



STUDENT SUCCESS



'MAKING A DIFFERENCE' A STUDENT VIEW OF EXCELLENT TEACHING



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

'Making A Difference' A Student View of Excellent Teaching

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National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

c/o 19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

T: +353 1 6090648

Email: admin@teachingandlearning.ie

Web: www.teachingandlearning.ie

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Foreword

This report presents the voices of almost 4000 of our students who have identified and described good teaching and exceptional teachers. What they are saying is vitally important!

Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education, published recently, highlights the significance of teaching and learning, and teachers, to supporting student success. If we are genuinely concerned with student success, we must be entirely committed to validating, valuing and celebrating good teaching and exceptional teachers. The students have told us that the quality of teaching has a profound impact on their learning. Through their words, they highlight that the human qualities of our exceptional teachers are of paramount importance. Certainly, students tell us that our best teachers possess the requisite skills to enhance teaching but these skills are not sufficient in and of themselves. They need to be complemented with particular behaviours and human characteristics. Exceptional teachers are entertaining-interesting, kind and caring, supportive, inspirational, passionate and approachable. They are helpful, encouraging, generous with their time and go 'above and beyond'. They help students to learn, to develop, to progress, to be successful. They make a difference to students' learning and their lives. Our students are discerning - no student said that good teachers make things easy for them, rather they said that they were fair and sometimes tough, setting high standards for them but supporting them every step of the way to achieve those standards.

From the National Forum consultation with students at the end of 2018, we know that employability, academic attainment and degree completion are important to students in terms of their success. Our best teachers provide links with the world beyond higher education, including the world of work, through practical delivery and the relevance of their teaching material; students linked this with 'real life' and 'real world' examples, and with instances where the teachers drew on their personal and professional experience, which 'brought the teaching to life and really aided understanding of the material'.

In turn, what students told us through the consultation and through this report's data reflects national policy, institutional perspectives and the literature more broadly. All these voices articulate similar messages including: the transformative potential of the higher education experience and exceptional teaching (and teachers) as a part of that; the need to address employability; the importance of student engagement, empowerment and partnership; the need for inclusive learning environments which are respectful of, and celebrate, diversity.

As Director of the National Forum, I am delighted to share these insights with you. We need to listen to what our students are telling us and we need, as a sector, to ensure we are responding to what they are saying. This report builds on the initial analysis of the data from the 2014 student-led Teaching Hero Awards outlined in the National Forum Insight, 'What Does it Take to be a Teaching Hero?' published in 2015. The insights we gained at that time have already informed the national professional development framework and the inclusion of 'the self' as one of its five domains.

I would like to thank the USI for their support of the student-led awards and all student unions nationally who encourage and support students to identify their teaching hero and contribute to these learning impact awards. I would like to thank the National Forum team, many of whom have contributed to this publication in its development. I would like to say a special thanks to Dr Alison Farrell and Dr Eileen McEvoy who compiled the report and made it possible for us to share our students' views of exceptional teaching with you.

Terry Maguire

Director, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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Introduction

Student success is a central priority of the work of the National Forum. A recent National Forum report, *Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education*,¹ includes the following shared understanding of student success:

Student success optimises the learning and development opportunities for each student to recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society.

To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community.

A genuine national and institutional commitment to student success involves listening to what students have to say about their higher education experience. It also involves providing opportunities for students to articulate what they value about that experience and what they would like to see validated and celebrated about good teaching and exceptional teachers.

The Teaching Hero Award is one of the Irish higher education national learning impact awards. The Award is student-led; students nominate, in writing, the teachers that they believe are their teaching heroes. The Award celebrates the best of Ireland's higher education teachers for the impact they have on the development of their students and the part they play in promoting educational excellence in higher education. This report shares findings from a unique dataset arising from the National Forum Teaching Hero Awards.

Focus of this report

The dataset presented in this report comprises the recorded perceptions of approximately 4,000 students in Irish higher education regarding the characteristics, behaviours and skills associated with exceptional teachers; it also provides evidence of the impact of exceptional teachers on their students. The report includes a dialogue between insights from the student data and insights from the teachers they view as exceptional.

1 See www.teachingandlearning.ie/publications

Data and Methods

The Teaching Hero Awards process is a collaborative one between the National Forum and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). It is co-ordinated locally by the institution's student union office as part of a national campaign. Students participate in the process voluntarily; the nomination they make is an online submission in 150 words or less explaining why the teacher they are nominating is a teaching hero; the submission prompt asks students to:

Tell us about your higher education Teaching Hero in 150 words or less. Don't just tell us that your Teaching Hero was great ... tell us why.

