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Practice papers

Using research-based evaluation to inform changes in the development of undergraduate sports science education in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

In this article we offer practical directions and guidance for a functional researcher on how to use research-based evaluation to inform changes in the development of undergraduate sports science education. For this, we introduce a research-based evaluation framework based on evaluation theory and tailored that to the realities of Ethiopian undergraduate sports science education. The framework uses both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs. A case study of the application of the framework shows that it has several benefits to help universities generate valuable institutional evidence to inform changes. The paper concludes with a brief note about implications for research and practice.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

With the advent of quality assurance system, undergraduate education has become the focus of considerable attention in evaluating quality in higher education around the globe (Ewell, 2010). Whereas most universities worldwide conduct some form of evaluation work on their undergraduate programs, the institutional evidence basis for that work is limited and less used. In fact, a number of higher education researchers have extensively been working on the issues surrounding evaluation, yet there is a large variation in terms of the research methods and approaches utilized. In this respect, it is argued that research in this area has been more influenced by personal and methodological interests of scholars rather than a conceptually-orientated research agenda (Kuh, 2009; Melrose, 1998; Tam, 2007). The other problem is the difference in areas of focus among researchers (Pascarella, 2001). While the various works of literature are revealing, in particular, aspects of the undergraduate education program, systematic evidence informing holistic impacts on students' success is not yet available (Harvey & Williams, 2010; Tadesse, Manathunga, & Gillies, 2012).

Research shows that quality assurance has had a remarkably small impact on the day-to-day operation of departments and colleges (Stensaker, 2008). The very reason contributing to this small impact is the focus of quality assurance itself (Taousanidis & Antoniadou, 2010). While numerous higher education institutions have established a quality assurance

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scheme and quality initiatives of various sorts, nearly all of them have focused on non-academic activities (Tadesse, 2014b). Also, less is known within the framework of quality assurance in relation to opportunities for growth and development, as well as, challenges that the program implementers could face over the years (Clemmer, 2012).

1.2. Statement of the problem

Over the last two decades or so, the Ethiopian government, moving from a traditional system that privileged elites has attempted to make higher education more inclusive, reaching out to the broad strata of society (Goastellec, 2008). In fact, there has been a great leap in expansion having 2 public universities a couple of decades ago, now reaching 36 public universities that offer general education across several disciplines. Correspondingly, the system has endorsed a rapid, massive increase in students' numbers, now accommodating 593,571 students (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Also, various forms of centrally initiated education reform and innovations have been proliferating (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2010). For example, it is a recent experience to engage in curriculum harmonization through a compulsory adoption of a national curriculum framework and organizing course offerings through a modular approach (Higher Education Strategy Center, 2012). Also, using continuous assessment and criteria-referenced grading have become apparent.

The difficulty of evaluating undergraduate program successfully and the complexity of the components used in the evaluation process are now widely acknowledged (Harvey, 2008; Ross, Cen, & Zhou, 2011). Also, evaluative attempts in the Ethiopian higher education context have also been problematic; particularly in recent years as quality assurance has come to the primary concern of higher education institutions disseminated by centralized government agencies (Tadesse, 2014a). Moreover, methodological issues surrounding the evaluation tasks are apparent (Tadesse, 2014b; Tadesse & Gillies, 2015; Zerihun, Beishuizen, & Van Os, 2012).

Therefore, useful strategies and systematic evaluation approaches are becoming increasingly important to inform future decisions in undergraduate education. In this article, we argue for evidence-based practice in evaluating undergraduate sports science education through introducing a “research-based evaluation framework”. We describe the distinctive feature of each component of the evaluation framework and its potential benefits. We back up this with a case study report on the application of the framework and present a summary of the major findings of the case, and the implications of the framework for research and practice in undergraduate sports science education. The case study was conducted specifically to answer the following research questions.

1. In what context does the undergraduate sports science education operate in Ethiopia?
2. What are the perceived realities and challenges alumni's faced during their experiences of attending undergraduate sports science education in Ethiopia?
3. Is there a significant difference in academic achievement of undergraduate sports science students in Ethiopia across gender and university years?
4. Which demographic variables and university experiences relate with academic achievement of undergraduate sports science students in Ethiopia?

In the process of presenting evidence to address the above stated research questions, we also describe how the researchers collected the data and the various methods of analysis used to examine realities and challenges of implementing the undergraduate sports science program, and a range of group differences, and relationships among variables. Also, we provide a summary of the findings to synthesize evidence pertaining to the contributions of different demographic variables and university experiences on the academic achievement of undergraduate sports science students. In so doing, we provide directions and guidance to the functional researcher on how to use research-based evaluation framework to inform changes in the development of sports science education in Ethiopia.

1.3. Research-based evaluation framework in sports science education

The distinctive features of research-based evaluation that differentiate it from other common research approaches or methods is that this evaluation occupies the implementation process and learning outcomes as central concerns (Harvey, 2008; Tam, 2007), thereby embodies significant aspects of the program to promote quality (Tadesse, 2014b). Moreover, generating data across a range of primary and secondary sources makes the findings particularly useful resources for the institutions providing undergraduate program both locally and internationally. Thus, universities have the opportunity to understand the nature and functions of the undergraduate sports science education based on multiple stakeholders' perspectives, thereby developing a broader understanding of the vast variety of relevant issues surrounding the sports science education. This could serve as the foundation for quality improvement in the undergraduate sports science education.

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