Studies in Higher Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cshe20

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To cite this article: Nadia Gulko, Kieron Barber, Lies Bouten, Natalie Tatiana Churyk, Patricia Everaert, Elizabeth A. Gordon, Seyram Kawor, Camillo Lento, Nicholas McGuigan, Susanna L. Middelberg, Enoch Opare Mintah, Saravanan Muthaiyah, Suresh Kumar Sahoo, Madiha Sarwar, Olubukunola R. Uwuigbe & Nadeeka Withanage (09 Sep 2024): Let the students be heard – student voices on teaching excellence awards, Studies in Higher Education, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2024.2396453

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2396453

Published online: 09 Sep 2024.

STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2396453

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Let the students be heard – student voices on teaching excellence awards

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ABSTRACT

Globally, academics are encouraged to facilitate teaching excellence. Many business schools use teaching excellence awards to recognize exceptional efforts toward students' learning, foster pedagogical innovation, and improve faculty motivation. However, prior literature has noted that many business schools lack clear and transparent criteria for TE awards, which can hinder the process and potentially reduce the motivational effects. Research has yet to fully incorporate student voices across a global setting into the evaluation criterion. As a result, this study seeks to identify universal criteria for TE awards based on a large-scale survey of 2,775 business students across eleven countries and five continents intending to capture global student perspectives. First, we reveal whether the possession of a TE award for an educator has any importance from students' perspectives. Second, we find that students across the globe have a general agreement regarding the criteria for awarding an excellent educator by identifying 30 criteria for TE awards students noted across our global sample. Third, we reveal 15 criteria that are specific to some countries but not globally. Lastly, we explore the differences in TE award criteria across different study levels. Overall, our study makes a significant contribution by identifying global criteria based on student voice to inform the development of teaching excellence award criteria in business education or by higher education providers and professional bodies.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 11 March 2024
Accepted 20 August 2024

KEYWORDS
Teaching excellence; teaching awards criteria; global student voice; higher education; business students

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1. Introduction

Globally, many universities encourage academics to deliver educational excellence. To recognize the impactful work of outstanding educators, many universities offer teaching awards, most commonly a teaching excellence (TE) award that recognizes innovative pedagogical practice and acknowledges educators' efforts toward students' development and learning. TE awards can be institution-wide or focused on a specific program. Aside from recognition of excellence, TE awards can also motivate faculty members to strive towards excellence (Chism and Szabo 1997; McNaught and Anwyl 1993; Seppala and Smith 2020).

The recognition of an excellent educator results in questions related to the ideal candidate to receive a TE award, usually based on some evaluation criteria for awarding an excellent educator this distinction. The questions of who should decide to award outstanding educators and how they should be selected have been debated for a considerable time (e.g. Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Chism 2006; Halse et al. 2007), yet the extant literature has scarce evidence to answer these questions. Currently, many TE awards lack clear and transparent criteria for the awarding of teaching excellence and have a relatively unfocused nomination process (Kiersma et al. 2016). Recently, Kiersma et al. (2016, 484) concluded that 'expanding current teaching award criteria to include additional components, programs could better inform faculty of the selection process, as well as promote evidence-based teaching practice, scholarship, and innovations in education', and recommended the development of standards for criteria or a rubric that could be used globally.

Clear criteria for selecting outstanding educators are also important to ensure the process is transparent, thereby increasing the effect the TE award might have on promoting TE. For example, Fitzpatrick and Moore (2015) caution institutions to take care to ensure that there are clear expectations regarding the teaching awards process and criteria to enhance the motivating features of teaching awards. Additionally, Kiersma et al. (2016) discuss how the lack of clear criteria can make the selection of an award winner difficult and reduce the effect that winning the award has on recognized faculty striving to enhance educational quality. Clear and transparent criteria are also crucial if TE awards impact the promotion and tenure process (Schindler et al. 2013), which appears to be the case as Warren and Plumb (1999) highlight how TE awards are often used when staff are considered for promotion, even if the nominated educators have not successfully won an award.

Aside from a lack of clear and transparent criteria, TE award criteria generally fail to acknowledge the student voice. A better understanding of student voices across the globe in relation to TE awards is therefore imperative. *First*, we do not understand whether students perceive the possession of a teaching award as important to their learning. *Next*, it is unclear what criteria students believe should be used for selecting an excellent educator. *Lastly*, the internationalization of higher education has highlighted the importance of considering international aspects in teaching and learning towards quality education, for example, through mobility of academic staff and students, knowledge transfer, and national policies and institutional strategies of internationalization (e.g. Kehm and Teichler 2007). A better understanding of student voices in relation to TE award criteria is also consistent with recent trends toward student-centered learning (Berg and Lepp 2023; Krause 2024; Marín 2022; O'Neill and McMahon 2005; Sakata 2023), which emphasizes the need for educators to understand and integrate into their teaching practices student perceptions and preferences.

Prior research has concluded that the inclusion of both student perspectives and clear criteria would likely encourage and reward a more complete and comprehensive form of TE (Kiersma et al. 2016). Our research therefore aims to enhance the understanding of teaching excellence and TE award criteria based on student voices across a more internationally diverse setting spanning multiple countries. Focusing on the lack of clear and transparent criteria for evaluating TE awards with the need to hear more student voices across the globe in recognition of TE awards, this study seeks to identify universal criteria for TE awards based on a global student perspective.

Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017) cautioned on the use of generic TE award criteria that did not consider the constraints and enablement of a discipline. We situate our study within the business

education setting where TE has been shown to contribute to business students' optimal development in becoming trusted business professionals and leaders in society (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017). Specifically, we survey 2,775 students across eleven countries and five continents to pursue the following four objectives. *First*, we reveal whether the possession of a TE award for an educator has any importance for business students globally. *Second*, we identify 30 criteria that are universally associated by business students with TE awards. *Third*, we identify 15 criteria that are specific to some countries in our sample but not others. *Lastly*, we explore the differences in TE award criteria revealed across study year levels by business students. Overall, our study makes a significant contribution as it is the first study, to the best of the authors' knowledge, to comprehensively identify global criteria based on student voice that can inform the development of institutional teaching excellence award criteria in business education. This research is therefore of interest to academics, students, researchers, educational institutions and policy makers, university administrators, professional bodies, and higher education agencies.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the relevant literature on TE awards. Section 3 outlines the methods used, followed by section 4 that discusses the findings. Section 5 provides concluding thoughts, implications, and future research suggestions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teaching excellence and teaching awards

The definition of 'excellence' in teaching and learning can be subjective and depends on diverse factors. An ongoing debate, both within the literature and in practice, continues around the definition of TE (Gourlay and Stevenson 2017); however, it is generally agreed that TE is 'more than just knowing about how to teach' (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015, 240). When considering TE in higher education, some researchers note the general difficulty in defining excellence and the lack of a clear articulation of the distinction between different quality thresholds – defined for example as low level teaching, good quality teaching, and excellent teaching (e.g. Brew et al. 2022; Cui, French, and O'Leary 2021; Gunn and Fisk 2013; Little et al. 2007). Some studies focus on defining TE frameworks (e.g. Matheson 2020), by for example, examining academics that students recognized as inspirational teachers to shed light on the nature and practice of TE. Other studies explore drivers of teaching effectiveness from the views of award-winning educators (e.g. Wygal, Watty, and Stout 2014) rather than students. Although the prior literature does not offer a universally accepted definition or a consensus of opinions on what constitutes TE in higher education, support is overwhelming for its importance, as the focus on teaching quality has increased significantly in recent years (Filippakou 2011; O'Leary and Cui 2020). The emergence of quality assurance and quality enhancement programs in teaching and learning in higher education and globalization have accelerated the demand for quality of teaching.

Many universities use TE awards to promote and recognize TE as a distinctive aspect of a reward system in higher education. Prior studies (Badri and Abdulla 2004; Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Chism and Szabo 1997; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019; Madriaga and Morley 2016; Seppala and Smith 2020; Warren and Plumb 1999) suggest that TE awards offer institutional support to faculty members, acknowledgement of educator excellence and motivation for faculty members to strive towards such performance in teaching. Kalis and Kirschenbaum (2008) argue that TE awards can improve the retention and morale of excellent educators. TE awards can also play a role in promotion and tenure decisions. For example, Warren and Plumb (1999) discuss how TE awards can contribute significantly to the tenure, promotion, and merit decisions of faculty members. They provide a comprehensive summary of TE award types employed in higher education globally.

Although there is no universal agreement on the benefits of TE awards, they are often considered a causal factor in improving teaching quality or increasing motivation (e.g. Efimenko et al. 2018;

Macfarlane 2007; Mackenzie 2007) through career progression, esteem amongst peers (Seppala and Smith 2020), and formulation of new connections outside their immediate environment (Forland and Roxa 2024). Contrastingly, if TE awards are not appropriately designed and operationalized, they risk being seen as tokenism, creating competition and division, and wasting time and resources (Madriaga and Morley 2016; Warren and Plumb 1999). Additionally, concerns arise around institutional and faculty-led TE awards that can 'harvest' students' comments and module evaluations as proxies of teaching excellence (Madriaga and Morley 2016), with Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting (2019) noting that this approach is not student-led.

The prior literature tends to place an emphasis on the benefits and risks of TE awards as they relate to faculty members. The current environment places value on the student voice and it has become increasingly important in all aspects of higher education (Kerimbayev, Umirzakova, and Shadiev 2023; Otto et al. 2024; Ski-Berg and Stabell 2024), including pedagogical design, assessment, feedback, quality assurance and governance (Holen et al. 2021; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bovell 2023; Matthews and Dollinger 2023). However, what is currently unclear is whether students value the possession of a TE award and understanding the views of students in relation to TE awards seems imperative. Therefore, this research begins to explore student voices on TE awards by asking the following:

RQ1. Do students consider **possessing a TE award** as important for an excellent educator?

