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**What Practical use is Made of Student Evaluations of Teaching?**

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This is an electronic version of a paper presented at the *European Conference on Research Methodology for Business and Management Studies,* Cass Business School, City University, London, UK 16 to 17 June 2014.

**What Practical use is Made of Student Evaluations of Teaching?**
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**Abstract:** Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are an accepted method of investigating the impact of lecturers' work with students. Although research generally shows that student evaluations are a positive development, conflicting research on the reliability and validity of the methods used leads to our overall research objective of discovering what practical use is made of the evaluation data by lecturers. Particular focus is placed on the lecturers' attitude to the use of quantitative and qualitative questions and the reliability of the evaluations as an effective tool. Considerations include the halo effect, students' ability to accurately assess course content, the influence of assessment grading, and fundamentally the fitness of this instrument for the purpose of acquiring useful, objective data.

In a global context SETs may be used by institutions for recruitment or promotion purposes. However, in Europe they tend to be regarded as confidential documents seen only by individual course leaders and senior management at faculty level. They are therefore more commonly expected to be used by the lecturers themselves as evidence of particular necessary steps that would improve course quality and student satisfaction. With regard to the use to which the evaluation results may be put, a certain cynicism is evident among lecturers who perhaps shrink from a perceived obligation to cater to the demands of the student in the role of consumer. Such evaluations include both quantitative and qualitative measurements, generally concentrating on the quantitative as a useful tool to produce statistically comparable data. This initial study uses interviews with lecturers and senior faculty staff at a German private business school and examines their perceptions of the procedures, including their assessment of the effectiveness and use of the results of SETs of their undergraduate students. The data analysis shows a diverse attitude to the evaluations and the call for more open debate and agreement on the format, reliability and use of these evaluations.

**Keywords**: Business School, Lecturer perceptions; Quality of university teaching; Reliability; Student evaluations of Teaching;         Validity

## 1.  Introduction

Student eva**lu**ation of teaching (SET) is used as a measure of teaching performance in almost every institution of higher education throughout the world (Spooren, 2010). ). Used in over 99 percent of Higher Education institutions, SETs are frequently seen as the most valid, democratic, and even are the only, tool for measuring teaching performance (Clayson, 2009:121; Iyamu and Aduwa-Oglebaen, 2005). In recent years few issues have been as well debated, especially since the 1970s' "explosion of research" on the topic, with business schools being found "particularly heavy users" of this form of feedback on activity (Clayson, 2009:121. However, this study is intended to address a lack of research on the lecturers' own view of SETs (Moore and Kuol, 2005).

Many authors, including Rayder (nd), quote a comment attributed to Aristotle, "You get a better notion of the merits of the dinner from the dinner guests than you do from the cook". In a climate of student unrest during the 1960s, Cornell University conducted an experimental survey of student opinion on the performance of their teaching staff and found amongst other things that: "[g]rossly inadequate teaching occurs in more instances than is tolerable" and "[t]here can be no doubt that student dissatisfaction with undergraduate instruction has basis in fact" (Rayder, nd:2) . It is unsurprising; therefore that Eble (1974a) concluded that "professors [sic] get uptight about student evaluations". Eble identified the benefits of student evaluations as recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching, creating a platform for participation between lecturers and students, providing the only direct and extensive information about faculty members' teaching, motivating an institution to consider its own goals and values and providing a platform for students' contributions to shape the institutions educational goals (in Inko-Tariah, 2013, p. 21). Dorasamy and Balkaran (2013:268) also show that no other data source gets more attention in the evaluation of teaching – not classroom visits, not self reports and not examination marks.

This paper analyses lecturers' attitudes to and use of evaluations concentrating on areas highlighted in previous research with the aim of gaining an insight into current practice and attitudes. The primary data collection takes place in a private business school in Germany.

