

Online Students' Expectations Differ: The advantage of assessing students' expectations in online education

Wieser, Desiree^a; Seeler, Juergen-Matthias^b, Sixl-Daniell, Karin^c and Zehrer, Anita^d

^aResearch, Innovation & Entrepreneurship, Management Center Innsbruck, Austria,

^bBusiness Administration Online, Management Center Innsbruck, Austria ^cBusiness

Administration Online, Management Center Innsbruck, Austria ^dFamily Business Center,

Management Center Innsbruck, Austria.

Abstract

Student feedback on online education has become of major importance for many higher education institutions. While researchers already identified students' success factors and analyzed student satisfaction in online study programs and courses, the role of expectations in students' online educational experience has been very often neglected in previous research. Our study adds here as it captures students' expectations at the beginning of an online study program, highlighting the differences to traditional on-campus students. Our results reveal that expectations of on-line students differ from the expectations of on-campus students and must therefore not be confused. Furthermore, the assessment of student expectations is not only a way to consider and satisfy student needs in order to improve online programs or courses, but also a means to track the institutions own performance.

Keywords: *Online education; student experience; expectations; retention; higher education management.*

1. Introduction and Background

Literature reveals that it is mainly the interplay between students on one hand and the institution on the other, which determines success or failure in online education and thus the passing or non-passing in an online degree course or program. Furthermore, prior studies showed that students enrolled in online courses or programs are influenced by a lot of different factors which determine their level of satisfaction, as well as the success and the degree of retention. Students backgrounds such as age, ethnicity and former education, as well as personal or external factors as job and family responsibilities, and the financial situation for example have been identified as such influencing factors (Rovai, 2003). Furthermore, student skills such as time-management, self-management, motivation, commitment, cognitive and intellectual skills, their study skills and learning styles play a substantial role influencing on student success and satisfaction in online education (Bitzer & Janson, 2015; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Rovai, 2003). Moreover, interaction links the institution on one side and the student on the other, and is therefore seen as an additional crucial factor (Bitzer & Janson, 2015; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Rovai, 2003).

The influence of students' expectations at the beginning of an online degree program or course on satisfaction and success has been overlooked to a great extent within the context of higher education (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006). There is however evidence that students who take the same course, collaborate in the same working group and receive the same grade; differ considerably in their levels of satisfaction after the completion of the course. This is at least partly due to students' prior expectations (Appleton-Knapp & Krentler, 2006). Within the online education context, the study by Appleton-Knapp & Krentler (2006) provides evidence that to understand student satisfaction fully, examining and knowing students' expectations is crucial. Finally, the study of Yukselturk & Bulut (2007) found evidence for the link between students' expectation, satisfaction and success in online settings, as results reveal that an underestimation of study time and -effort, is often a reason why students actually fail in online courses.

These findings are perfectly in line with the assumptions of the Expectancy Theory by Vroom (1964). Expectancy Theory is a prominent theoretical approach to address expectations and to discover and understand why individuals behave in a certain way or another (Eerde & Thierry, 1996; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1989). It explains that individuals are more motivated to behave in a certain way if they expect a positive perceived outcome (positive expectations) and less motivated to perform in another if they expect a negative perceived outcome (negative expectations). Hence, students with positive expectations might be also more motivated to complete a study program. In addition, the Confirmation/Disconfirmation paradigm by Oliver (1980, 1997) can be used to understand the relationship between expectations and actual performance and the subsequent customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction in more detail. If students are seen as customers and their

expectations are not met, it can be assumed that they tend to become unmotivated, are less satisfied and more likely to drop-out in turn (DeShields Jr, Kara, & Kaynak, 2005; Oliver, 1980; Rust & Oliver, 1994; Vroom, 1964).

Intervening and addressing students' study experience properly becomes difficult however, if higher education management is not aware of students' expectations at the beginning of an online study program or assumes them to be equal to on-campus students' expectations. Hence, our study tries to address the topic of students' expectations, looking in particular at assumed and anticipated challenges and fears at the beginning of an on-line degree program compared to the challenges and fears in on-campus programs.

