

What do ‘good teaching’ and ‘effective learning’ look like at university? Insights from international (and other) students

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Literature and public discourse on teaching and learning in university contexts has often reflected a view of international students as necessarily different to so-called ‘local’ students. However, increasingly, critical scholars are calling for university teaching (and research about teaching) that is responsive to students’ actual voices, and not grounded in culturalist assumptions about their sameness, difference or learning styles. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of an ongoing pilot project aimed at foregrounding diverse students’ conceptions of ‘good teaching’ and ‘effective learning’ in university contexts. Our study involves up to 40 high achieving ‘international’, ‘local’, Māori, and Pacific Island students (7-10 students from each cohort) at a New Zealand university. Specifically, we use focus group interviews, critical incident technique, and ‘photovoice’ to explore four research questions: (1) how do students conceptualise ‘good teaching’ and ‘effective learning’ at university; (2) which data collection approaches do they prefer; (3) which elicit the richest insights into students’ conceptions; and (4) how can students’ conceptions inform research, support provision, and staff development? The study’s rationale is multifaceted. Theoretically, the study is a response to calls for researchers and university teachers to remain open to both commonalities and differences between students. Practically, our study is intended to build a staff network spanning the university’s international, Māori, Pacific, and academic development portfolios, as a basis for ongoing collaboration and more comprehensive staff development and student support approaches. Also, our aim is to foreground student success; participating students form a kind of ‘advisory panel’, and receive recognition for this at the project’s conclusion. Methodologically, our study is piloting ways of eliciting students’ tacit knowledge concerning ‘good teaching’ and ‘effective learning’ in (and in relation to) university lectures and tutorials in the Humanities Division, as a basis for a future, larger study. The paper is structured as follows. We begin by outlining the study’s rationale, theoretical framework and methodology. Then, we share some preliminary findings from our international student cohort, comparing their conceptions of ‘good teaching’ and ‘effective learning’ with those articulated by the other students involved in the study. We conclude by highlighting our ‘next steps’ in terms of both the study and our use of its findings.