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COVID-19 Reshaped Students' Perceptions of Teaching Excellence but not their Evaluations of Teaching

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Abstract

Teaching excellence (TE) at the tertiary level has been extensively researched, with student perceptions of its frequency and the educator attributes that comprise it, increasingly important for student retention and learning, and institutional quality and benchmarking purposes. Despite its myriad of issues, student evaluation of teaching instruments (SETs) are the most commonly used proxies for TE. University students enrolled in medicine, nursing and health science courses were surveyed about TE-associated educator attributes before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were also surveyed about the frequency of TE they experienced, and this was compared with metrics for associated unit SETs. Students' 2022 perceptions of the frequency of TE were significantly lower than those for 2017, both overall and based on years of university study. Conversely, the mean 2022 SET was significantly higher than that of 2017, indicating a discordance between the perceived frequency of TE and SETs. Applying a framework with validated TE 'themes', we found a significant difference between pre- and post-pandemic values for the overall cohorts and non-first year students' weightings of educator attributes that best describe TE. No such difference was found for first year students. These results strengthen calls for tertiary institutions to develop more authentic TE criteria, bespoke and dynamic SETs that more accurately reflect TE, and relevant educator professional development that will enhance students' learning gain and overall university experience. The implementation of such initiatives will be increasingly important in a rapidly changing and more disrupted tertiary environment.

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Introduction

Teaching quality is an issue of continuing importance in today's increasingly globalised and competitive higher education (HE) sector. Teaching excellence (TE) is a crucial contributing factor to student engagement and retention (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019), learning and academic achievement (Eyler, 2018; Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019), and graduate employability (Wilcox, 2021). Further, TE is also widely used for university marketing and benchmarking purposes (Gunn & Fisk, 2013). In disciplines such as medicine, nursing and health sciences (MNHS), within a research-intensive Australian university, TE assumes perhaps greater importance due to the broad appeal of MNHS courses from local and international students and the crucial need to optimally equip such graduates for a post-pandemic world (Asad et al., 2024). Given these general and contextual factors, it is perhaps not surprising that tertiary institutions invest considerable resources in measuring and rewarding TE, and research related to TE has increased markedly over the past two decades (Land & Gordon, 2015).

Regardless of the educational setting - secondary or tertiary - students should ideally experience excellent teaching on a frequent basis. Thus, the frequency of TE can be defined as the product of the periodicity and effectiveness of high-quality teaching (Ko & Sammons, 2013), in terms of student engagement and learning gain, among other factors. Despite a plethora of scholarship, there remain diverse conceptions of TE (Bartram et al., 2019; Heron et al., 2021; Johnson, 2021), which has neither a broadly accepted definition (Ka Yuk Chan & Chen, 2023), nor a universally adopted framework for it. At the course unit level, the commonly used benchmark of TE, and by proxy, teaching quality (Zabaleta, 2007), is the Students Evaluation of Teaching (SETs) instrument. The use of SETs is almost universal across the HE sector as a means for tertiary students to appraise their unit learning experience (Clayson, 2009). Beyond the unit level, TE is recognised by a range of faculty, institutional and national awards, typically evidencing an individual's high-quality teaching for longer periods of time and across different contexts (e.g. leadership, scholarship).

Literature

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global HE sector experienced repeated, major disruptions (Neuwirth et al., 2021) generating impacts for all stakeholders, including students, staff, institutions, and employers. Recent literature has reported on a wide range of negative effects of the pandemic on students' overall learning experience (Brown et al., 2022; Hagedorn et al., 2022; O'Shea et al., 2021). These impacts on students, including a decline in their motivation and mental health, are partly a consequence of emergency remote teaching or ERT (Shin & Hickey, 2021), implemented at the early stages of the pandemic. For MNHS students in particular, high curricular workloads and an inability to engage in discipline-specific placements or practical activities frequently resulted in lower academic achievement and a diminished learning experience (Ibda et al., 2023).

A burgeoning TE-related literature has identified a range of attributes that tertiary students consider to be most closely aligned with the quality of their educators (Baglione et al., 2012; Baglione & Tucci, 2019; Su & Wood, 2012) and their course experience (Cooper, 2019). While a number of TE frameworks have been designed and implemented, many encompass multiple factors that are difficult to quantify objectively. For example, the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (Ashwin, 2017) includes elements such as learning environment (e.g. resources, scholarship, research, professional practice), teaching quality (e.g. student engagement and feedback), student outcomes and learning gain (employment, further study, employability and transferrable skills) (DfE, 2017). Given the complexity of such frameworks, and the above-mentioned difficulty in accurately measuring these variables, the value that students ascribe to particular educator attributes may be a more accurate validation of TE. To this end, Parmenter and Robertson (2022) recently implemented a framework comprising four broad behavioural 'themes' denoting good university teaching: namely, Communication, Clarity, Commitment, and Care. This framework's publication in 2022 is timely, as it provides a suitable fulcrum for the pre-pandemic TE-related literature and for post-pandemic contexts and conceptions of TE (Ka Yuk Chan & Chen, 2023).

