Perceptions of American and Nigerian Lecturers at an American Style University in Nigeria

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Abstract

Understanding students’ perceptions is critical to delivering consistent quality service at an American-style higher education institute. This paper exclusively describes an exploratory study that investigates Nigerian students' perceptions of American expatriate and Nigerian teaching faculty at an American style education initiative in Nigeria based on clearly defined faculty evaluation results. These perceptions are specific to three areas across all disciplines and schools: course, instructor and student. By evaluating these perceptions, it is anticipated that our analysis will create a starting point for examining how an American style education can be maintained and supported in a Nigerian education system.

Keywords: American, lecturers, student, Nigeria, faculty

Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of American style universities opening campuses around the world. These universities enable local students to gain an American degree without leaving their country of origin. In order to maintain American style standards and to provide an American style teaching and learning experience to the students, these institutions will typically employ American expatriate lecturers. However, realistically, with the expense of hiring and maintaining expatriate faculty lifestyle, and in support of the local economy, locally trained lecturers are also becoming part of the American experience. It therefore becomes imperative to evaluate the students’ perceptions of locally trained faculty as well as western-trained faculty.
One method used to measure students’ perception and which is prevalent in American universities are the end-of course evaluations. The focus of this paper is on the student and not the lecturer or administrators. With the focus on learning, it is argued that unless there can be an evaluation process that is analyzed, then the process of learning may be in question (Marlin, 1987).

This paper describes a study carried out by the authors that investigated students’ perceptions towards American expatriate and Nigerian teaching faculty at a relatively small, private, American-style university known as the American University of Nigeria (AUN). This university is the first of its kind in western-Sub-Sahara Africa in terms of offering a comprehensive American curriculum and hires a large number of American faculty including the President of the University.

For the study, the researchers studied the faculty evaluations results of fall semester of 2010 that student fill out at the end of each semester. The purpose of the study is to gauge the overall quality of the course, and instructor including students’ comments of their contribution over the semester. This analytical evaluation is the first to review and summarize the faculty evaluations from an American perspective.

Our analysis is an attempt to capture and synthesize the key issues and findings regarding the perception of Nigerian students on American and Nigerian lecturers. It is expected that this study will give attention to future research in this area of great personal and professional significance to educators and administers so to continue to prioritize strategies for growth and educational development in these countries.

Literature Review

In most colleges in the U.S today, faculty evaluation to gather students’ feedback at the semester’s mid/end is standard practice. These student rated evaluations are probably the most common tool used to assess classroom teaching (Wright, 2006), (Seldin, 1999), (Centra, 1979)). While some deem these evaluations as over-weighted for professional decisions (Franklin, 2001), the faculty evaluations continue to be highly controversial and highly debated within administration. Nevertheless, they are still readily used. (Abrami, 2001) argues that there is no other tool supplies the same sort of measureable and comparable data. It is therefore expected that these evaluations will continue to be part of the teaching profession and a way to obtain the perceptions of students towards their teachers.

In most colleges in the U.S today, faculty evaluation to gather students’ feedback at the semester’s mid/end is standard practice. These student rated questionnaires are probably the most common tool used to assess classroom teaching (Wright, 2006) and are consequently the best way to obtain the perceptions of students towards their lecturers.
To have a better understanding of the impact of the student evaluation results, the researcher must offer some insight in the conceptual definition of the term ‘Perception’. (Robins et al., 2001) presents one theory referred to as the ‘Person’ perception.

Here the lecturers are rated as outstanding by a few students and unsatisfactory by other students despite the same course content, the lecturers’ teaching behavior and classroom environment. Even though the students see the same lecturer, they perceive his/her abilities differently. This experience by the student is measured as perceptions and rated as such.

The notion of perception is believed to be a series of interpretations of one’s sensory impressions that provide meaning to his/her environment. (Robins et al., 2001) further states that the factors that cause an impression are labeled the ‘perceiver’, the ‘target’ and the ‘situation’. The perceiver in our study is the student who is affected by their own characteristics and personality such that if their needs are not met or satisfied this may arouse strong inferences in their perception of the lecturer. The target is the faculty member and their characteristics are being evaluated, hence influencing what is perceived. In our study, the faculty member’s personality, conduct and manner undoubtedly influence perception. Finally the situation is the place of the activity which can play a vital role in perception. In our study, the situation is characterized as the classroom setting, temperature of the room, noise level are just a few factors that may persuade the outcome of the feedback.

