

Students' perception and preference of feedback methods: enhancing the quality assurance of higher education institution

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated students' perceptions about providing feedback and identified their preferred feedback methods. The study design comprised quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a better understanding of students' perceptions and increase the study's validity. A structured questionnaire was distributed in five higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman, followed by a focus group discussion (FGD). A total of 614 students responded to the questionnaire. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic text analysis. It was observed that although students understand the importance of feedback, they feel that the methods can be improved. Furthermore, HEIs did not share the outcomes with the students, and therefore, students believed that HEIs were not considering their comments. Whilst students preferred anonymous online surveys, they believed that in-person meetings would be even more useful. This paper looked at how the educational well-being of students in Oman can be improved through the development of methods of seeking feedback from institutions. Additionally, this result can be applied worldwide to improve feedback mechanisms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Different methods are used by higher education institutions (HEIs) to collect student feedback on the academic and administrative services they provide. These methods include surveys, meetings, and social media channels. However, higher education (HE) depends more on surveys than other methods [1]–[6]. Fosnacht *et al.* [7] found that surveys were used in 60% of published research about HE. Similarly, the survey was found to be the most common feedback method used by HEIs in the Sultanate of Oman (hereafter, Oman) [2], [3], and the results obtained from these surveys are used for decision-making, quality enhancement, planning, and development.

Student feedback methods in the context of this study refer to those methods used by HEIs to enable students to express their voices. HEIs use feedback for two main purposes: quality assurance and development and evaluating teaching and learning processes [5]. Student voice in HE has two dimensions: student representation and student partnership in the different activities and practices [8]. The foundation of a strong quality assurance (QA) system at HEIs is an understanding of students' needs and expectations [9]. Many studies have discussed the importance and effect of students' voices on enhancing the quality of HEIs

from different angles [5], [10]–[12]. According to Gürbüz and Bayraktar [9], understanding students' needs and expectations is a key step for effective quality in HEIs. Students' welcome changes and developments when they feel their voices have been heard. According to Matthews and Dollinger [13], students' realization that they can actively participate in shaping their educational experience can strengthen the impact and understanding of student representatives and student voice. Moreover, Könings *et al.* [12] reported that responding to student feedback on curriculum design leads to an improvement in student performance. Many studies showed the effect of student voice on improving educational experiences of students at HEIs [14]. Yet, Cook-Sather and Matthews [14] point out that HEIs should be placing student voice from data sources for research and documentation to innovation in teaching and learning.

Higher education institutions follow different ways to capture student feedback; however, some factors can affect the significance of the results. For instance, Ahmadi [15] points out that language can be a struggle for students, and the culture of democracy is missing in some parts of the world, even within HEIs. According to Alhassan [10], timely student feedback enhances the quality of courses and improves the performances of the instructors at HEIs. However, the convenience and ease of providing feedback have to be taken into consideration by HEIs. For instance, according to Chen *et al.* [16] student questionnaires should not be complex, and they need to be brief. In addition, studies indicate that students mostly prefer online evaluation for courses. They also prefer to complete the evaluation outside the classroom so that they can express their opinions freely [17]–[19]. Zou and Lambert [20] have examined students' perceptions of three feedback methods in classroom evaluations: paper questionnaires, oral question-and-answer reports, and digital tools. They found that around 10% of the students preferred the digital tools because, according to the students, such methods were 'fun, provided anonymity, allowed multiple interactions and immediate responses, and kept a record of feedback' [20]. Still, this percentage is seemingly small, which means there is no specific preferred method for all students. Although some research has been carried out on student voices, especially in classroom evaluation, no previous studies have discussed the perceptions of students about the feedback methods used by HEIs regarding student satisfaction with academic and administrative services. These services include the HEI's infrastructure, consultation services, training opportunities, registration, and administration. In addition, with the exception of Zou and Lambert [20], there is a general lack of research that regards the preferred feedback methods of students.

