

VENUS CHAN (The Open University of Hong Kong)

**What Makes a Good Teacher in Vocational Education? Students  
Talk Back**

**Herausgeber**

BERND ZINN

RALF TENBERG

DANIEL PITTICH

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## **What Makes a Good Teacher in Vocational Education? Students Talk Back**

**ABSTRACT:** Vocational education plays an important role in promoting socio-economic development. Yet, it is under-researched, especially in terms of what constitutes quality teaching and what is attributed to good vocational teachers through the lens of the student. The present study aims to explore concepts of exemplary teachers and the effective teaching of vocationally-oriented higher diploma students. Adopting a thematic analysis, four themes and fourteen subthemes have been identified: i) teacher's knowledge and skills (subject knowledge and specific vocational knowledge, technical skills, and pedagogical content knowledge); ii) teaching approaches and content (teaching in an interesting way, teaching in a clear way, teaching in an adaptive way, exam-oriented teaching, practical skills and knowledge of professional work, and integration of theory and practice); iii) teacher-student relationships (caring for students and friendliness); and iv) the teacher's personal characteristics and roles (enthusiasm, dual identity, and role modelling). The findings reveal that vocational teachers play a distinct dual role: not only do they need to be professionals in their subject and industry and competent in its pedagogy, they also have to possess practical skills and up-to-date expertise relevant to the broader workplace.

*Keywords:* Good teacher, good teaching, higher education, vocational education

## **Was macht eine gute Lehrperson in der Berufsbildung aus?**

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG:** Die Berufsbildung spielt eine wichtige Rolle bei der Förderung der sozio-ökonomischen Entwicklung. Es ist jedoch wenig erforscht, was unter qualitativ hochwertigem Unterricht zu verstehen ist und was gute Lehrpersonen in der beruflichen Aus- und Weiterbildung aus Sicht der Studierenden ausmachen. Ziel der vorliegenden Untersuchung ist es, Konzepte einer vorbildlichen Lehrperson und eines effektiven Unterrichts von Studierenden in berufsbildenden Bereichen an Hochschulen in Hongkong zu erforschen. Mittels einer Inhaltsanalyse wurden vier Themen (und vierzehn Unterthemen) identifiziert: i) das Wissen und die Fähigkeiten der Lehrperson (Fachwissen und spezifisches berufliches Wissen, technische Fähigkeiten und pädagogisches Inhaltswissen); ii) Lehrensätze und -inhalte (Unterricht auf interessante, klare oder adaptive Weise, prüfungsorientierter Unterricht, praktische Fähigkeiten und Kenntnisse der beruflichen Arbeit sowie Integration von Theorie und Praxis); iii) Lehrperson-Studierenden-Beziehungen (Betreuung der Studierenden und Freundlichkeit); und iv) die persönlichen Eigenschaften und Rollen der Lehrperson (Begeisterung, doppelte Identität und Vorbildrolle). Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass gute Berufsbildner eine besondere Doppelrolle spielen: Sie müssen nicht nur in ihrem Fach und ihrer Branche Experte und in deren Pädagogik kompetent sein, sondern auch über praktische Fähigkeiten und aktuelles berufliches Fachwissen verfügen, das für den Arbeitsmarkt relevant ist.

*Schlüsselwörter:* Qualifizierte Lehrer, Lehrqualität, Hochschulbildung, berufliche Bildung

## 1 Introduction

Quality teaching is crucial in facilitating student learning, and teaching effectiveness is one of the most significant factors affecting student gains (Sanders & Rivers 1996). It is generally believed that teaching quality is an influential factor in student development and achievement (Goldhaber 2016). Over the past few decades, there has been a growing interest in concepts developed by researchers and educationalists, in particular, concepts of what makes a good teacher and what is effective teaching.

Although the concepts of a teacher are closely related to those of teaching, they are not identical because the role of a teacher may go far beyond the performance of only teaching (Chan 2018). In fact, the characteristics of teaching excellence and good teachers may just overlap. In general, terms such as “good”, “ideal”, “effective”, “exemplary”, “outstanding”, “excellent”, “best”, “great”, “superior”, “successful”, “professional”, and “quality” teaching and/or teachers are applied interchangeably in reference to the facilitation of student learning (Alhija 2017). It is difficult to achieve a universal definition of a good teacher and quality teaching (Devlin & Samarawickrema 2010). Hill and Christian (2012) highlighted the important role of student perceptions of teaching in both student growth and the decisions of faculties regarding performance reviews. Student ideals of best teaching practice and exemplary teachers might affect the quality of classroom interaction, teacher-student relationships, students’ learning motivation and outcomes, and even their career choice. Learners’ preferences might also influence teacher performance appraisal, design of teaching evaluation systems, and school promotion and recruitment decisions.

Vocational education, which provides students with valuable practical skills and industrial knowledge, plays an important role in a country’s education system and economic development. Therefore, assuring the quality and relevance of vocational education and training has become a crucial and challenging task as today’s labour markets and technologies change faster than ever (ETF 2014). Vocational education is also playing a significant role in transforming the development of Hong Kong as a knowledge-based economy. However, although it might be due to entrenched mindsets and social stigmas, vocational education is still perceived by many as a safety net, “blue-collar” education for less-talented students, with qualifications which are inferior to academic ones. Since the last decade, an increasing number of vocational training programmes have stepped-up to the post-secondary level. Because of the education reform and the government’s advocates, there has been rapid development in the sub-degree education sector. In addition to publicly-funded programmes, there has been a sharp increase in the number of self-financing programmes. The enrolment of full-time accredited self-financing post-secondary vocationally-oriented higher diploma (HD) programmes has increased from 5163 in 2001 to 14163 in 2019 (iPASS 2020). Due to increasing accountability, the quality of education of these vocationally-oriented HD programmes has come under scrutiny. The rapid expansion of self-financing HD programmes has led to criticism of a decline in resources and quality of teaching. Thus, it is vital to explore what vocational excellence looks like and how it can be developed, focusing especially on vocational teaching, which involves what to teach (content) and how to teach (approach).

