Student Satisfaction among Learners: Illustration by Jazan University Students

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Abstract

This study highlights essential findings concerning satisfaction and factors influencing satisfaction among students attending various colleges at Jazan University in Jazan, Saudi Arabia. A 27-item, two part survey was administered to students in order to gather opinions concerning their instructors and the courses taught at the university. The results revealed that students generally appreciated the quality of communication maintained between themselves and university administrators and teachers, although they preferred classes to be taught in Arabic rather than English. Moreover, 65% of those sampled were satisfied with course content and the quality of instructors teaching said courses.

Keywords: Educational satisfaction, satisfaction in higher education, student satisfaction, measurement of satisfaction

Introduction

This study examines satisfaction and factors influencing satisfaction among students attending various colleges at Jazan University (JU), which is located in Jazan, Saudi Arabia. We begin by establishing a theoretical framework concerning the notion of satisfaction and its determinants, while also presenting key models and approaches for its measurement. Next, an attempt is made to apply this framework to the educational context at JU. We then discuss the research model adopted by this study, in addition to the survey items and sample. The data collected were subsequently analyzed using SPSS, and the results were interpreted.

Section I: Satisfaction from an Educational Perspective

I-1-a Defining of Satisfaction

The definition of satisfaction differs according to discipline (e.g., philosophy, sociology, psychology, and economics). Despite these variations, satisfaction generally entails a sense that one's expectations have been met. Indeed, in most dictionaries satisfaction has become nearly synonymous with gratification and fulfillment, which are the opposite of frustration and indignation. For example, according to Merriam-Webster satisfaction is "a happy or pleased feeling because of something that you did or something that happened to you" or "a result that deals with a problem or complaint in an acceptable way" ("satisfaction", 2015).In both cases satisfaction refers to the gap between an actual undergoing/mediated experience and one's expectations (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry,1990); it reflects the subjective and personal experience of dealing with or relating to things, which is rooted in emotional factors (Oliver & Swan,1989; Chen, Hsiao, & Lee, 2005). In a business context the definition of satisfaction is similar, although emphasis is placed on the customer's assessment of a product or service (Deng, Lu, Wei, & Zhang, 2010). Thus, in commerce satisfaction not only reflects a customer's feelings toward an experience or product, but also determines his or her loyalty toward the manufacturer or service provided (Mittal, Ross, & Baldasare, 1998; Deng et al., 2010). Furthermore, in business and economics literature satisfaction is frequently measured on a transaction-specific or overall basis.

Transaction-specific satisfaction entails, "the consumer's dis/satisfaction with a discrete service encounter"; in contrast overall satisfaction involves, "the consumer's overall dis/satisfaction with the organization based on all encounters and experiences with that particular organization" (Bitner & Hubbert, 1994, pp.76-7).From a consumer perspective, satisfaction refers to a product or a service's ability to meet or exceed one's expectations. Nevertheless, the true measure of whether satisfaction has beenachieved is determined by a product or service's success or failure in the marketplace (Đukić & Kijevčanin, 2012). In an educational context, institutions such as universities are service providers, and students are considered costumers. Accordingly, business approaches are commonly applied to higher education, which by extension entails an examination of customer satisfaction in order to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the services provided. Despite these similarities, concepts and tools used to evaluate satisfaction in business contexts are not necessarily applicable to scenarios involving higher education. Therefore, before attempting to apply business-oriented approaches to measuring satisfaction in an educational environment, one must first understand key differences between both domains.

