

WHAT INFLUENCES STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS IN WHAT REGARDS GRADES?

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Abstract: After a period of studying a certain subject, students form an opinion about it and begin having certain expectations. These expectations and the degree in which, in the end, they fulfil, contribute to the reputation of the university. Consequently, a continuous evaluation of the quality of the educational process is needed. The present research presents a part of a more complex study made on a sample of master students in Audit and Financial Management in Romania. The goal was to evidence the main factors that affect students' expectations in what regards the grades they will obtain at the end of the semester. For this, a questionnaire of 20 questions was applied to 250 such students. After factor reduction procedures were applied, six most significant variables were kept in the analysis: the proportion of knowledge acquired, the perceived level of utility of the discipline in the professional career of the student, the proportion in which the subject could contribute to getting employed in the field it belongs to, the evaluation method and two variables evaluating through grades the didactic performance during the course and the overall performance of the tenure professor. The influence of these variables upon the grade expected by the student was assessed with the help of the OLS regression, both in the simple and multiple forms. Out of the six hypotheses formulated, only one proved to be false based on the simple regression analysis. When individually assessed, the evaluation method announced by the teacher at the beginning of the semester turned out to have no statistically significant influence upon students' expectations. For the rest of the variables, results were according to the assumptions made, i.e. all determine in a significant positive manner the students' opinion about the grade they will get. We have also constructed the multiple regression models. When putting all variables together, the significance changes. The level of difficulty of the evaluation method becomes significant, while from the rest of the variables only the proportion of knowledge acquirement still holds. The final conclusion is as expected: the higher the proportion of acquirement, the higher the grade expected at the end of the semester, while the more difficult the evaluation method, the lower the grade.

Keywords: academic performance; master program; education; OLS regression; evaluation expectations, students' grades.

JEL classification: A23; C12; C21; C31; I21.

1. Introduction

Students' expectations in what regards grades they will obtain at the end of the semester depend on a series of factors. In a complex analysis, they were asked to grade different aspects related to the teaching – learning process. The final goal was to evaluate the quality of the educational process and problems that may appear. Out of the results, the present study emphasizes the main factors that affect their expectations.

For an important educational progress it is necessary to know students' opinion on various aspects regarding the educational process. In literature we can find many studies on different factor influencing students' perceptions on education. Many researches were conducted on the importance of the education programs in finding a job after graduation (Phillips and Crain, 1996, Sellers and Fogarty, 2010). The way in which students prepare for the employment moment is reflected also in their implication in assimilating as much information and knowledge as possible during the years of study.

Cooper and Tom (1986) based on a study called Pygmalion in the Classroom (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968) demonstrated that the expectations teachers held for student performance influence student achievement. Others researchers conducted studies on the same relation between teachers and their students (Madon et al., 1998; Alvidres and Weinstein, 1999 etc), reflecting that the higher the teacher expectations were, the higher was the student achievement.

Later on, Periasamy et al (2012) conducted a study which reflected that the students' grades depend on their gender, financial status and study time. Other studies pointed out that without hard work students' performance cannot be achieved and their grades reflect that (Harb and El-Shaarawi, 2007).

Despite these internal factors, Jaggia and Hawek (1999) consider that the family background and the stability of a community are the main factors affecting students' performance.

As we can see there are many factors affecting the students' achievement of information and knowledge. Our study aims to develop a possible relation between some of these factors and the grades students expect to obtain, considering that the grades that students get reflect in a different proportion some of the factors described before.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first part, the Introduction, we present the reasons for this study and others researches identified in the scientific literature. The second one refers to the research hypotheses and the methodology we used to process the data we collected. Results are presented in section 3, followed by conclusions.

2. Research Hypotheses, Data and Methodology

In order to analyze the main factors that influence students' expectations, we have constructed a series of working hypotheses.

H1: There is a direct relationship between the level of knowledge acquired by the students and the grade they expect to obtain.

H2: If the course is important for its future career, the student will learn and will get a higher grade.

H3: The higher the contribution of the course to finding a job in the field, the higher the interest of the student and, consequently, the grade expected.

We expect students to be more interested in subjects that could increase their chances on the labour market, both from the point of view of finding a job and from the point of view of the type of job and level of salary.

H4: There should be a negative relationship between the grade expected and the evaluation method announced.

The tenure teacher was asked to inform the students at the beginning of the semester about the way they will be evaluated for the final grade. Obviously, we assume a low level of difficulty to be associated with high expectations of the students.

H5: A positive relationship between the academic performance of the professor and the students' expectations for evaluation.

Regardless of other factors, a bad academic performance may lead to a loss of interest of the students for that subject. Instead, the opposite should have as a final consequence a better performance of the student. Actually, this hypothesis was divided into two. Consequently, resulted hypotheses H5a and H5b. The first one evaluates the didactic performance during the course, bearing in mind that some of the classes were held by other persons than the tenure teacher. The latter assesses the overall performance of the tenure professor.

