

Enhancing Student Feedback Efficacy: A Critical Analysis of University's Module Evaluation Questionnaires

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ABSTRACT

This report discusses a British university Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQ) which was produced as a part of university-wide interdisciplinary MEQ project at a British University.

Purpose: The aim of this report is to investigate the purpose of university MEQ and to review aims and weakness of the current Sussex University MEQ seven questions/statements. **Methods:** The method is quantitative and critical review and analysis was conducted. Data was collected at University of Sussex, UK. The participants were three members of the MEQ project team. The focus of analysis is to identify the aim and weakens of the current University MEQ questions/statements. **Results:** MEQ has three stakeholders, students, university and staff. Each stakeholder's purpose of MEQ are different. University has institutional and teaching staff have teaching and academic promotional purposes. It is suggested to MEQ designers to take consideration of students whose mother tongue is not English and to write questions as simple and clear language as possible. **Implications:** The primary recommendation of this report is to undertake a staff-student partnership to agree the purpose of the MEQs and co-design a revised instrument that meets the stated purpose.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2023-10-13

Accepted 2023-12-13

KEYWORDS

University Module Evaluation
Questionnaires
Student Evaluation of Teaching
Academic promotion
Staff-student partnership

INTRODUCTION

Student Evaluation of Teaching and Module Evaluation Questionnaires

Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) or Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQ) is an important source of student feedback on teaching and learning. They are also often relied upon to evidence cases for promotion and is an important element of a teaching portfolio. However, in their current form they suffer from low response rates reducing their usefulness and validity. In addition, local practices have grown to address the need for feedback, however they are not consistent year on year or across the university. Existing research on teaching evaluations indicates that they be a source of bias and that careful design is important to promote equity.

SET may consist of two types: Institutional SET and Local SET. Institutional SET is what a university set the standard questionnaires and distribute them to all schools and departments, which is considered more traditional. The majority of SET research appears to focus on the institutional level SET. Institutional SET is also often relied upon for evidence cases of academic promotion and is an important element of a teaching portfolio. Sussex University SET is institutional and conducted by the means of MEQ in the UK. We call it

'University MEQ' in this report as it is set by the university institution-specific questions. This report is based on the Sussex University MEQ Report (Appendix 1) which is specific to Sussex University. It is believed that the University MEQ have the potential to offer a valuable insight to the student experience within the University, national, international and on a longitudinal basis where appropriately developed and deployed.

Local SET, on the other hand, usually refers to what each School or Department in the Faculty has set its own questionnaires in addition to the Institutional SET. Local SET is implemented as a compliment to the institutional SET providing insight and feedback on specific School, Departmental level questions. However, local School, Departmental within the Faculty has grown to address the need for student feedback at a module level (we call it 'local MEQs') specific practices. However, they may not be consistent year on year or across the university. Inconsistencies can lead to confusion as students may not understand the different purposes of institutional and local MEQ. The consistency is considered important in conducting both University and local MEQ as it is claimed that "for a research instrument to be reliable, it must be consistent" (Gray, 2004, 173). Reliability is defined as "stability or consistency with which we measure something" (Robson, 2002, 101). "If the implementation of local MEQ is consistent across university, local MEQ results also become comparable among School, Department and Faculties. Furthermore, current Sussex University MEQ suffers from low response rates, Basset et al. (2015) claim that students may not appreciate how the information is used and feel it is a pointless exercise. Low MEQ response rate also reduces usefulness and validity. Bias is a source of unreliability which also threatens validity. Research on SET has thus far failed to provide clear answers to several critical aspects concerning the validity of SET (Spooren et al., 2013). It has been highlighted that SET remains controversial topic in higher education research and practice with regards to the validity and reliability of SET results (Ory, 2001). That is why MEQ report was considered important by University of Sussex.

Research Questions, objectives and significance of this report

The objective of this study is to answer the following two Research Questions (RQs) of this report:

RQ1. What is the purpose of MEQ at University?

RQ2. What is the aims and weakness of current Sussex University MEQ?

