Determinants of Students' Evaluations of Teaching

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PROVISIONAL

Abstract

We use a comprehensive data set on student evaluations of teaching from a medium-sized Italian university to provide the first detailed analysis of student evaluations within the Italian university sector. We find strong evidence for "halo" effects, whereby students' responses to different questions appear to be highly correlated despite the questions being on aspects of teaching which should not be related. Contrary to other studies we find very little evidence that the gender of either the lecturer or the student makes any difference to the evaluations.

JEL Classification: A22; I23; J16

Keywords: Students' evaluation of teaching (SET); gender bias; halo effects; motivation

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1. Introduction

Students' evaluations of teaching (SET) are the main and often the only instrument universities use to evaluate teaching performance. It is not surprising, then, that a large literature has developed over the last decades to test its validity and reliability. In fact, one of the major concerns of this literature is the relationship between student opinions and teaching effectiveness. The literature on SET has found that several student or instructor characteristics seem to be able to influence student ratings. These characteristics include students' gender, age, field of study and expected grade and teachers' gender, academic rank and age. One possible interpretation of this result is that student evaluations are unreliable indicators of teaching quality, but that need not be the case if the relevant characteristics were correlated with other unobserved determinants of teaching quality (and which were not controlled for in the study).

The literature has also provided evidence of a "halo" effect, i.e. students assign similar ratings across many evaluation items, thus failing to view the multidimensional aspects of SET as independent of each other. But again, this finding needs to be interpreted with some care, since it is quite likely that different aspects of teaching are correlated with each other.

In so far as the evaluation questionnaires measure factors that are unrelated to teaching quality, their use in decisions about hiring or promotion creates obvious concerns and various researchers have concluded that they should not be relied upon when making personnel decisions (see, for a very recent discussion, Boring et al., 2016).

In this paper we use a large dataset, comprising of all teaching evaluations submitted to a mid-sized Italian university to investigate how much student and course characteristics matter in teachers' ratings. Our dataset is peculiar in that, with respect to the literature that uses mainly American data, it comes from a rather different educational system. Moreover, with respect to all the other analyses we know about, the dataset links the individual student and all his or her characteristics, with all their questionnaires. This dataset allows us to study how much student and course characteristics affect students' rating of professors. In particular, we have information on the student's gender, high school type and school leaving mark. We also have information on the course attendance and the motivation for attending or not attending

a course. Naturally, we also have all the relevant information on the courses themselves, including the lecturers' gender.

In line with previous literature, we find strong evidence of halo effects, even for aspects of teaching for which there should be no strong correlation. However, in contrast to the literature, we find that lecturer or student characteristics have only small effects and these are statistically insignificant

The rest of our paper is structured as follows. In the next section we briefly review the literature and section 3 describes our data set. Section 4 describes our results and section 5 concludes.

2. Literature review

In the following paragraphs we briefly look at the relevant literature, without pretending to be exhaustive, given its very large size. In fact, there appears to be almost 3000 articles published on student evaluation of teaching from 1990 to 2005 alone (Al-Issa and Sulieman, 2007). For a comprehensive analysis of the main findings of this literature, an excellent review of more than two hundred articles can be found in Spooren et al. (2013).

The main student characteristics that seem to play a role in judgments are class attendance, expected grade, gender, age and motivation. Among the teacher characteristics, researchers have found a role for gender, age, research productivity and experience and physical attractiveness. Course characteristics that are significant predictors of SET include class size, discipline, level and type (lectures vs. tutorials or laboratory). In the following paragraphs we will focus our attention on some of the most recent and relevant papers that take into account the effects of characteristics that are observed in our dataset and for which we can provide an analysis.

Beginning with grades, the recent work by Butcher et al. (2014) using a natural experiment provides convincing evidence that a university change in grading policy has an effect on students' evaluations of their professors. Many other studies have concluded that students reward lecturers who give them high grades or assign low levels of work so that, in effect, instructors could "buy" better evaluations through more lenient grading. For instance, Krautmann and Sander (1999) and Nowell (2007) find that expected grades do affect an instructor's evaluation. This may induce instructors to act

strategically by reducing grading standards and course content. In fact a survey by Crumbley and Reichelt (2009) found that 53% of accounting instructors in America knew of other professors who had done just this. All these results are consistent with the hypothesis that student evaluations of teaching have been a contributing factor to a trend of grade inflation (Eiszler, 2002).

