

# How do Academic Faculty Members Perceive the Effect of Teaching Surveys Completed by Students on Appointment and Promotion Processes at Academic Institutions? A Case Study

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## Abstract

It is commonly thought that the promotion of faculty members is affected by their research performance. The current study is unique in examining how academic faculty members perceive the harm or damage to academic appointment and promotion processes, as a direct effect of student evaluations as manifested in teaching surveys. One hundred eighty two questionnaires were collected from senior faculty members at academic institutions. Most respondents were from three institutions: Ariel University, Ben Gurion University, and the Jezreel Valley College. Qualitative and statistical research tools were utilized, with the goal of forming a model reflecting the effect of the harm to academic appointment and promotion processes, as perceived by faculty members. The research findings show that the lecturers find an association that causes harm to their promotion processes as a result of student evaluations. Assuming that students' voices and their opinion of teaching are important – the question is how should these evaluations be treated within promotion and appointment processes: what and whom do they indicate? Do they constitute a reliable managerial tool with which it is possible to work as a foundation for promotion and appointment processes – or should other tools be developed, unrelated to students' opinions?

**Keywords:** higher education, evaluation, teaching survey, excellence

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 *The Role of Research and Teaching within Systems of Higher Education*

The goals of higher education in Israel were strongly influenced by three dominant outlooks: those of Germany, the UK, and the US. The effect of these outlooks is evident in the perceived aims of the system of higher education, namely, in the relative significance ascribed to research and teaching. Israel's system of higher education can be said to be mainly university-centered and research-oriented. The conception of the research university has dictated the arrangement of Israel's system of higher education (Davidovitch & Sinuany-Stern, 2014).

Until the early 1970s, the Humboldtian concept of combining research and teaching permitted the unquestioned superiority of research as the goal of the entire system. This concept shaped, to a large degree, the nature of the academic profession, affecting the curricula and the system of degrees and limiting the institutional diversity between universities (Davidovitch, Sinuany-Stern & Iram, 2013).

Smilor, Dietrich and Gibson (1993) propose a more detailed model of "the two paradigms of the American university". According to the traditional paradigm of the university, research, and particularly basic research, is the main purpose of a university, and while teaching is considered important, it has less weight than research achievements in promotion decisions and academic recognition. In contrast, in the American system, top-notch colleges have excellent faculty who are engaged both in research and in teaching. They select students with a fine-tooth comb, similar to the top universities, and prepare their students for advanced degrees and professional degrees (Davidovitch & Sinuany-Stern, 2014).

In Israel, the many undergraduate college students require special attention to defining their role in a system where universities place research at the top of their academic priorities. In addition, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) changed the dominant paradigm of separating research and teaching by reducing costs. This although Israeli universities have a double role: on one hand they nurture research excellence, and on the other they have opened

their gates to a fairly high proportion of young students. In this way, the principle of equitable access to the system of higher education is implemented in theory and in practice (Gruenwald, 2000).

In contrast to the university approach, based as it is on research excellence, at the colleges the situation is different: on one hand, they seek to refresh their teaching for the benefit of their students and on the other hand, some try new methods to enhance their research aspects and strengthen the senior faculty. This, in order to attain the university-type prestige sought by students and to maintain an academic institution that is equal to all others.

Indeed, at present there is no longer any point to the argument concerning which academic institutions are considered research-oriented and which non-research oriented. This distinction should be replaced by another, between institutions where research constitutes a relatively large proportion of their budget and those where research constitutes a relatively small proportion. All academic institutions in Israel are at present staffed by faculty members proficient in research, whose promotion depends on research publications. Carrying this out also depends on a clear policy regarding the need of the entire system for research and teaching (Davidovitch & Sinuany-Stern, 2014).

It may be said that the deliberations concerning the role of research and teaching at the Hebrew University dictated the concept of the research university and became landmarks in consolidating the system of higher education in the various academic institutions established further on as well. They reflect the disagreements concerning the aims of academic institutions. Investigating the changes that occurred in the field of higher education in general and in Israel in particular in the status of research and teaching, raises the issue of differentiation and duality in the purpose of undergraduate studies. This is evident in the approach that assumes that all students should be trained for a career in research and that, intellectually and mentally, students are mature people with a thorough education. Therefore, lecturers were considered researchers first and foremost rather than teachers and instructors (Iram, 1983). As such, they are judged by their research outcomes (Davidovitch, Sinuany-Stern & Iram, 2013).

