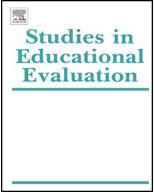




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Validation of a unit evaluation survey for capturing students' perceptions of teaching and learning: A comparison among Australian and Estonian higher education students

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ABSTRACT

This study reveals the results of validating and implementing a student evaluation survey called eVALUate into the Estonian higher education context for the purpose of benchmarking and determining those factors that help and hinder students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. A comparison of the responses from Estonian and Australian students indicated that the factors that least helped students in their achievement of the learning outcomes were: in the Estonian case, student engagement with their learning and in Australian case, feedback on students' work. These results help to evaluate current teaching and learning practices within an outcomes-based paradigm and provide a comparison for self-improvement for the purpose of transforming higher education.

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In the last decade the Bologna Process has been implemented in the European Higher Education sector leading to major reforms that aim to improve the sustainable quality of higher education by transforming programmes to be more transparent and comparable through outcome-based education (Attard, Di Ioio, Geven, & Santa, 2010; Sursock & Smidt, 2010). These reforms include the establishment of external and internal quality policies for measuring and comparing the overall quality of higher education institutions (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010). Such measures of quality include student evaluation surveys for capturing student feedback on their experiences. However, student evaluation surveys traditionally focus on the activities of the teacher. The adoption of outcome-based education has provided the impetus to reconsider current student evaluation surveys and to develop evaluation surveys that ask students their perceptions of what is helping or hindering their learning.

Student-centred learning in outcome-based education

One of the aims of the Bologna process is to ensure that greater emphasis has been placed on the student and their role in learning.

As a result, higher educational institutions, stakeholders and teachers are encouraged to place student learning at the centre of their goals (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Biggs & Tang, 2007; Lokhoff et al., 2010; Marsh, 2007; McKeachie, 2007). In doing so, the focus in higher education has shifted to student learning rather than teaching (Attard et al., 2010).

To evaluate student-centred approaches to learning within the outcomes-based education system, universities should focus on how students are learning rather than on asking students' perceptions of teaching quality (Barrie, 2000; Carey & Gregory, 2003; Huba & Freed, 2000). One of the widely recommended tools for determining student learning within student-focused education is learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are clear, observable statements created by academics, which are described from the perspective of what students should learn (Spady, 2001). According to Spady (2001), outcomes based education shapes the design and delivery of teaching and learning and the stated learning outcomes drive the course content and assessment structure. Teaching in an outcomes-based system necessitates the development of those aspects that are essential for learners to be able to demonstrate and to choose the strategies that support student learning and achievement of the intended learning outcomes (Rauhvargers, Deane, & Pauwels, 2009). Learning outcomes should be described in ways that support students in choosing flexible learning paths and result in their transparent achievement

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(Surssock & Smidt, 2010). Learning outcomes are the key feature to the implementation of student-centred learning. According to the Biggs and Tang (2007) theory of constructive alignment, the achievement of learning outcomes can be successful if the assessment, teaching strategies, and learning experiences are coherent and connected. Although the focus on student learning has permeated the higher education sector, little research has been published on those factors, which help or hinder students' achievement of outcomes resulting from their learning within outcomes-based education.

Student evaluation surveys

Internal quality measures have been developed to establish how successfully higher education institutions have transformed to student-centred approaches of learning through outcome-based education (Saarinen, 2005). A common internal measure of quality that has been traditionally used in higher education is student feedback collected in student evaluation of teaching (SET) surveys (Spooren, 2012). Students' feedback on teaching and their study experiences give stakeholders valuable information on the quality of teaching and learning and to improve the curriculum in order to better support the desired learning outcomes (Edström, 2008).

Student evaluations are used in almost every higher education institution throughout the world (Knapper, 2001; Marsh, 1987; Spooren, 2012; Zabaleta, 2007). Although there have been many changes in the sector, most student evaluation instruments focus on rating teachers and institutions use this data for institutional accountability, for determining tenure, promotions, and for improving teaching quality (Kember, Leung, & Kwan, 2002; Spooren, 2012). However, as student learning is the ultimate goal of higher education (Ramsden, 2003), particularly within a student-centred paradigm, there is a need to reconsider the appropriateness of current evaluation surveys which focus largely on teacher related activities.