2.2. Student-led criteria for teaching excellence awards

TE awards are generally based on peer nomination (Fitzpatrick and Moore 2015), self-nomination (Centra 1993; Madriaga and Morley 2016), or student-led nominations (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Hill, Lomas, and MacGregor 2003). Once nominated, nominees are evaluated based on specific criteria. The development of such criteria varies significantly across institutions and can often be unclear. Fitzpatrick and Moore (2015) caution institutions to ensure clear expectations regarding the teaching awards process. Clear and transparent criteria are essential to mitigate any negative externalities, such as changes in higher education or award funding directives, associated with TE awards and those in the tenure process (Schindler et al. 2013). Kiersma et al. (2016) posit that the award process in most higher education institutions is comparatively unfocused and lacks any rubric, which often compromises the clarity of the award process and may negatively impact the award-winning faculty. For example, the authors referred to unfocused criteria when using student votes for the best faculty due to their admirable personality qualities. The negative impact is connected with faculty members being adjudged winners or recipients not based on scholarship of teaching and learning.

Prior research has concluded that the inclusion of both student perspectives and clear criteria would likely encourage and reward a more complete and comprehensive form of teaching excellence (Kiersma et al. 2016). The inclusion of student perspectives into the development of TE award criteria is also consistent with Student Centred Learning (SCL). SCL and pedagogical design in higher education is accelerating (Geven and Attard 2012; Hosein and Rao 2017; Marín 2022; Patria 2012; Tangney 2014), with more student voices being integrated into learning and assessment design through co-created forms of learning (Gravett, Kinchin, and Winstone 2020; Kek and Huijser 2011). A learner-centered approach has been crucial in shaping students' experiences and attitudes toward work and graduate outcomes (Downs et al. 2024; Jackson and Rowe 2023; Perusso and Wagenaar 2022). The student role in higher education has been receiving increased attention from academics in recent years (Ski-Berg and Stabell 2024) with calls for further involvement of students in key decisions relating to their higher education within institutions. It therefore follows that students' voices should equally apply to TE awards, supporting the need for a deep understanding of student perceptions of TE awards and, more specifically, the criteria that students deem most important.

The concept of SCL advocates active engagement of students in decisions that relate holistically to what, when, where, and how students prefer to learn (Kerimbayev, Umirzakova, and Shadiev 2023). Holen et al. (2021) argue that student partnerships in higher education have paved the way for the practical contributions, institutional reforms, and national policies. The concept of students as partners proposes that students should be involved in transforming the institutional cultures (Gravett, Kinchin, and Winstone 2020) within the universities and that involving students and staff as partners in learning and teaching is key for higher education in the twenty-first century (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). A high degree of student immersion in the higher education learning process encourages a collaborative approach to co-generating learning content and activities (Marginson 2024).

Another area of SCL is focused on assessment. Student self and peer assessment, especially through anonymous exercises, is becoming integral to student-centered evaluation and appraisal processes in higher education (Panadero and Alqassab 2019). This anonymous procedure has been linked to the improvement of student performance as the inclusivity and validity of this process facilitate constructive feedback and enhance assessment reliability of the whole evaluation process (Iglesias Pérez, Vidal-Puga, and Pino Juste 2022; Seifert and Feliks 2019). It follows that students should also play an integral role in the assessment of teaching excellence, including TE awards. Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga (2015, 240) argue TE is precisely 'about student perceptions of inspirational teaching.' Students have different perceptions of teaching quality and usually evaluate educators on their unique teaching approach and consider attributes such as engagement of students, evidence of effort, consistency of support, innovation, and being able to break down any barriers between students and educators (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019). As a result, hearing students' voices will allow for student contribution to the process of recognizing TE and help students further appreciate the excellence of their educators (Kiersma et al. 2016).

Prior research has explored TE more generally. For example, teachers' personal qualities, such as generous use of time, enthusiasm, helpfulness, and management of complex interactions, are valued by students (Thompson and Zaitseva 2012). Teaching award winners are praised for their capability, humor, precision, character, enthusiasm about their field, sympathy, and willingness for their students to succeed (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Symbaluk and Howell 2010). While students have itemized these competencies and qualities as characterizing which educators deserve an award, the question of how these have primarily or comprehensively been fed into TE awards criteria remains underexplored. Furthermore, there is even less understanding of how the discipline-specific nature of business education should impact the development of TE award criteria.

Despite the lack of identifiable criteria for awarding TE awards, they are usually provided either based on a nomination or letter of support or on students' ratings or evaluation of teaching. In these cases, there is a mismatch between the criteria and evidence provided as support for TE (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Chism 2006). Behari-Leak and McKenna (2017) recommend more comprehensive and transformative award criteria involving different stakeholders directly related to TE. Some studies have suggested general criteria for awarding a teacher in a national or state system (Chan and Chen 2024; McNaught and Anwyl 1993; Warren and Plumb 1999), but these studies lack comprehensive information, especially for awards based on peer nomination (Chism 2006). This problem becomes more complex as different stakeholders have distinct perceptions of evaluating TE and the quality of teaching. For instance, some academics maintain that the introduction of a metric narrows the measurement process towards a quantitative approach. Although this is the case, Gibbs (2016) also acknowledges that the qualitative process is neither free from problems as it makes the measurement more subjective. However, Gibbs (2016, 17) further notes that 'process measures of teaching quality provide better indicators than outcome measures but are not yet sufficiently developed'. Skelton (2005) also identifies issues with national teaching fellow awardee submissions, such as lack of nominator criteria used for nominees, no available observation information, and a general lack of evidence included in the application. Thus, from

the teachers' point of view, assisting students in their learning process is essential, albeit some academics doubt that teaching excellence can be quantified (Wood and Su 2017).

Education is also becoming more global with the move towards internationalization of higher education (De Wit and Altbach 2021; Jibeen and Khan 2015; Knight and De Wit 2018). The aims of educational institutions may vary from income generation, cultural diplomacy, improvement of innovation, and productivity to acquisition of talent (Green, Marmolejo, and Egron-Plak 2012; Uzhegova and Baik 2022), which necessitates a strong coordination between teaching staff and institutional objective (Cavallone et al. 2022; Dewey and Duff 2009). Student diversity is increasing, and many universities are expanding satellite campuses across borders. Student perceptions of TE awards and TE award criteria in a more global context have, therefore, become even more imperative.

To date, relatively limited comprehensive empirical research investigating student perspectives on how TE informs award criteria has been conducted (Baglione and Tucci 2019; Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Khayati and Ariail 2020; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019). Additionally, most studies that have included student voice tend to focus on a single country (Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019) or institution (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015) instead of broad student feedback across a global setting. This research aims to explore the need for clear and transparent TE award criteria driven by the student's voice in an increasingly international higher-education setting by asking:

RQ2a. What are the **universal criteria** perceived by students for selecting outstanding educators worthy of a TE award?

RQ2b. What are the **country-specific criteria** perceived by students for selecting outstanding educators worthy of a TE award?

2.3. Teaching excellence awards across year-levels

Teaching and learning styles vary significantly across undergraduate versus postgraduate-level students (Srivastava and Shah 2022). Dai, Matthews, and Shen (2024) found evidence that the expectations of undergraduate students were different when compared with postgraduate students in a Chinese University where undergraduate students preferred to be 'taught' in a more traditional, passive way and postgraduate students appreciated being co-creators of their own learning. As a result, universities may have teaching awards focused specifically on teaching undergraduate or graduate students. In prioritizing what is essential in evaluating faculty's teaching and research accolades, some differences between the perceptions of undergraduate students – both first and final year – and postgraduate students are evidenced. For example, in a study evaluating the effects of faculty research on students' learning, Lindsay, Breen, and Jenkins (2002) reported that undergraduate students' negative comments on research assessment exercise ratings increased while those of postgraduate students diminished. First-year students have unique challenges and experiences with academic onboarding, making it difficult for them to contribute to what constitutes a criterion for TE awards. However, the narrative is different for final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students (Williams 2014). This rationale underlines why, for example, final-year students are the focus of surveys, such as the UK National Students Survey, US National Student Engagement Survey, and Australasian Survey of Student Engagement, used to assess student satisfaction and experience, prepare university rankings and league, and to inform student outcomes and teaching excellence framework (Ingham 2016; Lowe and Shaw 2019).

In the context of TE awards, the difference in perceptions or views on criteria between first-year, final-year undergraduate, and postgraduate levels has received minimal attention in prior literature. As a result, our third set of research questions:

RQ3a. Do **first-year undergraduate** student's perceptions of TE award criteria vary relative to **final-year undergraduate** students?

RQ3b. Do perceptions of TE award criteria vary across **undergraduate versus postgraduate students**?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and participants

By collecting quantitative and qualitative empirical data, the main research objective is to obtain insight into the business students' perceptions of the criteria for TE awards. We gather student voice data through a large-scale survey spanning thirteen institutions and eleven countries across the globe.[1] The survey instrument measures the relative importance of how students perceive the possession of a TE award. We also collect demographic information, including the respondents' country of study, academic status (year level of study), degree area of study, age, gender, and ethnicity. Our survey allows us to evaluate any relations between the student views and country or student views and specific individual student characteristics, such as level of study. Further, qualitative data are collected as students share their insights on TE award criteria important to them through open-ended questioning. Our approach enables us to conduct empirical research, as described by Gephart (2004), to uncover, describe, and theoretically interpret the meaning that people use in natural settings. Therefore, we did not define TE award criteria for students; instead, we asked students to discuss their three most important criteria for selecting a TE award winner, as if they were designing a TE award. Students were also given an opportunity to provide an example or an explanation of the criteria they suggested.[2]

Primary data is collected by means of an online survey questionnaire distributed in eleven countries between November 2022 and June 2023 (Appendix 1). The survey link was administered via email invitations, posting announcements on learning systems, or in class. The sample covers 2,775 undergraduate, postgraduate, and alums business students from thirteen institutions across five continents, with a balance between research-oriented and teaching-oriented institutions (Khayati and Ariail 2020) from developing (49.7%) and developed (50.3%) countries (Table 1). In terms of academic status, 58.2% of the respondents studied for an undergraduate degree, 31.5% a postgraduate degree, and 10.2% were alum students. Regarding age, 69.4% of students were 24 years or less, 14.3% were between 25 and 29 years, 10.6% were between 30 and 39 years, 4.9% were 40 years or older, and 0.8% preferred not to say. The sample consists of 50.7% of participants identified as women, 47.2% identified as men, 0.8% as non-binary, gender diverse, or other gender terms, and 1.2% preferred not to say. The sample respondents had the following ethnic background: 25.5% identify as Asian, 30.7% as Black, 34.2% as White, 2.7% as Mixed, 2% as Hispanic or Latino, 1.4% as other, and 3.5% preferred not to disclose. The anonymous survey responses are coded for each participant from P1 to P2,775.