The use of SETs and their overall tertiary course experience has quite a long history, with a particular upsurge from the early 20th century (Ali et al., 2021). At Monash University, SETs provide measures of both teaching and unit quality together with the opportunity for open-ended student comments. SETs are frequently used in educators' applications for teaching awards (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bunting, 2019) and promotion. Despite this, previous research has shown SETs to be a poor measure of teaching quality (Alauddin & Kifle, 2014; Esarey & Valdes, 2020; Spooren et al., 2013). The key issues, as succinctly described by Ali et al. (2021), lie principally in their lack of reliability and validity. In relation to the latter, while Clayson (2009) reported a small correlation between SETs scores and student learning, a more recent meta-analysis by Uttl et al. (2017) found no correlation between these variables. It might be expected therefore that the pandemic would negatively affect SETs, and if so, also generate a decline in students' perceptions on the frequency of TE.

Despite a thorough search of the literature, nothing appears to have been published about pandemic-related impacts on students' perceptions of the frequency of TE, and the educator attributes they most strongly associate with it. Students' perceptions of the frequency of TE as they emerged from ERT is a vital consideration, as is how the impacts of the pandemic may have rebalanced students' perceptions of the educator attributes that they value with respect to such excellence. Additionally, in an institutional context, SETs are used as analogues of TE, with educators teaching into units that achieve a score of 4.75 or above (out of 5) being recognised for the quality of their teaching.

Due to the multiple challenges generated by COVID-19 on students' learning experiences, the pandemic's impacts on student perceptions of TE are worthy of investigation, to more strongly interrogate the relationship between TE and SETs, and to better plan for and mitigate against future disruptions. Therefore, the principal aim of this study was to investigate whether students' perceptions of the frequency of TE, associated educator attributes, and unit SETs differed between 2017 and 2022; i.e. before and after the onset of COVID-19. The research questions that guided this study were, in terms of pre- and post-pandemic:

1. What are students' perceptions of the frequency of TE, and is this influenced by their years of university study?
2. Is there a correlation between students' perceived frequency of TE and SETs?
3. Which educator attributes do students consider best describe TE, and is this influenced by their years of university study?

Method

Study design

The study sought to investigate students' perspectives of the frequency of TE they experienced, and the educators' attributes that best describe TE. The research was empirical and non-experimental in nature, with quantitative data providing frequency counts for these variables. The surveys were cross-sectional in nature as they provided data at specific time points and allowed inferences to be made about the sampled MNHS student populations. The study design enabled the collection and analysis of sufficient data to answer the underlying research questions.

Students' perceptions of the frequency of TE were obtained through use of a single, tailored Likert-scale question (Table 1). The second survey question asked students to select educator attributes that best described TE (choice of five out of twenty; Table 1). Selection of the twenty educator attributes for the survey was based on student researcher perspectives together with the scholarly literature (Baglione et al., 2012; Ilic et al., 2016; Su & Wood, 2012).

Table 1

Frequency of TE and Educator Attribute Survey Questions

Topic	Question
<i>Perspectives on teaching excellence</i>	Rate the following statement: How often have you experienced excellent teaching (at a higher education institution)? (hardly ever [1], sometimes [2], often [3], frequently [4], very frequently [5]).
<i>Educator attributes associated with excellent teaching</i>	Choose five of the following attributes that you believe best describes teaching excellence (accepts feedback, acknowledges and cares about student concerns/empathetic, adaptable to students' needs, charismatic and confident, creates a safe environment, enthusiastic, explains assessment material clearly, fair and flexible, friendly and kind, humorous, intellectually stimulating, inspiring, knowledgeable and experienced in the field, passionate, prepared and organised, prompt response and interactive, provides constructive feedback, respectful, sets boundaries, tries new techniques/innovative).

Attributes ($n_{2017}=330$, $n_{2022}=1915$) were categorised into the four broad behavioural themes of Parmenter and Robertson (2022). These themes were adopted due to their contemporary value and broader concordance with TE-related literature (Gunn & Fisk, 2013; Land & Gordon, 2015; Johnson, 2021).

Study participants

Students enrolled in the MNHS faculty at Monash University were invited to participate in an anonymous survey regarding their experiences of TE. In July 2017, the survey was distributed through social media via Facebook 'groups', and in October 2022 was emailed directly to students. Participants voluntarily undertook the survey, using a tailored Google form. Students' demographics data were collected and tabulated (Table 2). Students who identified as having 0-1 years of university study (herein referred to as 'first year' students) were identified with 100% certainty as new enrolments in each sample year.

