

What matters? Academics' perceptions of their work environment

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Abstract

This paper describes a study into the perceptions of academics teaching in the management area within universities in Australia and New Zealand. It aims to identify those factors within the teaching environment perceived as negatively influencing teaching and the key themes underpinning these. The most commonly cited factors were the weight of administrative duties, large class sizes, difficulties of imposed curriculum re-structure, student lack of interest and lack of departmental/institutional support. The reasons that these were perceived negatively ranged from their being construed as making the organisational/practical aspects of teaching more difficult through to perceptions that they transgressed personal educational ideals in some way. The implications of these findings for both teaching and the management of human resources within universities are discussed.

Introduction

Universities are responding to increased economic pressures and changing government and community expectations as to their purpose and responsibilities by increasingly thinking and behaving like profit-seeking entities in the marketplace. This has led to a greater emphasis on corporate management practices, on a consumer service orientation and on achieving quantifiable improvements to productivity (Karmel, 2003; Wallace, 2003).

In order to satisfy these expectations, universities must rely on their major resource - their staff. At an anecdotal level there is

evidence of increased levels of stress and job dissatisfaction among university employees. In spite of this, it appears that very little systematic empirical investigation has been undertaken by universities, to substantiate, to disprove or to more fully understand these trends. This reticence has been noted in the UK (Kinman and Jones, 2003), the USA (Johnsrud, 2002) and Australia (Robertson, 2002). It may or may not be associated with reports of academics' perceptions of inadequate support mechanisms for their teaching (Adler, Milne and Stringer, 2000). For university administrators however, the importance of such an understanding cannot be underestimated. It has implications for success in recruiting, for retention rates, for the quality of teaching, learning and overall performance. In sum, it has implications for the quality of campus work life.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a study into a quality issue of campus work life by investigating academics' perceptions of their work environment. The participants were academics teaching in management and management related faculties at universities in Australia and New Zealand. The aim of the study is to identify those factors they perceived as negatively affecting their teaching and to identify the key themes underlying these factors.

In the next section, the theoretical background for the study is provided. The study method is then outlined and the results are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion and the implications of these results.

Literature review

The role of perceptions in forming attitudes and the influence in turn of attitude on behaviour continues to provoke much discussion and debate. There are theoretical and empirical studies across a range of contexts and from both psychological and non-psychological perspectives that argue in support of the formative role that perceptions play in shaping attitude and subsequent behaviour (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975, 1980; Newman and Noble, 1990). Empirically, attitude has been shown to directly influence behaviours such as a willingness to use new information systems (Lucas, 1975; Ives and Olsen, 1984; Melone, 1990) and consumers' intentions to purchase financial planning and medical services (Doney and Cannon, 1997; Mazis and Raymond, 1997). Attitude has been shown to influence intention indirectly as well (Jackson, Chow and Leitch, 1997) highlighting the subtlety of its effect.

Within education, investigations into the role of perceptions have largely been confined to students' perceptions of their learning environment. Although the relationships are complex and vary between institutions and individuals, perceptions have been shown to be closely related to the approach to learning adopted by students (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983; Ramsden, 1992) and to the ultimate quality of their learning outcomes (Entwistle, 1989; Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse, 1999). For instance, perceptions of good teaching, relevant curriculum, appropriate forms of assessment and freedom to learn are

consistently associated with superior results whilst perceptions of a burdensome workload, poor quality teaching and lack of choice are more consistently associated with inferior results (Entwistle and Smith, 2002; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999; Entwistle, 1989; Ramsden, 1992; Trigwell and Prosser, 1991).

Less is known about lecturers' perceptions of their teaching context and their possible effects on teaching and on the quality of work life in general. Two studies, Prosser and Trigwell, (1997) and Adler *et al.*, (2000) provide some interesting insights into the environmental factors that are perceived as affecting teaching both positively and negatively. Both used surveys based on data derived from face-to-face interviews. Adler *et al.*, (2000) identified from the responses of 108 Australian and New Zealand accounting academics three categories of constraints, one of which relates closely to the teaching environment. The main factors mentioned in this respect were a lack of resources, poor staff: student ratios and a departmental/institutional culture that fails to reward good quality teaching, either through promotion, study leave or other incentives. Prosser and Trigwell (1997) undertook a two-phase study that involved a qualitative analysis of interviews with 13 Australian science academics about their perceptions of their teaching context. A subsequent quantitative analysis of responses to two inventories (Perceptions of the Teaching Environment and Approaches to Teaching) administered to 46 science lecturers led the researchers to conclude "that there is an interpretable relationship between perceptions of the teaching environment and approaches to teaching" (1997, 34). This relationship was most observable between positive perceptions (manageable workload and class sizes, autonomy over what is taught and how, and a supportive departmental culture) and better quality (ie, student-centred/conceptual change) teaching approaches.

