

Assessing teaching competency of academic staff at university level: Are we competent?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to assess the teaching competence of faculty members who are applying for a job at university from the perspectives of the Board of Examiners and Invitees. This qualitative study was conducted using non-guided content analysis. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 22 expert Board of Examiners. In addition, 22 applicants for faculty recruitment who achieved the required score for participation in the 'teaching competence evaluation' station were enrolled in the study. Data analysis was performed using the step-by-step method and Strauss and Corbin analytic techniques. The finding was classified into three main categories, namely, before, during, and after teaching. We extracted 52 indices, 10 subcategories, five general categories, and three main categories, which were formulated based on the teaching competence of the faculty members from the perspective of the board of examiners. The results could be used for the recruitment of capable faculty members.

Keywords: Teaching competence, higher education, faculty members.

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1. Introduction

Higher education plays a pivotal role in the developmental processes. As a unit of thought, consciousness and innovation, a university takes effective steps towards the improvement of quality of life and the realization of the society's ideas through performing its duties and missions in three areas, namely, education, research, and science and social services (Bazargan et al., 2001; Hosseini & Nasr, 2012).

Today, the social demand for higher education is growing. Capable, competent and committed faculty members are the inherent elements of higher education systems and universities (Gappa, 2008), who play a key role in achieving goals and drawing the future path of the university (Hyatt & Williams, 2011). Therefore, the empowerment and raising the awareness of faculty members equates to the enhanced quality of universities (Camblin & Steger, 2000). Evidence attests that professors and their competence determine the effective responsiveness of universities. Therefore, the development and improvement of competence in university professors must be prioritised in higher education systems (Little et al., 2007). Teaching competence shows the minimum level of information, skills, creative capacities, professional tendencies and desirability of faculty members, which is attained in order to effectively perform duties and provide services (Al-Hattami et al., 2013; Al-Sharif, 2010).

Competence is defined as a set of talents and skills that is acquired by an individual for problem-solving (Cebrian et al., 2019). Competence also refers to the motivational, voluntary, and social tendencies and skills required to successfully and responsibly use solutions in various contexts and situations (Rauch & Steiner, 2013). In fact, competence is defined as the explicit and implicit knowledge, behaviours and skills that provide the potential to effectively perform tasks (Draganidis & Mentzas, 2006). The concept of competence implies the knowledge and skills in performing a task (Batra, 2009).

According to the literature, competence encompasses the behaviours that urge individuals to successfully play their roles based on their knowledge, aptitudes, skills and other individual characteristics. However, there is no evident consensus over the exact meaning of competence, and knowledge, skills and attitudes are only the common features of the definitions that have been proposed so far. In this regard, researchers believe that competence encompasses the knowledge, skills and qualities that result in proper performance based on specific standards (Martel & Gilles, 2013). Therefore, competence in faculty members consists of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are expected to be utilised in the teaching process (Gonczi & Hager, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 2011). The teaching process is an important factor for the assessment of the competence of professors (Maroufi et al., 2007; Stronge, 2007) and is considered a fundamental characteristic of an efficient professor (Matlabifard et al., 2011). Theories on teaching are divided into three categories; in the first category, teaching is the reiteration and transfer of data. Therefore, knowledge is a product that is transferred from one person/place to another person/place. In the second category, teaching refers to the organization of the activities of learners, which requires determining the techniques and methods used to ensure the learning of learners. In the third category, teaching involves the attempts to make learning possible. The first and second categories are primarily focused on the role of the teacher and a learner, respectively, while the third category shows the learner and content that must be learned and linked to each other within a framework.

