

PROMOTING STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN QUALITY ENHANCEMENT AT THE WISCONSIN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY COLLEGE (WIUC)

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Abstract

In this study a survey was conducted to gather information on students' participation in quality enhancement strategies in higher education. Students studying various courses at the WIUC were randomly selected. The survey was conducted in the first semester of 2011. Respondents' views were sought on three (3) quality enhancement issues in higher education and a total of 125 responses were obtained. Twenty-five of these students were MBA students specializing in Project Management; Seventy-two (72) were evening students offering Organizational Behaviour and the remaining twenty-eight (28) students were evening students offering Operations Management. Respondents were of the view that there is minimal student participation in quality enhancement activities. Majority of students also confirm they do not participate in the quality assurance process in the University College. Students' participation in designing the content, duration, objectives as well as the selection of teaching methods for new courses is rather on the low side. Students' suggestions included their request for an opportunity to assess quality of provision and value of learning experience in courses and modules, their active participation in shaping the quality of education and the incorporation and recognition of their views and feedback in key quality enhancement decisions.

Introduction

Wahlen (1998), defined quality assurance in higher education as the activity that aims at maintaining and raising quality, e.g. research, analysis, assessing acceptability, recruitment, appointment procedures and different mechanisms and systems. Lomas (2002), shows that the goal of the quality management in higher education is to assure the improvement of standards and quality in higher education in order to meet the needs of students, employers and financiers. Student participation in quality management and its enhancement is paramount because students' understandings, attitudes and objectives evolve in the course of the study process. The better students can manage in their future working life with the help of the knowledge, experience and skills gained in the University-College, the more satisfactorily has the academic institution in question achieved its goals.

According to Beaver, (1994), a noticeable trend in higher education has been that of increasing competition among universities and higher education institutes to attract students leading many college administrators to use the implementation of quality practices as a way to reassure students and their parents that their institutions perform well and that the customers of higher education are being well served. However, Sohail et al, (2003) note that there are criticisms to the effect that reformation of such campuses have been mainly on non-academic matters, such as more efficient handling of admissions, improvement in campus administration, better and efficient application of funds. But, Kock and Fisher, (1998) have shown that there have been instances where campuses which adopted total quality management have utilized the process to change the fundamental nature of academic life or the curriculum.

Tam (2001) has noted that besides cognitive reshaping, enhancement of quality in higher education influences the intellectual aptitude of students and provides individuals with

skills, equip them with knowledge, change attitudes and fight prejudice. The above submissions stress the importance of the university in bringing along positive change in students, both in the cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions. It follows that the better the university is at empowering its students to participate in quality management and its enhancement, the better it can meet the goals that include equipping the students with special skills, knowledge and attitudes that enable them to work and live in the society of knowledge.

To this end, this paper is guided by the following questions: What is the nature of the evidence linking quality management and its enhancement in higher education? How powerful predictor is academic quality and its enhancement of student involvement? Which types of students' participation are most effective in increasing quality enhancement? What is known about the processes that link students' participation and successful academic quality management and its enhancement? What steps are involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating effective student participation in quality enhancement in higher education?

The topic of student participation in quality enhancement has been widely researched. Experience accumulated over the past few decades, especially in developed countries, shows much about the value and characteristics of successful students and the college partnerships. Indeed, enough groundwork has been laid to inform and guide the efforts of enterprising school administrations and quality assurance units or agencies ready to help students carry out the type of activities that benefit the partnership. However, in Ghana, the body of research on this topic has not yet evolved to the point where all of the questions posed above can be answered satisfactorily.

Although there seems to be an agreement in the field about the importance of linkages between students and schools, there remains the need for more rigorous study to help educators predict the precise outcomes of implementing particular strategies for involving students in the management of quality and its enhancement in higher education in Ghana. In particular, more information is needed on student participation in the management of quality and its enhancement in the private University Colleges.

