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ARTICLE

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## Increasing undergraduate student satisfaction in Higher Education: the importance of relational pedagogy

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### ABSTRACT

How to increase student satisfaction is a question that Higher Education institutes have become increasingly focussed on. While previous research indicates a number of factors can contribute to student satisfaction, teaching has been found to be of high importance. This study interviewed students and staff in a UK university that had achieved high student satisfaction ratings in a national survey. The programme leader interviews (n8) and student focus groups (n20) discussed the teaching and learning behaviours that seemed to increase and decrease satisfaction levels. The study revealed new insights regarding the fundamental importance that students place on warm and respectful interactions with staff in the context of trusting relationships. The students particularly emphasised staff approachability, empathy, sensitivity and caring. The staff also thought relationships were important but put more emphasis on course organisation. Staff training and institutional evaluations which take account of relational pedagogy would be helpful in increasing student satisfaction. However, sensitive and caring teaching needs to be supported by secure jobs and adequate staffing levels so that teachers have the time and peace of mind to develop these quality relationships.

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University; lecturer; teaching; learning; quality; relationships

## Introduction

This research aimed to contribute knowledge that could be used to improve undergraduate student satisfaction in Higher Education (HE). There are a number of reasons for researching student satisfaction at the present time. Firstly, student satisfaction is a current focus of debate and interest, both within universities, and in the HE literature. In the UK, this may in part be a response to the introduction of fees and the competition surrounding league tables. This influences the quality and quantity of future students since the ranking of institutions is one of the most important factors influencing university choice (Bell and Brooks 2019). Secondly, student satisfaction is now a major consideration in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The TEF assessment impacts on the fee level chargeable to students and, thereby, university income. Thirdly, the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK has heightened a focus on the 'student experience' (Gibbs 2010, 2012). As well as the NSS impacting on the TEF metrics, it is also useful to understand the factors that affect the student experience because it seems fair that students should feel they have had a university experience which meets their learning needs and supports their life aspirations.

This study focused on a 'post-1992' UK university, i.e. a former polytechnic that was given university status through the UK Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This university had recorded high student satisfaction results in the most recent NSS survey (2019), yet there was

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significant variation in results across departments. The focus on this high performing university enabled distinction between course level and institutional level effects since, within this high-scoring institutional context, it should be possible to achieve high student satisfaction. Yet, as other research (e.g. Ewell 1989) indicates, 'sub-environments' at course level might be more important for student satisfaction than overall institutional culture.

The study also focussed on the teaching and learning activities of the staff. While the literature points to a range of other factors as also influencing student satisfaction, the teaching and learning aspects were the main focus for this study since these are (a) found to be important for student satisfaction (Bell and Brooks 2017) and (b) features that the teaching staff have some control over (as opposed to campus facilities, for example).

Using this university case study, the aim was to understand which teaching and learning practices increased undergraduate student satisfaction. From this, it was considered possible to gain insights into the kind of practices that could be encouraged to enhance student satisfaction in HE, more generally.

## Background

As noted, student satisfaction rests upon multiple factors, not all related to teaching and learning. In 2002, Elliott and Shin emphasised that 'Student satisfaction is being shaped continually by repeated experiences in campus life . . .' (p. 198). A number of studies have since confirmed that 'student experience' is often linked with factors other than teaching e.g. built campus environment, accommodation experiences, extra-curricular activities, transport, health services, careers services, social life, employment outcomes, timetabling, and appropriateness of teaching rooms (Brennan and David 2010; Letcher and Neves 2010; Sandberg Hanssen and Solvoll 2015; Linet 2020).

Satisfaction may also link to the academic topic being studied, the research/teaching focus of the university and university reputation. For example, Bell and Brooks (2017), analysing data from the NSS, found that those registered on clinical degrees and studying humanities were the most satisfied and those on engineering and media courses were the least satisfied. Numerous studies have found reputation and institutional image to be a strong predictor of satisfaction (DeWitz and Walsh 2002; Palacio, Meneses, and Perez Perez 2002; Arambewela and Hall 2009).

