Advice on obtaining high Response rates to online student evaluations

The Evaluation team surveyed sixty Otago University staff to determine how they had obtained evaluation response rates of at least 70% from classes of 30 or more students between 2018 and 2019[1]. Staff actions and experiences span the lifecycle of a student evaluation and are reported below to help others achieve similar outcomes.

Planning your questionnaire

- Of staff who had colleagues teaching the same student cohort, half (19/38) coordinated the scheduling of evaluations with their colleagues.
- Almost two thirds (60%, 34/57) gathered student feedback from multiple sources such as class reps (10/34), class discussions, requests for written/emailed/verbal feedback, and other online surveys e.g., Menti.com, google surveys.
- Some timetabled evaluations in student course books.

Leading up to and starting the questionnaire

- Nearly all staff told students that they were running their evaluation to improve students' experience of the paper (92%, 54/59).
- Most also told students to expect an email invitation from the Evaluation team (86%, 50/58).
- Yet, almost two thirds of staff were unaware that there is link on the home page of Blackboard and Moodle where students can log in to complete evaluation questionnaires (60%, 30/50).
- Three quarters of staff highlighted to students that responses were confidential (73%, 41/56).
- Three quarters also told students how previous feedback had shaped the paper (78%, 46/59).
- A fifth invoked reciprocity (I feedback on your work, you can now feedback on mine, 21%, 12/56).
- About two thirds of staff allocated time in class to complete the survey (64%, 37/58).
  - Of those who specified a particular time, half (14/28) said they evaluated at the beginning, a quarter in the middle, and a quarter at the end of class.
  - Three quarters allocated 10 minutes or less of class time (72%, 26/36). A quarter allocated 15 - 25 minutes (28%, 10/36). The average was 10.6 minutes.
  - Apart from providing, or asking students to bring, a device for responding (42%, 15/36), students didn't receive step by step guidance to open the questionnaire.

While the questionnaire is running

- About a third of staff were unaware that they could monitor response rates while their survey was running (36% 21/58). Of those who were aware, about a half did (19/37).
- Of those who monitored response rates and specified what they did upon doing so (17/19), most (88%, 15/17) thanked and reminded the class. Some staff conveyed the current response rate and two fifths set students a response rate target (41%, 7/17).
- Staff made students aware of their evaluation via:
  - Verbal reminders (81%, 47/56)
  - Email (57%, 33/58)
  - Blackboard (17%, 10/58)
- Only 5% (3/55) offered students an incentive to reach a response rate target (e.g., food or early release of internal assessment marks).

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[1] 10% of the 60 staff who shared their practices had obtained response rates of 74% or more in classes of over 100 students.

Staff quotes

Monitoring response rates

"I have not formally set a required response rate but I'd expect to get around 70% and keep pushing them until I do."

"I gave them updates on where the response rate was at so they could encourage each other to respond and meet the target."

Engaging with students and building rapport

"I encouraged my students in the very last week of the lectures. In addition, I sent an email to them as the deadline for the [evaluation approached]. But, the secret is that the students observed my dedication for them. Let me copy one of the open comments from my students: "[Teacher's name] is an absolute asset … and I cannot stress enough how highly I think of him. From knowing every student in the class on day 1, having a 24/7 "office hours" policy, and emailing individual feedback and updates in regards to assessment, I could only wish that every lecturer gave the genuine passion and dedication to wanting their students [to] succeed as [Teacher's name] does.""

"I strive to create great rapport and engagement with my classes during the semester so they feel more motivated to fill the evaluation surveys. On the day of the survey, I also give them time in class to do it before the class starts. I also explain the importance of those both in terms of our requirements for promotion etc., but also how it informs and helps developing the course. I then give them practical examples of changes we implemented in the course based on feedback from students from previous years."

Emphasising value of feedback

"We have verbal feedback half way through the course and try to adapt parts of the second half to fit in some of their comments - so they know we take them seriously."

"I explained to them how I used the results - including sharing some comments from previous years and evidencing how I had used them to make changes for this year."

