

## Student Engagement in Fostering Quality Teaching in Higher Education

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### Abstract

Student engagement should be one of the most powerful drivers for improvement of quality teaching in higher education. As students are direct beneficiaries of quality teaching, they are able to provide crucial feedback not only on what works well but also on what they would like to be done differently and how. The paper presents results of research related to students' perception of course Accounting Information Systems (AIS) and way of its implementation at the Faculty of Economic - University of Mostar. At this course lectures include many opportunities for active student engagement through cooperative learning activities (debates, team work, and presentation of project results). The authors developed two questionnaires in order to investigate the students' understanding of AIS course at the beginning and at the end of lectures. At the first class students completed a questionnaire about their expectations from AIS lectures (content, their engagement, learning activities, learning outcomes, assessment) and at the last class they completed another questionnaire about their real experiences related to AIS lectures. Research has been conducted for last two years and it enabled authors to use its results to tailor lectures in accordance with student's expectation and accordingly to improve teaching process.

**Keywords:** student survey, student evaluation of teaching, teaching quality, student engagement.

### 1. Introduction

Last decades it has become obvious that citizens of an increasingly complex community, country and globalized world need the skills, critically reflective processes and creative approaches in order to cope successfully. Education institutions are urged to prepare students for entry into this competitive environment by equipping them with appropriate skills, knowledge, values and attributes. There is a strong drive to build and create knowledge together with an understanding of working life and reformulate the concept of knowledge in education institutions. Namely, education institutions, especially higher education institutions, are bound to provide quality teaching that leads to learning outcomes and, above all, added value for their students.

In Learning and Teaching, the traditional teacher centred, transmission model of learning adopted by the 'sage on the stage' (McWilliam, 2007; referenced by Martin, 2010) has gradually begun to change to a more facilitative approach to teaching that is learner centred and where the teacher becomes the 'guide on the side'. Barr and Tagg (Barr, Tagg, 1995; referenced by Martin, 2010) see this shift from an 'instructional' to a 'learning' paradigm as changing the role of higher education institutions (HEI) from a 'place of instruction' to a place to 'produce learning'. Given greater democracy in learning, McWilliam (McWilliam, 2007; referenced by Martin, 2010) suggests that the teacher can become the co-creator of new meaning making.

Today's higher education institutions are complex organisations under high pressure from different directions and fostering quality teaching is a daily challenge for them. Although most universities have developed teaching and learning strategies, they still struggle to implement them and effectively assess their impact on the learning experience. It is hard to find way to match overall learning needs of students with curriculum development and to ensure programmes are relevant for students living in a globalised world.

Quality teaching is a complex issue and it requires the overall commitment of the entire institution:

- *Institution level* - policy development, support for organisation and internal quality assurance systems.
- *Programmes level* - comprising actions to measure and enhance the development, content and delivery

of academic programmes.

- *Individual level* - initiatives that help teachers achieve their mission, encouraging teachers to innovate and support improvements to student learning and adopt a learner-oriented approach.

In the framework of international project Tempus CCMLL (Curricula Modernisation and Long Life Learning Centre), University of Mostar developed *Handbook for teaching programme and curricula development*. Handbook consists of two parts. In the first part are explained and described learning outcomes, competence and student oriented teaching. In the second part is presented methodology for development of teaching programme and curricula at University of Mostar. Model of teaching programme development at University Mostar includes following elements (Rezić & Višekruna, 2012):

- Existence of appropriate resources.
- Existence of need for specific teaching programme identified through consultations with internal and external stakeholders (academic staff, students, business, public institutions, non-governmental organizations and so on).
- Well defined profile of teaching programme.
- Defined set of expected learning outcomes expressed as field and generic competences.
- Defined end described academic content (knowledge, understanding and skills) and structure (modules and credits).
- Adequate strategies of teaching, learning and identification of achievement in order to realise expected learning outcomes.
- Adequate system of evaluation and quality assurance, especially focused on coherence of teaching programme and its compatibility with qualifications framework.

