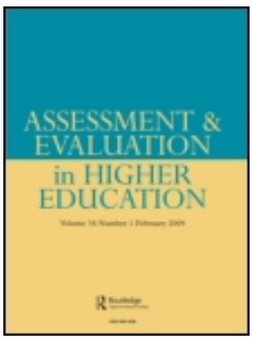

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# A recipe for effective participation rates for web-based surveys

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One way many universities have approached the process of better understanding and meeting the needs of their students is through student evaluations. The evaluation data provide not only diagnostic feedback but also useful information in terms of the quality of learning and teaching experiences. In an effective quality cycle, the data gathered are analysed and used to make improvements. This is often referred to as 'closing the loop'. However, for any evaluation data to be of value an important prerequisite for 'closing the loop' is that response rates should be sufficiently high to be representative of the student cohort. This paper describes how a faculty within Monash University utilising only web based surveys developed a successful communication strategy to elicit staff and student participation in the unit (subject) evaluation process which achieved a response rate as high as 83.2%.

**Keywords:** web-based surveys; response rates; participation; recipe; student

## Introduction

Harvey (2003) argues that students are important stakeholders and consideration of their views are crucial to any quality process in higher education. Research over the last four decades has consistently recognised that students' perceptions are important parameters of the social and psychological aspects of the learning environments (Fraser 1998; Ramsden 2005) with studies consistently confirming a strong correlation between learning and teaching environments and levels of satisfaction (Fraser 1998; Nair and Fisher 2001; Richardson 2005; Nair and Bennett 2008). In more recent times with increased scrutiny levels of government and public, many providers in the higher education sector have realised that they need to re-evaluate their approach by placing greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of their key stakeholders (e.g. Cheng and Tam 1997; Griffin et al. 2003).

One way many universities have approached the process of better understanding and meeting the needs of their students is through student evaluations which serve numerous purposes. These include:

(1) diagnostic feedback to faculties about their teaching that will aid in the development and improvement of teaching;
(2) useful research data to underpin further design and improvements to units, courses, curriculum and teaching;

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(3) a measure of teaching effectiveness that may be used in administrative decision-making, e.g. performance management and development appraisal;
(4) a source of useful information for current and potential students in the selection of units and courses; and
(5) a measure for judging quality of units and courses which is increasingly becoming tied into external funding formulas.

The first two purposes are recognised universally as the basis for many evaluations (Webb, 1994; Fraser 1998; Nair and Fisher 2001). The next Purposes (3) to (5) are relatively new to many universities, especially in the Australian context. For Monash the usefulness of evaluation measures related to the quality of the units, courses, programmes and student experience are reflected in the values, aspirations, strategic documents and the nature of the organisation (Monash University 2004, 2005).

### *Online responses*

The online approach to administering and collecting evaluations offers numerous advantages over traditional paper-based approaches (Dommeyer et al. 2004; Porter 2004). Some of these advantages are as follows:

- the lower cost factor to administer;
- little or no class time involvement;
- data processed immediately and stored in a database;
- no requirement to scan and store completed questionnaires; and
- the approach allows flexibility for students to complete the questionnaires at their own time.

In addition, researchers who have compared online and paper-based responses have shown that students provide more information to open-ended questions in an online-based format as compared to the paper-based format (e.g. Layne, DeCristoforo, and McGinty 1999; Hmieleski and Champagne 2000; Dommeyer et al. 2004). However, though there are advantages which support the use of online administration, a key disadvantage often cited in literature is that online responses typically elicit lower response rates than 'in class' administration of surveys (e.g. Dommeyer et al. 2004; Porter 2004).

Recent research suggests that a key ingredient to better response rates is greater engagement of students in the process (Coates 2006). One engagement strategy that literature floats is the possibility of enticements in the form of incentives to elicit greater interest from potential respondents. The evidence with incentives is quite varied with no indication that every time an incentive is given, a higher response rate is achieved (e.g. Dommeyer et al. 2004). There are also major disadvantages in having incentives, one being the cost to purchase reasonable incentives according to the needs of the cohort and the other which has relevance to universities with offshore campuses, being compliance with international gambling laws.

An argument that has been voiced by many academics is that 'survey fatigue' a phenomenon to do with over surveying students, might be the root cause for low response rates. However, counter evidence suggests low response rates are not due to survey fatigue, but due to a reluctance of participants to continue to provide feedback if there is little evidence of action taken in response to their feedback (e.g. Powney

and Hall 1998; Leckey and Neill 2001; Harvey 2003). For example, Leckey and Neill (2001) argue that "closing the loop" is an important issue in terms of total quality management. If students do not see any actions resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate' (25). Harvey (2003) reinforces this with the qualification that not only must the action take place on the basis of students view but also that students need to be convinced that change has occurred.

