

How to make the most out of national evaluation data to improve the first-year experience.

Ellen P.W.A. Jansen & Cor J.M. Suhre, University Centre for Learning and Teaching,
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

Low rankings in national student satisfaction surveys often lead course managers to adopt defensive reactions such as expressing doubts about the accuracy of figures and the soundness of research methodologies. In this contribution we show how a department used the less favourable outcomes to start a process of course redesign. Based on the national survey, a follow-up survey was conducted and focus group interviews with students as well as teachers were held. This led to a first clarification of the less favourable results. This clarification was presented during a mini conference, which was proclaimed as the starting point for a serious curriculum re-design. This approach guaranteed an active involvement an engagement of teachers, students, and management.

Introduction

In several countries information about student satisfaction or the student experience in higher education is obtained by means of national surveys. In the United States the NSSE (NSSE, 2008) is widely used, in the United Kingdom the National Student Survey (www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss) is a part of the quality assurance framework, and in Australia and New Zealand the Course Experience Questionnaire (GCA & ACER, 2006) and the AUSSE (ACER, 2007) are common instruments to assess student perceptions of the quality of higher education. Until recently in the Netherlands, however, only more ‘commercial’ national surveys are available, which provide data for prospective students on quality aspects of Dutch Higher Education (www.choi.nl; www.elsevier.nl/web/Weekblad/De-beste-studies-2008.htm). The natural reaction of stakeholders tends to be defensive. Instead of using the data as a starting point for the quality enhancement process, the quality of the data, the survey instruments and the methodology used are questioned. Prosser (2005) and Harvey (2008) argue that data from student satisfaction surveys should preferably not be used for league tables or rankings. However, this is the case in the Netherlands and for one of the programmes at our university the low ranking was used as an impetus for a research in order to get insight if the low scores on the different aspects of the national survey indeed reflected the student experience. In this paper we report mainly on the part of the research that goes more deeply in the first-year experience and how it will be used to redesign the first-year curriculum.

Site

The University of Groningen is the second oldest research-intensive university of the Netherlands. It comprises nine faculties, among which the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences. One of departments in this faculty is the Department of Pedagogy & Educational Sciences that offers degree programmes that focus on education, professional assistance for education, and didactical methods for children and adults. The bachelor programme had in

2009 an influx of 248 students, mean age 18.8 year, 94 % female. The programme had the lowest overall ranking of the 6 bachelor programmes in the Netherlands, although the ranking scores on the different subjects differed.

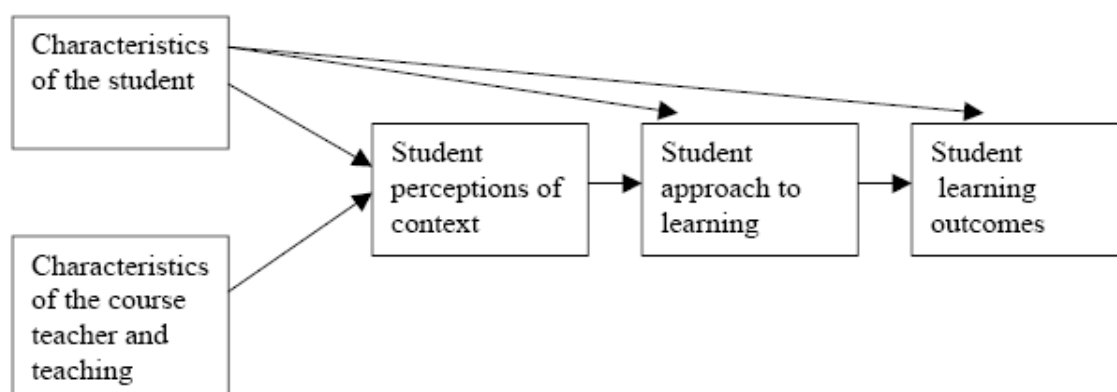
The national survey focuses general qualities of degree programmes and on the quality of teaching and learning. Students are invited to fill in Likert type rating scales that correspond with ten aspects belonging to either one of both topics. Students' scale scores are subsequently totalled to a sum score. The ten topics in the national survey are: learning content, room for electives, coherence of the programme, teaching methods, professional preparation, teacher qualities, communication, organisation, facilities, and buildings. The department under study scored low on teaching methods, electives, professional preparation, content, and teachers. For the facilities and buildings the department had the highest scores in comparison with the other departments in the Netherlands.

