

Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET): a tool for quality assurance in higher education institution (HEI)

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The current paper investigated the impact of student evaluation of teaching (SET) on University academic staff members' experiences and their professional development. Explored were issues of practicality, relevance and sheer impact on the quality of the teaching. The data was collected by means of questionnaires with academics in the university. The design was a survey, which sampled 50 lecturers, with a 70% response rate. A Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 was achieved for reliability of the instrument. The Findings revealed that SET results influence mainly the content of the course, its structure, teaching style and methods employed.

Keywords: Student Evaluation of Teaching, Higher Education, South Africa

Introduction

The past few years have witnessed an upsurge of the use of Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) as a tool for quality assurance of teaching in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Pincus, 2006). Other forms of Quality Assurance in teaching include; assessing the curriculum design, organisation, implementation and review; the institutional strategies for teaching, learning and assessments; student support, guidance and achievements, learning resources; external assessors and external examiners' reports, feedback from stakeholders and former students (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society - TFHES, 2000). Additionally, TFHES re emphasised the fact that in the new millennium, higher education has become the major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge driven economy.

Previous research suggests that student evaluation increases the chances that excellence in teaching would be recognised and rewarded (Carr & Hagel, 2008; Pincus, 2006). The study also adds that student evaluation provides a means of participating between students and teachers in the teaching-learning process and raises the whole level of instruction (Pincus, 2006; The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). This suggests that SET provides direct and extensive information about the lecturers' teaching. Hence, an institution may be stimulated by SET to consider its overall goals and values. The ramification therefore is that the support of SET could be a tangible sign that institutions recognise the importance of student involvement in shaping the institutions' educational goals and practices.

Background of the study

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The University of the Witwatersrand, through the Centre for Learning Teaching and Development (CLTD) presents a range of methods to assess the impact and effectiveness of lecturing by academic staff. In the case of University of the Witwatersrand, the purposes are in several folds thus; helping them to monitor, build and reflect on their personal professional development, probation monitoring, performance appraisal, promotion, all for quality assurance purposes. The effectiveness and practical implementability and value of this policy is monitored by the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning. To achieve this purpose student ratings of teaching serves as an important component in University of the Witwatersrand. It is no surprise that around the world, institutions of higher learning often place great weight on student rating data in making decisions that impact faculty rewards, career progress and professional growth (Pincus, 2006).

Traditionally, most professions have held a strong service value orientation (Hemson, 2006). It is important that academics reclaim their professionalism and one way to do this may be to revive a commitment to learning in the classroom as a professional value and an intrinsic good of higher education (Guimond, 2006). This commitment to learning could be pursued deliberately by academics who, as professional educators, take control of their teaching practice and seek to reflect, research and improve it, supported by communities of good teaching practice. Such educators would be in a position to use quality assurance measures to improve their teaching and learning, provided they are given the institutional space to use evaluation as part of a participatory action research cycle. Through this systematic process, SET of and reflection on teaching practice can provide an equitable assessment of their strengths and weaknesses in lecturing. Thereby providing guidelines for improving their instruction and pursuing professional growth. Then too, because information is drawn from several sources, each of which has been selected as the most reliable source for providing data on the activity to be evaluated, a lecturer is freed from purely subjective and/or arbitrary assessments. Additionally, Schools, Faculty and University management as whole would have at their disposal valid documentation to assist them in making sound and objective decisions with regard to probation, promotion, and performance appraisal. Consequently, the University would better be able to reward satisfactory and distinguish lecturers.

However, little is known about the use of SET and how university lecturers are intrinsically motivated to teach well as a matter of professional duty and pride (Snowball & Wilson, 2006; Hemson, 2006). Furthermore, little is known of the new lecturers' perceptions of student evaluation in South African Higher institutions. Not much is also documented regarding how evaluation of teaching enables lecturers to become reflective practitioners through a process of receiving feedback from their students.

Nonetheless, it has been argued that evaluations such as students enable lecturers to identify areas for improvement and strengths which could be built upon, and to set professional development goals (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). In contrast, some authors argue that student evaluation of teaching should not form part of reflective practice (Robinson & Diaz, 2006; Ratele, 2006). In this way, the authors argue that it does not enhance the scholarship of teaching by promoting the critique of practice that is often facilitated by conversations about teaching among peers (Ratele, 2006).