One question that is often asked of survey analysts is: what is an acceptable response rate so that reports of student surveys are deemed useful? The literature indicates that there is no magic formula by which a response rate can be identified as 'acceptable'. Equally, there is no evidence that online surveys with lower response rates produce biased evaluations (Layne, DeCristoforo, and McGinty 1999; Porter 2004; Coates et al. 2006). An analysis of the 2004 unit evaluations data for first-year business and economics students at Monash supports this 'no bias for lower response rates' finding. In this study, the initial online survey was re-run as a paper-based survey. The response rates for the paper-based survey were about 65% and for the online survey about 36%. Results for items relating to the overall unit were not found to be statistically significantly different. The conclusion from this work is that the generic results from the unit evaluation questionnaire at Monash are reliable, despite smaller sample sizes of about 30% for online surveys (Monash University 2006).

Two factors that are also considered important with regard to response rates are the purpose of the survey and the construct of the items (Coates et al. 2006). At Monash much consultation and planning was involved in the construct of the survey questions and staff and students were frequently informed and reminded of the purpose of unit evaluation surveys – to listen to the students' voice and where possible to make improvements to the learning experience for students.

### *The paper*

For evaluation data to be of value an important prerequisite is that the response rates should be sufficiently high to be representative of the student cohort. This paper describes how a faculty within the university developed a successful communication strategy to elicit staff and student participation and as a consequence achieved a high response rate on unit evaluation surveys. Units or subjects are the vital 'building blocks' of the curriculum in any university. For Monash, the importance of embedding a systematic way of monitoring units was identified as a major recommendation in the institutional self-review *Still Learning* in 2002 and since its introduction the data have been used to demonstrate compliance with the Department of Education Science and Technology (DEST) requirements and for determining development priorities.

## The approach

In 2005, the Monash University re-engineered its evaluation system by introducing a new Survey Management System with the ability to have both paper and in-house web-based versions (Nair and Wayland 2005). This meant that faculties could choose to administer unit evaluations online, use a combination of paper-based and online methods or stay with all paper-based evaluations.

In line with this change, the university redesigned their approach to collect unit feedback from students. The university went from a policy of evaluating a unit once in five years to evaluating each unit at least once in a year it is offered. In addition,

the survey design was enhanced in line with research to improve the saliency and to make the questionnaire short and easy to complete. The new survey contained 10 standard university questions common to all faculties with the option for faculties to further include up to 10 questions of their choice which would be common to all units within the faculty.

The unit evaluation surveys have been administered each semester every year since 2005 to all faculties and campuses at Monash University at the start of Week 9 in a 13-week semester. The survey runs for five weeks and terminates on the date examinations begin.

## The recipe

The Faculty of Education opted for an all web-based evaluation strategy as many of the students were on school placements during the evaluation period which was not conducive to administering paper-based surveys. Of the 3307 units evaluated at the university across 10 faculties, the Faculty of Education evaluated a total of 169 units online. The Faculty was aware that traditionally online surveys achieved a global average of around 30% (Dommeyer et al. 2004). To address this concern, the faculty developed a comprehensive and targeted communication strategy within the evaluation process aimed at achieving substantial 'buy in' from staff and students.

The faculty communication strategy was designed to complement a central communication strategy which included global emails to staff and students, reminder emails during the evaluation period, the provision of regular progress response rate reports to faculties and the introduction of a helpline for students and staff to answer queries on the evaluation process.

The main elements in the communication strategy that was implemented at the Faculty of Education are outlined in Table 1 below. They provide a useful roadmap for others striving to improve response rates.

Figure 1 outlines the Faculty of Education response rates for units that were evaluated in Semester 1 compared with the university and two other faculties which utilised web-based surveys. The data show that education achieved a very high response rate compared to the other two faculties. The conclusion was that this was largely due to the efforts that were put into planning and implementing a comprehensive faculty-wide communication strategy designed to ensure high levels of staff and student engagement and commitment to the unit evaluation process. The reminder emails employed at the central level, which were critically timed to reach students just before the start of the weekend, were also seen as a contributing factor to the high response rate (Porter 2004; Nair and Wayland 2005).

### *Maintaining the participation rate*

As well the importance of embedding a comprehensive communication strategy into the evaluation process, this paper also argues that Monash's central quality unit, the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ), is critical in maintaining student and staff involvement in the process of evaluation. To this effect, global emails were sent out to staff and students by senior administrators (Pro Vice-Chancellor (Quality) and Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor) thanking them for supporting the process. Further,

Table 1. Elements of strategy.