In this research, a study was conducted to explore the overall perception of students about providing feedback to HEIs and the most preferred feedback methods for students. It seeks to address the following questions: i) what is the overall perception of students about providing feedback to HEIs; and ii) what are the most preferred feedback methods for students? Data were collected from different HEIs in Oman and used for quantitative and qualitative analysis. This study also offers some critical insights into the preferred feedback methods for students at HEIs.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

To understand students' perceptions deeply and increase the validity of the results, the study design included a triangulation of the data sources. A structured questionnaire and focus group discussion (FGD) were used to answer the research questions. The questionnaire instrument was designed by the authors. Then, a small focus group (FG) was constituted to finalize the questions as suggested by Nassar-McMillan and Borders [21]. The FG consisted of staff from different professional positions (e.g., a statistics lecturer, a senior manager within HE, and academic writing specialists). The questionnaire was reviewed to confirm the suitability and content validity by two quality assurance professionals from accredited HEIs in Oman. These two HEIs are accredited by the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority and Quality Assurance of Education (OAAAQAE). In addition, it was crosschecked by a consultant from the planning and quality assurance department of an HEI in Oman and a senior statistician from the Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information. The questionnaire was piloted among 35 students, and the reliability assessment using Cronbach's alpha indicated a strong level of internal consistency ($\alpha=0.838$), as explained by Taber [22].

The questionnaire consisted of 14 questions using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 as strongly disagree to 5 as strongly agree) and one open-ended question. The survey was built using SurveyMonkey, and the link was emailed to the students. The targeted students were those who had been enrolled at an HEI for at least one year to ensure that the targeted students had participated in the feedback process at their HEIs at least once.

In Oman, HEIs are classified based on funding schemes: HEIs are owned by the government (public HEIs) or the private sector (private HEIs). In addition, they are further classified into college, university college, and university depending on the degree of programs offered (undergraduate or postgraduate) and mode of study (research or coursework) [23]. So, there are five different types of HEIs in Oman: private college, private university college, private university, public college, and public university. There is no University College owned by the government as of now. To obtain a better representation, one HEI was

selected from each type based on the highest number of active students. To maintain consistency, the authors selected HEIs under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation, Oman, and were audited by the OAAAQAE [24]. The questionnaire was distributed to students studying at the five selected HEIs.

In the academic year 2017–2018, there were 119,725 students at HEIs in Oman, and the majority were studying in undergraduate programs. Table 1 presents the total number of male and female students studying in each qualification. This table was extracted from a public document published by the national center for statistics and information.

Table 1. Number of students at HEIs in Oman during the 2017–2018 academic year [25]

Qualification	Male	Female	Total (%)
Diploma	4,765	6,508	11,273 (9.4)
Advanced diploma	2,291	670	2,961 (2.5)
Educational diploma	10	62	72 (0.1)
Bachelor's	39,861	59,731	99,592 (83.2)
Postgraduate certificate	130	131	261 (0.2)
Postgraduate diploma	4	9	13 (0.01)
Vocational diploma	758	1,090	1,848 (1.5)
Master's	1,944	1,596	3,540 (3)
Ph.D.	62	103	165 (0.1)
Total	49,825	69,900	119,725

There were 40,747 active students at the five selected HEIs in the fall semester of 2017 (September–January). The appropriate sample size was determined by using a Krejcie and Morgan table [26]. With a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a sample of 381 students was required for this study. As there are variations in student numbers due to differences in HEI types and capacities, the authors used stratified sampling where each HEI was considered a *stratum*. Then, a proportional allocation approach was implemented, as explained by Lavrakas [27]. Although 381 students were targeted for the study, higher participation was achieved due to the interest shown amongst the students. Table 2 presents the number of students who participated in the survey from all five HEIs.

