

Advocating Student Evaluation of Teachers in Higher Education in Nigeria: a pilot study

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Abstract

Evaluation constitutes a crucial part of quality assurance work. In higher education institutions (HEIs) in Nigeria, evaluation in the pedagogical domain has usually been characterized by the traditional approach, a one-sided evaluation of students by the teachers. Over the years, research in education has shown that student evaluation of teachers improves the overall quality of teaching and learning. In this study, in addition to the current situation in higher education institutions in Nigeria, we advocate an evaluation of teachers by the students for formative purposes in order to provide a better strategic output of the educational products in HEIs in Nigeria.

Keywords: Assessment, evaluation, higher education in Nigeria; best practices in higher education, quality management

Introduction

Black and William (1998b) define assessment “to broadly include all activities that students and teachers undertake to get information that can be used diagnostically to alter teaching and learning.” The word “diagnostically” is crucial to draw attention to the fact that assessment is not an end to itself. Assessment may be for formative or summative reasons. Boston (2002) defines formative assessment as “the diagnostic use of assessment to provide feedback to teachers and students over the course of instruction.” In the summative sense, it is used in formal reporting for perhaps disciplinary or promotional purposes. Evaluation, along with synonyms like assessment or appraisal, has been one instrument used in the personal and

public domains to assess work that has been done in order to attempt to determine and quantify the level of success or failure and to make improvements in the system.

As far as evaluation is concerned, the traditional approach in educational institutions, including higher education institutions, entailed teachers' formal assessment of their students, for inspectors to assess the teachers, and so on. In essence, it was the case that a "superior" had the mandate of formally assessing the "subordinate," but not the other way round. It was therefore a one-sided approach, which did not provide holistic or comprehensive insight into the teaching and learning experience. Although students have always assessed the performance of their teachers, this has always been informal, behind the scenes and not used as a definitive tool for formative or summative purposes. Prior to this time, any failure or poor performance of students/learners was rarely officially blamed on the quality of teaching, infrastructure, etc., but attributed to dullness and or lack of seriousness of the student/learner. The blame rested squarely on the learner. Current research reports showing the impact/effect of the quality of teaching, class management, class ambience or infrastructure, among others, have changed the perception and dynamics of education evaluation.

Globally, the situation has recently changed drastically such that the "subordinate" can now assess the "superordinate," in addition to what was the status quo ante! This is what we experience in modern educational institutions in the 20th and 21st centuries. Although this is widely practiced in the West, the traditional approach to evaluation is still predominant in many higher education institutions in Nigeria. In comparison with the USA, Canada and Germany, for instance, evaluation is a relatively new and recent development, which is still being resisted and receiving knocks in some quarters.

This study, which is based on a Project Action Plan (PAP) under the International Deans' Course (IDC) organized by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), German Rectors' Conference (HRK), the University of Applied Sciences, Osnabrück and the Centre for Higher Education Management (CHE), seeks to advocate a change in traditional evaluation approaches to a more balanced approach, with students making contributions through the evaluation of teachers, facilities and resources in their HEIs in order to optimize the learning experience.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey method to obtain relevant data on, first, whether or not Student Evaluation of Teachers (SET) is practiced in Nigerian universities and how prevalent the practice is, and, secondly, on having an overview of SET practices and

the relevant assessment instruments employed in its implementation in various institutions in different parts of the world. In doing so, we sampled the situation in a few Nigerian universities in the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria, comprising Akwa Ibom State, Bayelsa State, Cross River State, Delta State, Edo State and Rivers State. The HEIs included the University of Uyo, Uyo (Akwa Ibom State); the University of Calabar, Calabar (Cross River State) and the University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt (Rivers State). In addition, we obtained information on SET practices from colleagues in higher educational institutions in Ghana, Ethiopia, Germany, UK, Japan, Canada and the USA. The survey was done through e-mail correspondence, telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews and internet searches.

Findings

Under the first objective, our survey revealed that SET was practiced in very few universities in the South-South zone of Nigeria. In fact, none of the universities used in the study practiced SET at an institutional level. However, we found that individual lecturers, based on their experiences and interactions with colleagues elsewhere, had adopted SET as part of a formative tool in the assessment of their teaching.

On the second objective, the findings showed a widespread use of SET instruments. The SET instruments varied depending on the institution and the teacher. A summary of the SET instruments captures information from the following areas:

- Personal
- Institutional (Departmental/Faculty/University)
- Covering responses from both students and evaluators
- Detailed/additional comments
- Some on clearly stated objectives, others less so

Some SET forms were short, whereas others were quite detailed.

