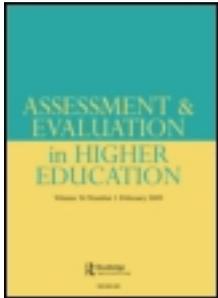


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Tertiary teachers and student evaluations: never the twain shall meet?

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Internationally, centralised systems of student evaluation have become normative practice in higher education institutions, providing data for monitoring teaching quality and for teacher professional development. While extensive research has been done on student evaluations, there is less research-based evidence about teachers' perceptions of and engagement with student evaluations, the focus of the research reported in this paper. An interpretive approach framed the study in which data were gathered through questionnaire and interview responses from teaching staff at three New Zealand tertiary institutions. Results highlighted the general acceptance of the notion of student evaluations, recurring ideas about the limitations of evaluations and significant gaps in the way academics engage with student evaluation feedback. Recommendations for enhancing teacher engagement with student evaluation are made to optimise the potential for student evaluations to inform teaching development and to improve students' learning experiences.

Keywords: student evaluation; tertiary teacher perspectives; engagement; teacher development; tertiary teacher perceptions; teaching quality; appraisals

Background

Internationally, centrally administered student evaluations of teaching and courses are normal practice in most tertiary institutions. These systems provide students with an anonymous avenue for reporting their experiences of their teaching/courses, and teachers with a way to gather that feedback from students. For teachers, reflection on the data is potentially an important contributor to the development of the professional practitioner. Standard questions included in questionnaires provide data that can be viewed by individuals, groups and the institution for monitoring and enhancing quality.

There is a widely reported view that academics are hostile towards evaluations despite the plethora of research studies that have taken place over the last 50 years demonstrating their validity and reliability (Benton and Cashin 2012). Contrariwise, other research argues that academics are generally resigned to the notion of evaluations as a fact of the contemporary tertiary environment (Beran and Rokosh 2009). Even so, literature suggests this notional acceptance does not translate into serious

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engagement with evaluation as a tool for professional development (Beran and Rokosh 2009; Burden 2008), nor does it imply automatic improvements in teaching (Kember, Leung, and Kwan 2002).

Previous studies indicate that factors such as institutional expectations and norms can affect academics' attitudes and responses to evaluation (e.g. Nasser and Fresko 2002) and contextual, philosophical, practical and personal factors influence their engagement with feedback from evaluations (Benton and Cashin 2012). These factors include teachers' perceptions of the limitations of student judgement (Aleamoni 1981), the quality of their institution's evaluation instruments (e.g. Ballantyne, Borthwick, and Packer 2000; Penny and Coe 2004), the institutional ownership and use of evaluations (e.g. Edström 2008; Nasser and Fresko 2002) and the individual academic's teaching beliefs (Hendry, Lyon, and Henderson-Smart 2007) and personal emotions (e.g. Moore and Kuol 2005).

The current study sought to investigate the relative significance of these factors for New Zealand tertiary teachers in terms of their views of, and engagement with, student evaluations. Correspondingly, ways were sought to address concerns and build institutional cultures, systems and practices that maximise the potential of student evaluation feedback to enhance the student learning experience.

The core research question was

How do current formal student evaluation processes and practices influence teachers' thinking and behaviours in relation to student learning at all stages of the teaching and learning cycle?

and focused on identifying teachers' perceptions about evaluation, the factors that seem to affect these views and how those views are represented in the ways teachers say they engage with evaluation.

Design and methods

An interpretivist research approach (Erickson 1998) framed the study, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data that included a questionnaire and interview. Research questions, questionnaire design and interview questions were shaped by the literature and by a scan of evaluation policies and practices of New Zealand universities and polytechnics available through their websites.

The New Zealand tertiary sector is made up of a number of types of providers: universities, polytechnics, wānanga, private training establishments, industry training organisations and adult and community education (Ministry of Education 2010). Universities are expected to emphasise research, knowledge creation, and the provision of degree and higher degree programmes. Polytechnics, on the other hand, have a focus on vocational education, applied research and support for learners to experience higher levels of learning.