I-1-b The Concept of Satisfaction in Higher Education

According to Stone and Thomson (1987), the notion of customer satisfaction and the variables examined in its assessment should be modified to address issues that are pertinent to education and educational institutions (e.g., administrative satisfaction and school policies, in addition to educational goals and methodologies).However, in terms of measuring customer satisfaction, the essence of education itself is what primarily distinguishes it from the business world: educational institutions do not produce consumable goods or products, but contribute to the development of human capital and social conciseness. Satisfaction in an educational context entails a dialectical relationship between the receiver (i.e., student/costumer) and the sender (i.e., an instructor and the curriculum that he or she teaches). As such, the components of educational satisfaction are intricate, and their profiles vary due to the dynamic nature of educators and school curriculums, which are inherently connected to the learning and teaching process. Educational satisfaction is therefore a complex process involving learning and teaching outcomes in relation to student behavior, judgment, and motivation. Through education, students transform from objects and consumers into subjects and producers. Thus, educational satisfaction concerns a student's attitude toward learning; and if he or she appreciates the curriculum and exhibits a desire to learn, satisfaction can be inferred. This study contends that educational satisfaction can be measured according to whether a student acquired requisite knowledge and skills to a degree exceeding one who did not. Comparatively, dissatisfaction materializes when a learner has not acquired the knowledge and skills that he or she expected, and subsequently perceives the investment to be wasted(Tough, 1982; Chen et al., 2005). Furthermore, the degree of student satisfaction is embodied in the chasm between an individual's level of anticipation and the actual results achieved, wherein a smaller and larger gap is indicative of higher and lower levels of satisfaction respectively.

I-3 Measurement

In the context of higher education, the concept of satisfaction and methods of measuring it are primarily influenced by consumer behavior theory. However, in pursuing a more comprehensive measurement approach, some elements from social/behavioral theory are frequently integrated as well. This entails placing greater emphasis on the role of students' academic and social environments, experiences, and ways of thinking. Some researchers have proposed synthesizing consumer behavior and social/behavioral theories in order to establish more thorough guidelines for the evaluation of satisfaction. Based on research conducted by Harvey (1995), Hill (1995), Elliott &Healy (2001), and Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002), we have identified 15 criteria that influence students' perception of their academic experience. These factors include(1) the courses offered; (2) quality of lecturers; (3) support received from lecturers; (4) real-world relevance of course content; (5) quality of administrative and student services; (6) social atmosphere; (7) attractiveness of the surrounding city; (8) access to computers and technology; (9) library services; (10) quality and size of lecture halls; (11) cafeteria and food quality; (12) university reputation; (13) school location; (14) presentation of information; and (15) quality and appearance of university buildings.

Section II: Empirical Study

II-1 Background and Research Methodology

JU was established in 2006, and as a young and still growing institution lacks many amenities. For example, the majority of its colleges are located in rented buildings, and there is no library, restaurants,dorms, public transportation, or free Internet access.

Accordingly, many of the 15 aforementioned factors are not applicable given the university's unique circumstances. Therefore, we have opted to focus solely on student satisfaction in relation to course content and teacher performance.

Methodology

A 27-item, two part questionnaire was distributed randomly to students in order to gather their opinions concerning instructors and the courses taught at JU. The first and second halves of the questionnaire evaluated student satisfaction as it relates to course content and teacher performance, respectively. By examining this data, we intended to identify the main factors influencing student satisfaction in order improve teacher performance and the university curriculum.

Study Objectives

The aim of this study was to evaluate overall student satisfaction, in addition to student satisfaction in relation to course content and structure, the fairness of teachers in assessing student work, support from lecturers, teacher commitment, and the real-world relevance of course content. Furthermore, we intended to highlight domains in which students were least satisfied in order to identify areas for improvement.

Questionnaire, Sample characteristics, and Data Analyses

A questionnaire was developed based on the study's theoretical framework, and therefore combined consumer behavior and social/behavioral approaches to the measurement of satisfaction, which by extension included relevant items from the 15 previously discussed criteria. The questionnaire was administrated to 5000 male and female students from various faculties enrolled in regular courses at JU, although students from the colleges of medicine and applied medical sciences were not surveyed. Questionnaires were distributed by the instructors of each respective class prior to beginning their lessons and later collected. Forty-one hundred questionnaires were returned in total, of which 2000 (48.78%) were valid.[2] Closed and open-ended questions pertaining to course quality and teacher performance were included in the questionnaire. To ensure diversity in the sample, courses from various disciplines were examined, which varied in their content and form. For example, an attempt was made to include courses in the natural sciences, those focusing on analysis and discussion, and also those involving a mixture of both. Additionally, staff members were categorized according to whether they spoke both English and Arabic or only English. The collected data were later analyzed with SPSS 18 using descriptive and factor analyses.

