



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Sociology and Community Development*

Teaching excellence in applied universities: The student perspective

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ABSTRACT

Applied universities, which focus on training high-level technical talents, lack information on how gender and academic achievement affect students' perception of effective teaching to inform curriculum enhancement in China. Thus, this research aims to explore the influence of gender and academic performance on students' perceptions of excellent teaching in a typical Chinese applied university. In the present study, data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 senior students at the applied university, and the response was analysed through thematic analysis. It has been revealed that female students are especially concerned with the relevancy and up-to-date information in the materials, which they perceive as the characteristic of professional teaching. On the other hand, while male students were discussing lesson contents and their structures, they emphasised lesson delivery. Furthermore, it has also demonstrated that intelligent students with higher academic achievements embrace the value of updated content and claim that their teachings should reflect intellectual competency, with the craze of the current industry relevancy. The harmonious incorporation of humour and motivational approaches to teaching enhances the learning process and learning outcomes. Therefore, teaching skills, professional knowledge, and concern for students are found to be appreciated by male and female students, irrespective of their performance levels. These understandings provide the need to come up with teaching-learning techniques that consider different education requirements in furthering the Relevance and outreach of Higher Education in responding to diverse Learner and industry needs.

KEYWORDS: academic excellence, applied universities, gendered perceptions, industry-relevant education, student engagement, teaching quality

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1. Introduction

Applied universities are a separate category of post-secondary education institutions that focus on applicative and vocational education and training and immediate business interaction (Li et al., 2024; Yin & Han, 2018). The proposed curricula are designed to prepare students for employment upon graduation in certain specialities (Li et al., 2024; Zhang & Qiu, 2016; Feng et al., 2023). This emphasis on applied learning, therefore, enhances the focus on teaching and curriculum (T&C) content on experiential learning, practical training, and industry participation (Li et al., 2024; Zhang & Qiu, 2016). Thus, while traditional universities focus on research output and publishing as key indices of performance, applied universities look at performance in terms of the employment rates of their graduates, successful links with industries, and vocational training outcomes (Li et al., 2024; Smell, 2019). The intended student outcome in applied universities is the preparation of students toward employment and the ability to positively impact the respective field of study (Li et al., 2024; Zhang & Qiu, 2016; Feng et al., 2023). This requires teaching strategies that seek to incorporate a workplace experience perspective through collaborations with industries, computerised training facilities, and a pedagogy that involves both the academic and work experience of faculty members (Zhang & Qiu, 2016). This expertise is not just about the acquisition of knowledge but its application as well as the incorporation of creative thinking processes in solving problems within a specified profession (Qi & Hu, 2022; Zou & Chen, 2024). This approach also benefits the students since they are well-equipped academically and ready to handle professional roles without much training once they join the workforce. In this regard, since applied universities are expected to provide knowledge and skills appropriate to the economy and industries in different regions, they have a central function in equipping the workforce that can respond to these areas' needs and demands effectively.

Across the world, higher education institutions are integrating new strategies in teaching and learning processes with a view to improving academic achievement and addressing the emerging needs of society (Mohammad & Tamimi, 2017). These changes include technology, globalisation, and the demands of the world of work that continue to evolve (Teye et al., 2019). Moreover, there is pressure on universities to show the returns on their products to various consumers, including students, employers, and the government (Smell, 2019). This pressure is especially sensed in relation to increasingly expensive tuition fees and doubts about graduates' job opportunities (Bussu et al., 2019). In this background, the appearance and development of the applied universities are the best evidence of this trend at the international level (Li et al., 2024). These institutions are particularly intended to help solve the existing skills deficit in the workforce and foster economic growth (Yin & Han, 2018). In this view, their emphasis on skill-based training and partnership with industry stakeholders is in response to the need for employable graduates as they participate in efforts aimed at reducing unemployment among young people (Zhang and Qiu, 2016). In the Chinese context, the transformation of training paradigms in applied universities indicates a necessary social approach towards enhancing balanced student development (Li et al., 2024). This reform also focuses on social practice education, the incorporation of cultural factors, and the training of professionals with practical innovation (Li et al., 2024). Specifically, it meets the national demand for professionals with a high level of education and training in different disciplines, such as civil engineering, and aims to enhance the harmonisation between the knowledge acquired within the framework of academic degrees and personnel demands in practice (Li et al., 2024; Feng et al., 2023). The development of applied universities in China is, therefore, connected with the national economic development planning and the fight against youth unemployment (Feng et al., 2023; Zhang & Qiu, 2016). This calls for a one-stop school-enterprise cooperation to reform curriculum, optimise instructional delivery, and enrich practice-based learning strategies to produce graduates ready to embrace the economy (Feng et al., 2023; Zhang & Qiu, 2016). This is a national emphasis on applied education and preparing students with innovations and entrepreneurial skills to find jobs and create jobs.

