

Can Student Feedback Improve Teaching and Learning? A Case Study at a University of Technology

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ABSTRACT Student feedback regarding teaching and learning experiences could be a valuable mechanism to improve teaching, learning and assessment practices in the classroom. This paper focuses on the experiences of lecturers and students from a university of technology on the use of student feedback to improve teaching and learning. The purpose of the research was to explore the experiences and perceptions of students and lecturers regarding student feedback. Data collection entailed the qualitative approach with the use of interviews and focus group interviews with staff and students respectively. Findings revealed that the experiences encountered during the student feedback process had a direct bearing on its success or failure in improving teaching, learning and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

Feedback involving students as partners is a key strategy to enhance the teaching and learning process (Fluckiger et al. 2010; Bennet and Nair 2011; Carless et al. 2011). Several government acts have informed this demand including the promulgation of the South African Qualification Authority Act of 1995 (Act 58 of 1995) and the Skills Development Act of 1998 (Act 97 of 1998), which introduced the concepts of an integrated and a quality approach to education and training in the country. The Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act 101 of 1997), specifically, provided for the transformation of Higher Education (HE) (1997b) to a single sector, characterised by diversity in terms of the nature of qualifications and their provision. Gruber et al. (2010) support the fact that public and private sector's demand for greater customer focus and accountability in higher education highlight quality education for all. As fee-paying students this need becomes great as the students demand value for money.

With regards to the above, many institutions have been implementing student feedback instruments and approaches to get an overview of the quality of teaching and learning that students succumb to in the classrooms. Effective feedback from the student perspective must be timely and accessible with a clear purpose. It is

critical in providing the right and correct knowledge in a learning environment. Feedback can, therefore, be seen as encouraging learning so that students take control of their learning processes (Quinton and Smallbone 2010; Bennet and Nair 2011).

The overall aim of this paper was to explore if the use of student feedback could indeed improve the quality of teaching and learning. This was anticipated by determining the areas in need of improvement so that intervention would follow. Unfortunately, the use of student feedback mechanisms at this institution is not used consistently and differs in how it is administered, analysed and followed through so that students and staff are made aware of the findings and the interventions that will take place to improve the teaching and learning process. In this paper, only one faculty was identified for data collection on the effectiveness of the use of the student feedback in improving teaching and learning. This was determined by the fact that, at this time this was the only faculty that was performing this activity at the university.

Customer focus, student involvement and continuous improvement of quality Higher Education has become core values at many universities during the last few years. Yet Gruger et al. (2010) argue that since quality cannot be measured objectively, perceived quality can only be determined by comparing customer service expectations with their perceptions of the actual

performance. Despite this progress, much of the design and development of university courses are still often conducted inside the walls of the university departments. In such an environment, the needs of the customers (primarily students and industry) are all too rarely investigated, evaluated and included as input variables to the course design process. The implication of not undertaking this task may lead to poor customer satisfaction which may then have implications for quality assurance and recruitment for experiential learning.

At Loughborough University (2010), the student feedback project was underpinned by the belief that, “students are a valuable resource in evaluating teaching and learning, and that their views should be considered.” They add that, “as consumers of higher education (now fee-paying), students rightly expect a high quality learning experience.” Zeithml et al. (2008) consider service quality as an antecedent to customer satisfaction. They add that customer satisfaction is broad with service quality being only one component of it. The current South African educational perspective is strongly aligned with the statements above and this is evident by the establishment of a South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) which will oversee the implementation of various quality assurance standards.

In the literature, there are many definitions and conceptualisations of student feedback. Plimmer (2001) define student feedback simply as the “expressed opinions of students about the service they receive as students.” Ory (2000) and Joseph et al. (2005) view it more broadly as they explain that the evaluation of teaching in higher education has evolved from a primary reliance on a chair’s assessment to a formal, systematic, and multiple approach, including a variety of methods like student ratings and peer reviews. At Loughborough University (2010) for instance, student feedback represents the experiences and opinions of students as captured by their institution, and has the potential to be a valuable opportunity for academics to enhance the quality of their teaching and professional development. Alongside these changes, staff are being recruited who are more familiar with and receptive to being evaluated, and a growing acceptance of student feedback is emerging. This paper is strongly aligned with the views stated above and regards student feedback as a developmental tool for the main purposes of building

lecturers so that teaching and learning may be improved.

According to Oldfield and Baron (2000), the mechanisms for measuring service quality of courses and programmes often rely on research instruments. The instruments allow students to communicate their experiences with the courses and programmes to the programme designers and facilitators and to be active participants in the improvement of teaching and learning. Evidence suggests that listening to and facilitating people to participate in decision-making is likely to assist positive outcomes (Oldfield and Baron 2000).

