ASSESSING THE ADEQUACY OF CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY TEACHING METHODS: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS ON INNOVATIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Hristo Chukurliev
New Bulgarian University, Bulgaria, hchukurliev@nbu.bg

Abstract: In the ever-changing realm of higher education, the rapid progression of technology and the shifting needs of the professional landscape have compelled the re-evaluation of teaching methods. Through this study, thorough examination of current pedagogical practices in universities has been conducted, taking into consideration the viewpoints of both educators and students. This research explores the potential for fresh, pioneering approaches, offering valuable perspectives to the ongoing conversation surrounding academic transformation. Through a comprehensive survey, the beliefs of faculty members and students were thoroughly captured, with the goal of pinpointing which traditional educational techniques are seen as obsolete, and which are crucial for preparing tomorrow's workforce. The findings indicate a clear preference for traditional teaching methods, such as lectures and seminars. However, there is also a recognition that these methods must adapt and integrate innovative techniques. The consensus among scholars emphasises the crucial role of digital literacy in modern curricula, highlighting its necessity in preparing capable and well-rounded professionals for the future. The results call for a shift in pedagogy, encouraging a multidisciplinary approach and the practical utilisation of knowledge. This study sheds light on the difficulties of aligning academic concepts with practical application, emphasising the role of higher education in nurturing a globalised, engaged, and interconnected population. As a result, educational strategies must evolve to mirror the societal shift towards a more united and interconnected global community. This research highlights the need for universities to shift towards a model that prioritises hands-on participation and collaboration in tackling complex, real-world issues. The responsibilities of educators have evolved from being the main providers of knowledge to becoming mentors and guides in facilitating students' transformative educational experiences. This study is promoting an educational system that meets the demands of the digital age while maintaining academic rigour and fostering curiosity. It is imperative for institutions to be flexible and forward-thinking, continually adapting and innovating their pedagogical approaches to remain effective for students in a rapidly evolving world. This study should serve as a reminder that the educational landscape must continuously evolve to meet the diverse and ever-changing needs of our society. It calls for a renaissance in education, one that is deeply attuned to the complexities of our times. Above all, it celebrates the impactful and transformative effects of thoughtful and well-crafted educational policies on both individuals and societies, reaffirming the enduring power of learning.
Keywords: higher education reform, pedagogical innovation, digital literacy, student engagement, post-pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to approach university education, given the diverse range of participants involved. In the history of higher education, there is a noticeable evolution in the methods of teaching and learning. These advancements are often made in direct relation to the broadening human understanding of the world or as a reaction to the shifts in manufacturing and industry. This dynamic landscape has transformed the primal task of higher education. Initially aimed at fostering a deeper comprehension of one's surroundings and the ways to interact with them, the focus has gradually pivoted towards equipping individuals to better participate in the social and economic spheres. The modern goal of higher education transcends mere intellectual enhancement; it aims often to enhance individuals' material conditions and facilitate their financial prosperity. This shift mirrors a wider societal tendency, where education is increasingly measured and valued by its economic success and social mobility-enhancing potential. Considering these complexities, the article aims to serve as a conduit for informing the community about the perspectives of students and professors at the New Bulgarian University (NBU) regarding the relevance of the teaching and studying methods and forms in current use. This discourse is essential as it reflects the impact of evolving educational processes on the academic community. Insights from the student and faculty population at NBU are being gathered to shed light on the practical implications of the generational digital divide and the debated objectives of higher education. These perspectives are critical, functioning as indicators of the degree to which traditional and contemporary educational strategies meet the demands of a world that is firmly rooted in its analogue heritage while simultaneously navigating a digital evolution. Feedback from this scholarly milieu may provide pivotal recommendations on how higher education might recalibrate its methods and objectives to prepare a generation for versatility, innovation, and the unpredictable dynamics of the modern world or workforce. Amidst this exploration of varied academic viewpoints on pedagogical approaches, attention must also be given to the