- Discussion and endorsement at the Faculty Curriculum Committee level as well as at the campus sub-committee level of the need to spread the word to staff and students about the importance of unit evaluations.
- Personalised emails sent to programme leaders and course co-coordinators from the Associate Dean (Teaching), emphasising the need to promote the value of unit evaluation surveys with students.
- Notices placed in the faculty internal electronic newsletter urging staff to inform students of the opportunity to provide feedback through the online evaluations system. At the same time staff were asked to inform students of the changes to the course and units that have been introduced as a result of previous student feedback (e.g. changes to assessment due date schedules to spread the student work load, reductions in the amount of assessed work required for some units, with a focus on quality rather than quantity, online access to assignment cover sheets through students' my.monash portal).
- Postings on the online unit sites created in the Monash University Studies Online (MUSO) alerting students to the unit evaluations and providing details on when and how they could complete them.
- Electronic messages placed on the my.monash portal leading up to the evaluation survey period alerting students to the survey, confirming when it would be available, how to respond and how the faculty uses and values their feedback.
- Just prior to and during the survey period displaying 'Have Your Say' posters around the faculty (e.g. in elevators, in key classrooms and in computer laboratories).
- Sending faculty email reminders to students during the evaluation period.
- Sending targeted email reminders to staff during the evaluation period with progress data on how many students had responded in each unit. This led to some staff contacting students through group emails or through the Monash University Studies Online (MUSO) unit site, encouraging/reminding them to complete the survey.

both staff and students were alerted to the availability of unit evaluations reports on the university website. The willingness of staff to actively participate and promote future surveys was also increased by acknowledging the high performing units both centrally and at the faculty levels.

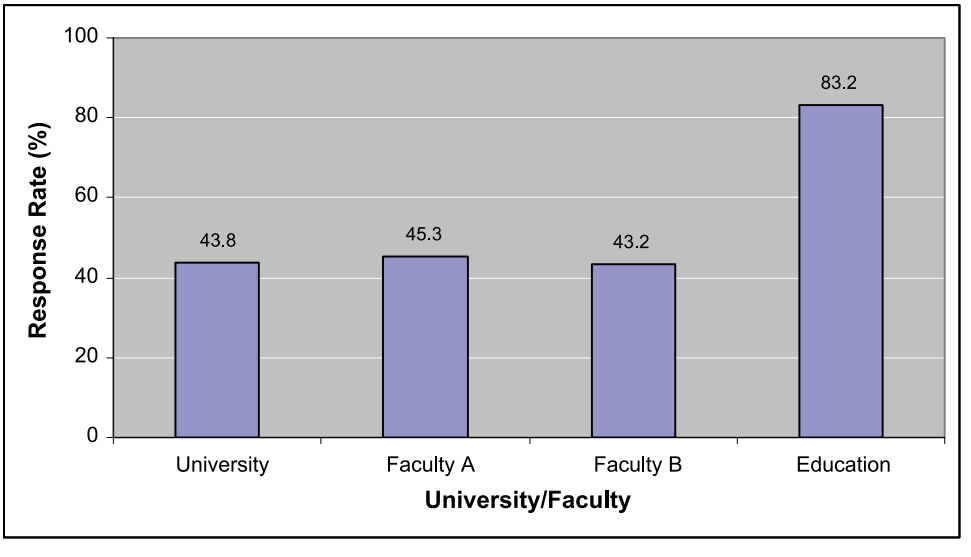


Figure 1. Comparison of overall unit evaluations based on the response rate by faculty and university.

During the evaluation period, the Centre for Higher Education also maintained a helpdesk:

- for students not only to answer queries but also to aid students who were having problems accessing the unit evaluations web links; and
- for staff to answer queries on policies; the administration methods and construction of the surveys.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

Feedback from faculty quality coordinators and administrators responsible for overseeing the evaluation process generally report that they prefer web-based surveys over paper-based evaluation primarily because of the ease of administration and the cheaper cost of administration. The cheaper administration costs primarily result from savings in not having to hire extra staff to administer paper-based surveys in class, in not having to print questionnaires, in not having to organise a schedule for administering the surveys and in not having to mail surveys, especially to and from the international and country campuses. However, even with these advantages there is a usual 'complaint' found in literature that web-based surveys elicit low response rates. This paper demonstrates that effective response rates are possible to achieve with web-based surveys when a communication strategy to elicit staff and student participation is embedded into the overall survey administration process.

