

STUDENT EVALUATION OF MODULES: DOES THE TIMING MATTER?

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ABSTRACT

The common practice in many higher education institutions in Ghana and Africa is for module evaluation to be carried out at the end of teaching and learning activities. It is usually done before the final semester examination. This timing is believed to be more of a conventional wisdom than a systematic research informed practice. This study sought to find out students' most preferred timing for module evaluation. The study used a mixed methods design with a simple random technique to select four hundred and fifty (450) students from a public university and a private university college. The findings revealed mixed views among participants with regards to the timing of module evaluation even though majority (57%) prefer module evaluation to occur after the last class meeting with the teaching staff, or after the final assessment of the module. The findings also established that there is no significant difference between the views of students from a public university and those from a private university college with regards to the most preferred timing of module evaluation. This implies that the timing of module evaluation matters to students, which requires their involvement in the decision-making process of when to evaluate a module. However, this study recommends that further research with larger sample size will be required in order to establish a more conclusive outcome on students' most preferred timing of module evaluation.

Key Words: Evaluation, module, timing, higher education

INTRODUCTION

The effectiveness of quality assurance within higher education institutions depend not only on structures but also key stakeholder involvement and the reciprocities within feedback systems (Ansah, 2015; Chalmers, 2011; European Association of Universities, 2012). The structures may usually include: policy and planning, roles and responsibilities, and evaluation process and feedback loops. Key stakeholder involvement also includes: senior leadership, academic and administrative staff, students, and external stakeholders such as funders, employers, and graduates' participation (European Association of Universities, 2006; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003).

With regards to structures, it has been argued that it is a pointless exercise as well as de-motivating to implement institutional quality assurance without linking it with institutional policy and planning. Policy and planning provide strategic direction for building quality culture which is a key principle for successful implementation of institutional quality assurance (European Association of Universities, 2006; Frazer, 1994). Effective implementation of institutional quality assurance also requires a stable and durable organisational structure with clear roles and responsibilities that balance bureaucracy and professional autonomy, and promotes effective communication. This means that quality assurance units are required to coordinate quality assurance implementation; however, the units should not be over-bureaucratic but facilitate the building of quality culture within the institution. Furthermore, institutional quality assurance needs internal evaluation processes and feedback loops. This implies that an institution conducts regular evaluation involving members outside the institution who can provide objective

judgement so that the institution can “learn from its experiences, share good practices, and minimise and correct mistakes” (European Association of Universities, 2006, p. 18).

The involvement of stakeholders starts with senior leadership. Scott (2009) has argued that change does not happen, it must be led. It has been indicated that best practice implementation of quality assurance has effective leadership (European Association of Universities, 2006). Leadership is required to coordinate, provide strategic direction, and set out clear priorities to guide activities of staff through effective discussions (European Association of Universities, 2006). Senior leadership is responsible for promoting effective communication to improve relationships within the institution and also with the outside world. It has also been indicated that in best practice situations, senior leadership provides effective monitoring of implementation and ensures that monitoring plays supportive and developmental roles, so as not to be considered by staff as a controlling mechanism (European Association of Universities, 2006). Stakeholder involvement also includes effective staff participation. Frazer (1994) argues that everyone in the organisation should have a responsibility for maintaining and enhancing quality. It has been asserted that in best practice situations, academic and administrative staff members have substantial responsibilities with increased sense of ownership for quality assurance implementation (Frazer, 1994). This is achieved through effective and efficient top-down and bottom-up communication channels, and staff recruitment, development and incentive systems (European Association of Universities, 2006). Effective communication articulates the benefits to staff members for being part of a successful enterprise by taking responsibility for quality assurance which includes quality enhancement. Additionally, among the main perspectives of quality required for effective implementation of quality assurance in higher education are funding bodies and employers (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Many more perspectives including professional bodies, graduates/alumni and international experts have also been identified as necessary for effective implementation of institutional quality assurance (European Association of Universities, 2012; Hancock et al., 2009). In best practice situations, the involvement of external stakeholders in quality assurance implementation has been highlighted in the literature. Finally, and the point of interest to this study is student involvement in quality assurance implementation. In best practices situations, students’ evaluation and involvement in decision-making bodies are evident (European Association of Universities, 2006). This is consistent with Harvey and Green’s (1993) argument that students are participants who co-create quality outcomes which require their participation in quality assurance processes.