The review of the literature revealed a significant, positive correlation between the competence of teachers and the academic achievement of students (Torkzadeh et al., 2018). In other words, efficient teaching encourages high-quality learning in students (Ramsden, 2005). In this regard, Zolfagharian et al. (2018) believe that there is a significant, positive association between the active teaching of professors and the development of the abilities of students. Moreover, the teaching competence of professors could predict the success of students more accurately compared to other factors (e.g., income and classroom size; Darling Hammond & Snyder, 2000). A competent professor can neutralise the effects of the socioeconomic status of students on their learning, thereby increasing their

efficiency (Porter & Magee, 2004). Mastering the lessons and a good expression are also among the most important competencies of an efficient professor from the perspective of students (Dadkhah et al., 2009). In this regard, Barrett et al. (2008) suggest that the improvement of the competence of teaching and learning must be considered simultaneously in order to enhance the quality of education. Furthermore, studies have indicated that respect for professors, appreciation of their duties, and their participation in academic decision-making are influential in the fulfilment of teaching duties (Shahidi & Hadadniya, 2017; Smeenk et al., 2006; Tamosaitis, 2006). Since the selection of competent individuals has been a major challenge in educational organizations due to the extreme competition and dynamic atmosphere in this area (Barth et al., 2016; Cebrian et al., 2019; Pendarpour Fard, 2013), selecting the most efficient individuals with the highest competence is of utmost importance in order to advance goals and productivity, especially in higher education. Considering the direct impact of the teaching competence of professors on higher education performance (Barth et al., 2016; Cebrian et al., 2019; Lozano et al., 2015, Silva, 2010; Talebi et al., 2011), and since overlooking teaching and its quality are important issues in higher education (Biggs & Tang, 2011), the University of Mashhad aimed to establish a 'teaching competence evaluation' station for the better recruitment of faculty members. The current research aimed to present the opinions of two groups of board of examiners and invitees regarding the station.

2. Method

This qualitative research was conducted using unguided content analysis. The subjects were selected via simple and snowball sampling, with the former applied to select 20 subjects from each group (board of examiners and invitees). Afterwards, 12 other individuals were identified and evaluated after an introduction by the first subjects. In the next stage, targeted sampling was carried out with maximum diversity. In qualitative studies, the sample size is determined based on the obtained information. Therefore, the sample size may depend on the number of the individuals, interviews or sample events. The purpose of this study is to assess the teaching competence of faculty members who are applying for a job at a university. This study examines the competence of teaching from both Board of Examiners and Invitees perspectives. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 22 professors and experts in the University of Mashhad, who were invited as the board of examiners, and 22 invitees who achieved the required score to participate in the 'teaching competence evaluation station' for the applicants of the contractual faculty member recruitment program at this university. Data analysis was performed using the step-by-step method and analytical techniques proposed by Strauss and Corbin. Open codes were extracted by dividing the interview transcriptions into elements containing message phrases. Due to the multiplicity of the extracted concepts, coding was performed in several steps. In addition, three basic steps were taken to ensure the validity of the data and outcomes. In the first stage, the data were implemented by two individuals who were involved in the research, and the differences between the data were eliminated through the review of the interviews. In the second stage, the categories were formed and labelled by the first researcher and revised by the other researchers in order to ensure the coding validity. Finally, the categories were formed by applying the opinions of the researchers and reaching a consensus. In the third stage, the final categories were shared with some of the interviewees, the opinions of whom showed that the categories formed and extracted results accurately reflected their viewpoints.

3. Results

According to the collected data, the teaching competence of the faculty members was divided into three main categories, namely, before, during and after teaching from the perspective of the board of examiners and invitees. In total, 52 indexes, 10 subcategories, five general categories and three main categories were extracted and formulated as the teaching competence of the faculty members from the perspective of the board of examiners. All results are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Evaluation of teaching competence of faculty members from the perspective of board of examiners

