

Assessing University Students' Perceptions of Teacher Care

Anne L. L. Tang^{a*}, Vincent Wing Sun Tung^b, Caroline Walker-Gleaves^c, and, Julie Rattray^d

^a Anne L. L. Tang

School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

E-mail Address: annetang625@gmail.com

ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8409-9508

**Corresponding Author*

Anne Tang's research interests include teacher care, Vygotsky's social constructivism, and Confucian heritage culture (CHC).

^b Vincent Tung

School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

17 Science Museum Road, Tsimshatsui East, Kowloon, Hong Kong

E-mail Address: vincent.tung@polyu.edu.hk

Vincent Tung is Associate Professor at School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong. His research interests include educational robotics and emerging technologies in higher education.

^c Caroline Walker-Gleaves

School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University,

King George VI Building, Queen Victoria Road, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 7RU, United Kingdom

Email: caroline.walker-gleaves@newcastle.ac.uk

Caroline Walker-Gleaves is a Professor of Education within the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences at Newcastle University. Her research interests include teachers' beliefs and behaviours, higher education pedagogy and inclusive education

^d Julie Rattray

School of Education, Durham University

Leazes Road, Durham, DH1 1TA, United Kingdom

Email: julie.rattray@durham.ac.uk

Julie Rattray is Professor in Higher Education at Durham University. Her research interests include the threshold concept framework, liminality, affective dimensions of learning as well as other aspects of policy and pedagogy in Higher Education. In particular she is interested in the ways that learners deal with troublesome knowledge and the extent to which affective characteristics and attributes might influence this

¹ Anne Tang is Research Assistant at Asia Pacific Centre for Leadership and Change, The Education University of Hong Kong

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine university students' perceptions of teacher care overall and in the three constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care, to consider their inclusion in quality enhancement models. Quantitative research using self-administrated online survey via Qualtrics was conducted with undergraduates in Hong Kong, Macau, Republic of Fiji, Taiwan and the United Kingdom. Based on the descriptive and paired-sample t-test analyses, empirical results have shown that university students perceived teacher care as important at relatively high level. They ascribed the highest importance to relational care, followed by pedagogical care and holistic care at significant level. This research advocates recognising the importance of teacher care in university education, and integrating it into higher education pedagogy. Policy-wise, this paper proposes a caring quality mechanism for enhancing teaching quality, to address the inadequacy of the audit-focused quality system.

Keywords

Teacher care; Pedagogical care; Holistic care; Relational care; Higher education; University students

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Introduction

This study investigated students' perceptions of teacher care overall and in three constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care, and considered their inclusion in quality enhancement models. Models of quality culture typically fall in to one of two categories, quality assurance and quality enhancement. Quality assurance models are audit-driven and emphasize the measurability of variables, whilst quality enhancement models focusing on quality augmentation are more holistic in nature. An audit-driven quality model however is viewed as problematic in relation to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Zepke & Leach, 2007; Cheng, 2009, 2017). This paper argues that teacher care, although not the panacea for solving all educational problems nor the sole ingredient of good teaching, is beneficial to learning. Considering that pedagogical caring work reveals more about the holistic aspects of quality elements, teacher care potentially fits into quality enhancement themes. This research therefore proposes that quality enhancement models take account of teacher care as a representation of quality teaching and learning experiences, and the importance of including care in notions of quality.

Research conducted in various school and university contexts has found that teacher care makes transformative and positive impacts upon students' learning experiences, behaviours and outcomes, and well-being (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Pishghadam *et al.*, 2015; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). Given the trends of the massification and internationalisation of higher education (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b, 2010c), today's students, who come from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and vary in academic preparedness and motivation, are prone to more emotional stress and different harmful effects on their academic study and well-being during the transition and learning process (Ng *et al.*, 2012; Lee, 2019). A caring approach might facilitate students' learning and help them cope with difficulties and distress (Ng *et al.*, 2012). The global pandemic moreover has prompted more teachers to be aware of the centrality of care in providing students with learning, emotional and holistic support (Christopher *et al.*, 2020; Corbera *et al.*, 2020). There is a pressing need for asserting the centrality of teacher care to quality enhancement practices and processes within universities. This paper raises the concerns about whether or not universities are effectively reflecting the importance of teacher care and incorporating it in quality enhancement mechanisms.