Students’ active involvement of the entire higher educational process including quality assurance is prevalent and there is a widespread recognition that their involvement has many advantages with regards to quality outcomes (Brooman, Darwent, & Pimor, 2014; Harvey, 2011). One of the most common practices with respect to students’ active involvement in higher education quality assurance is student evaluation of modules which are also referred to as units or courses in some higher education contexts. Almost all modules taught in higher education institutions have some form of feedback through students’ evaluation (Padró, 2011; Puteh & Habil, 2011). The regular practice in many higher education institutions including those in Ghana is for module evaluation to be carried out at the end of teaching and learning activities of the module, usually before final examinations (Harvey, 2011; Padró, 2011; Puteh & Habil, 2011). Regarding pen and paper evaluation, the practice is to reserve some teaching time at the final day of teaching for the evaluation to be carried out and in the case of virtual evaluation, students are requested online to evaluate a module after the final teaching (Anderson, 215; Bennett & Nair, 2011). Given that module evaluation serves three evaluative purposes, namely, formative, summative and informative (Spencer and Schmelkin, 2002 as cited in Anderson, 215), the timing is key. However, little is known in the literature to suggest that the common practice of evaluating module at the end of last teaching activity is a result of systematic research on the timing of module evaluation by students. This paper reports on a study conducted to determine students’ views on their most preferred timing of module evaluation, and to establish any association between the views of students from a public university and those from a private university college.

METHODS

A convergent mixed-methods approach was preferred for this study because the aim of the study requires qualitative data and quantitative data to be collected and analysed separately and merged (Bradt, Burns, & Creswell, 2013; Guetterman, Fetters, & Creswell, 2015) in order to comprehensively answer the research questions of “what is students’ most preferred timing of module evaluation, and why?” and “Is there an association of the views of students from a public university and those from a private university college regarding evaluation of modules by

students?” The study sought to measure not only students’ preferences but also reasons for their preferences with regards to the timing of module evaluation. The first part of the research questions was about measuring the students’ preference with regards to the timing of module evaluation and the difference in views of students from a public university and a private university college. This required the participant students to make a single choice from possible predetermined options of module evaluation timing. They were asked to make a single choice because the focus of the study was on their most preferred timing. In this vein, quantitative data was preferred and so five predetermined options of module evaluation timing were provided. They also had the opportunity to state their own timing if not indicated in the options provided. The second part of the first research question also requires the students to assign reasons for their preference of which qualitative data was considered most suitable. Respondents were therefore asked to provide reasons for their choice of module evaluation timing. The second research question was answered by a statistical calculation of an association between two groups of respondent, namely, students from a public university and students from a private university college.

A total sample size of 450 students made up of 225 from a public university and 225 from a private university college was chosen using simple random sampling technique. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw their participation at any stage. The semi-structured questionnaire was administered until a total of 450 responses were received.

The choice of a public institution and a private institution was intended to establish whether students in public institutions perceive module evaluation timing differently from those in private institutions. The data collection instrument was a questionnaire with closed ended and open ended questions to enable the students to provide both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004; Guetterman et al., 2015; Kettles, Creswell, & Zhang, 2011) to enable a comprehensive analysis of their views on the most preferred timing of module evaluation.

Findings of the study

This section presents the findings of the study which is divided into two subsections with the first section focusing on quantitative data regarding the most preferred timing of module evaluation by students, and any association of views from the two groups of respondents. The second subsection dwells on the qualitative data which deals with the reasons assigned to respondents’ choices.

Quantitative findings

The quantitative findings are about four predetermined timing options that respondents were expected to choose only one to represent their most preferred timing of module evaluation. Respondents also had the option to indicate their most preferred timing if they did not find it among the predetermined options provided but the data showed that respondents did not state any options in addition to the four options provided. Figure 1 presents the total quantitative responses of students from the both the participant public university and the participant private college university whilst figure 2 and figure 3 present responses for the participant private university college and the participant public university respectively.

