

Course Evaluation Working Party

Minutes

Date	Monday, 23 April 2007
Time	11.00 am
Venue	UCTL Seminar Room 427
Present	Lindsey Conner (Chair), John Hannah, Patrick Evans, Neville Blampied, Jan Cameron, Winston Howison, David Stevens, Kho Yau Hee, Richard Fisher, Keith Comer, Hamish Duff.
In attendance	Pam Grant (minutes)
Apologies	Alison Holmes, Assoc. Prof. Simon Kingham

SCOPING THE OVERALL PROJECT

The main reasons for the Course Evaluation project were outlined:

1. To establish the most effective ways of improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning at the University of Canterbury.
2. To design the procedures to make this happen university wide.
3. Currently the summaries of teaching evaluations are used in the promotions process. Are they an appropriate way to assess teaching for promotions purposes?

The Course Evaluation project came about because it had become more and more apparent to many people in the university that our methods of course evaluation need to be analysed for effectiveness and efficiency, and, if they are inadequate, replaced by a more effective system. The wider educational arena has increased its focus on teaching quality over the last 2-3 years which means that if we do not confront this issue it could also become a potential risk.

At present course evaluation forms filled out by students at the end of each course are the only way to find out about the effectiveness of the teaching within that course. As the only measure, they tend to be given more credence than they deserve. It is time to find out how accurate the information surveys provide actually is. The establishment of a peer review system may also be required.

DISCUSSION OF THE PROCESS AND SEPARATE TASKS

A number of key areas were identified:

Consulting students and staff –

Currently the only form of course and teaching evaluations the university uses requires students to complete survey forms at the end of each course, and this has its own set of issues:

- Students don't always appreciate the volume of surveys they have to complete and they often have limited time to fill them in, thus affecting the quality of the feedback.

- The surveys are used only at undergraduate level, not taking into account that students at different stages will have a different range of experiences and expectations.
- A dependence solely on student evaluation and excludes staff evaluation which may give an unbalanced point of view.
- The surveys evaluated the delivery and teaching aspects of the course but did not look at curriculum development. This is something students may not be able to judge this until later in their academic career.
- Students often feel that the information from the survey is never used.

It was agreed that one of the key areas of focus was to discover what both students and staff believed were the most effective methods of evaluating courses. This question has a wide scope but it was felt that this should be possible within the timeframe, but if not, it would be better to go overtime than to reduce quality.

One suggestion made concerned the possible use of offline web-based surveys as was popular in Economics. These gave the students more time to think over their answers and gave the incentive of possibly winning a music voucher.

A method of communicating what has been done as a result of student surveys needs to be developed, even if it is communicating the results of the previous year's survey.

For the purposes of the evaluation of the teaching and course evaluations, it may be possible to use focus groups, with separate groups for students at each level, of different cultures and of professional programmes. An international focus group should be included, The focus groups could be largely handpicked to gain a good cross-section of students rather than naively thinking an even representation could be achieved. Open focus groups might not get the attendance required so more deliberate invitations could be made. It was agreed it would be wiser to conduct the undergraduate focus groups first because of the size of the task.

Graduate Surveys –

The idea of talking to third year students about what happened in their first year was raised. By their third year of study students would have a better idea of what constitutes good teaching and will still be able to consider their first year in that light. This could be done by using graduate surveys such as exit surveys used overseas when a student graduated. This has been considered before but was put on hold when TEC was looking at the possibility of taking this up. The new funding formula means that TEC will not be doing this now.

Postgraduate -

Postgraduate supervision has not been investigated with the exception of that done by the head of department. The core issue that appears immediately is of confidentiality. In many departments the student-supervisor ratio is very low – classes are often not larger than ten students. The faculty with the biggest problem is Creative Arts, especially Music where there are two to three students in each class. The issue is that the lecturer may be able to easily identify the survey respondents and treat the students according to their opinions. This would put students in an impossible vulnerable position when they depend on their supervisors for references.

Independent Audit -

The possibility of an independent organisation conducting an audit of teaching quality as done in secondary schools was offered. However, it was pointed out that in this case the audit was not to evaluate the quality of teaching but to evaluate the assessment of teaching quality. It was also done as part of the teacher registration conditions. Tertiary educators would not welcome the idea of teacher accreditation or the idea of independent evaluation but would be more open to internal evaluation. People would also argue with the expense of independent evaluation saying the money could be better used for other things.

Teaching Award Nominees -

Teaching Award nominees were identified as a useful source for teaching evaluation methods that the university community may not be aware of. This would be good place to start because their peers already say they are the best.

Peer Review -

A peer review system would provide more balance to the present system weighted towards student feedback. The English Department, for example, uses a small subcommittee to review staff members applying for promotion. The panel of three would drop in by prearrangement, talk to the candidate about ways to improve and write a report that would be seen by the candidate. One flaw with this is that those staff that most need improvement may never seek promotion and bad habits can continue for years unchecked.

If peer review was initiated great care would need to create a constructive ethos rather than one that was critical and negative. Also, academics are already over evaluated in other areas and this needs reducing not increasing. A form of peer review is already taking place in undergraduate departments where external independent moderation is used in some courses.

Other Tertiary Providers -

The obvious need to look at the methods of teaching evaluation used by other tertiary providers was discussed also. This would involve looking at the measures they use and their consultation processes.

UCCE had a whole range of ways of evaluating courses and programmes and UCCE is presently collating them. These will then be taken to the schools for decisions about which to keep and which to discard.

Measuring Techniques -

It was pointed out that there are some quite arbitrary measures being used in the educational community to evaluate teaching quality, probably because people are unaware of the proper measurements, so seeking opinions may not get us far. Technical measures of human performance do exist and we need to investigate the array of techniques available.

Budget -

When the existence of a budget was queried we were informed that although there is not one presently, Keith and Jan would discuss this with Alison. As far as the of contracting someone to work on the project was concerned, one or two staff members in UCTL may be able to take this on as their chief responsibility but care needed to be taken not to overload them.

RESPONSIBILITIES ALLOCATED FOR:

- **Literature Review:**
A literature review could go on for years but this is not necessary. Neville has access to key articles. Keith (in charge), Neville, and possibly Alison.
- **Obtaining and collating feedback from staff, promotions committee and students:**
It would be unrealistic to have this done by the next meeting but a plan of how to do this could be done in that time. David, Winston, Yau Hee, will seek feedback from students. Hamish may assist (has experience doing focus groups in ICT).
- **Obtaining and collating submissions from schools:**
Other staff in the committee would be able to help with the collection. Patrick, Richard, and John..
- **Consideration and recommendations based on procedures used at other universities:**
Keith to discuss with Alison. It would also be worthwhile establishing contact with the TL committees.
- **Collating and writing final report:**
Lindsey.

ACTION POINTS:

- Jan will get copy of the AAU self audit report, 2005 for the group.
- Keith will find out the person in TL who has experience in with focus groups.
- Keith will find out contacts in other universities.
- David will contact other student associations and find out what other universities do for course evaluation and get samples of survey forms.
- Pam will set up email group and send the list of email addressed to the working party with the minutes.

Contact Alison, Lindsey or Jan if need to know further details.

Meeting closed 12.10pm. Next meeting is on 25 June at 11am.