

Confidential Student Feedback Evaluation Systems in Higher Education: A Review of Privacy Challenges and Design Imperatives

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Abstract- Student feedback evaluation systems have become indispensable instruments for quality assurance in higher education institutions across Africa and beyond. However, the effectiveness of these systems is significantly constrained by persistent privacy challenges, particularly the exposure of student identity credentials, which discourages candid participation and undermines data integrity. This paper presents a narrative review of literature examining privacy challenges in student feedback evaluation systems, with emphasis on African and Nigerian higher education contexts. Drawing on evidence from peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports, and empirical studies published between 2023 and 2025, the review critically examines the conceptual foundations of feedback systems, the typology of feedback mechanisms, the role of confidentiality in survey response quality, and the imperatives for stakeholder-sensitive system design. Findings reveal that anonymity assurance significantly enhances response quality, that most existing feedback platforms are poorly designed for the African institutional context, and that a shift toward cryptographic privacy-preserving architectures is both feasible and urgent. The review concludes with a framework of design imperatives tailored to Nigerian and African higher education institutions, calling for participatory system development, context-specific privacy policies, and institutional accountability structures.

Keywords: Student Feedback Evaluation, Confidentiality, Higher Education, Nigeria, Africa, Information Systems, Privacy-Preserving Design, Quality Assurance

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa are under increasing pressure to demonstrate accountability, enhance teaching quality, and respond to the learning needs of a rapidly growing student population [7]. Central to these quality assurance mandates is the collection and use of student feedback on teaching effectiveness, a

practice commonly institutionalized through Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) systems or feedback management portals [17]. These systems, when functioning optimally, provide institutions with empirical data to inform instructional improvement, staff promotion decisions, and curricular reform [3]. Despite their institutional importance, student feedback systems in Nigerian universities continue to suffer from well-documented dysfunction. Students are frequently reluctant to participate honestly due to fears of identification and reprisal from lecturers [11]. This reluctance is compounded by the structural absence of identity protection mechanisms in most locally deployed platforms, many of which require students to log in using institutional credentials that make their responses traceable [21]. As a result, feedback data collected through these systems tend to be positively skewed, unreliable as performance indicators, and inadequate for genuine quality improvement [16].

The global literature on feedback system design has long recognized confidentiality as a primary determinant of response quality. Landmark studies in survey methodology established that confidentiality assurances not only increase response rates but significantly improve the candor and validity of responses, especially when the data being requested is of a sensitive or evaluative nature [2,13]. In the African context, where hierarchical power relations between students and academic staff are particularly pronounced, this effect is amplified which makes the case for robust privacy-preserving design in student feedback systems especially compelling.

This paper makes three contributions to the growing literature on educational information systems in Africa. First, it consolidates and critically reviews

empirical and theoretical evidence on the relationship between confidentiality and feedback quality in higher education. Second, it maps the documented failures of existing feedback systems against established design criteria for privacy-preserving platforms. Third, it articulates a set of context-sensitive design imperatives for institutions in Nigeria and comparable African settings. The review addresses the following research questions: (i) What are the documented privacy challenges in student feedback evaluation systems in African higher education? (ii) What role does confidentiality play in determining the quality and utility of student feedback data? (iii) What design principles should guide the development of privacy-preserving student feedback systems in the Nigerian and African higher education context?

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Feedback Systems: Definitions and Theoretical Foundations

A feedback system, in its broadest technical formulation, is one in which the outputs of a process are reintroduced as inputs to form a closed loop of self-regulation [6]. In educational contexts, feedback refers specifically to the information provided to a learner or institution regarding performance in relation to established objectives, standards, or outcomes [8]. Hattie and Timperley's seminal framework distinguished four levels of feedback, task, process, self-regulation, and self and established that feedback directed at the task and process levels produces the greatest gains in learning outcomes. This framework has been extended by African education scholars to account for institutional and cultural mediating factors that shape how feedback is given, received, and acted upon in sub-Saharan contexts [18].

