The views of academics on the use of student feedback for curriculum improvement

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Abstract

The research compared and contrasted the views of educators in Teacher Education Programmes, located in two different institutions, regarding the ways in which they utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum. The educators were selected on the basis that they collected student feedback using self-created questionnaires, then analysed it manually. The design was qualitative. Data were obtained using open-ended questionnaires and triangulated with semi-structured interviews. The findings confirmed that the participants utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum. Nonetheless, inherent challenges, contradictions and gaps were identified in the evaluation system, including the lack of coordination of the evaluation process which resulted in the fragmentation of the system. The lack of monitoring of the evaluation system and of training of academic members on the analysis and use of student feedback proved to be vital processes that adversely affected the success of utilising student feedback maximally. In this article it is argued that for student feedback to be utilised effectively to improve the curriculum, clear policies and guidelines should be formulated and monitoring should drive the implementation of the evaluation process.

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) commonly solicit student feedback as a means of evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Student feedback provides data which serve a variety of purposes including a university's quality assurance and performance management processes, revision of courses and programmes, reflection, improvement of teaching and learning processes, institutional accreditation and decisions about staff promotions (Zepke, Knight, Leach and Viskovice, 1999; Barrie, 2001; Hess, Barron, Carey, Hilbelink, Hogarty, Kromrey, Phan and Schullo, 2005). Although different evaluation strategies exist, for example, action research, portfolios, self-evaluation and peer reviews, student feedback still remains the most popular of all. To support this view, Greenwald and Gillmore (1997) and

Hess *et al.* (2005) claim that student feedback represents an important, if not the best method for evaluating teaching and learning. In contrast, others believe it is not the only and best source of information (Emery, Kramer and Tian, 2003; Haefele, 1992; Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, 2005).

Whereas the assumption is that HEIs administer course evaluations in order to fulfil various institutional and curriculum needs, there is a paucity of research on academics' views on how student feedback may be utilised to improve the curriculum. This situation ignites the following pressing question: Do educators in HEIs utilise student feedback to improve the curriculum? Although some research in this area has been conducted in the USA and Australia (Rowley, 2003), in South Africa these questions have not yet been addressed.

The research on which this article is based investigated, compared and contrasted the views of participants who taught in Teacher Education Programmes (TEPs) within two institutions of how they utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum.

The research adds new insights into the way university lecturers could manage and ensure maximum use of student feedback to improve their own curriculum practices. It also provides a well-grounded set of recommendations for TEPs regarding the possible measures to close existing gaps in the use of student feedback. Furthermore, policy makers could use the information to develop a clear set of guidelines regarding the use of student feedback.

Context of the TEPs

The organogram of the universities in which the TEPs are located shows that they use the top-down managerial approach, with Executive Deans at the top of each faculty. However, decisions regarding teaching and learning are taken consultatively at the different levels of the organisation. Both institutions take high quality teaching and learning and professional development seriously, as shown by the presence of a teaching and learning centre in each institution. These centres promote and support academic growth and development of the academic staff by providing regular training workshops and seminars on a variety of teaching and learning aspects, including assessment. In addition,

they ensure that high quality teaching and learning takes place and that these processes are organised in an orderly manner. They also offer induction programmes specifically designed to improve the skills of the novice educators. Nonetheless, attendance of these programmes is not mandatory, which may adversely affect the improvement of the competences of the academic staff.

Unlike teaching and learning which is highly organised, course evaluations take the *laissez faire* approach by which lecturers use whatever evaluation instrument they deem fit. Thus, even though high quality in teaching and learning is emphasised, the evaluation format contradicts this ideal. Furthermore, the teaching and learning centres have not yet aggressively embarked on supporting the staff in developing individualised evaluation questionnaires. To address the evaluations, one of the two institutions has piloted a standardised evaluation questionnaire and the other has developed committees to look into the evaluations within the respective faculties.

