Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Private Higher Education in Africa

Organized

By

St. Mary's University College in Collaboration with
The Association of African Universities (AAU), The
African Union Commission (AUC), The Association for
the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA), and
Covenant University (CU, Nigeria)

August 8-10, 2012
African Union Conference Center,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Collecting Feedback from Students in Ethiopian Private Higher Education Institutions (HEIS): Implication for Quality Assurance and Enhancement

By

Melaku Girma, Faculty of Teacher Education, St. Mary's University College, Ethiopia

Abstract

Collecting feedback from students on their experiences of higher education and publishing the information to the stakeholders has become one of the major components of quality assurance and enhancement practices. Students' feedback can be obtained in many ways through formal and informal means. This paper examines whether private HEIs in Ethiopia possess an elaborate mechanisms for the collection of student feedback information to enhance quality as well as address accountability. The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency's (HERQA's), a national quality watchdog, institutional quality audit reports implied that collecting feedback from student is still nascent in most private institutions and the practice seems to be largely undefined, unclear and untamed. The presence of student representation on institutional bodies, open door policy, and other casual activities in the institutions is to be welcomed. However, the institutions need to move further to incorporate surveys using formal instruments in order to obtain feedback from the entire population of students and they can document the experiences of the student population in a more or less systematic way. The institutions also need to take this useful and informative feedback sufficiently seriously.

Keywords: Students; feedback; private institutions; surveys; institutional quality audit; quality assurance and enhancement; accountability;

Introduction

The collection and publication of student feedback now becomes a crucial focal point in several processes of quality assurance and enhancement. It is perhaps very important to inquiry that whether the

Ethiopian Private Higher Education System conforms to this pattern. Students, especially in developed countries, have been recognized as the principal stakeholders in higher education and their own voice on their experiences is now being heard more clearly by institution and governments (Williams and Cappuccini 2007). Virtually all HEIs possess quite elaborate mechanisms for the collection of student feedback information (Brennan et al 2003). While there are considerable variations in detail all institutions use a range of mechanisms, both quantitative and qualitative. Brennan and Williams cited in Williams and Cappuccini (2007) argue that there are two principal reasons for collecting feedback from students. The first is to enhance the students' experiences of learning and teaching and the second is to contribute to the monitoring and review of quality and standards. The emphasis here, therefore, is on quality assurance.

Congruent with public sector in the last fifteen years, the Ethiopian higher education system has witnessed a change in the form of the unexpected emergence and expansion of private HEIs. Recently there are 66 privately owned colleges that offer degree programs (HERQA 2011). Along with the effort to speed up the expansion, the Ethiopian government also appears to give more attention to quality and value for money. As a result a government agency acting as a national watchdog of quality in the higher education emerged in 2003. The agency brought into existence mainly in response to the rapid growth in tertiary education both in the public and private sectors and the resultant anecdotal decline in the quality of higher education. Different authorities on Ethiopian higher education suggested that the massfication process has already exacerbated the problem of a lack of the traditional mechanisms of ensuring quality.

Thus, the establishment and development of quality assurance system in each HEI will have a greater impact on quality than the operation of the existing university committee system. The main function of quality assurance is to hold institutions ultimately accountable for their performance in teaching and research, and provide learners with a guarantee that they will receive a certain standard of education in return of their investment of time and resources. Therefore, quality assurance requires, as one its key elements, systematic collection of quantitative and qualitative feedback from students with focus on quality enhancement. The purpose of collecting and publicizing students' feedback may also assist applicants to higher education by providing comparative information.

The main objective of this paper, therefore, is to inquire whether private HEIs in Ethiopia give due attention to the collection and publication of student feedback as one of key elements in the process of quality assurance and enhancement practice. Hence, the paper attempts to:

- describe the current practices ;
- identify areas of strengths and weakness; and
- forward further suggestions to ensure effective collection of students' feedback.

In this paper data is drawn from:

- HERQA's institutional quality audit reports;
- the investigator's experiences as a quality auditor in external quality audit of two public universities and two private colleges;
- self – evaluation documents of some HEIs ;and
- the related literature

Purposes of Collecting Student Feedback

The publication of feedback from students clearly provides a valuable source of information. The purpose of collecting such feedback, however, is seldom clearly established (Harvey 2001). As it has been indicated in the introduction there are two principal reasons for collecting feedback from students. The first is to enhance the students' experience of learning and teaching and the second is to contribute to the monitoring and review of quality and standards. In addition, those authorities found that there were seven further purposes behind the collection of student data, ranging from ensuring the effectiveness of course design and delivery to contributing to staff development. According to Harvey (2003b) feedback from students is more action-orientated. It provides internal information to guide improvement and external information for potential students and other stockholders, including accountability and compliance requirements. Overall, there appear to be six main reasons why feedback is collected (Williams and Cappuccino 2007). Feedback can:

1. Provide information for improvement.
2. Provide information for prospective students.
3. Provide information for current students.
4. Address accountability issues.
5. Provide benchmarking information.
6. Be used to make comparisons between and within institutions.