The theoretical grounding for student feedback evaluation systems draws from three intersecting traditions: quality assurance theory, information systems theory, and organizational communication theory. Quality assurance frameworks, as articulated within the National Universities Commission (NUC) guidelines for Nigerian institutions and the African Quality Assurance Network (AfriQAN) standards,

position student feedback as a mandatory input into institutional review processes [4]. Information systems theory conceptualizes feedback platforms as sociotechnical systems comprising task, people, technology, and structure, wherein the effectiveness of the whole is contingent on the coherence of all four elements [15]. Organizational communication theory contributes the insight that feedback quality is inseparable from the trust and psychological safety conditions under which it is elicited [20].

2.2 Typology of Feedback in Educational Settings

A comprehensive understanding of feedback systems requires familiarity with the diversity of feedback types deployed in educational settings. The literature identifies at least seven distinct types: informal, formal, formative, summative, peer, self, and constructive feedback [5]. Informal feedback occurs spontaneously within instructional interactions and is characterized by immediacy and relational context. Formal feedback is structured, scheduled, and typically documented for accountability purposes. Formative feedback, which monitors progress during rather than after instruction, has received particular attention in the Nigerian basic education literature in connection with its role in reducing academic failure rates [12].

Summative feedback evaluates achievement against benchmarks at the conclusion of a learning unit and is the type most commonly captured through institutional SET surveys. Peer feedback, in which students assess each other's contributions and performance, is increasingly recognized as a strategy for developing metacognitive competence and professional readiness [9]. Self-feedback, the autonomous evaluation of one's own performance against stated criteria represents the ultimate goal of feedback-for-learning, as it signals the internalization of standards and the development of self-regulated learning [10]. Each of these feedback types carries distinct privacy implications: summative evaluations of teaching staff are the most sensitive and therefore the most vulnerable to identity-related distortion when anonymity is not assured.

2.3 Information Systems in Educational Administration

Information systems that support educational administration encompass a broad range of platforms, from transaction processing systems that manage admissions and student records to knowledge management systems that facilitate institutional learning. Within this typology, student feedback evaluation platforms occupy the intersection of operational support systems which process evaluation data and management support systems which synthesize that data into actionable intelligence for academic governance [22]. The effectiveness of these systems as decision-support tools depends critically on the quality, completeness, and representativeness of the data they process, all of which are directly affected by whether students trust the confidentiality of their responses [14].

In the Nigerian context, most universities rely on either paper-based feedback forms or basic web-based portals that require institutional login credentials. The former is susceptible to physical identification (through handwriting or seating position), while the latter creates a digital trace that students correctly perceive as a threat to anonymity [1]. Neither approach meets the design standards for confidentiality-assured data collection articulated in the global information systems literature. The transition to modern, privacy-preserving feedback architectures therefore represents not merely a technical upgrade but an epistemological necessity for institutional quality assurance [19].

III. PRIVACY CHALLENGES IN STUDENT FEEDBACK EVALUATION SYSTEMS

3.1 Identity Exposure and Its Consequences

The most pervasive privacy challenge in student feedback evaluation systems is the structural exposure of student identities. Where systems require login via student matriculation numbers, institutional email addresses, or other personally identifiable credentials, students face a credible risk of identification by the academic staff whose performance they are evaluating [11]. This risk is not merely theoretical: documented instances of academic victimization following identifiable

negative feedback have been reported in Nigerian universities, contributing to a culture of self-censorship among students [20]. The consequence is a systematic upward bias in teaching evaluation scores, sometimes described as grade inflation of the evaluation process itself which renders the data unreliable for its stated purposes of quality improvement and personnel review.

Survey methodology research has consistently demonstrated that confidentiality assurances increase the quality and honesty of responses when the topic is sensitive. The effect is particularly pronounced for questions that touch on authority relationships, power differentials, or subjects about which the respondent fears social or professional consequences [2]. In Nigerian higher education, where student-lecturer power dynamics are culturally heightened and institutional complaint procedures are widely perceived as inadequate, these conditions are uniformly present. Students who fear identification will either refuse to complete evaluations, provide uniformly positive responses regardless of actual experience, or select socially neutral rather than informative response options, all of which degrade the diagnostic value of the data [13].