In terms of vocational teachers, Grollmann (2008) defined them as “who are working in institutions mainly devoted to the purpose of vocational learning and education, and not in workforce. Nevertheless, they are not granted high level of social recognition as a well-regarded the status of the teaching profession in general” are the main obstacles to the professionalization of teachers in vocational education (Grollmann 2008, p. 535). Vocational teaching has been facing problems gaining professional recognition and has even been referred to as a “semi-profession”

(Etzioni 1969). The professional competence is a critical factor in influencing the success of vocational education (King Rice 2003; Rivkin et al. 2005). Vocational teachers are generally expected to transfer their industrial competences and occupational techniques to their students (Lynch 1998). To improve the quality of vocation teachers, some researchers (e.g., Grollmann 2008; McLaughlin & Talbert 2001) suggest raising the level of the qualifications needed. However, students' expectations for effective vocational teaching and good vocational teachers are often neglected.

While notions of successful teachers and good teaching have been explored by a large number of researchers, by and large, they have focused on teachers who work in traditional school education. The conception of good teachers and quality teaching in vocational higher education is less evident, though it plays an important role in establishing a moral claim about the occupational culture and the professional culture of the teacher, and builds an anchor point for vocational teachers who are facing new challenges in the rapid reconfiguration of vocational education within the globalized knowledge economy (Palmieri 2004). The changing context of vocational higher education is shaped by a number of factors, such as commercial imperatives and regulatory arrangements. Indeed, little is known about the notion of effective teaching and the nature of good teachers even though this notion is of great importance in attaining a clear picture of the traits needed by vocational trainers at a time when students, industry bodies, and the public sector are developing higher expectations of ideal teachers and increasing accountability of quality teaching in vocational higher education.

Numerous researchers (Chan 2013; Holmes 2020; Smaoui 2020) have suggested that student perceptions are context-dependent, culture-bound and dynamic, and will inevitably change, to some degree, as society changes. It implies that different stakeholders might have different conceptions of outstanding teaching and superior teachers based on varying experiences and contexts, including such factors as schooling level, learning environment, type of institution, and social and cultural background (Watkins 2000). In previous literature, most research participants were undergraduate or graduate students and, for the most part, were studying in western contexts. Although vocational higher education is generally regarded as having a significant role in socio-economic growth, hitherto, it has surprisingly received little attention from educators and researchers, and there is particularly minimal empirical research focusing on Hong Kong learners. Given the rising public concern about the quality of teaching in the self-financing educational sector and the important role of students, this study aims to examine Chinese students' conceptions of the best teaching and ideal teachers in vocational education.

## **2 Literature Review**

Numerous studies have been done to examine the prominent features of effective teaching and traits of good teachers in tertiary education as perceived by students. A broad common set of characteristics have been found: being knowledgeable (Xiao & Dyson 1999), being enthusiastic (Basow 2000), being caring (Murphy et al., 2004), being friendly (Hande et al. 2014), being approachable (Devlin & O'Shea 2012), possessing effective teaching approaches (Sowden 2007), making teaching interesting and entertaining (Strage 2008), and delivering well-organized classes clearly (Alhija 2017). However, it is not clear whether students in vocational education recognize the same values.

## 2.1 Research into students' perceptions of good teaching and good teachers in vocational education

Prior literature (e.g., Alzeebaree & Hasan 2020; Clayson 2020) that underpinned students' perspectives of effective teaching and ideal teachers have rarely explored the context of vocational education. It is, therefore, still unclear whether vocationally-oriented HD students agree with the generally recognized characteristics of good teachers and teaching found in previous research. Palmieri (2004) provided a brief scan of some studies relating to vocational training and argued that vocational teachers are undervalued compared with school teachers, and the role of teachers in vocational education is undermined, especially by the trend of technology-supported learning and autonomous learning. Thomas (2001, p. 57) suggested that vocational teachers' technical skills were valued, and still are valued, more highly than pedagogical skills. Furthermore, Shulman (2005, p. 59) portrayed concepts of signature pedagogies as follows:

“Signature pedagogies make a difference. They form habits of the mind, habits of the hand and habits of the heart... they prefigure the culture of professional work and provide the early socialization into the practices and values of a field. Whether in a lecture hall or a lab, in a design studio or a clinical setting, the way we teach will shape how professionals behave.”

Corben and Thomson (2001, p. 2) investigated the characteristics and practice of 18 technical and further education (TAFE) teachers in Australia and found that good teachers should be able to deliver well-organized, student-oriented, and motivating classes that integrate both theory and practice.

“...excellent teachers have the capacity to respond effectively to differences in learner needs, curriculum or situation. They are able to draw selectively from an extensive repertoire of resources and strategies in order to motivate learners and to encourage active learning. They give a high priority to organizing and structuring the learning process so that theory is integrated with workplace practice and activities are sequenced in meaningful, holistic ways.”

