

Effective University Instructors as Perceived by Turkish and Omani University Students

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S. Al-Busaidi¹, S. Aldhafri^{1,2}, and O. Büyükyavuz³

Abstract

This study investigated the characteristics of effective university instructors as perceived by 547 students. The students came from institutions in two different countries, Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman and Süleyman Demirel University in Turkey. They were asked to indicate the personality and the teaching characteristics they felt were essential qualities of an effective university instructor. The students' responses were also assessed based on gender, year of study, and grade point average (GPA). According to the findings, an effective university instructor respects students as people, recognizes their identity, listens to their concerns and challenges, and is someone students can depend on for support when needed. With regard to teaching characteristics, an effective instructor is the one who treats students equally, builds their confidence, comes prepared for the lesson, and is clear and easy to be understood. Female students placed more value on personality characteristics. In addition, freshmen students were more concerned about optimizing the learning environment by having effective instructors who possess effective personality and teaching characteristics. There were no significant differences between students based on GPA. Finally, the Omani students rated both the personality and teaching characteristics more highly than the Turkish students.

Keywords

effective instructors, students' perceptions, teacher characteristics, university instructors

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of accountability in the field of education has emerged as an important notion placing the teachers at the top of the list of variables, which are deemed to affect educational outcomes. Teachers play a pivotal role in the learning process (Markley, 2004). Regardless of the subject matter, teachers play a pivotal role in constructing and shaping educational practices at all levels. It is the teachers who help educational practices function efficiently and enhance learning process, thereby affecting students' academic achievement from the very first hand (Campbell, Kyriakides, Mujisc, & Robinson, 2004; Rockoff, 2004; Lasley, Siedentop, & Yinger, 2006). Teachers are powerful figures and can have long-lasting influence on students. They play an important role in what, how, and how much students learn (Aldhafri & Alrajhi, 2014; Alrajhi & Aldhafri, 2015; Stronge, 2007).

In an effort to further analyze this indispensable part of the teaching mechanism, researchers have begun to focus on teacher effectiveness. They have explored the traits and qualities that could characterize an effective teacher (see, for example, Demmon-Berger, 1986; Koutsoulis, 2003; Lowman, 1996; Samples & Copeland, 2013; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, &

Minor, 2001). It is true that teaching is a universal activity but it does not seem to be seen in the same way by learners and teachers. Learners and teachers across the globe seem to have different understandings of what makes an effective instructor. This is inevitably shaped by one's experience and perceptions about teaching and learning. Regardless of the experience, teachers remain as influential figures throughout educational lives sometimes forming, reforming, and shaping students' career plans, goals, and perspectives. To this end, the question as to what constitutes effective teachers who are preferred by students to many others is a crucial one, which needs to be answered. In an attempt to provide a response to this critical question, the present study aimed at identifying essential ingredients of effective university instructors as perceived by undergraduate students at two universities in the Sultanate of Oman and Turkey. In the present study, a university instructor

¹Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

²The Research Council, Muscat, Oman

³Süleyman Demirel University, Isparta, Turkey

Corresponding Author:

S. Al-Busaidi, College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, P.O. Box 43, Muscat 123, Oman.

Email: asad@squ.edu.om



or teacher is someone who teaches at the university level. The instructor or teachers may have a master's degree or PhD.

A review of the literature on teaching effectiveness suggests that effective teachers have certain characteristics. To the best of our knowledge, there has been no comparative research whereby students from different geographical and cultural backgrounds were surveyed for their perceptions on this topic. As such, the present study attempted to contribute to the existing literature by exploring differences in the desired teacher characteristics by undergraduate students in the Sultanate of Oman and Turkey. It is assumed that the study will help, at least, unfold some of the layers of complexities embedded in the issue. Hence, the current study is significant in two ways. First, it provides cross-cultural data from two educational contexts in two countries, Oman and Turkey. Second, the study explores the effect of independent variables, gender, year of study, and grade point average (GPA) on students' perceptions. It is assumed that the study will contribute to the literature on the essential attributes of effective instructors in general and higher education instructors in particular, revealing the potential cross-cultural differences among students.

