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Students' Perceptions of Social Science: A Study on Perceptions and Learning Outcomes of Professional Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Undergraduate professional students of Medhavi Skills University, Sikkim, displayed an unfriendly attitude towards a social science subject at the beginning of their first-semester academic session. Ostensibly, the idea of studying social science alongside professional courses did not resonate well with the perceptions and expectations of the students. The current study investigates whether students' perceptions of the subject changed over time and whether these perceptions have any relation to their learning outcomes. A Google form questionnaire, which included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, was administered to students at the end of the semester to capture their perceptions of the course. The respondents were then segregated into two groups: (a) those who exhibited positive perceptions and (b) those who exhibited negative perceptions. The final semester grades between the two groups were compared to understand the linkages between perceptions and learning outcomes. Surprisingly, it was found that while the majority of students were appreciative of the course after completing it, there was no positive correlation between students' perceptions and learning outcomes. In fact, the reverse appeared to be true in the study.

Keywords: *Students' perceptions, learning outcomes, multidisciplinary education, professional education, National Education Policy 2020 (NEP - 2020).*

Introduction

Do perceptions influence learners' learning outcomes? The subject matter of inquiry is not new. Several studies have already been carried out to understand the nature of the relationship between perceptions and learning outcomes. With some exceptions, the majority of research studies indicate that students' perceptions have

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a bearing on their learning outcomes (Ferreira & Santoso, 2008; Greene et al., 2004; Lizzio et al., 2002; Struyven et al., 2005; Vereijken et al., 2018). For example, while Atkins (2018) and Pors (2001) concluded that there is no significant correlation between students' perceptions and learning outcomes, other studies have linked positive student perceptions with improved learning outcomes or academic achievement (Camiel et al., 2016; Ramsden, 1992, 1997; Struyven et al., 2005). This raises several questions: Why do certain students hold unfavourable views about social science subjects (Alvarez-Martinez-Iglesias et al., 2021; Gunawan, 2020; Irmiya et al., 2019)? Can negative attitudes—or rather, negative perceptions—demotivate and hinder students' learning progress? What are the factors that underpin students' negative and/or positive perceptions (Adekum et al., 2017; Ibem et al., 2017)? How can attitudinal issues among students be addressed to facilitate better learning outcomes? These are some of the pertinent questions this article seeks to explore.

The study acquires particular importance, as the investigation took place within an unconventional teaching-learning ecosystem. Previous studies on students' perceptions and learning outcomes have been conducted in diverse contexts and settings (Entwistle, 1998; Entwistle et al., 2002; Lucas, 2001; Posser & Trigwell, 1997), contributing richly to the already vast body of knowledge in education. Yet, there is little evidence of similar studies focusing on students' perceptions of social science within a professional education setting. Few research studies have specifically examined undergraduate professional students' perceptions of social science subjects vis-à-vis their learning outcomes. Some research suggests that students in general education courses often suffer from low motivation, as the subject matter does not align with their actual interests (Missildine et al., 2013). The implications may be even more acute in an ecosystem where students pursue programmes primarily to secure employment. Since social science is often regarded as irrelevant in professional and vocational education (Lind, 2006; Robinson, 1979; Watkins, 1946)—a misconception, of course—students in professional education may not attach as much importance to the subject as to their core area of study. This may have undesirable effects on their learning outcomes in the subject. Against this backdrop, this article attempts to examine the relationship between professional undergraduate students' perceptions of social science and their learning outcomes through empirical research at Medhavi Skills University, Sikkim, India.

