



Research Article

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Factors Affecting Students Evaluation of Teachers: A Case Study Research in Albania

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Abstract

The reliability, efficacy, and ethics of students “judging” their professors at university are considered to be controversial and political issues. Students’ evaluations of teaching (SET) instruments are used by universities to rate teachers and teaching. However, we question whether or not such instruments are adequate. And to what degree? What are the limitations? Are there any biased interpretations in the responses of the students? In this article, we address some of the issues concerning the evaluation of teachers by students at the University of Durres, Albania, such as the direct correlation between grading and positive evaluation, gender of professors, et al. A quantitative methodology was used for the realization of this study. The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire designed to explore students’ and academic staff attitudes, regarding students’ evaluations of teachers. The article presents the study results and recommendations for better, more effective SETs instruments that limit ethical implications in these evaluative processes.

Keywords: *ethics, students, teachers, evaluation*

1. Introduction and Background

Universities put effort into choosing the most ethical and appropriate method for the evaluation of their academic staff. Students’ evaluations of teaching (SET) are an important tool available to the faculty during the process of quality assurance (QA) to assess effective teaching and the overall performance of the faculty. The institutional ethical consideration of this process is fundamental to overall quality assurance as certain ethical implications need to be dealt with to make SET data

trustworthy and widely applicable. Despite the importance of SET in monitoring QA, it is increasingly being used as a requirement for applications in promoting career opportunities in teaching positions. This makes it even more important to question the ethical implications of this process, even more specifically reliability and trustworthiness.

Generally speaking, faculty members often face some ethical and methodological issues when involving students as focus groups in evaluating their teaching. The reliability, efficacy, and ethics of students passing judgments on their university professors are still considered controversial and political issues. The ethical evaluation of teachers as a concept relies on the standards of conduct which include integrity, honesty, and respect for both the teachers and students during the evaluation data. Teachers need to instill ethical principles of impartiality, integrity, and ethical behavior in the students' learning environment. It is a moral responsibility for teachers to function in the best interests of their students. There are certainly various ethical implications when teachers involve their students as participants in SET. This is why we need to emphasize the need for ethical approaches to this evaluation process, to reduce the quantifiable implications. Strategies should be employed to tackle the ethical implications, because an unethical organization of SET may deteriorate the relationship between the student and the teacher.

SET instruments are used by the faculty to rate the quality of teachers and teaching in general. In this article, we address some of the issues concerning the evaluation of teachers by students in general, and later we focus on the current situation of SET in Albania followed by a quantitative survey administered at the University of Durres in Albania. In the survey, ethical implications are taken into consideration such as reliability, validity, trustworthiness, conflicts of interest, and the direct correlation between grading and positive evaluation. To collect data, a quantitative methodology was used, gathering information from questionnaires posed to both teachers and students. Finally, we make recommendations for better, more effective SETs instruments that limit ethical implications in these evaluative processes.

2. Literature Review

There is a lot of debate in the literature concerning SET as a valuable instrument in assessing the quality assurance of the faculty. While SET advocates maintain that this is a reasonable instrument for measuring teachers' performance, some detractors see flaws and limitations in this method of evaluation. Therefore, the evaluation of teaching by students is considered positive on one side, and worthless on the other side.

First, we shall analyze SET as a positive and important instrument in ensuring the quality of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). It is designed to improve the quality of teaching (the principle of quality assurance) but it also offers students an outlet to express their ideas, opinions, and grievances. If properly administered as a procedure, teachers can use results from SET to make changes in the future and improve their teaching skills. In addition, it serves as valuable data to the university for important decision-making related to each professor's evaluation record. It means that their future careers and promotions depend on their performances in this kind of evaluation. Today, especially in the USA, some jobs ask teachers to submit 'teaching evaluations as part of the application process to justify their teaching records.

Significantly, teachers' evaluation by their students is a fundamental part of the core values of a university. More precisely, it is connected to the value of accountability, assessment of performance, and evaluation of results aiming at continuous improvement. It highlights the importance of performance assessments and the evaluation of results. This shows that it is fundamental to incorporate SET as a tool used to enable accountability as a core value of the HEIs. The HEIs have to ensure high-quality teaching and a high standard of curriculum content. Therefore, the collection of quantitative data from SET instruments is essential to measure accountability.

