



## UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING QUALITY BEFORE AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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### **Abstract:**

Teaching quality refers to the level of teaching practices, delivery, content and methods and it is often viewed subjectively by various stakeholders in education, including students. The aim of this study, applying a phenomenographic approach, was to replicate a study conducted before the Covid-19 pandemic with master students in Finland. Applying a similar process and participants, the study aimed to explore whether students' perceptions of teaching quality had altered after the Covid-19 increase in online teaching and learning. Three main themes arose from the interview data: teaching quality as clarity, teaching quality as engagement, and teaching quality as either online teaching or contact teaching. These themes differ from the pre-Covid themes in which teaching quality was associated with pedagogical professionalism, personal qualities of the teacher and the general learning environment. It can be inferred that the increased online modes and environments in higher education in Finland have had an impact on students and what they perceive as teaching quality. Teaching is also increasingly viewed through the personal experiences of the students, both positive and negative, and an emotional reaction to teaching and learning was also evident in the post-Covid data.

**Keywords:** student perceptions; university teaching; phenomenography; online teaching; higher education

### **1. Introduction**

Since the main Covid-19 pandemic years of 2020-2022, higher education (HE) teaching and learning globally have become increasingly technology-enhanced with online learning environments, blended learning, videoconferencing, mobile devices, gaming-related learning and fully online courses (Guppy et al., 2022). During the height of the pandemic, restrictions on face-to-face contact forced HE teachers to examine their methods, materials and implementations for online teaching and learning. In the worst cases, this resulted in offering students book exams or written assignments instead of engaging in effective teaching through online methods or modes (Lepp et al., 2021).

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Students across global HE had experienced various types of teaching and learning, and their perceptions of teaching may have changed after the exceptional times during the pandemic.

This study aims to discover whether perceptions of teaching quality by master students have altered from the pre-Covid HE context to the post-Covid context. This is attempted by replicating a study conducted before the global Covid-19 pandemic with master students in Finland (Tuomainen, 2019). If changes in the pre- and post-pandemic perceptions are discernible, the study also explores the role of increased online and blended learning on students' views of teaching quality.

In the study performed pre-Covid in 2018-2019 with Finnish and international master students, I examined students' perceptions of teaching quality which the students at that time connected to the teacher's expertise and subject knowledge, engaging teaching style, and clarity in purpose and delivery (Tuomainen, 2019). According to those students in that timeframe, a good university teacher was seen as an expert in their field, with teaching based on the latest research. Students also highlighted the personality of the teacher as good quality and characteristics such as creating connections and friendliness. A good student-teacher relationship was also frequently mentioned, especially in connection with support and motivation. Teachers were also appreciated for recognising and understanding individual needs so that acknowledging students' diversity and different situations in life was connected to high-quality teaching.

My own teaching and that of many colleagues in Finnish universities moved extensively to online teaching during the pandemic years. Many courses and modules also continue to be implemented online instead of returning to contact lessons or lectures. Hence, I have been curious about the role of teaching in this new online approach and students' views on teaching quality in the current educational climate. While online teaching and learning can be implemented effectively, the nature of the instruction is inherently different and students' learning objectives in online learning can also vary from face-to-face teaching (Lee et al., 2011).

Since the same master students from the 2019 study were no longer available as most had graduated, a follow-up study could not be performed. Instead, the current study is a replication study whereby the study is a repetition of an earlier, already published study and conducted using similar methods and under similar circumstances (Peels & Bouter, 2018b). There are various methods through which replication can be conducted in humanities, but this current approach applies with the same research protocol but with new data collection. Peels and Bouter (2018a) refer to this as direct replication.

The research questions guiding the implementation of this study are:

- 1) How do master students perceive teaching quality in the post-Covid era in higher education?
- 2) Do the perceptions in this replication study vary from results obtained pre-Covid in a similar study on teaching quality?

- 3) Has the increase in online and blended learning since the Covid-19 pandemic altered master students' perceptions of teaching quality?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The Concept of Teaching Quality

The concept of quality relates to standards that should be met to the satisfaction of the customer to achieve a particular purpose (Ellis, 2018). Teaching quality, on the other hand, can be a somewhat abstract and subjective concept dependent on the views of each stakeholder: students, teachers, teacher peers, HE administration or other quality assessors (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010; Hill & Christian, 2012; Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2017).

