

Constructive Feedback to Students: A Tool to Enhance Educational Quality

Abstract

Assuring and enhancing education quality in universities is currently a major and worldwide concern. Besides, providing high quality feedback to students is recognized by many scholars as one of the main factors that foster achievement of learning outcomes. This study was conceptualized as controlled intervention with academic staff of a private higher learning institution in Rwanda as a reaction to the fact that both students and teachers were dissatisfied with feedback provisions and the lack of feedback led to failures. The main objective of this intervention was to give participants necessitous knowledge about the concept of constructive feedback and to help them develop related competences. Later, a research was conducted by means of semi-structured interviews with purposefully selected trainees to analyse their experiences with regard to providing constructive feedback to students and more specifically encountered challenges and mitigation measures. It is important for higher learning institutions to avoid any culture of unhelpful feedback and to reflect on other educational quality aspects alongside providing constructive feedback not only to reinforce its use but also to assure effective and sustainable educational quality enhancement.

Keywords: *constructive feedback, educational quality, higher education*

Zusammenfassung

Die Sicherung und Verbesserung der Bildungsqualität an Universitäten ist derzeit ein wichtiges und weltweites Anliegen. Qualitativ hochwertiges Studierenden-Feedback wird als einer der wichtigsten Faktoren gesehen, um die Erreichung der Lernergebnisse zu fördern. Diese Studie wurde als kontrollierte Intervention mit Lehrkräften einer privaten Hochschule in Ruanda konzipiert, um auf das Problem zu reagieren, dass sowohl Studierenden als auch Lehrenden mit der Bereitstellung von Feedback unzufrieden waren und mangelndes bzw. schlechtes Feedback zu Misserfolgen führte. Das Hauptziel dieser Intervention war es, den Teilnehmern notwendiges Wissen über das Konzept des konstruktiven Feedbacks zu geben und ihnen dabei zu helfen, entsprechende Kompetenzen zu entwickeln. Später wurde eine Studie mit semi-strukturierten Interviews durchgeführt, um die Erfahrungen der Teilnehmenden im Hinblick auf konstruktives Feedback an Studierende zu analysieren und Herausforderungen und Veränderungsnotwendigkeiten zu

identifizieren. Die Studie zeigt zum einen, dass in Hochschulen nicht hilfreiches Feedback vermieden werden soll und zudem über andere Aspekte der Bildungsqualität neben der Bereitstellung von konstruktivem Feedback reflektiert werden muss.

Schlüsselworte: *Konstruktives Feedback, Bildungsqualität, Hochschulbildung*

Introduction

Rwanda is a sub-Saharan African country in which higher education dates back to 1936 (World Bank, 2003). It is diversified into governmental higher learning institutions and non-governmental higher learning institutions according to the ownership status. The research conducted focused on one Rwandan private higher learning institution. Generally, students who are admitted in public higher learning institutions are selected among the best performers in national examinations done at the end of secondary level. The remaining students, i.e. those who are not admitted in public higher learning institutions seek admission in private ones meaning that private higher learning institutions admit in most cases not the best but rather the average and the low performers. This is one of the reasons why the issue of quality development is foremost in Rwandan private higher learning institutions. Meanwhile, quality education is a worldwide concern (Fredriksson, 2004; Ross & Genevois, 2006) where the role of higher education in achieving the sustainable development goals is actually sought (UNESCO, 2016).

The topic of this study is linked to the reflection of the contribution of constructive feedback which discourses on teaching quality show that it is one of the important factors to reach higher competence levels among students (Kamardeen, 2013; Hattie, 2009; UNESCO, 2004). Besides, education quality is assessed from students' competencies especially according to how they apply their knowledge in solving real world problems (Biggs, 2001) and these competencies are expressed in terms of learning outcomes at school level. Likewise, assessment is considered as "an essential element in the learning cycle and central to an understanding of how these learning outcomes are achieved" (Wilson, 2012, p. 1). Moreover, it is argued that results from assessment should be used for feedback during learning since both students and teachers need to know how learning

is proceeding to improve learning of individual students and to improve teaching itself (JISC, 2012). Feedback in this context is understood as information provided by teachers to help their students reduce the gap between their current and desired performances (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Furthermore, regardless the feedback content i.e. good or bad, its delivery should always be positive. This is to mean constructive as it is the most useful and beneficial to the receiver because it provides encouragement, support, corrective measures and direction (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010).

This research was conducted as a reaction to problem of late feedback leading to students' dissatisfaction with regard to feedback received from their teachers resulting in low performances, high repetition and/or dropout rates (INATEK, 2014; ULK, 2014; INES-Ruhengeri, 2013; INILAK, 2013; Rwanamiza, 2011; Mugisha, 2009). On this issue, it is shown that neither grade repetition nor promotion without supplementary support help in alleviating academic problems faced by students (Jimerson, Woehr & Kaufman, 2004). With regard to this problem, this research has been conceptualized as a controlled intervention followed by research.

