's (2014) work as "a form of self-assessment... a method of improving teaching skills by means of meta-cognitive awareness" that is achieved by "reflection and making conscious efforts to evaluate one's current abilities" which results in "continuous improvements" that can "hon[e] ones teaching abilities" (p. 4). Some of the strategies suggested by Sirutis and Massi for doing this are keeping teaching journals, having peer observations, recording lessons, and getting student feedback. According to Iqbal, Ramzan and Arain (2016) "Reflective practices have led teachers to shift their attention towards student's feedback" where they "reflect upon" such feedback "and attempt to develop good relations with students" and "identify and rectify their professional mistakes" (p. 69). Reflective practices have been described as "vital to explore the teaching practices of educators" that either promote or hinder student development (Casum and Gul, 2017, p. 101). Today, reflective practice is seen to be "a key skill in many professions" where not only teachers, but students need to be trained to "explore reflection through a method of self-discovery supported by peer discussion" which will allow students "to recognise and value reflection as a learning tool (Pretorius and Ford, 2016, p.241). The impact of self-assessment and self-reflection continues to be important whether we are talking about more traditional learning contexts or newer approaches to teaching, such as in blended learning context in today's online driven courses and teaching environments (Dickfos, Cameron, and Hodgson, 2014).

A characteristic of effective teaching therefore, is that which "encourages learning from students about the effects of ... teaching and how it can be improved" (Nicholls, 2007, p. 37), and a professional effective teacher is one who is able to reflect critically on his/her own practice and "be prepared to question and evaluate their teaching seriously with a view to understanding the process of teaching and learning and...developing their own professional conduct" (Randall and Thornton, 2001, p. 2). Yet, reflections and changes in practices are of little use if they are not based on the experiences of both those involved in the teaching equation, the teacher and the student (Allwright, 2003; Gunn, 2005). Just as teachers need to learn who they are as teachers and what informs their practices, they need to know who their students are and develop an understanding of whom they are working with. On one end of

the teaching spectrum are the teachers, the way they teach and the strategies they use, and on the other are the students and how these practices and strategies are perceived by them. This becomes crucial when students and teachers do not come from the same culture and may carry different perceptions of the roles of teachers and students and what is considered as a good teacher, or teaching, and what is considered as a good student, and learning (Rogoff, 1990; Gunn, 2008).

So, as can be seen from the literature presented, there are evident differences between how students approach learning and how teachers approach teaching. Yet, as Song, Hannafin and Hill, (2007) explain, "Little attention has been paid to understanding these differences and their implications for designing successful learning environments" (p.27). Though the characteristics of what makes a good teacher have long been studied, as Zhang and Watkins (2007) clarify, these studies have mostly been conducted in Western contexts and "have been much less frequently explored" in non-Western context (p. 782). The majority of the data gathered has also been "from the teachers themselves or educational administrators, and not from the students" (Raymond, 2001, p. 18).

Research Objective

Recently, interest in education in the Arab world has begun to surface, but research on what makes an effective teacher, whether from the perspectives of teachers, the educational administrators or students, in the Arab context, remains minimal. Thus, this paper examines the perspectives of Middle Eastern students on what makes a good teacher. Research like this is needed, especially since, as Gao and Watkins (2001, as cited in Zhang and Watkins, 2007) explain:

[C]onceptions of teaching-related activities are context dependent and culture bound. Disparity in people's conceptions may exist in terms of different levels of schooling, curriculum, gender, major area, and cultural background. Thus, the findings of previous studies concluded at the primary and secondary levels in Western countries may not be applicable to tertiary institutions in a Chinese [and or Arabic in this case] context (p. 782).

Hence, this study aims to answer the following question:

What, according to the participating students, are the characteristics of an effective instructor?

