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Institutional Research & Advanced Analytics

Understanding UK's Teacher/Course Evaluation Reports

The primary purpose of the Teacher/Course evaluations is to help instructors improve the quality of instruction and enhance the value of their courses. Each two-page TCE report shows the number and percentage of students responding to each of the questions, the average rating and, in the far right column, the standard deviation (labeled as SD). A standard deviation is shown only when 10 or more students have responded. The number of students who completed an evaluation and the response rate are reported at the bottom of page two.

Department chairs and deans also use course evaluations in decisions involving tenure and merit pay. Summary reports are available for the university, college, department, and by course prefix. Reports also can be generated by class size, course level, and instructor type for each department or college.

Guidelines for Interpreting Evaluations

1. **View Multiple Sets of Student Ratings.** A pattern of students' ratings over time is the best gauge of instructor effectiveness. Ratings from only one course or from one term may not fairly represent an instructor's performance. Some courses are not as highly rated as others. For personnel and merit review decisions, it is essential to examine rating patterns over time.
2. **Consider Whether the Number of Student Raters is Sufficient.** Classes with fewer than five students should probably not participate in the standardized TCE process. Means and percentages based on relatively few students often fluctuate greatly. For very small classes comments from open-ended questions may be more useful than items that employ ratings scales. The proportion of a class that rates an instructor is also important. If participation rates are low,

results may not be representative of the entire class.

3. **Consider a Useful Reference Point for Interpreting Evaluations.** Institutional research at UK has shown that student ratings on the four-point scale used in the evaluation generally exceed 2.5, the midpoint of the scale. For example, the overall mean on the item assessing the "overall quality of teaching" is roughly 3.4, with a standard deviation of approximately 0.8.
4. **Reflect on the Impact of Course Characteristics.** A few course characteristics appear to influence ratings and should be taken into account:
 1. Small classes (with fewer than 15 students) often receive more favorable ratings than larger classes. However, very large classes are sometimes highly evaluated, possibly due to the fact that outstanding teachers are often assigned to these sections.
 2. Upper-level and graduate courses receive somewhat more favorable ratings than lower-level courses.
 3. Courses are sometimes rated lower when they are perceived to be either too difficult or too elementary.
 4. Required courses outside of a student's major or minor field tend to receive somewhat lower ratings.
 5. The bulk of research has not found that evaluations are consistently affected by the time of day a course is offered, the term, the sex of the student, or the grade a student expects at the time of the evaluation.

For these reasons, it is often useful to compare student ratings of the same course taught by different instructors.

1. **Interpret Carefully Students' Comments.** Students' general written comments provide helpful feedback to instructors, although they may not be representative of the perceptions of most students taking the class. Clearly, students who hold minority views about the course and the quality of instruction still may offer feedback useful to the instructor. Questions that focus on a specific aspect of a course are often more helpful to the instructor than open-ended questions of a general nature.
2. **Evaluate the Clarity of Supplemental Questions.** Supplemental questions developed by the college, department, or instructor should be interpreted carefully. Examine whether the question is clearly worded and easily understood. Meaningful feedback cannot be obtained if a question is subject to multiple interpretations or is stated in such a way as to encourage one type of answer rather than another.
3. **Consider Additional Sources of Information.** Student evaluations of teaching should not be used as the sole basis for assessing the effectiveness of instruction. A great deal can be learned by studying instructional materials, such as syllabi, texts, tests, homework assignments. Moreover,

evaluations from peers and administrators, as well as instructors' self-reports, can be used to assess the quality of teaching.

References

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