Class attendance has been found to be positively related to SET, in that students who attend most classes provide higher evaluations (Spooren, 2010, and Brockx et al. 2011). Also, this aspect has been studied as a possible source of selection bias (Wolbring and Treischl 2016 and Wolbring, 2012). In our dataset, we have separate evaluations for attending and non-attending students and we also have information on the reasons for not attending, therefore we can explore this issue in detail.

As for student's gender, it has generally been found that female students give higher SET than males and also there seems to be some gender preferences. In fact, Feldman (1993) provides a review of the literature and noted a slight tendency for same-gender preferences. This is confirmed by Centra and Gaubatz (2000), particularly in female students rating female instructors, although these effects are rather small.

Finally, student's age is positively correlated with SET (Spooren, 2010) and so appears to be the pre-course motivation or desire to take the course (Griffin, 2004).

Moving to the course characteristics, several papers have found that natural science courses receive lower SET (for example Beran and Violato, 2005) and that SET are higher in higher year level (Santhanam and Hicks 2001) and in lab-type and elective courses (again Beran and Violato, 2005 and Ting, 2000). In our dataset, we can make a distinction between courses in four disciplinary areas: humanities, law and economics, life and health sciences and science and engineering.

Another aspect which has received some attention in the literature concerns the halo effect. This effect arises when students do not view the different scales in the questionnaire as independent of each other so that the rating of one aspect influences the remaining ratings thus distorting the measurement characteristics of SET. Recent investigations have confirmed this distortion in the evaluation questionnaires of different US universities (Keeley et al. 2013), in open online evaluations (Clayson, 2014), and in a meta-analysis of studies investigating the relationship between SET and a

number of teacher personal characteristics (Mittal et al., 2015). Some of the questions in our dataset are ideal for testing the halo effect since they concern characteristics that are exogenous to the students or the lecturer.

3. Data

We collected data for all student evaluations for Economics degrees for a batchelors degree (i.e. a laurea triennale) in the academic year 2013-14. Students were not allowed to attempt the summative assessment (typically an exam) until they had completed the evaluation. The SETs were administered anonymously and only summary statistics were made available to the lecturers. However, sufficient information was available to match student evaluations to other pieces of information, namely student gender, student school mark and type of school attended, student's year of matriculation. Furthermore students chose to complete one of two different SETs; one was for students who had attended the lectures and one for those who had not (the latter evaluation allowed for the possibility that students had attended a small number of some of the teaching sessions).

The issue of attendance versus non-attendance raises the issue of selection into the two types. Students were asked why they attended or did not attend and reasons for non-attendance are given in Figure 3.1: the three main reasons are attendance of other courses, work or "other". There is little more that we can glean from this, but it is worth noting that we have student evaluations of non-attendance only for those who complete an evaluation and presumably wish to take the exam. This means that as with many SETs, there is an element of selection bias since some evaluations are not available for all students.

For those students who declared that they did attend lectures, we have responses to twenty questions, of which one is completely open for students' responses (question 19) and we ignore (the vast majority of students left this blank). Most of the remaining questions allowed students to respond on a Likert scale of 1 (bad) to 4 (good). Since this scale is not very granular and few students respond with a "1", we use probit or ordered probit analysis to complement our least squares analysis. A list of the questions is in the appendix.

4. Analysis

4.1 Halo effects

We start our analysis by looking at the correlation between responses to different questions by the same student. A positive correlation will often be unsurprising because a lecturer's ability or enthusiasm to teach may manifest itself through more than one question. In fact answers to all of the questions are very highly correlated.

