

Partnering students in higher education: what is preferred and less preferred

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Abstract:

This paper aims to uncover some areas of teaching and learning in higher education which students can contribute to and thereby, serve as partners. Twenty seven third semester undergraduate students from two core faculty courses offered by a public university in Kuala Lumpur consented to the participation. Ten open ended questions were given during class time and responses were written in English. A thematic analysis was used to analyse data which were then manually counted and categorized. Findings suggest that lecturers are still viewed to have some level of authority but students also viewed themselves as contributors. Where learning is concerned, students preferred a relaxing, informal, non-judgmental and interactive environment. Next, students preferred lecturers with certain characteristics for they can impact on learning. Of the issues to be negotiated, students preferred to be consulted on assignments, activities, deadlines, assessments and weightage of marks. These findings imply that courses offered in undergraduate programmes should take in the views of students so that teaching and learning can be further enhanced to benefit both parties.

Key Words: partnering, higher education, students, teaching, learning

Introduction

Education has always been an important component in the Malaysian context. In the past, a good education can ensure that one's future is better thereby, improving one's living standards. Those with a good education are more likely to hold better paying jobs and this, incidentally, can help to raise their personal, financial as well as social status. In the current twenty first century, education has become an even more pressing issue. This is aggravated by the fact that the younger generation has now got to contend with many others with good education to secure relatively fewer good paying jobs in a competitive society. Education has become a commercial commodity in Malaysia. As it aspires to transform itself into a developing nation with higher living standards and with more highly educated people, Malaysia is also set to serve as a regional hub of educational excellence which can attract more foreign students onto its shores. Malaysia aims to recruit more than 200,000 students into its various institutions of higher learning by the year

2020 (The Star Online, June 21, 2014). All these aspirations mean that Malaysia has to ensure that its education system is of quality, fulfills current national and global needs and meets the needs of the students. One way to ensure this is to constantly upgrade the programmes being offered and to fortify the components of courses where there are gaps. Undeniably, a good education system is an insurance for better human capital development which can ultimately serve the vision of the nation well.

Malaysia is a relatively big country with more than 28 million people and currently, about 123,000 international students from 163 countries are studying in local institutions of higher learning called higher education institutions or HEIs (The STAR Online, June 21, 2014). Current statistics indicate that there are 21 public universities and around 30 private universities (excluding the various colleges and vocational institutions) in Malaysia. Every five years, these institutions go through a rigorous process called curriculum review a requirement of the quality control unit called QMEC to assess and reevaluate the programmes and courses. The exercise is meant to improve the programmes or courses offered so that they meet the needs of human capital development. Additionally, good programmes enhance student quality thereby increasing the rate of student employability. Most universities engage a number of mechanisms which enable them to assess and evaluate their programmes and courses. Among these is one in the form of an evaluation sheet called, 'Course Teaching Evaluation Sheet' (CTES). This evaluation score sheet captures student feedback about a specific course at the end of every semester. Their feedback illustrates the quality of the course, teaching proper and lecturer's teaching style.

The CTES encompasses three components: the course itself – does it meet students' needs; the teaching materials used – are lecturers well equipped; the lecturer's teaching style - do they know what they are teaching and an open component in which students can indicate other comments. There are no components in the evaluation score sheet that assesses the learning environment, students' contribution to the learning or even if assessments can be further improved. While the CTES evaluation sheet feedback (see appendix) gives some input about what students think of the course, the teaching materials used and the teaching style of the respective lecturers, there are no indications as to what students would like to gain from the courses and how learning can be enhanced. Thus, it appears as if teaching and learning is autocratic – lecturers teach and students absorb and no negotiation is involved.

Aim of study

Having mentioned the gap identified in the CTES score sheet, this study aims to understand the type of learning environment that would attract Malaysian students. It also aims to understand what students expect of lecturers in the teaching and learning process and what issues ought to be negotiated with them. In short, this study aims to extract evidence which could be used to improve on the current courses offered by the university. In addition, the evidence can also be used for recommendations to improve on the current CTES evaluation score sheet.