Table 2. Number of active students, required samples, and student participants from each of HEIs

	Number of active students	HEI proportion	Required sample size	Number of respondents (%)
Public university	13,919	0.34	130	286 (220)
Private university	6,523	0.16	61	100 (164)
Private university college	5,320	0.13	50	59 (118)
Public college	11,700	0.29	109	109 (100)
Private college	3,285	0.08	31	60 (194)
Total	40,747	1.00	381	614 (161)

The structured questionnaires were analyzed using IBM SPSS 23, the quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and weighted means, and a thematic text analysis was used to analyze the responses to the open-ended question (qualitative data). After analyzing the results obtained from the questionnaire, the authors developed the questions for the FGD so that they could triangulate and crosscheck the previous results, which leads to higher validity of the study's results [28]–[30]. The questions of the FGD were further verified by an expert in the field of HE from an HEI in Oman. The FGD was designed for five students (F1, M1, M2, M3, and M4). According to Dworkin [31], an acceptable sample size for qualitative studies is between 5 and 50 participants. The selection criteria for participants was based on various characteristics, such as that the students should be enrolled at HEIs in Oman and no first-year students who had not participated in the feedback process should be included. Representativeness was ensured by selecting equal participants from both private and public universities, various academic programs, and both genders. The FGD was conducted in July 2018 for one hour, which was video recorded. The first author acted as the moderator of the discussion, and the discussions were in English. A transcript was made by an external agency using an intelligent verbatim style (or clean transcription style, which avoids all unnecessary spoken words such as 'um' and 'err,' for example). NVivo 12 and Microsoft Excel were used for data management and analysis of the FGD.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Results of the structured questionnaires

Overall, 614 students participated in this survey, mostly female (63.4%). Table 3 illustrates that 86.6% of the students were 19 to 24 years old, and most were Omani (97.6%). In this survey, the participation of students with a bachelor's degree was 77.9%, which is much higher than the participation of students with a diploma (17.3%), master's (3.7%), and Ph.D. (1.1%) students. This proportion of participation is aligned with the distribution of students with different qualifications across HEIs during the academic year 2017–2018 as shown in Table 1. The numbers of students representing years 2, 3, 4, and 5 were approximately equal.

Table 3. Demographic information

		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	225	36.6
	Female	389	63.4
Age	18 or less	4	0.7
	19–24	532	86.6
	25–30	41	6.7
	31–36	25	4.1
	37 or more	12	2
Nationality	Omani	599	97.6
	Other nationalities	15	2.4
Study level	Diploma	106	17.3
	Bachelor	478	77.9
	Master's	23	3.7
	Ph.D.	7	1.1
Program year	2nd Year	153	24.9
	3rd Year	133	21.7
	4th Year	142	23.1
	5th Year	156	25.4
	6th Year	18	2.9
	7th Year	12	2

The students' perceptions of the feedback methods currently used at their HEIs are presented in Table 4. The table shows the responses for the 14 items and the weighted mean calculated for each item. The analysis for each item is discussed separately, in which the weighted means were rounded to the closest scale (1- strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- neutral, 4- agree, and 5- strongly agree).

Concerning Q1, it was found that nearly half of the students (48.9%) agreed that responding to questionnaires to provide their feedback about the services provided by HEIs is essential; the weighted mean was 3.93, which is very close to 'agree.' Similarly, in Q2, almost half of the students (49.2%) agreed that it is useful to attend meetings to provide feedback about the services provided by HEIs. The weighted mean was 3.72, which is very close to 'agree.' The highest percentage of the students (39.5%) in Q3 agreed that the number of regularly conducted questionnaires is reasonable. The weighted mean was 3.33, which is close to neutral. In Q4, over half of the respondents agreed that each questionnaire has different purposes (51%), and the weighted mean was above 4. In Q5, about 40% of the respondents agreed that the current feedback methods, such as questionnaires, meetings, or any other forums, cover all the critical areas for them as students. The weighted mean was 3.30, which is almost neutral. Nearly half the participants (47.4%) in Q6 agreed they usually provided accurate information when asked for feedback through questionnaires, meetings, or any other forum. The weighted mean was 3.87, which is almost 'agree.'

