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## Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning as the Nexus for Quality Culture in Higher Education

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### Abstract

The increasingly knowledge-driven global economy is making higher education to be a key driver of economic competitiveness. The imperative for institutions of higher learning is, therefore, to improve on employment skills which call for quality teaching as well as the programs. However, many universities focus on public assessments and international rankings whose comparisons tend to overemphasize research, as the unit for institutional value without assessing the quality of teaching. Internally, many universities use overall student ratings in the summative evaluations as the primary faculty evaluation systems. Active involvement by and meaningful input from students is a significant factor in the success of the teaching-learning-evaluation process. Nevertheless, current studies have not looked into the role of students' evaluation in improving the quality of teaching. This study set out to investigate the role of student evaluation in improving the quality of teaching in institutions of higher learning. Cross-sectional research design was utilized where 30 faculty staff and 112 students randomly selected were requested to fill out a self-response opinionnaire regarding the value of evaluation of lecturers by students. The data was used to triangulate course evaluation form filled out by 876 students for 45 course units that were randomly sampled from a pool of evaluation data in quality Assurance course evaluation data base. The results show that students consider an improvement in teaching to be the winning outcome of an educational evaluation system. The second preferred outcome was using teaching evaluations to improve course content and format. Students' motivation to participate in teaching evaluations is also impacted significantly by their expectation that they will be able to provide meaningful feedback. Since quality student input is an essential antecedent of meaningful student evaluations of teaching effectiveness, the results of this study should be considered thoughtfully as the evaluation system is designed, implemented and operated

## Introduction

High Education institutions have already realized that new trends, demands and developments in this sector require a shift in the quality culture and improvement in learning and teaching. Universities must respond to market requirements, globalization, increased student numbers, funding constraints and calls for greater accountability. These have necessitated increased harmonization and mobility at international level whilst aiming to safeguard standards, improve quality, support diversity and increase transferability and compatibility.

Traditionally, good teaching has meant teacher-centered instruction, a focus on knowledge memorization and student responsibility for their own learning. This is the widespread view that “a college is an institution that exists to provide instruction.” Barr and Tagg (1995) However, because of external and internal pressures and developments over time, “subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: a college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything. It is both needed and wanted.” Barr and Tagg (1995)

This shift from providing instruction to producing learning is part of an active process at South East European University (SEEU). Opened only eight years ago as the first private/public University in the country and in response to the need to provide higher education in the Albanian language within a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic environment, the University has sought to combine the best of local and international traditions and initiatives. However, given the educational background of the teaching staff and the fact that some also teach at other, more traditional institutions, many and particularly more experienced teachers have followed the „instruction paradigm“. Good teachers are defined as being disciplinary experts, who deliver knowledge by lecturing. This approach

linked to a perception that any expert can teach and that being an expert in the field necessarily made you a good teacher. At its extreme, this meant that after earning a PhD, there was nothing more to learn, especially not from people who had lower academic qualifications. Students’ needs, interests and ways of understanding and learning were less important. It was their duty to attend lectures and study and if they could not understand, that was their problem and the result of their attitude or educational background.

Higher education presents significant implications for development all over the world. Consequently, institutions of higher learning assume a major role in the development of human capital by generation and dissemination of knowledge through research and publications (Okwakol 2009). As higher education becomes increasingly global and elite institutions in the Africa in general and Kenya in particular face competition from new markets, being able to assess the quality of a university occupies a very critical centre stage. This is more so, since teaching at university level is increasingly becoming very arduous due to massification, an increase in numbers and heterogeneity of student population, their mobility, information explosion (Poæarnik, 2009).

Quality teaching is increasingly becoming the major focus of stakeholders and the landscape of higher education is in a continuous state of change. With the liberalization and ease of access, the primary clientele have considerably expanded and diversified, both socially and geographically and this category of new students has necessitated innovation and new teaching methods. In addition, the increased use of modern technologies in the classroom practices has also led to modification of the nature of the interactions between students and lecturers. Finally, stakeholders in higher learning increasingly demand value for their money which propels the agenda of quality and efficiency through teaching.

