

INCORPORATING THE MATURE STUDENTS VOICE AND LIVED EXPERIENCES INTO CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Improving academic quality requires feedback from students since they have specific insight in their lived educational experience. Most institutions assess educational experience by evaluating individual modules. Few institutions collectively review evaluation data from multiple modules or explore this data for evidence of curriculum transformation. The University of Pretoria developed four curriculum transformation drivers and the School of Health Systems and Public Health developed and implemented 19 transformation-related statements. We revised the standard end-of-module evaluations to explore student experiences regarding the implementation of these drivers. 45 modules were reviewed. The quantitative data were analysed in Excel. Qualitative data were analysed using an inductive approach with open-coding. We generated categories and themes before comparing these to the curriculum transformation drivers. Four major themes emerged from the qualitative data: reflecting the “what”, “why”, “when”, “where”, “how” and “who” of the student experience. Categories and subcategories were explored and linked to the quantitative results. The results show that the students valued their educational experience and felt valued as students. The students’ voices provided a rich source of data regarding curriculum transformation and included detailed suggestions for quality improvement. Our study presents substantive evidence of authentic educational and philosophical intentions that were realised in practice.

Keywords: curriculum transformation, program evaluation, student experience, student feedback, quality improvement

INTRODUCTION

Quality, and quality improvement, arise from and are dominated by a production discourse focussing on meeting the needs of the market. Houston (2008, 61–79) suggests that the quality imperative in higher education is market related and driven by government. Houston (2008, 61–79) also states that the politics of quality drives agendas that include legitimising changes in the higher education landscape, funding and a focus on value for money while concomitantly reducing the autonomy of higher education institutions. This shift has resulted in systems that include elements of audit-based quality control, which may be inappropriate for higher education (Hoecht 2006, 541–563).

Although we use the term “quality” to measure outcomes in higher education, the concept of “quality” originated as a manufacturing paradigm. Applying the same concept to higher education is complicated by the presence of multiple customers or stakeholders who have different perceptions of quality. In higher education, stakeholders may include prospective employers (who value work-readiness); professional bodies (who value content knowledge and skills); the government (who value metrics such as graduation rates as a measure of value for money); the academic community (who value the generation of knowledge); and the student to name just a few. The systematic review done by Welzant et al. (2015, 3–13) resulted in a conceptual model of quality for higher education, which include concepts such as purposeful, transformative, exceptional and accountable. Each of the four components is clarified by examples of accompanying quality indicators. The model highlights the multifaceted, multi-sectoral view of quality in higher education. As a key stakeholder, the student features prominently in the model where quality is viewed as transformative (Welzant et al. 2015, 3–13).

Baird suggests that universities have three particular purposes: to be leaders in society, to be servants to society and to be visionaries for society (as cited in Houston 2002, 1–7). Universities, as servants to society, must respond to broader societal changes and demands. In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall campaign elicited a pivotal societal response from higher education institutions in the country. The campaign highlighted exclusionary fees and the lack of progress towards transformation within South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Muller 2016; Satgar 2016). In response, HEIs were mandated to implement curriculum and broader transformation by both the Department of Higher Education and Training (Cloete et al. 2006), and society.

In an effort to facilitate transformation, the University of Pretoria (UP) consulted with both external and internal stakeholders to develop a curriculum transformation framework for academic programmes (UP 2017, 1–6). The curriculum transformation framework provides

philosophical intent which each discipline can use to interrogate current practices and transform their curricula. The four drivers are: 1) responsiveness to social context; 2) epistemological diversity; 3) renewal of pedagogy and classroom practices; and 4) an institutional culture of openness and critical reflection. Driver 1 suggests that curricula should respond to local and global contexts, histories, realities and problems. Driver 2 intends to bring marginalised groups, experiences, knowledges and worldviews emanating from Africa and the Global South to the centre of each curriculum. Driver 3 focuses on the responsiveness and training in new pedagogical methodologies and approaches within disciplines. Driver 4 seeks to expose and resist the subliminal practices of the hidden curriculum that characterise South Africa's past (UP 2017, 1–6).