Further, regulatory changes by the government, particularly in Australia have led universities to change their student evaluation systems and surveys so that students' experiences can be publicly reported across the sector (Barrie, Ginns, & Symons, 2008). Some Australian universities have adopted two surveys to collect student feedback: a unit survey and a separate teaching survey (Barrie et al., 2008; Shah & Nair, 2012). The separation of the teaching survey from the unit survey provides information about teaching quality for the purpose of scholarly teaching practice involving self-reflection, promotions, tenure and teaching awards. In contrast, unit surveys provide information about the student experience for the purpose of quality improvement (Tucker, 2013) and public accountability.

Since the implementation of outcome-based education, many institutions have continued to use pre-existing student evaluation surveys or have developed in-house unit and teaching surveys (Barrie et al., 2008; Woldeyohannes, 2012). The validity and fitness for purpose of such student evaluation surveys has been debated (Alderman, Towers, & Bannah, 2012; Barrie, 2000; Carey & Gregory, 2003; Huba & Freed, 2000; Spooren, 2012; Surssock & Smidt, 2010). The major concerns expressed by researchers relate to the validity of the survey items; many surveys are home grown lacking any psychometric testing and do not reflect the dimensions of teaching and learning within the new paradigm (Onwuegbuzie, Daniel, & Collins, 2009; Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013). The consistent implementation of valid surveys across the higher education sector will provide unique opportunities to benchmark teaching and learning practices and research new pedagogies in teaching and learning in a rapidly changing digital environment (Ernst & Young, 2012; Hajkowicz, Cook, & Littleboy, 2012; Johnson, Adams, & Cummins, 2012).

Student feedback on teaching only reveals one aspect of the learning and teaching process (Spooren, 2012). In learner-centred education the experiences that should be evaluated are the quality of learning outcomes and the process of learning (Denson, Loveday, & Dalton, 2010). Most recently, this learner centred focus has been embedded within student evaluation surveys (Oliver, Tucker, Gupta, & Yeo, 2008; Zerihun, Beishuizen, & Van Os, 2011). An extensive search in the literature, conducted in 2009, revealed that only one published and valid survey focusing on student learning was found (Oliver et al., 2008). This survey is currently used in four Australian universities. As the outcomes-based approaches are similar in Australia and Estonia and the student learning survey had already been embedded in an Australian university, an opportunity to research and benchmark results between two countries was made possible. A comparison of students' perceptions in different countries may provide insight into those factors that contribute to successful student learning.

A survey for evaluating student learning

The eVALUate unit survey is a validated mixed method survey tool for gathering and reporting students' perceptions of their learning experiences. The unit survey consists of 13 items where Items 1–7 report students' perceptions of what helps their achievement of learning outcomes; Items 8–10 ask students what they bring to the learning in terms of their motivation and engagement; and Item 11 asks students' about their overall satisfaction with the unit. The qualitative part of the instrument (Items 12 and 13) helps to determine students' perceptions through two open ended questions: 'what are the most helpful aspects of the unit' and 'how the unit might be improved' (Oliver et al., 2008). For the quantitative items (Items 1–11), students are asked their perceptions on a categorical scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree and unable to judge). Explanatory text is provided to each quantitative item. For example the explanation of the term learning outcomes is provided.

The survey is administered online through the student web portal. The survey is open for six weeks (including the two week examination period) and non-responders are sent weekly emails encouraging them to give feedback. A full description of how the system works is described in Tucker (2013).

The Estonian context

Higher education in Estonian has changed as a result of the reforms conducted through the Bologna process. A new quality agency (named the Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency) has been formed and since 2009 outcome-based education has been compulsory. Within Estonia, every higher education institution must develop and implement internal evaluation surveys for the purpose of quality enhancement (EKKA Quality Assessment Council, 2012). Whilst most surveys are administered online, they vary in length, question types, formats, aims, design and so on. An analysis of the unit (also called subject) evaluation surveys from a single large university conducted in 2010 revealed that no survey provided feedback on the students' achievement of the intended learning outcomes (Kumpas & Õunapuu, 2011). Examples of items typically used in unit surveys are:

- (1) In my opinion the teacher was competent to teach this unit;
- (2) The teacher kept the promised deadlines during this unit; and
- (3) In my opinion the teacher was prepared well for every teaching unit (Kumpas & Õunapuu, 2011).

Within Estonia, each bachelor degree is 3 years in duration totalling 180 European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Programmes

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