Table 1. Characteristics of the sample.

Continent	Country	*N*	% country	% continent	Development status
Africa	Ghana	528	19%	37%	Developing
	Nigeria	140	5%		Developing
	South Africa	359	13%		Developing
Asia	India	315	12%	13%	Developing
	Malaysia	38	1%		Developing
Europe	Belgium	125	5%	26%	Developed
	France	107	4%		Developed
	UK	489	17%		Developed
North America	Canada	150	5%	18%	Developed
	USA	344	13%		Developed
Oceania	Australia	180	6%	6%	Developed
	Total	**2,775**	**100%**	**100%**	

Note: Primary data were collected by means of an online survey questionnaire distributed in eleven countries. *N* represents the number of responses gathered from each country, showing the percentage response of each country. % continent indicates the percentage response of different continents and development status identifies the development condition of each country.

3.2. Data analysis

3.2.1. Quantitative measures and analysis

Participants were asked to rate the possession of a TE award for an excellent teacher on a five-point Likert scale from '5' extremely important, through '3' moderately important to '1' not important at all. The data is analyzed statistically by using SPSS software. Univariate mean tests examine whether participants' answers differed significantly from a neutral response (scale value of 3, moderately important). Results indicate that all participant answers differ significantly ($p < 0.0001$) from neutral (scale value of 3). We use the Mann–Whitney U test to evaluate differences across variables, as explained further in the findings section. Additionally, a relative importance index analysis is employed to rank the survey responses according to their relative importance.

3.2.2. Coding of qualitative responses and data analysis

The open-ended survey responses resulted in a total of 234 pages (60,511 words) of raw data. The first author first read all responses, anonymized the data where required and prepared it for coding. We thematically analyzed the student voice data with an iterative process (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013) using NVivo, a qualitative software package. Initially, one of the co-authors coded the responses by country, focusing on the semantic meaning of each response. Where the provided answers were deemed irrelevant, or the responses were confusing, a code 'other' was created with a small number of responses in each country. Two additional co-authors then reviewed and discussed all latent codes and direct quotes allocated into a category. We held weekly meetings to review, discuss, and make necessary amendments in NVivo. Lastly, the broader research team provided feedback on the results of this first stage of coding. Input from the wider researcher team ensured that we captured differences in the interpretation of the responses from different geographical continents. This first phase of coding generated a total of 446 codes.

During the second phase of coding, two co-authors reviewed in detail all of the codes and the original responses and incorporated some latent coding consistent with a more interpretive approach. During this phase of coding, we created a keyword dictionary for each category to serve two main objectives. First, the keywords helped us describe a category and reconcile any differing interpretations among the research team by establishing consensual decision criteria to determine how to code various terms and phases (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). Second, the keywords aided in the process of reducing the number of categories to a more germane and manageable number of distinctive codes (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). Seven additional co-authors from seven countries reviewed the resulting codes and keywords in detail. Feedback from the broader research team was discussed and incorporated into the coding until we reached a consensus on the codes and keywords.

Overall, the final data of usable 7,523 references (quotes) across the whole sample resulted in 45 distinctive codes, each representing a criterion of a TE award. Finally, we categorized the codes as universal (30) and country-specific (15) criteria. The term 'universal' is used when the code refers to quotes mentioned in all countries and 'country-specific' when it applies only to certain countries. Additionally, as we originally converted the survey data into NVivo, including all demographics attached to individual responses, we were able to compare the results by conducting a cross-tabulation NVivo analysis (*CrossTab Query*) to break down the spread of each code across countries and demographic variable (study level).

3.2.3. Python coding and visualization

We supplement our NVivo thematic analysis process with Python language software to code and visualize our vast qualitative data set (Wilkinson and Hageman 2023). In order to visualize the criteria that were important by country, we generated a bipartite graph utilizing the availability of the Python library NetworkX (Balachandran and Hernandez 2018). First, we coded the dataset as the

weighting of specific TE award criterion was not of concern, but whether or not there was a connection at least once between the country and the criterion. Therefore, we transformed the dataset into a binary dataset in which we coded any non-zero responses as 1, and if there was no mention of a criterion from a country, it remained coded as 0. This enables us to generate a network between the respondents' countries and the criteria they believed were essential for TE awards.

3.3. Ethical approval

Our research team first received ethical approval from the Principal Investigator's university in the UK (10224), which covers various ethical policies, such as data management, quality assurance, and potential ethical, health, and safety issues. Next, each co-investigator's institution, where required, provided research ethics board clearance prior to primary data collection in a given country to ensure that the research was of high ethical standards within each jurisdiction. Additional approvals were granted in Canada (1469535), South Africa (22-089), and the USA (0185/30395). Our approach to research ethics was to ensure that all survey participants gave an informed consent before participating. An information sheet provided participants with a clear understanding of the purpose of the project, the requirements of the participants, any potential risks or inconveniences, possible benefits, confidentiality, data retention policies, and the ability to withdraw from the study. The respondents were assured confidentiality in their responses. Voluntary participation in the study, administering the survey online, and collecting no identifiable information allowed for the reduction of the potential social desirability bias.

4. Findings

This section presents the main findings of the student participant survey in line with the three research questions investigated, namely the importance of TE awards (RQ1), award criteria (RQ2), and differences by study level (RQ3). A discussion of the main student-identified TE award criteria follows in sections 4.2 and 4.3.

4.1. Teaching excellence awards: overall relative importance

We start the analysis of the first research question by testing the overall relative importance of TE awards globally as perceived by students. Table 2 illustrates that the respondents, on average, perceive that possessing a TE award has moderate importance for being an excellent educator, with a mean of 3.06 (SD = 1.35, *N* = 2,775). Specifically, a majority of the students (65.11%) believe that TE

Table 2. Student views on teaching excellence awards (*N* = 2,775).

	1	2	3	4	5	*N*	M	SD
The importance of possessing teaching excellence awards	17.01%	17.88%	26.09%	20.32%	18.70%	2,775	3.06	1.35

Note: Table 2 analyzes the importance of possessing TE awards as perceived by students. Descriptive analysis represents the N as total number of respondents, M: mean, and SD: Standard Deviation. 5-point Likert scale: 1 = not at all important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = very important, 5 = extremely important.

Table 3. Relative importance of teaching excellence awards by development status.

	1	2	3	4	5	*N*	M	SD	RII	Ranking
Developing countries	12.1%	14.3%	26.6%	24.3%	22.7%	1380	**3.31**	1.297	**0.662**	**1**
Developed countries	21.9%	21.4%	25.6%	16.4%	14.8%	1395	**2.81**	1.344	**0.562**	**2**

Note: Table 3 applies the Relative Importance Index (RII) to analyze student views on TE awards by development status, including developed and developing countries. 5-point Likert scale: 1 = not at all important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = very important, 5 = extremely important.

Table 4. Relative importance of teaching excellence awards by country.

	1	2	3	4	5	*n*	M	SD	RII	Ranking
Ghana	6.3%	10.4%	24.8%	29.5%	29.0%	528	**3.65**	1.18	**0.7292**	**1**
India	11.1%	9.5%	24.1%	28.3%	27.0%	315	**3.50**	1.28	**0.7010**	**2**
Malaysia	15.8%	10.5%	21.1%	26.3%	26.3%	38	**3.37**	1.40	**0.6737**	**3**
Australia	10.0%	16.7%	27.8%	20.0%	25.6%	180	**3.34**	1.29	**0.6689**	**4**
Nigeria	10.7%	23.6%	33.6%	12.9%	19.3%	140	**3.06**	1.25	**0.6129**	**5**
UK	18.0%	19.4%	23.1%	20.4%	19.0%	489	**3.03**	1.37	**0.6061**	**6**
South Africa	21.7%	21.2%	29.2%	17.3%	10.6%	359	2.74	1.27	0.5476	7
France	16.8%	26.2%	33.6%	15.9%	7.5%	107	2.71	1.14	0.5421	8
USA	26.2%	20.9%	25.3%	15.4%	12.2%	344	2.67	1.33	0.5331	9
Canada	33.3%	21.3%	26.7%	8.0%	10.7%	150	2.41	1.31	0.4827	10
Belgium	32.8%	32.8%	28.8%	8.8%	0.8%	125	2.12	0.99	0.4240	11

Note: Table 4 ranks student views on the relative importance of TE awards by country. The table represents the descriptive statistics of eleven countries, while applying the Relative Importance Index (RII). 5-point Likert scale: 1 = not at all important, 2 = slightly important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = very important, 5 = extremely important.

awards are either moderately, very, or extremely important, whereas 17.88% of the students consider them as slightly important and 17.01% as not important at all.

By calculating the Relative Importance Index (RII), we further analyzed student views on TE awards by development status, including developed and developing countries. We conducted a Mann–Whitney U (un-tabulated) and found significant differences ($U = 758576.5$; $p = 0.000$). Specifically, Table 3 shows that students from developing countries place more emphasis ($M = 3.31$) on educators who possess a TE award compared to developed countries ($M = 2.81$).

