Obtaining Student Feedback on Teaching & Course Quality

Centre for Excellence in Learning & Teaching

Briefing Paper, 2

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Contents

1. Introduction

Systems for evaluating teaching and course quality in higher education have long been established in the US, the UK and Australia and are also common in many other countries. Within Ireland, there has been a growth of interest in this area from a range of different perspectives driven both internally by institutions themselves and externally by funding agencies, national quality initiatives, the response to widening participation and general public calls for increased transparency, accountability and quality assurance.

Whilst there is a large number of possible sources of feedback and evaluation data on both teaching and course quality (including, for example, course documentation, progression rates, curriculum design processes, teaching committees, etc.) the most common source of input to teaching evaluation (particularly the US, the UK and Australia) is feedback from students. Indeed, the collation of student feedback forms (for example) is routine practice in most institutions and causes little concern or debate in these countries. In the Irish context, the 1997 Universities Act provides the legislative framework for the use of a system of student feedback in higher education. However, systematic collection and appropriate processing of such feedback is not well established in most Irish universities, with the exception of voluntary feedback at the initiative of individual lecturers or in specific departments. Some feedback data is gathered for the purposes of Departmental Quality Reviews, but often on an *ad hoc* or incomplete basis.

In a recent *Review of Quality Assurance Procedures and their Outcomes* at NUI Galway, the EUA[1] stated:

> "*Course evaluations by students are not mandatory at NUI Galway, and some students in their fourth year* [who we spoke to] *said that they have never heard about such evaluations and have never been asked to complete a course evaluation. This means that students' experiences are not systematically collected.*"

The Review Group recommended therefore:

> "*that systematic evaluations of all courses be introduced immediately. However, these evaluations must be kept confidential and not made public. The deans and department heads should assume the responsibility for the follow-up of course evaluations. Students should be informed of actions taken as a result of the evaluations, e.g. inform the new course group of comments from the former students and tell them about department actions taken as a result of the former evaluation.*"

It is important to note that because the primary purpose of such feedback is to improve the quality of course delivery and to provide direct feedback to teaching staff, the Review

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[1] European Universities Association

Group recommended that the feedback be kept confidential, which constitutes a significantly different (and more productive) perspective from that in some other national systems.

There is, of course, already a (very popular) system of obtaining student feedback in place at NUI Galway. Individual lecturers may voluntarily, and confidentially, obtain feedback on their teaching through the CELT "Grouped Student Evaluation" system, managed by an external consultant. In addition, many individual lecturers and departments at NUI Galway collect feedback from students in relation to teaching and course quality using questionnaires of various kinds, usually adapted from a variety of sources or constructed by themselves. However, it can be argued (as has been in the EUA review and other documents) that there is a need for a more standardised approach to this process; one that is informed by a review of best practice models and relevant research findings. Whilst it is thought highly unlikely to be possible to recommend one questionnaire or system that will suit *all* purposes at the University, it may be the case that a set of questionnaires and techniques (adapted to suit the NUI Galway context) could be recommended for particular purposes.

2. Why evaluate?

Hounsell (2003) reminds us of the key stages in any evaluation cycle - reproduced below:
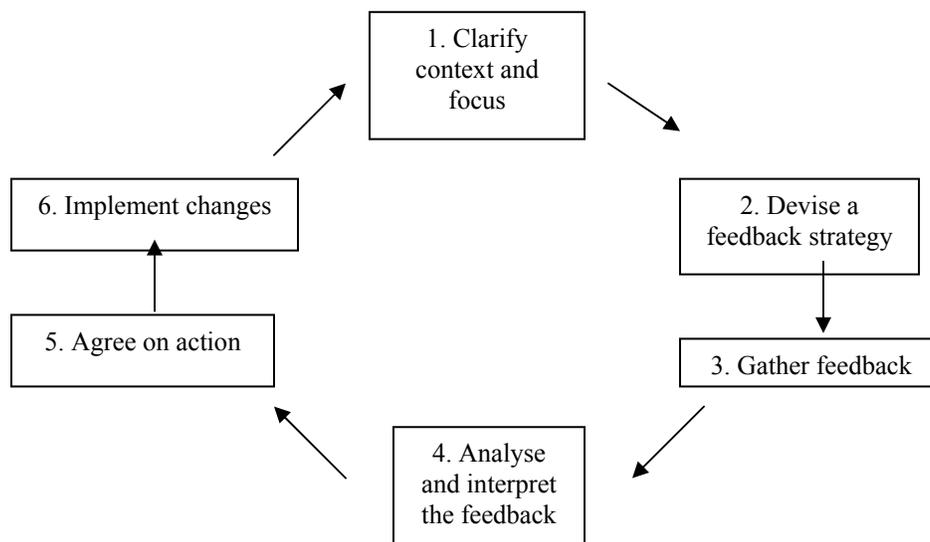

