

## TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE COURSES IN AN EXPANDING HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM: THE DILEMMA AND CHALLENGES

By

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the experiences of lecturers working with undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds with low academic skills. A qualitative study involving interviews with fifteen (15) participants from three (3) public universities was used to gain information around participants' views on teaching and learning in relation to undergraduate courses. The findings suggest that lecturers face profound teaching challenges which affect how they teach, the way they structure their courses, and the way they evaluate students. Recommendations were made to address the dilemma and challenges in higher education system.*

### Introduction

While there is a prolific body of research examining students' conceptions of learning, their perceptions of the learning environment and approaches to learning, it is only in the last decade or so that similar research has begun to focus upon lecturers and their teaching. Since the evidence suggests that learning outcomes are influenced by the approach taken by students to their study (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991), it seems that examining lecturers' experiences of teaching should be significant. In a recent study which investigated teaching in three public universities in Ghana (University of Cape Coast, University of Science and Technology and University of Ghana), lecturers spoke about impediments to providing quality teaching and learning within the expanding higher education system. While there was considerable enthusiasm for teaching, lecturers described the increasing pressures associated with achieving good outcomes for their students. Specific issues were raised as causing difficulties and frustrations. A key issue derived from what lecturers described as students' limited backgrounds in reading and writing which they perceive as impacting on their teaching and students' learning.

Prior to 1992, student numbers were not very large, and growth rate was modest. However, following educational reforms, student numbers have picked up significantly (Effah & Senadza, 2008). Hitherto, students who qualified for sixth form education which prepared them for university level work had to write the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced level examination at the end of two years of sixth form. This screened and further restricted access to university education. Expansion and growth in numbers of students at undergraduate level have had a major impact on teaching and learning. The shift in demographics of undergraduate students from a traditional, relatively small base of middle class school leavers to one which is numerically larger and socially broader necessarily means an increase in the diversity of the student body. Universities are finding that more and more high school graduates as well as returning adults come to university with limited backgrounds in reading and writing. They,

therefore, need some sort of remediation hence the introduction of a Communicative skills (English for Academic Purposes) course. A number of reasons have been posited for this lack of readiness. However, most often mentioned are lack of preparation at the senior high school level and returning adult status. Students entering university immediately after senior high school often lack the necessary academic skills to be successful. For returning adults, the issue is often a "re-learning" of those skills that were taught in secondary school.

It is not surprising that lecturers raised a host of contextual issues in relation to teaching and learning in higher education, given the substantial change within higher education in the past decade or so. Indeed, Biggs (1999) notes that "the past ten years have seen an extraordinary and worldwide change in the structure, function and financing of the university system," (p.1). Amongst the factors he highlights as impacting upon university teaching are: the greater proportion of school leavers entering higher education, the increased diversity within the student body, and increased class sizes. These problems are perceived to be compounded by the nature of secondary education in particular which, lecturers argue, does not adequately prepare students for independent learning and critical thinking. The problem of inadequate preparation for higher education provided by previous educational backgrounds over the previous 12 or more years presents a false start and the problems students can experience do not lend themselves to quick fixes. Despite remediation efforts for students, these can be carried over into the regular undergraduate curriculum.

Teaching and assessment in many secondary schools lend themselves to the development of a particular set of study skills and learning strategies. These are, however, no longer entirely relevant to the more independent learning expected in higher education but have nevertheless been shown to persist (Cook & Leckey, 1999). Consequently, many students appear inadequately prepared for university level work. Students' lack of academic skills presents difficulties and frustrations in teaching, posing challenges to the kind of teaching that most lecturers expect to do. Cohen (1986) reports the difficulty lecturers experience in defining their roles and their frustration with lower instructional standards and grading practices necessary to accommodate the general student population. Stahl (1981) reports lecturers' perceptions that students' competency in basic skills has diminished and that course requirements have been reduced to accommodate undergraduates' abilities. Ivanic (2001), Francis and Hallam (2000), and Lea and Stierer (2000) note the disparity between what lecturers expected in terms of student preparedness and willingness to engage in academic work, and what they experience in reality. Concern about students' academic ability has persisted throughout the 1990s.

