

A critical analysis of using student evaluation feedback to enhance students' experience of teaching and learning: Closing the loop

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Abstract

Internationally, higher educational institutions have adopted students' evaluation of teaching as a normative practice. Such student evaluations are normally used for making decisions on monitoring teaching and course quality as well as staff promotion. This paper critically reviews reports available on collecting, analysing and using student feedback to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. The review was combined with research findings from experiences and perspectives of Namibian higher education institutions. The paper established that in many higher educational institutions, there was a missing link between obtaining feedback from students and using this information to close the quality loop. The paper therefore recommends that in order to close the quality loop, there is a need for higher educational institutions to implement systematic approaches for collecting, analysing and using feedback; and for improving the communication of actions arising from results to all key stakeholders involved.

Introduction

Higher education institutions have become more and more centres of focus in terms of not only the qualifications that they confer but also the nature of quality imbedded through inputs that lead to the desired outputs. One of the most popular quality tools used by these institutions in order to foster quality is the administering of the student-lecturer evaluations. Although many institutions point to this tool as one of their key quality tools alongside many other quality engagements such as quality reviews, moderation of examination papers etc., the end result of this exercise is often not made to speak to its purpose, hence, its failure to close the intended quality loop.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify good practices in feedback mechanisms that provide appropriate feedback to students and other stakeholders. In sum, the authors sought to identify those best practices that define effective closure of the quality loop ensuing from the data gathered from student – lecturer feedback. These findings were then juxtaposed with experiences and perspectives of Namibian higher education institutions.

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Questions

The study was guided by the following two questions:

- How do higher education institutions in Namibia collect feedback from students about their learning and teaching experiences?
- What actions are taken and/or implemented as drawing from students-lecturer feedback in order to improve teaching and learning?

Literature review

The development and utilisation of effective mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement are critical to the success of higher education. In recent years, higher education institutions have been paying increasing attention to students' views in order to obtain feedback on their experience of learning and teaching using internal surveys (Alderman, Towels & Bannah, 2012). Internationally, students' evaluation of teaching in higher education institutions has become a normative practice (Stein, Spiller, Terry, Harris, Deaker & Kennedy, 2012). Accordingly, student evaluation of teaching has become common practice in many universities and has become the dominant input in evaluating staff performance (Palmer, 2012). This, according to scholars, is a vital engagement in the sense that the recognition that feedback from students plays a cardinal role in the maintenance of quality and standard (Brennan & Williams, 2004). Therefore, student evaluations are nowadays essentially used to monitor teaching and evaluate course quality. They are also used for passing effective judgment on staff promotion. Most of all, these evaluations are used to gauge staff performance for immediate remedy where a misnomer is detected or reinforcement where enhancement of best practice is to be sustained. Student evaluation feedback can also inform academic professional development and student learning outcomes. Some authors assert that academic performance measurement and the professional development purposes of student evaluation are complementary, but it is how academics perceive the evaluations within their context, and the role within it, that determines the nature and degree to which they engage in evaluations (Ramsden, 1992; Edström, 2008).

It is widely reported that academics are hostile towards student evaluations despite the plethora of research studies that have taken place over the past few decades to demonstrate their validity and reliability. This phenomenon, according to Benton and Cashin (2012) as well as Beran and Rokosh (2009), persists although academics are generally resigned to the notion of student evaluations being a part of contemporary higher education environment.

It has however been noted that academics often claim that students are not mature enough to discriminate between what they really need and what they want, resulting in unfair judgments being cast on their evaluations (Palmer, 2012). Proponents of student evaluations, however, argue that, as primary recipients of instruction, students are in a unique position to offer their perspectives on aspects of teaching, such as; student-lecturer relationships, workload, difficulty of material content, choice and availability of resources, what they have learnt in the unit, fairness of assessment, and aspects of lecturing such as the lecturer's ability to communicate clearly, the speed of delivery and audibility (Alderman, et al., 2012). They further contend that alumni or past students may also retrospectively pass useful comments on the calibre and quality of teaching they experienced at a given institution.

Nair (2011) echoes the sentiments above by contending that that students are the most important stakeholders of universities and their experience or knowledge and understanding of higher education must be based on their voices. In other words, student

experience is shaped by student judgement rather than being defined by the organisation. Students play a key role in university management by providing feedback on what they see as most important, as well as their satisfaction. By fostering and promoting engaged partnerships with students, institutions can improve the teaching, course design, assessments and quality processes and produce the best outcomes for students.