Our first measure of how correlated responses are to individual questions is illustrated in Table 4.1. For each of the 61 units, we calculate Pearson's chi-squared test for independence for each detailed question,[1] with the overall question 20 "On the whole, are you satisfied with the organisation and teaching of this course?" We summarise the large amount of information in two ways: first, the proportion of tests which are significant at the five per cent level; second, a test based on the N p-values proposed by Fisher of the form[2]

$$-2N\sum_{i} ln(p_i) \sim \chi^2_{2N}$$

Regardless of the method used the correlation between responses to all of the detailed questions and to question 20 is high and typically statistically significant. The strength of the relationship is particularly strong for the numerical questions, especially if we ignore questions which are optional or are on supplementary aspects of a unit (which is not present in all cases).

Table 4.1 about here.

Since we have responses to a large number of questions, we summarise the high degree of correlation between responses to all of the questions using a principal components analysis for the twelve questions 2-10 and 12-14 (questions 11, 15 and 17 are omitted as they concerns supplementary activities, which are not available in all courses). For each of the 61 units that we are analysing, we calculate the proportion of the variation in the

[1] Since the number of responses of 1 is always low and sometimes even the number of responses of 2 is relatively low, Pearson's test may be unreliable: however, the large overall sample sizes make it difficult to implement Fisher's exact test. Instead, as a robustness test, we discard the low responses and analyse the relationship between 3's and 4's only: the results are almost the same.

[2] Strictly speaking this is only valid if the tests underlying the p-values are independent and since some of our tests are based on the responses of the same students, this may not be the case.

responses which is explained by the first principal component. Figure 4.1 summarises this statistic by plotting the distribution across all 61 units, both for all students and separately for female and male students.

Figure 4.1 about here

In all three cases the first principal component typically explains about two-fifths of the total variation and it always explains more than one-fifth. This suggests a relatively high degree of correlation between all of the questions, some of which are quite different, but such a correlation must be partly due to unsurprising causal and selection effects.

A "halo effect" arises when a student's response to one question directly affects the response to another question even though there is no genuine link. We address this problem by using the responses to question 13 "Is the teacher/lecturer available to provide explanations/clarifications?" and question 14 "Are the lecture theatres where this course is held adequate? Namely, can students see, hear, find a seat?" Lecture rooms are assigned by university administrators and this can be thought of as random and uncorrelated with tutor ability or enthusiasm. Unlike some forms of teaching which may be affected by the quality of the lecture room, availability to see students depends primarily on the organisation and enthusiasm of the lecturer. Since there is unlikely to be any causal or selection effect linking the responses to these two questions, the most likely reason for similar responses is a halo effect, especially since the questions are next to each other in the evaluation. From Table 4.1 it can be seen that the correlations of responses with question 20 which are least statistically significant are the two questions with non-numerical responses and question 14, which concerns the adequacy of the lecture room.

Figure 4.2 about here

We calculate the correlation between students' responses to the questions 13 and 14 for all 61 units and illustrate the distributions of these correlation statistics in Figure 4.2. In the vast majority of cases the correlation is positive and often strongly so, with relatively little of this variation explained by students' gender. Since the response variable is discrete, we also test for independence using Pearson's chi-squared statistic for independence in the two-way table and report the distribution of the p-values: in 39

cases (64 per cent) these are statistically significant at the 5-per-cent level of significance.

This provides strong evidence for a halo effect and justifies concentrating much of our analysis on just question 20 (the question on overall satisfaction), which we do in the next section looking at the determinants of valuations.

4.2 Determinants of valuations: student characteristics

We have already noted that the gender of both student and lecturer appear to have some impact on student evaluations. The simplest way to model this is with a regression such as

$$v_{i.u} = \beta_u + \beta_1 g_i + \beta_2 f_u + \beta_3 g_i f_u + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where $v_{i.u}$ is the valuation of student i on unit u, g_i is the gender of the student and f_u the gender of the lecturer (both of these variables taking the value one for females and zero for males). The simplest way to estimate equation (1) is by least squares, effectively a linear probability model, which has the advantage that the coefficients on the dummy variables as differences in means.

