

Asian Students' Perceptions of a Good College/University Teacher

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Abstract

This study investigates Asian students' perceptions of the qualities of a good college or university teacher. Prior studies reported students' perceptions of the important qualities of a good college or university teacher, but few, if any, attempted to rank the perceived qualities in the order of importance. Literature seems to suggest that students' perceptions of the core qualities of a good college or university teacher vary with the learning environments, students' backgrounds, and societal values. The result of this study, conducted in an Asian learning environment, indicates that Asian students place knowledge of subject matter on the top of a list of qualities of a good college or university teacher. The implications of the results of this study are discussed in this paper.

Introduction

Students have many teachers during their lifetimes. Perhaps only a few of the many they have would be remembered as being good teachers. What makes a good and memorable teacher? At one time or another, most college and university teachers who are serious about their teaching would have asked themselves this question. Other frequently asked questions include: Why do some college students learn more from some teachers and much less from others? Why do some college teachers inspire students to learn while others cause them to skip classes? These are important and relevant questions if we are striving to be perceived as good college teachers. If we are entering the tertiary teaching profession for the first time, these are very important questions because to a large extent our success or failure as teachers depends on students' perceptions of our performance in the classroom. For these reasons college or university students' perceptions of the qualities of a good teacher should be reviewed and revisited on a regular basis and in different cultural settings because perceptions may change over time due to changes in the learning environment, including changes in students' approaches to learning and teachers' approaches to teaching. Perceptions of the qualities of a good and memorable teacher may also differ in different cultural contexts.

Related Literature and Prior Research

As early as 1975, Murray demonstrated that individuals who were extroverts with high anxiety for control were rated by students as being better teachers than persons who were low in these characteristics. Feldman (1978), in a systematic synthesis of a large body of research on college students' views on teaching, found the following characteristics to be consistently associated with superior college teachers and teaching: stimulation of interest; clarity and understandableness; knowledge of subject matter; preparation for, and organisation of, the course; and enthusiasm for the subject matter and for teaching. McKeachie, Lin, Moffett, and Daugherty, (1978) showed that teachers who adopted the roles of 'Facilitator' and 'Person' created more favourable attitudes toward the class from students than did teachers who adopted the roles of 'Authority' and 'Expert'. It was also shown that teachers who were empathetic and who delivered well prepared, well-organised, clear classroom presentations were regarded more highly (Branwhite, 1988; Carifio & Hess, 1987; Marcus, David & Preduscu, 1985). In another study, college sophomores described good teachers in terms of

personal qualities (such as flexibility and enthusiasm) while other senior students focused more on specific aspects of the instructional process (such as asking thought-provoking questions) (Dershimer, Saunders, Artiles, Mostert, Tankersley, Trent & Nuttycombe, 1992).

Papers have been written on what constitutes good teaching and a good teacher (Brain, nd; Nixon, 2005). In a bid to recognise students' voices, further studies were carried out to identify students' perceptions of good teaching (Miller, 1997; Wright, 2005; Ramsden, 2003; Forrester-Jones, 2003; Marentic and Steh, 2004; Nonis & Hudson, 2004; Brown, 2004; Palmer, 2000; Dyson, 1996; Xiao and Dyson 1999). The following is a review of the above literature on the issue of the qualities of a good university or college teacher.