Narasimhan (2001) state that, “the use of students’ evaluations of teaching is not new. It has become an increasingly important part of quality monitoring in higher education.” Internationally, there is support for the above-mentioned statement due to the move towards greater accountability and quality in higher education institutions (Gruber et al. 2010). Although it is accepted at the Loughborough University (2010) that student feedback provides valuable feedback, they warn that student feedback should be used as only one of a range of measures to assess teaching quality. Ory (2000) state that the utilisation of evaluation results has been limited on most campuses to aid the decision-making process only, for example, the number of campuses with student rating systems with available procedures that faculty can follow or people to contact to seek help after obtaining low ratings should be taken into account. Gruber et al. (2010) state that collecting student feedback plays a major role in delivering quality Higher Education and defines it as “expressed opinions of students about the service that they receive as students. This may include perceptions about learning and teaching, the learning support facilities, the learning environment, accommodation, health and student services and other external factors such as transport. Ried (2010) however, reminds us that it is important that “action takes place on the basis of student views and that this action is seen to take place.”

Gruber et al. (2010) state that universities collect data mainly for internal information to guide improvement or external information for potential students and external stakeholders (accountability and compliance). However, amidst the university at which this research was conducted there is still a feeling among staff and

students that these evaluations are used to “police” and could be used to dismiss staff if data show dissatisfaction.

Boughey (2001) summarise issues regarding the purpose of collecting feedback by outlining two models which are the “policing” and the “learning” model that capture two extreme uses of student feedback. The first model, “the policing model” aims for doing what staff fears as mentioned earlier, which is to call them to account for their poor practices. It is authoritative and uniform with blanket evaluation tools without room for flexibility of context and circumstances. This model is used in a subjective manner to promote or demote staff, in other words to “manage people.” The second model is the “learning model,” which belongs in an institution with a learning culture comprised of learning individuals. Although both these models have their place at institutions, at this particular university, the latter is aspired to in an attempt to develop a culture of learning at the institution.

Student Feedback Practice in the Faculty

The current practice of obtaining students’ feedback in the faculty is described briefly. Faculty administrative staff distributes and collects the questionnaires from students. This is done twice a year for the duration of two weeks. During this time, the secretaries and the faculty administrator set aside time, apart from their normal workload to distribute and collect the questionnaires. The various groups of student are visited during their lectures and because there are only three people distributing the questionnaires, they are filled in on different days and at different times of the day. The students fill in the questionnaires after the class lecturer is requested to leave the room. Sometimes, if the administrators have urgent work to complete, the questionnaires are given to the lecturers to distribute and collect. Classes are given different amounts of time to fill in the questionnaires, depending on how much work the administrators have to finish in their offices. Some administrators inform the students about the purpose of the activity. The questionnaires are then filled in and put through a computer programme that provides a print out of the results. The printout goes to the head of the department, who is then supposed to conduct interviews with the lectur-

ers about changes that need to be made. The printout is then given to the lecturers who attach it to their portfolios. It is the head of departments’ duty to provide feedback to students, since the lecturers are not allowed to do so. However, this is not done, leaving the feedback loop wide-open.

METHODOLOGY

Research articles that have been reviewed favour quantitative surveys when conducting research about student feedback systems. However, according to Crumbley et al. (2001) and Johnson and Ryan (2000), most studies on student feedback have dealt with the quantitative aspects and have ignored behavioural aspects as well as the perspectives of the participants.

As the aim of the paper was to explore the experience and perceptions of staff and students about the students feedback mechanism used at the faculty, it seemed practical that a qualitative approach would allow for such an exploration. Hence, data collection tools for this study included interviews with five staff members and three focus group interviews with five students per focus group. The staff was purposively selected as the researcher had to ensure that the staff selected had been subjected to the actual student feedback practice in the faculty. Students however, were randomly selected as all students had an opportunity to participate in completing the student feedback forms. Interviews and focus group interviews were conducted at convenient times for participants, which meant during free periods for staff and students. The list of questions posed to both staff and students were very similar in nature with few contextual differences where necessary. The questions were specifically aimed at gathering data regarding the participants’ experiences and perceptions about the student feedback practices that had been implemented in the faculty. Data were collected via recordings of interviews and focus group interviews with staff and students respectively. The recordings were later transcribed and verified through member-checking before analysis by the researcher.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

For the analysis of both focus group interviews with student and interviews with lecturers, the questions were themed as follows:

- Theme A: Prior information regarding the purpose and objectives of the student feedback
- Theme B: The contribution of student feedback to the quality of teaching in the faculty
- Theme C: The contribution of student feedback to students' learning in the faculty
- Theme D: The changes that have resulted from the student feedback
- Theme E: The issue of feedback
- Theme F: Suggestions and recommendations to improve the current student feedback process

The main findings for each category will be presented next.

Theme A

Most of the students indicated that they were not informed of the purpose and objective of the exercise. Students further indicated that as a result of this, they did not take the exercise seriously, and it had little value to them. It is also interesting to note that the lecturers had different conceptualisations about the objectives of the activity. Most lecturers believed that the activity was developmental and not for promotion purposes or for managerial decision-making, whereas other lecturers viewed it as a "policing" mechanism. Most lecturers felt that the purpose of the evaluations was to improve the quality of teaching in the faculty. Still others viewed the activity as an opportunity to reflect on themselves and their teaching. These findings resonate well with the literature reviewed with specific reference to Quinton and Smallbone (2011) who argue that the purpose of the practice must be clear.