On the other hand, some studies criticize the validity of SET, since it can be seen as biased. Crumbley and Reichelt (2009) refer to the negative social implications of SET, insofar as the SET can

have gendered and/or racially biased prompts, therefore the results can be frequently misinterpreted by or misrepresentative of the faculty (Monzón, Suárez, and Paredes, 2022). In addition, critics hold that teachers may shift their curriculum objective focus from quality of instruction to student satisfaction. As a result, students' grades can be considered as a reflection of their teacher's congeniality and not as a legitimate assessment of students' skills comprehension. Also, the reliability of SET results is challenged by the manner of administration which may result in low response rates and monotonic responses, two other arguments against the use of SET at university. Monotonic responses occur when focus groups respond with nearly identical responses in all facets of the evaluation, also known as *monotonic response patterns* –MRPs (Madichie and Nnamdi, 2011). Monotonic response patterns are said to compromise the reliability of the evaluation results.

In addition, poor response rates result in unreliable data. In fact, the larger the number of respondents who complete such surveys, the more reliable the result will be. Interpretation of data is also a major concern considering that the data processing should be objective and reliable. Misinterpretation of data may result in false results, which then affect the career of the teacher.

Students' evaluation of teachers/teaching and ethics cross when it comes to the correlation between SET results and student grades, gender, type of course, etc. To look at the validity of the data collected from the evaluation forms, it is important to consider how such forms are formulated, applied, and analyzed. SET instruments need to be designed carefully, to include valuable questions that provide answers, which are important for the overall goal of the evaluation process. When it comes to the implementation, we consider the manner of administration, in the classroom, during the lesson, before or after the final examination, and online forms. The way that this process is administered may result in poor response rates and consequently, the final data is not reliable.

Moreover, students' gender has also been found to influence SETs. Gender and age biases are evident in the data which show that male and young teachers are rated higher compared to female and older teachers (Doubleday and Lee, 2016). SETs were found to be significantly biased against female faculty members in several studies where female faculty members received significantly lower SET scores than male faculty members (Ferber and Huber, 1975).

Another argument against SET is based on the principle of a fiduciary relationship, i.e. the trust on which the relationship between the teacher and the student is based. It is argued that students consider this relationship as a social contract with their teachers, that their teachers are committed to their learning, and that they will avoid any self-interest in this kind of relationship (Lemmens and Singer, 1998). Students expect that the ethical principles of respect for the dignity and privacy of the person will guide their relationship with their teachers (Pounder, 2007).

3. Context in Albania

The student's evaluation of teaching effectiveness is so important to Albania that it is also included in Law No. 80/2015¹ "On higher education and scientific research in the institutions of higher education in the republic of Albania". Article 14 determines that the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASCAL) is responsible for quality assurance in higher education. Article 38 "Functions of the Academic Senate": it is the senate that creates the mechanisms for evaluating the teaching and research-scientific activity of academic staff. In this case, the senate approves the final form of the evaluation to be delivered to the students. The law also determines the rights and obligations of the students, Article 98 "Rights, and obligations of students": the students have the right to express their evaluation of the quality of teaching.

SET is a mechanism that supports the internal and external Quality Assurance of the HEIs in Albania. "Internal quality assurance" is the continuous process of monitoring, evaluating,

¹ https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/AKTET_NENLIGJORE.pdf

guaranteeing, preserving, and improving the quality of activity in educational institutions high, which is developed by the institutions themselves. "External quality assurance" external quality assurance in higher education is realized through processes of external evaluation of accreditation, analytical and comparative evaluations, as well as other processes that promote and improve quality. HEIs are subject to the first assessment, periodic assessment, and comparative assessment. The results of these evaluations are made public by ASCAL. It collaborates with institutions of higher education and maintains continuous relations with these units. Based on the law in force, ASCAL makes public, through its official website, the final evaluation reports of external, continuous quality monitoring, the National Student Survey as well as the acts of the Accreditation Board. The Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASCAL), in the framework of the National Student Survey (NSS), (2019) established working groups in all Institutions of Higher Education (HEI) in Albania to introduce NSS as a key tool in external quality assurance. It is designed as a measuring tool to rate students' satisfaction with the quality of academic performance. The data obtained from NSS is used to improve public higher education policies, identify weaknesses and propose potential interventions by addressing them. However, it needs to be highlighted that SET is administered by the faculty in the internal monitoring of quality, while NSS is an instrument used for external evaluation and accreditation purposes.