The dataset for this report comprises anonymous nominations from students across Ireland for the National Forum Teaching Hero Awards. The Teaching Heroes have been through two iterations, once in 2014 and subsequently in 2016. In 2014, 1973 valid student submissions were made, with 1967 student submissions in 2016, giving a total of just shy of 4000 student submissions.

Over the two years, submissions were received from 34 different higher education providers including universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and private providers. Approximately two third of students who provided submissions were female. There was a relatively even spread across year cohorts, with slightly higher numbers of students coming from the first year of undergraduate studies. There was also an even breakdown between those over and under 23 years of age. Approximately one in eight students nominated teachers who taught them in class sizes of over 100 students.

The findings in this report are drawn from the total number of submissions. Each submission was examined using content analysis as defined by Krippendorff². Coding was conducted line-by-line on every submission.

Quotes from the student submissions, which are included in the findings section, are illustrative of the themes discussed.

2 Krippendorff, K (2004) Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology, 2nd edition, Thousand Oaks, London: CA: Sage

Findings

The student submissions provided rich data which not only describe the characteristics of exceptional teachers but also provided examples of how these traits translate into action. The combination of what the teachers are like as people, and what they do as teachers, impacted positively on students, sometimes in profound and transformative ways.

Characteristics valued by students in their teachers

Across the dataset the characteristic that emerged most frequently and by a considerable margin was 'entertaining – interesting'. This was followed by 'passionate' and 'kindness and caring' which were cited nearly as often as each other. The subsequent four characteristics were 'supportive', 'inspirational', 'approachable' and 'knowledgeable'. It was noteworthy that 'support' was frequently used in association with words such as 'extra', 'additional' or 'constant' suggesting that teachers who went beyond standard support for students were indeed their heroes.