For Hativa (2000), teaching quality in HE is the amalgam of a variety of skills, competencies and knowledge held by a teacher, including:

- Subject-matter knowledge,
- General pedagogical knowledge,
- Pedagogical content knowledge,
- Curricular knowledge,
- Knowledge of educational aims, and
- Knowledge of learners and learning.

For Hénard and Roseveare (2012), quality teaching is the use of various pedagogical techniques to generate optimal learning outcomes for students, whereas Filene (2005) views it as enthusiasm, clarity, organisation, stimulation and care. Enthusiasm and motivation, relationships, reflection and research, skills and approaches are also elements of quality teaching for Wood (2017). Others still will claim that quality teaching amounts to a safe, stimulating and learner-centred classroom environment (Nilson, 2016), or the ability to communicate, make connections with others and transmit ideas (Moore et al., 2007).

What distinguishes university teachers from teachers at many other educational levels is that there are no formal pedagogical requirements to teach at most universities globally. Rather it is assumed that researching a subject and having extensive knowledge ensure suitability for teaching related content (Nevgi & Löfström, 2015; Tuomainen, 2018). In other words, it is often taken for granted at the university level that a person who has the necessary qualifications for conducting research will automatically also be suited for lecturing or teaching.

However, as HE students realise, good teaching is not automatic, and students strongly expect their teachers to be trained to teach (Ellis, 2018; Sander et al., 2000). Despite the increased role of independent study in HE compared to previous educational levels, university students often value good-quality teachers, and their overall educational experience can be strongly affected by teacher experiences and encounters (Hill et al., 2003).

## 2.2 Scholars' Perspectives on Teaching Quality

From a pedagogical perspective, it could be discerned that teaching quality equals good or effective teaching. Adjectives for so-called good teachers have included respected, dutiful, expert, ideal, competent, analytical, and reflective (Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001). A good teacher has also been defined as having enthusiasm for teaching and concern for students as individuals, so interaction and interpersonal skills have been seen as an integral part of good HE teaching (Larkin et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2013).

To Ramsden (2003), good teaching is strongly connected to the student connection and therefore includes the teacher's desire to share knowledge of and love for the area of expertise. The teacher should also be able to make the content interesting and appealing, explain materials clearly, apply a variety of teaching and learning methods, engage with students, show concern and respect for students and be willing to learn more about the craft and scholarship of teaching.

Other qualities of good teachers or teaching quality by HE teaching and learning scholars are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Qualities of good teachers by HE scholars

Pleschová et al. (2012)	Brookfield (2015)	Schneider & Preckel (2017)
Teachers have contact with students in and out of class	Teachers apply whichever methods help students learn	Teachers prepare and organise courses well
Teachers generate cooperation and collaboration	Teachers have a critically reflective approach	Teachers present content clearly and using examples
Teachers promote active thinking and learning	Teachers apply contextually informed teaching	Teachers stimulate interest in the course and subject
Teachers apply recognition of prior knowledge	Teachers are aware of how students experience learning	Teachers encourage students to become active learners
Teachers provide specific feedback	Teachers treat students as adults	Teachers are available and helpful
Teachers create challenging but supportive learning	Teachers are credible and authentic professionals	Teachers show enthusiasm for the subject and teaching

## 2.3 Students' Perspectives on Teaching Quality

The student-teacher relationship is integral to creating good teaching and a perception of good teaching. Already in 1916, John Dewey stated that teachers should have "*a sympathetic attitude towards the experience of the learner by entering into common or conjoint experience*" (1916, p. 160). Later, Raaheim et al. (1991) maintained the importance of teachers' concern for the students, and more recently Rowan and Grootenboer (2017) have also emphasised the role of positive staff-student relationships. This all connects teaching to the humanistic approach where teachers and students are co-learners and teachers have positive regard for students.

In previous studies, HE students have found a good teacher to be:

- Knowledgeable, inspiring, enthusiastic, and friendly to students (Greimel-Fuhrmann & Geyer, 2003; Hill & Christian, 2012; Hill et al., 2003; Thompson, 2002),

- Clear, easily approachable and diverse in pedagogical skills (Rowan & Townend, 2017; Vulcano, 2007), and
- Enthusiastic about their field, teaching, and students (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Kandiko Howson, 2018).