Figure 1   *The evaluation cycle* (Hounsell, 2003, p. 210)

Here, the cyclical and recurrent nature of the evaluation process is emphasised and it is crucial that none of the stages be left out; otherwise the process will become "dysfunctional" (Hounsell, 2003).

The first stage in any evaluative process is to define the aims and objectives of the process itself in order that an appropriate strategy and tool be designed. This tool is then

used to gather feedback, which must then be analysed and interpreted with great care so that action, and ultimately improvement, can result from the process. In the design of any system of evaluation, it is useful to keep the overall cycle and its stages in mind.

Some evaluation mechanisms in place in higher education give the impression that they have been implemented solely for the purpose of fulfilling a regulatory or administrative obligation and provide little useful insight into the student learning experience on a course other than very general and vague feedback. An effective evaluation is one which can potentially lead to genuine change in a course or programme where that is required. Key to developing such a system is the basic, overall purpose for the evaluation itself. What is it that we are aiming to investigate and to what purpose will the information gleaned be put? According to the literature (Marsh and Dunkin; 1992; Richardson, 2003; Chen and Hoshower, 2003), teaching and/or course evaluations can be used for four different purposes, including:

- as a formative and diagnostic feedback mechanism (for use, for example, in efforts to improve teaching and courses);

- as a summative feedback mechanism (for use, for example, in personnel and administrative decision-making);

- as a source of information for prospective students when selecting course units and lecturers; and

- as a source of data for research on teaching.

From our perspective as a centre that aims to promote good quality teaching and support academic staff in their challenging and complex role as teachers, our particular focus would be on the first of these (and in some cases, the fourth). In addition, we would emphasise the importance of undertaking such a process in a non-threatening and supportive atmosphere. However, for many staff for whom regularised feedback is new, there may be a suspicion or even a fear that such feedback could be used for other purposes. It is, therefore, vitally important that the system that is developed is used appropriately and that there is agreement on overall purpose. Important "political" decisions may have to be made regarding who sees the responses, how the feedback is responded to and how it integrates with other sources of information regarding the courses.

As Moore and Kuol (2005, p. 147) point out:

> "Too often SET (student evaluation of teaching) systems have been compulsory, publicly displayed, uncontextualised, unsupported, simplistic and interpreted in isolated ways, features which render SET's punitive bureaucratic tools rather than supporting mechanisms through which enhanced learning environments can be created and sustained. Furthermore these characteristics are particularly inappropriate in

academic environments, the very contexts in which people are encouraged to adopt critical stances to one-dimensional or naïve approaches to data gathering."

These authors discuss in some detail the problematic issue of developing institutional policy for student feedback before providing a list of recommendations for systems that are more likely to prove effective in supporting teaching practice. Particular emphasis is placed on trust, issues of controlled access/confidentiality and cross comparison with other sources of information regarding, for example, demographics within the groups being surveyed.

Other authors (e.g. Tomasco, 1980; Calderon *et al.*, 1996) have also stressed the value in ensuring that such feedback does not focus solely on the "performance" aspects of lecture delivery, for example, but also asks pertinent questions about the students' level of engagement, commitment and interest in their programmes of study. The ETL project (http://www.ed.ac.uk/etl/), for example, bases parts of their evaluation questionnaires on the earlier work on student "approaches to study" and motivation.