Research questions

This research was guided by the following research questions: What experiences do teachers have with the provision of constructive feedback to students? What are the challenges faced by teachers in delivering constructive feedback to students? And what strategies are necessary to ensure good provision of constructive feedback to students?

Methodology

In this research qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews and content analysis methods have been used as described below. Firstly, the methodology of the intervention is explained.

Intervention: Training workshop on constructive feedback

The intervention was a two-day training workshop on constructive feedback organized for 19 teachers of one Rwandan private higher learning institution. The intention while preparing this training was to help trained teachers acquire competences about the provision of constructive feedback to students. Improvement of teaching quality was awaited from trained teachers as a result of providing constructive feedback to students. They were for instance expected to adapt and adjust their teaching style according to students learning needs, help students improve their performances, support students bridge the gap between their actual performances and required performances, assure good learning climate, promote dialogue about learning improvement between them and their students, enhance students motivation and help students become self-reflective and self-responsible of their learning after participating in the training. Participants in this training were only full time teachers (males and females) with different academic grades from tutorial assistants to professors representing all departments. Active and participatory methods such as brainstorming, partner discussions, discussion in groups and presentations, role play, plenary sessions, and individual drawing were used to involve participants during the training.

Research approach and data collection method

A qualitative approach was chosen because this research seeks to understand experiences of trained lecturers with regard to the provision of constructive feedback to students, and qualitative research helps to "answer questions about human action and experience" (Savin-Baden & Mayor, 2013, p. 16). For data collection, semi-structured interviews were used as they allow flexibility in terms of questions to ask, their order, and management of time available (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The number of interviewees i.e. the sample size was limited to three trained teachers. This sample was chosen using purposive sampling since purposive sampling is used "if description rather than generalization is the goal" (Dawson, 2002, p. 49) and as it helps to carefully select participants who are likely to provide information to answer the research questions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Data analysis method: Content analysis

In this research, content analysis was used to analyse the data. The analysis followed different steps (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013): Firstly, the audio recordings of the interviews were listened to at least three times before transcription and notes were taken. Secondly data were divided into meaningful segments and then similar segments were assigned the same code. Thirdly similar codes were put together to form categories responsive to the research questions and categorized into major and minor categories. From codes and categories, I formed themes which helped to analyse my data with regard to the research questions (Berg, 2007).

Presentation of results

The results of the research underlying this article are described in accordance to the research questions. For the anonymity of the interviewees (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014), they have been given names of three lakes in Rwanda, respectively Kivu, Ihema and Muhazi. The results have been grouped into three categories with different themes for each category.

The first category concerns the recognition of the importance of constructive feedback with regard to improvement of teaching and assessment processes, pedagogical relationships leading to good learning climate, students' guidance, and students' performances. Interviewees expressed that they realized that they really needed this training for the enhancement of their work as teachers. It is obvious from this research that trained teachers are able to help their students improve their learning through providing them constructive feedback. For instance, Kivu said that before the training it was rare for him to comment on students' works. After participating in the training, he realized how worth is the time used to provide constructive feedback to students.

Adjustment of teaching and assessment methods to comply with identified gaps within students performances were mentioned by interviewees. As an example, Muhazi said that giving constructive feedback to his students helps him in preparing subsequent lessons and from this he gets to know where he needs to improve to meet students' needs. Besides, interviewees stated that constructive feedback was helping their students improving their performances.

Secondly, all three interviewees had so far realized some problems that reduce the quality of feedback they provided to

students. These challenges have been classified into four themes which are time consumption, large class size, lecturers' workload and students' availability after exams. Interviewees established a link between the two first challenges saying that in large classes, a lot of time is required for preparing and providing constructive feedback as in most cases students' problems differ from one another. From the views of interviewees, it is easier to provide constructive feedback to students in a small sized class than in a large one. It was also mentioned that the involvement of teachers in various activities besides teaching becomes an obstacle to the provision of constructive feedback to students. Moreover, the interviewees also realized that students do not only need feedback on continuous assessment tests but also on module exams to accompany them throughout their studies. According to the interviewees, the problem is the difficulty of meeting students for feedback on modules exams after completing a module.

In addition to mentioning problems in providing feedback interviewees also made suggestions on how to alleviate these problems which formed the third category of these results. All interviewees agreed that teachers should integrate the provision of constructive feedback in their daily teaching activities as if not the teacher's work is incomplete. The suggestions made reflected also the role of staff meetings and use of learning communities among lecturers in the implementation of the provision of constructive feedback to students via teachers' exchanges on their students' performances and what they could do to help them.

Concerning the problem of providing constructive feedback on module exam, interviewees recommended effective teamwork among teachers to ensure interconnectivity across modules through which students could realize that they needed to seek for feedback on module exam to understand better completed and subsequent modules. This suggestion was supplemented by the adjustment of students' number in all classes to let all students have equal opportunity of being given constructive feedback. Furthermore, interviewees mentioned that academic leaders had to play a great role in the implementation of constructive feedback provision to students in terms of monitoring and organization of regular trainings.

