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Student motivation: experiences from the course “International Business Relationships”

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Abstract—The paper presents a survey investigating students’ motivation in the course International Business Relationships. The course includes a project assignment where students travel abroad to interview companies. This survey is a part of an ongoing study. Results showed that students found the course objectives to be motivating and that they aimed to put much effort into the course.

Index Terms—constructive alignment, course objective, motivation, survey

I. INTRODUCTION

COURSE development aiming at pedagogical improvements is an important part of teaching in higher education. For teachers, there are a number of suggestions on how to design and assess courses [1, 2]. One method that gains much attention is constructive alignment (CA) [3, 4]. CA focuses on learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks.

This paper investigates students’ motivation in relation to course objectives by conducting a survey in the course International Business Relationships at Chalmers University.

II. CONSTRUCTIVE ALIGNMENT

Constructive alignment (CA) as a method improves content and symmetry within a course to align goals, teaching and examination. According to Biggs [5], CA starts with the student constructing his or hers own learning through a number of learning activities. The teacher’s responsibility is to enable the right setting for students: “The teacher’s job is to create a learning environment that supports the learning activities appropriate to achieving the desired learning outcomes.” [5, p. 1] In turn, a better learning environment provides for in-depth learning. CA create an active and engaging teaching and learning environment with engaging pedagogies to provide students with opportunities to construct and internalise knowledge [6].

Three building blocks guide CA:

- Intended learning outcomes (ILOs)
- Teaching and learning activities (TLAs)
- Assessment tasks (ATs)

Designing ILOs, TLAs and ATs are key elements in any course design [6]. According to Biggs [5], CA involves: (1) the idea that students construct meaning through relevant learning activities, and (2) that the teacher sets up an environment that supports learning activities to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Wang, Su, Cheung, Wong and Kwong [6] show that

a more constructively aligned teaching and learning environment directs students’ learning approaches to more in-depth learning.

Biggs [3] presents four instructions:

- 1) Teachers should be clear about what the students need to learn and how they would manifest that learning in terms of performances of understanding.
- 2) Performance objectives should be arranged in hierarchy from most acceptable to barely satisfactory, which becomes the grading system.
- 3) Students need to be placed in situations that are judged likely to elicit the required learnings.
- 4) Students are required to provide evidence that their learning can match the stated objectives.

Student activities in lectures are mostly listening, interpreting, comprehending and note-taking [3]. According to Biggs [3], the problem with lecturing is that students remain passive. Instead, teachers need to engage in TLAs that activate the students. Biggs [5] suggests that learning should instead take place outside of the classroom through interactive group work, peer teaching, independent learning and work-based learning.

Biggs [3] presents three types of activities that play a role in construction of knowledge:

- 1) Teacher. The teacher has control over formal activities such as lectures and seminars. The teacher can also organise collaborative student activities, such as discussion groups.
- 2) Peers. Peer-controlled activities can be formal organised by the teacher or informal collaboration between students outside the classroom.
- 3) Self. Self-controlled activities of independent learning and study.

Cohen [7] states the questions: “What’s worth teaching” and “What’s worth assessing?”, to emphasis reflection on teacher’s parts in developing and improving courses. Contemporary issues should be included in business studies, such as business ethics, intercultural sensitivity and sustainability, as they are increasingly important to global leaders [8]. In this way, students’ interest and motivation could also be increased. Biggs, Kember and Leung [4] present three dimensions for students’ motives and strategies:

- 1) Surface: keep out of trouble with minimal effort => selective memorizing
- 2) Deep: engage the task appropriately => seeking for meaning

- 3) Achieving: maximise grades => optimal time and space management

The 3P model for teaching and learning comprises presage, process and product [4]. Presage includes (1) student factors such as prior knowledge ability (preferred approaches to learning), and (2) teaching context, including objectives, assessment, climate/ethos, teaching and institutional procedures. Process contains learning-focused activities (ongoing approaches to learning). Product includes learning outcomes such as quantitative, facts, skills, qualitative, structure, transfer (contextual approach to learning).

III. THE COURSE

The course, International Business Relationships, focuses on the nature and content of international relationships, aiming at providing students with skills and tools to facilitate analysis of international business networks.