By contrast, numerous studies that were reviewed showed students registering their disappointment and declaring a vote of no confidence in these exercises by claiming that despite airing their views, feedback obtained through student evaluations is not used to improve the quality of their academic lives. Although students are considered major actors in quality assessment of universities, the way they perceive this process and the meanings ascribed to it is still neglected as a research subject (Cardoso, Santiago & Sarrico, 2012). This is in line with Powney and Hall's (1998) views that assert that although higher education institutions all over the world use a variety of ways to collect views from students about the quality of their educational experiences and suggestions for improvement, little is known about the impact of student feedback on teaching and higher education provision. This, the aforesaid scholars referred to the quality of students' learning and on standards achieved. As already suggested above, this paper is therefore an attempt to identify the missing link between obtaining feedback from students and usage of this data to close the quality loop.

Praxis

Gathering feedback from students

Students can provide feedback at any time during the semester. Whatever the approach used, what is important to discover from students about teaching is "whether" and "how" the teaching in itself promotes or inhibits their learning. The outcome of these evaluations can then be used to enhance teaching practice. According to Nair (2011), higher education institutions may employ a number of tools to obtain information about the student experience of teaching. These may include the students' perception of teaching, student unit reflective feedback and course experience questionnaires. Approaches that could be used include the direct approach, use of a suggestion box, focus groups, the minute paper, student representative groups, use of journals and information chats.

Brennan and Williams (2004) advocate that the purpose of student feedback should be clear to all involved, but especially students if their commitment to the process is to be maximised. These authors maintain that students should be made aware that they will not suffer for their feedback; they are being listened to; the process is being taken seriously; something is being done because of it; and they are actively involved as partners in the process. This paper endorses all these points.

It is especially important to state the purpose and use, as well as how results and actions will be reported, at the point where feedback is being requested. The literature analysis found a number of examples where the purpose of student evaluations was stated explicitly, especially in the use of questionnaires. However, there was no indication of the way feedback would be used and how the results/actions would be disseminated to students.

Analysing student feedback

The use of the information collected requires a conscious effort on the part of an institution to analyse and interpret it; prepare an evaluation report; consult with others during and after the preparation of the report; and develop an action plan (Brennan & Williams, 2004). Analysis should take account of the diversity of student intakes and the possibility that

teaching is meeting the needs of some students more than others. The next stage would then be the publication and dissemination of the results and/or actions arising from student feedback. A major consideration is to decide what should be published, depending on the purpose of evaluation. For example, if the purpose of collecting feedback is to evaluate lecturer performance at module level, should this data be available for anyone to see or should it remain confidential? Research findings show that many institutions that collect student feedback for the purpose of measuring lecturer performance prefer to share the data confidentially with the person concerned and sometimes their line manager. Despite the latter, it is generally agreed that students should be informed about the results of feedback, and of actions taken in consequence of it, in order to close the loop (Palermo 2004).

Closing the feedback loop

Feedback from students can inform improvements in teaching, units, courses and the general university experience, but for such feedback to be effective, it is important to 'close the loop' (Nair 2011). According to Nair (2011), closing the loop is made up of two components: the engagement of academics, managers and coordinators with the data and identifying issues and actions, and then informing students of the actions resulting from their feedback. By using student feedback to inform quality improvement, students will see that their opinions are valued by the institution. This is a critical factor in not only getting constructive feedback from the students but also sustaining their engagement. Alone, the evidence collected may not bring about improvement in teaching and learning.

When students participate in an evaluation process their main concerns are whether their opinions matter, what happens to their responses, whether the lecturer acts on their responses, and whether the lecturers communicate their responses and the outcomes to the following cohort of students. If higher education institutions expect students to take the evaluation process seriously then they must take their concerns seriously and close the feedback loop with them by indicating (University of Canberra, 2013):

- Which comments/suggestions will be acted upon and how?
- Which comments/suggestions they would like to act on but are unable to and the reasons why?
- Which comments/suggestions they will not be acting on and why?

One outcome of not completing the feedback loop with students could be poor response rates. Supporting this notion is the work of Powney and Hall (1998), which suggests that in institutions where staff is not concerned about student opinion, student apathy towards the completion of feedback surveys is more apparent. Students are less likely to take the time and effort to complete questionnaires if they feel that it is simply a meaningless, result-less ritual that the institution goes through. Therefore, ensuring students are part of the evaluation process is imperative for effective engagement. Informing students of actions resulting from surveys demonstrates that the student voice is being heard and is valued.

