WHAT REALLY MATTERS TO OUR STUDENTS?

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Abstract

Students are a key element in the educational process and, consequently, their opinions, perceptions and feedbacks are an important input for the assessment and improvement of different aspects of the process. In this research, a questionnaire was designed and administered at the beginning of an undergraduate course to gather the opinion of the students about the importance of several aspects to determine the quality of teaching. The analysis of the survey data show which are the aspects that students consider more relevant for determining the teaching quality of a course, along with those that are not considered so important. Moreover, differences of students’ opinions on the different aspects in terms of three characteristics were observed: gender, expected grade of the course and prior interest in the subject. With this information lecturers can do a better programming of the different aspects of the course and prepare the subjects more effectively, which is likely to positively impact student satisfaction which, in turn, has been related to an improvement in students’ performance.

Keywords: quality of teaching, students’ opinions, questionnaire.

1 INTRODUCTION

Students are a key element in the educational process and, consequently, their opinions, perceptions and feedbacks are an important input for the assessment of different aspects of the process and for informing the decision making regarding the implementation of improvement measures. Students’ voices and views must be seen as centrally important to the development of knowledge about teaching, particularly in higher education. Students have an important role because of their direct classroom contact with the lecturer, which allow them to can uniquely answer questions related to some aspects of the in-class lecturer’s behaviour and the delivery of the subject [1]. The importance of engaging students as co-producers of knowledge about pedagogy and practice in higher education in order to provide deeper and richer layers of understanding must be recognized [2].

One of the main purposes for which the students’ feedback is collected is the teaching quality assessment. Course and teacher evaluations are an important mechanism for improving the teaching and learning processes [3], [4]. In almost all cases, formal measurement of course quality is conducted through course evaluations completed by students at the end of the course. Nevertheless, for improving the students’ perceptions of the teaching quality, it is important to determine first what the students expect before entering the course [5]. Obtaining feedback at the end of a course could not benefit the respondents themselves, and earlier feedback would have a more immediate value [6]. Moreover, administering a questionnaire at the beginning of a course asking the students the importance they give to different aspects of teaching, would allow finding out their opinions regarding the different aspects abstractly, without linking it to the performance of a particular lecturer.

If a questionnaire is administered at the beginning of the course, asking the students about the importance they give to several factors related to the quality of teaching, results obtained from the survey instrument would help lecturers to improve the quality of their teaching by providing insights into the factors that students perceive as more relevant for determining the quality of teaching. Taking this information into account lecturers can do a better programming of the different aspects of the course and prepare the subjects more effectively, which is likely to positively impact student satisfaction which, in turn, has been related to an improvement in students’ performance [7]. Moreover, the mere fact of administering the questionnaire can serve to foster a more positive relationship between the teacher and the students, and to generate a better working climate in the group. This could improve students’ performance, since previous studies revealed that students’ perceptions of classroom environment may exercise an indirect influence on achievement by boosting interest and self-concept [8], [9].

In this context, this paper presents the results of analysing the data of a questionnaire designed and administered to second year students of the Degree in Economics and the Degree in Economics and Tourism in the University of the Balearic Islands. The survey instrument included an adaptation of the
Student Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) [10] along with questions about sociodemographic and academic characteristics of students, such as, gender, age, studies. The SEEQ is considered one of the most widely used and universally accepted instruments for collecting the students evaluation of teaching [11], [12] and its reliability and validity have been confirmed by numerous researchers (e.g. [13], [14]). The usual objective of the SEEQ is the assessment, for a specific subject, of the teacher's performance at the end of the course. Therefore, the writing of the items that make up the SEEQ scale was adapted to be administered at the beginning of the course to gather the opinion of the students about the importance they give to each of the aspects to determine the quality of teaching in general.

The analysis of the survey data shows which aspects students consider more relevant for determining the teaching quality of a course, along with those that are not considered so important. Differences of students' opinions on the different aspects in terms of three characteristics were analysed: gender, expected grade of the course and prior interest in the subject. Results reveal the existence of differences in the importance that students give to the different aspects depending on these characteristics.

The following sections present the survey instrument administered to gather students' opinions and the statistical methods used for analysing the data. Next, results are presented and, finally, the main findings are discussed.

2 METHODOLOGY

The individuals considered in this research were the 87 second year students enrolled in an undergraduate course of the Degree in Economics and the Degree in Economics and Tourism in the University of the Balearic Islands.

Based on a previous literature review, a self-administered questionnaire was designed, that included an adaptation of the SEEQ along with questions about sociodemographic and academic characteristics of students, such as, gender, age, and studies. Since the usual objective of the SEEQ is the assessment of the teacher's performance at the end of the course, the writing of the items that make up the questionnaire was adapted to gather the opinion of the students, at the beginning of the course, about the importance of each of the aspects to determine the quality of teaching in general, without linking them to the particular lecturer or subject. 29 items were included to assess the importance of the following dimensions: Learning, Enthusiasm, Organization, Interaction, Rapport, Breadth, Examinations and Assignments. These items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all important) to 5 (Very important). Next, the students were asked two questions about the specific subject they were going to start: Your level of interest in the subject prior to this course is…, measured with five possible answers (Very low, Low, Medium, High, Very high), and The grade that you expect to obtain in this course is…, with the following possible answers: lower than 3, between 3 and 5, between 5 and 7, between 7 and 9 and higher that 9. Finally, six sociodemographic and classification questions were included, asking the studies in which the respondents were enrolled, the subject group, gender, age, whether the student was repeating or not the subject, and the highest year in which the student was enrolled. The survey was administered the first day of the course just before the beginning of the first lecture. All students present in the classroom answered the questionnaire, and a total of 63 questionnaires were obtained.