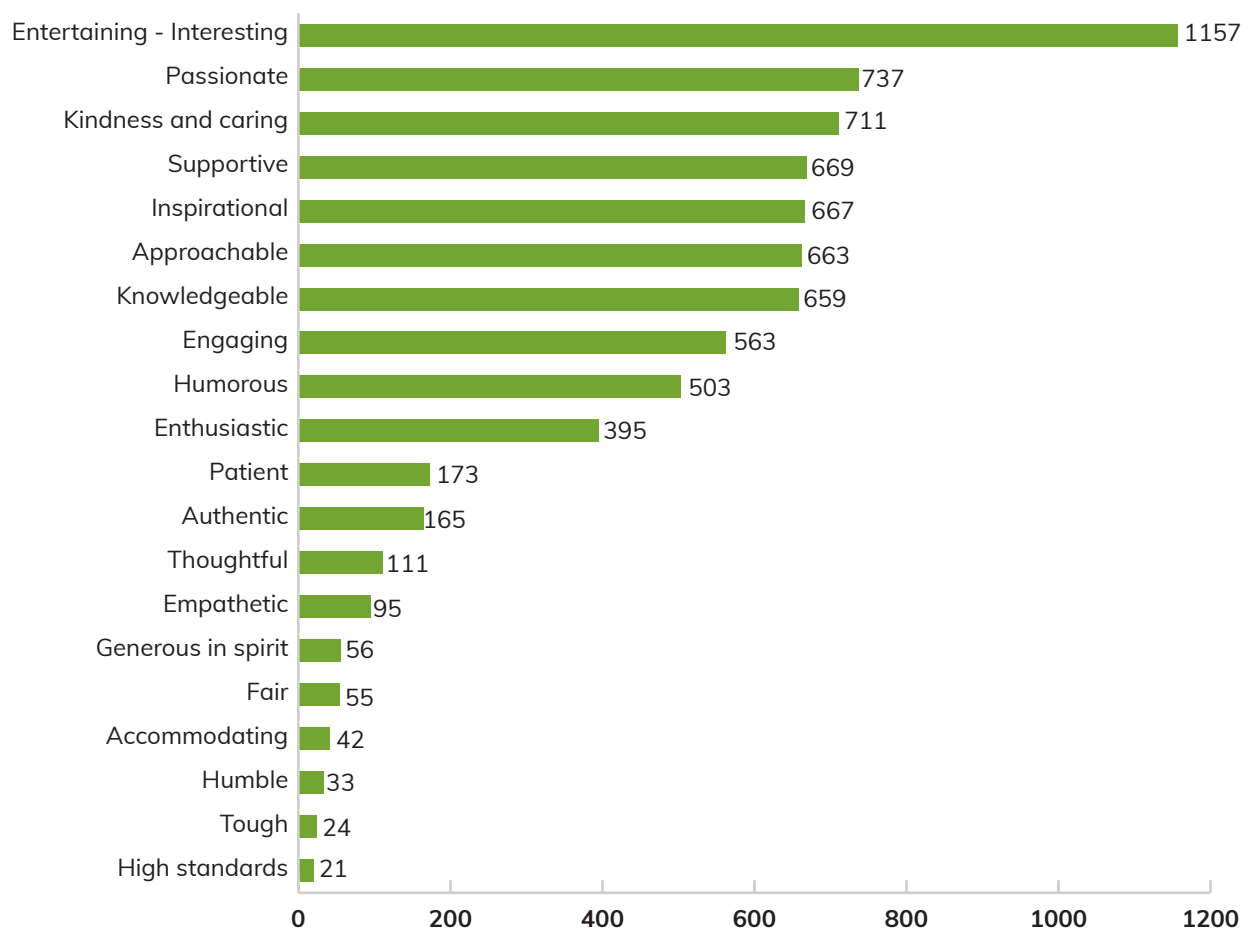


Figure 1 Characteristics valued by students in their teachers

While Figure 1 tells us succinctly the characteristics that matter to students, honing in on the explanations of these characteristics fleshes out to a much greater extent not only what exceptional teachers are like but how they enact these personal and professional characteristics. The following brief explorations of the top characteristics aim to provide a deeper understanding of the data.

Interesting and entertaining

Lectures were very entertaining and interesting as well as easy to understand [and] supported with the real-life examples.

The top characteristic of exceptional teachers as cited by students was 'interesting – entertaining'. Interesting – entertaining was described in a variety of ways by students but the two characteristics were almost always noted in connection with each other and almost always in connection with a positive learning experience. Teasing out what interesting – entertaining might mean, students remarked on being challenged to think, for example through the use of 'ethical conundrums', on how teachers bridged the abstract and the tangible, how they used a variety of different ways to explain difficult concepts and ideas, how they connected with real life examples and/or life experiences in order to make the classes relevant and 'relatable'. Teachers made the subject real and 'human', they contextualised the subject, they interacted with students, and they presented 'in a fun and thought-stimulating way'. Students also remarked on the use of humour and how this helped to make the learning more accessible:

He differs from most lecturers because he made the subject interesting and accompanied it with a sense of humour that made the subject overall less of a daunting task.

Some teachers created all but subliminal learning experiences:

She makes learning almost invisible insofar as learning with her is so interesting and fun we almost forget we are learning . . .

Teachers proved interesting to the extent that students could go further into a subject, and potentially push beyond the subject:

He encourages us to go further, try harder and aim for the best we can be. He makes you think everything is possible with just a tiny bit more effort.

. . . she enriches our general culture with additional pieces of information that tie in with our subjects that direct us to further reading and learning when we have the time.

In addition, teachers maintained interest for their students by encouraging students to contribute, thus varying the voices and opinions in the room and allowing for diversity:

Her open discussions in the lectures and tutorials allowed us to hear the voices of our peers also.

Being passionate - inspirational and knowledgeable

Teachers were passionate and enthusiastic about their subject. This was 'infectious' for students, encouraging them to engage, inspiring them to learn, and giving them confidence:

[Name] is passionate about [discipline] and everything to do with it. He really inspires students to love this field, rather than just becoming functional practitioners.

Students noted teachers or lecturers as the primary source of inspiration over peers, materials, literature or other potential sources of inspiration:

[Name] has been a source of inspiration for the last two and a half years and having her as a lecturer has really helped me grow in confidence.

Being knowledgeable and inspirational were also noted together, and in terms of their consequences:

Very knowledgeable and inspiring lecturer. Got me interested in science which I never thought of before.

Kindness and caring, and being supportive

The student insights suggest that kindness and caring, and being supportive, are particularly prevalent characteristics among exceptional teachers. In turn, these qualities are enacted in a variety of ways including being compassionate towards students, 'genuinely' caring about students, providing extra support especially when students need this, knowing students' names, responding to students and helping them to do better. Caring and kindness were not equated with being a pushover or compromising, rather they were associated with being fair:

She's a tough lecturer, insofar as she expects excellent standards but is very approachable, genuinely cares about her students, supports them in their learning and above all, if you're going through a tough time and need extra support or just a quick chat . . . you can be guaranteed that she'll not only be completely honest with you but she's the one that'll always have your back.

Being approachable

Students felt they could connect with the teachers. They found them to be friendly and approachable. These teachers created comfortable learning environments where students felt they could ask questions, where they were understood, where they were treated with respect, where they felt like equals and where they felt valued:

[Name] is a very friendly and approachable lecturer. The class always felt comfortable asking him questions and he was always enthusiastic answering them and helping students with any difficulties they had. He got along great with the class and talked to us as equals while still remaining professional.