The sectoral approach seemed to reflect the following:

- Students' responsibilities
- Course contents
- Teachers' responsibilities
- Resources
- Institutional responsibilities

Additionally, some universities have started to use online tools to implement the evaluation of courses. Overall, forms are designed to elicit information on students'

attendance and participation in the course – to qualify them to make useful evaluation. Forms are also designed to evaluate the lecturer vis-à-vis interaction with students, class management, time management and/or class ambience (friendly, hostile, etc.). The course content, reading materials, instructional materials, assignments and class work also constitute part of the evaluation.

Findings from Institutions in the South-South Zone

Three tertiary institutions were investigated for the purpose of this study – the University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt in Rivers State; the University of Calabar, Calabar in Cross River State and the University of Uyo, Uyo in Akwa Ibom State, all in the oil-rich Niger Delta region and South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. All three institutions had not yet embraced SET as a quality control measure institutionally. Information on SET seemed not to be widespread in two of the three universities, and there appeared to be no immediate plans for its implementation. However, striking in Nigerian universities from June 2009 to October 2009 made it difficult to do more than telephone or personal interaction with just a few lecturers. With the cessation of conflict, we plan to do a more comprehensive survey and interact with key officials and management staff of these institutions.

In one university, we found a research report of a study by staff of the Faculty of Education on the attitude of secondary school teachers towards SET practice. The study reported a negative attitude to SET regardless of gender, academic qualification and teaching experience, especially when the evaluation reports were used for summative purposes.

One of the three institutions had actually constituted a senate committee to study and make recommendations on the implementation of SET in that institution. In fact, they had prepared the SET forms and were on the verge of standardizing the instrument in three other universities in the region and beyond. The constraint on the standardization of the instrument seemed to be the lack of funding for the project. Another finding, in the same institution, was that some lecturers, at the individual level, designed SET instruments, which they administered to their students at the end of the semester for formative purposes.

Why SET?

Even in western societies, our survey on SET shows that some teachers are not too enthusiastic about the practice of SET. Debates are still ongoing on the desirability of students evaluating their teachers. Those who take a more positive attitude insist

on clearly defined objectives regarding the use to which the results are put ultimately. They argue for the need to have strict controls on who should have access to the evaluation reports. We summarize the debates below.

Shortcomings Associated with SET

The debates on whether or not SET should be adopted in educational institutions can be quite vociferous. Opponents of SET practice argue that SET is subject to students' biases. Students who may not like a teacher or who think the teacher is too strict or holds different views may be downgraded. This in itself, in pursuance of the argument, is a threat to academic freedom, where teachers are expected to be free to hold any view. Another criticism is that in order to receive positive ratings from students, teachers tend to "dumb down" their courses, in other words, teachers may lower the tone of their courses to enable many students to pass. Teachers with excellent communication skills and charisma but with little intellectual content tend to receive positive assessment, as opposed to those who are not imbued with such charm, also known as the Dr. Fox phenomenon. Finally, opponents question the qualification and experience of students to evaluate course content. Other concerns relate to who is responsible for collecting the data so obtained, who has access to the data, data protection and when students should participate in the evaluation. So what then is the point of SET, given the above criticisms?

Benefits of SET

Those who argue in favour of SET practice make the following claims. SET is a reliable method of evaluating the performance of teachers. In addition, it is said to be a valid instrument of assessment. SET is an invaluable tool to gauge staff performance, the professional growth of the teacher (formative purposes), staff promotion, pay rise or reduction and/or discipline (summative purposes). SET is regarded as inexpensive and easy to administer; there seems to be few alternatives, and SET is considered to pass the objective test.

Other suggestions have been preferred to address the criticisms. They include:

- Capacity building programs for teachers to improve teaching and class management
- Designing questions that will likely elicit more objective indices
- Teachers to design their own questions based on how they can improve their performance

- SET to be administered more than once in a semester, perhaps in the middle of the semester and at the end
- Questions that elicit written comments instead of those that simply require “True,” “False,” “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree,” etc.

Analysis – Insights and Lessons from the Study

Given the ambivalence and controversies that trail SET implementation, it seems that it would be wise for us in Nigeria to conduct more in-depth and comprehensive studies on SET, even as we advocate the introduction of the practice into our tertiary institutions. Secondly, the importance of prior sensitization and raising the level of awareness on the part of school administrators, teachers and students cannot be over-emphasized. The intentions are to enable the stakeholders to understand the purpose of the exercise, to stress the fact that it is not meant and should not be meant for punitive reasons (but for the overall professional development of the teachers) and to advance efficiency of the institution. The advantage is that we are likely to become aware of challenging areas and to find ways of addressing them to avert sabotage and or other problems. In addition, SET should only be one of many tools employed in performance assessment; other ways suggested in the literature should be explored and adopted. Teachers should be well trained, provided with conducive work environments and should have access to or be encouraged to attend refresher courses for the enhancement of their professional career.