Finally, we compare student views on TE awards by country. Table 4 reveals that across our eleven countries, the country placing the highest level of importance on TE awards comes from students in Ghana ($M = 3.65$), India ($M = 3.50$), Malaysia ($M = 3.37$), Australia ($M = 3.34$), Nigeria ($M = 3.06$), and the UK ($M = 3.03$). At the same time, the award is not considered as important by 26.2% of the respondents from the USA, 33.3% of the respondents from Canada, and 32.8% from Belgium.

4.2. Teaching excellence award criteria

Our second research question explores TE award criteria that emerge across our cross-section of students spanning five continents and eleven countries. Figure 1 presents a summary of the thematic analysis results, which encapsulates the comprehensive dataset comprising both universal and country-specific TE award criteria. Blue (square) nodes represent the universal criteria and interconnect with the black nodes of the respondent's country. The multi-color (round) nodes display the country-specific criteria, which receive the same color edges as the country nodes. We identify 30 criteria that are universally associated with TE awards (RQ2a) and also highlight 15 criteria outside of those identified as universal as being unique to each country (RQ2b). Detailed descriptions of all criteria are included in Appendices 2 (universal) and 3 (country-specific). The teaching excellence award criteria identified by the students based on an open-ended question are then discussed in detail within separate sub-sections below.

4.2.1. Universal TE award criteria

Appendix 2 provides detailed descriptions of 30 criteria students universally identified as important in determining a recipient of a TE award. It is noteworthy that students in all eleven countries discuss these TE award criteria that appear most frequently. That is, no criteria appear frequently that are unique to a particular set of countries. This is particularly important as the finding suggests that students across the globe have a general agreement regarding the criteria for awarding an excellent educator. We now provide a deeper discussion of the top ten of the 30 universal TE awards criteria. The top ten[3] criteria represent the cumulative 55% of the sample results.

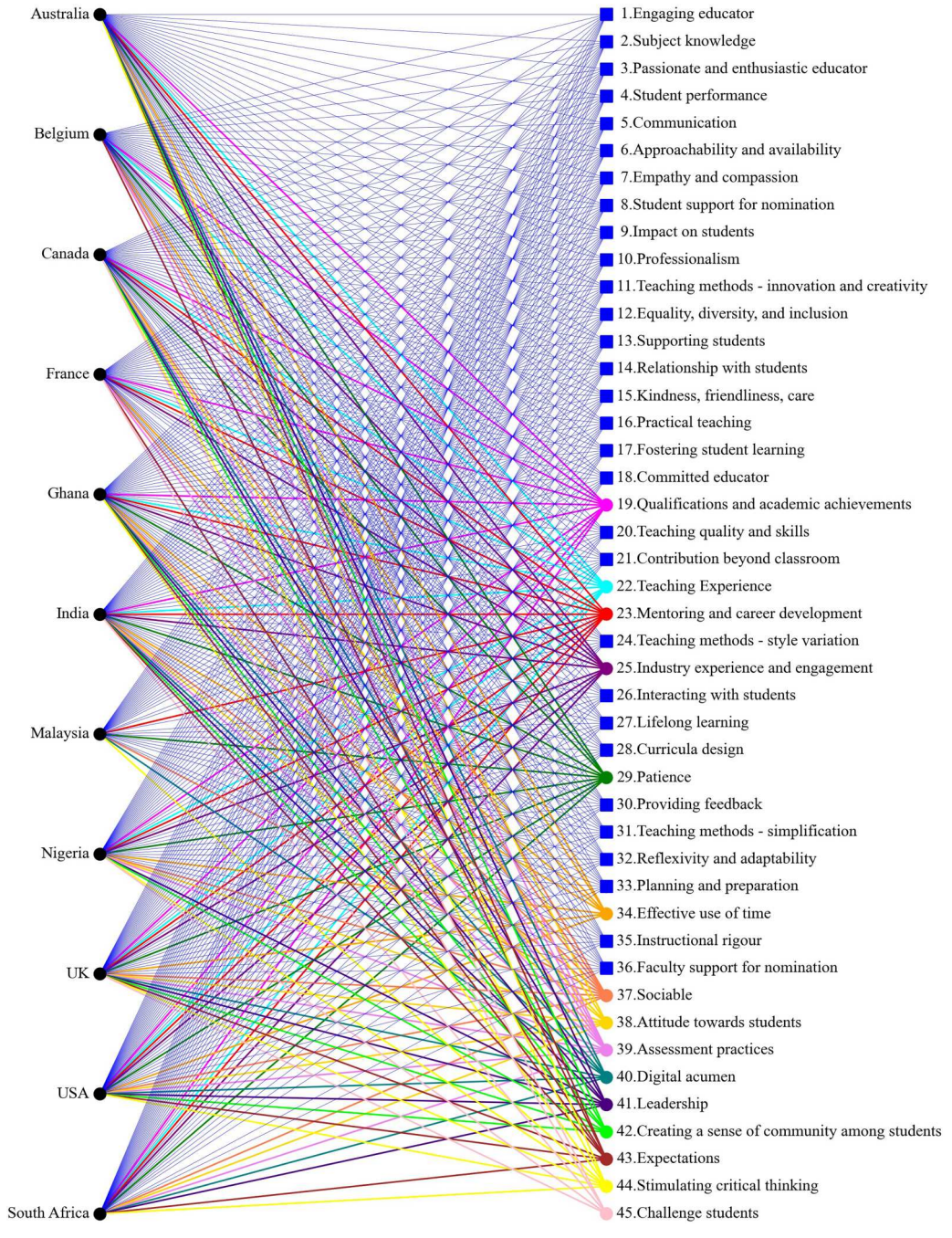

Figure 1. TE award criteria: universal versus country-specific.

Note: This figure presents a summary of the thematic analysis based on the final sample of 7,523 references categorized into 30 universal and 15 country-specific criteria. The 45 codes are ranked from 1 to 45 based on their total frequency. The term 'universal' (blue color; square node) is used when the code refers to references mentioned by students in all countries and 'country-specific' (multi-color; round node) when references apply only to certain countries. Detailed descriptions of all criteria are included in Appendices 2 (universal) and 3 (country-specific). The TE award criteria identified by the students are based on an open-ended question: 'If you had to design a Teaching Excellence Award/Outstanding Teacher Award, provide examples/explanations of THREE KEY criteria'. The top ten criteria represent the cumulative 55% of the sample results.

1. ***Engaging educator***. The participants agreed that the number one criterion for TE awards is engagement; an educator who is able to engage, captivate, and entertain students in the classroom. This notion is also emphasized by earlier research (Kiersma et al. 2016; Kwok and Potter 2022; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019; Thompson and Zaitseva 2012) where engaging educators ensure that classes are enjoyable, interesting, capturing attention, and, more importantly, providing opportunities for collaboration and participation. These engagement elements have different impacts on learning and represent a unique aspect of the student voice. Some students suggested how to capture/measure engagement. Examples of evidence that could be used to evaluate this criterion include 'student feedback surveys, class observation reports, and evaluations of student projects and assignments' (P59). This could also be 'measured by looking at factors such as student attendance' (P1031). Others described actions that would lead to engagement, such as:

   > A teacher who is engaging is essential for ensuring the award is granted appropriately. This means that when teaching, their class structure should include a mixture of lecturing and learning material as well as activities which involve group discussions, hands-on group work and collaboration which would help with the enhancement of learning. (P36)

2. ***Subject knowledge***. In congruence with existing literature (Kiersma et al. 2016), subject knowledge was highlighted as the second highest criterion. This includes evidence of the educators' expertise, mastery, competence in the subject they teach, 'deep understanding of the subject' (P976), and 'extensive knowledge of the specific areas and also certain other areas that may be connected indirectly' (P545). A knowledgeable educator not only 'fully understands the topic they are lecturing about' (P333), but also knows 'how to talk about what they're teaching at the most basic level as well as the highest to help all students' (P348). This allows intelligent educators to demonstrate 'a thorough understanding of key concepts, theories, and principles' (P2368), 'facts about the subject that is outside of the handbooks' (P1702), 'knowledge of the material beyond reading powerpoints' (P2562), be able to 'clearly explain any questions' (P2566), be transformative in applying 'knowledge to every situation' (P1087), and 'convey complex ideas in a clear and concise manner' (P2173).
3. ***Passionate and enthusiastic educator***. Enhancing the existing literature (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Kiersma et al. 2016; Kwok and Potter 2022; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019; Thompson and Zaitseva 2012), the third criterion is related to educators' passion for the subject, enthusiasm, interest, and love for teaching because their passion will 'transfer into students' (P293), 'allow students to learn more things' (P1426), 'take information in' (P2201), and 'motivates students to learn' (P2480). It is someone who 'truly cares … what they are teaching' (P2440) and has 'the desire to teach their students' (P2521), which, in turn, 'really makes a change in so many lives' (P334). When an educator 'is excited about what they are teaching, this enthusiasm is infectious and makes a student excited to go to class and excited to learn' (P392). Passionate educators 'do not view their position as a professor as a job. Rather they do it because they love it and want to educate others' (P375). This also translates to their ability to 'demonstrate a level of passion in relevance to their field that encourages students and peers alike to follow their example' (P175).
4. ***Student performance***. The participants highlighted the importance of considering how students perform in their studies when recognizing an excellent educator. Therefore, evidence could include student pass rates, retention, grades, and outcomes on the courses taught. This allows educators to demonstrate the ability to prepare their students to 'achieve the best marks' (P53), 'help students understand the core ideas in the unit well' (P150), allow them to leave 'with useful knowledge for future success' (P314), and to 'go on either further study or professional work in the field they teach' (P1953). To measure this criterion 'quantitative data on student performance and outcomes would be helpful' (P526), including evidence of 'exam performance, course completion rates, and student satisfaction surveys' (P794). Some students mentioned that an excellent teacher should have a specific pass rate on the course, such as 100%

(P1617, P1593, P1614) or 85% (P1597), or 80% (P1636, P1956). Others highlighted that this could be measured through the 'average grades of their students for the period respective to the award' (P2541), or if x% of students achieved a certain grade (P2460, P2462, P334). Student performance has a long history of being a component of teaching excellence, with more prominence in the United States (Gore 2021). We recognize the concerns regarding the complexity of measuring student performance (Ballou and Springer 2015), along with the multitude of other factors that impact performance, we therefore suggest it be included as part of a broader portfolio of TE award criteria and avoid having educators account for the performance of their students.