Behaviours and skills valued by students in their teachers

'Helpful' was the top ranked 'behaviour' while 'communicates well' was the top skill. Other highly ranked behaviours and skills included 'generous with time', 'being encouraging', 'offers advice', 'includes all students' and 'above and beyond'.

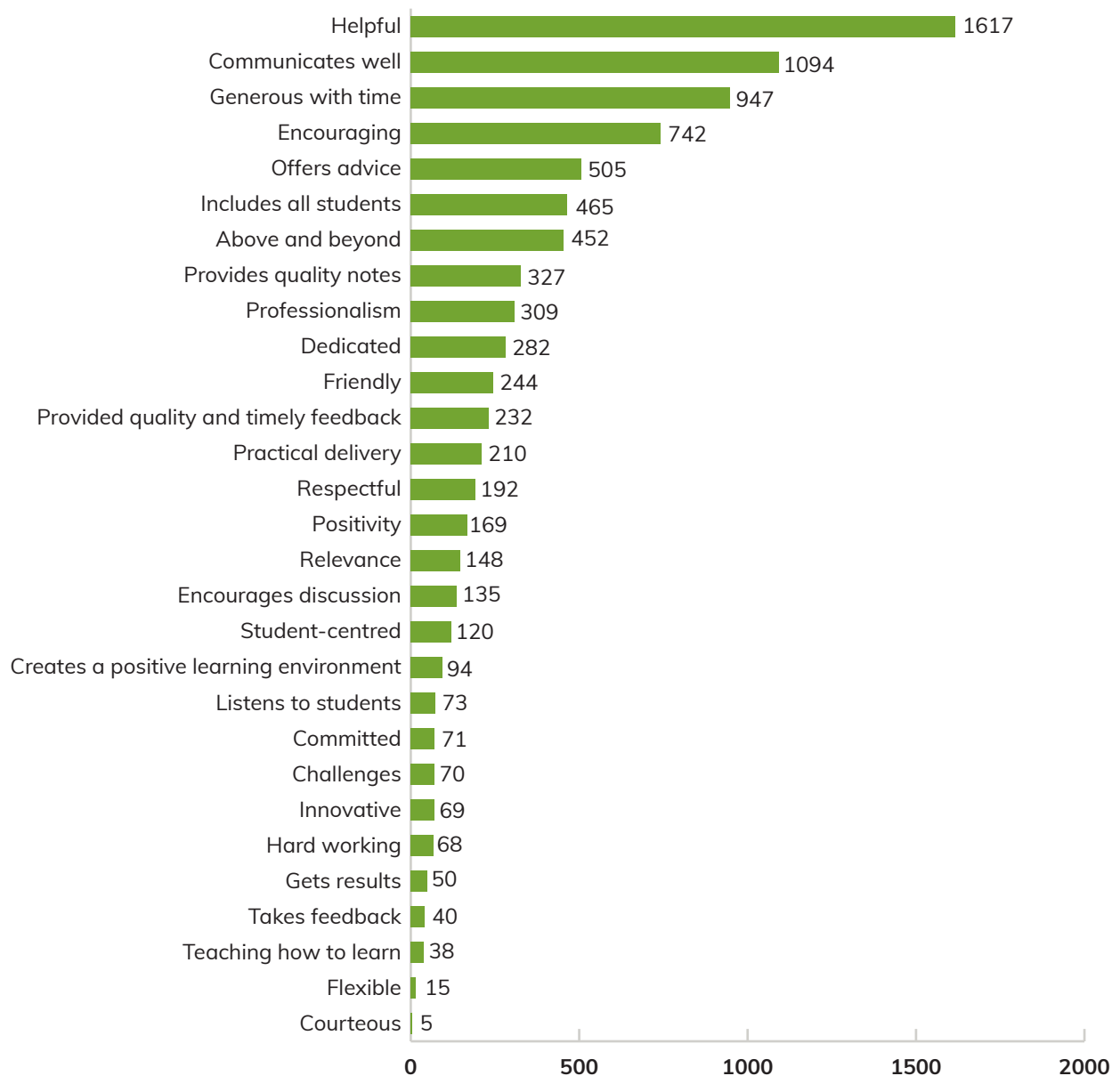


Figure 2 Behaviours and skills valued by students in their teachers

Being helpful

The top behaviour identified as valuable by students was being helpful. Being helpful was described as 'being all about the students'. Help was demonstrated in a variety of ways including: being involved; being ready to listen to feedback from students; giving support and guidance; providing practical help with placements, interviews, job applications, what to do next; giving advice and guidance.