Recently, Ryökkynen et al. (2019) examined Finnish students' perceptions of interactions between students and class teachers in vocational education and found that the learners described their interaction with their teachers as being teacher-orientated and their expectations of their teachers seemed to be traditional. Subject knowledge was emphasized by the students, and they perceived their teachers' main role was to provide on-going workplace teaching.

In general, previous studies have suggested that teachers who teach higher-level vocational courses should possess not only higher-level industry-relevant knowledge and skills but also pedagogical and curriculum development skills. Thus, the social-cultural context in which this is enacted has to be considered. Nevertheless, there is little empirical research to explore what constitutes effective teaching and what is attributed to good vocational teachers from students' perspectives in the Chinese-Hong Kong context.

## 2.2 Research into students' perceptions of good teaching and good teachers in Chinese contexts

Prior literature (e.g., Alhija 2017; Kane et al. 2004; Martin 2019) on students' perceptions of good teaching and outstanding teachers have mainly investigated the concepts of learners in tertiary environments and western contexts. Research on Chinese learners is not extensive. Chan (2018) summarized and reviewed the major results of prior studies on Chinese students' perceptions of good teaching and good teachers. Szalay et al. (1994) conducted a large-scale survey of Chinese beliefs of ideal teachers and found that the learners perceived their teachers in an idealized role,

endowed with a great deal of authority, respect and esteem. They also stated that Chinese learners not only perceived their teachers as transmitters of knowledge, but also as “an idealized role model, a resource for solving all types of human problems, and a model for lifestyle as well” (p. 245). Cortazzi and Jin (1996) examined 135 Chinese university students regarding their ideas of best teachers by asking them to write essays, and five major traits were identified: “deep knowledge” (67%), “patience” (25%), “humor” (23.7%), “good moral example” (21.5%), and “friendliness” (21.5%). Focusing on a single field of study, Xiao and Dyson (1999) investigated Chinese learners’ conceptions of desirable accounting teaching and showed similar findings. The most significant attributes included: being knowledgeable, adopting effective teaching approaches, being responsible and conscientious, making teaching interesting, having the ability to encourage and facilitate learners’ independent thinking, and having the ability to provide moral and behavioral guidance. Previous Chinese research has generally revealed that role modelling (*Wei Ren Shi Biao*) and guidance are important characteristics of an exemplary teacher. It has been suggested that traditional Chinese educational philosophy and beliefs still have a certain influence on Chinese students and teachers. Among the limited studies conducted in post-secondary contexts, Chan (2018) examined Chinese associate-degree students’ perceptions of effective teaching and exemplary teachers by a thematic analysis of interviews with 72 students in Hong Kong. Three main themes were identified: teaching approaches and content, the teacher-student relationship, and the teacher’s personal characteristics and roles. The findings revealed that the students perceived good teaching as teaching in a clear, interesting, and adaptive way. The students valued the teachers’ care, enthusiasm, praise, and their friendly rapport with students. It indicated an interrelationship between these three themes and suggested that students’ perceptions of learning and learning styles might shape their perceptions of quality teaching and good teachers.

In addition, there are several cross-cultural studies. For example, Jin and Cortazzi’s (1998) research indicated significantly different emphases between British and Chinese learners on the conceptual items as indicators of an outstanding teacher. Ideal British teachers were held to “arouse students’ interest”, “explain clearly”, “use effective teaching methods”, and “organize a variety of classroom activities”. In contrast, ideal Chinese teachers were believed to “have deep knowledge”, “have an answer to students’ questions”, and “be good moral examples”. Such findings supported the perceptions of “knowledge delivery” and “conduct guidance” proposed by Gao and Watkins (2001).

Lai (2000) investigated Hong Kong secondary school students’ perceptions of a good teacher and found that they did not consider teaching approaches as important as the Mainland Chinese and British students did. They were relatively dependent and passive and preferred their teachers to focus on exam-oriented materials so that they could acquire this knowledge most quickly. They did not care whether the teachers could help them think critically and learn independently. The disparities among the participants in the above study reveal that an understanding gap might appear in an educational setting where learners are from different contexts and bring different concepts and beliefs with them about effective teaching and exemplary teachers (Chan 2018).

It has been observed that prior research pertaining to ideal teachers and best teaching is manifold, yet often conflicted, in findings concerning attributes of effective teaching and traits of good teachers. As concepts are dynamic, context-dependent, and culture-bound, it is vital to study those of quality teaching and exemplary teachers in different institutional environments and cultural contexts.

### 3 Aims of the Study

In prior research, most participants were undergraduate students and, for the most part, were studying in western contexts. Concerns about the teaching quality of self-financing vocational education in Hong Kong have steadily increased; however, little is to be examined about Chinese learners' perceptions of teaching effectiveness, and few of these views have been based on empirical investigation. Moreover, many of these studies are based on quantitative ratings; as such, they have not fully examined the characteristics and attributes students value and look for in teachers. Qualitative research addressing students' perceptions of good teaching and ideal teachers is generally rare but necessary for teaching advancement (Tobbell & O'Donnell 2013). Hence, this study aimed to explore how students in vocational higher education perceive effective teaching and exemplary teachers. More specifically, the research has addressed the following questions:

- What are the key attributes of good teachers perceived by Chinese students in their vocational education context?
- How is effective teaching perceived by Chinese students in their vocational education context?