Research Questions

In line with the aim, four research questions were formulated.

1. What does a conducive learning environment mean to Malaysian undergraduates?
2. How can Malaysian undergraduates serve as partners in the teaching and learning process?
3. What are the main issues which should be negotiated with Malaysian undergraduates in a teaching and learning context?
4. What are the positive attributes of a good lecturer?

Background to the study

Students from two faculty core courses – Critical Thinking and Critical Reading and Writing, were approached for participation. Fourteen were from the former and fifteen were from the latter course and all are in their third semester of studies. Majority have experienced six to eight courses in the university and all are Malaysians comprising of males and females with more females in both classes. The general characteristics of the 27 students can be described as passive in class, preferring to take back seats in the classroom, avoiding eye contact with the lecturer, rarely offering suggestions or comments unless approached individually and preferring not to be called by their lecturers. One or two among them may stand out to be more outspoken and active but they too would withdraw once they perceived themselves to be intimidating to their classmates through 'talking' too much.

Defining 'partnership'

The Higher Education Academy Framework (HEAF) (see www.heacademy.ac.uk) notes that it was developed based on the conceptual model proposed by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014). It mentions that this model provides a set of partnership values which enables the academy to propose 'Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education' which supports the development and enhancement of partnerships between students and staff, among students, and between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their students' unions, associations or guilds in learning and teaching.

From this conceptualized model, partnership is perceived as "a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement" (2014, p. 2). The meaning is further extended to encompass "a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself." 'Partnership' is seen as student engagement but the not necessarily the other way round. For example, partnership reflects a qualitatively different approach to student engagement than listening to, or consulting with students. In this sense, all partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership; hence the approach here is described as engagement through partnership.

The motives developed within this need for partnership encompass the following:

- to design and deliver engaging student learning experiences;
- to make higher education more accessible and inclusive;
- to align with personal beliefs and values about learning and teaching;
- to develop a sense of community and belonging;
- to develop student and staff knowledge and capabilities;
- to address some of the challenges currently facing higher education;
- to offer a constructive alternative to consumerist models of higher education;
- to align with national policy imperatives which place engagement and partnership as key to quality enhancement.

The conceptual model proposed by Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) describes four overlapping areas in which partnerships among students, and between students and staff, in learning and teaching may be located:

- **learning, teaching and assessment;**
- subject-based research and inquiry;
- scholarship of teaching and learning;
- curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy.

The model also recommends that the framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education be used as a tool to enhance policy and practice including:

- to plan or reflect on a specific initiative or process where engagement through partnership is important;
- to review the curriculum and make pedagogic decisions;
- to inform validation and course approval processes;
- to frame research into partnership –for example, exploring disciplinary differences in pedagogies of partnership;
- to undertake a mapping exercise of current practice across an institution, faculty or department
- to assess institutional readiness for partnership;
- to explore the relationship between an institution and its students' union, association or guild
- to develop a sense of community among students and staff;
- to develop ground rules for partnership meetings and initiatives;
- to develop meaningful strategies and policies – for example, a 'partnership agreement';
- to inform professional development for staff;
- to benchmark across and between institutions

The conceptual framework

1. Learning, teaching and assessment

- a. To what extent, and how, are active and collaborative learning approaches embedded in student learning experiences?
- b. How are students and staff involved in the delivery and assessment of learning?

c. Is the use of pedagogic approaches that promote partnership between students and staff, and among students, supported and rewarded?

2. Subject-based research and inquiry

a. To what extent, and how, do pedagogic approaches emphasise learning as discovery and inquiry?

b. In what ways do pedagogic approaches reflect disciplinary research processes?

c. To what extent, and how, do students and staff contribute to the development of knowledge in their subject area/professional field?

3. Scholarship of teaching and learning

a. To what extent, and how, are students and staff involved in the evaluation of learning and teaching practices?

b. Who takes responsibility for using research findings to bring about change in learning and teaching?

c. How are students and staff recognised and rewarded for their role in the scholarship of learning and teaching?

4. Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy

a. To what extent, and how, do students and staff shape the curriculum?

b. What role do staff and students play in course approval and validation processes?

c. What role do students and staff play in the design and delivery of professional development in learning and teaching?

Need to conduct classroom research

According to Roberta Ross-Fishcer (2008), research is not typically something that many of us teaching would conceive to be a part of our regimen. In schools, teachers are more focused on getting through each day while in higher education, lecturers are more focused on getting the syllabus covered and preparing their students for the assessments of examinations. As said earlier, lecturers do not see the need to do their own classroom research since the CTES of the university can provide them with some insight into how students perceive their course and teaching skills. Many of them have no choice but to incorporate research into their professional practice which becomes a necessity for contract survival and promotion. Moreover, traditional forms of research are driven by quantitative and qualitative data analysis and those types of research often consumes months and years until completion. In addition, sample sizes need to be large and results are then shared usually in the form of scholarly writing through peer-reviewed journals or in research-focused professional conferences (Mason, Lind, and Marchal, 1991).

Action research, which involves doing research in one's teaching classroom, on the other hand, presents a more user-friendly, practical approach to conducting research. Using this model, which is generally less formal than other types of research, teachers and building research is

conducted for the purpose of improving teaching and learning (Slavin, 2006). Action research can involve a single teacher or a collaborative team of two or more teachers working together to focus on a mutual topic.

The difference between action research and traditional forms of research is that a teacher or administrator can even conduct research with a single student, if necessary. However, results share may vary from formal publication in journals, presentations at conferences, or mere reports at less formal congregations such as faculty meetings, and possibly professional development workshops. Unlike traditional research, action research may span only a few weeks and involve a single teacher.

What makes learning conducive?

It is undeniable that a teacher affects how students learn thus the qualities a teacher brings with him/her to the class is crucial in either making or breaking a student quality. Goodwin (2010) says that research has implicated that good teachers should possess a few simple, quantifiable attributes.

Verbal and cognitive ability

A teacher's verbal and cognitive abilities are strongly tied to their success in the classroom. Ferguson and Ladd's (1996) analysis of the achievement of nearly 30,000 Alabama 4th graders found that teachers' ACT scores exerted a larger influence on student achievement than did student poverty level, class size, and teaching experience *combined*.

Adequate knowledge of their content areas

Rice (2003), who has reviewed hundreds of studies of teacher quality, notes that "subject matter knowledge contributes to good teaching only up to a certain point, beyond which it does not seem to have an impact" (p. 37). Good teachers must know their subjects well, but having doctoral-level knowledge of Freudian interpretations of Victorian literature, for example, doesn't really improve someone's ability to teach language arts to 8th graders.

Knowledge of how to teach their subject areas

Baumert and colleagues (2010) tested 194 high school mathematics teachers on both their math skills and their knowledge of how to teach difficult math concepts. They found that although content knowledge is essential, teachers who also possess strong *pedagogical* content knowledge are more effective than those with content knowledge alone. Students in the study whose teachers had strong pedagogical content knowledge (ranking among the top one-fifth of teachers) were likely to gain a full year more learning than students whose teachers had weak pedagogical content knowledge (among the bottom one-fifth of teachers).

High Quality teachers

Goldhaber (2002) says that much of the research published since the Coleman Report has confirmed that high-quality teachers raise student performance and it is one of the most important thing a school should provide. The Coleman Report's finding was based on the

influence of a set of quantifiable teacher characteristics, such as years of experience, education levels, and performance on a vocabulary test. Since then, due in large part to the availability of new data sources that link and track teachers and students over a number of years, researchers have been able to estimate the *overall* contribution of teachers to student learning. This includes not only the effect of easily measurable attributes, such as experience and degrees obtained, but also the effect of harder to measure intangible attributes, such as a teacher's enthusiasm and skill in conveying knowledge.

Procedures for conducting research in classroom

Sagor (2000) says that all excellent teachers became excellent because they do some things which most teachers do not do, i.e. to conduct research on their own teaching so as to improve their profession. In pedagogy, this is termed as action research. There are procedures for conducting this kind of research and in the K-12 action research model (Sagor 2000), eight steps are involved.

