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Utilizing the student voice to improve the quality of teaching and learning in private higher education institutions

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Abstract:

This study was aimed at exploring the impact of the student feedback in enhancing the quality of educational provision in private universities. The study used the longitudinal approach which was carried out as two separate surveys covering a period of three years. An initial survey to determine the issues affecting teaching and learning quality in five private universities was made from June 2011 to May 2012. In 2013, a follow-up survey was carried out to check whether the issues of concern raised by students had been addressed. The study used a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected using semi-structured self-administered questionnaires as well as focus group discussions with students and academic staff. The sample represented four percent of the enrolments of students at each university. The students were drawn from all faculties making sure that each field of study was represented.

The findings showed that the major issues affecting quality of teaching and learning were inadequate assignments, absentee lecturers, poorly qualified lecturers, sexual harassment and the lack of public address systems for mass lectures. During the second survey, results showed that all universities had addressed the students' concerns but new challenges caused by the ever increasing enrolments had emerged.

The study points to the need to continuously engage the student voice as a way of improving the quality of the teaching and learning environment. The paper contributes to the body of knowledge on the importance of the student voice.

Keywords: Student voice, quality enhancement, teaching and learning, sexual harassment

1. Introduction

The concept of ‘student voice’ has been endorsed and incorporated across a broad spectrum of contemporary educational thinking, research, policymaking and provision (Bahou, 2011; Bragg & Manchester, 2012; Rodrigues, 2013). The student voice phenomenon covers a whole gamut of initiatives focused on providing students with the opportunity to actively articulate their views and to be partners in the planning, implementation and appraisal of their teaching and learning experience (QAA, 2012) with the aim of improving quality (Rogers, 2005).

Although the need to heed the student voice has been recognised for a long time in secondary schools (Heath, 2004; Rudduck, 2007), it is fast emerging as a dominant concept in higher education (Leach, 2012) and has been described as a panacea to solving inherent problems. Carey(2013) marvels at the fact that the student voice concept has an unusually widespread appeal as it is backed by governments, non-governmental organisations university managers, academic staff as well as being championed by student bodies.

Students are central to the higher education system: they contribute time, money, energy and intellect (Jackson, 2006), and hence they are critical in the advancement of knowledge. Bloxham and Boyd (2007) aver that since students play an active role in the ‘judgment process’ and knowledge creation, it is unfair to view them solely as recipients of wisdom. This assertion was also raised by Rudduck (2007) who reported the huge potential of students to actively contribute to knowledge creation. Proponents for utilizing the student voice argue that students always say something worth listening to (Blair & Noel, 2013).

Biggs (2001) found that interrogating students on quality of their learning experiences was valuable, because they are able to pinpoint what they believed to be the best practices. Levin (2000) posits that indeed it is the students who are best placed to explain their experiences, indicate what motivates them, spot what works and what does not work and why, suggest what needs to be included in the curriculum and contribute in evaluating alternatives. This is so because students directly

experience the teaching and learning; they are the ones who fail or drop out, are frustrated, bored, and/or can't find a job. It should be noted that even successful students are perceptive enough to identify with the challenges faced by their peers.

Many universities, in a bid to hear and heed the student voice, encourage students to provide feedback on all student experiences during the study period. Students do not only proffer their opinions on the quality of social services and university resource provision, but also pass judgement on the content of the curriculum, length of studies as well as teaching and learning methods. Reid (2010) found that students are kept motivated when they are involved, participate and contribute in activities that enhance the quality of their education. This results in the improvement of their learning environment (QAA, 2012). For this to be effective, the university should create a culture and conducive environment which has transparent, formal and informal mechanisms of engaging students in their quality processes.

Hodkinson and Shaw (2013) reported that the current mechanisms used by institutions to engage students include surveys, evaluations and special project focus groups (individual voice) as well as representative systems at all levels (collective voice). The mechanisms make use of questionnaires and other data gathering instruments to collect feedback, utilizing student representatives to sit on various university-wide committees, carrying out student consultative events, involving students in university projects, encouraging students to participate in discussion forums available online and carrying out quality assurance processes, including course and program reviews (QAA, 2012). In some universities students receive training to enable them to get their voices heard more effectively (McKeachie & Svinicke, 2006).

2. Objectives of the study

The study aimed at first establishing the problems deemed to have adverse effects on the academic well-being of either individual students or the student body as a whole in Zimbabwe's private higher education

institutions with the ultimate aim of investigating whether the universities heed the student voice. The specific objectives were to:

- Identify the opinions of students vis-à-vis the quality of educational provision in higher education institutions, and
- Evaluate the perceptions and views of students concerning the extent to which their voice is heeded.