Contextual Background

Medhavi Skills University (MSU) is a newly established institution founded under the Medhavi Skills University Act, Sikkim, which was passed in June 2021 by

the Sikkim State Assembly. The university currently offers various professional programmes at the undergraduate level and intends to introduce postgraduate programmes in the upcoming academic session. All students are enrolled in professional courses such as Optometry, Hospitality, Tourism, Business Administration, Computer Applications, and Health Care Services. The student body is drawn largely from diverse socio-economic backgrounds within Sikkim, with only a negligible number from outside the state. Most students aspire to enter the formal workforce immediately after completing their studies. Classroom interactions revealed that students had come from varied educational backgrounds. A majority had studied liberal arts and natural sciences at the senior secondary level, while a smaller number pursued commerce, business studies, finance and accounting, or computer and information technology.

MSU is fully aligned with the newly introduced National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020). In line with NEP 2020, the university has adopted an educational ecosystem in which a multidisciplinary approach forms an integral part of all professional programmes. The emphasis on multidisciplinary education is to provide multiple perspectives that encourage meaningful engagement in knowledge production processes while preparing the future workforce. More importantly, multidisciplinary education aims to produce well-rounded individuals (and future professionals) who are socially and culturally sensitive, morally responsible, economically productive, and politically well-informed citizens. With this aim, the university offers a compulsory social science course entitled *Introduction to Contemporary Social Problems (ICSP)* across all undergraduate programmes. However, the intention of this multidisciplinary approach was not initially well received or fully understood by many students. The idea of studying social science alongside professional courses did not align with their perceptions or expectations. Course instructors and the academic management frequently faced backlash from the student community. *"Why should I study a social science subject (ICSP) when I have enrolled in a professional programme to find a job?"* was a common refrain among dissatisfied students. One female student, name withheld for privacy, was particularly insistent—tearfully demanding to be allowed to drop the course. Against this backdrop of strong resistance and negative perceptions, it becomes significant to investigate the causal relationship, if any, between students' attitudes toward ICSP and its implications for their learning outcomes.

Literature Review

A societal misperception about non-professional and non-natural sciences subjects or liberal arts (which include classical subjects such as rhetoric and logic, languages,

and even modern-day social sciences such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc.) that was prevalent in 20th century American society is well captured by Watkins (1946) in the following manner: "When a member of the faculty in business administration is presented in public lecture, he is quite likely to be regarded as a paragon of practical wisdom, but when a member of the faculty in liberal arts is presented, he is regarded condescendingly as the impractical inhabitant of an ivory tower" (p. 77). Nowadays, social sciences subjects are considered indispensable for preparing young learners as well-rounded individuals. Yet, many societies and individuals still regard social sciences as secondary to practical subjects and/or natural sciences in the educational hierarchy (Gunawan, 2020). Does the gap in students' perceptions of social sciences significantly influence their learning outcomes? Available literature, with some caveats, indicates that negative perceptions can negatively influence students' learning outcomes. Negative perceptions foster unhealthy attitudes toward learning, demotivate students, and can seriously impair learning abilities (Isen, 2004). Negative stereotypes may give rise to antagonistic responses and false conclusions (Bierhoff, 1989). Positive perceptions, on the other hand, are correlated with enhanced learning outcomes (Alvarez-Martinez-Iglesias et al., 2021).

Positive and healthy perceptions can stimulate motivation for learning, enhance skill performance, and improve academic achievement (Lizzio et al., 2002). Entwistle et al. (2002) even claimed that students' perceptions matter more than teaching methods when it comes to academic performance. Important factors such as appropriate curriculum structure can generate positive perceptions, which in turn may positively influence students' learning outcomes (Vereijken et al., 2018). Yet none of these studies focused specifically on perceptions of social science among professional students in a skills university. As students in skills universities have specific ends in mind, it is crucial to understand their perceptions of a subject considered unrelated to their goals. The study becomes even more critical with the National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, 2021) mandating Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in India to adopt a multidisciplinary approach in their educational programmes. It is important to recognise that perceptions are formed over time. Perceptions are the opinions, views, and beliefs one holds about something. The formation of perceptions in young learners is greatly influenced by the kind of information they encounter in the past. Information gathered in earlier stages of life can have lasting impacts on how later information is processed. As Ferreira and Santoso (2008) note, "information received at later stages by a person is interpreted in the context of an existing mindset," which is built upon past experiences (p. 213).

