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Competency-based learning in a real and multicultural marketing consultancy project

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Abstract

The European Higher Education Area proposes a reformulation of the teaching methodologies based on the education–learning teaching methodologies, oriented to a continuous process of acquisition of competences that improve the professional profile. The great variety of courses and universities involved in the framework of the European Higher Education Area are concerned to know the satisfaction level of students and how it is possible to attend to their needs. The present work provides empirical evidence of how satisfaction improves the perception of acquired competences of the marketing students who had followed the methodology of the International Virtual Consulting Firm (IVCF). It is an innovative project about an international educational program designed to bring college students closer to the skills required by companies to facilitate their entry into the labour market. The universities can use these results to incorporate similar methodologies in their study plans and to improve the attractiveness of their marketing studies.

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1. Introduction

The Bologna process introduced a model of teaching focused on student learning, which is a significant change for the university as an educational institution and a challenge for curricula. In this sense, we advance the concepts

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of competences acquisition, continuous evaluation, and the use of information and communication technology for the development of new learning systems.

The great variety of studies and universities involved in the framework of the European Higher Education Area are concerned to know the satisfaction level of the students and how it might be possible to attend to their needs. Teaching methods are changing towards a continuous process of acquiring competences that will improve the professional profile of students. González and Wagenaar (2008), responsible for the Tuning Project, define the competences as a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities.

This paper presents a teaching methodology, the International Virtual Consulting Firm (IVCF), and provides empirical evidence of the influence of satisfaction on the perception of acquired competences. The higher education institutions can use these results to incorporate similar methodologies in their study plans to improve the attractiveness of their marketing studies.

2. Satisfaction in higher education

In the current framework where students can choose from a wide variety of studies and universities, it is vital to know their satisfaction levels, in the same way as companies seek to satisfy the needs of their customers. A good satisfaction level helps to increase better ‘word of mouth’, which is the best way to achieve public awareness.

Oliver (1980) defines satisfaction as a surprise to the consumer, in line with the contributions of Howard and Sheth (1969), Hunt (1977) and Tse, Nicosia and Wilton (1990) who understand and have overcome previous expectations regarding the use or consumption of a product. Large numbers of studies about consumer satisfaction have considered the aspect of product experience to evaluate satisfaction (Cadotte, Woodruff & Jenkins, 1987; Westbrook & Oliver, 1991; Giese & Cote, 2000; Söderlund & Öhman, 2003). In the same way, in this paper, the students evaluated their experience with the IVCF once the project was finished.

Literature about the definition of student satisfaction in higher education is focused on higher education institutions and, overall, is about university degrees and postgraduate studies (Harvey, 1995; Athiayaman, 1997; Browne et al, 1998; Martensen et al., 1999; Alves & Raposo, 2004; Arambewela & Hall, 2001; Elliot & Healy, 2001; Chevaillier, 2002; Machado et al., 2011; Poon, 2015; Paddle & Reimers, 2015; Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2016). Fewer studies exist about seminars, Master's programs or specific courses (Marzo, Pedraja & Torres, 2005; De Juan-Vigaray & González-Gascón, 2013). Although student satisfaction can be considered an attitude resulting from an evaluation of a student's educational experience (Elliot & Healy, 2001), there is a consensus about its multi-dimensional nature (Hartman & Schmidt, 1995; Harvey, 1995; Hill, 1995; Elliot & Healey, 2001; Wiers-Jenssen, Stensaker, & Groggaard, 2002). Alves and Raposo (2004) present a synthesis of different ways to measure student satisfaction in higher education.

In this research, we measure the students' satisfaction with a learning project based on the scales used by Harvey (1995) and Hill (1995). We focused the scale on the learning process and removed items related to university services (for instance, computers, library, accommodation, social life, health, financial service) not relevant for this research. Consequently, we used four items: teachers' feedback, learning, organization and teaching method. In other studies, these dimensions of student satisfaction are considered to be precedents of satisfaction (Hearn, 1985; Alves & Raposo, 2004; Marzo, Pedraja & Rivera, 2005; De Juan-Vigaray & González-Gascón, 2013). Thus, the determinants of student satisfaction with their learning are: teaching methods, teaching feedback, classroom infrastructure (Marzo, Pedraja & Rivera, 2005; De Juan-Vigaray & González-Gascón, 2013) and acquired competences (De Juan-Vigaray & González-Gascón, 2013).

Despite the importance of skills development in the current higher education scenario, there have been few studies studying the influence of competences acquisition in the marketing students' satisfaction (De Juan-Vigaray and González-Gascón, 2013).

