

Student Evaluation of Programmes of Study: Policy Statement and Guidance Notes

Learning and Teaching Committee

The Purpose of Student Evaluations

Student evaluation is an essential part of the quality assurance and enhancement of the University's programmes of study. Student evaluation gives departments vital feedback on their teaching, and how and where it could be improved. The process of student evaluation should give students the opportunity to reflect and provide feedback on their educational experience on an anonymous basis, on the understanding that their views are taken seriously and acted upon where appropriate.

Senate believes it is important to have an effective method of conducting student evaluations, and that this may be achieved efficiently by the use of a well-designed questionnaire survey. Other methods, such as formal feedback from Staff-Student Committees, programme representatives and face-to-face interviews, and informal feedback from tutorials, laboratory classes, focus groups etc., can also play an important part in student evaluation.

Policy Statement

It is Senate policy that:

- **All programmes of study should be evaluated by students on an annual basis using questionnaire surveys in either electronic or paper format. The entire programme of study should be systematically evaluated, as well as each contributing level and every component unit.**
- **Evaluation on an annual basis enables Departments to demonstrate that the learning environment provides students with the appropriate opportunities to achieve their learning outcomes, to have an overview of the students' experience of their provision, to give staff feedback on the taught material they are providing, and to provide further opportunities to share good practice.**
- **The form and timing of student evaluation of programmes of study, together with the results from previous years (and any necessary action arising from these), should be discussed at Staff-Student Committee and appropriate Departmental meetings at the beginning of each session.**
- **Students are made aware of the outcomes of evaluations and are informed of the changes made as a result of the information they have provided.**

Departments are reminded that this policy statement applies to all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes of study, full-time and part-time students, those undergoing continuing professional development, dual degree and distance learning students.

For information on the student evaluation of research degrees, please consult the Graduate Research Office website at: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/pgresearch/staff/quality/studenteval.html>

Information from student evaluations should be collected in accordance with the principles outlined in University policies on confidentiality and the use of information and the 1998 Data Protection Act. These policies can be found on the following web pages: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/cics/dataprotection/dataprot.html>.

Guidance and Notes on Good Practice

1. Questionnaire Survey Design

The *arrangements* for student evaluation, and for setting, collating and analysing the results of programme, level and unit questionnaire surveys are the responsibility of the Department as a whole, and Departments should not rely solely on individual members of teaching staff to conduct their own evaluation. However, individual members of staff may, *in addition*, wish to set further questions, or conduct their own evaluation to obtain feedback on specific aspects of their teaching.

Questions included in the student evaluation questionnaires should contribute to the development of a department's provision. The questionnaire design and analysis of results are inextricably linked and should be considered as a whole in order to obtain valid and reliable evaluation results.

Students should be asked to comment on the experience of the level as a whole in each session, in addition to commenting on individual units. Furthermore, students at the end of the programme of study should be asked to comment on the programme as a whole.

Departments are strongly encouraged to involve students in the design of their questionnaires and questionnaire surveys, for example by consulting the Staff-Student Committee, perhaps with advice from the Department's Teaching Committee (or equivalent).

Departments should seek information on the positive aspects as well as those areas in need of improvement. This provides examples of good practice to share between cognate departments and is useful and motivating for staff.

There may be occasional instances where students abuse the anonymity of the student evaluation process by providing personally offensive comments. It should be made clear that the inclusion of such comments is unacceptable and may invalidate the whole questionnaire.

2. Questionnaire design

Level and programme questionnaires should provide departments with information about whether students consider that teaching provision and learning support is appropriate for helping them to achieve the learning outcomes for the level or programme. Questionnaires should also include questions on the coherence of the programme, tutorial support including personal development planning, timetabling, assessment deadlines and feedback, appropriateness of teaching methods, availability and suitability of learning resources, the development of transferable skills, and careers advice for programme evaluations, as well as providing space for student comments.

Unit questionnaires should enquire whether students consider that teaching provision and learning support is appropriate for helping them to achieve the learning outcomes for the unit. Unit questionnaires should also include questions on the content, lectures, tutorials, laboratory work, learning resources, recommended reading, assessment and feedback on assessments, as well as providing space for student comments.

Questionnaires for both programme and unit evaluations should be unambiguously worded and should provide a measure of students' overall satisfaction with a programme.

Some evidence has suggested that questionnaires requiring tick-only responses are popular with students, and that, where a rating scale is used, the optimum number of points on the scale is five. Questionnaires of this type can be completed and analysed in a relatively short time, and in addition provide the opportunity to compare aspects of provision over time.