Teaching and curriculum (T&C) excellence in applied universities poses several challenges that academics have to meet, such as being tasked with the responsibility of meeting changes within the industry. Enhanced technological and economic development requires that instructors keep revising the curricula to match advanced teaching models and industry requirements (Bi, 2023). Failing to innovate changes in teaching styles, the system may lose relevancy with the market, pushing the students into the job market inappropriately prepared (Tang, 2019). Meeting these challenges involves embracing favourable integration practices such as project-based learning, industry links, and training modules in applied universities (Liu et al., 2020). These approaches ensure

that courses offered by educational institutions reflect industry expectations while also ensuring that students gain applied experience (Liu et al., 2020). As these initiatives are established, the need to maintain quality consistency calls for systematic curriculum evaluation approaches aiming at students' outcome-based education and curriculum improvement processes (Zhang, 2023). However, a significant question emerges: What practices should be put in place to ensure that applied universities deliver quality teaching and curriculum experiences? There is a need for a properly managed feedback system that links academia to industry so that the content of the programs can be updated regularly. In addition, faculty development programs have to empower teachers with the knowledge and skills required in light of emergent trends in pedagogy and technology (Zhang et al., 2024). The approach of categorising and presenting literature based on the timeline can also help in showcasing the progressive scale of T&C reforms and its future path of excellence.

Students' feedback is central to the assessment of the teaching quality, most importantly in the applied university, where it is emphasised that it matches the practical realities. Literature shows that when students' perspectives are included in assessment strategies, explanations of teaching competencies and recommending specific areas that need enhancement are more comprehensive than traditional approaches (Song, 2024). Therefore, gaining the students' insights into their learning process will assist in shaping the practices which are aimed at catering for their learning needs and challenges intended to transform them into a professional market force. Applied universities, therefore, have to ensure that they set comprehensive and effective quality assurance measures that include student feedback. Ideal quality assurance systems can reveal gaps in the teaching practice, which can facilitate academic institutions to introduce changes to the teaching approaches and courses using evidence from the findings (Zhang, 2021). Further, they help in the continuing professional learning of educators and establish that teaching practice remains current in the industry based on areas demarcated for skills improvement (Chengying et al., 2019). The incorporation of student feedback into teaching evaluations allows the applied universities to keep a vibrant and relevant teaching framework that fosters high-quality teaching. This approach ensures graduates are not only academically qualified but also have skills for the job market as envisioned by applied universities to meet the needs of the job market.

In this background, the research aims to examine the influence of gender and academic performance on students' perceptions of excellent teaching at a Chinese applied university. In this background, research objectives of this research are given below:

- To analyse the influence of gender differences on students' perceptions of excellent teaching at a Chinese applied university.
- To examine how perceptions of excellent teaching vary among students with different academic performances at a Chinese applied university.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations

There are certain attributes of teaching in Chinese applied universities that dictate good teaching practices. In this respect, the knowledge of subject content becomes blended with the mastery of instructional approaches that address the pragmatic, applied nature of the course material (Guo, 2020). This includes not only the ability to express the provided theoretical knowledge but also the ability to transform it into practical activities, making it possible to develop an understanding of practical applicability (Zhong et al., 2015). In addition, expert teachers in applied universities focus on developing students' critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and cooperative learning environments so that students are prepared for their future professions (Zhou et al., 2024; Hou, 2021). Furthermore, high-performing instructors are constant learners, eager to learn from their students to be better suited to teaching the students what they want to learn (Khattapan, 2022).

However, providing support for excellent teaching in applied universities is not without its difficulties. Among them, the most challenging one would be the scenario where such institutions are inadequately funded, which restricts their capacities to acquire innovative teaching tools and professional training (Zuo et al., 2018). The other difficulty comes from the constantly evolving technologies and industries forcing teachers to improve their understanding and application of practice in order to be most helpful to the children (Tian, 2020). Furthermore, students of applied universities also exhibit different learning styles and prior learning backgrounds that require an accommodation strategy, which may vary depending on the students (Zhou, 2024; Chandra Handa, 2020). Furthermore, the evaluation of teaching efficacy in applied universities is multilayered,

as it should take into account not only the degree of knowledge improvement but also the extent of practical skills gained (Zamora Serrano, 2021).

From the theoretical perspective of the Humanistic Teaching Theory and Danielson's Framework for Teaching, the study reveals considerable guidance on attaining teaching excellence in applied universities specifically (Holm & Beckman, 2022; Xiu, 2020). Humanistic Teaching Theory embraces the centrality of the learner, affirming the learner's personality, individual learning patterns, and self-effort learning strategies (Ghenaati & Nastiezaie, 2019). This is particularly important in applied universities where such attributes as practical learners and individualised learning approaches yield the desired effects for the students. Danielson's Framework for Teaching, on the other hand, provides a multi-faceted model for evaluating teaching effectiveness across four domains: Time and work, classroom and learning environment, teaching and instruction, and professionalism (Soriano, 2021). These domains allow for an evaluation of the extent of teaching effectiveness in the applied universities and areas that need enhancements. By combining these two mentioned frameworks, it is possible to obtain an overall view of how teaching excellence can be achieved at the applied university level and link the humanistic approach with a definite methodology of evaluation.