Under the growing prevalence of neoliberalism, higher education is undergoing changes in implementing the ‘new managerialism’ model driven by the need for accountability concerning quality enhancement (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Olssen, 2016). The neoliberal ideal underpins establishing and maintaining a market-driven, authoritarian, hierarchical and top-down approach to accountability, including institutionalising individual accountability, quantifiable performance measures, and audit-focused systems (Zepke & Leach, 2007; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Olssen, 2016). As the whole higher education sector is becoming increasingly globalised, there are more and more supra-national standards and regulative frameworks to address the needs of various stakeholders (namely, governments, societal policy groups, international students) with different agendas in the international communities (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Accountability is used as a rhetorical tool to convey an image of good governance when public services have high quality and run cost-effectively (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b). However, the voluminous quantified measures, audit procedures and performance reports produced seem not to provide useful information for effectively informing the universities of quality issues and particularly those that make a tangible difference to students’ experiences and their testimonies of what counts as meaningful and transforming teaching (Gosling & D’Andrea, 2001; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010a, 2010c). In contrast, accountability appears to legitimise and preserve its continuity and the need for more stringent and closer surveillance and control (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010c; Olssen, 2016). Furthermore, the increasing and over reliance on line managers to devise, execute and oversee accountability systems has removed academics from the universities’ inner circle of key decision-makers on quality matters (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b, 2010c; Olssen, 2016). This has created the serious consequences of eroding academics’ autonomy, de-professionalising them and creating an ethos of distrust (Olssen, 2016). This likely promotes a compliance of minimum threshold standards and a bureaucratisation of quality, that are detrimental to quality enhancement (Gosling & D’Andrea, 2001; Cheng, 2009, 2017; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b, 2010c; Olssen, 2016).

Despite this, there are caring university teachers who are committed to enhancing teaching quality through devoting time and efforts to caring about and for students (Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Walker & Gleaves, 2016; Tett *et al.*, 2017). It however is fair to say that even though they want to do care, they might not be able to, and may regard caring as some form of resistance to, and against, the bureaucratic frameworks in which they work (Walker & Gleaves, 2016). In many countries, academics are increasingly reduced to a group of precarious,

functional and underpaid precariat given the abolition of tenure under the neoliberal governance (Lopes & Dewan, 2014; Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015; Olssen, 2016). To be awarded tenure, they have to generate more external research funding and publications (Olssen, 2016; Tett *et al.*, 2017). Nevertheless, the hegemony of dominant and powerful external users and regulators increasingly dictates the research contents and substance through the rhetoric of accountability in assessing the potential research impacts and controlling the funding (Olssen, 2016). This has seriously threatened academics’ professionalism, autonomy and career advancement (Olssen, 2016; Tett *et al.*, 2017). Teaching appears not to be prioritised, despite the increased attention to enhance teaching quality in universities (Olssen, 2016). This might undermine university teachers’ motivation in exploring innovative pedagogy or engaging in other teaching enhancement initiatives (Gosling & D’Andrea, 2001; Cheng, 2009). They are likely to be distracted from giving care to attending to students’ needs which are central to teaching and developing their students. There is an urgent need for re-introducing care to higher education pedagogy for quality enhancement.

This paper proposes a quality mechanism underpinned by the quality elements of care to be in place in universities. Educational processes and outcomes are complex constructs, which might not be wholly captured by a set of auditable indicators or reduced to a simplified causal mechanism (Zepke & Leach, 2007; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b; Zepke *et al.*, 2012). For example, students’ learning experiences (namely, engagement), behaviours and outcomes (such as, examination performances, retention) might be influenced by external factors and personal circumstances (namely, personal health problems, dependents’ needs), which are beyond the universities’ control (Zepke & Leach, 2007; Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b; Zepke *et al.*, 2012). Neglecting some crucial but hard-to-audit elements might not completely reflect the crux of the matter in quality enhancement. It is agreed that accountability and quality appraisal are important, but should not extend into neoliberal surveillance or become an end by itself (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b, 2010c; Olssen, 2016). For instance, useful data on quality enhancement (like, students’ perceptions of engagement) could be collected at the course level (Zepke *et al.*, 2012). Internal quality mechanisms (namely, peer observation of teaching) moreover are useful for university teachers to continuously seek out evaluative feedback on teaching practices that need improvement (Gosling & D’Andrea, 2001; Cheng, 2009). It is worth taking account of teacher care as a central theme of quality teaching and learning experiences, and including it in quality enhancement models.

