FACTORs STUDENTS IN STRATHMORE UNIVERSITY CONSIDER IN EVALUATING TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS: LESSONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT

Harry Bett and Everlyne Makahanu
(School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Strathmore University)
hbett@strathmore.edu emakhanu@strathmore.edu

ABSTRACT

More studies have been carried out in the field of Students Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness (SETE) than in any other area of evaluation of teaching. Several factors, such as instructor personality, grades awarded and students’ tastes and preferences, have been found to influence (albeit in varying degrees) the evaluation of teaching by students. This has therefore put the validity and reliability of scores from such evaluations into question. Though student evaluation of teaching is carried out in most institutions, there is need to establish if the ratings that are awarded in this process are valid and reliable enough to be used for academic and personnel decision making. This paper reports results of a study done in 2012 in Strathmore University as part of research findings for a Master’s degree thesis.

The study aimed at investigating the factors that university students consider in evaluating teaching effectiveness in Strathmore University (SU). The specific objectives were: to explore students understanding of the reason for evaluating teaching effectiveness; to examine the factors that students consider while evaluating teaching effectiveness, and lastly, to analyse students’ opinion about their evaluation of teaching effectiveness. The study was carried out using the explorative descriptive design; and used the probability sampling technique to collect data. Stratified probability sampling was used as second and third year students provided feedback for the research study. The data was collected using questionnaires and processed using the SPSS statistical method then analysed in percentages.

Findings from the study indicate that majority of the students (85.8%) understand the reason for evaluating teaching to be improvement of teaching and learning. On factors considered in SETE, instructor personality and extent of learning are considered the most important factors at 86.6% and 85.8% respectively. Majority of the students (87.2%) are in favour of the use of the SETE process in the university to evaluate teaching effectiveness. This research study will be of immense contribution to the field of SETE, especially here in Strathmore University. It will help guide decision making with regard to improvement of instruction; as well as matters pertaining to staff appraisal. The findings from this study will also help other institutions of higher learning within the country and beyond.

Keywords: student evaluations; teaching effectiveness; ratings; instructor; instruction

INTRODUCTION

Evaluation of college teaching worldwide is often carried out in many ways, for example through peer observation, self-reflection, and students’ evaluations, internal and external evaluations among others (Looney, 2011; Marsh & Roche, 1997). The use of students to evaluate effectiveness in instruction is however the most widespread form, yet one full of controversies, for example, regarding the validity and reliability of results from its instruments (Crumbley&Reichelt, 2009). Student Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness (SETE) subject has been deeply studied by many scholars with a view to ascertaining the usefulness of this instrument in teaching effectiveness (Centra, 2003).

According to Centra (2003) and Clayson (2009), no other component is as widely researched and with debatable issues in college evaluation of teaching effectiveness as the Student Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness (SETE). Since the early 18th century,
institutions of higher learning have utilised SETE for three main reasons: to improve instruction; to help students choose courses; and for administrative purposes such as staff tenure, promotion and pay among others, (Dunegan & Hrvinak, 2003; Sprague & Massoni, 2005; Lang & Kersting, 2007; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Madden, Dillon, & Leak, 2010). As the years have gone by, and more so today, the increasing need and demand for accountability in higher education, as well as the modern, business view of students as clients rather than just consumers of the education process, has called for more adoption of SETE (Gursoy & Umbreit, 2005; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2007; Cremonini, Westerheijden, & Enders, 2008; Stehle, Spinath, & Kadmon, 2012). Many institutions therefore utilise the instrument as a key tool in evaluating teaching effectiveness.

SETE tools are very instrumental in the learning process, especially college education; if adjusted to cater for biasness, and used alongside other tools of evaluation (such as peer evaluation, individual portfolios, appraisal forms, internal and external evaluations) these instruments will yield tangible and valuable information (Dunegan & Hrvinak, 2003; Looney, 2011; Nargundkar & Shrikhande, 2012). Arguably, SETE rating scales tend to be more reliable, valid and free from the bias than other methods of evaluation of teaching yield. Ratings from SETE have been found to be similar to those from alumni, self-evaluation and faculty evaluation (Marsh & Roche, 1997; Wachtel, 1998), meaning that they play an invaluable role in teaching effectiveness. According to Johnson and Ryan (2000) SETE ratings are used to understand students’ experience and perspectives on the course; but they caution that a comprehensive approach should be used to get a meaningful picture of teaching and learning.