Table 4.2 about here

Table 4.2 summarises the responses to question 27 for all 61 units under consideration, broken down by students' gender. This shows that very few students give a "1" and that female students are more likely to give a "3", effectively the middle option, than male students. This suggests that we could use an alternative specification to (1) such as a probit model where the binary response is either between 4 versus less-than-4 or between 4/3 versus 2/1. We also consider an ordered probit model.

Our results are reported in Table 4.3. Specification (1) shows that female tutors tend to get lower evaluations, but the effect is not large and not statistically significant. From specifications (2), (3) and (6), we see that female students give lower responses to male tutors but slightly higher responses for female tutors (e.g. in specification 2, female students' responses are 0.032 lower for male tutors but 0.057 - 0.032 = 0.025 higher for female tutors). Specification (4) shows that female students are particularly less likely to award a "4", consistent with the summary statistics in Table 4.2. To put these figures into context, the average evaluation for a lecturer is 3.01 with a standard deviation of

0.29, so many of the larger coefficient estimates in the table suggest that the effect of gender only changes the evaluation by between a third or a half of a standard deviation.

Table 4.3 about here

The striking feature of the table is that the effect of gender is very small and insignificant, with the exception of the possible behaviour of female students awarding "4"s to male lecturers. Centra and Gaubatz (2000) found some evidence that female lecturers got higher evaluations, while Boring et al (2016) found the contrary. In our case the effect sizes are arguably too small to matter.

Similarly there is little evidence that school background matters. The mark on leaving school (voto di maturità) is statistically insignificant. We also include school-type dummies to distinguish "istituti" (ie more professional training) from "licei" (more traditional schools) with a third category for other schools (e.g. for foreign students). There is evidence that students from istituti give higher responses than students from licei, especially on the 4/3 versus 2/1 margin. Note that students from istituti may have different preparation for certain subjects and so may find courses easier or teaching more consistent with previous experience. But it is also probable that type of school is an indicator of student preferences or innate ability.

This raises the question of whether student characteristics do really make much difference to student evaluations. Clearly, an individual's student characteristics may affect that student's evaluation of a particular lecturer, but this will only affect a lecturer's average evaluation if both (a) the effect is fairly large; and (b) the allocation of students leads to large selection effects. To test this we consider the following comparison. Consider a regression of the form

$$v_{i.u} = \alpha_u + \gamma_i + \varepsilon_{i.u} \tag{2}$$

where the γ_i are student-specific effects on the valuation. The average valuation of a lecturer is then

$$\overline{v_u} = \alpha_u + \overline{\gamma_i} + \overline{\varepsilon_{i.u}} \tag{3}$$

which shows that the average valuation will be close to α_u unless there is a significant effect due to the students which is correlated with the average. To test this we estimate two "panel" regressions: the first a random-effects regression of the form

(4) Random effects: $v_{i.u} = \alpha_u + \varepsilon_{i.u}$

and the other a fixed effects regression as in equation (2). We are able to do this due to the unique aspect of our data that we have evaluations of different lecturers from the same students as we can match up different evaluations using the anonymised student identifiers. Comparison of the two regressions is then a straightforward Hausman test. For a least-squares estimation, this is $\chi^2_{(46)} = 23.9$, which is not statistically significant. This suggests that even if some individual student characteristics do matter, they do not do so in a way which affects the average evaluations of lecturers in a statistically significant way.