The Faculty of Health Sciences tasked its Teaching and Learning Committee, composed of members from all schools, to develop specific curriculum transformation plans for their programmes. One school, the School of Health Systems and Public Health (SHSPH), engaged its academic and support staff in a process to create awareness, ensure “buy-in” and interpret the intent of the four institutional drivers into practical, contextualized statements which could be implemented in the SHSPH. The process resulted in 19 specific statements which specified personal behaviours that support and advance transformation (Turner et al. 2019, 1129–1135). Each statement included a non-specific statement (other) to allow for variation in job descriptions. The SHSPH implemented a programme of change with the academic and administrative staff. To evaluate the level of change, the SHSPH considered student evaluations, which are completed at the end of modules. The SHSPH revised the module evaluations to include four questions exploring the changes implemented to achieve the four transformation drivers and the aspirational statements articulated by the SHSPH staff. Student evaluations are an important source of information about the progress of curriculum transformation and provide the basis for further improvement, as well as providing accountability to both internal and external stakeholders such as government and society (Douglass, Thomson and Zhao 2012, 317–335).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

It is not known how curriculum transformation interventions implemented by the SHSPH were experienced by the postgraduate students.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

In this study, we explored the perceptions of postgraduate students regarding the changes made by the SHSPH to achieve curriculum transformation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We reviewed the evaluation documents of 45 modules presented in 2019. The quantitative data from nine questions with Likert-type scales were analysed in Excel. Qualitative data were extracted from three open-ended questions and analysed using an inductive approach with open-coding. The researchers combined the responses for the three questions and performed two individual cycles of open-coding. After the open-coding, the researchers discussed their coding, and collectively identified themes and categories. Once this step was completed, the categories and themes were compared to the curriculum transformation drivers. Ethics approval was granted (#363/2019).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored postgraduate students' perceptions of some of the changes made to achieve curriculum transformation at one school in the Faculty of Health Sciences. The data from the open-ended questions gave insight into students' subjective experiences (positive and negative) and how they interpreted the content of the curriculum, and the context in which learning took place. The resultant themes aligned well with the institutional drivers, and we decided to frame our findings according to these four drivers. The results from the quantitative analyses that related to each driver were interwoven with the qualitative results to provide a single narrative. We excluded the "neutral" and "disagree" categories because these received fewer than 5 per cent of the responses per question.



Figure 1: The four institutional drivers of curriculum transformation (adapted from: UP 2017, 1–6)

Epistemological diversity

This theme is related to educational content knowledge, or “WHAT” is taught. Respondents commented on the appropriateness and relevance of the content included in the programmes. Respondents considered the level of difficulty or cognitive complexity to be appropriate. The

content of the modules and the modules themselves were thought to be well organised, with a logical sequence to the content. From a programme evaluation point of view, we valued what the respondents' thoughts on the theory-practice integration of the content and how it contributed to their own professional development. The importance of theory informed by practice and vice versa for epistemological diversity is also echoed by Jabbar and Mirza (2019, 569–588). Responses such as “Mind-opening” and “Crucial to my academic development” echoed the respondents' appreciation of the academic content. From the quantitative analysis, 73 per cent (n=429) of the respondents strongly agreed that the surveyed modules incorporated reading material and examples that referred to an African context, reflecting the epistemological intent of curriculum transformation.

Prominent words and phrases, from an open-ended question, indicated positive views and appreciation from students regarding the programme and theoretical content in general. Words and phrases that were echoed or repeated included:

- Focussed and intellectually stimulating content
- Important content, immediately applicable
- Reasonable volume of work
- Well organised
- Well structured, well-tailored
- Good integrated and sequencing (scaffolding) of content
- Informing
- Clear expectations communicated to the students
- Practical imperative.

A few students contradicted this general perception and viewed the amount of content as too much (content-overload) for the time allocated and therefore experienced the programme as content-heavy with cognitive overload. A case study by Flodén (2017, 1054–1068) suggests that most lecturers are constantly juggling the need for positive student feedback while trying to deliver a high standard of teaching. Unfortunately, in this case, few students perceived the programme as content-heavy.