In their study, Keeley et al. (2006) found that of the list of 28 items for optimal teaching effectiveness or excellence, university students in the US most appreciated teachers who were humble, sensitive and striving to be better teachers. Also, qualities such as being respectful, encouraging and enthusiastic were highly ranked. In a more recent study with Australian university students, Rowan and Townend (2017) listed five components of teaching quality:

- 1) Teachers' communication and interpersonal skills,
- 2) Variety in pedagogical creativity and course-delivery techniques,
- 3) Excellent understanding of course content,
- 4) Clarity and consistency in expectations, and
- 5) One-on-one relationships.

Kandiko Howson's (2018) study with UK university students provided a similar list of qualities as students viewed 'good' teachers as knowledgeable and passionate about their subject, easily approachable and having a dedication to students. It should be noted that these results have been obtained before a more extensive transition to online and blended learning although such teaching methods have been widely in use in global HE.

## 2.4 Teaching and Learning Online

Online learning is today an essential part of HE. Together with blended learning, where online elements are combined with face-to-face contact sessions, online learning can be used to enhance pedagogy by creating the best mixture for each course and set of learning outcomes. Online learning also promotes lifelong learning by offering flexible opportunities for learning in all stages of life. Even before the attendance restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, blended and online learning were applied in increasing prevalence in global HE for their flexibility and diversity, an enhancement to the learning experience and increased efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Gaebel et al., 2014; Lumsden et al., 2020; Moskal & Cavanagh, 2014).

Currently, the applications for online and blended learning in HE are endless. Teachers can apply flipped classrooms where students familiarise themselves with materials in advance and join classes to discuss them (Bergmann & Sams, 2014). Studies can also be enhanced through gamification and the use of social media for various learning purposes (Chung et al., 2019; Neier & Zayer, 2015). Technology has also provided blogs, podcasts, forums, chat rooms and videoconferences to assist in teaching and learning and to support all students. Diverse students can also be supported by increasing the accessibility of materials such as offering pre-recorded lessons (Brookfield, 2017).

Both online and blended learning can take place synchronously, i.e. live, or asynchronously with more flexible scheduling. Some students may prefer the flexibility of asynchronous learning, but many teachers may prefer the immediate contact and interaction of synchronous classes and sessions (Beyth-Marom et al., 2005). Live, synchronous teaching can allow for a more immediate response with students, also in peer-to-peer contact. On the other hand, asynchronous modes allow for the beforementioned flexibility that diverse learners appreciate (Wise et al., 2014), and this can increase participation in online discussions as there is more time for organising ideas and arguments.

While online and blended learning have become a permanent part of HE, there are still concerns about insufficient engagement and interaction in this type of teaching and learning (Kaufmann et al., 2016). Isolation, self-discipline, and technical literacy are some challenges faced by students in online learning, especially as the only offered mode of study (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). However, Nichols (2020) has argued that in online learning or digital teaching, the teacher as a person no longer matters as such and the main function is how the teaching takes place, i.e. teaching over teacher.

However, others argue that online teachers should actively nurture student-student and instructor-student collaboration and communication to support students' active learning and participation (Fehrman & Watson, 2021). Online courses with regular interaction between the teacher and students and other students with regular feedback on learning have been more likely to retain students (Blake & Guillén, 2020; Walmsley-Smith et al., 2019). Further, most students also in online learning do wish to communicate and collaborate with their peers (Harasim, 2017; Kaufmann et al., 2016).

### 3. Material and Methods

This research aims to investigate how university students pursuing a master's degree perceive the quality of teaching in post-Covid HE by conducting phenomenographic interviews. Given that contemporary research on HE often focuses more on processes and individuals, such as teaching, learning, and students, obtaining a broad student perspective on teaching quality can be valuable in enhancing teaching methods and evaluation criteria in universities. This is because students tend to respond to educational circumstances differently from what teachers, administrators, or researchers anticipate or presume, as students' reactions are based on their perceptions rather than policies or scholarly study (Bensimon, 2007).

This is a replication study of the pre-Covid exploration of teaching quality (Tuomainen, 2019). Replication research in humanities refers to the process of reproducing an existing study or experiment to test the reliability and validity of its findings or to introduce new findings on a similar research process (Freese & Peterson, 2017). While replication is more commonly applied with quantitative methods and in natural and health sciences, Peels (2019) argues that replication is also relevant in

humanities and qualitative methodology as such studies contribute to the aims of academic inquiry such as knowledge, insight, understanding and truth.

