



Course and Lecturer Evaluation by Students at Higher Institutions: Review and Challenges (The Case of Methodist University College Ghana)

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Abstract

Course and lecturer evaluation is a phenomenon that has been in practice for quite some time now. It is a widespread activity that is conducted in almost all academic institutions; public and private alike. The practice is an indication that a lecturer has to be well prepared before he delivers his lecture and that he has to conduct himself as professionally as possible when dealing with his students in and outside the lecture room. This paper looks at the topic in an African context as there already exists enormous literature outside Africa. The research used a qualitative approach to solicit views from the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit of the University on the challenges of the exercise and uses of the results. It is realised that course and lecturer evaluation by students is not a witch-hunting exercise, but an exercise to help improve teaching performance of lecturers. It is also a way of letting the institution know students' perception of it in terms of facilities that are at the disposal of students which act as learning aids.

Keywords: Course, Lecturer, Evaluation, Student, Challenges

Introduction

Evaluation of performance of lecturers by students was introduced as early as 1915 (Wachtel, 1998). Informal student evaluations of lecturers were started in the 1960's by enterprising college students (Cahn, 1986). Since then, its usage has spread across to the extent that they are administered in almost all universities and are probably the main source of information used for evaluating teaching performance of lecturers.

As lecturers teach daily in lecture rooms, they need to know whether the implementation of effective teaching initiatives and strategies used are well received by students (Chuan and Heng, 2013). One accepted method of measuring teaching effectiveness is course and lecturer evaluation by students (CLES), which is often carried out during the middle of the semester at Methodist University College Ghana (MUCG). This is in order to get a lot of students to fill the questionnaire since that is the time one actually knows the real number of students for a class.

Half way through every semester, lecturers are evaluated by their respective students on a course by course basis. Questionnaires are sent around the campuses of Methodist University College Ghana, especially the Dansoman and Tema campuses. This activity is undertaken by the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit of the University. Many of the lecturers are determined to ensure that they all get useful feedback from their students. The questionnaires are administered in such a way that the students are anonymous, to ensure that no student comes under victimization.

After the data are gathered, analysis is undertaken and the feedback is given to lecturers and the management of MUCG. Over the past years, lecturers have continuously asked, what such information is used for, that is, they want to know the importance of such an activity. This continuous questioning by lecturers has led to this review of course and lecturer evaluation by students at MUCG. The CLES does not go on without challenges on the part of the administering staff. Extensive work on course and lecturer evaluation by students has been done outside Africa, but it has been difficult to get the literature on this topic in an African context. Thus, this research is a first step to course and lecturer evaluation by students in an African context. It looks at the various challenges encountered by the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit of the University in executing the Course and Lecturer Evaluation by Students.

Problem statement

For any academic institution to thrive on quality, it is very important to get feedback from recipients of the teaching, through course and lecturer evaluation by students. It cannot be underestimated that lecturers know the use of such an exercise. Lecturers have continued to ask what the essence of the course and lecturer evaluation is. This research wants to find answers to the following:

- How is the course and lecturer evaluation by students carried out?
- Who is involved in the execution of the exercise?
- Is the exercise bereft of challenges?
- Of what use is such an exercise?

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- To determine the challenges of the course and lecturer evaluation by students
- To undertake a review of the course and lecturer evaluation by students
- To find out what the results of the exercise are used for

Literature Review

Years of research have proven that it is of great importance for an academic institution to provide effective lecturers for their students (Chuan and Heng, 2013). This should be of utmost consideration in both private and public institutions. In a competitive world of education today, many institutions of higher learning demand that effective teaching and learning take place, both inside and outside the classroom (Chuan and Heng, 2013). MUCG has therefore been very proud lately as one of its products won the 5th edition of “The Challenge” – a national competitive program for all graduates in Ghana and the winner is given sponsorship for further studies in UK. Also, one of its current Level 400 IT students won a national competition and his project is

to be sponsored by the Catholic Relief Service (CRS) for onward implementation. These kinds of achievements make lecturers of MUCG happy and more so, the academic institution receives satisfaction that its efforts for national development are yielding results.

