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ASSESSMENT METHODS IN HIGHER EDUCATION. A STUDY FOR ROMANIA AND BULGARIA

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Abstract

We all know that the assessment of student performance represents an important part in the teaching-learning environment and a key element in establishing the ranking of each university. Students have different opinions about assessment and ways it should be done. Nevertheless, students favor multiple-choice format exams to essay type questions, even if they are always questioning the fairness of all kinds of evaluation methods.

We shall take as sample two universities: Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania and University of Economics, Bulgaria. Besides the fact that both countries are ex-communist countries, there are more common elements, among which, in both places, there are fewer intentions for students to achieve level of proficiency. We intend to examine evaluation from the student's point of view. Research findings reveal that students' perceptions about assessment significantly influence their approaches to learning and studying.

Keywords: Assessment methods, study, students, Romania, Bulgaria

1. Introduction

Assessment of student performance and the evaluation of courses and teaching are critical elements in the teaching-learning environment and are central to each higher education institution's mission of preparing students for the future. It provides information which can serve a number of crucial purposes in education, including: guidance for students in their learning; decision making relating to grades, levels of award, etc., as well as the derivation of quality and performance indicators or profiles for institutions or units within institutions. The importance of ensuring that assessment of student performance in higher education programs is based on sound conceptual principles and valid processes has continued to be a topic which generates considerable critical discussion (see Craddock and Mathias, 2009). Thus the variety of questions arising during the assessment process - beyond the obvious realities of standardized exams, there are open book exams, teaching exam-taking, exam

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subjectivity and relevance, cheating.

In educational contexts, understanding the student's learning must take account of the student's construction of reality, states B. Hurst.

In order to reach the main aims of modern education powerful learning environments are designed, with the assessment as an important element.

According to K. D. Konings et al., students' perceptions of a learning environment affect their subsequent learning behavior and the quality of the learning outcomes.

The motivation of students plays a major role in the learning process, and in a substantial way their results are heavily influenced by it. Thus fostering the motivation and applying suitable tools for this goal is crucial for better learning outcomes.

Findings suggest that students hold strong views about different assessment and evaluation formats (see Carless 2015). In this respect students favor multiple-choice format exams to essay type questions. However, when compared with more innovative assessment methods, students call the "fairness" of these well-known evaluation modes into question.

In any academic setting, the learning approaches the students adopt can be influenced by factors such as the type of examination they are to engage in, and the discipline of study.

As hiring in recent years does not depend heavily on grades received during study years, there are fewer intentions for students to achieve level of proficiency. The lack of incentives to learn falls back in the quality of learning and teaching, so that the work of students often does not reach satisfactory performance. Students' approaches to studying, their conceptions of learning, their perceptions of teaching environment need clearer observance. R. Hernández even questions himself on the importance of continuous assessment in higher education.

It is commonly believed that highly subjective humans ultimately perform all testing and grading efforts and that all testing and grading is completely subjective (see Durham 2006) and thus multiple-choice testing is widely used. But given the ongoing debate on the usefulness of multiple-choice questions as an assessment instrument (see Williams 2006) there is also place for estimating the alternatives.

The multiple-choice questions are considered as the one possible independent open exam form, almost excluding any subjectivity, although there are some weak points.

Multiple-choice assessment (see Smith and Miller 2005) can be regarded as assessing the lower of three levels of student learning, the three levels being lower, higher cognitive learning and transfer learning. Low cognitive learning involves the acquisition of facts and information for accurate recall and higher learning involves integrating and synthesizing ideas for conceptual understanding of the given information. Transfer learning involves the extension and application of knowledge.

It is argued that the multiple-choice examination encourages students to adopt a convergent type of strategy with major focusing on factual information and details. In preparing for a multiple-choice exam students are more inclined to apply surface strategies and motives than in preparing to essay assignments.

We aim to examine evaluation and assessment from the student's point of view. Research findings (see Balla and Boyle 1994) reveal that students' perceptions about assessment significantly influence their approaches to learning and studying.

We believe anonymous exams to be an alternative to multiple-choice exams, and as such - helping to overcome the limitation to students' perceptions of study. Furthermore the grading through ranking should foster competition among students and there should be greater attitude to attain proficiency.