The course builds on two blocks: lectures and a project assignment. The aim of the project assignment is to get deeper understanding of the features of business relationships in an international context. By conducting a case study, the international position of a firm is investigated. Students work in groups of 5-6 students. Each group identifies a focal company and some international counterparts (i.e. production units, suppliers, customers, sales offices) to be visited. See Figure 1 for an example of focal company's position in an international business network. The collected data is analyzed by applying the course literature. Each group provides a written report and presents the project in a seminar. The opportunity to travel as for students to get international experience is enabled by the financial support of the Elof Hansson Foundation.

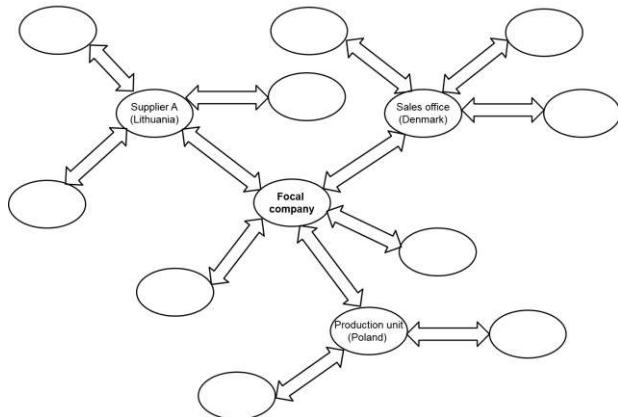


Fig. 1. Focal company's position in an international business network.

IV. METHOD

In order to investigate student motivation, a pilot survey was developed and presented to fellow teachers at the pedagogical project course who the authors of this paper participated in. Based on this feedback the adjusted survey was developed to consists of four questions related to ILOs and one question related to TLAs. The first questions asked students *how motivating* they found the four course objectives, on a scale from 1 (not motivating) to 5 (very motivating). The final question, addressing TLAs, covered the students'

motivation strategy. For each of the questions the students had the possibility to comment on their response.

The anonymous survey was launched on ping-pong shortly before the course started. Before the introduction, 23 students had filled in the survey. At the course introduction, the teacher asked students to take 3 minutes to fill in the survey. As a result, 38 students filled in the survey. Three days later an additional 2 students had filled in the survey, resulting in 63 responses in total. The total number of students participating in the course was 72.

V. SURVEY RESULTS

Students belonged to various master programs: MPSCM, TIPMA, MPALG, TKIEK, MPMEI, MPBDP, MPISC, MPQOM and MPTSE. International students were from India, France, China, South Africa, Finland, Sierra Leone, Thailand, Nigeria, Mexico, Canada, Iran, Russia and Italy. The result of the survey is presented in Fig. 2 - Fig. 5.