Harvey (2003b) suggested that the most important use of student feedback (whether published or not) is in providing top management with invaluable information from the student perspective to assist in an institution's continuous *quality improvement* process. One of the principal purposes in

collecting feedback from students is often taught to be to provide information about institutions for *prospective students* (Williams and Cappuccini 2007). Prospective students need to make decisions that are based on more than just the increasingly glossy prospectuses that are being produced. More objective measures are needed that are drawn from the experiences of the users, the students themselves. Published student feedback can provide valuable information such as that relating to the quality of the learning experience, the quality and availability of library and IT resources and to the financial situation of students. This feedback may prove to be an important factor in helping students and parents make their decisions about where to study.

For current students, the collection and publication of feedback can provide conformation that their views and concerns are being heard, and responded to, by the institutional authorities. Indeed, there is a clear moral responsibility in collecting, publishing and acting on student feedback. After all, students have a fundamental right to be voice their opinions, because, as learners, they are the chief recipients of the higher education system (Harvey 1996).As paying 'customers' students may expect to be asked their opinion of the varying aspects of their chosen higher education institution, as well as to be informed what actions have resulted from the collection of their views (Williams and Cappuccino 2007). Now that students in many countries pay tuition fees, it is arguable that institutions of higher education now have a duty as a service provider to be more responsive to students' requirements and as this situation (*addressing accountability*) becomes more common, it is likely to become an increasingly important issue.

The implication of *benchmarking*, however, is that students not only want to be listened to but that their voice is heard in a very concrete manner

(Powney and Hall 1998). Indeed feedback surveys that result in clear action are an excellent method of benchmarking change overtime (Cappuccini and Kane 2006).Institutions are keen to see improvement over time and student feedback surveys can provide benchmarking data in order to help institutions or the sector as a whole judge success or failure in specific areas. Student feedback surveys also allow *comparisons* to be made between institutions. This is the next stage in the decision-making process after gathering information about each institution. Certainly, the enthusiasm for comparisons within league tables appears to be growing amongst higher education authorities and agencies. Universities UK, the body that represents higher educational institutions in the UK, some years ago held a conference on the role of league tables, implying that direct comparisons between institutions had some positive advantage (UUK 2002). The press, politicians and senior managers in institutions use them as short-cut indicators of status and reputation, so important, it is perceived, in a world where higher education is competitive not co-operative. In essence, most league tables continue to be of dubious real value and tend to reproduce various versions of the reputational status quo.

Context: National Policy Developments and Quality Assurance in Ethiopian Higher Education

Since the introduction of the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (ETP) in 1994 the Higher Education Sector is in the process of rapid growth. As different government data on Ethiopian public education indicated, Ethiopia is currently undertaking major public higher education expansion. To this end, at present there are 22 public universities and 10 more under formation due to start their operation in 2011-12 academic year (

at this juncture there are 31). This is a rise from 2 in 1991 and from 8 in 2005 (Rayner and Tesfaye 2005; Teshome 2007). According to the latest Education Statistics Annual Abstract (MOE 2011), the total enrollment of the HEIs in all programs is 467, 843.

Congruent with public sector, The Ethiopian higher education system has witnessed a change in the form of the emergence and expansion of private HEIs. There were virtually none fifteen years ago and now there are 66 privately owned colleges that offer degree programs (HERQA 2011). The non-government HEIs took 17% of the total enrollment (MOE 2011) .According to the same source, about 20% of the accredited non-government institutions are not captured in the figure.

It seems that the Ethiopian higher education has started changing fundamentally from elite and exclusive, to mass and inclusive provision. Hence, this fundamental change dictates the urgent need for the assurance of quality and standards. Now academic standards are not private matters to be left to few concerned individuals or groups.

Alongside the effort to speed up the expansion, the Ethiopian government also appears to give more attention to quality. As a result a government agency acting as a national watchdog of quality in the higher education emerged in 2003. The Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency [HERQA] brought into existence mainly in response to the rapid growth in tertiary education both in the public and private sectors and the resultant anecdotal decline in the quality of higher education. This required the establishment of an autonomous agency with sole responsibility for setting and monitoring standard (HERQA 2011). It is indicated, that in 2005, HERQA assumed the role as a semi-autonomous external quality assurance

agency with responsibility for providing the (pre) accreditation permit of degree programs in private higher education, conducting audits in all HEIs and offering guidance and support to the expanding Ethiopian HEIs.