Table 2

Participant Demographics (Indications for Each Sample Year are Number of Participants and %)

Years of university study	2017	2022
0-1	17 (25.8)	43 (11.3)
1-2	10 (15.2)	45 (11.8)
2-3	25 (37.9)	46 (12.0)
3-4	7 (10.6)	59 (15.4)
4-5	1 (1.5)	61 (6.0)
5+	6 (9.1)	128 (33.4)
Prefer not to answer	0 (0.0)	1 (0.3)
Total	66 (100)	383 (100)

Student evaluation of teaching

Faculty unit SET data for 2017 (n=757) and 2022 (n=761) were obtained from Monash University records, with the question of 'overall satisfaction', the most commonly used metric of teaching satisfaction, chosen for analysis.

Data analysis and ethics approval

Analyses of differences between means for sample years and year levels were carried out using unpaired Student's *t*-test (Gösset, 1908), which is a widely used statistical test to compare the attributes of two samples. The data passed screening for normality, with analyses carried out in MS Excel™, using $p < 0.05$ as the threshold of significance for all comparisons. Tests of association among categorical variables - the proportions of the broad educator attribute themes - were conducted using chi-square analysis (Zibran, 2007). These tests also incorporated Yates' correction, which addresses unequal sample sizes and is more conservative, and thus less likely to generate a Type I error (Brown, 2004). This study was approved by Monash University Human Research Ethics (CF16/2248 - 2016001111 for the 2017 sampling, and 36045 for the 2022 sampling).

Results

Students' perceptions of the frequency of TE, overall and stratified by years of study

Combining all years of study, MNHS students' mean perceived frequency of TE for 2017 (3.59 ± 0.09) was significantly higher ($T = 2.24$, $p < 0.0001$) than that for 2022 (3.00 ± 0.05). This difference between sample years was also significant for each of first year students (Figure 1 - A) and non-first year students (Figure 1 - B). First year and non-first year students' perceptions of TE were not significantly different for both sample years (compare pairs of white columns and pairs of grey columns in Figure 1).

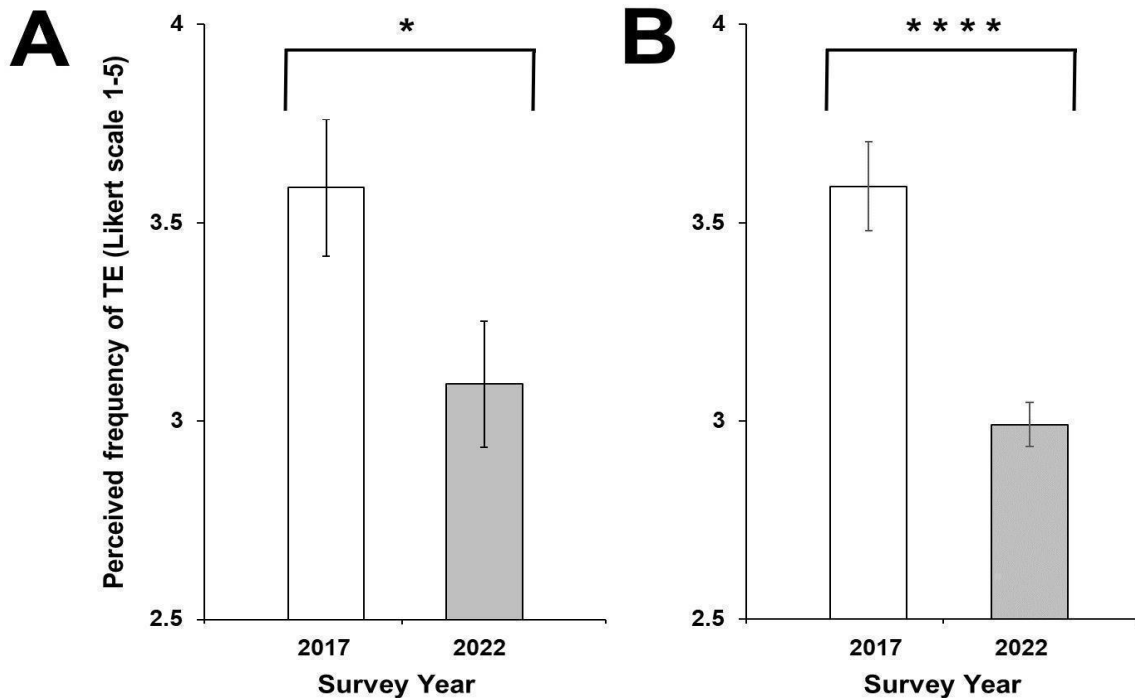
Comparing students' perceptions of the frequency of TE with SETs

While students' perceptions of the frequency of TE for 2017 was significantly higher than that for 2022 (see above), the mean SET score for 2017 (3.96 ± 0.02) was significantly lower ($T = 1.83$, $p = 0.0002$) than for 2022 (4.08 ± 0.02).