Even though, teachers proved to face some challenges what was more important is that they were able to propose relevant mitigation measures and were happy of the good results they were realizing from providing constructive feedback to students.

Discussion of results

The findings of this research are either in relation or complementary to the findings of the educational discourse. This is because; it is shown that the provision of constructive feedback is helping trained teachers in different ways of their teaching and learning process such as improvement of their teaching and assessment methods, improvement of pedagogical relationships with students, guidance of their students, and improvement of their students' performances. Educational discourse also indicate that constructive feedback enhance teaching and learning process, pedagogical relationship, students' motivation and self-regulated learning. Moreover, different authors show that the above aspects are indicators of education quality as well (for example: OECD, 2012; Ross & Genevois, 2006).

According to the results of this research, the importance of feedback is not limited to the improvement of teachers' work and

students' performances in the concerned module but also in the whole programme. More importantly, the findings of this study support the statement that the benefits of successful feedback set in the context of learning outcomes are many (O'Farrell, 2002). Helping students to know how they are performing in class and how to improve this performance is an essential factor to assure their success (Hattie, 2012; Biggs & Tang, 2007). Students underperform or do not achieve their capabilities if they are not given effective feedback (Hounsell, 2008).

It is also revealed that trained teachers have started experiencing some of the problems linked to the provision of constructive feedback mentioned in the discourse on feedback (UNSW Australia, 2014; James Cook University, 2011; Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). The main challenge for the teachers is the time required for preparing and providing feedback. This problem reflects that the preparation of high-quality assessment feedback useful in learning improvement requires much time (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). It was noted that these problems do not stop trained teachers from giving feedback to students but rather affect the quality of feedback provided. Likewise, it is argued that feedback is central to students' learning but its quality is reduced by large class size and workload of higher education academic staff (Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). It is disclosed that this problem of workload was mentioned but teachers were aware that when feedback is not provided on time students miss a lot in their learning process.

Trained teachers are already aware of and have experienced the importance of constructive feedback in teaching and learning process. This knowledge will hopefully help teachers to avoid late feedback which is considered as wasted effort and opportunity for both the teacher and students (UNSW Australia, 2014; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989) and instead try to find ways to provide regular feedback to students. Additionally, regarding large class sizes, the use of peer feedback and collective feedback was pointed out as proposed in some literature (for instance UNSW Australia, 2014; Spiller, 2012).

Another problem met is associated to the fact that feedback should be solicited rather than being imposed, that is, feedback is useful when the receiver actively seeks for it (Susan, 2012). Participants said that it was hard for them to get students back for feedback after marking modules exams whereas they had realized after the training that feedback on continuous assessment tests alone does not suffice but rather should be accompanied with feedback on modules exams to help students better understand the same module or subsequent modules. From the above suggestion, if students could be aware of the importance of feedback, they would be the first to seek for feedback on modules exams. This is in line with the model of giving constructive feedback suggested by Hattie and Timperley (2007) which shows that for feedback to enhance learning it should be linked to learning goals and progress made by students toward these goals and then advices for better progress.

Strategies proposed by interviewees to overcome mentioned problems confirm with or supplement literature ones (UNSW Australia, 2014; Spiller, 2012; James Cook University, 2011; Hatziapostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). According to this research, the teacher's work is incomplete once he/she does not provide constructive feedback to students. Incorporation of constructive feedback in the teacher's daily activities considering its

importance is then suggested. In addition to this, the reduction of teachers' workload is proposed to allow enough time for preparing and providing quality feedback to students (Hatzia Apostolou & Paraskakis, 2010). Different strategies for teachers professional capacity building proposed by interviewees match as well with those reflected on in educational discourse (Krogull, Scheunpflug & Rwambonera, 2014; James Cook University, 2011; Vavrus, 2011; Henard & Leprince-Ringuet, 2008). These strategies include for instance the use of staff meetings and learning communities among lecturers, continuous in-service training, and effective teamwork among lecturers, monitoring and evaluation. The consideration of providing timely feedback for it to be effective, is in accordance with literature arguing that feedback should be given at appropriate time because if it is not the case it may do more harm than good (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010).

Conclusion

Following results from the research underlying this article as well as already existing literature, constructive feedback is then on-going, open and solution-oriented information provided skilfully by teachers to help their students reduce the gap between their current and desired performances and to reach required competences. Teachers especially in the Sub-Saharan African region where the quality of education is still low are notified to make improvements on how feedback is conveyed to students insisting on meeting the characteristics of constructive feedback. However, providing constructive feedback alone does not suffice to ensure effective and sustainable educational quality improvement in Sub-Saharan African countries. There is need therefore to reflect on other aspects of educational quality improvement to complete its use.

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