Though, HERQA is still a new organization and no other fully functional nationally established system of quality assurance in the country, it is assumed that the agency, for the last nine years has been instrumental in encouraging quality culture in Ethiopia HEIs. Ashcroft and Rayner (2004) suggested that the Ethiopian HEIs generally rely on the individual action competence and ethics of each instructor to insure the quality of their programs and teaching.

HERQA's Institutional Quality Audit

HERQA is mandated to report on the relevance and quality of higher education offered by all HEIs in Ethiopia (HERQA 2006). Thus, carryout institutional quality audit of HEIs. According to the Agency, an institutional quality audit is an in-depth analysis and assessment of the quality and relevance of programs and of the teaching and learning environment. Equally important, an institutional quality audit will assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of a HEI's approach to quality care, its systems of accountability and its internal review mechanism. An essential contribution to a HERQA institutional quality audit is a Self Evaluation Document (SED) prepared by the HEI. An institutional quality audit will seek to verify claims of quality and relevance made in SED. HERQA has identified ten key aspects of operation which will form the focus points for quality audits in Ethiopia HEIs (HERQA 2007). These are: vision, mission, and goals, (ii) governance and management , (iii) infrastructures and learning resources, (iv) academic and support staff, (v) student admission and support service,

(vi) program relevance and curriculum, (vii) teaching, learning and assessment,(viii) student progression and graduate outcome, (ix) research and outreach achieves; and(x) internal quality assurance.

Student Admission and Support Services, as one of the key focus point for quality audit by HERQA, checks whether every HEI have a transparent admissions policy and adequate student support service to ensure effective implementation of its programs. Thus, for this focal area reference points and threshold descriptors have been developed that are seen as desirable indictors of quality. Hence the following are among the reference points and descriptors that directly link to the student voice (HERQA 2007).

Reference	Reference Point	Threshold Descriptor
5.4	The extent of student representation in the affairs of the HEI; the effectiveness a students' council	Existence of formal mechanism for representative student voices to be heard. Evidence that student views are considered

As per the information secured, while composing this article, HERQA has undertaken 26 external institutional quality audits and so far has produced reports for 10 public universities and 11 private HEIs. Thus, this paper focuses on the analysis of 11 audit reports of private HEIs published and disseminated to stakeholders between 2009-2011.

The Commendations and Recommendations from Institutional Audit Reports Published by HERQA: Systems to Inform Practice with Student Feedback and Engagement (see table below).

No	Higher Education Institution	Commended	Recommended
1	Alpha University College (2011)	Establishment of students' council.	__
2	New Millennium University College (2011)	Existence of functional and effective student council.	Allows student representatives to participate in the different structure of the UC.
3	Ethiopian Adventist College (2011)	Establishment of students' council.	__
4	Agro. Technical and Technology College (2011)	Plan to establish student's council.	Establish student union ; Maintains good communications with students on all matters of student support and academic affairs.
5	City University College (2009)	System of class representatives.	__
6	Admas University College (2009)	__	__
7	Unity University College (2009)	__	__
8	Royal University College (2009)	__	Encourages and collaborates with the student counsel at all levels; Considers student representation in committees
9	St. Mary's University College (2009)	Open door policy; System of class representatives; Practice of conducting student satisfaction surveys.	Investigates allegations of unfairness and takes appropriate actions
10	Mekelle Institute of Technology (2011)	Availability of student council constitution.	__
11	Sheba University College (2011)	The open door policy ; The system of class representatives.	Encourages students' representatives to take part in committees that they are represented for.

Reflections on the Current State of Students Feedback in Private HEIs and Some Suggestions

The institutional audit reports by HERQA appear to incorporate useful information in the form of commendations and recommendations as illustrated in the table above. The commendations emphasize the importance of:

- students' council ;
- system of class representative;
- open door policy ;
- conducting student satisfaction surveys (indicated only in one case).

However, the audit reports also contain a number of recommendations about systems to inform practice with student feedback and engagement.

- student representatives to participate in the different structure;
- maintains good communications with students on all matters;
- investigates allegations of unfairness and takes appropriate actions ;
- greater student involvement in student support services ;
- establish student union;
- encourages and collaborates with the student council at all levels.

The following statements from the institutional reports taken randomly from those considered may help to gain further insight into the status of student voice.