Nevertheless, the primary goal of lecturer and course evaluation is formative (Ratele, 2006). It is also argued that it nurtures *continuing academic staff* commitment to excellence in

classroom instruction and management (Ratele, 2006). Thus, the role of student evaluation should primarily be one of development, thus academic staff members need to support it in their efforts to improve their teaching. This implies that University should commit to creating an environment in which it is „safe“ for lecturers to be observed and reflect upon their practice openly and honestly. Where the evaluation feedback is primarily used to assist in the professional development of the lecturer and for improvement of course design and delivery, rather than as a punitive measure. However, in University of Witwatersrand, there is lack of research investigating the influence of the evaluation system (SET) on the teaching practice from the point of view of the academics themselves.

Therefore, the purpose of the current paper was to explore the impact of SET on University academic staff experiences and their professional development. Explored here are issues of practicality, relevance and sheer impact on the quality of the teaching brought about by the evaluations. The data was collected by means of questionnaires.

Research Method

The design was a survey, which sampled 50 out of 70 lecturers (thus a 70% response rate). Data was collected through the use of a questionnaire (closed ended) as well as interview schedule which were sent to all (70) academic staff at the University of the Witwatersrand. The selection of the sample was random. The questionnaire sought to find out how new lecturers perceived student evaluation of teaching as a quality assurance tool.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was made of number of sections. The first question sought years of service. The next sought information on how often the lecturers did their evaluations. This was followed by a section that sought to find out the purpose of the evaluations. Additionally, respondents were required to indicate the purpose of the evaluation. Lastly, they were required to indicate their experience about student evaluations as a tool for quality assurance. In addition, the interviews (10 respondents) were derived from the records at The Centre for Learning Teaching and Development. The data was used for triangulating. The analysis of the interview was content analysis. Prior to administrating the instruments, a pilot study conducted reflected a 0.78 Cronbach“ s alpha for reliability purpose. It (interview schedule) was also assessed by colleagues in the Centre for Learning Teaching and Development for validity of the instrument. The responses were used to improve on the content and structure of the instruments for final data collection process. Meanwhile, a Cronbach“ s alpha of 0.89 was achieved for reliability of the questionnaire, suggesting a high reliability of instrument.

Nature of SET in University of Witwatersrand

According to the information provided by the Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, SET is a questionnaire which consists of 10 items which are mandatory together with 15 more questions that are chosen by the lecturer to be completed by students in a course. This is a system designed to receive the feedback from students on various aspects of teaching and course content in order to assist academic teaching staff develop improve for quality assurance purpose. It also gives an insight of lecturer‘ s opinion on the issue of SET.

Analysis of data

The responses were grouped according to whether they „agree“ or „disagree“ that SET is a tool for quality assurance (QA), then the report of each was compiled. The questionnaire was analysed using frequencies for descriptive data, while content analysis was used for the interview schedule.

Results of data

Figure 1 is a representation of the answers on the question „what do you mostly use your evaluation reports for? The graph suggests an encouraging response which suggests lecturers use it for both formative and summative purposes.

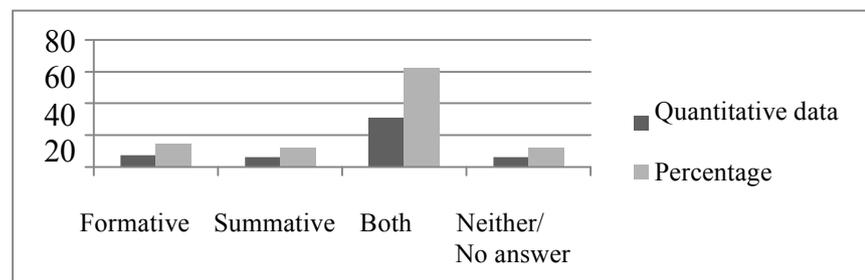


Figure 1: Purpose of evaluation reports

Length of Experience of the Lecturers

However, it is worth noticing that majority of the surveyed are either quite inexperienced (less than 3 year of teaching) or very experienced (more than 10 years of working as a tutor or lecturer): 38% and 34% respectively. The rest of the lecturer surveyed have either less or more than 5 years of experience. The graphical reflection of the experience range of the lecturers can be seen in figure 2.