3. Methodology

The study used a triangulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Triangulation is the use of more than one method in collecting data using different vantage points (Tritter, 1998). Data were collected using observation, document analysis, questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions involving students and academic staff. Students were asked to provide information relating to different aspects of their experience and to suggest ways of tackling areas requiring improvement. King et al. (1999) averred that cross-sectional surveys provide just a snapshot of student feedback therefore adding little value to research on assessing the incorporation of student views. Wilson et al. (1997) and Oppermann (1997) recommend the use of the longitudinal approach in such studies. Accordingly, the longitudinal approach, carried out as two separate surveys covering a period of three years, was adopted in this study in order to check whether the student voice was heeded by private higher education institutions. The initial survey to determine the issues affecting the quality of educational provision in five private universities was made from June 2011 to May 2012. Although there are six private universities in Zimbabwe, the Reformed Church University was left out because at the time of the first survey all its students were using the block release model and thus did not have conventional students.

The issues of concern raised by students from each university were communicated to the lecturers and the university administration by ZIMCHE officials. This was done in order to inform them of issues that students might find difficult to raise in the presence of their superiors. In

2013, a follow-up survey targeting the five private universities was done to check whether the issues of concern raised by students had been addressed.

The sample represented at least four per cent of the enrolment of each university. The sample included students from all the faculties and levels of study. Such a representation allowed the researcher to undertake university-specific analysis which would assist respective universities to improve those aspects that might need improvement while at the same time giving an overview of the conditions affecting quality of teaching and learning.

Questionnaires and focus group discussion guides were designed to collect data on current student problems as well as obtaining feedback on how the concerns raised in the first survey were addressed. Although the main target of the study was the student body, it was necessary to verify and seek explanations from the teaching staff on issues raised by the students, given that teaching and learning involves both students and staff. Hence, focus group discussions were first undertaken with students, and later with staff. Focus group discussions were intended to explain the issues identified in the quantitative survey and at the same time contextualizing the issues raised. Students and academics who participated in these discussions were picked from their respective faculties.

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009) defined a focus group as a facilitated group discussion involving multiple participants carried out for purposes of collecting comprehensive information about a particular subject simultaneously. Focus groups are considered to be user friendly, thus creating an environment conducive for discussing perceptions, thoughts, facts, ideas, beliefs and suggestions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The focus group discussions in this study were aimed at exploring views, experiences and suggestions by students and staff. The focus group discussions followed the procedure described by Gillespie (2001) wherein the researchers from ZIMCHE employed a structured method in order to improve the quality of information gathered whilst ensuring that

each participant was afforded an opportunity to be heard. The researchers started by asking broad open-ended questions and then gave each participant a chance to respond before opening up the question for group discussion. Gillespie (2001) argues that asking broad open-ended questions ensures that the information collected is driven by participants. The researchers then asked further questions to probe and explore deeper into the experiences and perceptions of the participants. At the end of each broad question, the researcher summarized the responses given, and requested for comments, additions or changes. This process was repeated for each of the question areas. Each focus group discussion was allocated one hour and was recorded.

4. Results and discussion

The results and discussion for the first survey are presented first before those from the follow-up survey are presented.

Findings from the first (2011-2012) survey:

Socio-economic and demographic characteristics of students

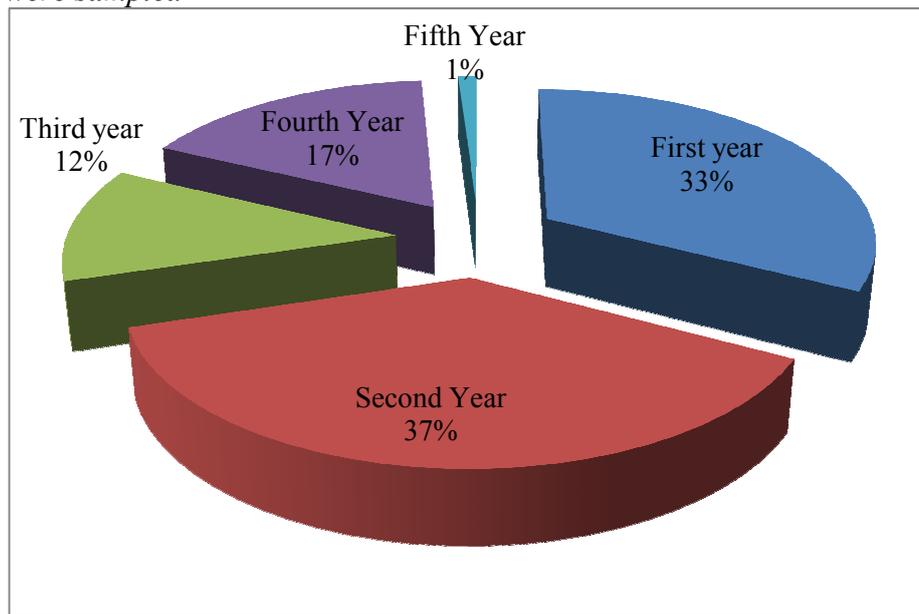
A sample of 507 students was interviewed from five private universities. Table 1 shows the proportion of students that were involved in the first survey from each university. The total number of students sampled was 507. The survey included students from all study disciplines in private universities namely agriculture, commerce, health studies, education, religious studies and social sciences. Figure 1 shows the distribution of students sampled from different levels of study.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of universities from which students were sampled

Institution	Enrolment (2011)	Sample (%)
Women's University in Africa	1970	6.3
Africa University	2100	8.3
Solusi University	2089	8.2
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	402	7.5
Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	20	34

N=507

Figure 1: Percentage distribution of levels of study for students who were sampled



Students' rating on quality of teaching

The students rating of the quality of teaching is shown in Table 2. The average scores for excellent, good and poor quality of teaching ratings were 36.5, 40.2 and 23.4 respectively. The university where the students had the highest excellent rating for quality of teaching was Africa University (44.8%). Africa University also had the highest score for good quality of teaching of 51.2%. Catholic University in Zimbabwe had the highest rating for poor quality of teaching of 47%.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of rating on quality of teaching

Institution	Excellent (%)	Good (%)	Poor (%)
Women's University in Africa	42.6	33.6	24
Africa University	44.8	51.2	4
Solusi University	44	37	19
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	8.1	44.9	47
Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	43	34	23

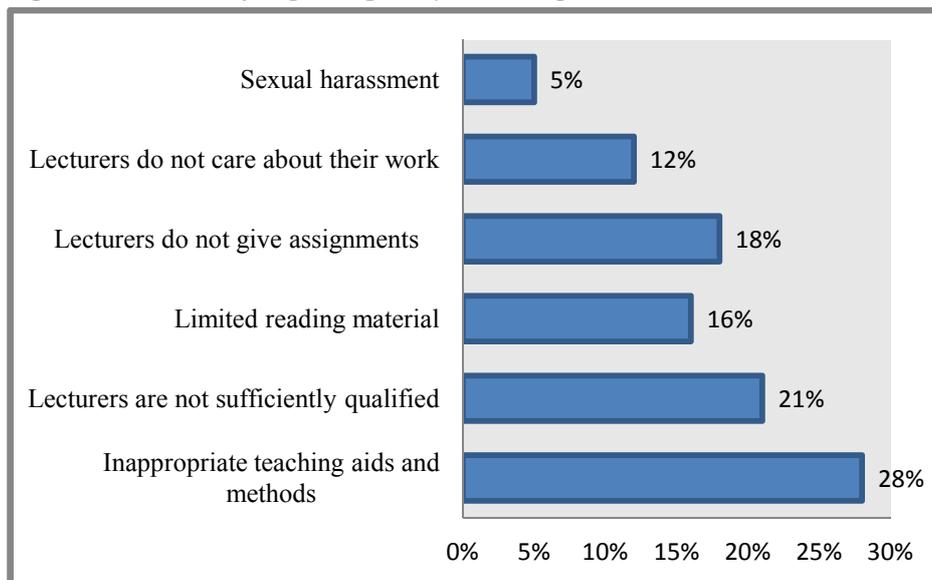
N=651

The major reasons given for rating quality of teaching as poor at all the universities are shown in Figure 2. These included: inappropriate teaching aids and methods; insufficiently qualified lecturers; limited reading material; lecturers do not give assignments; lecturers do not care about their work and sexual harassment.

Inappropriate teaching aids and methods

The reason that was prioritised by most students (28%) to lead to poor quality teaching was to do with teaching venues and inadequate teaching aids. Students reported cases where mass lectures of over 300 students were performed without using public address (PA) systems. In some cases lecturers were still using archaic teaching methods like dictation when students expected to be given electronic handouts and literature. Some universities had not yet invested in laptops and projectors and were still using chalk boards even for large classes thus making it impossible for everyone to see.