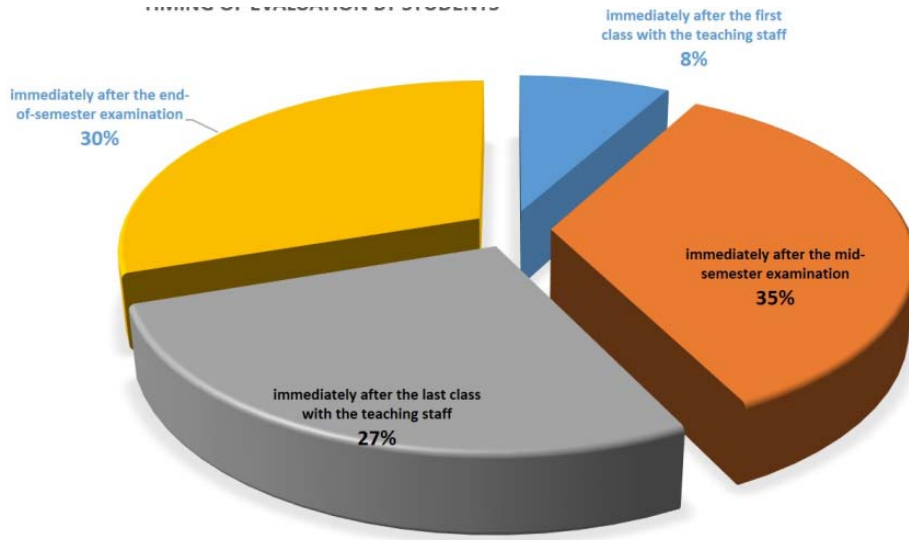


Figure 1: Preferred timing of module evaluation (All responses)

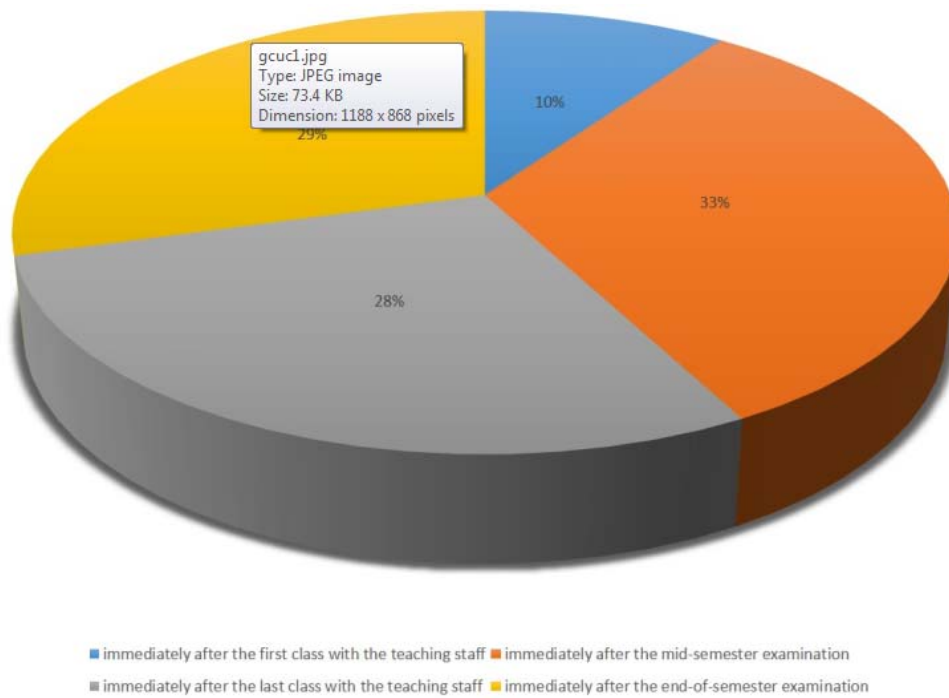


Figure 2: Preferred timing of module evaluation (responses from a private university college)