5. Conclusion

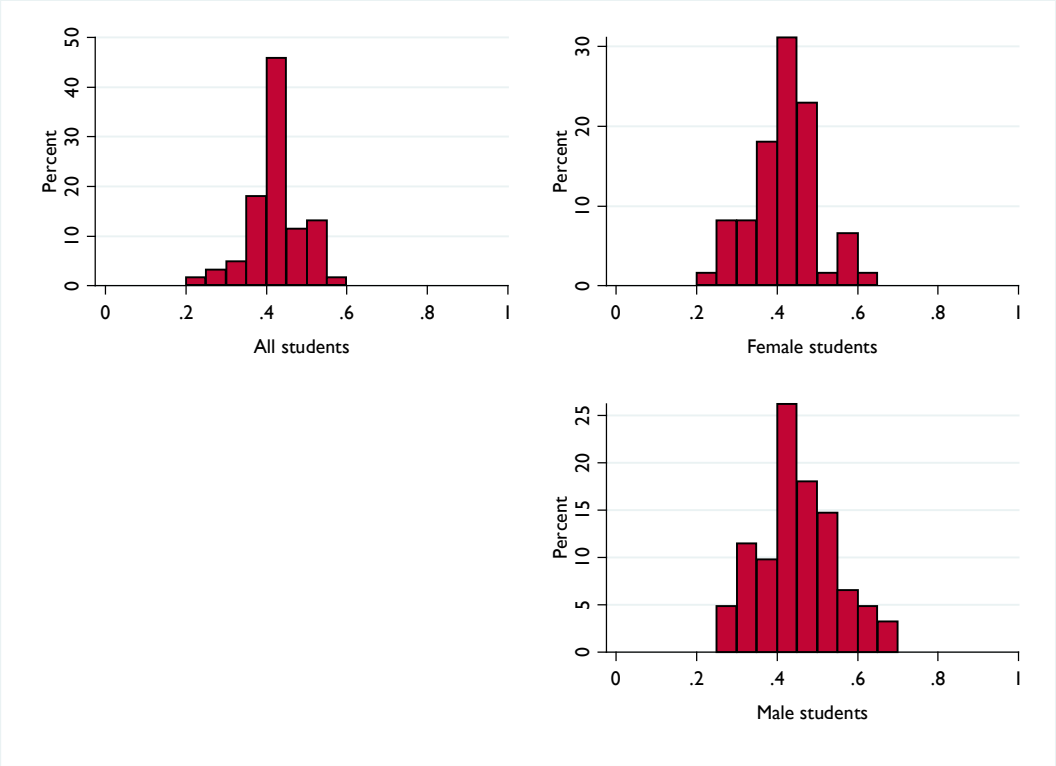
We have provided the first detailed analysis of student evaluations of teaching in the Italian university system by analysing SETs for an economics department. Our results confirm that there are strong halo effects, since we are able to compare responses to two questions (availability of tutor and adequacy of lecture room) for which it is implausible that there is any causal link: despite this the correlation between the answers to these two questions is not much lower than the correlation between other questions. Conversely we find different results for the effects of those student and lecturer characteristics that we are able to observe: the effect of student and lecturer gender is small and statistically insignificant; similarly the best available measure of student ability, namely school mark, has no explanatory power. We do find that students from istituti tend to give higher evaluations than those from licei, possibly because their schooling better prepares them for the subjects that they are studying at university.