Methodology

Participants

To examine the perspectives of Middle Eastern students on what makes a good teacher, a survey (see Appendix A) was sent out, via Survey Monkey, to students from the American University of Sharjah (AUS) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A total of 1,557 students (751 males and 806 females) enrolled in this university participated in the study. AUS is one of the few accredited coeducational institutes in the Middle East following an American curriculum. It is a medium sized institution with approximately 350 full-time faculty and 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students representing over 80 nationalities. Students from all colleges and all levels (years) participated as displayed in Figures 1 and 2 below.

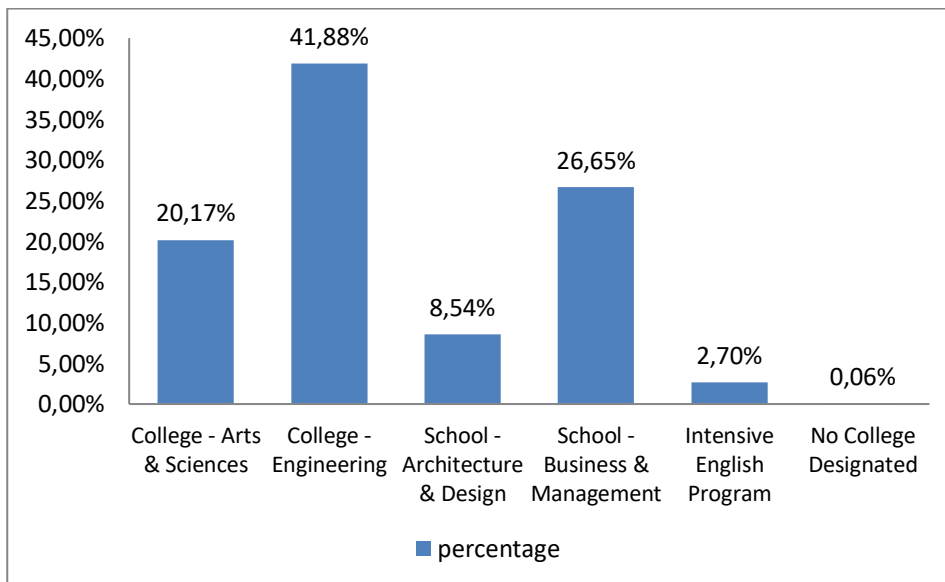


Figure 1. Participants aggregated by college/school

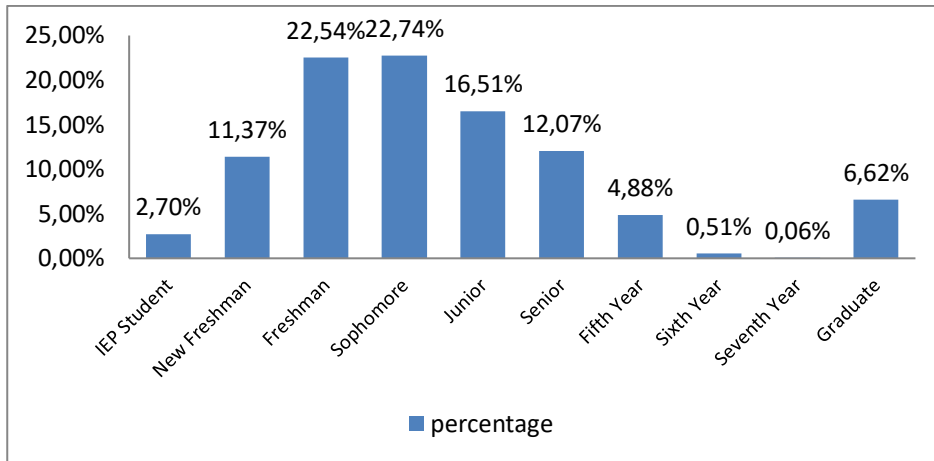


Figure 2. Participants aggregated by classification

The students in the study come from 57 different nationalities (see Figures 3 and 4 below). Those coming from countries in the Middle East, for example, UAE, Jordan, and Palestine have the largest representation (68.85%), followed by the Sub-Continent and South-East Asia, including Iran (17.21%), and lastly from other countries, such as the USA and Canada (13.94%). Participants ranged in age from 16 – 56 years old (52.22% ranged between 16-19 years, 41.17% ranged between 20-24 years, 3.79% ranged between 25-29 years, 1.80% ranged between 30-40 years, and 0.71% ranged between 41-56 years).