The lecturers normally get to assess the performance of the students in several ways but the students have limited ways of assessing their lecturer's performance. The course and lecturer evaluation by students reflect on qualities associated with good teaching such as lecturers' knowledge, clarity, classroom management and course organization (Chuan and Heng, 2013). Although the usefulness of CLESs is still much doubted and questionable, it is still the most common tool used to assess classroom teaching (Wright, 2006). Most lecturers in African universities have not acknowledged this evaluation (except those in Ghana and Kenya as noted by Isiaka (1998)). According to Inko-Tariah (2013), most people believe that students may not be objective enough in evaluating their lecturers.

Economic Notebook (2011) illustrates that students may prefer lecturers who do not challenge them enough in terms of materials and activities. A lot of students these days are not ready to put in effort in their studies and may see lecturers who insist on doing the right things as wicked (Inko-Tariah, 2013). There have been numerous times that as a lecturer, students have informed me that the materials given to them are too many.

A large volume of research has shown the benefits gained from the information obtained from this practice (Chuan and Heng, 2013). Besides being a measurement tool of teaching excellence, the results of the evaluation are beneficial in helping lecturers and academic institutions identify the specific areas for improvement (Yeoh, et al. 2012). There have been countless times at MUCG when lecturers were called and counselled and asked to find out what difficulties they were going through as a result of the feedback they get from students. There have been times as well when lecturers were called and encouraged to continue the good work they are doing, as a result of the feedback from students. In some cases, the outcome of the evaluation is often used to formulate key performance index of lecturers in staff appraisal for promotion, awards and tenure decisions (Griffin, 1999; Liaw & Goh, 2003).

By gathering evidence of teaching effectiveness through course and lecturer evaluation by students, departments, deans and management are able to make informed and objective decisions about retention, promotion, tenure, and salary increases (Speaking of Teaching, 1997). Asking for evaluations regularly from students also sends a clear message that effective teaching matters, and not just in personnel decisions (Speaking of Teaching, 1997). The most important benefit of evaluations of lecturers is the feedback the forms provide directly to lecturers, so that they can refine their courses and teaching practices to provide students with better learning experiences (Speaking of Teaching, 1997). By calling attention to teaching methods and outcomes, student evaluations play a positive role in improving the climate of teaching and learning at Stanford (Speaking of Teaching, 1997).

As teaching evaluation researcher, William Cashin, reminds us, "Student ratings are the start of the instructor's journey toward improvement, not the end" (Cashin, 1990). This implies that course and lecturer evaluation by students serves to benefit every participating member of the

education community, especially, the lecturer. It is essential for academic institutions to know students' opinions about their lecturers, besides, it provides an opportunity to define students' needs (Gül, 2010). Generally, in Turkey, performance of lecturers is determined by seniors or managers but this is a deficiency, and it must be compensated for by the perceptions of students (Gül, 2010).

By a wide margin, course evaluations are used for summative, as opposed to formative purposes. That is, as a means of making personnel decisions (e.g. hiring, tenure, promotion, and annual review) based in part, on a student's rating of an instructor's teaching effectiveness (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008).

The collected data, in particular, the qualitative responses, are also used by instructors and teaching support offices to provide formative feedback intended to facilitate improved teaching and course development (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). Some researchers have argued that, the feedback provided by course evaluations does not effectively promote change in lecturers. However, a significant majority of researchers consider student evaluations to be a useful measure that contribute to teaching effectiveness (Beran et al., 2007; Abrami, 2001; Schmelkin et al., 1997). Most studies have shown that management, in general, have a positive attitude toward evaluation data and find it a useful source of information for personnel decisions (Campbell & Bozeman, 2008; Beran et al., 2005).