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## 2. Literature review

A definitive list of characteristics that represent effective teaching across contexts and courses does not exist. Nonetheless, institutions generally design one standard student evaluation form, which may emphasise some examples of qualities, skills and actions identified by research as important for effective teaching. Penny (2003) argues that the "one size fits all' which characterises standardised rating forms should be reconsidered in favour of departments or faculties adding questions which are specific to their own teaching strategies. Moran (2012) believes "students' evaluations are not very good at measuring teaching effectiveness". He contends that anonymous student evaluations of teachers can serve as vehicles for popular misconceptions, expectations and prejudices. Academic staff associations should provide expert advice and counsel to members in reviewing their own results. Anonymous student ratings should never be the primary measure of teaching performance..

Damron (1996) claims that "most of the factors contributing to student ratings of university teachers are probably unrelated to a teacher's ability to promote student learning." Clayson & Haley (2011) and Spooren et al (2013) analyse the extent to which students are capable of providing appropriate teacher evaluations. Zivkovic et al (2012:43) believe students may not be qualified to judge the appropriateness of course objectives, the relevance of assignments and readings, the suitability of the content material and the grading standards. Read et al (2001:189) find that many SETs require students to infer beyond their knowledge and experience . They are a "happiness grade" at the end of the course before receiving grades, but are not effective in assessing effective teaching.

Clayson and Haley go on to discuss the "halo effect" (2011:102). This involves judging a lecturer positively on one aspect simply because they are positive on others. The halo effect suggests that students believe that some variables are so important that they justify ignoring or falsifying other variables. Zivkovic et al (2012) report the halo effect in students in Nigeria consistently evaluating American professors higher than their Nigerian colleagues (p.39). Clayson and Haley's study reviewed interesting previous research on the reliability of student evaluations (2011): Tang and Tang (1987) reported that the evaluations might give a better indication of the students' self-concept than the instructor's actual performance e.g. students who reported reading the class text before coming to class, rated the instructor's knowledge as high. A consistent 20 percent of instructors are rated by students in the same class as the very best or the very worst teachers that a student has ever had (Follman, 1984). Reynolds (1977) reports students evaluating a film they had never seen and a lecturer who never turned-up. Sproule (2000) reports an instructor deliberately turning up late every lecture with a group of students who had known him for 3 years – he received 100% on "always turns up on time". Clayson and Haley (2011:105) sum up the halo effect with "there is a strong halo effect with SET indicating that students will ignore the actual content of the questions or statements by answering them in a manner consistent with a more global student concern or issue." Deliberate misreporting is also described. Whether this is malicious, or even done consciously, is not always evident" (p. 103). These authors conclude that many have asserted that students are the best judge of what they are learning, but this claim has not been widely supported in objective measures. Students are rating their adequacy as a student along with their satisfaction with their own effort and participation in class. Madichie (2011:384) feels that students punish teachers for their grading, asking difficult questions and giving a lot of homework. The result is that teachers inflate grades to get good evaluations. Courses affect evaluations in that difficult courses are graded poorly. Both class size and time are significant in good grades.

On a more positive note Kelley's (1972) research concluded that "student evaluations appear to possess substantial credibility as measures of educational output." (p.18). Scriven (1995) suggested that among the sources of the validity of evaluations are the students' unique position to evaluate their own increased knowledge and understanding as well as increased motivation towards the courses. Moran (2012) concurs that Students are well placed to comment on their own reactions to what happens in the classroom; however, they are not in a position to assess all of the components of teaching effectiveness. Clayson and Haley (2011:101-102) conclude that "No matter how reliable the measures, student evaluations are no more than perceptions and impressions."

Colley (2013) points out that the problem is that most universities have little at their disposal to help them deal with poor teachers. Formal performance management or disciplinary action is rarely taken and universities are reluctant to confront good researchers with low teaching scores. Colley says publishing SET scores would improve teaching and compares this to the US where doctors publish patient survival rates. A framework to develop teaching skills and evidence-based research to enhance students' learning and effective assessment strategies with good-quality feedback are needed.

The above analyses show varied attitudes to SETs, but an overall consensus that measuring teaching performance needs more than an evaluation sheet. "The effectiveness of an educational programme can be greatly enhanced if instruction is in synch with prevailing student interests. The

difficult part is knowing when to build on student interests and when to challenge them." (Rochester Institute of Technology, nd:165).