In Nigeria, for instance, we may wish to reflect a little on the General Studies (GST) courses offered in our universities and on the performance of the students in these courses, within the backdrop of the personnel and facilities/infrastructure available. Most general studies courses are offered for all first year students in all the faculties. This entails huge numbers in terms of student enrolment. Many students fail GST courses at the first attempt, largely because of structural problems, such as inadequate classrooms to accommodate the large student numbers, absence of public address systems, inadequate personnel, etc. If students were only to evaluate the teachers of GST courses, they would most probably grade them low. However, if the teachers, facilities and resources were to be evaluated separately, a different picture would likely emerge. The inherent structural inadequacies would be thrown up, shifting attention to other areas, not only the teacher. This provides a good example where SET results are put to formative use, once again addressing the questions of the use of the SET reports and and who has access to them. A careful consideration of the result of such a study would therefore assist in providing the needed facilities for the GST programs in our higher education institutions.

Update

Since the regional meetings in Abuja (Nigeria) and Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), which have been carried out in the framework of the IDC, we have continued to work on the PAPs. At the Abuja and Addis Ababa meetings we learned important lessons from our colleagues in other African countries, e. g., on SET practices and procedures. We received sample SET questionnaires from Ghana and Ethiopia. From Ghana, we learned that SET had been in place for over ten years at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. And from Ethiopia, we learned that SET has also been in practice and that there are no promotions or salary increases without SET reports for lecturers and that continuous absence of SET reports thereafter attracts a warning letter, followed by a termination of appointment. This is a good example where SET reports are used for summative reasons.

Although the University of Uyo had raised a committee to consider SET, the report of this study added impetus to the process. The University of Uyo is about giving approval to the adoption of SET as part of the assessment report for the overall evaluation of academic staff.

On our part, we have sensitized colleagues within the department and introduced sample SET questionnaires to some colleagues in our department who appear to be quite enthusiastic about the practice. The Head of Department of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages has indicated interest in adopting this as a departmental policy. We believe that this will extend to other departments in the Faculty of Arts and eventually become a university-wide policy.

Just in February 2010, we concluded a two-week workshop on social science research methods for graduate students in our university. To test if SET is desirable and practicable for an inter-faculty course, we asked the participants to complete SET forms, which they willingly did with interesting results. The lecturer did not seem to mind the exercise at all. The result from that exercise revealed that the course was quite popular but also threw up areas that could be improved upon by way of provision of better facilities.

The University of Uyo is almost set to implement SET in the system as part of its quality assurance scheme. The indicators show that it is now only a matter of time before SET is implemented in the entire system.

As part of the quality measures embarked upon by the University of Uyo, promotion of university teachers will no longer be based solely on publications. The input of students taught by the lectures, based on students' assessment reports of the lecturers, will be an integral aspect of the total appraisal exercise.

Conclusion and Future Work

From insights gained from the PAP study, it is suggested that Student Evaluation of Programs (SEP) should be introduced to underscore the idea of a more comprehensive assessment, not only targeting the teachers but the overall learning environment. The result would lead to the general improvement of the learning experience – facilities, learning resources, human resources, etc. Variables that are deficient could be addressed, through retraining in the case of human resources and through the provision of adequate teaching and learning facilities in the case of infrastructure. This is where feedback is crucial. Studies have shown that even where SET is practiced, the exercise becomes largely futile without feedback.

For instance, apart from lecture staff in education faculties in HEIs, many other faculty members do not have the requisite skills for teaching at any level, simply because they have not been trained in the basic and underlying principles and practice of education. In spite of the enormous knowledge and information at their disposal, such untrained teachers may not be equipped with the philosophy behind teaching and therefore sometimes perform poorly in information dissemination in the classroom setting. In recognition of this gap, calls have been made to provide short (in-house) courses and training on the principles and practices of education to faculty members. This issue has often been ridiculed by those faculty members in in most dire need of such training. This attitude can be changed through a conscious effort to raise the awareness of the teachers on these issues. Such in-house training would be beneficial to the teachers' overall teaching performance.

This survey shows that Student Evaluation of Teachers is already in practice in a few higher education institutions in Nigeria, such as University of Maiduguri, Maiduguri and Abia State University, Uturu, as well as in other HEIs in Africa, such as in Ghana or Ethiopia. It would be ideal in terms of quality control to introduce the evaluation of programs to all HEIs in Nigeria. This would certainly improve teaching and learning, if the results were used primarily for formative purposes. Formative assessment is used to improve the teaching and learning processes and can be fruitfully exploited both from the teachers' and students' perspective for positive gains in the classroom setting. Indeed, studies have shown that formative assessment adds significant learning gains to the learning experience (Black and William 1998a). In this paper, it is suggested that SET/SEP be introduced in HEIs in Nigeria because it is believed that if properly implemented, the results in the teaching and learning experiences of both teachers and learners would be promising.

This is a pilot study, and the findings have shown that there is substantial evidence that SET application judiciously improves higher education in Nigeria. However,

there is need for further research in the near future with a view to further improving the teaching and learning experiences.

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