Literature Review

Students' role in quality management and its enhancement

According to Lawrence and McCollough (2001), a system of guarantees focusing on three customer groups: students, instructors of advanced courses that build on prerequisite courses and organizations that employ graduates are key in the educational process. A system of guarantees, they asserted, provides an institution with a competitive advantage by allowing it to transform intangible educational quality to students. In a similar vein, Durlabhji and Fusilier (1999) state that customer empowerment in education requires greater input from students as well as from the business community that will eventually employ them and this in turn will streamline education and eliminate wastage idleness after students graduate from school.

Fullan (1993) shows that, policy makers have an obligation to set policy, establish standards and monitor performance. He argues further that they must articulate important educational goals. In achieving these goals, Fullan asserts that, the success or failure in meeting the objectives of educational policy makers will depend on factors over which they have little direct control. Sustained educational improvement and committed shared vision therefore depend on the nature and quality of leadership and interaction between leaders and members of the institution which includes students.

Students as actors and information providers

Giving feedback is the most common way students participate in quality management and its enhancement. There is a wide diversity of how, when and what kind of feedback students give. It is typical that feedback is given after each course or at least once in a

semester. Both quantitative and qualitative procedures are used to obtain feedback from students (Alaniska & Eriksson, 2006). According to them, the method they use is to ask the students to write down their feelings, problems and ideas on how to improve the course on a blank piece of paper. They agreed that this may sound a very simple approach, but it seemed to be quite an effective way to collect feedback for both teachers and students. Students are able to do more than function merely as information providers. Roffe (1998) believes that due to open competition, students are becoming more of customers as well as consumers and expected to pay a growing share of the costs of education. For that matter students should be equally expected to increasingly participate in the management of quality and its enhancement in higher education. It should therefore, not come as surprise that in many universities in Finland, according to Alaniska & Eriksson, (2006) students design their own feedback questionnaires or do so in close cooperation with the academic staff.

Feedback is also often collected and analyzed by students. They organize staff and student development workshops, where innovative and problem-solving oriented discussions are encouraged in a comfortable atmosphere. Together with academic staff, the workshops discuss and solve problems relating to teaching. The student association uses the collected feedback to find solutions to problems in teaching and studying. Very often representatives of working life are invited to speak about the current trends and needs of employers.

Students as experts and partners

Sangeeta *et al.* (2004) consider education system as a transformation process comprising of inputs of students, teachers, administrative staff, physical facilities and processes. The processes include teaching, learning, and administration. Outputs include examination results, employment, earnings and satisfaction. In their model for quality management implementation in higher educational institutions, Osseo-Asare and Longbottom (2002) propose leadership, policy and strategy, people management, resources, processes and partnerships as enabler criteria, which affect performance and help higher education institutions achieve organizational excellence.

The belief that the focus of quality assurance in higher education should be about the quality of learning, makes the role played by students inevitably important (Alaniska & Eriksson, 2006). The authors support this assertion with vivid illustration of how in Finland, students are generally regarded as experts in learning. According to them, students know how they have reached their learning outcomes and how the teaching has assisted them in this process; an important reason why teaching should be evaluated through students' learning experiences and based on how it actually assists the learning process.

Exploiting student expertise in concrete form includes using methods like inviting students into working groups and meetings, asking widely for their opinions, and for written statements. Treating students as experts is now a cultural expectation in Finland, which demands a positive attitude both from the staff and from the students (Alaniska & Eriksson, 2006).

As a result of some of these practices, students and staff have been able to work in closer partnership which has facilitated the development of a shared commitment to recognising the value of student expertise and partnership. At the University of Oulu where Alaniska and Eriksson are based, there is a teaching development team for every subject. The main task of the teams is to improve the quality of teaching. Half of the team members are students; usually this means 4-5 students making sure that the expertise of students is heavily utilized.

Methodology

Data were gathered using questionnaires administered to 150 students engaged in three different programmes of study at the Wisconsin International University College. One hundred and twenty-five (125) of these were returned comprising 25 students offering MBA specialization in Project Management; 72 evening students offering Organizational Behaviour and 28 students offering Operations Management.

The questionnaire comprised five sections, i.e. Respondents' demography, perception on their participation in the University College's quality enhancement strategies, extent of respondents' participation in quality enhancement activities, respondents' satisfaction with their participation in quality enhancement activities and challenges faced by the student body in participating in quality enhancement. This paper is presenting results on students' participation in the University College's quality enhancement strategies. The study employed the 5-point Likert-type scale.