Surprisingly few studies examine lecturer perceptions and the nature of teacher reaction to student feedback (Moore and Kuol, 2005). In general, teachers tend to agree that SET is an acceptable means of assessing institutional integrity and that it may be useful for administrative decision-making. SET apparently has a greater negative effect on female teachers – in the sense that they report more often that their gender influences their evaluations (Kogan et al, 2010). Interestingly enough Ory (2001) claims that many faculty members are unaware of the sheer volume of research on SET in which almost all of their concerns are addressed. It has been shown that teachers who are more familiar with the SET literature are more positive toward such evaluations.

Given the confusion in the literature about the validity of SETs and the lack of research into the use that lecturers make of them, the objective of this study is to establish lecturer attitudes to evaluations and the use to which they put the information received.

### 3.Method

The aim of the primary data collection is to establish lecturers' views and use of end-of-semester SETs. A comparison was made between lecturer statements and the literature review to establish if the lecturers are aware of or agree with the analysis of the evaluation procedure.

The aim is to create a representative overview of lecturer attitudes and behaviour. It was carried out over a six-week period via a semi-structured interview eliciting quantitative demographic data such as age, years of employment at the university and gender. Some yes/no questions (such as "do you read your evaluations?"/ "do you encourage students to complete them?"/ "do you carry out other forms of evaluation?") were used, supplemented with qualitative open questions asking how and why. The quantitative data allowed a certain comparison of lecturers' answers to be carried out. The qualitative data was intended to examine the reasons behind the actions followed and also to provide a more detailed insight into lecturers' attitudes to and use of student evaluations,

It was felt (and confirmed by the university) that online questionnaires were not appropriate for this study. This is due to the high number of requests for feedback received by all consumers and also the fact that the university has problems attaining adequate response rates on online surveys and does not want to increase the number circulating. Additionally, many students carrying out primary research for research projects and theses, contact lecturers asking them to complete questionnaires. This overload was confirmed by the participants, several of whom commented that the many quality evaluation questionnaires are actually meaningless as people either ignore them, or complete them with little thought. This view is, of course, highly ironic in a study of SETs which are distributed as online questionnaires.

From our perspective as researchers, the qualitative data was extremely important due to the detail it provided. This was felt to be most effectively collected in a face-to-face interview. The interviews took an average of 20 minutes.

Anonymity and confidentiality are a very important part of the research process. The population was the permanent, full-time and part-time lecturing staff (47 people). 15 took part in the face-to-face interview and two answered by email or in some other written form. Convenience sampling was used, but all the Business School departments were included. The request was mostly met with interest which increased during the interview itself. Most staff members asked to be informed of the overall results and whatever their opinion of student evaluations, considered the topic as highly important in the university.

### 4. Results

Most respondents were not clear about the exact attitude of the university towards SETs and their use. They stated this as the reason for not wanting to express an opinion publicly. Most of them seemed encouraged by the promise of confidentiality and anonymity to give very detailed answers.. The relatively small size of the population (47) and respondents (17) meant it was not possible to record all answers in this paper and retain confidentiality.

### 4.1 Gender, age, length of employment

Overall age and length of employment could not be established as important characteristics in opinions and behaviour. All respondents had been at the university a minimum of 2 years. Of the 17, seven were female and ten male.

Gender appeared to be a significant variable in that six out of the seven female respondents reported that they take negative feedback "personally" and can lose sleep over one negative comment. The male respondents appear more objective, dismissing single extreme comments and paying more attention to overall satisfaction grades as indicated by Likert scales.

### 4.2 Subjects taught

Respondents work in the departments of Hospitality, International Management, Languages and Communication, and Tourism and Event Management. A difference between departments was noted with regard to lecturer perceptions of evaluations including their usefulness and reliability. The striking differences were in willingness to publicise and attention paid to SETs.

**4.3 SET Response rates**

Most respondents had an accurate idea of the university response rates. Those who were unsure tended to place the rate approximately 20% too high.