> *The view of the EQA team is that this ad- hoc arrangement is inadequate ….However, in discussing this with the student representatives no complaints were aired. This may reflect a situation where either student views are considered to their*

223

satisfaction or that their consciousness of the importance of having systematic outlets for their   voice to be heard is low (HERQA Publication Series-032, 2009, 29).

Actually, the student constitutes a vital component of the college community. They should be provided by the college with means and forums for enhancing ….However, the EQA team was unable to obtain information about the roles responsibilities and functions of the student representatives. No information could be obtained about exact days when the student union will be established (HERQA publication series -047, 2011, 32).

..., the EQA team learned that, student representative of any class or any individual student is at liberty to go any office at any time of the day to discuss an issue of concern. The students stressed that this practice has significantly helped….For this, and the practice of conducting student satisfaction survey, the university college and its students are to be congratulated (HERQA publication series-035, 2009,25)

…, the HERQA EQA team has noted that the students are allowed to participate in the mentioned committees. Nonetheless, the discussion with students and staff disclosed that, in many cases, students did not participate in many committees.

The University College follows an open door policy for its students. Every classroom has a student representative who facilitates contacts with departments, student council,… for any mater related to teaching and learning activities. From the discussion with students, the HERQA EQA team learned that the student representative of any class or any individual student has the right to go to any office… to discuss an issue of concern. The students mentioned that the UC management is proactive in response to their issue of concern (HERQA publication series- 053, 2011)

As it has been pointed out earlier forming a mechanism to collect feedback from students on their experiences of higher education has become one of the central pillars of the quality process. In line with this the general perception in Ethiopian private HEIs of the establishment of student council (or equivalent) is indicative of the institutions' desire to conform to this pattern. While this current provision is commendable, the system to collect and publicize student voice is still in its infancy stage in the institutions.

While in theory establishing student council provides students with a say in many matters that concern them, in many reports students hinted that committee membership did not necessarily ensure that they were heard and were able to influence decision- making on student matters. Students reported that because they were in a minority on committees, although they considered their requests reasonable, there is no guarantee that issues will be decided in their favor. It also noted in the reports that student council raises issues, it is not as active in the systematic collection of student experiences especially in the teaching-learning situation that could be used it improve student learning and support and enhance quality.

The practice of collecting and publishing student feedback is common in many countries and a crucial element in many processes of quality assurance and enhancement. It is perhaps, high time in Ethiopia to follow suit. Since students are becoming the principal stakeholders in higher education and their own voice on their experiences should be heard more clearly by institutions .The institutions tendency to leave student voice to students' council may not be an effect way to reach all students on a range of issues relating to the quality of teaching, learning, course organization, assessment and the learning resource available to them.

The presence of student organizations, system of class representatives and open door policy in the HEIs, as students complaint handling system is to be welcomed though they appear unsystematic, ad-hoc activities and students are very reluctant due to different reasons to exercise their right in practice .Conducting student satisfaction survey appears to be a good practice even if it is limited to a single institution and the practice seems to be largely ill-defined and blurred.

The institutions need to move beyond students complain handling mechanism to feedback from students that should be more fully integrated in the quality assurance process and it should be more systematically collected. There are many different methods, as the major ones described below, of collecting feedback, from students, as Brennan et al. (2003) have outlined and it has largely been left to individual institutions to collect feedback in ways that they have felt to be most appropriate.

*Students' Evaluation of Teaching:-*This practice of obtaining student feedback on individual teachers and courses is widespread. The feedback in question usually takes the forms of students' ratings of their level of satisfaction or their self-reports of other attitudes towards their teachers or their courses. The feedback is obtained by means of standard questionnaires.

Student Satisfaction Surveys: - Perhaps the most serious limitation of students' evaluation of teaching is that it focuses upon students' evaluation of particular courses, and hence it provides little information about their experience of their programmes or their institutions as a whole. Many universities (e.g. In North America) make use of commercially published questionnaires to collect data on their students overall satisfaction

as consumers .A similar has been adopted in in-house satisfaction survey developed in UK. ***The National Student Survey*** is an attempt to provide feedback from students at the national level that could be published quickly and effectively. The results from this survey are to be an essential element of the revised quality assurance framework for higher education, as part of a package of new public information on teaching quality. ***The Student Satisfaction Survey*** is locally based survey and varied in scope, approach and quality. This approach is an effect tool in which to obtain, analyze and report students' views of their total university experience in order to effect change and improvement within institution.

Students' Preparation of Quality:-From the perspective of an HEI seeking to maintain and improve the quality of its teaching, it could be argued that the appropriate focus of assessment would be a programme of study rather than an individual course or the whole institution and this has been the dominant focus in Australia and UK. In relation to the above methodology Brennan et al (2003) also underlined the importance of the following as practical issues in obtaining feedback.

