Southern Regional Hub-funded project

Student Perceptions of Student Evaluations

Enabling Student Voice and Meaningful Engagement

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Introduction

This project was supported through the Ako Aotearoa Regional Hub Project Fund 2018 and by Otago Polytechnic to explore student perceptions of the evaluation process to inform the institution on how student evaluation systems can be refined to encourage better student engagement.   The research team expresses our thanks and gratitude to Ako Aotearoa, Otago Polytechnic and the learners who responded for helping make this project possible.

This project had three main purposes.

1   To specifically capture students' understanding of the purpose of student evaluation of teaching (SET) in this institution; their reasons for non-engagement; and, their response to practical considerations such as mode of delivery, timing and frequency.

2   To offer reflections on whether and how the perceptions of students relate to teacher perceptions reported in earlier work (Stein et al. 2013) and in the extant literature.

3   To summarise the evidence which supports practical ways to encourage and support meaningful institutional, teacher and student engagement in SET.

The project team for this project consisted of Stuart Terry (Project Lead), Adon Moskal (Senior Lecturer), Ruth McGlashan (Survey Analyst), Dr Sarah Stein (Project Advisor, University of Otago) and Fiona Stuart (University of Otago, Research Support).

NB: This project was run collaboratively between the University of Otago and Otago Polytechnic however; the focus of this report is on the results from respondents from Otago Polytechnic.

Executive Summary

This research explored students' perception of student evaluation systems (SET). The research provided six key findings that will be of value to Otago Polytechnic as well as other tertiary educational institutions.

1. **Students do see the value of Student Evaluation of Teaching System (SET) as a way to provide feedback on their experiences of courses and teaching.** Anonymity came through as a strong reason why learners feel confident when giving feedback via SET.

2. **Reconceptualise SET within a framework and narrative of students as partners by shifting the educational paradigm of teaching and learning to an endeavour done with students and not to students.**
   Rather than framing SET in the classical evaluation - review model with goals about quality assurance and performance reset the narrative to teachers and students investigating teaching and learning together. SET then becomes an integral core and essential part of the learning rather than, as it is currently, an adjunct.

3. **Students do not suffer from 'survey fatigue**. *W*hen asked about the timing and frequency of questionnaires 66% felt the level was just right or they wanted more. The large majority of students said SET should be offered every time a course is run. Some even suggested that course should be evaluated multiple times each time they are run.

4. **The three main reasons for non completion of SET were:**
   a. **Lack-of-time**
      Lack-of-time referred to the SET questionnaire prompt arriving at an inopportune time or the student having no time to complete it or even forgetting, because of being busy.
   b. **Disinterest**
      Disinterest was associated with a sense of disconnection with the SET process, as in, 'Time consuming to complete' and perhaps reflecting the level of understanding of the purpose and working of the SET system.
   c. **No Point**
      No-point was related to a variety of responses indicating a feeling of being unqualified to respond, that feedback would not be 'heard', or indeed that there was nothing overly positive or negative to say.

5. **Students do not have a good idea of how evaluations are used.**
   82% of students were unaware of how SET results are used. Of those 18% of students who were aware, 93% knew SET was used for assessing teaching quality and 94% knew they were used to make improvements to the students experience of teaching and course design. Explaining all potential uses of SET to students, including for promotion/tenure processes, is likely to increase participation and raising overall response rates as students can clearly see a purpose and outcome for participating in SET.

6. **Closing the loop continues to be fundamental to engaging students in SET.**
   This research suggest there are subtleties to the idea of closing the loop that need to be considered if an institution truly want to engage learners in evaluation processes. However simply reporting the results of previous evaluations to learners is unlikely to encourage learners to engage in evaluation processes. Students reflected a greater desire to know about the feedback of their current cohort, rather than feedback from previous students or how their feedback contributed to improvements for future students. It is also acknowledged that this could be hard to achieve.

Impact outcomes for the Research

The desired outcomes of this research was to provide evidence to support practical ways to encourage and support meaningful institutional, teacher and student engagement in SET that will result improved teaching practice and an improved learner experience.

We also wanted to broaden the small amount of research done in this field within the New Zealand context and thereby contribute to the call for validation studies. To our knowledge, there is only one other study of this type from a single institution in the New Zealand context (Harris & Twiname, 2012).

There are four key outcomes and four recommendations from this research project that can have significant impact on improving teaching practice and the learner experience.

Key Outcomes
1. Students do see the value of SET as a way to provide feedback on their experiences of courses and teaching.

2. Reconceptualise SET within a framework and narrative of students as partners by shifting the paradigm of teaching and learning to an endeavour done with students and not to students.

3. Students are largely unaware how their feedback is used by an institution.

4. Students do not think they are being over surveyed.

Outcome 1 - Students do see the value of SET as a way to provide feedback on their experiences of courses and teaching.

Impact
This research confirms that SET is seen as an important activity by both students and teachers. Our earlier study of teachers' perception of evaluations in 2012 has similar results about the important role students play in contributing to evaluating teaching and learning.

The opportunity to participate and provide feedback on teaching and learning is a fundamental right for all students as partners and evaluators of their own learning experience. They are in a unique role to offer evidence and feedback to inform change and enhancement to programmes or learner and to their experience with the institution. However, engagement with student evaluations by both teaching staff and students is inconsistent across the institution and expectations about roles and responsibilities in SET of students and teaching staff are at best ambiguous. The inconsistency of engagement and encouragement by teachers of students in feedback can be attributed in parts to teaching beliefs held by some teachers on their perceptions about student's ability to evaluate aspects of their learning.

The three main reasons students do not complete evaluations were lack-of-time, no point and disinterest.

Lack-of-time is connected with the questionnaire arriving at an inopportune time, or the student having no time to complete it, or even forgetting because of being busy.
No-point indicated students felt the feedback would not be 'heard', or that there was nothing overly positive or negative to say.
Disinterest was associated with a sense of disconnection with the SET process, as in, time consuming to complete, too many questions and perhaps reflecting a lack of understanding of purpose. This point goes back to the issues that students are largely unaware of how their feedback is used by the institution.

There is a strong connection between the three reasons and how teachers perception of SET can influence the messaging and encouragement they give students about SET.