In terms of students' perspectives, several factors were noted to affect the perception they have about effective teaching, disregarding gender and performance levels. In a similar manner, students have always appreciated instructors who are well-organized and who can present their information coherently (CG, 2024). They value teachers who make lessons fun and encourage interactivity and group work among students (Loda et al., 2020). Moreover, students appreciate when teachers give feedback and offer students a chance to learn and improve themselves (Farquhar et al., 2018). Thus, the task of connecting theoretical knowledge to practical cases is also considered important, especially in applied universities (Sachana et al., 2014).

Findings obtained from the literature show differences in perception toward teaching excellence in gender as well as in student academic performance. Studies show that female students might be more conscientious and achievement-motivated, which could also affect their perception of the quality of teachers (Lazo, 2023). On the other hand, there is evidence that gender stereotyping is still evident in grading practices where female lecturers are rated lower than their male counterparts despite offering equal-quality performances (Martí-Ballester, 2017). Moreover, students who perform better academically may have diverse perceptions of what constitutes quality teaching in comparison with poor-performing students (Goni & Tukur, 2015). Some students, especially the ones with higher academic performance, might prefer academically demanding approaches to teaching. However, others with low performance might prefer easily understandable methods, well-arranged classes, and those that offer support (Chauhan et al., 2019). More research is needed to appreciate the impact of gender, academic achievement, and perception towards teaching achievements within applied universities in detail. The literature available in this field shows the need to explain these factors in more detail and analyse the ways in which they affect students' perceptions of the quality of their teachers.

3. Data and Research Methods

In this study, data was sourced from 13 students from an applied university in Hebei, China. This is a public university staffed by about 20,000 students and 1200 academic employees, delivering instructional programs in various fields, including science, technology, humanities, and agriculture, etc. For the purpose of the present research, it is essential as the university is specific in its mission and vision as an applied institution with an emphasis on industry integration, which makes it the right context to study the concept of teaching effectiveness and its relation to practical and professional dimensions. The reason behind choosing this university is that it is one of the most reputable applied universities in the region, and its goal is to cultivate high-quality applied talents and respond to the demands of the modern and national workforce. The understanding of the university framework and intensive orientation at practical training enhances awareness of its teaching approaches, providing for a more profound and contextualised analysis as a researcher.

The participants of this study were 13 senior students (7 males and six females) from this applied university. These students were selected through purposive sampling in terms of academic majors such as mathematics and applied mathematics, Internet of Things Engineering, Agricultural Mechanization, tourism management, Human Resources Management, and others. The sample also included students with different academic achievements that were classified as excellent, good, and poor to get as far as possible in the

approach to the assessment of teaching effectiveness within an applied university context. This purposive sampling aimed to include multiple and varied perspectives of student participants to understand various aspects of their teaching, which has enriched their understanding of how teaching is being assessed (Campbell et al., 2020). However, it is useful to note that this sample is a limitation of the research. It may not represent the perception of all the students as it was only sampled on senior students. Thus, there might be perception differences from the juniors, who might have other perceptions or expectations of expert teaching. However, the consideration of students from diverse academic fields and learning abilities strengthens the validity and richness of collected data.

The data for this research was collected through semi-structured interviews. The tool used was an interview questionnaire with 18 core questions, along with some follow-up questions, which were provided to gain an understanding of the students' perceptions and experiences. These questions were designed in such a way that they encompassed a wide area of concern to teaching effectiveness, such as the student's educational background, particular classroom incidents, perception of teaching strategies, and characteristics of good teaching as identified by the students. The questions were not close-ended to enable the participants to give more information and to enable the researcher to follow up on the participants' responses. Intentional, purposive sampling was employed to ensure that students with diverse educational backgrounds and experiences were included. The first question in the interview was a general question about the educational background of the student to situate their responses. It then followed questions that were more targeted towards their encounters and beliefs concerning their teachers as well as the approaches used in the classroom. This structure was intended to develop a step-by-step understanding of the teaching qualities that are being appreciated by students at different learning levels and from both genders. The interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour, which allowed for a detailed look at all of the areas of the interview guide. This duration was considered suitable for resolving all the questions regarding teaching effectiveness without exhausting the participants. To accommodate the participants' circumstances and preferences, interviews were conducted in two modes: face-to-face and online. This dual approach offered flexibility, enabling a broader range of learners to participate despite potential timing or location barriers. However, while the online mode facilitated access and convenience, it occasionally limited the researcher's ability to capture non-verbal cues, which could otherwise provide additional depth to the data. Conversely, face-to-face interviews offered the advantage of richer contextual interaction but were more constrained by geographic and logistical factors. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin. This approach ensured that respondents could express themselves fully and comfortably in the language they were most fluent in, thereby avoiding any potential language barriers that could compromise the quality of the data collected.

The interview data was analysed through thematic analysis. According to the six phases of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2017). The data analysis method used in this study started with the transcription of all the interviews and then reading through all the transcripts in an attempt to get a general understanding of the data. The initial codes were based on the characteristics of the data features found within the entire dataset. These codes were then arranged into possible themes, which were examined and modified for possible inclusion in the research. The subsequent procedure was the classification of themes and giving them appropriate titles, which must have been in relation to the research questions and objectives. Finally, the analysis concluded with the production of a report, where some extracts that captured the themes were chosen in order to present a detailed description of gender and academic performance on students' perceptions of good teaching in a Chinese applied university.

