

University Lecturers' Perceptions of Students Evaluation of Their Instructional Practices

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ABSTRACT This article examines lecturers' perceptions of student evaluations on their instructional practices. A total of sixty lecturers from an institution of higher learning in South Africa participated in the study. Data were collected through a researcher-constructed 20-item Likert-type questionnaire. Data were analysed using frequency tables and the discussion revolved around the three research questions that formed the pillar of the study. The study established that generally university lecturers had negative perceptions of students' evaluation of their instructional practices. The study specifically revealed that while lecturers were sometimes positive about the use of results of student evaluations for formative purposes, they were strongly opposed to the use of such information for summative purposes. The study, therefore, recommends that student evaluations of teaching must always be triangulated with other multidimensional evaluation methods so as to increase validity and reliability in the evaluation of teaching effectiveness in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher evaluation is a vital part of the educational process, yet there is no consensus on the best way to it. Most education professionals would agree, however, that since many important decisions are made on the basis of information gathered in the evaluation process, it is crucial that the instruments used be both valid and reliable. According to Iyamu and Aduwa (2005), teacher evaluation refers to a periodic evaluation of teachers' performance by students. It involves a systematic gathering and analysis of information, on the basis of which decisions are taken regarding the effectiveness, efficiency and/or competence of the teacher in realising set professional goals and the desire of the school to promote effective learning.

Informal student evaluation of teachers began as early as the fifteenth century, when students at the University of Bologna paid instructors according to their teaching abilities (Barrette et al. 2006). Marsh and Bailey (1993) state that the literature on students evaluations of teaching effectiveness (SETE) consists of thousands of studies and dates back to the 1920s and earlier. In studies in the late 1920s, students and expert evaluators were asked to describe teachers they considered to be effective, and to rate characteristics of good teachers. In the 1930s, scales were devised for the evaluation of teachers; these scales were based on qualities believed to be important in teaching (Barrette et al. 2006).

As a preliminary step in developing a system of teacher evaluation, Barrette et al. (2006) report that Columbia University formed a committee to formulate criteria that would serve as the basis for teacher evaluations. The criteria consisted of a set of principles and objectives for teachers. For example, one of the principles was that both peer and student evaluations should be included in the evaluation process; in general, the objectives promoted personal as well as professional growth of teachers.

The public views teacher evaluation as a major problem in the school system today (Richmond 2003). State legislatures, aware of the concern, want to mandate more effective evaluation. Common methods for evaluating teachers, such as measurement tests of teacher characteristics, student achievement test scores, and ratings of teachers' classroom performance, have been ineffective (Imogie 2000). Some research has been done to improve the evaluation process, but teacher assessment, in general, remains unorganized (Gold 2001).

Certainly the issue with teacher evaluation, from the available literature, is not whether it is necessary or should be done or not. The concerns with the practice are largely who should do it, for what purpose, and by what means? (Gardener and Milton 2002; Iyamu and Aduwa 2005). Jackson (1998) identifies nine approaches to teacher evaluation, namely: classroom observation, students' ratings, student achievement, peer-rating, self-rating, teacher interview, par-

ents' rating, competency tests, and indirect measures. Studies concerned with measures of teachers' teaching competences have consistently employed some of these approaches (Otote 2004; Iyamu and Aduwa 2005).

As the most significant resource in schools, teachers are critical to raise education standards. Improving the efficiency and equity of schooling depends, in large measure, on ensuring that teachers are highly skilled, well resourced, and motivated to perform at their best (Weinberg 2007; Santiago and Benavides 2009). Raising teaching performance is perhaps the policy direction most likely to lead to substantial gains in student learning (OECD 2005). In turn, the effective monitoring and evaluation of teaching is central to the continuous improvement of the effectiveness of teaching in a school. It is essential to know the strengths of teachers and those aspects of their practice which could be further developed. From this perspective (Santiago and Benavides 2009), the institution of teacher evaluation is a vital step in the drive to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning and raise educational standards.

Meaningful teacher evaluation involves an accurate appraisal of the effectiveness of teaching, its strengths and areas for development, followed by feedback, coaching, support and opportunities for professional development. It is also essential to celebrate, recognise and reward the work of teachers whose practice is recognised at good. TALIS results reveal that the great majority of teachers report that the appraisal and feedback they receive is beneficial, fair and helpful for their development as teachers (Santiago and Benavides 2009).

The inability of stakeholders in education to evaluate the standard of classroom teaching has contributed to the falling standard of education in Nigeria. Students are stakeholders in education. The implication here is that if students' evaluation of instruction is, as a rule, made a part of evaluative process, instructional improvement in schools could result (Maiwada 2001; Iyamu and Aduwa 2005). Iyamu and Aduwa (2005) assert that there are really many questions about the reliability, validity and utility of student evaluation of teachers, especially when they are for personnel decision and other summative purposes.

