

## **2. A Guide to Interpreting the Student Opinion Survey**

**Short guide to the methodology and interpretation of information from the University's Student Opinion Survey**



## Background Information

The University of Otago Student Opinion Survey has been conducted annually since 1995. The first survey in 1995 sought feedback from currently enrolled students from half of the University's degree and diploma programmes. It was repeated in 1996 and 1997, in each case on currently enrolled students from a quarter of the programmes not covered in the 1995 survey.

From 1998, the graduate and student surveys timetables were aligned and the same courses and majors surveyed for both Graduate and Student Opinion Surveys. The aim was to survey each degree/major combination once every four years. Departmental reviews were also taken into account, in order to provide up-to-date and relevant information for departments and academic units in their review year.

In 2007, the Student Opinion Survey was divided into two shorter surveys (the Academic Experience Survey and the Support Services Survey) to reduce the length of the questionnaire and improve response rates. A new set of postgraduate questions was introduced in 2012. In 2017 the Support Services Survey was re-developed and the summarised results were reported separately due to the large volume of content. In 2020 in response to the increasing demand for more current data the Student Opinion Survey was delivered as a census of all current students bar those students in professional programmes. The intention is to conduct the survey in these courses every second year with students in professional programmes surveyed in alternate years.

## Survey Structure

Although refined and expanded specifically for Otago, the Academic Experience survey draws on similar exercises conducted in Australia and the UK. It contains sections dealing with the following:

- Course Experience (measured by the Course Experience Questionnaire)
- Postgraduate Experience (measured by the Postgraduate Taught Experience and Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaires)

In each case, students are asked to respond to specific questions on a five-point scale where, for example, '1' represents strong agreement with a statement and '5' represents strong disagreement, while '3' represents a neutral response. The items and their associated scales can be viewed in the questionnaire included at the end of this report (Appendix A).

## Academic Experience Survey

### Course Experience Questionnaire

The core instrument of the survey is the 'Course Experience Questionnaire' (CEQ). The CEQ is directed at those undertaking course work as part of their study, and groups questions into a number of scales in order to measure student assessment of the following:

- Quality of teaching (Good Teaching Scale)
- Clear goals and standards (Clear Goals and Standards Scale)
- Social experience of learning (Learning Community Scale)
- Assessment methods (Appropriate Assessment Scale)
- Acquisition of general competencies (Generic Competencies Scale)
- Overall satisfaction with course (Overall Satisfaction Item).

These scales were derived from the extensive literature on student evaluation of learning. The statements in the CEQ are based on comments that students often make about their experiences of university teaching and study which are indicative of better learning. The emphasis of this questionnaire is on students' perceptions of their entire course of study. The results are the "averages" of students' experiences.

After consultation with the Graduate Careers Council of Australia, a decision was made to alter the calculation of the Appropriate Assessment scale from the 2003 survey onwards, in line with current Australian practice. Item B23 (*Feedback on student work is usually provided ONLY in the form of marks and grades*) is no longer included in the calculation of the Appropriate Assessment mean. Individual results for Item B23 are recorded for information purposes only. For comparative purposes, Appropriate Assessment Scale means for surveys conducted prior to 2003 have also been recalculated.

It is important to stress that, like most performance indicators, the CEQ results are indicative rather than conclusive. Interpretation of the results within particular teaching contexts includes an element of informed judgement, and extreme caution is required when attempting to make comparisons with results either between graduates or between different fields of study. See the final section of this guide for further information on the interpretation of results.

In 2016, questions were added regarding course organisation/management and student engagement, utilising the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) scales. New open-ended questions allow students to comment on course experience issues. Two new items at the end of this section ask students what they would improve about their University course and then to describe their best experience.

### **Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)**

In 2012 two additional questionnaires were added to the Academic Experience Survey, one addressing postgraduate degrees with a coursework component (PTES) and the other one addressing postgraduate degrees with a thesis component (PRES). These questionnaires replaced the postgraduate section of the Course Experience questionnaire.

Both questionnaires contain a set of questions which map onto scales measuring students' assessment of their experience:

The PTES contains the following scales:

- Quality of Supervision Scale
- Learning Resources Scale
- Career and Professional Development Scale
- Overall Satisfaction Scale.

The PRES contains the following scales:

- Quality of Supervision Scale
- Skills Development Scale
- Infrastructure Scale
- Intellectual Climate Scale
- Goals and Standards Scale
- Professional Development and Career Scale
- Roles and Responsibilities Scale
- Teaching Opportunities Scale.

In 2016, several new open-ended questions have also been added to the PRES and PTES to encourage students to comment on postgraduate support.