Three institutions were involved in this study. Institutions A (a long established, research intensive institution; ~21,000 EFTS (effective fulltime students)) and B (a newer research-focused institution; ~14,000 EFTS) were universities and institution C was a polytechnic (long established, with origins in technical/arts schools; ~3600 EFTS). In all three institutions, while varying, there are clear probation, promotion and annual review processes, all of which include consideration of student evaluation of teaching and course data.

About 2426 teaching staff members from across the participating institutions were invited to respond to an online questionnaire which was open for three weeks (1065 responses (44%) received). The intention of the questionnaire was to elicit perceptions on how evaluations influence all aspects of teaching and learning. The questionnaire used Likert-scale and open response questions. Section A explored practices (Q1–8). Section B explored perceptions of evaluation data and influence on practice (Q9–22). Sections C and D asked for demographic information and interview availability (Q23–33).

Thematic analysis, using a constant comparative technique (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, and Coleman 2000), was used to investigate responses to the open comment questions. The process involved seeking descriptive and theoretical links between teachers' perceptions of the value of evaluations, their beliefs about their institution's views about evaluations, as well as their reports of how they used them in, and for, their teaching. For each open-ended question in Section B, key themes and sub-themes (alongside a statistical analysis of their occurrence), supported by relevant quotations taken from the responses, was the result.

Following the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore themes that emerged from the questionnaire data. Twenty teachers from each institution were selected purposively (Patton 1990) to provide a sample representing academic discipline, career stage and seniority. The core interview questions probed teaching and learning beliefs; students' capacity to make judgements; personal/emotional and other factors such as timing; and engagement with evaluation. Thematic analysis was used to draw out significant trends from the interviews.

Analysis of the findings from across all data-sets, in the light of the literature, shed light on perceptions of staff between and across all participating institutions and their corresponding levels of engagement with, and use of, formal student evaluation feedback.

Results and discussion

Results are now presented and discussed around

- (a) perceptions as they relate to personal professional development and engagement (reflecting the developmental purpose of student evaluations); and
- (b) perceptions as they relate to institutional expectations (reflecting the monitoring/quality assurance purpose of student evaluations).

Perceptions vs. engagement

In line with much of the current literature, the questionnaire responses demonstrated that most participants thought that collecting evaluation data was worthwhile. The response to Q17 *Do you personally think it is worthwhile to gather student evaluation data about teaching and courses/papers?* is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that around three quarters of all respondents view evaluations as personally worthwhile. Some explanation for this positive view can be gleaned from an examination of the responses to Q18 (*Please explain your answer to Q17*). Two themes accompanied by a series of sub-themes were identified in these responses, highlighting factors that either enhance (Theme 1) or limit (Theme 2) teachers' sense of worth of evaluation. The most commonly identified Theme 1 reasons were to inform teacher and/or course development (1a) and to identify student learning needs (1b). For example:

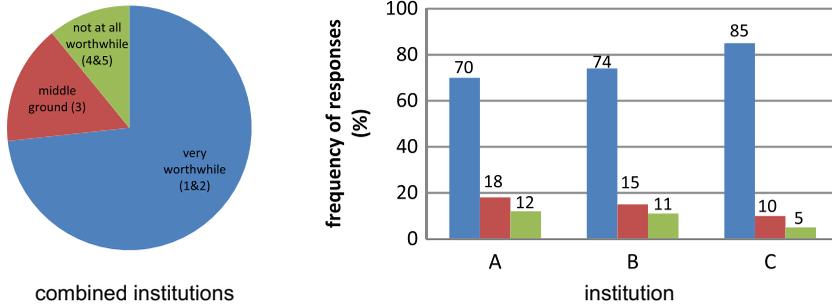


Figure 1. Frequency of responses to Q17.