Isiaka (1998) shows that lecturers in selected colleges of education in Ghana and Kenya ac-

cepted the idea of students evaluating their classroom effectiveness. Smith and Anderson (2003) also found out that teachers in most American Colleges are disposed towards student evaluation. The lecturers' acceptance cuts across gender (males and females). Isiaka's work emphasises the use of student evaluation for formative purposes only. In his study, teachers' opinions were not dependent on gender, but on seniority (teaching experience), as more experienced lecturers were found to show more preference for student rating of teaching effectiveness than their junior counterparts (Iyamu and Aduwa 2005).

Schools and teachers in developed nations of the world like the United States, Canada and Great Britain have recognised the role of teacher evaluation by students and have harnessed the immense importance and contributions of this exercise for the good of the school systems and the teaching profession. Students are the direct beneficiaries of instruction, and given that they spend a great deal of time with teachers, they can offer useful inputs in identifying flaws during instruction and ways of remediation (Iyamu and Aduwa 2005). To make student evaluations more reliable and valid, it may be necessary to construct instruments so that factors within the teacher's control are in a separate section from those beyond his or her control; ethnic mix in classes may need to be adjusted for; and teachers may need to be evaluated in a variety of types and levels of courses (Barrette et al. 2006). However, a better way may be to use student evaluations of teachers for formative purposes only, emphasizing the use of qualitative feedback obtained from both formal and informal measures.

According to Richmond (2003) and Clifford (1999), student opinion is of particular importance because it represents an important addition to the data customarily used to judge competence of lecturers. It is the one source of direct and extensive observations of the way teachers carry out their daily and long-range tasks.

David and Adebawale (1997) noted some benefits of the students' evaluation to include among others, that it increases the chances of recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching; provides means of interaction between the teacher and the taught; provides the only direct and extensive information about the teacher; and provide tangible evidence of students' recognition and involvement in rebranding the. In other words, students' evaluation can be used to improve

classroom instruction, student learning, and to foster professional growth of the teacher, and also the results of such evaluation are used for administrative/personnel decisions like promotion, salary increase, demotion, dismissal, awards and/or meeting public/government accountability demands (Gold 2001).

Significance of Study

Student evaluations of lecturers' instruction, if conducted in the right manner, can yield potential benefits to many stakeholders in the higher education context, including lecturers, the university itself and the students. First, the study seeks to engage lecturers in order to understand their feelings with regard to student evaluations. Knowledge of lecturers' perceptions is critical as it will stimulate further discussions and thinking around the issue of strengthening the practice. This way, lecturers are given a voice and an active role in the evaluation process and it is hoped that they will be more likely to accept the results from students' evaluations. The evaluation of lecturers by students can only be an effective tool for lecturers' development if lecturers themselves understand and value the process. This study is therefore critical since it is driven by the desire to improve teaching and learning in Higher Education (HE), through continuous lecturer development that among other things comes through effective feedback from student evaluations.

Research Questions

The main problem for this study was: How do lecturers perceive the students' evaluations of their instructional practices. In order to narrow the scope of this problem, the following research sub-questions have been asked:

- (a) To what extent do lecturers value student evaluations?
- (b) What formative functions do student evaluations serve?
- (c) What summative functions do student evaluations serve?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A survey design was adopted for the study. It sought to elicit the perceptions of university lecturers on students' evaluation of instructional

practices at an institution of higher learning in South Africa. All the university teachers constituted the population. Sixty respondents were randomly drawn from the participating University. A researcher-constructed 20-item questionnaire Lecturers Response to Students Evaluations of Teaching (LRSET), was used to generate data. The questionnaire items were structured on a four-point scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. Items 1-10 were on the general need for student evaluation; 11-15 were on formative purposes while 16-20 were on summative purposes of student evaluations.

RESULTS

Results for this study revolved around the three research questions as outlined above. For each research question, data is first presented in the frequency tables below and discussed thereafter.

To What Extent do Lecturers Value Student Evaluations?

This research question is addressed by items 1-10 of the questionnaire instrument. The responses to this question are illustrated in Table 1 below.

From an analysis of Table 1, it is clear that most items (6 out of 10) were rated negatively. This means that the respondents had a generally negative perception of students' evaluation of lecturers. However, the analysis revealed that those items that relate to the components of punctuality, transparency, self reflection and relationships with students were fairly positively rated.