The novelty of this report is that this is a report of the first Sussex university-wide scholarship activity which is response to university's shift on emphasise of scholarship. A recent shift in the teaching staff's academic responsibilities relates to promotion and academic employment in the UK, and it meant that lecturers have more responsibilities and workload in addition to their teaching responsibilities. Individual's professional development in teaching and learning, such as journal publications, conference presentation, research related activities are considered as scholarship activities. Academic responsibilities are also set in the lectures' job descriptions. Before this change, teaching-only positions existed in non-STEM subjects, which the teaching staff were not expected to do any scholarship activities. This sudden change bring individual academic staff's anxiety and burdens with regards to their academic promotion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purposes of MEQ

Various purposes of MEQ may exist and they may be different or may overlapped depending on various stakeholders. Among these stakeholders, the following three stakeholders are chosen as the focus of our discussion in this report: Students, University and Staff.

The first stakeholder is the Students who play an important part in the MEQ. "Students as consumer or partners" (Bienefeld & Almqvist, 2004) and the concept of "consumer satisfaction" (Blackmore, 2009; Olivares, 2003; Titus, 2008) has brought into education and that is how students play an important part in evaluating tutors. The literature of MEQ result is often discussed as unreliable due to students' bias which affects reliability and validity of MEQ. Students' bias include weather (Braga, Paccagnella & Pellizzari, 2014),

time of the day (Feldman, 1978), gender (Bavish, Madera & Hebl, 2010), racial (Bavish, Madera & Hebl, 2010), physical attractiveness (Gurung & Vespa, 2007), Students' personality traits (Patrick, 2011), and tutors' personality traits (Patrick, 2011).

Second stakeholder is the University. MEQ provides the university accountability of internal quality-assurance. Universities may often have ulterior motive in the student feedback process, specifically, league tables and the National Student Survey (NSS). Furthermore, accountability appears to be considered of paramount importance at universities not only due to the British government emphasis on university's accountability and transparency across the high education sector (2017), but also accountability links to attractive concepts such as 'quality', 'autonomy' and 'integrity', all of which give stakeholders special attention and positive connotation (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). Evidence of internal quality-assurance processes provides institutional accountability (Johnson, 2000). The universities report to the stakeholders regularly and openly (transparency), documenting (visibility) on the outcome of their effective teaching, research activities and institutional management. Institutional accountability consists of the myriads of either tangible or intangible expectations (Kearns, 1998) from the diverse stakeholders such as students, staff, politicians, alumni, funding bodies and the general public (Kearns, 1998).

The last stakeholders are the Staff, specifically in this report are the teaching staff. The two purposes of MEQ for the last stakeholders for our discussion are: a) teaching purposes and b) academic promotion. As for purpose a) teaching purpose, MEQ result can give evidence of teaching quality for individual tutors (Spooren et al., 2013). However, literature of MEQ results often discuss as reliable source due to teaching staff's bias. For example, 'grading-leniency hypothesis' is teaching staff's bias which affects reliability and validity of MEQ. "Grading-leniency hypothesis" is defined as "the professor's leniency in assigning grades favourably influences student evaluation scores" (Patrick, 2011, 241). Simply, tutors who give higher grades also receive better evaluation (Carrell & West, 2010; Johnson, 2003; Weinberg, Fleisher & Hashimoto, 2009). Some researchers claim that tutors *buy* good evaluations by giving higher grades (Isely & Singh, 2005; Langbein, 2008; McPherson, 2006; McPherson & Jewell, 2007).

Another purpose of MEQ for teaching staff is b) academic promotion. MEQ has been used for academic promotion decisions (Becker & Watts, 1999). In fact, 62% of the academic staff feel that Departmental heads and Deans make proper use of SET reports (Beran & Rokosh, 2009). The majority of institutions have been using MEQ for promotion since the 1970s when evaluations came into use for Faculty personnel decisions in hiring purposes (Becker & Watts, 1999) by supervisory positions such as School unit/course coordinators, directors and the Head of school. MEQ is also used as an input for appraisal exercise for tenure/promotion decisions as a measure of quality monitoring, administrative policymaking for professional career progression (Penny & Coe, 2004).