Characteristics of Effective Teachers

A large amount of research has been conducted on the most desired teacher attributes, dispositions, and behaviors. However, there is still no exhaustive list of the characteristics that constitute an effective teacher. Some researchers tend to associate teacher effectiveness directly with student achievement (e.g., Bain, 2004). To others, teacher effectiveness is the sum of high scores obtained from inspectors or other evaluative parties. Still others prefer to rely on student evaluations. Whatever the evaluative instrument, it is obvious that there are common attributes that characterize effective teachers. According to Kher, Molstad, and Donahue (1999), effective teaching is related to the relationship between teachers and students. To Brodie (1998), a teacher can be regarded as effective to the extent that she or he helps students achieve educational goals. To define effective teachers, researchers have also used adjectives such as enthusiastic, charismatic, and expressive (Kher et al., 1999; Young & Shaw, 1999), ideal, analytical, dutiful, competent, and reflective (Cruickshank & Haefele, 2001). According to Stronge (2007), as a teacher's overall influence is far reaching, it is difficult to define what outcomes lead to effectiveness and how these outcomes should be measured.

The literature is replete with studies that have attempted to characterize effective teachers. The use of students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness is a common practice in higher education (Clark, 1995; Delaney, Johnson, Johnson, & Treslan, 2010; Devlin, 2002; Marsh & Roche, 1993). These evaluations have been found to be useful in informing instructors about their strengths and weaknesses. Researchers used a set of characteristics for students and teachers to rate.

In 1957, secondary school principals working in New York were asked to describe the effective teachers. Based on the findings of the research, the most effective teachers were found to have a number of attributes such as mastery of subject matter, sense of humor, creativity, discipline, and amount of time devoted to students (Calabria, 1960). In the mentioned study, although mastery of subject matter was placed at the top of the qualities effective teachers are assumed to possess, accumulated experience over years was also mentioned to be an important indicator of effectiveness. In a review study by Feldman (1976), characteristics attributed to effective college teachers were igniting interest of students, being clear and understandable, having knowledge in the subject matter, being enthusiastic, and being well organized for the course (Feldman as cited in Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009). Along with these dispositions in the reviewed studies, Feldman warned that when the participants had the chance to describe their ideal teacher freely, friendliness, helpfulness, and being open to opinions were found to be far more preferable traits than the others. Feldman and Lynch (1988), in another study, reviewed 31 articles in each of which both students and faculty identified instructional characteristics as the determining factor. That is to say, the students gave more emphasis on teachers being helpful and available, being interesting, and having good communication skills whereas faculty placed importance on teachers being intellectually challenging, encouraging autonomous learning, and setting high standards for students.

In another study conducted on university students by Young and Shaw (1999), a group of attributes such as effective communication, course organization, comfortable atmosphere, student motivation, and teacher's focused interest in students' learning and progress were found to be highly correlated with teacher effectiveness. One of the striking findings of the study, though, was the correlation between "usefulness" of a particular course and teacher effectiveness. That is, the teacher was regarded effective to the extent that the course she or he has been teaching is found to be useful by students. This unexpected finding seems to be one of the legitimate indicators of the complexities embedded in the very nature of teaching, which is affected by a plenty of factors expected or emerging unexpectedly. In another study conducted by Okpala and Ellis (2005), college students enrolled in a U.S. university were asked to describe "quality teachers" through a questionnaire. The findings of the study revealed that a quality teacher is the one who cares for his students and their learning processes. Park and Lee (2006) explored the characteristics of effective English language teachers as perceived by 169 teachers and 339 students in high school through a self-report questionnaire in South Korea. The characteristics were divided into three categories: English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills. The researchers found that the teachers and students had different views about effective teaching in all three categories. The teachers ranked English proficiency the

highest whereas the students ranked pedagogical knowledge the highest.

Shishavan and Sadeghi (2009) investigated the views of 270 students and teachers in universities, high schools, and language institutes about the characteristics of effective English language teachers. The results showed significant differences between the students and teachers on some of the characteristics. The teachers stressed the qualities related to assigning homework, integrating group work in class, preparing the lesson well, and using lesson plans. The learners, however, emphasized the characteristics related to personality and the use of the students' first language, Persian, in teaching as one of the most important characteristic for effective teaching.

Unlike other studies that gave the students a list of characteristics to choose from, Delaney et al. (2010) investigated the perceptions of 330 students at Memorial University about effective teaching through an online open-ended questionnaire. The analysis resulted in nine core characteristics, namely, respectful, knowledgeable, approachable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and humorous. Birjandi and Rezanejad (2014) studied the perceptions of 35 instructors from different universities in Iran. The participants gave more importance to the teacher's ability to encourage pupil participation and get all involved in the lesson. They also regarded the teacher's beliefs and previous experience as among the top qualities that can lead to effective teaching.