### 4 Methodology

#### 4.1 Setting and Participants

A subsample of 64 HD adolescent students was selected from the sample pool for a larger project which was investigating the quality of teaching in higher education in Hong Kong. The data were collected from three educational institutions and the participants were recruited through email invitations. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured that their answers would remain confidential. The participants were studying 2-year full-time HD programmes in three disciplines. 25 (39.1%) students were from the stream of Applied Science and Information Technology, 23 (35.9%) from Business Administration, and 16 (25%) from Childcare, Elderly and Community Services. Males and females comprised 59.4% ( $n = 38$ ) and 40.6% ( $n = 26$ ), respectively. The participants were between 18 and 23 years old ( $Mage = 20.5$ ;  $SD = 1.51$ ).

#### 4.2 Instrumentation and Data Collection

As the research aimed to explore student concepts of exemplary teachers and effective teaching, a qualitative methodology was employed, and a semi-structured interview form was used to explore how students perceived quality teaching and to discover the qualities and traits which students themselves used to conceive good teachers. The guiding questions specially focused on students' views on ideal and realistic vocation teaching and teachers. The questioning was carefully designed based on prior literature (e.g., Brinkman & Kvale 2015; Raufelder et al. 2016) to impose a real open framework to explore their views on key aspects of exemplar teaching and effective teaching in the vocational education context. Three pilot interviews were conducted, and the results revealed a good fit. During the interviews, the participants were asked to describe what constituted good vocational teaching and what made an ideal vocational teacher. Each face-to-face individual

interview, lasting 15-20 minutes, was conducted in Cantonese (the first language of the respondents), recorded digitally and manually transcribed by the researcher. In the process of transcription, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. The qualitative data were analyzed in Chinese, and the excerpts used to illustrate the results were translated into English.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

Analyzing data by thematic analysis might promise greater objectivity than a questionnaire-based survey (Smith & Osborn 2008). The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (e.g. Chan 2018; Clarke & Braun 2013). After the data were manually transcribed, initial codes were created and applied to the data set. The students' comments were content analyzed and categorized into separate descriptors, staying close to participants' own words. Codes indicating similar content were grouped, and thematic groups that described quality teaching and good teachers were yielded. For instance, the content related to pedagogies, teaching methods, strategies adopted in classrooms were grouped under the main theme 2 "teaching approaches and content" and the responses related to clarity of teaching (e.g., "deliver the class clearly") were further categorized under the subtheme 2 "teaching in a clear way". After reviewing and refining the main themes, subthemes under each category were identified, revised and refined. The main themes and subthemes were extracted from the interview transcriptions manually until no further ones could be identified. Owing to the gap in empirical research that might have provided a potential framework for data interpretation, the data were analyzed inductively by the researcher and a vocational instructor (Raufelder et al. 2016; Saldaña 2016). Inter-rater reliability checks were performed ranging from  $k \geq .86$  to  $k \geq .94$ . Disagreements were discussed and codes were revised based on mutual agreement. A total of four main themes were identified in descriptions of the qualities of exemplary teachers and characteristics of effective teaching.

## 5 Findings

Adopting qualitative thematic analysis, the findings showed four main themes (see Table 1) concerning the attributes of good teaching and good teachers: (1) teacher's knowledge and skills, (2) teaching approaches and content, (3) teacher-student relationships, and (4) teacher's personal characteristics and roles. The first main theme of "teacher's knowledge and skills" was subdivided into i) subject knowledge and specific vocational knowledge, ii) technical skills, and iii) pedagogical content knowledge. Second, the theme of "teaching approaches and content" was split into i) teaching in an interesting way, ii) teaching in a clear way, and iii) teaching in an adaptive way, iv) exam-oriented teaching, v) practical skills and knowledge of professional work, and vi) integration of theory and practice. The third main theme of "teacher-student relationships" implied two subthemes: i) caring for students and ii) friendliness. The last theme, regarding "teacher's personal characteristics and roles" was split into i) enthusiasm, ii) dual identity (professional identity and occupational identity), and iii) role modelling.

Tab. 1: Themes and Subthemes of Good Teaching and Good Teachers.

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Theme 1: Teacher's knowledge and skills</b>		
Subtheme 1: Subject knowledge and specific vocational knowledge	58	90.6%
Subtheme 2: Technical skills	53	82.8%
Subtheme 3: Pedagogical content knowledge	49	76.6%
<b>Theme 2: Teaching approaches and content</b>		
Subtheme 1: Teaching in an interesting way	39	60.9%
Subtheme 2: Teaching in a clear way	42	65.6%
Subtheme 3: Teaching in an adaptive way	46	71.9%
Subtheme 4: Exam-oriented teaching	33	51.6%
Subtheme 5: Practical skills and knowledge of professional work	39	60.9%
Subtheme 6: Integration of theory and practice	25	39.1%
<b>Theme 3: Teacher-student relationships</b>		
Subtheme 1: Caring for students	22	34.4%
Subtheme 2: Friendliness	18	28.1%
<b>Theme 4: Teacher's personal characteristics and roles</b>		
Subtheme 1: Enthusiasm	32	50%
Subtheme 2: Dual identity (professional identity and occupational identity)	44	68.8%
Subtheme 3: Role modelling	7	10.9%

### 5.1 Theme 1: Teacher's Knowledge and Skills

The majority of the participants emphasized teachers' knowledge and skills as essential qualities of good teachers. They believed professional teachers should possess not only knowledge of the subject matter and vocational expertise, but also technical and practical skills and pedagogical knowledge.

#### 5.1.1 Subtheme 1: Subject Knowledge and Specific Vocational Knowledge

According to the students' narratives, having strong academic, occupational and industrial knowledge was the key component of being a good teacher and the prime factor in good teaching. In the context of vocational education, good teachers were expected to have not only professional knowledge of the subject matter but also practical skills and up-to-date vocational expertise relevant to the workplace.