Outcome 2 - Reconceptualised SET within a framework and narrative of students as partners by shifting the paradigm of teaching and learning to an endeavour done with students as opposed to students.

Impact

Reconceptualising the narrative on SET where students are partners investigating teaching and learning together can reposition SET within the learning and teaching framework rather than, as it is currently, as an adjunct. Reframing SET away from the classical evaluation review model with goals about quality assurance to a discourse of collaborative partnership activity with students moves feedback and evaluations to being a transactional conversations between students, teachers and the institution. This shifts the conversation away SET being an imposition that students perceived has little value to them to being a key method to contribute to quality learning and teaching.

Engagement in such a partnership model does constitute a dramatic conceptual shift in the role and focus of SET. This will l require the development of new language, new ways of collaborating together and reconceptualising the role of the student, teacher and institution in SET. The new framing directs attention to how students and teachers experience their learning and teaching environment together.

Outcome 3 - Students do not have a good idea of how evaluations are used.

Impact

When an institution invites learners to provide feedback on an aspect of their learning and teaching they have an obligation to listen and act on feedback, and to communicate back to learners the actions undertaken.

The vast majority (82%) of students are unaware of how SET is used by an institution to support or improve the learning experience. Only 18% of students were aware that SET results can be used for assessing teaching quality and making improvements to student experience of teaching and course design. Currently, SET can serve multiple purposes and be used for professional development for teachers, for promotion and performance review and for programme evaluation at an institutional level. While this multi-use of evaluations can be a source of tension for many staff, very few students were aware, for example, the evaluations could be used for promotion applications by teachers. During one of the focus group sessions they suggested that if this was more widely known, more students might engage with the evaluation. When the feedback loop isn't closed the lack of awareness about how SET is used by institutions is a potential barriers for students to participate or engage in the process.

Previous research and the literature report that students are more likely to respond to evaluations if they know what and how information is used, that their feedback is being heard and that it leads to meaningful change. However, this research has shown there are subtleties in closing the feedback loop.

Students have expressed a greater desire to know how their learning experience can be improved based on the feedback of the current student cohort. Knowing that changes have been made based on feedback from previous students or how their feedback helps future students is not a strong incentive to participate in SET. Planning with students about the timing of SET can be a pathway for students and teachers to use feedback to make changes that benefit current students.

In addition institutions can be more deliberate and proactive in how, when and where they communicate students' collective view about their experience and the institution response to that feedback. Working collaboratively with students and staff to identifying how best to close the SET feedback loop is a way an institution can demonstrate its respect for the student voice.

Using digital platforms such as web pages, student hubs and learner management systems are effective ways to close the loop by reporting student feedback and the institutional response. This explicit displaying what students said and how the institution responded is a simple and effective way to close the feedback loop to current and future students, and community stakeholders. Through open and transparent communications the institution demonstrates to current and future students and it's community that feedback including SET is encouraged, listened to and actioned. Closing the loop has been shown to engage more students to participate in SET as it is seen as a meaningful and worthwhile activity.

Outcome 4 - Students do not necessarily suffer from 'survey fatigue'.

Impact
Our research supports the numerous studies that confirm students do not suffer from survey fatigue if they see a purpose in completing SET. (Bennett and Nair, 2009; Coates, 2006; Ha, Marsh and Jones, 1998). In our study 60% of students felt the number of evaluations they were asked to complete was just right and 6% wanted more. 83% of students said SET should be run every time a course is taught and a small number of students also suggested that courses should be evaluated multiple times over their duration.

There has been a perception amongst some leaders and academics that students are over-evaluated, that is, frequent and multiple evaluation surveys falling at the same time in the academic year leads to 'survey fatigue' and subsequent disengagement with evaluation processes. The belief that students are over-surveyed may be in part due to low questionnaire response rates observed by some academics. However as noted earlier disinterest is often associated with a lack of clarity about providing feedback or how it is used by an institution. Despite the noise from a small number of vocal students, it is clear from the outcomes of this research and the research of others that students do not suffer survey fatigue. When students see a purpose for SET they want to contribute to enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. A contributing factor that SET is of little meaning is the influence by the teacher and their underpinning teacher beliefs in how and what they communicate to students about evaluations.

The development of a students as partners model removes the issues, real or perceived, about over surveying as SET is jointly created by student, teacher and the institution. SET then has a clear jointly agreed and created purpose and is validated as part of the learning journey for everyone.

Recommendations:
* Explore a model for feedback and evaluation based on a students as partners model to shift the educational paradigm of learning and teaching to an action undertaken with students.
  * Explore with student leaders the concept of students as partners framework to creating opportunities for students and staff to come together in partnership to ensure the student's are active participants in evaluation and feedback on learning and teaching. The Deakin University model of students as partners can be used as a basis to create a model aligned to the needs of a modern vocational education institution. See https://www.deakin.edu.au/students/studying/students-helping-students-hub/sap-roundtable
  * Work with student leaders to review the current student rights and obligations and reframe this into a student charter that recognises students are active engaged learning partners. The current student rights and responsibilities is framed from an institution perspective. Moving the conversation away from 'rights and responsibilities' to a co-created student charter transforms the thinking about the role of students in teaching and learning.
  * Workshop with student leaders and key student groups ways to identify and remove potential barriers to enhance students engaging in feedback.

* As part of developing the partnership approach, work with students leaders to learn more about why students respond or do not respond, and develop strategies to inspire more students to engage with SET.

* Review communications to ensure students explicitly understand how data from SET can be used for different purposes, for example, professional development of staff or evidence to inform quality assurance on a programme of learning

* Close the feedback loop by presenting feedback and the institutional response to all current and potential students and the community on the institutions external facing websites and internal student hub pages.

Background

To address issues of usefulness and validity of Student evaluation of teaching for formative purposes, understanding students' perceptions is a constructive first step. Enabling students to become co-producers/partners of tertiary institution development requires representative systems that critically ensure the student voice is validated and effective (Cameron, Crabbe, Steer & Johnson 2013). Collecting student feedback through institutional evaluation systems is one key means for enabling the student voice (Blair and Valdez Noel 2014). If evaluation systems are true to their spirit and to goals, then it is vital to enable students, as one group of participants within evaluation, to participate meaningfully.