3. The project International Virtual Consulting Firm (IVCF)

Aware of the need to introduce new systems of education to college students closer to the skills required by companies to facilitate their entry into the labour market, a new and innovative project (IVCF) was created for teaching marketing.

The International Virtual Consulting Firm (IVCF) is an international educational program that lasts about 10 weeks based on cooperation between higher learning partner institutions in Barcelona, Paris and Amsterdam. The students work in mixed teams as junior consultants and teachers have the role of senior consultants to guide the work of the groups. Students research and design marketing and communication solutions for real problems of clients in multidisciplinary and transnational teams. Through this style of work, IVCF students acquire a more contemporary approach to understanding the field of study, for example, the cultural differences between and/or similarities among cities and the implications this may have on a particular case.

The IVCF provides a real case study at the international level through working in groups, making presentations and defending the proposals in public; developing innovative capacity, creativity, critical thinking, thoughtfulness and competitiveness; and encouraging English speaking and providing personalized tutoring groups – all of which help to improve learning and build additional strengths over students who do not follow this system of evaluation in the same subject.

This project uses information and communication systems through the Internet (such as Skype, Whatsapp, email, and a specific website to present the information about the case. Virtual contacts (conferences and meetings) are established and each international team has a private space to communicate, publish partial work and exchange views and information with team members. Also, through this space students receive ongoing mentoring by teachers.

Our first edition of IVCF took place in 2006 and since then we have been working on urban cases in the fields of transportation, city development, music, art, finances, leisure and fashion. The IVCF cooperates with a number of important enterprises and companies in our cities using real life cases, for example Vueling, 22Tracks, Gran Teatre del Liceu de Barcelona, Muziektheater Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, MACBA, Modafad, YER, Gemeentebedrijf Amsterdam, 22@ en Bureau Zuidas, Brouwerij 't IJ, Cerveses Moritz, Fortisbank, La Caixa, Artis, Parc Zoològic de Barcelona, DUWO, Eurolines, Amsterdam Economic Board, Messika Paris and Bureau Zuidas.

4. The objective and hypotheses of the research

The aim of this work is to obtain empirical evidence of the influence of the perception of acquired competences in the marketing learning process on students' satisfaction with the IVCF project. Competence acquisition, one of the cornerstones of the European Higher Education Area, must provide the student with a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that should enable them to further their professional development (De Miguel 2005, Armengol et al, 2010). De Juan-Vigaray and González-Gascón (2013) provide empirical evidence of the relationship between the acquisition of skills by the student and satisfaction, which recognizes the practical usefulness of the competences developed during the course. In connection with the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: The marketing students with a greater perceived degree of acquired competences have a level of satisfaction above the mean.

In order to operationalize this general hypothesis, we selected nine of the 27 generic competences proposed by González and Wagenaar (2008) in the Tuning Project – those that the IVCF project aims to develop. We expected significant differences in the perceived degree of acquired competences between satisfied and not satisfied students for all competences, which configure the nine sub-hypotheses.

5. Methodology

We used the t-test analysis between the two groups of satisfied and not satisfied students that followed the IVCF methodology to test the equality of means of the perceived degree of acquired competences. Finished the project IVCF, in February 2013, we constructed a survey to collect information from the 71 participants. We use a structured questionnaire, which included questions related to satisfaction, evaluation of different features of the project and a set of questions related to the perception of acquired competences. A total of 72 items related to the competences, based on previous related works, were incorporated into the questionnaire using rubrics to measure competences (Villa & Poblete, 2007; Alsina, et al., 2013). We selected four items to measure satisfaction (teachers' feedback, learning, organization and teaching method) from Harvey (1995) and Hill's (1995) scales. We used 7-point Likert scales to measure all items.

6. Results

We used an exploratory factor analysis to check the reliability and validity of scales to measure the perception of competence acquired. That is, we have tried to verify whether the items used in measuring each of the competences are adequate.

Bagozzi and Yi (1988) and Vila, Küster & Aldás (2000) proposed that the factor loadings should be above 0.6, and on average, higher than 0.7 as recommended by Hair, et al. (1998) to check the convergent validity. In a preliminary factorial analysis, 21 items did not adjust and those criteria were rejected. We made a new factor analysis for each competence with the selected items (Appendix A) to check that all factor loadings adjusted to the criteria. All scales had higher than 50% of explained variance, and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measured higher than 0.7.

A Cronbach's alpha analysis was performed in order to analyse the reliability and test the internal consistency of the scales of perception of acquired competences. All factors exceeded 0.7, as recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994).

Table 1. Descriptives and t-test results.

