LECTURER EVALUATIONS RESPONSE RATES – DREADED ADMIN RITUAL OR INFORMATIVE FEEDBACK?

S.N. Basson, B.J. van Wyk, H.C. Van Der Watt
Tshwane University of Technology (SOUTH AFRICA)

Abstract

Background: A vital academic activity at the Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) is to conduct lecturer evaluations each semester, or year depending on the course-offering. Although a paper-based system is used at the institution, the faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment adopted online lecturer evaluations. Despite the potential advantages of online evaluations, such as guaranteed anonymity, it came as a surprise that response rates dramatically fell across all departments in the faculty. Nulty [1] reported the same reduced trend for online student response rates.

Interventions: Although a variety of strategies for improving response rates were consequently tested, including extra credits, email reminders, withholding grades and the shortening of questionnaires, student evaluations seem to remain external to the day-to-day business of teaching and learning, and reflection upon the practice for both students and lecturers seem to remain ancillary. The fact that lecturer participation in the process became less through the years could be a contributing factor. Anderson, Brown and Spaeth [2] observe that instead of seizing the opportunity to use student feedback and perspectives about the learning experience as an occasion to engage in a discussion about instructional strategies and student responsibilities, the evaluation is instead relegated to a dreaded administrative ritual.

Case study: The authors analyze and reflect on 29 subjects in the Department of Architecture over three years. The Department of Architecture was chosen, since it is the only department in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment which showed a constant average increase in the online response rate of students, from an average of 23% in 2016 to an average response rate of 33% in 2019. The reasons for this increase, and differences from the rest of the faculty are explored by interviewing 17 lecturers and 27 students from the Department of Architecture and other departments.

Result: The key themes that emerged from the narratives show that the reasons for an increase in the response/participation rates of students are the involvement of lecturers in the process to emphasize the need and importance of lecturer evaluations, the attitude of the Head of Department (HOD) towards lecturer evaluations and the positive lecturer-student relationship.

Keywords: lecturer evaluations, Students’ Evaluations of Lecturers (SET), student response rate, lecturer involvement, online evaluations.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to Lecturer Evaluations:

The primary purpose for using Students’ Evaluations of Lecturers (SET), referred to as Lecturer Evaluations (LE) in our study, is to improve the learning of students [3, 4]. As explained by Ramsden [5], it can assist in explaining the differences in teaching performance, thus helping faculty to identify areas for improvement or development. According to Griffen, Coates, McInnis, and James [6], SET play a significant role in higher education. Whereas SET tended to be mostly used for formative purposes in the 1970s it lately started to play a role in personnel issues and also became an instrument to measure the quality of education [7].

Architecture lecturers have year subjects and LE is only done at the end of each year. Most of the other departments in the faculty have semester subjects, and LE are done every semester (biannually). This contrasts with the view of Brenton and Young [3] who argues that teaching evaluations should be an ongoing process of development and not a mere single event at the end of a semester or year.
At the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at TUT, the Instructional Designer (ID) is responsible to set up the LE questionnaire on the Learning Management System (LMS) of the university (Blackboard). Enterprise Survey is linked to the LMS to publish the questionnaires. The LE questionnaire of all departments are similar. The questions during 2016-2018 covered topics such as student-lecturer relationship; communication and presentation style; assessment (tests, assignments, exams, projects); learning material; assignment; e-Learning/Blackboard, practical guide; laboratory; laboratory safety and e-learning. Reminders to complete the online LE are send by the ID to both staff and students.

The Architecture LE questionnaire during 2016 and 2017 comprised 42 specific questions related to the subject and the teaching theorem. During 2018 a questionnaire with only three questions was used related to problems experienced, suggestions for improvement and specific comments on the lecturer.

On completion of the questionnaires, the ID compiles reports per department and sends the results to the HOD, Departmental Administrators, and respective lecturers.

