Student Interpersonal Relationships with Lecturers: A Study of Student Perceived Characteristics of Lecturers' Professional Competencies in Malaysian Tertiary Institutions and Implications for Student Services.

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Abstract

Research in the past has indicated the importance of interpersonal relationships with their teachers and lecturers, an element that determines student academic success. Past studies have also noted student resentment of their lecturers' alleged poor attitude, and of professional competencies that has affected student performance. It is almost undeniable that one of the greatest challenges in education is aspiring to motivate the 'unmotivated'. Students must develop positive feelings about their lecturers' professional competencies in a number of areas before they could establish positive interpersonal relationships with their lectures. A positive interpersonal relationship between the two parties tends to result in the 'trust' aspect of that relation which triggers high motivation for students to excel in their academic endeavor. Student perceptions of their lecturers' capacity and of their own are essential keys to their engagement and learning. As such, universities should be designed to enhance students' feelings of accomplishment. In the light of this, this paper presents students' perceived professional characteristics and of competencies of their lecturers in a private higher learning institution in Malaysia. The very purpose of this study is to gain some psychological input for enhancement of student services in private university environments.

Introduction:

Literature points to a strong link between positive nurturing interpersonal relationships between students and instructors as an important ingredient in the recipe for student success. Socially supportive relationships can have powerful and lasting effects on the lives of students (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Richman, Rosenfeld, & Bowen, 1998). Pianta (1999) found that emotionally warm relationships between lecturers and students provide students with a sense of security within the university settings or learning environments. It is believed that this sense of wellness promotes exploration and comfort, as well as social, emotional, and academic competence among students. Similarly, Birch and Ladd (1997) found that students who had closer relationships with teachers were better adjusted academically than students with conflicted teacher-student relationships. Ryan and Grolnick (1986) comments that students who perceived their lecturers as personally positive and supportive were more likely to feel a greater sense of competence and to be more intrinsically motivated. In the light of this argument the present study was intended to unravel the phenomenon in lecturer- student relationships, using a Malaysian Private Institution of Higher learning as sample.

Background of the Research

In a university setting, there is often a great diversity in terms of socio-cultural, political, religious and ethnic backgrounds among students and lecturers. This diversity, with the presence of an appropriate lecturer-student relationship creates a campus environment that prepares students and lecturers to live and work amicably in a socio-culturally diverse community. It also equips them to respond to an increasing complex global environment. Besides, interpersonal relations in diversity make it possible for the generation, advancement and dissemination of knowledge, which is one of the key mission characteristics of university education across the globe. It might be undeniable that healthy relationship between the lecturers and students does influence students' academic, personal and social integration into higher education. This could be attributed to the fact that lecturers contact with students both in and out of the classroom is very important in student motivation and involvement in all facets of life.

Studies on college impact on students clearly demonstrate that students' interpersonal environment, which include interactions with peers and lecturers have the greatest impact on students' changes in their aspirations, values, attitudes, beliefs and actions (Chepchieng, 2004; Whitt et al., Nora, 2001). The norms, values, attitudes and ethics that tertiary institutions impart to students, either formally or informally are the foundations of the social capital, necessary for cohesive cultures; the very bedrock of good governance and democratic political systems (World Bank, 2002)

Writer's Personal Reason for Carrying out this Study

Throughout his tenure as a lecturer in various private institutions of higher learning, the writer has been forced to show interest in student affairs either directly or indirectly. As a mentor, he has been receiving enormous student comments about lecturers, both positive and negative. As such the writer always wanted to do a research in this area of interest. As the first part of the research the writer has used many occasions to ask students to indicate the 'aspects they liked about their lecturers and those aspects they did not like'. The writer has been compiling the 'Student Views" for two reasons. First, the writer shows great interest in student affairs as he is the official pedagogy trainer for the institution he is working for. He has been using 'those student voices' to address student-lecturer issues in his pedagogy training sessions. On the other hand, the writer always wanted to do an intercultural research on student-lecturer relationships behavior, involving several countries. This research is deemed a pilot approach in his aspiration to do a big-scale research capturing student-lecturer relationships and of issues inherent in this relationship.

Problem Statement

Students, by virtue of their differences in upbringing or cultural background exhibit a variety of behavioural characteristics in educational settings which need to be managed in order for universities to function as effective learning institutions. Likewise lecturers too, by virtue of their personal qualities and differences in their teaching ability affect the learning environment in a multitude of ways. Teaching is the essential profession, the one that makes every other profession possible. Without well-qualified, caring and committed lecturers, neither improved

curricula and assessments, nor safe academic environments by the best standards can ensure that students are prepared for the future challenges and opportunities. The lecturer relationship with students for better or worse is a moral relationship (Joseph and Effron, 1993). Lecturers who allow rooms for strained relationships with their students either intentionally or unintentionally by virtue of their ego, attitude and weaknesses in their pedagogical skills and of personal character traits contribute or add to unwanted problems that may affect both parties.