As SET results aim at rating the quality of teaching for the academic staff of the faculty, it is also important to clarify how it affects the career of the academic staff. First, the evaluation reports will serve, in certain cases and when necessary, to give an opinion on the continuity of the employment contract (for example: in the case of part-time staff and the cases of staff with fixed-term employment contracts), for different benefits in salary, for promotions in career and academic titles, for parallel positions in different departments, etc. Despite having a special status as academic staff, still, teachers at university have a pedagogical and scientific responsibility and they cannot presuppose exclusion from the process of evaluation. However, based on Decision no. 329, "On the status and special treatment of academic staff", teachers cannot be penalized by the higher education institution due to the evaluation results. It is a concept that is closely connected to academic freedom, a special status of the academic staff. If the member of the academic staff finds that his academic freedom and dignity have been violated or there is an unethical attitude towards him, he/she may address such issues to the Ethics Council of HEI, for this matter.

The overall evaluation of the academic staff is a complex process, which includes students' evaluation of teaching as a component with a weight range of 15-20 %. It is integrated with other factors such as: 1. Evaluation of the Head of the Department / Academic unit; 2. Evaluation Commission; Self-assessment; Students' evaluation².

At the end of the evaluation table, a recommendation is also made by the Head of the basic unit regarding the promotion or continuation of the contract. The final evaluation report is included in the personal file of the academic staff. When the teacher does not agree with the result of the evaluation, he/she discusses it with the head of the basic unit and he/she can complain to the dean. The dean, after reviewing the case (with the human resources and the quality assurance unit), may order the re-evaluation or decide to leave the current decision in force.

With regard to the procedure, before each exam, students will fill out the form in the classroom, evaluating each lecturer and each course they have taken. Then, these data will be collected by the rectorate and the faculties, to identify the problems and take the necessary measures to mitigate such issues.

After the academic senate drafts the evaluation form, it is distributed to all faculties for their opinion and suggestions, the final form is approved, which will then be distributed to the faculties again, to be administered before exams of each semester. The teacher evaluation form is composed of

² Regulations of the University of Tirana approved by the Academic Senate with Decision of no. 5, dated 12.04.2010

four main parts, which are: course evaluation, teacher evaluation, infrastructure evaluation, and comments. Thus, to maintain and further improve the quality of teaching and service, students should give their opinion on each of the parts of the form for the respective problems. To answer the questions on the form, students must use a grading scale of 5 to 1 each of them. Just to show their evaluation for a certain course, students will have to answer nine questions. In the same way, the students will answer 6 questions for the evaluation of the academic staff, which seems to be the most important part of this form. In the second part of the evaluation form, the evaluation of the teacher, students will describe the behavior of the lecturer. Then in the third part, they evaluate infrastructure, for which the students must answer five questions. While the last part of the form is about the student's comments on issues related to the academic staff and university.

Until the introduction of this evaluation tool in 2010, none of the Albanian students had the opportunity to officially declare their opinion about the academic staff. Using this form of assessment, the students have the opportunity to assess their professors, courses as well as infrastructure.

4. Study

4.1 Methodology

This case study is realized at the Aleksander Moisiu University of Durres. At the University of Durres, we use SET scores to evaluate the performance of the academic staff by the faculty. The purpose of this study is to explore the ethical issues related to the evaluation of lecturers by students from the perspective of students and that of the academic staff.

The research questions of this study are:

1. *What is the attitude of the students regarding the importance and values of the evaluation of teaching/teachers?*
2. *What is the attitude of the academic staff regarding the process of student evaluation of teachers/teaching considering the purpose for which SET is carried out?*

A quantitative methodology was used for the realization of this study. The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire designed to explore students' attitudes and a questionnaire for the academic staff. The questionnaire which was anonymous and completed electronically was built in two parts. The first part is demographic data and the second part is questions related to the evaluation of lecturers.

Students and academic staff of the University of Durres "Aleksander Moisiu" were part of the given study. More specifically, the sample of this study consists of a total of 156 students aged 19 to 26 years and 73 academic staff members. The students who were included in the study had completed the evaluation for the lecturers of the courses last school year.

5. Results

The data and results of this study are presented below. To start, we analyze the first research question:

1. *What is the attitude of the students regarding the importance and values of the evaluation of the teaching/teachers?*

Students involved in the study (28%), revealed that they think that their evaluation of the professors can affect their grades in that course, even though this evaluation is anonymous. This finding points to the ethical implication of conflict of interest as well as anonymity and privacy. There is some conflict of interest for faculty since teachers may use their "power of grades" to satisfy the students' needs and receive a positive evaluation. On the other hand, students may punish their professors who tend to assess students with low grades.

Some of the students (17.1%), reported that they do not know the purpose of the evaluation.

Therefore, they do not take it seriously, and their answers lose reliability.