Competences	Group	Descriptives			t-test for Equality of Means	
		Mean	Standard deviation	Standard error	t	p value (2-tailed)
Capacity for abstraction, analysis and synthesis	SATISFIED	0.397	0.840	0.156	2.625	0.011**
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.292	1.054	0.220		
Capacity for oral and written communication	SATISFIED	0.515	0.873	0.162	3.528	0.001**
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.425	1.049	0.219		
Capacity for communication in a second language	SATISFIED	0.265	1.035	0.192	1.284	0.205
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.083	0.880	0.184		
Capacity to identify and resolve problems	SATISFIED	0.536	0.749	0.139	4.247	0.000**
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.471	0.962	0.201		
Capacity to work in a team	SATISFIED	0.505	0.713	0.132	3.391	0.001**
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.330	1.058	0.221		
Interpersonal skills	SATISFIED	0.524	0.721	0.134	3.224	0.002**
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.264	1.039	0.217		
Capacity to motivate and drive to goals	SATISFIED	0.310	0.910	0.169	2.430	0.019**
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.293	0.860	0.179		
Respect for diversity and multiculturalism	SATISFIED	0.421	0.810	0.150	3.643	0.001**
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.500	1.013	0.211		
Skill to work in international contexts	SATISFIED	0.350	0.886	0.164	1.882	0.066*
	NOT SATISFIED	-0.156	1.052	0.219		

Significance levels: * < 0.10 ; ** < 0.05

After adjusting for goodness of fit for each scale, we contrasted the research sub-hypotheses by means of a t-test to compare the two study groups: satisfied and not satisfied students. We considered satisfied students who had a level of satisfaction equal or above the mean and not satisfied students who had a level of satisfaction below the mean. Considering the results, this finding can be confirmed for all the competences except the Capacity for communication in a second language. There are not significant differences between the means of both groups, therefore, all students who followed the IVCF have developed the ability to work in English.

7. Discussion of results, limitations and future research

The project IVCF responds to the need to develop new teaching methodologies to offer university students the necessary competences to stand out into the labour market. All students that followed the IVCF program present high levels of perception of competences. Universities and marketing teachers can use these results to incorporate similar methodologies to the IVCF in their study plans to increase the perceptions of acquired competences and improve the attractiveness of their studies.

The evaluation of perception of acquired competences of the marketing students that followed the methodology of the IVCF has confirmed the relationship between the perception of acquired competences and satisfaction. There were significant differences between the satisfied and not satisfied students in all competences except for the Capacity for communication in a second language. English is the vehicular language of the project but there are no classes to improve oral and written skills. The students practise their actual level. Thus, we must consider that the competences that do not improve with the project also do not contribute to differentiate the level of students' satisfaction. Future editions must introduce seminars to improve English skills.

The marketing students more satisfied with the project had higher levels of perceptions of the acquired competences (Capacity for abstraction, analysis and synthesis, Capacity for oral and written communication, Capacity for communication in a second language, Capacity to identify and resolve problems, Capacity to work in a team, Interpersonal skills, Capacity to motivate and drive to goals, Respect for diversity and multiculturalism, Skill to work in international contexts). Improving the skills of students not only contributes to their insertion into the labour market, as proposed by the Bologna scenario, but also contributes to the improvement of student satisfaction. Considering student satisfaction as a precedent of loyalty (Athiyaman 1997; Alves & Raposo, 2004; Marzo, Pedraja, & Rivera, 2005; De Juan-Vigaray & González-Gascón, 2013), continuing studies (Lervik & Johnson, 2003, Marzo, Pedraja & Rivera, 2005), and positive word of mouth (Martensen et al., 1999; Alves & Raposo, 2004; Marzo, Pedraja & Rivera, 2005), we can use competency-based learning as a source to attract the same students to other studies in the university or promote the recommendation to new students – definitely an opportunity for universities in this competitive context.

In future works we will study the satisfaction of students from the expectative-perception perspective, following the contributions of Howard and Sheth (1969), Hunt (1977) and Tse, Nicosia and Wilton (1990). The project IVCF is a practical teaching methodology and the acquired competences are close to the professional profile demanded by enterprises and therefore can be consequences of high levels of students' satisfaction according to Olea (2009). For this, we would want to use the acquired competences (objective measure) instead of the perceptions of the students (subjective measure).

Future studies might research the effect of integration and interaction between the various competences acquired in the learning process, as reflects the definition of competences of Cullen (1996) and Lasnier (2000). In another sense, future research could evaluate the acquisition of specific competences of marketing or compare the results of the IVCF with other teaching methodologies.

