

Student Engagement for Quality Enhancement and Responding to Student Needs in the Moroccan University: The Case of the English Studies Track

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Abstract

The present article aims at providing some empirical evidence on the important role student engagement plays in responding to student needs and in enhancing the quality of the teaching and learning environment in Moroccan universities. Student engagement happens at many levels that correspond to the “principles of good practice in undergraduate education” that were suggested by Chickering and Gamson (1987). This article tries to identify these aspects of student engagement and good practice in the English Studies Track (EST) program from the EST students’ perspective. The data were collected in three Moroccan universities: Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan, Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra, and Cadi Ayad University in Marrakech. An adapted version of *Student Engagement Questionnaire* (Kember, Leung & McNaught, 2005 in Kember & Leung, 2009) was administered to 883 EST students. The data were submitted to a statistical analysis of frequencies using SPSS. The results of this study show that EST students experience a low level of engagement with their studies and that the EST program lacks some aspects of “good practice” in higher education. This study can help enhance the quality of university programs as it reveals some gaps and negative practices that need to be taken into account in the reform process Moroccan universities are going through. Another implication of this research is that students are aware of their needs and, hence, are able to provide useful feedback that can be used to improve the quality of the teaching and learning environment in Moroccan universities.

Keywords: Moroccan university reform, quality enhancement, student engagement, student needs

Cite as: BEN AJIBA, I., & ZERHOUNI, B. (2019). Student Engagement for Quality Enhancement and Responding to Student Needs in the Moroccan University: The Case of the English Studies Track. *Arab World English Journal*, 10 (3) 165-177.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no3.11>

Introduction

The educational system in Morocco has undergone different reform attempts since 1999 with The National Charter of Education and Training (Commission Spéciale Education Formation, 1999) up to The Strategic Vision of the Reform 2015- 2030 (Conseil Supérieur de l'Education, de la Formation et de la Recherche Scientifique, 2015). The main aim of these reforms has been to improve the quality of the Moroccan educational system and to make it easier for Moroccan students to integrate the European and the American educational systems, especially at the level of higher education. One of the main reform principles that has been emphasized throughout the various reform documents is the shift towards a more student-centered pedagogy that promotes the learner's cognitive capabilities, life skills, critical thinking, and initiative taking (The Strategic Vision of the Reform, 2015). This entails giving the student more room to express their points of view about their studies and engaging students at different levels of the educational process. However, despite all the efforts and the good will, Morocco still lags behind in the international rankings as far as education is concerned. The Global Competitiveness Report (2018) reveals that out of 140 countries, Morocco ranks 117th in the category "skillset of graduates" and 138th in the category "critical thinking in teaching". This means that the Moroccan higher education system has not yet made the crucial shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered pedagogy that would take into account students' needs and that would allow the achievement of the abovementioned outcomes. In a study carried out among 55 university students belonging to different higher education institutions (Ben Ajiba & Zerhouni, 2017) it has been found that needs analysis is not a common practice in Moroccan universities as 78.8% of the respondents said they never took a needs analysis survey in their higher education institutions. Even the ones (18.8%) who reported that they rarely took this kind of survey were skeptic about its worth: "I guess they are just trying to give the impression that they care about people's opinions but they actually don't." (Ben Ajiba & Zerhouni, 2017, p. 171) Such a negative attitude is likely to hinder the development of student engagement and the improvement of university programs. Indeed, research has:

Consistently shown correlations between engagement and improvements in specific desirable outcomes, including: general abilities, practical competence and skills transferability, cognitive development, self-esteem, psychological development, student satisfaction, accrual of social capital, improved grades, and persistence. (Trowler & Trowler, 2010, p. 9).

The present article is an attempt to delve into the condition of student engagement in the Moroccan higher education and to provide evidence on the significance of this construct in responding to university students' needs as well as in the enhancement of the teaching and the learning environments in Moroccan universities.

Theoretical Background

As can be deduced from the title, the present article is based on three concepts: student engagement, student needs and quality enhancement. This section will define these concepts and will lay the ground for the methodological section of this article.

