Designing a Specific Tool for Measuring Students' and Tutors' Mutual Expectations from Each Other in an E-Learning Platform

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Abstract— Different aspects and dimensions of assessing students’ expectations has been addressed by many researchers. They, in general, assumed or approved that identifying and addressing students' expectations can result in many positive outputs or themselves, their tutors and their educational systems. However, there is a lack in paying enough attention to: Addressing tutors’ expectations as well. Designing and customizing an expectation survey system for e-learning systems, scaffolding a systematic and interactive process for identifying and modifying students’ and tutors’ expectations. So, the research question of this study is: how students and tutors can generate, exchange and revise their mutual expectations in an e-learning environment? So, 6 separate focus groups with the active participation of 10 academics, 16 master students and 10 entrepreneurs as the experts and end-users of our aimed e-learning platform have been conducted and some solutions that can be used in designing the aimed system have been generated. These solutions have been articulated in the form of Functional Specifications and then a Schematic Storyboard has been designed. This storyboard designs a comprehensive online system for identifying, exchanging and revising students’ and tutors’ expectations from each other. Finally, some supports of the main features of this system have been extracted from the literature. While the paper is written from an e-learning perspective, the issues and processes raised are applicable to any higher education system that seeks to value and reward a mutual expectation and feedback system in its teaching-learning process.

Index Terms— e-learning, Students’ Expectation, Tutors’ Expectation, Schematic Storyboard

I. INTRODUCTION

Tavani and Losh (2003) empirically found that expectations are the strongest predictor of students’ performance in school, implying that if students have strong beliefs that they will accomplish a particular goal, they are more likely to succeed in that attainment [1]. Teaching requires sensitivity to the student expectations when constructing an educational environment which connect directly with the ways in which students learn [2]. So, it can be expected that identifying and working with students’ expectations has beneficial effects on student satisfaction with tutor support, reducing student drop-out and increasing course completion rates [3]. Also Mullen and Tallent-Runnels (2006) found that a classroom environment where teacher expectations are clear is positively related to students’ motivation, academic self-regulation and scholastic achievement [4].

It seems the importance of the awareness of tutors about their students’ expectations is more in e-learning systems rather than face-to-face educational settings, since Stevenson et al. (2006) show that students come to distance education courses with variable expectations of the levels of service and support they will receive from their tutors [3]. The reason of this special importance can be found in the amount of tutors’ support which allocates to e-learning students in comparison with in-house students. Mullen and Tallent-Runnels (2006) find that students in traditional classrooms ranked instructors’ affective support higher than tutors’ supports in online classes [4].

There is a little evidence on assessing tutors’ expectations from their students in higher education settings. Perhaps the researchers did not pay attention to this issue since they thought that it has not a significant effect on students’ performance; as Harris et al. (1986) mentioned that teachers’ manipulated expectations for cognitive performance had little or no effect on pupils’ cognitive performance [5]. However, achieving a correct understanding of mutual expectations of students and tutors is an important factor in the success of educational bodies. Boer et al. (2010) point out that “Teacher Expectation Bias”, as the difference between observed and predicted teacher expectation, has a clear effect on students’ long-term performance [6].

Students and tutors can specify their expectations in different areas. For example, Deggs et al. (2010) identify that students’ expectations in an online degree programme at a research university in the USA yield three primary themes included expectations about learning outcomes, expectations of faculty related to teaching, and expectations related to support systems offered by the university [7]. Reviewing the different papers and studies which have been published in this area, we proposed that assessing students and tutors’ expectations can be categorised in the following levels: University’s Support, Approaches & Processes, and Content & Skills. For example, Paechter et al. (2010) assessed students’ expectations of e-learning and its relation to learning achievement and course satisfaction. They emphasised that aspects of a course that students consider important as well as students’ achievement goals were the best predictors for success and ranked higher than other course characteristics [8]. In another study, Christenson and Barney (2011) try to explore expectations of physical
student teachers. They pointed out that faculty members need to reinforce appropriate practices along with professional expectations and personal character traits of their students [9]. There are a lot of other examples of studies that have been focused on the different target groups and levels of this process within a learning-teaching environment. Table 1 summarizes the targeted areas of some of these research that have already been published.

As can be seen in Table 1, the most of prior studies have been focused on assessing students’ expectations in the area of different approaches including: teaching, learning, assessment, material delivering, etc.

Looking more closely at the Table 1 and findings of the assessment, material delivering, etc. area of different approaches in previous research activities, it can be concluded that:

- Almost all of the prior research focused on the students’ expectations and there is a little evidence and effort for assessing tutor’s expectations form their students;
- there is not any effort for designing and engineering a software that can be embedded in the current e-learning platforms for assessing students and tutors’ mutual expectations from each other;
- there is a vital need to have a comprehensive system that take into account different dimensions of an effective expectation identifying workflow in universities.