4. Findings

4.1. Teaching Excellence Characteristics in Applied University Lesson preparation

Lesson preparation emerged as a critical parameter of teaching excellence in applied universities, reflecting the importance of updated and accessible course materials. Lesson prep describes the extent to which educators plan and organise their teaching to meet academic and practical needs. Some of the participants, such as I10S, I7S, and I4S, noted that the use of up-to-date materials in lectures improves the learning process. This preparation helps to adjust the content to the modern industry requirements and to involve students in the class activities.

“Having updated materials makes us feel that what we are learning is practical and applicable. When

materials are shared before class; it helps us prepare and engage better during discussions” (Participant I10S).

“When educators provide materials that reflect current industry trends, it motivates us to take the content seriously. It shows that our learning is aligned with real-world applications” (Participant I7S).

Other participants, including I5S and I13S, also pointed to the value of having materials sent to them beforehand in order for them to go through and come prepared for lectures, leading to active participation. This approach shows the significance of careful planning in creating a positive and diverse learning atmosphere.

“Having materials in advance helps us understand the lecture’s focus. It allows us to ask meaningful questions and actively contribute, making the learning experience much more dynamic” (Participant I5S).

“When course materials are shared early, we can explore them at our own pace. This preparation not only boosts our confidence but also fosters deeper discussions during class” (Participant I13S).

This theme reflects the dual characteristics of content appropriateness and ease of use in applied university contexts. The teachers who update their materials and ensure that they give their students timely access to them show that they take teaching as their business. These practices not only help in filling the theory practice gap but also enable students to become more involved in their learning process.

Teaching skills & humour

Teaching skills and humour were identified as determiners of teaching effectiveness in applied universities, indicating that the use of humour in teaching is effective. Teaching skills include the ability of a teacher to explain ideas, create a positive classroom learning environment, and accommodate student requirements. Integrating humour into the teaching was a concept that the participants, especially I10S, I11S, I13S, and I7S, cherished since they had instructors who used jokes in the classroom. They argued that not only did humour make the lessons more fun, but it also reduced stress and encouraged people to take part in class. Using this approach makes the course material easy to understand and develops a bond between the teachers and the students.

“One teacher used humour to explain complex ideas, and it made the class more enjoyable. It felt like learning was fun and not just a serious task” (Participant I11S).

“When instructors incorporate humor, it breaks the monotony and makes complex topics approachable. It helps us stay engaged and creates a friendly atmosphere where we’re comfortable asking questions” (Participant I10S).

This theme captures the need to be professional and at the same time make learning fun and personable. Humour, when applied correctly, fosters a good relationship with the students, gets their attention and makes them remember what you taught them. In applied university settings where practical application of knowledge is paramount, using teaching skills with elements of humour helps to create a comfortable learning environment that fosters active learning and critical thinking.

Professional knowledge & expertise

Professionalism and expertise are the major factors that determine teaching quality in applied universities, focusing on the integration of the theoretical and practical aspects of learning. This theme refers to the extent of a teacher’s subject knowledge and knowledge of the subject area’s current trends and his or her ability to pass the information across to the learners. Participants I4S, I12S, and I7S emphasised the significance of subject matter expertise since it has a direct impact on education quality and significance. Participant 16S also added that those teachers who update themselves in the advances in their discipline will be in a vantage position to impart

knowledge that best prepares the students for the job market. This helps to show that pupils acquire both basic and contemporary knowledge, which is vital to their career development.

“A teacher with deep expertise and a modern perspective on the subject inspires us to aim higher. Their knowledge makes learning meaningful and helps us see its value in real-life scenarios” (Participant I7S).

“It’s inspiring when a teacher knows their subject deeply and connects it with real- world applications. It shows they care about preparing us for the future” (Participant I6S).

This theme highlights that teachers should have comprehensive and up-to-date knowledge. In applied universities, the primary goal is to teach students the practical skills and the industry knowledge that will help them succeed in their careers, as well as the professional knowledge and experience that are the foundation of quality education. Through the connection of the concepts, the subject areas and the practical application of these ideas, teachers prepare the students for the actual work that they are expected to perform.

Attention to students

Attention to students is one of the major dimensions of teaching effectiveness in applied universities, thus underlining the importance of creating a supportive learning environment. This theme demonstrates the teacher’s power to encourage learners, listen to their concerns, and guarantee student’s participation in the learning process. Participants I2S and I6S stressed how teachers should motivate and challenge students to do their best. Participants I1S commented that through listening, teachers make students feel valued and respected, thus improving classroom climate. Additionally, participant I7S highlighted the need for frequent assessment and evaluation on the part of the students in order to keep them interested and to ensure they grasp the concepts being taught. Moreover, participants I12S and I13S also highlighted the need to be conscious of the fact that the students are physically present and actively participating in the class.

“Teachers who motivate us to push our boundaries while being supportive create a positive classroom atmosphere where we feel encouraged to give our best effort” (Participant I2S).

“A great teacher listens to our concerns and makes an effort to understand our struggles. This motivates us to engage more actively in the class” (Participant I1S).