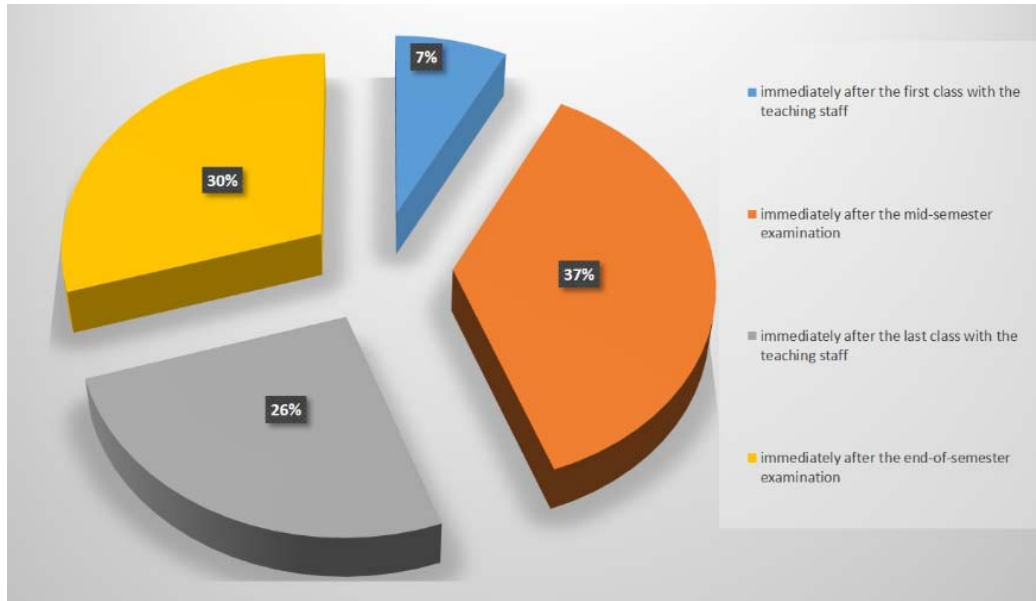


Figure3: Preferred timing of module evaluation (responses from a public university)

The quantitative data as presented in figure 1 reveal mixed views among all the respondents with regards to the most preferred timing of students' evaluation of modules. The quantitative findings in figure 1 indicate that 36(8%) of the students prefer evaluation of module to occur immediately after the first class with the teaching staff whereas 156(34.7%) want the evaluation to happen immediately after the mid-semester examination of the module. Also, 122(27.1%) of the students, desire that the evaluation is carried out immediately after the last class with the teaching staff whilst 138 (30.2%) of the students prefer that it occurs only after the end-of-semester examinations.

Meanwhile, responses of students from the private university college as shown in figure 2 indicate that 10% of the students prefer evaluation of module to occur immediately after the first class with the teaching staff and 33% wants the evaluation to happen immediately after the mid-semester examination of the module. Additionally, 28% of the students, desire that the evaluation is carried out immediately after the last class with the teaching staff whilst the remaining 29% of the students prefer that it occurs only after the end-of-semester examinations.

On the other hand, responses of students from the public university as depicted in figure 3 indicate that 7% of the students prefer evaluation of module to occur immediately after the first class with the teaching staff and 37% wants the evaluation to happen immediately after the mid-semester examination of the module. Additionally, 26% of the students, desire that the evaluation is carried out immediately after the last class with the teaching staff whilst the remaining 30% of the students prefer that it occurs only after the end-of-semester examinations.

Association of the responses from the two groups of respondents

One of the objectives of the study was to establish whether there is any association of the views of students from a public university and those of a private university college regarding the timing of module evaluation by students. As a result, Pearson Chi-Square Test was conducted on the responses and P Value (0.00) obtained suggests that there was association between the views of students from the public university and those from the private university college. Since the study dealt with nominal data, Phi or Cramer's V values was used to measure the level of association. The Cramer's V 0.862 indicates that the views of the two groups of students with respect to the timing of module evaluation are strongly associated and also statistically significant to suggest that the two groups of student hold similar views.

Qualitative findings

The respondents also provided reasons for their choice of timing for module evaluation. The reasons provided by all the respondents are presented below. The reasons of the respondents from the public university were similar to those from the private university college, and therefore have combined.

Evaluating after the first class with the teaching staff

The reasons provided by respondents for the choice of module evaluation timing “immediately after the first class with the teaching staff” are:

- It enables the teaching staff to determine whether to continue with his/her style of teaching
- It will help the teaching staff to know his or her weakness or shortfalls early
- It helps students and teaching staff to identify problems before examinations

Evaluating after mid-semester examination

The reasons given by respondents for the choice of module evaluation timing “immediately after the mid-semester examination of the module” are:

- The teaching staff can change his or her strategies after the first half of the module
- There will be more room for corrective measures before the end of semester
- To be able to determine what went wrong and right for the first half of the semester
- To identify the teaching style of the lecture and make recommendation where applicable before the second half of the semester
- “To help the teaching staff to make some modifications about the mode of teaching before the second half of the semester

Evaluating after last class

The reason indicated by respondents for the choice of module evaluation timing “immediately after the last class with the teaching staff” is:

- It will enable the teaching staff to understand the overall perception of students on the module

Evaluating after end of semester examination

The reasons given by respondents for the choice of module evaluation timing “immediately after the end-of-semester examination of the module” are:

- It is because examinations are part of the teaching and learning process
- It will enable the administration to judge the performance of the teaching staff depending on the results of the exam