Pedagogical renewal

This theme reflects the educational experience of students and reflects “HOW” students were taught as well as “WHEN”. The didactics referred to the use of the learning management system (LMS), a hybrid mode of delivery, and the teaching, learning and assessment strategies used by

lecturers and facilitators. This is an important theme as HEIs should deliberately focus to not reinforce dominant ideologies as it relates to the way students learn. The entire spectrum of the ethno-linguistic diverse student population needs to be considered (Diallo and Maizonniaux 2016). The respondents considered the assessment strategies to be fair and appropriate; an opinion echoed by the quantitative finding where 67 per cent (n=387) of respondents strongly agreed that the assessment criteria described in study guides were clear. Three-quarters (76%; n=444) of the respondents considered the preparation and efforts of lecturers to be noteworthy. This feedback resonates with previous studies that report that students prefer organised lecturers (Wong and Chiu 2019, 218–233). Most respondents strongly agreed that relevant materials were used in modules (80%; n=460), and that theory and practice were well integrated (74%; n=427). Theory-practice integration is a crucial pedagogical concept, reiterated by Jabbar and Mirza (2019) as well. If students fail to see the connection and application of the theoretical content into the environment where they have to apply it, learning becomes a mere memorization of facts with no grounding in practical application.

The subjective feedback (from an open-ended question) was interesting as some respondents felt that the entire programme could and should be facilitated online, while some felt that only certain sections of the work could be moved to an online environment: “time wasted on content that could be online”. In contrast, some respondents indicated a need for more face-to-face contact or suggested weekend classes. This feedback illustrates the difference in student needs, as well as the importance of a well-articulated purpose statement for the programme. Such a statement should clearly indicate the mode of delivery to allow prospective students to make informed decisions before selecting a postgraduate programme. An earlier study by Lowe and Cook (2003, 53–76) found that undergraduate students’ inaccurate prior perception of course requirements contributed to suboptimal performance. Although the assumption is that postgraduate students would be better equipped to navigate their studies without as much support that undergraduate students may require, the recommendation of Lowe and Cook (2003, 53–76) for a formal induction module “... that is designed systematically to induct learners into the culture and ethos of the institution, staff and programme” would still have value. The availability of institutional documents in the form of updated yearbooks and other relevant guides are practical ways to address the feedback of students.

Respondents commented positively on guidance they received regarding pre-contact preparation and said they clearly knew what to expect and what was expected from them. This feedback is crucial for programme assessment, as study guides and associated learning outcomes are continuously revised and reformulated to achieve clarity, alignment and structure.

A large portion of all modules consists of group activities and class discussions to foster

understanding and ensure integration and application of theoretical content. Respondents valued these discussions and commented on the interactions and the cooperative learning that took place.

There was also an appreciation for the efforts made by the lecturers to help students understand the content and the way in which it was done; “Out of the ordinary teaching and I LOVE it!” They commented positively on the practical examples, the reinforcement of concepts, the use of illustrations and revision techniques. A few students indicated that the lecturers did not do enough to get feedback on student understanding of complex issues, such as statistics. A small number of respondents also experienced lecturers’ personal opinions related to public health as negative and inappropriate. According to Uiboleht, Karm and Postareff (2018, 321–347), different approaches to teaching result in a varied standard and depth of student self-reported learning outcomes. The student feedback provided above supports these differences and the need for lecturers to be aware that not all students will respond well to controversial statements and content to stimulate critical thinking and discussions on contemporary public health issues.

Respondents had different opinions on the assessment of learning. Although respondents appreciated the daily quizzes, which they felt kept them motivated, they would have appreciated if the quizzes contributed more to the collated mark. Respondents agreed that the assessment strategies were fair (quantitative data), but in the open-ended questions some indicated that they did not like the notion that in some modules all assignments were group-related and that there were no individual assignments. They also indicated that the assignments were time-consuming.

