



Contents lists available at [SciVerse ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste



Academic Papers

Using the Course Experience Questionnaire for evaluating undergraduate tourism management courses in Greece

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Student experience
Course evaluation
Tourism education

ABSTRACT

An adapted version of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was administered to tourism management students at two technological educational institutes in Greece. This questionnaire has been previously utilised with students taking tourism-related degree courses in the United Kingdom. The analyses presented herein focus on the psychometric properties of the adopted research instrument with the purpose of testing its applicability in the context of tourism higher education in Greece. The results suggest that the CEQ demonstrated an appropriate five-factor structure, satisfactory internal consistency and appropriate relationships with students' rating of their overall satisfaction. Limitations of and directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Systems for the evaluation of teaching and course quality in higher education institutions (HEIs) have long been established both in the United States (US) and Australia and they have also become increasingly common in the United Kingdom (UK). In a recent comparative review of course evaluation surveys in these countries, the Higher Education Academy (Hanbury, 2007, p. 1) stated that the importance of gaining systematic evaluations of courses by means of national surveys “reflects the growing focus on the quality of teaching, formal institutional arrangements, and a growing emphasis on competition between higher education institutions”. Accordingly, within Greece, there has been an upsurge of interest in this area from a range of different perspectives driven both internally by institutions themselves and externally by national quality initiatives and general public calls for increased accountability and quality assurance.

While there is a large number of possible sources of evaluation data on both teaching and course quality, the commonest form of input to educational evaluation (particularly in the US, the UK and Australia) is feedback from students (Hoyt & Perera, 2000). Indeed, the practice of obtaining student feedback on individual teachers and course units is widespread and causes little concern in these countries although the uses to which it is put may be controversial. For example, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) is an annual government-mandated survey which all Australian Universities take part in, and is sent to the previous year's graduating students. In the UK, the National Student Survey (NSS) is administered to students still in their final year of undergraduate studies. The findings from both surveys are used to identify problem areas and inform enhancement activities.

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In the Greek context, Law 3374 of 2005 provides the legislative framework for the evaluation of HEIs. However, systematic collection and processing of evaluative data is not well established in most Greek universities. Individual lecturers may voluntarily obtain feedback on their teaching from students using questionnaires of various kinds. At the institutional level, some feedback is gathered for the purposes of departmental evaluations but often on an incomplete and ad-hoc basis. Indeed, 4 years following the passing of Law 3374, only 5 out of 500 departments of higher education institutions have completed evaluation processes (Kalimeri, 2009). It can be argued, therefore, that there is a clear need for a more standardised approach to this process; all the more so as course evaluation is promoted by the Greek government as a decisive step towards the convergence of the HE system with the principles that govern the European Higher Education Area.

Against this background, the Greek Ministry of Tourism Development, sharing responsibility for monitoring and evaluation of tourism educational programmes with the Ministry of Education, set up a project to advise on the development of such a survey. This led in turn to the commissioning of a pilot study of current undergraduate students following tourism management programmes of study. This was carried out during the spring of 2008 using an adapted version of the CEQ and yielded responses from 283 students at two institutions. In line with the use and purpose of the CEQ (see McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2001), the objective of this project was to provide reliable and valid indicators of crucial aspects of students' course experiences and ratings of overall satisfaction. An additional objective was to determine whether the questionnaire used in this study could be standardised as a performance indicator for monitoring the quality of tourism management academic programmes in Greece. This paper will focus on this second objective and emphasis is placed on analyses concerning the psychometric properties of the adopted research instrument. These analyses are important for HEIs to have confidence in the use of the questionnaire.

2. Obtaining student feedback in higher education

Student evaluation in higher education can take place at various levels: at the level of individual teachers, course units, programmes of study, departments and institutions. As Richardson (2005, p. 402) has pointed out, "at one extreme one could envisage a teacher seeking feedback on a particular lecture; at the other extreme one might envisage obtaining feedback on a national system of higher education". Clearly, the level at which one should collect feedback is dependent upon the purpose of the investigation. From the perspective of this study, the focus is on the experience of students over a whole programme of study, rather than an individual module. Accordingly, this section draws primarily on the predominantly Australian and British literature that is concerned with students' evaluations of their programmes.

Although formal questionnaires are most often used to obtain student feedback in higher education, they by no means constitute the only method. Student feedback can also be collected in many other ways. These include informal class discussions, formal staff-student meetings, students' notes, diaries and/or log books, student interviews and focus groups (Keane & Mac Labhrainn, 2005). However, formal questionnaire surveys have two methodological benefits: they can provide an opportunity to collect data from the entire student population; and they document the experiences of the student population in a systematic way, providing useful time-series data (Richardson, 2005). These two benefits are afforded by such instruments being standardised, with associated psychometric properties of reliability and validity, thus aiming at collecting more quantitative-type data (Hanbury, 2007). Student feedback could, of course, be obtained by means of open-ended questionnaires. Nevertheless, while rich and informative, the analysis of open-ended responses and other qualitative data may prove an extremely time-consuming and labour-intensive effort and is, therefore, not used for course monitoring when surveying large numbers of students (Keane & Mac Labhrainn, 2005).

Much of the research evidence in this area has been concerned with the reliability and validity of students' evaluations of their programmes (Prebble et al., 2004). To this extent, formal student surveys typically contain groupings of items reflecting different dimensions of the student experience of a particular course, referred to as scales. Reliability and validity are important psychometric properties of surveys, with reliability being concerned with the accuracy of the actual measuring instrument, and validity referring to the instrument's success at measuring what it purports to measure (Hinkin, 1995; Nunnally, 1978). Tests of reliability and validity are performed on the scales, and as such assess the magnitude of measurement errors in survey data (Bound, Brown, & Mathiowetz, 2001). A statistical technique called factor analysis is also typically used to establish whether the groups of items form the latent structure (dimensions) they were supposed to. Tests of reliability and validity are, of course, specific to the survey and as such will be discussed below with regard to the survey presented in this study. However, overall, Marsh (1987), Paulsen (2002) and Richardson (2005) suggest that student ratings demonstrate acceptable psychometric properties, and can provide important evidence for educational research.

The instrument that has been most widely used in published work is Ramsden's (1991) Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). In completing this questionnaire, students are required to note the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a set of 31 items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "definitely agree", scoring five, to "definitely disagree", scoring one. Statements 1–30 are intended to reflect five aspects of perceived teaching quality on particular academic programmes: Good Teaching, Clear Goals and Standards, Appropriate Workload, Appropriate Assessment, and Emphasis on Student Independence. Statement 31 measures the respondents' overall level of satisfaction with their programmes.

The CEQ has a substantial literature addressing its reliability and validity (e.g. Hanbury, 2007; Ramsden, 1991; Richardson, 1994, 2005). In the Australian national trial of the CEQ (Ramsden, 1991), its scales have been found to have

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