The research presented in this paper is result of process of evaluation and quality assurance related to teaching process, especially focused on students' perception of course Accounting Information Systems (AIS) and way of its implementation at the Faculty of Economic - University of Mostar.

## 2. Student Engagement in Teaching Process

The field of student engagement encompasses theory, practice and policy. It is huge and varied, with a significant history of publications in academic journals, published syntheses of literature (Trowler 2010; Trowler and Trowler 2010 referenced by Healey et al. , 2014); edited anthologies of case studies and articles (Nygaard et al. 2013; Bryson 2014; Dunne and Owen 2013a; Solomonides, Reid and Petocz 2012; Little 2011 referenced by Healey et al. , 2014); and nationally commissioned studies and reports (Little et al. 2009 referenced by Healey et al. , 2014).

As a concept, "student engagement" is ambiguous and contested (Healey et al. , 2014). Within learning and teaching it can be divided into two broad areas:

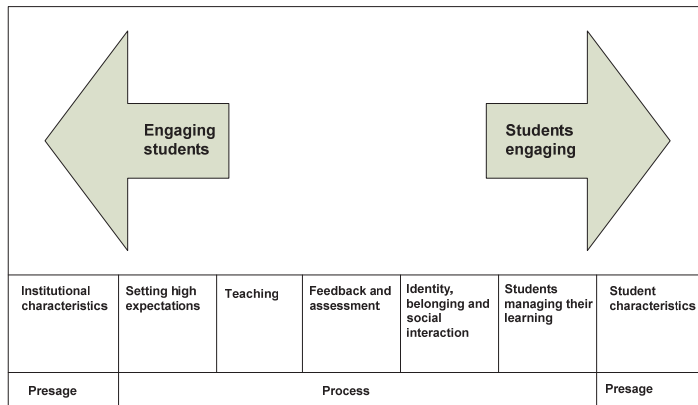
- Student engagement as the way in which students invest time and energy in their own learning,
- Ways in which students are involved and empowered by institutions to shape their learning experiences, both inside the classroom and beyond (Kuh et al. , 2007 referenced by Fry et al. , 2015).

Kahu argues that problems in the definition of engagement stem partly from the conflation of the state of engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences (Kahu, 2013 referenced by Fry et al. , 2015). Engagement involves the student, the teacher, the institution and the learning context. It is a "meta-constructor" that brings together various threads of research on student success (Fry et al. , 2015).

The common strands around student engagement are (Fry et al. , 2015):

- Institutional characteristics,
- Student characteristics,
- Setting high expectations,
- Identity, belonging and social interaction,
- Students managing their learning,
- Feedback and assessment,
- Teaching.

There is a strong correlation between these different strands (Kahu, 2013 referenced by Fry et al. , 2015).



**Figure 1.** Engaging students (Fry et al. , 2015)

In Figure 1. is presented the continuum of student and institutional efforts to improve engagement, from clear institutional responsibilities at one end, importantly student responsibilities at the other, and joint engagement in the middle (Fry et al. ,2015). Figure 1. shows that it is not all down to the teacher, or to the student, or to the institution.

### 3. Student Engagement and Quality Teaching

Many authors stressed that teachers are key players in fostering student engagement (Akey, 2006; Garcia-Reid et al. , 2005). They work directly with the students and typically are the most influential in a student's educational experience. Creating a culture of achievement in their classroom, developing interactive and relevant lessons and activities, and being encouraging and supportive to students are all ways in which teachers can foster student engagement in the classroom.

Also, student engagement is most powerful as a driver of quality teaching when it involves dialogue, and not only information on the student's experience. As students are the intended beneficiaries of quality teaching, they are able to provide crucial "customer feedback" not only on what works well but also on what they would like to be done differently and how (Hénard & Roseveare , 2012).

In order to ensure that student engagement will lead to quality teaching, HEI should encourage and define a clear role of students in fostering quality teaching. One of the first steps on that way is building up trust between HEI and students by involving students in developing the teaching and learning framework and ensure that it incorporates what quality teaching means for them. Also, it is necessary to develop the capacity of student bodies to become reliable partners when consulted on teaching matters or when serving as representatives on relevant committees.