1) Teacher/researcher will identify the problem.

2) Formulate specific researchable questions.

(Typically, three to five questions are common for most K-12 action research investigations. Constructing the wording of these questions appropriately is important. Each question should be as narrow, as specific, and as researchable as possible. These questions must be answerable through collection and analysis of data after administering a specific "treatment" or instructional strategy over a predetermined period. To develop a set of appropriate action research questions, the following elements are necessary: the student population, the desired result, and the specific strategy for achieving the end result.

3) Constructing the research question

(This step is perhaps the most crucial element of planning relative to a successful research design. As questions are being formulated, consider how those questions could be answered. For example, a question that can be answered by consulting a textbook or by reading a journal article is not appropriate for action research. To fit the model for action research, an actual strategy, technique, or "intervention" intended to elicit change must be implemented for a specified length of time. Before generating the wording of questions, clearly identify specific elements of the desired result, how the desired result will be attained, the specific student population, and how the questions could be answered. After drafting this information, the process for writing questions is relatively simple.

4) Review of related literature (see Pyczak Publications, 1999)

(What investigative work on the chosen topic already has been conducted by colleagues respected within the profession? If the research questions already have been answered, studying them again may be redundant. Many times, reviewing the work of others also provides insight regarding what additional avenues could be explored. Focus of the review should start from a broad scope and gradually become narrower, similar to that of an inverted pyramid.

Methodology

I followed a few procedures in this study in order to accomplish the aim of this study. First I made myself a friend by asking them to tell me about themselves from time to time in class during a break in between or when some issue came up during a discussion of a topic. This helps to thaw the iciness and create a relationship. From time to time, I would also share some family stories with them and one of the braver ones would ask me a question and that then became a breakthrough for me to disclose my vulnerability. Soon I got to know them better and jokes would be shared and some personal stories would also emerge. As I invite them to pay me visits for consultations on their own class work, I also got to know them on a personal basis. All these helped to develop trust between us. Consequently, they believe that what I was about to do in the study would be beneficial for others in the future.

Next, I taught them the idea of sharing through reflections and at the end of each class, they were requested to reflect on what worked, what did not work and what should be improved on and this activity was covered on six occasions out of 14 weeks. On a personal basis, I would also ask them if they would like to negotiate certain matters with me, for instance, class test and dates, oral presentation and deadlines, assignments, and what would make them more eager to learn. On one occasion, they sat for a quiz which they did not negotiate on and were asked to evaluate their own answers. This activity allowed them room to negotiate marks and answers with me. It gave them confidence and trust in me.

In week ten, I had formulated eight questions which were written on the white board. They were requested to write these down onto their own paper and to give me truthful answers so that I can use them to develop future teaching and learning processes. The aim of the study was explained and they were told to ask if the questions were unclear. Personal details were excluded to alleviate anxiety and to promote confidentiality. Answers were provided within 30 minutes of class time. Only one student asked for clarification of question (Q.6). A total of 27 papers were collected for analysis. All gave their consent for the use of their answers. A thematic analysis was used and these were manually categorized together and counted for frequency and presented in percentages. The eight questions are as follow.

1. What kind of class environment do you prefer?
2. In what ways can students become partners in T/L?
3. What kind of teachers help you to learn?
4. How do you know that you have learnt?
5. How should lessons be prepared for students?
6. What are some class issues which should be negotiated with students?
7. Should teachers be the only authority?
8. How can T/L be further improved so that students can become partners?

For the interview, the following questions were also posed to the students during the class. .

9. Has any of your lecturer told you that you are very important to them?
10. Why is it many of you do not participate in the class when you were asked a question in the class?