Two recurring themes in student evaluation (SET) research concern whether students see value in participating in institutional evaluation systems; specifically, do students think evaluation questionnaires are important, and do they know why they are asked to complete them. Towards the end of last century, Dwinel and Higbee (1993) concluded that while students think that an evaluation system is important, they do not necessarily understand how the data are used and are not aware of the effect that the feedback provided through SET systems might have. In the twenty-five years since, studies into student perceptions of SET have reiterated the same consistent narrative (e.g., Chen and Hoshowe, 2003; Iqbal and Khizar 2009; Gray, Nadelson and Busser 2009; Hejase, Kaakour, Halawi, and Hejase 2013; McClain, Gulbis, and Hays 2018).

Based on this literature, there is evidence that students do see the value of SET to provide feedback on their experiences of courses and teaching; and students do not have a good idea of how evaluations are used.

This research project specifically sought to capture students' understanding of the purpose of SET in this institution; their reasons for non-engagement; and, their response to practical considerations such as mode of delivery, timing and frequency.

The second purpose is to offer reflections on whether and how the perceptions of students relate to teacher perceptions reported in earlier work (Stein et al. 2013) and in the extant literature.

The final purpose is to summarise the evidence which supports practical ways to encourage and support meaningful institutional, teacher and student engagement in SET.

Design and Methods

This study gathered student perceptions about SET from Otago Polytechnic and the University of Otago. A questionnaire consisting of 26 questions, comprised of multiple choice, 5-point Likert-scale rating and open text questions. The questions prompted responses from students about their perceptions and experiences of SET, including purposes of SET; their reasons for non-engagement; and, their response to practical considerations including mode of delivery, timing and frequency. The questionnaire appears in the Appendix.

We chose to survey second year or higher level students because we wanted perceptions from those who were likely to have experienced the institutional evaluation system at least once. Because of institutional restrictions around timings of surveys, we were limited in the total number of students we could invite. In all, 4,575 students were invited from both institutions: 1,455 from Otago Polytechnic and 3,120 from the University of Otago. Of those invited, 855 responded from the University of Otago (response rate 27%) and 306 from Otago Polytechnic (21% response rate). The overall response rate was 25%. For this size of population the response rate can be considered to be representative of the total population of learners invited to participate.

We gathered demographic and student data to analyse responses by year of study, gender, whether international or local, and the division/school in which students studied. Where we had sufficient numbers of responses there was little variance between any of the demographic factors. In fact they were remarkably similar. It was our original intention to analyse the results of Māori or Pacifika learners. However, because of very low response rates from these groups of learners we have been unable to undertake that analysis.

While our request to complete the questionnaire was sent to roughly equal numbers of male and female students more females than males responded to the request. A Pearson's Chi Square test – to check for how likely the respondent group makeup was due to chance - was significant at the 1% level ($X2 = 56$, $df=1$). A large and predominantly female student cohort in Nursing, Occupational Therapy and Midwifery programmes meant more females than males received our request to participate. Nevertheless, a Pearson's Chi Square test was still significant at the 1% level ($X2 = 11.5$, $df=1$)., indicating significantly more females than males responded. See figure 1 below.

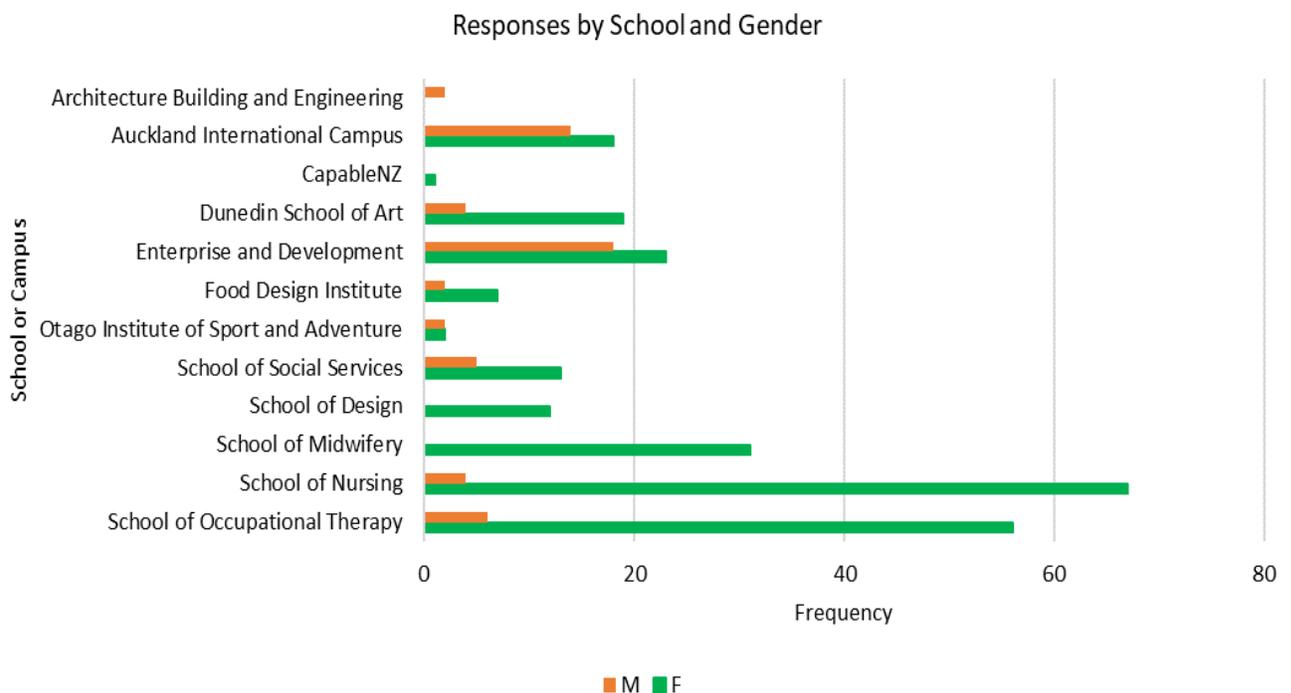Responses by School and Gender

Figure 1

We also looked at whether responses to our questionnaire may be influenced by year of study, whether an international or local student, or student's academic department. In general, the results were mixed and hard to interpret.