Browne-Miller (1995) and Bergquist (1995) observe that widening participation and the increase in access to higher education have certainly contributed to the number of students inadequately prepared for university level work. Lecturers in our higher educational institutions must confront the challenges posed by student unpreparedness. The purpose of this study is to explore lecturers' experiences with teaching undergraduate courses in three Ghanaian public universities (University of Ghana, University of Science and Technology and University of Cape Coast). In describing how lecturers deal with

these challenges, the study seeks to broaden understanding of how lecturers perceive the problem, how they manage it, and how they feel about it.

### **Methods**

A qualitative study involving single participant interviews was used to explore lecturers' experiences and perspectives. Participants were selected purposefully (Patton, 1990) because of the likelihood that they would have had some experience with students' academic work in the classroom setting and because they do not teach the remedial Communicative Skills course. The sample was confined to full-time lecturers who had at least five years of teaching experience. Five lecturers from each university participated in the study. A total of fifteen lecturers, four females and eleven males holding a range of academic positions and drawn from various disciplines (within the humanities, social sciences, science and engineering) participated. The gender imbalance among participants was due to staffing issues. A mix of disciplines was used to elicit variation in perspectives (Samuelowicz & Bain, 2001).

### **Interviews**

Data was gathered through individual face to face interviews. The objective of the interviews was to get participants to talk freely, to allow their perspectives to unfold, and to provide lecturers' accounts of their experiences and their judgment about these experiences. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to the interviews and asked that they give the matter some thought. To ensure that data collection was systematic for each participant while the interviews remained fairly conversational and situational, semi-structured interviews were used. This provided the flexibility, as well as the sense of direction needed for the research (Gray, 2004; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). An interview guide was used to increase consistency across interviews. Interviews lasted on average 50 minutes.

The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Respondent validation was used to seek corroboration that the findings and impressions were congruent with the views of interviewees (Bryman, 2004). The data was triangulated in order to identify emergent patterns of lecturers' experiences with teaching and student learning. The result was a descriptive account synthesized from the self-reported experiences of the 15 participants from the three higher education institutions. Credibility of the results is strengthened by the fact that multiple interviews were used and data was collected from three sites which enabled triangulation or the validation of data collected from one source against at least two other sources (Silverman, 2007; Flick, 2006; & Mason, 2005).

### **Findings and discussion**

All participants expressed the view that low academic skills of students in general constitute a major problem, and the majority of participants are affected both professionally and personally. The study identified three themes from data analysis. These are: how participants perceived the problem of students' inadequate preparation for academic work; how they managed it, and how they felt about it.

### **Perception of the problem of students' inadequate preparation for academic work**

Participants expressed concern about the level of general knowledge and academic skills of students and described these deficiencies as serious and pervasive (Stahl, 1981). Expressions such as "students don't want to read", "they expect lecturers to give them notes", "students cannot express themselves adequately", and "students can't write" appeared repeatedly in the data.

All participants, in various ways, expressed views which resonate with the observation of a Business Studies lecturer with 5 years teaching experience that:

*A lot of these students . . . don't want to read . . . they want copious notes . . . they don't really seem to understand what they're reading and give you back your notes. I'm expected to teach at a particular level, and I always have to move that level back or down.*

A senior lecturer in Education with 18 years teaching experience noted how "I have to teach at a lower level so my students would understand". A lecturer in Sociology with 10 years experience observed that "we seem to be passing and graduating students who really don't know much at all." While all participants expressed concern about the academic skills level of their first year students, a majority (80%) were also concerned about the general level of reading and writing skills in the other levels of courses. Indeed, all participants (100%) expressed concern in various ways about the writing skills of graduating students in the project work group they are supervising.

Participants did not only talk about the cognitive domain of learning. They took into account the affective domain of learning as well, mentioning their perception of students' general orientation and attitudes toward the teaching and learning experience which they saw as interactive components of lecturers' overall experience with students' inadequate preparation for academic work.

### **Student attitudes and behaviour**

Complaints about students' attitudes to learning cut across responses. There was a general conviction that majority of students are not properly disposed to learning.

A Professor of engineering with 21 years teaching experience observed:

*At one time lecturers could assume that students arriving at university would possess a core of basic knowledge, something to build on. They did most of the reading ... the university passed through them. Now . . . they just pass through the university. Students don't have that sense of wanting to learn just for the sake of learning ...all they want is grades ... and I find that if they get a low grade because they're not writing at the level that you want, they resent that rather than work towards improving their performance.*

This view is in tandem with those expressed by other participants who thought the majority of students lack an academic attitude.

