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Lecturers' perception towards student evaluation of their teaching competencies at Africa University in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

At Africa University, students evaluate their lecturers' teaching competencies toward the end of every semester. These evaluations are used for different professional and administrative purposes. Student evaluations of lecturers' competencies have a direct bearing on university teaching and on the financial sustainability of the institution. Notwithstanding the controversies and perceived usefulness of student evaluations of lecturers' teaching competencies, no study has been conducted at Africa University to confirm, modify or reject what is reported in the related literature about student evaluations. Accordingly, this study was undertaken to critically examine the perceptions of lecturers toward student evaluation of their teaching competencies at Africa University in Zimbabwe. A phenomenological methodology was used to understand the lived experiences of study participants in relation to the phenomenon being studied. The key findings of this research revealed that when properly administered student evaluations can be an important feedback mechanism for enhancing quality university teaching. There was concurrence among participants that education, particularly in a university setting, cannot be administered without student evaluations despite their downside. Evidence from this research showed a close link between student evaluations, quality university teaching and the financial sustainability of the institution. Areas of dissonance among participants, however, emerged on the validity and dependability of student evaluations. Thus, while a few participants argued that student evaluations are hundred % valid and dependable, the majority maintained that corroborative methods have to be used to ascertain the authenticity of such evaluations as students are not experts and mature enough to give a true reflection of what will have transpired in the lecture theater. Conclusions were therefore drawn from these findings suggesting

that administrators at Africa University need to provide students with systematic orientation programmes so that they become reliable judges and make informed decisions when evaluating lecturers' teaching competencies. Additionally, findings of this research provide compelling evidence that transparent structures and processes should be put in place to ensure that feedback from student evaluations is used effectively to enhance quality university teaching and the sustainability of the institution.

Key words: Lecturers' perception, student evaluation, teaching competencies, Africa University, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

At Africa University, students evaluate their lecturers' teaching competencies toward the end of every semester and these evaluations are used for different professional and administrative purposes. Students evaluate lecturers for each of the courses they take and through these evaluations they are afforded an anonymous opportunity to give feedback pertaining to their lecturers' teaching capabilities. Scholarly literature indicates that student evaluations have been used in universities for close to a century as an instrument for measuring lecturers' teaching effectiveness and for making crucial decisions pertaining to tenure, promotion, salary increases and the hiring and firing of academic staff (Backer, 2012; Calkins and Micari, 2010; Lekena and Bayaga, 2012; Murray, 2005; Spooren, Brockx and Mortelmans, 2013; Stark and Freishtat, 2014).

According to Murray (2005) and Natarajan (2005), formal evaluations of lecturers' teaching competencies were first administered at the University of Washington in the 1920s. However, Calkins and Micari (2010:8) and Cui and Li (2014) point out that systematic student evaluation were first developed and administered at Purdue University in 1927. Calkins and Micari (2010:8) elaborated that at their inception student evaluations were used "as part of a systematic inquiry into the traits associated with good teaching, which included fairness in grading, stimulating intellectual curiosity and personal peculiarities." Thus, existing literature reveals that student evaluations are now common practice in most universities across the globe (Lekena and Bayaga, 2012; Palermo, 2013; Surgenor, 2013). There is also agreement

among leading scholars that the use of student evaluations has become a very contentious, emotive and, at times discordant, issue in many universities (Calkins and Micari, 2010: Murray, 2005; Spooren, Brockx and Mortelmans, 2013; Stark and Freishtat, 2014; Surgenor, 2013). For example, the validity and dependability of the feedback from the student evaluations continues to be questioned despite extensive research and voluminous literature associated with these evaluations (Calkins and Micari 2010; Cui and Li, 2014).

Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans (2013:1), have thus concluded that research on the student evaluations has failed to provide convincing explanations linked to the validity and dependability of such evaluations. This gap in the literature justifies the need for continued research in order to generate new evidence on why and how student evaluations should continue to be employed in higher education institutions. Moreover, Stein, Spiller, Terry, Harris, Dekker and Kennedy (2013:892) declare that "while extensive research has been done on student evaluation of teaching, there is less research-based evidence about teachers' perceptions of and engagement with student evaluations of teaching." It is on these grounds that this study has been organised to understand lecturers' perceptions towards the evaluation of their teaching competences at Africa University in Zimbabwe. In the following section the researcher provides more rationale for conducting this study.

1. Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of this research was to critically examine lecturers' perceptions towards student evaluation of their teaching competencies at Africa University in order to develop convincing explanations on why and how these evaluations should be utilised at Africa University and similar institutions of higher education across the globe.

Africa University was founded in 1992 and was the first private university to be established in Zimbabwe (Africa University Prospectus, 2005). It is a pan-African and United Methodist institution located about seventeen kilometers northwest of Mutare City. There are seven Faculties at Africa University including those of Education, Health Sciences, Humanities and

Social Sciences, Management and Administration, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Theology and the Institute of Peace Leadership and Governance. As reflected in its vision and mission statements, Africa University strives to provide higher education of high quality (Africa University Prospectus, 2005). An important tool that the University has put in place as a quality assurance mechanism is the student evaluation of lecturers' teaching competencies. Student evaluation of lecturers at Africa University started in the 1995/1996 academic year. The teaching and course evaluation form currently used in the University ranks lecturers in terms of planning and preparation, content mastery, delivery, use of instructional technology, knowledge of sources, assessment of students' work and the utility of the courses they are offering. It is important to note that while student evaluations have been used at Africa University since 1995, no study has been conducted to understand lecturers, students or administrators' views about these evaluations. The present study was therefore carried out to address this but focusing specifically on lecturers' perceptions.

2. Research questions

This study was undertaken in order to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lecturers' perceptions towards student evaluation of their teaching competencies at Africa University?
2. What are the purposes of student evaluations of teaching competencies at Africa University?
3. How valid and dependable are student evaluations of teaching competencies?
4. What is the link between student evaluations and the financial sustainability of Africa University?

3. Research study design

The researcher selected the phenomenological research methodology as the most appropriate framework for carrying out the study. According to Finlay (2011:10), the main aim of phenomenological research is to describe and explain "the lived world of everyday experience." Therefore, the phenomenological research design was identified as the most appropriate

theoretical framework for this study being mindful that the researcher wanted to elicit university lecturers' views on the topic of student evaluations. Denscombe (2010:93-94) emphasises that phenomenological research is most suited for studies that focus on people's perceptions, beliefs, feelings and emotions. For the purposes of this research therefore, the phenomenological approach was also chosen on the premise that it would facilitate a fuller understanding of participants' lived experiences in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Mathie and Camozzi, 2005).

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study were seventeen full-time lecturers selected from the Faculties of Education, Agriculture and Natural Resources, Theology, Humanities and Social Sciences, Health Sciences, Management and Administration and the Institute of Peace, Leadership and Governance. Initially, the researcher selected twenty-one participants (three per Faculty) for the purposes of this study. However, four of the participants had to withdraw from the study because of various commitments. Participants were selected on the basis that they confirmed their availability and willingness to participate in the study. The number of participants was consistent with the principles of phenomenological research which allows for the use of smaller samples (Bernard, 2013; Mathie and Camozzi, 2005). Participants were selected using purposive sampling techniques. In this study like in other phenomenological studies, purposive sampling was used on the expectation that it would enable the researcher to identify key informants who would provide useful information for answering the research questions raised in the study (Bernard, 2013; Best and Kahn, 2006).

3.2. Research Instrument

Semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews were employed to collect data for the study. Englander (2012) emphasises that the semi-structured interview is one of the main data gathering instrument in phenomenological research. Therefore, in this study the semi-structured interviews were used in order to enable the researcher "to gather deep and rich insights into the topic being studied" (Mathie and Camozzi, 2005:29). Consequently, a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was utilised to elicit

participants' views on the administration, purposes, benefits and limitations of the student evaluations.