Keeps you on your toes – review by others is a great way to identify how others see you... and how they see your strengths and weaknesses. (Q18 sub-Theme 1a, institution A)

The most common Theme 2 reasons included shortcomings in the current evaluations system (2c), quality of student responses (2d) and the use of the same instrument for quality and development purposes (2a). For example:

The rating questions are rather useless but perhaps useful for a promotion committee to make broad judgements. That is their sole value, nothing else. The reason for that is that they do not specifically tell you what is wrong or what is right. The comments do that best. Also ... the statistical rigour in many of these [evaluations] would make a real statistician seriously question their meaning. (Q18 sub-Theme 2a, institution B)

While shortcomings with the current evaluation systems were highlighted in responses to Q18, the ratings question, Q19 (*How effective is your institution's centralised evaluation system in gathering useful/meaningful student data for you?* – see Figure 2, below), indicated that over half the respondents find their centralised system effective (rating 1 or 2). Sixteen per cent, on average, found the centralised system not effective (rating 4 or 5).

While not conclusive, this does suggest that the data gathered through the institutions' systems are considered good enough to be reasonably meaningful to staff, in spite of system deficiencies.

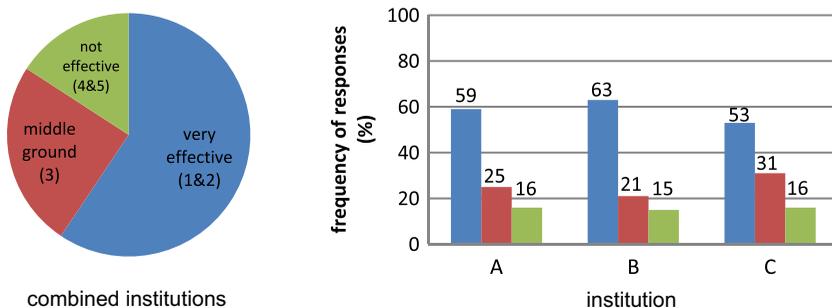


Figure 2. Combined total ratings for Q19.

Positive views about students' ability to make judgements about teaching were expressed through the 60 interviews. For example:

Yes, students have many years of knowing what is good teaching or a good course.
(institution A)

However, strong reservations were also voiced at the two universities concerning the quality of student feedback (9 at A; 11 at B), with a smaller number questioning the quality of student judgements at institution C (6).

I used to believe that [students can make judgements about teaching], but now I no longer believe that. I think in terms of how...students are believing they are buying a qualification.... (institution B)

Students have bullied staff and they use evaluations as an opportunity to dump on staff. (institution C)

At the universities, reservations were also expressed about evaluation survey instruments (8 at each of A and B), but this was not a noticeable concern in the institution C interviews. Another interview finding at institution A was the potential manipulation of the evaluations process by academics (8).

People are more careful to choose questions that are more likely to yield a positive response. (institution A)

Other problems mentioned were timing of evaluations, and the associated unease about institutional use of the data (8 at A; 3 at B; 2 at C), including a concern about institutional reliance on one evaluation source to base assumptions and decisions.

The institution tries to do too much with this limited data. (institution A)

A contextual difference that emerged in the institution C interviews was that small classes and close contact in skills-based teaching meant teachers had many opportunities to gather informal feedback on their students' learning and consequently formal evaluation data were seen as less significant.

More detail on teachers' perceptions can be seen through an examination of the responses to Q2 of the questionnaire. This question asked, *Please identify why you use student evaluations* and was followed by eight prompts, each of which requested a 'yes'/'no' answer. Figure 3 shows the summary of the 'yes' responses to each item in Q2, the total responses across institutions and then by institution.

Figure 3 shows that 2f (*getting feedback on students' learning experience* – 93%) and 2e (*to help with paper/course refinement/development* – 89%) attracted the highest total 'yes' response. These responses suggest that most teachers claim interest in checking with students about their experience of the teaching and the courses, and are interested in ideas for fine-tuning their courses to improve students' experiences. Simultaneously, 2a (*it is required*) and 2b (*for my own professional development*) both attracted similar total 'yes' responses of 85 and 87%, respectively. Not far behind, at 80%, was 2c (*for my promotion application*). Once again, a relatively high 'yes' response indicates that there is a sensitivity to the two main