What is often referred to as "belief perseverance theory" holds that people form their opinions based on previously received information, which in turn shapes how they view their surroundings. The persistence of beliefs is so strong that people tend to cling to them even in the face of glaring disconfirming evidence (Ferreira & Santoso, 2008). Thus, students' perceptions of a particular subject, whether positive or negative, are likely to be heavily influenced by prior information and experiences. Research further reveals that students' perception of social studies education is directly related to the kinds of information they encountered about the subject in earlier years (Irmiya et al., 2019). While there are several aspects to a person's perceptions, Mallum and Haggai (2002) identified four factors that influence students' perceptions: interest, need, experience, and ability. This calls for careful selection and strategic implementation of curriculum, teaching materials, sources, and methods. Modifications in curriculum, teaching styles, and learning environments have been observed to positively contribute to students' perceptions of the subjects being taught (Ferreira & Santoso, 2008). Suitable curriculum design and engaging learning environments stimulate positive perceptions in students, which are essential for attaining higher learning outcomes (Lucas, 2001). After all, people learn more easily and efficiently about things that interest them. Considering the differential needs and capacities of individual students is equally important to ensure better learning outcomes. Irmiya et al. (2019) suggested linking curriculum to learners' past experiences and presenting motivational and "thought-provoking" questions to stimulate positive perceptions in students (p. 274). Greater motivation, in turn, leads to greater learning achievement (Alvarez-Martinez-Iglesias et al., 2021).

There are several other factors that impact students' perceptions. Gender and parental background may also influence their perceptions about certain subjects. For instance, Alvarez-Martinez-Iglesias et al. (2021) found that female students were more appreciative of the values of competencies they learned in geography and history classes, while students whose parents had higher levels of education showed more positive perceptions of ICT skills and language competencies (p. 7). Even classroom structure may influence students' attitudes toward learning (Greene et al., 2004). Adekum et al. (2017) opined that classroom structure and learning spaces support the implementation of student-centered teaching-learning systems. Features such as space expansion, flexible classroom layouts, and technology integration are considered indispensable aspects of 21st-century learning spaces (p. 2). Ibem et al. (2017) also found that the learning environment is closely related to students' energy, focus, and comfort, which in turn impacts their learning outcomes (p. 6285). Therefore, the overall learning environment is crucial for fostering positive perceptions in students. Yet, linking students' perceptions with the attainment of

learning outcomes can be complex. Academic achievement and learning outcomes are influenced by many other factors beyond perceptions alone.

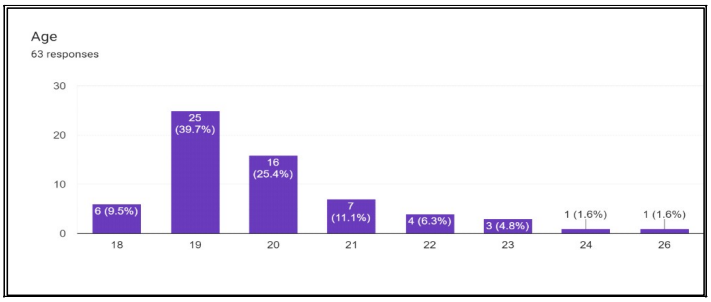
Family background, for example, cannot be overlooked. Several studies show that children from economically disadvantaged families fare poorly in academic achievement. For instance, Duncan and Murnane (2016) found that children from low-income families struggled with reading comprehension in science and social studies due to limited vocabulary and background knowledge. More affluent families, by contrast, are better positioned to provide resources and opportunities at home and outside—such as nutrition and learning materials—that underprivileged families often lack. Thus, a student may still perform poorly despite positive perceptions about a subject if their home environment is not supportive. Therefore, care must be taken when assessing the link between perceptions and learning outcomes. On the other hand, there is a stronger urgency for educational institutions and teachers to revamp and adapt teaching strategies to meet the diverse needs of students from varying socio-economic backgrounds.