To conclude this section, all of MEQ's three stakeholders, students, university and staff, have different purposes. MEQ results are also considered unreliable source of students' feedback due to students' and teachers' bias which affects reliability and validity of MEQ.

METHODOLOGY

Method

This study has two RQs. While RQ1 is investigated by literature review, the RQ2 is investigated by a critical analysis of Sussex University MEQ's 7 questions/statements. Both investigations are conducted at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom. Figure 1 summarises the relationship between the RQs and the investigation methods.

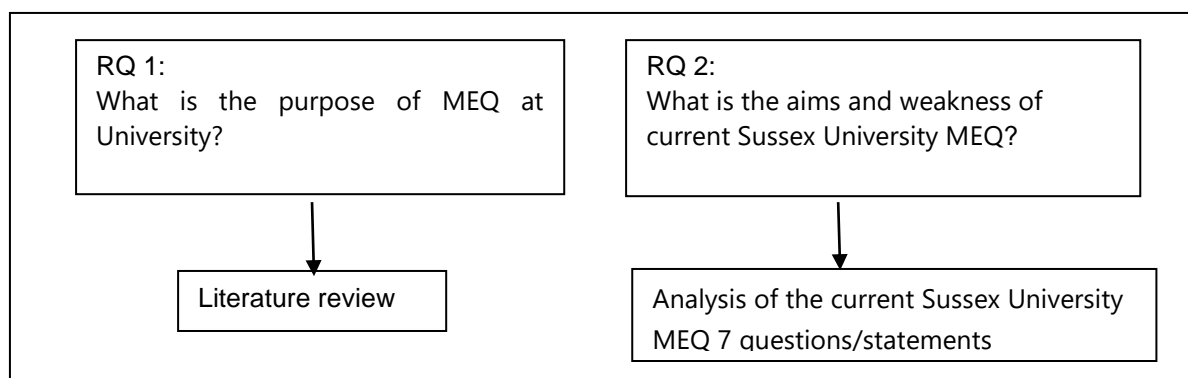


Figure 1. RQs and instruments

Participants

The number of participants of this project is three, the researcher, the Deputy Course Director-International Marketing MSc (Business School) and the Associate Dean of the Business School-International Marketing MSc (Business School). The researcher, a lecturer in Japanese, worked on the literature review and writing up the MEQ report. The Deputy Course Director-International Marketing MSc (Business School) worked on the analysis of the Sussex University MEQ's 7 questions which is discussed in the Results section. The Associate Dean of the Business School-International Marketing MSc (Business School) supervised the MEQ project and the MEQ project report.

To explain the background further to understand the participants, this report was produced as a part of university wide interdisciplinary MEQ project held at Sussex University in 2020. The MEQ project was a two month university project conducted between 13/07/20 and 13/10/20 at the beginning of Covid-19. On 14/07/20, the researcher had the first MEQ meeting with the Deputy Course Director-International Marketing MSc (Business School) who is another team member of this project. On 23/07/20, the second MEQ meeting was held with the Deputy Course Director-International Marketing MSc and the Associate Dean of the Business School-International Marketing MSc (Business School). On 14/09/20, the researcher submitted the MEQ report to the University Survey Group. On 13/10/20, the researcher was invited to present the MEQ Report and answered questions from the Survey Group (highlighted parts in Appendix 2). The University Surveys Group comprised of the Pro Vice Chancellor for Education and Students, Associate Dean of the Business School and the Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor of Student Experience, i.e. University's Executive Board Group. This MEQ report is an example of how Sussex university informed all teaching staff of the academic scholarship activity emphasis and encouraged all teaching staff to work on scholarship activities.

Data collection

The data in this section is regarding RQ2, and it is the Sussex University MEQ's 7 questions/statements, which was collected through Sussex Direct, University's central website which manages University records and information including MEQ questionnaires and results. Both professional and teaching staff can access to this information via Sussex Direct. To give details about Sussex University MEQ, Sussex University MEQ collect quantitative and qualitative data which consists of open and closed questions. Jeffrey et al. (2017) rightly points out that quantitative and qualitative data allows students to express details and information that might have not been considered by the designer. As for quantitative data, students are asked to respond to the 7 statements (e.g., "It was clear to me what I would learn and why") by choosing from the following 4 answers: strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. As current emphasis on MEQ data is on quantitative rating (Likert-scale questions) due to the easiness to collect, analyse and present the MEQ data (Penny, 2003). The quantitative data also includes students median and mean score. Students are also given opportunities to provide comments for each statement.

