

Embedding a robust evaluative culture through policy review

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Abstract

A critical element of embedding a robust evaluative culture in the university environment is a thorough review of student evaluation policies and processes. The University of Tasmania is currently undergoing a full review of its student evaluation policy, procedure and processes. The review process has been framed by the work of Gill and Saunders (1992) and Duck and Hamilton (2008). Findings thus far have identified gaps and similarities in student evaluation policy provisions both internally and nationally. The review process has also identified the importance of aligning internal student evaluation policies with the external public policy environment which is rapidly changing the way student evaluation is now approached in the higher education sector.

Key words: Benchmarking; evaluative culture; policy, review; student evaluation

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Student evaluation in the University and public policy environment

A key component to embedding a robust evaluative culture within the university environment is engaging in a structured process of consultation and review of policies, procedures and processes pertaining to student evaluation at all levels of the institution. University policy must engage institutional staff and persuade them that the policy meets operational needs and is the best way to achieve the institution's objectives (Hatwell & Jensen 2009a). An important feature of the university policy review process is consultation. Consultation is primarily with staff and only secondarily with students and other stakeholders (Hatwell & Jensen 2009a). Several of the key features of university consultation in the policy review and development process include identifying and including all stakeholders; consulting by gathering people in workshops; including members of approving committees; keeping attendance records for the briefing paper; and consulting on a draft policy, and implementation and communication plan (Hatwell & Jensen 2009b).

A desktop benchmarking of 22 current Australian university student evaluation policies (Appendix A) has identified similarities and gaps in the policy provisions.

The policy provisions consistently identified include the administration of student evaluation; application process; approval process; analysis and reporting; anonymity of respondents; release of data; student/staff responsibilities; survey register; role of university support units; core and optional questions; use of feedback and reporting requirements. Four policy provisions that appear to be absent are: 1) an evaluation process for survey management; 2) the recognition of the student life cycle as the foundation of student evaluation; 3) online survey management and 4) a university wide communication strategy to increase response rates. These gaps are most likely due to inconsistency regarding the length of time between policy reviews (varies between 1-8 years). Of concern is that some universities have not reviewed their student evaluation policies in 3-7 years, whilst others have no clear review date or multiple review dates.

To support the inclusion of these new policy provisions in university student evaluation policy, the national and international higher education sector in student evaluation public policy has recently involved a systematic review and consultative process across a wide range of stakeholders. Public policy, in comparison to university policy, enacts the policy of an elected government and involves a consultative process which engages stakeholders both across and outside of government agencies (Hatwell & Jensen 2009). The changes in student evaluation policy across the higher education sector reflect the changing uses of student evaluation and assessment data. Some of these uses now include improving teaching quality; improving the student experience; informing rewards and awards; informing performance management; quality assurance and improvement purposes; performance funding purposes and other regulatory initiatives.

The key driver for these changes in student evaluation policies is the importance of measuring the quality of the student experience, and learning outcomes for quality and funding purposes. The UK has had an extensive review and consultation on the National Student Survey (NSS) before implementing this public policy initiative in 2005. The NSS is an annual census of undergraduates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and some institutions in Scotland. The survey is commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of the funding bodies. In response, UK universities are beginning to change their student evaluation practices to include a communication strategy to increase student response rates (Mahoney 2009). The release of the Lord Browne's Report (2010) has also put the focus on the quality of teaching so that students are provided with informed choices in their quality of education.

Similarly in Australia, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) commissioned a Consortium led by the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER), including the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) and Griffith Institute for Higher Education to develop an instrument and methodology for a new national survey of the experience of university students, the University Experience Survey (UES). The establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA); the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) and the restructure of the higher education government agency into the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE) have these agencies developing a more coordinated national approach towards the measurement of the student experience.

The Advancing Quality in Higher Education (AQHE) Reference Group has also led the Australian public policy consultation process with universities, students and

businesses on a suite of performance measurement instruments that include the UES; the Australian version of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) and the Review of the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS). Some of the common issues to come out of these discussion papers and consultative groups have included:

- The need for an agreed method of assessing the benefits of higher education;
- Whether to collect sample or census data;
- That transparency informs student choice;
- That many other performance measures from other perspectives are required

University of Tasmania (UTAS) evaluation policy review and development

UTAS is currently undertaking a review of its policy, procedure and processes in the Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning system (SETLs). A full review had not been undertaken since 2007. The review has been approved through the University's Learning and Teaching (L&T) Evaluation Sub-Committee, based on a recommendation made in the internal Strategic Review of Surveys Report (2011). A SETL Review Working Party has been established with key stakeholders in learning and teaching, including a student representative, to lead the review across the institution over a four month period from March to June, 2012.