Stratified by years of study, for both first year and non-first year students, the 2022 mean SET score was significantly higher than that for 2017 (Figure 2), which contrasts with students' perceptions of the frequency of TE (Figure 1). First year and non-first year student SET scores were not significantly different for both sample years (compare pairs of white columns and pairs of grey columns in Figure 2).

Figure 1

Perceptions of The Frequency of TE Among (A) First Year Students and (B) Non-First Year Students. Values Represent Means \pm SEM. * Denotes $p < 0.05$; **** Denotes $p < 0.0001$



Aggregated students' frequency analysis of educator attributes associated with TE

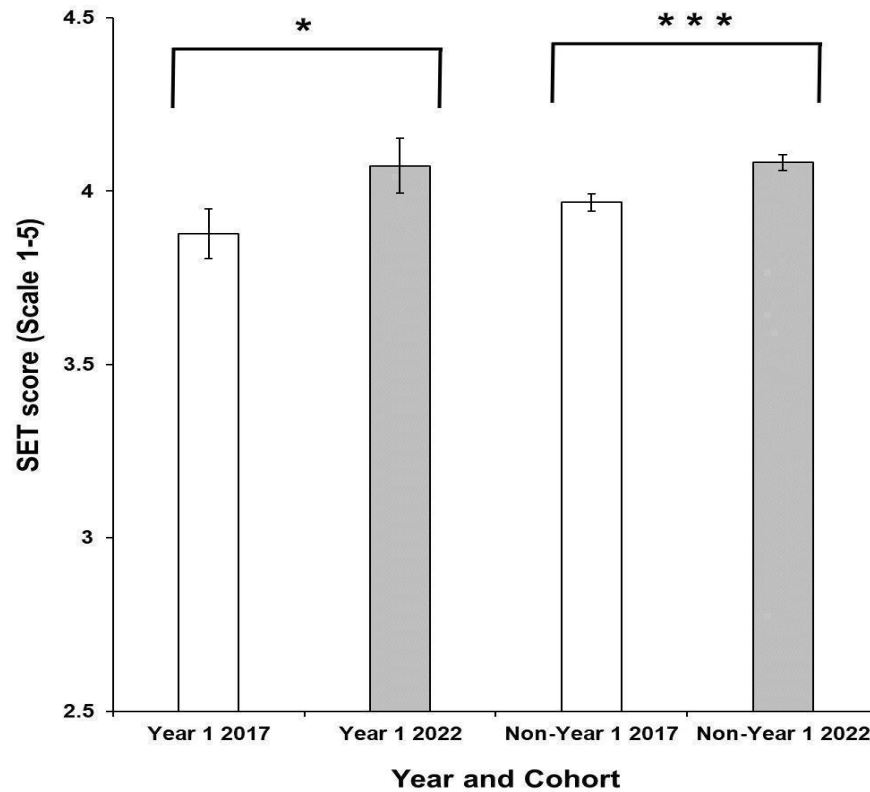
For 2017, the three most common educator attributes students associated with TE were; being *intellectually stimulating* (Clarity), being *passionate* (Commitment), and *providing constructive feedback* (Communication). For 2022, the corresponding top three educator attributes were being *knowledgeable and experienced in the field* (Clarity), *acknowledging and caring about student concerns* (Care), and *providing constructive feedback* (Communication).

For the overall cohort, the educator attribute that increased most in value (5.5%) comparing 2017 to 2022, was being *adaptable to students' needs* (Care). The corresponding attribute that decreased most (-5.7%) was being *passionate* (Commitment).

Comparing aggregates of 2017 and 2022 for each theme, Communication attributes decreased by 4.7%, Clarity attributes decreased by 3.7%, Commitment attributes decreased by 4.4%, and Care attributes increased by 13.5%: these proportions were significantly different from those expected ($\chi^2 = 26.0$, $p < 0.00001$).

Figure 2

SET Scores For First Year ($n_{2017}= 74$ Units, $n_{2022}= 81$) And Non-First Year ($n_{2017}= 683$ Units, $n_{2022}= 683$ Units). *** Denotes $p < 0.001$; All Other Indications Per Figure 1.



