Quality in Higher Education: The Need for Feedback from Students

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Abstract
Students in higher institutions are part and parcel of the system, thus their opinions should count in decision making concerning the quality of the education they are receiving. This study set out to examine from literature the place of feedback from students and its possible relevance in decision making on quality issues in higher education. Among other things it found that feedback from students should form part of decision premises on a range of issues for possible revision; such as the quality of teaching, learning, course organization, assessment and the learning resources available to the students. It can also help determine such phenomenon as "customer delight" synonymous with student satisfaction, how transformative the programmes are and how the students grade the institutions. Such knowledge could help the institutions self-assess and re-position to make better choices to increase the quality assurance of their processes and services. A number of recommendations were made.
Keywords: Quality, Higher Education, Feedback

1. Introduction
In matters concerning quality in higher education, a lot of people wonder about whose opinion should really be taken seriously or is of outmost importance in the decision making processes. An analysis of the positions of various groups on quality issues the researcher believes could produce a more robust understanding of the phenomenon, thus adding to the available premises upon which conclusions can be drawn. This study is focused on examining the views of one group, the students, who are among the stakeholders in the higher education system. To do this, students' views about quality issues as documented in literature are closely studied. The different opinions/positions identified are classified and highlighted with the intention of calling the attention of administrators and other stakeholders to the importance of feedback from students in decisions involving quality processes in the system.

2. Stakeholders in tertiary institutions
Various methods of defining or categorizing ways of thinking about quality in tertiary institutions have evolved in literature. One particular approach that has gained prominence is the stakeholder approach. This approach reflects the views of a variety of stakeholders who, as claimed by Middlehurst (1992), have legitimate authority to voice their perspectives because of their close proximity to the system. Thus stakeholders could be students, parents, administrators, lecturers/instructors, employers of labour, government officials, proprietors and such like. According to Vroeijenstijn (1995), quality is in the eye of the beholder and any definition of quality must take into account the views of various stakeholders. For example, government may consider quality as represented by attrition rates, throughput and pass/fail percentages; the professional may view quality in terms of the intensity of the skills and attributes developed during the period of study; students may consider the concept with reference to their individual development and preparation for a position in society; and academics may define quality as knowledge transfer, good academic training and a good learning environment (Vroeijenstijn, 1995). These contributions show that different groups view the concept of quality from their own perspectives.

According to Watty (2006), often times one may want to ask the question: "How would you decide on the quality of a higher education?" – would you (1) ask the academic registrar (or equivalent); (2) look up the most recent quality audit report; or (3) contact the teaching staff directly to discuss their perceptions in their institutions? While the opinion of one group may not necessarily be regarded above the other, the underlining thoughts seem to be that "if you really want to know about quality in tertiary institutions, then, ask those closest to the student-academic interface – the academics or the students". This study focuses on the views of the students.

3. Definitions and Categorizations of Quality in Higher Education
Looking at the definitions of quality as multifaceted, Harvey and Green (1993), contend that their definition is "not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label". They assert that the categories or perceptions of quality are discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about the phenomenon. Their definition of quality recognizes multiple stakeholder perspectives and their views include phrases such as "exceptional perfection (or consistency)", "fitness for purpose", "value for money" and "transformation". Thus their "the same label" phrase shows the ideas still revolve around similar thoughts but are made clearer by the use of varied/complimentary phrases.

The framework provided by Harvey and Green (1993), above is a rigorous attempt to clarify how various stakeholders view quality. Such attempts to define quality in tertiary institutions have resulted in a variety of labels being attached to the concept, yet similarities in explanations of the concept are evident, which is that quality at this level of education is about *efficiency, high standards, excellence, value for money, fitness for purpose and/or customer focused*. These qualities summarize most researchers' thoughts about this concept.

4. The place of Feedback from the Students

According to Williams and Cappuccini - Ansfield (2007), collecting feedback from students about their experiences in tertiary institutions has become one of the central pillars of the quality process. The collection and publication of students' feedback now provides a key element in many processes of quality assurance and enhancement, they explain. Students so long taken for granted according to these researchers have now been recognized as the principal stakeholders in tertiary institutions and their own voice on their experiences is now being heard more clearly by institutions and even governments. This is indeed a welcome development because students will now be expected to play a more active role in the learning processes and thus be held more accountable for their learning.

Brennan, Williams, Brighton, Moon, Richardson & Rindl (2003), have explained that there are different methods of collecting feedback from students but they observed that the processes have been left to individual institutions to collect feedback in ways that they have felt most appropriate. They noted further, that even though there has been an increase in interest in developing more effective feedback processes within higher education institutions in recent years, this has largely been as a result of pressure from central government and quality assurance agencies than from the institutions themselves. Parallel to this increased interest in feedback collection methodologies at local level, is the development of a mechanism for collecting student feedback that is nationally based, they observed. The example they gave is the National Student Survey in the United Kingdom which is a new quality tool. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) which distributes government funding to higher education institutions in England, requires that a range of student views on their experience of higher education be collected and made public (HEFCE, 2002). This feedback according to William and Cappuccini-Ansfield (2007) is to be collected and published on a range of issues relating to the quality of teaching, learning, course organization, assessment and the learning resources available to them. The implication of this is that the feedback from students should not only be more fully integrated into the quality assurance processes but should also be more systematically collected. The Nigerian tertiary institutions need to borrow a leaf from this practice. An activity of this nature can make the quality assurance practices in the country stronger, uniform and more nationally based, thus giving it more credence than individual university attempts. The publication of feedback from students can be an invaluable source of information for tertiary institutions. It could provide the perspectives of the students and thus throw more light on what they think and how they feel. It is a practice that should be given a more prominent place in our tertiary education system.