This paper reports findings of a study on Students’ Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness (SETE) within Strathmore University, Kenya. Its aim was to establish factors, as well as extent of consideration as influence in students’ evaluation of teaching effectiveness. The main concept in the paper, therefore, is the extent of the validity and reliability of ratings from SETE process within this university.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used William Glaser’s theory of Motivation (Glaser, 1986). The theory posits that individuals’ behaviour is motivated by a desire to satisfy an intrinsic need within them. For example, a teacher may work at being an effective teacher so as to receive a teaching excellence award. A student may fill SETE questionnaires maliciously, fueled by an intrinsic motive to punish the instructor. The area of SETE has been widely studied, some scholars advocating for it as a useful instrument in teaching effectiveness (Ramsden, 2008), while others questioning the validity and reliability of ratings from this instrument (Centra, 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used an exploratory descriptive design because it is useful in gathering more information and gaining insights into a particular issue, while a descriptive design is concerned with describing the features or characteristics of a particular individual or phenomenon (Kothari, 2004). The target population was all students of Strathmore University. The accessible population for the study was second and third year students in Strathmore University. About 36% sample size was used in order to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings yielded. In all the classes except the second year FIT group, a sample of 30% was used. As FIT had no third year students in session, the sample in second year group was increased to 54%. In total therefore, 150 students (32%) were sampled, out of the total students of 455 in second and third year. After coding and checking for errors, 132 questionnaires were finally used in the study. There were three variables in the study: antecedent variables (intrinsic motivation of students and staff); dependent variable (teaching effectiveness) and finally; independent variables (course-related factors, instructor-related-factors). Data was collected using questionnaires and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

FINDINGS

Of the 132 students involved in the study, 72 (55%) were female, while 60 (45%) male; showing that majority of the respondents in the study were females. Two schools (SMC and SFAE) and one faculty (FIT) were represented during the study; 44 (33%) were from SMC; 28 (21%) from FIT and 60 (46%) from SFAE. This means that SFAE had the largest representation while FIT (as it had no third years), had the least representation. Even then, the number of questionnaires issued in FIT were increased from 17 (30%) to 30 (54%) as only one class (2nd years) represented the faculty. With regard to year of study, 87 (66%) of the students were second years, while 45 (34%) were third years; hence the majority of the students in the study were second year students.
Students’ understanding of the reason for evaluating teaching effectiveness

The first objective of the study, which aimed at an exploration of students’ understanding of the reason for evaluating teaching effectiveness, showed that majority of the students (85.8%) think evaluation of teaching effectiveness in general is aimed at improving teaching and learning. The study sought to find students’ reasons for evaluation of teaching effectiveness and findings are in table 1.1.

From table 1.1, it emerged that 9.8% (Strongly Agree) and another 37.1 (Agree) of the students supported the reason that evaluation of teaching effectiveness helps students choose their courses. 40.9% of the students thought evaluation of teaching effectiveness is aimed at improving teaching effectiveness as they chose ‘Strongly Agree’ for this reason. On decision about lecturers, 41.7% of the students chose ‘Agree’ while 25.8% disagreed on this reason. 23.5% and 44.7% of the students chose ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree’ respectively for ‘fulfilling higher education requirement’ as a reason for evaluating teaching effectiveness. 18.9% of the students were however undecided about this factor. Increasing accountability, as a reason, attracted 33.3% of the students (Strongly Agree) and 49.2% (Agree). The rest of the details are summarised in the table.

From the study, it emerged that the majority of students (85.8%) understood any evaluation of teaching as being aimed at improving teaching and learning in the university. These sentiments mirror those of Looney (2011) who observed that a well-developed teacher evaluations system improves the quality of teaching and student achievement. About 82.4% of the students in the study also felt that evaluation of teaching effectiveness is carried out as a mark of accountability. One way of achieving accountability in higher education is if evaluation of teaching effectiveness is made a requirement therein. In the study, however, not all students felt accountability can be achieved through making evaluation of teaching effectiveness as a requirement, since 75.4% supported this reason. Onwuegbuzie et al., (2007) and Stehle et al., (2012) argue that one of the reasons why SETE has gained eminence over the last few years is due to the increasing need for accountability in higher education. The all (2010) argues in his work that students would like to participate in matters affecting them, which is a mark of accountability. This study therefore reinforces this view as students also understand that we live in a world where accountability is demanded.