First year students' frequency analysis of educator attributes associated with TE

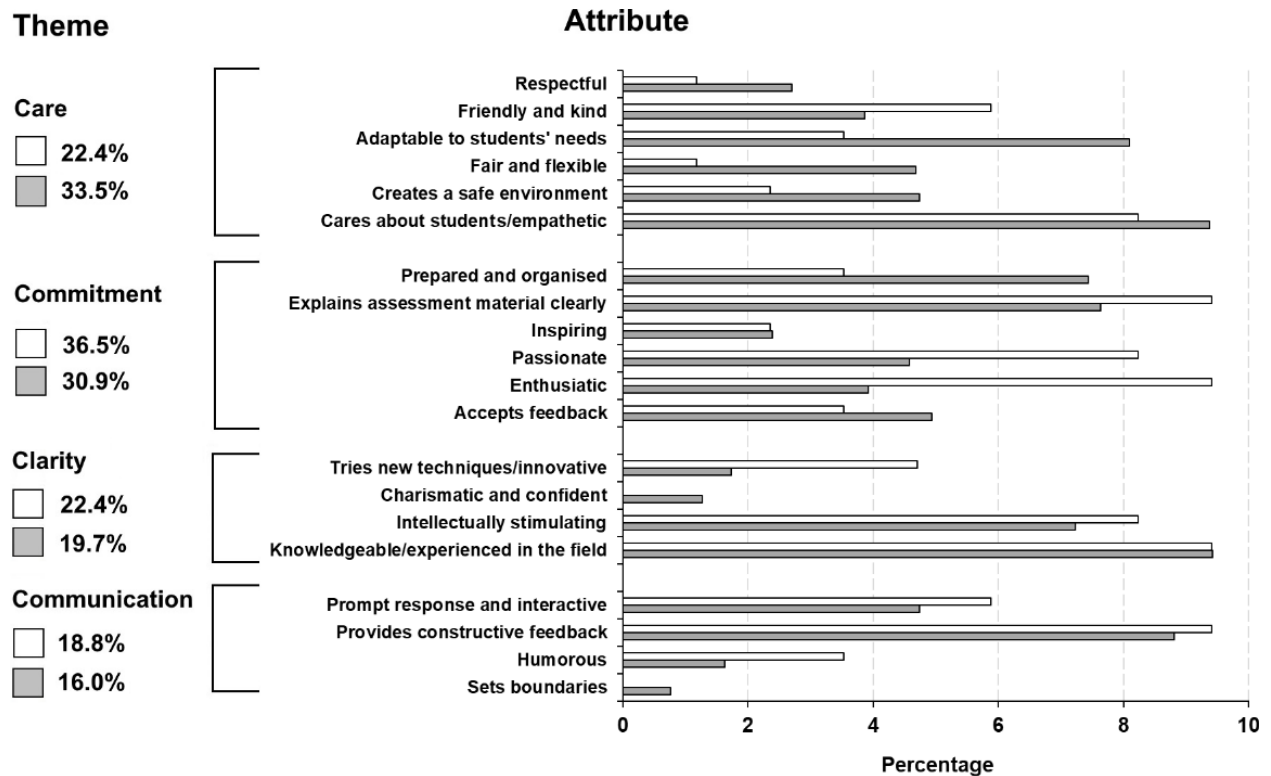
For 2017, the three most common educator attributes that first year students associated with TE were; *explaining assessment material clearly* (Commitment), being *enthusiastic* (Commitment), and *providing constructive feedback* (Communication) (white bars, Figure 3). For 2022, the corresponding top three educator attributes were being *knowledgeable and experienced in the field* (Clarity), *acknowledging and caring about student concerns* (Care), and being *adaptable to students' needs* (Care) (grey bars, Figure 3).

Among first year students, the educator attribute that increased most in value (4.6%), comparing 2017 to 2022, was being *adaptable to students' needs* (Care; Figure 3). The corresponding attribute that decreased most (-5.5%) was being *enthusiastic* (Commitment; Figure 3).

Comparing 2017 and 2022 aggregates in each theme, Communication attributes decreased by 2.8%, Clarity attributes decreased by 2.7%, Commitment attributes decreased by 5.6%, and Care attributes increased by 11.1% (Figure 3): these changes were not significant ($\chi^2 = 7.2$, $p = 0.07$).

Figure 3

First Year Students' Perceptions of Educator Attributes that Best Describe TE, in 2017 and 2022, Ordered by Theme. White Boxes and Bars, 2017; Grey Boxes and Bars, 2022 (n₂₀₁₇=85, n₂₀₂₂=215).



Non-first year students' frequency analysis of educator attributes associated with TE