**4.4 Knowledge of the SET**

Most staff know the questions the evaluation contains. The standardised list of questions was generally considered not ideal, but better than creating different questions for each course.

**4.5 Relevance of all questions**

Questions which were criticised were "connections to other courses" (not all do or should) and "level of language" (this university is in Germany with many non-native speakers lecturing in English). Most commented that they did not really know what the questions asked, but do not really have an issue with them. Several respondents commented that they only give an overview anyway as they are biased due to other external factors (teaching load, time of course, group constellation, only those who have something really 'strong' to say actually complete them). Contrary to the literature review, only one participant criticised the question asking whether the lecturer had sufficient knowledge. However, this point was picked up on as a reason to not read the SETs (see below). They commented that undergraduates cannot judge this, but the majority did not comment. Only one person referred to the issue already mentioned in the literature review that asking 1st semester students to judge whether the professor has adequate knowledge is not a good idea, as it actually suggests the university might employ someone who has poor knowledge of the subject taught.

**4.6 Most useful part of the SET**

All except one respondent said that the qualitative open questions are more revealing than the Likert scale quantitative data. The scale questions give an overview, but generally speaking, differences are small and insignificant. The comments give concrete ideas. One respondent said in actual fact, it is meaningless that they are anonymous – " if people have something to say, why don't they say it? – Nobody will bite." The classes are small, the university is small and comments often only make sense, if it is clear who has said them. An example given was that if someone says the assignment task was too difficult, it is very difficult to make anything of this comment or use it (unless many people say the same), without knowing what type of student had said this.

**4.7 Overall use of the evaluations**

The questions concerning the reading and use of the evaluations showed a very wide range of opinions. These opinions varied from, "I don't read them, as I don't think students are the best people to judge whether a lecturer has adequate knowledge of their subject", to "yes, I always read them and feel lecturers who get permanently low evaluations should leave". This was also linked to seeing lecturers as responsible for higher response rates – if one actively encourages and explains the importance of evaluations, more students will respond. It was also pointed out, that although it may be administratively easier; the online evaluations achieve lower response rates than the previous use of paper questionnaires. This is surely good evidence for the need to return to the old system.

One respondent said that they always look forward to the evaluations. Many commented on the importance of the present system i.e. that lecturers cannot read the evaluations until after they have submitted all course grades and the student evaluation portal is closed before students receive their grades. Even those who felt the evaluations are very important and can help lecturers and the university improve the standard of education offered, did not think that the management makes sufficient use of them or even has a clear policy regarding this. The process was also criticized as simply a bureaucratic requirement carried out without a clear aim. If their results are used at all, it is as a management tool against lecturers rather than to improve student learning and success. They can be useful to lecturers , but only if there is a clear procedure and method behind them which everyone understands and works towards.

**4.8 Discussion of results**

Very few people discuss their evaluations with anyone else. In some cases comparisons are made with other people lecturing the same course, but generally speaking the evaluations remain confidential and are not discussed. The majority would see it as a positive development if issues were discussed in detail in departments. Even extremely negative comments which cause "lecturer distress" although not being representative, could be less stressful if discussed.

### 4.9 Action taken as a result of SETs

Concrete examples were given of changes to teaching i.e. more case studies, less up-front teaching and also in dedicating time to explaining to students why course content is as it is. Several lecturers commented that when encouraging students to complete the SETs, they refer to concrete changes which have been influenced by previous feedback.