2. Method

We collected data from two cohorts of freshman students at an Austrian business school over a period of three years (2014 – 2016). Students of the first cohort are enrolled in an Online Bachelor Degree Program of Business Administration (online cohort) and students of the second cohort are either enrolled in the Bachelor Degree Program of Nonprofit, Social & Health Care Management or Business and Management (regular cohort), both of these programs are conducted as traditional on-campus programs. A questionnaire with standardized open questions asked all freshman students to assume and anticipate challenges for their further studies. The questionnaire also included questions regarding expected success strategies. All students were asked to answer and return the questionnaire in written form. As our study focuses on online students' expectations which are socially constructed, subjective, as well as multiple and changeable (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011), data was analyzed according to the content analysis approach by Mayring (2000). The coding and evaluation were supported by the software MaxQDA, following a combination of deductive (codes derive from theory) and inductive (codes derive from data) approaches. Furthermore demographical data as age, nationality, gender, and former education has been collected independently from the qualitative study of both groups and has been analyzed quantitatively.

3. Results

The quantitative evaluation of the demographical data reveals that online students are on average older than on-campus students and around 28 and 29. Furthermore, the variation of backgrounds, nationality and former education is much richer in the online student cohort compared with traditional on-campus students. Online students come from 12 different countries and mostly have or have already had work experience, vocational training, university- or higher education contact points.

Findings show that both types of students especially expect challenges regarding time- and self-management. The issue of work-life-study balance (WLB) has been mentioned frequently as major challenge from the online student cohort. In contrast, on-campus students are more worried about not being able to meet deadlines and express concerns about the increase of the overall workload and its consequences such as overload and stress. They are afraid that there might be no more free-time to relax and they also assume that motivation will decrease in turn. Moreover, online students mentioned that they are insecure and worried about 'learning to learn' again. Hence, many online students expect problems regarding initiating studying and learning, finding a suitable learning style, as well as regarding understanding of contents. On-campus students on the other side reported fears regarding exams and the amount of learning, and the multitasking between different subjects and contents. Furthermore they were very often also concerned about the language and expect linguistic difficulties if the study program is offered in English. Additionally, online students were not that sure about the practical relevance and the applicability of what will be studied during the study program. They expected in turn that the implementation and the integration of content learned into the workplace or a connection to the own interest area will be difficult. On-campus students did not report this problem at all. Moreover, students reported concerns regarding interaction and collaborative learning. While on-campus students are worried about the task of working in groups and the group grading, online students are insecure about the creation and cultivation of social contacts with peers and lecturers and interactive communication in general. Besides, online students are sometimes skeptical regarding the processes, the quality and the value of a study program conducted online. Few of them also reported that their environment is skeptical about the legitimacy of the program and that they struggle to justify themselves in front of family and bosses why they opted for an online program. Moreover, they often emphasized how important family and employer support is for their further studies. This was no topic in the on-campus cohort.

4. Discussion

Our results reveal that online students expect indeed to struggle with some of the same issues as traditional students. Taking however a closer look, some interesting variations can be discovered.

Time- and self-management are for example expected to be major challenges from both groups. However, in contrast to on-campus students who are more concerned about more than one exam taking place at the same day or not having enough free time for example, online students expect problems in balancing work-life and study. Nearly all of them have a full-time job and family-responsibilities and are therefore even more challenged to manage study demands and to fulfil outside obligations at the same time. Therefore, they also mentioned that the support of the family, as well as from the employer will be extremely important.

Substantial differences can also be observed regarding the expected challenges of study skills and learning strategies. While on-campus students expect to have to struggle with the amount of learning and are worried about having to express oneself in a foreign language as the program is offered in English, online students are more concerned about starting to learn again. Online students think about how to find the optimum learning style, and thus look at the topic from a very different perspective - rather than considering details they keep the focus on the big picture. Hence, it can be assumed that they are looking at this challenge in a more neutral and objective manner. Meanwhile, traditional students do not seem to reflect that much about this issue, as they are younger and expect challenges regarding study skills probably to be similar as to ones recently experienced in high school. They study from exam to exam, but tend to not to reflect on learning styles.