Referent literature indicates that quality teaching should of necessity student-centred where the focus is most and for all student learning. This has led to paradigm shift in pedagogical practices where attention is no longer focusing simply to the lecturer's experience and teaching skills and centering more on the learning environment. The implication is therefore, that quality teaching must address the learners' personal needs and help students know why they are working, be able to relate to colleagues and to receive help if needed. This points to the key role of the learner as the primary consumer of knowledge in improving the quality of teaching and academic practice within universities.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Kabarak University has been focusing on the provision of world class education in biblical perspective. The achievement of this goal thus puts the institution at a very demanding situation because the focus is not only on the quality of academics but also on the quality of the Christian practice in the disciplines offered. Quality assessment in the university has focused on the teaching staff as well as the resources and content. However, there is no evidence that research has been conducted in the institution to link the assessment of lecturers and the teaching practices by students to improvement of quality. This paper bridges the consequent knowledge gap by exploring the role of student evaluation in quality improvement in higher learning with specific reference to Kabarak University in Kenya.

### **Objectives**

This paper seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To establish the students' view on course evaluation feedback and improvement of teaching in Kabarak university
- ii. To determine lecturers' attitude towards student evaluation of teaching in Kabarak university
- iii. To examine the relationship between course evaluation feedback and quality teaching in Kabarak university

### **Literature Review**

Different stakeholders in the process of Quality Assurance within Higher Education undoubtedly have different expectations. Such stakeholders range from Higher Education institutions, academics, social partners, governments and above all, students who as central actors in the process have crucial demands at stake, including that of becoming employable in the labour market.

It is important point to keep in mind is that in order for student learning to be enhanced, the focus of quality teaching initiatives should not always be on the teacher. The primary recipients of the academic services should be involved and their input taken seriously. Using student course evaluation surveys is the most logical option of lecturer evaluation, because students are the individuals that are the most exposed to and the most affected by the teacher's teaching. However, this has its own limitations some of which have to do with perceived biasness. Students tend to blame their lecturers for all their academic problems, forgetting the role of the administration or the infrastructures.

Recent trends in higher education have increased the attention given to the quality of the teaching offered to the students. The advent of mass higher education in the last 10 years produced a shift in the conception of the role of universities in Kenya and East Africa. This has brought into question the nature of the relationship between teaching and

research. Indeed, as Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) observed, until the late nineteenth century, teaching was the major function of universities. This however changed with the influence of the export of the German model of research and teaching thus making research a major focus of the University during the 20th century, and teaching was often perceived as a second-class activity. Based on the rapid and mass expansion of the higher education sector, the importance of teaching is now being reexamined and reassessed. The States and the students demand that the learning experience be worth their money.

Second, changes in the funding structure of many universities also increased the focus on the quality of teaching. The modern approach to university quality management systems alluded to by (Neave, 1998) has strived to harmonize the quality of teaching since the concerns of stakeholders is dominated by value for money and public accountability. This worldview is fueled by the fact that higher education is increasingly seen as an investment that should contribute to national prosperity in the long term. The implication is that the return on the investment must be good (Yorke, 2000). It is on this basis that quality assurance in higher education has become a focus of attention for universities (Jones, 2003). This paradigm shift has led to institutions of higher learning viewing students as “clients” of higher education institutions (Telford & Masson, 2005) whose satisfaction takes on a center stage. Similarly, students have also increasingly been concerned with the quality of the lectures who offer academic services.

### **Student Course Evaluation and Quality Learning**

The nature of the relationship between traditional institutions of higher learning and their clientele has significantly evolved (NCIHE, 1997). Rowland (2006) observes that the empowerment of students as the primary client is bound to increase a litigious relationship between students and universities

rather than a relationship of trust and collegiality, as student identities shift from learner to consumer (Kaye *et al.*, 2006). In other words, 'the customer care revolution has hit the academy' (Morley, 2002b: 133, 2002a: 10), and with it come 'further implications for lecturers' control over the labour process' (Randle & Brady, 1997: 132), as the idea of the student as a participant in the learning process is in competition with the notion of student as a paying 'customer' (Clegg, 2003: 805). Fabos and Young (1999) argue that students are active consumers and passive learners.