broader regulatory context, which some fear may impede the innovative developments that are characteristic of our era. On one hand, the concept of 'academic freedom' has long been a cornerstone of university life, yet the world beyond academia has consistently sought to engage with and even influence university affairs. Regulations are essential, particularly when there is a tangible interplay between university education and external professional fields such as architecture, medicine, and law. However, these same regulations can inadvertently stifle critical thinking and empathy. While universities operate within a framework of rules, the current climate presents a fascinating challenge, as the extent and impact of academic freedom are being intensely scrutinized and questioned in modern times. Some believe that these regulations might stifle unexpected and innovative development, which characterizes the current situation (Readings, 1996; Scott, 2006). We acknowledge that differences between generations in knowledge exchange occur in the context of historical progression. Significant adjustments are necessitated by the potent influence of new technologies for communication, visualization, and interpretation of information and knowledge, which interject into this age-old tradition (Aoun, 2018). However, these changes must occur in the conservative environment of educational institutions and state administration. In the era before digital, educators' authority and knowledge were undisputed, and their contribution was integral to the learning process (Readings, 1996). The process was led by teachers, with students following—a concept from which the colloquial term for higher education, "to follow a series of lectures," likely has its origins. Generation Z's characteristics, which reflect high information literacy, are shifting focus from teachers to students. Now, students guide the process with teachers assisting them in their scientific advancement (Peneva, J., Dzhambazov, V. & Keremedchiev, D., 2017).

The introduction of new teaching methods has often happened naturally, without extensive theoretical analysis. For instance, Socrates used conversational methods, which blend questions and answers with lecturing, to impart knowledge. Plato, his student, expanded upon this approach, delivering extensive lectures, and composing large texts that served as textbooks for his disciples. Aristotle further advanced these educational practices by incorporating systematic observations of nature and experimentation into the learning process. This evolution of educational methods was not always the result of deliberate innovation but was a natural progression as thinkers of each era built upon the work of their predecessors. New educational practices often mirrored the evolving understanding of the world, with each philosopher's method reflecting and catering to the needs and curiosities of their time. This natural progression of teaching methods continues to shape the structure of modern higher education, responding to and mirroring societal, industrial, and technological changes. Consequently, it is of interest to examine the direct opinions of the participants and compare their perspectives.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There are numerous possibilities of determining the appropriateness of forms and methods in university education. One option is to look at historical development, while another is to ask for scholarly opinions in this area and so on (Marginson, 2016). But what is even more direct is extracting information from the main stakeholders in higher education through conducting a survey with additional quantitative statistical analysis.

The research seeks to investigate how students and teachers feel about teaching forms and methods in high education. The academic attitudes of both student and teacher populations are subjects of the study. The method used is surveying. The methodology selection was influenced by the desire to collect data that could be verified over time. It was recognized that quantitative research offers this possibility, as it is repeatable in different contexts and environments, providing a solid foundation for future comparative analyses to monitor ongoing processes. An alternative, conducting in-depth interviews and qualitative data analysis, could yield new insights; however, the quantitative research conducted did not include open-ended questions to capture respondents' authentic opinions.

A survey was carried out among teachers and students at New Bulgarian University (NBU) using a specially designed questionnaire, which consisted of substantive questions aligned with the study's indicators. The formulation of the questions was guided by the principles of researcher impartiality and the use of neutrally formulated statements. Consideration was given to whether each question would be correctly understood by respondents, whether they were expected to know the answer, and whether they would respond honestly and sincerely. Scales, predominantly ranking and nominal, were employed for the survey questions, allowing for the gradation of the studied indicator, and facilitating subsequent analysis in terms of both attitude and the degree of its manifestation.

The heart of the study was the exploration of educational methods and the learning experience structure, with attention to both the act of teaching and the learning process. Key participants' perceptions – those of teachers and students – regarding the educational process format were assessed. A series of survey questions addressed each indicator, collectively contributing to a comprehensive understanding of current educational formats' attitudes.

The survey research went through standard stages—preparation, fieldwork, and analysis. Many theoretical problems identified in contemporary higher education were considered during the preparation and formulation of objectives

and tasks. Although a pilot study to test the questions' quality was not conducted, they were coordinated with colleagues and experts in pedagogy and sociology. Data collection was carried out online via a Google Docs survey and distributed through the university's internal communication channels, aiming for maximum dissemination among the surveyed groups to ensure the analytical data and conclusions' validity. The entire university community was the object of the study, with one challenge being the achievement of completeness in the representativeness of scientific directions and fields. Conducted from February 27 to March 13, 2023, the study included 169 teachers and 735 students, with subsequent analysis indicating a good distribution across all NBU programs, larger programs seeing more student participation, which served as a prerequisite for high validity of results.