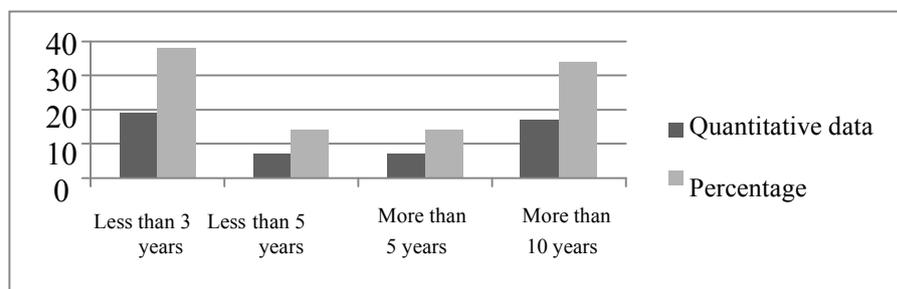


Figure 2: Years of Service

Lecturers' Comments on the Concept of SET

The section dwelt with how evaluations by students affect the quality of teaching. The survey confirmed that the feedback received from the students is useful for their professional development. Apart from stating that student's evaluation has positive effect, lecturers further elaborated on how exactly it influences their work and what changes it leads to. The lecturers commented that SET helps them to find the answers for the following questions: 1) what kind of problems student have and how to address them 2) what kind of impression the courses leave in general 3) what kind of material needs to be explained in which detail 4) how to meet students demands and reach wider audience 5) how to adjust material to the changing audience of students and how to make it more relevant 6) how effective are style and methods employed and lastly 7) how understandable the content is for students.

Most of the lecturers admitted that SET helps to make teaching a self-reflexive process and enables corrective action so that its results are further reflected in the content of lectures, changes in lecturer behavior, style and method choice. One of the lecturers claimed that "no matter what kind of changes I introduced the opinion of the students remained almost important" (lecturer 4). It was also noted that "SET may be of practical use only for those who want to become more popular among students and promote their courses" (lecturer 9). Others claimed that SET is not useful for them and stated that it "... has partly demoralising effect" (lecturer 3), "lacks logical grounds" (lecturer 1), "worsen student-teacher relations and students" opinion may be contradictive" (lecturer 7), but "...can be used for promotion purposes" (lecturer 8).

Discussion of Results

The first question aimed to figure out how the results of SET are used by the lecturers. When it comes to the assessment of a student, summative assessment is what students tend to focus on (The Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). When it comes to evaluation of lecturers, both types (summative and formative) of assessment means approximately the same, but with referral to the teaching process: evaluation should be offered during the semester as a way of helping lecturers gauge how a class is going, and at the end of the term. This is consistent with previous studies (Robinson & Diaz, 2006). Thus, suggesting that lecturers get acquainted to the results, and also refer to them, while planning further teaching activity.

There were few responses of formative responses. Lecturers believed that the evaluation received from students was of great importance and they see SET as a source of their professional development and inspiration. Similar view has also been shared by other researchers (Moore, 2004). Nonetheless, the formative developmental nature of evaluation needs to be balanced with the need for accountability as suggested by the lecturers which is also consistent with previous work (Moore, 2004).

Flexibility should be a key feature of any lecturer or course evaluation system. The University should thus offer a cafeteria, or menu-type of lecturer and course evaluation. The system should provide for a range of evaluation opportunities, and allow for customisation of the student evaluation or other questionnaires. This is particularly important when a course of instruction does not fall in the traditional instructional mode, or where an innovative method or approach is in experimental use (Francis, Hemson, Mphambukeli & Quin, 2003).

This does suggest that the mechanisms of SET should not be prescriptive, mandatory, or limiting. They should be intended to be an indication of the potential range of methods which could be used to elicit feedback on teaching as suggested by some authors (Francis et al., 2003). Therefore, Universities need to ensure that the source of feedback, and the methodology used are sensitive to their particular teaching context and are appropriately customised to best meet the purposes for which the SET is being conducted.

It is also argued that lecturers should undergo at least one form of external evaluation of his/her teaching every year. The lecturer may stipulate the scope and the form of the evaluation, provided within a three year period particularly for the purpose of promotion. Hence, data from a single perspective may not be considered to be a definitive evaluation without being balanced with experience from other perspectives.

Conclusion

Student Evaluation of Teaching is considered to be one of the most important resources for sustaining professional development in teaching. Indeed, the surveyed lecturers stated that SET results influence mainly the content of the course, its structure, teaching style and methods employed.

Where students have been involved in providing evaluative feedback, lecturers are strongly encouraged to share the results of the evaluation exercise with such students which did not feature as part of response. Additionally, they can use the opportunity to foster debate about teaching and learning practice, and about the lecturer's and students' mutual rights and responsibilities as members of a learning community.

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