Evaluating teaching: guidelines and good practice

TQA Manual - Introduction and Contents

Evaluation of teaching involves collecting evidence, from various stakeholders, for the purpose of improving the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. A successful evaluation generates outcomes that are valid, reliable and indicate directions and action for improvement.

There is much more to an evaluation than `putting out a questionnaire'.

These guidelines suggest **five key questions** to be addressed when considering the practical issues of evaluating teaching. They stop short of engaging in the wider issues of how such evaluations relate to the educational aims of the taught programme, or to the total experience of the student; these are issues for attention through the **Peer Teaching Observation** scheme.

1. What is the purpose of the evaluation?

It could be an evaluation of

- the **quality of the educational provision** (the product) - which could be the whole programme, a course (module), a class (lecture, seminar, laboratory, etc)
- the **performance of the provider(s)** - the academic staff, tutors, support staff, involved in the delivery of this programme/course/class
- the **experience of the students** as partners in the process - their experience of what is provided, and of the providers their motivation and approach to learning
- a **combination** of these things - provided that the various purposes are made absolutely clear to those asked to make the evaluation

Good practice: make clear to all those involved the purpose, or purposes, of the evaluation.

2. What is the focus of the evaluation?

For example, you might want to know about

- the clarity of the stated educational aims and learning outcomes
- the realism of stated pre-requisites/prior knowledge
- curriculum and content - perceptions of relevance/usefulness
- the way in which the curriculum was presented or delivered
- the development of subject-specific skills
- the development of non-subject specific (personal and/or transferable) skills
- the appropriateness of the methods of assessment
- the appropriateness of the style of teaching, and the performance of teacher
- the quality of feedback to the student on the performance of the student
- the motivation/attitudes of the student
- the educational challenge presented to the students

- the workload, how reasonable, how realistic
- the support available to students/coursebooks/resources for independent learning
- the effort made by the student, and the take-up of support/guidance
- the overall experience of the student of the teaching and support for learning

but a string of questions with such a wide range of foci makes it difficult for the person giving the evaluation to recall, reflect and give a careful response.

Good practice: make clear to all those involved the focus of an evaluation - if there are multiple foci organise the questions into clusters, identifying the focus of each cluster - help the evaluator to concentrate and make a reflective response

3. Who will be asked to make the evaluation?

An evaluation of teaching will normally be designed for students as the primary evaluators, but there is advantage in also seeking evaluation by all the partners in the process. The responses of the different participants in the process - students and staff - permit a correlation that adds greatly to the reliability and validity of the outcomes of the evaluation. Such correlation provides insight into the level of harmony, or disharmony, of perceptions between the partners in the teaching-learning process. Internal and/or external academic peers can also be invited to participate in the evaluation, to introduce a wider perspective on, for example, the academic standards of the educational provision.

Good practice: correlate outcomes of evaluation from different viewpoints wherever possible.

4. Who will see the outcomes of the evaluation; who will act upon them?

Before designing an evaluation it is necessary to define

- how, and by whom, the raw data will be processed to generate outcomes
- to whom the outcomes will be reported, and in what detail
- who bears responsibility for taking action in the light of the outcomes

The evaluators, and the evaluated, must have access to the outcomes of the evaluation. So too must the person(s) responsible for the management of the quality of the educational provision, such as a Head of Department, programme leader (or equivalent) or chair of a departmental teaching committee. However, not all of these need have access to the same level of detail.

Good practice: make clear, from the outset, to all involved in the evaluation process who will have sight of the outcomes, and who will be responsible for taking action, and monitoring the effectiveness of action. (Note: there is little point, and potential harm, in seeking evaluation of matters where there is no realistic prospect of any action following the outcomes of evaluation.)

5. What methods of evaluation are available?

Only when the purpose of evaluation, its focus, reporting and responsibility for action have been determined can the method of evaluation properly be addressed.

There is always advantage to be gained by using several methods of evaluation and correlating their outcomes.

a). Questionnaire

This familiar method of seeking feedback from students has the potential advantage of speed (in administration), anonymity (of response) and standardisation (for purposes of comparison between cohorts). It can suffer from poor response rate and validity of outcomes if not designed with care (for purpose and focus), and if over-applied (the effect of "questionnaire-fatigue").

Points to consider:

Who should design the questionnaire? The answer is determined by the purpose of the evaluation, and is, most commonly, the person(s) responsible for the delivery of the education under evaluation, but it is ***good practice*** to seek the views of the intended evaluators of its suitability for the purpose. The Education Enhancement team can provide help with questionnaire design.