Research Methods

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to participants, while quantitative data, comprising final semester grades, were obtained from the Head of the Centre for Assessment and Certification at the university. The participants included students from four different classroom sections representing various professional programmes in the university. All participants had been taught by the researcher during the first semester of the academic session spanning October 2022 to March 2023. A combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions was distributed via a Google Form to a total of 147 students. Of these, 71 students submitted responses, of which 8 were deemed invalid after initial scrutiny. The final valid response rate was therefore 42.85%. At the beginning of the semester, students displayed considerable discontent, frequently questioning the rationale for including a social science subject in professional programmes. This attitudinal issue was addressed by course instructors and the academic management through briefings and classroom interactions. To examine students' perceptions after exposure to the course *Introduction to Contemporary Social Problems (ICSP)*, a set of questions was posed to participants at the close of the semester. Based on their feedback, students were categorised into two groups: (a) those who exhibited unfavourable views of ICSP, and (b) those who demonstrated a positive attitude toward the course. To assess learning outcomes, the final semester grades of these two cohorts were compared using spreadsheet analysis.

Results

Fig. 1 Age Composition



The above figure representation reflects the age composition of the respondents. They belong to diverse age groups ranging from 18 years to 26 years of age. A large number of the respondents are aged 19 years. These young students are energetic, enthusiastic with high hope and aspirations for future career.

Fig. 2 Sex Composition

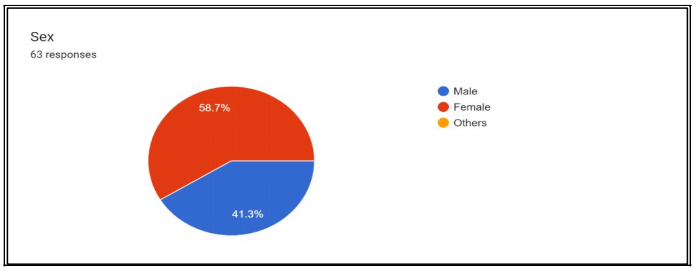
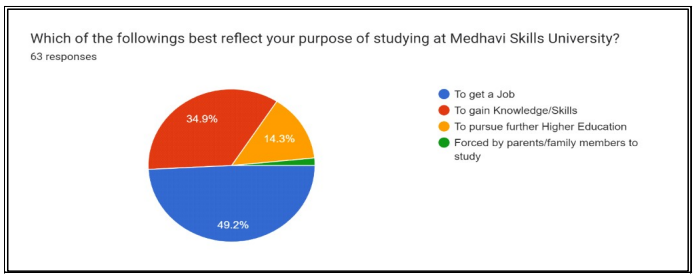


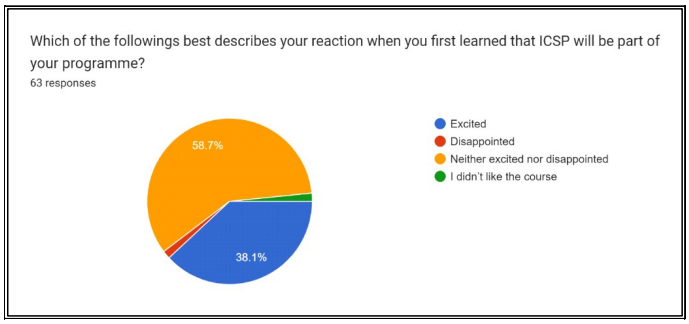
Figure 2 shows female respondents account for 58.7 %, whereas male respondents account for 41.3 %