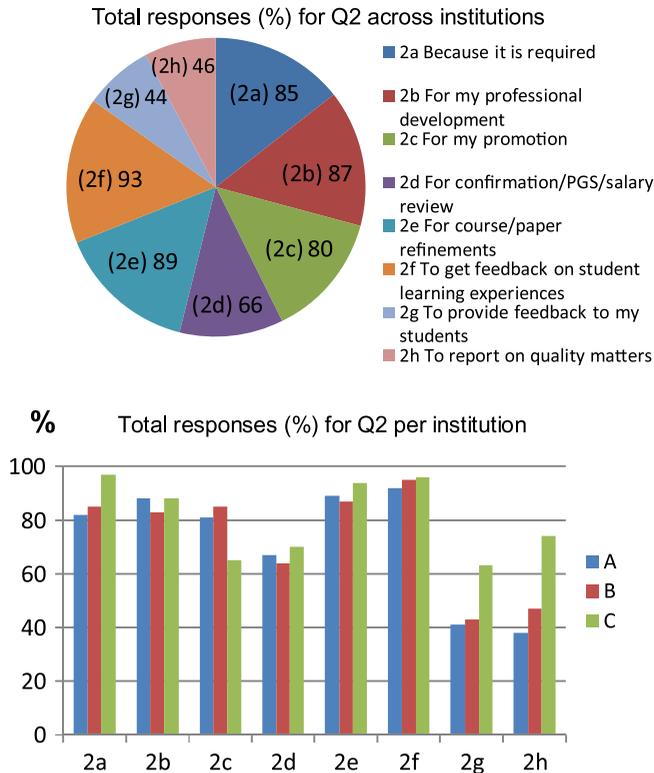


Figure 3. Summary of 'yes' responses to each item in Q2 across institution and per institution.

purposes for which evaluations have been shown to exist, namely, for accountability as well as for professional development.

Interestingly, 2g (*to provide feedback to my students*) and 2h (*to report on quality matters to relevant internal and external bodies*) were lowest of the total 'yes' responses (44 and 46%, respectively). A comparison of 2h and 2g with 2f (*to get feedback on my students' learning experiences*) (93% 'yes' responses), suggests that teachers see evaluations as providing feedback to them, *about* their students and for their own use, but *not for* their students. These findings indicate that while many academics are interested in student feedback, there appears to be a fundamental step missing. Generally teachers do not seem to see the student evaluations as part of a shared conversation between teacher and learners in which both parties have a significant stake.

Further insights can be gained from responses to Q4 *When you receive the results from your student evaluations, do you....?* followed by seven prompts providing examples of possible activities that teachers may engage in when they receive evaluation results (see Figure 4, below). The prompts, 4a to 4g, requested responses on a five point Likert scale (Always 1 to Never 5) and highlight connections between perceptions and behaviours. The percentage figures show the 1 and 2 responses summed together to represent the higher levels of engagement with each activity.

Figure 4 shows that the majority of participants across all institutions indicated they read the open questions/comments when they received evaluation survey

results (4b, 95%). High numbers said they spend time reviewing the data (4a, 87%), looking for feedback on teaching (4g, 77%) and comparing data with previous results (4d, 77%). By contrast, the number who said that they sought assistance with interpreting results was low (4f, 12%) and providing students with feedback on the results was also low (4c, 16%). Discussing the results with colleagues/teaching team (4e, 47%) were not activities they engage into a high degree. While individual teachers were ready to be informed, evaluations did not appear to be part of a regular and dynamic conversation about teaching learning and a widely participated in process of continuous improvement. The culture of a private, isolated engagement with evaluations data was evident, with all three institutions citing the most common reason for not feeding back to students was that evaluations tended to be run at the end of a semester creating the perception that the timing makes reporting back to current students impossible.

In keeping with the literature (e.g. Beran and Rokosh 2009; Burden 2008; McKeachie 1990), the current study indicated considerable range in perceptions of the quality of the evaluation data. Many respondents noted flaws such as the unreliability of students' feedback (Aleamoni 1981). Student ability to judge teaching was doubted and a concern was expressed that students were swayed by easy courses and likeable teachers, a view expressed in comments like, 'It's a popularity contest. I'm embarrassed to be using them' (institution A, interview). This view was expressed by a proportion of all three interviewee groups, but particularly at institution A.

