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RESEARCH NOTE

The Ramsden Course Experience Questionnaire: A Pilot Study of Final-Year Students Taking Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism Degree Courses

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Abstract

This research note outlines a pilot study which was undertaken to test the viability of implementing a national survey of the quality of the student experience of teaching and learning within hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism programmes. The research utilised the Ramsden (1991) Course Experience Questionnaire, which has been used extensively in Australia. Indications of the initial findings are given. These show that overall, students recognise and appreciate the skills development they have achieved during their study, the teaching they have received and the content of their courses. Students feel that the primary aspect which could be improved relates to communication, including timely feedback on their work, more information about what is expected of them, and more time with tutors.

Keywords: student experience, evaluation, learning and teaching

Introduction

Student feedback plays a vital role in the review, development and evaluation of Higher Education (HE) course provision. Under the planned changes to Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) inspection procedures, it is likely that student feedback will also play a more central role in the evaluation of academic programmes (Baty, 2001). Currently, the majority of evaluation undertaken focuses on the assessment of individual teachers and course units. However, where it is sought to establish, maintain and improve overall teaching quality and student experience, it could be argued that an appropriate focus of evaluation is an entire programme of study rather individual units of study (Richardson, 1994).

This paper reports on the methodology adopted to undertake a pilot study conducted with final year students during the summer of 2001. It was designed to test the appropriateness of assessing student perception regarding the quality of their teaching and learning experience in hospitality, leisure, sport

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and tourism. The survey was done on a national basis with final year students on completion of their course.

The approach used in the present study was to adapt and implement The 'Ramsden Course Experience Questionnaire' (CEQ). The CEQ was designed by Ramsden to be a performance indicator of student satisfaction at the University of Sydney (Ramsden, 1991). The aim of the CEQ is to evaluate the experience of students over a whole programme of study, rather than an individual module/unit. It is considered suitable to economically measure differences between different organisational units, such as departments or faculties, in terms of perceived teaching quality (Ramsden, 1991).

For the pilot study, it was decided to use the CEQ from the University of Sydney. This included questions which related to the quality of teaching and learning, and student support and administrative services. Some minor changes were made to the section regarding student support and administrative services to better suit the average HE institution in the UK, but the section on teaching and learning was kept intact. The version used for the pilot study is no longer available (<http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/sceq/2000/sceq.cfm>). However, the questionnaire which is currently in use in Australia can be found at <http://www.itl.usyd.edu.au/CEQ/usydquestionnaire0401.pdf>. The CEQ now forms part of the Graduate Careers Council of Australia survey and is used as an indicator of the quality of learning and teaching within Australian degree programmes. The survey is mailed to all Australian graduates following successful completion of higher education study.

The questionnaire survey and analysis method

In order to test the applicability of the CEQ within a UK context and if appropriate, to inform the development of a methodology to enable the provision of a facility for the survey across HE institutions teaching hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism, the pilot study was undertaken with six institutions and 25 courses. This was considered sufficient to test the applicability of the questions for UK implementation, to provide representative information on the population from which it was drawn, and to generate sufficient data to enable the testing of the method of analysis.

The introduction to the CEQ explained the aim of the survey and ensured respondents that the confidentiality of their response to the survey was assured. Students were also asked to indicate their degree course and whether they were male or female. The CEQ has 56 statements/questions. In the first section there are 31 statements on teaching and learning, referring to positive and negative aspects of the course. Students are asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statements along a five-point scale. Responses to statements 1 to 30 were grouped into six categories; Academic Environment, Teaching, Skills Development, Appropriate Assessment, Appropriate Workload, and Clear Goals & Standards. Statement 31 then asks for a rating of the overall quality of the degree course. Following this there are two open-ended questions asking students to identify the good aspects of the course and suggestions for improvement. The second section was amended to reflect UK university departments and included questions relating to 20 services that may be provided by the university or the department. Students were asked if they had used the service and if they had, to indicate their rating of the quality of the service. Following this they were asked to indicate the degree of their overall satisfaction with the support and administration service and to add any positive comments about the service, or aspects that could be improved.

The CEQ takes about ten to 15 minutes to complete (including the section on student support and administration services). It was mainly distributed during lectures/seminars which resulted in a fairly high response rate. If it was not possible to complete the questionnaire in the time available, then students were asked to submit their responses to the department office. The total number of requested questionnaires was 1100. With 634 returned usable questionnaires the response rate was 58 per cent. This represented the following subject provision:

- Hospitality (eight courses)
- Sports related (six courses)
- Leisure Management/Recreation (three courses)
- Tourism Management (three courses)

- Joint subject courses – Hospitality/Tourism (one course) Tourism/Leisure (two course) Leisure/Sport (two courses)

The HE institutions that participated in the study were:

- Bournemouth University
- Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education (now University of Gloucestershire)
- Oxford Brookes University
- Sheffield Hallam University
- University of Ulster
- University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

SPSS was used to undertake quantitative analysis of the responses to statements 1 to 31 and Microsoft Excel to tabulate analysis of the two open-ended questions. The qualitative analysis of the responses to the two open-ended questions was complex due to the number of themes which emerged from the data. As a result the recorded responses were, as far as possible, grouped into categories for analysis. By using these two different approaches to measuring student satisfaction, it was hoped to give a more thorough picture than would have been possible from only one form of analysis. To date, confidential reports have been returned to participating institutions, detailing the responses made by the students from their institution, and an indication of the responses in comparison to the overall responses.