However, while the above factors mattered, Bell and Brooks (2017) found that teaching and course organisation were the most important predictors of overall student satisfaction, with resources being far less relevant. This is supported by other research which has found teaching quality important for overall satisfaction with the university experience (e.g. Kandiko and Mawer 2014; Neves and Hillman 2016).

In terms of the type of teaching that enhances student satisfaction, a recent study found the following key factors to drive overall satisfaction, in order of importance: The helpfulness of lectures and seminars; the extent to which a module integrates well with the rest of the course; the usefulness of the on-line materials; and the appropriateness of summative assignments (Sutherland, Warwick, and Anderson 2019). In particular, direct contact time with teaching staff in lectures and seminars, was found to be the most important determinant of student satisfaction at both the PG and UG level (*ibid.*). Earlier research suggested that students valued lecturers' presentation style over content (e.g. Guolla 1999; Shevlin et al. 2000). In these studies, students perceived enthusiasm, expressiveness and charisma as good teaching. Spooren, Mortelmans, and Denekens (2007) similarly identified presentation skills, alongside clarity of objectives, build-up of subject matter, organisation and course materials as important aspects of teaching style for student satisfaction. Other studies emphasise teacher knowledge as important (e.g. Douglas, Douglas, and Barnes 2006; Letcher and Neves 2010). Appropriate assessment and workload, and clear goals and standards for assessment, are also associated with student satisfaction (Ginns, Prosser, and Barrie 2007). The promptness and depth of

feedback from lecturers has also been found to be important (e.g. Richardson, Slater, and Wilson 2007). Other studies, conversely, have found that the role of feedback and assessment in influencing the overall NSS assessment is extremely small (Fielding, Dunleavy, and Langan 2010; Bell and Brooks 2017).

With regard to relational factors, there are mixed findings on how this impacts student satisfaction. For example, while Hadad, Keren, and Naveh (2020) and Alves and Raposo (2009) found that approachability, empathy, and staff-student interactions, were strong predictors of student satisfaction, other studies found these to be less important than teaching quality or feedback and assessment (e.g. Elliott and Shin 2002; Nevill and Rhodes 2004; Douglas, Douglas, and Barnes 2006).

A study of HE in Saudi Arabia (Sohail and Hasan 2021) found that empathy, defined as 'taking care of individual students' (p. 58) did not contribute to student satisfaction. However, conversely, a study of HE in Oman did find empathy to be related to student satisfaction (Alsheyadi and Albalushi 2020). In the latter study, empathy is defined as treating students equally and with respect; showing a positive attitude; understanding their specific needs; giving them individual attention; and having their interests at heart.

Several studies have also noted the difference between what students say enhances their learning in student evaluations of teaching (SETs) and what teachers say achieves this (e.g. Hadad, Keren, and Naveh 2020; Linet 2020). Hadad, Keren, and Naveh (2020), for example, found that students assigned more importance to the lecturer's attitude towards students (respectful and fair) and their availability to respond to inquiries and questions. They assigned less importance to whether the course and the lessons were organised, clear, dynamic and interesting. However, the lecturers assigned the highest importance to whether the lessons were organised and the least importance to their attitudes to the students.

Bell and Brooks (2019) found no link between student satisfaction and the proportion of faculty holding formal teaching qualifications. Perhaps this indicates that some aspects of the training curriculum are missing: those relational elements of student satisfaction.

It is also of relevance to consider the difference between what students like and what is good for their education. While there may be considerable overlap, they should not be considered as the same. For example, one study found that the strongest predictor of a student's satisfaction is their grades (Letcher and Neves 2010). More recently, Sutherland, Warwick, and Anderson (2019) found that module difficulty was a strong driver of dissatisfaction and posed the question of whether excessive focus on student satisfaction could lead to 'dumbing down' in HE. The NSS, in particular, has been linked to student grades (Linet 2020).