Brennan and Williams (2004), at first argued that there are two principal reasons for collecting feedback from students. The first is to enhance the students' experience of teaching and learning and the second is to contribute to the monitoring and review of quality and standards. They later identified seven other reasons behind the collection of student data, which range from ensuring the effectiveness of course design and delivery to contributing to staff development. The seven reasons go to show how feedback from students at this level of work is useful in appraising the quality of the processes in these areas of concern in the system.

For Harvey (2003), feedback from students is action orientated. It provides internal information to guide improvement and external information for potential students and other stakeholders, including accountability and compliance requirements. On the overall, Harvey (2003), believes that there are six main reasons why feedback is collected. These include the fact that feedback can:
- provide information for improvement;
- provide information for prospective students;
- provide information for current students;
- address accountability issues;
- provide benchmarking information;
- be used to make comparisons between and within institutions.

Harvey (2003), has also observed that the most important use of student feedback (whether published or not) is in providing senior management with invaluable information from the student's perspective to assist in an institution's continuous quality improvement process. Thus a tertiary institution's assessment process would be incomplete without having this aspect of feedback.

In another development, the use of such methodologies as the Student Satisfaction Approach [SSA] has allowed many institutions world-wide to gain enhanced perceptions of where improvements need to be made. A publication of students' feedback also has advantages for quality assurance process itself as this would provide for public assessment what is going on in the institutions. Recent research findings seem to suggest that as students

observe that actions are taken from a survey of their views, they become less cynical and more willing to co-operate in the "quality process" since they now no longer see it as a simple waste of time (Powney and Hall, 1998; Watson, 2002). This indeed is a good reason to have more students' involvement in the quality assurance process, that way; the students can no longer remain distant and aloof from a learning system designed for them.

5. Transformation and Students' satisfaction

Some researchers have considered the definition of quality as "transformation". Transformation, according to Watty (2006) is a unique, individually negotiated process between the teacher and the learner where the learner or participant is transformed or has more value added to his/her life. Harvey (1994) refers to transformation as a mega-quality concept; possibly operationalized by the other four concepts earlier defined by Harvey and Green (1993): excellence/high standards, perfection, fitness for purpose and value for money. However, while acknowledging these attributes, Harvey (1994) asserts that this operationalization is not an end in themselves but simply part of a notion of quality as transformation. Higher education as the highest level of educational provisions for professional growth and development of individuals should be about transforming people and not just for knowledge sake.

Pushing these arguments further, Bramming (2007) adds that transformative learning is a painful process as well as a state of being, that students have to accept and see it as not only necessary but desirable. Harvey and Knight (1996) have also added that not only must the personal identity of the student be transformed; higher education must transform itself also to meet the demands of a new economy. As a result they added that when transformative learning is approached in evaluation and monitoring practices, it is only natural to begin to look for "indicators" of transformation. Thus "Student Satisfaction" has become a familiar indicator of quality in higher education, it has also become natural to evaluate quality learning by measuring whether or not students are satisfied with their transformation that is, with what they have become (Bramming, 2007).

The label "transformative learning" argues Bramming (2007) cannot however be applied to all learning, but only to learning which has qualitatively transformed the learner or the problem or the subject matter. Thus coming from this perspective, learning/teaching in higher education in order to be deemed qualitative must aim at also being transformative and the students should be able to attest to this transformation.

6. How Transforming are the Quality Processes in Tertiary Institutions?

In an article concerning quality in Higher Education, Popli (2005) adopts a marketing approach and presents a perspective on quality enhancement of management education in India. In it, Popli (2005) argues that management education must prepare itself to incorporate present and future changes to a field that is witnessing intense transformation and growth. He describes management education today as being mainly oriented towards the delivery of information and teaching, and not sufficiently directed towards learning. The present system, he said, builds on an assumption that learning needs can be diagnosed a "priori" and can hence be taught by a teacher who has the correct answers to any imaginable question. This kind of educational thinking, says Popli (2005), fits poorly with what he calls "the future demands of management education" which he describes as a learning-oriented system with a keen focus on higher-order learning skills of students and the learning abilities of the educational institution itself. Popli (2005) makes a case for what might be called 'transformative' graduates in the future who will require a shift in the way education is approached; from merely providing information towards learning to where information is sought out by learners themselves. In order to overcome the shortcomings of the present educational system, Popli (2005) goes ahead to present the concepts of 'customer delight' which he explains as a way of measuring whether a student has created an emotional bond with the educational institution, which, he argues, will be necessary to ensure success, and which, in turn is understood as the production of "transformative graduates". To measure the needed areas of improvement by an institution, it has to determine the degree of "students' satisfaction" which is understood as a function of perceived performance and expectations. These considerations make a lot of sense as they highlight more and more the importance of considering feedback from the student group.