Fig. 3 Purpose of Studying



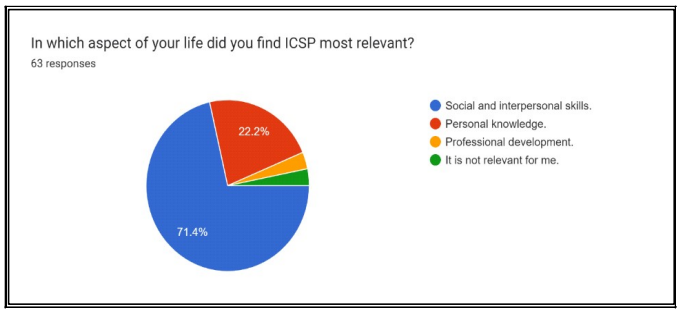
When asked about the purpose of studying at Medhavi Skills University, 49.2 % of the respondents replied that they aspire to get a job after the completion of their programmes. Fewer number of students accounting for 34.9 % wished to gain knowledge and skills; 14.3 % of the students wanted to go for further higher education, with the exception of one student being forced by parents or family members to get enrolled at the university.

Fig. 4 Initial Perceptions of Social Science



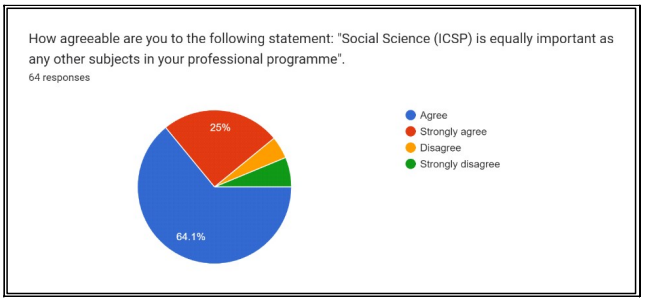
The respondents were then asked about their initial reaction on learning that social science (ICSP) will be a compulsory course in their programmes. 38.1% of the respondents said they were excited; majority of the students accounting for 58.7% remained neutral, they were neither excited nor disappointed. Whereas a fraction of the respondents didn't like the course and felt disappointed. However, the above figure needs to be treated with caution as the respondents have already had sufficient exposure with the course. Their actual answers could have differed, had the question been put at the very start of their academic session.

Fig. 5 Relevance of Social Science



When asked about the relevance of ICSP course, 71.4% of the students found it relevant in terms of learning social and interpersonal skills, 22.2% found it important for personal knowledge, 3.2% for professional development and another similar percentage of the respondents found the course irrelevant.

Fig. 6 Post-exposure Perceptions of Social Science



When enquired if social science (ICSP) was equally important as other subject studied in their professional programmes, 64.1% of the respondents agreed with the statement, 25% students strongly agreed; whereas 4.7% and 6.3% of the students disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively.

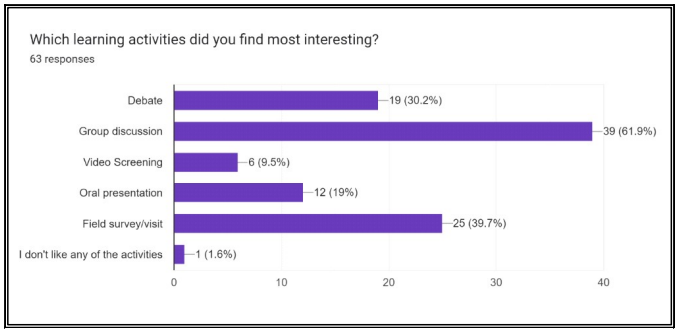
Table 1: Mapping Perceptions with Learning Outcomes

Statement: "Social science (ICSP) is equally important as any other subject in your professional programme"

Responses	**% of students**	**Average final semester grades**	
Agree	64.1	65.25	
Strongly agree	25	67.50	65.87
Disagree	4.7	69.33	
Strongly disagree	6.3	72.75	71.28