In recent years there is a risk of grade inflation - thus the idea of self-standardizing assessment in order for the grades to be unbiased.

The major goal of exams has always been to assess students' learning outcomes but also to contribute to the development of social skills and thus - to raising the social capital. Anonymous exams, as being essay exams should lead to more participation of entering students in learning communities, to enhancing the learner-centeredness of students (see Duncan and Buskirk-Cohen, 2011).

We consider tendency to anonymous exams and to competition as a sound indicator of deeper learning-student reactions and opinions in this direction as suggesting that students' performance might improve in applying appropriate assessment.

The inconsistency of findings might be attributed to a sample difference in terms of academic ability. In order to avoid as much as possible such inconsistencies we limit our study to two curricula.

We use a questionnaire, given in Appendix A, as an instrument to gather data on students' attitudes to assessment.

2. The case of Romania - Bucharest University of Economic Studies

Assessment in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies is written and sometimes oral, or a combination between the two forms of evaluation. Students don't think written exams are fully impartial, that is why they tend to prefer anonymous exams. In this paper, we shall insist on students' opinion about anonymous exams.

We are mainly referring to students who attend lectures, even if we have to take into account that students tend to adhere to a common and coherent opinion, especially when assessment is concerning.

The questioned students are divided into two groups: those who study Finance as their main subject, and those who are students at the Faculty of Commerce.

We have to mention that the Romanian banking system has developed lately; also the number of SME has increased recently, people are more confident in the banking sector as considering it a sure source of financing. That is why students graduating from Finance are regarded to have a better chance to find a job and a better salary.

Usually continuous evaluation is recommended during the whole semester; still in the end, a written exam is regarded by professors as being appropriate for testing students' knowledge; the written exam accounts in most cases for 50% of the final grade.

Researchers (see Struyven et al.) have been long debating on the fairness of the assessment process, the introduction of the anonymous exam being considered to be the fairest form of assessment.

As the questionnaire is showing, the competition is still regarded as a theoretical issue in Romania; there is no competition on the market, in real life professional situations; so, no matter what kind of assessment system we could design, it will not function as an incentive to competition among students.

Assessment through ranking and quotas is neither completely rejected by students, nor fully accepted; they tend to consider it as quite indifferent, even if some of them believe that grades could be more biased if this assessment procedure is applied.

We all know that the assessment of student performance represents an important part in the teaching-learning environment and a key element in establishing the ranking of each university. According to the literature in methodology (see McClure 2005), students have different opinions about assessment and ways it should be done. Nevertheless, students in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies favor multiple-choice format exams to essay type questions, even if they are always questioning the fairness of all kinds of evaluation methods. They also consider that practice-oriented exams are more suitable for rank-based grading, what could be plausibly explained by the fact that practical skills are easier assessed through fixed rules, while assessment of theoretical achievements depends on the personal feeling of the professor who makes the assessment. Finally, they tend to prefer anonymous examination, which they consider it fair enough.

3. The case of Bulgaria – University of Economics – Varna

Anonymous semestrial exams and assessment through quotas are new for the Bulgarian academic tradition in the field of economic education.

Despite the fact, that for the last several decades the entrance exams in Bulgarian universities are anonymous and the rank list determines the matriculation, the semestrial exams are usually open exams. However, there is a trend to more impartiality in exams – the vast majority of exams are written exams. As there are some concerns, written exam is still not enough to assure accuracy of assessments, the attitudes about anonymity seem an interesting starting point of our study.

Another important topic for Bulgaria is the possibility of gaining a 'self-assessment' through

the ranking within the group of students examined. This is necessary, given the worsening of the quality of secondary education in the last years in Bulgaria – especially the last several years have shown the problems in secondary education – the entering students in recent years have received their secondary education in the ‘problematic’ period of major economic and social changes – entirely after 1989, and there is a remarkable shift in the students’ perceptions towards learning.

We define our target sample as the students, who regularly attend lectures. As this is not a representative study, we base our findings on the responses given. Attending lectures is not obligatory at UE-Varna, so the sample does not include all matriculated students.