Marshall Brain describes four core qualities of good teachers. These are *knowledge, communication, interest, and respect*. Commenting on these qualities, Brain has this to say. 'You must be an expert in your field if you are going to be a good teacher at a university'. With regard to communication, he stresses that good teachers must have 'the ability to communicate their knowledge and expertise to their students'. Using his words, 'good teachers are interested in the materials being taught, they make the class interesting and relevant to the students'. Complementing these three qualities, Brain continues to stress that 'good teachers have a deep-seated concern and respect for the students in the classroom'. Nixon (2005) describes some of the traits of a good teacher and helps to identify the essentials of good teaching. In looking over the attributes, he identifies flexibility, communication skills, sense of humour, and integrity as the key elements of a good teacher. Nixon argues that having the above elements does not ensure good teaching. Good teaching, he says, is being passionate, enthusiastic, entertaining, listening, questioning, and treating each student as a consumer of knowledge. Excellent teachers, according to Hattie (2003) and the Minnesota University (2006), should have a positive attitude, good problem solving skills, monitoring of student progress, have high respect for students, and be passionate about teaching and learning. These writers appear to agree on several quality characteristics of good college/university teachers – having good communication skills, being passionate and enthusiastic about the subject, and having respect for students (Table 1).

Table 1. Qualities of Good College/University Teachers

Author	Qualities of Good College/University Teachers			
Marshall Brain (nd)	Knowledge	Communication skills	Interesting	Respect for students
Nixon (2005)	Flexibility	Communication skills	Passionate, Entertaining Enthusiastic about teaching	Integrity
Hattie (2003)	Positive attitude	Problem solving skills	Passionate about teaching	Respect for students

Marsh, in 1987, provided a substantial review of the use of student perceptions to evaluate tertiary teaching, noting that one of the major uses of such evaluations is to provide feedback to faculty about the effectiveness of their teaching and its usefulness for the improvement of teaching. In recent years, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of university teaching (Palmer, 2000, Metcalfe & Matharu, 1995). This is evidenced by the creation of awards for teaching excellence. As part of this process, student evaluations of teaching are regularly used as a way of helping teachers improve the quality of delivery in the classroom. What these evaluations do not tell teachers is what the students are looking for in a university teacher.

Over the last decade, research studies attempted to identify the kinds of teacher behaviours which were perceived by students to be important in helping or motivating their learning. The results of these studies (mostly in western countries) imply, from the students' viewpoint, that a good knowledge of the subject matter was not as important as one might expect at the university level (Dyson, 1996; Miller, 1997; Palmer, 2000; Ramsden, 2003; Forrester-Jones, 2003; Marentic and Steh, 2004; Nonis & Hudson, 2004; Brown, 2004; Wright, 2005). Dyson's (1996) study of students' perceptions indicates that stimulation, availability and helpfulness, knowledge, preparation and organisation, and concern and respect for students, are the important factors influencing students' learning. Miller (1997), in her study of what makes a good teacher,

found three common perceived qualities across all groups of respondents – flexibility, clear communication skills, and sense of humour. Palmer's study (2000) shows that students place an equal or higher value on basic teaching skills such as the ability to explain clearly, encourage interaction, and on the ability to motivate students by displaying enthusiasm and using a range of interesting ways to present material content in the classroom. Ramsden (2003), reporting on an Australian study, suggested that students identified helpfulness, timely and extensive feedback, sympathetic staff, good quality explanations, and creating interest and motivation as the characteristics of good teaching. His study was supported by other studies (Forrester-Jones, 2003; Mercentic and Steh, 2004; Nonis & Hudson, 2004). Brown (2004) identified personality traits as an important factor. Wright's (2005) study suggests three most important characteristics of a good lecturer – accessible, enthusiastic, and passionate. Adding to this list of studies is the research study of Voss and Gruber (2006), which reveals that students want their lecturers to be knowledgeable, enthusiastic, approachable, and friendly. The studies cited above made little or no attempt to rank students' perceptions of the core qualities of a good college or university lecturer. They simply reported students' perceptions of the important or most desirable qualities.