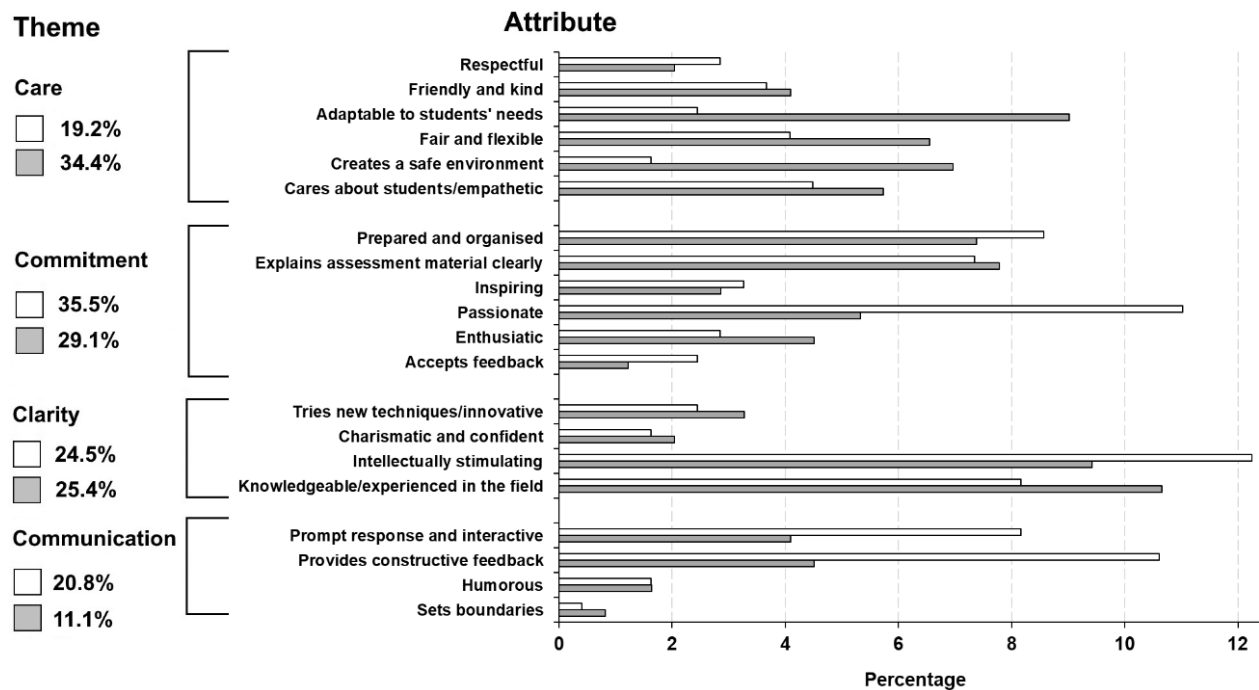
For 2017, the three most common educator attributes that non-first year students associated with TE were; being *intellectually stimulating* (Clarity), being *passionate* (Commitment), and *providing constructive feedback* (Communication) (white bars, Figure 4). For 2022, the corresponding top three attributes were being *knowledgeable and experienced in the field* (Clarity), *intellectually stimulating* (Clarity), and *adaptable to students' needs* (Care) (grey bars, Figure 4).

The educator attribute that increased most in value (5.3%) for non-first year students, comparing 2017 to 2022, was *creating a safe environment* (Care; Figure 4). The corresponding attribute that decreased most (-6.1%) was *providing constructive feedback* (Communication; Figure 4).

Comparing 2017 and 2022, in aggregate for each theme, Communication attributes decreased by 9.8%, Clarity attributes increased by 0.9%, Commitment attributes decreased by 6.4%, and Care attributes increased by 15.2% (Figure 4): these changes were significantly different ($\chi^2 = 21.0, p = 0.0001$).

Figure 4

Non-First Year Students' Perceptions of Educator Attributes that Best Describe TE, in 2017 and 22, Ordered by Theme. All Indications Per Figure 3 (n₂₀₁₇=245, n₂₀₂₂=1700).



Discussion

Students' perceptions of the frequency of TE, overall and stratified by years of study

That MNHS students perceived a significantly lower frequency of TE for 2022 compared to 2017 is likely to be a consequence of the rapid pivot to ERT at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of which have been evaluated from the perspective of students and educators (Calderon et al., 2022) and educators themselves (McGill et al., 2021). Students who enrolled in 2020 and 2021 likely anticipated, at the very least, a blended learning experience and ERT may have prevented value for money, in particular for international, full-fee paying students (Martin, 2020). Recent literature indicates Australian students were not sufficiently equipped to learn on a fully online basis at short notice and during repeated, disruptive lockdowns (Fang et al., 2023). While most students would have been broadly familiar with pre-2020 models of blended learning, they nonetheless had a negative learning experience during the pandemic years. This was likely due to various factors, including a lack of access to technology, equipment and opportunities for labs and fieldwork (Day et al., 2021), a paucity of information and resources (Lassoued et al., 2020), and importantly, an inability to engage meaningfully with course content, peers and educators (Fabian et al., 2022).