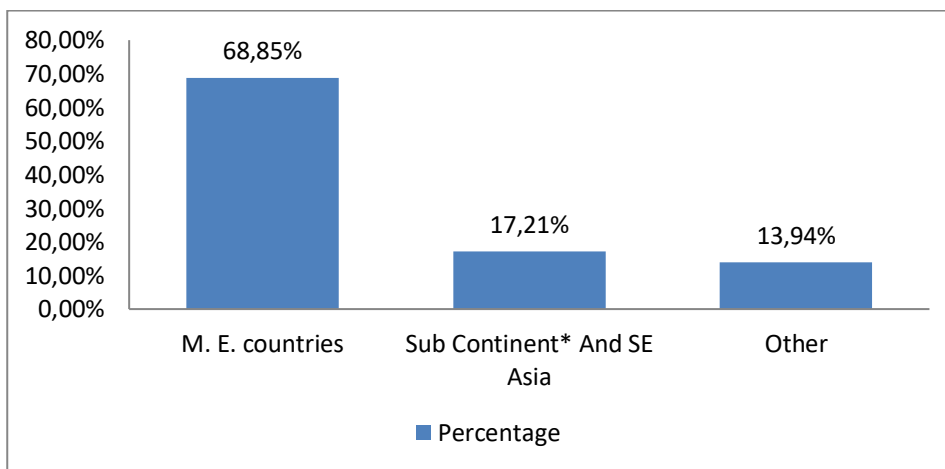


Figure 3. Participants aggregated by nationality sub-groups

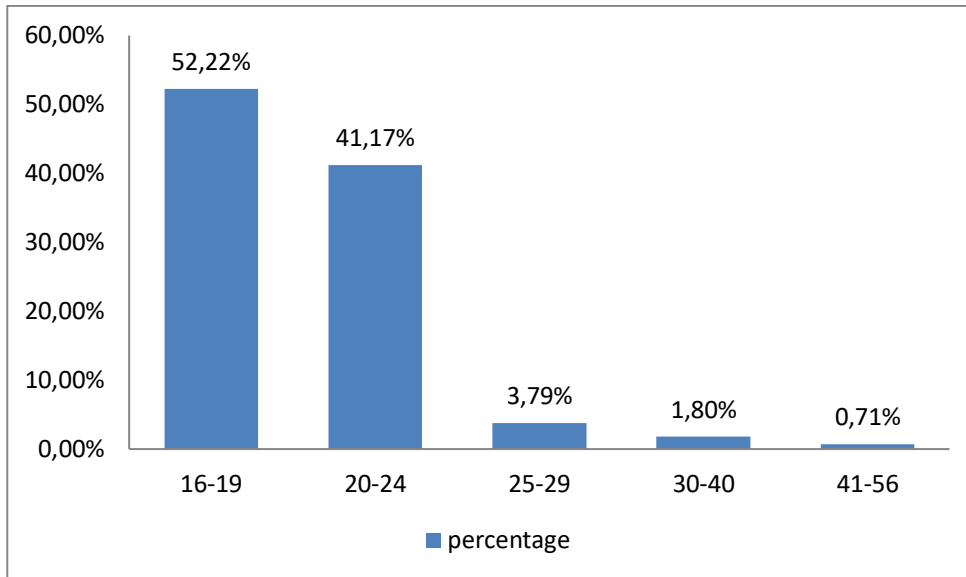


Figure 4. Participants aggregated by age

Data Collection Tool

The data was collected via a computer-based survey, using Survey Monkey, which was open for four weeks. The complete survey included:

