Statement – Concerns and recommendations on the use of student satisfaction in measuring teaching quality

Recognition and rewarding of teaching receive increasing attention in academia. Unfortunately, in some countries more than others, this has led to an increased or continued use of surveys that aim at collecting student satisfaction. There is a pressing need to improve ways in which university teachers* and especially quality of teaching, are evaluated.[1] In this statement, the League of European Research Universities (LERU) wishes to contribute to this need by analysing the (mis)use of student surveys focusing on satisfaction and by proposing a set of recommendations to improve student feedback as one of the evaluation measures, among others, for high quality teaching.

Concerns regarding student satisfaction surveys

There is increasing pressure to enhance the quality of education at universities and to improve ways to evaluate it. Due to the complexity and the systemic characteristics of education, there is a need to consider quality from a variety of perspectives and in the light of versatile evidence. Frequently, student feedback indicating their satisfaction of teaching is still used as the main evidence of the quality of education at universities.[2] This statement wants to warn against this common practice.

To improve the learning experience at universities, students' voice should be heard. Their feedback regarding their experiences with the teaching-learning environment in a specific context is important. However, the questions asked to students should not focus on the teacher and should not seek to evaluate mere 'satisfaction'. When developing surveys for student evaluation, it is critical to take into account that student feedback can have some well-documented deficiencies, if not solicited carefully: a) the data are biased, among other for gender, ethnicity and age; [3] b) they are subjective and reflect more student learning processes and experiences than the quality of teaching; [4] c) they may not focus on the intended learning outcomes; [5] d) they tend to be more negative when the course contents are challenging; [6] e) they are usually limited to separate elements (mostly courses) and do not focus on a wider learning experience such as a study programme [7] [8]. For these reasons, despite their importance in collecting feedback from the perspective of the students as important stakeholders, these surveys should not be the only perspective to be taken into account when evaluating quality of education or for measurement of teaching.

Next to this, there is strong empirical evidence that students' satisfaction of teaching is intertwined with their personal study goals, nature of motivation to studying, learning strategies, study practices and their study skills. Evidence shows that the students who aim at deepening their

*In this statement the concept "teacher" refers to university teachers in general, because in each country different concepts are used.

understanding and who reflect upon their learning and critically assess the study content, evaluate their teaching-learning environment (including the satisfaction of teaching) significantly more positively than the students who aim at passing exams and earning a degree and who rely more on memorisation and apply unreflective study practices.

So, universities and/or their legislative authorities need to be careful when developing instruments to collect student feedback, especially when including questions on 'satisfaction'. Awareness is needed that these also measure student-related factors such as their personal goals, preference and skills. The instruments that are used, need to allow separating and analysing the student-related goals from the evidence.

Recognising different ways of evaluating teachers and teaching

Instead of relying primarily on student satisfaction surveys when quality of education is being evaluated, one should focus on different components of teaching and learning. Crucial aspects in evaluating quality of teaching are constructive alignment of teaching, learning-focused approach in teaching, assessment enhancing student learning, students' ability to deeper learning processes (search for evidence, relating ideas, critical thinking), students' self- and co-regulation skills, and their learning outcomes. Next to cognitive learning outcomes, socialisation and personal developments are of crucial importance for academic education. Evaluation of these components requires collecting a variety of perspectives and evidence, including measurement of short- and long-term learning outcomes, and perspectives from other stakeholders such as academic peers and society. Students as primary stakeholders should definitely be heard. It is important to receive feedback on how students experience the teaching-learning environment, as well as giving students feedback on their own learning processes in order to support these optimally. It is also important to focus broadly on the quality elements of the learning environment and not only students' personal preferences and satisfaction as such.

However, there are arguments to be even more cautious in the use of satisfaction data when evaluating the quality of teaching. Although teaching quality is an important indicator for quality of university instruction,[9] the equation cannot simply be reversed. Many other, often systemic, factors influence quality of university instruction. Pedagogical leadership of degree programmes, quality and constructive alignment of curricula in degree programmes, systematic development of curricula, teachers' pedagogical skills as well as resources and equipment for organising learning-focused teaching contribute to high quality teaching. In addition, teaching consists of a wide number of tasks. Careful planning of courses, choices concerning the content, as well as the teaching and assessment methods are aspects of teaching that translate relatively directly into quality of instruction and student learning[10]. Also, scholarship of teaching and learning, educational leadership and professional development are of crucial importance for quality of higher education teacher.[11] Yet these tasks translate only indirectly, and over longer periods of time, into quality of university instruction and teaching. Quality of teaching is a team effort. Many factors enable or hinder quality teaching in a university. Therefore, the evaluation of education should focus on the full teaching-learning environment instead of on single teachers. The evaluation should be systemic and cover course, degree programme, and institutional levels.

We propose the following principles when evaluating the quality of education c/q teachers at university:

Recommendations

1. Use versatile evidence from multiple sources to evaluate quality of education at universities. Student satisfaction is unfortunately frequently used as a means to reward, rank and penalise individual teachers, departments or institutions which is – in the light of the complexity of the quality of teaching – a too narrow approach. Such focus on student satisfaction may have counterproductive and even harmful consequences for individual teachers, scholarly community and systematic institutional development of teaching.