The 2019 study included semi-structured interviews with 15 master students (9 females, 6 males) from a Finnish university, with ages ranging from 21 to 32 years. The participants represented seven different master's degree programmes and seven different nationalities. The current study, to match the requirements of a replication study, also recruited 15 master students from various nationalities and degree programmes from the same university to be interviewed with the same questions as in the original study. The participants are detailed further in the Method section.

### 3.1 Phenomenographic Research

Phenomenography is a research method that seeks to comprehend and explain how individuals encounter and interpret different phenomena. One of the key scholars of phenomenography, Ference Marton, has characterised it as "*the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended*" (Marton, 1994, p. 4425).

The primary focus of phenomenography is on the qualitative analysis of the variations in how individuals understand and interpret the various aspects of their experiences or surroundings. This process helps to identify the range of understanding or perceptions of a phenomenon and can be used to develop a more nuanced understanding of the topic under study. Phenomenography is often used in educational research to investigate how students perceive and understand certain concepts. In connection with student perceptions, the rationale for phenomenographic research can be said to arise from an interest in exploring students' experiences of learning. This can facilitate the understanding of learning and explore the meaning of the variation (Marton, 2015).

Individual interviews are the most commonly used method in phenomenographic research. Through this method, a researcher can identify a limited number of categories that describe distinct but interrelated conceptions derived from interview transcripts. The researcher uses relevant extracts from the interview data to establish the plausibility of these categories (Cousin, 2009). The categories represent groupings of descriptions and their interrelationships, resulting in a hierarchical structure that captures increasingly complex layers of individual experiences, i.e. the outcome space (Marton & Booth, 1997; Svensson, 1997).

### 3.2 Participants

The sample for this study aimed to be as similar to the 2019 study as possible. Therefore, the sample consisted of 15 master students from the same mid-sized Finnish science university as in 2019. Eight of the participants were female and seven were males, with ages ranging from 22 to 35 years. The participants represented six different nationalities (British, Chinese, Finnish, German, Indian and Sri Lankan) and six different master's

degree programmes: applied physics, business, computer science, environmental science, pharmacy, and public health.

When conducting phenomenographic studies, it is crucial to carefully consider the selection of interviewees, focusing on representativeness rather than frequency (Åkerlind, 2008; Collier-Reed & Ingerman, 2013). While there are no strict guidelines regarding the optimal number of interviews, previous studies have suggested that 10 interviews may be sufficient to capture the necessary variation (Cousin, 2009; Trigwell, 2000). This study collected 15 interviews, which should provide a suitable range of variation for the phenomenon being studied and is consistent with the number of interviews conducted in the 2019 article.

### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

The participants all were provided and completed a form of informed consent, which provided details about the study and the phenomenographic interviews. The consent form emphasised that participation in the interviews was voluntary and confidential and that participants were free to withdraw at any time without explanation. The study protocol was exempted by the university ethics committee as all subjects were adults and participated in the study voluntarily.

The interviews were conducted individually in April 2023, either on a campus location or via videoconferencing using Microsoft Teams. The interviews followed the principles of phenomenographic interviews, such as using a minimal number of prepared questions and engaging in empathic listening (Marton, 1994). The interviews lasted on average 10 minutes. One main question was asked of each participant: "What does teaching quality mean to you in a university context or your own studies?" Neutral, open-ended questions were used to elicit more responses and allow each participant to elaborate and clarify their reflection on the phenomenon. The interviews were all conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the data for subsequent analysis.

The interview data were left unanalysed until all interviews were completed to prevent any later interviews from being influenced by the analysis or processing of earlier interviews (Bowden, 2005). Once all interviews were complete, the interview transcript data were manually analysed according to guidelines for phenomenographic interview data analysis (Marton & Booth, 1997; Åkerlind, 2008). The analysis involved identifying utterances and quotes that related to conceptions and perceptions about teaching quality in a university context. Structural relationships between conceptions in the data began to emerge through repeated readings and the emerging themes underwent a process of confirmation, contradiction, and refinement, ultimately resulting in the categories of description as the outcome space.

## 4. Results

Three distinct perceptions of teaching quality can be distinguished from the interview data: 1) teaching quality as clarity, 2) teaching quality as engagement, and 3) teaching quality as online or contact teaching. Descriptions of these categories and their sub-categories are introduced next, with illustrative quotations from the interview data. Identifiers S1-15 are used for the 15 student participants with the quotations. Following the descriptions, the three categories are summarised and discussed as the outcome space of this phenomenographic study and relations between the participants and their perceptions of teaching quality are proposed.