To analyse students' answers the mean scores of the quality of teaching dimensions were calculated. Next, differences in the mean scores of the quality of teaching dimensions, which depended on students' demographic and academic characteristics, were analysed. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality indicated that normal distribution could not be assumed for any of the dimensions. Therefore, non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test) were calculated to test the existence of the aforementioned differences.

3 RESULTS

The survey instrument was administered to second-year Economics Degree (87.3%) and Economics and Tourism Degree (12.7%) students and a total of 63 questionnaires were obtained. Most of the respondents were men, 57.1%, the average age was 20.54 years, and 19% were repeating the subject. 55.6% rated their prior interest in the subject as medium and 38% as high or very high. Regarding the expected grade of the course, 47.6% of the respondents answered that they expect to obtain a grade (out of ten) between five and seven, and 52.4% higher than seven.
Table 1 shows the sample mean scores for the SEEQ quality of teaching dimensions. Results indicate that the aspects that students have considered more important in determining teaching quality are the lecturer’s enthusiasm (Enthusiasm), the lecturer’s organization of the course contents, materials and expositions (Organization), the students’ assessment methodologies and feedback (Examinations), the learning, interest and value of the subject (Learning), and the good relationship, interest and accessibility that the lecturer shows to the students (Rapport). On the other hand, students seem less worried with the lecturer’s breadth of knowledge and updating (Breadth), the contribution of the assignments to the learning of the subject (Assignments), and the facilities that are given to students to participate in the lectures, either asking questions, showing their opinions, etc. (Interaction).

Table 1. Mean scores of the SEEQ dimensions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>4.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>4.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>3.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapport</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breadth</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examinations</td>
<td>4.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Differences regarding students’ assessment of the teaching quality dimensions, in terms of three characteristics were analysed: gender, expected grade of the course and prior interest in the subject. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of normality reveals that normal distribution cannot be assumed for the scores of any of the quality of teaching dimensions. Therefore, to test the existence of differences in the mean score of each dimension depending on the considered characteristics non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test) were employed. In Table 2 asterisks indicate the existence of significant differences in the dimension mean score depending on the corresponding characteristic.

Table 2. Significance of the differences in the teaching quality dimensions mean scores, by gender, expected grade in the course and prior interest in the subject.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Expected grade</th>
<th>Prior interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
<td>***</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
<td>**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
<td>***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rapport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breadth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Examinations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
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</table>

* significant at 10%, ** significant at 5%, *** significant at 1%

Significant differences between men and women in all the dimensions, except Interaction and Assignments, were observed according to the Mann-Whitney U test. The assessment given by women to each dimension is greater than that given by men, in all cases where significant differences exist. As for the expected grade, the Kruskal-Wallis test indicates the mean score of the Breadth dimension differs depending on the mark that the student expects to obtain in the course. The higher the expected grade, the higher the importance that the students give to this dimension. Regarding the students’ prior interest in the subject the results of the Kruskall-Wallis test indicate that significant differences exist in the mean score of the Interaction and Assignments dimensions. The mean score of these two components increase with the students’ interest in the subject.
4 CONCLUSIONS

In this research a questionnaire was designed and administered at the beginning of an undergraduate course to gather the opinion of students regarding the importance of several factors for determining the quality of the course.

The results showed that those aspects related to lecturer enthusiasm, the organization of the lectures and materials, the examinations methods and feedbacks, the interest and intellectual challenge of the course, and the friendliness, interest and accessibility of the lecturer are the teaching characteristics that students considered more important for determining the quality of an undergraduate course. These results agree with those reported in previous studies [15]–[22].

Differences in the mean scores of the teaching quality dimensions by gender, expected grade and prior interest in the subject were also analyzed. The results showed that the scores given by females are greater than those given by males for the Learning, Enthusiasm, Organization, Rapport, Breadth and Examinations dimensions. Regarding the expected grades, the higher the expected grade, the higher the importance that the students give to the Breadth dimension. As for the prior interest in the subject, the mean scores of the Interaction and Assignments dimensions increase with the students' interest in the subject.

Therefore, it seems that satisfying the "best students" requires a level of extra effort on the part of the lecturer. Or, seen in another way, it can be said that the most interested students and with better academic expectations value what are fundamental tasks of university lecturers, that is, to continuously expand their level of knowledge, stay updated, and plan and carry out teaching activities that really add value and contribute to the learning of the subjects taught. These results agree with previous works. The prior subject interest and the expected grade are two of the variables that [23] and [24] described as the most influential for explaining the students' ratings of teaching effectiveness. And [25], [26] found a positive relationship between students' expected grades and their overall ratings of teaching.

The procedure presented in this paper could help lecturers in the adaptation of the teaching of their subjects to improve the students' perceptions of the teaching quality.

REFERENCES