Throughout the literature on student satisfaction, there are concerns over a focus on league tables and their propensity to commodify HE (e.g. Lenton 2015). There is a particular concern about the 'tyranny of metrics' (Ball 2012, 20) and the idea of students as consumers expecting 'value for money' to enable them to compete in the global marketplace (e.g. Harris 2007; Frankham 2017; Heaney and Mackenzie 2017). Leach (2019) argues that HE should, instead, be about enabling people to become empowered rounded citizens with self-confidence, self-worth, enhanced social capital and agency.

Centring this study on 'student satisfaction' rather than 'student experience' might seem to conform with the metrics-focussed 'quality assurance' agenda in HE. Several studies (e.g. Douglas et al. 2015; Tsiligiris and Hill 2021) highlight the inherent assumptions of 'students as customers' able to rationally judge quality inherent in these approaches. The 'students as customers' premise has been extensively criticised (e.g. Elassy 2015; Balloo, Pauli, and Worrell 2017). Since student satisfaction is based on a mix of perceptions and expectations (Gruber et al. 2010; Stukalina 2012), rational judgements about quality may be difficult.

However, despite these tensions, 'student satisfaction' is centred in this paper because it arises from the author's background in participatory practice and community development. This approach is based on a world view that believes in, and values, the ability of people to have a say in the design of policies and programmes that impact on them (e.g. see Bell and Reed Bell and Reed, 2021). This perspective particularly values the opinions and concerns of youth as skilled evaluators of policy and

programmes, sometimes bringing fresh and challenging ideas (e.g. see Bowman, Bell, and Alexis-Martin 2021). Hence, while there may be some less principled reasons for being interested in student satisfaction, it still seems worthwhile considering how to improve student satisfaction outcomes so as to understand how well we are meeting the student's educational needs and supporting their aspirations.

## Methods

The first step in the research process was to operationalise 'student satisfaction'. Undergraduate 'student satisfaction' is currently measured in UK universities via the National Student Survey (NSS). The National Student Survey results are given increasing importance as contributors to the ratings in league tables of universities (e.g. the Guardian University Guide). Since 2005, the National Student Survey (NSS) has taken place annually, surveying all final year undergraduate degree students at institutions in the United Kingdom. It is an independent survey intended to capture the opinions of undergraduate students regarding the quality of their degree programmes. The NSS is managed by the Office for Students (OfS) and undertaken by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies – the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland), the Scottish Funding Council and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

There are 8 broad themes in the NSS (from 2019) and each course is also given an 'overall satisfaction' score on the basis of the results of the survey as a whole. The eight themes are: The teaching on my course; learning opportunities; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; learning community; student voice.

This study focused on third year undergraduate students as undergraduates make up the majority of students and third years have a longer-term experience of being at the university. This made the NSS survey definitions the most relevant to operationalising the research. However, research on the helpfulness of the NSS for enhancing teaching practice indicates that it is insufficiently nuanced to improve performance (Linnet 2020). Therefore, the NSS was used as a starting point, in this research, for understanding student satisfaction, but the students own notions of the components of 'satisfaction' were also included.

A preliminary literature review, as outlined above, then identified the previous research on the topic of student satisfaction, exposing gaps in knowledge; identifying areas of dispute and uncertainty; and identifying patterns and themes. Searches were carried out through databases (e.g. Scopus) and related citation indexes; reference lists; library searches; manual browse of relevant journals; grey literature; and internet search engines (Google, Google Scholar).

## University case context

The research was based on a single university case study. While it may not be possible to generalise extensively, or at all, from a single case study, insights and knowledge transfer may be possible (Morgan 2014; Yin 2013). The single case has often been used for research in teaching and learning in HE (e.g. Linnet 2020). The particular case selected here fits with Seawright and Gerring's (2008) model as 'extreme', in terms of the institution having gained high student satisfaction ratings in the most recent NSS survey (2019).