Tables and Figures

Figure 3.1 Reasons for not attending lectures

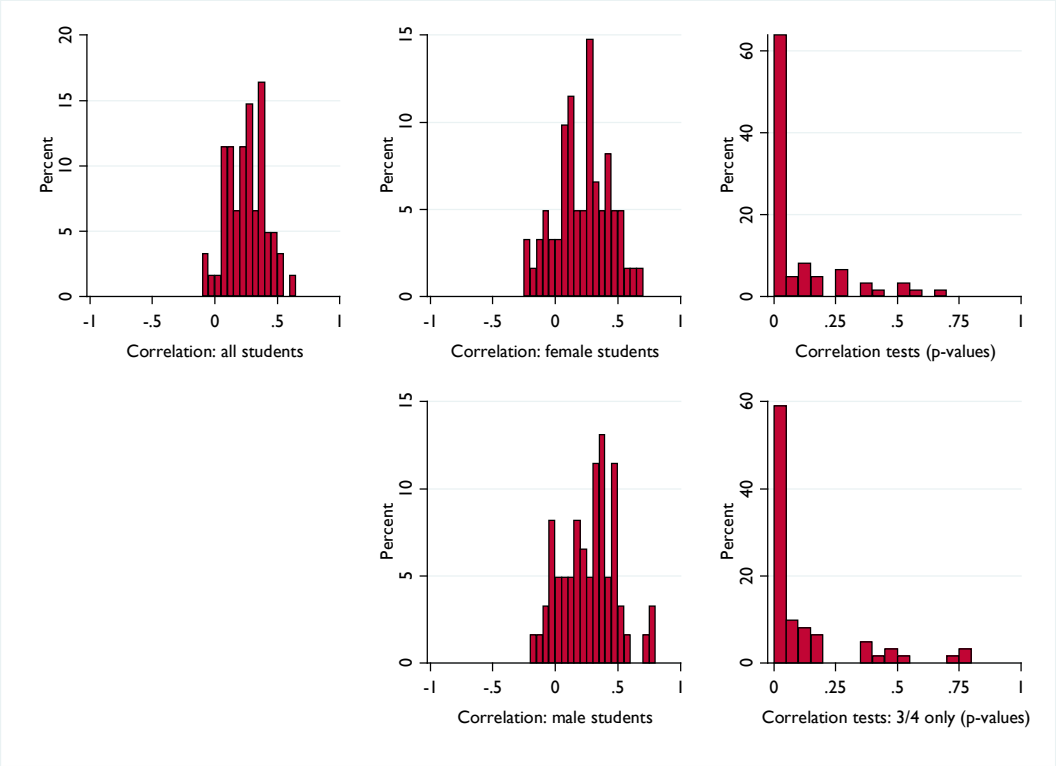
Reason for non-attendance	Number
Attendance at other courses	401
Attendance not useful for the exam	0
Facilities do not allow all students to participate	6
Work	463
Other reasons	354

Figure 4.1 Proportion of variation explained by first principal component



Figures summarise the statistics calculated separately for each of the 61 units we are analysing, first for all students and then for female and male students separately. The histograms illustrate the distributions of these 61 statistics which are the proportion of the variation explained by the first principal component.

Figure 4.2 Correlation between responses to questions 13 and 14



The three figures on the left report the distribution across 61 units of the correlation of responses to questions 13 "Is the teacher/lecturer available to provide explanations/clarifications?" and 14 "Are the lecture theatres where this course is held adequate? Namely, can students see, hear, find a seat?" The top-right test reports the distribution of the 61 p-values from Pearson's chi-squared test for independence in a two-way table. Because for all units there are relatively few responses of 1 or 2, we repeat the analysis for responses of 3 or 4 only, illustrated in the bottom-right figure.

Table 4.1 Relationship between individual questions and question 20

Question	No of units	Proportion significant at 5%	Chi-squared test	p-value
Numerical responses				
2	61	82%	1080.3	0.00
3	61	84%	1406.0	0.00
4	61	77%	800.8	0.00
5	61	89%	1089.9	0.00
6	61	90%	1444.3	0.00
7	61	85%	1362.1	0.00
8	61	74%	1062.1	0.00
9	61	95%	2309.9	0.00
10	61	95%	2264.4	0.00
12	61	89%	1693.1	0.00
13	61	85%	1547.3	0.00
14	61	39%	489.7	0.00
16	61	90%	1507.9	0.00
Numerical responses, but optional or sometimes irrelevant				
11	61	57%	554.9	0.00
15	61	26%	293.4	0.00
17	51	73%	854.7	0.00
Verbal responses				
1	61	26%	275.9	0.00
18	61	16%	177.1	0.00

Table 4.2 Values of responses to question 20

Response	All students	Female students	Male students
1	158	3.2%	4.1%
2	713	15.9%	17.1%
3	2,391	56.8%	53.3%
4	1,072	24.0%	25.5%
Sample size	4,334	2,329	2,005

Table 4.3 Determinants of responses to question 20

	(1) OLS	(2) OLS	(3) OLS	(4) Probit: 4 vs <4	(5) Probit: 4/3 vs 2/1	(6) Ordered Probit
Female tutor	-0.099	-0.130	-0.106	-0.223	-0.086	-0.164
	(0.100)	(0.101)	(0.104)	(0.142)	(0.179)	(0.154)
Female student		-0.032	-0.039	-0.146**	0.024	-0.066
		(0.032)	(0.032)	(0.048)	(0.072)	(0.049)
Fem × Fem		0.057	0.059	0.092	0.092	0.091
		(0.050)	(0.049)	(0.103)	(0.105)	(0.073)
School mark			0.001	0.003	-0.001	0.001
			(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Sch: inst			0.095**	0.043	0.216***	0.134**
			(0.033)	(0.052)	(0.063)	(0.049)
Sch: other			0.169	-0.384	.	0.206
			(0.098)	(0.537)	.	(0.159)
Other controls			✓	✓	✓	✓
N	3048	3048	3023	3023	3015	3023
R^2	0.005	0.005	0.019			