The previous studies have used a range of characteristics and grouped them in so many different ways. Below are some of the common ones:

- Pedagogical knowledge/teaching methodology
- Subject matter knowledge
- Socio-culture knowledge
- Communication skills
- Organizational skills
- Knowledge of the world events
- Personal skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Classroom management
- Student centeredness
- Human characteristics

It is clear that these categories are not exclusively different. There are many similarities between them. For this reason, Lowman (1996) argues that effective teaching occurs when two distinct dimensions meet. The first dimension is related to the instructor's ability to provoke intellectual excitement in the classroom. On this dimension are loaded some dispositions such as clarity of lessons, instructor's ability to transfer knowledge, organizing and delivering lessons, and instructor's enthusiasm, excitement, inspiration, creativity, and humor. The second dimension is more related to personal traits of effective teachers such as caring, friendliness,

concern, approachability, and helpfulness. Neil (1991) states that effective teachers are expected to possess professional knowledge. However, he argues that having merely the mastery of subject matter knowledge or teaching skills alone does not always result in being an effective teacher as personal attributes might be far more effective in enhancing student achievement.

The present study classifies effective teaching into two dimensions: the personal dimension, which is rapport between the instructor and the learners, and the teaching dimension, which is about the instructor's ability to deliver the material and make decisions about different aspects of the course. This framework is similar to Lowman's (1995, 1996) two-dimensional model, which divides teaching effectiveness into intellectual excitement and interpersonal rapport.

Method

The study examined students' views about the characteristics of effective university instructors. The students were drawn from institutions in two different countries, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in the Sultanate of Oman and Süleyman Demirel University in Turkey. The reason for choosing these two countries was that they were the authors' countries of residence. In addition, it was of interest to compare how the two educational systems in the two countries may yield similarities or differences in the students' perceptions of effective university instructors. In brief, the Omani higher educational system depends heavily on public universities that are supported by the government. The SQU, where the study took place, is the only state university in which students receive fully free education and they are offered either free on-campus housing or a monthly allowance for off-campus students. Entrance to the university is highly competitive and depends heavily on the students' scores on Grade 12. Although the Ministry of Higher Education generally supervises the higher educational system, each university has its own management system and regulations. Besides SQU, there are many government technical and vocational colleges as well as private colleges and universities.

The Turkish higher educational system is more centralized and connected to the Council of Higher Education. Different from the Omani system that has less than 10 universities in total, there are more than 176 state and non-profit foundation universities that contribute to the higher educational system in Turkey. A bachelor's degree is usually awarded after 4 to 5 years of study in both countries except for some programs such as the medical programs. Although both systems depend on face-to-face education, the Turkish universities provide more opportunities for distance education. Because of the diversity of programs in Turkish universities, more international students are enrolled in Turkey than in Oman. Universities in both countries use the local language and English as a medium of instruction more than any

other languages. Funding of government higher education institutions in both countries comes mainly from the government budget in addition to some other resources such as fees and research projects. Turkish students need to pass the Student Selection and Placement Examinations in addition to their valid high school diploma.

The study attempted to answer five research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of an effective university instructor as perceived by students with regard to personal characteristics and teaching characteristics?

Research Question 2: Are there significant differences in students' perceptions of personal characteristics and teaching characteristics of university instructors by gender?

Research Question 3: Are there significant differences in students' perceptions of personal characteristics and teaching characteristics of university instructors by year of study?

Research Question 4: Are there significant differences in students' perceptions of personal characteristics and teaching characteristics of university instructors by GPA?

Research Question 5: Are there significant differences in perceptions between Turkish and Omani students with regard to personal characteristics and teaching characteristics of university instructors?

A convenient sample of 547 students participated in the current study. There were 285 Omani and 262 Turkish university students. Within the Omani sample, there were 68.4% females, 58.6% from the College of Education, 20.7% from the College of Art and Social Sciences. The rest of the sample participants were from different colleges. They were all in their second, third, or fourth year of college. The Omani students had GPA distributed over the three categories (4%, less than 2; 58%, 2-2.9; and 38%, above 3). The Turkish sample included 65.6% females, 66% from the College of Education, 18.3% from the College of Agriculture, and 15.6% from the College of Law. More than half of the Turkish students were in their first year of college. The GPA of the Turkish students was better distributed over the three categories.

