Student evaluation at Windhoek College of Education: Evidence of quality assurance to improve teaching and learning

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Abstract

Using a qualitative approach, this paper took a critical look at the role of student evaluation at the then Windhoek College of Education as a tool to assess the quality of teaching at the institution. It examined the pros and cons of introducing student evaluation as a tool to measure teaching effectiveness of academic staff at this institution. The findings showed that, despite the fact that literature reveals that student evaluation is a common tool used to assess the content pedagogy of academic staff in many institutions worldwide, there are concerns that need to be taken into consideration in terms of validating the outcomes of these evaluations. The findings show that these concerns include: student-lecturer relationship; student interest in a particular subject; lecturer subject content and pedagogical skills; general appearance of the lecturer; lecturer's assertiveness and the quality of training received. It concludes by affirming that dealing with people's perceptions and attitude is a complex phenomenon, and, in the context of this research, there was a need for a paradigm shift in the way lecturers at the former Windhoek College of Education perceived student evaluations vis-à-vis its purpose in academia.

Context and aims of investigation

In the endeavour to maintain instructional quality assurance, a number of tertiary institutions in Namibia, including the former Windhoek College of Education, have institutionalised student evaluation as one of the tools to assess the quality of teaching. The quality of education vis-à-vis the quality of graduates from the colleges of education has been a longstanding debate. The critical role teacher training plays in contemporary

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society, which of transforming individuals from passive implementers of ideas to critical and reflective practitioners, has guided education policy and practice in Namibia.

Historically, the Windhoek College of Education (WCE) located in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia, catered for the "white" population only. After independence the WCE was merged with Khomasdal College of Education, which was for "coloured" people (Frykholm, 1992). Prior to independence the WCE offered teacher training courses which were developed, evaluated and administered from South Africa (Frykholm, 1992).   Although the courses offered by WCE at the time were of a high standard, they were not designed for and did not adapt well to the Namibian context (Frykholm, 1992). Since WCE was a "white" training institution, there was a strong connection between the institution and the former apartheid regime of South Africa. The programmes offered included a three-year Diploma in Education, a four-year Higher Diploma in Education (HDE),   a National Primary Certificate (NPC), National Education Certificate (NEC) and National Higher Education Certificate (NHEC). The Basic Education Teacher Diploma (BETD) that replaced all the aforementioned programmes was introduced in 1992 with about 624 students and 55 teacher educators. Based on the student enrolments the Windhoek College of Education became the second largest college of education in the country. It must be pointed out that the main reason why the BETD was introduced to replace the South African teaching qualifications, was to reconstruct the "education processes through the implementation of a learner-centred and democratic philosophy, which will involve learners beyond the role as receivers of education", according to Dahlström (1998, p.1).

Although the BETD programme was hailed to have responded to the needs and aspirations of the Namibian people in terms of providing access to education (Ministry of Education, 1993), it did not escape the criticism of producing teachers that were not abreast with the content pedagogy.

To deal with the challenge the Government of Namibia issued a Cabinet Resolution Number 18/29/09/011 of October 2009, to merge all four former Colleges of Education in Namibia with the University of Namibia. Apart from fending the widespread criticism of poor quality outputs (Auala, 2010), the merger was viewed as a strategy to address the quality dilemma experienced in the Namibia education system including teacher training (Amukugo, Likando & Mushaandja, 2010). Furthermore, at the tail end of this merger was the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for Africa to be attained by 2015.   As such, training institutions have a major role to play in this regard, that of providing strong and quality teacher training programmes to address MDGs 2 and 3, which deal with completion of primary education for both girls and boys and removal of gender disparity in primary and secondary education respectively.   Looking at this critically, bringing all teaching qualifications to the University of Namibia, might be difficult to meet the MDG goals of education for all since experience has shown that universities generally cannot meet demands in terms of numbers compared to colleges which tend to produce in larger numbers.

In support of the role of institutions in providing quality education Burkhalter and Muse (1995, p. 433) argue that, "since universities are the brain-trust of our society, they are critical to economic propensity as well as protecting our democratic process". It is therefore fit and critical for higher education institutions to provide evidence of quality assurance in order to meet government funding requirements.

In responding to the funding requirements and other tenets of quality assurance in higher education, the former Windhoek College of Education introduced student-lecturer evaluations with the aim was to improving lecturers' pedagogical skills. This is in line with the Ministry of Education's Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP) that demands lecturers demonstrate, develop and maintain high level skills and knowledge needed to function effectively in tertiary institutions.