Help was, predictably, connected with certain personal characteristics and the impact of receiving help from teachers resulted in positive pragmatic and personal outcomes:

[Name] has helped me in so many ways during my time here in [Name of institution] . . . She is so kind and helpful and never judgemental . . . She has made me feel confident in both my academic and practical ability by being supportive and giving.

Help was associated with learning, understanding and enhancing; teachers provided 'feedback and constructive criticism to help us improve'. When teachers helped they made time for students and showed empathy:

[Name] is extremely approachable, helpful and always makes time in her busy schedule to help her students. [Name] also has a way of making things clear, whilst understanding all the pressures we are under.

He understands the pressures we are under and adjusts the weight/load accordingly.

Communicates well

Communicating well was the top skill cited by students about the teachers they valued, where communicating was frequently linked with being understood and understanding. Communication certainly involved a range of strategies and techniques but it also involved pedagogical preferences.

In terms of communication skills, students cited 'includes all students' as most important to them. This was followed by providing quality notes, and quality and timely feedback. Practical delivery, relevance and encouraging discussion also mattered to students.

Teachers saw communication as two-way; it involves giving students time to speak and contribute, and listening carefully and respectfully to those contributions. It means being mindful of diversity and being accessible. It extends beyond the classroom to providing quality learning materials and providing feedback. Communication involves responding to students.

[Name] is a one in a million lecturer. He makes topics that are both confusing and difficult easier to understand with his informative lectures and notes. He always gets back to each and every query we ask.

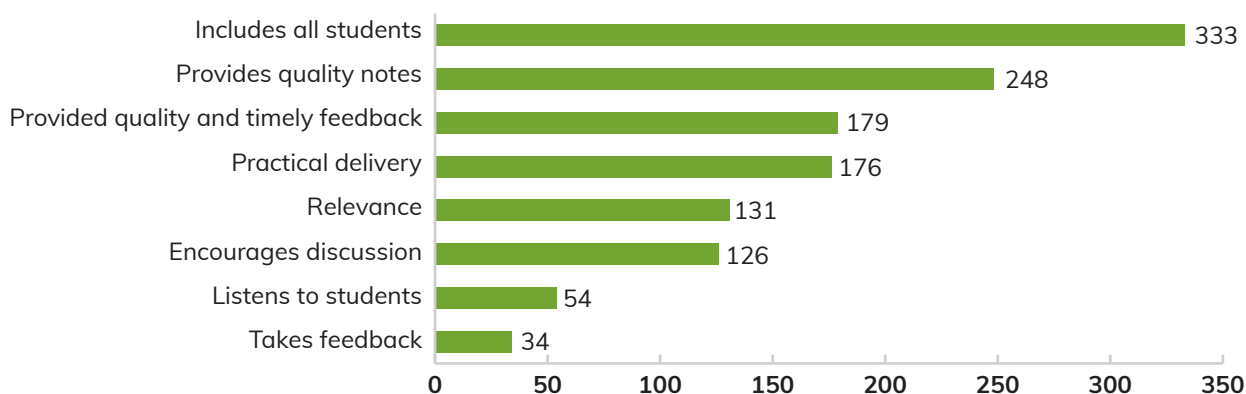


Figure 3 Communications skills valued by students

Being generous with time. Being encouraging. Offers advice. Includes all students. Above and beyond.

Teachers were recognised for the extra that they did and especially for being generous with time:

[Name] provided us with so much of her time over the years, was always willing to help and gave us everything we needed to know, cared about how everyone got on and did her utmost for everyone.

[Name] has given time above and beyond what I would expect.

Teachers encouraged and empowered their students. They created learning environments which are tolerant, where criticism was constructive and students could ask questions. Teachers included all students through the atmosphere they created in class and also through the approaches that they used. They responded positively to student input in class:

[Name] always has something positive to say about a student's contribution in class or assignments, which is really encouraging. She is a person we aspire to be like in our future careers. She is definitely a teaching hero.

They highlighted opportunities for their students, offered advice, and helped students to navigate learning and career paths. They helped students to stay focused on their learning, to concentrate, to persist:

[Name] . . . took time out to meet with me on a number of occasions during his very busy schedule in college and advised me not to 'walk away' from my studies but, if I was able, to come back and complete what I had started. [Name] was the instigator for my returning to college and it was ONLY he who managed to persuade me. Since I returned last year [Name] has been my lecturer for a number of modules and proves himself to be the most interested, encouraging, helpful and willing lecturer to all students in every year of [Name of course].

Teachers were recognised for the extra that they did especially 'going above and beyond' - they 'always go the extra mile'.