Research questions

- Do the results from the national survey reflect the student experience in our programme?
- Which other data on the student experience can clarify the results from the national data as well our own data and what data are needed to get tools for improvement?
- What can we do to enhance the student experience (and hopefully get better scores in the national rankings)?

Theoretical background

Starting from Biggs' 3P-model (Biggs, 1989) Prosser and Trigwell (1999) developed a model in which they clarified which kind of feedback a department needs to work effectively at the quality enhancement of the degree programme. Students' characteristics, students' perceptions of the learning environment and the types of assessment as well as students' approaches to learning will determine to a great extent students' learning outcomes.



Prosser & Trigwell (1999)

Ramsden (2003) argues that five issues need to be addressed in order to improve the university teaching practice: goals and structure, teaching strategies, assessment, evaluation, and, accountability and educational development. The first three issues mentioned are

extremely important in enhancing the student experience because those imply the necessity to clarity to students the goals and standards, why a specific approach to learning is desired and how this will contribute to their skills and knowledge development.

Method

We conducted this research in three stages. The first stage was used to validation of the national survey results and to obtain additional data on Ramsdens' five issues. In this first stage for every year of the programme students were asked to fill out a survey. The questionnaire was administered at lectures where we expected to approach a great part of the student body. In this questionnaire we addressed the same topics on which the programme had low scores in the national survey, added with questions about students' expectations about the course before enrolment, orientation within the programme on specialisation and profession, the quality of the course, generic skills acquisition, and wishes on teaching and learning. Parts of the Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991; Wilson, Lizzio & Ramsden, 1997) were incorporated in this survey.

The second stage consisted of focus group interviews with students and teachers separately. The results from the survey were used as a starting point for the discussion. The focus groups were meant to get more insight in the concerns of students that might be related to underlying reasons of the low ranking and to discuss with the students strong and weak points of the programme. The focus groups were held under guidance of one of the researchers with assistance of junior researchers for the reports. The interviews were voice recorded.

In the third stage we organised a mini-conference with teachers, students and management to discuss the results and to formulate the subject that need to be addressed in the following quality improvement process.

Results

Survey

To answer the first research question: yes, the data derived from the national survey are confirmed by our survey results. First-year students were a bit more positive than second and third year bachelor students, but the overall tendency from the national data was supported by our research. From our survey we could conclude:

- Information for prospective students paid too little attention to the desired approach to learning.
- Students did not get enough information about choices they have to make in the second and third year of the degree programme. The orientation function of the first year was insufficient.
- For students it was not clear which goals and standards were aimed at.
- There were no problems with the difficulty of the content and students acquired enough generic skills except problem-solving skills.
- Students like to have more tutorials/ practicals with other students who really want to study hard and who are actively involved in assignments.
- Most important wish is to get more practical assignments to get insights in the practical use of what they have learned during classes.

Focus groups

In contrast with the relatively low scores on content in the surveys, first-year students indicate in the focus group that their expectations about the programme content wise were met. However, they evaluate the difficulty of the programme as rather low and they miss challenges to go deeper into the subjects. They expressed also a need that teachers should deal with more practical assignments related to the course materials that had to be studied. Students demand challenges by assignments in order to process the information in a deeper way.