Although participants' perceptions of the severity of the problem varied, there was general uniformity of opinion that students are also under-motivated which compounded the situation. Lecturers agreed it is bad enough if students are poorly prepared. That in itself presents a huge problem in terms of getting accomplished what lecturers are supposed to accomplish. When students seem unmotivated to learn, a bad situation is made worse.

Participants shared the views of an associate professor of Religion with 18 years teaching experience that:

*when students come to class, you expect them to pay attention, follow lectures, take notes, and do all the assignments. These are minimum motivational qualities that you would expect but I can't say that I see much evidence of real motivation, generally speaking. In any class, you will have some poorly prepared students-- but I think they are in the majority now.*

Participants expressed concern and irritation about students' hesitation to become actively engaged in the learning process. "You ask students to read a chapter, you want to discuss it in class and they just sit there ..." said a Biology lecturer with 6 years teaching experience. This resonates with the observation of a lecturer of Philosophy with 5 years teaching experience that: "you are giving a lecture, you ask a question and a majority of students sit there looking at you. You ask what they don't understand and they tell you everything".

A lecturer in Pharmacy with 17 years teaching experience summed up perceived students' attitude as such:

*They run into something that baffles them and just seem to wait for you to come along and help them out. Many of those little problems they could have worked through themselves with a little thought and effort. I spend too much time trying to make students think.*

Students, participants agreed, are reluctant to pursue self-help strategies despite encouragement to do so. A lecturer in Biology with 6 years teaching experience lamented how: "I encourage students to see me if they have any difficulties but I have very few students who take advantage of that. . . . I offer suggestions on how to improve their writing, and I find that they rarely do the things that I ask them to do".

Several participants expressed dismay about students' attitudes which they saw as having adverse effects on the general academic environment. The inherent conflict between student's low academic ability and academic standards tends to create an uncomfortable situation for lecturers. A lecturer in Pharmacy with 17 years teaching experience observed that: "passivity with respect to problems associated with students' low academic ability tends to encourage lecturers to gravitate toward passive responses, perpetuating an uneasy status quo".

Participants noted that teaching in an environment where there are many students inadequately prepared for academic work is a task that carries with it problems and demands that often put lecturers' teaching skills to the test.

### **Managing the problem**

Teaching students who seem inadequately prepared for academic work carries with it enormous challenges and demands. Lecturers feel pressured to take remedial or compensatory measures in their classes, making it difficult to cover content as they would like to. The majority of participants (85%) spoke of a need to be flexible and responsive in their approach to teaching.

A lecturer of Biology with 5 years teaching experience commented:

*...I spend more time than what I'd like to explaining concepts that I feel they should already have. This uses up a lot of time, and I realize that I'm not covering what I'd really like to cover.*

The ultimate result for many, therefore, is to reduce the scope of content in order to teach in detail hoping students would come out knowing something. A professor of Religious Studies with 18 years teaching experience insists on teaching university level work despite having to cut back tremendously on content. The majority of participants (95%) felt compelled to alter content to accommodate students' general skill level.

Pressure to accommodate the general skill level encountered in the classroom also affects evaluation of students. Almost all participants (90%) indicated that they felt compelled to modify grades, at least to some degree, relative to their own subjective standards (Cohen, 1986). Pressure to modify grades, lecturers argued, originated to a significant degree from factors external to the lecturer.

A lecturer of Sociology with 5 years teaching experience recalled:

*When I began working here, my very first semester was a disaster. My exams results were far away from the normal curve, you know ...about half of my class failed. I was advised to adjust.*

She began to realize that she could not expect something from students that is simply beyond them, but that for her creates a difficult situation. Others talked about subtle messages and cues that tended to affect the evaluation process. "We sometimes get some pressure not to fail so many students," admitted a senior lecturer in Education with 18 years experience. He noted, "This is not something that anybody just tells you. . . . It just comes around." Certain implicit or explicit expectations exert pressure on the grading process. For instance, all participants (100%) were aware that students complain that lecturers fail them, with the implication that their failure is the lecturer's fault.

Participants tied this strongly with student evaluations of lecturers, suggesting an awareness of what those evaluations can mean. The notion of "pay back time" may also

be a factor that influences evaluation of students. To get a good evaluation, a lecturer has got to be well liked. To be well liked, a lecturer has got to give good grades.