With regards to whether the idea of students evaluating their lecturers was acceptable 38.3 percent of the respondents strongly disagreed, 33.3 percent just disagreed while on the affirmative side, 16.6 percent strongly agreed and 11.6 percent simply agreed. The view that students are responsible enough to evaluate their lecturers was refuted by most lecturers. On this item 48.3 percent strongly disagreed with the statement, while 26.6 percent just disagreed. Only 13.5 percent of the respondents were of the strongly agreed view whereas 11.3 percent agreed. Further, the majority of the lecturers (63.3%) did not believe that students possess value judgments to evaluate their lecturers. On

Table 1: The extent to which lecturers value student evaluations of their teaching (N =60)

No.	Item	SA	A	D	SDA
1	The idea of students evaluating their lecturer is acceptable.	10 (16.6%)	7 (11.6%)	20 (33.3)	23 (38.3)
2	University students are responsible enough to evaluate their lecturers.	8 (13.3%)	7 (11.6%)	16 (26.6%)	29 (48.3%)
3	Students possess good value-judgments to evaluate their lecturers.	7 (11.6%)	5 (8.3%)	10 (16.6%)	38 (63.3)
4	Lecturers will be more prepared for their teaching if evaluated by students.	20 (33.3%)	15 (25%)	15 (25%)	10 (16.6%)
5	Lecturers will be more punctual to class if they know that their students will evaluate them.	20 (33.3%)	18 (30%)	12 (20%)	10 (16.6%)
6	Lecturers will be more transparent to students if they know that they will be evaluated by their students.	22 (36.7%)	10 (16.7%)	10 (16.7%)	18 (30%)
7	Student evaluation of lecturers help improve lecturer-student relationships.	17 (28.3%)	18 (30%)	16 (26.6%)	9 (15%)
8	Student evaluation of lecturers help lecturers to be more committed to their jobs.	10 (16.6%)	10 (16.6%)	15 (25%)	25 (41%)
9	Lecturers will be more innovative in their teaching if they are evaluated by their students.	10 (16.6%)	12 (20%)	15 (25%)	23 (38.3%)
10	Lecturers will be more disciplined generally if they know that their students will evaluate them.	18 (30%)	11 (18.3%)	16 (26.6%)	15 (25%)

whether lecturers will be more prepared for their teaching if evaluated by students, a total of 58.3 percent responses were in the affirmative. This figure comprises the 33.3 percent and the 25 percent who strongly agreed and agreed respectively with the statement. However, a sizable number of lecturers (25 percent) disagreed with the statement while 16.6 percent expressed responses of strongly disagree.

The statement that lecturers will arrive more punctually for class if they know that their students will evaluate them was rated fairly positively by most lecturers. The responses on this item were distributed as follows: 33.3 percent strongly agreed, 30 percent agreed, 20 percent disagreed and 16.6 percent strongly disagreed. Similarly, most lecturers thought they will be more transparent to students if they know that they will be evaluated by them. A total of 53.2 percent agreed with the statement. Of this figure, 36.7 percent strongly agreed while 16.7 percent just agreed. However, 30 percent expressed strongly disagree sentiments while 16.7 percent just disagreed with the statement.

With regard to student lecturer relationships, 58.3 percent of the respondents believed that student evaluation of lecturers help improve lec-

turer-student relationships. Of these 30 percent simply agreed with the statement while 28.3 percent strongly agreed. Only 26.6 percent of the respondents disagreed while 15 percent strongly disagreed. On whether student evaluations help lecturers to be more committed to their jobs 41 percent strongly disagreed while 25 percent simply disagreed. This brings the total on the disagree side to 66 percent. However, 33.2 percent of the respondents believed that student evaluations help improve lecturer-student relationships. This figure is inclusive of those who strongly agreed (16.6%) and those who just agreed (16.6%).

The view that lecturers will be more innovative in their teaching if they are evaluated by their students was found generally unpopular with many lecturers. On this issue 38.3 percent of the respondents strongly refuted the view while 25 percent just disagreed. However, 36.6 percent of the respondents were of the view that student evaluations help enhance lecturers' innovation. This figure comprises those respondents (20%) who agreed and 16.6 percent who strongly agreed with the statement. Similarly, lecturers expressed fairly mixed feelings on the impact of student evaluations on lecturers' discipline. A total of

51.6 percent of the respondents did not think student evaluations had an important bearing on their discipline. This percentage includes those who disagreed (26.6%) and those who felt strongly disagreed (25%). On the other hand, 30 percent strongly felt that student evaluations improve lecturers' discipline while 18.3 percent just agreed with the statement.

What Formative Functions Do Student Evaluations Serve?