(Danielson & McGreal, 2000) recommend that evaluation forms should measure the delivery strategies, professional behaviors and instruction of content knowledge that impinges on student learning. In our study we wish to determine the perceptions of students towards their course, instructor and themselves within the two subcultures (American and Nigerian).

There have been many studies of perceptions of professors. These include the style of dress and forms of address (Richard, et al., 2008) use of humour (Torok et al., 2004), voice and justification on students’ perceptions of instructor fairness (Schmidt et al., 2003), whether gender is an issue (Gumbiner, et al., 1998) and physical attractiveness (Romano et al., 1989). In this seminal paper we will study the perceptions of American and Nigerian teachers in an American style university in Nigeria.

The Study

The study was performed at the American University of Nigeria (AUN), Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria. AUN was founded in May 2005. AUN is the first American-styled university in the West African sub-region and currently has over 1500 full-time students and around 100 faculty members. The majority of the students at AUN are from relatively well to do and knowledge-based working class families and when admitted they are expected to purchase a laptop and activate their AUN email account to correspond with their lecturers, peers and administrators. This opportunity is extended 24 hours with steady internet connectivity.
All the American expatriate lecturers in our study had taught previously in a university in the U.S prior to their appointment. Likewise, all the Nigerian lecturers in our study had taught previously in a university in the U.S or Nigeria prior to their appointment. The study took place the fall semester of 2010 and involved studying the evaluations made by students of 9 courses taught by American expatriate lecturers and 9 courses taught by Nigerian lecturers. The sample size of faculty is particularly small and may have distorted the experiences documented particularly relevant or irrelevant.

The primary question that preoccupied the mind of the researchers was whether there would be a noticeable difference in the perceptions of the students to their course, the instructor and themselves when their course is taught by American lecturers compared to Nigerian lecturers. The perceptions were collected in the form of a student questionnaire and all three ratings were summative feedback. Perceptions were scored in the range 0 to 5 where 0 indicates unacceptable and 5 indicates excellent.

To obtain the perception of the course the average scores of the following 5 criteria were made: organization (whether the course was well organized, material was presented in a logical sequence, instructional time was used effectively etc.); clarity (whether the goals and educational objectives of course were clear, faculty expectations of students were clear, grading policy was clearly explained); content (whether the course content facilitated students’ ability to achieve course goals and objectives, and when applicable, was relevant to their career preparation); fairness (whether the material on exams was related to material covered either in class or in course assignments, and when applicable, was relevant to their career preparation); and overall perception of the course (whether the course objectives were met).

To obtain the perception of the instructor the average scores of the following 7 criteria were made: organization (whether the instructor presented material in an organized fashion; emphasized important points etc.); clarity (whether the instructor communicated effectively, explained well, presented content clearly, and gave comprehensible response to questions); enthusiasm (whether the instructor was dynamic and energetic, stimulated learner interest, and enjoyed teaching); rapport (whether the instructor discussed recent development in the field, directed students to current reference materials, and provided additional materials to cover current topics); contribution (whether the instructor discussed recent developments in the field, directed students to current reference materials, and provided additional materials to cover current topics), professionalism (whether the instructor demonstrated role model qualities that were of use to the students), and attitude (whether the instructor was concerned about students learning the material, encouraged class participation, and was receptive to differing views).

To obtain the perceptions of themselves, the average scores of the following 6 criteria were made for each student: attendance and participation in class sessions; completion of assignments on time; learned the required information for the course; used their laptop and technology successfully in the course; used the library as part of the class; and used at least one learning support program (writing center, math lab, tutor, etc.).
Results

To capture the perceptions, impressions and thereby gauge the positive or negative reactions of the students towards their American expatriate and Nigerian lecturers, the researchers analyzed and collated students evaluation results from the comprehensive questionnaires given out to the students at the end of their courses.