3. What are we evaluating?

Evaluation in higher education can take place at various levels: at the level of the individual lecturer, the course unit, the course module, the semester, year of study, the subject, the entire programme (e.g. the B.A., the B.Sc.), the academic department, the faculty or even at the level of the institution (Brennan and Williams, 2004). The level at which one should collect feedback is dependent upon the purpose(s) of the evaluation. If the purpose is to improve teaching within a particular module, then feedback should be sought on teachers and their activities within that module.

In terms of evaluating teaching quality, it is first necessary to define what is meant by "good" teaching. Individuals may hold different conceptions of what good teaching actually is. In the literature relating to student learning, key commentators have, in recent years, defined good teaching as that which actively facilitates student learning (through a focus on conceptual change) as opposed to the (possibly stereotyped) didactic "chalk and talk" transmission of information (Biggs, 2003; Ramsden, 2002; Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). There is general agreement that teaching is a multidimensional construct, that is, that it is made up of multiple factors. Cashin (1989), in a review of previous research on the topic, identifies seven important factors, namely; subject matter mastery, curriculum development, course design, delivery of instruction, availability to students and administrative requirements. Marsh (1984) identified nine dimensions of effective teaching; learning/value, instructor enthusiasm, group interaction, individual rapport, organisation/clarity, breadth of coverage, examinations/grading, assignments/readings, and workload/difficulty. For Seldin (1997a), effective teachers

- treat students with respect and caring
- provide the relevance of information to be learned
- use active, hands-on student learning
- vary their instructional modes

- provide frequent feedback to students on their performance
- offer real-world, practical examples
- draw inferences from models and use analogies
- provide clear expectations for assignments
- create a class environment which is comfortable for students
- communicate to the level of their students
- present themselves in class as "real people"
- use feedback from students and others to assess and improve their teaching
- reflect on their own classroom performance in order to improve it

Seldin, 1997a in Seldin, 1999, p. 3

Clearly, many of these definitions reflect the standpoint of the writer, but there would be general agreement with many of the individual items listed, many of which can clearly be exhibited in "traditional" forms of teaching carried out well and therefore do not necessarily require the widespread adoption of a wide range of new pedagogies.

4. Why involve students?

Student evaluations of teaching (SET) are the most common source used in the evaluation of teaching in higher education (Hoyt and Perera, 2000). However, as previously noted, students are not the only sources from which feedback may be obtained on teaching and course quality. Colleagues (through peer observation, review of curricula, etc), Head of Department, self-reflection, assessment performance, attendance, comparison with other courses or other institutions, etc., are all valuable and an integrated approach is necessary for a complete and detailed picture.

One of the key issues in the SET literature is the question of how competent students are to make judgements on teaching and course quality and this issue will be returned to at a later stage in this paper. Anecdotal evidence exists regarding lecturers obtaining high ratings due more to their popularity, for whatever reason, amongst students, than to their effectiveness as teachers. Importantly, it should be remembered that students are indeed not competent to evaluate teaching roles such as those involving course design (objectives, content, methods and assessment), delivery methods or grading practice in assessment. Individual lecturers, their colleagues, curriculum design experts and Heads of Department are best placed to provide feedback on such matters. However, in terms of *the quality of the delivery of instruction*, it is generally agreed in the literature that *only* students are in a position to provide feedback. (Coughlan, 2004; Cohen and McKeachie, 1980 in Hoyt and Pallett, 1999).

5. How should student feedback be collected?

Although questionnaires are most often used to collect student feedback, they by no means constitute the only method. Student feedback can also be obtained through student representation on staff-student committees and institutional bodies, structured group

discussions and/or focus groups, one to one student interviews, e-mail, bulletin boards, students' diaries and/or log books and informal comments. Again, the method selected will be dependent upon the purpose(s), level(s) and context of the evaluation. Generally it is recommended that a combination of mechanisms be used to gather feedback from students (Brennan and Williams, 2004; Richardson, 2003; Hounsell, 2003).

There are a number of methods used in other Irish Universities. Most provide at least a centralised questionnaire-based system whereby student feedback is collected and processed. The particular office or administrative centre that deals with this work varies from institution to institution (Quality Office, Teaching & Learning Centre, Information Services, Faculty Offices, etc). In many cases, at present, this is a voluntary scheme available to lecturers or programme leaders to avail of if they desire. Increasingly, however, there is a trend towards making such feedback mandatory at some level.