Appendix A. Competence scales

C1. Capacity for abstraction, analysis and synthesis

- i4. Verify the information and draw conclusions.
- i5. Analyse the problem and the elements involved (external and internal) and my interests.
- i6. Remove the relevant and essential information from numerical data.
- i7. Separate the facts from opinions or interpretations.
- i8. Distinguish the main issues from secondary.
- i9. Determine cause and effect relationships between variables.
- i10. Focus problems or situations in a broader framework to make connections with other data.
- i14. Counter-argued conclusions.
- i16. Getting to well-reasoned and logical conclusions based on the previous analysis. (Rejected)

C2. Capacity for oral and written communication

- i27. Exposing an orderly manner.
- i28. Maintain a good relationship between people and organizations.
- i29. Maintain an active attitude to answer questions and doubts.
- i31. Check that the message has been understood, giving summaries and asking.
- i32. Taking into account the different cultural norms and values of the team, customers and organizations.
- i33. Talk with colleagues, customers and organization with respect.
- i34. Argued opinions.
- i35. Use arguments that are consistent and complete, without contradictions or gaps.
- i36. Use reliable sources to argue.
- i38. Demonstrate personal involvement with the argument itself.
- i39. Receive objections without reacting defensively, asking for the arguments and refuting.
- i17. Use clear, logical and reasoned structures based on the previous analysis. (Rejected)
- i18. Use technical vocabulary and adapted to the group. (Rejected)
- i19. Do not give information or unnecessary aspects. (Rejected)
- i20. Use resources efficiently. (Rejected)
- i30. Allow to talk other people. (Rejected)
- i37. Maintain a body of communication in line with what is said. (Rejected)
- i40. Do not hesitate to give the answers. (Rejected)
- i41. The style of writing is in line with the content. (Rejected)

C3. Capacity for communication in a second language

- i24. Speak English correctly.
- i25. I understand the English text at first reading.
- i26. Correctly spell and use grammar in English.
- 21. Present information numerically or in schematic diagrams. (Rejected)
- 22. Express myself fluently without much doubt. (Rejected)
- 23. Be understood with proper intonation and a good rhythm. (Rejected)

C4. Capacity to identify and resolve problems

- i1. Shelling different aspects of a problem; know how to define a problem and break it down into subtopics.
- i11. Integrate knowledge and skills of different professional disciplines.
- i13. Evaluate the solutions to the previously formulated criteria.
- i2. Collect relevant information from theoretical knowledge to practical and professional experiences. (Rejected)
- i3. Conduct a valid and reliable research, if required by the problem as well. (Rejected)
- i12. Properly use academic knowledge acquired. (Rejected)
- i15. Use reasoned guesses, if have not information. (Rejected)

C5. Capacity for teamwork

- i51. Support team members and provide assistance.
- i53. Confronting team members in a constructive manner without hindering the relationship of members.
- i54. Manage conflicts in an open way to solve them.
- i55. Power to overcome differences of opinion through ideas in common.
- i56. Respect the different contributions, make use of these and allow everyone to participate.
- i60. Analyse how the group makes proposals to improve performance.

C6. Interpersonal skills

- i42. Make proposals and reach agreements.
- i43. Supervise who needs to do what and when.
- i47. Critically evaluate the contribution of others, ask for and give constructive criticism.
- i48. Using one's own initiative to solve problems and doubts.
- i52. Be open to suggestions and criticisms of others.
- i44. Being well prepared for meetings. (Rejected)
- i45. Being well oriented to goals. (Rejected)
- i46. Critically evaluate our contribution and ask how it could be improved. (Rejected)
- i49. Contribute to a good atmosphere: be easy to contact, taking into account the usual rules, be diplomatic, show

interest, publicize the different approaches and results. (Rejected)

i50. Involve team members in discussions and decision-making, and ask their opinion. (Rejected)

C7. Capacity to motivate and drive to goals

i57. Take the leadership to direct the group.

i58. Adapt leadership style depending on the situation.

i59. Delegating tasks.

i61. Leading meetings effectively and efficiently.

i62. Encourage and motivate team members to perform tasks.

C8. Respect for the diversity and multiculturalism

i63. Demonstrate an interest in each other's culture while working with colleagues and clients from other countries.

i64. Evaluate the effectiveness of their own behaviour in relation to other cultures.

i67. Use theoretical and cultural models in the international organization.

i68. Connect easily with people from other cultures.

i69. Use my network (international) and maintain contact.

C9. Skill to work in international contexts

i65. Fit and respect cultural differences.

i66. Identify cultural differences and adapt to them.

i70. Adapting quickly to the climate and the working methods of other cultures.

i71. Show respect at work and working with other cultures

i72. Connect people from different cultures and / or countries to achieve the goals of the group.

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