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Exploring the Challenges of Feedback Mechanisms in Higher Education: A Case Study of Faculty and Students in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the challenges faced by both faculty and students in delivering, incorporating, and utilizing feedback in one of the public sector universities in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan. This study adopted the qualitative research design, focusing on a case study design. Four faculty members and eight students from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities were selected conveniently. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews of both the faculty and students. Moreover, classroom observations and relevant documents analyses was conducted to triangulate the data and to validate the results. By using the thematic analysis model of Braun and Clark (2006), the data were analyzed. The result indicated that both the faculty and students face a lot of challenges while giving and incorporating feedback. Faculty faces challenges like cultural differences between faculty and students, faculty's lack of feedback literacy and their readiness, students' attitude towards receiving feedback, variations in students' cognitive level, time constraints in providing feedback, differences in educational culture and expectations, lack of institutional policy and guidelines on feedback, and gender related challenges in communication. Students, on the other hand, encounter difficulties while incorporating feedback due to personal challenges (introvert personalities), gender disparity, and cultural differences between faculty and students. Thus, based on the results, it is highly recommended that the faculty should know the educational and cultural background of students and seek students' preferences regarding feedback methods to ensure clarity, effectiveness, and better learning.

Keywords: Challenges, Feedback Mechanisms, Higher Education. Faculty, Students, Gilgit-Baltistan.

Introduction

Feedback is a crucial component of the learning process, as it provides learners with information about their learning performance, helping them recognize their strengths and address their weaknesses to enhance learning outcomes (Amjad & Awan, 2020; Esterhazy, 2018; Farid et al., 2021; Jurs & Špehte, 2020). Additionally, feedback in higher education helps the learner to improve their writing skills and boost their insight capabilities (Aprilia et al.,

2023; Adrefiza et al., 2021; Amjad & Awan, 2020). According to Thurling et al. (2012), "Effective feedback is defined as goal-directed, specific, detailed, and neutral; ineffective feedback was defined as non-goal/person directed, vague, non-detailed, and either too positive or too negative" (p. 14). Likewise, Dahal et al. (2022) articulated that effective feedback supports learners to improve their learning by identifying areas for improvement and motivating them to keep learning. Moreover, it must be detailed and according to the cognitive level of the learner (Selvaraj et al., 2021). While feedback is an essential part of learning for students of higher education (Glazzard & Stone, 2019), its effectiveness largely depends on how well it aligns with the learners' cognitive levels (Selvaraj et al., 2021). However, the implementation of feedback practices varies considerably both across and within the countries, shaped by differences in cultural norms, institutional structures, and educational policies (Rovagnati et al., 2022; Ramani et al., 2018).

Likewise, various studies have shown that the effectiveness of the feedback can be altered by various factors like students feedback literacy, teacher feedback literacy, students perceptions and preferences, teachers perception and practices, time, size of class, culture, social and emotional background of the students (Boud & Dowson, 2021; Carless & Boud, 2018; Jur & Sphete, 2024). For instance, Rovagnati et al. (2022) conducted qualitative research at a university in the UK. They used narrative inquiry, which is a qualitative research approach focused on collecting and analyzing participants' personal stories and lived experiences. In this case, they explored the assessment and feedback histories of international postgraduate students through their narratives. The findings of Rovagnati et al. (2022) found that students' feedback literacies reflect their previous institutional cultures and contexts, which often do not align with UK norms. These mismatches impeded students' ability to effectively interpret and use feedback early in their UK studies. Moreover, another study conducted by Gan et al. (2021) at two Chinese universities (one high-status and the other lower status with 308 second-year students) disclosed that teacher feedback practices, student feedback motivation, and student feedback behavior also matter for effective feedback. Gan et al. (2021) further entailed that the effectiveness of the feedback is affected when it is not used by the students for desired improvements. The study of a non-key university revealed that the students' feedback behavior was a significant predictor of both course satisfaction and exam performance; teacher feedback had an indirect effect on these outcomes via student behavior. On the other hand, the study of a key university found that both teacher feedback and student behavior directly influence course satisfaction. However, neither student behavior nor teacher feedback significantly predicted exam results. These variations highlighted that institutional context shapes how students perceive, respond to, and benefit from feedback, and the strategies effective in one setting may not be useful in the other context (Gan et al., 2021).

Moreover, Somba et al. (2016) discussed that students do not use feedback when the feedback is beyond their understanding level or they do not know the value of feedback (Glazzard & Stone, 2019). In addition, the study conducted by Henderson et al. (2019) revealed that limited time, large class size, and lack of effective feedback strategies are the challenges faced by teachers, which can hinder the effectiveness of feedback. Hence, this study explored the challenges faced by faculty and students regarding the feedback mechanism at one of the public sector universities of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan.