II-2 Results, Interpretations, and Recommendations

A- Overall Satisfaction[3]

Analysis revealed that 65% of those surveyed were satisfied, and proud to be enrolled in a young and developing institution that has garnered an excellent reputation among Saudi Arabia's recently inaugurated universities. Likewise, most students were satisfied with course content, the quality of instruction, and the quality of communication maintained between themselves and teachers and administrators. These findings are discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow.

B- Course Content and Structure

Concerning the structure of courses and the clarity of their content, 65.6% of those surveyed stated that they were highly satisfied, thus indicating that the structure of these courses, in addition to their content, met or exceeded students' expectations. Given that our goal was to identify areas wherein students were either satisfied or highly satisfied, we interpreted responses other than "agree" or "strongly agree" to be indicative of dissatisfaction.

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[2] An ethical considerations were respected to protect students anonymity
[3] All statistical procedures and tests were reviewed and validated.

Course content and structure are clear

Strongly agree	
Agree	
Other (dissatisfaction)	
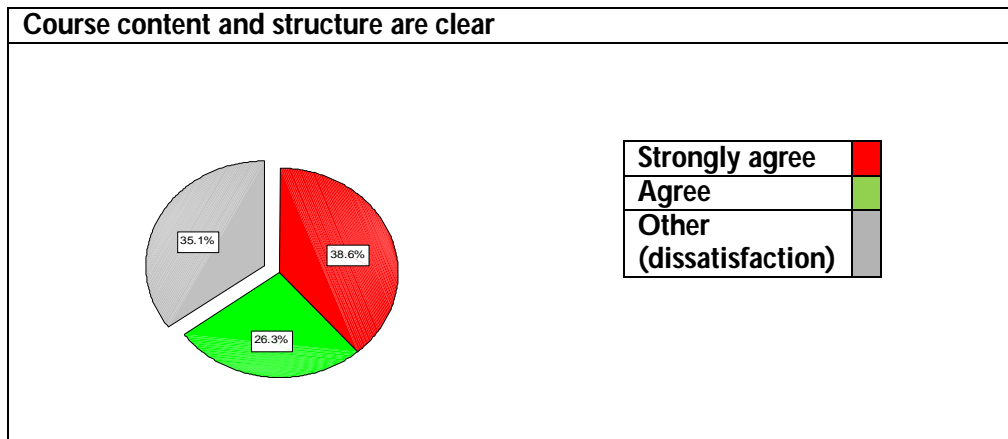
Our practical experience in Jazan University as teachers conducts as to believe that these results are, at least in part, attributable to the quality of books used by faculty members, which are generally written by respected authors and compiled by esteemed editors. Moreover, the results also reflect the great efforts instructors have exerted in synthesizing disciplines. It should be noted, however, that the meaning of clarity as understood by students could have differed from our own interpretation; consequently, students may have actually equated clarity with parity between course and exam content. In other words, learners may have measured clarity based on whether topics discussed in class were proportionately covered on exams. Following a general analysis of satisfaction in relation to the clarity of course content and satisfaction, we proceeded to triangulate the results by considering the influence of language on students' perceived satisfaction. We subsequently discovered that satisfaction dropped to 11% when lessons were taught in English alone. In contrast, satisfaction levels reached 88% when classes taught in English were supplemented with instruction in Arabic. A cross-sectional analysis revealed that students' perceptions of clarity were primarily affected by whether they comprehended the content being presented, not by test results. The analysis also revealed that most (92%) students perceived courses taught in Arabic to be educationally worthwhile, although this percentage fluctuated slightly between faculties. This result is in agreement with our discovery that levels of satisfaction were 96.6% in colleges wherein courses were taught exclusively in Arabic.