However, students' perceptions and experiences of care in each caring encounter are subject to their individual experiences within their wider contexts (Garza, 2009). Failing to address these nuances of differences in their perceptions of teacher care might constitute impediments to incorporating teacher care in a quality mechanism – the need to understand care as not only personal, but as situated, makes it inherently complex. Nevertheless, existing research into teacher care tends to be qualitative. This has unveiled a research gap that we would like to address by utilising the quantitative approach to statistically validating the significant caring constructs for quality enhancement in universities. Policy-wise, this paper proposes a caring quality mechanism to address the inadequacy of the audit-focused quality system. Two purposes have framed this research as below:

- 1) To assess university students' perceptions of teacher care overall, and the three caring constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care; and
- 2) To draw implications for a caring quality mechanism within the higher education context.

Literature Review

Teacher Care

Teacher care has been discussed in terms of dispositions, relationships and pedagogical practices within the higher education context (Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996; Walker-Gleaves, 2009). Literature on teacher care has identified two broad schemas, a dispositional one premised on personal attributes and motivation, and a pedagogical one based on action-based and behavioural terms (Larson, 2006; Walker-Gleaves, 2009). Teacher care involves pedagogical actions and relational dynamics for promoting students' academic and holistic development (Noddings, 1984, 1992; Sun *et al.*, 2017). Several survey instruments have been developed for appraising and verifying these factors of teacher care (Gholami & Tirri, 2012; Pishghadam *et al.* 2015; Sun *et al.*, 2017; Garza & Van Overschelde, 2018). The development and successful application of these instruments have strengthened the plausibility of using statistical analysis to gain a deeper conceptual understanding and determine the significant elements of care, to better integrate care into pedagogy and build a caring quality mechanism for enhancing quality in higher education.

Caring pedagogical action is one of the core constructs identified in studies of teacher care. Gholami and Tirri's (2012) survey on caring teaching among primary- and secondary-school teachers in Iran has identified four dimensions, 'Nurturing of a students' character' and 'Awareness' representing personal care, as well as 'Didactical bias' and 'Respectful didactics' depicting academic care. Personal care concerning about nurturing the whole character of students as human beings is considered as more important, compared to academic care which attends to enhancing students' learning (Gholami & Tirri, 2012). Caring teaching calls for respectful and sensitive pedagogy to promote students' dignity and humility (Gholami & Tirri, 2012). In Garza and Van Overschelde's (2018) study of pre-service teachers' perceptions of university faculty's caring behaviours in the United States of America, faculty's caring pedagogical actions in recognising students as a distinctive individual with different learning needs, helping and encouraging them when personal challenges emerge, cultivating responsible relationship, using facilitating instruction and creating an inclusive classroom conducive to promoting students' scaffolding are found to be important. These studies have underlined the significance of pedagogical caring practices for learning facilitation.

Other studies have stressed teachers' relational dynamics and caring support for students' learning facilitation and holistic development. Nie and Lau's (2009) research into Grade-9 students' perceived quality of teacher-student relationships and teachers' caring support in Singapore has shown that the frequency of a teacher showing warmth, concern and acceptance is considered as important. Pishghadam *et al.*'s (2015) survey on Iranian English language teachers and students has found that 'Bias', 'Stroke' and 'Feedback' are perceived as central to the relational dynamics of teacher care. Whilst bias focuses on treating students fairly and equally, stroke lays stress on teachers' actions to acknowledge student's presence and values (Pishghadam *et al.*, 2015). Feedback moreover contributes to reinforcing and recognising students' knowledge acquisition (Pishghadam *et al.*, 2015). These studies have emphasised the importance of teachers' relational dynamics and caring support for promoting students' learning facilitation and holistic development.

Most work on teacher care has been conducted in the Western context. The studies undertaken by Sun *et al.* (2017) and Ng *et al.* (2012) were contextualised to the Asian setting. In Sun *et al.*'s (2017) study of primary- and middle-school teachers and students in mainland China, six elements of teacher caring, including 'Amiable', 'Self-disciplined', 'Understanding', 'Concerned', 'Responsible', 'Respectful' and 'Helpful', were first identified

and have been developed into three second-order factors of teacher caring, including ‘Conscientiousness’ (self-disciplined and responsible), ‘Receptivity’ (understanding and respectable-encouraging) and ‘Availability’ (amiable-helpful and concerned). Ng *et al.* (2012) have explored the perceived campus caring among undergraduates in Hong Kong and found that ‘Faculty support’ underpins the important role of teachers’ caring support in students’ learning facilitation (Ng *et al.*, 2012). These studies imply the primacy of teachers’ caring relational dynamics and support in fostering a positive, agreeable, respectful and inclusive caring classroom and overall atmosphere for facilitating students’ learning and holistic development, built on the core caring qualities of kindness, respect, support and responsibilities.