Data Collection

The data for the study came from a questionnaire that was developed for the purpose of this research. The student samples in both contexts responded to the questionnaire during their regular class sessions in the spring semester of 2014. The participants were invited to participate and were assured about the confidentiality of the data. The participation was voluntary and all students who were present during the classroom visits agreed to participate. The students were recruited through their course instructors. The authors contacted a

number of instructors in different colleges at their own universities randomly to obtain their initial approval for their students' participation in the study. Classes of those instructors who responded positively were included in the study. The researchers were hoping for a larger sample but there was not much response from instructors. The course instructors distributed the questionnaire to their students. There were no international students in the sample. The authors' contact information was given to the instructors for any assistance or clarification. The students were given 30 min to answer the questionnaire.

The questionnaire went through a rigorous process of development. First, the researchers conducted a brainstorming session with students in the two institutions. The students were asked to list the key characteristics of an effective university instructor and those of an ineffective university instructor. This resulted in a list of about 60 items from both groups. There were many similarities between the students in the two contexts.

Second, the researchers surveyed the literature for related studies. We found 16 studies conducted in different parts of the world. There was a lot of overlap in the questionnaires used. There was also a wide range of statements used. However, there was not a single robust instrument that we could adopt. We have, therefore, started to note the topics and debates that were recurrent in the literature. It was obvious that there were many topics and so we had to be very selective.

The researchers compiled the characteristics of effective teachers from the literature and the two student classes. This yielded a comprehensive list of 350 items. The list was refined several times. The characteristics were worded into statements for the sake of understanding. The statements were then checked for relevance and importance.

After compiling a long list of characteristics from the two sources, we had to find a way to classify them. We realized that there were no common categories used in the literature. There was also no clear rationale given for the use of the categories that a few studies had cited. In addition, we realized that there was overlap between the existing categories. We have, therefore, decided to only use two broad categories (personal characteristics and teaching characteristics) for the sake of avoiding overlap between the categories and also producing a stronger factor impact. The final version of the questionnaire consisted of 105 characteristics. The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part asked for demographic information, that is, gender, college, GPA, and year of study. The second part listed 49 items related to *personal* characteristics of an effective university instructor. The third part included 56 items related to *teaching* characteristics of an effective university instructor. The items in the second and third parts of the questionnaire were subjected to exploratory factor analysis using generalized least squares as an extraction method. The obtained eigenvalues of the first factor and the scree plot supported the existence of one factor

for the personal characteristics explaining 25% of variance. Similarly, one factor solution was found for the teaching characteristics scale explaining 32% of variance. The items in the third part were presented in a rating format. The students were asked to rate each statement from 1 to 10 according to the degree of importance (10 being the most important).

The questionnaire was qualitatively checked for validity, relevance, and clarity by five university professors. It was found to be suitable except for a few minor corrections. After that, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic and Turkish. The translation was checked by three professional translators in each language.

Results

The data were analyzed using the statistical package SPSS. The data were first screened for outliers but none was identified. To explore the best characteristics of a university instructor, descriptive statistics were run separately for the personal and the teaching characteristics of the effective university instructor. The results show that most of the suggested characteristics for effective instructor were highly endorsed by the participants.

To begin with the list of personal characteristics, the highest mean scores were reported for “care about students as people,” “respective of students,” “does not underscore the students’ worth,” “listen to students,” and “a person whom students can depend on.” A group of instructor’s characteristics were not favored by the participants and, thus, received the lowest mean scores within the personal characteristics of instructors. Starting from the least, these characteristics included “being from the same gender,” “strict with the students,” “being authoritarian with students,” “having the same nationality,” “strict in classroom attendance,” and “strict in academic regulations.”

In addition, the results indicate that effective instructors should show specific *teaching* characteristics more than others. The highest means were reported for “treat students fairly and equally,” “is competent in teaching,” “develop students’ confidence,” “is prepared for the lesson,” and “is clear and understandable in teaching.” However, the lowest means show that university students do not like the instructor who “gives a lot of homework” or “communicates frequently with students’ parents.” In addition, other characteristics were least favored by the sample of the current study. Examples include an instructor who “adopts instructor-centered approach,” “sticks to the lesson plan,” “uses games in teaching,” or “considers tests as a tool for learning.” The complete list of personal and teaching characteristics can be obtained from the researchers as space does not allow presenting the full list of these characteristics.