Teachers (academics) have become 'knowledge brokers' (Kenway, *et al.*, 1993:4) and higher education institutions are being considered as 'marketer' (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004:1). In this market model of higher education the consumer is right at the centre, as education in this model is treated as a commodity (Gibbs, 2001). According to Naidoo and Jamieson (2005b: 40), commodification in higher education implies that the education process and knowledge can be 'captured' and 'packaged' in order to be bought and sold under market conditions where, in the teaching and learning transaction, the teacher becomes the commodity 'producer' and the student becomes the commodity 'consumer', having distinct, if not opposing, interests. In this 'consumerist ethos towards knowledge' (Skeggs, 1991:257), taking into account the expectations of customers/consumers, can quality as a concept be defined in and applied to the teaching and learning process in higher education?

Quality assessment is an essential element of all quality enhancement initiatives especially in higher learning. In order to evaluate which mechanisms really improve the quality of the teaching, one must assess the level of teaching before the launching of the enhancement initiative. Once the program is well started, the quality of teaching must again be measured. And for such an initiative to be truly effective, the level of teaching must continue to be

assessed very regularly – indeed Quality Teaching’s goal is the continual improvement of the teaching level and the continual “removal of learning defects” (Hau, 1996). However, there is much debate in the literature on the methods that should be used to assess the level of teaching and its hypothetical improvements. The choice of the testing method, for teachers and for students, influences the teaching and learning processes. What is tested determines what gets learnt, and how it is tested impacts how it is learnt. Assessment does not only inform students about their achievement, assessment in itself is a prerequisite for quality learning. Assessment drives learning (Chalmers, 2007).

### Methodology

The study was basically cross-sectional in nature. Self-response questionnaires were distributed 30 lecturers and 112 students who were randomly selected sampled from across academic divisions and years of study. In addition, responses were triangulated with data collected through course evaluation forms administered to 26 randomly selected courses units with a total response rate of 478 students. The responses were systematically analyzed and described from students’ perspectives and discussed by backing up with information from lecturers’ responses and document analysis. The students’ responses formed the basis for compiling findings. Because the learner is viewed as the main stakeholders, they are informed, curious, their participation often surpasses the four walls of the University and the world over, there is a wide and positive attitude towards increasing student influence in higher education governance (Basheka, Muhendo & Kittoba, 2009).

### Results

The study comprised responses from 21 lecturers and 84 students generating a response rate of 70% and 75% respectively.

Lecturer’s Appraisal by Students	SD	D	N
Uses lecture time productively	7(1.5%)	1(0.2%)	13(2.7%)
Makes up for missed classes	6(1.3%)	2(0.4%)	16(3.3%)
Presents the course in an interesting manner	5(1%)	11(2.3%)	63(13.2%)
Communicates clearly	5(1%)	15(3.1%)	40(8.4%)
Presents course contents in a logical manner	6(1.3%)	3(0.6%)	27(5.7%)
Shows broad knowledge of the subject matter	7(7%)	6(1.3%)	24(5%)
Explains the subject matter clearly	5(1%)	3(0.6%)	39(8.2%)
Prepares well for class	5(1%)	3(0.6%)	30(6.3%)
Usually punctual	5(1%)	6(1.3%)	28(5.9%)
Usually available for consultation	5(1%)	9(1.9%)	45(9.4%)
Encourages students to learn	4(0.8%)	7(1.5%)	14(2.9%)
Evaluates students fairly	6(1.3%)	7(7%)	32(6.7%)
Encourages student participation	5(1%)	3(0.6%)	36(7.5%)
Encourages students to think	5(1%)	4(0.8%)	39(8.2%)
Has a sense of humour	23(4.8%)	21(4.4%)	67(14.1%)
Gives intellectually challenging activities	39(8.3%)	41(8.8%)	116(24.8%)
Recommends useful key textbook	18(3.9%)	17(3.7%)	98(21.1%)