C- Fairness of Teachers in Assessing Students

Regarding the fairness of teachers in assessing student work, most students indicated that instructors set clear requirements for success in their respective classes. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed reported that instructors established clear criteria for the assessment of class assignments, midterms, quizzes, and final exams, as well as their respective roles in determining students' final grades. Satisfaction rose to 84%, however, when teachers explained the assessment criteria in Arabic; in contrast, dissatisfaction was amplified and becomes 61.4% when the same criteria were presented in English. Despite students' limited English proficiency and aversion to using it, (90.3%) were registered in faculties wherein courses were taught in English, and nevertheless were satisfied with the assessment of their work.

**Quality of teacher assessment is fair**
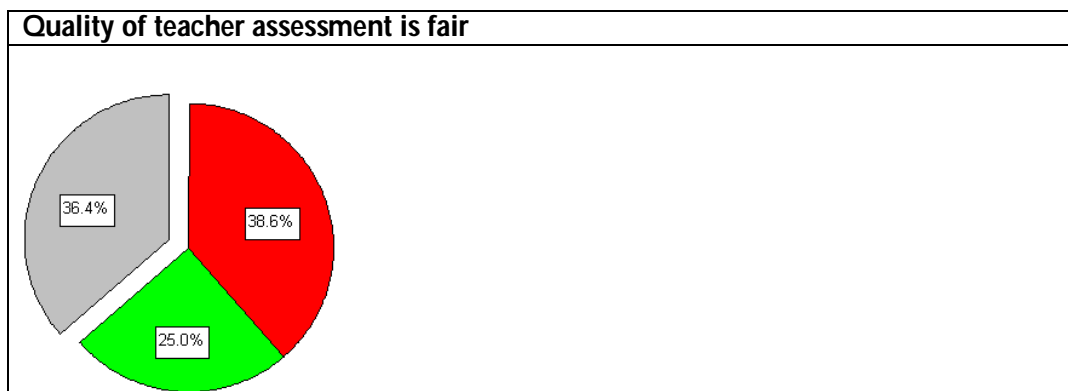
D- Support from Lecturers

Concerning the quality of support received from instructors and the availability of said support, 70.2% of the students surveyed were satisfied. We believe that this result reflects the high standard of communication maintained between students and faculty members at JU, as well as the ability of instructors to convey course content clearly and effectively. Teachers who were consulted concerning these results had a different interpretation, however. According to them, students rarely make appointments to see them except prior to exams. Thus, students are not driven to seek guidance from faculty members concerning the acquisition of knowledge and a proper understanding of it, but to prepare for exams and procure acceptable results.

Support from lecturers is satisfactory

39.9%   38.6%   21.5%
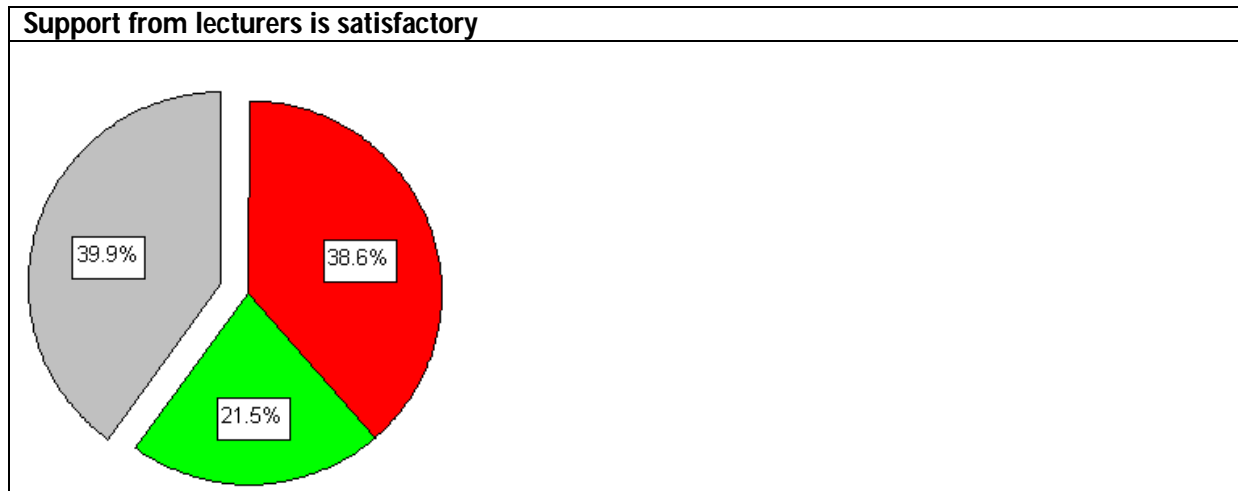
As was the case with the previously discussed criteria, language played a significant role in students' levels of satisfaction in relation to teacher support. Ninety-four percent of students surveyed indicated that language choice was an important factor in ensuring effective communication between students and teachers, both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, whether a teacher is capable of speaking Arabic can contribute to students' perception of whether an instructor's support is satisfactory or not.