Located in England, the case study university currently has more than 30,000 students, with the majority being under 25 years old, undergraduate and full time (more than 20,000). In the 2019 NSS, the university recorded undergraduate student satisfaction results which put it in the top 20 in the UK. Despite this positive result, there was significant variation between different programmes.

- 46 programmes achieved 92% or above
- 16 programmes scored 80% or below
- 17 programmes achieved an overall satisfaction score of 100%

No faculty was performing better than any other. The variation seemed to be at the programme level. In order to understand more about why these differences occurred, eight in-depth interviews with programme leaders and four focus groups with students were organised, involving those teaching or studying in the high and low NSS rated courses.

### *Interviews and focus groups*

In order to gather data on the students' views, four focus groups made up of five participants in each, were undertaken as follows:

- (1) Focus groups A and B with students attending high satisfaction courses (100% on NSS) (n10 focus group participants)
- (2) Focus groups C and D with students attending low satisfaction courses (80% or less on NSS) (n10 focus group participants)

These smaller groups enabled the students to contribute to the discussion more comfortably than in a larger group. Students from mid-performing courses were not included in the study. eleven females and nine males took part in the focus groups. Eight individual interviews with programme leaders were also undertaken, as follows:

- (1) Programme Leaders W, X, Y, Z – course leaders with 100% student satisfaction (n4 interview participants)
- (2) Programme Leaders A, B, C and D – course leaders with 80% or below student satisfaction (n4 interview participants)

Programme leaders from the mid-performing courses were not included in the study. There was a balanced mix of male and female course leaders across (1) and (2) and a variety of ages.

The following non-probability sampling strategies were used: 'Purposive sampling' (Patton 1990), using participants who had particularly relevant knowledge and experience; 'snowball sampling' (Gilbert 2001), using networks to gain access to information-rich participants; and 'maximum variation sampling' (ibid.), selecting participants who taught, studies on the maximum diversity of courses (in order to increase the opportunities to identify the varying factors and influences). The combined techniques were selected from the typologies listed by Miles and Huberman (1994) because, together, they were most likely to meet the requirements of the research, in terms of providing a selection of diverse, typical, informed, relevant and demographically balanced participants.

The participants were approached in person or by email, as appropriate, and given a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form in advance of organising the interviews and focus groups. They were assured that there was no pressure to participate and more than half declined or did not respond to a request to participate across staff and students.

The interviews and focus groups mostly took place on the university campus in private rooms. However, four of the staff interviews took place via phone and email as they occurred after the 'lockdown' response to the Covid19 virus. The individual interviews with staff took 30–40 minutes and each focus group took 60 minutes. The topic guides included questions that were linked to all the key themes from the NSS and the literature, including questions such as:

### Programme leaders

- (1) What do you do to ensure teaching quality on this course?
- (2) Are there any external factors that impact on teaching quality in a negative way for this course?
- (3) What do you think the university could do that it is not currently doing to facilitate student learning and satisfaction with the course that you lead?
- (4) In general, what do you think helps and hinders student learning at this university?

### Students

- (1) If you think of the 'best' and the 'worst' of your lecturers . . . what did the best ones do that the worse ones did not? What did the worst ones do that the best ones did not?
- (2) Did you find some units more interesting than others and, if so, was there anything about the teaching that made them more interesting?
- (3) What do you think the University could do that it is not currently doing to facilitate student learning and satisfaction with the course you did?
- (4) In general, what has helped and hindered your overall satisfaction with studying at this university?

The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured, allowing prompting where helpful to increase understanding. The questions were formulated to best elicit rich information. For example, while referring to the 'best' and 'worst' lecturers in these questions might seem to speak to the 'rate my teacher' approach to understanding student satisfaction, this wording was considered useful. The question was framed in this way as a means of encouraging the students to think about behaviours that they found helpful/unhelpful and to focus their answer on the teaching skills, rather than the other aspects of their experience, which other questions were more focused on (e.g. the institution or the organisation of classes). Extreme examples were requested as there can be more learning from these and the highs and lows of life are sometimes more easily remembered. This approach is similar to other student satisfaction research, such as that of Douglas et al. (2015) who ' . . . encouraged the retelling in narrative form of specific good and bad experiences by students' as this ' . . . provided a rich source of data to help a University Faculty understand what drives satisfaction and dissatisfaction for their students' (2015, pps.3–4).