This also gives qualitative data for Sussex University MEQs. However, this report does not involve the descriptive statistical analysis as the focus of report is to find the purpose and review the Sussex University MEQ 7 questions.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted by another project team member who is a lecturer and also the Director of the Business School, which provided Business School academic teaching staff's perspective on MEQ review. He analysed the current Sussex University MEQ's aims and weakness. If he has suggestions, he also included as suggestions. In analysing, he focused on: 1. the needs of the stakeholder groups is taken into account when addressing the design of the University MEQs, and 2. the intended purpose of MEQ.

RESULTS

The result of this section is for RQ2, which asks the aims and weakness of current Sussex University MEQ and the current Sussex University MEQ 7 questions/statements were analysed.

The first Sussex University MEQ statement (Q1) states that "It was clear to me what I would learn, why and how". The aim of the first statement is to assess the clarity of the module content. The weakness of this statement is unclearness of this statement as the three wh-questions 'what', 'why' and 'how' are in one statement. This may give students different interpretations and may affect validity and reliability of the result analysis of the collected data. It may be very difficult for students to answer all three combinations of 'what', 'why' and 'how'. Some students may be able to answer 'what' but may not be able to answer 'why' and 'how'. This also affects validity and reliability of result analysis of the collected data.

The second statement (Q2) is "The materials on Canvas were useful and relevant". The aim of the second statement is to assess the validity and relevance of the module content on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE = Canvas). The weakness of this statement may be the combination of two adjectives 'useful' and 'relevant'. Students might find the material relevant but not useful or vice-versa, which results in misinterpretation of the statement and affecting validity and reliability of result analysis.

The third statement (Q3) is "The recommended reading lists were appropriate and up to date". The aim of the third statement is to assess the quality of the reading list. The weakness of this statement is the combinations of terms 'appropriate' and 'up to date'. Students might find the reading list appropriate but not up-to-date or vice-versa, which results in misinterpretation of the statement and affecting validity and reliability of the result analysis.

The fourth statement (Q4) is "I have received feedback on my work (including queries after teaching sessions, in person, or by e-mail) which may have helped my understanding/clarified things I didn't know, helped to explain a grade, or identified areas for improvement". The aim of the fourth statement is to assess the level of feedback which student received. The weakness of this statement is unclearness of this statement as various mixtures feedback methods (teaching sessions, in person and e-mail, grade, improvement area) are in one statement. Students may misinterpret or unsure if Q4 is feedback for whether summative assessment, formative assessment or both as it is not specified. Furthermore, the tutor may not be consistently good at giving feedback to students. For example, a tutor might be very good at giving summative feedback, but may not be good at giving formative feedback or vice-versa.

The fifth statement (Q5) is "Clear information about the assessment of this module, and the marking criteria, was provided". The aim of the fifth statement is to assess the assessment instruction and marking criteria. This statement is clear and no weakness is observed in this statement. It is suggested to keep this Q5.

The sixth statement (Q6) is "Teaching accommodation and facilities were satisfactory". The aim of the sixth statement is to assess the learning environment. The weakness of this statement present current Sussex teaching spaces and facilities as limited teaching spaces are available. In addition, the statement is not in line

with other questions which focuses on students' learning. It is suggested to replace this statement with asking students' feedback on Canvas (VLE).

The seventh statement (Q7) is "Overall I was satisfied with the module". The aim of the seventh statement is to assess the students' satisfaction. The weakness of this statement is the term 'satisfaction' which might have different meanings in different culture.

The results of the Sussex MEQ questions/statements shows that all questions/statements except one are ambiguous or misleading which leads to unreliable students' feedback, affecting validity.