### 4.1 Category 1: Teaching Quality as Clarity

The first theme in connection with teaching quality in the interview data focussed on clarity in teaching in a variety of elements, further divided into two categories: clarity of delivery and instructions, and clarity of purpose and materials.

#### 4.1.1 Clarity of Delivery and Instructions

A category related to teaching quality was the notion of clarity of university teachers' delivery during instruction. For many participants in this study, teaching quality was associated with obtaining clear information from the teacher, lecturer or instructor in any teaching situation. These included both contact teaching such as lectures or tutorials in person and online situations such as synchronous teaching sessions or lectures or asynchronous sessions such as pre-recorded lectures or instructional videos. Students had the following comments in their interviews:

*"I appreciate clear delivery from the teacher so that teaching is easy to follow. I also like instructions and deadlines and schedules expressed very clearly so I understand directly what I'm supposed to do, when and how." (S2)*

*"I think teaching quality is clear instructions and deadlines, especially online when it's more independent study." (S13)*

Clarity in teaching as a sign of quality was linked in these data to many students appreciating university teachers who were clear and concise in their explanations of course contents and information. Hence many students evaluated teaching quality based on how well a teacher was able to explain difficult concepts or theories. Similar results regarding clarity as a positive quality of university teachers have been demonstrated by Aimah and Puwanto (2019) and Baier et al. (2019) in a pre-Covid HE environment, and Müller et al. (2020) and Rapanta et al. (2020) during and after Covid.

Overall, the interview data indicate that regardless of whether teaching live or online, teachers who communicate clearly and effectively are highly valued by students.

This includes providing clear instructions, outlining expectations, and responding promptly to questions and concerns.

*"I've had teachers who react very quickly to my emails and that's very helpful and then I've had teachers who don't reply to any messages and expect students to understand everything from the course materials even though they're unclear and I have to reread them all the time to get the point." (S4)*

This type of inadequate communication mentioned by the previous student was also highlighted by many students as the opposite of good teaching quality. Even small issues that caused confusion or frustration left a strong imprint on the students and ultimately lead to a negative impression of a teacher.

*"Sure, we are master's students and I suppose expected to handle everything the university has to offer. But some teachers or professors still don't see students as students and kind of live in their own academic bubble... I would like to see more crystal clear instructions from my teachers, without having to ask for it." (S6)*

#### **4.1.2 Clarity of Purpose and Materials**

Another category of clarity identified in the students' interview data was the teacher's clarity of purpose and materials. Many students connected teaching quality to understanding the purpose of the course and its content. This was seen to begin already from the course description and learning outcomes mentioned in the registration system so that the aim and the purpose of the course were clear to the students already before the course had begun.

*"I see all kinds of course descriptions when I sign up, it depends on who the teacher is I suppose, or the admin, I don't know. Some are very detailed, even too much I would say, but I like the clear way of saying, after the course you will know this and that." (S10)*

Learning-centred course descriptions and learning outcomes are in use in Finnish HE and relate to the so-called Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Bloom's Taxonomy connects learning objectives and outcomes to knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation and creation, and these can be shown through expressions such as *"After the course, the student will be able to define/explain/demonstrate/analyse/develop..."*

Further, the clarity of purpose and materials was also appreciated as teaching quality when the course materials had a clear structure, especially in online learning environments, and allowed students to distinguish the required tasks and other requirements for successfully passing the course. This was particularly important in online courses with increased self-study when a course could be completed without explicit teacher presence or lessons.

*"I need to have very clear course materials when studying online, and I hope there are also different kinds of study methods in a course so that I can find methods that are good for me." (S8)*

However, some online materials have been detrimental to students' learning, especially if there has been a lack of structure to the online materials and little explicit presence from the teacher.

*"One Moodle page, I could not see what the course structure was, there were boxes and pictures and tables and instructions here and there, I had to ask a friend to tell me what I was supposed to do." (S11)*

Lack of clarity in the course materials can lead to procrastination from some students and ultimately also poor time management (e.g., Song et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2020). Issues with other students' time management were also mentioned by students in this study as leading to delayed feedback or assessment from the teacher, especially in online assignments.