Regression results for responses to question 20 (overall satisfaction) for 61 units. Other controls include the year of the degree and whether or not students and year of matriculation (to allow for students repeating year or transferring into the university in the second or third year). Standard errors in parentheses are clustered by unit. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

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Appendix: List of Questions

Number	Question
1	Perchè ha scelto di frequentare questo insegnamento? - Why did you decide to attend this course?
2	Il carico di studio complessivo degli insegnamenti ufficialmente previsti nel periodo di riferimento (bimestre, trimestre, semestre, ecc.) è accettabile? - Is the overall study load of the courses officially scheduled in one term (two-month term, quarter
3	L'organizzazione complessiva (orario, esami intermedi e finali) degli insegnamenti ufficialmente previsti nel periodo di riferimento (bimestre, trimestre, semestre, ecc.) è accettabile? - Is the overall organisation (timetable, midterm and end-of-term ex
4	Le conoscenze preliminari possedute sono risultate sufficienti per la comprensione degli argomenti previsti nel programma di esame? - Was your preliminary knowledge adequate to understand the topics covered for the exam?
5	Il carico di studio dell'insegnamento è proporzionato ai crediti assegnati? - Is there an adequate balance between the study load and the number of credits assigned to this course?
6	Il materiale didattico (indicato e disponibile) è adeguato per lo studio della materia? - Are the teaching and learning materials provided adequate to study the subject?
7	Le modalità d'esame sono state definite in modo chiaro? - Has information on the exam structure been clearly provided?
8	Gli orari di svolgimento di lezioni, esercitazioni e altre eventuali attività didattiche sono rispettati? - Are class timetables (for lectures, tutorials, practice sessions and other teaching activities) adhered to?
9	Il docente stimola/motiva l'interesse verso la disciplina? - Does the teacher/lecturer motivate students towards the subject?
10	Il docente espone gli argomenti in modo chiaro? - Does the teacher/lecturer explain the topics clearly?
11	Le attività didattiche integrative (tutorato, esercitazioni, laboratori, ecc.) sono utili all'apprendimento della materia? - Are the scheduled supplementary teaching activities (tutorials, practice sessions, labs, etc.) useful to learn the subject?
12	L'insegnamento è stato svolto in maniera coerente con quanto dichiarato sul sito web del corso di studio? - Was the teaching consistent with what stated on the website about the course?
13	Il docente è reperibile per chiarimenti e spiegazioni? - Is the teacher/lecturer available to provide explanations/clarifications?
14	Le aule in cui si svolgono le lezioni di questo insegnamento sono adeguate? (si vede, si sente, si trova posto) - Are the lecture theatres where this course is held adequate? Namely, can students see, hear, find a seat?

Number	Question
15	Nel caso in cui abbia frequentato attività didattiche integrative, i locali e le attrezzature dove sono state svolte le attività didattiche integrative sono risultate adeguate? (si vede, si sente, si trova posto) - If you attended the scheduled supplementary activities
16	E' interessato/a agli argomenti trattati nell'insegnamento? - Are you interested in the topic/s dealt with during the course?
17	Se tale insegnamento è stato erogato anche in modalità e-learning, ritiene che tale strumento sia utile ed efficace? - If e-learning is available for this course, do you believe this tool is useful and effective?
18	Suggerimenti - Suggestions:
19	Eventuali altri osservazioni e suggerimenti - Further remarks and suggestions:
20	E' complessivamente soddisfatto/a di come è stato svolto questo insegnamento? - On the whole, are you satisfied with the organisation and teaching of this course?