A search of the literature was made to identify studies which might give some indication of the ranking of the perceived core qualities of a good college or university teacher. The search did not produce clear answers. Trice and Harris' (2001) study on perceptions of teachers' qualities of American and Bulgarian pre-service teachers seems to indicate that Americans endorse good relationships with students and enthusiasm as the most important qualities, while Bulgarian students rank knowledge as the most important and enthusiasm as the least important qualities. The Americans ranked knowledge behind both enthusiasm and relationships with students. A study in Israel on students' concepts of a good teacher (Miron and Segal, 1978) put primary importance on methods of instruction. Of secondary importance was the teacher's ability to spark intellectual growth. Research talents, personality, and academic status were of relatively little concern. Miron and Segal concluded that students rated teachers by their ability to transmit knowledge rather than according to the university's criteria of research and publications. However, a study in an Asian education environment (China) suggests that the most important characteristics of good teaching, perceived by students, are being knowledgeable, the adoption of effective teaching approaches, being conscientious, making teaching interesting, and an ability to encourage and facilitate independent thinking (Xiao & Dyson 1999).

There is no total agreement on the most important qualities of a good college or university teacher among writers and research findings, but there is an agreement that good college or university lecturers possess certain important qualities. These perceived qualities, from the review of prior studies, seem to be different in different learning environments. An outcome of a research study suggests that the Chinese and the Bulgarian students (Trice and Harris, 2001) tend to place lecturer's knowledge of subject content as more important than other qualities that affect their learning, while students from western cultures tend to see things like stimulation, ability to explain, and teacher-student interactions as the more important teacher behaviours affecting their learning. This difference in perceptions has motivated the undertaking of this research project in a private education institution setting in Asia to see how Asian students rank their perceived qualities of good teachers. The answer to the question: 'What makes a good teacher?' seems to vary with the characteristics of the audience, particularly its previous experience with higher education and their society values.

Present Research

The purpose of this study is to investigate students' perceptions of the qualities of a good university or college teacher in a small Southeast Asian Christian education environment and to find out the ranking of the perceived qualities. This is a teaching and learning environment where most of the students and lecturers live on campus and participate in college organised activities – spiritual meetings, assemblies, social and cultural programs or events. Most of the classes are small and small classes allow a lot more teacher-student interactions and easy access to lecturers. The researchers are interested in the students' perceptions of a good university teacher in such a learning environment, how they rank the perceived qualities, and whether their perceptions of good teaching are in any way different from the findings of previous studies.

Method

Three hundred questionnaires were given out at random to students of a small private Christian tertiary education institution of higher learning. All respondents were Southeast Asian students. All students live on campus. Random respondents were drawn from first, second, third and fourth year students. Two

hundred and four (204) useable responses were returned (64% response rate). Students were asked about their perceptions of a good teacher. Seventeen factors were given for students to rate and they were asked to add and rate any other factors they considered important that were not listed on the questionnaire. The items given to respondents to rate were selected from the review of literature (See Table 2). The rating scale ranges from 0 to 3. Zero (0) means 'not important', 1 represents 'important', 2 means 'very important', and 3 represents 'most important'. After analysing the responses to identify the qualities of a good teacher, twenty (20) interviews were conducted. In these interviews, respondents were asked to give reasons why certain qualities of teachers were perceived to be extremely important to being a good university teacher in the Asian context. Descriptive statistics and factor analysis were used to analyse the students' responses.