*"Sometimes a few of the students are on time with their submissions but then if they are not, the teacher says, 'OK, I can't give answers until everybody submits'." (S14)*

The clarity of assignments, deadlines, assessments and feedback were also individual mentions related to teaching quality. Particularly for master students with various responsibilities for studies, work and their families, effective learning practices and direct and clear use of their time were valued as part of university teaching. As one student commented,

*"On a good course, time should be used in a way that benefits students, no unnecessary tasks and no unnecessary waiting time." (S1)*

## **4.2 Category 2: Teaching Quality as Engagement**

Secondly, teaching quality by the interviewed master students was perceived as engagement by the teachers to students and their learning in various stages of life. This perception could be divided into further two main categories: engagement through flexibility and support, and engaging students in the learning process.

### **4.2.1 Engagement Through Flexibility and Support**

A frequently mentioned element of teaching quality related to flexibility shown by the university teaching staff to acknowledge students' various study and life situations. In Finland the average age of entry to university studies is 21 years (Saari et al., 2020) so by the time students are at the master level, the average age can be close to 27 or 29, as in recent studies by Filippou (2019) and Pappa et al. (2020), respectively. Therefore, students

appreciate the flexibility of the teacher, teaching methods and materials to accommodate various circumstances and situations in life.

*"Because I work full-time and have small kids, for me teaching quality is also the flexibility that I can participate in lectures from home or the lectures are recorded so I can watch them when I can." (S15)*

In recent years, also before the Covid-19 pandemic, many master's degree programmes in Finland had adopted remote and online study comprehensively to their course modules and implementations to cater for the versatile study body and to ensure enrolled students could complete their degrees. Hence the variety of teaching modes was often mentioned in the interviews, such as variation from classroom teaching to online and blended learning used actively in Finnish HE, and how the variety and flexibility were appreciated, especially with master students.

*"I can pick and choose how to complete many courses, I think that's necessary in today's studies, especially for older students like me who work and live away from the campus city." (S3)*

*"Also, it's the possibility to complete the course without exams, just doing assignments." (S9)*

This flexibility in courses and assignments was further highlighted as students appreciated the teachers' understanding of individual needs and levels of knowledge. In this manner teaching quality was associated with recognising diversity in the student body and offering support for studies through the various modes.

*"For me teaching quality is creating a relaxed or unhurried atmosphere in the course. So that I'm not forced to do something all the time with really tight deadlines, I can do the exercises in my own pace and calmly because it suits me. Also, it's important to have additional support for those who need it." (S12)*

#### **4.2.2 Engaging Students in the Learning Process**

Many participants also highlighted the teacher's various activities in engaging and activating learning so that group discussions, a variety of cooperative or collaborative exercises or activities or a variety of teaching technology were seen as teaching quality. On the other hand, some students also highly appreciated being supported by the chance to tailor their learning process, for instance, if self-study or asynchronous online learning were more suitable for their lives.

*"Teaching quality to me is having a teacher who creates suitable study materials, different kinds of tasks and takes different learners into consideration. I also like a lesson that*

*provides comprehensive understanding of the subject and forces me to apply that information.” (S13)*

Another characteristic of student engagement in teaching quality, especially for more traditional lecture-based teaching, was the notion of engaging teaching. In the interviews, this type of engagement was connected to both contact teaching and online implementations. Therefore, if the teaching mode is a lecture, be it live in person, live online or pre-recorded and shared online, the engagement of the audience can be attained with student activation and interaction. Arguably, this is more challenging to achieve in online materials but still attainable and very much part of post-Covid HE teaching.

*“I like good and encouraging atmosphere, versatile tasks and meetings with the teacher.” (S1)*

*“Good teaching has to include interaction between the teacher and the students, both online and in the classroom.” (S5)*

As seen in previous studies about good university teaching (e.g. Brookfield, 2015; Pleschová et al., 2012; Schneider & Preckel, 2017), students often appreciate instructors who actively attempt to engage students and are enthusiastic about their subject. This can be demonstrated through a variety of teaching techniques, such as class discussions, concrete examples, and treating students as individuals as much as possible.

### **4.3 Category 3: Teaching quality as Online Teaching or Contact Teaching**

The third perception indicates that many master students were strongly divided by teaching quality as either online learning environments or contact teaching environments. Many students explicitly indicated they enjoyed online teaching and learning while others indicated that online learning was detrimental to good quality teaching, some even indicating it equalled “lazy teaching” (S15).