Table 1. A summary of some studies for assessing students’ and tutors’ expectations in the learning environments

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Target level</th>
<th>Stu nts</th>
<th>Tuto rs</th>
<th>University’s Support</th>
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<th>Content &amp; Skills</th>
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II. METHODOLOGY

A. Figures and Tables

As a qualitative research methodology, 6 separate focus groups with the active participation of 10 academics, 16 master students and 10 entrepreneurs as the experts and end-users of our aimed e-learning platform were conducted in University of Tehran, Iran and University of Limerick, Ireland. Participants in each focus group were required to generate some solutions only based on their personal experiences with regard to assuring that an e-learning system provides an effective process for assessing students’ and tutors’ mutual expectations from each other? Each participant raised a solution based on his/her experience in his/her educational life and described the different dimensions of that solution. This was an open discussion and other members of each focus group participated in the discussion and expressed their ideas regardless of rightness or wrongness of the answer. All of these generated solutions were gathered, classified and used to construct Functional Specification (FS) and finally schematic storyboard. The FS includes four different dimensions of the workflow, containing: Educating (How we can promote and implement mutual satisfaction survey in our e-learning platform?), Motivating (How students and tutors should be encouraged to express and modify their expectations from each other), Monitoring (How students’ and tutors’ actions related to mutual satisfaction survey should be monitored?) and Assessing (How users’ actions in mutual satisfaction survey should be assessed?).

In addition, a literature review was conducted in terms of the following keywords: “mutual satisfaction”, “Getting Feedback”, “e-learning”, “University”. Some online databases e.g. Google Scholarship, Sage, Springer and Willey have been used in this process. Accordingly, for drawing the final schematic storyboard the below process has been followed:

![Figure 1. Different stages and process of this study](image-url)
As can be seen in Fig. 1, firstly, the solutions for well implementing mutual satisfaction survey in an e-learning setting were generated by the participants of 6 focus groups. Then, using the recorded discussions of members of the groups, FS were written and then supports from the empirical studies were identified. The FS tries to transfer the generated solution from the theoretical to a practical domain. Finally, using the functional specification, Schematic Storyboard has been drawn (Fig. 3). This Schematic Storyboard is a process diagram of how the overall system works for this particular use-case to accompany the functional specification (FS) depicting data/control flow in the system in response to getting feedback process being executed.

III. FINDINGS

Four components of the FS related to the mutual expectation survey tool were written here by reviewing participants’ experiences have been generated through the focus groups. These components of the FS were used to draw a Workflow Depiction (Fig. 2) and a Schematic Storyboard (Fig. 3).

According to Fig. 2, the process of this function is divided into 10 main stages: firstly, both students and tutors are required to look at some documents and then submit their expectations from each other. Students need to see their initial submitted goals as well as the course’s structure; and tutors need to see their students’ personal profile as well as the course’s structure to be able to proceed to the expectations submission page. Their expectations can be submitted by responding to a questionnaire as well as a set of open-ended questions. After submitting these initial expectations, students are required to see and reflect on their tutors’ expectations and vice versa. In the next stage, both students and tutors are required to see the other side’s comments and perhaps modify their initial expectations. Finally, and before providing access to the course page, students and tutors need to look at the final expectations of each other. Since tutors need to see numbers of students’ expectations, an average of their students’ expectations will be calculated and shown to the tutor.

1.1. Students see their course / module structure and their generated goals.

1.2. Students present their expectations from their tutors by responding a questionnaire and some open-ended questions.

1.3. Tutors see their students’ expectations, reflect upon them and discuss with students.

1.4 students modify their initial expectations

2.1. Tutors see their students’ profiles and the course / module structure.

2.2. Tutors present their expectations from their students by responding a questionnaire and some open-ended questions.

2.3. Students see their Tutor’s expectations, reflect upon them and discuss with the tutor.

2.4. Tutors modify their initial expectations.

3. Students and Tutors see their revised mutual Expectations.

4. Allowing students and tutors to enter to the module workplace.

With regard to the users’ (including students and tutors) motivation to be actively engaged in the process, it is compulsory for them to do this process to get access to their modules. In fact, doing this function is the prerequisite of their first entry to the module page. However, it seems that this compulsion is not sufficient to achieve a satisfactory result from this process. They might attend this function and do the necessary steps but without paying the enough attention. So, they need to be aware that these submitted expectations will be the main base of: 1. The other side’s services/behavior; and 2. The other side’s satisfaction survey at the end of the semester.