Characteristics, behaviours and skills combined

Needless to say, within the student submissions there are overlaps between the characteristics, behaviours and skills associated with being an exceptional teacher, as evidenced, for example, in the following quote:

His guidance, patience and concern for each and every student goes beyond his job description. Each lecture he gives us "food for thought" teasing out of his students opportunities to discuss and evaluate the learning modules which we study in a safe and comfortable environment without prejudice. His skill at engaging students to feel valued and respected allows individuals to not only process theoretical knowledge but to question its content.

When the characteristics, behaviours and skills are combined, the common determinants of being recognised by students as exceptional teachers were being helpful, being entertaining and interesting, communicating well, being generous with time, being encouraging and passionate, being kind, caring, supportive, inspirational. Such teachers were also approachable, knowledgeable and engaging.

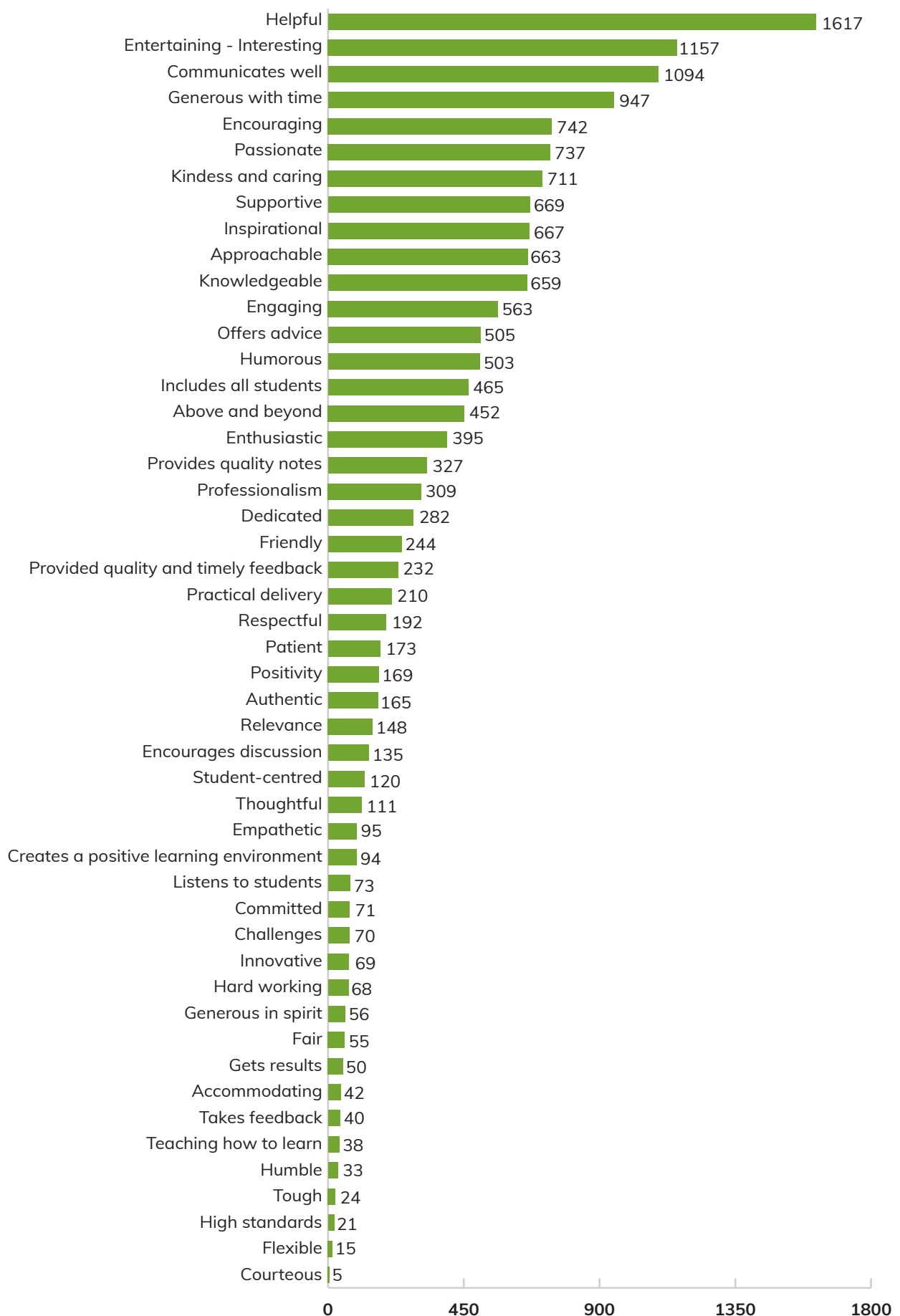


Figure 4 Combination of valued characteristics, behaviours and skills

About me – it's personal; the effect of exceptional teachers on students

For some students, their motivation for submitting their nominations was deeply personal and went far beyond mere educational outcomes towards rich personal development.