E- Teacher Commitment

Instructors are committed to fulfilling their duties

29.4%   46.1%   24.6%
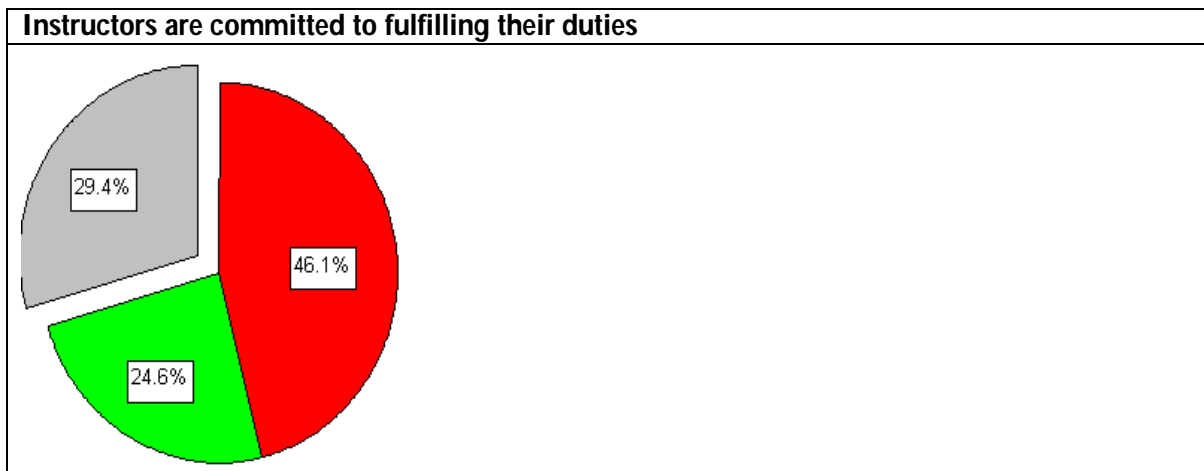
Regarding teacher dedication and commitment to teaching the content of each college's respective curriculums, 70% of the students surveyed felt that faculty members sufficiently fulfilled their duties, and that classroom activities were generally relevant to course syllabi. Furthermore, 73% of the students related that their instructors covered course content in its entirety. This performance is imputed to the high levels of the professionalism of university faculty members. Despite these positive findings, 45% of the students conveyed dissatisfaction concerning the obtainment of resources, references, and relevant documents from instructors.

Cross-sectional analysis revealed further dissatisfaction regarding the languages and technologies used in classrooms. For example, 62% of the students expressed that using English exclusively impedes comprehension, particularly in courses related to Saudi society and the social sciences. Moreover, these students felt that such courses should be taught by instructors who possess awareness of Saudi Arabia's social, economic, and institutional realities, or at minimum the realities of other Arab countries. Technology could prove useful in such cases not only to assist learners in understanding course content in general, but also to present them with culturally suitable examples that may lead to greater knowledge retention.