These existing surveys however had their limitations. Some of these studies (namely, Nie & Lau, 2009; Gholami & Tirri, 2012; Sun *et al.*, 2017) were contextualised to the school setting, rather than representing the university context. Some of them were limited to specific samples, which might not represent university students overall (such as, Pishghadam *et al.*, 2015; Garza & Van Overschelde, 2018). Despite this, premised on the conceptual and empirical underpinnings of these existing studies, it is reasonable to deduce that teacher care could be framed within the three constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care.

Constructs of Teacher Care: Pedagogical Care, Holistic Care and Relational Care

Pedagogical care concerns teachers’ volitional caring pedagogical actions conducive to students’ learning facilitation (Noddings, 1984). It encompasses understanding students’ needs, taking sensitive and individualised actions and support for enhancing their learning, and establishing a positive and intellectually-stimulating environment conducive to learning facilitation and critical-thinking development. It emphasises a delicate and subtle balance of university teachers’ affection and support, uncompromising expectations and standards of academic achievement, critical curriculum and assessment, pedagogical design and quality, and classroom management for the good of the students (Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996; Walker-Gleaves, 2009). Caring teachers put their best caring efforts to establish an enriched and facilitating learning environment where every students’ needs and capabilities are met by their pedagogical activities, whilst being sensitive to students’ feelings and the possible harmful emotional consequences of their pedagogical behaviours (Noddings, 1984; Gholami & Tirri, 2012). Pedagogical care involves teachers’ pedagogical activities ranged from their instructional methods, interactions with students, and classroom management for promoting students’ learning and academic achievement (Gholami & Tirri, 2012; Garza & Van

Overschelde, 2018). It includes a positive regard of the others, and entails maintaining an inclusive classroom environment in which the students feel respected and are respectful of teachers (Pishghadam *et al.* 2015). It is embodied in teachers' professional teaching competence premised on their caring academic facilitation and support.

Holistic care concerns teachers' deliberate caring actions of promoting students' academic learning and holistic development. It entails teachers' caring efforts and support to recognise students as a distinctive individual, affirming their presence and values, showing concerns for their academic and personal challenges, providing them with individualised advice and guidance, and nurturing their whole character (Nie & Lau, 2009; Gholami & Tirri, 2012; Pishghadam *et al.*, 2015; Sun *et al.*, 2017; Garza & Van Overschelde, 2018). It concerns caring behaviours responding to students' academic and other needs, resulted in taking responsibility for nurturing students' holistic development and persisting with difficult students (Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Ng *et al.*, 2012). This has implications for university teachers' roles and responsibilities for helping students grow and self-actualise (Noddings, 1984, 2003).

Relational care concerns teachers' dedicated efforts to engage students in the affective and supportive relational dynamics. Excellent teachers use an array of behaviours to create learning experiences underpinned by high-quality teacher-student relationships, and a core element of their relational approaches is teacher care (Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Walker & Gleaves, 2016). No matter how pedagogical models are positioned in practice, the relational dynamics pervasive of teacher care play a critical role in students' learning facilitation and holistic development (Noddings, 1984; Walker-Gleaves, 2009). Relational care is expressed in the relational dynamics between teachers and students, epitomised in teachers' affective qualities of kindness, friendliness and nurturance, and their dedication to building up an agreeable relationship with students and fostering a sense of community underpinned by their respect for students. It moreover concerns about teachers' sensitivity and responsiveness to students' needs for relatedness by showing concern, empathy, support and respect (Rogers & Webb, 1991; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1996; Nie & Lau, 2009). It refers to teacher-initiated affective actions that foster strong interpersonal bonds with students (Rogers & Webb, 1991; Pishghadam *et al.* 2015).