3.3. Data collection procedures

After developing the research instrument and having accomplished the other preliminary stages in the research process, the researcher made appointments with the selected participants. On the agreed dates and times, participants were briefed about the aims of the research, signed consent forms and interviewed individually in their respective offices. With the consent of the participants, a voice recorder was used in order to audio record the semi-structured interviews. Data were collected physically by the researcher between 20 June 2015 and 10 July 2015.

3.4. Ethical Measures

The researcher first applied for and obtained permission and ethical approval from the Africa University Research Committee before embarking on the study being mindful that ethical issues would arise at all levels of the research process. Key ethical principles including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation and the anonymisation of data (Heaton, 2004) were observed by the researcher throughout the study.

3.5. Data Processing

In processing the data, the researcher followed procedures recommended by Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002) including the development of transcripts, coding, and identifying unique and overarching themes in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the research topic. The audio-taped interview data were transcribed manually by the researcher using pen and paper. After transcription, the data were coded into specific themes and patterns in order to understand different participants' perspectives (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004). Key themes and subcategories that emerged from the data processing were used to answer the research questions.

4. Research Findings

In this section findings obtained using semi-structured interviews with seventeen lecturers selected from the seven Faculties at Africa University are presented. Findings are presented according to the research questions in the semi-structured interview guide and following a thematic approach. The researcher used selected quotes from the semi-structured interview transcripts to illustrate key findings of this research. Symbols such as R1-R17 were utilised to indicate sources of data obtained from respondents one to seventeen. The four main themes that surfaced from the data analysis are presented below.

Theme 1: Perceptions toward student evaluation of teaching competencies

The first two questions in the semi-structured interviews held with study participants focused on how student evaluations are administered at Africa University and the perceptions of participants towards these student evaluations. Feedback from the participants indicated that there is a paper-based student evaluation system at Africa University. Findings of this research showed that the student evaluation form in the university is administered through Faculty secretaries. The Faculty secretary works with student group representatives who are given blank forms and after completion, the forms are returned to the secretary. The evaluation forms are targeted to be filled during lecture time and the concerned lecturer will not be present throughout the administration of the evaluations to make the atmosphere as free as possible.

Varying opinions however emerged when participants were asked about their perceptions towards student evaluation of teaching competencies. For example, some participants supported the use of student evaluations and underlined that the formal evaluation that students use is not bad practice because it conforms to international standards. Conversations with these participants indicated that university lecturers should expect to be evaluated on a consistent basis by their students, peers and deans and that there was nothing sinister about this. Thus, when properly administered, student evaluations should not create any tension or hard feelings between lecturers and students unless there are some sinister motives behind.

Contrary to this, other participants opposed the use of student evaluations especially when these evaluations are employed as a system of rewards and punishments. These participants argued that the student evaluation is very subjective as students are using the evaluation form as a police document and at times give false or insincere feedback about particular lecturers. Many participants also pointed out that they have never received any feedback from the student evaluations since they joined the university thus rendering the whole exercise fruitless. Examples of participants' responses that support these findings are provided below.

Student evaluations are a sign of good practice. Compared with experiences elsewhere the evaluation for we are using here is not bad; it is similar to what I have seen used when I was teaching in one university in the United States (R2).

The problem is the analysis of the evaluations and the method of giving feedback to the relevant stakeholders. For example, the biggest stakeholder in these issues is the lecturer but in our system we don't have a method of going back to the lecturer or giving the lecturer the feedback that come through. So I may say student evaluations might not be very useful to the lecturer because if what students have said does not go back to the lecturer; of what use is it? So for us we have that problem. What we normally see is that the evaluations are being administered but that's the end of the story; no feedback (R15).