These findings, and the recurrence of certain themes, suggest that there are narratives around students and evaluations that have become deeply embedded in the minds of tertiary teachers. Interestingly, these narratives seem more prevalent in the universities where perhaps the large-class traditional lecture format promotes notions of students as a collective entity with certain assumed characteristics.

Possibly because a student-focused philosophy appears to be much more the norm in the institution C context, it is a less obvious potential indicator of teacher attitudes to evaluation feedback. Even so, the interviewees from institution C generally provided detailed reflections on their teaching conceptions and were also more

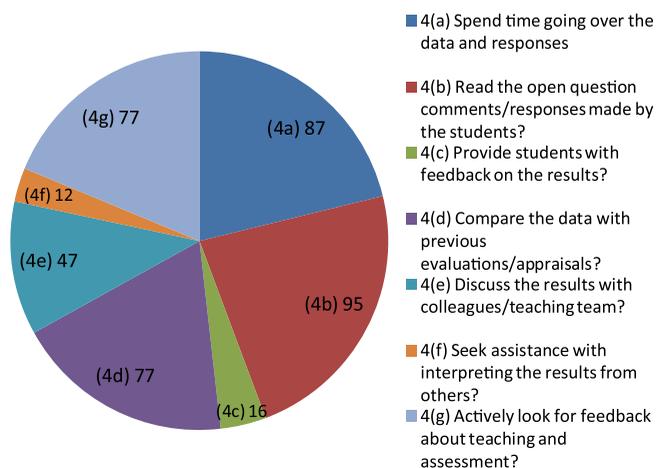


Figure 4. Total responses to Q4 prompts across institutions.

inclined to refer to educational theorists than those from the universities. In addition, institution C interviewees described a much higher degree of engagement with student feedback than those from the universities as well as a focus on students and their long-term outcomes. A number of university interviewees, on the other hand, talked about teaching and learning in terms of teacher behaviours and/or the handing over of content and some saw themselves primarily in terms of their discipline research (8). This is, perhaps, not surprising in terms of the historical antecedents of the different tertiary environments as well as their current goals and student populations.

Concerns about the evaluations process and/or the instruments, including questions about their validity and reliability, emerged in Section B themes. These concerns reflect the literature (e.g. Beran, Violato, and Kline 2007; D'Appollonia and Abrami 1997; McKeachie 1990; Menges and Mathis 1988). Generally, the concerns fell into two broad groups: (a) criticisms of the evaluation instruments and process (e.g. design faults, bluntness of the instruments, interpretation difficulties, dissatisfaction with the questions/format, the timing and/or delays getting the results, preferences for other forms of evaluation; statistical issues); and (b) criticisms of the source of the data, the students (e.g. the number and representativeness of the students; whether students can judge good teaching/courses; potential for bias; feedback not constructive/contradictory; difficulty level of course; differences between student cohorts). The unreliability or the limitations of the evaluations instrument itself did not arise in the institution C interviews, but eight interviewees from each of the universities voiced criticisms of this nature.

Generally, the data thus confirmed that there is a gap in the quality of engagement with evaluations data, its deliberate and systematic use for professional development and ongoing engagement with students about their feedback and how it is being valued and used.

Perceptions vs. institutional expectations

Teachers' engagement with the evaluation system varies according to perceptions of the institution's use of the system and of its practical implementation. Mistrust or suspicion of institutional use of evaluations has been widely reported in numerous studies (Arthur 2009; Beran and Rokosh 2009; Edström 2008; Moore and Kuol 2005). The questionnaire findings in this research indicated that institutional use of evaluations is a factor for some academics (see Figure 3), but is not nearly as pervasive and dominant as was expected at the outset of the project. Question 11 asked *To what extent does your institution's use of student evaluation data influence your teaching decisions?* (1 = a great deal to 5 = not at all). Roughly, a third of staff indicated a high level of influence (35% 1 or 2 rating), a third chose the middle ground (29%) and a third indicated little influence (36% 4 or 5 rating). Of the staff who commented on this question, only 10% indicated an explicit tension with institutional use. Other comments showed awareness of institutional use but this ranged from positive attitudes of the importance of having evidence of quality to not allowing it to influence their teaching decisions.