“Frequent assessments and feedback keep us on track and engaged. They ensure we understand the material and stay connected with what’s being taught” (Participant I7S).

“When teachers actively involve everyone, it creates a dynamic environment where we feel accountable and enthusiastic to participate in the learning process” (Participant I13S).

This theme focuses on the importance of embracing a student-centered culture; where teachers are genuinely concerned about the academic and welfare of students. At applied universities, such attentiveness, and motivation are important for creating an environment that not only promotes learning but also readiness for the challenges that define the world and make students feel welcome and valued at educational institution.

Classroom interaction

Classroom interaction emerged as a vital parameter of teaching excellence in applied universities, emphasising the importance of engaging students in meaningful and active participation during lessons. This theme reflects the ability of educators to create a two-way communication channel that fosters engagement and deepens understanding. Participants I6S and I9S noted that teachers who regularly ask questions encourage critical thinking and participation, while participants I4S, I1S, and I7S emphasised the value of two-way interaction in making the classroom dynamic and inclusive. This approach ensures that students are not passive recipients of

knowledge but active contributors to the learning process.

“When teachers ask thought-provoking questions, it challenges us to think critically and articulate our ideas. This makes learning more engaging and interactive” (Participant I6S).

“Dynamic classroom discussions allow us to learn from each other’s perspectives. Teachers who encourage this make the learning process inclusive and more effective” (Participant I7S).

This theme highlights that teaching excellence in applied universities requires interactive teaching methods that involve students as active participants in their learning journey. By fostering two-way communication, teachers not only enhance engagement but also build a collaborative learning culture. Such practices align with the objectives of applied universities to develop students’ problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, preparing them to succeed in both academic and professional settings.

4.2. Variations Observed Among Gender of Teaching Excellence in Applied Universities Lesson preparation

The variations in students’ perceptions of teaching excellence in applied universities reveal nuanced differences between male and female students. Although the findings are based on a small sample (n=13), they highlight key themes that offer insights into gendered expectations in education. In terms of lesson preparation, male students noted that they appreciated getting materials before the lesson to help them prepare for the class, and this was echoed by participants, such as I13S and I5S.

“When teachers provide materials ahead of time, it allows us to review key concepts and come prepared. This helps us engage more effectively during class discussions” (Participant I13S).

“As a student, I find it helpful when materials are shared beforehand, so I can organise my notes and stay focused during lectures” (Participant I5S).

On the other hand, the female students stated that the use of updated content and material was important in order to keep the students interested and relevant, as observed by participants I10S and I8S.

“Using updated materials keeps lessons engaging and shows us that what we’re learning is aligned with current trends, which motivates us to stay interested and focused” (Participant I10S).

“When teachers use relevant and modern content, it makes the topics feel practical and applicable to real-world scenarios, which helps us see the value in what we’re learning” (Participant I8S).

These findings show that although both sexes appreciate planning, they have divergent concerns, which mirror different perceptions concerning teaching methods in practical contexts.

Teaching skills & humour

Regarding teaching skills, and especially the use of humour, male students expressed that this method can facilitate teaching skills, and these particular attitudes are clear from the participants I7S and I13S.

“When a teacher uses humour to explain a tough topic, it not only lightens the mood but also helps us grasp the concept better” (Participant I7S).

“Humour in teaching creates a relaxed environment where learning feels less overwhelming. It helps break down complex ideas into simpler ones, making it easier to understand and remember” (Participant I13S).

Female students, particularly I11S, noted that humour helps to make the class sociable.

“When teachers use humour, it breaks the ice and encourages interaction. It makes the class less formal and more enjoyable, helping us feel comfortable sharing our ideas” (Participant I11S).

This contrast clearly brings out gendered expectations where male participants associated humour with mastering and teaching, as well as females related it to the creation of a positive learning atmosphere.

Professional knowledge & expertise

The experience and the knowledge of a profession were regarded as important by all the students; however, males and females differed in their preferences. The assumption, for example, is that I6S and I12S male students put emphasis on the practical applicability of knowledge by teachers and the occurrence of educational outcomes.

“Teachers with real-world experience make learning practical and relatable. It’s easier to understand concepts when they show how theories are applied in real-life scenarios” (Participant I6S).

“A knowledgeable teacher who connects theory to real-world applications helps us see the relevance of what we’re learning” (Participant I12S).

In contrast, female students such as I4S and I9S suggested that subject content knowledge is a valuable attribute of teachers as they should be knowledgeable about the subject matter.

“A teacher’s deep knowledge of the subject builds our trust in their teaching. It ensures that we’re learning accurate, comprehensive information that is essential for our academic and professional growth” (Participant I4S).

“When teachers demonstrate expertise in their field, it inspires confidence and motivates us to learn. Their subject knowledge ensures that the lessons are thorough and help us grasp the core concepts” (Participant I9S).

Such differences reflect the gendered approach to the assessment of competence, where men focus on practicality and results while women pay attention to validity and professionalism.

Attention to students

Similarly, analysis of the attention paid to the students also showed clear differences based on gender. The male students like I6S argued that motivation and the use of interactive methods to teach were the most important aspects of attentiveness.

