

A Guide to Interpreting the Student Opinion Survey

**The following is a 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.

All aspects of the survey process were reviewed by a Student and Graduate Opinion Surveys Working Party in 1998. This group recommended a number of changes which were implemented with respect to the 1998 survey round. From 1998, the graduate and student surveys timetables have been aligned. The same courses and majors are surveyed for both Graduate and Student Opinion Surveys. The aim is to survey each degree/major combination once every four years. Departmental reviews are also taken into account, in order to provide up-to-date and relevant information for Departments in their review year. A Surveys Reference Group ensures the survey results are accurate and meaningful. This group includes staff from the Department of Mathematics and Statistics.

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. The questions asked of the students remained the same as before the separation.

Surveys Structure

Although refined and expanded specifically for Otago, these surveys draw on similar exercises in Australia.

The surveys contain sections dealing with the following:

Academic Experience Survey:

- Course Experiences
- Postgraduate Supervision and Support

Support Services Survey:

- General Questions on University Services and Facilities

In each case, respondents were asked to respond to specific questions on a five point scale, where '1' represented extreme satisfaction (or strong agreement with a statement) and '5' represented extreme dissatisfaction (or strong disagreement); '3' represented a neutral response.

Academic Experience Survey

The Course Experience Questionnaire

The core instrument of the Student Opinion Survey is the 'Course Experience Questionnaire' (CEQ). The contribution of Professor Paul Ramsden as author of the CEQ instrument is acknowledged. 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 (The Good Teaching Scale)
- Clear goals and standards (The Clear Goals and Standards Scale)
- Social experience of learning (Learning Community Scale)
- Assessment methods (The Appropriate Assessment Scale)
- Acquisition of general competencies (Generic Competencies Scale)
- Overall satisfaction with course (Overall Satisfaction Item)

The instrument was 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 Australia practice. Item C23 (*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 C23 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 students or between different fields of study. See the final section of this Guide for further information on the interpretation of results.

Postgraduate Supervision and Support

Two further scales, one dealing with postgraduate supervision and the other with postgraduate support, have been developed for respondents (including honours degree candidates) undertaking study involving a thesis or dissertation component. On occasion, third year students undertaking a significant project component of study also complete this section.

Support Services Survey

General Feedback on University Services

Questions in this area seek feedback on libraries, computing resources, University facilities and administrative and student support. This part of the survey is used mainly to inform Service Divisions of areas of strength and weakness, but may also assist Departments in identifying areas which are of particular concern to their students.

Other Questions

In both surveys students were also asked to supply personal details covering such items as gender, disability and ethnicity. This enabled analysis by particular categories of students. Note however, that when data was analysed based on such categories, it was not always possible to give the number of students surveyed (or the response rate), as this would require knowledge of the self-identification traits of those students who did not respond.

Respondents were provided with the opportunity to make written comments throughout the survey. The comments are provided word-for-word to Departments, 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

Invitations to respond are sent to all students from Departments or qualifications due for surveying. The 2008 Academic Experience Survey was first made available to students online. Students who did not respond were sent a follow up letter several weeks after the initial invite, which also included a paper survey (see Appendix B of this report for details). A second online reminder was then sent to non-respondents a few weeks later.

Information from Departments or qualifications for which the response rate is less than 40% is excluded from Summary Reports produced for general circulation. The same is true for groups with fewer than 10 respondents, except where the response rate for such a group is at least 75%.

Reports from these groups are supplied to Departments for internal use, but caution is advised in the use of information from such Reports. No Reports are supplied for groups with fewer than five responses.

Support Services Survey

Invitations to respond are sent to a randomly selected sample of students. Similarly to the Academic Experience Survey the Support Services Survey was made available online. Students who did not respond were sent two follow-up email several weeks after the initial invite. Only the students who requested a paper version of the survey (see Appendix C of this reports for details) were sent one by mail.

No results were supplied for questions with fewer than 5 responses.

Presentation of Results

Results are broken down to the level of degree/diploma/certificate and major for the Academic Experience Survey. This allows the distribution of relevant material to the appropriate Deans, Heads of Department and programme administrators. For the Support Services Survey results are broken down to the level of Special Interest Groups and are distributed to the appropriate recipients (academic and administrative staff).

This Summary Report combining the results of both surveys was then produced. The Summary Report is divided into two parts corresponding to the Academic Experience Survey and the Support Services Survey results. The Summary Report includes:

Part I Academic Experience Survey:

- Results for all respondents
- CEQ scale results for all degree/diploma/certificate and major combinations with sufficient responses
- Postgraduate Supervision and Support items responses for Qualifications with sufficient responses.
- CEQ and Postgraduate Supervision and Support scales results for special interest groups (e.g. Distance, International)

Part II Support Services Survey:

- Results for all respondents
- Assessment of University services questions results for special interest groups (e.g. Distance, International)

Calculation of Means

The Otago surveys follow the Australian model in the use of a weighted mean. 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 generally negative response, and any positive number a generally positive response.

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

	Very Satisfied/ Strongly Agree		Neutral		Very Dissatisfied/ Strongly Disagree
Standard Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Responses Received	3	4	1	2	0
Weighted Scale	+100	+50	0	-50	-100

Weighted Mean: $[(\text{responses} \times \text{weighted scale})] / \text{total responses} = [(3 \times 100) + (4 \times 50) + (1 \times 0) + (2 \times -50) + (0 \times -100)] / 10 = 40$

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

Standard deviations are not presented, but these generally fall in the range 45 – 55 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 noteworthy 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

The weighted mean for the sample groups is accompanied by further means on the summary tables. These allow for comparison with previous results for the same or similar groups of students.

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 more able students are harsher judges than less able students, and that students from some disciplines will judge some items on the CEQ more harshly than others. Variations have also been observed between institutions and, obviously enough, students and graduates will be making their judgements from quite different perspectives. 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.

It is important to note that respondents may, on occasion, answer questions even if they have had no involvement or experience of the area concerned. For example, students who do not make use of the University childcare facilities may still answer that question. Experience suggests that such responses are generally neutral and, as a result, a high percentage of neutral responses to a particular question is a possible indicator of this.