

Vital Statistics for Restoring True Academia

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Introduction

The global expansion of access to higher education and its influence on renewed interest in global and national university ranking has prompted Malaysian universities to relook and rethink about academic quality. Restoring or improving the academic standards of universities has to start with an analysis of the inherent quality of academics. Little has been done hitherto to systematically address the quality of academics in the local context. Hence, an empirical exploration of students' perception of lecturers in a local public university was carried out. The small questionnaire survey (n=69) gauged students' candid views on the attributes, attitudes and aptitude of lecturers with respect to effective instruction. The caveat here is that the data is from responses of science students only.

General Perception

A convincing majority (83 per cent, Table 1) of students believe that public speaking skills of lecturers are more crucial for effective instruction. Most of the respondents (64 per cent) also feel that lecturers' competency in knowledge to be less important than oratory skills. This suggests that lecturers need to improve their public speaking skills in order to teach well. Effective communication, and not amount of knowledge, influences a better learning environment as far as the students are concerned. To my knowledge, there has been one related study (Beardsley, 2001) but of which focused on verbal communication skills of students rather than lecturers. This article may be the first to highlight a positive association between oratory proficiency of lecturers with instructional effectiveness.

Additionally, most students (67 per cent, Table 1) deem that the English proficiency of lecturers to be important for effective instruction. They consider lecturers with good English to be better teachers. This can be envisaged of Malaysian science students from current cohorts who studied science and mathematics using English at secondary and pre-university levels. It remains to be explored, whether this is similar for the arts and humanities. Although studies have been done on the association of students' English language skills with academic performance in a non-native speaker environment (Johns, 1981; Graham, 1987), even in the Malaysian context (Ting et al. 2009), literature to date reveals no such studies on lecturers. This survey results represent novel findings of a parallel relationship between lecturers' English proficiency and teaching capability in the local context.

Most of the respondents (72 per cent, Table 1) are convinced that lecturers active in research and publication teach better. They also supported a positive association between good credentials in research and publication of lecturers with effective instructional skills. Hence, there is a general preference among students for research-active lecturers. A clear majority of students (80 per cent, Table 1) concur with the idea that the availability of research information, and not just textbook facts, influence effective learning. All these imply that teaching alone, without an unequivocal involvement in research, does not complete the role of an academic. Quintessentially, students reckon that good lecturers come from good researchers. Academics weak in research and publication should reassess their attitude if they are to gain recognition and respect from students.

TABLE 1 Results (in %) from survey done on students' (3rd year cohort) feedback regarding attributes, attitudes and aptitudes of lecturers in relation to effective teaching and learning

Student responses		Description of questionnaire items
Yes (%)	No (%)	
83	17	• Lecturers who can speak well can teach well also.
36	64	• Competency in knowledge outweighs oratory skills in effective teaching.
77	23	• Lecturers with good English are better teachers/supervisors.
33	67	• Lecturers' English proficiency does not affect teaching skills.
72	28	• Lecturers who are active in research and publication teach better.
48	52	• Research and publication capabilities do not affect teaching skills.
94	6	• Incorporation of current research information supports better learning.
20	80	• Textbook information alone is sufficient for effective learning.
57	43	• ICT-savvy lecturers teach better.
41	59	• ICT competency of lecturers does not affect effective teaching.
96	4	• Flexibility and leniency provide a more conducive learning environment.
57	43	• Lecturers who are strict and demanding produce better students.

The results on ICT factor show that between 57 to 59 per cent (Table 1) of students are of the opinion that instructors have to be competent users of ICT in order to teach better. Nonetheless, ICT-competency is not an overwhelmingly advantageous factor. Students who supported ICT competency (of lecturers) as a positive influence on teaching do not exceed 60 per cent. In fact, studies by Keller and Cernerud (2002) concluded that an e-learning environment is neither a bonus for the education process nor positively received by students. Hence, despite the relevance of ICT, pedagogical activities in universities cannot be devoid of a human-to-human interaction.

The last finding is confusing. Firstly, almost all respondents (96 per cent, Table 1) have a penchant for lecturers who provide flexible and lenient learning environments. This setting is construed as favourable. Secondly, an unanticipated but noticeable majority (57 per cent) feels that strict and demanding lecturers provide real guidance. The two results contradict. One would think that students who prefer leniency would naturally abhor strict lecturers. Perhaps, this study reveals a pervasive problem of immaturity among university students nowadays who are undecided in the necessary requirements of good study habits. For experienced lecturers, this is unsurprising, although it can be disturbing news for external stakeholders of local universities.

