

Preface

This book considers the foundations, function and potential of student evaluation in higher education. It is particularly focused on the work of formal methods of deriving student feedback, primarily in the form of end-of-semester, quantitative surveys.

Conventionally such surveys pose a range of closed answer questions about teaching, teachers, curriculum, assessment and support issues and offer students a Likert-type rating scale ranging from the strong agreement to strong disagreement. They sometimes also include the opportunity for a limited number of open-ended comments by students.

Student evaluation is now a ubiquitous and formidable presence in many universities and higher education systems. For instance, it is increasingly critical to the internal and external quality assurance strategies of universities in the USA, the UK and Australia.

Student opinion is an increasingly important arbiter of teaching quality in higher education environments, gradually being institutionalised as a valid comparative performance measure on such things as the quality of teachers and teaching, programmes and assessment, and levels of institutional support.

As a result, student evaluation also acts a powerful proxy for assuring the quality of teaching, courses and programmes across diverse discipline and qualification frameworks across higher education. This centrality represents a meteoric rise for student evaluation, which was originally designed as a largely unexceptional tool to improve local teaching (albeit in response to student unrest and rising attrition rates).

However, despite being firmly entrenched in a privileged role in contemporary institutional life, how influential or useful are student evaluation data? Is it straightforward to equate positive student evaluation outcomes with effective teaching (or learning), or even as a proxy for teaching quality? Similarly, can it be simply assumed that negative student evaluation outcomes reflect poor teaching (or that positive results equate to good teaching)?

Moreover, there are other significant assumptions about student evaluation that demand critical analysis. For instance, can students be reasonably expected to objectively rate their teaching and can these ratings then simply be compared to other teaching and discipline outcomes? Is the increasingly visible presence of student evaluation benign in influencing or distorting academic decision-making? And perhaps most significantly given the origins of student evaluation, is the extensive data being generated by student evaluation actually meaningful in guiding or inspiring pedagogical improvement?

Yet despite these important questions naturally arising in considering student evaluation, much of the research in higher education environments in the USA, Europe and Australia over the last three decades has remained largely centred on the assurance (or incremental refinement) of quantitative survey tools, primarily focused on the design, validity or utility of student rating instruments. In addition, there has also been other research interest into effective strategies to ensure the outcomes of such student surveys influence teaching practices and improve student learning.

However, it is conspicuous that there has been far less scholarly discussion about the foundational assumptions on which student evaluation rests. This gap is rendered all the more problematic by the rapidly emerging role of student evaluation as a key pillar of quality assurance of teaching in contemporary higher education. It is difficult to explain exactly why the foundational epistemologies of student evaluation has not attracted the attention of educational researchers and has remained largely confined to the more technical domains of statistical analysis or of localised field practitioners. Perhaps the answer lies with the 'everydayness' of student surveys, which often relegates it to an administrative sphere of practice. This has perhaps meant the student voice has been largely understood as of peripheral value to educational practice and therefore less important than fundamental questions of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.

Yet the use of student feedback has arguably been a reality of higher education since its very conception. It was reputedly the basis for the death of Socrates at the behest of an Athenian jury, which affirmed the negative assessment of his dialectic teaching approaches by students (Centra 1993).

However, as Brookfield (1995) notes, until relatively recent times the quality of teaching in higher education tended to be primarily determined on demonstrations of goal attainment by students. This was either in the form of achievement of defined behavioural objectives, or in acquisition of specified cognitive constructs. This inevitably meant the quality of teaching was largely related to positive or negative outcomes of student assessment, and this was primarily considered in deliberations about academic appointment or promotion.

Having said this, the concept of quantitative student surveys itself is not a recently developed model. The core of the quantitative approach was pioneered in behaviourist experimentation in the USA in the 1920s. Yet it has only been in the last three decades in response to rising social and institutional pressures that student evaluation has been widely adopted in US, European and Australian

universities as a legitimate and respected form of evaluation of teaching effectiveness (Chalmers 2007; Harvey 2003; Johnson 2000; Kulik 2001).