Should the questions be designed for response on a **rating scale** (eg. a positive statement with response on a scale of `agree' to `disagree')? Rating scales lend themselves to rapid processing and ease of comparability across cohorts/years, especially when using online survey tools, but they limit the range of response.

Should the questions be designed for **freeform** response (eg. "what did you find most challenging about ...")? Freeform responses allow a more subtle range of responses, and for the raising of issues beyond those set out in the questionnaire, but they take longer to complete, longer to process and much longer to report. It is ***good practice*** for the processing and reporting to be done by someone not closely involved with the subject of the evaluation. A **good compromise** is a questionnaire that is mainly of rating-scale format (for speed and consistency) with some opportunities for freeform response.

How long should the questionnaire be? In order that the purpose and focus remains clear it is ***good practice*** to keep a questionnaire short - about 20 questions would be about right for a rating-scale format, but much less if all the questions allow freeform response.

When should it be administered? The answer to this depends entirely on the purpose. For example, evaluation after the end of a module gives a more complete picture, but too late for that cohort to benefit from the information - evaluation part-way through the module, or after individual classes, gives an incomplete picture, but would enable some adjustment of the remainder of the module to benefit that cohort. The purpose and focus also determine the best frequency of administration, but it is unwise to overload to the extent that questionnaire fatigue sets in. It is ***good practice*** for a department to have a planned schedule of evaluation, with higher frequency of evaluation where there is cause for concern, and lower frequency where evaluation gives stable positive outcomes.

b). Structured group interview (nominal group technique)

This is a meeting with students at which they are asked to give their views about a programme, course or class. It must be structured with care to generate constructive debate, and so that students feel free to express their views without personal risk.

Typically, students are asked to work in small groups to reflect upon good and bad features of the educational provision (eg. programme, course or module), its delivery, and their own performance and experience. A spokesperson from each group is asked to relay the considered views of the group to the meeting. The role of the member of staff leading the meeting is to compile a summary of such views, to validate them at the meeting, and, later, to produce a short report of the main outcomes.

The structured group interview allows students to have greater freedom of expression than a questionnaire, and more opportunity to make constructive suggestions for improvement. It typically requires a meeting of about an hour, but the processing is done during that hour and the time needed for producing a report is short. It is ***good practice*** for a group interview to be led by an experienced leader who is not involved in the delivery of the educational provision that is being evaluated, and preferable not in the same department. Education Enhancement can provide guidance on the operation of structured group interviews, and members of EE have experience of leading and reporting such meetings.

c). Student-staff liaison committee

Every academic department has a staff-student liaison committee. While this is neither the right venue, nor necessarily the right group, to conduct evaluation, it is an opportunity for students and staff as partners in the teaching/learning process to

identify priorities for scheduling evaluations

propose particular purposes and foci of evaluation

comment on the outcomes of evaluations, their validity and reliability

It is ***good practice*** for every meeting of a liaison committee to include a default agenda item on evaluation of teaching, so that it is a legitimate topic to raise at any meeting. Points raised at student-staff liaison committees can provide useful correlation with outcomes of evaluations made by other methods (see also the *Code of Practice* for student-staff liaison committees).

d). Self-evaluation and **peer evaluation**

A simple but effective form of self-evaluation by a course/module team is for them to undertake the same form of evaluation undertaken by the students, ie. to complete the same questionnaire, or to conduct a self-evaluation using the same format of a structured group interview. The degree of harmony between the staff responses and the outcomes of the students' evaluation is a good indicator of staff awareness of student perceptions. Items of disharmony suggest that staff understanding of students' needs and concerns needs to be addressed before attending to issues of detail that arise from the evaluation.

Peer evaluation, by external examiners, to support self-evaluation of teaching in relation to the maintenance of academic standards is a familiar and routine activity. Less familiar, but equally valuable, is regular peer evaluation of the teaching/learning process.

A colleague, focusing on the process that is taking place, adds a dimension of evaluation that may escape the member of staff and the students, who are generally too busy with the business of teaching and learning to observe the process itself. However, casual `dropping-in' on a class is not the best approach to peer evaluation.

It is ***good practice*** for peer evaluation to be a planned and structured process, involving the separate stages of

- **briefing**, to set context and identify aims and learning outcomes of the process that is to be observed
- **observation**, with a checklist of key features to look for, agreed at the briefing
- **de-briefing**, to give feedback on the observation and to compare the perceptions of the observer and the observed

Examples of observation checklists and features to look for in the teaching/learning process are available from the Education Enhancement. Again, both self-evaluation and peer evaluation provide correlation with, and add value to, other forms of evaluation of teaching.

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