"The session is planned right from the start of the semester, and timetabled in their course book. We usually have a combined seminar called "Exam outline and Course Evaluation". Students are encouraged to bring their laptop/smartphone to the Lecture Theatre."

"Throughout the paper I made sure students knew I valued their feedback. I gave them time in class to complete and … before this time I told them of the importance of the surveys and gave them examples of how students feedback had shaped the paper in the past and that is why I mainly had a lot of open ended questions and that I cannot read their minds and what to me seems to work they may have found challenging so it was important to get their perspective."

"I role-modelled throughout the year feedback I had received and how I had worked on it. Asked students for feedback frequently throughout the year. At the end of the year in the last class meeting we let the students know the feedback forms would be emailed out and that we really valued their feedback in making us better teachers/practitioners. I also put a reminder on blackboard the week before the survey ended."

"I tell students how much I value their feedback and try to make sure I am approachable. I also highlight at various times over the year what changes I have made based on previous years student feedback. I guess they can then "see" and "hear" that I value their input."

"Sent the following email message: "Dear [paper code] participants, Just a reminder of the opportunity to complete the evaluation questionnaire for [paper code]. So far only four students have done this - less than 10% of the class! And I was hoping [to] break the University's record for student participation! :(The evaluation form goes off line on [date] so it's not too late. I have inserted the link below. Completing the Q provides useful feedback and opportunity to improve the paper. And it takes only 5 min.""

"Instructed tutors for each of the groups to make time available within the last tutorial of the series for completing the evaluation. Suggested tutors make this time in the middle of the two hour tutorial - to avoid disruption if it was taken at the beginning, and to avoid students rushing through it (or avoiding it completely) to get away early if it was placed at the end. Suggested tutors specify a fixed time to complete (e.g., 10 minutes, or until 10:37am) during which the tutor would leave the room, and return on time to continue with the next component of the tutorial. Arranged for the start of the evaluation to be as close to the start time of the tutorial as possible - so that the email providing the link would not be deleted before the tutorial, or drop too far down their inbox. Suggested tutors give clear instructions about the address the email would have come from, and when it would have arrived so that students can find it easily. Suggested tutors make it clear what is being evaluated (e.g., personal teaching, or the course - tutors were often doing both at the same and these needed to be clearly differentiated) and why it was important for us to get feedback (course improvement etc.)."

"Throughout the year I mention to the students what feedback we have received, why we do things the way we do them, and how the course has evolved as a result of feedback. When the surveys go out I explain to the students the purpose of them. This includes who gets a copy of the surveys, that the points tell us how we do year-to-year, and that the comments tell us how to be better. I reiterate that we have made changes to the course as a result of student feedback. I tell the students I value their opinions. I tell the students that the evaluations matter to me personally. When the [QAU evaluation section] sends its reminder email I also send an email thanking those who have completed and reiterating the above points (that I appreciate their completion and value the students' opinions)."

"First, I encouraged anonymous feedback on the learning experience early on in the paper. In week 3 I gave students a chance to feedback to me and then gain in week 7. I also emphasized the importance of feedback to improve the paper content and its delivery. Second, I set up my evaluation so that the deadline was prior to the release of the internal assessment marks. I created a verbal contract with my students that required at least an 85% response rate on the teaching evaluation before the [early release of] marks would be made available. The students engaged in the contract and we actively checked completion rates in class leading up to the deadline. I think these gentle reminders and the 'fun' approach to reminding students about the evaluation prompted those students who had not responded to go online."

Advice for other staff

"I would advise staff to timetable their [evaluation] to make it visible. I am aware that students always show up for an Exam outline, so if this could be scheduled at the same time it will automatically result in a high response rate. Also, remind the students to bring their laptop/smartphone for this occasion."

"You could give students feedback about how their feedback and feedforward to you is being used. I did this prior to the major inForm email evaluation by getting their written feedback at each lecture (2 hrs in length), with a PMI or Questions and Suggestions comments. At the next lecture I presented a summary and showed them how I was acting on the feedback and feedforward. I think this experience with giving feedback and feedforward helped them realise that their voice was valued and was actually used to improve their learning experiences. This experience gave purpose to the task of providing me with feedback which may have motivated many of them to fill out the email evaluation survey."