A lot of critique by the students concerned the organisation of the programme, the test and assessment techniques and procedures and the communication between students and teachers. Students declared that there was a lot of overlap between subjects on the one hand, and on the other hand there were subjects that should be attuned, but were not. Most course units were evaluated by means of multiple choice examinations, which students felt was an insufficient instrument for mastery of knowledge and skills of which they felt they would need in their future careers. Students also criticized the quality of the test items and the lack of transparency concerning grading and pass-fail decisions. The mentoring system for first-year students was valued, although questions were asked about the aim and goals of the system. The quality of the mentor seemed to differ considerable between the mentor groups. Preparation for and information of the profession is realised by guest lecturers. Students, however, are unhappy with these lectures and feel uneasy, because they do not grasp the purpose of those lectures.. Students also indicate that the content of the lectures is severely biased. They feel that too much attention is given to the provision of services and interventions for children with physical and mental disabilities and too little for the more general pedagogical profession or the educational scientist profession.

The focus group with the teachers revealed that teachers also perceived weaknesses in the degree programme organisation and in the communication with students. They especially experienced a lack of guiding principles and a concept or theme to interconnect course units. If they do not know what the programme is aiming at, how could they inform there students and more seriously, how can they construct themselves a coherent programme? The problems with the mentoring system students mentioned was known and they already started some changes in the system.

The teachers indicated that they would prefer more peer consultation in order to be able to better align assessments and evaluations. They also expressed that they preferred a somewhat more active course design in which they could offer students more assignments provide feedback in order to improve mastery of both research and basic professional skills. They felt the problem that in a university context research is higher valued than teaching and it is almost impossible to make a career in teaching.

Mini-conference

The mini-conference was organized to present teachers, students and education managers a coherent view on shared concerns and to start an education improvement track. In the mini-conference in which teachers, students, and management participated, seven groups worked on a specific topic. The topics addressed were the underlying educational concept, academic level and challenging students, communication, assignments and feedback, variation in teaching methods, professional preparation, and engagement of students and teachers. Each group discussed the topic and presented the results of the discussion and possible solutions in

a plenary. These themes will be elaborated on in a few task forces to redesign the complete bachelor degree curriculum.

Conclusions

The student voice in the national surveys should not be disregarded nor discarded! There is no reason for ignoring those results or to react defensive. On the contrary, use those results as a starting point for a broader evaluation and as a tool to enhance students' and teachers' engagement in the quality improvement process. Such an approach is in line with the point 4 and 5, Ramsden (2003) mentioned: evaluation and accountability and educational development. Make the most out of the data that are available!

Session plan

Introduction (5 mins): explaining the Dutch context and general problem

Group discussion (5 mins): looking for comparable experiences

Presenters (10 mins): presentation of our project, resulting in questions for the audience

General discussion (10 mins): sharing experiences and solutions

References

- ACER (2007) *AUSSE 2007 development and methodology*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Biggs, J. B. (1989). Approaches to the enhancement of tertiary teaching. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 8, 17-25.
- GCA & ACER (2006) *Graduate Course Experience 2006: The report of the Course Experience Questionnaire*. Melbourne: Graduate Careers Australia and Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Harvey, L. (2008): Rankings of higher education institutions: a critical review. *Quality in higher education*, 14, 187 – 207.
- NSSE (2008): *Promoting engagement for all students: the imperative to look within*. nsse.iub.edu/NSSE_2008_Results/docs/withhold/NSSE2008_Results_revised_11-14-2008.pdf.
- Prosser, M. & Trigwell, K. (1999) *Understanding Learning and Teaching: The experience in higher education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Ramsden, P. (1991) A performance indicator of teaching quality in higher education: The Course Experience Questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education*, 16, 2, 129-150.
- Ramsden, P. (2003) *Learning to teach in higher education*. Second edition. London, RoutledgeFalmer.
- Wilson, K.L., Lizzio A., and Ramsden, P. (1997) The development, validation and application of the Course Experience Questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education*, 22, 1, 33-53.