We adopted a general inductive approach to analyse qualitative comment data (Thomas, 2006). The inductive approach was complemented by a corpus analysis of key terms and phrases and supervised classification for a selection of open comment questions. (McDonald, Moskal, Goodchild, Stein and Terry 2019) We explored student reasons for non-completion and identified factors associated with non-completion. As a further check on the validity of our findings, student focus groups were formed to discuss the reality and relevance of our results from the student perspective, thereby helping to refine or qualify the conclusions.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study are in two part:

The first validates key themes identified from existing literature; specifically, that students take SET seriously and complete them with sincerity but that students generally do not know the how their SET feedback is used by their institution.

The second part explores:

a) the reasons students give for non-completion of SET and factors associated with non-completion;

b) student perceptions related to practical implementation issues such as timing and mode of questionnaire administration.

Part 1. Validation of Existing Literature

Theme: Students do see the value of SET as a way to provide feedback on their experiences of courses and teaching

Participants reported that it was important to complete SET. We asked *To what extent do you think that it is important to complete student questionnaires?* We also asked students to explain their response. 88% of Otago Polytechnic participants rated completing SET as important to a 'large', 'very large' or 'medium' extent and a (Figure 2). As can be seen from Figure 3, the distribution of responses is also similar between Otago Polytechnic and Otago University.
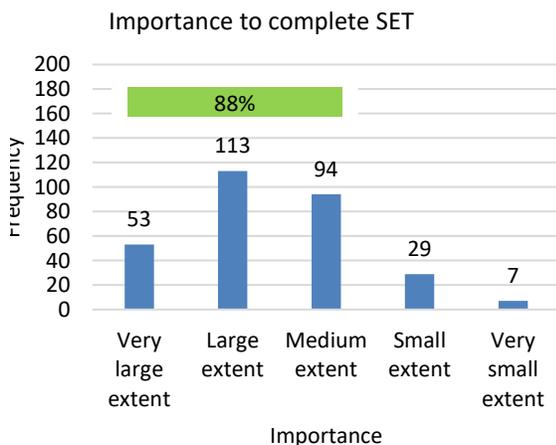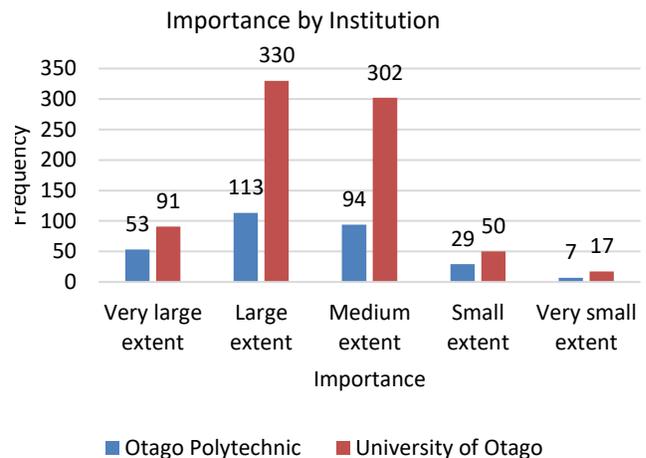

Figure 2

Figure 3

Examples of comments made in response to this question included:

- *'Sometimes courses aren't as wonderful as they should be, and I find it helpful to say why.'*
- *'Sometimes lecturers are fantastic, and it's good to say thanks.'*

This degree of importance varies from the view held by teachers. When teaching staff were asked a similar question in our earlier study (Stein, et al. 2013), which was carried out across three New Zealand tertiary institutions, (Otago Polytechnic, University of Otago and University of Waikato) just under three quarters of the respondents (n=943) claimed that they regarded evaluation data gathered from students as being 'worthwhile' or 'very worthwhile'.

Ability to Provide Honest Feedback.

Associated with importance, we also wanted to gauge how confident students felt in being able to provide honest feedback using the SET system; and whether they valued 'closing the loop', that is, being informed about, and experiencing actions resulting from, aggregated class feedback.

The concept of 'honesty' is an important consideration in SET reliability and validity: students need to feel able to answer questions honestly and provide accurate feedback without fear of consequence (McClain, et al., 2018). In the questionnaire we asked - *To what extent do you feel confident about giving feedback on your papers and teachers?* As Figure 4 shows 65% of students reported they felt confident giving honest feedback on courses and teaching. (Figure 4)
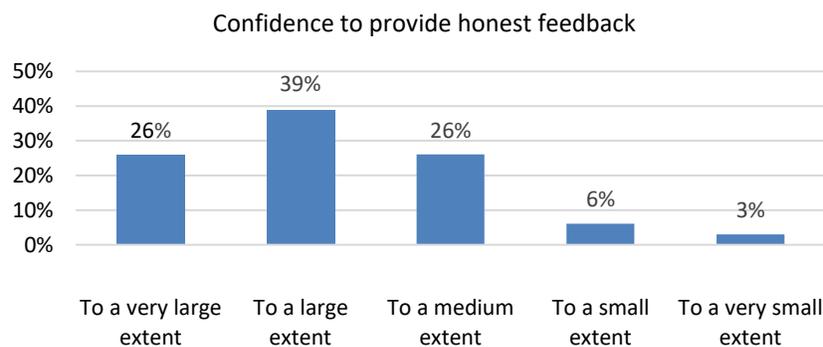
Confidence to provide honest feedback

Figure 4

Student comments include:

- *'Who else is better suited to judge than someone who's just been through the paper?'*
- *'If I have some constructive criticism I would feel happy to pass this on to the appropriate people.'*
- *'Questionnaires provide a good opportunity to do this.'*

The sense of anonymity came through as a strong reason why students feel confident when giving feedback via SET, as in:

- *'I feel confident with this due to the anonymity of the process.'*
- *'It can be helpful when it comes to improving their teaching and it is anonymous so no reason to feel uncomfortable about giving feedback.'*

Closing the Loop.

