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How might we achieve higher response rates on our Online Unit Evaluations?

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Information Sheet

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If you have any questions about this paper please contact the author(s) directly.

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Introduction

The University of Bath has been running Online Unit Evaluation (OUE) across all Departments since 2006/07 as a means of collecting end of unit evaluations. This replaced the paper based system and merged all online evaluations into one central tool and procedure. For more information about OUE see (<http://www.bath.ac.uk/learningandteaching/surveys/unitevaluation/>).

The aim of this discussion is to reflect on the response rates for OUE. In particular, what strategies might departments, Directors of Studies and individual staff adopt to improve their OUE response rate? The methodology focuses on undertaking a number of structured interviews across 6 departments. The broad findings highlight the need for a more joined up Departmental approach. However, further work is proposed to unpick the perception that response rates are low because the vast majority of students are silent and satisfied.

Methodology

A structured interview was undertaken with 10 members of staff across 6 departments during the 2008/09 academic year. The questions encompass areas such as the perception of the system by both staff and students, departmental (or in some cases programme level) strategy for student engagement, and questions about the results obtained and the suggested reasons for these results.

Findings and discussions

The pattern of returns for OUE at the end of Semester 1, 2008/09 indicates a very wide range in the response rate (Table 1).

Table 1: OUE Response Rates (Semester 1, 2008/09)

Dept	% Response Rate
MA	33.20%
CM	34.95%
CH	34.96%
PH	42.03%
FL	42.92%
SP	43.81%
XX	45.42%
FH	48.62%
EC	49.56%
MN	52.72%
EU	56.65%
EE	59.22%
ME	61.63%
PS	61.97%
PA	62.75%
BB	63.32%
AR	65.19%
ED	66.75%

Table 1 illustrates the aggregated response rate for a selected number of Departments. It is evident, even with this aggregated view, that there is a large variation in the level of response rates (33.2% to 66.7%). It should be noted the use of aggregated data will mask higher variation between units in a Department.

A key question derived from Table 1 is, *what is a satisfactory response rate?*

Whilst almost all the respondents would like to improve their response rates, there was no general consensus as to what constitutes a satisfactory response rate. For some departments and programmes, a return of approximately 40-50% is considered

satisfactory whilst others state a return of 50% would be considered disappointing as their response rates sometimes rise to 80-90%.

Clearly, there needs to be a discussion at the Departmental level including both staff and students around what constitutes a satisfactory response rate, for this to be set this as a target.

An often cited reason for low response rates is the population size of the survey. Those reporting particularly high response rates tended to be those co-ordinating the OUE work at a programme level, particularly, for distance learning programmes. It could be argued the smaller the cohort the easier the process of OUE promotion, therefore, the higher response rate. There is going to be some truth in this. However, as illustrated in Table 1, there are examples of Departments with extremely large cohorts who are able to produce high response rates. This suggests the size of the cohort is not a sole determinant of the response rate.

The next question is, *what do people identify as important determinants for increasing response rates?*

A key message from across the interviews was the need for a coordinated approach to OUE. This needs to include academic staff, support staff and students at all stages of the process. It is important to realise not only does this need to be coordinated, but there must be alignment with Departmental objectives around feedback, and appropriate resourcing.

As expected there is no silver bullet or quick solution. The emerging messages (see below) are that the solution requires a coherent and coordinated approach for a number of years. The findings include;

- Positive leadership is required, as HoD and DoS need to believe in the benefits of OUE (as a process rather than a box ticking exercise to be forgotten about afterwards) and communicate their enthusiasm for it to colleagues (and students) which will have a positive impact on adoption. Interestingly, it was evident those who were negative about OUE suggested no-one (staff or students) valued the exercise.
- A clearly thought out departmental strategy is essential. This should be communicated at all levels and should have a high profile within the departmental committee structure.
- There should be appropriate Departmental goals for the response rate each year, and failure to achieve these goals should be investigated.
- Students should be involved more closely in the process. There needs to be a positive culture developed around the area of evaluation and feedback. The OUE needs to be embedded within a broader feedback agenda, and students realise the role it plays as a key data collection point.
- Student should be informed of the changes that are made year on year so that they are aware of the positive changes they are about to benefit from (i.e. based on the previous cohorts feedback) and participate for the benefit of future cohorts
- Consider tailoring questions for different years. One Department gives years 1 and 2 the same questions, whilst year 3 students get a different set.

Concluding comments

Clearly there are some important messages emerging from these findings. In particular, the need to be more strategic across the Department and place a higher importance on OUE as a value added activity for staff and students as it feeds into the enhancement of the student experience.

However, these findings are based on a small sample size. Therefore, a recommendation would be to repeat the exercise with a larger number of people across more departments. In addition, a perception from other discussions is the response rates are low as people online submit the survey if they are dissatisfied, therefore, the response rates are low because the vast majority are satisfied and silent. It would be interesting to run a number of focus groups with students to evidence if this is the case.