### *1.2 The "Response to Needs" Approach – Learning-Centered*

Paradigmatic transformations have occurred in Israel's system of higher education (Mizrachi, 1994), indicating that the face of higher education has changed with the changes reflect the different and preferential treatment of the needs of science, society, and the individual (Yaoz & Iram, 1987). The changes are, to a large degree, the product of developments in educational thought in general, higher education in particular, and shifts in Israeli society as manifested in higher education. The effects of "progressive" trends in the philosophy of education, which demand that the learner be placed in the center, have gradually intensified in Israel. These trends have been translated into the language of education, in all educational systems, in the form of excess individualization (Chen, 1998; Iram, 1978).

Higher education is measured from this perspective of responding to needs (Miller, 1990). This approach is compatible with the aims of institutions of higher education: research and teaching, which constitutes a service for the community of learners (Mizrachi, 1994).

The paradigmatic changes that have occurred reinforce intentions to unify processes of appointment and promotion in Israel's academic institutions. Israel's system of higher education is a monistic system, where the differentiating boundaries between universities and academic colleges are blurred. In all academic institutions the classification process is based on competition: institutions that enjoy benefits related to location, a proven ability to teach desirable fields, the ability to develop unique regional programs, and more – acquire a reputation and attract more skilled students and faculty as well as supplementary, extra-budgetary resources. Other academic institutions that do not manage to develop exemplary domains and stress them to candidates are compelled to "absorb" most of the increasing demand for popular higher education (Davidovitch, 2014).

We estimate that this scenario will be maintained at all academic institutions that successfully compete with prestigious institutions, unless a centrally operated "blocking" intervention is put into place by the national authorities by means of limiting budgetary tools that artificially distinguish between institutions. According to Luria and Luria (1970), it is currently not possible to establish universities based purely on autonomous functions, and therefore the distinction between "autonomous" universities and "popular" colleges is unrealistic. The development trends of academic institutions in Israel indicate that the institutions are becoming more similar to each other, also regarding appointment and promotion processes (Davidovitch, 2014).

Examination of the paradigmatic changes in Israel's system of higher education might constitute an important key to evaluating the primary scenarios for the promotion of faculty members – in a system of higher education that stresses research and teaching – as a service: Will appointment and promotion processes be part of a binary system that maintains a clear division of labor between the various institutions, aimed at different target populations, or will

these processes be part of a monistic system, with the various types of academic institutions becoming more similar and the faculty measured primarily by their research performance?

### *1.3 Accessibility and Excellence – Are They Compatible?*

The issue of quality and quantity at academic institutions in Israel is examined from a perspective of approximately 30 years with regard to academic teaching. The research literature indicates that, with regard to higher education, the desire to enjoy the benefits of both approaches has led to a continuous discussion of the central issue within the public debate concerning higher education: the dialogue between the social designation and the academic designation – have we paid an academic "price" for following the social designation? Is the essence of academic teaching still focused on raising the next generation of researchers (Davidovitch, 2014)?

Over the years, academic institutions in Israel have grappled with the issue of their declared mission. Israel's system of higher education has undergone ideological shifts manifested in changing the declared aims of institutions of higher education, which reflect global trends. Academia, which began its course even before the state was established, has undergone many transitions:

- From imparting higher education for its own sake – to imparting a profession;
- From seeing education as a goal – to seeing education as a means;
- From the value of study for its own sake, expanding knowledge, and the value of inquiry and discovery – to technological studies and utilitarian-applied science;
- From studies oriented towards excellence – to studies that stress equality for all.

### *1.4 Higher Education – For Whom?*

Until World War II, the main role of the higher education system was to nurture the elite. This system served as a mirror of the elite and as an instrument for preserving the existing social order. The change that occurred is that higher education, which was previously defined as an opportunity reserved for the privileged few, became a universal right and even a civil duty. From the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we witnessed a phenomenon of massification of higher education, when higher education was transformed from the elite to the masses, namely, a transformation was evident in the composition of the student population, their motives for studying, and their study habits – a new reality (Davidovitch, 2014). One of the challenges encountered in this new reality was to preserve quality: in research, in teaching.

### *1.5 The Implications of Higher Education Accessibility for Academic Teaching within Israeli Academia*

Following the transformation of higher education to a system that is accessible by the masses we are witnessing phenomena such as: large classes, a diminishing of the humanities and the natural sciences, degree commercialization, degree inflation, grade inflation and superficial demands, disrespect for research values, involvement of workplaces, studies motivated by the desire to acquire money and status, "advanced" degrees for everyone (with no thesis), plagiarism, and more. These are phenomena that affect academic teaching processes, and a new profile of learners has emerged, who are now "consumers". As a result, faculty members currently doubt the results of teaching surveys indicating students' satisfaction with faculty teaching.