Theme 2: Perceptions on whether university students are qualified to evaluate teaching competencies

Another question asked by the researcher was on whether university students qualify to evaluate their lecturers' teaching competencies. There were varied responses to this question and in some cases very emotive reactions were recorded. For instance, most participants argued that university students are critical stakeholders, the customers or primary clients who should automatically qualify to evaluate teaching competencies. These participants suggested that students are legitimate evaluators of teaching competencies and are able to distinguish between good and bad lecturers. The expectation was that at university level students are fairly intelligent to tell whether they are learning or not, they can be very accurate on certain things such as the lecturer's preparedness, pace of delivery, simplicity of content, use of subject specific language and they are in a

position to tell whether the delivery is worthwhile or not. Participants who held that students qualify to assess teaching competencies maintained that the current evaluation form used across Faculties at Africa University is very simple and straightforward that any university student can complete it successfully. Some participants even concluded that student evaluations are the closest measures of realities of teaching and that they provide a much more grounded view of how the teaching and learning process has been taking place in the lecture room.

Conversely, other participants maintained that students are not qualified to assess teaching competencies since they lack the knowledge and skills to execute such a demanding task. Teaching as argued by these participants is so complicated for students to grasp the intricacies and make an authentic judgment. Some of the common subcategories emerging from participants who suggested that students do not qualify to assess teaching competencies were that they are not widely read as their lecturers, they are not trained teachers, they are not mature enough, at times what they say is motivated by personal feelings and therefore their evaluations cannot be taken seriously. Concerns were raised that the students particularly first years are not prepared for the evaluations, some are not aware of what the tool is for and only participate *'as long as they can read and write and put crosses that's all'* (R2). These findings are supported by the following responses made by some of the participants:

Yes, students are qualified to evaluate teaching competencies. Even passengers on a bus can evaluate their driver. They should not be considered passive participants in the course but should rather be seen as involved individuals in terms of how the course is taught. However, their evaluations should be considered objectively!(R1).

At university level every student should be able to tell whether they are learning or not; these are our customers who should tell us the type of product we are giving them (R4).

I think students are in a good position to assess aspects of teaching but it is not advisable to take student evaluations as everything because students are not as

widely read as their lecturers. We have to very careful because rather than evaluating teaching competency students may end up evaluating other things (R6).

If a person who is 18 or 20 years votes for the President of his own country and this is accepted as a practice at that political level, I don't see why it should not be accepted as a practice in a university that students should evaluate their lecturers . Students are qualified to evaluate lecturers; they are in a position to tell whether the delivery is worthwhile or not. My view is that it will be wrong for an institution not to take what students say seriously (R15).

Students are ill-prepared and not qualified to evaluate the lecturers' teaching competencies. Most lecturers will have trained in teaching methodologies of their subject areas which they will be employing and the students will not be conversant in them and hence some misconceptions in evaluations (R8).

Not really; students are not trained in teaching and as it is they could easily evaluate a lecturer's talking and not teaching. Some of us were trained for three years how to teach and to have us evaluated by students who have no clue what teaching competencies are all about leaves so much to be desired (R13).

Evaluation is even so complicated at the level of an expert to evaluate another professional in the same area let alone students evaluating an expert. Student evaluations can only give you an indication and not the whole picture (R17).

Theme 3: The purpose and benefits of student evaluations

The next question asked by the researcher was on the purposes of student evaluations. There was consensus among participants that if properly done the primary purpose of student evaluations should be to improve teaching and learning. Feedback from student evaluations should give an impression about the lecturer's work in terms of strengths and weaknesses, methods of delivery, whether the lecturer is teaching at the level of students or not and thus encouraging lecturers to be professional when discharging their duties and responsibilities. Many participants held that student evaluations should improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the lecturer. Evaluations give students a window to provide feedback that contributes to the realignment

of courses and the repackaging of the curriculum in line with student recommendations. It was discernible from participants' perspectives that student evaluations can be a branding tool which the university could use to enhance quality teaching and maintain high standards.

Thus, in terms of benefits, participants indicated that to the concerned lecturer, student evaluations help in identifying grey areas that require attention and to make out their strengths in order to consolidate on them. One participant (R5) pointed out that student evaluations will force lecturers to fully prepare for their lectures and work a little more diligently for fear of being poorly rated by the students. From the management's perspective, student evaluations can assist in indicating areas that need human resource improvement and staff development, resource capacitation, relocation of academic staff to other areas, issues of tenure and promotion or even demotion. Student evaluation was also regarded by some participants as part of the university's checks and balances meant to guarantee quality teaching. It was clear from participants' responses that improved quality would lead to an improved image of the university and under normal circumstances lead to increased enrolments of students and therefore resulting in the financial sustainability of the institution. The good reputation of the university will also attract other stakeholders who may want to collaborate and support a number of programmes offered in the university. Examples of responses that are consistent with these findings are as follows:

Ordinarily, university teaching quality should go up persistently on the basis of evaluations. The quality control process should be persistently linked to student evaluations. The only way of keeping university standards is through evaluations by students, deans, peers and external experts (R2).