As per the present trend higher education is viewed as business-like enterprise, where the student as a customer seeks a business-like relationship with the producer (lecturer) that delivers knowledge, skills and competencies he or she wants (Newton, 2002). In effect, to be able to fulfill their educational, research and informational functions in the 21st Century, tertiary institutions need to recognize the importance of this emerging issue (World Bank, 2002). Lecturer-student relationship is viewed as a helping hand and a consoling factor in which the student perceives that the lecturer has his or her best interest at heart. This usually averts student negative feelings towards the campus and hence the student persists in the university.

In the light of the above, in the lecturer-student relationship that facilitates both formal and informal interactions, the university lecturer would transmit more than just knowledge and skills of his or her discipline (Ngara, 1995). In such an environment, the student is assisted to develop those qualities that go with good learning skills and leadership (Okwilagwe, 2002). This is perhaps due to the students' identification with lecturers as role models, which has been acknowledged as vital to the acquisitions of good learning skills and functional behaviour (Ronning, 1997;Ngara, 1995); However, in the context of acquiring learning skills and functional behaviour the students must perceive their relationship with lecturers as positive, confident, meaningful and relevant to them.

Why Student Voices?

One pertinent question in this context as one might ask, 'How can we rely on information given by or rather perceptions of the students? According to Joshua and Bassey (2004) students are the direct beneficiaries of instruction and they spend a great deal of time with their lecturers. As such they can offer useful inputs in identifying flaws during instruction or interaction and ways of remediation. In the opinion of the two writers, these , they can do in spite of their seeming immaturity or responsibility.

In view of the above an attempt was made in this study to clarify the inherent elements of student perceptions of student- lecturer relationships and identifying possible implications for student services.

The Sample

The sample for the study is deemed a convenience sample (N=98) drawn randomly from a private university in Malaysia. The university has a good blend of both foreign and local students. Out of 150 questionnaires distributed only 98 were returned.

The instrument

While studying past literature in this discipline, the writer did not come across any questionnaire items that perfectly matched the aspects indicated by students in his institution. As such he did not use any specific instrument used in other studies as it might not depict the cultural situation in the Malaysian context. Moreover, the writer wanted to explore the cross-cultural phenomenon of both the local and multicultural milieu in his institution. On a further note, the writer did not manipulate the listed lecturer characteristics in order 'not to interfere' with student perceptions. He did this in order to eliminate elements of bias resulting from his role as a lecturer himself and a mentor for students.
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Methodology

This simple quantitative study was conducted using a 65 item quantitative questionnaire in the form of a five (5) pointer likert-Type rating scale which consisted of lecturers professional attributes, both positive and negative. After obtaining the permission from the relevant authorities, the writer distributed the 150 sets questionnaire to the five faculties in the university. However, only 98 sets were returned.

Reports on the Findings

The following section outlines some of the key findings of the study in the context of lecturer-student relationship.

A. Students' Positive Interpersonal Relationship with Lecturers (an overview)

Data was keyed in the SPSS system for analysis. Factor analysis was performed on the 20 items in Student positive interpersonal relationship with lectures. Out of these items only 9 items came out as two distinct dimensions. The first dimension consist of items 56, 57, 58, 62 and 63. These items are measure of Friendliness. The other dimension consist of items 7, 8, 9 and 11. These items are measure of Students' Caring of lecturers.

[Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value= 0.730, which is more than 0.7. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE)=60% which is more than 50%.

B. Lectures' Positive Interpersonal Relationship with Students (an overview)

Factor analysis was performed on the 11 items in Lectures positive interpersonal relationship with students. Out of these items only 2 items i.e. items 24 and 27 came out as a meaningful dimension. These items are measure of Professionalism on the part of the lecturers.

[KMO value=0.500 (this is the value for two items) AVE=72% which is more than 50%]

C. Students' Negative Interpersonal Relationship with Lecturers (an overview)

Further factor analysis was performed on the 5 items in Students' negative interpersonal relationship with lectures. Out of these items only 3 items, items 59, 60 and 65 came out as a meaningful dimension.

[KMO value=0.565, which did not turn out to be good. AVE=55% which exceeds the set rate of 50%]

D. Lecturers' Negative Interpersonal Relationship with Students (an overview)

Factor analysis was again performed on the 7 items in Lecturers' negative interpersonal relationship with students. Out of these items only 6 items, i.e. items 28, 29, 30, 32, 33 and 34 came out as a meaningful dimension.

[KMO value= 0.839, which is considered good. AVE= 58%, which is more than 50%]

Summary of statistics

Dimension	Mean	Std. Dev
Friendliness	2.40	0.80
Students' caring of lecturers	2.64	0.81
Professionalism	2.40	0.76
Students' negative	2.80	0.84
Lecturers' negative	2.87	0.84

In the questionnaire, the items are on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, where a value of 1 indicates strong agreement while a value of 5 indicates strong disagreement to the statement. Hence, in the table above, a low mean value indicates agreement, while a high mean value indicates disagreement in the construct. In the table, all mean values are deemed close and less than 3, indicating that, generally, the students agree in all constructs.