### *Analysis*

The technique of 'framework analysis' was used to analyse the data, as described by Ritchie and Lewis (2003). The distinctive aspect of framework analysis is that, although it uses a thematic approach, it allows themes to develop, both from prior to analysis, from the literature review, and also from the narratives of research participants. The process involved a number of distinct, though interconnected, stages: familiarisation with the data, identifying themes, indexing, charting and interpreting. The initial analytical themes from the literature review and NSS categories amounted to 19 themes. There emerged a further 2 themes through analysis of the interviews and focus groups (IF). The final list of themes was as follows with the primary source of the theme in brackets (LR = literature review, NSS = National Student Survey; IF = interviews and focus groups):

#### Teacher qualities

- Teacher knowledge (LR)
- Lecture presentation style – enthusiasm, expressiveness and charisma (LR)
- Approachability, empathy, and positive staff-student interactions (LR)
- Teacher explanation (NSS 1,2)
- Availability of staff for academic enquiries and support (NSS 12,13,14)
- Sensitivity (IF)
- Appropriate teaching techniques (IF)

### Course qualities

- Clarity of objectives (LR)
- Course stimulating and challenging (NSS 3,4)
- Organisation of overall course and timetabling (NSS 15, 16, 17)
- Enabling thinking (NSS 5,6,7)
- Direct contact time with teaching staff in lectures and seminars (LR)
- Course materials – clear and interesting (LR)
- Feedback and assessment (NSS 8, 9, 10, 11)

### Non-teaching factors related to student satisfaction

- Resources (NSS 18,19,20)
- Academic community (NSS 21, 22)
- Student voice (NSS 23,24,25,26)
- Campus (LR)
- Support services (LR)
- Extra-curricular activities (LR)
- Institution reputation and image (LR)

### *Ethics considerations*

The research complied with respected social science principles and guidelines, including that of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2018, as well as the relevant institutional ethics procedures of the researcher and participant institutions. Participant Information Sheets; Consent Form; and a Privacy Notice for Research Participants were prepared for staff and student participants. There were a number of particular ethical issues that it was important to consider for this research project. Firstly, the course leaders on the low performing courses (according to NSS) may be feeling uncomfortable, stressed or ashamed about their scores and the research could intensify this. In order to avoid this, efforts were made to ensure the interview was as supportive as possible, in terms of not focussing on the NSS outcome during the discussion and, instead, focussing on their teaching strategies.

Secondly, all the course leaders may have been concerned about speaking openly regarding their practices for fear of judgment or negative consequences. To reduce this possibility, I ensured and reassured that the interview would be entirely confidential and anonymous. I reiterated my independence as a researcher and that the purpose was to understand, more generally, how to improve student satisfaction. Offers were made to check with the participant regarding using extracts from their interview in any publication, to ensure they were satisfied that their identity could not be revealed.

Similarly, students may not have wanted to speak openly in a focus group as it is not a situation that allows confidentiality. However, I reassured them that their comments would be anonymised in any publication and that I would not pass on any information about them as individuals to anyone. I also organised the session so that, at the end of the discussion, I gave each student a post-it note where they could jot down anything else that they want to say. Six participants out of the twenty chose to do this.

Finally, given that this research was conducted in the period leading up to the NSS survey for 2020, it was important that I did not influence the students regarding their responses to this survey. I, therefore, made sure not to discuss the NSS; not to use NSS language and terms; and to use neutral questions.

