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Evaluation of Teaching Quality: how does it impact on teachers' professional practice?

A UK perspective

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Abstract

Evaluation of the quality of higher education is undertaken for the purposes of ensuring accountability, accreditation and improvement, all of which are highly relevant to veterinary teaching institutions in the current economic climate. If evaluation is to drive change, it needs to be able to influence teaching practice. This article reviews the literature relating to evaluation of teaching quality in higher education with a particular focus on teachers' professional practice. Student evaluation and peer observation of teaching are discussed as examples of widely-used evaluation processes. These approaches clearly have the potential to influence teachers' practice. Institutions should strive to ensure the development of a supportive culture that prioritises teaching quality, whilst being aware of any potential consequences related to cost, faculty time, or negative emotional responses that might result from the use of different evaluation methods.

Keywords

Quality in higher education; Evaluation of teaching; Peer observation

Acknowledgements

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the potential impact of evaluation of teaching quality on teachers' professional practice, with particular reference to teaching within veterinary education. Written from a UK perspective, the article will start with an overview of the role of teaching quality evaluation in higher education (HE) and a discussion of what is meant by professional practice in the veterinary teaching context. The impact of evaluation on teachers' practice will then be discussed. Student evaluation of teaching (SET) and peer observation will then be used as examples of processes which, when used appropriately, can drive change in practice.

What is "evaluation of teaching quality" in Higher Education?

"Quality" is a term which means different things to different people in different contexts [1, 2]. Students may be more interested in the quality of the teaching, whilst other stakeholders such as employers may be more interested in the consistency of the standard of degree classifications. It is also a relative term: "quality" may imply exceptionally high standards, or merely adherence to an established minimum benchmark.[2].

Evaluation of educational (or institutional) quality is generally undertaken for three primary purposes [3, p4]: accountability, accreditation and improvement. It is also relevant to consider these purposes from the perspective of the widely-used notions of quality in HE proposed by Harvey and Green [2], namely: exceptional (excellence), consistency, fitness for purpose, value for money, and transformation (enhancing and empowering the student).

Accountability is defined by Scheerens and others (2003, p11) as "holding public institutions and services responsible for the quality of their performance"; this definition could be seen to incorporate Harvey and Green's "Excellence", focussing on the quality of inputs (e.g. the incoming students) and outputs (the outgoing graduates). In the current economic climate, value-for-money is of increasing importance in HE, both to institutions working within tight budgets, and to fee-paying students. There may be tensions and challenges created by an institution's desire to evidence high quality teaching (likely to be a factor in student recruitment) and the realities of limited finances available for investment in innovative, exceptional teaching.

Accreditation has relevance for employers who require some assurance over parity of degree awards within (and between) institutions; accreditation is clearly a key requirement for professional programmes which must meet the standards of their professional bodies. Also of relevance is the variable requirement across institutions for accreditation of teachers within established frameworks such as that provided by the Higher Education Academy [4]. "Accreditation" has resonance with Harvey and Green's criteria of "consistency" and "fitness for purpose".

Improvement, or enhancement, is a more formative aspect of evaluation, where data is collected and reviewed in order to drive modification and improvement in the teaching and/or processes of the institution, as well as student outcomes. Improvements in student outcomes can be correlated with Harvey and Green's "transformative" quality concept in HE, with a focus on both enhancing and empowering the students. There is increasing emphasis on the importance of "value-added" measures for students, a concept which is commonly considered in school and further education evaluation but is more challenging to apply in the HE setting where the student intake is already highly selected [1, 5].

Institutions can evaluate institutional and individual's teaching quality using a variety of strategies. **Table 1** illustrates the array of systems commonly in place for evaluation of teaching quality within UK HE institutions, indicating the primary purpose of each system in terms of ensuring accountability, reliability of accreditation, or driving improvement.