This research question is addressed by items 11 -14 of the questionnaire instrument. The responses are summarised in Table 2.

An analysis of Table 2 shows that most lecturers had no problems with student evaluations as long as the results of such evaluations were used for formative purposes only. This is clearly attested by the fact that all the 5 items on this section that sought to gauge lecturers' views on the formative function of student evaluations were rated very highly positive. In a way this seems to suggest that lecturers are not necessarily against the idea of student evaluations as such. Rather, reflecting the work of Gardener and Milton (2002) and Iyamu and Aduwa (2005), the critical point seems to lie on how the student evaluation results will be used. Whereas 61.7 percent of the respondents believed that the exercise helps lecturers improve on their teaching, 65 percent cited improved instruction while 61.7 percent underlined the improvement in student learning as the major formative benefits of student evaluations. Similarly, 75 percent and 66.7 percent of the respondents cited professional growth of lecturers and self evaluation respectively as the critical benefits that result from student evaluation of teaching.

What Summative Functions Do Student Evaluations Serve?

This research question is addressed by items 16 -20 of the questionnaire instrument and the responses are summarised in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the first item sought to determine the extent to which lecturers felt the results of student evaluation should be used for administrative purposes. On this item the combined response for those who strongly disagreed and those who just disagreed was 86.6 percent showing a strong dislike of the idea of basing administrative decisions on student evaluation results.

Similarly, lecturers refuted the idea of using student evaluation results for promotion purposes. This was attested by the 50 percent respondents who strongly disagreed to the above stated view. The idea of using student evaluation results for salary purposes was also criticised by most lecturers (85 %). Only 15 percent of the respondents thought otherwise. On whether student evaluation results could be used to select the best lecturers for faculty awards, 85 percent of the lecturers gave negative responses. Only 15 percent of the participants gave responses which were in the affirmative. The last item sought to gauge the lecturers' perception on the use of student evaluation results for making decisions on lecturers' retention. This item attracted an 85 percent disagree response and a 15 percent agree response. Results from this table make it abundantly clear that the majority of lecturers are strongly opposed to the use of student evaluation results for administrative purposes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that generally, university lecturers in this study had nega-

Table 2: Formative functions of student evaluations of teaching (N = 60)

No.	Item	SA	A	D	SDA	TL
11	Feedback on students' evaluation helps lecturers to improve on their teaching	15 25%	22 36.7%	10 16.7%	13 21.7%	60 100%
12	Results of student evaluation are needed to improve classroom instruction.	19 31.7%	20 33.3	10 16.7%	11 18.3%	60 100%
13	Results of student evaluation are used to improve students' learning.	18 30%	19 31.7%	9 15%	14 23.3%	60 100%
14	Results of student evaluation are used to foster professional growth of lecturers.	20 33.3%	25 41.7%	8 13.3%	7 11.7%	60 100%
15	Student evaluation reports help lecturers to evaluate themselves.	22 36.7%	18 30%	10 16.7%	10 16.7%	60 100%

Table 3: Summative functions of student evaluations of teaching (N =60)

No.	Item	SA	A	D	SDA	TL
16	Results of student evaluation are needed for administrative decisions.	5 8.3%	3 5%	20 33.3%	32 53.3%	60 100%
17	Student evaluation results should be used for promotion of lecturers.	2 3.3%	3 5%	25 41.7%	30 50%	60 100%
18	Student evaluation results are needed for salary increase for lecturers.	5 8.3%	4 6.7%	18 30%	33 55%	60 100%
19	Student evaluation results are needed to select the best lecturers for award in the faculty.	8 13.3%	7 11.7%	20 33.3%	25 41.7%	60 100%
20	Results of student evaluation are used for decisions on lecturers retention.	4 6.7%	5 8.3%	23 38.3	28 46.7%	60 100%

tive perceptions of students' evaluation of their instructional practices. While the causes of such negative perceptions may not be obviously clear, various arguments can be raised to account for such a scenario. One possible explanation could be the fact that lecturers are probably apprehensive about the potential academic and professional inadequacies that may be exposed by student evaluations. This argument could be made especially in the case of junior and less experienced lecturers. The argument is not without merit as it is supported by Kilpatrick (1997) and Imogie (2000) who concluded on the basis of their research that senior lecturers tend to have a more positive disposition towards students' evaluation of teaching than junior academics.

Contributing to the debate on lecturers' perception of student evaluations, Cross (2002) asserts that senior lecturers tend to be less sensitive to the harm of student evaluation by virtue of their qualifications and experience and the fact that they have reached the top of their career. The same author goes on to add that the senior lecturers are more likely to advocate student evaluation as a means of improving teaching and promoting the quality of university education. In addition, the finding is in line with Kilpatrick (1997) who concluded on the basis of studies made in Asia that many of the senior lecturers are probably more confident, and have better pedagogical skill in their instructional delivery, compared to the junior lecturers whose teaching have been characterised by lack of clear focus.