“Motivating us through creative and interactive lessons helps build interest and keeps the class dynamic. It’s this attentiveness that makes us feel valued and eager to learn” (Participant I6S).

Females such as I11S noted that teachers should listen to the students’ problems and attend to their needs. *“When a teacher listens to us and addresses our questions, it makes the class more meaningful and shows that they care about our learning” (Participant I11S).*

These views indicate that although both sexes value attentiveness, male learners link it with promoting active participation, while female learners think that it entails paying courtesy to all individuals.

Classroom interaction

Gender differences were also observed in classroom interaction. Male students like I7S said that two-way

communication is effective in making them attentive and understanding what is being taught.

“When teachers encourage open dialogue, it makes the classroom dynamic and keeps us attentive. Being able to share ideas and ask questions enhances both our understanding and participation” (Participant I7S).

Female students, especially from I9S, valued the process of thinking and an opportunity to express their own opinions during the interactions.

“Frequent questions and discussions in class push us to think critically and articulate our ideas clearly” (Participant I9S).

These differences can be attributed to gender differences, as males prefer interaction for the sake of communication while females appreciate it for growth in knowledge.

These observations, although based on a limited sample, shed light on the diverse perceptions and concerns regarding the assessment of the teaching performance in applied universities by male and female students.

4.3. Varied Perceptions Based on Academic Performance of Teaching Excellence in Applied Universities Lesson preparation

The student's academic achievement levels show different attitudes towards lesson preparation as a parameter of teaching quality. Low-achieving students, such as I1S, complain that the use of old learning materials is unhelpful and hampers their learning. These students, therefore, appreciate content that is relevant to the current academic and market demands, and therefore, the educators need to prove their credibility by preparing well.

“Outdated materials make it hard for us to stay engaged or see the relevance of what we're learning. Teachers who provide updated content make lessons more meaningful and beneficial” (Participant I1S).

The good performing students, the I5S, prefer a lot of structure in their preparation and enjoy lessons that are planned in a manner that enables them to work through the material effectively.

“Structured lessons make it easier for us to follow along and absorb the material effectively. When teachers prepare thoroughly, it creates a learning environment that supports our academic success” (Participant I5S).

Furthermore, excellent-performing students such as I10S and I12S value up-to-date information and analytical approaches, insisting that course materials should be relevant to current knowledge and practice.

“Up-to-date course materials ensure we're learning what's relevant and applicable in today's world. Analytical approaches help us think critically and connect theoretical knowledge to practical applications” (Participant I10S).

“When teachers prepare updated content that connects with real-world applications, it shows they care about our learning and ensures the class remains engaging and impactful for everyone” (Participant I12S).

This shows a range of expectations where the underachievers require applicability, the average achievement seekers want organisation, and the high achievers want creativity.

Teaching skills and humour

The use of teaching skills and humour also portrays a number of perceptions depending on academic achievement. The poor-performing students use humour as a compensatory strategy, as I1S explained that humour alone cannot solve the disengagement resulting from tedious lectures.

“Humour can lighten the mood, but it doesn’t make up for dull or overly tedious lessons. Teachers need to balance humour with engaging content to truly capture our attention” (Participant I1S).

Good-performing students like I6S enjoy and value humour so as to ensure they have a clear understanding of the content as well as remain focused.

“Humour keeps the class engaging and helps us stay focused, making it easier to grasp complex concepts. It creates a positive learning environment that supports understanding and retention” (Participant I6S).

For high-achieving students like I3S and I12S, humour is an important aspect of a lively teaching and learning environment. They consider humour to be part of good teaching, stimulating thinking and engrossing the learners.

“Humour adds energy to the classroom, making learning enjoyable and engaging. It sparks curiosity, encourages participation, and helps us think more critically about the topics being discussed” (Participant I3S).

“A teacher who uses humour effectively not only makes the lessons more enjoyable but also creates an atmosphere where students feel comfortable asking questions and exploring complex ideas” (Participant I12S).

This shows that expectations are rising, and humour moves from being a way of getting students’ attention to being a sign of good teaching.

Professional knowledge and expertise

According to the findings, students highly regard professional knowledge and expertise, but the understanding of the value varies depending on the performance of the students. Low-achieving students, including I1S, complain that teachers who are not well-informed in their areas of teaching fail to provide adequate answers to questions or explanations.

“Teachers lacking deep knowledge in their subject struggle to explain concepts clearly or answer questions effectively, which makes it difficult for us to understand and stay engaged” (Participant I1S).

It is also evident from the findings that good-performing students, like I6S, value understanding as they appreciate the efforts made by their teachers to explain things as simply as they can.

“Teachers who simplify complex topics make learning more accessible and enjoyable. Their ability to break down information helps us understand the material thoroughly and perform better academically” (Participant I6S).

The high-achieving students, like I10S, require their teachers not only to be knowledgeable but also to update their classes with the latest theories and practices.

“An exceptional teacher goes beyond the basics, integrating current advancements into lessons to show how theoretical concepts connect with real-world applications” (Participant I10S).