Evaluating teaching to make decisions about lecturers, though with a 67.2% support of the students, came fourth to show that in the eyes of the students, evaluation is more about teaching and accountability than it is about administrative purposes. This is in agreement with a study by Dunegan and Hrivnak (2003) who observed that students will mindlessly fill SETE forms if they perceive that no action is taken, especially about instructors. Helping students to make decision on courses became the last reason for evaluating teaching effectiveness with a 60.8% support; implying that courses in the university are often selected without consultation of SETE ratings. The same study by Dunegan and Hrivnak (2003) criticise administrators who do not give feedback to students on SETE ratings despite doing it continuously; hence they cannot for example, make informed choices on courses they would wish to undertake.

Factors that students consider while evaluating teaching effectiveness

The second objective aimed at examining factors that students consider while evaluating teaching effectiveness. Of these factors, instructor personality and extent of learning were the foremost considered factors at 86.8% and 85.8% respectively.

As shown in Table 1.2, 52.3% and 35.6% of students felt lecturer personality as a factor in evaluating teaching effectiveness in SU is ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ respectively. Only 4.5% of the of the students felt lecturer’s gender is a very important consideration; the bulk 29.5% and 38.6% opted for ‘Unimportant’ and Very ‘Unimportant’ respectively. Rank/experience of lecturer had 32.6% and 42.4% for ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ respectively. Only 4.5% of the of the students felt lecturer’s gender is a very important consideration; the bulk 29.5% and 38.6% opted for ‘Important’ and ‘Unimportant’ respectively. Rank/experience of lecturer had 32.6% and 42.4% for ‘Very Important’ and ‘Important’ respectively.

When the factors were ranked, a summary was made as shown in figure 1.1 with different percentage representations.
From the study, it emerged that lecturer personality is the most important consideration in SETE process in SU with 86.6% of students’ support. This was closely followed by extent of learning, which had 85.8% support. The third and fourth factors considered are type of course studied and rank/experience of lecturer at 79.6% and 78.8% respectively. Grades awarded, student’s tastes and preferences and student’s year of study had a support of 77.8%, 71.6% and 68% respectively. Both genders were last considerations, with lecturer gender at 43% and students’ at 42.8%.

From the open ended items in the questionnaire, other reasons given for evaluation of teaching effectiveness were more of complimentary or explanation of those given; for example ‘to assess students’ understanding’; ‘to check lecturer’s commitment and punctuality’; and ‘improve service delivery in the university’. Other reasons quite unrelated to those given included ‘to make students participate in matters affecting them’ ‘give students value for money’ and ‘inquire on state of resources’.

This study realized that while evaluating teaching effectiveness, a high percentage of students (86.6%) consider the personality of the instructor, confirming what many other researchers have established in their studies. Clayson and Sheffet, (2006) Buchert et al., (2008) in their studies concluded that the instructor personality is the most important consideration by students in carrying out evaluation of teaching; and that SETE instruments can easily be replaced by personality tests with minimal results. Madden et al., (2010) argues that personality is a very strong determinant in ratings, yet cautions that a well-liked instructor does not necessarily mean he/she is the best teacher.

It was apparent from the findings too, that majority of the students (85.8%) consider the extent of learning in a particular course while evaluating teaching effectiveness. The difference between lecturer personality and extent of learning is a dismal 0.8%, which seem to imply that though the students prioritize lecturer’s personality, such a personality should in a way lead to learning in the class. According to Clayson (2009), students’ evaluation of teaching effectiveness should be a reflection of what they learn in class, hence in agreement with the findings of this study. These findings also support the study by Remedios and Lieberman (2008) who observed that SETE can be used to measure quality of teaching as students are bound to rate teaching effectiveness according to the learning that has taken place.