In its broadest sense, any form of student evaluation involves an assessment of the value of an experience, an idea or a process, based on presupposed standards or criteria. Its interpretation necessarily involves the 'collection and interpretation, through systematic and formal means, of relevant information which serves as the basis for rational judgments in decision situations' (Dressel 1976, p. 9).

At its essence, student evaluation necessitates a judgment being exercised from a particular viewpoint (*the subject*) on an identified and bounded entity (*the object*). Conventional quantitative forms of student evaluation invite the judgment of individual students to be exercised on the value of teachers, teaching approaches and courses at the end of the semesters. The criteria for such judgments are inherently subjective, but its outcomes are objectively framed in numeric rating scales that form the basis of student feedback reports. The explicit intention of these student feedback reports is to inform future academic decision-making.

However, the relationship between these reports and the broader evaluative processes around the effectiveness of academic teaching and course design remains largely ambiguous. Given the tangible nature of student feedback data, it represents an explicit representation of teaching and course effectiveness. Yet other often less visible forms of evaluative assessment, such as assessment outcomes, student reactions and peer interaction also mediate academic judgment. It is therefore unsurprising that student feedback creates some tensions in teaching environments, particularly if the explicit nature of these data challenges other forms of evaluative assessment of an academic.

Moreover, as institutional motives for student feedback have moved from quality improvement to quality assurance, these tensions have tended to be aggravated. At its essence therefore, student feedback inevitably negotiates the complex intersection between individual and collective interests in institutions (Guba and Lincoln 1989).

There can be little doubt that student evaluation is now educationally powerful in the contemporary institution. As such, it has the distinct capacity to influence, disrupt constrain and distort pedagogies. Therefore, the core foundational assumptions of student evaluation do matter and deserve and demand much greater critical scrutiny than they have encountered, particularly as its status as a proxy for teaching quality flourishes within institutions and in the metrics of burgeoning global league tables.

Hence, this book seeks to move beyond these well-researched debates around the design of questionnaires and the deployment of evaluation data. It will also not debate the optimal use of quantitative student feedback or seek individual perspectives on experiences working with it. Instead, it seeks to explore the less researched foundational paradigms on which student evaluation rests.

A fundamental element of this analysis will be the consideration of the forces that have shaped (and continue to reshape) the form and function of student evaluation in higher education. These forces include the following:

- the desire to use student feedback to improve the quality of teaching approaches and student learning outcomes;
- the need to demonstrate and assure teaching quality, principally by identifying where requisite standards are not met;
- providing evidence for individual and collective forms of academic performance management; and
- fuelling institutional marketing and rankings in an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

Specifically, the book explores the mounting tension between the first two of these imperatives: the competing discourses of quality improvement and quality assurance that largely shapes the contemporary form, acceptance and perceived value of student evaluation in higher education. Critical to this has been the rising imperatives of neo-liberalism over the last three decades, which has necessitated the creation of market mechanisms to allocate resources in higher education. This has led to rising demands for transparent measurement tools to guide student-consumer choice. Student evaluation has progressively become such a measure, despite its distinctive origin and uncertain suitability for such a purpose.

Finally, the book also considers the rich potentiality of the student voice to tangibly influence the professional dialogue and pedagogical work of teaching academics. Using case study research conducted in a university environment, empirical evidence is presented as to the prospective value of student evaluation as a stimulus for pedagogical improvement when used in more sophisticated forms to harness more complex understandings of student learning (and learning practices).

Specifically the expansive potential of the student voice is explored—beyond these quality assurance paradigms—to discover what methods may enhance the provocative power of student evaluation and how this could be harnessed to actually spark pedagogical improvement.

Origins of This Book

The origins of this book are manifold. Firstly, it stems from quite practical beginnings in my own unsettling experiences of teaching in a postgraduate teacher education programme for university teachers. Over several years, I taught a subject on evaluative practices in education, which included an element on student evaluation. In this subject, it was consistently apparent that student feedback provoked unexpectedly frequently powerful and emotional reactions amongst teachers, eliciting responses that were as divergent as they were determined.