DISCUSSION

The result of the RQ2, which asked the aims and weakness of MEQ statements/questions showed that all 7 MEQ statements/questions have aims but the majority except for Q5 have weakness. The aims of MEQ statements/questions cover wide topics including to assess the clarity of the module, relevance of the module content on VLE, quality of reading lists, level of feedback that students received, assessment instruction and marking criteria, learning environment and students' satisfaction. The weakness relates to ambitious and unclear words or sentences, leading misinterpretation which makes students' responses invalid and affects reliability of the data. Furthermore, the focus of Q1 statement/question is unclear due to use of more than one wh-question in one sentence, which also makes students' responses invalid and makes the results unreliable. This results are in line with current SET research which claim that not only the validity of SET (Spooren et al. 2013) but also the validity and reliability of SET results (Ory, 2001). From the above results, University MEQ results should not be relied upon as the only evidence for academic promotion due to possible unreliability and validity of MEQ results.

As a result of Q1, literature review showed a close link between academic promotion and MEQ results. Therefore, a discussion between academic promotion and MEQ results at Sussex University may be relevant. The current Language Department academic promotion practice at Sussex University does not appear to consider MEQ results as evidence for academic promotion, but rather on how individual contributes to the university administration as evidence of academic promotion. As those who were successful in the academic promotion are actually those who contributed to the administration of the Faculty regardless of their scholarship activities.

Yet, relying on the university administration as evidence of academic promotion does not reflect on the current 'scholarship' activity emphasis and in this respect, a gap exists in the current academic promotion practice between the emphasis of scholarship activities and academic promotion.

Until the new emphasis of scholarship activities (around 2000), not all academic staff were expected to engage in scholarship activities as 'teaching-only' positions existed for the academic posts. However, after the new emphasis of scholarship activities, the majority of academic positions were told to choose 'education and scholarship' pathway between 'education and scholarship' pathway and 'education and research' pathway. The majority of academic staff believe that scholarship is very important for their academic promotion and make effort to engage with scholarship activities. However, the following view of the Director of Department of Language Studies at Sussex University shows that scholarship activities is not really important : "Many of us have research projects and deadlines that we need to meet and that occupy our research/scholarship hours in our workload plan, but the delivery of teaching is the highest priority. This has been stipulated multiple times in meetings by the Dean of the School. Any other responsibilities need to be worked around teaching." This makes us think what the real purpose of new emphasis of scholarship activities was for. The current scholarship emphasis is contrary to the truth.

CONCLUSION

To answer RQ1, MEQ has three stakeholders: students; university and staff, all of which have different purposes. For example, University has institutional purposes while teaching staff have teaching and academic promotional purposes. As students play the most important part of MEQ, the primary recommendation of this report is to undertake a staff-student partnership to meet the stated purpose of the University MEQ. Staff-student partnership of University MEQ means to co-design and revise MEQ with students. To answer RQ2, all questions/statements except one are ambiguous or misleading which leads to unreliable students' feedback, affecting validity.

Recommendations

There are two recommendations on designing and stakeholders of MEQ. Firstly, it is suggested to the stakeholders of MEQ to undertake a staff-student partnership to agree with the purpose of the MEQ and co-design to meet the purpose of MEQ. Secondly, with regards to the design and focus of the questions as questions determine the levels of students' engagement. MEQ should be written as simple and clear language as possible for any students whose native language is not English. For example, one question per one sentence and not combining more than two adjectives in one sentence. Students' perception of the words such as "satisfied" may be different from culture to culture and different interpretation and answers to such question "how satisfied are you" may exist. Careful consideration should also be given in designing the statement as it affects validity, reliability and the purpose of MEQ.

Limitations and contribution

Unfortunately, due to the nature and the focus of this report is to analyse Sussex University MEQ questions, the result may have affected the generability of the conclusion and limitations on methodology. As the analysis is a quantitative data which embraces possibilities in obtaining a unanimous interpretation. Despite this generability and limitations, the findings of this MEQ report as well as the identified gap, i.e. emphasises on the scholarship activity but not university administration contribution, in the current academic promotion may contribute to the specific individuals, groups or university who may be interested in this topic.

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