## Findings

### *Student focus groups*

There was no real difference in the content of the discussions between the four focus groups. In all the focus groups, the students tended to focus on the teachers' personal qualities more than the course qualities and the non-teaching context. There were a number of issues they did not mention as important for student satisfaction. When prompted, they did not seem interested in discussing the following topics, stating there was not a problem in this area: Teacher knowledge; clarity of objectives of the course; the course being stimulating and challenging; enabling thinking; and direct contact time with teaching staff in lectures and seminars. They did not want to discuss non-teaching factors related to student satisfaction, on the whole, including resources; the student voice; the campus; support services; extra-curricular activities and institutional reputation and image. Interestingly, many of these topics pertain to the NSS.

The main aspect of non-teaching related factors that was discussed was the topic of academic community. Students really valued the support and friendship from other students. For example, one said:

What helped my learning, [was] the relationships with my course mates. Even if I don't want to come to the lecture, if I know someone is there, I will come or if I really like the lecturer. (*Female, FG D*)

The students felt the teaching staff could do more to foster this academic community by, for example, having more small group discussions in class and more informal events.

In terms of the course, there were some negative comments about coordination of programmes, orientation to the university systems, repetitive material, assessment overload and a lack of grade alignment across lecturers.

The main factors considered to be important for student satisfaction in relation to teaching, according to the students in these focus groups, were the lecturers presentation style; their approachability, empathy, and positive staff-student interactions generally; and their availability for academic and pastoral support. Echoing the literature discussed earlier, the students placed a high emphasis on the presentation skills of their lecturers. They said that the lecturers need to be 'engaging' and 'interactive'. They particularly dislike being 'talked at'. They were also wanting the lecturer to present with energy. For example, they said:

It matters a lot, how they speak. Especially if it is a boring topic. For a couple of years I had the same lecturer and it was so hard to focus because . . . they were very monotone. (*Female, FG C*)

I think when you have someone who is kind of, they don't have to be over the top, you know, in your face, but more energetic, delivering it in a more engaging way, or it is really hard to follow. (*Male, FG B*)

The quality of the relationship was particularly highlighted in all the conversations. For the students, this was indicated by the lecturer knowing their name; responding quickly to communications; showing an interest in what the students says and thinks; checking up if they have not seen the student; being friendly and patient; being even-handed (no favouritism); and going beyond their obligations. This included the following comments:

They know my name . . . the best lecturers are more engaged and willing to talk to you. The worst ones, I think, even now, they don't know my name. (*Female, FG B*)

The good ones check up on you and ask what you think and they talk to you outside of the lectures, as well. (*Female, FG C*)

Some lecturers seem to be very impatient towards their students, kind of like, they don't want to be there . . . (*Male, FG, D*)

This strongly linked to their comments on the availability of staff for academic enquiries and support. There was a mixed picture in all the groups of the extent to which this support was available but the discussions indicate that it was not consistently available. For example, the students said:

When I first came to Uni, in the first year, we were very much thrown in at the deep end, we had no idea how anything worked. It was a lot of trial and error. (Male, FG D)

My personal tutor ... I have to say, I could not praise them highly enough. They did an absolutely amazing job of supporting me on a daily basis ... and they very much went the extra mile. (Female, FG A)

All of the student focus groups also stressed some new themes that were not particularly apparent in the NSS and literature around 'appropriate teaching techniques' and 'sensitivity'. Regarding techniques, the students frequently said how they did not want three-hour long lectures, without variety in activities. Regarding the sensitivity of the lecturers, the students said that they felt 'put on the spot', 'embarrassed' and 'humiliated' by some of their comments and actions. This included, pointing them out to speak when they had not shown they wanted to; ignoring their body language about how they were feeling; harshly contradicting them in front of their peers; and not speaking to them as an adult of equal status. For example, two of the respondents said:

I don't particularly respond well to being forced to answer questions if I don't want to publicly. I will avoid going to a lecture if I think they are going to point me out like that. (Female, FG A)

The above comment illustrates a lack of empathy, in terms of not considering the feelings and needs of the student.