Figure 1: Student scores given to course, instructor and student by both groups

Figure 1 is a summary of the average scores given by the students to their course, instructor and themselves when their courses are taught by American expatriate and Nigerian faculty. Though both sets of lecturers scored very highly, it can be seen that for each criteria the students evaluate their American expatriate lecturers better than their Nigerian counterparts.

Figure 2: Overall student scores given to American expatriate and Nigerian lecturers

Figure 2 is a summary of the overall average scores given by the students to their American expatriate and Nigerian lecturers. Again, though both sets of lecturers scored very highly, it can be seen that the students evaluate their American expatriate lecturers more highly than their Nigerian counterparts.

Discussion

There are 4 judging impairments that influence perception that could explain our results. The first impairment is called the ‘Halo Effect’ (George & Jones, 2008). This phenomenon occurs when students rate their lecturer based on a single favorable characteristic - it portrays the
tendency of the student rater to form a general opinion of the lecturer being rated and then allows that opinion to influence the results. For example, if the general opinion of a lecturer is favorable then the halo effect is positive and the lecturer receives higher ratings on many items than a more objective evaluation would justify. The opposite also applies in the halo effect, if, for instance, an unfavorable opinion is formed, then this will cause a lower rating of the lecturer across all areas. As a result of this effect, student ratings make less differentiation between "strengths" and "weaknesses" than is desirable.

The second impairment that may limit more objective rating is the ‘Contrast Effect’ (George & Jones, 2008). Here the students do not evaluate the lecturer in isolation; a student’s rate is influenced by other lecturers or events they have recently encountered. This distorts perceptions, for example, if the student had a class and a lecturer that was mediocre and also happened to be a Nigerian, then soon after in the next class, the same student had a good experience with a lecturer that happened to be American, this experience may rank the American lecturer higher than the Nigerian.

The third impairment that may limit more objective rating is the ‘Similar to me’ effect (George & Jones, 2008). The ‘Similar to me’ effect records that the student will rate more positively who share similar traits to them, than they would perceive those who are dissimilar. Here, a student’s perception of their lecturer is selectively altered to align with the vested interest they represent.

The fourth impairment that may have affected our results is that students may not be deemed qualified to judge many other factors which may be used to characterize excellent instruction (The IDEA Center, 2011). For example, students may not be qualified to judge the appropriateness of the course objectives, the relevance of assignments and readings, the suitability of the content material, the grading standards. These and other dimensions of teaching excellence are important to a comprehensive evaluation, however the only tool employed in the study was the student ratings which some may argue is insufficient evidence to base any conclusions.

Possible reasons for the disposition of the sampled students towards their American expatriate and Nigerian lecturers could be varying expectations, students’ background, and teacher-training. One of the possible reasons why American lecturers scored higher than their Nigerian colleagues is that AUN uses American teaching style which the American lecturers are already familiar with and they also have more experience in managing and administrating their classes than the Nigerian lecturers. Another possible reason why American lecturers received a higher mark in their course is because of their ability to integrate their experience into the course through practical activities such as group discussions, debates, and case studies. Due to poor general infrastructure, the Nigerian educational system has periled greatly with the lack of professional and qualified teaching staff, out of date books and hard to access technology, it would seem that American trained and experienced lecturers would perform at a higher level incorporating up-to-date researched teaching methods. It may also be argued that American
lecturers are more experimental in their teaching approach, flexible with their personalities and behaviours which, in turn, may influence the perceiver and result in a more positive outcome.

Conclusion
In this paper, the authors examined the perceptions of students in an American-style university in Nigeria towards their American expatriate and Nigerian lecturers by evaluating specific indicators such as organization, clarity, content, facilities and others. From our results, it can be seen that the American expatriate lecturers are perceived better than their Nigerian colleagues.

It is hoped that these students’ opinions are used in policy changes, faculty effectiveness and course allocation. The results confirm that students’ differences significantly impact perceptions of the three areas at the American University of Nigeria and these differences represent promising areas for ongoing exploratory research.

References