Rationale of the questions

The questions were formulated for the following reasons. Answer to question 1. provides an insight into the kind of classroom that would make learning more conducive. Answer to question 2. provides an insight into what students think they can contribute as partners in the T/L process. Answer to question 3. draws on the students' mental picture of the characteristics of a facilitating teacher who can enhance learning. Answer to question 4. draws on the reflections of students to see if they know whether or not they had learnt. Answer to question 5. indicates what students had experienced and would like to see in an ideal classroom. Answer to question 6. draws on the students' experiences and needs which could be implemented if their voices could be heard. Answer to question 7, provokes students to see if they were able to take some responsibility and accountability for their own learning. Question 8 asks a similar question to question 2 and it aims to verify their answers given to question 2. For the purpose of this paper, responses to questions 4 and are not included because they were not complete.

Responses to the questions are identified through themes which are then written down in statement forms. They are presented in terms of frequency base don the response sof 27 participants.

Question 1: What kind of class environment do you prefer?

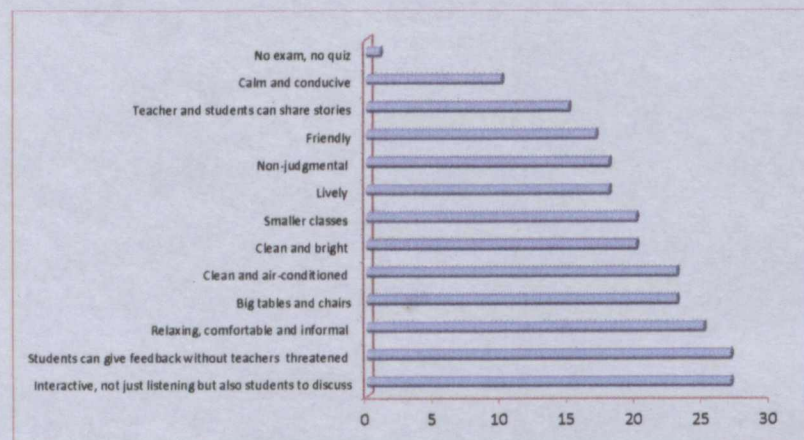


Figure 1: Preferred class environment

As can be seen in figure 1, Malaysian undergraduates prefer an interactive class. Students claim that this can make the class less boring because they get to hear other students' input. They also prefer an environment which is not threatening such that lecturers are able to accept criticisms from students without being defensive. They claim that some lecturers cannot take criticisms and intimidate students by making subtle threats. A conducive learning environment is high on their priority but students want other accessories to go with it - bigger chairs and tables, air conditioning, clean and bright and smaller classes. Students also prefer a friendly, non-judgmental environment where both parties have a good rapport with no anxiety contributed by exams or quizzes.

Questions 2 and 8 ask the same question and the findings are represented in the figure below. The blue and red graphs represent questions 2 and 8 respectively. 'In what ways can students become partners in the teaching and learning context?' and 'How can teaching and learning be further improved so that students can become partners?'