Closing the loop refers to the practice of sharing the results, acting upon and responding to the feedback gathered from student evaluations (Shah, Cheng and Fitzgerald 2017). Much has been made in the evaluation literature about the importance of closing the loop with students, emphasising that students are more likely to complete SET questionnaires if they perceive that their feedback leads to meaningful changes (e.g., Watson 2003). However, responses to this research survey would suggest that there are subtleties to the idea of closing the loop that need to be considered if institutions truly want to engage students in evaluation processes.

We asked - *In the last 12 months, has your, or another, class' questionnaire results been shared with you?* As seen in figure 5 an overwhelming 90% of Otago Polytechnic students overall said No. The results compared to responses from the University of Otago are very similar. See figure 6

Have results been shared
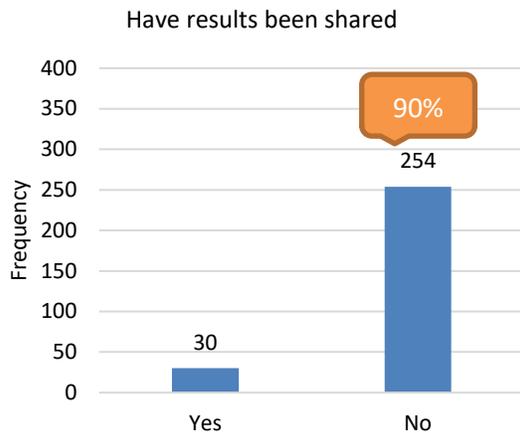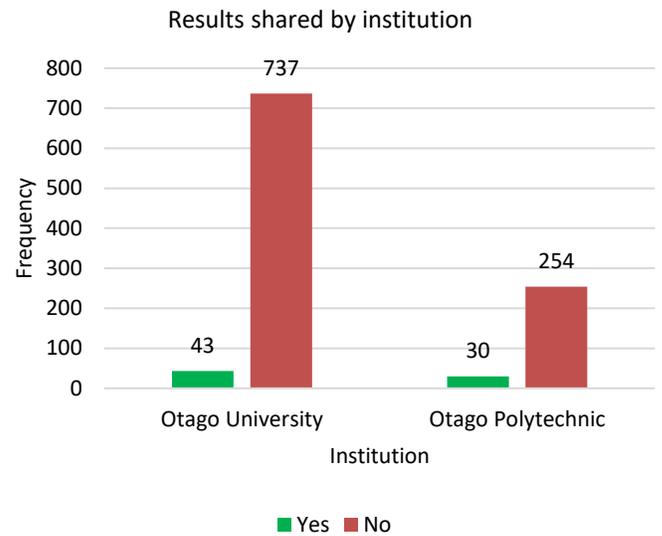

Results shared by institution

Figure 5

Figure 6

This result aligns with findings from Stein et al. (2013) who found that only 16% of teachers surveyed across three New Zealand institutions (two of which participated in this study) indicated that they shared SET results with students. It would be surprising indeed if a majority of students had indicated that results were shared.

We further asked how and when students would like to receive feedback from evaluation questionnaires.
1. 30% of Otago Polytechnic students opted for their own class' feedback,
2. 43% for the previous class' feedback,
3. 27% had no preference.

Some student comments reflecting the different viewpoints include:

- *'It would be interesting to see if any suggestions made by the previous year were followed through! It may also be good to give a heads up on the content level and difficulty of the paper.'*
- *'I guess the last classes feedback ahead of starting could be damaging and or setup false expectations.'*

The split results of the survey responses, combined with the range of opinions expressed through the open-ended comment questions, suggest that closing the loop is not as straightforward in practice as one might first expect. Simply reporting the results of previous evaluations to students is unlikely to encourage students to engage in evaluation processes.
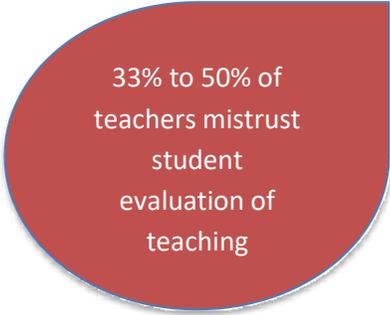
In this study student comments reflected a greater desire to know about the feedback of their current cohort, rather than feedback from previous students but also a perception that this could be hard to achieve.

- *'It might be a good idea to do a questionnaire maybe 4 weeks in so there is more time for the teacher to improve for the rest of the semester (or for the teacher taking the first part of the course to actually take on board the feedback.'*

Overall, these results suggest that students do value SET as an important tool for providing feedback on the teaching and courses they experience, and they take their responsibility for completing SET seriously. This is encouraging as teachers have been shown to make changes to their courses based on student feedback (e.g., Flodén 2017). In our previous study (Stein, et al. 2013), a high percentage of academics claimed that they were interested in SET comments from students because the feedback enabled them to know about their students' experiences (93%) which could then inform future refinement to the courses and to their teaching (89%).

Still, Hammer, Peer and Babad (2018) report that many staff (between one third and one half) continue to mistrust SET, and believe that students do not complete them with sincerity; rather, these staff believe that students complete SET vindictively or treat them as popularity contests, rewarding non-relevant teacher behaviours and attributes such as appearance.

33% to 50% of teachers mistrust student evaluation of teaching

Our earlier study (Stein, et al. 2013) also highlighted this perspective through interviews held across the three institutions involved. The perspective was linked to a general mistrust in the sincerity and ability of students to judge teaching.

Theme: Students do not have a good idea of how evaluations are used

For decades, SET have served multiple purposes in higher education, used both as professional development aides for the teacher and for formal promotion and tenure processes (Hornstein 2017). The multi-use of evaluations can be a source of tension for many staff (Edström 2008; Smith 2008), and some research has suggested that students regard SET differently if they perceive the outcomes are used for improving teaching as opposed to helping staff with career progression (e.g., Chen and Hoshower 2003; Worthington 2002). A dominant theme in the extant literature is that students are not typically aware of all the purposes that SET are used for within an institution.

To validate this theme within our context we asked - *Has it been explained to you how student questionnaire results are used?* At Otago Polytechnic only 18% of students said that they were aware. These results again mirror those of previous studies, showing that generally, while students think SET are important for gathering student feedback, they are unaware of how this feedback is actually used.