These teachers—who taught both in vocational and higher education environments—expressed a range of differing anxieties in response to their experiences with student evaluation. Such anxieties ranged from how to most effectively address student dissatisfaction, through to an outright rejection of the validity and/or value of the student voice in influencing pedagogical labour. Amongst teachers, there was variously empathy, scepticism and hostility and cynicism about student evaluation.

It was also evident that teachers' personal experiences with the student evaluation were highly influential in shaping their relative perspectives on the value or otherwise of the student voice. These sharp reactions tended to defy the conventional notion of student evaluation as merely an objective and largely benign measure of student opinion. Instead, these experiences suggested that teacher encounters with student evaluation had actually been volatile and laden with considerable (inter)subjectivity.

More surprising, the majority of teachers found it difficult to see the relevance of critically reflecting on the nature or pedagogical potential of the student voice. Despite the influential role student evaluation increasingly has in shaping local institutional perceptions about the value of their pedagogical work, it was generally greeted with either defensive reactions or resigned indifference.

So instead of contemplating the potential student evaluation may actually hold to enhance the quality of pedagogical work, much of this discussion primarily centred on its ritualistic inevitability and/or its increasingly influential quality assurance function that largely shaped institutional perceptions of teaching quality. Indeed, despite determined teaching interventions, most often any actual function student feedback may have in contributing to the improvement of teaching itself was largely overwhelmed by these various anxieties surrounding its institutional use. This sentiment proved remarkably difficult to disrupt.

A second driver for thinking about writing a book like this was the difficult and confounding experience of attempting to reform an existing student evaluation system in a leading international university. Although the university quantitative student evaluation system was well established—being one of the first founded in the nation in the early 1980s—its usefulness was being increasingly contested amongst academics, students and university management. However, it was evident that these various stakeholders held quite divergent concerns.

Although participation in student evaluation remained voluntary for teaching academics, the system was being increasingly perceived by academics as the imposition of a perfunctory quality assurance mechanism on their work. Underlying this was the intensifying use of student evaluation data as usefully reductive evidence for promotional processes, performance management and teaching grants. Paradoxically, this made student evaluation a high stakes game even though regard for it was clearly in decline. Unsurprisingly, this dissonance around the work of student evaluation often produced intense academic reactions where it proved a negative in these important deliberations.

Alternatively, student representatives frequently let it be known that they believed that their evaluation work was doing nothing to actually improve teaching quality. They argued that there was little real evidence that their feedback was being seriously considered—let alone actually being acted on. As the costs of study increased over time, so had the associated expectations of what student evaluation was meant to do as a device for consumer (dis)satisfaction.

Despite student evaluation data providing some form of empirical ground for decision-making about teaching quality, university management asserted that more comparable statistics was needed to ensure deficits that could endanger institutional reputation were rapidly identified and acted on. This would allow the establishment of benchmark averages by which adequate and inadequate teaching quality could be determined. Although this was explicitly framed as a response to student concerns about inaction on their feedback, the implicit reality was the rising competitive and marketing pressures around perceptions of teaching quality in the contemporary university. These were seemingly more persuasive in engineering this sentiment.

Leading this system as change was debated meant encountering frequent bouts of end-of-semester anger, defensiveness or despair from academics seeking answers to negative student feedback outcomes or student demands for action. Conversely, the outcomes for those not aggrieved tended to remain largely abstract, anonymous and seemingly unproblematic.

These divergent conceptions as to the value of student feedback were broadly similar and equally as diverse as those that emerged in the earlier teaching environment. However, here more tangible and potent issues of academic identity, professional autonomy and regard for the student voice were all in immediate play, intensifying varying responses.

Moreover, attempts to generate a critical debate within the university academic community in response about the possible prospective role and function of student evaluation generated far more heat than light amongst academics and students. Again, the possibility of the student voice performing as a tool of pedagogical improvement was largely abstract within these alternative narratives.

A specific proposal to significantly disrupt the entrenched teacher-centred axiom of the existing quantitative student evaluation model created unexpectedly intense anxiety within university management. This proposition—to redesign the student evaluation system to draw more qualitative student perceptions of their learning experience—seemed to be an affront to institutional quality assurance strategies which stressed measureable outcomes.

