

### **Forum Insights**

## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A TEACHING HERO?

Exploring students' perceptions and experiences of impactful, transformative teaching in Irish Higher Education

#### Introduction

This Forum insight paper summarises the key findings from the testimonials provided as part of The National Forum's Teaching Heroes campaign. The Teaching Heroes campaign is a national, student-led initiative that empowers students to identify and recognise teachers in all higher education institutions who have had a transformative impact on their learning. Through the leadership of students unions, and focusing on criteria relating to teaching effectiveness, we gathered over a thousand testimonials from higher education students all over the country. This brief document summarises the findings of an analysis of those testimonials. A more detailed paper will follow.

### Rationale for a National, Student-Led Teaching Heroes Campaign

The National Forum's consultations with students and academics across the sector highlighted that a lot of excellent practice by teachers happens under the radar – appreciated by students, impactful on their learning but not always recognised or learned from by others. Students want to have their voices heard and are keen to help identify those teachers in higher education who have made a difference in their lives and to their learning. Student organisers and participants welcomed the opportunity to lead the Heroes campaign to identify impactful teachers in their contexts.

### The aims of the Teaching Heroes Campaign

Inclusive of all higher education institutions, some of the key aims of the Heroes campaign were:

- a) to help students to take the lead in analysing and highlighting what good teaching means to them.
- b) to identify those teachers who have had a transformative impact on their students' learning but whose achievements may not have been identified through other routes.
- c) to gather student-generated data on definitions of effective, transformative teaching.
- d) to learn from examples of excellent teaching practice across the sector.
- e) to celebrate, recognise and showcase excellent teaching in all higher education institutions in Ireland.

# Main insights: COURAGE, CARE, CREATIVITY, COMMUNICATION, COMMITMENT

The data shows that students who participated in the nomination process value their teachers for certain kinds of characteristics and behaviour. Typical of these included: generosity with time, approachability, helpfulness, passion for their subject, encouraging of student learning, and skilled communication. Five key constructs can be identified that summarise most of the testimonials provided by students:

**Courage** – Teaching heroes help their students to gain courage and confidence in the development of knowledge, attitudes and skills in the learning of their subjects. They sometimes push them outside their comfort zones, often challenge them but never in a way that makes them feel abandoned. Teaching heroes help students to build on what they already know in order to discover and acquire new skills and new levels of knowledge.

**Care** – Teaching heroes behave in a way that shows they care about their students. They often work hard for example to ensure they remember students' names (even in very large class settings), they follow up on issues that students have raised and respond to concerns that students express. They make every student feel important and work to forge positive learning relationships.

**Creativity** – Teaching heroes are keen to be creative in the interests of learning. They will try new methodologies, develop new materials, use resources in new and interesting ways in order to ensure that learning is effective and motivating. A creative orientation to curriculum provision, assessment and learning is something that distinguishes teaching heroes.

**Communication** – Teaching heroes place a strong priority on effective communication within their teaching contexts. This is not simply a matter of ensuring that their own lectures, tutorials or seminars are well communicated – and good communication does not relate only to didactic elements of teaching. Teaching heroes maximise the opportunities that students have to interact, to question, to contribute and to develop ideas – often using technology to facilitate that communicative process - but also ensuring that their own communication style is open and engaging.

**Commitment** – Teaching heroes show strong commitment both to their students and to their subjects. They are often described as passionate and enthusiastic, demonstrating dedication to their roles as teachers. This palpable dedication is something that responding students clearly valued.



## **Clarity of impact**

Students very clearly related these types of orientations and behaviours to strong impact. Some talked about how their teaching heroes changed their views about themselves and their capabilities and helped them to achieve standards of performance that they didn't think they were capable of. (in the words of one student: 'I am now laying the ghost of being bad at maths to rest'). Some teaching heroes acted as strong advocates for their students thus enabling them to stay in college at a time when their persistence was at risk '[without this teacher] I would never have passed my exams'. Some imparted such passion for their subjects that they influenced students to clarify their career aims and goals. All of the teachers identified in the heroes process were seen as having had a strong impact on the learning, development and experience of students across the sector.

## Some demographic and other differences

Gender: male students were more likely to nominate male teachers, while female students were just as likely to have nominated male or female teachers. Furthermore, the constructs associated with male and female teachers are somewhat different. Male teachers are more likely to have been described as creative and communicative; female teachers are more likely to have been described as caring and encouraging.

Passive /Active: 24% of all constructs associated with teaching heroes indicated a more passive orientation to learning (information given to me, entertaining me, being clear, making things easy), whereas 76% of constructs demonstrated that students adopted an active orientation to learning, when thinking about their teaching heroes: (I was engaged, I worked hard, I persisted, I tried my best, I developed skills, I went beyond requirements etc.).

### **Implications and lessons**

- 1. Teaching heroes have a strong, memorable, effective and lasting impact on students. Students seem to have no difficulties identifying their most effective teachers, and they value them greatly.
- 2. The transformative impact of outstanding teachers should be acknowledged, respected and supported.
- 3. We need to learn more about the kinds of academic cultures that value and encourage 'teaching hero' behaviours.
- 4. In addition to the strong requirement for intellectual excellence among our academics, good teachers are also accomplished in interpersonal and relational aspects of their work.
- 5. Transformative teaching is often associated with time and help received outside class time, and this is an issue that needs to be recognised when considering how good teaching happens.
- 6. Good communication in good teaching environments fosters interactivity, engagement, mutuality and connection between students and teachers.

Wordle – Illustrating the most frequently used words among student testimonials of their teaching heroes



## Conclusions

When analysing the words used in the student testimonials of impactful teaching, the words TIME and CARE were the most frequently cited. Notwithstanding the strong cognitive and academic strengths that higher education teachers bring to their teaching roles, the caring role of teachers matters greatly to students. Teachers' capacity to engage emotionally as well as intellectually and their capacity to connect with and interact effectively with students are skills and orientations that are related to experieneces of progression, performance and success among higher education students of all backgrounds. While the teaching heroes data has been derived from just a sample of higher education students (those who provided testimonials about their teachers as part of the national, student-led award system) it provides us with a strong sense of the kinds of characteristics and behaviours that students value, and gives us a good picture of how students define and experience excellent teaching. More of this data should be gathered in future and it should be combined with other indicators of excellence to develop strong guidelines for good teaching across the sector.