5. ***Communication***. Students identified the ability to communicate effectively as a critical criterion for selecting a TE award winner. Both written and verbal communication emerged in the responses. However, the vast majority of the responses tended to focus on verbal communication, where students discussed the fluency of language and speech, clarity, and articulation. In addition, communication appears in the context of clear lecture delivery and presentation. What is also noteworthy is that students often discuss communication in the context of the instructor's ability to communicate with students which supports earlier research (Kiersma et al. 2016; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019; Symbaluk and Howell 2010). That is, students highlighted not just an instructor's ability to speak fluently and precisely but also how they were able to connect with their students. For example, students stated: 'how well the professor is able to communicate topics in a way that the student can learn and retain the information' (P336), or 'the manner with which a teacher talks to students is vital to student success' (P976).
6. ***Approachability and availability***. Students regularly discussed an educator's approachability and availability as being vital in determining a TE award winner (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Kwok and Potter 2022; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019; Miller-Young, Sinclair, and Forgie 2020). These factors were often discussed simultaneously by the students:The award should be granted to a teacher that is approachable, this includes students being able to access their resources either by booking appointments with them to discuss material and content from class as well as being able to have conversations that would assist in the completion of assessments through clarifying questions and understanding of the material. (P36)

   Students note that TE award recipients should be those who make themselves readily available to students during the semester or year, respond to emails, and are timely in responding to student queries. Many students noted that TE award recipients should be available both inside and outside of the classroom. Approachability for students meant that they felt comfortable enough to approach educators (assuming they are available), 'A teacher needs to be approachable, so when you have uncertainties or questions, you are not afraid to go and ask them' (P216).

7. ***Empathy and compassion***. Empathy and compassion is a particularly unique theme to the student voice, identified among primary criteria for determining a TE award winner. Although not as common in the TE literature (e.g. Jaber, Dini, and Hammer 2022), the value of empathy in teaching is recognized in the prior literature. Our study suggests that empathy and compassion be more formally incorporated into the criteria for evaluating TE awards. This criterion is built on the keywords of empathy, understanding, care, and compassion. Essentially, students thought that TE award winners should be those who can understand and share the feelings of students throughout the semester (empathy and understanding towards students) and think about how students can be helped (care and compassion). It is also about the educator's ability to place themselves in the shoes of the student and try to empathize with their specific circumstances and situations.It is important for professors to be understanding when it comes to the situation of students. Some are working full-time, have responsibilities at home, or are going through medical issues. Flexibility and understanding can go a long way in both directions by extending the due date once in a while or allowing some extra credit sparingly. (P2562)
8. ***Student support for nomination***. Regarding the student's voting to recognize teaching excellence, this study aligns with previous research (Kiersma et al. 2016; Symbaluk and Howell 2010).

Students believe that a successful TE award recipient should have the full support of the students. That is, TE awards should not be based solely on peer or institutional nominations but should reflect the student voice. The students clearly articulated that their support for the nomination is an essential criterion for the TE award. Student support could be collected in the form of testimonials, or student votes as part of the process, or feedback from students who take courses with the professor (e.g. results from student satisfaction surveys, support from former students). Many students discussed their ability to vote as part of the TE award process, as evidenced by comments such as 'students should be allowed to vote on the winner of the Outstanding Teacher Award' (P2636), or 'votes by each student in the university' (P1839).

9. ***Impact on students***. Students identified the impact of an educator on students as important for TE award criteria. In discussing impact this study finds support within the existing literature, students highlight an educator who had a positive influence on their learning, was inspirational (Kwok and Potter 2022) and motivational (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Kiersma et al. 2016; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019) in helping them achieve their goals and full potential, and could act as a positive role model. Regarding the impact on student learning, one student commented:

> 'A great teacher not only imparts knowledge, but also has the ability to inspire and motivate student to learn and achieve their goals' (P508). Another participant mentioned that 'the teacher should be able to demonstrate that their teaching has had a positive impact on their students' learning, and that they have helped their students to achieve their goals and excel in their studies' (P1427).

10. ***Professionalism***. The top 10th essential criterion for selecting a recipient of a TE award was identified by students as professionalism in the classroom or professional behavior (Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015), such as being ethical and maintaining a professional attitude when teaching becomes challenging, as demonstrated: 'Their ability to maintain professionalism in times where students can cause teaching difficulties' (P1588). This was stressed to be an important long-term ability: 'This is a kind of award given to teachers who were able to overcome all the challenges they encountered throughout the year with professionalism' (P1852). The professionalism theme also had some general connections to professional competency, such as being able to search for an appropriate answer in a professional manner.

4.2.2. Country-specific TE award criteria

In this section, we focus on TE award criteria that were mentioned by students only in some countries. Appendix 3 exclusively details these 15 country-specific criteria, allowing for a clearer view of the criteria that were important to the students from specific countries.

One of the notable differences emergent from the data is related to the 'Teaching experience' of an educator, which was driven mainly by students from Ghana (31%) and moderately in the UK (12%) and India (12%). This would include evidence of years of teaching, tenure, or the number of students (year levels) taught. However, we further reveal that having 'Industry experience and engagement' is of much higher importance than 'Teaching experience' for an educator as perceived by students from the USA (21%), the UK (21%), Australia (12%), and France (12%).

Additionally, 'Mentoring and career development' was considered an important criterion, particularly by students from the UK (20%), Ghana (19%), USA (17%), and Canada (14%). This would include educators' engagement with mentoring students about career development and providing advice and guidance on future employment. This would require an educator to provide evidence of up-to-date professional competency, business experience, and connections with industry. The value of 'Qualifications and academic achievements' was regarded highly by students from Ghana (29%), South Africa (19%), and the UK (18%), whereas it was barely mentioned in Canada (1%), France (1%), Belgium (4%), and Australia (5%). This would include educational qualifications (e.g. MSc, PhD), certifications, and academic achievements.

Educators' 'Leadership' was considered very important by students from the USA (30%), Canada (22%), and India (17%), albeit it was less frequently mentioned in other countries. At the same time, 'Effective use of time' was viewed as very important by students in Ghana (75%), whereas the educators' ability to 'Challenge students' and push their learning was highlighted strongly by students in Canada (44%). Students from the UK (23%) and India (23%) noted the importance of a positive and professional 'Attitude toward students' as an essential criterion of excellence.

4.3. Teaching excellence award criteria: comparison by study level

4.3.1. Top ten universal criteria by study level

Lastly, we explore differences in TE award criteria by disaggregating student responses by study levels. Figure 2 presents the total responses for the top ten universal criteria for undergraduate and postgraduate students. We reveal postgraduate students have the largest proportion of responses for the 'Subject knowledge' and 'Communication' criteria, whereas the criteria for 'Passionate and enthusiastic educator,' 'Student performance,' and 'Engaging educator' were the largest for the undergraduate students.

Figure 3 shows the total responses for the top ten universal criteria disaggregated by first-year and final-year undergraduate students. The value placed by first and final-year students on TE criteria showed contrasting results. The largest proportion of final-year undergraduate students value 'Professionalism' and 'Impact on students.' First – and final-year students equally value a 'Passionate and enthusiastic educator.' Overall, a larger proportion of final-year undergraduate students value the individual TE criteria compared to first-year students.

4.3.2. Largest differences across study level groups

Next, we calculate the percentage of the total responses from students by study level. We then compare the difference in percentage to find the largest differences across the groups for all 45

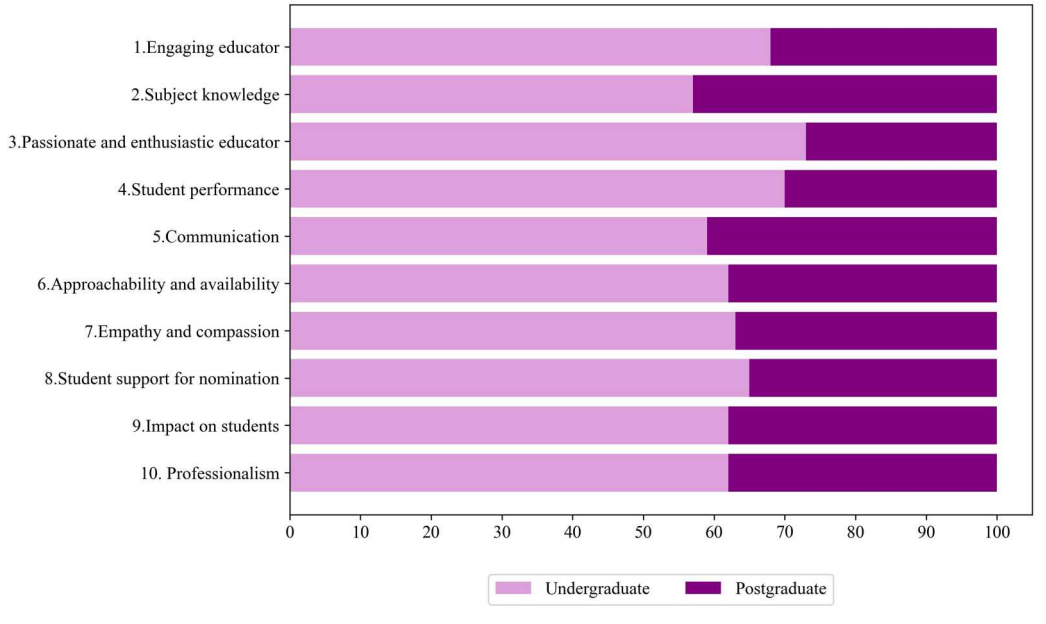

Figure 2. Top ten universal criteria across undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Note: This figure disaggregates the top ten universal criteria by undergraduate and postgraduate students. Light color shows the responses for the top ten universal criteria for undergraduate students, with dark color representing the responses of postgraduate students.