Institutional culture

This third driver links to the institution and those who work there or the “WHO” and the “WHERE AT”. Four categories supported this theme:

- Lecturer behaviour (objective component)
- Lecturer attributes (subjective component)
- Physical spaces related to student comfort
- Physical spaces related to equipment

On lecturer behaviour and attributes, respondents were complementary and appreciative that lecturers were punctual, well prepared, polite, passionate and “willing to go the extra mile”. They viewed the lecturers as content specialists who “brought it [sic: content] to life” and “the

lecturer inspires us”. They (the lecturers) explained and simplified content which enhanced the learning process for the students. Respondents acknowledged an emotional connection with the lecturers, commenting on the emotional support received and said that they were experiencing “separation anxiety” as they were nearing the end of the programme. These valued lecturer characteristics of being well prepared (organised), content specialists (knowledgeable) and emotional connection (approachable) are similar to what has been reported previously (Wong and Chiu 2019, 218–233). The institutional culture of openness and collegiality with postgraduate students was supported by the quantitative findings that showed that 84 per cent (n=492) of respondents said that they felt welcome to participate in academic discussions.

There were few negative remarks from the respondents regarding the physical environment and their own comfort levels. These aspects included some cramped venues and instances when the air conditioning did not work. Respondents also mentioned that some of the equipment e.g. computers in the computer laboratory are sometimes out of order. The feedback regarding the physical environment is positive as this environment can have far reaching cognitive, physiological, and affective effects (Choi, Van Merriënboer and Paas 2014, 225–244).

Paphitis and Kelland (2016, 184–203) argue that for HEIs to develop civic-mindedness in their graduates, an epistemic shift is required at the level of institutional culture “... to affect the three core pillars of the university (teaching and learning, research and community engagement), enabling universities to achieve the goal of developing civic-minded graduates, and making universities spaces for transformation rather than merely transformed spaces, in the eyes of both their students and the broader public”. Although Paphitis and Kelland (2016, 184–203) provide much theoretical knowledge, they do not provide enough examples of the “how to”. In our study, module coordinators made practical efforts to transform the institutional culture in their teaching space, which is commendable.

Responsiveness to social context

This driver links to students’ internal motivation, their own professional development and their ontological value system or “WHY” they chose to study public health. This is an important driver to establish whether students view their studies as fair value for the time, money and input they have to invest. This driver also links to whether students think their studies will contribute to their professional and personal growth, as well as increasing their employability or eligibility for promotion and career progression. Positive comments included remarks such as “This will assist me with ...” and “mind-opening” which clearly indicate that respondents experienced the programme as a positive contribution to their professional and personal

development. Almost three-quarters of respondents (72%; n=404) agreed that participating in the programme enhanced their professional development.

Although students are encouraged to complete the module evaluations, due to the anonymous, voluntary and non-credit or penalty bearing nature of the online survey, only students that are motivated or feel strongly about sharing their opinion will be heard. Our findings may thus be limited by the fact that not all students' views are represented here. However, the SHSPH and module coordinators provide multiple platforms for feedback (e.g. email, face-to-face) and our findings appear consistent with ad hoc module feedback shared in academic meetings.

Finally, these modules preceded the dramatic changes in the global teaching and learning environment with the arrival of COVID-19. However, the driver framework used in the evaluation requires minimal adaptation for fully online modules and therefore, trend analysis may still hold potential for future research.

CONCLUSION

The students' voices provided a rich source of data of the curriculum transformation efforts and included detailed constructive suggestions for quality improvement. The findings indicate that the respondents value their educational experience and feel valued as students. There is substantive evidence of authentic educational and philosophical intentions linked to curriculum transformation that materialised in practice.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Maintaining and assuring quality in higher education is as multi-faceted as the needs of multiple stakeholders that need to be met. Central to this endeavour is the student experience, and nuanced and well-designed routine evaluations can provide valuable feedback for academics regarding their academic efforts. The planned addition of the perspectives of alumni regarding the usefulness of their qualification, their career progression and their contribution to society will add to what is already known about curriculum transformation within the SHSPH. With the need for an "online in a hurry" teaching approach in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, academic staff will be pressured to optimise their modules quickly and the student voice will be pivotal in the ability to adapt quickly.

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