1.1 Student engagement

There is a large body of literature dealing with the concept of student engagement due to its critical role in achieving learning and improving the quality of higher education (Trowler &

Trowler, 2010). Since the late 1980s, researchers have investigated how to increase engagement among students in order to “restructure” the educational system (Keedy & Drmacich, 1991) and to improve student success and reach the desired outcomes (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Student engagement is a complex construct that has a behavioral, a psychological, a psycho-social, and a socio-political dimension. However, in the context of higher education, it is the behavioral perspective that has been most emphasized because there is a deeper concern with “student behavior and teaching practice” (Kahu, 2013, p. 759) and “a desire for enhancement” (Trowler & Trowler, 2010, p. 7).

Among the many definitions of student engagement, Jones (2009) provides the following definition:

Learner engagement is [the] extent to which all learners (1) are motivated and committed to learning, (2) have a sense of belonging and accomplishment, and (3) have relationships with adults, peers, and parents that support learning. Students need to be engaged before they can apply higher order, creative thinking skills. They learn most effectively when the teacher makes sense and meaning of the curriculum material being taught. This can only happen if the teacher has created a safe learning environment that encourages students to meet challenges and apply high rigor skills to real-world, unpredictable situations inside and outside of school. (p. 24)

Jones’ definition indicates that student engagement is a construct that goes beyond motivation. Student engagement is the result of students’ positive interaction with their teaching and learning environment (peers and teachers) and their social environment. It is also the result of students’ involvement in “educationally purposeful activities” (Coates, 2005, p. 26). Finally, student engagement is the product of students’ sense of belonging to their institutions not because they are enrolled in these institutions but because they are given the opportunity to voice their points of view about their studies and because their needs are taken into consideration.

In this regard, Zyngier (2008) suggests that teachers and students must work together within the framework of an “engaging pedagogy” that is based on the principles of “Connecting, Owning, Responding, and Empowering” (p. 1772). This engaging pedagogy is likely to improve students’ motivation which “is an essential element [...] for quality education” (Williams & Williams, 2011, p. 2).

1.2 Student needs

Student engagement is closely related to the concept of student needs and the very essence of education. According to Tyler (1949), education consists in “changing the behavior patterns of people”; hence, it is necessary to study the learners in order to diagnose the kind of changes required in a given educational context. A common misconception about student needs in the Moroccan higher education context is that it is a luxury and a way to ‘spoil’ students. The idea that students do not know their needs is quite widespread among university teachers and staff. The reason may be due to a lack of awareness of the difference between *needs* and *wants*. It is thought that if we study student needs and if we involve students in this process, teachers will have to submit to students’ whims and fantasies. Tyler’s definition of student needs dissipates this

confusion and attests to the extreme importance of having a clear idea of student needs in the educational process:

“Studies of the learner suggest educational objectives only when the information about the learner is compared with some desirable standards, some conception of acceptable norms, so that the difference between the present condition of the learner and the acceptable norm can be identified. This difference or gap is what is generally referred to as a need.” (Tyler, 1949, p. 2)

In fact, student needs are closely related to the changes and outcomes that the educational system is supposed to achieve.

According to Harris (2010) graduates of the 21st century need to study in a learning environment that is fair, engaging and motivating, accessible, challenging, appropriate, comfortable, and is also a learning community. These criteria can be identified in Chickering and Gamson’s article “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” (1987). These seven principles are based on what students need in their higher education programs, regardless of the field of specialty, in order to achieve a high level of engagement and the ultimate purpose of undergraduate education which is to “prepare students to understand and deal intelligently with modern life” (Chickering and Gamson, 1987, p. 3)

According to Chickering & Gamson (1987), “good practice in higher education

1. Encourages contacts between students and faculty
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students,
3. Uses active learning techniques,
4. Gives prompt feedback,
5. Emphasizes time on task,
6. Communicates high expectations, and
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.” (p.2)

If these principles are practiced, they are likely to increase student engagement and enhance the quality of the higher education programs.

1.3 Quality enhancement

Quality is one of the main concerns in the 21st century education context. Quality assurance mechanisms and agencies are created by governments to maintain and raise the quality of education. However, many quality institutions in the world are focusing more on enhancement rather than assurance. Biggs (2014) states that quality enhancement is broader than assurance because quality enhancement veers towards “addressing problems as they arise and takes steps to prevent them, ensuring that teaching will be better” (p. 19). Quality enhancement or improvement is a cyclic process that aims at refining the educational practices in a way that helps achieve the set goals and objectives. According to The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Scotland (2017), enhancement is “taking deliberate steps to bring about improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experiences of students even when threshold quality is secure” (p. 3).