### *Programme leader interviews*

Consistent with the literature which notes a difference between what students say enhances their learning and what teachers say achieves this (e.g. Hadad, Keren, and Naveh 2020; Linet 2020), the Programme Leaders (PLs) tended to focus on organisational aspects of teaching and learning, rather than the teaching and learning itself. This, perhaps, should be expected as they were being interviewed in their capacity as Programme Leaders, rather than as lecturers.

On the whole, there was no perceptible difference between the methods used to improve teaching and learning on the high NSS scoring programmes and the low NSS scoring programmes. However, the high NSS scoring Programme Leaders put a lot of emphasis on listening to the students and making changes in line with their comments, wherever possible. For example, PL W said that to ensure teaching quality on the course, he ensured that he was

'... taking feedback seriously and acting on it' (PL W). He also made sure to respond to feedback from staff-student forums, module and programme evaluations and the NSS.

On the other hand, in their interviews, the low scoring NSS Programme Leaders did not spontaneously mention listening to the students and, when prompted, were somewhat dismissive of the idea. For example, PL B said:

Yes, we do respond to the student feedback when we can but often it is contradictory or they want the impossible or what will not really help them learn ... (PL B)

Also, all the PLs talked about the importance of positive staff student relations, for understanding what the students wanted and needed, and, in general, as a basis for learning and teaching. They all either had an open-door policy or office hours to ensure availability. However, the high-scoring NSS PLs put more of an emphasis on quality and quantity of interaction and ensured that this happened through informal activities, such as welcome events, and formal activities with informal elements, such as fieldtrips.

The PLs also talked about the need for more resources, to have more staff to draw on to deliver the course and more staff on permanent contracts, rather than fixed term. They also spoke about the increasing marketisation of education and its perception as a consumer product. It was felt that this distorted the priorities of everyone, away from good teaching and towards selling courses. Both high and low scoring PLs highlighted a number of issues beyond their control which detracted from the quality of the teaching. These issues applied across the board, but were discussed more by the low scoring PLs, perhaps to justify their low score (which we did not discuss but would likely be in their thoughts), or perhaps these issues are more problematic in their department or for their topic and, therefore, the issues help to explain the score differential. There was a strong feeling of a need for more investment in staff across the board but particularly in the low NSS scoring programmes. It was felt that this would enable the small group teaching that the students seemed to value.

## Discussion and conclusion

Because of the very small samples used in this study and its qualitative nature, it not possible to make generalisations beyond the sample. However, the research does provide potential insights into areas for possible future research and, perhaps, further discussions at universities hoping to improve their levels of student satisfaction. It also supports some of the prior literature, whilst developing new emphases that can be investigated further. In particular, the study revealed new insights into the fundamental importance that students place on warm and respectful interactions with staff in the context of trusting relationships.

Despite variations in individual experiences, the students in all the focus groups tended to focus on the teaching, itself, when considering what factors enabled their learning, contradicting some of the literature which emphasises factors beyond the teacher and the course, such as the campus facilities (e.g. Elliott and Shin 2002). This confirms the work of Bell and Brooks (2017) and the many other authors mentioned earlier, who found that teaching quality was one of the most important factors for student satisfaction.

With regard to the particular aspects of teaching that are important, the study confirms work reporting that students value lecturers' presentation style over content (e.g. Guolla 1999; Shevlin et al. 2000). The student focus groups also stressed some new themes that were not particularly apparent in the NSS and literature i.e. 'appropriate teaching techniques' and 'sensitivity'. The latter was articulated in terms of 'humiliation' arising from lecturer comments. This emphasis on staff-student interactions supports the studies by Hadad, Keren, and Naveh (2020) and Alves and Raposo (2009) which found that approachability, empathy, and interactions, were strong predictors of student satisfaction. This is not a topic that is particularly highlighted in the NSS framework but this study indicates this may be one of the most valuable supporters of student learning.