Students' Perceptions of the Qualities of a Good/Inspiring Lecturer

Based on the mean scores, students' perceptions of the seventeen qualities of the teachers are divided into 7 groups. The mean scores in Table 2 show that *Lecturer's knowledge of subject matter, good preparation and organisation of subject content, and lecturer's fairness and impartiality* were rated as the most important factors, with *lecturer's knowledge of subject matter* topping the list. All these three factors scored means of 2.50 or higher out of the maximum of 3.00. Approximately fifty-nine (58.8) percent of respondents rated '*lecturer's knowledge of subject matter*' as most important and over thirty-three (33.3) percent rated it as very important, giving a total of 92.2 percent of respondents rating this factor as either very important or most important. With regard to '*good preparation and organization of subject matter*', over thirty-five (35.3) percent of respondents rated it very important and nearly fifty-seven (56.9) percent gave it a rating of most important. Lecturer's fairness and impartiality in evaluating students was rated very similarly. Overall, ninety (90.1) percent of respondents gave this item either a very or most important rating. *Lecturer's concern and respect for students, clarity of presentation, accessibility of lecturers, enthusiasm and helpfulness* were rated as a second set of factors, with mean scores ranging from 2.40 to 2.47. Overall, close to ninety (89.52) percent of respondents gave the five items either very important or most important ranking. *Presenting material in an interesting way; encouragement of independent thought; frequent feedback; clearly stated objectives and requirements; and friendly, caring and approachable* were seen as the third set of factors associated with a good quality teacher, mean scores range from 2.35 to 2.39. An average of 84.1 percent of respondents gave these qualities a rating of either very or most important. Other factors were *well designed and relevant assignments, intellectual challenges, and good personality*. They were not rated as highly as others. See Table 2 for details of mean scores. These mean scores are useful in ranking the perceptions of factors but they do not show the correlations between various variables.

Table 2: Students' Perceptions of the Qualities of a Good/Inspiring Lecturer

Qualities Of Good/Inspiring Lecturer	Mean	VI		MI		VI/MI F %
		F	%	F	%	
Lecturer has excellent knowledge of the subject matter	2.54	68	33.3	120	58.8	188 92.2
Good preparation and organization of subject content	2.50	72	35.3	116	56.9	188 92.2
Lecturer is fair and impartial in evaluating students	2.50	69	33.8	115	56.4	184 90.1
Lecturer has concern and respect for students	2.47	77	37.7	108	52.4	185 90.1
Clarity of presentation of subject material	2.45	79	38.7	106	51.9	185 90.1
Lecturer is accessible when help is needed	2.42	86	42.2	99	48.5	185 90.1
Lecturer is enthusiastic about the subject and teaching	2.42	86	42.2	99	48.5	185 90.1
Helpfulness of the lecturer when you seek help	2.40	78	38.2	100	49.0	178 87.2
Lecturer presents subject material in an interesting way	2.39	83	40.7	98	48.0	181 88.7
Lecturer who gives encouragement for independent thought	2.37	89	43.6	92	45.0	181 88.7
Lecturer gives frequent feedback	2.35	86	42.2	92	45.0	178 87.2
Lecturer clearly states the subject objectives and requirements	2.35	88	43.1	91	44.6	179 87.7
Lecturer is friendly, caring and approachable	2.35	63	30.9	71	34.8	134 65.7
Openness to questions and discussion of subject materials	2.31	90	44.1	86	42.2	176 86.3
Lecturer gives well designed and relevant assignments	2.29	89	43.6	85	41.7	174 85.3
Lecturer who gives intellectual challenges	2.27	98	48.0	79	38.7	177 86.8
Lecturer has good personality	2.17	77	37.7	81	39.7	158 77.5

0 = Not important (NI) 1=Important (I) 2 = Very important (VI) 3 = Most important (MI) n=204

In order to obtain a more meaningful outcome of this investigation of the qualities of a good teacher from the Asian students' perspective, factor analysis was used. The correlation matrix indicates that a considerable number of correlations exceed 0.30. It was decided that the matrix is suitable for factoring. The Bartlett Test of Sphericity is significant and is greater than 0.6. It is 0.884. Therefore, it is appropriate to proceed with factor analysis.