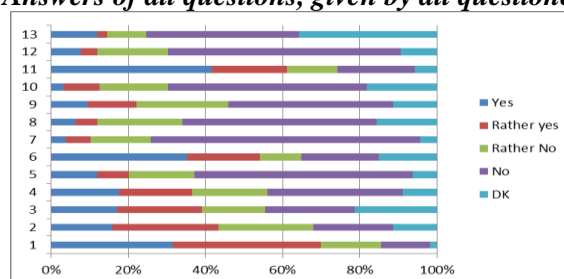
In order to obtain comparable results, we make the questioning in two groups of students - "Finance" and "International Economic Relations" – the curricula with the biggest number of applicants, they are first class students. The difference between them is the foreign language requirement – the "Finance"-students are expected to make a local career and the IER-students – an international one. The answers given are represented in Figure 3.1.

The dominant pattern in the answers is the attitude towards anonymous examination and the strong attitude against assessment through quoting in setting of the grades.

A plausible explanation of the opposition to ranking could be the uncertainty of life in Bulgaria, and the relative lack of experience, especially of labor experience. As shown below, in Figure 3.4 the younger the students are, the stronger their attitudes against ranking is.

We made comparisons in several aspects – between the curricula and between different groups of students within a curriculum.

Figure 1 Answers of all questions, given by all questioned students



The students in UE are relatively positively disposed towards the anonymous exams – the majority of students (Yes and Rather yes 56.2%) would prefer an anonymous exam to an open exam, and 71.6% consider the anonymous examination as more exact than open exams in terms of accuracy of grades. However there is a difference between more experienced students – last year of study, and the others. They tend to prefer anonymous assessment.

A comparison between different groups of bachelor students – IER and Finance, different years of study is shown in Figure 3.2.

The last group of answers shows the difference in the answers given by the two groups of the same year of study – the number of students enrolled in the academic year (ier 2a) and the students attending lectures (ier 2b). Those who attend lectures are supposed to be more interested in the teaching process, and they are less inclined to the anonymity in the assessment.

Figure 2 Would you prefer an anonymous exam?

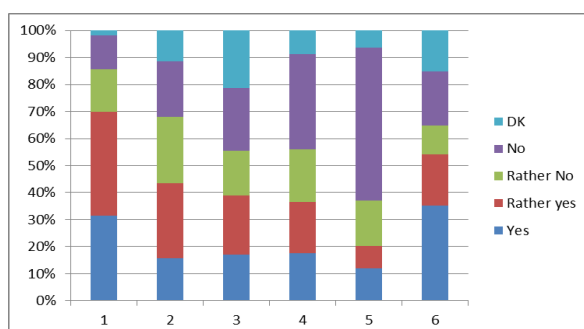


Figure 3 Differences in answers between IER and Finance students



Assessment through ranking and quotas is being regarded by students as not suitable. The majority of students consider the ranking as strongly discriminating.

In the same time most respondents agree, that ranking and quotas in the assessment foster competition among students.

Students' answers differ according to their curricula and years of study.

The answers to the question about the ability of ranking to improve learning by stimulating students to concentrate on more important parts of the material reveal once again the attitude against ranking – the respondents consider ranking as tolerating superficial learning.

4. Conclusions:

We all know that the assessment of student performance represents an important part in the teaching-learning environment and a key element in establishing the ranking of each university. According to the literature in methodology such as e.g. John T. E. Richardson, students have different opinions about assessment and ways it should be done. Nevertheless, students favor multiple-choice format exams to essay type questions, even if they are always questioning the fairness of all kinds of evaluation methods, including the one we are testing in this paper.

They also consider that practice-oriented exams are more suitable for rank-based grading, what could be plausibly explained by the fact that practical skills are easier assessed through fixed rules, while assessment of theoretical achievements depends on the personal feeling of the professor who makes the assessment. Finally, they tend to prefer anonymous examination, which they consider it fair enough.