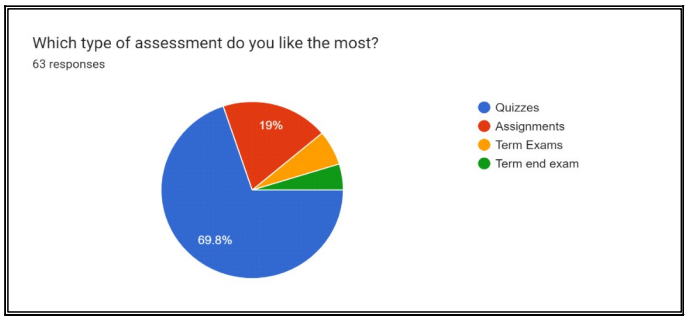
As the above table reflects, there seems to be no positive correlation between students' perceptions of social science and learning outcomes. In fact, other than a minor difference in the achievement level (2.25 %) between those who "agree" and "strongly agree", the average final semester grade or performance of students increases as the level of disagreement goes up. In other words, students who harbour negative perceptions seem to perform better than those who viewed the course positively.

Fig. 7 Preferred Learning Activities



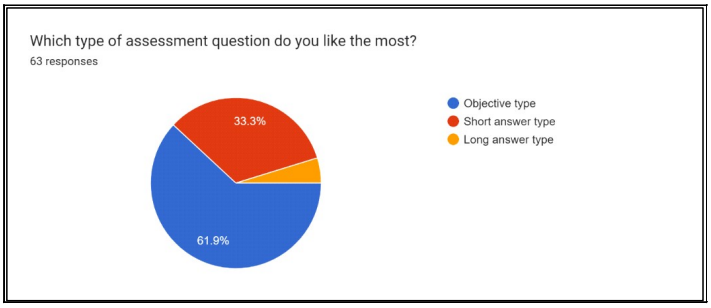
The instructors of the course incorporate a variety of learning activities. Going by the above figure group discussion happens to be the most favoured learning activity with 61.9% of the respondents opting for it, followed by field visit/survey (39.7%), debate (30.2%), oral presentation (19 %), and video screening with 9.5 % being the least favoured learning activity. A fraction of the respondents accounting for 1.6 % did not like any of the activities.

Fig. 8 Preferred Assessment Type



A variety of continuous assessments are in place in the university. Each week of learning is immediately followed by online quizzes, which happened to be their most preferred type of assessment with 69.8 % of the respondents opting for it; followed by assignments 19 %, term exams 6.3 %, and term end exam 4.7. It is pertinent to mention that quizzes were designed for a maximum of 2 marks, assignments 5 marks, term exams 15 marks, and term end exam 30 marks. It seems students' preference of the type of assessment diminishes as the assessments type become more rigorous.

Fig. 9: Preferred Assessment Questions



Similarly, students prefer lighter and shorter type of assessment questions with 61.9 % of them choosing objective type questions, 33.3 % of them opting for short answer type questions, and 4.7 % of students preferring long answer type questions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research examines students' perceptions of the social science subject. Unlike in traditional universities, these students are enrolled in professional programmes to find suitable careers. Therefore, it is likely that their aspirations and expectations of learning differ from students enrolled in traditional universities. Hence, the chances for rejection of social science as part of their professional programmes are high. Students' perceptions about learning rest on several factors. Research indicates that family background and parents' education (Alvarez-Martinez-Iglesias et al., 2021), among others, have significant influence on students' attitudes and motivation for learning, even pointing out that children from higher levels of income perform better in schools and colleges (Duncan & Murnane, 2016). The students involved in the study mostly belong to low-income families and semi-educated parents of Sikkim state. A majority of the parents (87.3%) earn below 200,000 rupees annually, with the exception of 4.8% earning between 500,000–1,000,000 rupees per annum. About 11.1% of the parents are educated up to graduate or post-graduate levels, whereas the rest are either illiterate or educated only up to 10th or 12th standards. The data in Figure 3 indicates that a majority of the respondents (49.2%) were admitted to the university with an aim to get employment, 34.9% to gain knowledge and skills, and only 14.3% aspired to pursue higher education, while 1.6% were compelled by parents. Considering these factors, it becomes clear why several students were not ready to accept social science as part of their professional programmes in the beginning. Social science is generally understood to be unrelated to future career advancement.