Figure 3: Reasons for poor quality teaching

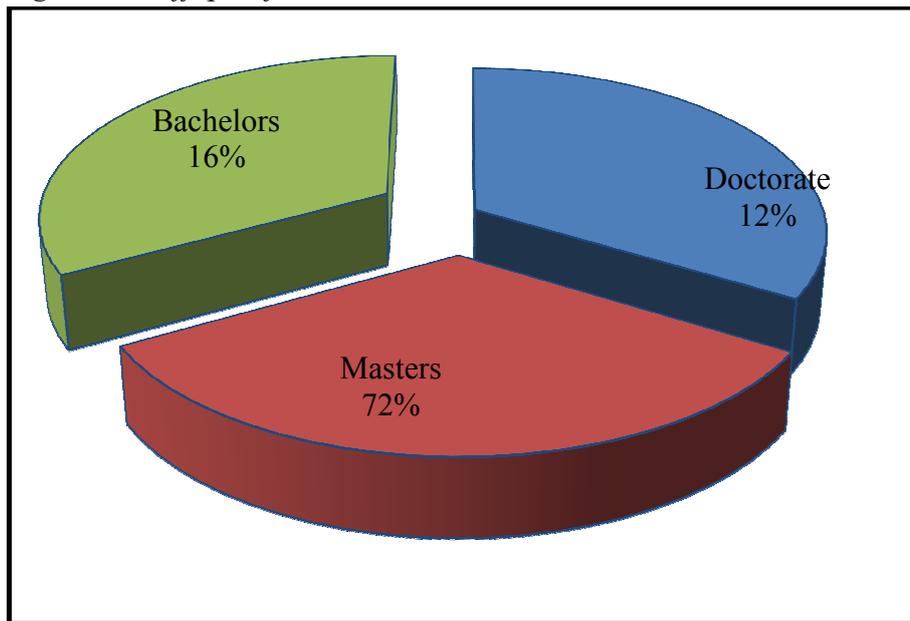


Academic Staff qualifications

The assertion by students that some lecturers were not sufficiently qualified to teach was further explored using secondary data on staff qualifications. The academic staff statistics for 2012 (see Figure 3) revealed that the majority of academic staff had masters' degrees (72%) as compared to Bachelors (16%) and Doctorates (12%). However, the proportions of academic staff with these three qualification levels differed according to the different universities. Universities with the highest proportion of staff with Doctorates were Africa University (29%) and Solusi University (17%).

The proportion of Lecturers with Doctorate Degrees (12%) fell below the international and regional standards. For example in Nigeria, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan reported that 40 percent of lecturers in Universities possess a Doctorate Degree (Adeyemo, 2012).

Figure 3: Staff qualifications



Reading material

The students who complained about inadequate reading material (16%) mentioned both library hard copies as well as electronic resources. These students were mostly from Women's university in Africa, Catholic University in Zimbabwe and Solusi University Students from Africa University lauded their university for providing adequate books and electronic resources.

Sexual harassment

A critical problem which was mentioned at two of the private universities was sexual harassment. According to Argus (2004), sexual harassment refers to gender discrimination that involves the imposition of an unwanted condition, display or requirement on the continued education of the victim. It means therefore that sexual harassment is defined in terms of the subjective experience of the victim as well as the degree to which the behaviour exhibited by the perpetrator is unwelcome and unwanted. In this study, respondents reported that sexual harassment took many forms (see Table 3); the most common of which was verbal harassment through sexual comments, insults, stories and jokes on appearance, age and/or private life. The problem was very serious at one of the universities where students reported that there were three male lecturers who abuse female students. These academic staff would ask female students to take their assignments to their respective homes, while some would threaten to fail the students. Students remarked that a group of students can be failed if such lecturers suspected that the group was involved in the lecturer's failure to harass a female student. One of the students was quoted saying: *"It is painful to know that you are competing with a lecturer who will not marry your girl friend but will probably infect her with HIV. It is not fair at all."*