Moving to the second question of the study, independent *t* tests were used to examine possible gender differences in the rating of personal and teaching characteristics of effective

university instructors. Female students endorsed the value of personality ($t = 2.98, p < .01$) and teaching ($t = 4.48, p < .001$) characteristics significantly higher than their male counterparts.

The third question focused on possible differences on students’ perceptions of the personality and teaching characteristics of effective university instructors based on the students’ year of study. A one-way ANOVA was used to examine these differences. There were statistically significant differences in students’ perceptions of personality, $F(3, 541) = 5.63, p = .001$, and teaching, $F(3, 536) = 2.49, p = .05$, characteristics of effective university instructors based on students’ year of study. A post hoc test (using least significant difference, LSD) showed that younger students scored higher than older students (with statistically significant differences only found between first-year students and older students). As for the teaching characteristics, these differences were found to be significant between first-year students compared with only third- and fourth-year students.

The researchers also examined possible differences in students’ perceptions of the characteristics of effective instructors based on the students’ GPA. Using one-way ANOVA, the results showed no statistically significant differences in either personality or teaching characteristics of effective university instructors. Because of the big differences between the cells related to college distribution of the study sample, the researchers did not examine differences based on college.

Finally, differences in the personality and teaching characteristics were examined based on country. Independent *t* tests showed that there were statistically significant differences in students’ perceptions of personality characteristics of university instructors favoring Turkish students ($t = 2.33, p = .02$). In contrast, there were no statistically significant differences found between students in the two countries with regard to their perceptions of the best teaching characteristics ($t = 1.30, p = .19$).

Discussion

The current study aimed to examine the personality and teaching characteristics of university instructors in Oman and Turkey. A large sample from both countries was recruited from different colleges, years of study, GPA, and from both sexes. The participants completed a questionnaire that examined some demographic variables, a list of personality characteristics, and a list of teaching characteristics of effective university instructors.

The results showed that the participants endorsed most of the listed characteristics as being important for effective teachers. First, for the personality characteristics, an effective university instructor should respect students as people, recognize their identity, listen to students’ concerns and challenges, and should be someone students can depend on for support when needed. For the students in this study, an

effective instructor can be of any gender or nationality but should not be authoritarian or strict in attendance or academic regulations. It is clear that the emotional aspects of the instructors' personalities are very important to be perceived as effective. More attention is needed by graduate programs that prepare college instructors for teaching to focus on the emotional characteristics of instructors and communication skills. Along with subject matter knowledge and good teaching skills, Thompson (2008) argues, personal traits are equally important in learning process. Teachers, he further adds, to create an environment that is conducive to learning, should assign time to build rapport in the classroom. Being effective cannot be characterized merely by one's professional knowledge and teaching skills obtained through formal training of a certain duration (Adams & Pierce, 1999).

Similar emphasis on communication skills was noticed in the data related to teaching characteristics. The students perceived an effective instructor to be the one who treats students equally, builds their confidence, comes prepared for the lesson, and is clear and easy to be understood. In contrast, giving homework, centralizing the teaching around the instructor, heavily depending on exams, being strict in following the lesson plan, or contacting students' parents do not make an instructor to be effective. Such behaviors should not be dominant in the instructors' practices because they are least favored by students. University students perceive themselves as matured learners and, therefore, expect to be given more freedom. Understanding the psychology of university students is important to maximize their positive learning experiences (Felder & Brent, 2005). University instructors need to be trained to acknowledge these attitudes and perceptions to effectively teach students during their university life.

The study also revealed rather striking findings related to effective university instructors as seen by students. That is, both Omani and Turkish students do not seem to give high regard to the use of games in teaching. It is possible that given the students' age and educational level, games may not be seen as being directly relevant at this stage. In addition, games are not commonly used in teaching in subject-area courses except perhaps in language courses despite the ample research on the benefits games bring to learning (Gee, 2003; Lago & Seepho, 2012; Lu, Hou, & Huang, 2010; Whitton & Moseley, 2012). Another rather interesting finding was about the students' disapproval about using tests as a tool for learning. This could be due to the students' desire for less test-dependent teaching. These findings certainly require further investigation.