> **82% of students have not been told how feedback is used**

To investigate exactly what students thought SET were used for we asked three follow-up questions:

Has it been explained to you that student questionnaire responses:
- *help improve students' experience of the paper*
- *help the institution assess teaching quality*
- *help teachers apply for promotion .*

Overall, of the 18% of students who answered yes were generally aware that SET were used for assessing teaching quality (93%) and making improvements to the students experience of teaching and course design (94%). These results are consistent with previous studies, for example, Gray, et al. (2009) and Iqbal and Khizar (2009). In fact, during one of the focus group sessions the suggestion that academics might reference SET results when applying for promotions was a surprise. **The focus group participants later suggested that if this was more widely known, more students might engage with the evaluation process.**

While highlighting the use of SET for promotion processes, as opposed to improving teaching practice, might result in students offering more negative feedback (Worthington 2002), there is merit to the idea that it might increase overall participation in the evaluation process. For example, Hoel and Dahl (2019) note that many students do not engage with evaluations because they do not have extreme (either positive or negative) opinions to report; a large contingent of students have nothing to say and thus do not bother filling in the questionnaires. It is this group of students I have been calling for a number of years – 'benignly happy'.

> **Many students do not engage because they do not have extreme opinions either positive or negative**

This is congruent with the findings below where we explore why students do not engage with SET. Hoel and Dahl recommend that:

- *'Teaching staff encourage students to participate in evaluations even if their opinions of the course/teaching are neutral.'*

They argue that increasing response rates, even of those with neutral feedback, strengthens overall validity and reliability. Explaining all potential uses of SET to students, including for promotion/tenure processes, could be a way of increasing participation and raising overall response rates.

Reasons for non-completion and practical implementation issues

Non-completion of SET: Reasons and Associated Factors

As part of this research we asked our participants: **Thinking back to the last student questionnaire that you didn't complete, what were your reasons for not completing it?**

44% of respondents from Otago Polytechnic answered this question and provided 134 comments. The main reasons provided by students when asked for a reason for non-completion were clustered into three main reasons:

Lack-of-time
- *'Didn't get around to it and then ran out of time';*
- *'Busy and time poor'*

Disinterest
- *'Couldn't be bothered'*
- *'More important things to do'*

No Point
- *'Nothing in the course was good or bad enough to make me want to complete it'*
- *'Waste of time'*

> Most students want to provide feedback but often the request arrives at the wrong time for them or they don't think they will be listened to or in some cases they had nothing to add either good or bad.

Using text analysis tools built into Quantext software (McDonald and Moskal 2017), nuances of meaning within these three reasons were further investigated. The analysis compared meanings suggested by relative frequencies of words and words groups with those assigned by raters and by an automated labelling system trained on human ratings. This study drew attention to subtle connections between words and possible meanings.

Lack-of-time referred to the SET questionnaire prompt arriving at an inopportune time or the student having no time to complete it or even forgetting, because of being busy. Comments made included:

- *'I was intending to complete it, however was distracted and in my delay in responding the original email got buried in my inbox. By the time I looked again, I had just missed the deadline to submit it.'*
- *'The timing of the questionnaire is never convenient. It's always near final exam time. If they were available one to two weeks after the final exam, I'd complete them all!'*

No-point was related to a variety of responses indicating a feeling of being unqualified to respond, that feedback would not be 'heard', or indeed that there was nothing overly positive to say.

For example, for this student commented:

- *'The feedback was for a teacher who I felt neutral about. There was nothing I particularly liked or disliked about the course'*

For others, the possible lack of impact of their comments was noted, as in:

- *'Not sure if the results would be valuable'*
- *'Didn't really see the point, don't know if my opinion will change anything'.*

Disinterest was associated with a sense of disconnection with the SET process, as in, 'Time consuming to complete' and perhaps reflecting the level of (mis)understanding of the purpose and working of the SET system.

Theme: Completion of SET and Practical implementation issues

There has been a pervasive perception amongst academics that students are over-evaluated, that is, frequent evaluation and multiple evaluation surveys falling at the same time in the academic year leads to 'survey fatigue' and subsequent disengagement with evaluation processed (e.g., Adams and Umbach 2012; Porter, Whitcomb, and Weitzer 2004). Stein, et al. (2013) revealed that this belief is held also by many academics in our New Zealand context.

Students do not suffer from **'survey fatigue'**

However, the idea of survey fatigue might be more nuanced than previous literature would lead us to believe. Wiley (2019) reported perceptions from 38 students about the level of evaluation they were asked to participate in, and only 18% reported that they felt over-surveyed (53% students reported the amount was just right, and 29% felt under-surveyed). While these results are based on a small sample size from a single institution, our study shows similar distributions of perception.

In our study, when asked about the timing and frequency of questionnaires 60% felt the level was just right and 6% wanted more.

We also asked students how often they thought courses should be evaluated. Overwhelmingly, students responded that SET should be run every time a paper is run. 83% of respondents agreed to this question and some even suggested that course should be evaluated multiple times each time they are run.

Some comments included:

- *'Again, it is about what each class experiences/feels. By having a survey for every time a course is run can result in a more balance/complete set of results because they would not be taken from just one setting.'*

- *'It is important to pick up positives and negatives as regularly as possible. Lecturers should constantly be aiming to improve and work on their own personal development, so regular feedback is an important part of this.'*

The perception that students are over-surveyed when it comes to completing evaluation questionnaires appears to be relatively unfounded. Not only did the majority of our respondents from Otago Polytechnic and the University of Otago report that they were happy with the number of questionnaires they were asked to fill in, many students also asked for more feedback opportunities.

