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What do students want from teaching and learning in Higher Education?

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Initiatives such as the National Student Survey and Teaching Excellent framework highlight the importance of student satisfaction in Higher Education bit without exploring specific teaching practices. This mixed-methods study explored which technology-agnostic teaching and learning practices are valued by students. Students were surveyed on a variety of learning outcomes and teaching practices and 22 students were subsequently interviewed to explore attitudes further. The survey identified that transferable skills were the least supported learning outcomes, although interviewees appreciated the need to demonstrate transferable skills when applying for graduate roles. Among teaching practices, participants valued activities that help them grasp the taught material and meet assessment requirements. Finally, students felt they had become better learners, despite being ambivalent towards practices that may enable them to become better learners. The presentation will elaborate further on students' sometimes contradictory opinions.

Full paper

The last decade has witnessed various attempts to define teaching excellence, especially with respect to the National Student Survey[1] and Teaching Excellence Framework[2], for example by interviewing academics[3,4] or interrogating students' teaching award nominations[5]. However, little attention has been paid to the actual practices that take place while teaching and learning. This mixed-methods study explored which technology-agnostic teaching and learning practices are valued by students, and why.

We conducted a series of surveys and interviews designed to elicit student opinion on programme learning outcomes and broad opinions on teaching and learning practices in HE. Surveys were conducted during the 2020-21 academic year, utilising Likert-type scales to elicit a total of 178 online responses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 students; half were conducted by an academic in 2021-22 and half were conducted by a student researcher in 2022-23, following the same question schedule. Interview transcripts were analysed by thematic analysis. Participants were students on Biomedical and Biological Sciences programmes, across three years of undergraduate study, although first years were excluded from interview participation. The research was approved by the institution's Research Ethics Committee.

We found that, out of 15 programme learning outcomes, students had a stronger preference for developing discipline-specific skills rather than transferable skills. For example, 88% strongly agreed they should learn how to reference scientific papers, while only 29% strongly agreed they should learn

to “negotiate with [their] peers and overcome conflict” and less than half (47%) wanted to learn to manage their time effectively. Conversely, when interview participants were asked what employers would look for when students applied for graduate roles, most mentioned transferable skills such as teamwork and time management:

“every time I applied for some placements, they were looking for teamwork … problem solving a lot, probably just some organisation skills, some time management, self-motivation, this sort of things.” (Second year, Biology)

In terms of teaching practices, interview participants primarily valued activities that help them grasp the taught material and meet assessment requirements. Specifically, students value seeing lecturers “think aloud”, i.e. verbalising their thinking as they work through a problem:

“I did find it very helpful because I think it shows a methodological approach to things. And it … also shows that there are multiple ways to view the same thing or multiple ways to approach something” (Third year, Biomedical Sciences)

Similarly, participants appreciated skill development sessions, such as those where they learned how to read a scientific paper, write a report, or identify key information.

“Checklists” were popular with both survey respondents (62% strongly agreed with their usefulness) and interviewees:

“I feel like that helps because those who do go through the checklist, it just gives you that feeling that ‘I can solve it myself’.” (Second year, Biomedical Sciences)

Interviewees valued staff breaking down topics in lectures and explaining material:

“I think good teaching would [be] where, like, the topic is broken down into simpler terms in a way that a student understands it.” (Third year, Biomedical Sciences)

Interviewees appreciated the opportunity to ask questions in lectures, which they cannot do while reading the recommended textbook; this may explain why 50% of survey respondents agreed that it is useful to have lecturers “explaining material which can be easily found in a textbook”.

Almost all interviewees agreed that they had become better learners while at university, as evidenced by their independence and efficiency in studying, and a tendency to engage with their subject in a less superficial way.

“I would say that I am a better learner. It's definitely given me the ability to think independently and it has given me the base knowledge that I need to grasp and tackle concepts that are more complex … [I] have the ability to think critically and to actually engage with the content beyond memory, memorization, and basic recall.” (Third year, Biomedical Sciences)

Despite this, students showed little interest in engaging with some practices that may enable them to be better learners. For example, 30% of survey respondents never wanted to engage with self-assessment and 22% disagreed that it was valuable to be asked how confident they are in their work:

"I can't see what added benefit it would bring" (Second year, Biomedical Sciences)

This study explored student opinion on a broad range of technology-agnostic teaching practices. Whilst student opinion is only one element of evaluating teaching and learning approaches, the results can help inform decision making and have implications for increasing student satisfaction with teaching in HE, potentially impacting NSS and TEF results.

References

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