From this study, the aspect of grades awarded in the course, though selected by 68% of the students, was the sixth factor in consideration of teaching effectiveness. What this suggests is that this is not a core factor in the evaluation of teaching effectiveness by students here in SU. This therefore contradicts studies by researchers such as Olds and Crumble (2003) who concluded that higher grades result in higher evaluations and vice versa; yet in agreement with studies of Remedios and Lieberman (2008) who argued out that students are sober enough to judge good learning and not just offer higher ratings for grades. The lecturer’s gender was also a less consideration by students in evaluation of teaching effectiveness, as it was approved by 43% of the students and as the second last factor. This too contradicts a study by Sprague and Massoni (2005) who found that students carry out evaluation of teaching while having a gender-stereotype mentality. Student’s gender from the study, too, plays a minimal role of 42.8%, more or less similar to lecturer’s gender.

Another notable observation from this study with regard to factors in evaluation of teaching effectiveness is that students seemed to shift responsibility to other factors but themselves as considerations in teaching effectiveness. Hence, instructor related factors (save for gender) and those related to the course were important to them; for example type of course undertaken-79.6%; rank and experience of instructor-78.8%; students’ tastes and preferences-71.6%. This is in agreement with a study by Nargundkar and Shrikhande (2012) who argued that we are dealing with the millennial generation of students for whom motivation is the key factor in their teaching; without which we will lose them. Also, Gross et al., (2009) argues that students’ tastes and preferences influence their evaluation of teaching effectiveness; more of what they feel or think is right and appropriate to them. This study supports this argument as 71.6% of the students admit that the tastes and preferences of the students do influence evaluation of teaching effectiveness.

Students’ opinion on SETE

Students’ opinion on SETE, which was the last objective, showed that 87.2% of the students favour the use of SETE as a means of evaluating teaching effectiveness in the university.

From Table 1.3, administrative use of SETE to make important decisions in SU received a 25% and 43.9% for ‘Strongly Agree’ and ‘Agree’ respectively. 28% of the students were undecided on whether students fill course evaluation forms seriously, while 39.4% ‘Agree’
with this reason, 50% of the students felt (Strongly agree) that SETE process is important and should be maintained in the institution.

Generally Figure 1.2 summarizes that 87.2% of the students feel that SETE process is important in the university and should be maintained. 74% of them are of the opinion that SETE ratings are used by administrators to make important decisions in the university, while 63.4% feel students fill the SETE forms seriously.

From the findings of this study, it was apparent that students are in favour of the use of SETE as 87.2% of them support their use in SU. This proposition is in line with studies, such as that by Remedios and Lieberman (2008) who contend that SETE instruments are important and they contribute meaningfully to the teaching and learning process. Also, from this study, it emerged that 74% of the students agreed that SETE findings are often used for administrative purposes, yet 63.4% admitted that SETE forms are often filled seriously within the university. This difference seems to suggest that though students are aware of the use of SETE ratings, not all of them attend to them with the seriousness they deserve. This thus contradicts the study by Dunegan and Hrivnak (2003) and Al-Issa and Sulieinan (2007) that established that students will fill SETE forms seriously if they perceive that they are being utilised in the university by administrators.

CONCLUSIONS

From the study findings, it was discovered that majority of the students (85.8%) understand evaluation of teaching effectiveness processes to be aimed at improving teaching and learning. Other core reason is to enhance accountability in higher education (82.4%). What these findings mean is that students are more perceptive and understanding when it comes to reasons for evaluation of teaching effectiveness. They do know that they are participating in a process that will eventually aid teaching and learning. That accountability was ranked second means that higher education is no longer a private premise, but something that many, students involved, are part of. It is probably the reason, also why many (75.4%) think evaluating teaching is a higher education requirement. It is also significant that students do not think evaluating teaching is aimed at making decision about instructors; it was the second last reason at 67.2%. It is significant as the study was carried out in a private institution where students would be expected to ‘have a say’ with regard to instructors. As decision on courses was the last factor (at 60.8%), meaning that evaluation of teaching has little influence over students’ choices of academic courses in the university.

