



Investigating perceptions of the academic educational environment across six undergraduate health care courses in the United Kingdom



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ABSTRACT

Aim: To compare how health care professional students perceive their academic learning environment in one Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Method: The Dundee Ready Education Environment Measure (DREEM), a scale that measures students' perceptions of their academic classroom learning environments, and demographic items were completed by 673 undergraduate students enrolled in health professional courses at the University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom. Respondent scores, partitioned by demographic variables, were obtained on the total DREEM scale and on the individual sub-scales. Analysis of variance techniques were utilized to investigate associations between demographic variables on the total DREEM score and sub-scale scores.

Results: All students from all year levels reported total DREEM scores between 101 – 150, indicating a more positive than negative perception of their academic learning environments. Both profession and year of study were found to be significantly associated with total DREEM scores, with occupational therapists, physiotherapists and nurses scoring higher than operating department practice students; and first year students scoring higher than third year students. A significant interaction between these two factors was found to exist, indicating that the impact of the year of study does not apply equally over the different professional groups of students.

Conclusions: Students in this study reported positive perceptions about their academic classroom learning environments and teaching delivered. Further interrogation of the DREEM sub-scale dimensions at a programme/cohort level may offer course teams' further information to inform continuous quality improvement.

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Introduction

It has been argued that identifying, matching and understanding the range of health professional students' learning styles with classroom delivery of subject matter and learning strategies has the potential to enhance learning experience (Doolan and Honigsfeld, 2000). This paper presents and explores results of a study using the Dundee Ready Educational Environment Measure (DREEM).

The paper aims to identify factors that are associated with the academic learning environment and the perceptions of undergraduate health care students perceptions of the quality of teaching delivered.

Background

The maintenance and continued development of quality in higher education institutions (HEIs) is vital to allow students to transfer knowledge and skills learnt to their chosen profession upon qualification. In the United Kingdom (UK), the National Student Survey provides some information about students' perceptions of their overall higher education experience, and Institutional

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Review seeks to safeguard quality and standards of HEIs in England and Northern Ireland. Together they endeavour to make transparent students' experiences of higher education, and identify and offer solutions to public concerns about quality and standards in higher education quickly and efficiently (Quality Assurance Agency, 2011). Quality assurance is not indigenous to the UK: in the United States, the Department of Education's Accreditation and Quality Assurance ensures that education providers meet, and maintain, minimum standards of quality and integrity regarding academics, administration, and related services. Similarly, in Australia the Australian Higher Education Quality Assurance Framework (2000) maintains standards and quality in HEIs. In the UK, training for nursing, midwifery and allied health professions is funded on a contract basis by Local Training and Education Boards and are delivered by a range of universities. Students are able to evaluate their experience at universities through the national student survey, and university rankings are published annually.

University student demographics continue to change: in the UK, health care professional students are often more mature and pursue a career in health as a second career. The Royal College of Nursing (2008) undertook a survey of nursing students ($n = 4500$) across the UK and identified that 47% were over 30 years of age, including 19% who were over 40 years; and about two-thirds (65%) were in paid employment before starting their nursing course. Therefore these students will enroll on their chosen professional course expecting an academic environment that both supports their knowledge development and individual learning needs.

Student engagement with academic activities has been used as a tool to measure an institutions performance at fostering student learning (Huang and Fisher, 2011). Students' involvement in educational activities both inside and outside of the classroom have been identified as enlarging a student's capacity for continuous learning and development (Kuh, 2003). An effective educational environment should advance knowledge and social and economic progress (Watty, 2006). Brown et al. (2011) analysed DREEM scores from a sample of 548 Australian university undergraduate students enrolled on a range of health professional courses to explore their perceptions of the learning environment. The results in this study uncovered some key differences across student groupings; namely, that neither age nor gender were significantly associated with total DREEM score.

However, the study of Brown et al. did identify significant differences when comparing cohorts from different years of study and gender; finding females to score higher than males. Similarly, Al-Hazimi et al. (2004) identified that female medical students recorded higher total DREEM scores than males; whereas Khan et al. (2011) found that male students had higher total DREEM scores than females; a difference apparently explained by institutional bias toward male students.

Individual students learn in significantly different ways, as HEIs need to employ a range of teaching and learning strategies to encompass the various needs of the student including, problem-based learning, lectures, seminars, simulation, on-line learning activities and a range of assessment strategies. Identifying the most appropriate match of teaching and learning methods to the learning style needs of students has received research attention: Kift (2008) suggested that curricula design is critical for enhancing first year student engagement, success and retention, with student satisfaction being associated with a university's ability to identify and meet students' needs and expectations.

As such it is important that academic staff understand, and are able to adapt their teaching methods to suit numerous learning styles in order to maintain effective academic learning environments in classrooms.

Purpose and research questions

The overall aim of the study was to compare how health professional students view the academic learning environments.

The research questions used to inform the study were:

1. To investigate whether students' programme of study (discipline) affected their perception of the academic learning environment
2. To explore if gender affected the students perception of the academic learning environment
3. To explore if the age of the student affected their perception of the academic learning environment
4. To investigate if year of study affected students perception of the academic learning environment

Why is this study important?

It is essential to compare, explore and examine how students perceive the support for learning they receive during their professional courses. This will provide an understanding of how students learn, how they construct knowledge and how this influences future learning and skills acquisition. Examination of the academic learning environment will assist in the generation of data that can provide further insights into students learning needs, particularly in the context of curricula design. In the case of this study, we have interpreted the educational environment to encompass the students' perception of teaching styles adopted by lecturers; academic support for students and the environment itself, including library and information technology (IT) facilities.

Method

Participants

Using a convenience sampling approach, data was collected through completion of a survey package distributed to health professional students (nurses, midwives, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and operating department practitioners) at the University of Huddersfield, who had completed at least one practice placement during their programme of study. Prior to distribution, students were provided with an explanation of the study and an opportunity to ask questions, and a copy of a written information sheet outlining the research project. Students present when the pack was distributed were asked to sign to indicate informed consent.

Instrumentation

The DREEM questionnaire was developed at the University of Dundee, supported by an international Delphi panel, and designed to specifically measure medical and health care-related students' perceptions of their experience of the learning environment in which they undertook their education. The instrument has now been used worldwide to assess students' perceptions of the academic learning environment (i.e. classroom) across a number of undergraduate courses for health professionals (Roff et al., 1997, 2005). DREEM contains 50 statements designed to measure the quality of the educational environment of health professional programmes (university based learning); made up of five sub-scales:

1. Student perception of learning (SPL)(12 items)
2. Student perception of teachers (SPT) (11 items)

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