Separate questionnaire were administered to ten (10) student leaders and fifteen (15) academic staff including some in top leadership positions on the issue of student participation in quality enhancement at the University College. This was done to gain broad understanding of the issues affecting student participation in quality enhancement in the University College. The survey was conducted in the first semester of 2011. Respondent views were sought on the issues of the context of their participation in quality enhancement in the University College, their participation in evaluations and assessments as well as their participation in course design and selection of teaching methods.

Results and Discussion

The Context of Student Involvement

Within the context of the WIUC system, Table 1 shows that student participation in planning and governance in general is well below average (5% of Student respondents and 15% of academic staff/student leaders agree). Students do not participate in the elections of the Vice Chancellor and other academic leadership (2% of Student respondents and 5% of academic staff/student leaders agree). There is a participation in social movements such as representation at National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) (70% of Student respondents and 80% of academic staff/student leaders agree). Besides the NUGS, it was learned significant numbers of students participate in social movements and student associations on campus. As regards the participation in decision making structures or function within the University College, there is minimal student participation (5% of Student respondents and 10% of academic staff/student leaders agree). Student and academic staff interaction is also reported to be low (3% of Student respondents and 5% of academic staff/student leaders agree) as shown in table. Further discussion with some academic staff revealed that there have been no requests from students to participate in such responsibilities.

Table 1. The context of student participation in quality enhancement in WIUC

Context of student Participation	Percent (%) in agreement <i>Students (N=125)</i>	Percent (%) in agreement <i>Student leaders/Academic staff (N = 25)</i>
Student participates in decision making structures	5	10
Student participates in election/appointment of academic leaders (eg.VC, HODs)	2	5
Student participates in planning and governance e.g. membership in academic boards etc	5	15
Student participates in student-academic staff partnership meetings	3	5
Student participates in social movements	70	80

The reasons for this could be, perhaps, students having the view that, they are merely passing through college, which must have gone on in a way that has weakened collective participation. Students having this perception may feel that it is not possible for them to influence the running of the institution. Moreover, it appears that, academic activities take up a lot of the students' available time and as a result collective participation to influence decision at the University College have not been adequately addressed. There is the need for students to see themselves as collaborators in higher education rather than mere users of it. This will ensure that students not only participate in social movements but become important players in the planning and governance of the University College. This is requiring students to be proactive and give up the role of being merely passive receivers of higher education.

Student Involvement in Evaluations and Assessments

Table 2 below reveals that student participation in evaluations and assessments is minimal (40% of Student respondents and 50% of academic staff/student leaders agree that students participate in evaluation and assessments). There is low representation of students in the assessment and evaluation committee (10% of student respondents and 15% of academic staff/student leader respondents) agrees that this is so. Similarly, just mere 5% and 10% respectively of student respondents and academic staff/student leaders' respondents agree that students participate in quality assurance processes. Furthermore, only 18% and 20% respectively of the two respondent groups agree that students are familiarized with the quality assessment process in place in the University College. Majority of students are not involved in the quality assurance process in the School. Respondents further revealed that they are not aware of programmes and plans that are already in place (only 5% and 12% of respondent groups agree that programmes are already in place) to stimulate students' active participation in quality enhancement in the University College.

Table 2: Student participation in evaluation and assessments in WIUC

Context of student Participation	Percent (%) in agreement <i>Students (N=125)</i>	Percent (%) in agreement <i>Student leaders/Academic staff (N = 25)</i>
Students participate in internal evaluations and assessments	40	50
Students have representation in assessment and evaluation committees	10	15
Students are familiarized with the WIUC quality assessment tools	18	20
Student participates in quality assurance processes	5	10
There are programmes or plans in place that help to stimulate student active participation in quality enhancement	5	12

There is the need to create suitable conditions at the University College that enable steady streams of students to participate in assessing and evaluating the internal system. Conditions should promote the active participation of students in the University College's quality assurance policies and thereby to help establish a participative culture in the WIUC. From the institutional point of view, plans made should aim at providing students with skill and competence of participation with additional skills for critical analysis. This will enable students' experiences and ideas to contribute to the improvement of degree programmes and thus bring about a new type of student association, the members of which become more interested in the technical aspects of the University College.