One respondent wrote:

I didn't like the subject. We joined Medhavi for paramedics…I don't think ICSP needs to be studied by a paramedic student.

Thus, a general sense of rejection, confusion, and disapproval of the course was reflected in classrooms during the early days of the semester. To get a sense of their initial attitudes, students were asked about their reactions to the inclusion of social science in their programmes. A majority of students (58.7%) remained noncommittal—they were neither excited nor disappointed. About 37.5% felt excited about the course, 1.6% were disappointed, and another 1.6% did not like the course. It is important to note that this question was asked after they had long been exposed to the course. Their actual reactions may have differed had the same question been asked at the very beginning of the session. In any case, it is safe to assume that no more than 37.5% initially felt positively about the course. To compare initial reactions with current perceptions, another similar question was posed. In response to whether social science is equally important as their professional subjects, 64.1% and 25% "Agreed" and "Strongly agreed," respectively, while 4.7% and 6.3% "Disagreed" and "Strongly disagreed." This implies that the percentage of students who now view social science positively increased to 89.1% from the initial 37.5%. The rest continue to hold negative perceptions.

This improvement in students' perceptions of social science (ICSP) is attributable to several factors. The first is related to reasoning and explanation by instructors and university management regarding the inclusion of the subject. Misgivings and apprehensions were promptly addressed, which reduced the initial resistance. Another factor is pedagogy. The course delivery at the university is different from traditional approaches, with emphasis on practice-based learning. Unlike the usual theory-heavy delivery of social science, at Medhavi Skills University an hour-long lecture is followed by a "learning by doing" session, where students apply theoretical knowledge to real-life situations. Customisation of delivery to make the course relevant to students' lives helped mitigate resistance. One student validated the relevance by writing:

In my point of view ICSP is not only a subject but it is life's basic need of all humans. It shows the humanity and characteristics of human behaviour; by studying ICSP we come to know about social problems and their solutions.

Active learning took place in various ways. Respondents' preferred activities, in descending order, were: group discussion (60.9%), field visit/survey (40.6%), debate

(29.7%), oral presentation (18.8%), and video screening (9.4%). Such activities and pedagogical practices require constant improvement in line with learners' needs. Appropriate curriculum structure and teaching methods are linked with positive perceptions and motivation (Irmiya et al., 2019; Vereijken et al., 2018). Moreover, assessment practices need to be flexible and tailored to individual needs. At MSU, students may choose oral or written assessments. They also preferred lighter and shorter forms of questions. Such preferences, though seemingly minor, are crucial for meaningful and positive learning experiences (Alvarez-Martinez-Iglesias et al., 2021). Perhaps the biggest concern in course delivery was that students' negative perceptions could hinder learning outcomes. Instructors were apprehensive that students unwilling to embrace ICSP as openly as other courses might fail to achieve the desired results. Indeed, this concern motivated the study. Yet, as reflected in Table 1, there appears to be no positive correlation between perceptions and learning outcomes. Among students who "Agreed" or "Strongly agreed" that ICSP was as important as other subjects (89.1%), the average final grade was 65.87%. Meanwhile, those who "Disagreed" or "Strongly disagreed" (11%) averaged 71.28%. This result corresponds with findings by Pors (2001) and Atkins (2018), who also reported no significant correlation between perceptions and outcomes. Similarly, Gilboy et al. (2014) found that students who had negative perceptions of flipped classrooms registered better learning outcomes. The current study confirms that positive perceptions do not necessarily lead to higher outcomes—in fact, the opposite may be true. This reinforces the view that academic achievement depends on multiple factors beyond perceptions alone, which future research should continue to explore.

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