The primary purpose should be to improve my teaching and issues of salary or promotion should be treated as secondary. If our evaluation process improves our teaching and satisfies our students then they will be our ambassadors out there; we will get more students and more numbers means more money and leading to the financial sustainability of the university (R4) (R4).

If we get the reliable feedback from students focusing on the mode of delivery and efficiency, this helps in terms of branding ourselves as lecturers, to prop up the

Africa University name so that at the end of the day we are able to sell ourselves in a better way (R15).

The student evaluations are a feedback mechanism and if they are done properly and correctly they should be an instrument through which as lecturers we can improve how we teach. Students are our major stakeholders so they are giving us feedback in terms of how they perceive what we do, how we do it etc. If done properly then the major purpose is to give us feedback on whether we are doing well or not. Student evaluations also help administrators when it comes to promotion because in universities we are normally promoted on the basis of teaching, research and community service (R16).

Theme 4: The validity and dependability of student evaluations

Participants were further asked about the validity and dependability of the student evaluations basing on their lived experiences as lecturers at Africa University. There were opposing and emotive responses with most of the participants suggesting that the evaluations are not valid and dependable while only three participants (R7, R15 and R16) argued to the contrary. Participants who questioned the authenticity of student evaluations argued that such evaluations are highly subjective and affected by a number of variables both in and outside the classroom. For example, participants argued that students are more concerned about passing, and the extent to which lecturers grade their work will always inform the manner in which they assess their lecturers. It was pointed out that lecturers who are principled, demand students to read, do their assignments in time and mark honestly are oftentimes rated poorly by the students. This is unlike lecturers who are not very serious, softy and easy going, not pressuring the students; award high marks and pass even mediocre work and good at jokes who *'can easily get away with murder'* (R6). Basing on their experiences at Africa University, many participants also pointed out that students simply rush through the evaluation form in two or three minutes just to get the evaluation form out of their way. Thus, according to these participants, a whole semester is evaluated in few minutes making the entire exercise incredible. Furthermore, it was highlighted that for weak students, the evaluation may be a way of backlash or a tool for vengeance to hit back on a lecturer especially one who awards low marks. The argument was that weak

students will always want to blame their failure on the lecturer and thus lowly evaluating him or her. Such discrepancies, biases and anomalies make the student evaluations invalid and anecdotal as suggested by the majority of the participants.

However, three participants (R7, R15 and R16) maintained that student evaluations are valid, trustworthy and a true reflection of what transpires in the classroom. Their argument was that students are the consumers of instruction and will always give an honest view. As argued by these three participants, a normal curve would tell that five % of the evaluations may overstate the lecturer's performance; the other five % could be of the vengeance type while the greater %age (ninety %) would be very valid. Respondent 16 even declared that student evaluations are hundred % valid and dependable because students will always arrive at these evaluations basing on their experiences with the concerned lecturer in the classroom. Participants' responses supporting these findings are summarised below.

Student evaluations are just some routine exercise with nothing to show for them. I personally don't take them seriously. I am a study and research demanding teacher; I give work and task; I mark honestly; I know they evaluate me harshly and see me as a bad teacher so to me and others like me the evaluations are simply invalid and not dependable (R13).

I would say student evaluations are hundred % dependable because students sit there every day and listen and they are with the lecturer for the whole semester and they meet with the lecturer three times a week for the whole semester. So at the end of the semester they will be able to determine whether they have benefited or not from a particular lecturer. Therefore, their evaluation must be taken seriously (R16). If a person is a good lecturer students will confirm and if you are bad students will do the same. If you are a good lecturer there is no way students can turn around and say you are bad. Lecturers simply need to be fair with students (R16).

