

Teacher's Feedback: CHEM-E0105 Academic Learning Community

Course facts: 3-5 cr; periods I-V (2021-22); number of students: 169 (102 students in total passed the course, ca. 60%); grades: pass–fail

MyCourses: <https://mycourses.aalto.fi/course/view.php?id=33599>

Teaching and learning methods: Lectures, workshops, quizzes, independent studying and exercises, attending events, as well as academic advising and major-specific feedback sessions. Due to the pandemic situation, all the activities were carried out online (Zoom). For the bachelors coming from outside Aalto University, the orientation week events formed a part of the course, enabling these students to receive 4 cr. Two elective 1 cr modules were also offered: Career Planning Exercises and the basics of MatLAB. By attending these modules, the students could increase the extent of the course to 5 cr. In addition to the themes already mentioned, the topics covered during the course included: Aalto Ethical Guidelines, Study Skills, Scientific Article Exercise (SAE), Communication Skills, Master's Thesis Review, and Entrepreneurial Mindset.

Assessment methods: The possible grades for the students were “pass” or “fail”. To pass the course, the exercises and quizzes had to be carried out in an acceptable manner. In addition, the students were required to attend certain activities and events (major-specific orientation, Aalto Talent Expo, academic advising, and feedback sessions). Details on this can be found in MC (click the link above).

Feedback summary: Feedback was collected actively during the course (discussion during Zoom sessions, as well as open questions in the quizzes). In addition, the standard electronic survey (Webropol) provided valuable feedback – see Table 1 for a summary of the results.

Table 1. Summary of the student feedback from the electronic (Webropol) survey. The figures are averages from the students' responses. The number of the responses given in the option “E=not applicable” is displayed in parentheses after the calculated average. The deviation of the answers is described presenting the range of the given responses (the column titled Min.-Max.; only for 2022). For comparison, the corresponding average values are also shown for last study year (2021). The number of respondents (n) was 55 in 2022 and 61-63 in 2021.

	Average 2022 (E)	Min.-Max.	Average 2021 (E)
1. Overall assessment	2.53 (0)	1-5	3.02 (0)
2. Teaching methods	3.07 (0)	1-5	3.23 (0)
3. I am pleased with my study effort	3.67 (1)	1-5	3.74 (0)
4. Workload compared to other courses	3.33 (4)	1-5	3.40 (1)
5. Correspondence to the description	3.80 (1)	1-5	3.72 (0)
6. Effect on the study motivation	2.51 (0)	1-5	2.63 (0)
7. Difficulty compared to other courses	2.51 (6)	1-5	2.38 (3)
8. The course enhanced my general skills	3.04 (0)	1-5	3.33 (3)

The numerical averages of the students' feedback are good but still clearly lower than last year. Therefore, unfortunately the rising trend of the students' numerical feedback is not anymore continuing this year. Looking at the results of the previous feedback surveys¹, it can be seen that this year the overall assessment (Question 1) is lower than in 2021 and 2020 (2019: 1.96; 2020: 2.63; 2021: 3.02); the evaluation of the teaching methods (Question 2) shows a slightly higher value than in 2020, but it is still lower compared to last year: 2.43, 3.04, and 3.23 (from 2019 to 2021, respectively). It is also noteworthy that the number of the students giving the answer “E=not applicable” has increased.

¹ Available in the course's MyCourses workspace: <https://mycourses.aalto.fi/course/view.php?id=33599> (scroll down to the bottom of the page)

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The answers to the open questions showed very polarized opinions. Many students have found the whole course, or some parts of it, frustrating (not as important as other courses, tedious work, unsuitable or unclear schedule, too many assignments, repetition of earlier studies), while other students liked the whole course, or at least some parts of it. This is very well reflected in the questions, where it was asked, which parts should be removed, and which retained: basically, all the modules get votes in both directions. My analysis from this is that each module is useful for someone. Again, it is remarkable that the lecture time (Mondays 8:30-10:00 am) was not actively criticized. The lectures were organised online, so the students did not need to use time for travelling to the campus.

Even though many students had a positive view of the course (or at least some parts of it), several students expressed an utter dislike towards it. Some students claimed that they had not learned anything and that the contents were just a repetition of bachelor-level courses. I find this criticism difficult to accept because I know as a fact that the contents of the modules have been created especially for the ALC course. There may be similar themes with previous courses, but the detailed contents of the modules are original.

Development actions for next year: It is evident that this course can be further improved. For next year, I will still try to improve the communication about the modules' contents as well as about the schedule. Moreover, no assignment deadlines will be placed on the examination weeks. In the schedule, most probably the Thesis Review will be moved to March-April, while the Entrepreneurial Mindset module will take place in January-February. This change will most probably even out the students' and teachers' workload, and basically makes more sense.

I feel privileged to collaborate in the context of the ALC course with extremely competent professionals: Henna Niiva – study skills; Kirsi Heino and Prof. Riikka Puurunen – SAE; Rinna Toikka & Henni Kervinen – Communication Skills; Matthew Billington – Thesis Review; and Lidia Borisova & Sonja Hilavuo – Entrepreneurial Mindset. Also, numerous teachers from all CHEM School's master's majors have been helping me with evaluating the students' essays. Without this valuable support, implementing the course would be simply impossible. I thank you all, and I am looking forward to continuing the collaboration!

General feedback from the teacher: I repeat myself by stating again that the students' justified and analytical feedback is very important – I am extremely proud of our smart and skilful students! It is delightful to see that some students have very much liked the course and see it as an important part of their studies. Nevertheless, the student feedback also points out clearly some critical aspects, and it is evident that there is still a lot of room for improvements in the ALC course.

In the end, I again quote myself: I am fascinated by the different themes covered in this course, and I am convinced that all of the topics are of extreme importance for CHEM School students during the studies, as well as in their future working life. Therefore, my motto for this course continues to be: "Let's make this the best course ever!"