It became apparent from the findings that instructor personality and extent of learning are the top most considered factors at 86.6% and 85.8% respectively. Bearing in mind that the most important reason for evaluating teaching effectiveness, according to the students in this study is to improve teaching, the findings on factors seem to bring forth a suggestion. It appears that students, much as they are interested in improving teaching, are also concerned about the personality of the person delivering the concept. It is here that these findings need to be interpreted with caution; for it is highly doubtful that learning will be judged fairly if the personality of the instructor is not likable to the students.

The type of course undertaken was the third factor considered by students while evaluating teaching effectiveness. This seems to suggest that evaluations of courses in the university will be higher or lower depending on the specific course to done. The lecture’ rank and experience is the fourth factor in the ranking, meaning that faculty with senior titles (professor, Dr.) are likely to be highly evaluated, than say graduate assistants. Grades, though significant, was the fifth factor (77.8%); meaning grade manipulation in the university is not likely to yield higher evaluations. Students’ tastes and preferences had a 71.6% meaning significant though not among the main factors. Both students’ and lecturers’ genders were last with very low support of 42.8% and 43% respectively; meaning that they are least likely to influence students’ consideration in evaluating teaching effectiveness in SU.

The study discovered that majority of the students (87.2%) are in support of the use and maintenance of SETE in the university; probably attesting to the claim by some that they needed to ‘participate in matters affecting them’. It also suggests that students understand their role as important stakeholders in the university, whose input cannot be neglected. 74% were also of the opinion that SETE ratings are being used for important decisions in the university, hence probably the reason why they feel they should continue being used. However, that 63.4% of the students thought their fellow students feel SETE forms seriously, seem to imply that not all students treat SETE process with the seriousness that it deserves.
The conclusion of this study therefore is that SETE is an important tool in teaching evaluation since students in SU understand its importance. However, as argued by other scholars such as (Emmelman&DeCesare, 2007; Hoefer, et al., 2012; Dunegan&Hrivnak, 2003; Clayson&Sheffet, 2006), this mode of evaluation should not be used in isolation but used alongside other methods. This is because biases such as an overemphasis on instructor personality may affect the ratings from such an evaluation. Only then can a meaningful and better perspective of teaching effectiveness be arrived at.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the findings of this study, the researchers make the following recommendations:

i) As the most important factor considered in SETE in SU is personality of the instructor, there is need to establish what exactly in an instructor’s personality is considered by students during evaluations.

ii) The notion of ‘teaching effectiveness’ is understood differently by different people, it is important that students’ perception of this concept be understood, hence their evaluation of it;

iii) This study was carried out among second and third year students within the university; there is need to carry out a research on what fourth years and graduate students think about this process of evaluating teaching effectiveness.

**REFERENCES**


Table 1.1 Reasons for evaluating teaching effectiveness in Strathmore University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for evaluation</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help students make decisions on courses</td>
<td>13, 9.8</td>
<td>49, 37.1</td>
<td>19, 14.4</td>
<td>32, 24.2</td>
<td>19, 14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve teaching and learning</td>
<td>54, 40.9</td>
<td>67, 50.8</td>
<td>6, 4.5</td>
<td>5, 3.8</td>
<td>0, 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make decisions about lecturers</td>
<td>19, 14.4</td>
<td>55, 41.7</td>
<td>24, 18.2</td>
<td>22, 16.7</td>
<td>12, 9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfil higher educ. requirement</td>
<td>31, 23.5</td>
<td>59, 44.7</td>
<td>25, 18.9</td>
<td>15, 11.4</td>
<td>2, 1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase accountability</td>
<td>44, 33.3</td>
<td>65, 49.2</td>
<td>19, 14.4</td>
<td>3, 2.3</td>
<td>1, .8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1.2  Factors considered for SETE in Strathmore University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
<th>Very Unimportant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer personality</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturer’s gender</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank/experience of the lecturer</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32.6</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ gender</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ tastes and preferences</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ year of study</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades awarded in a course</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent of learning in a course</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of course undertaken</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 1.3  Students’ opinion on SETE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Freq</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use SETE for important decisions in SU</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students filling of SETE forms seriously</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance and maintenance of SETE</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.1  Percentage representations of factors considered in SETE in SU

Figure 1.2  Percentage representations of students' opinion on SETE