Theme B

Most students were very positive in this category and felt that the student feedback would have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and that it would improve teaching methods. Most students however, indicated conditions under which positive outcomes would arise and they included, if lecturers took their comments seriously, if lecturers discussed the responses with them, and if lecturers were

positive about change. Most of the lecturers felt that student feedback could improve the teaching in the faculty, although a few felt that it would not change anything. Some stated that the feedback would indicate the changes that were needed to improve. Some lecturers indicated that they did not know how to improve their teaching methods. Lecturers also indicated that changes could take place for the better if students were honest when giving feedback. Some felt that positive change could only happen if measures like criteria for good teaching and staff development were first put in place before the teaching was evaluated. Studies by Fluckiger et al. (2010), Bennet and Nair (2011) and Carless et al. (2011) have all highlighted the role of student feedback in enhancing teaching and learning.

Theme C

Most students agreed that student feedback would improve their learning experience in the faculty, as it allowed them to communicate their problems and fears. They added that if the teaching improved then this would result in improved learning experiences in the classroom. Furthermore, most students were of the opinion that lecturers that were informed and used different teaching methods allowed for students to learn with better understanding. Although there were mixed views regarding this theme, most lecturers agreed that learning could be improved through student feedback provided that the process was consistent and carried out properly. Many lecturers indicated that the process had many flaws, which prevented effective change in teaching and learning. Most lecturers claimed that they never got feedback from their head of department, so it was difficult to make changes that would result in better learning experiences for the students. Others stated that if positive changes were made in teaching then learning would improve. However, some lecturers indicated that if students were not serious about providing feedback, the evaluation focused on the teacher instead of on teaching and learning issues, and the process was not consistent for all, then there would be no improvement in the learning experience. In light of these findings, Reid (2010) mentioned that action must take place from feedback received and that these actions must be visible.

Theme D

The responses to this category indicated a mixture of perceptions about the student's feelings regarding changes from the feedback. It must be highlighted however, that students had different lecturers in the following semester and therefore, it was very difficult to decide on the validity of the responses to this category. Moreover, in most cases students were not with a lecturer for a long enough period to actually see if changes took place. These findings are relevant to suggestions by Bennet and Nair (2011), regarding the timing and accessibility of the feedback.

Theme E

Most of the responses to this category were negative in nature. Most students indicated that they did not receive any feedback after they had filled in the questionnaires. They added that failure to get feedback led to negative perceptions and frustrations about the value of the activity. Most students felt that it was very irresponsible of the faculty not to provide them with feedback. Again reference is made in the literature regarding access to information and the visibility of changes (Bennet and Nair 2011).

Theme F

Most students felt that the timing issues, surrounding the evaluation needed more attention. Other aspects to consider included, the need for feedback and the need for an independent body to conduct the activity and not the class lecturers. Lecturers should not be aware of when the evaluation will take place, the process must be transparent, the process should be the same for all (consistency) and the use of simple language should be paramount. Furthermore, information communicated to the students about the purpose and the objectives of the activity should be lucid and the intention for what the information would be used for should be considered.

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on exploring the experiences and perceptions of students and staff of a student feedback mechanism used on a faculty

at a University of Technology in South Africa. The paper argues that by neglecting the voices of students and staff about their overall teaching and learning experiences at the institution would hinder positive change and improved teaching and learning opportunities and experiences. The findings of the literature survey and the empirical investigation clearly show that student feedback is indeed a quality assuring tool which if used well and understood by all, will result in improved customer satisfaction. Furthermore, it can be concluded that institutions must ensure common understanding on the culture it wished to instill with the use of student feedback mechanisms. This will ensure that all stakeholders share a common culture and understanding of the practice.

Lastly, if institutions are to meet the national demands for quality higher education for all students, then greater effort must be made in ensuring that initiatives like these are well thought through on an institutional level before they are implemented. Efforts must also be made in ensuring that policies and procedures are in place before implementation and that properly trained people are appointed to successfully implement student feedback mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The involvement of all stakeholders in the planning phases of the student feedback mechanisms should be encouraged and is critical to the success of the initiative. Students especially need to be involved in the planning phases and not just in the implementation phase. This will ensure that they understand the purpose and aims of such initiatives.

The availability of an institutional policy that outlines institutional agreements on the purpose and procedure of student feedback mechanisms as well as the role of the participants within the activity is necessary for successful implementation.

The implementation phase should be closely monitored by quality advisors so that faults are corrected. This will, therefore, ensure that the mechanisms are reviewed on a regular basis for improved practice and results.

It is highly recommended that students be educated on the value of their voice on the overall image and quality of teaching and learning at the institution. Issues of honesty and constructive feedback should be encouraged and in turn visibly valued by the institution.

Furthermore, a culture of learning through reflection and sharing of ideas, and thoughts with other institutional stakeholders need to be encouraged and nurtured by visibly highlighting the results and actions that emerge from these initiatives.

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