"Look at it from their perspective that they have 5-10 of these per semester and then try and come up with reasons why they should take time to fill out your form (even if they don't fill out any others)."

"Set a time in the middle of a lab/lecture/tutorial to do the evaluation, and also set the "release time" to of the evaluation to go out (by email) to the students only a few minutes before you ask them to do it. Then the email is at the top of their inbox for them to easily access!"

"Be aware that the students are doing this a lot acknowledge that, remind them that feedback is important and without it how we would not be able to improve."

"… Allow time for the evaluation in the class. … ensure their privacy is maintained. … This particular evaluation was done in the Mellor labs, where iPads are available for students to use to complete their responses. Most students seem to have devices anyway, but they are not allowed to bring them into the labs, making lab evaluations more difficult."

"Mention feedback in the timetable and at introduction session/s
Allocate 5-10 minutes before an assessment starts - e.g., [multi-choice questionnaires] so all have access to a computer"

"Demonstrate throughout that you listen to their input, you want to help to make their learning a good experience so they feel it's worth spending the time on the questionnaire - you will take notice of the feedback and act on it where ever possible."

"I think it is important to administer the evaluation in a classroom setting, when student's minds are (hopefully) on their work and there is a greater chance they might consider pedagogical issues. … I usually state there is a mismatch between the casual way some students fill in the form and the seriousness with which the university takes it. I then go on to say it is used to assess my teaching and that I go over the responses carefully, in order to see how to proceed the following year…"

"Make the [evaluation] purposeful. Make the completion target a 'fun' goal for the class to achieve. Give an incentive that students value - that is, the outcome is in a 'currency' that will attract student attention e.g. release of internal assessment marks. Check progress of the SEQ in-class, REAL TIME, so students are informed about what is going on."

Others at Otago achieving high response rates

In addition to the above survey, here are a few scenarios in which Otago University staff achieved high response rates:

Scenario 1: Mid-term evaluation

One Otago University staff member gives her students an early opportunity to raise any concerns about teaching/the course with a brief, open-question, mid-term evaluation using Otago inFORM or Survey Monkey. She then discusses this feedback with the class. This, she believes, shows students that she truly cares about what they have to say. At the end of term, she schedules the Otago inFORM evaluation invite to be emailed to students halfway through an important/exam advice class session. This ensures that the email is one of their top/more recent ones. During the class she explains how important student feedback is to career progression and how every word written will be read by her and the department head. She explains to students that she is saying this not to elicit only positive feedback, but to encourage participation, including constructive criticism. She then leaves the class 15 minutes early so that students can complete the evaluation on their mobile devices without her presence influencing their responses. In 2018, 75% of her class of almost 150 students completed her end of term evaluation.

Scenario 2: Response rate target

When ordering the questionnaire, one Dental lecturer sets the questionnaire start date and time to coincide with the start time of an important lecture in which exam revision is discussed. This way, no students will have completed or dismissed the invite email prior to this lecture. With 15 minutes to go, the lecturer leaves to be replaced by another lecturer who encourages students to complete the questionnaire by discussing how previous feedback has influenced the course, how to provide constructive feedback, and to take the chance to voice one's opinions.

The lecturer sets response rate targets with associated dental prize packs consisting of marketing samples. If the response rate reaches 85%, 1 prize will be raffled off, 90% for 2 prizes, and 95% for 3 prizes. At this point, student anonymity is reinforced. The lecturer notes that because they can't identify who has or hasn't responded, all students will be included in the prize draw if a response rate target is met.

The lecturer provides two or three follow up emails after the class to inform students of the current response rate and to capture those who didn't attend the lecture.

When (if) a response rate target is met, all the students' names are put into a hat, and the class rep draws out the winner(s). Using this scenario, the lecturer has achieved a 94% response rate from more than 50 students. Before taking the approach just described, the lecturer noticed a massive decline in response rates, and a predominance of discontented feedback, when shifting from paper-based to online evaluations.