F. Real world Relevance of Course Content

Course content is relevant to the real world

33.3%

44.3%

22.4%
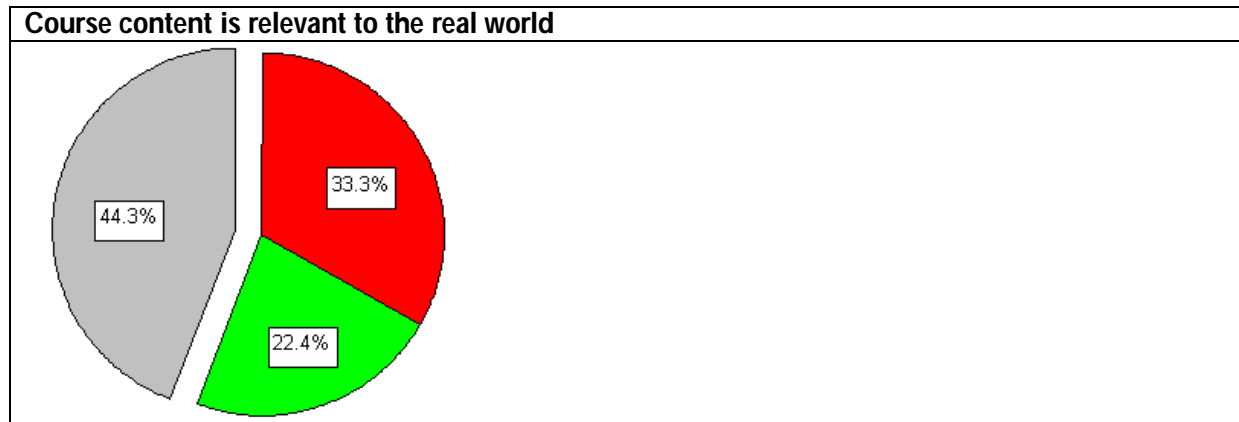
Concerning the relevance of each college's respective curriculums and courses to students' daily lives, more than 44% of the students expressed that neither aided them in understanding their environment nor the socioeconomic issues affecting them. According to students, teachers generally focused on course content without linking it to real world examples. Moreover, students also felt that the content of some courses should be linked together when appropriate. These findings indicate that formulas and theories alone are limited in their ability to explain and diagnose problems that students face on a daily basis, which consequently causes courses to seem irrelevant and polarizing. For students, even the seeming irrelevance of course titles to their socioeconomic realities may be off-putting. This is especially evident in the nature of courses offered at JU and their content, wherein the Saudi context is minimally addressed, particularly in the Community College, Business and Administration College, and other social and educational faculties.

Factor Analysis

Despite proven satisfaction in some areas, the rate of dissatisfaction in other realms was nonetheless high, and thus deserving of further investigation. To accomplish this, factor analysis was conducted to determine which specific variables were key in contributing to student dissatisfaction. The analysis revealed a correlation between dissatisfaction and three variables: the language of instruction, the nature of courses, and teacher performance. A fourth variable was also identified linking the three aforementioned variables to student performance and knowledge acquisition.