2. Continue student evaluations but extend these beyond student satisfaction to include feedback on the teaching-learning-environment and the students' own learning processes. These data can be used by the teaching team to develop the education and by both teachers and students themselves to support their learning processes.

3. Evaluate students' perceptions of different elements of the teaching-learning environment, not how satisfied they were about the teacher and teaching. It is important to ask students feedback on the teaching they have received, but satisfaction in itself cannot be used as the measure of quality of instruction and teaching.

4. Take students' motivation and engagement, their learning strategies, study practices and the quality of their learning outcomes into account when analysing students' perceptions of their teaching-learning environment.

5. Link students' perceptions with teachers' evaluations of their teaching and their students' learning. Developing teachers' pedagogical skills is important to ensure the quality of teaching.

6. Use a variety of feedback measures and sources of evidence in addition to student satisfaction when you evaluate quality of teaching.

7. To improve education do not focus on evaluation of teachers, but instead on evaluating quality of teaching systemically. Collect a variety of empirical evidence and feedback from different sources, such as teachers' experiences and external stakeholder feedback and focus group interviews, in order to be able to identify the strengths and the areas of development. The evidence should be systemic and collected from course, programme and institutional levels, and it should be utilised for the purposes of the development of teaching and learning.

8. Ask for programme directors' and teachers' reflections and justifications related to their programmes and teaching, as guidance when interpreting student satisfaction and other evaluation data.

9. Evaluate, using different methods, both institutional structures, characteristics of curricula, resources and pedagogical support that the university provides both for individual teachers and

faculties. Take all these factors (or lack of thereof) into account as factors contributing to the quality of teaching and learning.

10. Evaluate quality of education in relation to the quality of both short and long-term learning outcomes of students. Make sure that the scholarly community has a shared language on what is quality teaching and learning.

11. Consider the quality of teaching from a variety of perspectives and in the light of versatile evidence. Discuss the relation between quality teaching and quality learning. Engage the whole scholarly community in the discussion concerning the quality of teaching and learning as well as developments related to it.

Examples of items for students feedback in line with these recommendations can be found in the annex.

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Annex

Example items to measure quality of education and student learning

Below is a list of example items which can be used to measure the quality of education and student learning at a university. These items that can be used in enhancing teaching and learning at either course- or study-programme level.

Example items on quality of education

- I can see how the work (assignments etc.) carried out (in this course) fit in with what we are supposed to learn.
- I find most of what I learned in this course/ in this study programme really interesting.
- I can generally work comfortably with other students in this course/ in this study programme.
- I perceive peer learning and support utilised during the course highly beneficial for my own learning.
- The feedback given in this course/ from the teachers on my work helps me to improve my ways of learning and studying.

Example items on quality of learning

- I was encouraged to set my own learning goals to be achieved during the course.
- In this course/ When I am studying I summarize what I've learned after I finish
- In this course/ When I am studying I find myself using helpful learning strategies automatically.
- On the whole, (in this course) I've been systematic and organised in my studying.
- Much of what I've learned seems no more than unrelated bits and pieces.
- I look at evidence carefully to reach my own conclusion about what I'm studying.
- I'm certain I can learn well the skills and knowledge required in this course.
- I feel overwhelmed by the work related to this course/ to my studying.

The items a university choses to use in a student survey, should reflect the university's understanding of good learning and teaching and the strategic goals set for teaching and learning at the university. They should also be formulated so that they emphasise students' active role in the learning and teaching process.

The use of the results from student surveys to enhance the quality of learning and teaching

When analysing the results from a student survey featuring, for instance, the items above, it is important to focus on variation in students' answers, not just on the mean scores. Variation in students' answers capture different experiences of the teaching-learning environment and give important information to universities on how to support students, taking different perceptions and experiences into account.

The selected items should focus on the quality of learning and teaching. It is important to discuss the results together with the teachers and students and create interpretations of the results. Analysing the results together, enable students to see their own experiences and perceptions against the group-level perspective. In case it is possible to collect longitudinal data collected from the students in different study years, universities can also reflect on the course of the development. All these practices help students to reflect on their own learning and experiences of teaching from a broader perspective.

It is important to realise that feedback is always contextual and situational. To support teaching and learning effectively, the feedback should be discussed and utilised as soon as possible among the students and teachers.

The feedback should be systemically analysed on both degree-programme level, faculty level and university level. The meaning of the results should collectively be reflected on in board of directors' meetings and data sets collected from different years and from various degree programmes should be compared. This could allow the identification of foci of development based on the feedback. It is important to also decide on actions with which you aim at improving the quality of teaching and learning on the programme, faculty and university level. Students should be encouraged to join the discussions and present their suggestions. Reporting continuously to students on how their feedback has been taken into account when enhancing the quality of learning and teaching is crucial.

Important: Student data should always be analysed and utilised at a group level and anonymously. Although data would be gathered with identification information and, for example, in relation to student academic achievement (e.g. credits and grade points), the analyses should be done in a group level. Specific software or trained staff might be needed for such analyses, to ensure the anonymous interpretation of the results.