Noteworthy is that the introduction of this evaluation was prompted by the College's pro-activeness in putting together a mechanism to prepare its staff members and students towards this longstanding tradition of evaluation (McKeachie, 1969), which is considered to be the main determinant for teaching performance in most universities and colleges around the world.

Relating this to the Namibian context and new developments, the National Professional Standards for Teachers introduced in 2006 require teachers in the future to be registered and licensed. Therefore, meeting the Professional Standards for Teachers in Namibia demands teachers to perform well in all four professional domains namely: Professional Knowledge; Professional Values; Professional Practice; and Professional Relations (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Against this backdrop this article interrogates student-lecturer evaluation as evidence of quality assurance of teaching effectiveness at the former Windhoek College of Education based on student-lecturer evaluation projects implemented in 2006 and 2007. It examines evaluation reports and other relevant policy documents and discusses implications for the introduction of student evaluations as evidence of quality assurance of teaching effectiveness. In addition, the paper further questions the limitations of student-lecturer evaluation as a tool to assess the teaching effectiveness.

Literature Review
Although student evaluation of teaching and learning is a relatively new concept in Namibia, it has been around for many years and widely accepted as a method of evaluating teaching effectiveness in other parts of the world such as Australia, United States of America and United Kingdom (Chalmers, 2007; Harvey, 2003; Johnson, 2000, Kulik, 2001). Richmond (2003) underlines the fact that student views are of uttermost importance in evaluating the competence of lecturers. In this paper this was viewed relevant because there had been constant concern expressed in the public discourse about the quality and competence of teachers graduating from colleges of education in Namibia (Dahlström, 1999). Dahlström (1999) asserts that the public perceived strong causal relationship between the subject content of student intakes at colleges of education with the content pedagogy as demonstrated in their teaching.

To legitimise this claim, student-lecturer evaluation was introduced in the former Windhoek College of Education. This initiative is supported by policy documents such as: National Standards and Performance Indicators for Schools in Namibia; National Professional Standards for Teachers in Namibia; and the Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme (ETSIP). In ETSIP for instance it is clearly stated by the Ministry of Education (2007, p. 4) that:

> Education and training in Namibia is at a turning point. .... Too many of our children are not gaining the basic skills of functional literacy. More than that, at

the current level of performance in education, we will not be producing citizens who are capable of making Namibia a knowledge- based economy as is expected of us in Vision 2030....

In response to the aforementioned statement the National Standards and Performance Indicators for Schools was introduced in Namibia in 2005 as a benchmark on which internal and external school assessors could evaluate total school performance. With the introduction of this policy document, the issues related to quality assurance in schools were considered vital in realising the quality imperative in education (Ministry of Education, 2005).

Despite the role student evaluations play in assessing teaching effectiveness, this tool has shortcomings. Tapping from the findings of Greenwald and Gilmore research studies (1997) it is evident that teachers/lecturers who are lenient towards giving high marks to their students tend to get a more positive evaluations than those who are strict in the same respect. In the same vein, Brown and Tomlin (1996) find that sense of humour and diverse teaching styles were significant factors in achieving positive student evaluations. In addition, literature show that the appearance of the teacher/lecturer also have influence on student evaluations (Anderson, 1965; Hill and Lando, 1976; Goebel and Cashen, 1979, Feingold, 1992). In summary the implication here is that students assume that teachers who are attractive are good teachers, as such they are perceived to have better social skills, warmth and intelligence than those who are not of which in itself is a limitation on the outcome of the evaluations. Another shortcoming of the student evaluations involves issue of *validity*; since most evaluations take place at the end of the year or end of the course the likelihood of students forgetting how some of the subject content was presented is very high as a result, their judgment of the teaching effectiveness of a particular teacher/ lecturer is likely to be inaccurate (Ediger, 2000).

Methods
Given the fact that this research deals with review of student evaluations, a qualitative approach was adopted supplemented by document analysis. We also looked at the policy documents on teacher education and made personal interviews with lectures and students. In designing the student evaluation tool, a consultative process was used. We made a consultative process as one of our core elements in this pilot project in order to ensure that views of student teachers and lecturers were well captured and to further enhance the quality of the evaluation tool.

We also conducted focus-group discussions with teacher educators across the departments. The focus group discussions created a platform for us to talk directly to those responsible for finding a solution to the problem of quality of teaching and learning at work. By doing this we were also hoping that student teachers and lecturers, as the most important stakeholders in this project, could own the process. At the end of the process a pilot student evaluation form with 22 items/ statements rated on a 5 point scale of which 1 = agree strongly, 2 = agree, 3 = uncommitted, 4 = disagree, and 5 = disagree strongly was produced, and this marked the first phase.