At institutions B and C, expectations are made very clear through policy with biennial (B) or annual (C) evaluations being mandated. At institution A, perhaps in line with its value statement about 'academic freedom', there are no mandatory requirements about evaluations, but teaching evaluations are needed for confirma-

tion path and promotion processes. Respondents from all three institutions said that they use evaluations because it is a requirement of their institution (see Figure 3), but this was highest for institution C (97%).

Overall, the evidence suggests that combinations of factors predispose teaching staff to conduct evaluations and use the data. It appears to be a mix of seeing inherent value of involvement in evaluation (as a learning and reflective process – e.g. Figure 3, Q2f, e and b) and the necessity to report on teaching and course effectiveness and quality to internal and external bodies and respond to institutional demands (e.g. Figure 3, Q2a, c and h). Each of these factors is not mutually exclusive.

The type of organisation – its mandate from the government and how it is funded (Ministry of Education 2010) – determines the priorities and foci for the institution which are then reflected in mission, vision and goals statements. As members of an institution, teachers are both contributors to, and subject to, the generation and continuation of the many policies, processes and practices governing all aspects of their work, including evaluations. If institutions are unclear about why teaching staff should be involved in evaluation, and/or reasons are not communicated explicitly in understandable ways, then confusion, and even mistrust and suspicion will result (Edström 2008; Moore and Kuol 2005). Consequently, some teachers may respond by blindly administering evaluations because it is mandated, or even avoid them altogether. Other teachers will endeavour to fit their institution's expectations into their own conceptualisation of evaluation, thus ensuring that evaluation activities are not entirely meaningless.

While there are studies that draw attention to the negative views teachers have of evaluations (e.g. Aleamoni 1981; Arthur 2009; Moore and Kuol 2005), as well as those that highlight the more positive worth teachers place on them (e.g. Nasser and Fresko 2002; Penny and Coe 2004; Schmelkin, Spencer, and Gellman 1997), the current study indicated a 'grey area' between the negative and the more positive views. In summary, the participants in this study saw evaluation variously as: a way to meet requirements; a way to promote oneself; a way to get to know what is going on; and a way to determine the effectiveness of the course and the teaching with a view to making changes.

Academics' acquiescence to evaluations as part of current tertiary environments often does not convert into using them to improve teaching (Arthur 2009; Beran and Rokosh 2009; Penny and Coe 2004; Smith 2008). The gap between acceptance and engagement appears to have many causes, and it is speculated that strong emotion around receiving evaluation results may be a factor (Arthur 2009; Moore and Kuol 2005). Interviewees in the current study acknowledged the presence of emotions, their comments often suggesting emotional rawness. Although no conclusive evidence was found, these reactions to receiving feedback, especially when negative, could be an additional reason why evaluation seems to be an individual and private activity for the teachers who participated. This culture of privacy appears to constrain discussion about, and engagement with, evaluations. Some teachers in the study stated that they were not aware how their institution used evaluation data. In the case of institution C, with its 'flatter' structure and smaller size than the two universities, it appeared that teachers were more aware of institutional use of evaluation data, one reason being, that they were more closely involved in reviewing student feedback with the aim of reporting to external bodies. Simultaneously, the high percentage of interviewees from institution C who spoke about

ongoing engagement with their students and their learning progress reflects a culture and a context in which teachers appear to work alongside their students to a far greater extent than at the universities. The feedback about proximity to students' learning is also in keeping with the predominance of student-focused views in the teaching beliefs of institution C interviewees.

The literature suggests that many academics believe that evaluations should be complemented by other forms of evaluation such as peer and self-review (Ballantyne, Borthwick, and Packer 2000; Braskamp and Ory 1994; Penny and Coe 2004). This theme surfaced in the questionnaire and interview data in this study, although not consistently across all responses.