Several scholars have outlined the common characteristics of course evaluation tools. Algozzine et al. (2004) for example, describe a typical evaluation based on their research on the development and use of course evaluation instruments:

- (a) an instrument is developed, comprised of a series of open-ended and closed questions about course content and teaching effectiveness;*
- (b) at least one item addresses 'overall' effectiveness;*
- (c) written comments about the course content and the effectiveness of the instructor are solicited;*
- (d) anonymity of responses is assured and assumed;*
- (e) responses are obtained at the end of the semester in the absence of the instructor;*
- (f) item and scale responses are summarized across instructors, departments, and colleges and evidence of "teaching effectiveness"*

According to Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf (2008), the several items on course evaluation forms assess different aspects of a lecturer's teaching behaviours and the course. Students are supposed to assess each of these individually, ranking them as they think it best (Beran et al., 2007). This is the ideal case but in practice, on a few occasions, one sees another student getting a cue from his colleague as to what response was chosen.

Though course and lecturer evaluation by students seems to be an important exercise in an academic environment, it appears students sometimes do not attach a lot of importance to the exercise. One key issue in the Students Evaluation of Teaching literature is the question of how competent students are to make judgements on teaching and course quality (Keane and Labhrainn, 2005). Subjective evidence exists regarding lecturers obtaining high ratings due more to their popularity, amongst students, than to their effectiveness as teachers as opined by Keane and Labhrainn (2005). The challenge becomes helping students to see the importance of this activity (Stassen et al, 2001), because if this is achieved, the assessment process can both make the results more meaningful and encourage students' active participation in the future undertaking of the CLES (Stassen et al, 2001). This rids the exercise off subjectivity.

Common uses

There are several common uses for course evaluation data: teaching improvement; personnel decisions; course selection (by students); and increasingly, in the compilation of teaching award nominations files.

Teaching Improvement

Since the use of evaluating lecturers began, researchers have argued that course evaluation data can be used for the purpose of improving teaching and thereby student learning (Goldschmid, 1978). Some researchers like Marsh (2007) think that this alone is not enough, since many lecturers are not trained in data analysis, and are therefore less likely to have the necessary skills to interpret their ratings to understand what the students are saying. At Methodist University College Ghana, some lecturers are faced with similar challenges; "how should they interpret the results?"

Personnel Decisions

Some studies have suggested that administrators are more likely than individual lecturers to make use of course evaluation data, particularly for personnel decisions and recommendations for teaching awards, monitoring progress for the remediation of teaching problems, evaluation of teaching at the unit level and for curriculum planning (Beran et al., 2005).

Teaching Awards

Course evaluation data is often a necessary element for teaching award nominations in a University (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). It is therefore an important component for selecting the "Best Teacher" for an Academic year.

Approaches to gathering of data for evaluation of lecturers.

Student evaluation forms could be redesigned to emphasize relatively objective matters, such as "Did the lecturer come to class on time?", "Did he read student work and return it within a reasonable time frame?" and so on, rather than subjective items such as "How would you rate this lecturer?" or "How fair was the grading?" The former sort of questions would probably be

less subject to the effects of bias than the latter (Huemer, 2007). In addition, they have a better chance of inducing improvements in teaching performance (Huemer, 2007).

Teaching can be evaluated in part by examination of the syllabi and other course materials. These can be used to verify that a course contains substantive content, but lecturers should not be monitored for the “correctness” or moral or political value of that content (Huemer, 2007).

The performance of students in a course taught could be another way of evaluating a lecturer’s performance only that it may be inadequate to use only the performance of students.

Letters could also be written to the body in charge of the evaluation by individual students, where they have the luxury of time to express their thoughts as to how they feel the lecturer performed.

Keane and Labhrainn (2005) are saying that colleagues through peer observation can assess a lecturer, the Head of Department can also, and a self-reflection can be used. All these methods can be used in conjunction with another method.

Questionnaire Format and Content at MUCG

The questionnaire is normally administered to students of a lecturer for all the different courses taught in a semester. It is not administered for Teaching Assistants. The questionnaire used at the Methodist University College Ghana takes the following format.