Literature Review

There are various challenges faculty faced while providing feedback at the university level, i.e., time constraint, hierarchical nature of teacher-student interaction, cultural challenges, student feedback behavior, and so on (Henderson et al., 2019; Sanchayan et al., 2024; Jurs and Sphete, 2024). A qualitative study grounded a constructivist paradigm conducted in three medical schools of Sri Lanka by Sanchayan et al. (2024) aimed to explore the how feedback is given and received in real-life clinical teaching and learning setting, in medical schools with the focus on understanding the dynamics, effectiveness and challenges of feedback in a culturally diverse context revealed that Educators in local contexts acknowledge the presence of a hierarchical gap between themselves their students. This power distance often results in one-way, directive feedback that restricts students' engagement in meaningful dialogue. Although teachers understand the value of reducing this gap to promote interaction, many maintain that a certain level of authority and distance is essential for maintaining students' discipline and ensuring task completion (Sanchayan et al., 2024). Similarly, another quantitative study conducted by Zeb et al., (2022) at Medical College of Majmaah University, KSA aimed to find the challenges face by faculty and students while feedback process found that 70% of students do not consider feedback as important for them, 72 % considered it time consuming process, increases workload and language barriers by (Zeb et al., 2022). Correspondingly, the study conducted by Gan et al. (2021) in two universities in China found that feedback does not work the same way in every university, and its impact depends on how students respond to it. For example, in a lower-ranked university, students who received teacher feedback and acted on it, such as improving grammar or rewriting assignments, showed after exam performance and felt more satisfied with their course. In contrast, at a top-ranked university, students felt that the feedback was helpful, but it did not lead to better exam scores because many students did not actively use it, and the effectiveness of feedback depends on the learning environment and student behavior. Therefore, a feedback method that works in one context may not work in another. Moreover, research indicated that students often overlook the importance of feedback (Glazzard & Stone, 2019). Additionally, various studies have shown that learners' responses to feedback can differ significantly based on the instructional context. This variation underscores the need for a tailored approach to feedback in order to enhance student engagement and the overall learning experience (Gan et al., 2021; Hamidun et al., 2015; Lyster et al., 2012). A research conducted by Carvalho et al.(2014) across schools in Portugal revealed that, in both regular and vocational education settings, students generally did not respond well to feedback that criticized their work or made them feel discouraged about their performance. Similarly, a study conducted by Seker and Dincer (2014) in Turkey demonstrated a significant connection between students' emotional states and their responses to feedback. Moreover, the research indicated that students who experience positive emotions are more likely to act swiftly on the feedback they receive. In contrast, negative emotions can lead to delays in their responses (Seker& Dincer, 2014). Similarly, a study conducted by Zeb et al. (2022) in Pakistan reported that many students admitted that they found the feedback boring, lengthy, and irrelevant, and failed to incorporate feedback. Moreover, the same study found that students have a fear of judgment, which results in students avoiding asking for feedback (Zeb et al., 2022). Somba et

al. (2015) entailed the same thing that students did not incorporate feedback because they did not get it. Additionally, a research analysis of fairness and quality issues in online assessment at higher education in Pakistan has shown that online course formats often lacked planned checkpoints; students reported that assignments were not returned with feedback in a timely manner, and there was a lack of continuous feedback (Uzair-ul-Hassan & Zaytouni, 2023). The study by Warner and Miller (2014) examined how international students' cultural backgrounds influence their perceptions and utilization of feedback in an Australian university context. The research further highlighted that students from cultures with high power distance and collectivist orientation may face challenges in interpreting and acting upon feedback due to differing expectations and communication styles. For example, students may be less inclined to seek clarification or engage in dialogue about feedback, viewing such actions as disrespectful or inappropriate. The study underscored the importance of culturally responsive feedback practices that acknowledge and bridge these cultural differences to enhance students' learning outcomes (Warner & Miller, 2015).

Research Questions

1. What are the challenges faced by faculty while giving feedback at the university level?
2. What are the challenges faced by students while incorporating feedback at the university level?