## **Statistical Information**

Students were also asked to supply personal details covering characteristics such as gender, disability and ethnicity. This enabled analysis by particular categories of students. Note that when data was analysed based on such categories, in order to provide the number of students surveyed (and the response rate), prior knowledge of these traits was required and sourced from University of Otago central databases used to draw the survey sample. However, it should be highlighted that this information was collected using a different instrument and at a different point in time, therefore it is possible for slight inconsistencies between the two information sets to occur. Consequently, calculations (e.g. response rates) made using data from both sources should be treated with caution.

In 2016, additional information was requested, including, parents' levels of education and family attendance at the University, home country and region, and scholarships received.

## **Other Questions**

Respondents were provided with the opportunity to make written comments throughout the survey. The comments are provided word-for-word to academic units, except where such comments identify an individual student (positively or negatively) or a member of staff (negatively), or are deemed offensive.

## **Sampling Methodology and Response Rates**

### **Academic Experience Survey**

From 2020 onwards, students from all of the University's academic units will be invited to answer the Academic Experience survey on a biennial (2-yearly) basis. A random selection of approximately 4000 students are excluded because they are chosen to participate in the annual Support Services Improvement Survey. As a result, the number of survey responses has increased, institutional statistics are more representative, and data users receive more frequent and current information.

Before 2020, invitations to respond were sent to all students from academic units due for surveying according to a pre-arranged schedule. A different selection of academic units were made each year, therefore direct comparisons between academic units generally occurred every 3 – 4 years, and annual institutional averages were influenced by this methodology.

The Academic Experience Survey was made available to students exclusively online. Students who did not respond were sent a follow up email at regular intervals after the initial invite.

Information from academic units for which the response rate is less than 30% is excluded from the Summary Report produced for general circulation. The same is true for groups with fewer than 50 respondents.

No reports are supplied to academic units for groups with fewer than 5 responses and caution is advised in the use of information from groups of between 5 and 10.

## **Presentation of Results**

Results are broken down to the level of degree/diploma/certificate/endorsement and major for the Academic Experience Survey. This allows the distribution of relevant material to the appropriate Deans, Heads of Departments, Heads of Programmes and Programme Administrators.

The Summary Report includes:

- Results for All Respondents
- CEQ scale results for academic units with sufficient responses
- Postgraduate Supervision Experience scale results for qualification types (e.g. Honours, Masters, PhD)
- CEQ and Postgraduate Supervision Experience scales results for special interest groups (e.g. Distance, International).

## Calculation of Means

The University of Otago Student Opinion Surveys follow the Australian model in the use of a recoded mean to present the results. This transforms responses on the 1 - 5 scale into a scale ranging from +100 to -100. On this scale, zero represents an overall neutral response, any negative number a dissatisfied response, and any positive number a satisfied response.

For example, the following illustrates the calculation of a recoded mean for 10 students:

	Very Satisfied/ Strongly Agree		Neutral		Very Dissatisfied/ Strongly Disagree
<i>Standard Scale</i>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Number of Responses</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<i>Recoded Scale</i>	+100	+50	0	-50	-100

**Recoded Mean:** [(=responses x recoded scale)]/total responses = [(3x100) +(4x50) +(1x0) +(2x-50) +(0x-100)]/10 = 40

Where a question is framed in a negative way, the recoded mean is calculated using the same formula, but with the values reversed (i.e. the recoded scale ranges from -100 for a response of 1, to +100 for a response of 5).

Standard deviations are not usually presented, but these generally fall in the range 20 - 40 for each question. Australian experience with the CEQ portion of the survey instrument suggests that differences of more than 0.3 standard deviation units (a difference of approximately 15 points between means) can be considered significant in terms of identifying areas worthy of further consideration. Less conservative analysts may wish to lower this threshold to 0.2 (a difference of approximately 10 points between means), while a more conservative approach would be a 0.5 threshold (a difference of approximately 25 points between means).

## Interpretation of Results

### Use of Comparative Information

Weighted means for a sample group is accompanied by comparative means on the summary tables. These allow for comparison with previous results for the same or a similar group of students. Comparisons with the same course of study at the same institution, have been found to be the most reliable source of comparative data and should be given the greatest weight in any comparative analysis.

It is important to realise, however, that caution is required in the use of comparative information.

Australian research on the CEQ suggests, for example, that students from some disciplines will judge some items on the CEQ more harshly than others. Variations have also been observed between institutions. As a result, the ranking of results - either by discipline for different institutions, or across disciplines within an institution - to create 'league tables' should be avoided.

The most reliable source of comparative information has been found to be that from earlier surveys of students undertaking the same course of study at the same institution. Where this

information has been provided, it is this which should be given the greatest weight in any comparative analysis.

### **Tips for Interpretation**

Having assessed the information provided in the General Profile of Respondents section, a useful first step to interpretation is to scan the subsequent section of each report, identifying those questions or scales where the mean is least positive. A second step is to identify those questions or scales where the mean for the group you are examining is notably different (see Calculation of Means section above) from those supplied in the comparative tables.

These questions or scales should be the primary focus of attention.

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