#### **4.3.1 Online Teaching and Learning**

*“Lots of online courses, definitely.” (S2)*

*“Good teaching includes an equal opportunity to participate even remotely.” (S12)*

The connection to online learning and teaching quality in this study may be partly linked to the previous two perceptions, clarity and engagement, but many students also explicitly connected the quality of their overall educational experience as master students to being able to complete their studies mostly in online learning environments. This also connects to the teacher as the facilitator of learning in student-centred approaches to teaching rather than teacher-led modes (cf. Hoidn, 2016). Many students in Finnish HE

have been accustomed to online and distance learning which can make the preference more common. However, online teaching and learning should still include interaction with the teacher and collaboration with other students, rather than being fully self-study.

*“Good university teaching is versatile and interactive. As a distance student myself, I value distance education, but I like that there are contacts with other students, teachers and lecturers.” (S3)*

### 4.3.2 Contact Teaching and Learning

Some students in the study held an opposite view on how teaching and learning should be implemented and felt contact lessons and campus presence were the optimal teaching modes. Online teaching and learning were seen as inadequate concerning teaching quality and interaction in particular.

*“I would say contact teaching would have more quality than online.” (S8)*

*“Prior to the pandemic, we didn't have anything called online, so it was always interactive and that was more beneficial.” (S14)*

Also, the lack of perceived interaction and communication in online classes led some students to indicate that classroom sessions, lectures or classes on campus are more useful to students as they would generate more discussion and debate while online there is less communication and spontaneous interaction.

*“We are not getting exposed enough [in the course] because it's held online and it's not working for me.” (S14)*

### 4.4 Outcome Space: Teaching Quality as an Experience

Processing the three main themes connected to teaching quality (clarity, engagement, online or contact) and the subsequent six categories of description through a contextual analysis reveals the internal relations between the categories. As a result, three varying characteristics relating to teaching quality can be distinguished: positive experience, negative experience and emotional experience. The characteristics are further described in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Types of relation with teaching quality

<i>Positive experience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The perception of teaching quality is mainly based on the participant's collection of positive recent or long-term experiences of teaching and learning at university.</li><li>▪ Participants can connect teaching quality to specific courses and how the implementation of the course has had a positive reaction, especially because of the clarity and flexibility of the teacher and the overall suitability of the implementation, including online study.</li></ul>
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<i>Negative experience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Some of the perceptions of teaching quality were built from negative experiences, ranging from the approach of the teaching to a lack of clarity in the teaching or lack of interaction in online teaching.</li> <li>▪ Students would reflect negatively on teaching that was implemented in a manner unsuitable for them (e.g. online or contact).</li> </ul>
<i>Emotional experience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Many students reacted emotionally to their recollection or understanding of teaching quality. This may have been attributed partially to the data collection method of individual interviews where students had one-on-one contact with the researcher.</li> <li>▪ Many students also appeared to connect their understanding of teaching quality to an individual teacher or course, either positively or negatively, rather than explore the notion of teaching quality through conceptual understanding.</li> </ul>

The types of relation are further summarised with the perceptions and categories as the outcome space in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Themes and characteristics relating to teaching quality

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Positive experience</b>	<b>Negative experience</b>	<b>Emotional experience</b>
<i>Teaching quality as clarity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Clarity of delivery and instructions (clear and concise, prompt reactions)</li> <li>▪ Clarity of purpose and materials (clear course descriptions and requirements)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unclear instructions and materials</li> <li>▪ Lack of structure in online materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Unclear leading to frustration or confusion</li> <li>▪ Lack of clarity leading to a perception of time-wasting</li> </ul>
<i>Teaching quality as engagement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Flexible course modes and arrangements</li> <li>▪ Support available when needed</li> <li>▪ Interaction and activities to support learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ None</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Appreciation of recognising individual needs and life situations</li> </ul>
<i>Teaching quality as online or contact teaching</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Online courses and online learning options</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Online courses instead of contact teaching</li> <li>▪ Lack of interaction in online teaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Lack of collaboration, dependence on other students' work</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion

Replication research in humanities can help to address questions such as whether the findings of a particular study are generalisable to other populations, whether they hold up over time, and whether they are affected by changes in the research context. This was the impetus for this study of master students' perceptions of teaching quality. The results of the previous study in 2019 provided certain perceptions but as the HE teaching and

learning environments had altered after the Covid-19 pandemic years, the purpose of this study was to replicate the 2019 process and discover similarities and differences in students' understanding of teaching quality.