For this purpose, the QAA Scotland has designed the Quality Enhancement Framework that encompasses five elements: “Enhancement Themes, institution-led review, student engagement in quality, public information, and Enhancement-led Institutional Review” (QAA, 2017, p. 2). Student engagement plays an important role in the Scottish Enhancement Framework for two reasons. First, students are believed to have an important role in the “formulation, operation and evaluation of the institution’s approach to enhancement” (QAA, 2017, p. 27). Second, the Enhancement-led Institutional Review team takes into consideration in its evaluation “the approach institutions take to engaging students in their own learning” (QAA, 2017, p. 27).

In light of the aforementioned evidence from the literature, the present article argues that student engagement is a key factor in responding to higher education students’ needs and in enhancing the quality of the teaching and learning environment in the Moroccan tertiary level. The less students are engaged in their studies, the less quality there is in the higher education programs and the less students are satisfied with their studies. This premise will be examined through the fieldwork that will be presented in the following sections.

Methodology

2.1 Research questions

The two questions this article tries to answer are:

1. To what extent are the English Studies Track (EST) students satisfied with their teaching and learning environment in EST?
2. To what extent does the EST program respond to Chickering and Gamson’s seven principles of good practice?

2.2 Research setting

The study was carried out in the English departments of three Moroccan universities: Abdelmalek Essaadi University in Tetouan (AEU, North of Morocco), Ibn Tofail University in Kenitra (ITU, North West of Morocco), and Cadi Ayad University in Marrakech (CAU, Center of Morocco). The choice of these universities was based on two criteria: representativity, i.e. representing universities from different regions of Morocco; and accessibility.

2.3 Research Population and sample

The research targeted the English Studies Track students in the English departments of the abovementioned universities. 883 students studying in Semester 2 (S2), Semester 4 (S4), and Semester 6 (S6) participated in the study. Table 1 gives more information about the distribution of the participants in terms of the university and the semester they belong to.

Table 1 *The participants’ distribution*

The English Department	Semester			Total
	Semester 2	Semester 4	Semester 6	
AEU	130	24	43	197
ITU	116	85	165	366
CAU	75	102	143	320
Total	321	211	351	883

2.4 Research instrument

Data was collected using Kember, Leung, & McNaught's (2005) the *Student Engagement Questionnaire* (SEQ) (in Kember & Leung, 2009) which was adapted to the Moroccan context. The adapted version of the SEQ contains 32 statements. Each statement is followed by a five-point agreement Likert scale or a five-point frequency Likert scale. The present article will report the findings related to eight items of the questionnaire; namely the ones that will answer the aforementioned research questions.

Results

3.1 First research question results

The first research question "To what extent are the English Studies Track (EST) students satisfied with their teaching and learning environment in EST?" was answered in the survey through the following statement: "I have been satisfied with the quality of the program."

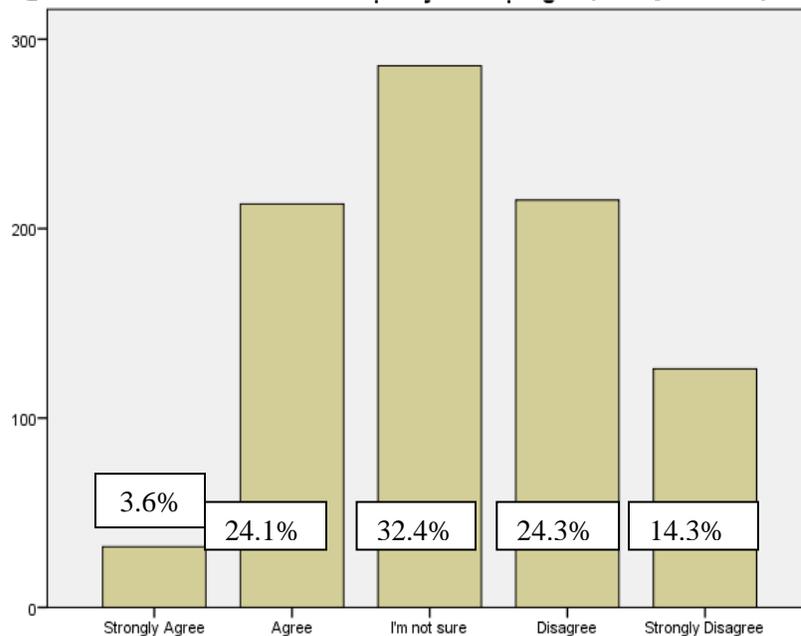


Figure 1 EST students' satisfaction with the EST program

Figure 1 shows that 32.4% of the respondents cannot make up their mind on their level of satisfaction with the program. However, a striking phenomenon that arises from the results yielded by this item is that the percentage of students who are satisfied with the EST program (27.7%) is lower than the students who are dissatisfied (38.6%). The reasons for students' lack of satisfaction with the teaching and learning environment in the English Studies Track may be due to the information revealed by the answers to the second research question.