PLACE TABLE 1 HERE (CURRENTLY AT END OF MANUSCRIPT AS PER GUIDELINES)

Despite the broad array of evaluation systems in place, it is acknowledged that there is a danger that quality evaluation may be constrained or even driven by a tendency to "measure the measurable", using readily available, convenient data rather than creating tailored systems of data collection that can help address specific questions [6, 7]. This may be particularly relevant for national and international league tables and ranking systems which, despite criticism, are of increasing importance in a competitive global market place stay [8, 9]. For example, national league tables in the UK put the emphasis on quantitative data in particular those related to inputs (e.g. staff:student ratios) and outputs (quantitative survey data; examination results) which do not allow for comparison of important potentially transformative aspects of HE such as student self-motivation [10].

It is also appropriate to consider the role of faculty development in teaching, and how this can influence teaching quality. Despite a paucity of evidence [11], it is widely assumed that faculty development programmes can lead to improved teaching performance, with better learning outcomes for students. Embracing faculty development strategies, and ensuring systems are in place for rewarding excellence in teaching, can motivate faculty to develop their teaching skills and improve morale by reflecting the values and culture of the institution [12-14].

The next section considers definitions of professional practice, prior to discussion of how selected systems of evaluation impact on practice.

What is teachers' professional practice?

Before considering professional practice, it is important to consider professional identity. In school education, professional identity and practice is likely to revolve around teaching as a discipline. However, this is not necessarily the case in higher education settings. As in other professions [15], in veterinary education many teachers will have a well-established professional identity centred around their original career choice as veterinarians. Some who pursue an academic career may do so because of a love of teaching; however others are likely to be drawn to academia by the challenges of research or specialist practice. Clinical academics may spend a large part of their time interacting with and training students in the workplace; for some pre-clinical academics, teaching may be a relatively small part of their academic role. Consideration must also be given to the important teaching role of veterinarians in general practice with responsibility for mentoring students on placements, whether in the context of a distributed model of teaching [16], or on extra-mural studies (EMS) placements [17]. For any veterinarian assuming teaching responsibilities, it is likely that their "teacher identity" will be at a comparatively early stage of development.

Professional practice is about more than just teaching activity in the classroom, lecture theatre or clinic; it encompasses a wide range of additional skills, attributes and values. Professional practice has been defined by three key concepts [18]: knowledge, autonomy and responsibility. *Professional knowledge* requires a strong underpinning theoretical background, supplemented by an understanding of and familiarity with the decision making processes and non-cognitive skills (e.g. attitudes and attributes) expected of a professional. For teachers in HE, this applies to both subject specific knowledge and an understanding of educational theory and practice. A distinction can be made between the codified, explicit knowledge which is formally taught to students (or on faculty development programmes), and the non-formal, implicit, tacit knowledge which may be acquired within the workplace [19, 20]. *Autonomy* has traditionally been considered a given right of professionals, including academic teachers and veterinarians; many professional bodies are self-governing and have for many years been placed on something of a pedestal by the general public [21]. However, increasing scrutiny and evaluation by funding bodies and the public, along with availability of league tables, has meant that many professions are by necessity becoming more accountable to their stake-holders. This requires some re-adjusting of expectations and priorities within the

professions [22-24] which, whilst often for the greater good, may result in inevitable challenges during the change process. *Responsibility* traditionally refers to the requirement for professionals to act ethically and in the best interest of their students/clients/patients. However there are now increasing, often conflicting pressures to consider the needs of other stakeholders e.g. funding bodies, institutions, or government. An additional responsibility of professionals is a commitment to ensuring that knowledge and skills are kept up to date as appropriate to their own individual career path. For veterinary teachers this can be considered to apply to both clinical/scientific knowledge and skills as well as to teacher development.

The next section discusses how different evaluation methods and increasing HE requirements for evaluation may have influenced teachers' practice, relating particularly to these three aspects.

How does evaluation impact on professional practice?

The "audit culture" can be perceived by academic faculty to have both positive and negative effects [15, 21, 25]. Evaluation, in all its forms, can be viewed as an essential process to ensure accountability and a competitive place in the global market, and as a useful tool for self-evaluation and individual and institutional learning. Several evaluation strategies in the UK, such as the external examiner system and professional accreditation visits, whilst acting as essential benchmarks of quality, also create opportunities for inter-institutional collaboration to share good practice and drive further improvement. Evaluation can however also lead to tensions and undermining of teaching professionals' sense of autonomy, and can be perceived as overly bureaucratic and time-consuming.