DISCUSSION

The quantitative results presented depict divided views from students regarding the timing of module evaluation. However, at the aggregate level, Majority (57%) of the respondents believe that module evaluation should not happen until the last class with the teaching staff or final assessment of the module. Respondents in this group prefer module evaluation to happen immediately after the last class with the teaching staff or after the end-of-semester examination. The reasons for the views of this group were found in the qualitative responses. A respondent posited, “It is because examinations are part of the teaching and learning process”. Another said, “It will enable the

administration to judge the performance of the teaching staff depending on the results of the exam”. Again another added, “It will enable the teaching staff to understand the overall perception of students on the module”. These reasons were repeated by all the respondents in this group. It is clear that this group perceives module evaluation from summative standpoint in order to provide a comprehensive students’ view of the module to the teaching staff and leadership, probably intended to help leadership to make tenure and promotion decisions. This summative view of the respondents in this group appears to be at variance with claims by some authors (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Nasser & Barbara, 2002) that the most important purpose of module evaluation from students’ standpoint is formative. Nonetheless, the views of this group of participants in the current study appear to support the common practice of module evaluation in higher education institutions in Ghana and Africa. This practice, however, does not benefit evaluating students directly but future students because improvement activities based on the evaluation result will be implemented at next delivery of the module.

Meanwhile, minority (43%) of study participants were in favour of *evaluation timing* before the last class with teaching staff or final examinations. The reason for that was revealed in the qualitative findings where respondents appear to be emphasizing that a module should be evaluated only for formative purpose (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Dorit, McClean, & Nevo, 2012). The first group who preferred module evaluation to occur immediately after the first class with the teaching staff offered reasons that suggested formative purpose of module evaluation. A respondent said, “It will help the teaching staff to know his or her weakness or shortfalls early”. Another added, “It will help students and teaching staff to identify problems before examinations”. Similar reasons were given by the rest of the respondents in this group. It is obvious that this group of respondents was interested in module evaluation as mechanism for instructional improvement (Anderson, 215). This, of course, is useful but this timing has the limitation of not being able to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the module because just a single class cannot provide sufficient information to carry out an informed evaluation. The group that preferred module evaluation to occur immediately after the mid-semester examinations also offered reasons that suggested formative purpose of module evaluation. A respondent said, “The teaching staff can change his or her strategies after the first half of the module, and there will be more room for corrective measures before the end of semester”. Another added, “To be able to determine what went wrong and right for the first half of the semester and to help the teaching staff to make some modifications about the mode of teaching before the second half of the semester”. Similar reasons were given by the rest of the respondents in this group. It is obvious that this group of respondents was also interested in module evaluation as mechanism for instructional improvement (Anderson, 215). This supports the claim that students most important purpose of evaluation is formative (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Nasser & Barbara, 2002). Obviously, this group’s view has the same limitation of insufficient information to make an informed assessment of the module because the module is only halfway through.

It is plausible to infer that the views of respondents preferring the purpose of module evaluation to be formative stem from the notion that those students must directly benefit from the results of their module evaluation, and not solely for future students. This is reasonable but administratively challenging under the practice that module evaluations are usually done by the Quality Assurance Directorates of tertiary education institutions in Ghana rather than the teaching staff members themselves. This implies module evaluation data needs to be analysed and feedback provided to both teaching staff and students to enable the necessary adjustment to be made for the remaining part of the semester. This also suggests that module evaluation should be carried out twice or more in a semester resulting in more administrative difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Student voice has become a vital component of quality assurance practices of contemporary higher education than ever before. Students are required to provide their views on the quality of the learning experiences including module evaluation. However, their voice on the timing of module evaluation appears to be missing in the literature. This study’s quest to examine higher education students’ most preferred timing of module evaluation has revealed that there is no consensus among students about a preferred timing as well as the purpose of module evaluation. Whereas some prefer the formative purpose of module evaluation and the timing to occur half way through the module’s delivery, others desire a summative purpose of evaluation and the timing to happen after the final delivery of the module. Even though, the dominant view was that the timing of module evaluation should be after the final delivery of the module, the mixed views imply that the timing of module evaluation matters to students, which requires their

involvement in the decision-making process of when to evaluate a module. In another vein, the study established that the views of students from public and private tertiary institutions are similar with regards to the timing of module evaluation.

RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends that further research with larger sample size will be required in order to establish a more conclusive outcome on students' most preferred timing of module evaluation.

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