Evaluating Small Groups

Collecting student feedback data via questionnaire from small groups of students can be problematic as the lack of confidentiality may inhibit students from making full and frank responses and data from small samples has less validity than larger samples. It is important however, that these groups of students are given the opportunity to provide feedback. The following options show ways to use questionnaires or other methods to collect student feedback that mitigates some of these issues.

Online or Hard-copy Questionnaire?

There are pros and cons to using online versus hard-copy questionnaires. Online questionnaires tend to generate fewer responses but more in-depth comments than questionnaires handed out in class. Comments typed online also avoid the risk of recognising individuals from their handwriting style.

Combine Data

Combine the questionnaire data from a number of similar small groups into a single set of results to increase the sample size. This can only be done if the same questions have been asked in similar groups (e.g., multiple clinical or tutorial streams, supervisions). You can request that data is combined in either of two ways: (1) when requesting questionnaires for each group, or (2) after you have run the questionnaires and have received reports for each group.

1. At the data collection stage, questionnaires are run with each group but the results are only processed when all groups have completed them, at which point you are sent one set of results. The advantage of this method is that student confidentiality is improved as the lecturer does not view the questionnaire responses from each small group. The disadvantage is that the teacher will be unable to identify any interesting differences between each group.

2. After completing separate questionnaires with each of your small groups, the Evaluation Service can provide an extra analysis which combines the data from the groups. The main advantage is that this combination can be done retrospectively and include data from many small groups over a number of years even. The disadvantage is that confidentiality may be compromised as you are receiving separate results for each small group. Contact the Evaluation Service to organise this or request it when ordering your questionnaires through Otago inFORM (in the notes section).

Due to the number of different teaching situations at Otago please feel free to contact the Evaluation Service for advice about what is best in your teaching situation.

Peer Review

Instead of using a questionnaire you can ask a colleague to collect student feedback as part of a peer review process. This increases the level of confidentiality as the student responses are reported back to you indirectly, in a way that does not identify individual students. For more detail about peer review visit the HEDC website:

http://hedc.otago.ac.nz/hedc/teaching/evaluating-your-teaching/peer-review/.

Interactive Group Sessions

You can run a session with your students to gather their feedback. If you are asking the students to directly evaluate your teaching it may be more effective if a third party such as a peer reviewer acts as the facilitator.

Three common types of interactive group session structures are:

1. **Focus Groups** - tend to be free-flowing group discussions that are guided and directed by a facilitator. The main advantages are: focus groups provide a relaxed environment to obtain rich data about participant experiences and perceptions; and participants are often able to build on one another's opinions to provide new insights. Disadvantages are that: focus groups are dependent on the skills of the facilitator to keep the discussion on track and to avoid dominant personalities taking over the discussion.

2. **Nominal Groups** - tend to be more structured than focus groups. With this technique a common problem is presented to a small group of people who each list possible solutions. Once all the solutions are exhausted they are discussed in detail by the participants and finally ranked in order of importance. The main advantages are: nominal groups allow all members to participate and reduces any power imbalances; and there is a greater sense of closure for participants as the group reaches a final conclusion. Disadvantages are: nominal groups are very structured so some of the richness of the interactions can be lost; and the process does not work well if the group has a strong hierarchy.

3. **Delphi Groups** - less commonly used as it takes longer to conduct but useful in situations where students are geographically distant. A Delphi Group is an iterative process where the results of one round of questions are anonymously presented back to the participants for further comment in the next round. Iterative rounds of comments continue until the group reaches consensus.

For more detail about interactive groups contact HEDC.