

## **INFLUENCE OF EDUCATORS' PERCEPTION OF GEN Z STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The article aims to reveal the relationship between educators' misperception of Gen Z students as a generation, educators' attitude, instructional behavior, students learning engagement and performance. Presented are the results of two complementary qualitative studies conducted at the same higher education institution with educators (N 35) and students (N 184) in 2020 and 2022. Both groups report inadequacy and dissatisfaction in the others behavior, in the teaching process and communication. Referenced with findings from other research the results indicate that students' unrecognized generational characteristics and preferences lead to a reciprocal adverse influence on educational engagement of both, students and professors, and thus affects the learning outcomes. In order to break the vicious circle, educators need to familiarize with the characteristics of the students' generation and need guidance to optimize communication and implement a student-centered teaching approach.

**KEY WORDS:** higher education, Gen Z students, educators' attitude, reciprocal influence

### **INTRODUCTION**

Educators in higher education still struggle to engage and activate Generation Z (Gen Z) students- the generation which already enrolled in faculties for several years and is different from previous generations.

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<sup>1</sup> original research paper

Educators' perception of Gen Z students in higher education was the subject of a qualitative study (Cickovska) conducted in 2020 at the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in Ohrid, North Macedonia. The results revealed that the behavior of the students in and towards teaching seems inadequate from educators' point of view. They have the impression that students don't want to learn, are passive and not interested and report unsatisfactory learning outcomes. The attempts to motivate the students do not lead to success, cause professors' dissatisfaction and even the feeling that everything is in vain. The complementary study presented in this paper is conducted to examine the matter from students' perspective and to determine whether the misperception of the professors and their attitudes towards the students, their teaching practices and communicative behavior in-fact affects students' engagement and performance.

Literature (Frenzel, Götz,& Perkun, 2008; Saidi&Vu, 2021; Hagenauer&Volet, 2014; Walker &Gleaves, 2016) on the quality of instruction shows that teaching is considered successful when the content, teaching methods and the teacher-student relationship are motivationally and affectively positive, supportive, respectful, caring and inspirational. According to Miller and Mills (2019), students talk about professors' attitude as being caring or uncaring. The study in 2020 (Cickovska) indicates that the misperceptions of Gen Z students and the disappointment of the non-success with time leads to not caring of the educators. Gen Z students in particular "are most motivated by relationships" (Seemiller, 2017, p.6), it is important for them to feel valued, and have strong connections with their educators (Seemiller et al., 2021; Seemiller, 2017; Schwieger&Ladwig, 2018). They need faculty to 'care' as a significant variable shaping students' engagement, educators' credibility, and students' performances (Chory&Offstein, 2017; Miller& Mills, 2019; Schwieger&Ladwig, 2018), as well as to be enthusiastic, approachable and humane (Seemiller et al., 2021). Studies (Seemiller et al.,2021; Miller& Mills, 2019; Saidi&Vu, 2021; Scholz, 2018) even suggest that they are not motivated by the task but by the person behind it. Miller and Mills (2019) define the results of their research of the meaning of educators' 'caring' in higher education context through a sentence from one of the focus group Gen Z students "If they don't care, I don't care". Gen Zs also expect of the educators to understand them, to adapt and align with their values and learning styles. (Sethi, 2019)

Prior research generally outlines that "Instructors' behavior is central for learning engagement" (Seemiller et al., 2021). "Instructors' emotions have a reciprocal influence on their instructional behavior (i.e., cognitive

stimulation, motivational stimulation, and social support), which in turn influences student outcomes (i.e., competence level, motivation, and social-emotional skills)” (Becker, Götz, Morger&Ranellucci, 2014,p.19).

### SURVEY – STUDENTS’ PERCEPTION OF PROFESSORS/TEACHING/COMMUNICATION

The qualitative study about students’ perception of professors, teaching and communication was conducted in 2022 at the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in Ohrid, Republic of North Macedonia. It is the same institution where the previous study (Cickovska, 2020) about educators’ perception of Gen Z students in higher education was conducted.

#### RESEARCH METHODS

An online questionnaire was sent to all enrolled undergraduate students (N 580). Taken in account are answers of Gen Z students N 184 (response rate 31.7%). The questionnaire had an open question: What do you think about professors / teaching / communication with professors? To provide qualitative answers based on students’ opinion and experience and to consider what emerges in the data rather than what is expected to emerge, the students were not limited with predefined answers. The main purpose was to see if reasons for low motivation, engagement and performance (which were pointed out by the professors in 2020) emerge and if the attitude of the professors towards Gen Z students does influence professors’ behavior and students’ engagement and performance.