It has the first part where the student indicates his level, lecturer’s name, the semester and academic year and then the date. There is a preamble to the questions which emphasizes the importance of the exercise and why students should take it seriously. The questions are divided into 5 sections: Course Content; having 4 items, Delivery of Course; having 3 items, Mode of Delivery; having 6 items, Assessment; having 5 items and General; having 3 items. The general section concerns the University itself and not the lecturer directly. Each section has the response set: Very Good, Good, Satisfactory, Poor, and Not Applicable. There is then a last section which is the comments/suggestions/recommendation by students.

The course and lecturer evaluation by student questionnaire of MUCG follows the structure of Algozzine et al. (2004) design except that unlike item (c) which states that *written comments about the course content and the effectiveness of the instructor are solicited*; written comments are about the university in general; the facilities available and how they influence teaching and learning and not the course content. Looking at item (e) *responses are obtained at the end of the semester in the absence of the instructor*, in MUCG, sometimes the lecturer is present while the students are filling the questionnaires only that they are not given to him to look at after filling. Responses in MUCG are obtained in the middle of the semester but not at the end. Also with item (f) *item and scale responses are summarized across instructors, departments, and colleges*, that of MUCG is not summarised across departments and colleges/faculties but lecturer, though the course title and course code, can inform on the department and college/faculty thereof.

The questionnaires are distributed and collected in lecture rooms for students of respective courses to fill them. During the lecture, 5 minutes of lecture time is taken to do this. This is done by the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit of MUCG. In some cases, the Class Representative is put in charge to collect the questionnaires and submit to the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit. So, sometimes, the questionnaires are filled after the lecture time.

While most institutions administer evaluations during the last weeks of a course, other institutions like Guelph, require that students get a copy of the form at the outset of the semester (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). Yet, in other institutions, students complete the forms towards the end of a course. Yet still, at MUCG, students respond to the questionnaire around the middle of the semester.

Method of gathering data for CLES at MUCG

The method of distributing and collecting questionnaires to evaluate course and lecturer by students is quite easy and inexpensive to administer. Thus, it is the commonest method used in most universities in the world, not excluding Methodist University College Ghana. This method gives an impression of objectivity, in comparison with more “subjective” measures such as letters from observers, since it produces definite numbers. There are few alternatives to the evaluation of lecturers by students, if one wants to assess teaching effectiveness.

Another reason why this method is widely used may be the belief that the operations of a university is producing excellent students and for that matter any university has the responsibility of ensuring that students are satisfied while pursuing their studies. Whether they measure teaching effectiveness or not, course and lecturer evaluation by students is probably a highly accurate measure of student satisfaction (Huemer, 2007).

Steps to Analysis of Data

The analysis of course and lecturer evaluation by student data is the process of gathering, translating and synthesizing individual student responses (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). This analysis may be done by the administrative body responsible for course evaluations at that institution (for example, the Quality Assurance Unit at MUCG, the Office of Evaluations and Examinations at Michigan University or Test Scoring and Questionnaire Services at Alberta University) or by external consultants. It is relatively less expensive if done in-house than by consultants. This includes the calculation of response means for each question on the evaluation, as well as response means that can be used for comparative purposes while the written comments are most often typed into a computer file to ensure student anonymity (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008). At MUCG, percentages of the response sets are computed and written comments are also normally typed out as done elsewhere. The Decision Support System used for this exercise is the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) together with Microsoft Excel Office Automation System. The steps involved in the process of analysis of the course and lecturer evaluation by students are as follows:

- The data is first gathered by the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit.

- Data entry is done using SPSS.
 - All the questionnaires gathered are entered in the data sheet view but foremost, the questionnaire is coded in the variable view.
- The data is then cleaned.
- Individual lecturer evaluation is analysed.
- Summary of individual lecturer evaluation is analysed.

