

Evaluating the Student Experience

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Student surveys are part of the evidence-based higher education movement. Students' feedback on their experience emerged from Western democratic improvement drives, with end-of-module evaluations a key part of quality enhancement. This facilitates a dialogue between students and teachers—albeit one that leads to improvements for the next cohort of students. This practice soon became assimilated into internal and external quality assurance processes.

Origins of Student Evaluations of Teaching

In the 1990s, researchers began to develop surveys about teaching to counteract the focus of research-based performance indicators, which feed into domestic funding schemes and global rankings. In many countries with nationally standardized surveys, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, they also function as a transparency tool for governments and allow for benchmarking across the sector.

Abstract

Student surveys are ubiquitous. Originating with the democratic improvement ethos in Western higher education, student evaluations became a bedrock of quality assurance. Ratings of teaching feed into the neoliberal model of higher education, providing a transparency tool for governments, fuelling competition, and driving marketing campaigns. Some argue for the power of the student voice, others critique bias in ratings. But a future based on students' actions—through data analytics and artificial intelligence—may speak louder than words.

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More recently, student surveys emerged as a key data source in the marketplace of students-as-consumers. They fuel competition across institutions and feature in marketing and public relations campaigns. Websites such as ratemyprofessors.com operate outside of institutions' control but may influence teachers' probation and promotion prospects.

Where Did They Come from?

The Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), developed by Paul Ramsden in the 1980s, was one of the first large-scale student surveys to emerge. It had an explicit basis in consumer (student) satisfaction, exploring teaching, goals and standards, workload, assessment, and independence.

In the 1990s in the United States, in response to research and reputation-based rankings and subsequent discussions of quality, researchers developed surveys on student engagement. These focused on what students did in their time in higher education and how institutions created an environment to support student success. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was designed to provide institutions with actionable data, focusing on academic challenge; collaboration; staff-student interaction; and campus environment.

A decade later, the United Kingdom took a more consumerist approach, launching the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005, with the aim to inform prospective students' choices about higher education courses. The survey soon expanded to act as a public accountability tool, as well as a vehicle for institutional enhancement. Somewhat ironically, the surveys were initially boycotted by many student unions.

Where Did They Go?

As to be expected, each of the large-scale student surveys informed the development of the others, with UK-based research providing the bedrock for the CEQ, which also strongly influenced NSSE. The nationally standardized surveys in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States contrast with individualized, institutionally based surveys used more widely across the world. Engagement surveys, which focus on institutional enhancement, student self-formation, and development of societies' human capital and engaged citizenry, have had widespread adoption across the globe, being duplicated in Australia, Canada, China, Ireland, New Zealand, and South Africa, with similar initiatives in Japan, South Korea, and Mexico. Part of the staying power of engagement surveys is that they are not widely used in rankings.

Globalization has influenced the spread of student surveys. After using the CEQ, Australia adopted an engagement approach for a while, then moved to the current Student Experience Survey in 2015, which takes a more marketized approach than the CEQ. In the United Kingdom, the NSS has been regularly reviewed (with the first three reviews led by Paul Ramsden). It is under review again for being overly bureaucratic and not delivering outcomes aligned to government priorities around value for money and employability outcomes.

Due to the large expense of developing robust surveys and varying national higher education systems and priorities, there is little comparative research on the topic. There is more focus on within-country comparisons, across institutions, disciplines, and subgroups of students. Student surveys have become embedded globally as part of quality assurance, accreditation, and regulatory systems. In some countries, they feed into performance regimes and value-added discussions. Interestingly, in the United Kingdom the weighting of student surveys was downgraded in the national Teaching Excellence Framework, which prioritized employment outcomes instead.

Challenges and Alternatives

There is big business in capturing student data. International rankings have made efforts to include measures of teaching and learning to counteract criticisms of focus on research and reputation, but have found them hard to develop and to compare internationally. A collaboration for the US market, the *Wall Street Journal/Times Higher Education* College Rankings faced challenges getting students to complete surveys to have sufficient data to rank institutions. Similarly, the OECD Assessment of Higher Education

Learning Outcomes (AHELO) program failed to get international consensus on outputs (see [article by Loukkola and Peterbauer](#) in *International Higher Education*, issue 104).

Critiques of student surveys are as broad as surveys, including reliability, robustness of measures, and response rates. The merging of many student opinions into a single “voice” homogenizes students and feeds into an instrumental and reductive view of the student voice. There is also a plethora of research on bias across gender and other characteristics in student ratings and feedback, which is particularly problematic when data is used for probation and promotion.

The challenges of student surveys lead to regular calls for alternative approaches to gathering data on quality in higher education. This includes more qualitative and localized initiatives, working with students as partners, and other collaborative approaches. As student feedback shifts from being formative feedback to their teachers to a summative rating of their experience, there is a danger that the market of student opinion defines effective teaching and quality in higher education.

More holistically, there is a need for greater triangulation of research, to address concerns such as links between student ratings and grade inflation. A greater use of learning analytics has been long called for but is still not standardized within institutions, better yet across countries. The shift to online delivery due to the pandemic has highlighted how much data is available on students and how they engage with their learning. There is a danger that students’ actions may drown out their voices. ▲

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