Initial results and future activity

The results of the quantitative analysis of the learning and teaching statements 1 to 30 show that there is commonality regarding students' views of their teaching and learning experience across the four subject areas. Table 1 shows the means for the six categories selected for the quantitative analysis, together with their ranking.

	Academic Environment		Teaching		Skills Development		Appropriate Assessment		Appropriate Workload		Clear Goals & Standards	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Hospitality	3.4	5	3.3	4	3.8	6	3.2	3	2.9	1	3.1	2
Leisure	3.3	4	3.3	4	3.8	6	3.3	4	3.0	1	3.1	2
Sport	3.3	5	3.2	3.5	3.9	6	3.2	3.5	2.9	1	3.1	2
Tourism	3.4	5	3.3	3.5	3.9	6	3.3	3.5	2.9	1	3.1	2

Table 1: Mean and Rank of the six categories of statement included in the CEQ

The table shows that overall students rank most highly their satisfaction with the Skills Development aspect within their programme, this is followed by the Academic Environment, and Teaching and Appropriate Assessment. The students rank Clear Goals and Standards and Appropriate Workload respectively as least satisfactory. To find out how the ranking of each category varied across the subject areas, a 'Friedman Analysis of Ranks' test was carried out (data was merged to form a single sample rather than examined by subject area). The result is a $\chi^2 = 18.71$, $p < .05$ which indicates that there were significant differences between category scores which¹ the results of the post-hoc test² confirm are significant differences, between Skills Development and Appropriate Workload/Clear Goals & Standards.

¹ Test results are reported at the 5% of significance level and, where appropriate, together with the corresponding p-value.

² The results of the post-hoc tests are based upon Student-Newman-Keul test.

The results of the qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions show that students from all four subject areas have many opinions in common regarding both the Best Aspects of the course and Aspects for Improvement. The Best Aspects of the courses, in the opinion of the students, were as follows:

- Course Content is the most popular aspect for all four subject areas with ‘content related to industry/ workplace/ the real world’, ‘variety and range of modules’, and ‘content of specific module/ unit’ being the most predominant features.
- Teaching Methods and Skills, were ranked second, with ‘personal development/ learning various skills’, and ‘group work’ being the most popular aspects. Hospitality and Sport students also enjoyed ‘the interesting mix of assessment’.
- Staff, who were characterised as ‘knowledgeable/effective or helpful/approachable,’ or the Work Placement, where students ‘gained valuable industry experience,’ were ranked third or fourth (Sport students did not mention work placement).

In ‘Aspects to be Improved’ there was less consistency than for ‘Best Aspects’. According to the respondents from all four subject areas, the areas most in need of improvement are:

- Communication: students want ‘clearer information about what is expected from students’, ‘more time with lecturers and tutors’, ‘more timely and useful feedback’, and ‘improved communication between staff and students’.
- Course Content: students want ‘more modules/units to choose from’, and ‘more practical/ work related modules/ units’.
- Course Delivery: students want improved ‘group work’, and ‘lectures/ lecturers’.
- Facilities and Resources: students want ‘improved learning resources’.
- Workload: students claim it is ‘too concentrated’.

The findings of the pilot study indicate that there are; considerable strengths of provision within the hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism subject areas, aspects that require further investigation, and both commonalities and differences within the subjects. A more detailed account of the findings is currently being written up and will be published shortly. This will give a more detailed evaluation of the statistical quantitative analysis and qualitative responses for the four individual subject areas in conjunction with further evaluation of the overall results.

Plans are now underway to launch a scheme which will enable wider participation in the survey during the current academic year. The CEQ will focus only on the student experience of learning and teaching, and will be offered to students either via a website with restricted access to participating institutions or using paper questionnaires. In order to facilitate the survey, it has been agreed that an external service will be used to administer the process and analyse the responses. Following completion of the survey, confidential summary reports will be mailed to the individual institutions. It is hoped that this will provide an overview of student perceptions within the hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism subject areas concerning their experience of learning and teaching. Although this will be of interest, the main value and purpose of the survey will be the use of the results in the longer term. Useful time series data, will indicate significant changes and patterns over a period of time within a particular course/subject area, as well as overall results for the four subject areas (Wilson, Lizzio and Ramsden, 1997).

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