The evaluation models

This section presents the different paradigms emphasised in the student feedback questionnaires. Barrie contends that:

> Student evaluations of teaching systems reflect the underlying understandings and beliefs about teaching and learning of those who design and use them (2001, p.6).

The different frameworks may also explain why different descriptors are used to refer to the evaluation process. These descriptors are course evaluations, student ratings, student feedback, learner-centred evaluation, evaluation of instruction, students' evaluation of teachers' performance and students' evaluation of teaching effectiveness (Johnson, 2009; Caulfield, 2007; Sadoski, Charles and Sanders, 2007; Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen, 2005; Richardson, 2005; Filak and Sheldon, 2003; Gold, 2001).

Similarly, diverse views on the process of teaching and learning may manifest themselves in the choice and construction of the items included in the evaluation questionnaires. For instance, Prosser and Trigwell's (1998) 3Pmeta-model focuses on the aspects of the learning process, including characteristics of the student and the course, teacher and teaching, student

perceptions of context, student approach to learning and student learning outcomes.

In contrast, Johnson (2009) proposes a learner-centred evaluation model which comprises four areas: learning goals, learning activities, learning assessments and learning outcomes. Ballantyne (1999) extends this model by suggesting a framework which emphasises teacher-student relationships, as these are of paramount importance in facilitating learning.

Cannon (2001) notes that student evaluations tend to place emphasis on teaching and courses instead of learning. He perceives this approach as risky as there is no universally accepted model of good teaching. He suggests moving towards the learning-centred approach, using the portfolio in documenting evidence. Thus, learning rather than teaching becomes the driving force of change while teaching takes the role of designing learning environments that are student and learning focused.

Pettigrove (2001) concurs and refutes the evaluation model that focuses on teacher behaviour as the assumed cause of effective learning. He proposes broadening the scope of the evaluation questionnaires to embrace both learner and teacher behaviours. Thus, Pettigrove (2001) suggests the progressive uncovering of the student discourse and what it says about teaching, learning and the relationships between the three in the context of diverse and changing educational contexts. He promotes the use of 'contextualised' questionnaire items, since the latter can stimulate more focused comments than non-contextualised questionnaires. He further suggests that evaluations should include topic- and statement-responses.

Sadoski *et al.* (2007) advocate an evaluation model which focuses on course characteristics or overall course quality rather than teacher behaviours. They recommend evaluations that include characteristics such as course organisation, course goals and objectives, knowledge and preparation of academic staff, appropriateness of workload, student understanding of their responsibility and their evaluation, fairness of performance evaluations and quality of lectures and textbooks. They maintain that a course is highly rated based on the extent to which it is well organised with clearly communicated and delivered goals and objectives.

Rankin and Hess (2001), on the other hand, propose an evaluation approach which requires students to provide feedback on the links between course

goals, objectives and assessment tasks. Specifically, this approach entails using the course syllabus to clearly align and explicitly link course objectives with student assessment. Such evaluation could be used to explore the effectiveness of the chosen assessment tasks against the stated goals and objectives.

For the purpose of this article, the model adopted and used as a reference is the one emphasising teacher-student relationships (Ballantyne, 1999) as relationships underpin the phenomenon of effective learning and teaching.

The models discussed above show that since there are different understandings about teaching and learning, it stands to reason that the participants may emphasise different curriculum features for curriculum improvement. Consequently, these research questions directed this study:

1.   What are the views of academics within Faculties of Education about the collection of student feedback for purposes of course evaluation?

2.   What are their views on the usage of student feedback for purposes of curriculum improvement?

3.   What challenges do academics experience in course evaluations?

Methodology

The research used a qualitative approach on three TEPs within Faculties of Education located in two different institutions. These programmes were purposely selected on the basis that, in them, student feedback was collected using individually self-created rather than institution-wide standardised evaluation forms, and that student feedback was analysed by the academics and not centralised.

Before the research was conducted, seven South African universities offering TEPs were surveyed in order to determine in which of them standardised evaluation forms and centrally-analysed student feedback were used and in which self-created evaluation forms and self-analysed data were used. The survey revealed that four out of seven HEIs utilised self-created evaluation

forms and self-analysed data and three used standardised forms and centrally-analysed data.