3.2 Second research question results

The second research question "To what extent does the EST program respond to Chickering and Gamson's seven principles of good practice?" was answered through seven statements in the survey. The results will be presented in the order Chickering and Gamson's principles have been presented in the theoretical background. Each principle will be followed by its corresponding statement in the SEQ.

3.2.1 Principle 1: encourages contacts between students and faculty

“I can have meetings with my teachers if I need extra help.”

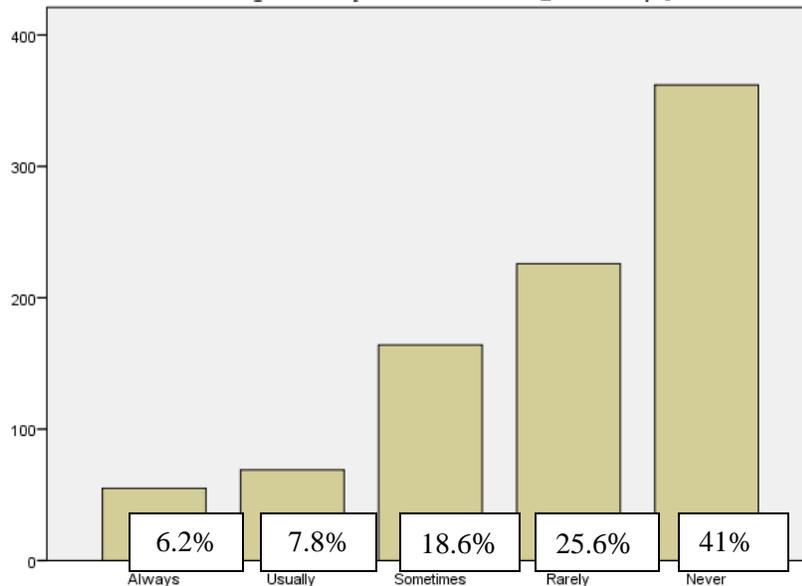


Figure 2 Frequency of EST students' meetings with teachers

The majority of the respondents state that they never (41%) or rarely (25.6%) receive any kind of tutoring from their teachers if they face any academic difficulties (Figure 2). 18.6% claim they can sometimes meet their teachers if they need extra help. However, only 14% of the respondents have been able to meet their teachers to get some kind of counseling.

3.2.2 Principle 2: develops reciprocity and cooperation among students

“I have developed my ability to work effectively as a team or group member.”

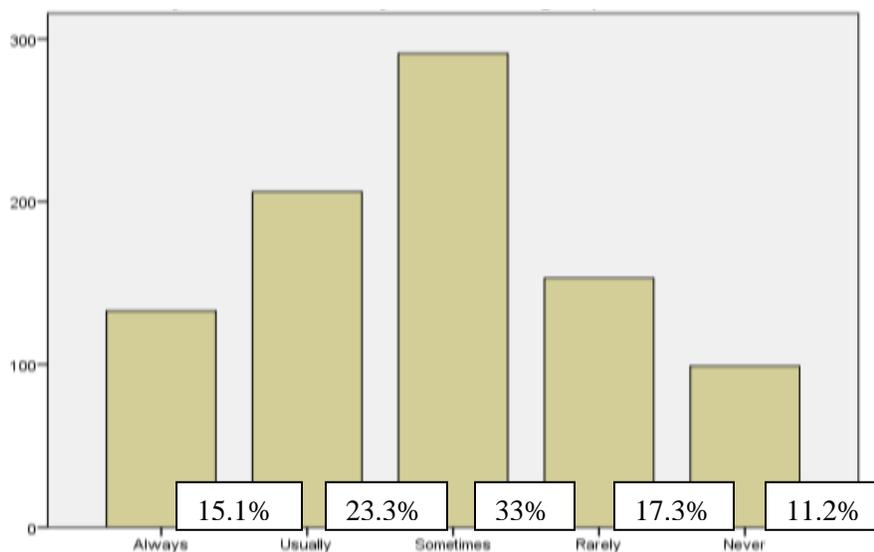


Figure 3 Team work in the EST program

Figure 3 shows that 38.4% of the respondents consider that the EST program has always or usually provided them with opportunities to work effectively in a team. However, 33% deem

that these opportunities happen sometimes only; and 28.5% think that it has been rarely or never possible for them to develop effective collaborative skills in the EST program.