The motivation and learning habits of current day students were studied by Almog and Almog (2016). Their main findings:

- The most significant consideration when undertaking academic studies is professional-functional. Sixty six percent of those asked selected "to earn a degree in order to find work in a field that interests me" as the most important reason.
- The growing perception is that which degree you earn and what grades you receive are not so important. First of all you must earn a Bachelor's degree. The ultimate goal, an academic degree, sometimes sanctifies the means.
- Sixty three percent of students only read the abstracts of most articles and 8.6% do not read anything. Only 16.5% read most of the articles in full.
- Students arrive with no experience of reading books or articles. There is an entire industry of translations and summaries. They do not know how to accept criticism.
- "I often encounter papers that look like one long text message. They don't know how to connect words to form sentences, and sentences to form paragraphs..."

- Work is at the center and studies are a hobby on the side.
- "It is important to note that nearly 10% 'do not read the articles at all'. This reflects a growing perception that it does not matter what grade you receive so long as you pass the course and receive the Bachelor's degree. Hence, we are gradually becoming institutions that sell degrees rather than imparting an education. Young people want change and the direction is quite clear: a professional degree culminating in occupational placement.

Therefore, many lecturers simply thin out the reading lists or, alternately, give students a list with a wink. There is a type of tacit agreement that the reading commitments will not be required for the test.

Liebman (2014) too deals with the change in the academic scale of values and refers to the phenomenon of grade inflation in higher education: a grade of 80 is the new fail.

- In recent years a phenomenon has emerged: grade inflation. The main claim made by researchers, academics, and educators is that the grades of academic students are rising and "improving" significantly, although there is no decisive proof that the level of the students and their knowledge have improved accordingly.
- The accessibility of higher education has changed the profile of those admitted to academic institutions. Sociologists are of the opinion that the "massification" of higher education is gradually making it less elitist and as a result more adapted to diverse populations that formerly had no access to higher education.
- Educators attest that students are less involved and make less of an effort at their studies, and particularly – are less eager to acquire extensive knowledge, while applying pressure to receive high grades in return for less work. The name of the game today is high grades at a discount.
- A grade of 80 is the new fail.

#### *1.6 Do Grades Reflect Hard Work? Quicker, Easier, Higher...*

- The system of higher education is betraying its fundamental values (academic level, striving for excellence) when it awards gifts with no real return from students. There is a concerning deflation in the value of higher education and the reputation of academia and its institutions is bearing the brunt.
- From many respects, accessibility is positive and more democratic and its contribution cannot be disregarded, as "also mass and quantity has quality". But the claim is that increasing accessibility did not create a significantly high level of human capital, rather it mostly caused institutions of higher education to adapt their study demands to the students and to reduce the proper academic standards and level. At the same time, the students' grades have been rising each year.
- The ability to distinguish between different levels of knowledge is being lost. Thus, the main role of the academic accreditation system has been impaired and the evaluation scale is losing its legitimacy. This phenomenon is also hampering the motivation and morale of good students to make an effort at their studies.
- A weakening emphasis on the academic level and the value of education for its own sake and its intellectual aspects. Institutions of higher education are required to cope with a larger mass of students, with a strong desire to retain them within the academic settings, but the result was supposed to have been a significant improvement of human capital rather than a lowering of standards. Instead, what is happening today at educational institutions is a compromise of academic demands. The result is high grades with no supervision.
- In most academic institutions lecturers are not compensated for good and thorough teaching. Considering the large load carried by lecturers and the many pressures of working at producing research, most lecturers prefer to put less efforts into teaching and to compensate students by granting high grades and keeping things quiet.
- Lecturers are afraid to raise the academic demands for concern of students' pressure, conformity, and going with the crowd, and also for fear of becoming outcasts or of being marked as "undesirable" lecturers. Despite the many studies indicating no connection between academic demands and maintaining a high level and students' evaluation of lecturers, many faculty members are certain that they will be marked as bad teachers if they are strict.

In 2016, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) published the findings of a study conducted on fissures in research skills in a global world (Davidovitch & Sinuany-Stern, 2014). The study focused on capabilities and knowledge

improved by undergraduate students in their first two years of studies, according to their self-report. Here are the main findings:

- During the first two years of their studies, most undergraduate students improve their general knowledge (77%) and professional knowledge (76%), as well as their critical thinking (68%) and learning skills (68%).
- Most students (62.3%) do not improve their command of English.
- Most students (59%) do not improve their research skills.
- Most students (57%) do not improve their creativity.
- Most students (57%) do not improve their technological skills.
- Less than half improve their written and oral expression ability.