1. 12 demographic questions
2. 24 item statements that have the characteristics of an effective teacher
3. 2 open-ended questions

Procedures

The 24 characteristics of an effective teacher were rated by the participants according to a five point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. These 24 characteristics were derived from the literature, as well as from an earlier pilot study conducted with five undergraduate classes of approximately 30 students each. The pilot study was based on Miley and Gonsalves' (2005) suggestion where students were asked to write, on index cards, five effective teacher practices that helped them learn and five ineffective practices that hindered their learning. The 24 choices of characteristics used in the cur-

rent study were framed in a manner that completed the statement: "An effective university/college teacher/instructor is one who...". For analysis purposes, the 24 characteristics were grouped (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 2005) into three categories/themes: professional knowledge, social aspects and technical aspect, as shown in Table 1 below.

The two open-ended questions at the end of the survey are:

1. "What advice do you have for university/ college instructors?"
2. "Do you have any other comments/suggestions you would like to offer?"

The answers to these open-ended questions were first transcribed and then scanned "to see what categories suggest themselves, or 'emerge', from the data" (Burns, 2010, p.107).

Statistical Analysis of Results

The researchers also wanted to see if there was any statistically significant difference in student responses between:

1. undergraduate levels (i.e. freshman, sophomore, junior and senior),
2. undergraduate and graduate levels
3. males and females

To do this a 2-proportion z test was used (a 2 proportion z test was used because the random sample was large and data was approximately normally distributed).

Results

The results of the data analysis of the 24 characteristics, grouped into the 3 categories, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' answers to effective characteristic categories

Answer Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Technical Skills/Aspects	53.84%	27.67%	12.41%	2.78%	3.30%
Professional Knowledge	30 %	38.16%	25.36%	4.97%	2.21%
Social Aspects	37.85%	25.90%	17.10%	4.03%	15.12%

The study reveals that the technical skills/qualities yielded the highest results (81.51%). These skills include, giving students the opportunity to ask questions, providing useful feedback, grading fairly, starting and finishing

class on time, showing no favoritism, creating a friendly atmosphere, willingness to help students after class, giving constructive criticism and asking for feedback on their teaching, and is lively in class and not boring. The skills that centered on professional knowledge yielded the second highest results (67.45%). Professional characteristics and knowledge in one's field include aspects such as being a leader and an active researching in their field of study. The characteristics that dealt with social aspects yielded the lowest results (63.75%). These include aspects such as using humor in class, being sociable, smiling, and showing interest in the students.

The advice and suggestions that were provided in the open-ended questions, to a great extent, also centered on the professional, technical and social aspects. Students suggested that instructors, should be "well informed about [their] subjects," should have the skills "to keep a class full of impatient students entertained at any time of the day," show that they "care...about [students'] future," "create a friendly atmosphere," make students "feel comfortable in the classroom," "be nice," and have "a good sense of humor...by smiling or cracking a few joke[s] when needed...this does not mean turn the classroom into a circus".

In sum the results from the 2-proportion z test (see Appendix B for the details) show that senior students think that an effective teacher needs to be motivating, yet, freshmen and Junior students feel that an effective teacher is one who provides useful feedback. In comparison to undergraduate students, graduate students feel an effective teacher asks for feedback on their teaching, need to be 'leaders in their fields' and should be actively involved in research in their field of study, more so than the undergraduate students. Female students think that effective teachers are those who are motivating, have interest in their job, and are willing to help students after class, whereas male students feel that effective teachers are those who are leaders in their field of study.

Discussion

The students in this study, like many students in other studies (Bress, 2000; Tang, et. al, 2005), consider a solid knowledge base to be important. The study also shows that the lower the level (i.e. freshman junior, sophomore, senior) the student is in, the more motivation, and useful feedback they may need.

Like others, these students have also rated characteristics, such as showing respect for the student and having a sense of humor (Coe et al., 2014; Delaney et al., 2010; Berlin, 2000; Bress, 2000; Saffin, 2008) to be important.