Moreover, the desire of online students to connect the content learned to their work or private lives stands out in the comparison between traditional on-campus students. This emphasizes again the assumption that they tend to focus more on the big picture and the overall value of the study program. On the other hand, traditional on-campus students do not have the expectations of applying newly learned skills into their work environment presumably as they are not working and are in fact full time students.

This difference can also be replicated looking at collaborative learning and interaction. Whereas on-campus students are rather negatively biased towards group assignments in class and their outcomes, online students are concerned to have no contact to peers at all. Hence, both groups see collaborative learning and interaction as an issue but online students tend to be more concerned about not being socially integrated, whereas on-campus students tend to be more worried about close collaboration with peers during their studies.

Furthermore, public acceptance seems to be a big issue for online students, but no issue at all for on-campus students. Online students actually study and invest the same time and effort as on-campus students do but are actually often not rewarded with the same respect. Hence, it seems that official acceptance of online education is sometimes still lower and not only an issue for students making use of - but also for institutions offering online education and their legitimacy.

Considering Expectancy Theory by Vroom (1964) and the Confirmation/Disconfirmation Paradigm by Oliver (1980, 1997), expectations can influence and reflect actual needs of online students and should therefore not be ignored when designing online educational offers. As our results reveal they can be used as important signposts for higher education institutions which still hesitate to implement online education, as well as for institutions which already implemented it. Moreover, support and feedback services in particular may be important to shape unrealistic expectations (Diaz, 2002; Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). Especially the training of students in time- and self-management might be an expedient way to motivate and support students to succeed in an online study program, as already proposed by other authors (Mandernach et al., 2006; Moessenlechner et al., 2015; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Moreover, work-life balance is a very prominent topic within our results and should be addressed from higher education institutions therefore. In this regard, aspects such as flexibility of deadlines and attendances could be reconsidered, as well as the possibility to introduce blocked courses, and weekend classes for example. In addition, support services as nurseries, but also financial assistance can facilitate the study experience for online students significantly. Hence, taking a closer look at the expectations at the beginning of on-line students compared to on-campus students we see that there are various different forms of expectations which must not be confused. Therefore, as other authors before (Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001), also we call upon the consideration of these differences and recognize that developing and designing an online program embraces different educational services regarding components, curricula, pedagogy and even marketing compared to on-campus students. Furthermore, in line with the authors Cheung & Kan (2002) we recognize the importance of diversity within the online student population itself and the need to identify individual student characteristics in order to be able to design and develop online programs and courses in line with the needs of the audience. Hence, we claim that not only success factors have to be considered when looking at the problems of drop-out rates and retention, but satisfaction as well. Students satisfaction can be partly also explained by their expectations and therefore we emphasize the need to assess online students' expectations in order to increase students' satisfaction. This contributes not only to the completion and the passing, but even more to a 'successful' completion of the online study program as the whole study experience, from the beginning to the end, can be referred to a positive event. Even more so this will be of relevance for the institution itself. Students will evaluate the educational experience not only in terms of

passing or non-passing a course or program, but they will consider their whole study program and if they were satisfied or not. Hence, students' feedback might be richer which is again an advantage for the institution and the assessment of its own performance as well as for the benchmark with other competitors in the industry. Finally such a novel approach in assessing students' expectations at the beginning of an online program, could be even seen as competitive advantage and should be therefore fostered and strengthened from a strategic point of view.

5. Conclusion

Online students' expectations and needs may appear similar to traditional on-campus students' expectations. Nevertheless they differ from on-campus students' expectations in some main points. Therefore a separate assessment is needed and useful in order to develop, design and implement online education successfully. Furthermore, this study highlights the role of expectations which have to be considered as they have an impact on student satisfaction which in turn influences student retention and also the reputation and the image of the educational institution itself. Thus, our study does not only show the importance of the assessment of students' expectations for the successful completion of an online study program, but it emphasizes its advantages for the institutions and its position in the market from a strategic point of view as well. Student feedback on expectations enables higher education institutions to assess their own online offers in order to explain and understand student retention and to improve the design and implementation of technology enhanced learning. Furthermore it is not only a way to consider and satisfy student needs in online programs or courses, but also a means to track the institutions own performance (Bitzer & Janson, 2015; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Gibson, 2010).

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