Open-ended questions can provide some very useful qualitative information, and ensure that important aspects of the student learning experience are not overlooked. Students will probably be more inclined to give extensive useful feedback in response to open-ended questions when the importance of the process is clearly explained to them. For these reasons, it is recommended that open-ended questions are included and/or space be provided for free-form comments on all evaluation questionnaires.

Whilst it is recognised that open-ended responses cannot easily be analysed by quantification, such questions can reveal issues that were not addressed in the structured part of the questionnaire. In this way open-ended questions can indicate areas of concern that can be examined by structured questions in future.

More detailed advice on questionnaire design with examples questions can be found on [LeTS Evaluation pages](#).

3. The National Student Survey and the University of Sheffield Annual Student Survey

Students participate in a number of surveys throughout their study at the University. In addition to departmental evaluations, a large number of final year undergraduate students take part in the National Student Survey, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. This survey consists of a short questionnaire designed to give a measure of overall satisfaction with the students' programme of study, the results of which are published on the website of the Higher Education Research Opportunities website in October of each year. The University also undertakes a larger Annual Student Satisfaction Survey, which is completed by students of all levels, and includes the question set used in the National Student Survey. The University considers the results of these surveys to be one of the key indicators of a Department's provision, and departments are expected to reflect on the results of these surveys as part of their ongoing quality monitoring processes. The information gained from the results of these surveys should be used to inform the design of the questionnaires used in departments' own student evaluation surveys to enable a department to explore potential areas for improvement, where appropriate.

4. Maintaining Anonymity in the Evaluation Process

Evidence suggests that people are influenced in their responses by the way in which the data is collected, and that people are more likely to give honest critical feedback in situations where their anonymity is ensured. Therefore, in order to receive useful and informative feedback, it is thought to be essential for departments to ensure that, wherever practicable, students' evaluations of their units, levels and programmes of study are collected and analysed in a way that maintains students' anonymity.

It is recognised that some departments may experience difficulty in maintaining anonymity in the evaluation process, due to the nature of the provision. This situation might arise for dual degree programmes, some taught postgraduate programmes and particular specialist units, where there are small numbers of students. For the purposes of this guidance small numbers would be defined as fewer than 10 students. Where possible, it is important to maintain anonymity, and this might be achieved by:

- Surveying students from different dual degree or related taught postgraduate programmes for which the Department is the 'home' Department as one group, if this was thought to be appropriate, in order to obtain a sufficiently large group size to maintain anonymity. This could be useful for level and programme evaluations.
- An evaluator external to the unit/programmes of study could be used, particularly where one person might be solely responsible for a unit, in effect, having a peer review process for administering and preparing the results of student evaluations.
- Devising a system whereby students submit evaluations on-line.
- Written comments could be re-presented by someone not involved in the delivery of the unit, to avoid handwriting being recognised, for example, typing up by an alternative member of staff.

It is acknowledged that there may be occasions when it is not possible to conduct student evaluations on an anonymous basis, due to small numbers of students on a programme of study. Using electronic evaluation systems can help to maintain anonymity in a small student group. Where maintaining anonymity is impracticable, arrangements for carrying out evaluations should be agreed with the relevant student group and Staff-Student Committee in advance of the evaluation exercise.

It is also recognised that there are occasional instances where anonymity might not be able to be preserved, an example being clinical placement information that might raise professional issues involving patient safety. In these instances, the limits on anonymity should be clearly explained to students at the beginning of the process.

5. Evaluation of Dual Degree Programmes

It is important that departments offering dual degree programmes have in place arrangements for evaluating the year and the programme as a whole. Areas of particular relevance to dual degrees might include: the extent to which the curriculum was coherent and suitably ordered between the two subjects; the co-ordination of time-tabling, tutorials and examinations; tutorial support; advice on any choice of options in the context of the degree programme as a whole. It is recognised that conducting student evaluations with small student groups on particular dual degree programmes can pose difficulties in terms of maintaining anonymity.

Departments offering dual degrees should agree on how they will collect student views on each level of the programme and of the programme of study as a **whole**. This information should then be made freely available to both contributing Departments and the outcomes disseminated to all staff and students.

6. Information given to students about the process

The purpose and process of student evaluation should be clearly explained to students, and the importance to the Department and the University of obtaining their feedback to improve units and programmes of study should be emphasised.

Departments should clearly communicate to students how the information they provide is going to be used, for example, for unit and programme review, for staff review, or for departmental reviews. Departments might, for example, indicate how a particular area of provision was evaluated in the previous year, and what actions had been taken in response.