3. RESULTS

Although certain teaching methods, like seminars, have decreased in importance, none have been completely abandoned. The following charts show initial findings that will be further explained in later charts. From Table 2, it is evident that hands-on activities, lectures, and training exercises are still valued by both students and instructors. However, they also highlight a need for significant improvements. To confirm these results, Table 3 repeats the same questions as Table 2. The consistent results across all tables strengthen the validity of the study's conclusions.

Table 1

Which of the current teaching methods should be discontinued?		
	teachers	students
discussion	1%	3%
team work	1%	6%
university seminar	8%	13%
lecture	6%	5%
travelling seminar/field work	1%	4%
internship/practice	0%	2%
laboratory exercise/training	1%	1%
none	83%	77%

Table 2

Which of the current methods need to be transformed and rethought? (more than one answer is possible)		
	teachers	students
Discussion	13%	23%
Team work	18%	29%
University seminar	27%	25%
Lecture	50%	47%
Traveling seminar/Field work	15%	20%
Internship/Practice	37%	53%
Laboratory exercise/Training	23%	30%
None	22%	18%

Table 3

Which of the current teaching methods should remain unchanged? (more than one answer is possible)		
	teachers	students
Discussion	53%	45%
Team work	53%	41%
University seminar	31%	32%
Lecture	36%	42%
Traveling seminar/Field work	40%	37%
Internship/Practice	40%	43%
Laboratory exercise/Training	46%	47%
None	20%	16%

Table 4 presents the attitudes of students and teachers towards educational methods that are not currently widely represented in higher education, but for which there are already successful precedents or the possibility of integration. In addition to the comprehensive analysis, Table 4 delves deeper into the perspectives of students and teachers on non-traditional educational methods. These methods have either demonstrated success in the past or

show potential for integration in higher education. The insights revealed in this table are noteworthy. Firstly, students share a harmonious sentiment towards incorporating interactive social media platforms into their learning journey, indicating a widespread recognition of their importance and usefulness. Secondly, there is a clear consensus on the value of service learning, highlighting a collective understanding of its advantages without any reservations. Within the context of education, the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) is being keenly recognized and welcomed. This is an encouraging observation, considering the scepticism that may have been expected from both students and teachers, who may have feared the possibility of being replaced by technology. However, the widespread acceptance of incorporating AI in education highlights a willingness to view it as a valuable addition rather than a threat to their roles, demonstrating a shared belief in its potential to elevate educational achievements.

Table 4

Which methods of interacting with information, that are not part of university education, should be incorporated into it? (more than one answer is possible)		
	teachers	students
Service learning	57%	57%
Podcast	24%	38%
Artificial intelligence	40%	32%
Virtual reality	38%	29%
Watching/Creating short videos	34%	27%
Influencing	6%	7%
None	8%	13%

Tables 5 and 6 present the attitudes of teachers and students towards existing forms of education, while Table 7 summarizes the results of the attitudes of both groups towards forms that are not part of the traditional university education. Tables 5 and 6 capture the attitudes of teachers and students towards the traditional forms of education pre-dating the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, there was a noticeable trend among students favouring a shift toward online and less in-person engagement. However, the post-pandemic landscape has brought a renewed appreciation for in-person teaching, and this change in sentiment is reflected in a marked decline in the preference for online formats. This rejection of purely online modalities should be interpreted as a reactionary shift. Concurrently, the prominence of blended learning is on the rise, suggesting a growing recognition of its efficacy. One interpretation of the differing responses between teachers and students, as seen in these tables, could be that student, as consumers of the educational 'product,' may have differing expectations and preferences compared to teachers, who are the 'producers.' This difference might indicate a reluctance on the part of teachers to invest in methods they are either unfamiliar with, unsure about, or lacking confidence in their ability to effectively implement. Table 7 presents a particularly compelling set of results, underscoring a strong alignment with methodologies such as agile and self-paced learning, which are relatively novel concepts for teachers. From the teachers' perspective, there appears to be an element of weariness, possibly signalling a desire to streamline the educational process. This could be due to a variety of factors, including the additional effort required to adapt to these innovative methods, or a general sense of fatigue after navigating the rapid changes in educational delivery necessitated by the pandemic.

