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Students' Perception of the Learning Environment in Business Education in Kuwait: A Comparative Study between Private and Public Universities

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Abstract
Several private universalities have opened doors to students in the last decade or so in Kuwait. This has raised some questions about the quality of education these universities have been providing. This study explores the learning environment in business schools at private universities in Kuwait and tries to relate it to students' attitudes toward their universities. The study compares that with the public Kuwait University and tries to find out if there is any gender difference in students' perception. The study used regression analysis to explore the individual effects of each of the five dimensions of the learning environment (student cohesiveness, teacher support, involvement, task orientation and cooperation) on students' attitude toward their academic institution. The findings of the study proved positive effects of the five dimensions of the learning environment on students' attitude toward their academic institution however; students' attitude was significantly higher for public institutions than private ones. When it comes to gender, the study found significant differences in students' perception of the five dimensions of the learning environment and the attitude toward the academic institution.

Keywords: Students' Perception, Learning Environment, Kuwait Education, Kuwait Private Universities, Kuwait Public Universities.

Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to investigate students' perceptions of the learning environment in business and management colleges at the undergraduate level in several private and public Kuwaiti universities. The study will also try to relate the perception of the learning environment to students' attitudes towards the academic institution they belong to, and to their positive and negative opinions regarding their university.

The academic and practical importance of this study stems from several points:

Firstly, most of the current literature about the learning environment at the university level reflects the perspective of the educator, implying a teacher-centered view of the classroom environment, with little focusing on the perspective of the student. Secondly, since the emergence of private universities in Kuwait, there has been little or no research conducted to spot the light on the quality of academic teaching presented by these universities, either solely, or in comparison with the long established public Kuwait University. Thirdly, it is expected that

this research will assist business academics and administrators to improve the learning process of business students in business and management schools. Finally, academic institutions are increasingly recognizing that higher education is inevitably a service industry. Therefore, they are placing greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of their participating customers, namely, the students.

This study will also help schools of business and management in Kuwait deal with the challenges they are facing. According to Al-Atiqi et al. (2010), Sibert (2011) and Alfajjam (2013) Arab and Kuwaiti business schools and colleges are facing three main trends that are changing the environment within which business schools operate: technological and market changes, increased competition and changing educational needs and expectations.

Literature Review

Adult Learning Environment Research

Individual characteristics of learners were the focus of investigation by Auger (1992) who proved that gender differences exist in evaluating the learning environment within the classroom. It was also concluded that gender differences regarding the learning preferences were significant in three areas: academic content, learning processes, and in the application of knowledge. A later study by Kariuki (1995) differentiated between the concepts of "learning style" and "learning environment" and concluded that matching students' learning styles with those of teachers was not found to be related to the perception of the classroom environment. However, the teachers' views for the actual classroom environment were found to be significantly higher than students' views in Kariuki's research.

Swoope (1995) conducted a research to identify and investigate retention factors that facilitate and increase minority retention in college education in an American university. He concluded that students' satisfaction with the university was due to their satisfaction with the academic environment, their satisfaction with the open, comfortable learning environment provided by professors; and by large, their satisfaction with the social environment within the university. In line with the previous view, Spencer (1995) recommended that university instructors need to understand that within the classroom, the academic, social and personal factors are naturally linked and promote student-student interaction; therefore, instructors need to be aware of the social character of the university classroom and to make it a comfortable venue for adults to share experiences and to assist the adult student to grow as self-directed learner.

Rideout (1995) identified several factors that impact the learning process among adult learners. Positive factors perceived as impacting learning included: academic support, a non-threatening learning environment, collaboration and mutual respect and trust, and development of skills in time management, organization, studying and priority setting. Numerous negative factors identified by Rideout (1995) included family commitments, role conflict, time commitment, finances and any learning activity that created more stress on time or family. In a further research, Sanders (1996) examined adult learners' attitudes and perceptions concerning the educational system and the learning environment in a nontraditional, post-secondary college degree program. The findings suggested that adult learners were highly concerned with several academic and personal issues including: the academic support services, the quality of the adult education program, and the lack of having access to an administrator. The researcher recommended that a clear two-way communication line between the institution and the adult learner must be provided.

Zehyoue (1996) followed a field observation qualitative methodology that provided new insights concerning excellence in college teaching, which includes the following:

(a) Cooperative group work among students which promoted significant academic, personal and social outcomes necessary for college students to succeed in the subject.
(b) Frequent use of history and philosophy in classrooms as well as numerous references to current human and societal issues was well embraced by students and as such sustained their interest in learning.
(c) The use of multiple traditional and non-traditional assessment techniques adequately accommodated the learning needs and styles of the diverse student population in the classroom.
(d) The overall establishment of a non-threatening and accommodative learning environment appeared to be a crucial factor in success at recruiting and retaining students in the subject studied. In her qualitative study, Mouzes (1996) explored the strategies female college students used in overcoming the barriers to become computer literate. The researcher concluded that adult women were successful learners because of the perceived safe learning environment in which they found themselves, as well as instructor's support and approachability. Other reasons for participants' positive learning experiences were the availability of instructional materials and the collaboration of fellow classmates. Oziri (1996) focused on how the college environment and program services influenced students' academic success. The researcher concluded that the support services program was significantly effective in the retention and the overall academic success of the students. Fraser (1998) emphasized that it is very important for the learning environment research to associate between student outcomes and learning environments as a mean to evaluate educational innovations and to identify differences between students' and teachers' perceptions of the same classrooms.
In a later study, Fraser (2002) also focused on the investigation of associations between students' cognitive and affective outcomes and their perceptions of the classroom environment. The learning environment was found to be consistently and strongly associated with affective and cognitive outcomes. In line with Fraser's conclusion, other researchers have also indicated that students' perceptions consistently account for a significant amount of variance in students' learning outcomes (Lizzio, et al, 2002, Aldridge & Fraser, 2003)

Students' Attitudes Research
Attitudes are generally defined as enduring dispositions to respond consistently, in a given manner, to various aspects of the world, including persons, events and objects (Zikmund 1997). The three components of attitudes are: the affective -emotions or feelings involved, the cognitive -awareness or knowledge, and the behavioral -predisposition to action (Solomon et al. 2006). Many researchers have established a strong link between learning or teaching environment and students' attitude. In an earlier research, Ward (1993) examined the effect of student participation on the process by which students acquire attitudes. Ward (1993) concluded that adopting a participative method of teaching within the classroom will consistently lead students to have a positive attitude toward the subject learned and the manner in which it was taught. Results also suggested that adopting a non-participative teaching style will result in negative student attitude.
Many researchers have also reported in their findings the existence of strong attitude-environment associations (Kim et al., 2000, Quek et al. 2005, Telli et al., 2006, Kerr et al., 2006, Dorman et al., 2006, and Koul & Fisher, 2006). Furthermore, many other researchers have established proved positive effects of the learning environment on students' attitudes and performance (Wong & Fraser 1996, Goh & Fraser 1998, Fraser & Chionh 2000, Soerjaningsih et al. 2001, Aldridge & Fraser 2003, Margianti et al. 2004).

Methodology

Building on the previous research that has been reviewed the current research established the following hypotheses:

H1: Students' perception of the five dimensions of the learning environment positively affects their attitude towards their academic institution.

H2: Students' evaluations of the five dimensions of the learning environment in private universities are significantly more positive than those in public universities.

H3: There are significant gender differences in students' perception of the five dimensions of the learning environment and in their attitude towards their academic institution.

The scale of the perceived learning environment dimensions was partially adopted from Chee (2007) who validated the scale and proved it to be reliable. The learning environment dimensions within the classroom, according to Chee (2007), consist of the following factors:

Student Cohesiveness: refers to the extent to which students know, help and are supportive of one another.

2. Teacher Support: refers to the extent to which lecturer/tutor helps, befriends, trusts, and shows interest in students.

3. Involvement: refers to the extent to which students have attentive interest, participate in discussions, perform additional work and enjoy the class.

4. Task Orientation: refers to the extent to which it is important to complete activities planned and to stay on the subject matter.

5. Cooperation: refers to the extent to which students cooperate rather than compete with another on learning tasks.

Students' attitude scale was derived from several previous attitude studies (Oliver 1980, Gorn 1982, Allen, & Madden 1985, and Lichtcnstein & Bearden 1989). A self selected convenience sample of 342 university students studying management and business in public and private universities in Kuwait participated in the current study through filling out a questionnaire that included the scales of the study. The current study conducted a reliability test for each of the above scales and all Alpha coefficients were highly acceptable (Hair et al., 1986) as table 1 indicates.

Scale Title	**Number Of Items**	**Alpha Coefficient**
Student Cohesiveness	8	0.810
Teacher Support	8	0.883
Involvement	8	0.875
Task Orientation	8	0.816
Cooperation	8	0.896
Attitude	8	0.776

Table 1 Alpha Coefficients of Scales Reliability Tests

Results

Out of the overall participants who responded to the questionnaire of the study, 182 respondents were males (53%) and 160 were females (47%). Also 240 respondents (70%) were private university students and 102 were public university students (30%). The first hypothesis of the study stated that students' perception of the five dimensions of the learning environment positively affects their attitude towards their academic institution. The individual effects of each of the five dimensions of the learning environment on students' attitude were tested through simple regression. The results indicate a significant positive effect of these dimensions (Tabachnick, *et al.* 1996) as Table 2 shows.

Independent Variable	**B coefficient**	**Significance**	**R Square**
Cohesiveness	0.341	0.000	0.10
Teacher Support	0.258	0.000	0.09
Involvement	0.224	0.000	0.06
Task Orientation	0.399	0.000	0.13
Cooperation	0.275	0.000	0.10
Table 2 simple regression coefficient for learning environment dimensions			

Multiple regression analysis of the simultaneous effects of all independent variables on students' attitude revealed significant positive effects of all independent variables with the exception of the involvement and teacher support dimensions as Table 3 indicates.