As mentioned in point 5 above, students should be consulted on the arrangements to be put in place for the evaluation process should it prove impracticable to maintain anonymity.

Most importantly, as pointed out in the policy statement on page 1, it is essential that students are kept informed of the outcomes of student evaluations. Departments should explain to students why concerns that have been raised through the evaluation process might not have resulted in changes to units or programmes of study. Keeping students informed of the outcomes of their evaluations is thought to be important in preventing a possible 'questionnaire fatigue' reaction and encouraging participation in future surveys.

Further advice on [motivating students to engage with the process](#).

7. Electronic methods of conducting student evaluations

A number of departments successfully conduct student evaluations using electronic methods, the benefits of which are ease of data collection and analysis, quickly available results, and the opportunity for students to complete questionnaires in their own time. This can be useful for all sizes of student groups. Some departments that use web-based teaching aids have found that their students respond well to this method of evaluation.

However, it is recognised that web-based learning is not part of the learning culture in every department and students in some departments prefer to receive paper-based questionnaires. Departments should therefore use their discretion as to the method of conducting evaluations that best suits the learning culture and yields the greatest response.

Advice on introducing web-based methods of conducting student evaluations can be obtained from LeTS. [Contact details](#).

8. Response levels

A *representative response* is essential in order to obtain meaningful results. This is likely to be enhanced in departments where students feel that their comments are taken seriously and that completing the questionnaires is worthwhile (i.e. where the results of student evaluation are discussed widely and where a valid criticism has been made or genuine problems identified, departments undertake the necessary action and inform students of the outcome).

The following techniques for increasing response levels have been successful in some departments:

Option 1

asking students to hand in their completed questionnaires with a specific assessed assignment

Option 2

handing out and collecting questionnaires during a single compulsory teaching session (e.g. a lecture or laboratory class)

Option 3

holding a student evaluation session during which students complete their questionnaires

Option 4

using focus groups to look in more depth at issues raised through the questionnaires, which enables students to see a response to their comments and involves them in discussing solutions

Option 5

Holding student evaluation of levels at the beginning of the following academic session at planned sessions involving the whole student group

Departments should keep their response rates under review to ensure that results are representative of the whole student group, and should aim to improve them where possible. A high response improves the confidence that the feedback obtained is representative and departments are therefore encouraged to aim for a high response rate. Where there are large numbers of students, a representative sample can be obtained with considerably less than a 70% response rate.

9. Presentation and dissemination of results

Departments are encouraged to disseminate results as widely as possible and to provide students and staff with as much relevant information as possible. The results of student evaluation should, therefore, be available to those teaching the programme of study, the Head of Department, the Staff-Student Committee, the Teaching Committee or equivalent, and to the wider student group.

It is important to give feedback to students on the results of questionnaire surveys and particularly of action taken in response to issues raised. This can be done through a number of methods including informing the Staff-Student Committee of the results and action taken and making a report available on the student notice-board or appropriate web pages. E-mail announcements could be used to ensure that students are aware that this information is available.

The format in which results of student evaluations are distributed within departments will depend to a large extent on the content of the questionnaire(s) used by each department and on the other procedures, if any, used by departments. However, the following general points are applicable:

- an indication of the *distribution* of students' responses (e.g. on a five point scale, for example as a histogram or bar chart) for a given question is more useful and informative than the simple mean response.

- a *commentary* from the Department should include appropriate analysis and incorporate the views of the Staff-Student Committee, where practicable, and give details of action taken by the Department in response to the comments made, together with a timetable of any outstanding actions. It is recognised that the timescale for completing the commentary may necessitate disseminating results before the commentary is completed.
- Commentaries should also consider any trends that have emerged since the last review of the relevant degree programme.
- The department should be aware that some issues, for example relating to individuals, raised through the evaluation might require sensitive management.

Departments may also wish to emphasise the local context for any particular results in their commentaries on the outcomes of student evaluations, which may have led to a unit or particular area of provision be rated more highly or lowly than average.

10. Use of information derived from student evaluations

Any change in Departmental policy on the use of information from student evaluation should be discussed within the Department and reported to the Departmental Teaching Committee or equivalent and the Staff-Student Committee. Brief details of these changes should be included in the next full report of the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching (ARLT) alongside an analysis of outcomes of departmental student evaluations.

The outcomes of student evaluation, together with an appropriate commentary from the Department, should be used to inform reviews of programmes of study undertaken by the Faculty and/or the University's Learning and Teaching Committee.