In Q7, about 40% of the students said they could provide feedback openly and freely, and the weighted mean was 3.78, almost 'agree'. Regarding the feedback results in Q8, 35% of the students accepted that these are made accessible to survey participants, and the weighted mean was almost neutral (3.38). The highest percentage (35.1%) was neutral for Q9 ('I believe that my feedback has been considered'), and the weighted mean was 3.12, which is very close to neutral. Many students (43%) in Q10 agreed that they always knew the objective of each feedback method, and the weighted mean was 3.43, which is almost neutral. A high proportion (42%) of the students in Q11 agreed that the feedback methods applied at their HEIs to gather their opinions were appropriate, and the weighted mean was close to neutral (3.34). Amongst the respondents for Q12, 37.6% were confident that their feedback is used for their HEIs' continuous improvement, and the weighted mean was close to neutral (3.34). Most of the students in Q13 agreed that they had been asked to provide their opinion on the feedback methods (questionnaires and meetings, and so on) used by the institutions (47%), and the weighted mean was 3.45, which is almost neutral. In Q14, nearly

half of the students (45%) felt that the feedback methods available were suitable, and the weighted mean was 3.34, which is again close to neutral.

Table 4. Students' perceptions of providing feedback

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Total	Weighted mean
Q1. I think that responding to questionnaires to give my feedback about the services provided by my HEI is important.	19 (3.3%)	27 (4.7%)	88 (15.3%)	281 (48.9%)	160 (27.8%)	575	3.93
Q2. I think that it is useful to attend meetings to give my feedback about the services provided by my HEI.	12 (2.1%)	47 (8.2%)	132 (23.0%)	283 (49.2%)	101 (17.6%)	575	3.72
Q3. I believe that the number of questionnaires that are regularly conducted is reasonable.	26 (4.5%)	85 (14.8%)	186 (32.3%)	227 (39.5%)	51 (8.9%)	575	3.33
Q4. I understand that each questionnaire has a different purpose.	7 (1.2%)	17 (3.9%)	57 (9.9%)	293 (51.0%)	200 (34.8%)	574	4.15
Q5. I think that the feedback methods currently used, such as questionnaires, meetings, or any other forums cover all the areas that matter for me.	33 (5.7%)	89 (15.5%)	175 (30.5%)	225 (39.2%)	52 (9.1%)	574	3.30
Q6. I usually provide accurate information when I am asked for feedback through either questionnaire, meetings, or any other forums.	8 (1.4%)	36 (6.3%)	117 (20.4%)	272 (47.4%)	141 (24.6%)	574	3.87
Q7. I can provide my feedback openly and freely.	18 (3.2%)	50 (8.8%)	123 (21.5%)	229 (40.1%)	151 (26.4%)	571	3.78
Q8. The results of this feedback are made accessible to survey participants.	46 (8.0%)	89 (15.5%)	140 (24.4%)	201 (35.0%)	98 (17.1%)	574	3.38
Q9. I believe that my feedback has been considered.	65 (11.3%)	76 (13.2%)	202 (35.1%)	189 (32.9%)	43 (7.5%)	575	3.12
Q10. I always know the objective of each feedback method.	22 (3.8%)	57 (9.9%)	197 (34.3%)	247 (43.0%)	51 (8.9%)	574	3.43
Q11. The feedback methods applied in this institution to gather our opinions on services provided are appropriate.	31 (5.4%)	91 (15.8%)	158 (27.5%)	244 (42.4%)	51 (8.9%)	575	3.34
Q12. I am confident that my feedback is used for my HEIs' continuous improvement.	38 (6.6%)	76 (13.2%)	178 (31.0%)	216 (37.6%)	66 (11.5%)	574	3.34
Q13. I have been asked to provide my opinion on the feedback methods (questionnaire and meetings) as used by the HEI.	32 (5.6%)	74 (12.9%)	137 (23.8%)	270 (47.0%)	62 (10.8%)	575	3.45
Q14. Generally, I feel that the available feedback methods are suitable for me.	40 (7.0%)	79 (13.8%)	146 (25.5%)	260 (45.4%)	48 (8.4%)	573	3.34

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

The students were asked in the questionnaires to rank their preferences of the feedback methods, and the options given were online surveys, paper surveys, face-to-face surveys, phone call surveys, social media feedback, and others. To identify the preferred method, the authors calculated the weighted mean of each method and then ranked the values, and the data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. The weights were given to each method based on student preference, where the first preference has the highest weight (6) and the last preference has the lowest weight (1). Table 5 presents the weighted means for each method given by the students. The results demonstrate that the students preferred the following feedback methods (shown in the order of the most to least preferred): Online surveys, paper surveys, face-to-face surveys, phone call surveys, social media feedback, and others (such as meetings and FGDs).