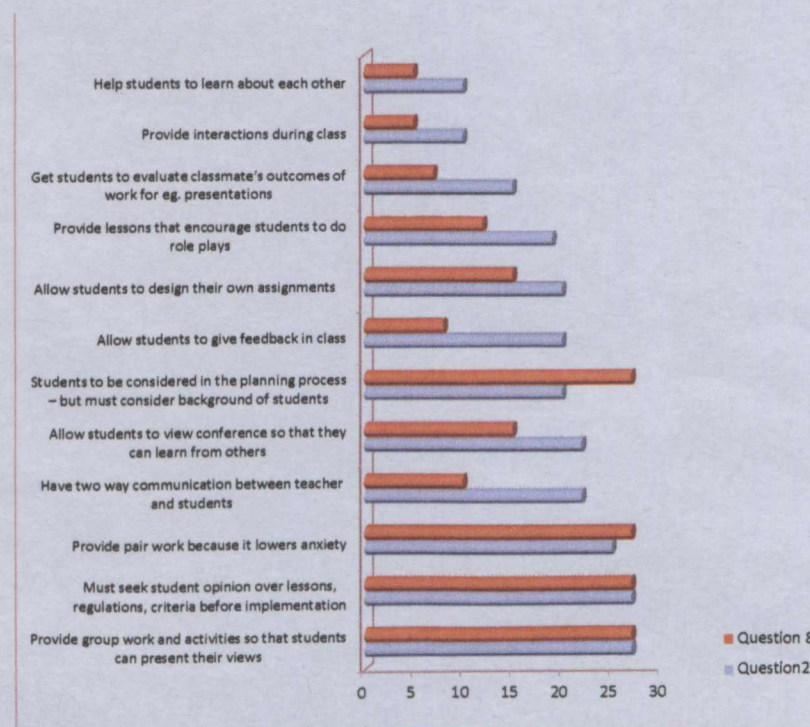


Figure 2: Comparison between students' responses to the same question

Note that the responses to these two questions serve as the core of the study. From the contents presented above, it appears that students have more or less the same things to say. A comparison of the contents indicate that two issues of utmost importance are a) student feedback which need to be consulted in terms of lessons, planning, syllabus, assignments, submission dates, weightage and b) class activities which need to involve group and pair work. Other issues raised based on frequency count are as follows:

- ❖ Two way communication
- ❖ Allow students to learn from others (other class mates, students from other universities, conference)
- ❖ Allow students to decide and design their own assignments
- ❖ Provide online platform to allow students to give opinions and ideas
- ❖ Provide more hands-on communicative teaching to encourage students to be more independent
- ❖ Strengthen teacher-student relationship
- ❖ Give reading list earlier
- ❖ Students should be responsible for their own learning
- ❖ Involve students in teaching (some may be good in certain areas)
- ❖ Make students feel that they belong to the class
- ❖ Ensure student equality
- ❖ Do not grade students into categories
- ❖ Organise games for students
- ❖ Help students be aware of teachers' roles
- ❖ Teachers must know how to teach
- ❖ Class should be student-centred

The responses given to question 3 which asks students, 'What kind of teachers help you to learn' raise many attributes and this finding is important because a lecturer's personality can affect learning.