Since the intention of the research was to solicit qualitative data, responses were collected using open-ended questionnaires. Where probing and further explanations were necessary, follow-up interviews were conducted. A questionnaire was sent to a purposeful sample of 40 participants, including four Heads of Departments (HoDs), six Course Coordinators (CCs) and thirty lecturers who taught in the three TEPs. Twenty-seven (68%) responses were received from the participants who had received the questionnaires. This response rate was acceptable based on Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), who maintain that researchers should be satisfied with a 50% questionnaire response rate.

Additional information was solicited from HoDs and CCs regarding monitoring and evaluation of the course evaluations. Data obtained provided the basis for the analysis of the evaluation models for these TEPs.

Data were analysed using the highlighting approach (Cohen *et al.*, 2000) in order to uncover the thematic aspects. Thus, the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were read several times and statements that appeared to be revealing about the phenomena under study were highlighted and coded. After identifying and recording themes, their interrelationships were described and finely analysed.

Several measures were taken to ensure instrument validity and reliability. A mother-tongue speaker of English reviewed the original questionnaire and verified the meaning with the researcher. The instrument was then piloted on two mother-tongue speakers of English and two second-language English speakers to ensure similar interpretation. In addition, some of the data obtained through the questionnaires were triangulated using interview responses.

The participants were informed about the confidentiality of the information gathered and about the voluntary nature of their participation. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the institution's Research Ethics Board.

Results

Frequency of course evaluations process

The responses of the participants revealed that the frequency of course evaluations varied considerably. Some participants indicated that they administered summative evaluations at the end of a semester or full-year course, or twice a year, at the end of each semester, in a full-year course. One of the participants stated that he evaluated his courses informally each term and formally at the end of the year. Others, however, maintained that evaluation was formative, which suggests that it was ongoing, as shown in this statement:

> I evaluate my courses constantly and regularly, after each assessment and formally at the end of the year.

Other participants noted that they solicited student feedback when something had gone wrong during the lectures for example, if students were unable to answer the questions correctly at the end of the lecture, or if a problem was detected after the initial evaluation for example, after the students had failed a test. This shows that the participants were not proactive as student feedback was collected to find out what had caused a problem.

The curriculum domains advocated in the TEPs

The participants were asked to identify the curriculum features they included in the evaluation forms and the ones they improved. Tables 1 and 2 summarise their responses.

Table 1 and 2:   Frequencies of evaluated and improved curriculum features

Table 1: Frequency of evaluated curriculum features		Table 2: Frequency of improved curriculum features	
Curriculum features evaluated	**Frequencies**	**Curriculum features improved**	**Frequencies**
Course outcomes	3	Students' interest	1
Course content	12	Course content	11
Classroom activities	2	Classroom activities	1
Assessment tasks	13	Assessment tasks	4
Instructional materials	7	Instructional materials	1
Lecturer-student interaction	2	Lecturer-student relationships	1
Student support	1	Student support	1
Teaching methods	10	Teaching methods	10
Timing/Pacing	5	Timing/Pacing	2
Lecturer	6	Students' involvement	1
Classroom organisation	2	All aspects	4
Course design	5		
Students' attitudes	5		
All aspects	8		

Table 1 showed a high frequency of evaluations of course content, assessment tasks and teaching methods, including instructional materials and lecturer. Course outcomes, classroom activities, lecturer-student interaction, student support and classroom organisation featured the least, with student support the lowest. The average frequency of timing, course design and students' attitude was five. When compared with Table 1, Table 2 showed the same high proportion of the course content and teaching methods and a sharp decline in the frequency of assessment tasks and instructional materials. The low frequency of classroom activities, lecturer-student interaction/ relationships and student support which was noted in Table 1 remained unchanged in Table 2. In comparison with Table 1, the frequency of 'all aspects' in Table 2 decreased by half, while that of timing decreased by three.