Universities aspire to maintain the quality of their teaching programs under conditions of increasing resource constraints. On the supposition that the quality of an academics' teaching performance is influenced to some degree on how positively or negatively they perceive their teaching environment, it appears logical to examine more closely what these perceptions are and how they might influence teaching. Attitude formation is complex and relies in part on direct experience in the world. In qualitative studies, the most appropriate means of gauging attitude is to seek peoples' perceptions about a particular situation or circumstance. In this study, academics were asked to describe those aspects of their teaching context that they regarded as exerting a negative effect on their teaching approaches and why. The decision to focus on negative perceptions rather than perceptions in general was made on the basis that these are more likely to predominate in times of increased work pressure.

The study

The study's objectives are summarised as follows:

1. To identify those factors within the teaching environment that academics perceive as having a significant adverse affect on

their teaching.

2. To identify and describe the key themes underlying these perceptions.

Method

Data collection and analysis

Fifty-eight academics, ranging in age and occupational level (assistant lecturer to professor), currently teaching in the management area at several universities in Australia and New Zealand, were surveyed using a brief interview format about those factors which had the greatest negative impact on their teaching practice. These were content analysed in order to identify the most commonly cited factors. Twenty-eight of the original participants were then interviewed at length about the effects these factors exerted on their teaching approach. The interview included questions such as “Is there anything that has happened say, within the past 12 months, either in the university or department, that has made teaching your ... class more difficult?”, “In what way(s)?”, “Have you done anything about this?”, “Why/why not?”.

These interviews were analysed using phenomenographic techniques in order to identify the key themes underlying these perceptions. This technique aims to identify the *entire range* of ways in which the phenomenon under scrutiny (ie, factors that adversely affect teaching) is conceived of, with a focus on the critical areas of difference between them,^[1] it is regarded as usefully complementing the perspectives offered by conventional content analysis. It differs from more traditional content analysis in important respects. Some of these are:

- All the data are pooled and analysed collectively so that the resulting themes are not linked initially with individuals but represent the range of perceptions across groups.
- Themes identified must include all the qualities of the preceding themes as well as having additional distinguishing aspects.

Optimally, this process helps to ensure that no key ideas or notions are omitted from the analysis.^[2]

- Together, the categories form a hierarchy ranging from the least to the most complex way of perceiving the ‘adverse factors’ as conceived by the group in question.

Results

The results for each of the two areas of investigation are as follows:

Factors perceived as adversely affecting teaching

The most often cited factors are provided in Table 1. below. They are ordered according to frequency of mention.

Table 1. Factors perceived as adversely influencing teaching approach

Factor	Frequency	Percentage
1. Classes too large	29	23
2. Workload too heavy - Teaching	9	
- Administration	<u>16</u>	25
3. Student lack of interest	18	14
4. Curriculum restructure -Increased complexity of subject	9	
- Unworkable / irrational	<u>7</u>	16
5. Problems with the system -Departmental - personnel	6	
- technical	<u>9</u>	15
- Institutional - personnel	2	
- technical	<u>2</u>	11
6. General decline in course quality	6	5
7. Poor status of teaching	6	5

Key themes

These are given in Table 2. below. They are differentiated on the basis that they are qualitatively distinct from each other according to criteria as identified in the data. Attention is drawn to the divide between themes based solely on pragmatic considerations and those that include pragmatic and affective considerations. Whilst the former relates to the practical/organisational aspects of teaching, the latter includes the more personal aspects such as interaction with students, feedback and the quality of the students' learning experience.

Table 2. Key themes underlying perceptions of adverse environmental influences

Level	Key themes
E	All of D plus: Factors that transgress personal educational ideals
D	All of C plus: Factors that adversely affect the quality of education for the students
C	All of B plus: Factors that adversely affect course quality
B	All of A plus: Factors that make classroom teaching more difficult
A	Factors that make the organisational/practical aspects of teaching more difficult

These themes represent another layer of meaning and provide an insight into *why* the factors listed above are perceived as

negative. For example, whilst the majority of the lecturers considered their classes to be “too large”, the lines of reasoning behind this judgment are varied. One line of reasoning, as represented in level A (below), is based solely on the practical, organisational difficulties associated with large classes. This can be compared with lecturers whose reasoning is represented by level E. These lecturers perceive “large” classes in negative terms because of the practical implications (level A) but also base their judgement on every other line of reasoning described in the table. This includes the reason that it transgresses their personal educational ideals. Thus the analysis helps to provide a window into the variety and levels of reasoning that underpin common (and less favourable) perceptions that exist in the teaching environment for the lecturers in this study.