3.2 Systemic Design Failures

Beyond the immediate problem of identity exposure, the literature identifies several systemic design failures in existing feedback platforms deployed in Nigerian and African institutions. First, most platforms are conceived as data collection tools rather than as communication systems embedded in institutional cultures of trust and improvement [4]. They lack feedback-on-feedback mechanisms that is, students rarely learn whether or how their evaluations influenced institutional decisions which erodes the intrinsic motivation to participate honestly. Second, the majority of platforms were designed in Western institutional contexts and imported into African universities without contextual adaptation, creating mismatches between the assumptions embedded in instrument design and the realities of local academic culture [21].

Third, data security standards in Nigerian university information systems are generally below the level

required to guarantee the confidentiality of evaluation responses. Many institutional servers are inadequately firewalled, and database access controls are insufficiently granular to prevent administrators or lecturers from querying response data in ways that enable individual identification [1]. Fourth, there is a near-total absence of independent auditing or third-party verification of confidentiality claims, meaning that even where institutions formally assure anonymity, there is no mechanism by which students can verify these assurances [19].

3.3 Regulatory and Governance Gaps

The privacy challenges in student feedback systems are compounded by significant regulatory and governance gaps in the Nigerian higher education system. While the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) Data Protection Regulation of 2019 establishes a legal framework for personal data protection in Nigeria, its application to student evaluation data within universities is inconsistent and poorly enforced [16]. Most universities lack formal data protection officers, and privacy impact assessments are not routinely conducted before deploying or upgrading feedback platforms [15]. The Nigeria Data Protection Act of 2023, which strengthened the earlier regulatory framework, has yet to be meaningfully integrated into university information governance policies at the institutional level.

At the continental level, the African Union's Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection (the Malabo Convention) establishes principles for the protection of personal data in digital systems, but only a minority of African states have ratified it, and its enforcement in educational contexts remains embryonic [20]. This governance vacuum leaves students in Nigerian and other African universities without effective legal recourse in cases of privacy breach through feedback systems, and it leaves institutions without clear compliance standards to guide system design decisions.

IV. CONFIDENTIALITY AS A DETERMINANT OF FEEDBACK QUALITY

4.1 Empirical Evidence on Anonymity and Response Quality

A substantial body of empirical research supports the proposition that confidentiality assurances improve both the rate and the quality of student participation in feedback evaluations. Studies conducted in West African university contexts have found that the provision of explicit anonymity guarantees increases survey completion rates by margins ranging from 18 to 34 percentage points, with the most pronounced effects observed among students in courses taught by senior academic staff [12,9]. The same studies document qualitative improvements in response content specifically, greater specificity, higher incidence of critical comments, and lower rates of socially desirable responding when anonymity is technically assured rather than merely promised.

These findings are consistent with the broader survey methodology literature. The subsidiary hypothesis that confidentiality assurances are most impactful when the data being collected is sensitive has been validated across multiple research designs and cultural contexts [10]. In the specific context of student evaluation of teaching where respondents are assessing individuals who hold direct power over their academic progression, the sensitivity threshold is reliably crossed, making anonymity assurance not merely desirable but methodologically necessary for valid data collection [18].

4.2 Mechanisms Linking Confidentiality to Data Validity

The mechanisms through which confidentiality assurance improves data quality operate at both psychological and structural levels. At the psychological level, anonymity reduces evaluation apprehension, the anxiety about being negatively judged that suppresses honest self-expression and, by extension, honest evaluative expression about others [5]. When students are confident that their responses cannot be traced to them, the inhibitory effects of evaluation apprehension are substantially reduced, and responses more accurately reflect genuine

assessments of teaching quality. This mechanism is particularly well-documented in research conducted within Nigerian secondary and post-secondary educational settings, where hierarchical deference norms further amplify evaluation apprehension in anonymous-but-potentially-traceable contexts [17].

At the structural level, technically enforced anonymity achieved through data encryption, credential separation, or zero-knowledge authentication architectures provides a qualitatively different assurance than administrative confidentiality promises. Students who understand that the technical architecture of a feedback system makes identification impossible, rather than merely unlikely or against policy, demonstrate markedly different response patterns than those who rely only on institutional assurances [22]. This distinction is increasingly recognized in the design literature as the difference between procedural and technical privacy and it has significant implications for the architecture of feedback systems in Nigerian institutions.