### **Opinions and feelings about the situation**

Most lecturers talked about the phenomenal increase in student numbers, touching on the quality versus quantity issue, its inherent dilemma and how they saw themselves as being affected. The issue of academic standards emerged as the most troubling to participants and they voiced strong opinions about declining standards. The inherent conflict between students' inadequate academic preparation and academic standards tend to create an uncomfortable situation for lecturers. All respondents commented about the inner struggles and pressures they experienced in trying to reconcile quality and quantity. For example, a lecturer in Business Studies with 5 years experience noted:

*when I do give a challenging assignment, such as case studies, I'm setting myself up for a disappointment. . . . students don't seem to take charge and work and think out something that is meaningful. . . . an indication of a lack of critical thinking skills. These skills haven't been developed. Students haven't had the practice.*

While concerned about maintaining quality, participants are also bothered about the high failure rate that this implies. Students do not seem to have the mental stimulation associated with the reading and writing that stretches them academically.

A majority of participants (75%) expressed some concern that the large number of inadequately prepared students in their classes was contributing to deterioration in their attitudes toward their jobs. This notwithstanding, participants seemed for the most part to have favourable attitudes toward, and a sense of commitment to the teaching profession. A lecturer in Economics with 8 years teaching experience, however, observed that efforts to mitigate poor student learning need to go beyond individual personal commitment to teaching:

*we will not make a change unless there is a critical mass with the same point of view. Why should I worry myself if I know my efforts will not bring about any change ... the problem is on a much larger scale...as individuals, we can't do much. I think everybody has to come on board if we should initiate change. It requires strong leadership and institutional commitment.*

In various ways, participants shared the views of an associate professor of Engineering with 21 years experience that if institutions are going to admit large numbers of students, which invariably compounds the problem of student preparedness, lecturers should be provided with the resources to make those students successful, rather than being told to do the best they can. Participants, individually, commented on the politics of access, widening participation and expansion which carry in their wake the burden of growth in student numbers. Politics, participants observed usually wins out or complicate what should be simple, straightforward approaches.

**Conclusion**

This study explored lecturers' experiences related specifically to perceived widespread students' low academic ability. Lecturers noted a considerable gap between the ideal and reality. Their collective experience suggests that students' low academic ability is acute and widespread at the institutions studied. Hopefully, the findings of this study will help create a definitive framework on which future studies on teaching and learning in an expanding higher education system might be based. Though this qualitative study is bounded and situated in specific contexts and therefore not generalizable in the probabilistic sense, one might derive cross-contextual generalizations allowing for claims that have a wider theoretical resonance (Marshall and Rossman, 2006; Mason, 2005).

The issues raised by participants support many of the informal discussions that occur in higher educational institutions in the country that inadequate student preparation for academic study is a serious problem for lecturers. The results of this study underscore, in particular, lecturers' concerns regarding student motivation and passivity. The words of participants themselves best capture the nature and intensity of those aspects of the problem, suggesting a level of frustration and dissatisfaction. Concerns about administrative support were articulated mainly in terms of teaching resources needed to intervene to make students successful. It was noted, for example, that large classes exacerbate the problem.

While recognizing that there is no simple solution to the numbers versus quality issue, participants seemed primarily interested in seeing more open acknowledgement and discussion of how the classroom is affected. The findings suggest that students' low academic ability significantly affect how participants in this study taught, the way they structured their courses, and the way they evaluated students. Concessions to academic quality were widely common.

**Recommendations**

It is recommended that teaching in an expanding higher education environment involves a personal process of adaptation which ultimately seems to include some redefining of the lecturer's role and some reassessment of teaching and learning at the university level. Finding a workable teaching practice requires a fair amount of trial and error, coming to grips with difficult situations as best as one can. A complete understanding of what lecturers may be dealing with in regard to students' low academic ability might stimulate institutions of higher education to re-examine their role in improving instruction and strengthening lecturers' morale.

This study is a small-scale investigation into lecturers' experiences of teaching. The findings provide the basis for a broader discussion of issues relating to teaching and learning in an expanding higher education. The study is limited by the fact that it involved only three higher educational institutions and that it focused only on lecturers' perspectives. Further studies along the same line should involve students and administrators for balance.



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