Main category	General category	Subcategory	Indexes
Before teaching	Notification	Strengths	(1) Appropriate notification (phone, email, official letter) (2) Timely notification (a few days ago and a reminder on the day of the interview) (3) Holding briefings 4. Justification before interviews
		Weaknesses	(1) Ability to notify at least 2 weeks before the interview (2) Time constraints in planning
	Features of the method	Strengths	(1) Fair (compared to previous methods) (2) Sufficient (in terms of methodology) (3) Innovative and creative (4) Face-to-face interactions (operational) (5) A friendly and respectful environment (6) A calm and relaxing environment (7) Interesting and challenging (8) Smart and sophisticated (9) Asking questions appropriate to the discipline (10). Possibility of relative knowledge of perspective, attitude, and interests (11) Ability to be aware of socialization, commitment, and legality (12) Ability in critical thinking, creativity, and participation (13) Understanding the speed of transmission and fast thinking (14) Creating equal opportunities in providing capabilities (15) Fair judgment
		Weaknesses	(1) Allocation of a short time to the presentation (2) No use of novel technologies (3) Lack of mastery in all aspects and knowledge about the abilities of volunteers (4) Stereotypical motivational questions (5) Inattention to practical and skill-related aspects (6) Lack of appropriate contexts for use of other teaching methods
During teaching	Executive process	Strengths	(1) Intriguing interviews (2) Accurate planning (3) Discipline in implementation (4) Compliance with the schedule (5) An appropriate, welcoming environment (6) Low stress (7) Clarity and usability of checklists and tools (8) Accurate documentation of cases (9) Teaching time management (using special cards) (10) Observance of justice in the distribution of information
		Weaknesses	(1) Time constraints in planning (2) Previous acquaintance of professors with invitees (halo error) (3) Possibility of inattention to the results and effect of group pressure
	Qualities of examiners	Strengths	(1) Recruitment of experienced and expert professors (2) Proper relaxation approaches (3) Scientific approaches of professors and asking specialised questions (4) Presence of a psychologist in the interview team (5) Consensus between examiners at the time of evaluation
		Weaknesses	(1) Inattention to various aspects simultaneously (2) Possibility of applying the opinions of examiners (3) Restrictions on selecting the psychiatrist and psychologist (4). Effects of group and environmental pressure on the evaluation score of the examiners
After teaching	Feedback	Strengths	(1) Receiving oral feedback (2) Receiving written feedback (questionnaire)
		Weaknesses	(1) Lack of feedback to volunteers

Table 2. Evaluation of teaching competence of faculty members from perspective of invitees

Main category	General category	Subcategory	Indexes
Before teaching	Notification	Strengths	(1) Proper notification (2) Justification before interviews
		Weaknesses	(1) Failure to disclose the details of the interviews and teaching methods
During teaching	Features of methods	Strengths	(1) Fair (compared to previous methods) (2) Innovative and creative (3) Face-to-face interactions (practical) (4) A friendly and respectful environment (5) An opportunity to partially showcase abilities 6.Integration of qualitative and quantitative evaluation
		Weaknesses	(1) Allocation of a short time to the presentation (2) No use of novel technologies (3) Lack of mastery in all aspects and knowledge about abilities of volunteers (4) Stereotypical motivational questions (5) Inattention to scientific and skill-related aspects (6) Lack of appropriate contexts for use of other teaching methods
	Executive process	Strengths	(1) Intriguing interviews (2) Accurate planning (3) Discipline (4) Compliance with the schedule of interviews (5) Holding interviews in an appropriate environment
		Weaknesses	(1) Impossibility of simulation with real classes and student presence (2) Excessive stress and no possibility of indirect presentation using videos (3) Decreased concentration and not showing the real abilities
	Qualities of examiners	Strengths	(1) Recruitment of experienced and expert professors (2) Proper, relaxing approaches (3) Scientific approaches of professors (4) Asking specialised questions (5) The presence of a psychologist and psychiatrist in the interview team (6) Fair judgment (7) Positive thinking and benevolence (8) Ability in effective communication (9) Conscious observation
		Weaknesses	(1) Inattention to different aspects simultaneously (2) Recruitment of relevant professors from other universities (3) Possibility of applying the opinions of the examiners (halo error) (4) Increased number of the examiners for multidimensional evaluation
After teaching	Feedback	Strengths	(1) Receiving oral feedback (2) Receiving written feedback (questionnaire)
		Weaknesses	(1) Lack of feedback to volunteers