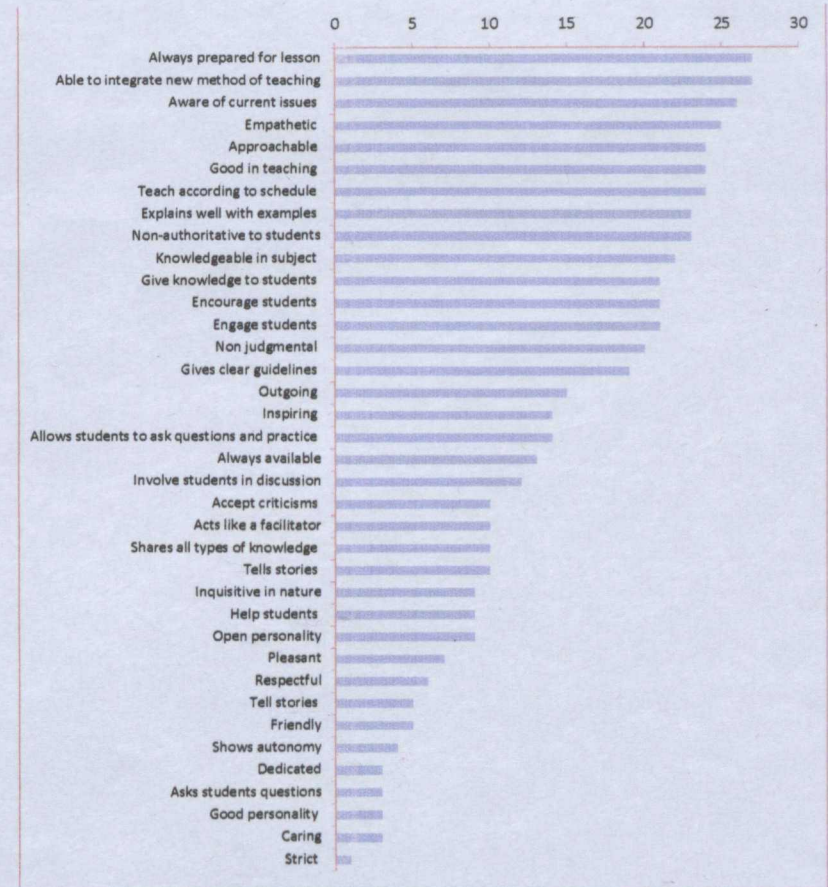


Figure 3: The kind of teachers that help students to learn

As the contents illustrated above show, Malaysian undergraduates have the highest perception that they learn better from lecturers who are well versed in their teaching areas when the lecturers themselves have the knowledge, are skillful in disseminating the knowledge, and that they follow the schedules of teaching. Malaysian students also expect their lecturers to possess attributes including being emphatic, encouraging, friendly and approachable, helpful, respectful

of students, outgoing and a good personality. It thus seems that Malaysian undergraduates would prefer their lecturers to have the necessary qualities of a good friend.

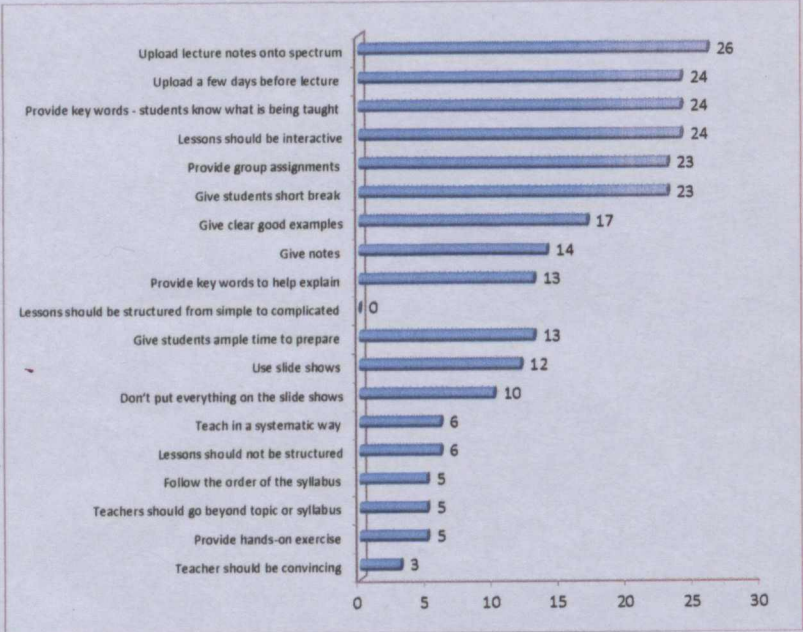


Figure 4: How lessons should be prepared

From the analysis shown above, it appears that Malaysian undergraduates would prefer lecture notes uploaded (onto Spectrum) on time for them to use and prepare for the lesson. They also indicate that providing key words would ease their learning process. More than half of the students also prefer group assignments and breaks especially for classes that last two or three hours in a row. They also noted that lessons should be structured from simple to complicated.

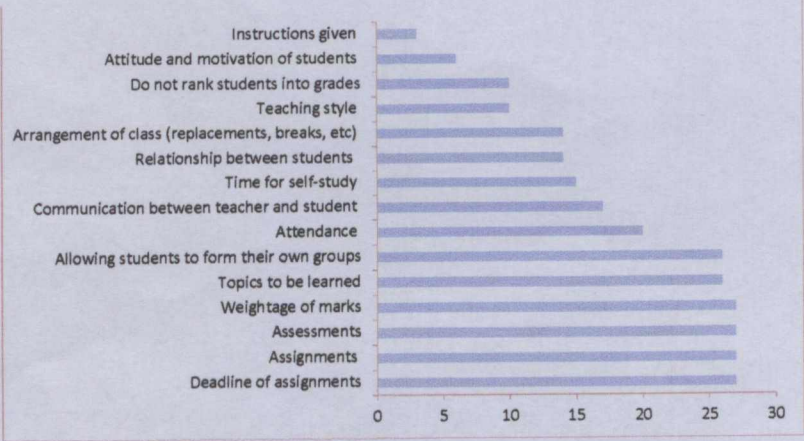


Figure 5: Class issues that should be negotiated with students

In trying to detect students’ ability to detect issues which they have the right to negotiate with lecturers as they are the customers, their responses to question 6 are provided in figure 5 above.