Components diagram
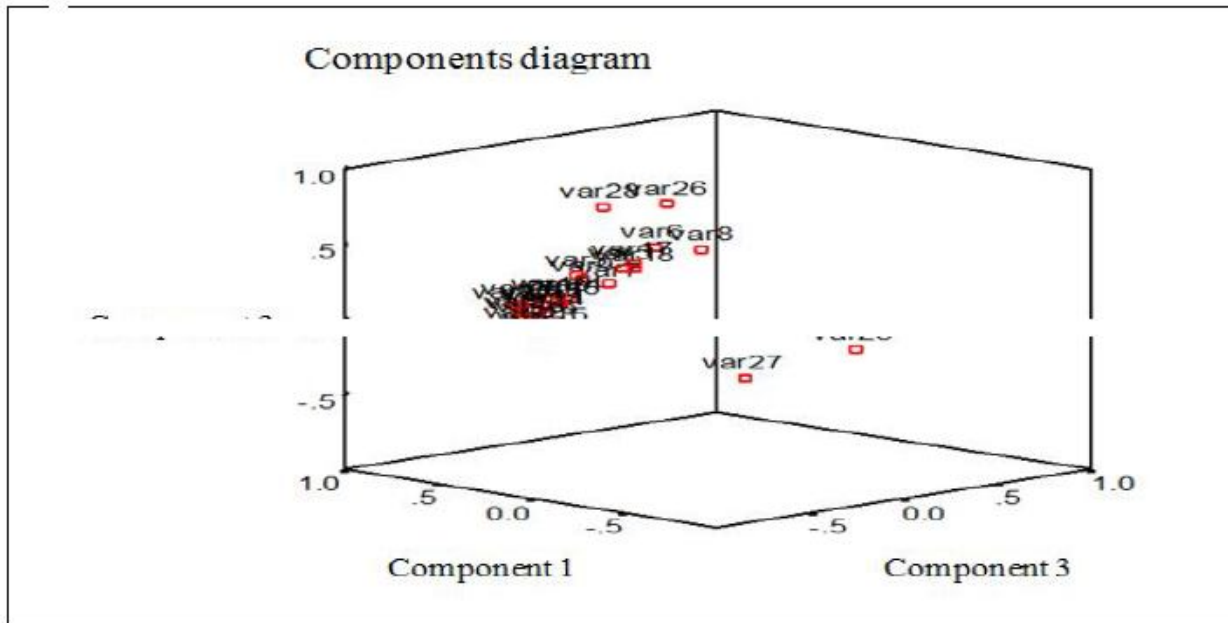
The above results were confirmed based on students' responses to the survey's open-ended questions, wherein individuals were asked to suggest ways in which their learning experiences could be improved upon. Analysis of their responses revealed that:

- 91.7% preferred to be taught in Arabic
- 88% believed that students should be afforded greater freedom in selecting their majors
- 87.2% emphasized the importance of motivating learners by establishing a balance between their needs and course content
- 95.5% believed that the university's preparatory program should adopt an alternative approach that emphasizes one's major
- 71% believed that more courses should be offered that address the Saudi social and economic context

Conclusion

The concept of satisfaction in higher education can be enriched by combining business-oriented and social/behavioral theories concerning it, thus bridging the gap between the sender (i.e., teacher) and receiver (i.e., student). This approach facilitates the quantification of student satisfaction by furnishing tools that enable one to measure its levels. Furthermore, our examination of overall satisfaction seemed to indicate that learners' opinions were shaped not only by a desire to achieve success and social distinction, but also by a need to acquire knowledge and skills that could be applied in real world contexts. Given JU's unique circumstances as a new Saudi university, some of the 15 criteria established by Harvey (1995), Hill (1995), Elliott & Healy (2001), and Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002) were not applicable, and therefore excluded from our analysis.Triangulation revealed that most(65%) students possessed a relatively high level of satisfaction regarding teacher performance and course content/structure. We believe that this result is attributable to students' tendency to associate satisfaction with success, and indeed success rates at JU exceed 90%. Nevertheless, the aforementioned high levels of satisfaction should not cause us ignore the many areas wherein students were dissatisfied. To address these issues, it is necessary to focus on certain troublesome variables that were highlighted through cross-sectional analysis and triangulation. The importance of language is particularly deserving of attention, as the correlation between language and satisfaction was exceptionally strong (more than 90%). Thus, the primary obstacle to learning in JU classrooms is language, which affects how students communicate with instructors and their ability to acquire knowledge. The effect of language was further emphasized during the factor analysis, which caused us to conclude that four factors primarily determine student satisfaction, namely the language of instruction, the nature of courses, teacher performance, and student performance/knowledge acquisition.

Responses to the survey's open-ended questions confirmed these conclusions, wherein students overwhelmingly expressed the necessity of adopting Arabic as the primary language of instruction, particularly in courses involving the humanities and the social sciences. Therefore, teaching courses in Arabic should aid students in understanding the information being conveyed in a Saudi context, and thus allow them to utilize such knowledge in a practical manner. In doing so, students can move beyond mere formulas and theories and instead focus on the analysis and interpretation of real world problems, which are in constant flux. Nevertheless, in considering the above findings it should be noted that there were some limitations in the analysis, namely related to time constraints, the sample itself, the data collection method, and measurement criteria. Moreover, the scarcity of similar research examining other Saudi universities prevented us from reviewing our results in light of other studies.

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