### 4.10 SETs as a measurement tool for effective teaching performance

No one thought that student evaluations on their own are effective. Several (4) respondents mentioned the halo effect as described in the literature review i.e. that if students like you for one aspect they consider important, they will grade you positively for everything. A case was quoted of someone "wooing" students just to gain positive evaluations. Similarly, if a lecturer is criticized for one "major" issue, they will be criticised for everything. People also mentioned that gender, race and subject taught can influence evaluations. No one thought evaluations alone could show how effective teaching is, but many felt that those with negative evaluations would almost certainly get the same results through observations, informal in-class discussions or paper questionnaires. Many felt that the evaluations are meaningless as, as far as they know, there is no concrete policy on how the university uses the information collected. Some participants felt that lecturers should be told to increase their response rates if they are low, as if lecturers encourage students, explain how they can be useful, and give time in a lecture to answer the questions, everyone will get significant response rates. It was even mentioned that lecturers should be put under a certain amount of pressure to improve response rates. Some members of staff felt that lecturer evaluations should be publicised i.e. available for all students and lecturers to see. "The students know the general evaluation of each lecturer anyway". It was mentioned that staff should be obliged to improve their evaluations, if necessary, and show concrete strategies they intend to use to do so.

### 4.11 Encouragement of students to complete SETs

Most staff actively encourage students to complete the online evaluations. "Actively encourage" in some cases meant actually pointing out parts of the course or ways of teaching which have been introduced or changed due to student feedback. Many staff give time in the lecture to complete the evaluations, but many felt that it takes too much class time when students are preparing for tests and exams and secondly end of semester tests are in the final class and therefore the evaluation cannot take place at that time.

However, several do not mention the evaluations and never refer to them in their teaching. The reasons given were either that they are not a valid research tool and although the qualitative comments are interesting, they cannot be given too much attention, to 'those who want to complete them, will, without encouragement, and those who don't, won't, no matter what you say.'

### 4.12 Use of other forms of student evaluation

There were no majority answers. Many felt that mid-term evaluations make sense, but not in a written anonymous form, as students like lecturers receive too many requests for feedback leading to them being carried out quickly and without much thought, if at all. Informal in-class discussion is a lot more useful and in fact also at the end of the course. It is of course dependent on building up a good rapport with the students, but this is normally possible. This particular institution has maximum class sizes of 30 students. Peer observation was rated in completely different ways. Some felt that another lecturer with a different teaching style watching them would be useless, whereas others felt this would provide impetus. Many simply did not feel it to be useful as colleagues will not give honest criticism (i.e. be too honest) or the lecturer prepares their "best lecture" to be observed and therefore not a "realistic" everyday lecture.

### 4.13 SETs as increasing the impression that students can dictate the conditions of their education.

No one felt that it was negative to see the students as consumers. Some felt that students sometimes do feel they have paid for their education and so the lecturers should do as they want, but most felt that students are consumers and it is the lecturers' job to deliver a quality product. It is right for students to look for return on investment. They have paid for a service and expect it to be delivered. Several respondents stressed that students have to learn to give feedback: it should not be insulting, but provide "food for thought" to further improve the education given. It was also stressed that evaluations are important as they do not assess the research lecturers do which often gains international renown, but what actually happens in lectures, what course content is, how the lecturer transmits information etc.

### 4.14 Additional comments

Many respondents said that students on the whole do not think lecturers read the evaluations. They are actually shocked when lecturers point out that concrete issues in the courses have changed partly because of student feedback.

Very few of the interview questions provided a common answer. Most lecturers see the qualitative questions as more useful, but they are also the questions which lead to "sleepless nights"

i.e. one negative comment which can certainly not be taken as representative of the group. Many felt with continuously assessed courses, the grading could play a role in the evaluations i.e. students with lower grades, would evaluate more negatively. There was absolutely no consensus on how the evaluations should or could be used by the university. Most say they are not a valid enough tool to use them in disciplinary action, yet as mentioned above several people did say lecturers should be under pressure to improve perceived performance.

## 5. Conclusions

Student evaluations are without doubt a useful tool to reflect on courses taught and to improve quality. However, lecturers are generally not aware of the research carried out in this area or of the issues effecting reliability and validity of such a research tool. Opinions and behaviour vary so greatly between lecturers that more open discussion of the issue can only be beneficial. Some do not even read the evaluations whereas others examine comments and go through the evaluations with a fine-toothed comb. Educational managers should open the discussion of evaluations by indicating their use as a tool for improvement rather than as an axe to wield over lecturers' heads. This open debate can include other ways of assessing and improving teaching performance to positively enrich both the teaching and the learning experience.

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