The belief that students are over-surveyed may be in part due to low questionnaire response rates observed by some academics (e.g., Adams and Umbach 2012). Lecturers believe that students do not fill in SET because they are sent too many and subsequently become disengaged. To further explore this, we asked students to estimate how many questionnaires they were asked to complete and then compared that estimate with how many questionnaires did they estimate they completed. The results are summarised in Figure 7.
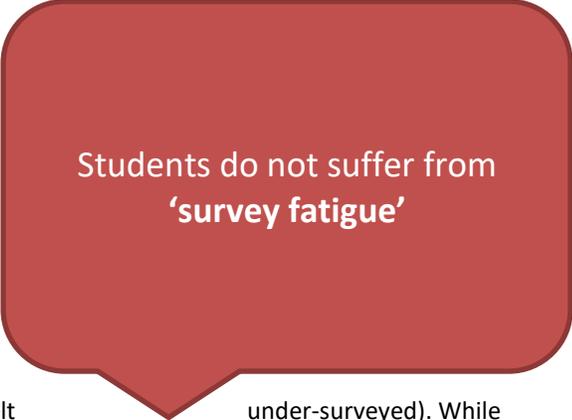
Otago Polytechnic

Number of questonnaires asked to complete compared to perceived number completed

■ Asked to complete ━ Actually completed
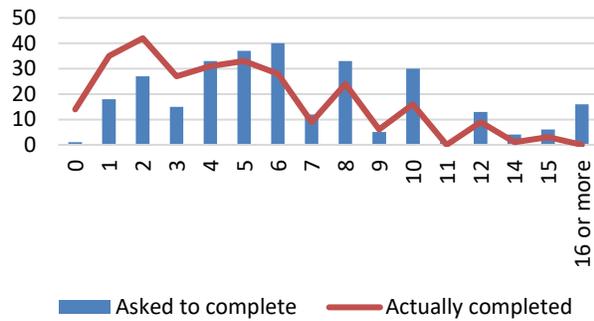
Otago University

Number of questonnaires asked to complete compared to perceived number completed

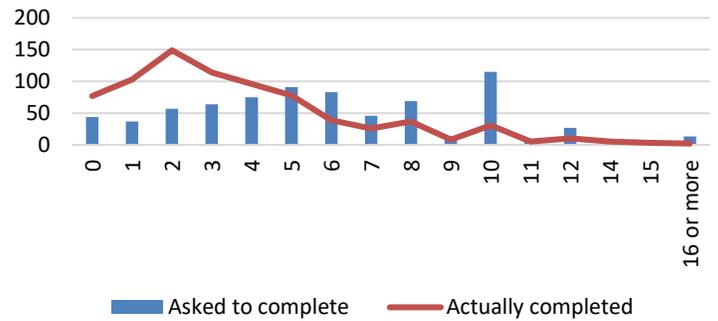■ Asked to complete ━ Actually completed

Figure 7

For each student, we computed a completion fraction: the number of questionnaires they felt they were asked to complete divided by the number of questionnaires they felt that they actually completed. Many students at Otago Polytechnic and the University of Otago believed that they completed all the questionnaires that they were asked to complete. This trend is more pronounced among Otago Polytechnic students.

Interestingly, among students who indicated that completing SET was relatively unimportant, their average perceived completion fraction was still around 50%. While this was substantially less than those who felt completing SET was important (average 80%), it supports the suggestion that willingness to complete questionnaires is nuanced and depends on a range of factors.

Student preferences to provide feedback

The mandating of online SET has only occurred within the last few years, and as reported from other institutions around the world, criticism about the change has focused on, amongst other things, low response rates (e.g., Anderson, Brown and Spaeth 2006; Kuch and Roberts 2019). While 'going online' can affect response rates, there are many positives and much potential for making the move (e.g., Gakhal and Wilson 2019; Young, Joines, Standish and Gallagher 2019).

In our study, we asked g*iven a choice, how would you prefer to complete student questionnaires and why.* As Figure 8 shows 72% of students said they prefer online evaluations, while 11% chose the paper-based option and 17% said they had no preference.
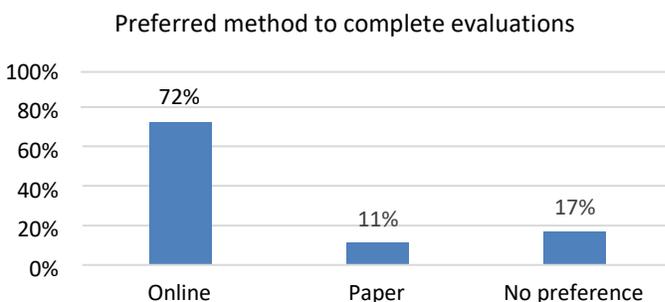
Preferred method to complete evaluations

Figure 8

The reasons cited for the different methods included:

Online
- Convenience
- Anonymity
- Environment - can do when you want
- Quicker and easier
- Accessible

Paper
- Forced (as in, do it there and then)
- Over and done with
- Faster and quicker
- Efficient
- Won't forget to do it.

However, the mode of questionnaire administration can influence the nature of the response. For example, the comment below relating to reasons why students didn't complete questionnaire draws attention to the disengaging effect that impersonal and automated invitations to provide feedback can elicit:

- *'Only a computer asking me to complete it. No or little mention from teachers, tutors or other staff. It feels like an algorithm, not a real human need. When I am pressed for time and scanning my emails for things I need to respond to, an automated email does not grasp my attention. Having a prompt from lecturers about these would be huge. Even better would be 5 minutes in class to do them on mobile devices. This would inspire collective action.'*

Provision of information about the SET system, its role in the wider educational setting (e.g., Edström, 2008; Smith, 2008) and managing expectations (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler 2006) might be a way to motivate and support

student engagement.

Implications and reflections

A telling comment made by one student sums up well a general perspective about SET held by all students in our study.

- *'Life is full of questionnaires and polls, and they can cut into valuable seconds you will never get back! I jest a bit, but perhaps students simply think, 'Is this of any value to me right now (emphasis on "me"), and is it compulsory?' If not, then why be bothered?'*

This study has shown that, overall, students see value in having institutional evaluation systems, and want to be asked about their experiences. However, despite the wealth of documented studies across almost half a century (Benton and Cashin 2011), many of which have argued for changed thinking and practice, doubts and uncertainties about the worth, value and place of SET continue. While there is plenty of evidence to support changes to practice, issues remain. This study has illustrated the challenges from the perspectives of learners. Such challenges can be linked to systemic, contextual, procedural and individual factors.