Some participants asserted, remarkably, that they evaluated and/or improved 'all aspects' of the curriculum instead of distinct curriculum features. They argued that doing so helped them to 'get a bigger picture'.

Other participants evaluated themselves, as illustrated by the frequency of six for this item in Table 1 and by the utterance:

> In my subject evaluation, I do not have students evaluate the curriculum but they evaluate me as a lecturer.

Ironically, the curriculum feature of 'lecturer' was excluded in Table 2.

Some inconsistencies were noted in the data presented by the participants in Tables 1 and 2. For instance, the curriculum features such as course outcomes, lecturer, classroom organisation, course design and students' attitudes included in Table 1 did not appear in Table 2. Instead, new items such as students' interest and students' involvement appeared in Table 2.

Utilisation of student feedback

Improvement of professional practices

One of the participants indicated that student feedback was used to improve professional practices:

> When the feedback arrives, I review the comments around my lecturing style and presentation, and try to accommodate the students' needs as much as possible.

Another participant acknowledged that although students sometimes made unrealistic demands in the evaluations, some of their suggestions were easy to implement, such as replacing a certain topic with one which the students found more useful. Other participants claimed that they used student feedback to reflect on their practice, such as ascertaining which teaching methods worked or did not; enhancing various aspects of the curriculum such as students' interest, difficult aspects, assessment tasks, course relevance, pedagogic approaches and reading materials, and helping the students learn how to learn. Others reported that after reading the student feedback, they wrote reflective reports resulting in action plans used to improve their practice, especially when compiling their course guides or for planning.

Judging by the participants' responses, it is evident that the majority of them were concerned about curriculum and professional improvement and not so

much about meeting bureaucratic needs, except for one participant who claimed:

> I use the information to support my presentation for changes to management, and as a way of showing my worth to my superior after which they are more confident of what I am doing here.

Handling of student feedback

It could be safely argued that for course evaluations to yield positive results, negotiations with students should be entered into before they fill out the evaluation questionnaires, to explain clear guidelines and ethical concerns. They would then understand the purpose and their expected roles in this process, as put succinctly by one participant:

> Course evaluations are crucial for the students and myself. In order to obtain maximum benefits, I explain to the students why I need this info, discuss confidentiality issues, ask them to be honest and to make comments where necessary, and give them enough time to fill out the questionnaire. More often than not I obtain very good feedback that helps me to grow as an educator.

Ballantyne (1999) emphasises dialogue with students about their feedback to make them feel part of the teaching and learning process. In the research, one of the participants said he paid attention to the importance of dialogue:

> A week or so after conducting the evaluation, I give feedback to the students (on their feedback!). I discuss some of the suggestions they made and indicate to them whether I will be able to make the suggested changes. I think it is important that students should know the reasons why certain things are the way they are and why they can or cannot be changed. . . this contributes to a sense of being involved in decision-making, which will serve to motivate students.

It was evident from the participants' statements that some of them applied certain criteria to judge student feedback before implementing the changes, such as looking at the feasibility and common trends of the students' remarks. One participant explained that she looked at the students' achievements in relation to their comments before deciding on the changes to make. Others used feedback which they considered 'constructive' and 'appropriate' while discarding what they regarded as 'not useful' or 'irrelevant'. Other participants considered improvements only if there were 'a substantial number' or 'more than 10%' of similar negative responses to a specific

aspect. One of them admitted that if 'only 2/50' of the students had made the comment, no improvements were effected.

Contradictions embedded in the course evaluation system

It was striking that, although the lecturers had explained how they utilised student feedback to improve the curriculum, the CCs and HoDs were ambivalent. Out of the four HoDs and six CCs, only two HoDs confirmed that course evaluations were administered in their programmes. The rest of the HoDs and CCs were hesitant, with one of the HoDs responding with:

> I am not sure to what extent this is happening. . .there is really no concrete evidence where that has happened in my department,

and the other CCs putting it thus:

> Some do [and] others don't. It should be part of the performance process, where the lecturer give[s] feedback on the student evaluation as well as provide the evidence, the originals, but this does not always happen – we only see the interpreted results.