A total of 124 comments were received for the open-ended question provided in the questionnaire, and they are summarized in four points. First, the students preferred different feedback methods to the existing methods for various reasons. For instance, they preferred face-to-face surveys, meetings, and open discussions because they were more exciting and allowed for discussing the matters and agreeing on a suitable solution for all parties. In addition, Twitter and other social media channels were preferred because students felt they were more convenient and could freely express their opinions. Yet, online surveys were the most preferred method amongst the students. Second, the students preferred short questionnaires with simple questions. For example, 'it is preferred that the questions be simple and abbreviated and that the number of questions does not exceed 10'. In addition, they want sufficient time to complete the questionnaire. For example, 'the time given to complete the questionnaire should be adequate.' Third, the students raised the point that there is a feedback loop closure where HEIs do not inform students of the actions taken based on

their comments. For example, ‘announcing the relevant results, for example, whether it has been approved, rejected, or still working on it.’ This process will motivate the students to participate in future surveys, as, for example, it will ‘encourage the participants to feel that they are part of many improvements in their institutions and that their opinions are significant for decision-makers.’ Fourth, the students believed that the HEIs were not considering their comments. For example, the students suggested that the institutions should ‘consider the views of students seriously and try to find appropriate procedures for their suggestions.’ Moreover, the students said that even the opinions of the student council members are not taken into consideration and that staff or faculty should ‘meet with the student council and discuss students’ opinions regarding services and the educational system and try to improve them, study them, and not neglect them.’

Table 5. Weighted means of students’ preferences of feedback methods

	Students’ preferences	Weighted mean
1	Online surveys	4.90
2	Paper surveys	4.33
3	Face-to-face surveys	3.93
4	Phone call surveys	3.64
5	Social media feedback	3.62
6	Other	1.26

3.2. Results of the focus group discussion

In the FGD, to clarify the students’ perceptions of providing feedback, the first author facilitated the discussions to verify the results received through the questionnaire. The comments raised by the students aligned with the questionnaire responses. The students (F1 and M4) pointed out that the feedback methods currently used by their HEIs are not always appropriate. One student (F1) preferred meetings with the management at their HEIs more than responding to surveys because meetings involve direct interaction, and the responses to their concerns could be obtained immediately. Another student (M2) preferred meetings with the student representatives and the management. They added that some positive changes were happening at their HEI because of the adoption of this method. The student (M1) felt that FGD were more effective. They said they had participated in many surveys during their studies, but it was infrequent. They added that they were not informed of the results of these surveys and did not notice any action based on their feedback. They also mentioned that most students think that “their marks are related to the survey,” and hence, “they do not give the right answer” in the surveys related to academic matters. Similarly, the students lack faith in such survey methods and fear the repercussions if they do not provide positive feedback. The student raised a point that “they think if any negative comments were given about any services (... that this might) affect them in some ways during their study at the institution.”

Furthermore, student feedback is helpful for HEIs but not seen as beneficial for students. The students spoke about the module evaluation surveys conducted at the end of the semester to evaluate the students’ satisfaction with the delivery and content of modules. A student (M2) mentioned that in most cases, they would not know if changes were being made based on their feedback because this survey takes place only at the end of the semester, and therefore, only future students may benefit from it. Hence, the decisions tend to be reactive and not proactive, and the students are unsure if the institutions are using their feedback. In addition, another student (M3) said that many sectors, including academic institutions, tend to collect feedback merely for documentation (audit) purposes.

The students’ responses to the question “Are you ready to give honest feedback?” varied. A student (M1) said they could not attend meetings and speak with the instructors directly; however, they are ready to “attend a meeting (...) with the Dean without the instructor.” Likewise, another student (M3) mentioned that they could not respond honestly because of a bad experience giving feedback. Furthermore, M4 added,

“I am worried if they take it personally (...) and maybe the professor will think that I hate him.”