In summary, the research literature indicates that in recent years fissures have been appearing in academia – and on this background faculty members are gradually finding more faults with the results of teaching surveys that reflect students' satisfaction with the teaching of faculty members. The current study focuses on faculty members' perceptions of the harm inflicted by teaching surveys that decide the fate of appointment and promotion processes at academic institutions.

## **2. Performance Measures of Academic Faculty**

In recent years, evaluation of and compensation for faculty members' performance have become important topics in recent decades (Wadsworth, 1994; Gillespie, Hilsen & Wadsworth, 2002). Faculty at academic institutions perform diverse activities. In addition to teaching and research, faculty write up and publish the results of their research, attend and make presentations at conferences, submit research grant proposals, fill academic administrative duties, engage in community service, and others. However, academic freedom challenges efforts to perform supervision, reporting, and evaluation of faculty's performance in these various fields of activity (Maning & Romney, 1973).

Academic institutions employ various methods to evaluate the performance of faculty members. The dominant tool for evaluating teaching is teaching surveys, which students complete in class at the conclusion of each semester (Kreber, 2001; Davidovitch & Sinuany-Stern, 2006). Faculty promotion decisions are based on the results of these surveys, and on peer-evaluations of performance by senior faculty members. Since 1993, many universities and colleges in Israel have employed annual self-evaluations and peer-evaluations by senior colleagues, based on a predefined list of criteria that represent excellence in research and teaching. The results of this evaluation are expressed in the salaries of faculty members, in the form of excellence rewards (Sinuany-Stern & Davidovitch, 2007).

Several questions arise concerning the performance measures of faculty members, particularly in light of society's expectations of academic institutions – what is the weight of research and teaching, perceived as service to the community of learners? The present case study examines how academic faculty members perceive the harm or damage to appointment and promotion processes in the academic track as a direct result of teaching surveys completed by students.

## **3. Research Hypotheses**

### **The effect of frustration and letting off steam on teaching surveys**

- H1. The fact that surveys are utilized as a sphere for venting frustration leads to annoying comments.  
H2. The fact that surveys are utilized by students as a place for letting off steam leads to annoying comments.

### **The effect of the annoying comments on feelings and motivation**

- H3. Annoying comments in the surveys cause bad feelings and reduced motivation to teach among lecturers.

### **The effect of the surveys on promotion processes in the academic track**

- H4. The fact that the surveys are utilized to let out steam is ultimately harmful to the lecturer's promotion.  
H5. The management's excessive attention to these surveys and the weight they give them result in harm to promotions.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Instruments

Optimizing performance is a key issue for business organizations (Eckhaus, 2011, 2017; Eckhaus, Klein, & Kantor, 2017; Eckhaus, Kogan, & Pearlman, 2013), as well as for academia (Davidovitch & Eckhaus, 2018a; Davidovitch & Eckhaus, 2018b). In order to enable and maximize the potential of the responses, open-ended questions were used in our survey, which do not inhibit responses (Roberts et al., 2014) and allow new ideas and at times even creative solutions. Content analysis often provides valuable insights (Ben-Hador & Eckhaus, 2018; Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2017), as well as providing cues for detecting problems within organizations (Eckhaus & Sheaffer, 2018c; Eckhaus, Taussig, & Ben-Hador, 2018; Klein & Eckhaus, 2017). The teaching evaluation survey the students are given included two parts, where the first was a general score for the lecturer, and the second consisted of free comments. A questionnaire was used for data collection, with two open-ended questions: "how may the teaching evaluations harm?", "what is the value of the teaching evaluations?" along with demographic questions.

### 4.2 Initial Sample

The questionnaires were distributed online using Google Docs, to the senior faculty members of seven academic institutions. One hundred eighty two completed questionnaires were collected. The majority of the respondents were from Ariel University (91), Ben-Gurion University (21), and the Jezreel Valley Academic College (20); 7 additional respondents were divided between four other institutions, and the rest did not identify their institution. Of all respondents, 47.9% were females and 52.1% males. Respondents' ages ranged from 22-39 (17.1%), 40-49 (41.4%), and 50+ (41.4%).