Deliberate and systematic discussion of students' evaluation feedback does not seem to be part of the culture at any of the institutions. Discussion may occur within a course team or else tends to be of the informal, 'staffroom chat' variety. While this was not explicitly stated by interviewees or in questionnaire comments, the timing of most evaluations at the end of the semester may also limit opportunities for post-evaluation collaborative analysis. The literature suggests that an important reason for the post-evaluation vacuum is that institutions tend to offer very little guidance and support around interpretation and use of evaluations (Arthur 2009; Penny and Coe 2004; Smith 2008).

For the universities, this study confirmed the findings of the literature that in spite of a relatively positive attitude to evaluations, there was not a corresponding degree of engagement with, and use of, the data by academics. In this respect, the interviewees at institution C expressed considerably more engagement with evaluations to inform their teaching. It is possible that interviewees did not discuss the problem of interpretation and support with improvement because help in these processes has not been part of the traditional summative evaluation system. Research that involves help in interpretation and subsequent professional development (e.g. Smith 2008) needs to be extended in order to see if these additions can heighten staff engagement with evaluations and improve their usefulness for students. The culture of relative silence around evaluations also needs further examination. The isolation of summative evaluation systems from the rest of the teaching and learning process (Arthur 2009) may convey that evaluation is an individual exercise, undertaken almost independently. This is also an important focus for future research, because until evaluation is *for* learning as well as *of* learning (Bovill 2011), it is failing to meet the most important part of its brief, the improvement of student learning.

Recommendations

In investigating answers to the research question, the findings of this study point to the need for changes to centralised evaluation systems to optimally enhance teaching and student learning. Furthermore, institutions need to explicitly articulate their commitment to the link between evaluations and professional development. Institutions also need to endorse and resource mechanisms to assist teachers to use student feedback to enhance teaching and learning. This study suggests the need for a shared understanding of teaching and evaluation, and for evaluation approaches that are collaborative and organic, not solitary and isolated. Such an endeavour should be complementary to, and not undermined by, the quality purposes of evaluation. Evaluation systems should include processes and practices that target each purpose,

but that also recognise their complementarity and that a level of integration is needed to provide cohesion between them (e.g. Smith 2008). Tools such as rubrics can delineate and communicate expectations of quality, and provide transparency around decision-making as well as use and interpretation of data. The inclusion of customised and standard elements/questions in surveys will meet the various needs of different audiences. The promotion of teaching as a scholarly activity will encourage the application of research/inquiry approaches, with evaluation-thinking being a key part of such an approach. In addition, the creation of, and support for, teaching networks to foster collaboration, sharing and inquiry could have a focus on evaluation activity, including critique of the institution's evaluation tools, their limitations and possibilities. Thus, staff development opportunities could be capitalised upon, and processes and practices surrounding data gathering, analysis, interpretation and planning and implementing responses could become foci.

Conclusion

This study, undertaken in three New Zealand tertiary institutions, provided an overview of a wide range of tertiary teacher views about evaluations, and the ways that tertiary teachers say they engage with evaluations processes. The study showed that teachers hold a variety of perceptions which relate closely to institutional goals and intentions, processes and practices involved in evaluation systems, as well as individual teacher beliefs, views and experiences. It is argued that institutions need to offer a consistent message about the requirement to use student feedback for professional development. Such a message needs to be underpinned by the provision of support structure and rewards which encourage academics to engage with their subjects, their colleagues and their students in a process of continuous improvement. Unless quality monitoring and auditing are accompanied by a visible emphasis on evaluation for development, institutions run the risk of fostering cynicism and disengagement by academics and the view of evaluations as an isolated add-on to their work. If this issue is not addressed, what the students say and what teachers say and do in response may continue to be a case of 'never the twain shall meet'.

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Jo Kennedy is the coordinator of Evaluation Research & Development at the Higher Education Development Centre at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. Her current position is non-academic, and her research interests include evaluation of tertiary teaching and student perceptions of teachers/courses.

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