Written Comments

The written comments that are entered in SPSS are extracted according to lecturer and kept in different files. In the process of extraction, repeated comments by other students are weeded out. The language of the students are also put in appropriate form not going away from the point they want to make but putting it in a better form to be understood by whoever reads after the analysis.

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative approach (Neuman, 2007). A group interview was staged on the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit of MUCG where views were gathered on the challenges of the CLES and how the exercise is undertaken and its uses. The questioning took the form of an unstandardised interview where all the questions asked were open ended. Permission was sought from the interviewees to record the interview using a smart phone and it was later transcribed. The results were then discussed and conclusions drawn.

Results

The information below is what was gathered from the respondents.

The staff of the Quality Assurance Unit said that, normally a week to gathering of data on the Course and Lecturer Evaluation by Students, they run photocopies of the evaluation forms to get prepared for the exercise. The forms are taken round the lecture halls during the lecture periods in unspecified quantities since they do not have the actual number of students at the time of the distribution. So as the forms run out, they go for more. The data on the CLES is normally collected around the middle of the semester, the reason being the nature of the questions. It intends to capture data that by the middle of the semester, students can provide that.

On enquiring whether they are able to capture data on all the lecturers, the respondents admitted that they are not able to do so because they have a human resource constraint. There are just two people in charge of going round the lecture halls to collect the data and as there are different lectures going on at the same time at different venues, they cannot be at all the lecture halls at the same time. The other issue was that, distribution of the CLES is either 5 minutes to start of lecture or 5 minutes to end of lecture and the staff are supposed to be there while the students fill the CLES forms else the students just do anything. This can affect the results of the exercise. Due to these reasons they sometimes miss both lecturers and students.

The interview went on to find out whether the students cooperate with them in the exercise. The staff admitted that they don't have the full cooperation of the students. The numbers they expect to have is normally not realised. The trend has been that the first and second year students participate in the exercise more than the third and fourth year students and for that matter, the more the students are in the system, the less they participate in the exercise. This, the respondents attributed to the fact that, the students probably think that whatever they say in the CLES is not acted upon and so why should they continue to participate? The students tend to lose confidence in the exercise according to the respondents.

In soliciting the views of the staff on whether lecturers cooperate with the exercise, they responded that some lecturers do not cooperate with them especially those that the exercise did not favour in the previous exercise. There are also some occasions where the lecturers themselves discourage the students by telling them that, the results are not used for anything meaningful and this definitely affects the input of students. Lecturers also counter the process by saying the exercise is criss-crossing with their lecture periods. All these can influence students' perception of the exercise.

Another information sought for was whether they had all the required logistics to ensure a successful exercise. They answered by saying that, sometimes they are late in administering the CLES forms due to the fact that, they don't have a giant photocopier for the Quality Assurance Unit to enable photocopying of forms for the CLES. This means that normally the evaluation forms have to be run elsewhere and that poses a big challenge as until the forms are run, the exercise cannot be carried out. It has not been defined as to who should run the copies and so when it comes to that, everyone is running away from the responsibility of running the copies. Besides that, every other logistic sought after is provided to the unit like, computers, printers, UPS, paper, etc.

Finally, the Quality Assurance Unit was asked what the CLES is used for. They enumerated the uses of such an exercise as below.

When the data is completely analysed, it is supposed to be put to use. There are several uses of the results of Course and Lecturer Evaluation by Students (CLES). The uses are as follows.

As used elsewhere, at MUCG, the purpose of the Course and Lecturer Evaluation by Students is to improve the teaching of lecturers. It helps lecturers identify the problem areas of students and work to improve on those areas for better teaching.

The respondents continued that it also helps lecturers to improve upon themselves. Until such an exercise is conducted, lecturers sometimes feel they know it all. But, as a result of this, they re-evaluate themselves and prepare for better performance. Lecturers who normally have poor results are called by management and spoken to in order to find out where they are facing challenges to enable management come in to help.