3.2.3 Principle 3: uses active learning techniques

“I have been given the chance to participate actively in classes.”

EST students’ perception of their participation in the program they study is not very positive (Figure 4). Only 15.1% of the respondents state that they have always been given the chance to participate actively in classes. 36% say they sometimes participate actively in class; whereas, 21.1% declare they rarely do so. 10.2% of the participants consider they never experience an active participation in class.

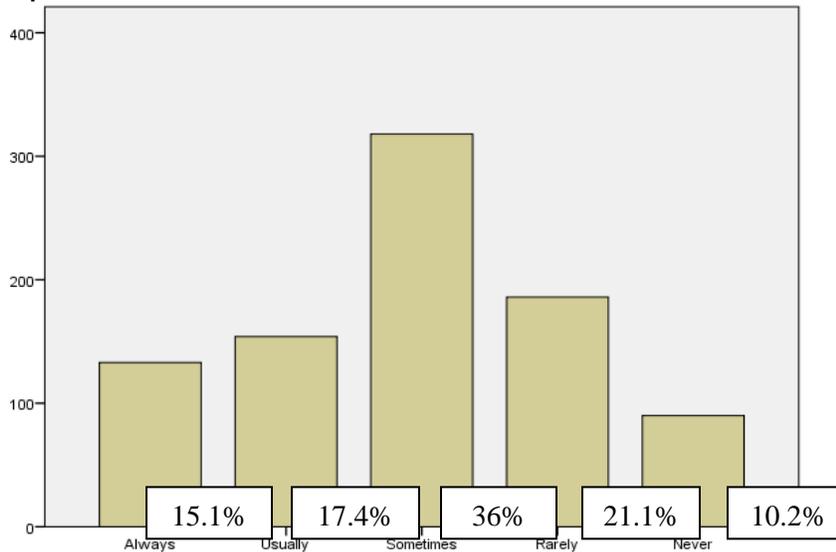


Figure 4 Students’ active participation in the EST program

3.2.4 Principle 4: gives prompt feedback

“I am given enough feedback on activities and assignments to ensure that I learn from the work I do.”

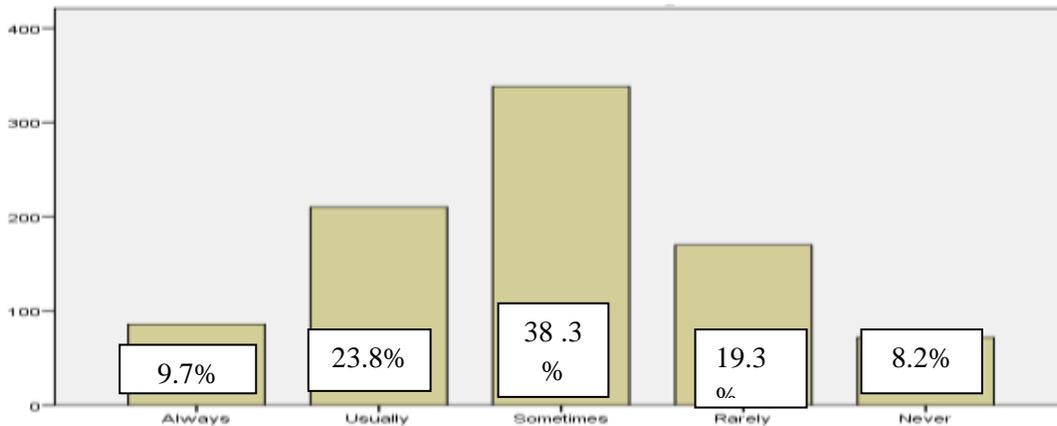


Figure 5 Feedback in the EST program

Figure 5 uncovers an unsystematic practice of giving feedback to students on the activities and assignments they do in the EST program. 38.3% of the participants get feedback only sometimes and 27.5% rarely or never receive any feedback. Only 9.7% claim they always receive feedback from their teachers and 23.8% say they usually do.