Only 7.1% of the students reported that they find that there are issues with wording, or terminology that is not clear to them. This way, they might answer a question without understanding it. Consequently, it relates to the unreliability of the results of evaluation questionnaires.

A considerable number of the respondents (35, 7%) believe that they do not have enough explanation from the administration staff before the evaluation. As a result, they might not understand the whole process properly and lose focus. Another answer, which relates to unclear instructions, is the rating scale of 1-5 because certain questions require a maximum of 5 points to rate an answer positive, while others require the lowest scale of 1 to provide positive feedback. This is where the students find it tricky to apply the evaluation range of 1-5.

26.2% of respondents found the administration time and place inappropriate. This is another implication related to the reliability and validity of the results.

As much as 42.9% believe that having an online evaluation system is better, which reduces class pressure.

Last but not least, 35.7% of the respondents rated communication to be the key element in the evaluation of teachers, followed by class management with 21.4%, while the professional competence of the academic staff was rated as the least important in this process. This is an indicator that sometimes students rate their teachers based on non-pedagogical characteristics such as image, personality, and communication skills. Such qualities seem to prevail over the teaching qualities and professional background of the academic staff.

Furthermore, we analyze the responses of teachers and try to provide an answer to the second question:

2. *What is the attitude of the academic staff regarding the process of student evaluation of teachers/teaching considering the purpose for which SET is carried out?*

Let us first point out that 95% of the academic staff included in the survey are female full-time lectures compared to 5% of male respondents and most of them (55%) are young (30-40 years old) with 10-15 years of experience (60%). A considerable number of the teachers (48%) reported that the number of students who participate in SET is not sufficient. This is related to the implication of a "low response rate" which is an indicator that challenges the validity of results.

The majority of the respondents, 75% of academics, found the student rating practice to be an acceptable means of assessing teaching and institutional integrity and is useful to the faculty in making summative decisions, while 25% see it as not effective. Implications of trustworthiness arise at this point.

Most of the lecturers reported that (65%) their performance is improved and affected by the result of the evaluation by their students. This shows that it is quite effective and it can contribute to further improvement of the quality of their teaching skills. However, 35% are not affected by SET results. Only 15% of the respondents reported cases when SET results affected the employment and career future of the academic staff. 58% of the academic staff hold the opinion that the students do not have the capacity to evaluate quality teaching. 70% of lecturers reported that the time of administration of questionnaires during the lesson before exams is appropriate. It confirms the response of the students (74%) who also believe that this is the best way to administer this process.

The majority of the academic (85%) staff reported that they would prefer online to class evaluation. This is almost double the % of students on the same question.

Last but not least, the academic staff judge's methodology to be the key element to be considered during evaluation (55%), followed by the professional skills of the professor. This is different from that of the students, who rated these facts as least important.

6. Discussions on SET Ethical Implications

Some of the ethical implications in the process of SET are validity, reliability, confidentiality and anonymity, conflict of interest, independence of judgment, accountability, etc.

To have reliable results, it is important to consider form, administration, and data processing as three important foundations. Ethical issues in the manner that the evaluation process is conducted include such issues as organization procedures, place, the presence of the teacher who is subject to the evaluation, time, etc.

But, are students capable of providing objective opinions and rating their professor? Because they base their judgment on their experience, they can provide meaningful feedback. Since teaching is directed toward students, they are the ones who are the primary stakeholders in this process. It is their learning experience that matters and based on the such experience they can evaluate teaching as productive or not. It shifts power into the hands of the students and by having a voice they can contribute to further improvement of the quality of teaching.

In viewing students as the most appropriate raters of teachers' performance, we need to assume that the SET instrument is appropriate and valid. This is why it is crucial to have adequate instruments used in this process, which are well formulated and properly delivered. When it comes to structuring and form, we consider wording. It needs to be understandable and not confusing. One factor contributing to the unreliability of the questionnaires is the wording, and the use of inappropriate education terminology which is hard to understand by the students. Students misinterpret some educational terms, such as "independent learning", and this may alter the results of the evaluation process.

As far as the administration of SET instruments is concerned, it is important to explain to the students the importance of their opinion, and the overall impact of the results of their rating. Some students use it to "punish" their teachers who either drive them too hard or give them lower-than-expected grades (Pounder, 2007) As Pounder stated: "*the SET system causes professors to manipulate students and students, in turn, manipulate teachers... central to this manipulation are grades*". This is also directly related to conflict of interest which we will further analyze below. In addition, when it comes to organization, responses also depend on the year of studies, i.e. the students' experience with the faculty. Therefore, a more experienced student in the second or third year would provide a more reliable rating of teaching. The time of administration is also important because during the lesson it is most appropriate to have students focused, get explanations for any unclear questions, and pay attention to their responses.