The results are presented in response categories coded from formulations that describe the same matter with same or different discourse and emerge repeatedly. They are not classified by gender because there were no significant differences. The categories are derived in three themes as in the question. Two themes are according to Miller and Mill’s (2019) classification as the essential factors for students’ engagement and performance, educators’ attitude or demeanor and pedagogical practices in class. The third theme is added because of frequent expressed complaints of the students. Within the response categories positive and negative views of the matter are determined. To clarify and ‘hear’ the voice of the students sentence boxes with significant statements are given for all categories.

## RESULTS

The first chart (Chart 1) shows the overall way of answering in terms of length of the answers. Short answers consisting of one or only a few words are divided into three categories.

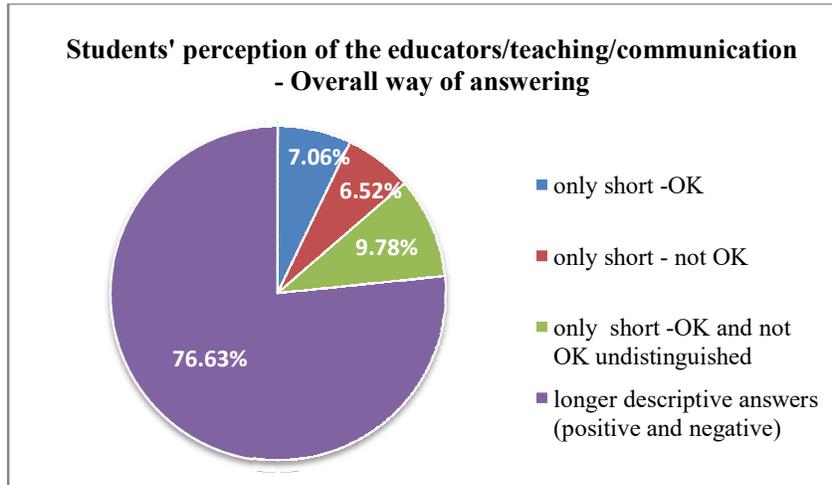


Chart 1. Students' perception of professors/teaching/communication - Overall way of answering

Sentence box 1. Short significant statements of students from the categories "Only short – OK" (+) , "Only short – not OK" (-) and "Only short – OK and not OK, undistinguished" (+/-)

+	OK; Good; All right; I am satisfied; Good professors;
-	Not good; I do not like it; Unsatisfactory; Negatively affect me;
+/-	Sometimes positive sometimes negative; With everyone different; It depends on the professors; It can be better; Some good some unsatisfactory; So-so; It is partly good;

The longer descriptive answers (76.63%, N 141) from which reasons for positive or negative perception can be extracted are presented in response categories in chart 2 by number, i.e. frequency of occurrence.

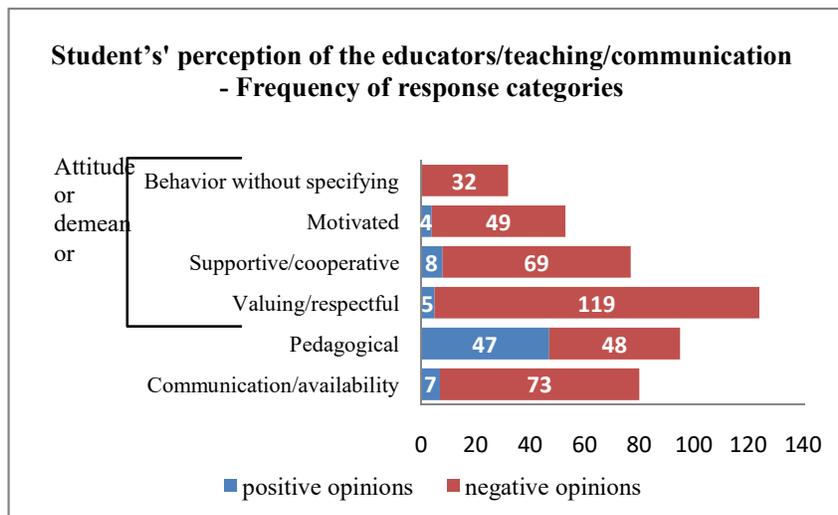


Chart 2. Students' perception of professors/teaching/communication – frequency of response categories

In the category 'Behavior without specifying', expressed by 32 students, all statements (Sentence box 2.) have an unfavorable connotation about professors' behavior. These are short answers in which they do not state why they think the behavior is inappropriate.