"Unlike our secondary school teachers, I think good (vocational) teachers should have both knowledge of the subject matter and knowledge about the profession." (Nelson, 22)

"Good teachers should possess up-to-date knowledge about the industry" (Vincent, 23)

### 5.1.2 Subtheme 2: Technical Skills

Many students ( $n = 53$ ) emphasized that good teachers should possess not only academic and industrial knowledge but also specific vocational skills. The participants believed effective teaching should aim to provide students with task-oriented and problem-based learning. Excellent teachers are expected to facilitate students in developing technical and practical skills which work well in the particular workplace and diverse contexts of the world of work.

“I want to be a social worker in the future. I think learning specific skills of counselling may be more practical than studying the theories.” (Kelly, 20)

“For example, IT and engineering are practical subjects. Teachers should have good technical skills and specific techniques.” (Bill, 22)

### 5.1.3 Subtheme 3: Pedagogical Content Knowledge

76.6% of the students mentioned pedagogical content knowledge as a necessary attribute of an effective teacher. They stated that good teachers should be able to select the most appropriate learning materials and teaching methods. Teaching expertise and pedagogical content knowledge mentioned by the participants were an integration of knowledge of the students, curriculum and teaching strategies, and pedagogical practice in different contexts.

“Good teachers should know not only what to teach, but also how to teach.” (Steve, 23)

“Professional knowledge is not limited to academic knowledge. I think an understanding of effective teaching is also important.” (Candy, 21)

## 5.2 Theme 2: Teaching Approaches and Content

Most of the participants perceived good use of effective pedagogical strategies as an essential attribute of quality teaching and highlighted the importance of teaching in an interesting, clear and adaptive way.

### 5.2.1 Subtheme 1: Teaching in an Interesting Way

60.9% of the participants emphasized teaching in a stimulating, encouraging and motivating manner as an influential factor. The students expected teachers to design interesting, achievable and relevant materials and activities, and create a pleasant, creative, and enjoyable environment in which they could actively participate and learn happily.

“Good teachers should be able to arouse students’ interest in learning.” (Anson, 20)

“Good teachers should make lessons fun and interesting.” (Thomas, 18)

### 5.2.2 Subtheme 2: Teaching in a Clear Way

Teachers’ elocutionary, presentation, and organization skills were also valued by the students ( $n = 42$ ). They stated that well-designed and authentic materials would facilitate their learning.

Good teachers were expected to teach in a clear, understandable and logical manner with the appropriate use of instructional aids.

“Good teachers should ensure students can understand them easily.” (Yvonne, 20)

“Good teachers should be able to present the materials clearly.” (Bonnie, 23).

### *5.2.3 Subtheme 3: Teaching in an Adaptive Way*

In addition to teacher clarity, over 70% of the students pointed out that a good teacher should be responsive and flexible and able to adopt a variety of appropriate teaching and learning resources, pedagogical approaches and class activities based on students’ diverse needs, learning styles and capabilities. Teachers are expected to design learner-centric content to best-fit student needs and strive to individualize and personalize teaching practices to accommodate students’ individual differences.

“Teachers should teach according to our levels.” (Sharon, 19)

“Ideal teachers should reflect on what suits us best.” (Jay, 22)

### *5.2.4 Subtheme 4: Exam-oriented Teaching*

While HD programmes aim to provide students with the opportunity to acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills to support their initial employment, approximately half of the students mentioned their need for exam-oriented teaching. Even without the pressure of public examinations, the participants were still sensitive to their academic results. They generally believed that “the higher the GPA, the better the job offers”. Hence, they thought good teachers should help them to get good grades to increase their competitiveness in the job market.

“I hope my teachers can help me to get good grades so I can find a good job easily.” (Miller, 23)

“High GPA can polish my CV. I hope my teachers can help me.” (Felix, 20)

### *5.2.5 Subtheme 5: Practical Skills and Knowledge of Professional Work*

In terms of teaching content, according to the students’ narratives ( $n = 39$ ), good vocational teaching should balance both specific knowledge and technical skills in professional work. They appreciated teachers who could teach them not only the necessary skills and knowledge of the broader workplace, but also industrial norms, problem-solving skills, and life skills. However, a few students complained that some curriculums and teaching content were too general or theoretical. They pointed out that teachers who did not have substantial industrial experience sometimes failed to provide job-specific training and up-to-date industrial knowledge.

“Good teachers should teach us how to deal with problems that we may encounter in the workplace in the future.” (Queenie, 22)

“One of my teachers got a good master’s degree. However, he worked in the profession for only 10 months, a long time ago. What he shared with us were old stories or basic knowledge from textbooks.” (Tommy, 20)

### 5.2.6 Subtheme 6: *Integration of Theory and Practice*

While some students placed more importance on the development of practical skills and knowledge in professional work, about 40% of the students addressed the significance of integration of theory and practice. They emphasized that ideal teachers should unleash their full potential through a dynamic balance between learning about theory and actual practice.

“Good teachers should strive for a balance between theory and practice.” (George, 21)

“I think both academic knowledge and technical skills are important.” (Kitty, 20)

## 5.3 Theme 3: Teacher-Student Relationships

About one-third of the participants expressed that good teachers could not only transmit knowledge, but also establish positive teacher-student relationships, and interact with them on a personal level. During the interviews, the students showed their personal needs for care from friendly teachers.

### 5.3.1 Subtheme 1: *Caring for Students*

About a third of the students valued their teachers' care and concern. The students appreciated their sensitivity to their development, personal growth and goals, and individual needs. They mentioned that exemplary teachers should be approachable and take time to build a trusting and caring connection with them, no matter inside or outside the classroom.