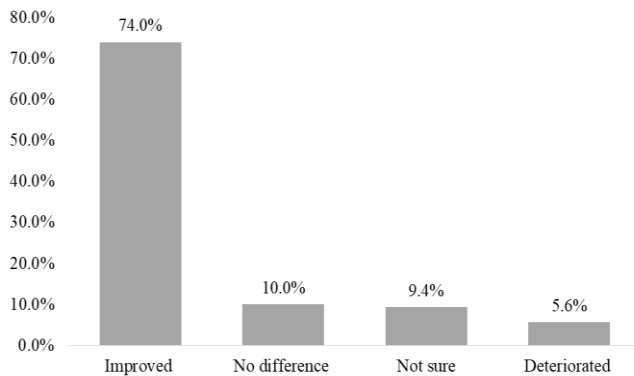
The role of course evaluation was conceptualized as a series of items that measure students’ level of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. The role was generated as an index comprising of two artificial categories with a transition points at 2.5. Scores above 2.5 were taken as an indicator of strong agreement. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Students’ Responses on Role of Course Evaluations (n = 112)

Item	Agreement Index
My lecturers have improved on areas of concern after evaluation	4.2
I positively evaluate my lecturers so they can be lenient with grades	1.7
Students’ evaluation have led to quality teaching in my course	3.8
Students have a role to play in academic quality assurance	4.5

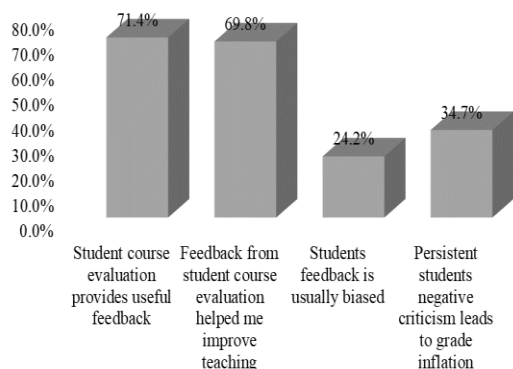
Table 1 indicates a 4.2 agreement index for lecturers’ improvement on areas that course evaluations showed they required corrective action. A mean index of 4.5 was taken to indicate that students felt they played a key role in quality improvement in teaching process. It was also established that 3.8

agreement index implied students' evaluation have led to quality teaching in the university courses.



**Figure 1:** Students' Feedback on Improvement on Quality of Teaching

In this survey, 74% of respondents indicated that most lecturers had improved the quality of teaching after repeated evaluations whereas 5.6% indicated an observed deterioration and 10% indicated there had been no observed difference and 9.4% were not sure if quality improvement had been achieved. The high percentage of positive response imply that improvement has in fact been achieved due to student evaluation.



**Figure 2:** Lecturers' Response to Course Evaluations by Students

Similarly, it was observed that 71.4% of interviewed lecturers agreed that student course evaluation provides useful feedback, and 69.8% agreed that the feedback from student course evaluation helped them improve teaching. Thus, the majority of lecturers felt that student evaluation of teaching played a key role in improving quality of teaching. On the other hand, 24.2% of the sampled lecturers were of the opinion that course evaluation by students affected them negatively citing that feedback was biased. It was also observed that 34.7% of lecturers indicated that course evaluations had a tendency towards strong and persistent criticism by students which could result in grade inflation and consequent compromise of academic quality. This is supported by the popular view that since lecturers assume that course evaluations are used in human resource decisions, they are afraid that giving low grades to students would cause retribution from students in the form of low rating. Consequently, it could lead to the quid pro quo status where lecturers respond by raising grades to get favourable students course evaluation feedback and this grade inflation is deleterious to academic quality.

The observed correlation between positive course rating and high grades was 0.6 which was significant ( $p = 0.03$ ). It was observed that 40% of lecturers observed that course evaluation by students cause grade inflation. This item was triangulated with another, where they were asked to state whether it affected their own grading practices. The responses indicated that 67% of lecturers indicated that course evaluation did not affect their grading practices. However, it is important to note that scientifically, correlations between grades and ratings does

not always imply a cause-effect relationship between grades and ratings. Indeed, research has established that there are several possible underlying cause-effect patterns that could produce a correlation between grades and ratings. On one hand, it can be hypothesized that when grades are high or low, students tend to give high or low ratings and this type of evaluation causes grade inflation. However, a lecturer's effectiveness in teaching attract higher ratings from students, but it also tends to foster higher academic engagement levels among students leading to better academic grades. Thus ratings are correlated with grades because both higher ratings and higher grades are both caused by the same thing, higher quality of teaching and learning.