1.2 Case Study

This case study focused on response rates in LE during 2016, 2017 and 2018. The Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at TUT has 10 Departments: Architecture; Building Sciences; Chemical, Metallurgical and Materials; Civil; Electrical; Geomatics; Industrial; Mechanical, Mechatronics & Industrial Design. The data for the period 2016-2018 shows that the average response rate (students completing the questionnaire divided by total number of students) for Architecture is 27.5%, while only 9.5% on average for the rest of the departments. To determine why Architecture has a higher response rate compared to other departments, the authors interviewed 17 lecturers and 27 students (7 lecturers and ten students from Architecture).

In summary the results show that Architecture students are more educated on the advantages of LE, receive more encouragement and support from lecturers to complete the evaluation, and that the shortened questionnaire with only 3 questions during 2018, was seen as positive.

2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used was based on two criteria:

1. Calculations of response rates of LE done during 2016-2018 by dividing the number of students who completed a specific subject by the total number of students in the subject/class. The response rate (average over 29 subjects) for Architecture is shown in Table 1. The rest of the faculty had an average response rate of only 9.5% (obtained by calculating the average response rate for all LE done during 2016-2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>22.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>26.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>33.38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Lecturers and students were interviewed using the following questions:

Lecturers:
- In your opinion, do lecturer evaluations add value to your teaching?
  - If YES, why?
  - If NO, why?
- In your opinion, does your HoD regard lecturer evaluations as important? Y/N
- Do you have any suggestions on how to improve lecturer evaluations?
Students:
- Do you usually complete the lecturer evaluations?
  - If YES, why?
  - If NO, why?
- Are you alerted by the lecturers to complete lecturer evaluations during a course? Y/N
- In your opinion, do lecturer evaluations add value to teaching?
  - If YES, why?
  - If NO, why?
- Do you have any suggestions on how to improve lecturer evaluations?

The lecturers and students were randomly selected and informed that the study is conducted anonymously. No information that could link the lecturer to any manager or any student or vice versa was collected. This was done to put respondents at ease and to obtain more authentic responses from the participants.

3 RESULTS

The results vary widely, but common themes were identified from the responses:

3.1 Lecturer responses and discussion

Common themes that emerged from the interviews are highlighted for each question:

3.1.1 Question 1: Architecture

Question 1: In your opinion, does lecturer evaluations add value to your teaching? If YES/NO why?

From the seven lecturers interviewed in Architecture, the results show that 71.4% responded positively. The themes that emerged from the positive responses can be summarised as follows:

- Vehicle to see possible shortcomings and to understand student perception
- Specific areas which lecturers became aware of is that:
  - student perceptions of learning and understanding are different from the lecturer’s perception
  - Language barriers and pronunciation
  - Time on task – needed more time on certain areas of the work
  - Creates awareness of physical problem areas, i.e. airconditioning, outside noise or frustration with data projectors or equipment not working
- Positive feedback inspires me and shows that I am on the right track

From the seven lecturers interviewed in Architecture the results show 28.6% negative responses and only one theme was identified:

- Never looked at the survey.
  - I have never seen the survey.
  - I have an open door policy and students discuss problems openly.

Discussion:

The ID re-sent the LE reports to lecturers who claimed they had not received their reports. Most were surprised by the feedback and indicated that they would give the issue more attention in the future. Architecture lecturers, in general, seemed to be more interested in the feedback that is provided by the LE and indicated that it contributed to their teaching. Brenton and Young [3] states that it is important that feedback is provided that will enable the lecturer to improve. Providing a mere number or ranking is not adequate.

Lessons learned: Not all lecturers receive the LE and the instructional designer who sends the LE to the Departmental Administrators, should also send it to each lecturer.
3.1.2 **Question 1: Other Departments**

**Question 1:** In your opinion, does lecturer evaluations add value to your teaching? If YES/NO why?

From the ten lecturers interviewed in the other departments, the results show an 80% positive result. The themes that came out of the positive results could be summarised as follows:

- Vehicle to see possible shortcomings
  - Specific areas which lecturers became aware of is that
    - Language barriers
    - Time on task – needed more time on certain areas of the work
    - Creates awareness of physical problem areas
    - Get an understanding of what students are struggling with
    - Positive feedback is useful for encouraging me.