“I hope my teachers can listen to me and guide me to achieve my goals.” (Louisa, 18)

“A good teacher should be caring. For example, they should provide advice when we have individual problems.” (Adrian, 19)

### 5.3.2 Subtheme 2: *Friendliness*

Mutual feelings of respect sympathy, and affection were also considered as essential traits of ideal teachers. Some participants ( $n = 18$ ) desired a positive and friendly rapport with their teachers. Instead of the traditional authoritative role, they wished they could be treated as “a friend” by their teachers.

“I wish my teachers can be my friends.” (Chris, 20)

“I like teachers who are nice, kind, friendly and easy-going.” (Rose, 18)

## 5.4 Theme 4: Teacher's Personal Characteristics and Roles

The results revealed that students wanted their teachers' personal traits and roles to be inter-related to teachers' knowledge and pedagogies, and the teacher-student relationship. They generally placed more importance on teachers' enthusiasm and dual identity than the role as a role model.

### 5.4.1 Subtheme 1: *Enthusiasm*

Half of the participants addressed the importance of teachers' enthusiasm for both the subject and teaching. Good teachers should have a passion for teaching and the ability to make a difference to students' lives. They expressed that enthusiastic and devoted teachers could make a significant change in students' learning motivation, engagement and achievement. Enthusiastic teachers were more willing to care about their students and reflect on their own teaching effectiveness to advance their professionalism and teaching quality according to student needs.

"Good teachers should be dedicated and enthusiastic." (Patrick, 23)

"A good teacher should be hardworking and devoted." (Leon, 22)

### 5.4.2 Subtheme 2: *Dual Identity: Professional Identity and Occupational Identity*

According to the students' narratives, good vocational teachers play a distinct dual role. They have to be professional experts in their subject and industry with a comprehensive understanding of its pedagogy; they also need to be specialists who possess practical, technical, and up-to-date vocational expertise and occupational skills relevant to the broader workplace.

"I think vocational teachers differ from teachers from traditional schools. Good vocational teachers should act as a good teacher and a professional practitioner in the industry." (Ivy, 23)

"Their roles are not only as a teacher but also an expert in the workplace." (Andy, 21)

### 5.4.3 Subtheme 3: *Role Modelling*

Only a small minority of participants ( $n = 7$ ) reported that exemplary teachers should be role models and moral exemplars to cultivate learners' moral and conduct values. They did not put great emphasis on the ethics and morality of their teachers, nor the role of traditional Confucian philosophy.

"A good teacher is generally expected to have higher ethical standards. However, I don't think it's necessary." (Martin, 23)

"I think academic development is more important than moral development. Therefore, good teachers should focus on academic learning outcomes." (Maggie, 22)

## 6 Discussion

The quality of education largely depends on good teachers and is particularly evident in vocational education, where vocational teachers have a distinct role to play (Lucas 2014). In general, the findings reveal that the students place more importance on teachers' knowledge and skills and teaching approaches and content than teacher-student relationships and personal traits. The results suggest that good vocational teachers are those with both expert knowledge and practical skills in their field and who have the capability to transfer this expertise and these techniques to their students. The current study concurs with the prior research that learners believe that good teachers should be knowledgeable and skillful (Shulman 2005), as well as caring and friendly (Basow 2000).

## 6.1 Theme 1: Teacher's Knowledge and Skills

The results of the current research match those observed in earlier studies (Alhija 2017; Chan 2018; Heikkinen 2000). Chappell and Johnston (2003) suggested that vocational teachers should bridge the gap between the worlds of work and education, and the divide between the private and the public sectors. The present results show that teachers' academic knowledge of the subject matter, vocational expertise in the industry, and technical skills are very important attributes of effective teaching and ideal teachers. It appears that good teachers are expected to support the development of excellence in the vocational curriculum. Many students hope their teachers can create rich learning opportunities to develop the occupational skills and industrial knowledge needed in professional work and acquire generic skills which are transferable for use in other workplace settings.

From the results, it would seem that some vocational schooling focuses too much on general skills and theoretical aspects. The results reflect not only the students' perceptions of good teaching and ideal teachers but also the quality of teachers and teaching effectiveness of some HD programmes. A few students highlighted how some teachers had good academic qualifications; however, they did not have substantial work experience in the industry and, thus, they might not be able to transmit vocational expertise and technical skills effectively. They emphasized that teachers should have a greater depth and breadth of knowledge and be aware of the skills required in the workplace. In addition to an understanding of the cultural norms of the industry, in some cases, they further expected teachers to have a network of contacts within the industry, which would open special avenues for employment to them. This might be due to the influence of "guanxi" (relationships) — one of the most powerful forces in Chinese culture. Some students hoped their teachers could help them to get a good job offer via their personal networks of influence in the industry. Besides full-time teachers, it is worth noting that more and more part-time teachers are hired by self-financing educational institutes to minimize staffing costs. Since part-time teachers often continue to work in their industry, they keep themselves up-to-date with current industrial practice. Yet, it seems that many of them have not received teacher training and, hence, may not have sufficient pedagogical knowledge and the necessary teaching skills. Therefore, it may be important for the vocational teaching workforce to strive for a balance between technical and pedagogical skills and academic and industrial knowledge to unleash the students' full potential through a dynamic balance between learning about theory and actual practice.