This is a clear, gradual refinement of expectation: the poor learners want to perform well, the average learners want the content to be well explained, and the high-achieving learners want new and applicable content.

Attention to students

It was also revealed that students' perceptions of teacher's attention are not equal based on academic achievement. Students who perform poorly, like I7S, complain that teachers do not impose order and discipline and address learners' disengagement throughout the class.

“Without proper discipline and order, it's hard to stay focused during class. Teachers need to address disengagement to ensure that all students, especially those struggling, remain attentive and involved” (Participant I7S)

Good performing students, including I6S, expect teachers to be attentive and engage the learners in class because attentiveness is a motivator.

“When teachers observe our participation and address individual challenges, it shows they are invested in our success and creates a learning environment that motivates us to improve” (Participant I6S).

Students in the excellent performance category, like I12S, hold a progressive, student-centred approach in high esteem, as they expect teachers to establish a balance between discipline and creativity, for better performance.

“A balanced approach where teachers maintain discipline while actively engaging students creates an environment that supports both focus and creativity, leading to better academic performance” (Participant I12S).

These perceptions demonstrate how attentiveness moves from being a matter of control to being a means of connection and the cultivation of student success.

Classroom interaction

Classroom interaction is another domain where students' academic achievement differs and hence defines their behaviours. Those students who underperform, like I1S, require interaction as a way of keeping them on track and preventing them from losing interest, which supports the idea that there should be more and proper interaction in lessons.

“Interaction during lessons helps keep us engaged and focused, especially when we struggle with the material. It creates opportunities to clarify doubts and stay connected with the learning process” (Participant I1S).

Good-performing students such as the I5S understand that interaction is helpful in reinforcing learning and prefer teachers who moderate the conversation and encourage engagement.

“Interactive discussions allow us to test our understanding and reinforce what we've learned. Teachers who guide these conversations effectively help us grasp concepts more thoroughly and stay engaged” (Participant I5S).

As for the excellent performing students like I8S and I10S, they understand interaction as a process in which two or more entities engage in a reciprocal relationship and value the chance to think independently and solve problems in a team.

“Interaction helps us develop independent thinking by exposing us to diverse perspectives. Working in teams to solve problems enhances our critical thinking and prepares us for real-world challenges”

(Participant I8S).

“An interactive classroom lets students explore ideas and challenge perspectives, creating a shared learning experience that deepens understanding and prepares us for real-world problem-solving”
(Participant I10S).

This is a process of gradual change whereby interaction moves from the basic desire to direct attention to a place to a forum for learning and thinking. This study also shows how the students' academic achievement affects their perceptions of quality teaching. These perspectives help in understanding how teaching methods should be in the applied universities to meet the students' needs.

5. Discussion

In terms of Teaching Excellence Characteristics in Applied Universities, the findings of this study suggest that teaching practice in applied universities relates more to Humanistic Teaching Theory rather than Danielson's Framework for Teaching practice among this ethnocentric sample. Humanistic Teaching Theory particularly highlights students' participation, their personality, and self-actualisation, which were strong teaching factors. For example, concerns with lesson preparation and the use of relevant teaching aids are consistent with the theory and meet the individual and practical needs of the learners (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020). Likewise, a sense of humour and interaction in a classroom are also associated with creating a natural environment to support learners, which is a mission and vision in the application of the humanistic approach (Putri et al., 2024). Conversely, Danielson's Framework mainly comprises fixed instructional categories such as planning and professionalism and, though essential, does not necessarily capture the interpersonal and communicational aspects highlighted by the students in this sample (Morris-Mathews et al., 2021). For instance, humour and two-way interaction show the student's need for a humanistic approach, which is partially covered by Danielson's model (Kettler & Reddy, 2019). Hence, the Humanistic Teaching Theory is a better approach to satisfying the varying wants and ongoing relational aspects vital for effective teaching in applied universities. It focuses on the students; therefore, it is more conducive to the development of realistic and purposeful learning.

In terms of gendered expectations in teaching excellence in applied universities, similar findings also showed that gender is a determinant of perceptions of teaching effectiveness. In like manner, Ibrohim et al. (2022) revealed that gender is a demographic factor that influences the perception of teaching efficacy, and females have a higher tendency to provide positive feedback on teaching quality compared to males. This is in consonance with the present research where female students ranked the appropriateness of the teaching materials as their foremost concern; this may indicate a trend in educational settings where women learners have higher standards concerning teaching quality. Furthermore, Atwa et al. (2020) found that female students are more likely to be critical in the quality of teaching and learning environment, especially the participation and involvement of learners in the class. This agrees with the current study's findings that assign female students to value such aspects of classroom experience as meaningful student-teacher interactions. Moreover, Bakhshialiabad et al. (2019) also found important differences between males and females regarding their attitudes towards several aspects of the educational context, which strengthens the idea that gender influences the experience and expectations of learning and teaching. These studies together support the conclusions of the present research that gender is an important factor in understanding students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness in applied university contexts.