The negative responses had one theme

- Do not see the value
  - Student attendance is low, so LE has no value
  - Students review me based on their emotions and not my content
    - I don’t know why they are required because hardly any students complete them

**Discussion:**

The results show that lecturers who provided positive feedback have seen their reports and see the value of LE. The negative feedback suggested that the evaluations do not have much value for lecturers who perceive students as not attending class and those who view feedback as emotional and subjective.

**Lessons learned:** Lecturers are aware of the low response rate and lose further interest.

3.1.3 **Question 2: Architecture and other departments**

**Question 2:** In your opinion, does your HOD regard lecturer evaluations as important. Yes/No

From the 17 lecturers interviewed, the results show a 94% positive result.

Comments from architecture lecturers indicate that the HOD is stringent and regularly reminds them on email, during staff meetings and even during staff luncheons. Most other lecturers in other departments only receive e-mail reminders from their HODs and the Instructional Designer.

**Discussion:** Almost all non-Architecture lecturers feel that their HODs see the LE as necessary. Anderson, Brown, and Spaeth [2] and Guder and Malliaris [8] confirmed that a positive attitude and encouragement from faculty improve response rates.

**Lessons learned:** It is crucial to have HOD’s buy-in.

3.1.4 **Question 3: Architecture and other Departments**

**Question 3:** Do you have any suggestions on how to improve lecturer evaluations?

The themes from question 3:

- Student education on the value of LE
  - LE should be simple, should be done more often, fewer questions should be asked
  - Create more awareness, the environment should be welcoming and encouraging to students to complete the LE, and they should see the importance
  - Maybe more education for students.
  - Happy with three questions.
  - Personalization

- More evaluations per annum and shorter questionnaires
Shortened questionnaire.
Do in mass.
Not at the end of the year. Twice a year, mid and end year

- Paper-based
  - Used paper before – not worked.
  - It should be a paper-based system; results should then be tailored at the end

- Technology enhancement
  - Schedule students in a room with computers
  - Pop up reminders should be added to the LMS system
  - Mobile App enhancement

- Reward system
  - Provide students with an incentive.

Discussion:
It is clear that there is a wide range of suggestions. The most suggested improvements were student education and enhanced technology, including a reminder system and the use of mobile apps. Paper-based questionnaires were used for many years. It produced a reasonable response rate but took a lot of effort to analyze, and analyses were not done in many cases. Spooren and Van Loon [7] highlights the advantages of making use of online questionnaires, yet state that the main challenge thereof is the low response rate.

Lessons learned: Schedule time in class to do LE; Enhance mobile app/technology; Make LE simple to answer and maybe more often; Educate students; Make LE part of assessments.

3.2 Student responses and discussion
Twenty-seven students were interviewed, ten from Architecture and 17 from other departments. As mentioned, other departments complete 2 LE per annum with 17 questions and Architecture complete once per year. During 2018 Architecture only used three questions.

3.2.1 Question 1: Architecture and other departments

**Question 1:** Do you usually complete the lecturer evaluations? If YES/NO, why?

From the ten students interviewed in architecture an 80% positive response was received and with the 17 students from other departments, only a 24% positive response was received. The positive themes are mentioned:

  - Need to inform/remind
    - Channels to educate lecturers and students are positive
    - Understand how it would benefit the teaching process
  - Reminders
    - Receive lots of reminders on LMS
    - WhatsApp groups (Architecture) contribute positively

The negative responses varied widely between architecture and other departments, the themes from the negative responses:

  - Happy with lecturers and no need to complete (Architecture)
    - Busy and was delighted with the lecturer
    - Most lecturers are easy to approach
  - Time to complete
    - It takes too much time to complete
    - Make it simpler
  - Anonymous
- I protect my identity
- I must protect my marks
  - No value added
    - Waste of time, because I don’t see any my concerns addressed
    - I don’t get any reward
    - No feedback is given
    - Lecturer says that he doesn’t care if they complete or not

Discussion:
It is clear from the feedback that a different culture exists in Architecture than in the other departments. Students from other departments are not educated on the importance of LE and are not convinced it is anonymous. Brenton and Young [3] confirm that the preparation of the students who complete the questionnaire is relevant and can impact on the reliability of the result. Dev & Qayyum [4] found that students are not serious about LE since they think teaching will not improve as a result thereof.

