

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FACULTY AGE AND TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper explores university students' perceptions of faculty age and how it influences their evaluation of teaching effectiveness. Drawing from literature that highlights age-related stereotypes regarding professional competence, the study aims to identify perceived differences between younger and older instructors and assess their impact on the educational relationship. A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with students from various university programs. Thematic analysis revealed five core dimensions: pedagogical style, adaptability to technology, didactic communication, relational attitude, and age-based biases. Findings indicate that perceived teaching effectiveness is more closely linked to professors' behaviour and attitudes than to their chronological age. Senior faculty members who demonstrate openness, empathy, and adaptability are positively evaluated, whereas rigid styles and formal communication are associated with lower student engagement. The conclusions call for institutional strategies to support lifelong professional development regardless of age and to counteract age-related stereotypes in academic settings.

Keywords: student perceptions, teaching effectiveness, faculty age, higher education, educational stereotypes

1. Introduction

In recent years, the assessment of teaching performance has undergone significant transformation, with students increasingly becoming key actors in shaping the public and institutional perception of academic staff. Although age is not an official criterion in formal evaluation processes, it is often associated with certain biases regarding efficiency, openness to technology, and adaptability to the demands of contemporary student cohorts. Research by Stonebraker and Stone (2015) highlights that, despite their professional experience, senior academics may be negatively perceived when they fail to integrate modern teaching methods or to maintain accessible and engaging communication with students. The present study explores students' perceptions of the teaching effectiveness of older university professors, employing a qualitative approach that focuses on educational relationships and the influence of age-related stereotypes.

2. The sociology of education and the dynamics of the professor–student relationship

The professor–student relationship in higher education represents a complex process of negotiating authority, legitimacy, and shared responsibility in the construction of knowledge. Within the sociology of education, this relationship is conceptualised as a space of reflexive interaction, in which institutional norms,

cultural capital, and power practices—shaped by both teaching staff and students—converge within a fluid field of meanings. In this context, formal authority, conferred by academic titles and institutional status, is complemented by its validation through disciplinary competence, socio-emotional skills, and the ability to foster constructive dialogue.

Teaching authority derives from both formal position (such as academic rank or managerial role) and cultural capital, expressed through expertise, scholarly publications, and professional recognition. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) argue that experienced educators consolidate their authority through reflexive teaching strategies, including clear course organisation, the stimulation of critical discussions, and the ability to establish connections between theoretical concepts and their practical applicability.

Non-verbal communication plays a mediating role in fostering students' trust and emotional engagement. Keelson et al, (2024) have shown that senior lecturers, due to more reserved facial expressions and stricter proxemics, may inadvertently convey a heightened emotional distance. This, in turn, can lead to lower student ratings in terms of perceived “connectedness” and “engagement”. However, positive critical experiences—such as those related to honesty and pedagogical responsibility, as identified by Snijders et al. (2022)—can effectively counterbalance initial non-verbal restraint, helping to re-establish a climate of trust within the learning relationship. Therefore, older academics who become aware of the gestural and tonal impact of their communication can adapt their body language to enhance students' perception of approachability and openness.

Institutional norms and policies significantly shape the distribution of power within the classroom. The implementation of 360° evaluations (which include self-assessment, peer feedback, and student opinions) transforms the professor–student relationship into a reflexive process of negotiating performance criteria. Stonebraker and Stone (2015) demonstrated that universities employing continuous professional development programmes and multidimensional evaluation frameworks can reduce rating discrepancies between junior and senior staff by up to 30%.

3. The impact of professors' age on perceived teaching effectiveness

3.1 Age-related stereotypes and student evaluations

Joye and Wilson (2015) demonstrated that students tend to assign lower average scores to senior teaching staff (over 55 years old), particularly on dimensions such as “accessibility” and “interactivity”, although disciplinary competence was not perceived to decline significantly with age. Wilson et al, (2014) described a “reverse halo effect” whereby younger academics received higher evaluations for enthusiasm and creativity; however, this effect diminishes in the presence of objective indicators of high performance among senior professors. Keelson et al., (2024) investigated in Ghana how lecturers' facial expressions, eye contact, and gestures influence students' perceptions of teaching quality. Professors aged over 55 tend to use more reserved body language, which some students interpret as emotional distancing, potentially reducing scores for “connectedness”

and “engagement”. Nevertheless, no statistically significant effect was found on student retention or academic performance, provided verbal communication and course structure remained clear and coherent. Stonebraker and Stone (2015) found that senior academics’ participation in digital methodology training programmes improved student evaluations by up to 20% compared to colleagues who had not engaged with technology.