Regarding the Monitoring of users’ activity in this function, all of the final expectations both from students and tutors are visible in Course/Module Structure Page. Moreover, all of the discussions between students and tutors regarding their initial and final expectations will be published in a specific forum and are visible for all users who have been assigned to that module/Course. Also, the module and course leaders have access to all of these submitted expectations and can check them randomly.

With regard to Assessing students’ and tutors’ performance in this function, a sum score of users’ interaction, commenting and revising will be automatically calculated and exported to their Reward System, affecting their final score in each class and course. This can be also considered as an extrinsic motivation for them to be active in the process.

Fig. 3, as a schematic storyboard, shows a brief illustration of the process that has been mentioned in the above and demonstrates the different layers of the e-learning platforms that will be affected by this process.

Figure 2. The Ten-Step model of generating, exchanging and modifying students and tutors mutual expectations
IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper presents a framework for implementing mutual satisfaction survey in the e-learning environments. This system was partially suggested by other academics as well. Stevenson et al. (2006) tried to embed a specific expectations-led quality assurance process in a large-scale project carried out by Oscail (the Irish National Distance Education Centre) that enables the sharing of students’ expectations from their tutors before a course starts. They find that conducting an expectation survey amongst distance students could be of mutual benefit to the student and the tutor, as well as generally improving the overall quality of tutor support provided by the distance learning organization. The findings suggest that the majority of students and tutors involved in the study see the value of the process and that it helps tutors consider and respond to the type of support students hoped to receive [3]. While this study as one of the first efforts for assessing students’ expectations in an e-learning environment is valuable, two major drawbacks can be seen in their proposed process. Firstly, there is not any process for assessing tutors’ expectations from their students; and secondly, there is not any structured process for creating an interactive communication between each student and tutor to make a better balance between their mutual expectations and ideas. Moreover, there are some other concerns with regard to students-tutors expectation survey. Two of these concerns are presented in the following paragraphs.

As the first concern, Calvo and Ellis (2010) [17] as well as Orsmond and Merry (2011) [18] mention that Tutors’ intentions when providing feedback may not be accurately perceived and acted on by their students. Accordingly they suggested that introducing better scaffolding and variation into the feedback can help reducing this misunderstanding in the flow of feedbacks and expectations between tutors and students. We think that this reverse mutual expectation survey which provides a compulsory viewing, commenting and responding to each other’s feedbacks helps both students and their tutors to achieve a common and accurate understanding about their expectations from each other.

The second concern has been addressed by Stephenson & Weil (1992) when they point out that: “Starting at the point students have reached is almost a first principle of teaching” [19]. Accordingly, it is adjusted that the function
of this storyboard would be implemented at the beginning of each semester and before starting the course. In fact, doing this process completely and carefully is the pre-requirement of the users’ first entry to the module.

This process, which is argued by our participants, would be appreciated by both students and tutors, has beneficial effects on: enhancing student satisfaction with tutor support, improving tutor satisfaction with student performance, reducing student drop-out and increasing course completion rates, improving module curriculum, increasing the effectiveness of tutors’ teaching preferences, enhancing students’ involvement in the teaching-learning process, and improving a better mutual understanding of students and tutors.

Some of these benefits have been approved by prior studies. Stevenson and Sander (1998) find empirical evidence that collecting expectations from students before they embark on a course assists tutors to reflect upon the content and delivery style that he/she has planned to deliver [20].

This paper not only proposed the possibility of assessing students’ and tutors’ expectations, but also provides the possibility of seeing and reflecting on each other’s expectations. Then, each of them will have the opportunity of revising their initial expectations; and finally, each of them needs to see the other side’s final expectations. However, in most other related studies, researchers used to only assess students’ expectations, but they did not propose any system for:
- Assessing tutors’ expectations as well;
- Redirecting students and tutors to have a look at some necessary documents and information before expressing their expectations;
- Exchanging students’ and tutors’ expectations with each other;
- Asking them to reflect upon the other side’s expectations;
- Giving them another opportunity to revise their initial expectations;
- Requiring them to see each other’s final expectations;
- Linking between their expectations and their final satisfaction level at the end of the semester

In fact, this paper tries to implement the features and capabilities above in designing the new mutual expectation system that has been proposed here. This system seems to have some limitations as well. For instance, it has not been programmed and tested in a real environment of higher education yet. Initially, many students and tutors believe it is too time-consuming and students and tutors need to be convinced that the process is helpful and useful for them. Also, in some cases, the system has to be sensitive with regard to the privacy of some information that has been entered to the system.

REFERENCES

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