The other CC assented, adding that:

> Some do, with others it's not clear because they do not submit the reflective reports.

Another CC added the dimension of negative student feedback, arguing that some lecturers manipulated student feedback when writing evaluation reports. She put it as follows:

> Very few do this [course evaluation]… and it is a known fact that there are lecturers who do not reflect anything negative in their reports... I cannot understand why lecturers at our faculty are allowed not to make their originals available to the HoD.

Some HoDs and CCs believed that negative student feedback was the cause for some lecturers avoiding conducting course evaluations. Others argued that lack of consequences for the defaulters led to some lecturers not feeling compelled to perform this task. They articulated the need for the evaluation process to be formalised, hoping that everybody would buy into the idea.

Inherent challenges in the course evaluations system

The responses of the participants showed that course evaluations and utilisation of student feedback could have structural challenges. These challenges involved the lack of reliability and validity of evaluation questionnaires and student feedback, ambivalence in dealing with student feedback which was beyond participants' control, poor data analytical skills and the lack of systematic monitoring.

Some of the participants expressed a concern about the self-created evaluation questionnaires which they claimed had not been tested for reliability and validity. They argued that the biases inherent in these questionnaires led to subjective evaluation as some lecturers avoided questions that might yield negative responses.

They further highlighted the fact that the students sometimes suggested curriculum changes that were beyond their control, or too difficult to effect. Emery *et al.* (2003) repudiated student feedback, maintaining that it failed to distinguish between factors that were within the control of the academic staff and system-determined factors that were beyond their control. One participant said he explained the curriculum changes that could or could not be effected and gave the students reasons for this. Others stated that they consulted with their colleagues and supervisors to find answers for these suggestions.

In the three TEPs studied, student feedback was analysed manually by the participants. The respondents expressed a grave concern about inadequate data analysis and interpretation skills, which Emery *et al.* (2003) refer to as user errors in data interpretations emanating from unskilled users, which could pose a serious challenge to some lecturers in using student feedback. So, other lecturers expressed a preference for electronic data analysis above manual analysis, maintaining that the former could help prevent flaws in data interpretation.

The participants also identified the lack of training and induction for the academic members on the analysis, interpretation and utilisation of student feedback as a huge obstacle to the effective use of student feedback. Only two of the four HoDs claimed to have received training while the rest of the lecturers and CCs had never received any training. The HoDs and CCs expressed much ambivalence regarding the induction of newly appointed lecturers on the use of student feedback. None of the newly appointed

lecturers acknowledged having received the induction. One of the CCs was under the impression that:

> All new lecturers are experienced and do not need this kind of assistance.

Some of the HoDs and CCs candidly admitted that monitoring and evaluation were 'not applicable' in their programmes. Another HoD acknowledged that monitoring happened informally but was never included in the minutes of the meeting.

Discussion

The responses of the participants indicated that the evaluation system in the three TEPs was problematic. For example, inconsistencies in the frequency of the evaluations could have emanated from the lack of standardisation in the process, which would invariably have guided the participants about the frequency and purpose of the evaluations.

The high prevalence of course content in Tables 1 and 2 might be an indication that the participants mostly evaluated and improved course related aspects. This paradigm supports the conviction of Sadoski *et al.* (2007), that evaluations should focus on course characteristics rather than teacher behaviours. Nonetheless, the frequency of teaching methods was also high, which might be a reflection of the participants' orientation toward teaching as well. Orientation towards the course and teaching indirectly suggests that the participants overlooked the features related to the learner and learner-teacher relationships. In contrast, Ballantyne (1999) views teacher-student relationships as vital in facilitating learning, suggesting that items such as lecturer-student interaction/relationships and students' interest, involvement, support and attitudes should have been rated much higher than they were in Tables 1 and 2.