Students' Perceptions of Qualities of a Good/Inspiring Teacher Using Factor Analysis

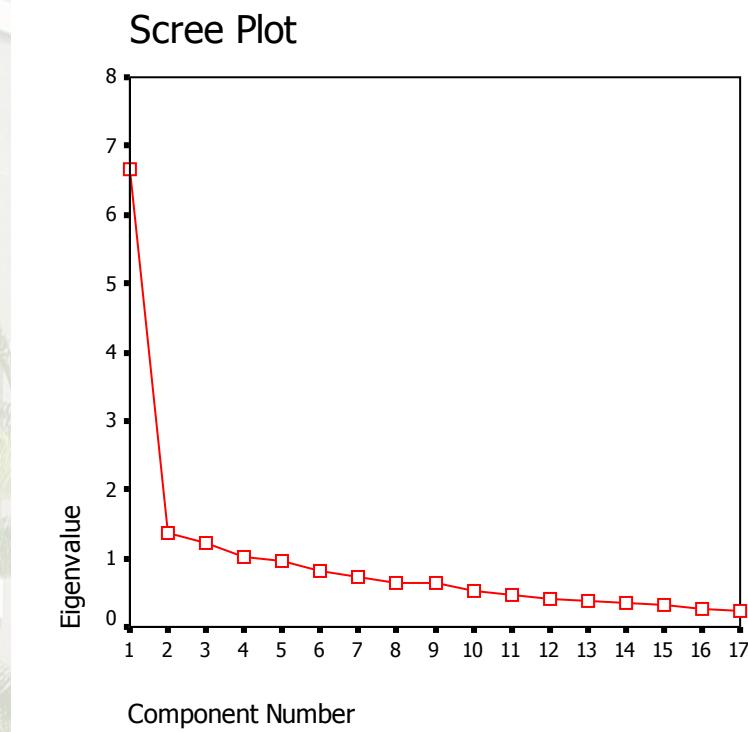
Factor analysis was used to reduce the seventeen variables into a smaller set of underlying factors that summarise the essential information contained in the variables and at the same time identify the underlying constructs in the data. It serves to combine variables, thereby creating new variables (factors). This technique is often referred to as *analysis of interdependence technique* because it analyses the interdependence between variables or objects. The goal is to generate understanding of the underlying structure of variables or objects and to combine them into new variables. The results of factor analysis are displayed in Table 3. This table displays the total variance explained at four stages. At the initial stage, it shows the factors and their associated eigenvalues, the percentage of variance explained, and the cumulative percentages. Looking at the table below, four factors are extracted because their eigenvalues are greater than 1.00. The four factors extracted explain 60.43 percent of the variance.

Table 3: Perceptions of Qualities of a Good/Inspiring Lecturer
Total Variance Explained

Component	Total	Initial Eigenvalues		Total	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		Total	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	
		% of Variance	Cumulative %		% of Variance	Cumulative %		% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	6,658	39,167	39,167	6,658	39,167	39,167	3,100	18,233	18,233
2	1,376	8,096	47,263	1,376	8,096	47,263	2,857	16,808	35,041
3	1,231	7,242	54,505	1,231	7,242	54,505	2,573	15,133	50,174
4	1,007	5,922	60,428	1,007	5,922	60,428	1,743	10,254	60,428
5	,963	5,663	66,091						
6	,824	4,849	70,940						
7	,734	4,318	75,258						
8	,649	3,819	79,078						
9	,633	3,725	82,803						
10	,515	3,030	85,833						
11	,472	2,776	88,609						
12	,399	2,349	90,958						
13	,372	2,191	93,149						
14	,351	2,065	95,214						
15	,328	1,929	97,143						
16	,250	1,470	98,613						
17	,236	1,387	100,000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis

Figure 1



The scree plot above (Figure 1) displays the eigenvalues for each factor and suggests that there is one strong dominant factor in the students' perceptions.

Table 4
Rotated Component Matrix

Qualitative Factors	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Fairness and impartiality	.718			
Knowledge of subject	.695			
Enthusiasm	.672			
Preparation	.569			
Clear objectives	.566			
Clarity of presentation	.517			
Encouragement		.797		
Openness		.762		
Frequency of feedback		.693		
Intellectual challenge		.691		
Relevant assignments			.647	
Good personality			.634	
Interesting presentation			.624	
Friendliness			.614	
Concern and respect			.521	
Helpfulness				.836
Accessibility of lecturer				.740

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation.