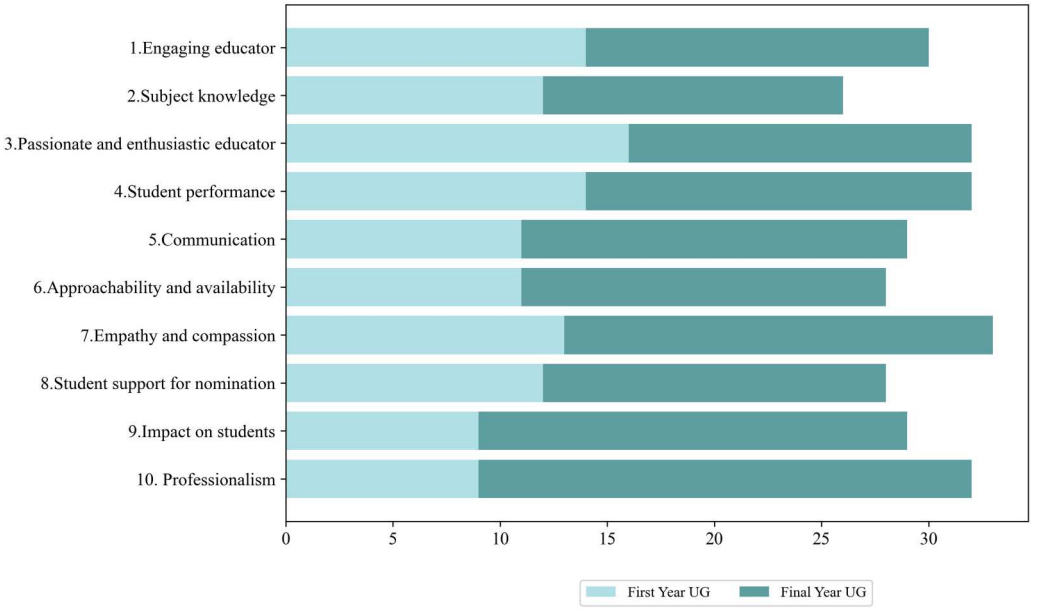

Figure 3. Top ten universal criteria across first year and final year students.

Note: This figure disaggregates the top ten universal criteria by first-year and final-year undergraduate students. Light color shows the responses for the top ten universal criteria for first year undergraduate students, with dark color representing the responses of final year undergraduate students. The total for each criterion does not equal to 100% because the analysis focuses only on first and final year students.

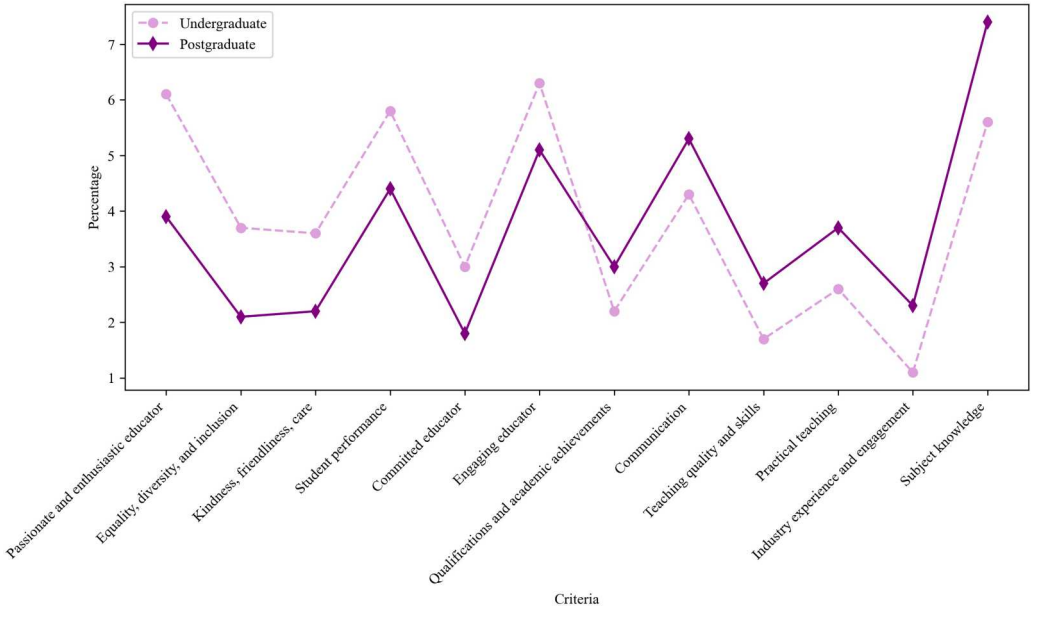

Figure 4. Differences in perceptions of TE award: undergraduate versus postgraduate.

Note: This graph presents the comparison of the largest percentage differences across the 45 TE award criteria between undergraduate and postgraduate students. The percentage is calculated by dividing the total frequency of responses per criterion by the total responses for all criteria for each student group.

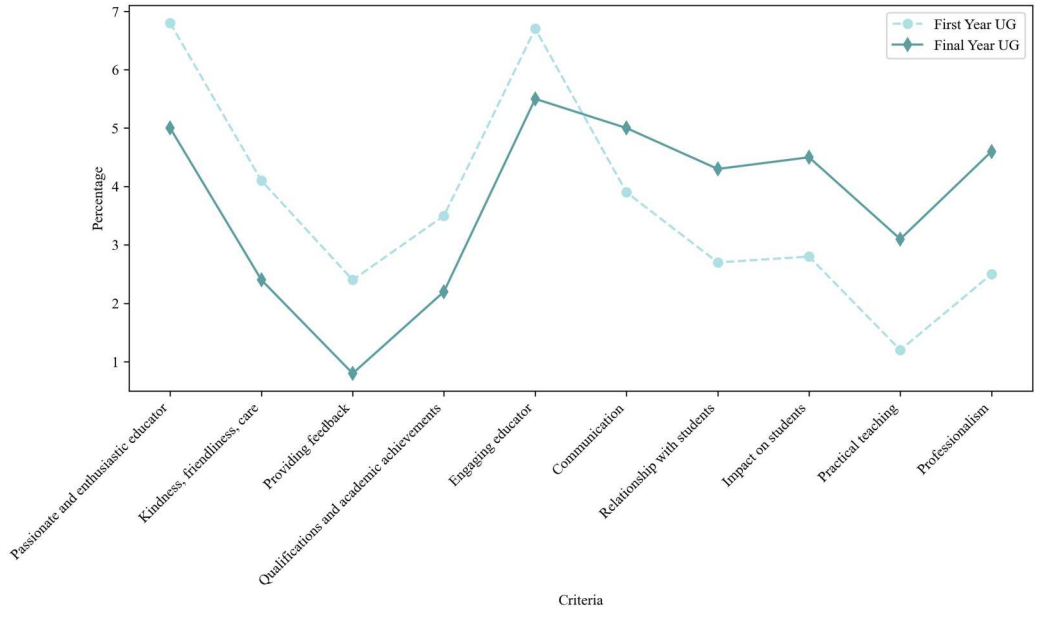

Figure 5. Differences in perceptions of TE award: first year versus final year.

Note: This graph presents the comparison of the largest differences across the 45 TE award criteria between first-year and final-year undergraduate students. The percentage is calculated by dividing the total frequency of responses per criterion by the total responses for all criteria for each student group.

criteria. Figures 4 and 5 present the results of comparing undergraduate students with postgraduate students and first-year versus final-year undergraduate students.

A comparative analysis between the postgraduate and undergraduate student responses reveals (see Figure 4) that postgraduate students value the teacher's knowledge and experience in the relevant area and the inclusion of practical aspects of the theoretical content being taught more, while the undergraduate students seemed to value the soft skills more, such as an educator's passion, enthusiasm, kindness, commitment, and engagement. The highest-ranking criteria among postgraduate responses were subject knowledge, industry experience and engagement, practical teaching, communication, and teaching quality and skills. In comparison, the highest-ranking criteria among the undergraduates were passion and enthusiasm, a focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion, kindness, friendliness and care, engaging delivery of content, commitment towards educating students, and student performance.

Figure 5 presents the differences between first-year and final-year students' preferences in teaching award criteria. The first-year students' responses seemed to place more emphasis on the educator being passionate and enthusiastic, kind, friendly and caring, providing feedback, possessing relevant qualifications and academic achievements, and being engaging in the classroom. On the other hand, the final-year students seemed to place more emphasis on professionalism, practical teaching, impact on students, relationship with students, and communication. First-year students also showed more preference towards the educator, creating a sense of community among the students, demonstrating a good attitude towards the students, and contributing beyond the classroom. At the same time, final-year undergraduate students also seemed to consider innovative and creative teaching methods, curricula design, and effective use of time necessary.

Overall, the results may indicate that student-driven teaching award criteria could vary across year-levels. First-year students seem to appreciate a more approachable, friendly, and kind educator whom they may feel they can approach, and they also long to build and belong to a 'community'

within their classroom, while final-year students prefer a more professional educator with a more practical approach. The findings also demonstrate that postgraduate students prefer a more practical approach to learning where the application of the content in the real world seems more important. As a result, these findings provide data for an evidence-based approach to modify teaching award criteria in the case that an award is unique to a particular year level (e.g. first-year, final year) or degree level (e.g. postgraduate, undergraduate).

