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Methods

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“Students’ attitudes towards exams at Postgraduate Level”

Abstract

Introduction

At the beginning of the semester, the teacher asked the class why we chose to take this subject, Management Research Methods. In her leading question, she asked if we chose this subject for without having exam. Similar question was made by my other teacher from other subject as well. This makes me inspired to be interested in doing survey on exams. On the same day, when the teacher asked us to think about choosing a topic for our survey in our group, I initiated this topic to our group that agreed to choose it. Therefore, this topic, “Students’ attitudes towards exams at Postgraduate level” became our survey’s topic.

Bennett (1991) defines research as “a systematic, careful inquiry or examination to discover new information or relationships and to expand or verify existing knowledge for some specified purpose”. According to Bennett, research is carried out to inquire about discovery of new knowledge or expending existing knowledge with a specific purpose. Our aim is to explore how Postgraduate students perceive about doing exams.

At Postgraduate level of study, there are various assessment methods and most subjects have combination of different assessment approaches such as assignments (individually or in groups) and presentations. Exams are, however, not compulsory in every subjects at the Postgraduate level. Depending on subject nature and subject area, exams are unnecessary for some subjects.

There is an interesting phenomenon that most students prefer to choose subjects which have no exams. Teachers are also aware of the fact that students have no preference to having exams. It clearly shows that in first classes of the subjects that have no exams, the teachers usually ask the same question if the students take these subjects for not having exams.

Moreover, by choosing subjects based on without having exams is not only a controversial debate, but it also has impact on students’ learning styles and strategies. In addition, it can be a negative effect on students’ future career development. Whilst students choose the subjects based on without having exams, it sometimes is irrelevant to their interests, and it can also create negative attitudes towards their learning. This is one reason to carry out the survey.

According to our background knowledge and own experiences, our peer students prefer to assignments than exams. There are some reasons why students prefer to do assignments. Doing assignments is less stressed due to the fact that it needs not require memorizing the content of textbook and finishing at limited time. Trying to arrive to exam hall is also a stressful matter. Exams are more stressful for having limited time, demanding more preparation, including memorizing for closed book exams. (References to be valid the survey)

**[*Introduction to Survey***

*Having reasons above, we have a passion to carry out a survey on students’ attitude towards exams. The survey is mainly based on questionnaire which has some questions related to find out how students have attitudes towards exams. The questionnaire is based on multiple choices, and easy to understand. They are also easy to choose. There is one open-ended question to find out how they perceive on exams. Furthermore, there are two different types of students: international and local students. There can be some different situations between international and local students. For international students, they live in a different environment from their homeland. It can be more stressful for them in studying than local students that live in a more relaxed environment. Based on this issue, the questionnaire has a question for asking whether they are international or local student.]*

**Aims and Expectation**

Aim of survey

Our survey aims to explore postgraduate students’ attitudes towards exams at the Postgraduate level. Their point of views towards exams can be different based on cultural status and background. The type of exams also has impact on their attitudes towards exams. According to our experience, many students usually complain about having exams, and they prefer to have at least open book exams. No matter whatever outcome of survey is, favouring positive attitude towards exams or negative attitude towards exams, it is worth doing this survey to explore extent of students’ preference to exams. The survey can be useful at least to discover how students perceive on exams.

Expectation of Survey

Before doing survey, there are some expectations for the survey. These expectations are based on the aim of the survey and our background knowledge and experience. Whilst we are studying at Postgraduate level, we discover ourselves that most of us have negative attitudes towards exams. It can be based on some reasons and assumption like the fact that exams are stressful. Moreover, exams require more preparation than other assessments such as assignments and presentations. Definitely, it requires memorization which most people have less interest. According to my own experience at UTS, there are some teachers who told us that they could not demand for not doing exams. Some teachers admit that exams are only for memory testing, not assessing students’ ability of practical knowledge that is necessary at Postgraduate level.

Therefore, we expect that most of Postgraduate students have less favoured attitude towards exams, especially older working students who study part time as they work full time and have less time of preparation for exams.

Bennett (1991) suggests that research is an essential management tool.