3.2 The Role of emotional competences and professional experience

Crisol-Moya et al. (2020) emphasised the importance of emotional intelligence (including empathy and affect regulation) in creating a safe and motivating learning environment. Senior professors who effectively deploy socio-emotional skills receive significantly higher evaluations regarding “academic support” and “orientation towards students’ personal development”, especially in contexts characterised by high academic demands. Wilson et al., (2014) reported an interaction effect between gender and age: senior male professors were rated more favourably for “authority” and “content mastery”, whereas female professors over 55 had to compensate by demonstrating stronger socio-emotional skills to achieve comparable scores to their younger counterparts. Joye and Wilson (2015) identified minimal disciplinary differences, indicating that the age–gender bias is consistent across STEM fields and the humanities.

3.3 Contextual effects and institutional differentiations

The analysis of perceptions regarding the effectiveness of older teaching staff must be contextualised according to institutional type and the nature of the pedagogical relationship. Bibi et al., (2024) study revealed that in private colleges, students tend to assign higher scores to senior professors in terms of “classroom discipline” and “respect for academic norms”, whereas in public institutions, the same professors receive lower ratings for “interactivity” and “adaptability to educational technologies”. This disparity appears to be explained by institutional expectations and organisational culture: private universities often associate seniority with rigor and prestige, while public institutions prioritise innovation and interaction, potentially disadvantaging professors with traditional teaching styles.

Additionally, Tran and Do (2020) provide a multivariate analysis showing that age alone is not a direct predictor of student evaluations. Significant factors are combined: academic qualification level, teaching tenure, and the use of active teaching methods. Thus, educators over 55 who integrate digital resources, participatory methods, and relevant examples receive scores comparable or superior to those of younger colleagues. This challenges the stereotype that advanced age implies resistance to change or pedagogical inefficiency.

Finally, longitudinal data from Stonebraker and Stone (2015) suggest that initial differences between younger and senior teaching staff diminish over the course of a semester, contingent on the professor’s level of engagement with student feedback. Professors who revise course content, adapt methodologies, and respond to student suggestions are able to overcome initial age-related perceptual barriers and achieve evaluations convergent with those of younger colleagues.

3.4 Effects on student perceptions

Student evaluations reflect the impact of senior professors' digital training on perceived teaching quality. Zancajo et al., (2022) noted that, in European universities that implemented digital development policies, scores for "interactivity" and "practical relevance" in courses taught by academics over 55 increased by up to 20% in the 2021/2022 academic year compared to 2019/2020. At the national level, senior professors who attended digital pedagogy workshops were evaluated as clearer in structuring materials and more open to asynchronous feedback, contributing to a reduction in the satisfaction gap relative to younger colleagues. Thus, post-COVID-19 university policies on continuous professional development not only enhance technological competencies but also reshape students' perceptions of senior professors' teaching effectiveness.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design, focused on an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions regarding the teaching effectiveness of professors aged over 55. Group interviews were selected as the method. This approach facilitates a structured yet flexible discussion in which participants can freely express their opinions and experiences.

Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling, aiming for disciplinary and academic level diversity. Four group interviews were organised with first- and third-year students from the „1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia, Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, specialising in Human Resources (first and third year), Sociology (first year), Social Work (first year), and Occupational Therapy (first year). Inclusion criteria were attending courses taught by professors aged over 55 and willingness to participate actively in discussions lasting approximately 75 minutes. The groups were homogeneous with respect to specialisation to facilitate focused discussions based on shared experiences, but heterogeneous regarding year of study in order to capture the evolution of perceptions over time.

Group interviews were conducted under conditions ensuring participant confidentiality and comfort. Each session, moderated by the researcher, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview guide. All discussions were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and anonymised for subsequent analysis. To comply with ethical principles, participants were informed about the voluntary nature of involvement, the possibility to withdraw at any time, and the procedures for ensuring data confidentiality.

5. Data Analysis

Following the analysis of the interviews, the following major themes were identified:

A. Differences between younger and senior professors: comparative perceptions of teaching style → Participants clearly distinguished between two models of interaction and instruction. Younger professors were perceived as more dynamic, technologically engaged, and oriented towards rigor and structure. Conversely, senior professors were characterised by a more permissive, traditional

teaching style that was sometimes viewed as less coherent: “*Younger professors are stricter, adhere more closely to rules, are tougher, but at the same time they know how to explain things*” (AŞ); “*Older professors are more permissive and friendly, but sometimes they don’t express themselves well or organise their teaching*” (MA). This duality highlights a dissociation between relational competence and pedagogical competence according to age, with direct implications for perceived effectiveness.