We took as sample universities the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania and The University of Economics in Varna, Bulgaria. Besides the fact that both countries are ex-communist countries, we noticed more common elements, among which, in both places, there are fewer intentions for students to achieve level of proficiency. We wanted to examine evaluation from the student's point of view. Research findings reveal that students' perceptions about assessment significantly influence their approaches to learning and studying. We also reached the conclusions that anonymous exams could be an alternative to multiple-choice exams. Furthermore, we thought that grading through ranking should foster competition among students and there should be greater attitude

to attain proficiency. We used a questionnaire as an instrument to gather data on students' attitudes to assessment.

We noticed that even if in both universities anonymous exams were introduced, major economic and social changes (we have in mind the situation after 1989) made students to change their perception towards learning in a negative way.

We used the questionnaire with students who regularly attend lectures; in The University of Economics, we questioned two groups of students: Finance and International Economic Relations and in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies we chose as a target students in Finance and students in Commerce. In the Bulgarian university the dominant pattern in the answers is the attitude towards anonymous examination and the strong attitude against rank-based grading assessment, while in Romania, assessment through ranking and quotas is neither completely rejected by students, nor fully accepted; students tend to consider it as quite indifferent; also, as regarding anonymous exams, in Romania, students tend to believe examination is fairer. In Bulgaria, most students consider practice-oriented exams as more suitable for ranking assessment.

We also have to take into account that in both countries, Romania and Bulgaria, students still disregard competition and no matter what kind of assessment system we could design, it will function more or less as an incentive to competition among students.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire:

Possible answers: Yes, Rather yes, Rather no, No

Definition: anonymous exam

Written exam with several questions; student identification numbers do not appear on the sheets.

Questions:

Do you think that with anonymous exam

1. the scores are fair
2. the scores are less biased (there are less “wrong” grades)
3. the hardworking students get better grades
4. there is more competition among students
5. there is more psychological tension in the group
6. Do you prefer the anonymous exam to the non-anonymous one?

Part 2

Definition: quota scoring (ranking list scoring)

There is a minimum level of knowledge, in order to pass the exam

Questions:

Do you think that with quota scoring:

7. the scores are fair
8. the scores are less biased
9. you concentrate better on the most important topics
10. you learn better
11. there is more competition among students
12. Do you prefer quota scoring to other type of scoring?

Part 3

13. Do you think theoretical exams are more suitable for ranking assessment than the practical-oriented ones?

Appendix B

Questionnaire – Results Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of Finance, Insurance, Banks and Stock Exchanges

	yes	Rather yes	Rather no	no
1	28	8	2	
2	10	16	6	4
3	10	16	6	8
4	8	16	4	14
5	6	2	14	16
6	18	6	8	8
7	10	16	6	10
8	12	20	2	6
9	18	14	8	
10	10	20	10	6
11	10	10	8	6
12	10	12	10	6

Faculty of Commerce

	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No
1	10	12	2	
2	6	18	2	
3	6	18	2	2
4	6		4	16
5	2	4	8	12
6	6	10		10
7	2	10	6	8
8	4	10	4	8
9	12	8	4	8
10		4	8	14
11	2	8	8	8
12	2	6	2	16

Appendix C

Questionnaire – Results UE, Faculty of Management - IER, Faculty of Finance and Accounting -
Finance
Faculty of Management

	Yes	Rather yes	Rather No	No	DK
1	24	43	19	12	0
2	13	30	22	22	11
3	9	20	21	27	21
4	11	16	27	37	7
5	13	8	19	49	9
6	30	19	13	22	14
7	2	4	21	68	3
8	3	3	28	55	9
9	3	8	31	49	7
10	1	7	18	57	15
11	35	19	17	22	5
12	6	2	20	62	8
13	12	4	13	33	36

Faculty of Finance and Accounting

	Yes	Rather yes	Rather No	No	DK
1	26	18	6	8	3
2	12	14	17	11	7
3	18	15	5	10	13
4	17	14	4	19	7
5	6	5	8	41	1
6	26	11	4	10	10
7	4	6	4	43	4
8	7	6	7	25	16
9	12	12	7	19	11
10	4	8	10	25	14
11	31	12	4	10	4
12	6	5	9	34	7
13	7	0	3	30	21