Sentence box 2. Short significant statements of students from the category 'Behavior without specifying' from the theme 'Educators attitude or demeanor'

Prof. do not behave correctly; do not behave like professors; badly - creates repulsion; Spread negativity; ; Bad relationship;

Statements in which students express that the professors are or are not motivated to teach, are or are not engaged, enthusiastic and interested, are coded in the response category 'Motivated'. 49 students note that educators lack motivation and only 4 mentioned the contrary. Therefore in sentence box 3 presented are only significant formulations of the first group.

Sentence box 3. Significant formulations – Response category ‘Motivated’ from the theme ‘Educators attitude or demeanor’

Prof. are not engaged with us and teaching; Pr. are not motivated to work at all; Do not try to impart knowledge; Are disinterested; Demotivated and demotivate me; Not committed to teaching;

Category ‘Supportive/cooperative’ appears in 77 answered questionnaires of which 8 are positive and 69 negative opinions.

Sentence box 4. Significant formulations – Response category ‘Supportive/cooperative’ from the theme ‘Educators attitude or demeanor’

Prof. insufficiently support us; Do not help; Are not affirmative; Are not open to cooperation; Not committed to students; Have no close relationship with students; Should have a more positive impact on students;

The category ‘Valuing/respectful’ appeared the most in the answers. 124 students write about conditions linked to this category, 119 of them have complaints. This category includes statements about the impression that professors don’t know and/or understand them, don’t value them, are not friendly or respectful and even verbalize it.

Sentence box 5. Significant formulations – Response category ‘valuing/respectful’ from the theme ‘Educators attitude or demeanor’

Prof. do not respect us; Are not kind; Do not treat us politely; Have no understanding; We work hard but it is not valued; Do not appreciate us; We have a great capacity, we fight to the end but prof. do not value it; We try in vein to prove to them that we are good; Prof. think we are stupid and not worth explaining or teaching; They think we do not know how to communicate and cooperate; They say we are a bad generation; They keep saying that we don’t know anything; Are not interested in us; They should put themselves in our place; We need to be on the same side to function better;

The opinion about the instruction in class and professional knowledge of the educators is divided evenly in positive (N47) and negative (N 48) comments. In sentence box 6. are given significant formulations for both.

Sentence box 6. Significant formulations – Response category ‘Pedagogical’

+	Good; I like it; professionally; works well; without difficulty; great knowledge of the subject; professionals in their field;
-	Do not transfer knowledge properly; I do not like the way they teach; Poor online teaching; They do not know what we know; Weak interaction with students; Pure lecturing and presenting; Should act as mentors; They need to know about our generation for easier integration into teaching; We try to adjust with them and their way of teaching;

The communication with the professors appears 7 times in positive and 73 times in negative connotation.

Sentence box 7. Significant formulations – Response category ‘Communication /availability’

Prof. are not accessible; should be more communicative; poor communication; do not respond to emails; Communication is most important and needs to be improved in terms of availability;
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## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that professors’ behavior seems inadequate from students’ perspective. Students repeatedly express that they feel disrespected, that educators don’t value them and their efforts, that they are not motivated to teach, ‘not committed to work and the students’, that they ‘insufficiently support’ them and are not available particularly in online communication.

Compared to the results of the study on educators’ perception of the students (Cickovska, 2020,) which indicate that behavioral characteristics of the students also seem inadequate from educators’ point of view, it can be concluded that there is a reciprocal relationship. Educators complain that students are indifferent to studies, not interested, passive, that they cannot provide a conducive atmosphere in class. 95.83% noted that there are weaker exam results compared to previous generations. Outcomes from the study in 2020 proposed that the reason is using inappropriate teaching methods due to generational differences and not reflecting on the context of

which Gen Zs learn. Sentences expressed by students from this research underline the conclusion: 'They need to know about our generation for easier integration in teaching,' 'We try to adjust with them and their way of teaching.' -but it should be vice versa. 'They are not committed to teaching and demotivate me.' Research (Frenzelet al., 2008, p.195) suggests that motivation and performance levels of students are related to the emotional experience of educators. Negative levels of these class features evoke different negative emotions like disappointment and anger and influence educators' behavior. Both studies compared confirm Frenzel's result. In professors' words: 'I lose enthusiasm, I can hardly activate them;', and in students words: 'Professors think it's not worth explaining to us.'

The study in 2020 (Cickovska) compared to the results of this study confirms that professors are demotivated under the influence of the low engagement of students and low results in class and in exams. Students notice professors' demotivation which in turn affects students' motivation. The results from this study strongly indicate that professors have a disadvantageous attitude and behavior towards students. Expressions like 'Professors behave badly and it creates repulsion' 'They do not respect us,' 'Professors are demotivated and it demotivates me' often appear in different formulations.