Other methods used include student representation on university committees, and student group discussion. Dublin City University (DCU) has used the Course Experience Questionnaire (details of which are provided later) and has also piloted a "Structured Group Discussions" model, using external facilitators, which focuses not only on collecting student feedback but also on planning and implementing change as a result of that feedback.

Where questionnaires are used, items may be open-ended in nature and thus gather more qualitative data or may be closed-ended and thus aim at collecting more quantitative-type data focussed on specific, pre-determined issues. Whilst rich, revealing and very informative, the analysis of qualitative data can nonetheless be extremely time-and labour-intensive, and is, therefore, not often used for "routine" course monitoring in centralised feedback systems. When surveying large numbers of students, it is more common to use closed-ended questions in standardised questionnaires.

In terms of delivery and collection methods, the commonest is to use OCR (Optical Character Reader) forms that are issued in class (or by post, resulting usually in a low return rate) and then sent to a central unit for scanning and the production of a statistical summary. This can be quite effective if done in class provided the attendance levels are reasonable. However, providing such a service requires appropriate equipment and staffing.

An alternative, which is being used in many institutions in the US, in particular, is online surveys. These can be quite flexible in format, and relatively easy to organise. There are a number of commercially available systems[2] that are being used by universities. The disadvantage is that return rates can be very low since students are required to find additional time in which they should log on in order to work through the survey. Many systems can track which students have not completed the forms and send reminder e-mails.

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[2] e.g. CoursEval (http://www.academicmanagement.com/index.asp?app=cou)

VLEs such as Blackboard, can also be used in this capacity to a limited extent and many lecturers are already doing so, though in this case the feedback is only available to the person responsible for the Blackboard course module and results cannot be combined across subjects or modules, nor are they reviewed/analysed by an independent body, should that be required.

6. Published, international questionnaires

In terms of the more formal, internationally validated questionnaires in use in higher education, five are particularly worthy of mention:

- The Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ);
- The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ);
- The Module Experience Questionnaire (MEQ);
- The Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ); and
- The Experiences of Teaching and Learning Questionnaire (ETLQ).

The SEEQ
The SEEQ was developed by Prof. Herbert Marsh (a psychometrics expert at the University of Western Sydney) and is used to evaluate the teaching quality of individual course modules. Its validity and reliability have been confirmed internationally (Marsh and Roche, 1992; Coffey and Gibbs, 2000). Students respond (anonymously), using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "very poor" to "very good", to 35 closed-ended statements exploring teaching effectiveness, which are based on nine dimensions of effective teaching (Marsh, 1984), *viz*; learning/value, enthusiasm, organisation, group interaction, individual rapport, breadth of coverage, examinations/grading, assignments and workload/difficulty. Space is provided on the instrument for open-ended and other additional items to be included where required. It is recommended that the SEEQ be administered as near as possible to the final week of the course module and preferably by someone other than the teacher of the group. Completion time is approximately 20 minutes. This instrument is best used with a group of more than 10 students, as with fewer than 10, the reliability decreases. The SEEQ is very widely used North American universities.

The CEQ
This instrument, developed by Ramsden (1991) is very widely used in Australian higher education institutions and explores students' experiences of the teaching quality of entire learning programmes, such as the B.A. or the B.Sc. Originating out of an earlier instrument (the Course Perceptions Questionnaire, Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983), this instrument was most recently revised in 2002. The current version contains 25 items, 24 of which relate to the original five scales, namely; good teaching, clear goals and standards, appropriate workload, appropriate assessment and generic skills, with the 25th item being an overall summary. Students are required to note the extent of their agreement or disagreement with statements on a five-point Likert response scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The CEQ has recently been successfully

used in an Irish university context (Byrne and Flood, 2003) and its psychometric properties are viewed as being robust (Richardson, 2003).

The MEQ

The CEQ was modified to form the MEQ by Lucas, Gibbs, Hughes, Jones and Wisker (1997) and was successfully used in the UK to explore the effects of module size (in terms of student enrolment) on students' approaches to learning and their experiences of learning within modules. The MEQ scales are: good teaching, clear goals and standards, appropriate workload, appropriate assessment, student independence, deep approach, and surface approach.