Using varimax rotation, four factors were generated. Factor 1, labelled as *knowledge and communication of knowledge*, is a combination of six variables – fairness and impartiality in evaluating students, excellent knowledge of subject matter, enthusiastic about the subject and teaching, knowledge of subject matter, good preparation and organisation of subject content, clearly stated subject objectives, and clarity of presentation of subject material - with factor loadings ranging 0.517 to 0.718. This appears to be the

dominant factor. These six variables, interacting together explain 39.167% of the variance.

Factor 2, labelled as *openness, challenge, feedback, and encouragement*, is made up of four variables – openness to questions and discussion of subject material, encouragement of independent thought, frequent feedback and intellectual challenge of lecturers - with factor loadings ranging from 0.691 to 0.797, explain 8.096% of the variance. Five variables are correlated to form factor 3, labelled as *friendly approachable personality with concern and respect for students* – well designed and relevant assignments, good personality, present subject material in an interesting way, friendly caring and approachable, and concern and respect for students - with factor loadings ranging from 0.521 to 0.647, explain 7.242% of the variance. The last factor, factor 4, labelled as *accessible and helpful* is a combination of two variables – helpfulness of lecturers and accessibility when help is needed - with factor loadings ranging from 0.740 to 0.836, explaining 5.922% of the variance. Altogether, these four factors explain 60.428% of the variance, with Factor 1 being the dominant factor.

Conclusions and Implications

Based on mean scores, the analysis of students' responses suggests that the '*lecturer's knowledge of the subject matter*' was perceived by Asian students as the most important single quality of a college or university teacher. All other factors given for students to rate fell below this variable. It scored a mean of 2.54 out of 3.00. This outcome is consistent with the findings of Dyson and Xian (1999) in terms of the most important perceived variable. As shown in Table 2, the perceived variables tend to cluster in groups.

Why is '*lecturer's knowledge of the subject matter*' perceived to be the most important single quality of a good college teacher? To identify the reasons for this perception, twenty interviews were conducted. All students interviewed were Asian students who took part in the survey. The following is a collection of the typical respondents' comments:

'We do not know what is important and we depend on the teachers to tell us, so that we can learn'.

'We depend on the lecturer to guide us, and to help us to focus on learn the important things'.

'I do not know what is important. I am depending on my teacher to tell me'.

'I do not trust lecturers who cannot answer my questions or want me to find out answers for myself'.

'I paid the lecturers/teachers to teach me. He or she should tell me what I needed to learn'.

'We are taught that the teacher is always right'.

'We do not like finding things out for ourselves to tell the teacher. It means that we students are teaching the teacher'.

'We only study what the teachers say are important. We only study the material the teachers ask us to study'.

In a learning environment where students depend heavily on teachers to guide their learning and their perceptions are that lecturers are the source of information and knowledge, as the comments cited above suggest, the push to develop and implement a student-centred learning environment may be difficult to accomplish. Comments collected from interviews with students appear to suggest that they perceive that lecturers are paid to teach. It also suggests that Asian students' approach to learning is very much teacher-centred. There are three plausible explanations for such perceptions: (1) The educational background of students, many of whom have been taught to respect the teacher as the centre of their learning. (2) Students have not been taught to be self-learners and take responsibility for their own learning. They act as empty bottles to be filled by their teachers. (3) Second language students are unable to fully understand and interpret written information (e.g. textbooks) and they need the teacher to help explain, interpret and decide what is important for them to learn.