Overall, a caring ethos of warmth, pleasantness, generosity, friendliness, trustworthiness and responsiveness as developed by caring teachers contributes to students' learning facilitation

and holistic development (Ng *et al.*, 2012). This might imply that teacher care being more holistic is likely to fit in to quality enhancement models. As far as accountability scheme in quality enhancement is concerned, Stensaker and Harvey (2010b, p.15) suggest that it should be perceived as relevant by central stakeholders, contain fair judgement of performance, be open to feedback and dialogue, and stimulate trust. These preceding arguments have been germane to this research to examine the approaches to inclusion of teacher care in quality enhancement models.

Methods

A quantitative research design was adopted in this study to assess university students' perceptions of teacher care overall, and in the constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care. A rigorous scrutiny process was employed to form the survey instrument used in this research. Firstly, based on the comprehensive literature review, six existing survey instruments for measuring different aspects of teacher care were identified (Nie & Lau, 2009; Gholami & Tirri, 2012; Ng *et al.*, 2012; Pishghadam *et al.* 2015; Sun *et al.*, 2017; Garza & Van Overschelde, 2018). After that, the authors conducted a rigorous and iterative process of comparing and contrasting the existing survey items with the literature on teacher care and pedagogical-behavioural caring exemplifiers. This aimed to scrutinize whether or not the candidate items met the conceptual premise of teachers' caring attributes and behaviours, whilst avoiding any biased interpretation of teacher care based on the researchers' subjectivity (Walker-Gleaves, 2009; Walker & Gleaves, 2016).

A total of 55 candidate survey items were generated. These candidate items were submitted for expert scrutiny. The experts identified were three caring professors who were leading experts and experienced practitioners of their respective academic disciplines working in public universities in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom. They were highly recognised for their caring and pastoral support for teaching and thesis-supervision through teaching awards, and by faculty and students alike. Their comments on the survey mainly concerned revision of wordings and collection of demographic data. The survey was amended for the pilot study, which was administered to undergraduates via Qualtrics in the autumn semester. The pilot questionnaire moreover was sent to two instructors in a public university in Hong Kong for further scrutiny and improvement. They were experienced practitioners of teaching undergraduates and highly commended for being caring teachers in their respective fields. Their feedback mainly focused on refining the phrasing of the survey items and avoiding

repetition of similar items. The survey was reduced from 55 items to 23 items, and the wordings were modified. These rigorous scrutiny processes were to ensure that the survey items were well grounded in conceptual and empirical analyses.

The final survey consisted of 23 items using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) to indicate the degree of agreement. There were ten items used to gauge students' perceptions of pedagogical care, five items measuring holistic care, and eight items discerning relational care. During the whole scrutiny process of survey items, the four authors in this research actively participated in reflexivity and continuous exchanges of critical views to ensure neutrality and credibility (Babbie, 2021).

Convenience sampling was employed to reach the potential pools of respondents in different university settings efficiently and effectively (Babbie, 2021). The author sent solicitation emails to the gatekeepers (including teaching staff, administrators) to seek their assistance in survey distribution. The finalised self-administrated survey was distributed to undergraduates in Hong Kong, Macau, Republic of Fiji, Taiwan and the United Kingdom by means of Qualtrics in the spring and summer semesters. Descriptive analysis was applied to investigating undergraduates' perceptions of teacher care overall and in the three constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care. Paired-sample t-test moreover was adopted to examine any significant differences in the three constructs (Babbie, 2021).

Findings and Discussion

This paper aimed to discern university students' perceptions of teacher care overall and in the three constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care, to consider their inclusion in quality enhancement models. Among the 252 undergraduates who responded to the survey, 56.7% were female. Most of them studied in their second or third year. More than one third of them were from the region of Greater China (including Hong Kong, Mainland China, Taiwan), followed by other Asian countries (namely, South Korea), Oceania (such as, Republic of Fiji, Solomon Islands) and other countries. They were drawn from a range of disciplines in the fields of management, social science and science (Table 1). The representativeness of our empirical findings allowed for generalisation about university students' perceptions of teacher care.