Learners as Partners is currently a hot topic in tertiary education that is challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about the role of students in learning, teaching, and institution decision-making. Learners are increasingly viewed as active participants with valuable expertise to contribute to shaping learning, teaching, and the work of an institution alongside academic and professional staff.

Viewing evaluation as a partnership that contributes to enhancing and enriching teaching and learning experiences, assumes proactivity, planning, intentional policies, systems and procedures set in place to engage all.

This study indicates that Otago Polytechnics current implementation of engaging students in evaluation falls short from a students' perspectives. Specifically in terms of ensuring:

- that staff understand that students do value SET and appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback;
- the multiple purposes of SET are clearly communicated to students;
- Institutional and teacher responses to SET are communicated back to students.

Outcomes from this research

The results of this research coincide with an Otago Polytechnic Executive Leadership Team initiated strategic focus on improving quality at Otago Polytechnic which included a review of learner feedback. The results from this report will be add value to the data being collected from a range of stakeholders including students, teachers and decision makers to inform the direction of how and when learners are engaged in feedback and how learners are informed on how the feedback is used by the institution. The findings from this research are being explored with members of the Performance Excellence team, the Director of Performance Excellence and Director of Research and Postgraduate Studies.

The key outcome for this research is the need to reconceptualise SET and frame it within the a partnership model with teachers and students focused on their experiences of the teaching and learning environment collaboratively together.

A component of the strategy is to engage learners and teaching staff in workshops to discuss the findings and themes of this research and to explore moving forward in a partnership approach. A series of blog posts on the Otago Polytechnic intranet sight – Tuhōno will start the conversation on specific outcomes of the research. In the interim as a result of this research the current tip sheets and help guides for teaching staff on how best to engage learners are being updated to include new information from the research.

The results of the research have been discussed with the Otago Polytechnic Student Association President and executive office staff. At the time of writing this report a student symposium on starting the student partnership approach is planned for later September 2020. The outcomes of the research together with the discussions from the symposium provide the foundations for SET to be a meaningful engagement tool for students, teachers and the institution.

Conclusions

This study has confirmed and reaffirmed the wealth of advice and insight about evaluation practice in higher education institutions.

- Students are willing and eager to contribute their perspectives and ideas through SET to enhance teaching and learning.

- Framing SET within a partnership will direct attention on how students and teachers experience their learning and teaching environment together.

- Active demonstration that evaluation is normal practice, through embedding and integrating evaluation within the culture of institutional life, will serve to shift the focus away from distractions of process and procedure, which, while being of high importance, can also easily divert attention away from root issues related to perception and principle.

- Explicit processes supporting information provision geared to needs of various institutional audiences should be in place.

- Systems should embed good evaluation practices more deeply and more widely, to engage both staff and students collaboratively and meaningfully.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Q1 Have you been asked to complete a student questionnaire at Otago Polytechnic?

Q2a In the last 12 months, about how many student questionnaires have you been asked to complete and how many have you actually completed at Otago Polytechnic?

Q3a Thinking back to the last student questionnaire that you didn't complete, what were your reasons for not completing it?

Q3b What do you think are the main reasons why some students don't complete student questionnaires?

Q4 Given a choice, how would you prefer to complete student questionnaires?

Q5a Why would you prefer [your choice]?

Q6 To what extent do you think that it is important to complete student questionnaires?

Q7 Please explain your response above

Q8 To what extent do you feel confident about giving feedback on your papers and teachers?

Q9 Please explain your response above:

Q10 Do you think that teachers can link a rating response in an online questionnaire to the student who gave it?

Q11 Has it been explained to you how student questionnaire results are used at Otago Polytechnic?

Q12a At Otago Polytechnic, has it been explained to you that student questionnaires responses help: improve students' experience of the paper?... the institution assess teaching quality?... teachers apply for promotion?

Q13a What, if any, other uses for student questionnaire results have been explained to you at Otago Polytechnic?

Q14 How likely do you think that student questionnaire responses help... improve students' experience of the course?... the institution assess teaching quality?... teachers apply for promotion?

Q15 In the last 12 months, has your, or another, class's questionnaire results been shared with you?

Q16a How were questionnaire results shared with you?

Q17 Would you prefer to: receive a summary of your class's feedback during the course by completing a student questionnaire mid-way through the course? …receive a summary of the previous class's feedback at the beginning of the course and complete a student questionnaire at the end of the course?

Q18 Please explain your response above:

Q19 How often do you think student questionnaires should be run?

Q20 Please explain your response above

Q21 Do you want to receive more, fewer, or the same number of student questionnaires at Otago Polytechnic? Why?

Q23 What changes might get more students to complete student questionnaires?

Q24 What do you want to be asked about in a student questionnaire?

Q25 In the last 12 months, apart from questionnaires, were there any other ways that your teachers received your views of their papers or teaching?

Q26 What else might improve student feedback at Otago Polytechnic?

Glossary

Likert-scale

Likert scales are a way for participants to respond to a question with a level of agreement, disagreement, satisfaction, and so on. The major defining factor among **Likert** data is that, on its own, it appears ordinal, and has a tendency to rise when opinions sway toward the higher anchor and fall when opinions sway toward the lower anchor. These scales are technically ordinal in that they consist of a series of ordered categories. An ordinal scale is used as a comparison parameter to understand whether the variables are greater or lesser than one another using sorting.

Pearson's Chi Square Test

The Chi Square statistic is commonly used for testing relationships between categorical variables. The null hypothesis of the Chi-Square test is that no relationship exists on the categorical variables in the population; they are independent.

The Chi-Square statistic is most commonly used to evaluate Tests of Independence when using a crosstabulation. The Test of Independence assesses whether an association exists between the two variables by comparing the observed pattern of responses in the cells to the pattern that would be expected if the variables were truly independent of each other. Calculating the Chi-Square statistic and comparing it against a critical value from the Chi-Square distribution allows the researcher to assess whether the observed cell counts are significantly different from the expected cell counts.

To make a conclusion about the hypothesis with 95% confidence, the *p*-value of the Chi-Square statistic should be less than .05. If it is, we can conclude that the variables are not independent of each other and that there is a statistical relationship between the categorical variables.