5. Discussion and conclusion

Our study responds to Fitzpatrick and Moore's (2015) and Kiersma et al.'s (2016) calls for further research by identifying comprehensive global criteria based on student perspectives. Specifically, we survey 2,775 business students across eleven countries and five continents. This deeper understanding of TE award criteria based on student voice contributes to the higher education literature by providing the first, to the best of our knowledge, research based on a comprehensive student voice across the globe that can be used or adapted by higher education institutions, professional bodies, and other organizations informing the development of awards criteria internally.

In answering RQ1, the research finds that the majority of students surveyed place significant importance on educators possessing a TE award and deem such possession as being of high relevance to excellent teaching. Specifically, we found that students from developing countries tend to place more emphasis on educators who possess a TE award than students from developed countries. This is important as currently, the literature establishes that TE awards can benefit and motivate educators (Forland and Roxa 2024; Kalis and Kirschenbaum 2008; Seppala and Smith 2020; Warren and Plumb 1999), but it is much less clear whether students place any importance on TE awards. In letting the students' voices be heard, we document that students prevalently perceive TE awards as an important attribute of an excellent educator. We also find that students in the USA, Canada, and Belgium demonstrate a moderately lower interest in TE awards. This is interesting as it potentially suggests that such awards are one step removed from students wherein students perceive the TE award as being more relevant and beneficial to the educator as a form of development or recognition rather than to themselves in enhancing their teaching and learning environments. This finding is particularly interesting within the North American context, given students tend to place a heightened emphasis on the ranking of their professors, through external sites such as 'Rate My Professors.'

In response to RQ2a and RQ2b, our findings suggest that students across the globe have a general agreement regarding the criteria for awarding an excellent educator. We find 30 criteria that students universally identify as indicators of teaching excellence and 15 criteria that are more country specific. Criterion was deemed universal when the code refers to quotes mentioned across all countries of the study. We have provided a detailed discussion of the top ten most identified universal criteria across the globe (i.e. (1) engaging educator, (2) subject knowledge, (3) passionate and enthusiastic educator, (4) student performance, (5) communication, (6) approachability and availability, (7) empathy and compassion, (8) student support for nomination, (9) impact on students, and (10) professionalism). These universal criteria are important to identify as HEIs place a strong emphasis on internationalized curricula, and require educators to teach within international exchange programs and across diverse audiences all around the world. It is therefore beneficial for educators to know which elements in a certain teaching approach are appreciated by all audiences and which others may need to be adjusted based on a specific audience. Despite varying educational systems, there is a universal aim across HEIs to provide quality education that prepares students for the future. Student feedback is a critical indicator of how well these global learning goals are being met, providing a consistent measure across different contexts. Further, essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and effective communication are valued worldwide. Student evaluations can highlight how effectively these skills are being developed, regardless of the specific content or curriculum. A universal set of criteria provides the ability to create a strong student-centered approach to learning, where across

different educational systems, the core objective remains the same – enhancing student learning and experience. Student feedback universally reflects the effectiveness of teaching from the learners' perspective.

Our universal TE award criteria share some commonalities with the studies of Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting (2019) and Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga (2015), such as relating to engaging educators, subject knowledge, supporting students, passionate and enthusiastic educator representative of students' voice in teaching awards criteria development. However, the findings of previous studies have been criticized for lack of generalizability for not taking into consideration the geography, country, culture, diversity, and status of students. Thompson and Zaitseva (2012) sought out a more extensive sample by engaging with eight student unions in the UK. However, our study provides the only comprehensive and well-represented sample evidence to support universal and country-specific awards criteria from students. While previous studies have used a student-led nomination proxy for awards criteria, our study employs a primary design with a reflexive approach, giving students the leverage to consider TE awards criteria in its broadest sense compared to a restrictive nomination process (e.g. Bradley, Kirby, and Madriaga 2015; Lubicz-Nawrocka and Bunting 2019). Further, 'empathy and compassion' represented a particularly unique theme to the student voice, identified as being in the top ten criteria for teaching excellence and not previously identified in the literature. This was particularly strongly emphasized amongst the commencing introductory student cohort around the world. There is no doubt that this finding is perhaps intensified as a result of the recent pandemic and the isolated education environment recently experienced by students (Goedegebuure and Meek 2021; Jiang et al. 2021; Tharapos et al. 2023). However, this finding is likely to be of interest to both educators and HEIs, as students identify a need for nurturing within their first years of study. Empathy and compassion are not skills traditionally motivated or developed within HE teaching professional development programs and workshops, and therefore attention will be needed to develop and potentially measure these attributes within educators now and into the future.

It is equally important to review the TE award criteria that were not considered across each of the educational jurisdictions and thus not deemed as universal criteria as this provides educators and HEIs with a deeper understanding of what is deemed important in teaching across different geographic locations. An educator's 'teaching experience,' that is the number of years of service and/or classes facilitated, was seen as important by students from Ghana (31%) and moderately by those in the UK (12%) and India (12%). In general, students failed to place a great deal of importance on how much teaching or years of teaching service the educator had performed. In contrast, having 'industry experience and engagement' was seen as having much higher importance than teaching experience for an educator from the USA (21%), the UK (21%), Australia (12%), and France (12%). Business students from these jurisdictions tend to see the importance of and place more relevance on the real-world experience of their educators. This is an interesting finding, where in recent decades business school accreditation requirements have meant a conscious steering away from practical, industry-based educators towards more research-based, PhD-qualified educators. HEIs would find it useful to reflect more deeply on the importance students place on their educators possessing industry experience and engagement, not only achieving this through substituted programs or experiences such as work-integrated learning, capstone programs or internships.

Additionally, 'mentoring and career development' was considered an important criterion, by students from the UK (20%), Ghana (19%), the USA (17%), and Canada (14%). Given the rapidly changing and uncertain business environment, this places significant pressure on educators from these jurisdictions to remain up to date with both their industry knowledge and business connections, providing additional and often time-consuming guidance to students to assist with their career and scholarly development. Interestingly, being qualified to teach through formal qualifications was not deemed important by students from the majority of countries, including Ghana (29%), South Africa (19%), the UK (18%), Canada (1%), France (1%), Belgium (4%), and Australia (5%). This perhaps reinforces the students' emphasis on the practical skills educators possess.

Many of the challenges faced today and tomorrow, such as climate change, artificial intelligence, resource consumption, and the future of work, are complex, interconnected, and uncertain (WEF 2024). The professions of the future are going to require graduates to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, hold high degrees of resilience, agility, creativity, social intelligence, and be able to think in novel, integrated, and adaptive ways (Goos et al. 2019). It is therefore surprising that only students from Canada (44%) valued the educators' ability to 'challenge students' and push their learning as a desirable attribute of teaching excellence. This lack of willingness to be challenged and/or pushed by educators amongst students seems to oppose the skill development needed for future employability, where graduates will be required to embrace complexity, agility, and an openness to new ways of thinking and doing.

Lastly, in relation to RQ3a and RQ3b, we reveal that students' perceptions of TE awards differ depending on their level of study. Specifically, we find that postgraduate students have the largest proportion of responses for the educators 'subject knowledge,' indicating that discipline knowledge and expertise is of critical importance to these students. This is perhaps not altogether surprising when many educational jurisdictions place importance on specializations at the postgraduate level of study. This can be contrasted with undergraduate students who placed a stronger emphasis on social criteria such as 'engaging educator' and 'passionate and enthusiastic educator,' indicating that undergraduate learners were expecting more than professional knowledge and expert advice from their educators. These findings are particularly important for HEIs and administrators as they suggest that student-driven teaching award criteria could vary across year levels. The findings provide data for an evidence-based approach to modify teaching award criteria in the case that an award is unique to a particular year level, providing a more nuanced approach to measuring teaching excellence.

Further, it is interesting to note that as business students progress through their undergraduate studies, they place a stronger emphasis on 'professionalism' (23%) and 'impact on students' (20%) in comparison to when they start their studies at 9%, respectively. First-year students seem to appreciate a more approachable, friendly, and kind educator whom they may feel they can approach, and they also long to build and belong to a 'community' within their classroom, while final-year students prefer a more professional educator with a more practical approach. This provides useful insights for business educators wanting to implement student-centered approaches to learning, adapting their teaching practices to meet their learners' needs.

Future studies could explore further research avenues, such as those linked to our potential limitations discussed next. *First*, our sample includes students from a broad range of subject areas within business, and the focus of our manuscript is on TE awards in general. Future researchers may wish to explore whether there are any differences in TE award criteria across subject areas. Many faculties offer awards for faculty or discipline-specific teaching excellence (Jackson 2006). For example, within the business faculty, accounting education has a long history of rewarding TE (Apostolou et al. 2016; Wygal and Stout 2015). Future researchers may wish to explore discipline-specific TE award criteria. *Second*, our study highlights 15 country-specific criteria that students do not universally discuss across our sample of eleven countries. We also find that perceptions of TE awards differ geographically, with students from developing countries placing more emphasis on this. Using a primary research design, future researchers are encouraged to build on our findings by exploring the reasons for differences or influencing factors by adopting a cultural framework to interpret the cultural nuances and how culture may influence country-specific perceptions of TE awards (e.g. cultural dimensions).

Our findings are comprehensive and provide insight into moving forward our understanding of TE awards. The basis of this research shows how student voice should make up part of the composition of TE criteria and how such insights can be used or adapted by HEIs, professional bodies, and other organizations informing the development of TE awards criteria internally. Teaching awards based on student voice are important because they enhance teaching quality, increase student engagement, and ensure accountability to student learning. Students represent a key stakeholder

group in teaching outcomes and as such their inclusion in contributing to such award criteria should be acknowledged. This could take differing forms across various HEIs, for example, student representation on TE award judging panels, student ranking or voting system of TE award candidates or student representation when reviewing TE award criteria within institutions. The policy implications of this research for HEIs extend to include developing standardized evaluation frameworks, providing ongoing nuanced professional development, integrating student feedback into promotion and tenure decisions, and fostering a student-centered institutional culture.