Evaluation systems for the purposes of accreditation and accountability could be expected to drive change at institutional or programme level; this may then impact on individual practice. Any process that specifically aims to drive *improvement* in quality and is tailored to this purpose will have more obvious potential to lead to changes in individual teachers' practice to achieve that improvement. The potential emotional effects of the processes and outputs of some of these evaluation systems should not be overlooked; inexperienced faculty members in particular may be very anxious about any evaluation of their own teaching skills [25, 26]. The research, clinical and administrative demands on academic faculty time can make it challenging to prioritise high quality teaching.

To discuss these concepts further, student evaluations of teaching (at a local level and within national surveys) and peer observation will be used as examples of commonly used evaluation methods that are likely to have significant impact on individual teachers' practice.

Student evaluation of teaching

Student evaluation of teaching (SET) has been widely used within institutions since the 1970s, and has become a common tool to judge the performance of teaching faculty and universities, as well as being used to drive improvement in professional practice [27]. Evaluations can be run at a local level or nationally; aggregated results can be used to inform, for example, accreditation visits by governing bodies, or national/international league tables. For example, within the University of Bristol, student evaluation forms a required part of annual programme review, and the summary data is made available to internal review teams such as the Faculty Quality Enhancement Team, and external accrediting bodies such as the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. Thus, although SET is not without its limitations (discussed below), it is commonly used for purposes of both improvement and accountability (Table 1).

Evaluations can be undertaken in a variety of manners. Student evaluation of the teaching skills of clinical veterinary teachers is a relatively under-researched area and is particularly challenging given the importance of assessment of the professional aspects of a clinical teacher's role, in addition to the traditional academic attributes. There are examples of questionnaires used specifically for evaluation of clinical teachers in both medical [28, 29] and veterinary [30] training contexts.

Informally, individual faculty members might seek to improve their own teaching by using techniques such as distributing sticky notes at the end of teaching sessions, and asking each student to write one good thing and one suggestion for improvement; other teachers make use of student response systems (e.g. Turning Point®) to gain quantitative data regarding student satisfaction with their lecture courses. Improvements at Unit or Module level can be driven by data which might be gathered by paper or online surveys, or by focus groups led by academic faculty with or without responsibility for teaching on the Unit in question. At Year and Programme levels, recurrent issues can be reported at staff-student liaison meetings. Additionally, national surveys (e.g. the National Student Survey (NSS)[a], an annual survey of all UK final year undergraduates, commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council in England) are promoted, with the results published and used to inform league tables. With increasing student fees, students are likely to behave increasingly as consumers of their educational programmes, expecting that their comments and concerns are addressed, and their comments are taken seriously by institutions and reviewing bodies. It should be noted that systems designed at first glance to have an accountability purpose (e.g. National Student Survey) can effect significant improvement. For example, it is well established that health profession programmes generally score poorly in the NSS for satisfaction with assessment and feedback. In the 2012 NSS the University of Bristol Veterinary School's score for satisfaction with feedback and assessment was 51%. This led to the introduction of various initiatives designed to improve the feedback culture in the final year of the programme [31]; in 2013 the score rose to 64%, and in 2014 to 71%[e].

The perceived advantages of SET have been summarised by Moore and Kuol (2005) and include: providing useful information regarding effectiveness of teaching methods; increasing equity in evaluation and teaching; celebrating good practice; harnessing faculty enthusiasm; and increasing the likelihood that representative views are obtained from the student body. SET can also enhance the esteem of the teaching role of academics, and lead to improvements in student teaching. However, whilst there may be an assumption that SET is always a good thing, potential detractors (also summarised by Moore and Kuol, 2005) include the possibility of student bias (perhaps related to leniency of marking), and a perception that SET is driven by the needs of bureaucracy rather than a genuine drive to improve student experience. Some learning activities that challenge the students and require them to be more active participants may not be initially popular with students, as it may take time for the students to understand the benefits of that approach. Various studies, reviewed by Arthur (2009) have suggested that whilst there is no evidence that lenient marking improves student satisfaction with teaching, the size of the class, nature of the subject, and the lecturer's personality can all have an impact. Whilst there is evidence that students primarily base their ratings on teaching quality and that the impact of these others factors is minor [27, 30], relying solely on SET to evaluate individual teachers is not considered appropriate [32].