### **Interpretation of results**

Concerning their role, staff overwhelming saw innovative teaching as a main part of their job (93.48%), although a majority felt that this might be valued more. A substantial majority (70.65%) felt that academic qualifications conferred ability to teach well in higher education and 82.6% felt that years of experience made you a better teacher per se. With regard to the role of students in their own learning 32.61% felt that they were responsible for their own success whilst 83.7% acknowledged that their own teaching had a great influence on their students' learning.

Staff had very mixed feelings about whether institutional leaders and performance management processes had a positive effect on the quality of teaching (45% Faculty leaders, 31% senior managers, 42% annual evaluation process, 46% attendance monitoring 38% disciplinary measures). However, 77% stated that discussions about teaching with colleagues and peers were useful. In

conclusion, whilst staff valued their role as teachers and identified their colleagues as a positive support, they were less influenced by management and processes and still largely believed that qualifications and experience equaled competence. This provides a strong basis for change but makes individual and group training and improvement more challenging.

With regard to fostering dialogue and regular discussion about what constitutes excellence in teaching, it was pleasing to note that 85.87% staff said they tried to follow good practice and 66% said the University's review process had enabled shared discussion. In addition, over 80% of staff surveyed said that they tried to provide a model of good practice and to evaluate their teaching against learning objectives. In meetings, they welcomed the opportunity to articulate and share ideas about what they defined as excellence in teaching in higher education. Their individual definitions corresponded to a large extent to the characteristics identified in research. It is interesting to note that there were no significant inter-disciplinary differences in the written statements, although the survey results indicate more varied views where 49% felt that excellence spanned subject fields, 26% believed that separate subject areas could not be taught in the same way and 17.39% were not sure. There was a similar mixed response about whether the country/region has a significantly different approach to teaching from other European countries (26.09% agree, 35.87% disagree with 34.78% neutral. 2.36% didn't answer)

There were two recurring points which appear to reflect what might be interpreted as „culturally“ different. In defining the

characteristics of good teaching, there was a strong emphasis on professional conduct such as attendance, punctuality, seriousness, integrity and lack of prejudice. Even more pronounced was the belief, from 58.6% of staff surveyed, that one of the most important elements of excellence was deep subject expertise and excellent qualifications. This links to the survey results on the value of qualifications and years of experience as conferring automatic competence.

We conclude that staff are actively trying to use strategies that they consider to be excellent, to evaluate their practice and consider wider issues related to approaches in other subjects and countries. They appreciate discussion with peers as a positive opportunity for reflection. However, staff are still very focused on professional standards and knowledge of subject as specific features and the University needs to note this whilst operating procedures and developing initiatives.

Finally, it is clear from the survey results that the Teaching Observation procedure has been broadly accepted and has had some positive effect in supporting improvement and shifting perceptions. Over 77% believed it helped with reflection and 61% said it had impacted on their teaching. Almost 60% believed that the scheme was relevant for someone with their experience. The majority of staff (76%) felt it was generally supportive. Not so many respondents felt that it had improved self-confidence - 54% said it had but 28% remained unsure and 13% disagreed. This might be explained by previously very self-confident staff who have for the first time discussed the actual value of the strategies they used. It is important to note that nearly 73% said they

had tried something new or different as the result of the observation and 68% felt it had made them more aware of teaching methodologies and strategies. This suggests a shift in their approach and an increased awareness of the impact of their delivery on the learning process.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The results show that students consider an improvement in teaching to be the winning outcome of an educational evaluation system. Lecturers view student feedback through course evaluations as an important resource tool for improvement of quality of teaching. The second preferred outcome was using teaching evaluations to improve course content and format. Students' motivation to participate in teaching evaluations is also impacted significantly by their expectation that they will be able to provide meaningful feedback. Since quality student input is an essential antecedent of meaningful student evaluations of teaching effectiveness, the results of this study should be considered thoughtfully as the evaluation system is designed, implemented and operated

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