The discrepancies between the curriculum features identified in Tables 1 and 2 are worth noting. The interpretation might be that the items omitted in Table 2 did not require any improvement. Similarly, the decline in the frequencies of some items in Table 2 compared with Table 1 could be interpreted in the same way. However, the emergence of new items in Table 2 could suggest a mismatch between the curriculum features that were evaluated and those that

were improved, which could highlight a lack of synergy between student feedback solicitation and curriculum improvement.

Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen stress:

> The involvement of students in the evaluation of their lecturers' teaching effectiveness [as it] is seen as a practical demonstration of democracy in education (2005, p.621).

Zepke *et al.* (1999) concur, emphasising respect, care for students and listening to what they have to say on teaching and other issues as vital to good teaching. Granted, some participants made a concerted effort to accommodate the students' needs and to handle their feedback with care. However, the criteria which some participants used to select or discard student feedback raise concerns about power and powerlessness. Those with power are seen to have been able to determine what was 'appropriate', 'not useful', 'irrelevant' and 'constructive', which could be interpreted as a lack of care and respect for the students' voices.

The emphasis placed by some HoDs and CCs on raw evidence as opposed to evaluation reports could point to a level of mistrust in the evaluation system and the lecturers under their supervision. This insistence is unsubstantiated as research supports the value and validity of self-reports in promoting instructional improvement (Braskamp and Ory, 1994) and in developing teaching portfolios (Seldin, 1997). Nonetheless, Rowley (2003) recommends that raw and analysed data be shared among course leaders and managers as they are in a position to use them to contribute to quality enhancement.

Of particular importance was the concern about the reliability and validity of the self-created evaluation forms. Existing literature confirms this (Haefele, 1992; Harrington and Reasons, 2005). Equally significant were the arguments raised about the subjectivity of the self-created questionnaires and some participants avoiding dealing with negative feedback. Rowley argued that if student feedback is analysed by module tutors, there is a chance that:

> they [would] suppress negative comments and write history to suit their own agenda (2003, p.148).

Manipulation of student feedback, whether positive or negative, could be regarded as a violation of the students' rights. In this article it is argued that important lessons could be learnt from negative student feedback, and that the

academic members should respect and use such feedback for curriculum improvement.

Other issues pertain to the lack of training and induction and the uncertainty of the HoDs and CCs about the evaluation process. Of equal importance are the contradictions between their statements and those of the lecturers about administration of the course evaluations, and by implication, student feedback utility. Lack of training and induction could have severely hampered the effective use of student feedback. Similarly, in an ideal situation one would expect the HoDs and CCs to be in control of the evaluation process. However, they themselves were uncertain and did not possess the expertise, which could have adversely impacted on the effective use of student feedback. Likewise, the fact that evaluations were not monitored and evaluated, as reported in the findings, could be a reason for the gaps identified in the evaluation processes.

Recommendations

A number of issues about the administration of course evaluations and utilisation of student feedback were raised in this article. There is overwhelming evidence in support of the fact that the participants in the three TEPs utilised student feedback for curriculum improvement. For instance, the participants were able to identify the curriculum features they evaluated and improved, albeit with some discrepancies. They were also able to describe the ways in which student feedback helped them to improve their practice and how they handled the feedback from students. However, a number of gaps existed in the evaluation system. In this section of the article, a number of recommendations are made that could help to address the gaps identified.

It was evident from the data collected that the evaluation system in the TEPs was inconsistent, unsystematic and uncoordinated, as shown by:

- the lack of uniformity in the frequency of the administration of the evaluations

- the mismatch between the curriculum features that the participants evaluated and those they improved (Table 1 and 2)

● the contradictions between the views of the lecturers and those of the CCs and HoDs about whether the evaluations were administered and student feedback utilised.

The lack of structure and coherence could suggest that the evaluation process is chaotic and that student feedback is under-utilised. However, a systematic approach and a set of clear underlying objectives and guidelines for conducting evaluations could guide the participants to evaluate in an orderly manner. Hence, it is recommended that the TEPs formulate an evaluation policy with a set of clear guidelines that determine the frequency of the evaluations, the curriculum features to be evaluated and the management of the evaluations. Such a policy might minimise the ambiguities and challenges embedded in the evaluation system.