A major concern for many faculty is the reliability of SET data for progression and promotion purposes. In tandem with the increasing "managerialism" within Universities, there may be a perception amongst academic faculty that their autonomy is being eroded and that this "performativity" aspect of student evaluation may even supercede the professional drive for reflective practice as part of personal learning and improvement [25, 26]. Some academics may also hold beliefs that students are not qualified to make judgements about the quality of their teaching, preferring to be evaluated either not at all or only by their peers. Training of academic faculty in the background, research into and use of SET (e.g. through workshops) is likely to be important to reduce misconceptions and impact on faculty morale [27].

Few studies specifically evaluate the impact on academic faculty following SET. Moore and Kuol (2005) used questionnaires to explore faculty reaction to SET when a system was initially introduced within their institution. They identified two main problems relating to academics' interpretation of SET: firstly, lecturers with overall positive performance focussed excessively on relatively minor

issues, and secondly, lecturers whose performance was evaluated negatively could experience profound emotional reactions with a negative impact on their motivation to improve their teaching. Arthur (2009) suggests a typology of four common reactions to SET, with a proposal that teaching faculty might move through these with increasing experience: shame, blame, tame and reframe. Kogan and others [33] found that female teachers (in a veterinary teaching context) were more negatively impacted emotionally by critical but unconstructive student evaluations. These findings emphasise the need for faculty support and training in the interpretation of SET results, and highlight that the potential emotional impact on lecturers should not be underestimated.

SET is only valuable if it drives change. It is important to ensure that SET is appropriately analysed, reported and acted upon [34]. Similarly to concerns in school education that a greater focus on league tables has influenced teaching behaviour [35], there is potential in HE that an excessive focus on SET could lead to inappropriate prioritisation of specific areas for improvement [34]; skilled and informed analysis of results is essential. However, when SET is viewed in a more positive framework and employed as a catalyst for change, results can be encouraging [31].

Peer observation of teaching

Peer observation of teaching is widely used as a developmental tool for improvement of teaching, as well as ensuring accountability. It has been recognised as an important part of faculty development within Higher Education [36] and within medical and veterinary teaching [11, 13], and it can play a role in the achievement of tenure within the North American HE system [37]. Guidelines for effective implementation of peer observation are available [38]. Effective, consistent training of suitably experienced peer observers is essential to maximise the value of peer observation; this in itself can pose a challenge to institutions.

Although there is limited literature on the impact of peer observation in HE, researchers have examined potential impacts on both the observed and the observer. For example, Peel (2005) in a reflective account of her own experience as a new HE lecturer, suggests that an instrumental approach to peer observation of teaching is inadequate for improving performance; it must be accompanied by an understanding of educational theory, critical reflection, and a challenging of assumptions. Trust between observer and observed, and acknowledgement of any power balance, is important for effective peer observation [39]; teachers may be quite anxious about being observed [40]. Peer observation can be as beneficial for the observer as for the observed, with sharing of good teaching practice and reflective discussion of new ideas [39-41]. Peer observation in the clinical setting can drive explicit changes in the teaching practices of inexperienced teachers [40].