In terms of varied perceptions based on the academic performance of teaching excellence in applied universities, several studies have shown how academic achievement affects students' perceptions of instruction. For example, Desai et al. (2022) established that students who perform well academically have a positive perception of their learning environment and expect quality teaching. This corresponds with this study, which found that excellent students insist on up-to-date relevance and meaningful content from their teachers. Furthermore, Lubicz- Nawrocka and Bunting (2019) revealed that the student's choice of nominees for the teaching awards depends on their expectations for teaching quality, which differs based on the academic standing of the students. They pointed out that mastering students usually not only appreciate the material taught but also the approach used by the teacher, which supports the assumption that expectations of teaching effectiveness

are related to students' achievements. Moreover, Avci and Kalelioğlu (2019) came up with similar findings that showed that students' perceptions of the quality of teaching depend on their academic achievement. In their research, they determined that students with higher academic achievement levels give more positive ratings of the teaching practices, which supports the notion that clear communication and organisation in lessons should be seen as essential for effective teaching. This is in concurrence with the current study that revealed that excellent students expect their lecturers to make use of up-to-date relevance and scholarly challenge. These studies together support the results of the present research and prove that the attitude towards teaching quality depends on academic achievement in concrete applied conditions of a university.

However, there is a lack of empirical evidence in the current study regarding the importance of teaching profession qualifications and their relationship to the effectiveness of teaching. Credentialing and continuing education are essential to providing teachers with formal skills and current approaches to practice and subject matter specialities. Scientific evidence suggests that professional development results in improved self-reported teacher efficacy in the domain of lesson planning and management, as well as student engagement (Bruno & Tippett, 2022). Moreover, more qualified teachers are capable of implementing updated, contemporary material into practice, another essential condition of applied university environments (Regis et al., 2022). Research also confirms that resultant professional training programs related to active learning paradigms and pedagogy add substantially to instructional quality (Niemi et al., 2016). For instance, the subject-specific professional learning opportunity allows teachers to offer not only basic knowledge but also updated and relevant information on various learners' needs (Tran & Do, 2020). By not exploring the use of professional qualifications in the research study, this particular research fails to capture an aspect of teaching proficiency that would be appropriate, especially for the applied universities which focus on vocational training, among others. Subsequent studies should consider teacher quality and teacher training as permanent features of teaching performance to obtain broader insight into the concept of teaching excellence.

6. Conclusion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into gender and academic achievement as factors that influence students' perceptions of teaching quality in a Chinese applied university. This research revealed that female students considered the practicality and the up-to-dateness of the course materials as the most important criteria that determine a teacher's professionalism in applied universities. On the other hand, males were more concerned with the structure of the lessons, a characteristic of practical universities. Furthermore, students' academic achievement levels have a strong effect on their perceptions of teaching quality in applied universities in China. The students with low performance complained of such things as outdated content and lack of participation, whilst the excellent students valued clear preparation and organisation of courses offered at the applied university. However, excellent students are not only seeking updated information but also significant thinking and lively class discussions that demonstrate a profound knowledge of teaching methods. The study identified that although all the students in the focus groups appreciate preparation, they have different critiques and expectations depending on their academic progress, indicating a complex understanding of learning needs and desires. This difference in perception stresses the need for faculty members at applied universities to align their teaching approaches with the varying needs of students in terms of their academic achievements in order to improve overall the quality of teaching and learning and students' satisfaction.

From this study, some useful information was gained concerning gender differences in students' perceptions of excellent teaching according to their academic performance at a typical applied university in Hebei province, China. Nevertheless, there were some drawbacks in the research process. First of all, the sample of this study is 13 students, which is sufficient for data saturation but may not be fully generalisable to other students from various majors and achievement levels. Secondly, semi-structured interviews that were used as a source of qualitative data might have been affected by interviewer bias, and, therefore, subjects' answers were restricted to the topics set by the interviewer. Third, there is a possibility that the data collected may not be as consistent or detailed as it would have been with only face-to-face interviews simply because online interviews may not allow for observation of non-verbal communication that could form part of the context of the respondent's answers. Furthermore, the sampling technique limited the subject to the senior students only, which may not give the view of students in other academic classes. Finally, the thematic analysis used in this study can

be useful in identifying the main themes, but the results may be rather personal and can be a result of the research rather than a comprehensive analysis of the issue. These limitations indicate that the findings give promising initial results that, however, should be treated with caution and more research is recommended to expand the understanding of the studied processes.

Based on the limitations found in the initial study, the following recommendations for future research are proposed. First of all, the participant sample may be increased in size and made more diverse. To avoid limitations in generalising the findings, it would be useful to include students of different years of study and from different universities. Moreover, the lack of generalizability of results can be mitigated by using mixed-methods research design. It could be useful to use numerical values to establish the effectiveness of gender and academic achievement in the perception of teaching quality. Future research may also need to standardise the interview process further for online and face-to-face interviews, perhaps through the use of sophisticated technology that can help capture aspects of communication that are lost in online interviews. To minimise the effects of interviewer bias, using many interviewers or a technique known as blind analysis could be used. Second, comparing the views of students and faculty members would provide a better understanding of what makes teaching excellent. Furthermore, future research should undertake longitudinal designs in order to establish shifts in perceptions related to changing educational interventions and student profiles.

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