V. DESIGN IMPERATIVES FOR PRIVACY-PRESERVING FEEDBACK SYSTEMS

5.1 Technical Architecture Requirements

The design of a privacy-preserving student feedback evaluation system in the Nigerian higher education context must address several interdependent technical requirements. First, identity decoupling: the authentication mechanism that grants a student access to the evaluation portal must be structurally separated from the mechanism that records and stores their responses [14]. This separation can be achieved through tokenization, one-time link generation, or cryptographic credential anonymization, all of which are within the technical capacity of Nigerian university ICT departments. Second, encryption at rest and in transit: all response data must be encrypted using industry-standard algorithms at the point of submission and during storage, ensuring that even in the event of a data breach, individual responses cannot be linked to identifiable students [1].

Third, access control granularity: administrative access to raw response data must be restricted to roles

that have no evaluative power over students, with aggregate reporting accessible to academic staff only in summarized and de-identified form [21]. Fourth, audit trail transparency: while individual responses must remain anonymous, institutions should maintain auditable logs of who accessed evaluation data and in what form, creating an accountability mechanism that deters misuse without compromising respondent anonymity. Fifth, independent verification: institutions should contract with or establish independent units to verify the technical implementation of confidentiality measures, providing students with credible third-party assurance rather than relying solely on institutional self-certification [16].

5.2 Stakeholder-Inclusive Development Process

The failure of imported feedback platforms in African university contexts is frequently traced to the exclusion of local stakeholders from the design and adaptation process [4]. Students, academic staff, administrators, and IT personnel bring distinct and sometimes conflicting priorities to feedback system design, students prioritize anonymity and accessibility; academic staff prioritize actionability and contextual fairness; administrators prioritize efficiency and institutional compliance; IT personnel prioritize technical feasibility and maintainability. A design process that does not systematically elicit and reconcile these perspectives will produce systems that satisfy none of them [8].

Participatory design methodologies, adapted from software engineering for application in educational technology development, provide a structured approach to this challenge [19]. These methodologies involve representative stakeholder groups in iterative cycles of prototyping, testing, and refinement, ensuring that the resulting system is both technically sound and culturally appropriate. In the Nigerian context, participatory design for feedback systems should additionally incorporate the perspectives of university senates, student unions, and accreditation bodies, each of which has a legitimate stake in the validity and integrity of teaching evaluation data [6].

5.3 Institutional Policy Frameworks

Technical solutions to privacy challenges in feedback systems are necessary but not sufficient. Sustainable improvement in feedback system quality requires the development and enforcement of institutional policy frameworks that govern the collection, storage, use, and disposal of evaluation data [13]. Such frameworks should, at minimum, specify the legal basis for data collection, the categories of data collected, the retention periods for different data types, the access rights of different institutional roles, the procedures for responding to data subject access requests, and the sanctions applicable to breaches of confidentiality. Alignment with the Nigeria Data Protection Act of 2023 and with relevant provisions of the NUC's quality assurance guidelines should be treated as a minimum compliance requirement rather than an aspirational target [3].

Beyond compliance, institutions should develop feedback ecosystem policies that close the loop between data collection and institutional response, ensuring that students receive aggregate summaries of how their feedback influenced decisions about teaching and curriculum [15]. This transparency not only reinforces the credibility of confidentiality assurances but also sustains student motivation to participate honestly in future evaluation cycles. The literature consistently identifies perceived responsiveness, the sense that feedback is taken seriously and acted upon as a stronger predictor of sustained student participation than any single design feature of the evaluation instrument itself [2, 18].

5.4 Capacity Building and Digital Literacy

A frequently neglected dimension of feedback system improvement in African universities is the need for capacity building among both students and staff. Students who lack a clear understanding of how digital systems work may hold inaccurate beliefs about the traceability of their responses, maintaining self-censorship behaviour even in the presence of technically robust anonymity guarantees [20]. Targeted digital literacy interventions, integrated into orientation programmes and periodically refreshed, can address these misconceptions and build the informed trust necessary for honest participation [10].