Our survey aims to explore postgraduate students’ attitudes towards exams at Postgraduate level. Their point of views towards exams can be different based on cultural background. The type of exams also has impact on their attitudes towards exams. The stress of exams piled on them can have negative attitudes towards exams. According to our experience, many students usually complain about having exams. No matter whatever outcome of survey is, favouring positive attitude towards exams or negative attitudes towards exams, it is worth doing this survey to explore the extent of students’ preference to exams. The survey can be useful at least for discovering students’ favoured type of assessment.

Expectation of Survey

Before doing survey, there is some expectation to the survey. These expectations are based on the aim of the survey and our background knowledge and experience. Whilst we are studying at Postgraduate level, we notice that most of the students have negative attitudes towards exams. Therefore, we expect that most of the students have less favoured attitudes towards exams, especially international students who speak English as second language.

Methodology

Our survey is questionnaire-based survey which is the most common approach in management research (Veal and Ticehurst 2000). The purpose of the research will drive the rest of the process of selecting an appropriate methodology(Jones 2009).

Sample selection

Whilst our topic is in relevance of students at Postgraduate level, our target group is Postgraduate students at the University of Technology Sydney. Sampling of our survey is 40 Postgraduate students that are our classmates. In this semester, all of my classes are evening sections in which majority is local full time working students. Most of them are part time students. It is one of the reasons to expect that full time working people find the exams harder as they hardly find time for preparation. While doing sample among our classmates, the sample is convenience sampling.

Questionnaire development

According to Veal and Ticehurst (2000), open-ended question is a line or space left for the respondent to write their own answer without providing any prior list of answers in a self-completed questionnaire.

The week after the first class of this subject, we met up for group meeting and we started to prepare survey proposal and did final decisions for questionnaire. Being the first time of doing survey, there were some mistakes which were judged by our classmates and corrected by the teacher. Finally, we could be able to start our survey which was carried out in our classes to make sure to have our targeted sampling of Postgraduate students.

The questionnaire has ten questions including one open-ended question which is aimed for their opinion of doing exams.

Open-ended question:

An open-ended question is when the interviewer asks a question without any prompting in regard to the range of answers to be expected. There is a line or space left for the respondents to write their own answer in a self-completed questionnaire (Veal 2005). The open-ended question is important for the survey to have the Postgraduate students’ attitudes towards exams. It can be various opinions based on their experiences and background knowledge.

Data collection and analysis

The survey was carried out in our classes among our classmates to make sure to get the target sample of ‘Postgraduate students’. Even though the requirement of samples is 40, there were 45 samples to make sure if some people do not answer our key questions like open ended question. There were 5 people who did not answer the open-ended question. Therefore, there are 40 responses out of 45 target samples. There are only one numerical data for the students’ exam mark.

Results:

The report covers only the results of the key questions which are important in the study.

Finally, there are the results of open ended question which has the data that 15 of the respondents have negative attitudes towards exams, 16 of them have positive attitudes, and 9 of them is neutral.

Univariate:

First question is whether exams are harder than assignments. According to pie chart (figure ), over half ( )of students consider that exams are harder and only 42% of students think assignments are harder.

Bivariate:

The bar chart (figure ) basically represents the relationship between the first key question and the type of students. For full time students, there is no obvious preference about exams or assignments; however, more part time students, about 67% of them, consider that exams are harder than assignments. It might be because exams require more preparation time than exams, and part time students might not have enough preparation time for exams because of their full time work.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Full time students | Part time students | Total |
| Exam | count | 14 | 12 | 26 |
| % of total | 31.1% | 26.7% | 57.8% |
| Assignment | count | 13 | 6 | 19 |
| % of total | 28.9% | 13.3% | 42.2% |
| Total | count | 27 | 18 | 45 |
| % of total | 60.0% | 40.0% | 100.0% |