Research Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research paradigm focusing on case study design in order to explore faculty's perceptions, preferences, and practices of feedback at a public sector university in the context of Gilgit Baltistan. Qualitative research, as articulated by Asper and Corte (2019), is an iterative process designed to develop a thorough understanding of a phenomenon through close engagement. This method is particularly effective in examining human behaviors, opinions, and complex ideas (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Samaduzzaman et al., 2014). This approach enabled the researchers to deeply study the challenges faced by faculty and students through a feedback mechanism. A convenience sampling strategy was employed, selecting four faculty members and eight students from the two departments of Arts and Humanities based on their willingness and accessibility. The researchers conducted interviews with faculty members as well as students from the two departments of Arts and Humanities. There were a total of four faculty members and eight students chosen conveniently. The interview protocol was semi-structured in nature, which aimed to explore the challenges faced by faculty and students in the feedback mechanism. Moreover, this interview protocol was developed after a thorough review of the literature. After that, the researchers triangulated the data by using classroom observations and document analysis of faculty members to get more in-depth insights from the findings. There were a total of four unstructured and non-participatory observations and document analysis. First, the researchers obtained consent letters from the research participants before conducting their interviews. They recorded these interviews using a phone recorder and then carried out classroom observations of four faculty members. Additionally, they performed document analysis to triangulate the data and gain more in-depth insights from the results. Moreover, a strict code of ethics was upheld throughout the research. Institutional involvement was

obtained through letters of informed consent. Through these consent letters, it ensured their willing participation.

Findings

Upon data analysis, it was revealed that both the faculty members and students face a lot of challenges related to feedback and the feedback mechanism. For instance, lack of guidance or policy about feedback, lack of feedback literacy, teachers face cultural challenges, lack of readiness, attitude of students toward feedback, cognitive level of students, time constraint, educational culture differences, gender related challenges, and teachers' attitude towards feedback. On the other hand, the challenges faced by students in perceiving and incorporating feedback include personal challenges, i.e., lack of feedback literacy, students' personality (having an introvert nature), cultural challenges, gender disparity, cultural values, and language barriers.

1. Challenges Faced by the Faculty while Giving Feedback

All participants agreed that they face challenges while giving feedback to students. Each participant shared a real classroom example regarding what challenges s/he faced while giving feedback at the university level. For instance, one of the major challenges faculty face is the lack of feedback literacy among students. Almost all faculty members mentioned that most students are unable to understand the nature of the feedback. For example, faculty A explained, "Students often lack the cognitive and writing skills needed to fully comprehend the nature of feedback and incorporate it. For example, when I tell my students that their writing lacks coherence and flow, many students struggle to improve because they have not yet developed their basic skills, such as generating clear ideas and expressing them effectively. As a result, I often feel the need to start from the basics of writing and support students in building their skills". She further explained that this mostly happens with research students. "...This illustrates that if students do not have the required cognitive level to understand the feedback, then it is of no use. The problem is not with the feedback; instead, it is the students' lack of cognitive abilities to grasp and apply it. These are the challenges because the discrepancy between the feedback and the students' ability to understand can hinder improvement".

Through classroom observations and document analysis, it was so obvious that students were repeating the same mistakes again and again, even after being provided with both written and oral feedback. They did not even understand the feedback, which was especially in written form. This shows that their cognitive level is not enough to get the meaning of feedback. Students' attitude toward feedback is another major challenge mentioned by the faculty. Each faculty member agreed that students become defensive or offensive when feedback is provided. For instance, faculty A was of the view that the majority of university students are not even ready to get feedback from their faculty. She further added, "Either students are overconfident or they lack knowledge of feedback. Whenever they are provided with feedback, they get offended". Likewise, faculty D stated, "In my opinion, students do have knowledge about feedback. If they don't have knowledge about what the feedback is and how to incorporate it, it is imperative for faculty to explain the details of feedback to student orally to maximize students' understanding of the feedback and its incorporation". Similarly, . Faculty D further shared her recent experience with feedback by saying that "after OHTs, I invited students individually to my office to provide feedback. One student who was

caught red-handed while cheating came in, and I asked her to explain her action. She did not accept it and started crying, making the situation more awkward and embarrassing". Classroom observations and document analysis revealed that students lack an awareness of feedback. Their primary concerns are their grades, and they rarely ask for feedback. Additionally, they often struggle to understand the feedback, especially if it is presented in written form. Observations are evident that most students get offended if they are told what they are lacking and what they need to improve.