Given the relative paucity of information relating to the impact of peer observation in HE, reflecting on the situation in schools may be valuable. There is increased emphasis on performance management within schools (resonating with progression/promotion and tenure processes in HE) which has meant that teacher observations have become a high stakes exercise, with less autonomy within schools regarding the process itself. Skilled leadership is required to ensure that faculty attitudes to the processes remain positive and that the overall aims of individual development and organisational improvement are kept in mind, rather than an overwhelming sense of bureaucracy and negativity [6, 42, 43]. In the UK, following introduction of school Self-Evaluation Forms (which, amongst many things, require input of teacher observation data), Hall and Noyes (2009) identified three different cultures within schools: collaborative, centralised, and resisting. They identified concerns regarding the performative nature of teacher observations if only ever done in the model prescribed by the regulatory body (which focus on learning over a 30 minute period). There were also significant concerns over the resulting intensification of work with time pressures, emotional burdens and increasing impact on home life. On the other hand, staff in one school noted that they observed each other much more than was required as it was found to be such a useful peer learning experience. This willingness to share practice and reflection on the developmental versus

bureaucratic aims of peer observation has resonance in the Higher Education setting, particularly when institutions establish a peer review system as a requirement for all faculty [39].

Peer observation, when fully engaged with and done well, should inevitably impact on teachers' practice. Peer observation by a trusted colleague should increase teachers' knowledge of their own weaknesses, allowing them to address strategies for improvement in an autonomous manner, whilst taking responsibility for improving their own skills in order to enhance the student experience.

Conclusions

Educational evaluation of institutions, programmes and teachers clearly plays a role in teachers' professional practice. Evaluation processes with the primary role of driving individual improvement have the potential to impact explicitly on individuals' practice and enhance the skills of individual teachers. It is important that these evaluations are carried out within a supportive culture that prioritises quality teaching and considers any potential for negative emotional responses amongst staff. It is also important that there is awareness of the increasing bureaucracy and summative nature of quality evaluations, and that any negative impact of this on individual teachers is minimised. There needs to be a balanced approach to the time and staff costs associated with evaluations and adequate support put in place for effective design, data collection and analysis. Individuals should feel encouraged and supported to put their own action plans into place, and institutions should give due regard to the importance of achievable actions being agreed and monitored in order to make the efforts that go into evaluation worthwhile [34].

Notes

[a]The NSS can be accessed at http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/

[b]The University of Bristol's guidelines on Annual Programme Review can be accessed at http://www.bristol.ac.uk/esu/facultyadvice/progreview/aprguidetp.html

[c]The University of Bristol's guidelines on Faculty Quality Enhancement Team processes can be accessed at http://www.bris.ac.uk/esu/groups/fqet.html

[d]The University of Bristol's guidelines on School Review can be accessed at http://www.bris.ac.uk/esu/facultyadvice/deptreviews/

[e]The NSS results can be accessed at http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/

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Table 1 Summary of evaluation systems in place in UK HE institutionsThe categories of primary purposes are those established within evaluation literature [2,3] Examples are discussed further within the text.   UOB = University of Bristol

Object	Evaluation system	Further information	Primary purpose[2,3]		
			Accountability (Excellence and Value for Money)	Accreditation (Consistency and Fitness for Purpose)	Improvement (Transformative)
Students	Assessments	Results of tests and examinations	+	+	+
Faculty	Peer observation/review	See p6	+		+
	Student evaluations of teaching	See p4	+		+
	Teaching and learning qualification requirements (e.g. Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy)	ww.heacademy.ac.uk Not a consistent requirement across institutions	+	+	+
	Teaching excellence awards				+
	Review of education-related publications and grants		+		+
Unit/	Annual Programme Review	UOB example[b]	+	+	+

Level	Method	Reference / Example			
Programme	External examiners	The traditional assurance of quality in UK HE (Harvey 2005)	+	+	
	Student evaluations of teaching	See p4			+
	Faculty quality enhancement visits	UOB example[c]			+
	Professional programme accreditation	e.g. Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, General Medical Council		+	
	National Student Survey (NSS)	www.thestudentsurvey.com	+		
	League tables	The Guardian [44] and The Times [45]	+		
School	School review	UOB example[d]	+		+
University	Quality assurance agency (QAA) visits	www.qaa.ac.uk	+		+
	Research assessment exercise	www.rae.ac.uk	+		
	National Student Survey (NSS)	www.thestudentsurvey.com	+		
	League tables	The Guardian (2014a) and The Times (2014b)	+		