In the bar chart, we can see the relationship between the mother tongue of students and the first key question. For non-native English speaker, they have no obvious preference towards exams and assignments. It might be because English is their second or foreign language. Both are hard for them. There is reading and writing skills involvement. However, more native-English speakers, about 83% of them consider that exams are harder. The reason for that might be native English speakers has much more confident in their writing skills in writing assignments. For result two and three, the same presenting pattern will be followed.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Native speaker | Non-native speaker | Total |
| Exam | count | 10 | 16 | 26 |
| % of total | 22.0% | 35.6% | 57.8% |
| Assignment | count | 2 | 17 | 19 |
| % of total | 4.4% | 37.8% | 42.2% |
| Total | count | 12 | 33 | 45 |
| % of total | 26.7% | 73.3% | 100.0% |

**Result 2**

The second pie chart explore whether students think that exams are stressful or not. The majority of students consider that exams are stressful, and only 26% of them assume that exams are not stressful. The reasons for that might be the time limit of exam, and students worry that they are not able to finish exam within time limit. Also, it might because that exams require memorization. (Sometimes, students just worry that they forget something during exams and have no chance to check on textbook again. )

In this bar chart, most of the part time and full time students consider that exams are stressful. However, fewer number of part time students, about 2 out of 17, consider that exams are not stressful.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Full time students | Part time students | Total |
| Stressful | count | 17 | 15 | 32 |
| % of total | 39.5% | 34.9% | 74.4% |
| non-stressful | count | 9 | 2 | 11 |
| % of total | 20.9% | 4.7% | 25.6% |
| Total | count | 26 | 17 | 43 |
| % of total | 60.5% | 39.5% | 100.0% |

In this bar chart, most of native and non- native English speakers think that exams are stressful. Surprisingly, more non-native English speaker consider that exams are not stressful comparing to native speakers.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Native speaker | non-native speaker | Total |
| Stressful | count | 10 | 22 | 32 |
| % of total | 23.3% | 51.2% | 74.4% |
| non-stressful | count | 1 | 10 | 11 |
| % of total | 2.3% | 23.3% | 25.6% |
| Total | count | 11 | 32 | 43 |
| % of total | 25.6% | 74.4% | 100.0% |

Content analysis

Content analysis is, as Veal and Ticehurst (2000) describe, technique that has detailed analysis of the content of a certain body of literature, or other documentary sources which are viewed as texts. Content analysis can be quantitative. In our survey, there is involvement of quantity such as counting the number of occurrences of ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

From the results, surprisingly, there are some Postgraduate students who prefer to do exams, especially among native speaker students.

As expected before doing the survey, non native speaker students have negative attitudes towards the exams.

Meanwhile, part-time students feel more stressful about the exams because they have less preparation time for exams and scheduled exams time may conflict with their work.

As mentioned above, there was expectation that exams can be more stressful than assignments whilst having more limited timeframe. The results show some students’ attitudes that assignments are harder. Therefore, the survey results do not meet the expectations in some cases.

Furthermore, we discover that most Postgraduate students prefer to do assignments, and some consider that at the Postgraduate level, exams are unnecessary. Based on the results of open-ended question, we can say our survey has nearly 50-50 ratio result.

Discussion:

According to the results from the survey, we can answer the aim of our survey to explore the Postgraduate students’ attitudes towards the exams. Based on the findings, there is contradiction in the results to our expectations. For instance, we expected before doing the survey that majority of Postgraduate students had negative attitudes towards exams. We, however, found that there were a number of Postgraduate students who preferred to do exams. Vice versa, the survey’s findings match with our expectations in some cases that students who are non English speaking background prefer to do assignments.

Moreover, when the questionnaire was being made, the expectation was that part time working students might be in the negative point of view towards exams whilst having limited timeframe of exams nature and their busy work schedule routine.

**Conclusion:**

From doing this survey, there can be some learning for the students who start to learn how to do the research. First, questions in questionnaire should be carefully chosen. There should not be leading questions, especially, not to be bias to the researcher’s perceptions and expectations.

Second, small mistakes can make the findings different. Finally, aim and expectations of the survey can be different from findings.

By doing this survey, we can learn that people can have different points of view towards the issue concerned even when they are exposed to the same thing based on their own nature and background knowledge.

**References:**

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Appendix:

(Data Matrix)