The student data reveals that teachers impacted positively on students' individual learning journeys and contributed to the navigation of those paths.

Teachers provided encouragement and practical advice when students were feeling vulnerable about their studies; this vulnerability might have been associated with concerns about content or other worries that were impacting on their learning:

Having had difficulties in the whole exam process and environment, I went to [Name] for advice on how I could cope and improve. We spoke openly and worked out a way that could help me not only achieve better grades but cope with the stress of exam preparation and the exam itself. My grades have improved and my attitude and confidence have soared, all thanks to having someone who is prepared to give their time, to understand and help in any way they can, this is [Name]. Her door is always open.

My teaching hero inspired me to aspire for more, to be confident in myself and my knowledge. He taught me to see my setbacks as learning opportunities.

In the quotes above we can see that while teaching heroes certainly helped students with their learning, they also supported them in persisting with learning. Other participants made similar comments:

I seriously considered leaving at this point. However, as [Name] is such a down to earth and approachable lecturer, I decided to talk to him, I . . . thought it was worth a shot as I didn't want to give up so easily. He was so understanding . . . he could see that I was petrified (literally), from then on, he has been the biggest and most constant source of encouragement and support for me, offering ideas on how best to approach the subject . . . I have the utmost respect and admiration for [Name] as a lecturer . . . he has truly made a difference to my educational experience.

It is due to the confidence that I gained in [Name's] class and also his encouragement of me that led me to continue with my studies . . . There is no doubt in my mind that had I not been fortunate to have [Name] as a lecturer whilst studying for my Diploma that I would not have had the confidence to continue down this path I am on towards my Degree. I now see education as a lifelong endeavour and am looking forward and thinking of a Masters.

Teachers helped students to find the intrinsic motivation to learn which led to success:

After I failed 2nd year I lost all motivation and [Name] inspired me to keep at college. I am now in 3rd year, [Name] being my most inspirational lecturer and my results have dramatically changed, achieving above average grades in first semester. This is all down to [Name], my lecturing hero.

She made me want to learn and didn't force me to learn. Her tutorials were the only things that I wanted to go to. If it wasn't for her I don't think I would've passed.

She kept me motivated and influenced me to keep going and now I love it and couldn't thank her more!

Students remarked that they felt 'comfortable approaching' the teachers and that they felt confident that the advice they received was timely and sound. Drawing on the advice and encouragement of these teachers, students felt they could learn, contribute, continue, achieve, develop and progress.

Class size, discipline and gender

Within the data, there was no evidence of significant trends based on class size or that class size was an influencing factor for students in deciding which characteristics, behaviours and skills define a teaching hero. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that over 80% of students represented in this dataset were in class sizes of 100 or fewer.

There was no evidence in the data to suggest that disciplines, in and of themselves, significantly influenced students' beliefs as to what constitutes a teaching hero.

Across the data, female participants were proportionally more responsive in nominating teaching heroes than male students, though the characteristics, behaviours and skills valued by students were largely the same for both male and female students.

More male teachers were nominated than female teachers (with a difference of approximately 10%). While female students were equally likely to nominate male or female teachers, male students were marginally more likely to nominate male teachers. The characteristics, behaviours and skills more popularly cited in the study were recognised more in female teaching heroes than their male counterparts, despite their lower number of nominations.

Findings in a nutshell

Students value skills which enhance teaching such as communicative, organisational, professional, and knowledge-based abilities. Skills, however, are not sufficient in and of themselves; they need to be complemented with particular behaviours and human characteristics. Exceptional teachers are entertaining-interesting, kind and caring, supportive, inspirational, passionate and approachable. They are helpful, encouraging, generous with their time and go 'above and beyond'. They help students to learn, to develop, to progress, to be successful. They make a difference to students' learning and their lives.

Findings in Dialogue with Teacher Data

As a result of the Teaching Hero Award student nomination process, 47 higher education staff members were identified as teaching heroes. As a group, these staff members had completed over 500 years of teaching between them.

Following their nomination, the 47 Teaching Heroes were asked to complete an online survey, the purpose of which was to find out more about their teaching approaches and practices, and to explore the personal and professional impact receiving the award had on them. Subsequent to completing the online survey, 27 of the teaching heroes agreed to participate in an in-depth one-to-one interview. The one-to-one interviews led from the survey data in that the interviews centred around a further exploration of key themes and issues that had been identified in the findings and analysis of the survey responses.