It is significant to observe how students appreciate simply being thanked for their contributions or, even better, receiving some indication that someone has at least looked at them. In line with this, Brennan and Williams (2004) also underscore the importance of feedback to students. These authors believe that feedback to students is just as important as feedback from students. This includes feedback both on the results and on the actions. It should therefore be made clear to students (and staff) how the results are to be disseminated. Even if the results and actions arising from feedback cannot, for whatever reasons, be conveyed to students, there seems to be no excuse for ignoring such basic courtesies as showing thanks and appreciation.

Leckey and Neill (2001, p. 25) argue that 'closing the loop' is an important issue in terms of quality enhancement: "If students do not see any actions resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate." Harvey (2003) supports this conclusion, adding that students need to be convinced that change has occurred based on their feedback. Bennett and Nair (2010) also suggest that there is a need to provide more information to students about the purpose and the subsequent use of evaluations in the quality process.

In order to close the loop, the actions taken can be communicated to students in a number of ways. Informing students of actions resulting from the evaluations demonstrate that the student voice is being heard and valued. Nair (2011) suggests some examples of how to close the loop with students as included in Table 1.

Table 1: Communication strategies for closing the loop

Strategy		Advantage	Disadvantage
In class communication	Verbal report to class by lecturer	Effective at the unit level No cost and easy to do	Uses class time
	Written report to class by lecturer		Lecturer time to summarise response
	Verbal report to class by a student representative		Uses class time All students may not be present Student representative may not be able to answer queries
	Include in unit outlines	Easy and quick Students can easily refer	Benefits only incoming students
Electronic communication	General email to all students in the class	Easy and quick Inexpensive and efficient	Might not reach students who have graduated
	Uploading on the Learning Management System (LMS)		Effective if LMS is frequently used in class
	World Wide Web including applicable Facebook and Twitter sites	Can be developed to varying degrees of sophistication Easy accessibility to current students Useful for multisite delivery situation	May involve web development costs May need to password protect access
Posters/Flyers	Advertise around department or mail directly to students	Effective at the course level	Will involve production and design costs Time consuming and delay in getting fast response to participants

Closing the loop on student feedback is a key component of the cycle of quality improvement. It allows academics to target areas for improvement to the benefit of students. Palermo (2004) identifies the following foci as requiring consideration by institutions dealing with student evaluations:

- The type of data – are the institutions collecting valid information on which to base planning?
- The quality of data – are the institutions collecting reliable information on which to base strategic actions?
- The quality of analysis – are the institutions getting the best out of the quantitative and qualitative information collected?
- Quality of action – are the institutions formulating the best responses to the information gained?
- Closing the loop – are the institutions informing students about what they do about the responses they provide?

The last focus is of particular interest because this analysis has found that giving feedback results to students in a meaningful and purposeful way remains a challenge for higher education institutions. Studies have shown that while much work has been conducted on linking student feedback to strategic actions at all levels of institutions of higher learning's activities, institutions have been less successful in sharing the outcomes of this data with students (Watson, 2002). Closing the loop on student feedback not only contributes to the quality of learning and teaching, but also demonstrates to students their value as key stakeholders of the institution. Doing this encourages students to participate in the institution's evaluation process, which, in turn, can lead to an increase in overall response rates.

Method

This study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data was collected through interviews. Student assistants collected data, using structured interview questionnaires which were administered face-to-face with either sampled groups or individual students. These participants were selected from different higher education institutions in Namibia. A total of 360 students were interviewed. The sample was selected through non-probability sampling technique and/or the convenience sampling technique.

Findings and discussion

Previous research findings posit that if students receive little or no feedback on actions taken as a result of their feedback, they show a lack of interest in evaluations. This could eventually result in declining evaluation response rates (Nair, Mertova & Murdoch, 2012). As common practice all over the world, high education institutions in Namibia collect students' perceptions about the quality of educational experiences through student evaluations with the purpose of determining and meeting their expectations and needs. This is in line with wide recognition that familiarity with student satisfaction levels is critical for sound university management, and dissatisfied students can have a powerful impact on reputation and realisation of institutional mission, vision, goals and objectives.