The findings show that female students endorsed the suggested characteristics more than their male counterparts. This may reflect the concern and the motivation that female students tend to show over male students. In other words, female students perhaps see the instructor as playing an important role in their learning and in creating a positive environment that will help them high grade. There is research suggesting that female students are more motivated and committed to their studies and, therefore, are more concerned about having

effective instructors who help them achieve their potential (Dayioglu & Turut-Asik, 2004; Stoet & Geary, 2014).

Similarly, compared with older students, freshmen students are more concerned about optimizing the learning environment by having effective instructors who possess effective personality and teaching characteristics. This reflects the needs of these freshmen students for a supportive teaching environment that helps them survive the transitional stage between school and university (Al-Husseini, 2006). This transitional stage is usually accompanied with uncertainty, difficulties in coping with the new challenges, and a lack of effective studying skills. Previous research shows that freshmen students face a lot of adaptation challenges, such as including time management difficulties, low self-esteem, procrastination, lack of communication skills, and shyness (Al-Darmaki, 2011; Chandler & Gallagher, 1996; Love & Thomas, 2014). These challenges make these freshmen students realize the need for highly effective university instructors who are willing to help them pass the transitional stage.

The results of the current study did not reveal any significant differences in the characteristics of effective university instructors based on students' GPA. It seems that students at all levels of achievement perceive the characteristics of effective university instructors equally. Grouping grades in three groups might have influenced the variance among the participating students and resulted in insignificant differences. Future research may further examine the effect of GPA and the effect of students' college on their perceptions of effective instructors.

Finally, Turkish students seemed to regard personality characteristics more highly than Omani students. This is consistent with the study by Celik, Arikan, and Caner (2013) of 998 Turkish university students. The students rated personal qualities such as fairness in decision making, reducing students' anxiety, and demonstration of enthusiasm among the top characteristics of an effective university instructor. In the current study, the two groups, however, did not differ with regard to teaching characteristics. The differences about personality characteristics might also be attributed to possible variables in our current sample. For example, none of the Omani students was in their first year, whereas 57.6% of the Turkish students were freshmen. To rule out the effects of college and year, we ran further analysis. We examined the possible differences between students in the two institutions using only second-year students. The *t*-test analysis showed that the Omani students were higher than the Turkish students in both personality and teaching characteristics. It is not clear how to interpret these findings from our current data. Future research may seek more matched samples across the two countries to reach more definite conclusions.

Conclusion

This study attempted to explore the characteristics of effective university instructors as seen by students in two different

contexts. The results showed that an effective university instructor is the one who respects students as people, recognizes their identity, listens to their concerns and challenges, and is someone students can depend on for support when needed. In relation to the teaching characteristics, it was found that students see an effective instructor as the one who treats students equally, builds their confidence, comes prepared for the lesson, and is clear and easy to be understood. Female students placed more value on personality characteristics. In addition, freshmen students were more concerned about optimizing the learning environment by having effective instructors who possess effective personality and teaching characteristics. There were no significant differences between students based on GPA. Finally, the Omani students rated both the personality and teaching characteristics more highly than the Turkish students.

It was clear from the data that there are two sides to teacher effectiveness, personal and teaching competence. Students would obviously prefer a teacher with the best quality of both. The study has great potential to inform future research on the issue of effective university teaching. The set of characteristics of an effective university instructor can be used as a checklist for recruiting new faculty. It can also be used for developing professional development programs. Data about the qualities that make university teaching effective are important in the efforts to enhance teaching and learning in higher education. Students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness is being increasingly adopted in higher education institutions as one indicator of quality control.

Future research may examine the order of the investigated characteristics using samples from different countries with a larger mix of demographic and academic representation to ensure validity and reliability of the checklist and possibly produce more interesting findings. Another possible future research topic is the comparison of students' and instructors' views about the characteristics of effective university instructors.

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Author Biographies

S. Al-Busaidi is an associate professor of education at Sultan Qaboos University. His research interests are teacher education, curriculum development, learner autonomy and academic readiness.

S. Aldhafri is an associate professor of educational psychology at Sultan Qaboos University and the director of Social Observatory at The Research Council of Oman. His research focuses on students' and teachers' motivation in addition to parenting styles.

O. Büyükyavuz is an assistant professor. Her research interests include Foreign Language teacher preparation, professional development and autonomous learning.