< Table 1 >

The empirical findings demonstrated that a relatively high mean value of 4.02 (SD=0.606) was recorded for **university students'** perceived importance of teacher care overall. The results moreover showed that they perceived the three constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care as relatively important (Table 2). This was reflected in the relatively high composite means of 4.10 (SD=0.610), 4.00 (SD=0.636) and 3.96 (SD=0.663) for the constructs of relational care, pedagogical care and holistic care respectively. High reliability estimates moreover were recorded for all the constructs of pedagogical care, relational care and holistic care as shown in Cronbach's alpha at 0.931, 0.919 and 0.877 respectively. The highest mean value of 4.25 (SD=0.763) was recorded for the survey item in the construct of relational care, 'Teacher care is shown through respecting students.', whilst the lowest mean value of 3.81 (SD=0.830) was indicated in the survey item in the construct of holistic care, 'Teacher care is shown through providing emotional support for students.' **Our empirical findings indicated that university students perceived** teacher care as important overall, and in the three constructs of pedagogical care, holistic care and relational care.

< Table 2 >

Based on the paired-sample t-test, the empirical findings have evidenced that significant differences were found in the mean values between 'Relational Care' and 'Pedagogical Care', and between 'Relational Care' and 'Holistic Care' at the significance level of 0.000 (Table 3). **This study** has unveiled an interesting finding that **university students** rate relational care as more important **compared to** pedagogical care and holistic care. The construct of relational care concerns **establishing a community** of bonding through **caring university teachers'** dedicating time and efforts to building up agreeable and supportive teacher-student relationships. **This research** promotes the focusing the caring initiatives on cultivating a caring **and** supportive teacher-student relationship **to build a respectful** and trustworthy relational network for promoting the dialectic of **affect and cognition**. **This in turn would facilitate students'** knowledge co-construction, and **support their** holistic growth **and positive coping with challenges**.

< Table 3 >

Our empirical results have verified that holistic care is ascribed a relatively lower significance compared to relational care. This might be partly attributed to university students' reluctant attitudes towards seeking emotional support, which constitutes one of the main attributes in the construct of holistic care. This is not to refute the importance of holistic care which is still regarded as important from university students' views. This might imply being more subtle and discreet in displaying care for their emotional needs. This study advocates establishing an overall caring, non-judgmental, inclusive and nurturing atmosphere, and a relational network underpinned by trust and respect, for serving as a security base and safety net to support students' self-actualised growth.

No significant difference was found in the mean values between 'Pedagogical Care' and 'Holistic Care'. Caring teachers dedicate their best efforts to utilising an array of caring pedagogical behaviours for students' learning facilitation. This implies the importance of supporting students' holistic growth, whilst individualising pedagogical actions for students' learning facilitation and knowledge co-construction within a caring, inclusive and positive learning context. Overall, this study advocates integrating care into higher education pedagogy and focusing caring initiatives on creating a caring relationship with students predicated upon a relational dialectic of mutuality and respect and within a supportive and inclusive learning context. This research supports a caring quality mechanism for quality enhancement.

Implications for Practice: Caring Quality Mechanism

Premised on our empirical results, this paper advocates establishing a caring quality mechanism through a four-stage process (Figure 1), to address the inadequacy of the audit-focused quality system. Accorded with Stensaker and Harvey's (2010b, p.15) discussion on accountability scheme, this paper's proposed caring quality mechanism is relevant to the key stakeholders, embeds fair performance appraisal, promotes feedback and dialogues, and builds trust.

< Figure 1 >

In the first stage, this paper asserts the importance of recognising teacher care in university education, and re-introducing care to the centre of higher education pedagogy and caring quality mechanism. This research advocates a caring pedagogy through fostering relational care, strengthening pedagogical care and promoting holistic care. University teachers could foster

relational care by recognising students as distinctive individuals, giving more individualised support, and interacting with them more (namely, providing individual consultation after class). Their caring attitudes, respect and kindness shown for students, and responsiveness in attending to students' needs, suggest that an active process of constructing an agreeable teacher-student relationship is significant. This would build a relational network of bonding and social resources for supporting students' learning. University teachers moreover could strengthen pedagogical care by using a wide repertoire of individualised caring pedagogical actions (like, adjusting teaching pace in response to students' level of understanding) to promote a relational dialectic of affect and cognition for facilitating students' knowledge co-construction. Furthermore, university teachers could promote holistic care by creating a respectful, trustworthy, nurturing, inclusive and non-judgmental ethos (such as, giving equal opportunities to all the students to voice their opinions) to serve as a security base and safety net for supporting students' self-actualised and holistic growth. University teachers' assuming the central roles in carrying out caring pedagogy would provide a foundation for quality enhancement models (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b). This would set the scene for the second stage of re-emphasising university teachers' professionalism in the mechanism.