Another challenge highlighted by the faculty is the time constraint. Faculty A stated, "There is a limited time constraint. Mostly, it is not possible to give feedback to individual students as there are more than 40 students in each class, and I have been teaching four classes, which means there are more than 160 students. Giving them individual feedback, reviewing their write-ups as well as their oral responses, is a significant challenge. Likewise, some challenges are from research students". Through classroom observations, it was evident that time is very limited while class size is too large, so it was really not possible to provide each individual with written or individual feedback due to time constraints. All faculty members saw eye to eye that they face cultural challenges and educational cultural challenges. For instance, faculty A expressed, "Students do not have feedback literacy. The concept of feedback does not exist in their educational culture". Faculty C supported faculty A's perspective, emphasized "in many educational settings, especially at the school level, feedback is minimal or virtually absent. Typically, it is limited to checking homework with ticks and crosses, without any detailed guidance or commentary. Faculty C further explained that students from strong academic backgrounds are more likely to engage actively in class, ask questions, and view feedback positively. This suggests that both cultural and academic backgrounds play a significant role in how students receive and apply feedback". Faculty also highlighted that the age, experience, and observational abilities of the students significantly influence the learning process. Students who possess greater life experiences and keen observation skills are generally more adept at processing feedback and tend to learn more quickly". The faculty also pointed out the absence of institutional guidelines or policy regarding feedback practices. As faculty A said, "There is no detailed policy or any guideline regarding feedback for the instructors at the university level. There is no written way or framework to give feedback to students. However, I provide feedback based on my personal experiences, the way I was given feedback by my teachers".

Upon reviewing the semester rules and other documents, the researcher did not find any proper institutional guidelines regarding feedback practices. The document "KIU Semester Rules and Regulations for the Undergraduate 4-year Program" did not clearly explain the feedback policy. On pages 14 and 15, it stated that after marking tests, quizzes, and exams, instructors must show and discuss them with students. Questions about marking should be handled individually, and the instructor should collect the answer papers and assignments after the discussion for record-keeping. Additionally, pages 17 and 43 only covered the grading policy. Overall, the document lacked a detailed feedback mechanism and policy. Another major finding of the study was related to gender differences as a challenge to giving feedback. In this regard, faculty D said, "Providing feedback to female students for a male faculty is a kind of challenge at times. Many tend to be more reserved and may hesitate to actively seek improvement or fully engage with the feedback process. However, this is not

universally true. There are also highly motivated female students for whom even minimal feedback can result in substantial progress. These dynamics underscore the nuanced challenges instructors face when delivering effective feedback". Classroom observations indicated that female students often appeared reserved and demonstrated sensitivity in response to feedback. When male faculty members provided feedback, it tended to make them uncomfortable, sometimes resulting in reactions that created unnecessary disruptions, ultimately affecting the faculty's own comfort in the classroom environment. Another important finding was faculty attitude towards giving feedback to students. In this regard, faculty D was of the view that "a teacher's sincerity significantly influences the effectiveness of the feedback. When feedback is delivered with genuine intent and thoughtful considerations, it becomes more meaningful and impactful". Faculty D further noted that "when instructors take the time to understand a student's personality, the feedback can be tailored to the individual, making it more relevant and easier for the students to act upon. Personalized feedback not only highlights areas for improvement but also signals to the students that the teacher is genuinely invested in their growth. This, in turn, encourages students to engage more seriously with the feedback and apply it constructively. Ultimately, sincerity from both the teacher and the student fosters a more effective and supportive learning environment".

2. Challenges Faced by Students while Incorporating Feedback

Mostly, students said that they do not get challenges while incorporating feedback, but a few admitted that they face a variety of challenges, including students' personality type, gender differences, cultural differences, and lack of feedback literacy. For instance, Student A stated that she faces many challenges while incorporating feedback due to her introverted personality. She expressed "I am an introvert so during class discussions, I cannot properly express my ideas, feelings and opinions, I feel hesitant while speaking but my teachers often ask me to participate in the class which I cannot". Furthermore, she explained "In our culture, it is not considered appropriate to speak with men outside the family but in university there is a co-education. We have male class fellows, so talking in front of them makes me feel reluctant. My teachers always ask me to participate, but this is why I cannot". She also narrated an example of how she could not improve. She further stated that her teacher asked her to improve her English speaking skills, so she joined an English language group on WhatsApp to improve her English speaking, but it was a mixed group of females and males, so she had to leave it. Likewise, student D shared her experiences regarding feedback challenges. She said, "I face mostly cultural challenges. I wear hijab and cover my face as it is a part of my cultural attire. However, while giving a presentation or any expo project, I am asked to take off my face mask because my voice is not loud enough to be heard by the backbenchers, which I cannot do". She further expressed that she gets the same feedback from every teacher, which cannot possibly be acted on. Sometimes teachers don't understand the limitations and difficulties of their students. She further added, "Most of the time, teachers tell us to correct our mistakes but do not tell us how to correct the mistake, which hinders me from improving my learning". Similarly, student F was of the view that as faced difficulties with the English language. He said that when he was new at the university, he was asked to give presentations in English, which was a big challenge for him. He further added, "I came from an Urdu medium education background, so how am I supposed to give