Another observation is that the themes fall into two distinct groups and indicate the existence of two quite distinct types of teaching experience. One is based primarily on pragmatic considerations and relates to the practical/organisational aspects of teaching while the other also includes affective and idealistic considerations as well. These relate to the more personal aspects such as interaction with students, feedback and the quality of the students’ learning experience.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study is a small one and investigates associations rather than cause and effect and so any conclusions based on the results need to be drawn with caution. Nevertheless, the findings provide further insights into which factors are perceived by academics as negatively affecting their teaching and why.

The factors identified as adverse are consistent with the findings of the Adler *et al.* (2000) and the Prosser and Trigwell (1997) studies cited earlier. Across the three studies, the most critical factors to emerge are levels of personal control, class and workload size, matters relating to student characteristics and institutional support mechanisms for good teaching.

The reasons (or themes) as to why these are regarded unfavourably range from everyday organisational concerns to those that affect the quality/altruistic aspects of learning and teaching. They give an indication of the things that matter for the lecturers involved and in a situation where teaching concerns are being addressed, would provide a useful entry point for comprehending both the breadth and depth of such concerns. The significant degree of variation between them indicates the need for empirical investigation rather than blanket assumptions in order to accurately reveal what is or is not important for teaching staff in any particular context.

Three implications can be drawn from the findings of this aspect of the study. Firstly, as perceptions are influenced by the particular context in question and as they are specific to an individual and may vary significantly between individuals, there is a need for future research to include studies that are context and discipline-specific.

The second implication relates to the importance of understanding more fully the role of perceptions in good quality teaching. The heightened awareness of the influence of individual belief systems about teaching and learning has changed the way in which educational developers devise and implement interventions in order to improve the quality of teaching and study practices (Bowden, 1988; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). As a consequence, workshops, which were once designed solely around instruction in better techniques, are increasingly incorporating mechanisms to help academics and students recognise and understand the underlying beliefs (and therefore assumptions) about their learning/teaching as a means of introducing higher levels of personal meaning into any subsequent changes they choose to make. A logical advance would be to recognise the relevance of workplace perceptions. If these can be changed for the better, then this may well be reflected in better quality teaching.

For relevant administrators and those in academic leadership positions, this task may not be insurmountable. For one thing, there is evidence that institutional expectations and attitudes actually shape workplace perceptions of employees (Johnsrud *et al.*, 2000) and for another, unlike belief systems, perceptions are regarded as being more transient. Furthermore, taking one particular action may have flow-on benefits. For example, initiatives aimed at eliciting and discussing workplace concerns may also ameliorate what appears to be a commonly held perception of inadequate departmental/institutional support. Since being heard and acknowledged is generally associated with empowerment, this in turn may influence another factor identified as important to perceptions of the positive kind - the degree to which teaching staff perceive they have control over their situation. To complete the circle, perceived control is associated with perceptions that classes sizes are “not too large” and both are associated with a superior quality teaching approach (Prosser and Trigwell, 1997). In other words, there appears to be an interpretable relationship between certain perceptions and certain approaches. Positive perceptions can be as powerful as negative ones.

There is empirical evidence in the data in this study that may explain why this is the case. Where class sizes are perceived as being “too large”, the interview data indicates that it does inhibit teaching. This, all lecturers expressed in common. They cope by using fewer student-centred activities such as group work, asking questions and seeking feedback (particularly in lectures). What they do not appear to have in common is a longer-term response to this problem. Four lecturers reported changing or intending to change the way in which their subject is delivered to their “large” groups. All gave examples that involved breaking their classes into smaller numbers and changing classroom delivery without, in their opinion, any diminution in the structural or quality requirements of the subject.

This example has been used to illustrate how perceptions can influence teaching approach. It also alludes to a caveat that

needs to be mentioned. It cannot be assumed that negative perceptions will automatically lead to poorer quality teaching, and by inference inferior learning. In the example cited, the perception of classes as being “too large” resulted in different reactions. Some lecturers actively intervened to change their situation as best they could whilst others relied more heavily on information transmission techniques. Thus understanding how behaviour might be influenced by perceptions of a number of situational aspects will involve understanding the possible effects of these aspects upon each other. In terms of the discussion in this paper, the influence of perceived “control” is illustrative of this point.

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[1] The correct phenomenographic term is either *conceptions* or *ways of experiencing*.

[2] It is acknowledged that another researcher working with the same data would not necessarily arrive at an identical set of categories.