In the second stage, this research advocates re-emphasising the centrality of university teachers' professionalism embracing teacher care in the caring quality mechanism to better engage them in a continuous process of self-appraisal for quality enhancement. University teachers' pedagogical caring work is influenced by their professional identities and motivated by their professionalism (Noddings, 1992; Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2017). By re-emphasising university teachers' professionalism espousing the notion of teacher care, this would motivate them to devote to doing well in their pedagogical caring work and actively involve in self-appraising their scope of practices for building quality enhancement models on a solid ground of trust (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b; Olssen, 2016). This would form the basis for re-engaging university teachers in the decision-making process of quality mechanism.

In the third stage, this study proposes re-engaging university teachers in the circle of key decision-makers on the caring quality mechanism. This aims to recognise their professionalism and expertise in teaching, and quality appraisal and augmentation (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Cheng, 2017). This moreover would empower them and build their ownership of the methods, processes and criteria for appraising and raising quality standards. This would motivate them to be personally committed to and actively engage in the whole and continuous processes of

planning the scope and attributes of pedagogical caring practices for appraisal, scrutinising teaching quality, and feeding forward the areas that need improvement for quality enhancement (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Cheng, 2017). For example, given the effectiveness of internal quality evaluation (Gosling & D'Andrea, 2001; Cheng, 2009, 2011), university teachers might decide to use peer observation of classroom teaching (like, observing in-class teacher-student interactions) to seek out feedback on improving teaching practices. Re-engagement of university teachers in the centre stage of decision-making process would stimulate dialogues and feedback, form a fair and solid basis for appraisal, and build mutual trust (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b, 2010c; Olssen, 2016). This stage would set the ground for the last phase of reinforcing the caring quality mechanism.

In the fourth stage, this paper advances the reinforcement of the caring quality mechanism by initiating policy changes at the university level in prioritising and supporting pedagogical caring practices, and fostering a culture of caring support. This research champions changing the audit-focused quality system and institutional policies to recognising and prioritising university teachers' pedagogical caring work. For example, to check the new managerialism model, reforms could be launched to develop academic assemblies within the institution and involve the elected members in governance committees to represent and speak for the academic and teaching staff and defend their interests (Olssen, 2016). The elected members should have the university's approval and protection to declare their opinions on management as they see fit to make (Olssen, 2016). Furthermore, the secondary-school reform in the Netherlands has shown an innovative way to implement a duality of bottom-up and top-down approaches to empowering teachers and giving them greater autonomy in liaising directly and closely with students and school management on their teaching obligations and appraisals (Veugelers, 2004). The bottom-up process engages both students and teachers in liaising on the former's learning needs and progresses and the latter's teaching tasks and schedules (Veugelers, 2004). The top-down process then involves teachers and management in discussing matters related to appraisals and accountability (Veugelers, 2004). Although the secondary-school context might be different from the global higher education sector, the case of the Netherlands might illuminate new directions and ingenious approaches to mitigating the impacts of new managerialism upon accountability. It moreover is necessary for university administrators to allocate more resources to reward academics' pedagogical caring work and quality enhancement efforts (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010c). These recommendations not only would promote more dialogues and feedback (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b), but also aim to foster and

reinforce a culture of caring support for university teachers. When they are well cared and supported by the universities, they would be better encouraged to care about and for their students and continuously seek out ways to enhance teaching quality. This paper advances reinforcing a caring quality mechanism with a culture of caring support for quality enhancement. This would contribute to building mutual trust which is central to quality enhancement models (Stensaker & Harvey, 2010b; Olssen, 2016).

Conclusion, Limitation and Direction for Future Research

This paper aimed to investigate university students' perceptions of teacher care to consider its inclusion in quality enhancement models. Conceptually, it contributes to statistically affirming that university students perceive teacher care as important overall. Relational care is considered as relatively more important compared to pedagogical care and holistic care. Policy-wise, this research proposes a caring quality mechanism for quality enhancement to address the inadequacy of the audit-focused quality system.