a whole presentation in English medium. On the other hand, engaging students with question answers was also a difficult task for me, but my teachers always kept saying that I should improve my vocabulary and should know how to engage students in a presentation, but it took a lot of time to do so. In addition, SRH clarified “the difficult terms used by teachers in their feedback were also challenging for me to comprehend and incorporate their feedback, which hinders my learning”. Regarding feedback, students were of the view that the majority of the faculty only highlight the areas for improvement or weak points of students as feedback. They do not share the positive points regarding their performance, assignments, presentations, and classroom participation. In this regard, student E said, “Teachers use weak points which make students feel down. Teachers can use positive words to address students’ weaknesses, i.e., they should say the point where the student can improve”. On the other hand, students were of the view that a few faculty members don’t even return assignments on time. They don’t even check their assignments and give marks only. The student G stated, “Some teachers do not return our assignments along with remarks. They should return our assignments on time with proper feedback and remarks on them so we can improve. We don’t know even towards the end of the session which areas we are supposed to improve”.

Discussions

This study identified significant challenges faced by both faculty and students regarding feedback processes and mechanisms at the university level. Faculty members encounter a range of obstacles, including cultural and educational difficulties, lack of readiness/lack of feedback literacy, attitude of students toward feedback, cognitive level of students, time constraint, educational culture at the university, lack of guidance or policy about feedback, gender related challenges, and teachers’ sincerity. This finding is in accordance with the previous research, for instance, Zeb et al. (2022) were of the view that due to students give the least importance to faculty feedback as they don’t give value to feedback. Moreover, Rovagnati et al. (2022) reported that students’ feedback literacy reflects their previous institutional cultures and contexts, which often do not align with the norms of another institutional culture. These mismatches impeded students’ ability to effectively interpret and use feedback early in their studies in another context. Likewise, Gan et al. (2021) claimed that student feedback behavior is also very important for effective feedback delivery. However, students do not incorporate feedback; either they do not value it, or the feedback is beyond their cognitive level (Somba et al., 2015). In addition, Henderson et al. (2019) noted that limited time, large class size, and lack of effective feedback strategies are the challenges faced by teachers, which can hinder the effectiveness of feedback. In addition, the study by Gul et al. (2016) observed that some institutional feedback policies exist; however, their impact was limited due to inadequate formal training, inconsistent enforcement, and prevailing institutional culture. The current study revealed that students also face challenges when attempting to incorporate feedback. These challenges include: Personal challenges, such as introversion, cultural differences, gender disparity, late feedback or no feedback, cultural values, and language barriers. The insights gained from this study highlighted the need for addressing these challenges to enhance the effectiveness of the feedback mechanism within educational settings. This finding was corroborated by the study of Warner and Miller (2014), who found that students from cultures with high power distance and collectivist orientation may face challenges in interpreting and acting upon feedback due to differing expectations

and communication styles. Moreover, the current study found that students demanded positive and timely feedback from faculty, which can help them to improve learning and development. This finding corroborated with the study of Uzair-ul-Hassan and Zaytouni (2023), who reported that assignments were not returned with feedback in a timely manner, and there was a lack of continuous feedback. Additionally, Seker and Dincer (2014) stated that positive feedbacks evoke positive emotions, which activate students to incorporate the feedback. On the other hand, negative feedback causes negative emotions, which hinder students' learning.

Conclusion

It is concluded that both faculty and students face various challenges regarding the feedback mechanism. The faculty faces multiple challenges, which include cultural challenges, lack of readiness/lack of feedback literacy, attitude of students toward feedback, cognitive level of students, time constraint, educational culture differences, lack of guidance or policy about feedback, gender related challenges, and teachers' sincerity. On the other hand, the challenges faced by students to incorporate feedback include personal challenges, i.e., having an introvert nature, cultural challenges, i.e., feedback against cultural values, gender disparity, and language barriers.

Recommendations

Based on the above findings, the study suggested the following points:

The HEC should introduce clear and detailed guidelines regarding feedback for the faculty to make the feedback process more reliable for both teachers and students. Additionally, surveys should be conducted at the departmental level to know the feedback preferences of students regarding feedback. It would help the teachers to provide feedback according to the needs and preferences of students. Moreover, teachers should use familiar and simple words while giving feedback and ask the students if they get the feedback or not. In addition, the teachers should take care of the cultural and educational backgrounds of students while providing feedback so the students cannot feel awkward and uncomfortable while receiving the feedback. Furthermore, teachers should consider gender sensitivity while giving feedback to avoid gender disparity or any kind of violation.

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