B. Age and teaching quality: experience versus adaptability → Student perceptions reflect appreciation for senior professors’ experience as well as difficulties in didactic communication. Experience was associated with authority and professional stability, but a gap in adapting language or methods to the current generation of students was frequently noted: “*Some older professors are not always clear... it seems they lack patience to explain clearly or speak too abstractly*” (AB); “*Others, on the contrary, rely on their professional life and explain through examples. That really helps*” (MG). This perception suggests that age itself does not determine a decline in teaching quality, but rather how professors leverage professional experience and relate to current educational needs.

C. Adaptation to technology and modern methods: between prejudice and confirmation → The theme of adapting to new technologies appeared across all interviews, with students noting positive developments, especially at university level. Senior professors who have experience with online teaching acquired minimal digital competencies and are perceived as “more adaptable than previously thought”: “*I had older professors who adapted very well to Teams, PowerPoint, presentations... sometimes better than younger ones*” (FI); “*In high school, they struggled with computers, but at university they managed quite well*” (BO). This observation highlights a recalibration of expectations, where the concrete behaviours of senior professors contradict prejudices related to technological incompetence.

D. Age-related prejudices: negative generalisations and latent stereotypes → Although most participants stated they held no explicit prejudice against older professors, discourse analysis revealed the presence of implicit stereotypes regarding rigidity, adaptation difficulties, and resistance to change: “*I think many consider them outdated... people expect an older professor not to know technology*” (ID); “*Some professors are very good, but they are labelled just because of their age*” (AA). These perceptions demonstrate how age can become an indirect evaluative criterion that negatively influences the professional image of the teaching staff, regardless of actual performance.

E. Educational expectations of adult students → A relevant aspect, particularly noted among working or family-responsible students, is appreciation for senior professors who demonstrate understanding and flexibility regarding students’ extracurricular responsibilities: “*An older professor was very understanding when I had problems with my child... they didn’t ask me for proof or excuses*” (AH). This human dimension of the educational relationship is valued and contributes

positively to perceptions of pedagogical effectiveness, especially in flexible forms of higher education.

The results confirm that perceived teaching effectiveness is not directly correlated with the professor's age, but rather with their willingness to adapt to current educational demands, communicate clearly, and build equitable relationships with students. Senior professors who demonstrate openness, flexibility, and pedagogical competence are positively perceived, making age either irrelevant or even an asset.

6. Discussion

The outcomes indicate a complex and often ambivalent perception of older professors among students. On the one hand, professional experience is valued—particularly when accompanied by empathy and applied examples (Crisol-Moya et al., 2020; Snijders et al., 2022). On the other hand, methodological rigidity and communication difficulties are negatively associated with age, supporting hypotheses concerning the influence of stereotypes (Wilson et al., 2014; Joye & Wilson, 2015). Teaching style appears to be a more significant variable than chronological age. Younger professors are perceived as stricter and better digitally adapted, whereas older professors are appreciated for their understanding and humane attitude but are sometimes criticised for a lack of pedagogical coherence. This finding supports approaches emphasising the compatibility between teaching style and student expectations (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

A positive emergent aspect is the capacity of some senior professors to adapt to the demands of the post-pandemic digital environment (Zancajo et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). This contradicts stereotypes regarding technological incompetence among older faculty and highlights the importance of continuous professional development (Ng et al., 2024). Student perceptions confirm that teaching effectiveness correlates with the professor's attitude towards learning, clarity of communication, and willingness to engage in feedback—factors that transcend age (Tran & Do, 2020). Thus, perceived educational performance is not determined by age but by relational and pedagogical competence.

7. Conclusions

The study highlights that the age of university professors is not a direct predictor of perceived teaching effectiveness by students. Relevant dimensions for evaluating effectiveness include teaching style, clarity of communication, adaptability to technology, and relational availability. Senior professors who demonstrate openness and leverage their professional experience in ways adapted to current requirements are positively evaluated.

At the same time, the persistence of age-related stereotypes signals the need for institutional interventions. The implementation of university policies promoting continuous professional training, intergenerational mentoring, and competency-based evaluation rather than symbolic criteria is recommended.

The research has several limitations that restrict the generalisability of the results. The qualitative design and small sample size limit the extension of conclusions beyond the institutional context analysed. Additionally, student responses may be influenced by social desirability bias, affecting the authenticity of expressed perceptions. The lack of triangulation with quantitative data and the absence of faculty perspectives reduces analytical depth, while the post-pandemic specificities of the educational context may influence perceptions of technological adaptability, limiting long-term relevance.

As for future directions, developing an inclusive academic culture that values generational diversity may contribute to optimising the professor–student relationship and improving the overall quality of higher education.

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