The findings also corroborate the ideas of Heikkinen (2000) who suggested that good vocational teachers were expected to possess a solid background in their field of industry and to keep their knowledge and skills of the profession up-to-date. The information, knowledge and skills teachers convey to their students should be up-to-date and should reflect the latest facts and current development of the field. This is particularly important in the field of information technology. In today's fast-changing digital world, emerging and advanced technologies have been rapidly developing and, thus, teachers may need to keep updating their technological competencies and teaching innovations. However, a few students reported that some teachers seemed to have ended their career development when they graduated and could not keep up with the pace of present-day practice. Hence, it may be necessary for teachers to have continuing professional development and to continuously adapt teaching materials and pedagogies to ensure students can learn the most recent subject knowledge and vocational skills, and the state-of-the-art skills needed in the workplace.

## 6.2 Theme 2: Teaching Approaches and Content

In line with Corben and Thomson's (2003) study, the findings indicate that good vocational teachers are expected to deliver well-organized and structured lessons, to prepare stimulating and authentic materials, and to design meaningful and holistic activities from an extensive repertoire of resources and strategies so that theory can be integrated with workplace practice. The results also support Chan's (2018) findings that Chinese post-secondary students believed good teachers should be able to teach in an interesting, clear, adaptive way, based on student needs. This might reflect how the traditional notion of Confucianism - "*Yin Cai Shi Jiao*" (all individuals should be educated according to their abilities) - has penetrated concepts of good teaching and teachers. Nevertheless, the results suggest that a teacher's outstanding subject knowledge might not guarantee good teaching performance. Teachers with a stronger academic background might not necessarily imply better teaching effectiveness or understanding of vocational excellence. It seems that there is an increasing number of teachers who own a doctorate but only a few of them have received formal teacher training (Robinson & Hope 2013). It is suggested that teachers need to acquire pedagogical content knowledge to advance teaching standards.

In terms of teaching content, the results reveal that while many students put more emphasis on acquiring practical skills and knowledge in professional work, some ask for a balance of theory and practice, and others desire exam-oriented teaching. Although the current research does not focus on the relationship between students' perceptions and their major studies, the findings might imply possible differences in students' concepts of good teaching and teachers according to discipline. In line with Neuman and Zideman (2003), the findings showed that the participants from hard-applied fields (e.g., applied science and information technology) placed more importance on the capability to deploy various principles, while students from soft-applied fields (e.g., childcare, elderly and community services) placed more emphasis on practical skills needed in the workplace. It appears that students from different disciplines have different expectations and desires. In contrast to numerous researchers (Hoa 2020; Kirkpatrick & Zang 2011) who have emphasized the backwash effect of exam-oriented education and argued that exam-oriented teaching would stifle qualities crucial for students' ultimate success, the participants pointed out the need for assessment-oriented materials and examination drills. Taking a pragmatic approach, they believe exam-dominated teaching is useful for them to pass their courses, achieve higher GPAs, and get better job offers in return. The results suggest that, although the exam-oriented culture of the Hong Kong education system has long been criticized, student preference for an exam-oriented style of learning has not totally changed. Students' preference for exam drilling has been reported in research on both professional teachers in vocational education and teachers in general education.

## 6.3 Theme 3: Teacher-Student Relationships

The findings support previous research (e.g., Banks 2009), which suggests good teacher-student relationships facilitate students' learning and personal development. Teacher care and friendliness are perceived as key elements of a positive rapport and perceptions of what ideal teachers are. Students want to be respected, appreciated, and recognized. A good teacher is expected to act like a friend who provides students with a feeling of being cared for.

It might be due to Chinese cultural values and Confucianism that the teacher's identity is traditionally regarded as authoritative and, hence, there is a significant power distance between

teachers and students (Wenren 2014). Indeed, it appears that this traditional value has been changing. The results indicate that the students prefer student-oriented teaching and fair teacher-student relationships. Teachers no longer enjoy superior status over students. Students, nowadays, generally expect teachers to respect their opinions and address their needs (Kasuya, 2008). It is observed that the power distance, roles, and relationship between teachers and students have experienced significant changes in both vocational and general education. The findings support Wong's (2012, p. 248) research, which argued that "the adoption of western-style educational initiatives has transformed traditional teacher/student role with students becoming more actively involved in their own learning" in contemporary Hong Kong.

#### 6.4 Theme 4: Teacher's Personal Characteristics and Roles

The results here agree with some prior studies (e.g. Kember & McNaught 2007) in which enthusiasm is an oft-cited trait of exemplary teachers. A few students reported that they were impressed and influenced by some best teachers who made a difference to their lives. The students generally cherish their teachers' enthusiasm and the passion they share for learning and for helping students to reach their potential and lead them in their career choices.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the identity of teachers is twofold: a professional identity and an occupational identity. Concerning their professional identity, good vocational teachers should have sound academic and vocational knowledge, and technical and pedagogical skills. As far as the occupational identity is concerned, teachers have multiple roles as a master or craftsman in the occupational field, as a member of an occupational network, and as a gate-keeper and guide to the occupation (Heikkinen 2000). It is suggested that the dual role is inter-related with the teachers' knowledge and skills, as well as their approaches and content.

It is probably because of the Chinese cultural value of "Jiao Shu Yu Ren" (teaching entails the development of a good person) and "Wei Ren Shi Biao" (a teacher being a role model for students) that Chinese teachers have traditionally been regarded as a role model for moral values which are used to cultivate students' attitudes, ethics and good citizenship, in Confucian heritage contexts. Yet the findings presented only seven students who highlighted the importance of a good moral role model in all aspects of life. Whereas these results differ from other studies (Gao & Watkins 2001), they are consistent with those of Chan's (2018) research. It appears that students perceive achieving short-term goals (e.g., acquiring the skills necessary in the workplace) as being more important than moral development.