Similar to the student data, the teacher data was examined using content analysis. This report does not provide a comprehensive account of the findings from that process³, rather key insights drawn directly from the teacher data are noted in this section. They are presented, in Table 1, alongside key insights from the student data for ease of comparison but also to highlight the level of agreement between students and teachers around what exceptional teaching looks like.

Table 1 A comparison of insights from students and teachers

Insights from student data	Insights from teacher data
Students believe that exceptional teachers should be valued and recognised.	Recognising good teaching is important because it validates and values good practice.
Students value being seen as individuals, not as cohorts.	It is important that teachers are student-centred.
Students recognise those teachers who care, and take a 'human' approach to teaching.	It is important that teachers care about their students – that they show this through helping, kindness, commitment and empathy.
Connecting with students is essential.	Good relationships are essential to learning.
Teachers' characteristics, behaviours and skills impact on student learning; how teachers teach impacts on student learning.	Good delivery, knowledge and enthusiasm are important factors in teaching and learning.
Student engagement is important and good communication skills are a key part of engagement.	Engaging students in a variety of ways, especially through interactive and active learning approaches, is essential.
Inclusion is important.	One size doesn't fit all – good teaching involves a variety of approaches which reflect the diversity of the student cohort.
Students want their higher education experience to connect with the 'real world' and to prepare them for work and the world beyond higher education.	It is important that teachers think about what the learning experience means for students within and beyond higher education.
Students learn in different ways.	Teachers learn in different ways.

3 A comprehensive account will be providing in a related National Forum report, forthcoming in 2020

What We Can Learn from What Students Say about Exceptional Teachers

The dataset presented in this report is genuinely one of 'hearts and minds'; students certainly recorded the myriad of practical ways that exceptional teachers helped them in their learning, but they also recorded how these teachers at times made all the difference to the quality and success of that personal learning experience complete with setbacks and achievements. Key reflections are summarised below.

We need to continue to ask students about what matters in terms of teaching and learning, and to pay attention to their responses.

The learning experience that students have is hugely influenced by the teachers and support staff they encounter. When students are given opportunities to comment on their learning experiences, and the staff who influence those experiences, they avail of those opportunities and give considered responses. Students' comments are discerning and students contribute opinions, impressions and insights which only they can provide; their unique perspective cannot be gleaned from any other group within the higher education community. Because of their unique perspective and contribution to the higher education community their feedback is vital for the sector. It is essential, therefore, that the sector as a whole, and individual institutions therein, continue to provide, develop and promote meaningful communication channels with students.

We need to recognise, value and nurture the human qualities associated with teaching and learning.

Students remark on the human qualities of exceptional teachers. They comment that their exceptional teachers were kind, caring, supportive, encouraging, generous. In the opinion of students, exceptional teachers create inclusive, respectful, enjoyable and engaging learning environments. Students recognise exceptional teachers' professional integrity and their commitment to their students as people. As a result of the enactment of these human qualities, and their associated relationships and interactions with students, exceptional teachers have a profound and transformative effect on students and their learning.

Feedback from students tells us that positive human qualities are essential in our higher education learning communities, and that asserting the importance of these qualities, recognising them in our communities, valuing them and nurturing them, is crucial to the creation and maintenance of positive learning environments, and student and staff well being.

We need to share and support good teaching and learning practice.

Students tell us that exceptional teachers are excellent communicators who firmly place students at the centre of the learning. As a consequence of good teaching and learning practices, students feel included and respected. They are listened to, carefully, and their contributions are valued. In turn, they learn to listen to others, to think critically and to consider diverse perspectives. Exceptional teachers plan and craft the environments where students feel safe to take risks in their learning. Students feel the support of exceptional teachers; they know that these teachers are there for them, and that they want their students to succeed whatever form that may take for each of them.

Students observe and can identify what works in the creation of exceptional learning situations. We can learn about student engagement and effective teaching methodologies and approaches from students. We can explore and share this knowledge within our institutional and national higher education

communities. We can use it to inform how we support all staff who teach including our philosophy of, and approaches to, continuing professional development.

We need to recognise that striving for exceptionality is a worthwhile process with positive effects.

Students identify exceptional teachers because they are just that, 'exceptional'. Nonetheless, we can use what we know from students about what exceptional teachers do, how they are, and the impact they have, to help us to enhance our higher education learning community. We can also use what students have identified to help us to recognise and validate good teaching, and as a prompt in our conversations about how best to support all staff who teach. In addition, we can use it to help us to clarify what we mean by good teaching and to help us to value, reward and celebrate good teaching.



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National Forum for the Enhancement of
Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
c/o 19 Dawson Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

T +353 1 6090648

E admin@teachingandlearning.ie

W www.teachingandlearning.ie

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