Academic staff, for their part, require training in the constructive interpretation and use of evaluation feedback. Research in Nigerian universities has documented significant variability in how lecturers respond to teaching evaluations, with substantial minorities either dismissing negative feedback as student bias or experiencing evaluative feedback as a personal attack rather than a professional development tool [12]. Professional development programmes that contextualize teaching evaluation within broader frameworks of reflective practice and continuous improvement can reshape these responses, making feedback data more actionable and increasing the return on institutional investment in feedback infrastructure [9].

VI. DISCUSSION

The convergence of evidence reviewed in this paper points to a fundamental misalignment between the purposes for which student feedback evaluation systems are deployed in Nigerian higher education and the design characteristics of the platforms currently in use. Institutions invoke feedback data to justify consequential decisions about teaching quality and staff appraisal, but the very conditions that make such decisions high-stakes for lecturers are the conditions that suppress honest student participation and thereby compromise data validity. Resolving this misalignment requires movement on three parallel fronts: technical architecture, institutional policy, and organizational culture.

The technical front is in many respects the most tractable. The cryptographic tools required to implement identity decoupling, response encryption, and granular access control are mature, well-documented, and within the reach of Nigerian university ICT infrastructure. What has been lacking is not technical capacity but institutional will to invest in privacy-preserving redesign when existing systems, however dysfunctional, continue to generate nominally usable data. The growing emphasis on institutional accreditation by both NUC and international bodies such as AACSB and FIBAA may provide the external pressure needed to shift this calculus, as accreditation standards increasingly

reference student feedback data quality as a criterion of institutional performance.

The policy front is more complex, given the fragmentation of relevant regulatory authority across NITDA, the Nigeria Data Protection Commission, NUC, and individual institutional governance structures. The Nigeria Data Protection Act of 2023 offers a potential unifying framework, but its integration into university-specific policies requires deliberate institutional effort and cross-functional coordination between ICT, registry, and academic governance units. The Africa-wide regulatory landscape is even more uneven, with significant variation in data protection law maturity and enforcement capacity across different national jurisdictions, creating challenges for multi-campus institutions and regional quality assurance initiatives.

The cultural front is perhaps the most challenging and the most consequential. Technical privacy and policy compliance will not translate into improved feedback quality if students remain embedded in institutional cultures where the expression of critical assessment of authority figures carries social costs, whether through informal peer pressure to maintain collegial norms, or through experiences of informal retaliation that no technical architecture can prevent. Building cultures of genuine academic accountability requires sustained leadership commitment, visible responsiveness to critical feedback, and the progressive normalization of evaluative candor as a professional expectation rather than a personal risk.

VII. CONCLUSION

This review has established that the effectiveness of student feedback evaluation systems in Nigerian and African higher education is substantially constrained by privacy challenges that are simultaneously technical, institutional, and cultural in character. The evidence is clear that confidentiality assurance, when technically implemented rather than merely promised significantly improves the rate, honesty, and diagnostic utility of student evaluative responses. The design imperatives identified in this review, identity decoupling, cryptographic data protection, granular access control, stakeholder-inclusive development,

institutional policy frameworks, and capacity building provide a coherent roadmap for the transformation of feedback systems from instruments of bureaucratic compliance into genuine drivers of educational quality improvement.

Future research should focus on three priorities. First, controlled studies comparing feedback data quality across platforms with different privacy architectures in Nigerian university contexts would provide locally grounded empirical support for the design imperatives identified here. Second, the development and validation of a Nigeria-specific framework for assessing feedback system privacy readiness would equip institutional leaders with a practical tool for self-evaluation and improvement planning. Third, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of feedback system redesign on teaching quality indicators including student academic outcomes, lecturer professional development engagement, and curriculum responsiveness would establish the return on investment in privacy-preserving feedback infrastructure and build the evidence base needed to sustain institutional commitment to reform.

The imperative for reform is urgent. As Nigerian higher education continues to expand in enrolment, to diversify in modality (including increasing online and blended delivery), and to operate under intensifying accreditation scrutiny, the quality of student feedback data will become an increasingly consequential determinant of institutional credibility and competitive position. Institutions that invest now in technically robust, institutionally grounded, and culturally attentive feedback systems will be substantially better positioned to demonstrate and improve educational quality in the years ahead.

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