5. Discussion of key findings

The main purpose of this research was to critically examine lecturers' perceptions towards student evaluation of their teaching competencies at Africa University in order to develop convincing explanations on why and how these evaluations should be utilised at Africa University and similar

institutions of higher education across the globe. Therefore, in this section, the researcher discusses the key findings of this research basing on the following questions that informed the study:

1. What are the lecturers' perceptions towards student evaluation of their teaching competencies at Africa University?
2. What are the purposes of student evaluations of teaching competencies at Africa University?
3. How valid and dependable are student evaluations of teaching competencies?
4. What is the link between student evaluations and the financial sustainability of Africa University?

The key findings of this research were that when properly administered student evaluations can be an important feedback mechanism for enhancing quality university teaching. University lecturers appreciate the role played by students in quality assurance processes. As a result, many participants agreed that by world standards it is a very good policy to involve students in quality assurance because students as customers can be best judges of a service. Participants admitted that universities are service industries and students are the primary clients should be allowed to assess and give feedback on the quality of teaching going on in a particular university. The student evaluation form was therefore accepted by many participants as a quality control instrument that should be constantly used in universities. Evidence from this research showed that student evaluations can be genuine reflections on how lecturers are performing in class.

However, from other participants' reactions, it could be gleaned that the involvement of students in quality assurance processes has to be done in a transparent way and key players in higher education including lecturers, students and administrators have to be thoroughly consulted. When feedback from the student evaluations is not given to the concerned lecturer then the whole exercise becomes worthless. Feedback from the evaluations has to be given as promptly as possible for the concerned lecturers to take them seriously. This is because some participants in this study disputed the validity and dependability of the student evaluation as it is administered in their university. There are inconsistencies highlighted by participants that

can lead lecturers to dismiss student evaluations simply as a waste of time. For instance, students are not given any induction prior to their evaluation of lecturers' competencies and there are many assumptions about their capabilities to do an honest assessment. Accordingly, findings of this research revealed that student evaluations should not be taken to be everything since they have their own downside. It is on these grounds that participants reiterated the fact that student evaluations should never be used for purposes of retribution or punishment but to help lecturers to become better and effective teachers.

Another key finding of this research was that student evaluations can an important entry point in terms of improving teaching and learning. Findings of this research indicated that there is a symbiotic link between student evaluations and quality university teaching being mindful that properly administered evaluations would obviously inform course design, implementation and assessment. What surfaced from the data analysis was that student evaluations when properly done feed into the developmental agenda of the institution and that naturally, all forms of evaluations should improve teaching and learning. An institution that promotes quality teaching will under normal circumstances attract more students who will be paying fees thus increasing the financial sustainability of the institution.

Lastly, from the findings of this study it became clear that student evaluations can be very subjective but they cannot be throw away because at times they bring the real issues of what will be happening in the lecture room. Instead, the student evaluations as emphasized by many participants would need to be buttressed by other corroborative mechanisms such as peer evaluations, assessment from administrators and external evaluations.

6. Conclusions

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that for student evaluations to be accepted by all key players in a university setting including lecturers, students and administrators the starting point should be to develop an instrument in which all these stakeholders make an input and claim ownership. There is need to develop a reliable student evaluation instrument in order to transcend the tag of war with lecturers. Student

evaluations should not be used in isolation from other forms of assessing lecturers. As illustrated in this research, despite their dark side, students remain an important package of the evaluation system which continues to inform practice and in most cases enhance quality university teaching. However, for student evaluations to function successfully there should be effective mechanisms for communicating feedback from these evaluations especially to the lecturers for the purposes of improvement. Implied is the fact that administrators at Africa University need to provide students with systematic induction or orientation programmes so that they became reliable judges and make informed decisions when evaluating lecturers' teaching competencies. There is also need to put in place transparent structures and processes to ensure that feedback from student evaluations is used effectively to enhance quality university teaching and the sustainability of the institution.

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