The PREQ

This instrument explores post-graduate research students' experiences and it, along with the CEQ, is sent to all new university graduates in Australia each year, as part of the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS). This instrument focuses on six dimensions, namely; supervision, intellectual climate, skills development, infrastructure, thesis examination process, and clarity of goals and expectations.

The ETLQ

Two important questionnaires were developed as part of the *Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Undergraduate Courses* (ETL[3]) project, the Learning and Studying Questionnaire (LSQ) and the Experiences of Teaching and Learning Questionnaire (ETLQ). These questionnaires focus on exploring students' perceptions of the learning-teaching environment and their approaches to studying in a particular course unit/module. The LSQ focuses on students' approaches to learning while the ETLQ, although incorporating some items on students' approaches to learning, focuses in the main on their perceptions of course demands and what they have learned.

Overview

The choice of a particular instrument depends on the purpose of the evaluation and the particular circumstances of the learning and teaching context. In terms of these standard questionnaires, Richardson (2003) recommends using either the SEEQ or the CEQ as both have been validated for use internationally through research.

However, for lecturers wishing to carry out quite in-depth evaluations of *learning* and teaching in their individual courses, we would recommend the adoption of the ETL approach and its two questionnaires(the LSQ and the ETLQ).

If individual lecturers and/or departments wish to gather feedback at a less in-depth level, one relatively rapid and effective method of gathering feedback from students' regarding their experiences on a particular module or course unit involves the use of a few global-type open-ended questions, such as;

- What worked best in this module?
- What didn't work in this module?

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[3] http://www.ed.ac.uk/etl/

- What needs to be changed/improved in this module?

It should be remembered, however, that if one has a large number of students the analysis and interpretation of the data produced with this method may be quite time-consuming. Nonetheless, such a method and reflection upon even a brief reading of the students' comments will give the lecturer a good idea of the students' experiences.

7. The administration of a student feedback system

Timing

It may seem logical to survey courses after students have had the opportunity to experience the complete course (or as much of it as possible), but if one considers ethical issues (McKeachie and Kaplan, 1996) it could be argued that those students would not be in a position to benefit from any changes made in response to the feedback. This could be addressed by some form of mid-semester feedback focussing on course delivery. Of course, if a large number of surveys are foisted upon students there is a real danger of "feedback fatigue." Generally, this can be minimised by careful planning, explaining the purpose of the evaluation to students and by making clear exactly what will be done as a result of their feedback.

Response rates

When collecting feedback from students, lecturers should aim for a response rate of 60% and should treat with extreme care the results obtained where the response rate is below 30% (Brennan and Williams, 2004; Richardson, 2003). If questionnaires are issued during class time, this can help to achieve a high return rate, but of course it is dependent on attendance levels and also the extent to which those present on that day are representative of the class. Another issue which arises here is whether students may feel pressured into providing feedback in a class-type situation. As noted by Richardson (2003),

> … there is an ethical issue as to whether students should be required to contribute feedback in this manner. In a class situation, students might feel under pressure to participate in the process, but the guidelines of many professional bodies stipulate that participants should be able to withdraw at any time. It will be important for institutions to clarify whether the collection of feedback is a formal part of the teaching-learning process or whether it is simply tantamount to institutional research.
>
> Richardson, 2003, p. 30

8. Analysis and interpretation of student feedback

Broadly speaking, the recommendations made in the literature in relation to the interpretation of student ratings include keeping in mind student, course and teacher

characteristics and other contextual factors as well as possible sources of bias, being open to situational explanations which might explain particular results, ensuring that the number of respondents is adequate to be reliable and representative, collecting data from other sources to compare with the student evaluations and using more than one set of evaluation results.

Cashin (1990) makes two recommendations. The first is the need to develop a clear written guide and explanation of how SET results should be interpreted by the individual staff member. The second is that a staff member should be appointed in each department/faculty that will act as an "instructional consultant", who will assist other department staff to interpret their results and improve their teaching. Evidently, the individual teacher is best placed to interpret the results of his/her students' feedback. However, it may also be useful for him/her to consult with another teacher and/or expert who may help to shed an objective light on the findings and assist in the interpretative process.