With regard to the Programme Leaders, there was not much difference between the practices of the low and high NSS scoring course leaders, according to their answers to the questions. All the PLs talked about the importance of positive staff student relations as well as the need for more resources and more investment in staff on permanent contracts. However, the high NSS scoring Programme Leaders put a lot more emphasis on listening to the students and responding to their comments, wherever possible.

Overall, the study seems to indicate the importance of relationships. Both students and staff said that these were important. The lecturer's caring and sensitivity may be the most important foundation for student learning and satisfaction. This links to the literature on 'relational pedagogy' (e.g. Bingham and Sidorkin 2004; Margonis 2004). This literature argues that student learning is significantly supported by teachers and academics who engage positively and proactively with students in, and outside of, lectures (Pearce and Down 2011; Ljungblad 2019). These interactions foster a sense of belonging (see Hooks 2009) and trust (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

According to relational pedagogical philosophy, the development of teacher-student relations largely depends on the relational proficiencies of teachers (Aspelin 2012; Ljungblad 2019). Key attributes that demonstrate relational proficiency include care, empathy, appreciation, respect, trust, attentiveness, flexibility, humour and inclusiveness (Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen 2015; Aspelin and Jonsson 2019; Ljungblad 2019).

Some institutions have chosen to focus on relationships (Smyth et al. 2009) though relational pedagogy may be being undermined by neoliberalism (Chomsky 1999; Giroux 2007). It may also be undermined by present Covid-19 restrictions where there are few opportunities for interactions outside of the class and where extended contact times, such as fieldtrips, have not been possible. However, any crisis also presents opportunities for staff to show that they care through showing a genuine interest in how students are doing.

Whether these findings apply to a wider body of the students at the university looked at and undergraduate students in the UK and globally is not known but worth further investigation. The research also does not explain why some lecturers appear to lack relational pedagogy skills. The reasons could be poor training, 'personality', or occasional insensitive behaviour resulting from the stress of work overload or job insecurity. This would also be important to investigate further.

Whilst these research findings are tentative, they do report student experience and support key literature. In particular, the study highlights the importance of developing positive relationships based on trust. The examples the students gave were very helpful for highlighting specific actions that would support this: knowing their name; responding quickly to communications; showing an interest in what they have to say and what they think; checking up on them if we have not seen them; being friendly and patient; being even-handed; and going beyond our obligations.

A few studies detail how to develop the relational competencies of educators (Jensen, Skibsted, and Christensen 2015; Aspelin and Jonsson 2019) but there is much more research needed in this area. Empathy can be taught to the extent that teachers can be encouraged to consider the student perspective as discussed in the work of, for example, Chika-James (2020). Many self-development/self-awareness techniques could be taught in lecturer training programmes, such as practicing 'attunement' (Stern et al. 1985). This investment would create positive feedback loops as enhancing student wellbeing has been linked with higher NSS scores (Mantzios et al. 2020; Egan et al. 2021).

It would be comforting to believe that individual teaching staff only have to learn some new techniques so as to achieve these relational behaviours. However, we also need to consider contextual factors. All humans have the capacity for these empathic and caring acts (see Tudge 2013), yet these impulses can be undermined, and even reversed, in some situations where we are stressed (von Dawans, Strojny, and Domes 2021). With more casualised work and increasing workloads in UK HE, stresses are increasing, possibly undermining the possibility for relational pedagogy. While universities have been spending more on new buildings as a result of the increase in tuition fees (Morris, Adams, and Ratcliffe 2016), this study indicates that students appear to be more interested in having the attention, support and care of their lecturers, than the campus facilities. If so, student satisfaction in UK HE can best be increased by providing a more supportive context for relational pedagogy through secure jobs and adequate staffing. Sensitive and caring teaching can enhance student satisfaction, in turn increasing further student recruitment and retention, and thereby providing more resources for staffing. This virtuous circle can only, function, however, if the need for relational pedagogy is properly understood and valued.

## Availability of data

Anonymised transcripts can be made available upon request

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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