Institutions should develop reliable instruments and techniques for gathering and using student feedback and convince students that institution will acted upon their feedback. When the teachers are in question, HEI should provide professional development for teachers to learn how to use student feedback most effectively to improve their teaching practice and provide incentives for programmes that implement methods to engage students in relevant and active learning, e. g. new curriculum, project-based learning, new methodologies, active learning classes, cooperative programmes, etc. (Hénard & Roseveare , 2012).

### 4. Research Methodology

During the two academic years (2013/2014 and 2014/2015) the authors conducted empirical research on a convenience sample of bachelor students at Faculty of Economics University of Mostar who attended the course Accounting Information System (AIS). The aim of research was to investigate the students' perception of AIS course and way of its implementation. The authors developed two types of questionnaires and students fulfilled one at the first class – at the beginning of lectures, and the second at the last class – after the lectures and all activities related to continuous students' assessment (tests, project and seminar activities) were finished. The first questionnaire was about students' expectations from AIS lectures (content, their engagement, learning activities, learning outcomes, assessment), while the second

questionnaire was about their real experiences related to AIS lectures. Data were analyzed in Microsoft Office Excel 2007 and expressed in absolute and relative frequencies (%).

## 5. Research Results

### 5.1 The initial questionnaire – Students' expectations of the course AIS

In the first questionnaire students were asked to express their opinion about the course content. The question was open-ended. Also, through this questionnaire authors tried to find out whether the students looking for information about the course, either by asking older colleagues about course, or by themselves browsing Internet and looking for information about AIS. Distributions of students according to researched items in the years of research and in total are shown in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distributions of students

Group of students n	2013/2014		2014/2015		Total	
	yes	no	Yes	no	yes	no
Students looking information about						
the AIS course, generally	25	21	25	20	50	41
the modalities of assessment at AIS	20	26	20	25	40	51
the teaching materials for AIS	16	30	15	30	31	60
the literature for AIS	9	37	16	29	25	66
A type of instruction at AIS	10	36	23	22	33	58
the necessity of AIS' class attendance	16	30	20	25	36	55

Results presented in Table 1. Shows that slightly less than half of the respondents did not even asked other about the course and they were expecting to be introduced with everything during lectures. It is interesting that when it comes to looking for information about AIS on the Internet almost all students have said no. Only six students stated that they had used Google for collecting information about "Accounting Information System" and 9 indicated that they are looking for other materials related to the course, too.

Expectations related to the teachers and the course is examined through the open questions. Some of the answers are shown in the Table 2.

**Table 2.** Some of students' expectations

Expectations of teachers (professor and assistant)	Expectations of teaching (lectures and exercises)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be accessible for consultation</li> <li>• Try to explain everything and help us with ambiguity</li> <li>• Transfer their course knowledge to us on the best way, the lecture are interest and supported by examples from practice</li> <li>• Good clarifications</li> <li>• Do not be boring</li> <li>• To be interesting</li> <li>• The performers are friendly and collegial</li> <li>• Help in learning course content</li> <li>• A lot of new information and interesting things</li> <li>• To be fair and do not require much of us students</li> <li>• A lot of new information and interesting things</li> <li>• To be fair and do not require much of us (students)</li> <li>• To clarify and approach the subject matter of the course</li> <li>• Sufficient engagement and collaboration with students</li> <li>• To strive, to be always available and to have an</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching is understandable to all students so they would be able to successfully pass this course</li> <li>• Introduction of accounting on practice</li> <li>• Understanding of the course and acquire new knowledge of AIS</li> <li>• To understand the content through practical examples</li> <li>• To learn and to master everything we needed for exams</li> <li>• Expect interesting lectures and exercises, team work, practical work</li> <li>• Successfully pass examination</li> <li>• To master the teaching material of the course</li> <li>• Lectures should be as specific and interesting as possible, and the exercises should adequately prepare me for the exam</li> <li>• To learn as much as possible</li> <li>• Facilitate understanding of the course</li> <li>• Much knowledge and practice</li> <li>• Passing exam</li> </ul>