- Why obtain student feedback?
- Why use formal instrument?
- What kind of feedback should be collected?
- When should feedback collected?
- How serious is student feedback taken?

Moreover, student views may be collected in a formal qualitative sessions, such as focus groups, facilitated discussions or suggestion boxes (Harvey 2003).

Conclusions

Critics commonly allege that private HEIs are identified with low academic quality and hyper commercialism (Farag 2000; Levy 2002). Theses authorities cited the private HEIs in Egypt, Philippines and India. It is true Ethiopian private HEIs, have not been without problems. In line with, today's private students tend to choice institutions which can offer better services, require lower costs and have higher quality. Parents now ask "what exactly are we paying for?" and they measure the quality of higher education in terms of their children's ability to get secured and well-paying job.

Thus, student feedback has become to be core element in providing evidence for assessing quality, it can be used to support to quality enhancement for the institutions and it can be useful to prospective students or to parents on providing comparative information to reach decision about the higher education that fits value for money. Feedback should be sought at the level at which one is endeavoring to monitor quality and the focus should be on students' perceptions of key aspects of teaching or on key aspects of the quality of their program. Feedback should be collected as soon as possible after the relevant educational activity. Though many institutions believe that student feedback is useful and informative still many institutions do not take students feedback sufficiently seriously.

Student feedback can be obtained in many ways other than through the administration of formal questionnaires. These include casual comments made inside or outside the classroom, meeting of staff-student committees and student representative on institutional bodies. Good practice would encourage the use of all these means to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. However, surveys using formal

instruments have two advantages they provide an opportunity to obtain feedback from the entire population of students; and they document the experiences of the student population on different issues in a more or less systematic way.

Hence, the concept of students' voice in Ethiopia private HEIs seems to be largely undefined, unclear and untamed. It is still nascent. Some institutions leave student voice to chance or conduct it unsystematically. Collection and publication of student feedback should take place regularly. The process should be cyclical gaining effectiveness overtime. It can be argued that the best system is one that acts on a formative basis. It acts continuously and internally (that is, organically) overtime to regulate or cause improvement to assure the stakeholders.

References

Ashcroft, K. & Rayner, P. (2004). **Promoting quality in higher education and challenges for the private higher education institutions in Ethiopia**, Proceedings of the 2nd National Conference on Private Higher Education in Ethiopia, St. Mary's College, Addis Ababa

Brennan, J. et al. (2003). **Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in higher education**, Higher Education Funding Council for England, London

Cappuccini, G. & Kane, D. (2006). The Changing in student experience, The 28th Annual EAIR Forum, Rome: Italy

Farag, I. (2000). **Higher education in Egypt: The Real politic of privatization,** International Higher Education,

Levy, D. (2002). **Private higher education surprise roles**, International Higher Education

Harvey, L. (1996). **Transforming higher education students as key stakeholders,** The Swedish National Agency Conference on Quality Assurance, Stockholm

Harvey, L. (2001). **Student feedback**, HEFCE, London

Harvey, L (2003a). Student feedback, *Quality in Higher Education*, 9(1)

Harvey, L. (2003b). **Scrap that student survey**, Times Higher Education Supplement, December

Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). (2007). **HERQA institutional audit: A Note book for auditors**

Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) (2009) **HERQA publication series**-*032,033,034 035,039*

Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA) (2011) **HERQA publication series**- *046,047,048,050, 052,053*

Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (HERQA). (2011). Analysis **of institutional quality audit reports by herqa: challenges faced and way forwar**d, Proceedings of the Conference of HERQA on the Quality and Relevance of Ethiopia Higher Education System: Reflections on the Evidence, HERQA, and Addis Ababa

Ministry of Education (MOE) .(2011). **Education Statistics Annual Abstract** */2010-11/, MOE,* Addis Ababa

Powney, J. & Hall, S. (1998). *Closing the loop: The Impact of* **student feedback on students' subsequent learnin***g,* Scottish Council for Research in Education, Edinburgh

Rayner, P. & Tesfaye T. (2005). Quality a many headed hydra? Quality perception in the eyes of different stakeholders, Proceedings of the 3ʳᵈ National Conference on Private Higher Education in Ethiopia, St. Mary's University College, Addis Ababa

Teshome Y. (2007). **The Ethiopia higher education creating space for reform***,* St Mary's University Collage Printing Press, Addis Ababa

UUK. (2002). The Best and the rest: Can league tables inform?, *conference held at Woburn house,* london

Willams, J, & Cappuccini-Ansfield, G. (2007). Fitness for purpose? National and institutional approaches to publishing the student voice′, *Quality in Higher Education,* 13(2)