Independent Variable	**B coefficient**	**Significance**	**VIF**
Cohesiveness	.175	.003	1.320
Teacher Support	.122	.051	2.490
Involvement	-.068	.298	2.470
Task Orientation	.299	.000	1.138
Cooperation	.121	.021	1.663
Table 3 multiple regression coefficient for learning environment dimensions			

The VIF values for the independent variables indicate no multi-collinearity (VIF = 10 or higher) among study variables as the above table shows, therefore, the construction of the five dimensions of the learning environment should be revised and cross-culturally validated to confirm its applicability across cultures and in different learning environments. However, the first hypothesis is proved to be true regarding the positive effects of the five dimensions of the learning environment on students' attitude towards their academic institution.

The second hypothesis of the study stated that students' evaluations of the five dimensions of the learning environment in private universities are significantly more positive than those in public universities. The independent sample T-test results of mean differences of the learning environment dimensions between private and public university students indicate that students' attitudes towards their university is significantly higher for public institutions that private ones, whereas, students' cohesiveness dimension was nearly equal for both private and public university students. Private university students scored significantly higher in the dimensions of Teacher Support, Involvement, Task Orientation, and Cooperation than public university students as shown in Table 4 and the second hypothesis of the study is partially supported.

Study Variable	University Sector	Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Attit	Private	3.3924	.024	-.19057
	Public	3.5830		
SC	Private	3.5339	.243	.09025
	Public	3.4436		
TS	Private	3.2292	.000	.71166
	Public	2.5175		
Inv	Private	3.2043	.000	.39199
	Public	2.8123		
TOR	Private	3.7407	.017	.19448
	Public	3.5462		
COP	Private	3.3205	.002	.31107
	Public	3.0095		

Table 4 Independent sample T-test results of mean differences of the learning environment dimensions between private and public universities

The third hypothesis of the study stated that there are significant gender differences in students' perception of the five dimensions of the learning environment and in their attitude towards their academic institution. The independent sample T-test results of mean differences of the learning environment dimensions between male and female respondents shows no significant differences between the two groups with the exception of Involvement and Cooperation dimensions of the learning environment, therefore, the third hypothesis is true for these two dimensions only as Table 5 indicates.

Study Variable	Gender	Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Attit	Male	3.4299	.593	-.04126
	Female	3.4712		
SC	Male	3.4417	.052	-.13960
	Female	3.5813		

TS	Male	3.0161	.985	-.00177
	Female	3.0179		
Inv	Male	2.9825	.012	-.22416
	Female	3.2067		
TOR	Male	3.6291	.109	-.11455
	Female	3.7437		
COP	Male	3.1162	.009	-.23894
	Female	3.3551		

Table 5 Independent sample T-test results of mean differences of the learning environment dimensions between male and female respondents

Discussion of Results and Findings

The results of the current study suggest that improved students' attitude towards their institution is associated with greater emphasis on the dimensions of the learning environment in management education (Students Cohesiveness, Teacher Support, Involvement, Task Orientation, Student Cooperation). Regression analysis proved that all relationships were positive, thus replicating the finding from past research (Aldridge & Fraser, 2003; Fraser, 1998; Margianti et al., 2004) that a positive classroom learning environment is linked to positive student outcomes, including attitudes. Students' attitude towards their institution was higher for public universities than private ones which might be due to the long heritage and previously stored positive image of public universities. Private universities, however, were evaluated significantly higher than public ones, in the four dimensions of Teacher Support, Involvement, Task Orientation, and Student Cooperation. This conclusion is a result of the relatively small number of students in the classroom which enables students to be task oriented, cooperate and be involved much more than students within public universities were the classroom is significantly bigger and the number of students is much larger. The results also indicated that female students have significantly higher perception of the Involvement and Cooperation dimensions of the learning environment than male students. Overall, the finding that female university students generally perceived a more favorable classroom learning environment replicates previous research (Fraser 1998 and Margianti et al. 2004).

Conclusion

The present study provides some practical and useful information to guide improvements in student achievement and attitudes through changing the classroom learning environment.

Information on students' perceptions of the classroom learning environment can provide a valuable source of feedback about the teaching performance of tutors and lecturers. Therefore, it is recommended that tutors be more sensitive to the learning needs of students so that they become more effective in delivering business studies courses through changing the classroom learning environment.

Public universities in Kuwait should enhance the learning environment of management students in terms of their perception of the Teacher Support, Involvement, Task Orientation, and Cooperation dimensions, whereas, private universities should work on enhancing their authenticity and draw a positive image in their students minds through pursuing academic excellence and being more customer oriented than profit oriented.

The findings of this study are a strong reminder that higher education institutions are essentially service providers; therefore, they should focus on their customers' satisfaction. This becomes even more important in private universities where university budgets depends totally on fees paid by students. So, in order to ensure that the need for business education services is met effectively, it is important to provide a classroom environment that is conducive to learning for business students.

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