The case study reported in this paper recommends that a communication strategy needs to address three distinct phases:

(1) A pre-survey phase where both students and staff are made aware of the upcoming survey and the importance of the survey. This pre-survey phase includes both online communications, face-to-face communication in class for students and at staff meetings for faculty members. As well, information posters around the campus are an important ingredient in the pre-survey phase. The message is more powerful if the dean and senior staff are seen to be supportive and demonstrate that they value and act on the feedback from students. Ensuring that casual and sessional staff such as demonstrators and tutors are aware of the evaluation policy is also important as they often interact with the greatest number of students;

(2) The active phase is the period when the survey is available to students. For online surveys this is usually for three to five weeks and sustaining the communication plan throughout this period is very important. Typical forms of communication recommended during this phase include: general emails to students from the university's central quality division announcing the availability of the survey and the relevant URL; personalised emails from senior members in the faculty endorsing the process, as well as personal emails from unit teaching staff. These forms of multiple contacts, sometimes referred to in the literature as 'reminders' have often been shown to enhance response rates for online evaluation (e.g. Heberlein and Baumgartner 1978; Ha, Marsh, and Jones 1998; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Coates et al. 2006). However, in addition to email contact, this case study found that response rates improved when teaching staff reminded students in class of the survey and reiterated the importance of their feedback in guiding future improvement;

(3) The post-survey phase is another important part of the communication plan. To encourage participation in subsequent semesters, it is recommended that shortly after the surveys close, students and staff are sent global emails by senior university administrators thanking them for supporting the process. A further email needs to be sent to both staff and students once the evaluation reports have been posted on the university website. Faculties are also encouraged to communicate to students a summary of the data trends and what improvement are planned or have been implemented as a result of students' comments. This approach is in-line with research that suggests that students are more likely to participate if they feel that their feedback contributes in a meaningful way (Leckey and Neill 2001; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Porter 2004; Coates 2006). Though ideally, such communication of actions taken should take place as soon as possible, at Monash this is only done when the units are offered again in the following semester. This gives the faculties and the individual academics time to digest the result and develop action plans. Actions reported to students take two forms. Firstly, in the first week of classes students are provided information on the feedback that was provided by the previous class. Students are taken through what has changed as a result of such feedback and also informed that they will be given the opportunity to provide feedback about the unit near the end of the semester. Secondly, such actions that were taken as a result of students' feedback are documented in the unit outlines that are supplied to students at the beginning of the next semester.

Another question that is often asked in relation to online surveys within faculties is about the effective time period for such evaluations. At Monash, the university-wide survey of units is carried out over a five-week period starting Week 9 of a 13-week semester. The survey closes on the day examinations begin. As previously mentioned, an important consideration of this strategy is to get the communication process happening in the pre-survey phase. An approach that has recently been adopted across the university is to inform students in the first few days of each term of the relevant surveys that they will be involved in throughout the semester and to point out what has been done with previous survey results. It is now a university policy that this information is included in the unit guides distributed to students at the beginning of the semester. Further reminders are recommended from around mid-semester in preparation for the survey period in Weeks 9–13.

Though there is considerable research across the sector that indicates that student survey response rates are declining and that participants are becoming more disengaged with surveys, the contention of this paper is that a properly implemented strategy to get the key stakeholders (students and staff) engaged in the process results in response rates that are sufficiently high to be representative of the student cohort (e.g. Coates 2006). This case also demonstrates the power of staff 'buy in' which was achieved through a number of strategies such as the dean acknowledging excellent performing units by sending personalised letters and by the staff demonstrating to students that their opinions are valued and will be acted upon.

This paper, reports on the impact on response rates of a communication plan implemented in a faculty at Monash University which nominated to use web-based student surveys to evaluate units. It is clearly demonstrated that a well conceived and implemented communication plan can substantially improve survey response rates. While many of the communication strategies discussed in the paper may work for

other methods of survey administration, it is recommended that customised communication plans be developed to cater for the nominated mode of data collection. For example, with distance education units there is no opportunity for face-to-face communication of the teaching staff with students so a range of other forms of engagement need to be explored. Another barrier to achieving acceptable response rates can also be experienced in faculties where there is staff and/or student resistance to engage in the process of collecting feedback for change. In this case, communication strategies need to initially address the culture within the faculty and focus on persuasive communication strategies if survey administration is to be effective.

## Notes on contributors

Lorraine Bennett is acting director of the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) at Monash University Australia. She is building an international reputation in leadership of learning and teaching and change management in the university sector. She recently received a second Australian Learning and Teaching Council leadership programme grant to advance an Engaging Leadership Framework which is based on her work at Monash in quality improvement. She regularly consults, presents and publishes on issues in learning and teaching and is active at state and national levels in academic development and quality arenas.

Chenicheri Sid Nair is an associate professor at Monash University, Australia. He is currently quality adviser (Research and Evaluation) and interim director in the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ) at Monash University, Australia. He has an extensive expertise in the area of quality development and evaluation, and he also has considerable editorial experience. Until December 2006, he was also managing editor of the *Electronic Journal of Science Education* (EJSE), and is a member of the Outstanding Paper Committee of the National Association of Research in Science Teaching. He is also an international consultant in a number of countries establishing quality centres, such as Oman and India. He is also involved in a project to implement effective student evaluations across Indian universities.

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