Other ethical issues in the manner that the evaluation process is conducted organization procedures, inside the classroom, with or without the presence of the teacher who is subject to the evaluation, before and after the examination, etc. Teachers are asked to go out of the classroom during this process to avoid pressure. On the other hand, the administration of SET during the lesson, by setting aside some time to carry out the questionnaire allows not only high response rates but at the same time responses. Consequently, their responses will be more reliable as they take time to elaborate on questions and give thoughtful feedback. In the cases when SET is carried out inside the classroom, teachers shall leave the room to ensure that students are not under the pressure of their teacher and consequently provide authentic feedback.

Conflict of interest is another ethical implication. According to Lemmens & Singer, *there might be the perception of a conflict of interest based on the actions of the teacher and the dependence of the students* (Lemmens and Singer, 1998). Is it right to include students who are in dependent relationships with the teachers at the time of the evaluation? Although inevitable, might be unethical to ask students to rate their professors when the latter are going to assess their performance with grades by the end of the course. In fact, according to Burns and Grove (2001) as cited in Ferguson, Yonge, and Myrick, (2004); *ethical issues are inherent in all research designs involving human respondents owing to an intrinsic tension between the needs of the researcher to collect personal data on which to base generalizations and the rights of the participants to maintain their dignity and privacy* (Ferguson, Yonge and Myrick, 2004). In addition, there is some conflict of interest for faculty since teachers may use their "power of grades" to satisfy the students' needs for good academic results, and consequently have students rate them positively. Consequently, from an ethical perspective, SET is not a reliable instrument for measuring learning or teaching effectiveness.

The grounds for ethical issues are usually related to situations where the participants' personal data should not be included in their responses. In this situation, there is a privacy issue, which is quite important for the process of evaluation. In considering confidentiality and anonymity, it is important to analyze methodology: quantitative vs qualitative studies. In the first type of methodology, anonymity is better maintained, while in the qualitative administration of SET through interviews, the identity of participants is difficult to hide. One of the feelings experienced by the students engaged in this process is *fear of self-disclosure* or *psychological distress* (Ferguson, Yonge, and Myrick, 2004).

Anonymity issues result in an increased potential for biases. For instance, sometimes students have the feeling they are being "forced" to engage and they try to hide their identity by providing false or incomplete information. This is a case of *social desirability bias* (Nederhof, 1985).

Another type of comment that usually affects evaluation is dress style and physical appearance. In one study, students explained their high-rated responses with some non-pedagogical characteristics, using such words as "charismatic," "animated," or "entertaining." "Boring" was used to rate a professor as "low". As a result, "the students' level of enjoyment becomes conflated with teaching quality" (Frenzel et al, 2017). In addition, sometimes students are motivated to engage in the evaluation process just because they have a personal admiration for the teacher especially related to *outer image, behavior, and communication* (Ferguson and Myrick, 2004).

A low response rate is also a problem to consider when questioning the validity of the results. In fact, with the application of online SETs, it has become difficult to maintain a high rate of responses. There is a minimum response rate of 74–91% which is considered necessary to have valid evaluations with less than 60 students (Surratt and Desselle, 2007).

7. Conclusions

To conclude, the ethical approaches to the student evaluation of teaching can surely facilitate the actual implications of this process. The SET instruments used at HEI in Albania are not perfect but they are important to the faculty. It is essential to understand their advantages and disadvantages to improve the form, administration, and interpretation considering the fundamental role of SET in quality assurance, student learning, and professional development of teachers. It is time that the HEIs recognize the weaknesses and try to mitigate the issues related to this process.

Furthermore, this strategy may be combined with other recommended strategies to produce more reliable results. More specifically, we suggest student feedback be further elaborated using other mechanisms including questionnaires, qualitative approach with focus groups (typical to the USA), student representatives (typical to the SET practices in the UK), email or suggestion box, etc. (Richardson, 2005).

We do also believe that to avoid pressure on the students, it is appropriate to have voluntary consent from students who participate in faculty research and have them sign a consent form before asking them to answer the questions on the evaluation of teaching, courses, and teachers. It is also very important to explain to the participant students the importance of their input, and how it affects future decisions about the faculty and the staff.

The level of the assessment should aim to be reflected in the benefit, the knowledge, or even recommendations for the future to the members of the academic staff.

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