3.2.5 Principle 5: emphasizes time on task

“I can complete the requirements of the program without feeling overly stressed.”

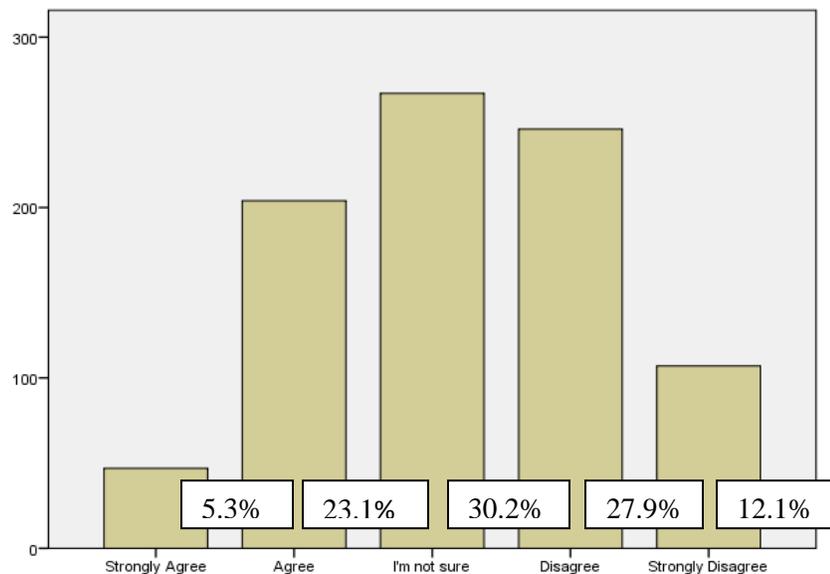


Figure 6 Enough time to complete tasks in the EST program

It can be deduced from Figure 6 that 40% of the participants think that the workload in the EST program is quite stressful because of a lack of time. 30.2% are not sure if they can complete the requirements of the program without feeling overly stressed. The students who believe that they can deal with the program requirements represent 28.4% of the respondents.

3.2.6 Principle 6: communicates high expectations

“I am aware of the outcomes I have to reach by the end of each course.”

EST students' lack of awareness of the program outcomes is the most striking result shown by Figure 7. Almost 40% of the students are only partially aware of the program outcomes; while, 13.8% are rarely aware of these outcomes. The percentage of students who know what they are supposed to achieve in the EST program reaches 40%. This means that the program does not communicate (high) expectations to 60% of the students.

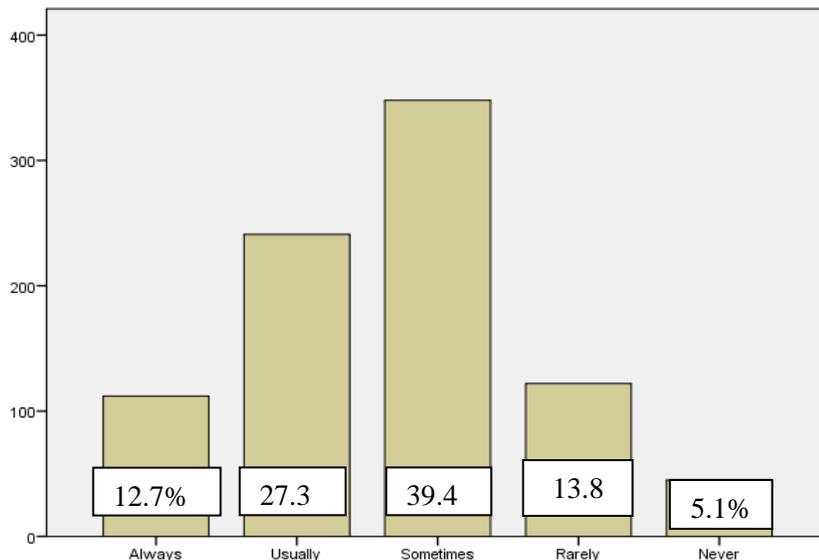


Figure 7 Students’ awareness of the EST program outcomes

3.2.7 Principle 7: respects diverse talents and ways of learning

“I have experienced a variety of teaching methods (lectures, group work and group discussions, class discussions, peer instruction, online courses ...)”