#### 6.5 Interrelationships between the Themes

The present research seems to be consistent with Chan's (2018) study. It is generally observed that the teacher's knowledge and skills are interrelated with teaching approaches, content and effectiveness. For instance, teachers' subject knowledge, vocational skills and teaching expertise might be closely related to whether they can effectively transmit knowledge and skills in professional work and strive for a balance between theory and practice. Moreover, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and teaching effectiveness might be connected. It seems that teachers with professional teaching competence are more likely to be able to teach in an interesting, clear, and adaptive way. Teachers' personal characteristics might also be interrelated with their teaching practice and rapport with students. For example, teachers who are enthusiastic and passionate tend to take a

more active role in showing care for students' well-being and are able to address their needs by using a variety of motivating and comprehensible pedagogies. As far as personal characteristics are concerned, teachers who are friendly and approachable may be more likely to build positive teacher-student relationships.

Unlike the general education which students mainly focus on academic knowledge, it is worth noting that the current research shows several aspects of dichotomy: academic knowledge versus industrial knowledge; specific vocational skills versus pedagogical skills; technical skills versus generic skills. While all these qualities are perceived by students as important attributes of effective teaching and good teachers, it appears that it may be too ideal to have all vocational teachers owning all of these characteristics, especially in a context where vocational education is undervalued, and many self-financing educational institutes face the pressure of cost reduction. Hence, the balance between these qualities is a critical and challenging issue in vocational higher education.

Vocational education outcomes are traditionally framed in terms of technical skills or vocational competencies relating to particular vocational domains with, recently, a greater interest in what are increasingly referred to as 21st century or wider skills (Lucas 2014). Indeed, while some students value the importance of generic and transferrable skills, they are aware of the potential danger of an overwhelming focus on general knowledge and theoretical understanding. For instance, some business students reported that the courses were sometimes taught with an unhelpful over-separation of theory and practice. They were told by other graduates that the business models learnt were not useful nor applicable in the workplace. Hence, in practical terms, ideal teachers have to balance their teaching competence with vocational expertise, and the pedagogy concept usefully links these two aspects together.

## 7 Conclusion

In summary, the present study shows the key attributes of good teachers and effective teaching perceived by students in the vocational higher education context. Four themes and, altogether, fourteen subthemes were found: i) teacher's knowledge and skills (subject knowledge and specific vocational knowledge, technical skills and pedagogical content knowledge); ii) teaching approaches and content (teaching in an interesting way, teaching in a clear way, teaching in an adaptive way, exam-oriented teaching, practical skills and knowledge of professional work, and the integration of theory and practice); iii) teacher-student relationships (caring for students and friendliness); and iv) teacher's personal characteristics and roles (enthusiasm, dual identity and role modelling). This research reveals that good vocational teachers have a distinct dual role to play not only do they need to be professionals in their subject and industry, with a good understanding of its pedagogy, they also have to possess practical skills and up-to-date vocational expertise relevant to the broader workplace. In addition to subject knowledge, vocational expertise and pedagogical content knowledge, some personal traits, such as friendliness and enthusiasm, are seen as essential characteristics of ideal teachers. This study also suggests there is a complex interrelationship and dichotomy between various attributes.

This current research also sheds valuable new light on HD students' conceptions of quality teaching and good teachers, and yields several practical implications for school administrators, policy-makers and teacher trainers, as well as teachers. In general, the findings indicate the discrepancy of teachers' subject knowledge, vocational expertise and pedagogical competence. While pedagogical content knowledge traditionally involves subject-matter cognitions, knowledge of

students, knowledge of curriculum, knowledge of context, and knowledge of pedagogy, technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK), which is an integration of technological knowledge (TK), pedagogical knowledge (PK) and content knowledge (CK), has recently developed as a new framework for teacher knowledge. TPACK and effective education technology integration are particularly crucial for online teaching amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Some educators (e.g., Chan 2020; Teräs et al, 2020) argue that the pandemic may have a long-lasting impact on pedagogies and education systems. For example, schools after COVID-19 will shift from a teaching culture to a learning culture. Thus, policy-makers and school administrators may need to provide appropriate training to help teachers to develop the necessary qualities of teaching excellence, especially teaching innovations for online and blended learning. Continuing professional development is a key element of teacher professionalism, especially in the complex, dynamic and multifaceted contexts. In this fast-changing world, it is vital for teacher trainers and teachers to be aware of the changing trends and directions in their profession and ensure their capabilities keep pace with the current standards and their knowledge stays relevant and up-to-date.

Finally, this study contributes to the understanding of important attributes of vocational excellence in improving learning outcomes in vocational higher education, and its role as a catalyst for advancing the quality of teaching. The results are particularly relevant to vocational teachers, school administrators, teacher trainers, and policy makers. A better understanding of student needs is likely to contribute to advancement of vocational teaching and learning. However, it is not free of limitations. First, the small sample size might limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, only qualitative data of the participants' overall perceptions were content analyzed. Hence, future studies may investigate students' views in the context of different background characteristics, such as field of study and age. It might also be useful to explore and compare concepts of excellent teaching and outstanding teachers perceived by other stakeholders, such as teachers and school administrators.

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DR. VENUS CHAN

The Open University of Hong Kong, School of Arts and Social Sciences

Ho Man Tin, Kowloon, Hong Kong

vwmchan@ouhk.edu.hk

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