<p>understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Clearly explain without 20 lessons in a one lecture</li> <li>● Cooperation and delivering of quality knowledge</li> <li>● The fair and proper attitude towards the subject and students and to help students to increase their knowledge</li> <li>● A quality approach in the form of interesting and useful lectures</li> <li>● Detailed and understandable explanation</li> <li>● Professional approach and help</li> <li>● In order to see their desire to teach us something new</li> <li>● That will teach us by presenting their practical experience</li> <li>● To be patient</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The acquisition of basic knowledge of AIS</li> <li>● That it will arouse interest for further investigation, study and learn about the AIS</li> <li>● Easily mastering accounting by using IT</li> <li>● Full schedule</li> <li>● Acquire new knowledge</li> <li>● To be interesting</li> <li>● More practical work on computers</li> </ul>
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As it is evident from the above responses, part of them refers to the substance of the AIS, and part on the communication and interaction of stakeholders - teacher, assistant and students. The students were also asked about their opinion related to the organization of teaching process. They asked what kind of activities they expect in lectures and exercises: ex-cathedra lectures, practical work, a combination or something else. The majority of students, in both generations, pointed out that they expected combination (84. 8% in generation 2013/2014 and 75. 5% in generation 2014/2015). In accordance with this, only few students stated ex-cathedra lectures and practical work separately (approximately 12%), even none in the generation 2013/2014. More than 90% of students from both generations indicated that they expect the lectures abound with numerous practical examples through which is easier to understand the theory. Related to involvement of students, most of them expected a combination of individual and team work. Of course, there are a few of them who were only for individual work, and those who would like to settle all in the team. According to the students' opinions, the ratio of individual and team work should be 40%: 60% and the ratio of theory and practice 50%: 50%. From these ratios we can indicate the responsibility of students, because they recognize the importance of individual work and theory, not only teamwork and practical examples. It shows that their aim is not only to pass the exam but to acquire knowledge and skills that they will use in their future career after graduation.

## 5.2 The final questionnaire - rating and review of course AIS

As highlighted in the methodology of the survey, after the end of the semester students through the second questionnaire have expressed their views about the realization of teaching process - they have commented organization, teachers, their success, and quality, what they learned and so on. At the second questionnaire the students were asked whether AIS course met their expectations and why. More than 90% of students answered yes. They believe that continuous work and their involvement are essential for successful realization. Students pointed that fact that at the beginning of AIS class they were asked about the expectations and organisation of the lectures and exercises, means a lot to them. It showed them that they are active stakeholders in the educational process.

According to the students' responses, the most common reasons for their high satisfaction with AIS course were: 1) because I learned something new, 2) because I could participate in class and prepare for the final exam, 3) because at the end of the semester I had passed the exams and get good mark, 4) because we worked differently than on the other courses, 5) because the continuous work is more interesting and different from the realization on the other courses, 6) because I had low expectations, but now I have a general information regarding AIS and realized its importance for company, 7) because we have taken the exam on interesting and unusual way, 8) because we were able to actively participate and present our ideas, 9) because there was no ex-cathedra lectures, students were constantly involved in the work and communication, 10) because in the team were only acquaintances not friends so working with them I made new friends. Last reason was worth additional explanation. Namely, one of the goals was that through the active and continuous work and collaboration, students learn to work in teams. Teachers started from the assumption that after graduation, when find the work, students will be in contact with different people (active, slow, innovative, lazy, disciplined, etc. ) and they will need to cooperate with them if they want to succeed in their jobs. At the beginning of AIS class teams of five students were formed randomly. Their good grades and successfully passed the examination show that students managed to organize and collaborate well.

Of course, some students have pointed out what they didn't like, what is the lack of this kind of work and what should be improved for future generations. Among the disadvantages they mentioned: the physical space and a weekly schedule of lectures.