Application challenges: The Namibian experience

Research studies in student evaluation in Namibian higher education institutions found that there is no effective system of collecting and using data from these evaluations. In other words, these evaluations that would ideally assist the institutions to achieve an improvement in student learning experiences and inform decision making especially in course and programme development and review are not taken seriously. The key findings of these studies revealed that academics were generally positive towards student evaluation as there was widespread recognition of the worth of gathering and using these

data. However, there were those who found the use of the data gathered from students to be limited. Of those who found the data to be useful, the most commonly cited reason for such usefulness was “to inform academic staff and programme development”, followed by their “use for identifying students’ learning needs”. Of those who perceived the data to be of limited use, the most commonly cited reasons were shortcomings in the current evaluation system and a perception of the unsatisfactory quality of student responses. On the other hand, as can be summarised in Table 2, students were generally negative towards student evaluation, citing lack of information about the purpose and effective of their use.

Table 2: Perceptions of student on evaluations

RespoResponse	No.	Frequency (%)
Useless, ineffective, waste of time, the same problems are brought over and over but no change	185	51.4
No formal feedback or response to grievances	40	11.1
No change, people are just complaining but no solutions	48	13.3
Feedback brought too late, sometimes nothing	36	10.0
Suggestions are not taken into consideration	51	14.2
Total	360	100

Some students expressed their gratitude in being afforded an opportunity to conduct these evaluations as they argued that they provided them with a chance to talk about their learning experiences in a more formal, participative and active way. Many students, however, cast grave reservations about the usefulness of these evaluations, pointing out that they are seldom given evaluation feedback. Student sentiments range from expressions of disappointment to views of the evaluations being ineffective as they found them to be a repeat of what had been said the previous years. Their main concern was that problems identified by students during these evaluations were not being addressed and rectified. In this regard, one student contended:

“My institution tends to be good at collecting information through platforms such as student evaluation, but there are no processes in place to address and rectify problems identified by the students through these platforms, for example, e.g., to oblige a lecturer to improve his or her performance if found not be performing to the expected standards.”

Some students expressed dismay at some lecturers who would even boast ‘they were here to stay’ and therefore nothing would happen to them even if students did not like how these lecturers conducted their teaching. Most students claimed that the information collected by these evaluations did not become public. Other student sentiments captured by the study can be summed in the following expression:

“... information such as lecturer’s performances is typically considered as confidential or accessible only to a restricted audience such as leadership level”. “Students who provide feedback through evaluations, for instance, are not informed about the results and follow-up actions”.

From the above sentiments, it could be deduced that the link between collecting information and informing those involved in this data collection (students and staff) seems to be distant.

These findings concur with most findings on studies on student views on such evaluations. These studies show that while much work has been conducted in tying student feedback to strategic actions at all levels of university activities, higher education institutions have been less successful in including students in the sharing of the outcomes of these data (Benton & Cashin, 2012; Palmer, 2012; Cardoso, et al., 2012). Students who are participants in these evaluations are neither informed about the results of the feedback they provide nor informed about the actions resulting from their feedback. Students often report that it is very rare to hear anything further after having made their comments (Brennan & Williams, 2004). Providing feedback on student lecturer evaluation to students in a meaningful and purposeful way remains a challenge for many universities. Evaluations are not always timely or conducive to feedback for students, and the type of information shared is not always interpreted as meaningful by students (Palermo, 2004).

Conclusion

When students participate in an evaluation process their main concerns are whether their opinions matter. They also worry about what happens to their responses, and whether the lecturer acted on their responses. If students receive little or no feedback on the actions taken, they are less likely to be interested in participating in future evaluations. In general, this paper found that feedback to students was the weakest quality link in many institutions of higher learning. Based on the findings from the analysis of research results in the field of student evaluations, this paper concludes that academics have negative perceptions of being judged by their own students. Despite considerable effort being put into collecting feedback from students about their learning experiences, there is an absence of agreed and systematic ways to analyse the various kinds of data collected and of an agreed approach to acting and dissemination of the said data. This could leave students feeling disempowered and potentially disinclined to take responsibility for improving the provision made for their learning. It would also appear that some staff is unwilling to take action on the basis of what they see as skewed information.

It is therefore recommended that higher education institutions review policies and practices with regard to student feedback. Such a review is likely to need consideration as to whether purposes of such evaluations are clear and continue to be appropriate. Additionally, such a review is likely to respond to questions as to whether purposes for such evaluations are achieved, and if so, whether they are achieved more effectively and efficiently. Institutions need to have the purpose of collecting and using student feedback discussed, shared and understood across the whole institution.

The balance of effort being given to collecting feedback data and to using it needs to be reviewed. More attention needs to be given to students being informed about the results of feedback and of actions taken as a consequence of their evaluation efforts. This could help in developing confidence in them and further encourage them to participate in the process without any hesitation. Most of all, such feedback on actions taken would define the most needed closing of the quality loop in student-lecturer evaluation cycle.

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