The results of both studies can be seen to have similarities but also differences. The obtained categories of description and their subcategories for both studies are summarised in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Comparison of the categories of description regarding teaching quality from the 2019 study and the current study

<b>2019 study</b>	<b>Current study</b>
<i>Teaching quality as pedagogical professionalism</i> 1. Knowledge and expertise of the teacher 2. Engaging and inspiring teaching practices 3. Clarity of purpose and delivery	<i>Teaching quality as clarity</i> 1. Clarity of delivery and instructions 2. Clarity of purpose and materials
<i>Teaching quality as personal qualities of the teacher</i> 1. Connection with students 2. Approachability 3. Pleasant personality	<i>Teaching quality as engagement</i> 1. Engagement through flexibility and support 2. Engaging students in the learning process
<i>Teaching quality as the general learning environment</i> 1. Relevant course contents 2. Physical learning environment 3. Role of students	<i>Teaching quality as online or contact teaching</i> 1. Online teaching and learning 2. Contact teaching and learning
<i>Teaching quality as an experience</i> 1. Conceptual understanding 2. Personal experience 3. Negative experience	<i>Teaching quality as an experience</i> 1. Positive experience 2. Negative experience 3. Emotional experience

The results of the current study, conducted post-Covid in 2023, indicate that teaching quality is connected to clarity, engagement and either online or contact teaching. Clarity was also present in the 2019 results, as were engaging teaching practices. It could also be argued that the third description in the 2019 study, the general learning environment, is also reflected in the current results as students' views on teaching quality connected to either online teaching and learning or contact teaching and learning.

Differences between the two sets of results mainly involve the teacher's role and qualities and the introduction of online learning to teaching quality. In the current results, the teacher's expertise was not highlighted as a sign of teaching quality and the teacher's approachability and personality has a less pronounced role compared to the 2019 results. Still, the support provided by the teacher was a sign of teaching quality, as was the flexibility offered as a recognition of master students' various situations in life.

The most prominent difference between the two studies appears to be the significance of online learning as both a positive and negative component of teaching quality in the post-Covid results. While online and blended learning were popular teaching modes in global HE also before the Covid-19 pandemic, there were no explicit mentions of online teaching and learning in 2019 while in the current study online learning was either heralded as a significant part of the success of master students'

studies or conversely, seen as an unsuccessful substitute for contact teaching which for some students was still by default a sign of teaching quality.

An interesting element of the current results is the students' reaction to the notion and concept of teaching quality. While in the 2019 study, the concept was mostly explored through conceptual understanding but also through personal and negative experiences, in the current study many students had an emotional connection to teaching quality and reflected on it through their general positive and negative experiences but also held strong emotional reactions to their understanding of teaching quality. As the data collection method was identical in both studies, it could be argued that after the imposed online presence and lesser personal connections during their studies, the students were now even more appreciative to be asked about their views and opinions on teaching. Also, a component of the increased emotionality could have been the students' overall increased emotional experiences of teaching and learning, as seen also in previous studies (e.g. Padrón et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020). The psychological vulnerability of university students during and after the Covid-19 pandemic has been present in many recent studies, but most studies have explored bachelor students rather than master students as in this study.

It can be argued that the increased amounts of online and blended learning since the Covid-19 pandemic have somewhat altered master students' perceptions of teaching quality. Many master students seem to enjoy the flexibility introduced by online learning as it allows for studies to be more suitably completed. After all, in their best versions, online teaching and learning can engage and retain students, support their learning, and teachers can create versatile learning environments conducive to meaningful learning (cf. Archambault et al., 2022; Schrenk et al., 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

The opinions and experiences of students are increasingly significant in assessing the quality of HE. As a result, exploring how students perceive teaching quality is a useful process to raise awareness about effective teaching methods and the different ways in which students learn in contemporary educational settings. Still, it should be noted that this study was limited in scope and scale and provided only one view into university teaching quality but also indicated how the perceptions have changed in the years before and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study offers a particular perspective on teaching quality in HE, but it should be noted that relying solely on student opinions is a singular view. Nevertheless, since university teaching is intended for a specific audience, the students, their perceptions are essential in identifying effective teaching methods and high-quality educators, and in supporting and enhancing the learning process of each student. It is unrealistic to expect every teacher to be flawless at any educational level, but instead of striving for perfection, research and improvement in teaching quality can facilitate the creation of more student-

centred, effective, adaptable, and supportive teaching and learning environments in today's HE.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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