The findings also uncovered the criteria used by some of the participants to make decisions about using or discarding student feedback. The decision to label student feedback as 'irrelevant' (simply because it has been raised by few students) could reflect the biases and subjectivity entrenched in the academic members' practices. Cannon warns as follows about the judgement process:

> It is here that much of the good intentions of an evaluation system can come to nought (2001, p.85).

Hence, evaluators should receive training so that they would learn to make sound judgements regarding student feedback.

Data also revealed that the manipulation of negative student feedback occurred. Negative feedback cannot be avoided, as students often blame even effective teachers. Therefore the academic members should not ignore it, as it could contribute to substantial curriculum improvements if taken seriously. In order to counter this behaviour, the academic corps should be trained in handling both negative and positive feedback. Furthermore, an audit mechanism should be put in place to enable the HoDs and CCs to audit and moderate raw and analysed student feedback. Rowley (2003) argues that doing so may enhance transparency. In addition, accountability measures should be put in place for the participants to ensure that they reflect on all feedback.

One of the challenges raised by the participants was the lack of data analysis and interpretation skills. Arguably, flaws resulting from inefficient data

analysis skills could lead to misinterpretations and inappropriate utilisation of student feedback and to a degree of defensiveness on some participants especially if they disagree with student feedback. Malos (1998 in Emery *et al.*, 2003) argues that the use of untrained evaluators may be subject to legal challenge. To avoid the challenges experienced by incompetent evaluators, Rowley (2003) recommends that a dedicated and central resource should be provided to undertake the data analysis task. The teaching and learning centres should also be more aggressive in making training on evaluation mandatory for the academic members.

According to the views expressed by the participants, monitoring of the evaluation system was generally not conducted. Thus, there were no mechanisms for determining the strengths and weaknesses of the evaluation system, which are critical in providing information about the success of the programme and the changes that need to be effected. Ideally, monitoring and evaluation should drive the evaluation process and be ongoing. It is therefore recommended that a well-coordinated evaluation system with monitoring and evaluation strategies in place should be developed so as to be able to determine the success and effectiveness of the evaluation system.

It was clear from the statements of the participants that some of them used the evaluation model that stressed teacher-student relationships. Such an approach should be commended and encouraged as it makes the students feel that they are included in the teaching process (Brookfield, 1986 in Zepke *et al.*, 1999) and that their feedback is acknowledged and valued. Educators should bear in mind that student feedback is the single most powerful tool for students to express their concerns about the teaching and learning processes. Hence, when conducting and dealing with course evaluations, academic members should respect, care for students and listen to what they have to say on teaching and other issues as these are essential principles of good teaching (Brookfield, 1986; Centra, 1993; Greene, 1973; Taylor, 1995 and Vella, 1994 in Zepke *et al.*, 1999).

Conclusion

The research uncovered the controversies surrounding the use of student feedback or lack thereof, and also revealed the gaps that may hinder the process of improving the curriculum through student feedback. These gaps

may indicate that the system in the TEPs studied is fragmented and uncoordinated. Similarly, lack of training and induction on the utility of student feedback and the absence of monitoring and evaluation pose a threat in the evaluation system. These gaps, coupled with a lack of policy guidelines and proper systems, render student feedback worthless. Unless clear guidelines and policies are put in place and implementation is monitored and evaluated, fragmentation and inefficient use of student feedback are likely to continue. Nonetheless, the challenges and gaps identified are not insurmountable. With proper structures they could be overcome.

Due to the non-representative sample of the study, the results cannot be generalised to other TEPs which utilise self-created evaluation forms and manual data analysis, or to those which utilise standardised course evaluations and electronic data analysis. Further studies need to be conducted in both situations in order to determine differences and/or similarities in the results. It is hoped that the comparison would further enhance the use of student feedback in improving the curriculum.

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