Student participation in designing and teaching of new courses

Table 3 below shows that in order to design new courses, lecturers in WIUC found it necessary to define the profile of the students at whom the course would be aimed and who ideally would participate (85% of Student respondents and 90% of academic staff/student leaders agree). However, students’ participation in designing the content (8% of Student respondents and 14% of academic staff/student leaders agree), duration (5% of Student respondents and 10% of academic staff/student leaders agree) objectives (7% of Student respondents and 8% of academic staff/student leaders agree) as well as methods to teach the new courses (5% of Student respondents and 11% of academic staff/student leaders agree) is rather on the low side. The challenge for academic staff in doing this well, revealed during further discussions, is whether to make an open call to all students, majority of whom they believe have very limited knowledge of participative dynamics, or to aim at certain specific student profiles.

Table 3: Students participation in course design and selection of teaching methods

Context of student Participation	Percent (%) in agreement <i>Students (N=125)</i>	Percent (%) in agreement <i>Student leaders/Academic staff (N = 25)</i>
Lecturers define the profile of students to whom the course would be aimed at	85	90
Students participates in designing the content of new courses	8	14
Students participate in setting duration of new courses	5	10
Students participate in setting objectives of new courses	7	8
Student participates in selection of teaching methods	5	11

What is being advised is to aim the call at students who are especially motivated by improvement and who have a vocation to make meaningful value addition to the process. It is necessary for this type of exercise, not to make any unrealistic assumptions. The participation of students must add value to the contents, duration, objectives and teaching methods to make the new courses attractive, as well as useful for the students at their university and in their professional career in the future.

It is necessary to be realistic regarding the course’s duration, i.e. that it should not be too short or too long. It has also to be ensured that the sequence of course topics stay in order and that the course would not go on for an excessively long time. It was also necessary for the objectives and teaching methods of the course to be sufficiently interesting to maintain the students’ motivation (through the development of skills like interpersonal, communication, negotiation, reasoning, etc.), and at the same time to take into account the vision and mission of the University College. Student participation in design and selection of teaching methods for new courses should be seen as an instrument and not an end in itself, with emphasis put on internal assessments. This means that the participation of students has to go beyond the informal.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the general perception of students, student leaders and academic staff on students’ participation in quality enhancement at the Wisconsin International

University College. The study examined the context of student participation in quality enhancement, students' participation in quality assessments and evaluations and their participation in the design and determining the teaching methods for new courses at the University College. Overall, the findings have shown that student participation in the three areas are below average giving important signals to students and their leaders as well as academic leadership to move in a new direction that enable students make more active participation in quality enhancement in the University College. The study has provided empirical evidence that can help our institution and other institutions in similar situation to better understand the need to promote participation of students in quality enhancement to improve institutional performance.

The findings show that students are not participating as much as they should to ensure the University College's quality performance. Thus more effort should be made to enhance the participation of students in the three areas examined in every component of the institution, and embed it as an institutional culture. There needs to be continual engagement by the quality assurance unit, by the academic staff and leadership, by heads of various departments and units as well as by student representative bodies to continue to fully embed the participation of students in quality enhancement, the benefits of which has been demonstrated to be of great value. The University College has an important role to play in determining the success of its students' participation in quality assurance, besides providing training and courses for staff, constant monitoring should be carried out on how this is done, examining progress made and problems encountered.

Commitment from every level of the University College is essential for a successful participation by students in quality enhancement. Student participation should be viewed as organizations' view customer participation in quality improvement. Once we have this understanding, it becomes important measure of the actual performance, which completes the feedback loop in the strategic management process.

Further research is suggested for better understanding of the subject matter. The instrument may be further improved by covering other elements of quality assurance, in total quality management and institutional performance. The sample should be increased, and extended to other universities and stakeholders to get more in-depth information.

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