Table 5

Is there a form of higher education that you prefer? (more than one answer is possible)		
	teachers	students
Regular in-person	70%	57%
Regular blended	41%	51%
Regular online	22%	26%
Distance online	14%	16%
Distance blended	18%	14%
Distance with meetings in-person	8%	9%
Regular evening	6%	11%

Table 6

Is there a form of higher education that should be eliminated?		
	teachers	students
Regular in-person	2%	7%
Regular blended	8%	4%
Regular online	18%	14%
Distance online	22%	21%
Distance blended	12%	12%
Distance with meetings in-person	12%	11%
Regular evening	10%	8%
none	50%	57%

Table 7

Is there a form of learning that is not part of university education and should be adopted by it? (more than one answer is possible)		
	teachers	students
Agile	18%	32%
Academies	38%	39%
Intensive courses	62%	53%
At one's own pace	38%	64%

4. DISCUSSION

Human beings are inherently social, empathetic, and nurturing qualities reflected in Margaret Mead's famous assertion that a healed femur represents the dawn of civilization, signifying care beyond immediate utility. This notion resonates with the unanimous support for service learning in higher education, as revealed in our survey. Both students and teachers agree that integrating such compassionate acts into academia is crucial, suggesting a desired evolution in educational norms that transcends mere knowledge transfer.

Lectures, a mainstay of traditional teaching, retain their value but are also recognized by both educators and learners as needing modernization. The anticipation for more dynamic and engaging presentations in lectures has been mounting over the years, with the inclusion of visual aids—such as images, maps, charts—being identified as a key enhancement (Tarczewski, 2021). While opinions may vary on the integration of new teaching methods, there is a shared belief that such changes are of substance.

Teachers' advocacy for intensive courses highlights a gap in the current educational approach, and the persistent preference for in-person learning is heartening, offering hope that universities will remain vibrant in the face of technological disruption and evolving professional landscapes. Travel, akin to goodwill, serves as another dimension that enriches our humanity. Although traditional seminars may be waning in importance, our survey points to the significance of traveling seminars, bolstered by initiatives like Erasmus+, as crucial to the EU's strategy for enhancing higher education.

The creation of university alliances following 2018, inspired by French President Emmanuel Macron's initiative, represents a novel form of solidarity within European university networks. This movement transcends singular projects, aiming to generate intellectual value on a broader scale. The European University Initiative (EUI) serves not just to internationalize higher education, but also to revamp the administration of educational processes.

Considering these reflections, it is important to note the psychological impact of educational environments and methodologies on both teachers and students. The traditional separation between the two groups is becoming more fluid, with students increasingly viewed as active collaborators rather than passive recipients of knowledge. The survey suggests that the integration of technology, while beneficial, should not overshadow the human element of education. The need for empathetic, nurturing, and socially interactive experiences in learning environments is becoming clearer, and the role of technology should be to facilitate, not replace, these experiences. The shift towards a more holistic educational experience is evident, one that values not only the cognitive but also the emotional and social development of students. This evolution reflects a broader societal recognition of the interconnectedness of knowledge, skills, and emotional intelligence in shaping well-rounded individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to an increasingly complex world.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The educator's role, no longer authoritative by default, shifts towards becoming a facilitator—requiring proof of the utility of their knowledge and convincing students of its relevance. By stepping into the students' digital and social

realms, educators can find elements of their subjects within the platforms students use daily (Bardakcı, 2019; Veldkamp, A., van de Grint, L., Knipples, M.-C. P.J. & Joolingen, W. R., 2020; Davis, L.L., Sigalov, S.E., Maljković, F. & Peschanski, J.A., 2023; Gegenfurtner, A., & Ebner, C., 2019; Reinsalu, R., Vija, M., Siiman, A., Org, A., & Remmik, M., 2023; Squires, 2016). In doing so, they must elevate the complexity of tasks and expectations, guiding students from fragments of knowledge to a cohesive understanding. This transformation calls for educators to become mediators, blending word and image to create a dynamic learning experience that resonates with students' realities.

The introduction of 'post-pedagogy' as a new term at the end of this text is not an overstatement, as it represents the need for a new kind of knowledge in the relationship between learner and educator in a world where technology changes not only the environment but also the pathways (Philpott, D. & Baume, M., 2023). This term and its exploration could become the focus of new research, as current and upcoming generations demand a different kind of knowledge that addresses the relationships between teacher and student.

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