4. Discussion

The first main category was ‘before teaching’, which encompassed the general category of the formulated data with two subcategories of strengths (four components) and weaknesses (two components). The examples of strengths and weaknesses included ‘timely notification and holding briefings’ and ‘time constraints in planning’, respectively. The second main category was ‘during teaching’, which encompassed three general categories. The first category was focused on the features of the method with two subcategories of strengths (fifteen components) and weaknesses (six components). In this regard, the examples of strengths and weaknesses were the ‘existence of calm, challenging, attractive, smart, and complex atmospheres and asking appropriate questions in specialised fields’ and ‘no use of new technologies, non-enclosure of all the aspects and capabilities of volunteers, and ‘stereotypical motivational questions’. The second category was the execution

process, which was formulated with two subcategories of strengths (10 components) and weaknesses (three components). In this respect, the examples of strengths and weaknesses were ‘intriguing interviews, careful planning and discipline in execution’ and ‘the time constraints in planning and previous acquaintance of the professors with the invitees (halo error)’, respectively. In the third category, the qualities of the examiners were formulated with two subcategories of strengths (five components) and weaknesses (four components). In this aspect, the examples of strengths and weaknesses were ‘the use of experienced and specialised professors and presence of a psychologist in the interview team as an effective approach to relaxation’ and ‘inattention to various aspects simultaneously and the possibility of applying the opinion of the examiners’, respectively. The third main category was ‘after teaching’, which was formulated with a general category of feedback with two subcategories of strengths (two components), such as ‘receiving oral and written feedback’, and weaknesses (one component), such as ‘the lack of feedback to the volunteer’. Moreover, the data obtained from the interviews yielded 39 indexes, 10 subcategories, five general categories and three main categories, which were formulated based on the teaching competence of faculty members from the perspective of the invitees.

The first main category was ‘before teaching’, which included a general category of information formulated with two subcategories of strengths (two components) and weakness (one component). The examples of strengths and weaknesses included ‘proper notification and justification before the interview’ and ‘failure to disclose the details of the interview and the teaching method’, respectively. The second main category was ‘during teaching’, which included three general categories. The first category was the features of the teaching method, which was formulated with two subcategories of strengths (six components) and weaknesses (six components). The examples of strengths and weaknesses included ‘fair (compared to the previous methods), innovative and creative interactions’ and ‘no use of new technologies, allocating insufficient time to presentations’, respectively. The second category was focused on the executive process, which was formulated with two subcategories of strengths (five components) and weaknesses (three components). The examples of strengths and weaknesses were ‘intriguing interviews, careful planning, and discipline’ and ‘impossibility of simulation with real class and student presence, high stress and the impossibility of indirect presentation using videos’, respectively. The third category assessed the qualities of the examiners, which was formulated with two subcategories of strengths (nine components) and weaknesses (four components). The examples of strengths and weaknesses were ‘the recruitment of experienced and specialised professors, use of appropriate approaches to relaxation, and scientific approaches of the professors’ and ‘inattention to various aspects simultaneously and no recruitment of related professors from other universities’, respectively. The third main category was ‘after teaching’, which included a general category of feedback formulated with two subcategories of strengths (two components), such as ‘receiving oral and written feedback’, and weaknesses (one component), such as ‘the lack of feedback to volunteers’. According to the obtained results, the board of examiners and invitees commonly mentioned the weaknesses of the ‘teaching competence evaluation’ station to be time constraints, inattention to various aspects simultaneously, no use of novel technologies, lack of coverage of all the aspects and abilities of volunteers, stereotypical motivational questions, inattention to practical and skilful aspects, and lack of appropriate contexts for the use of other teaching methods.

5. Conclusion

Both groups of participants reported the strengths to be proper notification; appropriate and accurate planning; intriguing interviews; fair, innovative, and face-to-face interactions in the evaluation method; appropriate methods for the partial assessment of abilities; and preparedness of the professors and discipline. Notably, no consensus was reached between the two groups regarding stress, so that the board of examiners suggested the decreased stress level in volunteers at this stage of evaluation, while the invitees reported high stress levels.

6. Recommendations

The development of Academic Staff through Assessing Teaching Competency is a fundamental strategy to increase the quality of the university. Therefore, the obtained indexes could contribute to the efficient recruitment of capable faculty members, while increasing scientific vitality in academic environments, realising higher education goals and developing the community.

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