

Stakeholder summary

Student choice in course evaluation can improve academic achievement

Giving students options for how they will be evaluated in a university course can improve academic achievement and the learning experience, according to a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

Differentiated Evaluation: An Inclusive Evaluation Strategy Aimed at Promoting Student Engagement and Student Learning in Undergraduate Classrooms explored whether evaluation options for students would improve engagement and learning while addressing the challenges of diverse student capabilities.

Project description

During the winter 2012 and 2013 semesters, students in a third-year psychology course at the University of Ottawa were given the opportunity to combine traditional examinations (midterm and final exams) with differentiated evaluation (DE), which in this study was the option of completing a term project (prepare a mini-class or participate in the university's Community Service Learning program). For all students, teaching assistant-led tutorials and online weekly quizzes were available.

The study looked at student achievement data, student perceptions of the options for term projects and basic personality characteristics, as well as impact on final exam results and final grades. Student surveys tracked how DE was perceived throughout the semester, what informed student choices of evaluation method, and what (if any) value they found in the addition of DE to the overall learning evaluation strategy.

Findings

While the study found no significant differences in personality characteristics between students who produced a term project and those who did not, as well as no significant impact of DE on the overall class average, it did have a positive impact on student academic achievement and on the student learning experience. The final grades of students who were performing below the class average improved when they completed the term project and their performance on the final exam improved more in comparison to students who did not complete a term project.

Student survey results revealed consistently positive perceptions of DE. Among the findings: its implementation provided interesting choices and opportunities to engage with the evaluation of their learning and completing a term project could help alleviate some of the stress associated with traditional examinations.

Qualitative analyses suggested that students might be drawn to participate in DE if they are underperforming and view the term project as an opportunity to demonstrate understanding of the coursework using a format that is more concrete and applied. Students who are performing well in the

class might view the term project as an interesting opportunity to add to their curriculum vitae or more generally to engage in learning assessment in a new and creative way.

Although students said that DE contributed to an increased workload, many welcomed the opportunity to be assessed in a way that allowed them to use what they had learned and to show their skills, as opposed to simply finding the right answers for an exam.

The authors note that the success of this kind of initiative relies on the clarity and quality of the options selected for term projects, on the availability and quality of the support offered to students in making their choices and preparing their work, and on the communication between teacher and students regarding learning expectations.

Faculty who are interested in DE need to invest time and effort in the original design for their course, but once implemented, it is relatively easy to manage. The initial time investment can be substantial and faculty should consider seeking additional sources of support such as the institution's teaching and learning centre.

Future research

DE initiatives in other types of undergraduate courses should be constructed and evaluated, say the authors. Given universities' increasing interest in evaluating learning outcomes and creating assessments of learning that are better connected to the career aspirations of students, DE appears to represent an interesting option worth exploring in many disciplines.

And with the growing diversity of undergraduate students, DE may also represent an inclusive strategy to help those students for whom traditional examinations pose greater challenges.

Authors of Differentiated Evaluation: An Inclusive Evaluation Strategy Aimed at Promoting Student Engagement and Student Learning in Undergraduate Classrooms are Julie Gosselin and Annie Gagné, University of Ottawa.