First and foremost, majority of Malaysian undergraduates were intent on negotiating the deadlines of their assignments. This is followed by the types of assignments, assessments, weightage of these marks, topics to be learnt, attendance followed by communication between lecturer and student. Half of them were also keen on time for self-study and relationship among themselves, arrangement of replacement classes, teaching styles and more than a quarter also insist on not ranking students according to grades.

Two other questions (9 and 10) were also posed to the two groups of students during class time. ‘Has any of your lecturers told you that you are very important to them? This question aims to gauge their status in the teaching and learning context. All the 27 students mentioned that none of their lecturers has ever said that ‘students are important to the lecturers’. Question 10 asks, ‘Why is it many of you do not participate in the class when you were asked a question in the class?’ and it aims to understand their anxiety during the teaching and learning process. Students provided a list of responses encompassing:

- Too much information to process
- Afraid to ask the wrong question
- Topic is new
- Afraid of being seen as dominant or aggressive

- Question does not make sense
- Like to find answers on my own
- I am an introvert
- I cannot process the question in that short time, I need to think about it when I am alone
- Afraid of others staring at me
- Afraid to ask a question which others already know the answer
- Not good at expressing myself and don't want to be judged
- Afraid of being disliked by others
- I feel intimidated by people who are superior
- Not sure if the question I ask is relevant or not
- I forgot what the question was
- I feel intimidated if I ask question
- I don't want to make others look bad with my question
- I am not feeling comfortable in the class

Discussion and Conclusion

This study is conducted for the purpose of improving teaching and learning within an undergraduate programme. It also aims to provide some relevant feedback which can help improve the current CTES evaluation score.

In this study, the background and procedure for conducting the classroom research has been explained. Under data collection, it was also mentioned how rapport between lecturer and students were developed so as to develop trust which can facilitate classroom study. Reflections were conducted over six occasions and in week ten, data were collected through ten questions via voluntary consent of 27 students from two core faculty courses.

Analysis were extracted and presented in figures based on six questions. The findings gathered from the interview were meant to support the aim of identifying how teaching and learning in a university undergraduate programme can be improved.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that Malaysian undergraduates want a better learning environment which is hereby termed as conducive, that can cater to their needs. This conduciveness includes the logistics of teaching and learning such as a cool and relaxing atmosphere, bigger chairs and tables, capable teachers who are not just be well versed in their respective disciplines but who also take an interest in their students.

Malaysian undergraduates are also able to contribute to their own learning if they could be engaged as partners via negotiations in terms of assignment deadlines, types of assessments, weightage, and anything to do with grades and marks. This aspect of the engagement can give them more confidence in taking ownership of their own learning.

In most public universities, lecturers have been overwhelmed by many responsibilities inclusive of teaching, doing research and ensuring consistent publications. Perhaps this can explain why many lecturers were unable to have the time to develop a good rapport or relationship with their students thereby, missing out on what students prefer in a teaching and learning context. This oversight is a crucial factor that will determine how students learn because the personality of their lecturers can impact on their learning. Moreover, as adults, many of these students have some exposure to other aspects of life and they are also capable of being engaged as partners in the process but their views need to be heard.

Lecturers may be carrying an inflated feeling that they know better than the students and thus knowledge imparted can only come from them. Nevertheless, students can be guided to acquiring information for themselves and they can teach each other if the teaching and learning process is conducive enough for them to acquire sufficient confidence that could enhance learning through sharing.

Perhaps, it is time for lecturers to realise that they are serving their customers, the students, and it is the lecturer's duty to unravel what their customers want so that 'service' can be adjusted to the customers' needs. Their presence in academia is crucial for it is them that provides lecturers their personal identity.

The study is confined to the responses drawn from a small fraction of participants. Further studies may need to encompass more participants in order to be able to make a generalisation.

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