Upon implementation of ERT, Martin (2020) contends that Australian tertiary educators were not equipped to effectively engage students online. This may have resulted from factors including

educators' unpreparedness to teach in an online environment (Rodriguez-Mejia et al., 2021), perhaps due to a lack of targeted professional development (PD) (Hartshorne et al., 2020), and/or their lack of proficiency for such teaching (Ahmed & Opoku, 2022). In this context, Armellini and Rodriguez (2022) reported that educators' readiness to engage in PD was significantly positively correlated with both their prior pedagogical knowledge and digital competence. Conversely, a high proportion of tertiary educators, in particular casual academics, do not engage in PD (Hattam & Weiler, 2022; Hitch et al., 2018), due to constraints including a lack of time, remuneration, and high cost-benefit ratio (Hitch et al., 2018). The reluctance of educators to engage in PD is likely to reflect the situation in research-intensive universities such as that in which the study was conducted. This highlights the importance of ongoing, relevant educator PD to both improve teaching quality (vis-à-vis TE) and better mitigate the potential impacts of future disruptions on student engagement and learning (Al-Naabi et al., 2021). It also has considerable potential to enhance the marketability and appeal for potential students and employers via scholarship (e.g. Krause, 2021), and analytics provided by the Australian Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT, 2023).

Regarding first year students' perceptions of the frequency of TE, it might reasonably be expected that these values would have been similar for both sample years. This is because the curricula, teaching modes and balance between online and face-to-face learning were largely similar in mid-2017 (pre-pandemic) and late 2022 (post-pandemic). That this was not the case may be explained by the factors outlined above, together with the possibility that students in different year levels communicated about changes to pre- and post-pandemic course curricula (e.g. learning activities and assessments), either informally and/or formally through peer mentorship, as has been reported for these disciplines (Kazerooni et al., 2020).

Comparison of students' perceptions of the frequency of TE with unit SETs

Our finding of a discordance between students' perceptions of the frequency of TE and MNHS unit SET scores, pre- and post-pandemic, bolsters widespread concerns of the assumed causality between teaching quality - and by proxy, TE - and SETs (Palmer, 2012). Our finding likely resulted from interactions among several variables, including the very large number of MNHS units from which SETs were obtained, with the range of disciplines and modes of study within MNHS (e.g. fully online versus blended), and the undergraduate and postgraduate nature of such units. Additionally, SETs are influenced by a wide range of other factors, including students' academic standing (Ackerman et al., 2009) and their individual preferences (Gross et al., 2009), leading to the increasingly popular supposition that SETs are an inexact and inappropriate predictor of TE. The results provide an opportunity for more finely-grained investigation, which reinforces calls to make SETs more unbiased (e.g. Esarey & Valdes, 2020) and through this, more authentic.

Aggregated students' frequency analysis of educator attributes associated with TE

The success of classifying MNHS educator attributes into the four broad behavioural themes, with moderate to strong representation for each theme, suggests the framework originally designed and implemented by Parmenter and Robertson (2022) for engineering students may be usefully applied more broadly in the tertiary education sector. This would provide the opportunity for further investigation and contextualisation of TE beyond MNHS disciplines and research-intensive

institutions, such as the one used for this study. In a broader sense, the framework may also be useful in investigating the permanency or transience of students' valuation of attributes that they most strongly associate with TE in post-pandemic environments. That is of potential value for educators to target student learning gain more accurately, and also for institutions in recognising and rewarding TE (Gunn & Fisk, 2013).

The sudden transition of ERT at the onset of the pandemic brought with it a particular importance to students on educators' ability to apply Care attributes in their teaching approaches, in particular their capacity for adaptability (Carlson, 2021), fairness and flexibility (Almutairi et al., 2021), and acknowledgement of and/or empathy for student concerns (Munoz et al., 2022). Given the disruption and uncertainty generated by the pandemic (Neuwirth et al., 2021), and their persistence in a post-pandemic environment, educators' ability to demonstrate care and resolve student concerns will continue to be highly valued by students. Our post-pandemic findings suggest that the refinement and application of educators' Care attributes will be just as or more important to students in a rapidly changing (e.g. technology) educational landscape, with an increasing focus on online or blended learning. In regard to this, Gourlay et al. (2021) argue that in developing digital education, the cultivation of an ethos of care is likely to enhance student engagement and through that, academic success.

First year students' frequency analysis of educator attributes associated with TE

There was a subtle, but not significant, shift from 2017 to 2022 in first year students' weightings of educator attributes that best describe TE. This included educators' capacity for care and concern for students' wellbeing, and the ability for educators to be adaptable to students' needs. This is perhaps unsurprising, given the rapid change to ERT at the start of the pandemic, and greater anxiety and stress that such students reported during the disruptions and lockdowns (Dodd et al., 2021; Lyons et al., 2020). While there appears to be little relevant literature about changes in TE-associated educator attributes for post-pandemic first year students, Kilfoil et al. (2020) have identified the value that students put on educators' ability to communicate in a caring and encouraging manner during the pandemic. For students who commenced their tertiary studies in 2020, the pandemic was an additional, major challenge that they had to contend with (McKay et al., 2021). In terms of planning for future disruption, first year students' access to adaptable, respectful, fair-minded educators must be a priority for course convenors.