This study however had its limitations. It had a limited sample of undergraduates. It did not probe into the demographics of sub-population and the impacts upon students' perceptions of teacher care. It moreover did not delve into students' views of caring pedagogy as compared to other pedagogical approaches. Future research thus is suggested to study a larger student population to obtain richer understanding of their needs and experiences for learning enhancement. Prospective research could scrutinise the effects of students' demographic, socio-economic, cultural and familial variables (namely, undergraduates' ethnicity, mature students' financial burden) on their expectations of teaching practices and learning support for quality augmentation. Considering that university teachers are central to deliver quality teaching, future studies are recommended to gain deeper insights into their views of different pedagogical approaches and quality mechanism for raising quality standards. Overall, this paper is expected to promote more dialogues and partnership among policymakers, administrators, researchers, academics and students for bettering quality in higher education.

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Table 1. Respondents' Profile

Variable	Category	Number (N=252)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	143	56.7%
	Male	88	34.9%
	Missing	21	8.3%
	Total	252	100%
Age	19 years old or below	63	25.0%
	20 years old	66	26.3%
	21 years old	52	20.6%
	22 years old or above	50	19.8%
	Missing	21	8.3%
	Total	252	100%
Region of Origin	Greater China	87	34.5%
	Asian Countries	33	13.1%
	Oceania	24	9.5%
	Other Countries	15	6.0%
	Missing	93	36.9%
	Total	252	100%
Year of Study	Freshman Year	37	14.7%
	Sophomore Year	83	33.0%

	Junior Year	60	23.8%
	Senior Year	50	19.8%
	Missing	22	8.7%
	Total	252	100%
Major Study	Management	112	44.4%
	Social Science	22	8.7%
	Science	61	24.2%
	Missing	57	22.6%
	Total	252	100%

Table 2. Mean Distribution of University Students' Perceptions of Teacher Care

Teacher Care Constructs	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pedagogical Care	4.00	0.636
Teacher care is shown through being responsive to individual student's learning needs	4.11	0.807
Teacher care is demonstrated through establishing a positive classroom environment	4.07	0.864
Teacher care is shown through dedicating time and efforts to support students' learning	4.04	0.771
Teacher care is demonstrated through adjusting the teaching pace in response to students' learning progresses	4.03	0.823
Teacher care is shown through providing study support	4.02	0.780
Teacher care is demonstrated through establishing an inclusive learning environment	4.00	0.816
Teacher care is demonstrated through fine-tuning the course contents in response to students' levels of understanding	3.97	0.803
Teacher care is demonstrated through customising the teaching methods in response to students' learning needs	3.97	0.776
Teacher care is demonstrated through accounting for individual students' differences	3.93	0.823
Teacher care is demonstrated through establishing an intellectually-stimulating learning environment	3.90	0.813
<i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.931</i>		
Holistic Care	3.96	0.663
Teacher care is shown through recognising students' accomplishments	4.04	0.776
Teacher care is shown through establishing a non-judgmental environment for students	4.00	0.861

Teacher care is shown through dedicating time and efforts to support students' holistic development	4.00	0.762
Teacher care is shown through recognising each student as a distinct individual, not a homogeneous mass	3.99	0.794
Teacher care is shown through providing emotional support for students	3.81	0.830

Cronbach's Alpha = 0.877

Relational Care	4.10	0.610
Teacher care is shown through respecting students	4.25	0.763
Teacher care embodies kindness	4.23	0.685
Teacher care embodies responsibilities	4.20	0.734
Teacher care embodies teachers' supportive attitudes	4.18	0.711
Teacher care is demonstrated through being responsive to students' needs	4.06	0.799
Teacher care is demonstrated through dedicating time and efforts to build relationships with students	4.02	0.744
Teacher care is demonstrated through establishing agreeable teacher-student relationships	3.97	0.854
Teacher care is demonstrated through taking the initiative in interacting with students in and after class	3.89	0.797

Cronbach's Alpha = 0.919

Note: Survey items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree)

Table 3. Paired-sample t-test of University Students' Perceptions of Pedagogical Care, Holistic Care and Relational Care

Constructs	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Mean	Error t value	Degree Freedom	of Significance (2-tailed)
Relational Care	4.10	0.610	0.019	-5.162	251	0.000
Pedagogical Care	4.00	0.636				
Holistic Care	3.96	0.663	0.022	-6.207	248	0.000
Relational Care	4.10	0.610				
Pedagogical Care	4.00	0.636	0.023	1.550	248	0.123
Holistic Care	3.96	0.663				

Figure 1. A 4-stage Process of Establishing a Caring Quality Mechanism