### 4.3 Data Analysis

First, we manually overviewed the texts and identified major themes relevant to the research question, regarding faculty's feelings and the effect on promotion (Eckhaus & Davidovitch, 2018a, 2018b). This process is known as text categorization (Niharika, Latha, & Lavanya, 2012). Based on these categories the model was constructed. Table 1 lists the categories.

Table 1. Main themes

Variable	Theme
<i>Frustration</i>	Teaching surveys are utilized by students as a sphere for venting frustration
<i>Steam</i>	Teaching surveys are utilized by students as a sphere for letting off steam
<i>Anger</i>	Students write comments that cause anger among lecturers who read them
<i>Feel</i>	Teaching surveys raise many negative feelings among the lecturers
<i>Promotion</i>	Teaching surveys undermine promotions and job conditions, creating a climate of fear for the faculty
<i>Management</i>	The management's attitude toward the teaching surveys is excessive and unrealistic

Categories were binary coded, i.e., texts were tagged as 0 (does not belong to the category) or 1 (belongs to the category) (Eckhaus & Sheaffer, 2018b). We employed a mixed methods design (Eckhaus & Ben-Hador, 2017), which enables the strengths of both qualitative and empirical methods to complement each other. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the model's goodness-of-fit (Eckhaus, 2019; Eckhaus & Sheaffer, 2018a). Model fit was estimated using CFI, NFI, TLI, RMSEA, NFI, and minimum discrepancy divided by their degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF). Values of CFI, NFI, and TLI close to .95 or higher indicate good fit, and above .9 is considered acceptable (Hinz et al., 2017), the ratio CMIN/DF should be as small as possible (ibid.), where typically lower than 3 is considered a good fit. RMSEA should be .06 or smaller (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

## 5. Qualitative Findings

### 5.1 The Effect of Frustration and Complaints in Teaching Surveys

H1. The fact that teaching surveys are utilized as a sphere for venting frustration leads to annoying comments.

H2. The fact that teaching surveys are utilized by students as a place for letting off steam leads to annoying comments.

"The comments are annoying and the feeling is that students use the surveys as a sphere for expressing frustrations."

"They complain about the level of difficulty when they don't even bother to come during office hours and ask questions. They complain about work overload etc. In other words, there is no serious attitude to studies and no comprehension of 'taking responsibility'. Regrettably, I have nothing to learn from these comments."

"When students write a verbal evaluation in impolite and improper language, this is harmful and annoying and of course doesn't really enhance my motivation to teach them."

"Sometimes [the surveys] are annoying."

### 5.2 The Effect of the Annoying Comments on Feelings and Motivation

H3. Annoying comments in the teaching surveys cause bad feelings and reduced motivation to teach among lecturers.

"The surveys are often not matter-of-fact and are hurtful. Sometimes they are affected by external elements to the teaching, for instance the number of assignments in the course."

"At times the surveys reduce motivation, when there is a feeling that students complain despite all the hard work."

### 5.3 The Effect of the Teaching Surveys on Promotions

H4. The fact that the teaching surveys are utilized to let off steam is ultimately harmful to the lecturer's promotion.

H5. The management's excessive attention to these surveys and the weight they give them results in harm to promotions.

"They are used inappropriately by the students and the management. Only students with distinctly positive or negative opinions complete them."

"Grades are perceived as threatening – a low grade can hurt you to the extent of not giving the course next year."

"The surveys create an atmosphere of fear among the teachers and of a desire to satisfy, which are not always compatible with good teaching."

"The manner in which the university relates to the surveys has an undue influence on evaluation of the lecturers."

"They might have a negative effect on promotions."

