



# Learning by doing: Do economics students self-evaluation skills improve?



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## ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to (1) measure the students' ability to accurately self-evaluate the quality of their own work, (2) see if this level of accuracy changes when students evaluate a second year essay, having evaluated a similar piece of work in the first year, (3) Investigate whether there is any significant variation in any of the observed changes and (4) identify any factors that might explain any of the observed variation. The data is generated from one cohort of students who were studying for an economics degree at a UK university. The self-evaluation exercise was introduced on two out-of-class essay assessments – one in the first year and one in the second year. Statistical analysis revealed that, on average, the students were significantly more accurate at self-evaluating the quality of their work in the second year than they had been in the first year. However there was considerable variation in this improvement. Those students who demonstrated the greatest improvement were firstly those who were awarded higher marks by the tutor for their second year essay and secondly, those who had been the least accurate at judging the quality of their first year essay. Other student characteristics such as different measures of student ability and gender had no significant impact on the changes in accuracy. However, there is no clear picture about what exactly is driving the improvement.

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## 1. Introduction

A key objective of any course in higher education is to develop the independent learning skills of the students enrolled on the programme. In order to meet this objective academic departments need to implement strategies that encourage and enable students to take greater control of their own learning rather than remaining dependent on others to direct and evaluate it for them. In order to become effective independent learners, students need to acquire good self-evaluation skills (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). They must develop the ability to monitor the quality of their own work as they are producing it. As Sadler (1989) argues, they need to understand the standard (i.e. know what a good piece of work looks like), identify any weaknesses in their own work (i.e. recognise gaps between their own and a good piece of work) and be able to take the actions required in order to rectify any perceived weaknesses and close the gap.

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In many undergraduate courses it is assumed that these self-evaluation skills will improve as the students act upon the information they obtain from grades and written feedback on their assessments. In this case one would expect the self-evaluation skills of second year students to be significantly better than those of first year students. First year students may initially find it difficult to adjust to the very different standards required for success in higher education. The speed of adjustment will be influenced by the exact nature of their previous study. However, after a year of producing assessments and receiving grades/feedback, tutors would hope that the majority of students had adapted to the new benchmarks. However, part of the motivation for this study comes from an increasingly common type of e-mail received by both authors from students who appear both surprised and bemused about the low marks they have been awarded for a particular assignment. Their incredulity seems so great that they are convinced that the only explanation for the low mark must be some type of transcription error by the tutor. This suggests that traditional methods of feedback are becoming less effective at improving the students' self-evaluation skills. This may be the result of rapidly rising numbers causing the quality of feedback to fall. Module/course evaluations and questionnaires often find deep dissatisfaction amongst the student body with the quality of the feedback they receive.

This paper attempts to measure the extent to which the self-evaluation skills of students improve as they progress from the first year to the second year of an undergraduate economics degree programme at a UK university. In theory the marginal impact of the grades and the feedback received from first year assessments on the students' perceptions of the standards required in higher education should be relatively large. One might expect the marginal impact from assessments in the second year to be somewhat smaller as students will hopefully have already adjusted to the requirements of the educational environment.

This study attempts to (1) measure the students' ability to accurately self-evaluate the quality of their own work, (2) see if this level of accuracy significantly changes when the same group of students progress from the first year to the second year, (3) investigate whether there is any significant variation in any of the observed changes, and (4) Identify any factors that might help to explain any of the observed variation.

In contrast to much of the existing literature, which uses the assignment mark as the only measure of ability (Cassidy, 2007) we argue that an observation from one piece of coursework might not be a reliable measure. Instead we used a range of different variables to try and capture ability. In addition to the assignment grade these include, UCAS points and the average mark across all the modules studied in the first year.

Our analysis revealed that, on average, the second year students were significantly more accurate at self-evaluating the quality of their work than they had been in the first year. There was also considerable variation in the extent to which this accuracy improved. We found two key factors that could help explain this variation – the level of inaccuracy in the first year essay and the mark awarded by the tutor for the second year essay. The greater the size of both of these variables, the bigger the improvement in accuracy. Other student characteristics such as different measures of academic ability, gender and nationality had no significant impact on the changes in accuracy.

In Section 2 we review the literature, in Section 3 we discuss our methodology, and in Section 4 we discuss the data and the characteristics of our sample. In Section 5 we present our results which focus on changes in the level of self-evaluation accuracy between first and second year students. In Section 6 we summarise our results and provide some conclusions.

## 2. Literature review

Numerous studies have attempted to measure how accurately students self-evaluate the quality of their academic work. Much of this research has been based on a single piece of assessed work such as an essay, in-class test or examination. One of the earliest and most widely cited surveys of this literature was carried out by Boud and Falchikov (1989). They reviewed over 50 papers that covered a wide range of academic disciplines. Unfortunately none of them involved economics students. The survey reported a number of frequently observed findings in the literature. For instance, studies tend to find that academically weaker students, as judged by the marks awarded by the tutor, are less accurate than their academically stronger counterparts. They also tend to be overconfident about the quality of their work whereas the academically stronger students tended to slightly underrate theirs. This same result has been repeatedly found across a broad range of social and intellectual tasks in the psychological literature (Ehrlinger et al., 2008; Kruger and Dunning, 1999). The experience of the student in their field of study also appears to have a positive impact on accuracy. However the authors found no overall trend for students on average to either under or overestimate the quality of their work. They also concluded that many of the studies were "both conceptually and methodologically unsound". Limitations with previous research include a lack of any incentives for students to take the activity seriously and potential bias in the data caused by the self-evaluation exercise being used by students as an impression management tool. These issues will be discussed in more detail later in this paper. Grimes (2002) carried out one of the first studies to focus specifically on the self-evaluation skills of economics students. He analysed the ability of 253 students to predict their performance on an in-class midterm examination in a Principles of Macroeconomics module. The findings were similar to those in other disciplines. The academically more able students, as measured by ACT (American College Testing) and GPA (Grade Point Average) scores, tended to be more accurate. Statistical analysis indicated that the students who over predicted their exam scores were less accurate than those who under predicted their exam scores. Rather than predicted marks on one piece of assessed work, Nowell and Alston (2007) examined data on the difference between predicted and actual grades at a module level. Using data from 715 completed surveys the authors found that 58% of students accurately predicted their grade while one-third were overconfident and just 9% were

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