The issue of lecturers' negative perceptions of students' evaluation of teaching on instructional practices is seemingly universal. For instance, Richmond's (2003) study conducted in Nigerian universities has shown that generally

lecturers hold a negative perception towards student evaluation of lecturers' instructional practices. In particular, the study revealed that faculty members in most institutions of higher learning were sceptical of student evaluation because they might have damaging effects on their career. This finding is consistent with Cross (2002) who noted that student evaluation does little general good and some particular harm to individual academics. The assumption implied here is that while the practice of having students evaluate their lecturers might be good for the university or higher education system, it may be harmful to the lecturers in certain respects.

Urevbu (1997) argues that many university lecturers consider the students' evaluation of teaching as abnormal since this means giving students a voice in a process that falls well beyond their areas of competence. The findings of this research have shown that on the one hand most lecturers are not convinced that university students are mature enough to evaluate their lecturers and on the other they doubt whether students possess good value-judgments to warrant them to carry out a task of such magnitude. Richmond (2003) brings a new dimension to the aforementioned perspective on the issue of student evaluations of lecturers. He succinctly contends that student evaluation might arouse unhealthy competition among faculty members which many of them considered unnecessary.

In analysing research question two, it emerged that lecturers had a fairly positive disposition towards student evaluations as long as the results were used for formative purposes only. This finding links very well with Cross's (2002) observations when he remarked that lecturers anxieties about student evaluations seem to be alleviated

if lecturers are convinced that the evaluation results are meant to help them assess their own teaching and work to improve on it. If this view is accepted then lecturers should not be viewed simplistically as people who do not know the value of student evaluations of lecturers' instructional practices. Rather, the critical and contentious issue here revolves around the purpose for which the data from student evaluations will be used. Thus, by endorsing student ratings for formative purposes, South African university lecturers are invariably recognising the unique contributions that students as stakeholders in the higher education system can make towards fostering the professional growth of lecturers (Iyamu 1998).

This study has shown that lecturers had a strong feeling that results from student evaluations should never be used for administrative purposes, promotion, determining salary increases and for making decisions on lecturers' retention as encapsulated in research question three. Perhaps the question that must be raised is why lecturers feel particularly and strongly opposed to the use of student's evaluations on such dimensions? The best way to address this question is by reflecting on critical findings made in Nigerian universities by Braskamp and Ory (1994). The two researchers established that lecturers in most faculties were sceptical of students' evaluations because of the possible damage these might inflict on their careers.

Thus lecturers tend to question the practice of deciding issues of promotion, salary, and tenure on the basis of anonymous student evaluations most of which have questionable degrees of validity and reliability. On the other hand, some critics have raised the concern that an assessment form consisting of a few items that students rate on a five-point scale at the end of a semester can hardly measure accurately the complexity and multidimensionality of effective teaching (Iyamu 1998). Such a cogent argument becomes particularly valid especially when viewed against the backdrop that many academics have difficulty agreeing on what constitutes effective teaching. From the foregoing, it comes to us as no surprise to observe that lecturers in this study responded very negatively to the idea of linking salary, promotions and tenure issues with results of student evaluations of teaching.

Bryk and Raudenbush (1999) have examined a number of student ratings on hundreds of

courses at Washington University, America, and found that lecturers who graded students leniently in assignments and tests received better evaluations than those lecturers who were tough. This goes a long way in showing how problematic the practice of having students evaluate their lecturers is. In the light of such constraints, the use of a variety of methods to evaluate and assess teaching effectiveness therefore remains critically important so as to enhance the validity and reliability of the evaluation process.

CONCLUSION

The desire to improve quality in higher education (HE) through the measurement and assessment of teaching effectiveness is not unique to South Africa as it has gained popular currency the world over. The use of students in lecturer evaluations stems from the assumption that students as clients in higher education deserve a strong voice and say in issues that concern the quality of instruction that they receive. This research has shown that while the issue of student evaluations of teaching has become an internationally acclaimed practice, which is consistent with best practices, the system is nevertheless fraught with numerous challenges which cannot be glossed over. The study has revealed that from the lecturer's perspective, the evaluation of teaching by students tends to have more demerits than merits. Consequently, results from student evaluations of teaching in higher education need to be treated with extreme caution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study therefore recommends that in order to appropriately measure and assess teaching effectiveness in HE, there is need for triangulating multidimensional methods.

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