CLES at MUCG is to be used for personnel decisions as done elsewhere. It is a factor in considering lecturers for promotions, extension of their contracts, and also hiring of more

lecturers; in the case students think the lecturer-student ratio is unacceptable.

Another use is that, the results of CLES are used as part of the considerations for nominating lecturers for “Best Teacher Award” for the academic year.

Furthermore, as the CLES solicits students’ views about its facilities, it could enable MUCG to identify where it needs to improve in terms of facilities, to enable a better teaching and learning environment.

In addition, MUCG is able to identify whether the class sizes are too large through the CLES; this informs the University about whether the classes need to be split up.

Lastly, the exercise is supposed to empower students. It makes them feel part of the Institution and that their views are not left out as they are important stakeholders.

The unit maintained in its final words that outsourcing the exercise would come at a huge cost to the university and for that matter, the university needed to properly remunerate the staff in charge executing and analysing the CLES to serve as motivation for their continuous commitment to the exercise.

Discussion

With regard to the inadequate capturing of all lecturers on the CLES, it was discussed with the staff that, around the middle of the semester, there could always be an ad hoc pull of human resource to assist the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit, in gathering the data. It was realised that it is extremely difficult for the only two staff of the Quality Assurance Unit to be at all the venues at the same time to collect the data. If there is additional human resource at the time of gathering the data, then more lecturers will be captured.

Students should be made aware that it is a requirement to assess the performance of lecturers for the semester. As soon as students are admitted, there should be creation of awareness straight away that, it is compulsory to partake in the CLES exercise, so that they take it serious. Also, students want to be part of the process and so they expect to get feedback from management, as to whether deserving lecturers were noted and lecturers who did not perform well had any action taken; been talked to or some other form of action.

The lecturers themselves also need to be schooled on the CLES. Because if some of them pass comments like the exercise is not used for anything meaningful, just as the exercise is being conducted by the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit, it means they have not had any feedback from the exercise. Normally, the results of the analysis of each lecturer are given to him/her and those who have done very well are congratulated and those who have not done well are talked to. But then it means the majority of the lecturers whose performance are in between the two extremes never get to hear from management. A word or two from management, to each lecturer, concerning the course and lecturer evaluation by students, will let them be aware that the exercise is a serious one.

If the unit is equipped with its own photocopier, it can run the CLES forms on time so that there is no delay in the execution of the exercise. An alternative is that, the unit responsible for running copies at the university should be informed that, running the copies for the Quality Assurance Unit is part of their job.

A few perceptions of course and lecturer evaluation by students at MUCG

Interviewing a cross-section of lecturers, they felt that by their being strict in lecture rooms and strict in their marking, students gave them low scores in the exercise. Some lecturers also believed that the more difficult the course they were teaching was, the lower the scores students would rate them.

Some lecturers also said that at MUCG, as the exercise is conducted around the middle of the semester, if it conducted at the time mid-semester exams were going on and depending on how students felt they performed, a lecturer could be rated high or low on the exercise.

Conclusion

Course and lecturer evaluation by students is an important exercise which should be undertaken by all meaningful academic institutions. It allows for both the lecturers and the institution to know how students are thinking about the courses being taught, the one doing the teaching and the institution itself.

It must be noted however that, it is not a witch-hunting exercise, where lecturers who are supposedly not performing well as a result of the exercise are to be “punished” for non-performance, but rather to improve upon the teaching.

Students have to be educated to understand why the CLES is undertaken so that they don't just tick options for the sake of it but then to pay attention and give a thought to the options chosen and the comments they write as well. They should be encouraged to participate in the exercise by creating awareness just as they enter the university as freshmen.

There should be an ad hoc pull of human resource at the time the CLES exercise is to be conducted, to assist the staff of the Quality Assurance Unit in gathering the data. This would ensure capturing of data on a lot more lecturers.

A future research should take a look at the best way to conduct the CLES exercise so as to get as many students as possible to take part in it.

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