Studies (Miller & Mills, 2019; Chory & Offstein, 2017; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014; Meyers, 2011) analyzing the concept of 'care' in higher education context show that students in higher education conceptualize caring through demonstration of empathy, reliability, approachability, encouraging enthusiasm, acknowledgement and teaching practices aligned with their preferences of learning. They "identify two specific areas in which caring is seen (or not) in their interactions with faculty – faculty attitude or demeanor and pedagogical practices in class" (Miller & Mills, 2019, p.82). The care concept is a critical factor involved in students' learning (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014) "and is a significant variable shaping students engagement and performance" (Miller & Mills, 2019, p.80). Caring doesn't mean lowered expectations for students (Meyers, 2011). Students' perceptions that professors' care, increase their motivation to work, engagement in class and thus learning outcomes, and vice versa.

The findings from this study compared with the results of the previous study (Cickovska, 2020) imply that the pedagogical practices in class, as one element of caring, are not the only problem, but educators' behavior i.e. the

attitude or demeanor of professors. The response category 'Pedagogical' with comments on instructional practices has the most positive statements, but also statements like 'Professors do not transfer knowledge properly.' are not rare. Elements regarding 'Faculty attitude or demeanor' on the other hand, emerged so often that it is the only theme that has more response categories in which the most statements are negative opinions and indications that it affects students' motivation. Significant formulations from the response categories about professors' disinterest and behavior linked to their attitude towards the students are shown in the sentence boxes in the results section.

Professors' attitude towards the students clearly affects students' motivation, engagement, learning and performance. This is consistent with outcomes from other research (Seemiller et al., 2021; Walker & Gleaves, 2016; Miller & Mills, 2019), which suggests that instructors' behavior is central for learning engagement, that faculty who seemed disinterested and unenthusiastic tend to demotivate students, that creating purposeful relationships within higher education is critical to student learning. Good and purposeful relationships cannot be built because of professors' attitude. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) characterize a good relationship with higher education students as "honest, respectful, trustworthy, safe, fair, encouraging, caring and supportive". Many of these elements appear repeatedly in the survey results as missing and desired, as presented in the sentence boxes in the results.

The results of this research also showed that availability and communication is an element that should be improved. Comments about this response category appear in 39,67% of the answered questionnaires. Availability is also an element of the behavioral categories but it must be stated that students refer most to the problem that they don't get answers on online questions sent per e-mail. It comes probably from having multiple online communication channels available and used instantly at all times, so not getting an answer immediately is not fast enough for Gen Zs. Professors are not used to answer straight away. The reasons are not clear and should be additionally examined.

Limitation: There is a percentage of 23,37 answered questionnaires where students give a short answer with one or few words. Almost 10% of the surveyed replies undistinguished with a formulation like 'It depends on the professors' or 'It can be better'. To collect more specific answers interviews would be more suitable. In the time of the survey it was not possible

because of Corona issues, though there were hardly any classes at the faculty. A problem is also the size of the faculty were almost everyone knows each other. It would be difficult to prove anonymity and insure honest statements without fear that it would negatively affect the personal attitude of the professors towards the surveyed.

## CONCLUSION

Both groups involved in the educational process in higher education, professors and students, are demotivated, not engaged, not enthusiastic and not connected. This indicates to a reciprocal impact and a vicious circle conditioned by professors and students but caused by the professors. They are not familiar with Gen Z students' characteristics and preferences and thus fail to engage the students. That is the point where the vicious circle begins: The lack of engagement of the students in the teaching-learning process results in low performance → professors are disappointed, build negative attitudes → professors engagement drops → students engagement drops and the influential circle starts again. One can assume that the situation deteriorates.

The attitude toward Gen Zs originates largely as a result of generational differences due to different behavioral unconscious and automatically acquired models (Wessel, 2019, Selingo, 2018; Sethi 2019; Duse&Duse, 2016). Educators are not aware of their own models and the different models of their students' generation, they do not know the learning preferences and what motivates and activates the students. The discordance of aspirations, expectations and demands due to the generational differences lead to the interrelated circle of demotivation.

It is paramount that professors are introduced to the characteristics of Gen Z students (and further the Alfa generation before it arrives at universities) and to the reasons that influenced the development of those characteristics. That is a necessary precondition to provide the opportunity to recognize them, to understand the difference between generations and thus to be willing to change educational practices in class and educational behavior aligned to students' needs and preferences. Faculty needs training and permanent support to adapt to the new generations of students, didactically and behaviorally.

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