



# On the assessment of attitudes towards studying –Development and validation of a questionnaire



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## ABSTRACT

This research aims to develop and validate an instrument for the assessment of attitudes towards two particular objects: the Higher Education Institution (HEI) and the process of studying. Investigating attitudes towards studying at a HEI in a comprehensive way addresses an important research gap. It connects students' perception of the institution with teaching and learning. To validate the Assessment of Students' Attitudes towards Studying (ASATS) Questionnaire, data was gathered at three different universities in Switzerland (820 students), Sweden (167) and Germany (133). Overall, the results show the internal consistency of the ASATS. Its nomological validity is also supported by correlations with other constructs, such as intrinsic motivation and study performance. The ASATS contributes to the theory on students learning by broadening the scope of research beyond learning in a narrow sense. From a practical point of view, it provides a tool for HE management to monitor students' perception of their HEI.

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## 1. Introduction

How do students experience Higher Education (HE)? This question has been at the centre of many research endeavors dealing with learning and studying at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Over the last three decades or so, this research has produced a huge number of concepts, with conceptions of learning (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Vermunt & Vermetten, 2004), and approaches to learning (Edmunds & Richardson, 2009; Richardson, 2011) as well as student motivation and learning strategies (De Feyter, Caers, Vigna & Berings, 2012; Komarraju, Karau & Schmeck, 2009; MacCann, Fogarty & Roberts, 2012) being among the most prominent. Another stream of research looks into student engagement, using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (e.g. Coates, 2005; Hu & Kuh, 2002; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup & Kinzie, 2008). While the existing body of research provides rich insights into student learning, there is less evidence about what happens beyond formal learning arrangements and how this influences the student experience. Indeed, much is known about what students do in classroom settings, but much less about what they do outside the classroom and, especially, why they do it that way. In this regard, Aineley (2008, p. 619) observes that “studies have focused almost exclusively on classroom/learning experiences, with fewer attempts to understand student life more generally” and should therefore “aim to contextualize formal learning in the shared meanings of various students' learning cultures”. For the same reason, Richardson, Abraham,

and Bond (2012) conducted a literature review and a meta-analysis on psychological correlates of academic performance and included “psychosocial contextual influences” in their analysis (pp. 355, 358). Those factors comprise students' social and institutional integration within academic contexts, as well as their study-induced stress and depression. Similarly, research on student retention in Higher Education has long emphasized the importance of students' enculturation with the university (Tinto, 1997; Ulriksen, Madsen & Holmegaard, 2010). This previous work implies the need for a broader conceptualization of studying, taking into consideration how students experience not only learning, but their being at a HEI in general. What previous studies have not addressed satisfyingly is the interrelation between contextual influences such as the social and institutional environment of HE, and students' developments concerning more personal variables such as self-efficacy, anxiety and emotions regarding their studies. This research gap is addressed with the study reported in this paper. Rather than focusing immediately on how students tackle the learning-related challenges of their studies, we aim at investigating students' general outlook on HE and, more specifically, their attitudes towards their HEI as well as towards their studying by providing a succinct and specific instrument for such research. An attitude is an individual's evaluation of a specific object within a certain environment. This evaluative nature of attitudes implies a more dynamic relationship between the individual and a certain attitude object than measuring, for instance, institutional integration as a state. Therefore, attitudes can provide the link between contextual features of the study environment and personal developments of the individual student.

The aim of the study is first to conceptualize student attitudes and second to develop and validate a questionnaire to assess the students'

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attitude towards their learning environment. For this purpose, two attitude objects, (1) the HEI and (2) the students' studying will be reviewed as a theoretical framework for the survey instrument.

### 1.1. Existing approaches to measure student learning in HEI

Different concepts concerning how students learn at HEIs have been developed over the last 30 years (Richardson, 2004) and have subsequently been transformed into inventories and questionnaires. For instance, research on students' approaches to learning (SAL) has a long tradition, resulting in e.g. Ramsden and Entwistle's (1981) Approaches to Studying Inventory (ASI) and Biggs, Kember, and Leung's (2001) Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) (Richardson, 2011). These instruments are very helpful in understanding how students deal with subject matter and learning tasks; however, they lack the capacity to explain why some students actively engage with their studies while others do not. To approach this question, a comprehensive questionnaire is used for the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the United States. It assesses whether students engage in educationally purposeful activities (e.g. reading, writing, attending classes) (Kuh, 2008). Engagement is regarded as a major predictor for students' achievements during their studies at HEIs (e.g. Coates, 2005; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2006). Although student engagement results from students' attitudes and motivations (Pascarella, Seifert & Blaich, 2010), the instrument itself assesses students' educational practices, characterized as the "level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment" (Hu & McCormick, 2012).

### 1.2. Conceptualizing students' attitudes towards higher education

Up to now, there are few studies explicitly assessing students' attitudes, that is, their current perception and evaluation of their university as an institution (Kuh, 1995; Smart, Kuh & Tierney, 1997). We address this research gap by defining the HEI as a first attitude object. Thus, it is assumed that students either favorably or unfavorably evaluate their HEI and that this evaluation ultimately influences their study behavior.