Language and research factors

In correlating teaching, research and language factors, 55 per cent (Table 2) of students feel that research-active lecturers good in English provide better instruction. Only six per cent of students think that good instructors are neither from those proficient in English nor research-active. In general, students prefer lecturers who are good in English and competent in research and publication. From this, can English proficiency be connected to research and publication credibility? If yes, it means that research-active academics, who publish well, naturally have better command of English. The sum of these attributes makes them better teachers. Whether this situation is true in the soft sciences (arts and humanities), remains to be investigated.

In linking factors of research-active lecturers, research information in teaching materials, and the limitation of textbook facts, 58 per cent of students (Table 3) maintain that the combination of all three factors is necessary for a conducive learning environment. The remainder indicated confusion or inconsistency over their preferences (Table 3). This finding strengthens the fact that university students, in general, are aware of the importance of the research agenda and construe the outcomes of research as important for knowledge acquisition.

TABLE 2 Findings on students' perception of language, research and publication factors on effective university teaching (as processed from survey data)

Responses (%)	Description of factors
55	• Lecturers with good command of English, and active in research and publication teach better.
6	• English language proficiency and research and publication capabilities do not influence good teaching skills.
22	• Lecturers with good English skills, but not research and publication prowess provide better instruction.
17	• Research and publication skills, but not English proficiency, affect teaching skills of lecturers.

TABLE 3 Findings on students' perception of research-driven teaching in determining conduciveness of university learning environment (as processed from survey data)

Responses (%)	Description of factors
58	• Research-active lecturers who make available current research information, and not just textbook facts alone, provide a better learning environment
3	• A good learning environment requires the availability of more than just textbook facts, but does not need research-active lecturers and research information.
13	• Research-active lecturers who make available current research information provide a better learning environment, but textbook facts alone can also do.
19	• A good learning environment does not require research-active lecturers but does need current research information rather than just textbook facts.
6	• A good learning environment does not require research-active lecturers but does need current research information, although textbook facts alone can do also.
1	• Research-active lecturers who give only textbook facts provide better learning environment. No comments on the research information factor.

This is encouraging for academics who believe that a true learning culture embodies a research culture. The urgency of this cannot be under-rated in light of the dangerous increase in lecturers keen in providing school-styled education to students. Their attitudes towards the processes of education are harmful to true academia. Unlike school syllabus, university education is beyond textbook-based curriculum. A notable portion of the curriculum comprises courses on academic writing, research methodology, recent development in research, and a small research project. Lecturers weak in research and publication cannot be a positive educational factor. Studies have shown that the inclusion of research elements in medical curriculum does have a positive influence on medical students' attitudes towards medical science (Hren et al. 2004; Vujaklija et al. 2010). Research-led teaching has also been emphasised in dental education so that students are in touch with new and changing ways of diagnosing, treating and preventing dental diseases (Ford et al. 2008). Clearly, in these examples, research-active lecturers have to be a major part of the effecting factors. Research-led teaching has also been linked to the inducement of creativity and other employability skills of students (Verran, 2010). In short, research-led teaching by research-active academics is sacrosanct for true academia to ensue. To quote from Pauline Ford et al.

“Research is and should be a fundamental activity of universities such that the best teaching cannot occur in an environment lacking active and enthusiastic research and scholarship.” (Ford et al. 2008: 45)

Conclusion and Recommendations

Within the context of a local university, undergraduate science students perceive a conducive learning environment to be characterised by the presence of research-dynamic lecturers who are good in English and public speaking, competent ICT users, understand student limitations, and strict on rules of faculty-student engagement. The criterion of research-led teaching must also be emphasised as necessary in creating a favourable academic environment.

A sure way of ameliorating true academia is for university management to exercise wisdom in staff recruitment and support. In recruitment, candidates with PhD qualification, with good research and publication, and passionate in their knowledge area will represent the best choice. In staff support, research and publication activities should be well supported and rewarded, while elements antagonistic to research should be contained. Apparently, such university environment can only be realised by a university leadership that excels in research and publication. Studies by Goodall (2006) revealed a positive correlation between the global ranking position of a university with the research and publication credentials of its top university management. In the words of Amanda Goodall,

“Better universities are run by better researchers.”
(Goodall, 2006: 404)

Restoring true academia must not be a trivial matter for Malaysian universities. The downfall of a nation's academia due to deteriorating quality of academics may not be reversible if early signs are ignored and necessary remedial actions are not duly taken.

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