The far greater importance first year students placed on educators' ability to be adaptable to their needs in 2022 compared to 2017, is consistent with prior pandemic-related literature (Bruder, 2020; Dietrich et al., 2020). This is likely to be of particular importance for first year students in units with large cohorts, encompassing a range of cultural diversity (Cox & Naylor, 2018) and levels of prior learning (Bone & Reid, 2011). At the other end of the spectrum, first year students have traditionally highly valued educator enthusiasm (Ilic et al., 2016; Jones & Masika, 2014). Thus, the greatly diminished value that our students placed on educator enthusiasm in 2022 compared to 2017 is noteworthy and might more generally reflect educators' difficulty in conveying this attribute in a completely online learning environment (Tichavsky et al., 2015). In relation to this, students' experience of living through the pandemic, and their transition from secondary to tertiary education, may have changed their perceptions of the importance of educator enthusiasm (e.g. Yan et al., 2023), in terms of both teaching approaches and/or the nature of the learning

materials provided. A final possibility regarding our first year students' diminished perspective of the relationship between educator enthusiasm and TE is that it is an artefact of the small sample size, and/or that these students experienced both a full semester of online learning in semester one 2022, followed by a semester of blended learning, during which the survey was administered. Given the above-described uncertainties regarding our 2022 first year students' perspectives of educator enthusiasm as a facet of TE, this will be the subject of further study.

Non-first year students' frequency analysis of educator attributes associated with TE

Our non-first year students' high valuation of educators' capability to be intellectually stimulating, both pre- and post-pandemic, is consistent with prior scholarship (Bolkan & Goodboy, 2010; Gevorgyana, 2015). It would thus appear that the pandemic did not significantly affect these students' regard for educators who could challenge (Patrick & Stewart, 1998) and/or motivate them (Ploghoft & Moden, 1989). The diminished value that non-first year students ascribed to educators' passion in 2022 compared to 2017 may have been an artefact of the pandemic; given that these students were engaged in ERT during most of this time, and more highly valued educators' knowledge, their ability to intellectually stimulate (as described above), and their being adaptable to students' needs.

Our observation that non-first year students more greatly valued educators' ability to create a safe environment in 2022 compared to 2017, may have resulted from the anxieties most students experienced over 2020-2022 (Jehi et al., 2022). However, De Gagne et al. (2021) have previously reported on the value nursing students intrinsically ascribe to educators' ability to create a safe learning environment. Alternatively or additionally, non-first year students surveyed in 2022 may have interpreted the *creates a safe environment* attribute in terms of their own health - in other words, their safety as linked to a sense of being 'COVID-19 safe' rather than an academic or educational context.

Regarding the *provides constructive feedback* attribute, that non-first year students did not value this as much in 2022 as they did in 2017 was unexpected, given the high value that students traditionally place on the provision of feedback from educators (Matyjasiak & Thumser, 2021; Su & Wood, 2012), including during the pandemic (Tan et al., 2021). This may be a consequence of non-first year students having a preference for more independent study, and/or having become more independent learners during the pandemic (Cranfield et al., 2021). Such MNHS students may therefore have placed less importance, compared to other educator attributes, on the provision of constructive feedback from their educators.

Study limitations

One possible study limitation was the relatively small first year student sample size, which may have confounded statistical analyses. Another potential confounding factor relates to study participants who had been at Monash University for longer than five years. These students, who may have undertaken Honours or a higher degree (e.g. PhD), were likely to have had a more nuanced perception of the frequency of TE compared to that of undergraduate participants, which may have possibly skewed the results to a minor degree.

Conclusion

Our findings align with the broader literature on tertiary students' learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and highlight the need for MNHS students and educators to be better prepared for future disruption to learning and teaching. This study also adds to the body of TE-related literature, and importantly, sheds light on the complex relationship between students' perceptions of the frequency of TE and SETs. Given this, universities should, given their broad profile (e.g. research-intensive) and the nature of their student cohorts, design authentic, evidence-based criteria for TE, that will dynamically allow for disruption (e.g. pandemic). Through this, institutional SETs can be more bespoke and importantly, adaptable to changing local and general contexts, and will thus more authentically measure TE, better reward and recognise high quality educators, and enhance student engagement and learning gain. Concomitant with this should be the development, implementation and evaluation of more reliable tools and techniques for SETs, with tailored professional learning to contextualise and synergise teaching and learning for educators and students alike. Finally, our findings point to the importance of university leaders' facility for and application of a culture of TE-related policy design and innovation to maximise the alignment between the institutional environment and the variables and stressors that are external to, and impact upon, the university.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this study. The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this study. The authors have not used artificial intelligence in the ideation, design, or write-up of this research as per Crawford et al. (2023). The authors list the following CRediT contributions: Rayner – conceptualisation and design, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, project administration; Papakonstantinou – methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

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