A critical review of the scholarly literature on HE reveals a) that the role of the institution for student learning has hardly already been of interest and b) that in fact attitudes implicitly play a major role in many of the various concepts concerned with learning and studying at HEIs. We will first take a closer look at the role of the HEI.

A first branch of research dealing with attitudes towards HEIs tackles the relationship of students and alumni towards their HEI (e.g. Gaier, 2005). Different authors investigate the satisfaction of alumni with their studies (e.g. Delaney, 2004; Hartman & Schmidt, 1995). For instance, Heckman and Guskey (1998) found that the alumni's satisfaction with their studies is related to actions taken after graduation (e.g. recommendation of the HEI, donation) (similar Tsao & Coll, 2004). Another vein of research looks at students' satisfaction with their past experiences at HEI, competence development or job situation after graduation (Martin, Milne-Home, Barrett, Spalding & Jones, 2000; Sung & Yang, 2009; Teichler & Kehm, 1995). In contrast, students' current relationship with their HEI has hardly been investigated. An exception is the study by Ghosh, Whipple, and Bryan (2001) who used the construct of trust to find out whether students trusted their HEI "to take appropriate steps that benefit him [the student] and help him achieve his learning and career objectives" (p. 325). They found that the perceived competence, friendliness, openness, honesty and integrity of the HEI were related to the students' trust.

In our study, students' attitude towards their HEI will be assessed by students' overall attitude towards the HEI, by their subjective norm, thus, the support they receive from family and friends for attending this particular HEI (Ajzen, 2002), and students' assessment of their HEI's goals.

The second attitude object is the students' own study process, referring to how students evaluate their own studying and learning. As mentioned above, attitudes have been included in different concepts concerning learning (Entwistle & Peterson, 2004). Thus, it seems appropriate to describe existing constructs with regard to their link to the actual studying in more depth.

The first concept with a link to studying is *conceptions of learning*. A common model by Edmunds and Richardson (2009), based on Säljö (1979) distinguishes between five different conceptions with three 'reproductive conceptions' and two 'reconstructive' conceptions of learning (Edmunds & Richardson, 2009; based on Säljö, 1979).

As a second concept, *learning orientations* are defined as "all those attitudes and aims which express the student's individual relationship with a course of study and the university" (Taylor, Morgan & Gibbs, 1981), directly referring to students' attitudes. These orientations are seen as "the collection of purposes which form the personal context for the individual student's learning" (Gibbs, Morgan & Taylor, 1984, p. 169). Four different types of learning orientations are distinguished: vocational, academic, personal, and social (Clark & Trow, 1966). With the notion of orientation, an active relationship of students with their studying is assumed; thus, success and failure concerns whether students fulfill their own aims (Beatty, Gibbs & Morgan, 1997). Similarly, Entwistle and Peterson (2004) state that "what students believe about learning overlaps with what they hope to achieve from being in higher education" (p. 412). This connection between students' attitudes/beliefs and their learning outcomes is in line with the Theory of Planned Behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), assuming that someone's attitude affects their behavior, mediated by one's intention.

*Students' approaches to learning* address how students grasp with different learning tasks. Three approaches are usually distinguished (Biggs, 1993): The deep approach refers to students analyzing learning content in order to develop new ideas and connecting them to pre-existing knowledge. This is presumed to lead to understanding and long-term memory. In contrast, with the surface approach, students focus on memorizing isolated facts. The strategic approach can be seen as a well-organized and adaptive surface approach where the students' main goal is to achieve good grades. As mentioned above, instruments assessing these approaches indeed include an attitude component as one implicit sub-construct. The instruments concerning SAL broadly encompass different aspects. For instance, the scale 'achieving orientation' in the Approaches to Studying Inventory includes the sub-constructs of 'strategic approach', 'disorganized study methods', 'negative attitudes towards studying' and 'achievement motivation' (Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981). Thus, the construct includes students' strategies for learning, their motivation and attitudes towards learning.

However, similar to other older instruments such as the Survey of Study Habits and Attitudes (Credé & Kuncel, 2008; Roark & Harrington, 1969), these conceptualisations of attitudes do not capture attitudes in the psychological sense. Accordingly, such instruments have not been specifically designed to address the multiple components of attitudes which will be discussed in the following section. This is due to the fact that the research traditions are rather distinct. As was shown, "SAL models focus on much larger grain size: its units of analysis are quite general [...]" (Heikkilä & Lonka, 2006, p. 104).

### 1.3. The multi-component model of attitudes

Attitude is defined by Eagly and Chaiken (1993) as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (p.1). Thus, attitudes are based on an evaluation and are always linked to a certain attitude object (Fazio, 2007). As mentioned above, relevant attitude objects for student learning in the context of HEIs include the HEI as an organization and the process of studying. They can also include attitudes towards certain individuals (e.g., lecturers), social groups (e.g., the administration, the management, or the other students), or certain subject matters.

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