However, some students (M2 and F1) were ready to give feedback. A student (F1) clarified this by saying,

“Even if no actions were taken (...) I believe that I have done something.”

Generally, the students agreed that feedback is essential for an institution’s decision-making and improvements. Two students (M3 and F1) believed that today’s feedback is tomorrow’s decision, and another student (M1) mentioned that they are the primary users of the academic and administrative services provided by HEIs; therefore, their feedback is essential, and HEIs must take it seriously.

4. DISCUSSION

The students understood the importance of their feedback for the planning and continuous development of HEIs. However, they believed their HEIs did not consider their input and comments. This perception could be due to HEIs not closing the feedback loop by communicating the corrective measures taken or their responses to the feedback obtained from the students. Therefore, HEIs should ensure that feedback results are made accessible to survey participants in addition to the actions taken. This exercise will build trust in the feedback methods. It will also motivate the students to participate more in future surveys. This study confirms the findings of other studies [11], [13], [32], which reported that students were more satisfied when they saw that their voice was being heard. The overall perceptions of the students about the suitability of feedback methods currently used at their HEIs were neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory (3.34). The students felt that the feedback methods used to gather their opinions on the services provided did not meet their expectations, and the same point was raised during the FGD as shown in section 3.2. They said the questionnaire was lengthy, and the response time was inadequate. Survey is the most frequent method used at HEIs [3], [7]. Therefore, HEIs should ensure the creation of suitable questionnaires in terms of length, time, and clarity. These findings further support the findings of Chen *et al.* [16] that the questionnaire should not exceed three pages.

Although researchers [12], [32] have discussed the importance of asking for student opinions while evaluating teaching and learning exercises, HEIs should use such feedback methods to be proactive and not reactive. A common agreement amongst the students was that the module evaluation survey at the end of the semester did not benefit them. However, it could positively affect future students or quality assurance documentation. Hence, HEIs should use alternative methods, such as an early evaluation of the first half of the semester. The students agreed that they usually gave accurate information when asked for feedback through questionnaires, meetings, or other forums. In addition, they said that they could give their feedback openly and freely. However, during the FGD, the opinions varied, and the majority did not feel confident about giving feedback in front of their teachers. They believed that providing negative feedback could be used against them. This study confirms that a lack of anonymity is associated with anxiety about giving feedback [20]. It was found from the questionnaire analysis that the students preferred online surveys to other feedback methods. These findings further support the results of [17]–[20]. They said that in-person feedback, such as meetings and discussions, was even better than surveys. This is because these methods provide the space for dialogue and immediate communication of the responses or actions directly from decision-makers.

5. CONCLUSION

This study presented students' perceptions at HEIs in Oman about the feedback methods used at their institutions. It was found that the students had a good understanding of the importance of their feedback for HEIs. However, they felt that the current methods were not suitable. Moreover, the results and actions taken were not adequately communicated to the participants, and thus, the students believed that their comments were not considered. The students were reluctant to provide negative feedback for fear of the disclosure of their identities, and their preferred method was online surveys. However, they still believed that meetings and discussions were more useful as they quickly received responses to their concerns. As it was found that students do not see the current feedback collection methods as proper or appropriate, it would be worthwhile to examine alternative methods of collecting feedback for planning, quality assurance, and development at HEIs in Oman.

The strength of this research is that there is not enough prior research on this subject, especially in Oman. However, the limitation of this study is the small number of participants during the FGD. Despite this limitation, this study is unique as it identified the preferred methods of student feedback and paved the way for future studies in this field. However, this study was conducted at HEIs in Oman, and thus, these findings may have limited generalizability and possibly might not provide a comprehensive contribution to an emerging picture of student perceptions and preferences regarding feedback methods at HEIs around the world. Perhaps the findings of this study can provide insights to HEIs in other countries where there is a paucity of research on the topic of student perceptions of feedback collection methods.




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