The students in this study also valued a good relationship with their professors. Students from the Middle East, as this study suggests, may not want their instructors to be friends with them, but they seem to appreciate an instructor who makes an effort at developing rapport with them and creating a positive classroom environment. They want some humor, yet, as one of the student says, "this does not mean turn the classroom into a circus." It is in such environments that these students feel that the instructors portray a willingness to listen and give the students the opportunity to freely ask questions without feeling intimidated. They seem to want instructors who show empathy, take into consideration their concerns, take interest in what they say, and show respect for their ideas and opinions. This may seem to contradict some of the misconceived notions that Middle Eastern students are mainly trained in memorizing and rote learning, and that they may prefer a strict form of learning and teaching context (Tan, 2010).

Effective teaching takes into consideration basics such as communication, interpersonal skills, and diversity issues (Lang & Evans, 2006) which can play a major role in creating effective classroom environments. Such environments could easily be fostered in the classroom by carrying out simple actions. As students in this study show, actions may be as simple as starting the class with a friendly greeting, getting to know students by their names, and asking them about topics of concern to them. As one of the students says, a "smile goes a long way" to opening doors of motivation and creating an environment of encouragement where students feel safe to not only approach their instructors, but to be able to express their views and opinions without feeling intimidated. It is worth noting that students in this study come from contexts where a perceived snub intimidates students, and may lead to never asking questions for fear that they would be humiliated in front of their classmates. In a culture where saving face is important, this may prevent the students from taking part in discussions and/or asking for any clarifications even if they do not understand.

These students want their teacher's encouragement to ask questions, and actually allow time for consideration of such questions and giving feedback

to them. Acknowledging and elaborating on students' answers show students that instructors are actually "interested" in hearing what they say. There is a sense that students are looking for acknowledgement and recognition whether it be in knowing their names or taking what they have to say into consideration.

Conclusion

This study contributes to increasing the amount of empirical research on students' perceptions from this part of the world and provides information that may prove beneficial to those involved in education in this region. It may help instructors gain better understanding of student perceptions of what makes effective instructors, which can contribute to teaching that is more effective. Understanding students' (as well as teachers') perceptions of what constitutes good teaching may offer ideas that could be considered in curriculum planning, teaching methodologies, and teacher training programs. This in turn may produce better learning and teaching environments and experiences that can lead to enhancing learning outcomes and creating better attitudes towards learning, instructors, and teaching. The study suggests that it is beneficial to get youth more involved in the educational process and participate as active members in the academic arena, and in different academic contexts, by asking for their perspectives so that instructors can adequately respond to these perspectives, preferences and needs.

This study shows that there are more similarities than differences between students, no matter what the context is. The fact that the students in this part of the world carry similar perspectives on what constitutes effective teaching, to those in Western contexts, is important, showing that students no matter what the context is, have similar perspectives in regards to what constitutes teaching effectiveness. Universities in this part of the world may benefit from the experiences of other institutions in the Western contexts. They can begin from where these institutions have reached and implement strategies that may have proven to be beneficial.

To conclude, "pupils' progress is most significantly influenced by a good teacher who displays both high levels of professional characteristics and excellent teaching skills" (Zhang & Watkins, 2007, p. 783). Many teachers may also lose track of the fact that, as one of the participants in this study said,

something as simple as “A good sense of humour” can “go a long way.” In sum, as one of the students in this study explains, “If you are well informed about your subject and keep a class full of impatient students entertained at any time of the day then you can pat yourself on the back for being a good professor.”

Finally, the researchers would like to suggest that future studies may consider investigating any possible connections between the type of courses taught, be they introductory or subject-specific courses, and any bearings they may have on the characteristics of effective university instructors. Furthermore, the cancellation of school and university classes all over the globe because of fear of spreading the infectious coronavirus may necessitate adding good knowledge of the use of information technology (IT) to the list of factors that make an effective instructor (Chen, 2008).

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