At one of the universities, sexual harassment was so rampant that even non-academic staff members were abusing female students. On the other hand, there were male lecturers who were also abusing male students. The sexually harassed students go through psychological trauma such as

fear, anger, depression, humiliation, self pity and sorrow. Similar results by Shumba (2002) revealed that students exposed to sexual harassment experience confusion, worry, stress, irritability, low self-esteem, helplessness, anxiety, vulnerability and alienation. Many countries in the world including Zimbabwe, have reported rampant sexual harassment of students in universities (Muchena & Mapfumo, 2012; Zindi, 1994, 2002). These results clearly reveal that the hostile and unfavourable gender environment that prevails in universities adversely impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. Win (1994) depicts the relationship between students and lecturers as similar to the biblical David and Goliath situation, where the one with authority uses their power to get what they want. She suggests that institutions must create and adhere to policies and grievance procedures for those who are sexually harassed. Singer (1989) found that institutions without well documented policies and grievance procedures on sexual harassment had higher cases of harassment compared to those that do not.

Table 3: Forms of sexual harassment

Forms of sexual harassment	Frequency (%)
Sexual comments, insults, stories and jokes on appearance, dress, age and/or private life	25.1
Demanding sex in exchange for good grades	21
Physical contact, for example, touching, pinching, patting	16.4
The use of threats or rewards to solicit sexual favors	14.3
Sexual advances and sexually suggestive gestures	10.3
Unwelcome telephone calls and correspondences e.g. emails/sms	5
Display of sexually explicit or suggestive material	4
Whistling	3.9
N=651	

Findings from the second survey:

Teaching venues, Teaching aids and methods

Two of the five universities had addressed the problems highlighted in the first survey. Projectors had been installed in most of the teaching venues and mobile projectors and laptops were also available. Public address systems were now available at teaching venues used for mass lectures. This was done to cater for the increasing enrolments (see Table 4).

Table 4: Change (%) in student enrolments for 2011 and 2013

Institution	2011 Enrolment	2013 Enrolment	% Change
Women's University in Africa	1970	2751	40
Africa University	2100	2504	19
Solusi University	2089	2142	3
Catholic University in Zimbabwe	402	558	39
Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University	20	34	70
Reformed Church University	70	197	181
TOTAL	6651	8186	23

Lecturer Qualifications

Table 5 shows a comparison between the ratio of Doctorate, Masters and Bachelors Degree holder between the first survey (2012) and the second survey (2013). It is clear from Table 5 that overall, the proportion of academic staff in the universities who are Doctorate Degree holders increased by 25%. This improvement was attributed to recruitment of Zimbabwean Lecturers from the Diaspora as well as staff development of Lecturers who were previously Masters Degrees holders. There was a marked (60%) decrease in the proportion of academic staff with Bachelor's Degrees.

Table 5: Proportions of academic staff holding Doctorate, Master's and Bachelor's Degrees

Qualification	2011	2013	% Change
Doctorate degree	12	15	25

Masters degree	72	75	4.2
Bachelors' degree	16	10	60

Sexual harassment

Students reported a decrease in the incidence of the menace of sexual harassment that had existed at the time of the previous survey. They attributed this to intervention by university management in making sure that: implicated staff members were reprimanded and in some cases dismissed; sexual harassment policies and procedures were crafted, enacted and enforced and awareness of students' rights was improved. The sexual harassment policies and procedures clearly stipulated the actions and situations that constitute sexual harassment as well as the procedures to be followed in addressing complaints and reports. The universities had put the following strategies in place:

- Seminars on sexual harassment provided during orientations for new students;
- Suggestion boxes and hotlines enable students to provide information on perpetrators anonymously;
- Workshops and training sessions on ethics;
- Induction of new employees and signing to acknowledge having read and understood the sexual harassment policy;
- Counseling and self-awareness sessions given students and
- Continued listening to students' concerns through ensuring their representation at meetings for example; departmental boards, faculty boards, senate and Council.

5. Observations

It was observed that students appreciated the process of soliciting views from them and addressing their concerns and suggestions extremely beneficial. Hodkinson and Shaw (2013) also reported that when students notice that their inputs are respected and when they derive benefit from their contribution, there is increased engagement and improved quality of the learning environment. Academic staff members engage students in

identifying loopholes in the teaching and learning system. Students, when engaged by an external body like ZIMCHE, felt free to reveal tough issues that they would normally not highlight to their lecturers and administrators. These included reporting sensitive matters like sexual harassment as well as exposing inherent injustices.

Lundy (2007) proposed a pertinent model comprising of four elements as a way of making sure that the student voice is well accommodated. The elements are space (opportunity to express a views), voice (facilitation to express their views), audience (listening to student feedback) and influence (acting upon the feedback given).

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