A complex questionnaire of 20 questions was applied on a sample of 250 students enrolled in the master courses in Auditing and Financial Management of the EU Funds. The master programme aims to develop a close relation between the higher education institutions and the entities from the practical environment that are already beneficiaries of programmes financed from the European Funds. Therefore, the master program management team decided that the involvement of the economic specialists experienced in the field of interest is very necessary. Therefore, the master classes and workshops for training will be held not only by the teachers, but also by the experienced practitioners in the master program field (Nistor et al, 2011).

After the validation process, the volume of the final sample was of 236 students. Factor reduction procedures (Buiga, 2000; Buiga, 2011) were applied and 6 exogenous variables were finally left in the analysis. The variables are:

- GRADE (endogenous variable) – the grade students expect to obtain at the end of the semester for the course under discussion. The minimum value is 1 and the maximum is 10.
- PROP_KNOWLEDGE (exogenous variable) – the proportion of knowledge students consider they have acquired for the discipline under discussion.
- CAREER_UTILITY (exogenous variable) – the perceived degree of the discipline's direct utility in the professional career of the students.
- EMPLOYMENT (exogenous variable) – the extent to which the knowledge assimilated during the course will contribute to finding a job in the field of the programme students are enrolled in.
- EVALUATION_METHOD (exogenous variable) – the perceived level of difficulty of the evaluation method announced by the tenure teacher at the beginning of the semester.
- DIDACT_ACT_PERF (exogenous variable) – the grade given by each student for the performance of the didactic activity during the courses.

• OVERALL_PERF (exogenous variable) – the grade given by each student for the overall performance of the tenure professor.

The first four exogenous variables were initially measured in proportions from 0% to 100%. For analysis purposes, they were transformed on a scale from 1 to 10, just as the endogenous variable.

In the case of the teaching performance two variables were considered. The reason is that all tenure teachers invited practitioners during the semester for practical lectures. Consequently, we have evaluated, on one side, the didactic activity as a whole, for all the persons that made presentations for a discipline, and, on the other side, only the overall performance of the tenure teacher.

In order to test the hypotheses made, we have employed the correlation coefficient and the OLS regression method, in the simple or multiple form (Dragos, 2008), with constant term. The endogenous variable was, in all cases, the grade each student has declared to expect at the end of the semester. The regression models were validated through the common regression diagnosis procedures based on residual values.

3. Results

The goal of the present study is to assess the factors that influence students' expectations in what regards grades they will obtain at the end of the semester. To do this, first we have asked the students in the sample to give the grade they anticipate to get. The average value for the sample is 8.95 (see table 1). Results show that students are very optimistic. On a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), most of them declared the value 9. Moreover, no grade lower than 6 was encountered and more than 25% of the students are expecting to be graded with the highest value – 10.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the grades students expect to get at the end of the semester.

		What is the grade you expect to obtain for the course?
N	Valid	227
	Missing	9
Mean		8.95
Median		9.00
Mode		9.00
Std. Deviation		0.96
Minimum		6.00
Maximum		10.00
Percentiles	25	8.00
	50	9.00
	75	10.00

Source: own calculations using SPSS 17.0.

To test the hypotheses we have run simple linear OLS regressions. The results are synthesized in table 2. We can conclude that the highest dependence is between the grade expected and the level of knowledge acquired by the student.

The first hypothesis tested the existence of a direct relationship between the level of knowledge acquired by the students and the grade they expect to obtain. The positive coefficient of 0.372 accepts this hypothesis at a 99% confidence level. Actually, all the hypotheses that were accepted by the analysis had a significance level of 0.000, so a confidence level of 99%. Consequently, only the sign of the coefficient remained to be inspected.

Table 2: Regression analysis: the grade expected versus factor – synthesis.

Hypothesis	Factor var.	Coef.	Sig.	Beta C.	Adj. R ²
H1	PROP_KNOWLEDGE	0.372	0.000	0.627	0.391
H2	CAREER_UTILITY	0.208	0.000	0.397	0.154
H3	EMPLOYMENT	0.193	0.000	0.370	0.133
H4	EVALUATION_METHOD	- 0.035	0.236	-0.080	0.002
H5a	DIDACT_ACT_PERF	0.350	0.000	0.393	0.150
H5b	OVERALL_PERF	0.290	0.000	0.290	0.080

Source: own calculations using SPSS 17.0.

In the regression model between the grade expected and the proportion in which the course is important for a future career, the coefficient is 0.208. Thus, we can state that the hypothesis made is true, the higher the importance of the course for a future career, the higher the grade.

In other studies (Mare et al., 2012, Span et al., 2012) we have seen that students are more interested in courses with a direct utility on the market. So, their main goal is getting employed in a certain field. That is why we expected a direct relationship to be found between the grade and the contribution of the knowledge taught during a specific course to finding a job in the field of interest. The positive coefficient sustains this assumption. However, when comparing the results for hypotheses 2 and 3, we can see that the importance of the course in a future career has a higher influence than the direct utility of getting employed in a certain field. H2 and H3 were constructed from the idea that students will try to learn as good as possible for a course that has practical utility. And the most important aspect is the contribution on the labour market. Consequently, the direct relationship should be first between this contribution and the level of knowledge acquired. Only afterwards, the grade expected and, finally obtained. That is why we have also tested the level of correlation between the above mentioned variables.