The results of students' evaluations can also appear to be contradictory and difficult to interpret. Hendry and Dean (2002) give the example of a lecturer finding out that 40% of his/her students felt that his/her lectures were not well organised. However, this does not provide information on the ways in which the students felt the lectures were not well organised, nor, as noted by Hendry and Dean (2002), does it give the academic information on the reasons why the remaining 60% of students felt that the lectures were, in fact, well organised. Hendry and Dean quote Murray (1997) who claimed that SET "… provide no clear indication as to exactly what is wrong or, specifically, what needs to be changed to bring about improvement" (Murray, 1997, p. 13 in Hendry and Dean, 2002, p. 76). Evidently, requiring students to include written qualitative comments on the evaluation forms would go some way in this regard.

9. Closing the "Feedback Loop" and acting on feedback

Central to the evaluation process is reporting back to students the results of the evaluation as well as plans for action based on that feedback. It is not difficult to understand that if students become accustomed to filling in evaluation questionnaires and yet rarely, if ever, receive any feedback on the process then they will become less motivated to participate in future evaluation processes. It is essential that all involved be made aware of the outcomes of that process. The information fed back to students need not be terribly detailed in nature – a list of bullet points summarising the key issues, main findings and actions to be taken will often suffice. Some of the issues raised by students may be quite easily and quickly addressed and evidence of the actions that are being taken should be made explicit to students. Other issues that arise may not be so easily addressed and may require attention and action over an extended period of time. As long as the plan of action is outlined to students and the reasons for any possible delay(s) explained, students will continue to attach value to the evaluative process rather than becoming sceptical and unwilling to participate constructively.

According to the *Centre for Higher Education Quality* (CHEQ) at Monash University (Australia), several strategies can be used in providing feedback to students, including the teacher/lecturer giving a verbal report back to the class, a students' representative reporting back to the class, information being posted on a relevant notice board, reporting to committees which have student representatives on board, using student newsletters, e-mailing all students involved with a report on the results, and using a posting on a restricted-access (via password) website. Watson (2003) also outlines various methods of providing feedback to students and gives examples of different methods used in UK higher education institutions, including the use of glossy leaflets and flyers, the inclusion of information on action taken and improvements made in course prospectuses and student and/or departmental newsletters. Watson (2003) also notes that an institution's VLE can be used in the evaluation process, not only to collect feedback from students (in the form of on-line questionnaires) but also to provide feedback *to* students, on the results of the process. There are, of course, pros and cons attached to each of these strategies and individual staff members and/or departments should think carefully, preferably in advance of collecting the data, about the mechanism they will use to provide feedback to students.

In terms of changes made to courses and/or teaching as a result of students' evaluations, it would appear that improvement is relatively rare and where it does occur it tends to be related to course organisation, course assignments and the use of instructional strategies (Nasser and Fresko, 2002). There is also the perception among students that academics don't pay any attention to students' evaluations. Evidently, the role of the modern academic is quite varied and generally there is a perception that workloads are increasing. Analysing, interpreting and acting on student evaluation data is time and resource-intensive. In addition, unless it is believed that teaching is valued in an institution, particularly relative to research, then there is very little incentive to expend time and effort on teaching improvement activities (Kember, Leung and Kwan, 2002).

McKone (1999) advocates requiring students to include written qualitative comments on SET forms in order to increase the likelihood that significant "improvement" in teaching methods will occur. Hendry and Dean (2002) support Ramsden's (1992) assertion that teaching improvement requires lecturers to learn. Readiness and ability to learn in terms of learning to teach differently can be affected by many factors and they claim that *academic staff developers* have a central role to play in assisting lecturers in this way. Encouraging academic staff to reflect on what constitutes good teaching, their teaching practice and their teaching goals are all essential in this process.

10. Important issues in the research literature on SET

Over 2000 references to research on SET can be identified in the literature (Coughlan, 2004; Cashin, 1999; Felder, 1992). Amongst the most prominent themes is concern regarding potential biases in student evaluations of teaching, for example that those teachers who are perceived as being easy graders or popular may get higher ratings than others.

Reliability and validity
Generally, students' evaluations of teaching have been found to be reliable although when interpreting the results of students' evaluations, caution is advised when there are fewer than ten students involved (Paulsen, 2002; Cashin, 1988).