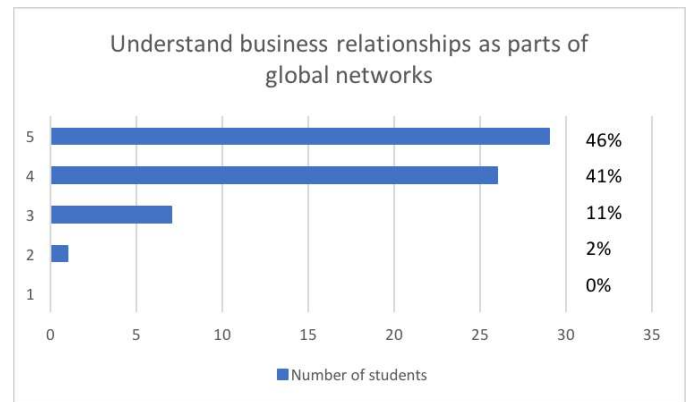


Fig. 2. Question 1

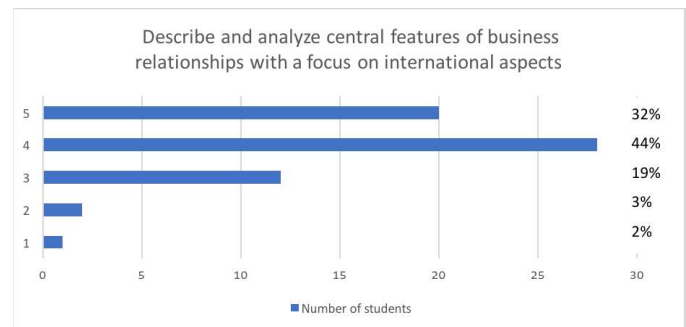


Fig. 3. Question 2

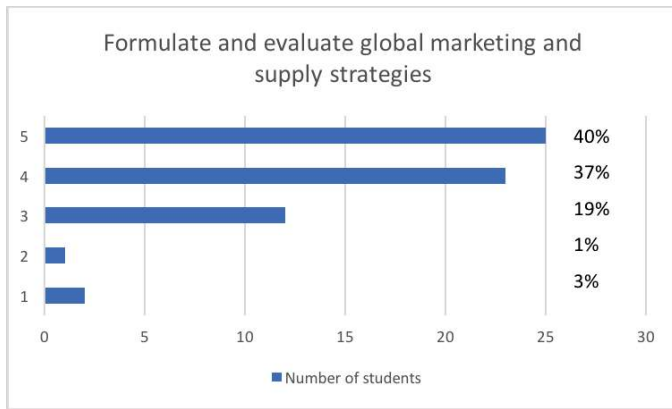


Fig. 4. Question 3

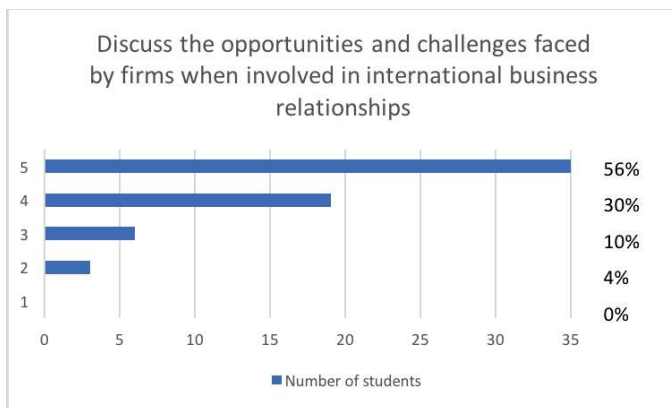


Fig. 5. Question 4

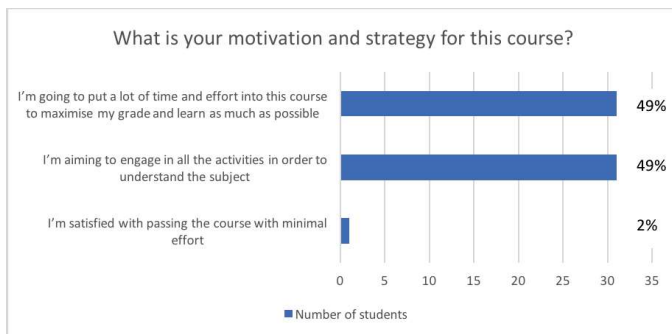


Fig. 6. Question 5

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results showed that the majority of students found the course objectives (Q1-Q4) to be motivating or very motivating. This could reflect that as an elective course, students have chosen the course in line with their interest in the topic, which would make the students motivated towards the course and its objectives. The mean of all individual course objectives was above 4 on a 1-5 scale. Consequently, a majority of the students find the course objectives to be motivating.

TLAs were investigated in Q5 in relation to students' motives and strategies (Surface, Deep or Achieving). Of the 63 students who answered the survey, 49% claimed that they would put in a lot of time and effort. An additional 49% students said that they would engage in all activities, while only 2% said that he was satisfied with passing the course. Hence, the majority of the

students have deep and achieving motives and strategies for the course.

During the course, students also expressed that they are very motivated as they can select their own companies to study, plan their travelling and get international experience "outside the classroom". One student phrased it as "this is a unique and very valuable learning experience". Hence, the course follows Biggs [5] suggestion to encourage and facilitate learning outside of the classroom while simultaneously supporting interactive group work. Students in the course study contemporary issues in business studies, including intercultural sensitivity, as suggested by Treleaven and Voola [8]. These aspects of the course could also be the reason for why students are interested in the course and motivated by the course objectives. This short paper is a part of an on-going study. Future studies will investigate the importance of the project assignment: the possibility to travel abroad, collecting empirical data (company, country) and application of theory to a real-life context theory for the students' motivation.

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