During the second phase which was the implementation process, a pilot study was conducted among 20 students spread across gender and years of study to determine the trustworthiness (Cresswell, 2003) of the instrument. The results of the pilot study indicated that highly charged "value" words such as "well prepared", "well in advance", "knew

the content well", "well in advance", "within a reasonable time", were not considered appropriate since were found to be subjective. As such, were removed from the instrument.

Discussion

The involvement of students both in the first phase of developing an evaluation tool and the second phase - the piloting of the tool proved useful, informative and empowering to students. Some students viewed this exercise as a noble endeavour that equipped them with a voice that would empower College administrators to make decisions regarding the teaching proficiency of some lecturers on the one hand. On the other hand, although lecturers were positive about the new initiative in the first pilot phase, some questioned the value of student evaluation in providing necessary feedback that would lead to real improvement in their teaching at the college.

The apparent fear among the lecturers was that student evaluations might be used as promotion criterion and for disciplinary purposes. Evidently, their views were in tandem with what literature reveal on the use of student evaluations. Research on this topic has shown that student evaluations play a major role in decisions making pertaining to promotions (Calderon, Gabbin, & Green, 1996; David & Adebowale, 1997; Gold, 2001). This is confirmed by Read, Rama, and Raghunandan (2001), research findings which pointed out that student evaluations were the common factor used by institutions when it comes to making decisions regarding staff member promotions.

In addition to the forgoing claims, lecturers questioned whether students had correct ideas of what was meant by teaching effectiveness and how that could be measured. They alluded to the fact that many students are less interested in taking core subjects which are considered as pre-requisite. Given this scenario, they concluded that evaluations in such subjects would not be positive at all.

Further concerns that were expressed by lecturers were related to the administrative procedures of student evaluations. They viewed the process as not being transparent, for example, they were concerned about the bureaucracy involved in processing the completed evaluations forms. They wanted to know the following:
• should feedback go directly to teacher educators/lecturers?
• should the Heads of Departments receive the forms, work through and discuss the results with lecturers or and
• should the management receive the forms/feedback and discuss it with each lecturer?

Other issues were raised in the following questions:
• should each year level complete an evaluation form each term? Or should it rather be done once a year by randomly selected class groups?
• would students be significantly honest, or would they rather try to give a positive image of their lecturer?
• would the management and administrative staff also be evaluated in the similar manner? and
• why were other colleges in Namibia not implementing the same kind of evaluations?

Although these questions are very pertinent and difficult to answer they also show the complexity of the student evaluations. However, imperative to mention is that dealing with people's perceptions and attitude is a complex phenomenon and it needs time.

The lecturers' systematic learning process

In the context of this paper, it is important to note that this was a learning curve to most of the lecturers at the former Windhoek College of Education. Therefore, there is a need for a paradigm shift in way lecturers at the former Windhoek College of Education perceived student evaluations vis-à-vis its purpose in academia. Firstly, lecturers learned how valuable student evaluations could be in providing information that helps them discover themselves as teacher educators. During the feedback process, lecturers used this opportunity to reflect critically on their teaching performance, attitudes and communication skills and at the same time strategise how to improve their teaching practise.

Secondary, the lecturers were able to reflect on real examples and issues emanating from student evaluations and brainstorm for strategies on how to deal with these issues at the individual level. This, in our view, provided a powerful platform for constantly self-discovery and identified possible gaps in areas that need further training in order for lecturers to provide quality teaching and learning to their students.

Thirdly, lecturers became aware of their own teaching weakness and as result they were more likely to take appropriate action in a systematic manner, taking into consideration the perspectives of the students. As the time progressed, we observed a more positive attitude towards student evaluation.

Conclusion

This paper critically examined the pros and cones of introducing student evaluation as a tool to measure teaching effectiveness of academic staff at the former Windhoek College of Education. The findings show that despite the fact that literature reveals student evaluation as a common tool used to assess the content pedagogy of academic staff in many institutions worldwide, there are concerns that need to be taken into consideration in terms of validating the outcomes of these evaluations. The findings show that these concerns include: student-lecturer relationship; student interest in a particular subject; lecturer subject content and pedagogical skills; general appearance of the lecturer; lecturer's assertiveness and the quality of training received. These findings confirm what exists already in literature (Anderson, 1965; Hill & Lando, 1976; Goebel & Cashen, 1979, Feingold, 1992). We would like to end this paper by saying that we have recognised that a student evaluation tool, while necessary, cannot serve as the only silver bullet to the problems of quality of teaching and learning we are seeking to address in our institution.

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