Cashin (1988) provides a useful overview of the research exploring the validity of student evaluations of teaching and concludes that students' evaluations tend to correlate highly with lecturers' self-ratings, with the ratings of lecturers' colleagues and with students' actual grades. Research has shown that certain teacher variables (such as gender, age, teaching experience, personality, research productivity), student variables (including gender, age, level, grade average, personality), course variables (class size, time of day of class) and administrative variables (time of module during the term) *generally do not impact upon the evaluations given by students on teaching quality* (Cashin, 1988).

The most significant *variables that have been found to impact upon students' evaluations*, are as listed in the table.

Teacher variables	Student variables	Course variables	Administrative variables
Rank	Motivation	Level of the course	Students not anonymous
Expressiveness	Expected grades	Academic field	Teacher present during evaluation
		Workload/difficulty	Purpose of evaluation as explained to students

Key points related to these are:

- Regular teaching staff tend to receive higher ratings than do graduate teaching assistants (Braskamp, Brandenberg and Ory, 1984).

- Naftulin, Ware and Donnelly (1973) found that students' evaluations could be influenced more by the style than by the content of presentation.

- Marsh (1984, 1987) found that students' evaluations tended to be more positive if they had opted (rather than had been required) to take a particular module and if they had a previous interest in the subject.

- Several studies have found that students' evaluations tend to be higher where students expect to receive high grades (Worthington, 2002; Braskamp and Ory, 1994; Marsh and Dunkin, 1992; Marsh, 1987).

- Contrary, perhaps, to many academics' expectations, students tend to give higher ratings in courses they perceive as difficult, and in which they are required to work hard (Felder, 1992).

- Post-graduate courses tend to receive better student evaluations than do undergraduate courses (Braskamp *et al.*, 1984), humanities and arts courses receive higher evaluations than do social science courses, which in turn receive higher ratings than do Mathematics and Science courses (Braskamp *et al.*, 1984; Marsh, 1984).

- Where students are not anonymous, the evaluations they provide of teaching tend, naturally enough, to be more positive (Marsh, 1984), a situation exacerbated where the lecturer remains in the room during the evaluation.

- Students' evaluations tend to be more positive when they are told that the results are to be used for personnel-related decisions as opposed to being used for information and/or improvement purposes by the individual lecturer (Braskamp *et al.*; Marsh, 1984).

11. Conclusions and recommendations

As we have seen, research shows that students' evaluations of teaching are generally reliable and valid. In order to minimise the effects of those variables known to impact upon students' evaluations, care should be taken to ensure that students remain anonymous and that lecturers are not present during administration of any feedback mechanisms used. The purpose of the evaluation should also be clearly explained to students and information should be provided regarding the plans for relaying information to students following the analysis of their feedback. In terms of the other variables which may impact upon SET, and which are, arguably, more outside of the control of the individual lecturer than are the administrative variables, they should be kept in mind at all stages in the evaluative process, in particular during the analysis and interpretation phase.

The choice of method and feedback instrument depends very much on *what we want to know* and *why we want to know it*. If the purpose of our evaluation is formative, i.e. the improvement of teaching and courses, then our methods and approach will be very different to those employed than if our evaluation purpose were summative, for example, to make personnel-related decisions.

For individual lecturers wishing to conduct an in-depth exploration of students' reactions to and experiences of a particular module (that they are still studying), the questionnaires developed as part of the ETL project would be appropriate and given that they link the issue of student commitment, effort and motivation provide a more complete picture of the learning situation. The SEEQ and MEQ also have potential since they are statistically validated. For departments aiming to explore the experiences of students who have since finished an entire programme of study, the CEQ would be the most suitable questionnaire. For less in-depth and comprehensive studies, in particular where the circumstances of the programme or module are non-standard, it may be the case that a specifically created questionnaire, designed in consultation with CELT, would be most useful. However, in some circumstances it may be more appropriate to use more

qualitative methods, such as student interviews or focus groups (or to combine these with questionnaires). The data obtained through such methods is rich and highly contextualized although transcription and analysis can be time-consuming and laborious.

Those interested in reading more about this topic should consult Richardson (2005) which is an excellent, recent review of the literature.

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