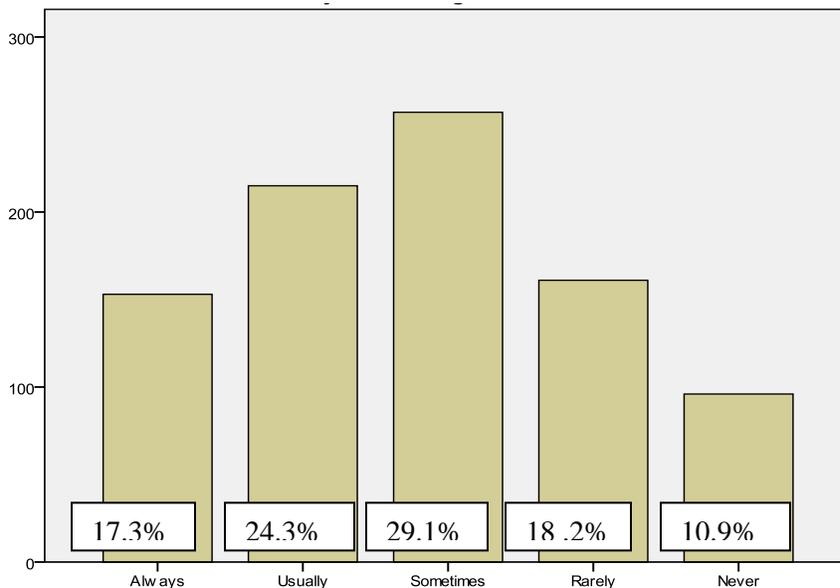


Figure 8 Variety of teaching methods in the EST program

The participants’ opinion about the use of different teaching methods in the EST program is quite segmented across the five points of the Likert scale. Figure 8 shows that 17.3% of the respondents have always experienced a variety of teaching methods in the program they study; and that 24.3% think they have usually done so. The highest percentage (29.1%) for this item represents the students who have only sometimes experienced this variety. Paradoxically, the same

percentage (29.1%) is scored if we add up the percentages of the students who believe that varied teaching methods have been rarely (18.2%) or never (10.9%) used in the EST program.

Discussion

The results of the study have shown, on the one hand, that the EST students are not quite satisfied with the teaching and learning environment in the three participating Moroccan universities. On the other hand, the study has revealed that the EST program does not fully respond to the seven principles of good undergraduate practice. Indeed, there is a permeating sense of confusion and lack of certainty among students that can be deduced from the participants' answers that fall within the "sometimes" and "I'm not sure" categories, as the abovementioned figures illustrate. The only time when students gave a clear-cut answer was to say that the program does not provide opportunities of contact between students and faculty. This means that the EST program in Moroccan universities lacks "the most important factor in student motivation and involvement", which is the "frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes" (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 3).

The present study provides evidence that the Moroccan higher education still adopts a teacher-centered pedagogy that does not create enough opportunities for student engagement and does not respond to the needs of the 21st century graduates. As a matter of fact, the instances of good practice in higher education are usually not instilled by the institutions. They are the result of the initiative of individual teachers who believe in their students' capacities.

The reform of the Moroccan educational system will not achieve its desired outcomes unless it pays more attention to classroom practices. It is not enough to create quality assurance institutions and evaluate the performance of higher education institutions on the basis of accreditation criteria. It is urgent to "engage with a research-informed, evidence-based approach to evaluation and enhancement" (Harvey & Newton, 2004, p. 160). In this regard, evidence from the literature and the practice of some Quality Assurance Agencies like QAA Scotland has proved that student engagement and a student-centered pedagogy that responds to student needs are the best way to enhance the quality of university programs. There is also an urgent need for more internal reviews within the Moroccan higher education institutions because, according to Harvey & Newton (2004), "it is more difficult for external review to engage with the learning-teaching interface" (p. 153). Enhancing the quality of programs entails getting to the core of the classroom experience in order to identify the positive and negative practices. However, these internal reviews have to be research- informed and not politically oriented.

Conclusion

The main objective of the present study was to shed some light on student engagement in the Moroccan tertiary level context, and its close relationship to student needs and quality enhancement. Little, if no attention has been paid so far to this key element in education in Morocco, hence, the importance of the current study. Great efforts are being made to enhance the quality of the Moroccan higher education system at the macro-level (reform projects, guidelines, new buildings ...); nonetheless, it is high time more attention was paid to the micro-level of classroom practices and the students' role in the educational process.

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