Lessons learned: Educate students on the significance of LE; Receive buy-in from HoDs; Act on concerns. In this regard, Ramsden [5] indicates that the effectiveness of the department should not merely be concerned with the results of the LE but actually with how they respond to the data.

3.2.2 Question 2: Architecture and other departments

**Question 2:** Are you alerted by the lecturers to complete lecturer evaluations during a course? Yes/No.

The feedback is 100% positive feedback from Architecture and 65% positive feedback from other departments.

Discussion:
It is clear from the feedback that more education needs to be done with students regarding LE and better mechanisms put in place to communicate to students.

3.2.3 Question 3: Architecture and other departments

**Question 3:** In your opinion, do lecturer evaluations add value to teaching? If Yes/No, why?

The feedback received is a 100% positive feedback from Architecture and a 59% positive feedback from other departments with the following themes:
- Platform to voice concerns
  - This is a better platform to voice concerns.
  - Find my voice
- Brings no value
  - Bring no impact on learning
  - Nothing is done with the information

Discussion:
Although a majority of students believe that it is an important platform to raise concerns, they are also concerned that it is not taken seriously and that nothing is done with the results.

Lessons learned: HOD’s in all departments should contribute to the success of LE and be involved in the outcomes and concerns.

3.2.4 Question 4: Architecture and other departments

**Question 4:** Do you have any suggestions on how to improve lecturer evaluations?

The feedback could be summarized by the following themes:
- Need time in class
Discussion: The above themes are prominent in the feedback and consequently repeated.

Lessons learned: Education in LE needs to take place for lecturers and students. Time in class in time should be scheduled, and LE should be simplified.

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Architecture

Figure 1 indicates the response rates for 29 subjects in Architecture during three consecutive years. There was a constant improvement from 23% in 2016 to 33% in 2018. The graph indicates that there is no clear correlation between the years about the specific number of questions asked (2016 and 2017 questionnaire was a 42 mostly quantitative survey, and 2018 was a 3 question qualitative survey).

Architecture outperformed the rest of the departments in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built environment at TUT with more than 300% with regards to response rates. The interviews with lecturers and students provided more information on what could be the reasons for such a performance, for example, Spooren and Van Loon [7] found in their research that mature students and those who pass examinations are more likely to complete LE than other students.

![Figure 1: % Response Rate per subject in Architecture](image)

4.2 Feedback from the interviews

The feedback from the lecturers in Architecture and other departments were very informative. It is suggested that a different culture is present in the Architecture department with regards to the lecturer-student relationships. This could be due to the drive from the HoD to implement processes and procedures and smaller class groups. The following differences are evident from the feedback:

| Lecturers and students are educated on the significance of LE | An average lack of education seems evident with the lecturers and students on the importance of LE |
| Concerns raised in LE seems to be resolved. | The feedback suggests a lack of feedback, communication and resolved concerns. |
| Shorter questionnaires are not necessarily the reason for better response rates. | Feedback suggests that current questionnaires are tedious and involved. |
| The HOD is involved with the process of LE | Feedback suggests a lack of commitment from the lecturers and HoDs to enhance response rates |

| Table 2: Differences between Architecture and other departments |
Lessons learned: Schedule time in class to do LE; Enhance technology; Make LE simple to answer and implement more often; Educate students on the significance of LE; Incorporate LE as part of assessments and get lecturers more involved with the process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This work was made possible in part by the 2018 University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET).

REFERENCES