The insights from this research can further inform HEIs who want to initiate or review the criteria underpinning their TE awards, especially the findings relating to the diverse range of teaching excellence criteria. In addition, insights into the various criteria different student cohorts emphasize may also foster our understanding of how to work with and adapt to an international audience, providing deeper insights into how diversity and inclusion or other objectives HEIs may want to emphasize can be fostered. Beyond the criteria, involving students provides an excellent source of insights into the expectations and needs of different student audiences. Such information provides important knowledge extending beyond the development and improvement of the TE awards. It assists educators to understand the different needs and expectations of their student audiences.

These findings provide further potential impact on the recruitment processes of HEIs, where some educator profiles match more with earlier/later years of study. This highlights the importance of providing staff development that is nuanced and specific to individual educator development needs rather than training that is generic, tick-boxing with no knowledge application to develop. It is therefore recommended that HEIs focus on staff development programs that are tailored towards the individual, taking an interest in them personally and working to develop their personal skills. Such programs are best offered as 1–1 training or in small groups.

We see it as important to position these findings within the debate of students as customers in higher education (Guilbault 2016, 2018), which requires the consultation of this stakeholder group and end users of teaching in the determination of criteria for TE awards to advance the student learning experience. Our study amplifies the debate on students as co-generators and co-creators of knowledge in the classroom by offering a different perspective from students' evaluation of teaching used as proxies for TE award criteria. The takeaway from this study aligns with the notion of providing the beneficiaries of the process or the end users a stake in defining what TE means for them rather than what faculty or university administrators believe should be the criteria for TE awards. We provide valuable insights into how TE award criteria can be customized when developing awards that are specific to the first-year student experience or to allow for consideration of undergraduate versus postgraduate teaching awards. These findings are important for institutions in developing criteria for TE awards, and imply the need for sufficient flexibility by potential level variability, for example, specific to teaching a particular student group (e.g. postgraduate, undergraduate).

Notes

1. Prior to collecting data, we pretested the survey instrument with 26 students across all countries in the sample. The pretesting highlighted minor wording issues that were resolved to improve clarity, along with some suggestions related to spacing and options within drop-down menus. All suggestions that emerged from the pilot testing were adopted prior to administering the survey.
2. Specifically, we asked students to respond to the following question, 'If you had to design a Teaching Excellence Award/Outstanding Teacher Award, provide examples/explanations of THREE KEY criteria.'
3. More detail on other criteria is available from the authors on request.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments made by the participants of the BAFA 2023 Annual Conference, the 45th Annual Congress 2023 of the EAA (Finland), the 2023 CAAA Annual Conference (Canada), and the 2023 SAAA

Biennial International Conference (South Africa). We are grateful to all students who participated in the study and extend our expression of thanks to Professor Simon Lilley and Professor Christine Helliar for their invaluable insights. We are in particular grateful for the very helpful suggestions by the editor and two anonymous reviewers.

Disclosure statement

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

Funding

This paper is part of a larger project on 'Teaching excellence.' We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Association of International Certified Professional Accountants® (the Association) that represents AICPA® and CIMA® [grant number 7597629].

Credit author statement

The authors have worked together on a number of papers as part of a larger project. We are happy that overall each author has contributed to the study at different times and in different ways. Following the first author (project lead), the authors are included in alphabetical order.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Survey questions

- If you had to design a Teaching Excellence Award/Outstanding Teacher Award, provide examples/explanations of THREE KEY criteria.
  [multiple line free text question]

- Indicate the importance of the following competencies / attributes for an excellent teacher.
  [multiple categories; ratings from 1 to 5 where 1 is not important, 2 is slightly important, 3 is moderately important, 4 is very important, 5 is extremely important]
  - Possesses a teaching excellence award

- What is your current academic status?
  [multiple choice, single answer]
  - First year of bachelor's degree
  - Final year of bachelor's degree
  - All other years of bachelor's degree
  - Master's degree or MBA
  - Doctoral or PhD
  - Alumni

- Which of the following best corresponds to the field area of your degree?
  [*multiple choice, single answer*]
  - Accounting / Commerce – including Auditing, Governance
  - Finance – including Banking, Investment

- Economics and Econometrics
- General Business – including International Business, and Business Administration
- Leadership / Management / Strategy
- Information Technology / Management Information Systems
- Entrepreneurship
- Tourism / Hotel / Restaurant
- Marketing
- Sports Management
- Human Resource Management / Personnel
- Supply Chain / Transport / Logistics
- Law / Legal studies
- Other

○ What is your age?
[*selection list question, select one*]
- From 1 to 100

○ Which one of the following best describes your gender?
[*multiple choice, single answer*]
- Woman
- Man
- Gender diverse
- Other gender term
- Prefer not to disclose

○ Which one of the following best describes your ethnic group?
[*multiple choice, single answer*]
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic or Latino
- Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
- White
- Other
- Prefer not to disclose

Appendix 2. Universal TE award criteria

Universal award criteria	Keywords	Aggregate Results
1. Engaging educator	Engaging. Attention. Participation. Attendance. Collaboration. Interesting. Captivating. Enjoyable. Fun. Entertaining.	474
2. Subject knowledge	Knowledge. Expertise. Understand subject matter. Mastery. Command. Competence. Intelligent. Smart.	470
3. Passionate and enthusiastic educator	Passion. Passionate. Love for teaching. Interest in teaching. Enthusiastic. Energetic. Dynamic.	408
4. Student performance	Pass rate. Retention. Grades. Outcomes.	400
5. Communication	Communication – oral or written. Language or speech. Fluency. Clarity. Articulation. Presentation.	337
6. Approachability and availability	Approachability. Accessibility. Availability. Response to emails. Timely response to queries.	330
7. Empathy and compassion	Empathy. Compassion. Understanding. Caring.	322
8. Student support for nomination	Nomination. Testimonials. Votes. Positive feedback.	311
9. Impact on students	Influential. Inspirational. Motivational. Role model.	308
10. Professionalism	Professional. Professionalism. Ethical. Professionalism in the classroom. Professional behavior.	255
11. Teaching methods – innovation and creativity	Innovation. Creativity. New. Unique. Novel. Original. Style.	249

(*Continued*)

Continued.

Universal award criteria	Keywords	Aggregate Results
12. Equality, diversity, and inclusion	Diverse. Safe. Inclusive. Fair. Unbiased. Respected teacher. Respect towards students. Accommodate. Student wellbeing and welfare.	240
13. Supporting students	Support for students. Helpful. Assistance. Guidance. Advice. Counseling. Consultation. Problem solver.	240
14. Relationship with students	Connection. Positive relationships. Rapport. Bonds. Getting to know students. Student centered.	237
15. Kindness, friendliness, care	Kindness. Friendliness. Care.	226
16. Practical teaching	Real world. Real life. Practical application. Practical learning. Case studies. Applied examples. Linked to industry.	223
17. Fostering student learning	Understanding. Explain. Learning. Learned. Knowledge transfer.	207
18. Committed educator	Committed. Dedicated. Hard working. Above & beyond. Extra learning opportunities. Extra mile.	198
19. Teaching quality and skills	Teaching quality. Teaching skills. Teaching ability. Teaching competency. Excellent delivery.	145
20. Contribution beyond classroom	Broader society. Volunteer. Extra-curricular. Professional contribution. Academic community.	140
21. Teaching methods – style variation	Different style for different students. Flexible. Mixture of teaching methods.	118
22. Interacting with students	Interaction.	110
23. Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning. Ongoing professional development. Up to date. Current. Continuing education. Curiosity.	102
24. Curricula design	Materials. Resources. Content. Relevance.	96
25. Providing feedback	Feedback. Constructive. Objective. Timely.	85
26. Teaching methods – simplification	Explain. Simplification. Easy. Break down concept. Detailed. Clear. Step by step.	80
27. Reflexivity and adaptability	Self-reflection. Adaptability. Listening.	77
28. Planning and preparation	Prepared. Organized. Planning. Clearly structured.	73
29. Instructional rigor	Rigor. Strict. Control. Disciplined. Responsible. Responsibility. Classroom management.	51
30. Faculty support for nomination	Peer nomination. Management nomination. Professional body nomination. Industry monitoring/classroom visit.	47

Appendix 3. Country-specific TE award criteria

Country-specific award criteria	Keywords	Aggregate Results	Africa			Asia		Europe			North America		Oceania
			Ghana	Nigeria	South Africa	India	Malaysia	Belgium	France	UK	USA	Canada	Australia
Qualifications and academic achievements	Academic. Achievement. Qualifications. Certification. Degree, doctoral, PhD. Educated. Research oriented. Publications. Research citations.	192	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teaching experience	Teaching/Education experience. Tenure/Years of teaching. Number of students/years taught.	121	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mentoring and career development	Career advice, guidance. Mentorship. Advisor. Supervisor. Future career development, preparation, employment.	118	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Industry experience and engagement	Professional or business (competency, skills, experience, knowledge). Up to date/relevant in field. Connections to industry and professional organizations.	115	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Patience	Patience.	94	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Effective use of time	Punctuality. Time management. Effective use of time. Time conscious.	65	✓	✓	n/a	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓
Sociable	Social. People skills. Soft/Interpersonal Skills.	46	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a
Attitude towards students	Attitude. Behavior. Positive.	44	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Assessment practices	Assessments: Novel. Varied. Appropriate. Consistent.	40	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Digital acumen	New technologies. Digital tools, literacy. Use of technology.	29	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Leadership	Leader. Leadership.	23	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Creating a sense of community among students	Connecting students with other students. Encourage teamwork and cooperation between students.	21	✓	✓	n/a	✓	n/a	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Expectations	Clear. Transparent. High. Realistic expectations.	19	✓	n/a	✓	✓	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓
Stimulating critical thinking	Critical thinking.	19	✓	✓	✓	n/a	✓	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Challenge students	Challenges. Pushes.	18	n/a	✓	n/a	✓	n/a	n/a	✓	✓	n/a	✓	n/a