Both correlation coefficients have values between 0.3 and 0.7, showing a medium intensity relationship. Moreover, this relation is positive, as expected. Again, the second variable has a lower coefficient, meaning a lower influence (thing already evidenced by the above mentioned results) (see table 3).

Table 3: Correlation coefficients between the level of knowledge acquired and the contribution of the course for a future career.

	Value	Approx. Sig.
What is the proportion in which you consider the course has a direct utility for your future career?	0.510	0.000
The knowledge acquired during this course will contribute to finding a job in the field of study in a proportion of...	0.473	0.000

Source: own calculations using SPSS 17.0.

The fourth assumption is related to the evaluation method. The coefficient has the right sign (negative) – the more difficult the evaluation method, the lower the grade expected to be obtained. But the significance value is much higher than 0.05 (0.236). We can conclude that there is no significant relationship between the grade expected and the evaluation method announced by the professor.

Our last assumption is related to the performance of the professor. A good academic and didactic performance should be accompanied by higher expectations from the students. To test H5 we have used two variables. In H5a the students were asked to grade the performance of the didactic activity during the courses. In the H5b case, the grade was given for the overall performance of the professor. In both cases the hypotheses made were accepted – the coefficients are positive and statistically significant. However, the performance seen strictly from the point of view of the course has a higher influence on students' expectations in what regards their final examination results. An increase in the grade for the didactic activity with 1 unit would lead to an increase in the grade expected by 0.35 points, while the same increase of the evaluation vote for the overall performance has as a consequence an expected higher grade by 0.29 points. An explanation of this could be the fact that for the entire sample, the tenure professor invited specialist to the courses that explained the applicability of the notions taught.

Up to this point, individual influences were assessed. We were curious to see what happens when all these factors are analyzed together – do they all remain significant and if changes occur in the degree of influence. The multiple regression analysis shows that almost all the factors considered become statistically insignificant (see Table 4). Consequently, we have re-estimated the regression with the two significant factors.

Table 4: Multiple regression model – coefficients and significance tests.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	5.848	0.563		10.396	0.000
PROP_KNOWLEDGE	0.349	0.046	0.588	7.538	0.000
CAREER_UTILITY	0.021	0.047	0.041	0.448	0.654
EMPLOYMENT	-0.017	0.046	-0.032	-0.359	0.720
DIDACT_ACT_PERF	0.070	0.068	0.077	1.036	0.301
EVALUATION_METHOD	-0.050	0.024	-0.115	-2.083	0.039
OVERALL_PERF	-0.004	0.068	-0.004	-0.060	0.952

Source: own calculations using SPSS 17.0.

Finally, the best model for explaining students' expectations in relation with their final evaluation is based on two factors – the proportion of acquirements for each subject and the level of difficulty of the evaluation method announced by the professor. This is the model with the best fit – $R^2 = 0.407$ and adjusted $R^2 = 0.401$. This means that the two predictors explain 40% of the variance of the endogenous variable. Additionally, the ANOVA analysis returned a value of 75.4 for the Fischer test, at a significance value = 0.000. Table 5 presents the coefficients and the significance tests for the model. Moreover, the signs of the coefficient are the ones expected – positive for the share of knowledge acquired and negative for the difficulty of the evaluation method.

Table 5: Best fitted regression model – with two factors.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	6.330	0.298		21.231	0.000
PROP_KNOWLEDGE	0.375	0.031	0.635	12.184	0.000
EVALUATION_METHOD	-0.056	0.023	-0.128	-2.458	0.015

Source: own calculations using SPSS 17.0.

4. Conclusions

The goal of the present research was to assess the factors that influence students' expectations in relation to the grades they will obtain at the final exams. After a complex judgment, based on statistical methods, six main factors remained in the analysis. Their individual evaluation confirmed the hypotheses in 5 out of the 6 cases considered. We demonstrated that the grade expected by a student to be obtained at the end of the semester is positively influenced by the degree in which the discipline was assimilated and it could influence the personal career in general

and the employment in that specific domain, in particular. A relationship of the same kind was also found with the performance of the didactic activity, through both the proxies used. Even though the sign of the coefficient returned as expected, the influence of the degree of difficulty of the evaluation method announced by the professor did not prove to be statistically significant. However, the low R^2 values show there other more important factors influencing the grade students expect for the final evaluation.

Things changed when multiple regression analyses were made. The most significant model consists in two exogenous variables – the proportion of knowledge assimilated and the difficulty of the evaluation method. The signs of the coefficients were as presumed – positive in the first case and negative in the second. All other exogenous variables turned to be insignificant.

In conclusion, the higher the proportion of knowledge accumulation, the higher the grade. In the same time, the less difficult evaluation, the higher the grade expected.

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