'Customer delight' mentioned above describes the situation where experiences by the customers exceed their expectations. If students in the higher education interface are referred to as the customers then they should be made to feel special and their satisfaction should be the delight of the institutions. In marketing terms, satisfaction is an emotional bond with the brand and "transformative learning", in this view should produce increased customer loyalty. Popli (2005) and thinkers like him in this respect posit that perceived transformation is a function of the degree of customer delight. Thus the more students delight in the kind of educational services offered them, the more they will be loyal to the "brand" (which in this case could mean the institution or the nature of the programmes offered).

The shift from the present to the future, which Popli (2005) asserts as necessary, seems to be not only a question of adding on extra features but rather a move from one educational paradigm to another. The teaching-based system predominant in higher education has a set of basic assumptions about students and learning that

differ from the expected learning system of the future. The expected learning of the future will no longer come from the manipulation of the student as an object but will depend on a more active, experimental approach, where the student is an active part, exercising some degree of control in the learning process. One can say that the difference between Popli's (2005) future and present systems lies in the determination of a more constructive learning process. In the teaching-based system (the old way), a constructive learning process can be understood as students assimilating and memorizing information. In the learning-based system (the new way), a constructive learning process is understood as the students being actively involved in transformative processes driven by problem solving. Popli (2005) describes the current system of teaching and learning in higher education as one that is mainly concerned with what is delivered and perceived as needs today, satisfaction on the other hand is determined by how close a learning experience meets or exceeds the expectations of students.

A close examination of Popli's (2005) 'future system' shows that the student is construed as a customer, and as a customer, the student is assumed to be able to 'recognize' a professional institution almost immediately from the manner in which the customer is treated. When the professional institute deals professionally with the customer the needs of the customers are met. The customer's need is met through effective pricing, communication distribution to inform and serve the market; all of which buttress the need for feedback from the customer. When these additional indicators are made to the definitions of quality that is, right price for the customer (reasonable cost as ascertained by the student), readily available information about products, availability and accessibility of products to would-be clients/students, then the quality cycle would be complete.

To drive the argument further, Popli (2005) identifies the following eight salient characteristics of the "future educational system";
(a) Open and flexible systems;
(b) Direct and easy access to every learner,
(c) A broadly based and futuristic visionary stream of learning,
(d) Edutainment
(e) Infotainment,
(f) Student-centred learning (emphasis on insight and knowledge rather than information collection),
(g) Personal knowledge,
(h) Needs and utility oriented learning.

It is unclear how Popli (2005) arrives at exactly these eight characteristics as being the most important to be fulfilled by the educational system of tomorrow. But a close examination of each shows their relevance in todays and future educational systems. Some of the characteristics have already been used to describe qualitative higher education systems in this write up, e.g. open, flexible, accessible to learners etc. In this generation, more and more students are known to favour educational programmes that offer some kind of entertainment in the learning experiences (edutainment). Furthermore, the world is moving more towards information that is not just information for information sake but one which offers some entertainment alongside (infotainment). It does appear then that Popli (2005) inputs have a lot of relevance in the present generation thus it should not just be thrown away or left to decorate the library shelves but should be put to use. Thus, administrators of higher education should be encouraged to collect and do business with the feedback from students in order to ensure that quality is really assured at this level and the students are happy with the education they are receiving.

7. Conclusion

The importance of collecting and giving a prominent place to feedback from students on quality issues in tertiary institutions has been brought to light in this discourse. The paper has taken a position that feedback from students is very important and their collection should be a part of quality assurance processes in tertiary institutions. Information derived from these feedback processes should form part of the premises upon which decisions are made with regard to quality issues in the institutions. Additionally, the discussions brought to light the fact that the emphasis on quality issues may differ from one profession, institution or nation to another. But as Ekwhaguere (2005), puts it, quality is not some kind of fixed, immutable target or destination that may be attained merely by striving sufficiently hard, but is a dynamic or moving target whose attainment is facilitated by a set of strategies that are also dynamic. This paper also tried to bring to light the need for tertiary institutions to continually assess their quality assurance processes and practices, to ensure that procedures employed are not obsolete but are those that in addition to standing the test of time will at the same time be relevant to the generation of students it serves.

8. Recommendations

In the light of the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:
1. Administrators of higher institutions should ensure that they device a system of collecting feedback from their students on a regular basis. Information so realized should form part of the basis for making decisions about quality issues in their institutions in order to strengthen the quality assurance processes.
2. The National Universities Commission (NUC), the National Commission for Colleges of Education

(NCCE) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) the supervising bodies for various tertiary institutions should make this practice mandatory for the institutions so that there will be uniformity in practices.

3. Individual university students' feedback report should form part of the requirement for the accreditation of the universities.
4. Students should be enlightened about the importance of the feedback exercise so that they will give the exercise the seriousness it deserves.

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