Weekly schedule is related to the organisation of lecturers at the level of the entire faculty and it is hard to influence on it. But, physical organization is a good observation. The classrooms are mainly organized for ex-cathedra lectures. Professor standing in front of students and teachers. Since the course is based on student involvement, the hall should be organized in another way. The goal would be that all see each other, but considering that the group has about 50-60 people it is a little difficult. So it would be nice to make work-tables for each team that would enhance their internal interaction in lectures.

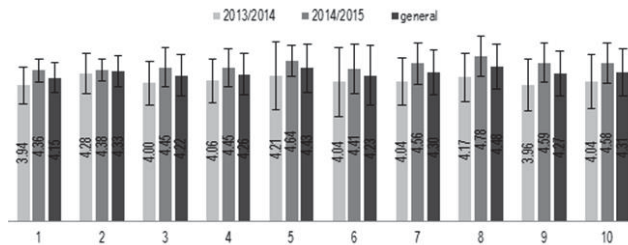
In order to understand the expectations and desires of students, they were asked to evaluate their satisfaction with the realization of the AIS course. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Students' satisfaction with the realization of the course AIS

No	Item	Group	M±SD		
			2013/2014	2014/2015	Total
1.	Course content		3,94±0,53	4,36±0,34	4,15±0,43
2.	The content of exercises		4,28±0,58	4,38±0,32	4,33±0,45
3.	Course Organization		4,00±0,63	4,45±0,56	4,23±0,59
4.	Organization exercises		4,06±0,64	4,45±0,55	4,26±0,59
5.	Examination method		4,21±0,98	4,64±0,45	4,43±0,71
6.	Grading standards		4,04±1,00	4,41±0,70	4,23±0,85
7.	Practicality of Course		4,04±0,69	4,56±0,61	4,30±0,65
8.	The independence of students		4,17±0,70	4,78±0,59	4,48±0,65
9.	Satisfaction with College		3,96±0,75	4,59±0,57	4,27±0,66
10.	The degree of fulfillment of expectations		4,04±0,78	4,58±0,59	4,31±0,68

Graph 1 was used to better present the differences in means (Table 3. ).

**Graph 1.** Students' satisfaction with the realization of the AIS



From the data presented in the Table 4, and even better from the Graph 1, it can be seen that the means are relatively high, all above the mark 4. Comparing the ratings for the two analyzed years, it is evident that the means increased in 2014/2015. Namely, after the first year in which a new way of realization of the course (continuous student engagement) was introduced, the survey results were analysed in detail. Accordingly, some changes were made for the next year (2014/2015): more detailed practical work was introduced, students were more involved in the discussion, students got greater freedom in preparing their presentations, and direct student engagement was raised. Also, students got for more detailed instructions for their tasks and structuring tutorials by lessons which each group solves, so they were better prepared than former generation. Therefore higher students' satisfaction with AIS course in the year 2014/2015 could be expected.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings of conducted research confirm the importance of students' engagement in teaching process. Also, results of

research stressed the necessity of surveys among students, related to measures of students' satisfaction with quality of teaching process, with way of organisation and realisation of lectures and with a teachers' approach to course. But, surveys could not be an end in itself. The results of surveys should be carefully analyzed and appropriate actions taken. There is one interesting fact related to presented research – the questionnaires were better filled and students freely expressed their opinions in 2015 than in the first research conducted in 2014. The reason could lay in fact that in 2014 students had no experiences in such kind of surveys and they were unsure about potential consequences of hearty answers. Research showed that students asked their colleagues about their experience related to AIS course, so information through word of mouth obviously encourage students to freely express their opinions in 2015.

Research showed that students were looking for and appreciate when they were asked about teaching process and ways of its realisation, and of course, when saw that their opinions were analyzed and respected, meaning when saw that teacher tries to adapt teaching process and adjust it with their expectations and abilities.

Obviously, it is necessary constantly be alerted to students opinions and attitudes and ensure their engagement in teaching process, starting from course planning till the final realisation and assessment.

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