Evidence was quickly discounted that illustrated that academics were most influenced by the limited qualitative data they derived from the current system. Put simply, unacceptable risk was perceived in moving from measurable student feedback surveys (centred on teachers, teaching and courses), to a more open formulation focused on student opinion of their learning (and embodying a broader understanding of quality improvement).

The eventual outcome of this attempted reform largely preserved these seemingly immutable teacher-centred characteristics, rendering the system redesign more incidental than paradigmatic. This episode demonstrated the surprisingly strongly held shared values amongst university management about the importance of retaining quantitative student evaluation focused squarely on teachers and teaching.

There was powerful importance attributed to retaining a simple and accessible quantitative measure of comparative teaching performance. This seemingly sprung from a strongly held managerialist desire to sanction perceived teaching deficits and reward success. Significantly, the overwhelming majority of teaching academics greeted this debate about the reformation of student evaluation with largely resigned indifference.

This proximity to the reality of student evaluation in a large institution, particularly where it was disrupted, proved a further revelation about the increasingly fraught role the student voice has in the contemporary higher education. Whilst academics more and more questioned its value as an accountability tool, students expected further from it as a consumer-response mechanism to their opinions. Meanwhile, university managements possess a seemingly irresistible attraction to the comparable metrics of teaching performativity it offers.

These complex experiences in working with student evaluation provide the catalyst for this book. Student evaluation was originally introduced to universities as a localised means of improving student retention and assessment results through the improvement of teaching strategies to engage students. Over the three or so decades, student evaluation systems have become a stubbornly entrenched landform in the terrain of higher education.

However, the *purpose* of student evaluation has undergone significant transformation (despite the model maintaining a remarkably similar form). This transformation has left unresolved core questions around what role the student voice should have in teaching improvement, in quality assurance of academic practices and in assessments of institutional quality.

As student evaluation has progressively become more institutionally and socially prominent, so arguably has its power to potentially shape pedagogies and other educational practices. Therefore, student evaluation is a matter of major consequence in higher education. It deserves dedicated scrutiny of its origins and evolution if its contemporary purpose is to be understood and its potential realised.

Structure of the Book

Although—as noted earlier—there has been considerable research interest in the quantitative instruments of student feedback and the effective use of their outcomes, research around its contemporary function is much more limited. This book attempts to address this gap, by exploring the forces that have shaped the

progressive emergence student evaluation in higher education and the influence it exerts on contemporary approaches to academic teaching.

This analysis is developed through a series of interpretive lenses. The book firstly analyses the historicity of student evaluation—both at a general level and in its specific evolution in higher education. This encounters the forces that have shaped its design and use, as well as the tensions that have been fundamental to this evolved form and function.

Secondly, by analysing the current institutional framing of student evaluation, the book considers the complex demands that shape its contemporary state. This adopts a particular focus on the increasingly ambiguous relationship of student feedback with pedagogical and academic development that results from elevating tensions between various drives for quality improvement, quality assurance, performance management and institutional marketing.

Thirdly, several qualitative case studies involving cohorts of postgraduate teachers in a contemporary university setting are considered. The research used the explanatory potential of cultural historical activity theory (CHAT) with the objective of generating a critical understanding of the development, function and potential of student evaluation.

These situated cases provide a critical insight into the current state and the developmental potential of student evaluation in higher education environments. These outcomes are analysed to further understand the increasingly complex relationship between student evaluation and institutional demands, professional discourses and pedagogical change. It also provides a means of considering the broader developmental potential that arises from collective forms of academic engagement derived from the elevated use of qualitative forms of student feedback.

Based on this analysis, the latter part of the book confronts the practical challenges of student evaluation practices and strategies to effectively harness the potential of the student voice. Particular focus is given to critically reflecting on what student evaluation practices can afford and what it hinders in pedagogical analysis and innovation. Finally, the prospects of more complex engagement with the student voice is considered, to assess its ability to incite more substantial forms of pedagogical and academic development in higher education environments.

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