The review of literature seems to imply that students' perceptions of the qualities of a good college or university teacher are strongly influenced by their environment and culture (Xiao and Dyson 1999, Trice and Harris', 2001) and status of the teaching profession in a country. The ways students and teachers behave in the learning environment is influenced by their society values. In the Asian culture, students are taught to respect teachers and to work hard to acquire knowledge. They value knowledge, because knowledge brings a brighter future.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the mean scores of each perceived factor is useful for ranking students' perceptions but they do not show the correlation or interaction between various variables. In order to get more meaning out of all those ratings, factor analysis was used. Factor analysis helps to identify the underlying construct that is not directly observable but needs to be inferred from the input variables. Factor 1 (the dominant factor) may be labelled as *knowledge and communication of knowledge*. The interaction of

the variables in factor one suggests that knowledge itself does not make a person a good teacher. It is the combination of knowledge of subject matter with other variables – such as preparation of teaching material; setting clear objectives for teaching and learning; having enthusiasm and ability to present learning materials clearly to students; and being perceived as fair and impartial in dealing with students (Table 4) – these factors working together created the dominant factor which makes an individual a good teacher. In other words, A college or university teacher who starts with a firm knowledge of the subject and builds on that with preparation of teaching material, stating clearly the objectives of learning and delivering the material with enthusiasm, will be well on the way to being perceived by Asian students as a good lecturer. Adding fairness and impartiality in dealing with students will further enhance such perceptions.

Four variables interact to form factor 2, which may be labelled as *openness, challenge, feedback, and encouragement* (Table 4). This factor suggests that Asian students desire an open communication with their teachers and they want their teachers to be a source of encouragement and challenge in the learning environment with frequent feedback on their performance. Hence, a good and effective lecturer is not only seen to be knowledgeable and interested in the material being taught, but he/she must come with an attitude of openness, friendliness and deep-seated concern and respect for them (factor 3). Complementing these perceived qualities there are other less important factors, such as accessibility and helpfulness of the lecturers, (Table 4).

The findings of this study tend to support the study of Xiao and Dyson (1999) and Marshall Brain's core qualities of good teachers. From the results of previous studies in different countries and this one conducted in Asia, it may be concluded that students' perceptions of the qualities of a good college or university teacher are influenced by their educational background, cultural factors, and the political and educational systems from which they come. Asian students, studying in the Asian education environment, tend to place more importance on lecturer's knowledge of the subject material, enthusiasm, preparation, clarity of objectives and presentation, and fairness and impartiality, while students from the western education environment tend to place more importance on other factors such as helpfulness, feedback, passion, good explanation skills, accessibility, enthusiasm, good relationships with students, etc. Knowledge of subject material is not seen to be high on their list. This may be because teachers' knowledge of the subject matter (qualifications of teachers) is taken for granted by students and is not an issue in the western education systems. However, this may not always be the case in Asia. Other possible explanations for students' perception of the importance of lecturer's knowledge of the subject matter are cited earlier in this paper.

It can be implied that students' perceptions of a good college or university teacher reflect their education backgrounds and values of their society. In many Asian high school education environments, student-centred learning is not the norm. Teachers play a central role in students' learning. As students move from high schools to colleges or universities, they carry this approach of learning with them. Hence, the desire to promote student-centred learning may face some challenges. It will take time to implement this approach of learning. Lecturers in the Asian college/university should be aware of the differences in student learning styles, and expectations and be willing to make adjustments as needed.

Currently, there is a push in Thailand to move towards student-centred learning. It will take time to change the learning style of students and the teaching approach adopted by teachers. Strategies need to be devised and implemented that will encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning and teachers to move away from the teacher-centred approach of teaching to the student-centred approach.

Limitations and Suggestion for Further Research

This research was undertaken at a relatively small education institution of higher learning, and therefore the results may not be representative of the wider Southeast Asian student population. However, it should be noted that this private higher education institution has a high percentage of international students representing most Southeast Asian Countries.

There is a strong desire to promote student-centred learning in the current education environment in Thailand. In a learning environment where students depend heavily on teachers to guide their learning, the push to implement student-centred learning may not be easily accomplished. A research study on students' perceptions of student-centred learning in an Asian setting may be useful. It will provide educators with a better understanding of how Asian students see and understand this approach in learning and teaching.

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