Scenario 3: Embedding evaluation link into lab computers

1,617 out of 2,059 students (79%) responded to a first year evaluation in 2019. A link to the student portal of Otago inFORM was embedded into the home page of the iPads in the Mellor lab. Students were given 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire before the lab class began.

While an in-class captive audience often works it is not necessary. One teacher implemented a 4 step plan:

1. He told the students about it in every class leading up to the date the questionnaire went live.
2. He sent students a reminder email just after it went live.
3. In class, he logged into the evaluation service's inForm website and showed them it would take only one minute to fill, including comments. He then told them that "If I can spend 64 hours in front of you, you can spend one minute filling the form for me."
4. He showed students that he could see how many of them had completed questionnaires at any one time, and promised that he would look at that number in the last class and that if the response rate was above 85% on that day then he would give away a small prize to a randomly selected student.

With this approach, and ensuring that the evaluation was live for at least a couple of classes before the last one, 86% of his 116 students completed his 2016 questionnaire. In 2017, with the same class he merely mentioned the online questionnaire in class a couple of time, but without any particular emphasis, active advertisement, or explanation as to why the questionnaire was important, and he received a 38% response rate from 96 students. He also noted that the effort involved in the 4 step plan was comparable to the effort required to execute the old paper-based evaluations.

Conclusion

As has been shown, there are many ways to increase student evaluation response rates. A key element is how to engage students. This can mean asking students what questions they want to be asked (where options are available), feeding back results to students and discussing how they will be used (i.e., closing the loop), and letting students know how previous feedback has shaped the current course. Reminding students to complete a questionnaire is useful, but insufficient by itself. While many factors underpin student participation, if students can see that providing feedback will make a positive difference, they are more likely to do so.

Research

The following includes literature reviews of methods used to improve online student evaluation response rates and examples of specific methods that have achieved high response rates.

Literature reviews

Berk, R. A. (2012). 'Top 20 strategies to increase the online response rates of student rating scales'. International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning, 8, pp. 98–107.

Morrison, K. (2013). 'Online and paper evaluations of courses: a literature review and case study'. Educational Research and Evaluation, 19(7), pp. 585-604, DOI: 10.1080/13803611.2013.834608

Wode, J. and Keiser, J. (2011). 'Online course evaluation literature review and findings'. Academic Affairs, Columbia College Chicago.

Case studies

Avery, R. J., Bryant, W. K., Mathios, A., Kang, H. and Bell, D. (2006) 'Electronic Course Evaluations: Does an Online Delivery System Influence Student Evaluations?'. The Journal of Economic Education, 37(1), pp. 21-37, DOI: 10.3200/JECE.37.1.21-37

Bennett, L. and Nair, C.S. (2010). 'A recipe for effective participation rates for web based Surveys'. Assessment and Evaluation Journal, 35(4), pp. 357-66, DOI: 10.1080/02602930802687752

Goodman, J., Anson, R. and Belcheir, M. (2015). 'The effect of incentives and other instructor-driven strategies to increase online student evaluation response rates'. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 40(7), pp. 958-970, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2014.960364

Hoel, A. and Dahl, T. I. (2019). 'Why bother? Student motivation to participate in student evaluations of teaching'. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 44(3), pp. 361-378, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1511969

Kuch, F. and Roberts, R. M. (2019). 'Electronic in-class course evaluations and future directions'. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 44(5), pp. 726-731, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1532491

Thielsch, M. T., Brinkmoller, B. and Forthmann, B. (2019). 'Reasons for responding in student evaluation of teaching'. Studies in Educational Evaluation 56, pp. 189-196, DOI: 10.1016

Young, K., Joines, J., Standish, T. and Gallagher, V. (2019) 'Student evaluations of teaching: the impact of faculty procedures on response rates'. Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 44(1), pp. 37-49, DOI: 10.1080/02602938.2018.1467878