Correlations

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Friendliness	1	.239[*]	.396[**]	.184	.025
2. Students' caring of lecturers	.239[*]	1	.388[**]	.176	-.053
3. Professionalism	.396[**]	.388[**]	1	.094	-.107
4. Students' negative	.184	.176	.094	1	.254[*]
5. Lecturers' negative	.025	-.053	-.107	.254[*]	1

*.Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Discussion

This study was endevoured to find out student perceptions of their relationships with their lecturers in a private higher learning institution in Malaysia. The questionnaire items that measured this incorporated five constructs: namely, student perceptions of the lecturers on friendliness, student caring attitude towards their lecturers, characteristics attributed to professionalism on the part of lecturers, student negative perceptions of lecturer characteristics and lecturers negative attitude towards students. Factor analysis on the perceptions of the students was done under five categories, namely, student gender, student residential status as

local or foreigner, programs they pursued (under graduate or post graduate and) the age category of the students.

Significant positive associations were noted between lecturer friendliness, student caring of lecturers and of lecturers attribute of professionalism. Significant associations were also found between students' negative perceptions and lecturers' negative attributes. In the context of gender there were no significant difference between male and female students in all dimensions taken into consideration. Significant differences were only noted in lecturers' friendly attitude and aspects that were perceived negative by students. For lecturers' friendliness the local students seem to agree more compared to their foreign counterparts. However, on the perceived negative aspects of the lecturers, the foreign students exhibited more agreement compared to the local students. Likewise in the program category the undergraduate students had more agreement on the lecturers' quality of friendliness compared to the post graduates. Significant difference in perceptions noted only in Friendliness: Means for undergraduates is less than the mean for postgraduates. The undergraduates seem to agree more that the lecturers are friendly compared to the postgraduates. Finally in the age group, significant difference was found only in Lecturer Friendliness: Means for those 25 and below is less than the mean for those 26 and above. This means the younger students seem to agree more on the notion that the lecturers are friendly compared to the older ones. Note: undergraduates and younger students are agreeing more that the lectures are friendly. Taken into account the undergraduates are generally the younger ones.

Implications for Student services:

The fact that effective student-lecturer interaction can impact positively on quality university education has encouraged many universities to embark upon rigorous programs geared towards enhancing such interaction. Many have done so with only the potential benefits in mind, without paying much attention to the contemporary snags surrounding the student-lecturer interaction. This situation is complicated by the recent revelations in the literature indicating a decrease in lecturers time to interact with students outside the classrooms

The results of the study did indicate some traces of student dislike for the university in a sense that they were unhappy with some of the lecturer characteristics. When this aspect persist, there is a tendency on the part of the students to become disengaged in their studies and other academic endeavours. As per the findings of the study, foreign student are more inclined to such feelings and frustrations.

Although learning involves individual cognitive and emotional processes, student motivation is also significantly influenced by a supportive network of relationships. The likelihood that students will be motivated and engaged in study settings is increased to the extent that they perceive their lecturers as supportive. Educational institutions that engage students promote a sense of belonging by personalizing instruction and creating a supportive, caring social environment where adults show an interest in students' lives. The research on belonging in educational contexts is relatively new, and the direction of causality has not been definitively established. Nevertheless, many correlational and non-experimental studies have shown that students who report caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in study settings have more positive academic attitudes and values and are more satisfied with their institutions.

There is a general belief that human behaviour and actions are influenced by attitudes, whereby attitudes are seen as the cause and behavior as the effect (Holland et al., 2002; Chepchieng, 2004). This implies that if students perceive lecturer-student relationship or interaction as irrelevant to them, they may develop a negative attitude towards the campus environment. As such the student services in the universities must show interest in knowing problems faced by students as some of them may be reluctant to voice of the problems and suffer in silence. The onus is on the part of the universities to provide the platform to voice out their grievances and render the support needed.

One of the recommendations of this study is that professional counselling units be established to render students with the support hitherto offered by lecturers outside the classroom. This suggestion, though might be worth considering, lecturers are the only people who can directly counsel students more effectively when it comes to academics. The proposed counselling units can, at best, serve as a supplement and not replacement for student-lecturer interaction.

Conclusions and Limitations:

Delving into the directions of the study, there were no clear evidence that indicated or strongly identified the inter-relationships that existed between the lecturers and students in the institution. It was the contention of the writer that the students who responded to the questionnaires did not comprehend the items well. The writer recommends that a more in-depth study should be conducted in this area of student-lecturer relationship issue, perhaps involving comparative groups in a number of private institutions. Likewise in the methodological context the study must be extended to qualitative aspects such as in-depth interviews with lecturers and students to capture the real-life scenario.

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