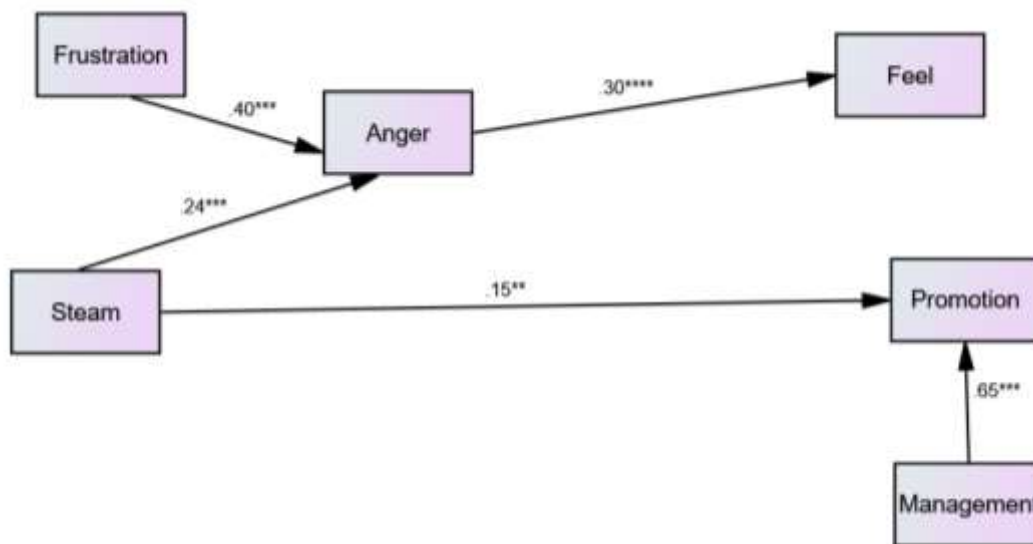
## 6. Empirical Results

Spearman's correlations, means, and SD are presented in Table 2. Figure 1 illustrates the model results.

Table 2. Correlation matrix: Means, SD, and reliability

	<i>Frustration</i>	<i>Steam</i>	<i>Anger</i>	<i>Feel</i>	<i>Promotion</i>	<i>Management</i>
<i>Frustration</i>	-					
<i>Steam</i>	-.07	-				
<i>Anger</i>	.38***	.21**	-			
<i>Feel</i>	.14	.03	.30***	-		
<i>Promotion</i>	-.07	.18*	-.08	.03	-	
<i>Management</i>	-1.0	.05	-.10	-.04	.65	-
Mean	.09	.04	.10	.10	.13	.08
SD	.29	.19	.31	.31	.34	.28

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Figure 1. Model results

The hypothesized model shows a very good fit: CMIN/DF = .65 ( $p > .05$ ), CFI = 1, NFI = .96, TLI = 1.05, RMSEA = 0. All hypotheses were supported. Frustration and Steam (H1 and H2, respectively) positively affected Anger, Anger positively affected Feel (H3), Steam and Management positively affected Promotion (H4 and H5, respectively).

In the next step, we added age, gender, and academic institution (college or university) as controlled variables, i.e., a relationship was added between age, gender, academic institution and all other variables. Results still showed a good fit with the model, CMIN/DF = .84 ( $p > .05$ ), CFI = 1, NFI = .94, TLI = 1.05, RMSEA = 0. All previous relationships remained significant. Results showed that gender and age had no effect on the research variables (Table 1). Institution type affected Frustration ( $B = -.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ), meaning that college faculty members complain more than university faculty about the use of teaching surveys to express frustration. Institution type also affected Management ( $B = -.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ), meaning that college faculty members complain more than university faculty regarding the exaggerated weight the management places on the teaching surveys.

## 7. Conclusion and Discussion

In this study we used a combination of methods, empirical and qualitative, to present lecturers' perceptions of the harm caused by teaching surveys to processes of appointment and promotion at their academic institution and the associations between the perceived harm and background variables. The research findings show that teaching surveys are not perceived as a reliable tool or as one that can be utilized to improve teaching.

Faculty members were found to perceive teaching surveys as a platform for venting students' frustrations, as a platform for expressing anger at faculty members, a platform for letting off steam – and all this has a direct effect on their appointment and promotion processes. Personal background variables were also examined: age, gender, and academic institution (college or university) and their association with lecturers' perception of teaching surveys as harmful to their appointments and professional promotions. The research results indicate that sex and age had no effect on the research variables. Type of institution constituted an influential factor, i.e., faculty members at colleges more than those at universities complain that teaching surveys serve to vent frustration. Faculty members at colleges more than at universities note the exaggerated weight given to teaching surveys by the management of the institution.

This finding can illuminate the existing monistic system, with a change regarding teaching surveys. At universities the attitude is different and their weight, as perceived by faculty members, is less harmful than at colleges, where the management of the institution ascribes more meaning to these surveys for the purpose of appointment and promotion processes.

Assuming that students' voices and their satisfaction with teaching are important and a significant resource for academic institutions, the Council for Higher Education, and the faculty members, the lecturers – who wish to perform their job well – the question is how should these teaching surveys be treated in appointment and promotion



processes: what and whom do they indicate? Do they constitute a trustworthy management tool capable of affecting appointment and promotion processes?

Academic teaching has undergone deep transitions throughout the world and therefore it is important to examine ways of properly and fairly evaluating the quality of teaching in academia, and teaching should definitely constitute a factor in processes of appointment and promotion – the question is how?

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