A further recommendation to come out of the Strategic Review of Surveys Report (2011) was the development of an institutional wide Survey Policy. Included within this recommendation was the establishment of a Surveys Working Party to ensure that the use of surveys had a strategic, coordinated approach across the university environment. Findings from the desktop benchmarking of a large number of Australian universities' current student evaluation policies (Appendix A) were that the universities of Edith Cowan, Monash and Canberra had a separate Survey Policy as well as a Student Evaluation Policy. The UTAS Survey Policy Working Party consulted with the L&T Evaluation Sub-Committee on the inclusion of these new policy provisions that were identified during the policy development phase which involved the alignment of national and internal survey policies. The new policy provisions identified in the draft Survey Policy include:

- Recognition of the student life cycle for both internal and external surveys;
- A survey management approach to survey design, which includes an error approach;
- An institutional communication strategy for increasing response rates for both internal and external surveys (particularly in an increasingly online environment);
- Institutional leadership to increase response rates; and
- A survey register.

This paper will now discuss the methodological approach used to frame the UTAS SETL review process and the initial findings from this institutional review of student evaluation policy.

Methodological approach

The methodological approach used to frame the UTAS SETL policy review was adapted from the work of Gill and Saunders (1992) and Duck and Hamilton (2008). Table 1 was adapted from both these works and captures the key elements used to frame the review of the UTAS SETL Policy and Procedure.

Phase 1: Policy review - An iterative process

The first phase of the policy review included an iterative process with the SETL Review Working Party identifying key concerns in student evaluation at UTAS. Some of the concerns were:

- There had been no review of the structure and content of Unit and Teaching SETL questionnaires since 2003;
- The number of Honours and Postgraduate (Coursework) SETL Evaluations ordered from 2008-2011 was critically low, with only 5 and 2 in 2011;
- The number of Teaching and Unit SETL Evaluations that were ordered, but not administered and/or returned was high;

Table 1: Policy analysis tools (Adapted from Duck & Hamilton 2008; Gill & Saunders 1992)

Policy Analysis Tools		
<i>Iterative Processes</i>	<i>Intuition and Judgement</i>	<i>Advice and Opinion</i>
Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Policy Review	Identify and Evaluate Policy Development	Policy Framework Development Review, Evaluate, Refine
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature Review- Research Papers • Benchmarking of Student Evaluation Policies • Surveys • Stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation Activities • Proposed Recommendations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process Template • Strategies and Advice • Evaluation Techniques
Identify		Output Policy Development Guidelines
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues • Assumptions • Anticipated Objectives • Time and Resources • Evaluation Criteria 	<div style="border: 2px solid #0056b3; padding: 10px; background-color: #e6f2ff;"> <p><i>Embedding an Evaluation Culture through Policy Review</i></p> </div>	
Internal Environment		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational Culture • Organisational Structure • Strategy 		
External Environment		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current public policy and practice 		

- SETL Evaluations are only administered during the final three weeks of each semester;
- Performance management is not mandatory for casual/sessional teaching staff, fixed-term staff with a contract of less than 12 months or part-time teaching staff, all of which are also required to undertake mandatory Teaching SETL Evaluations;
- The number of Unit SETL Evaluations that did not reach a statistically valid response rate (>40%) from 2007-2011 was high;
- The average response rate for students completing online SETL evaluations in 2011 was 12.8% (Semester 1) and 15.3% (Semester 2).

Subsequent to the identification of these concerns, the SETL Review Working Party commissioned three research papers to inform their decision making process. These research papers were:

1. SETL Review Consultation Paper;
2. Current Policy and Practices in Student Evaluation; and
3. Review of Online SETL.

These papers were instrumental in informing the SETL Review Working Party about key recommendations that will be released for consultation within the UTAS community, including a Student Feedback Survey at the end of May to early June, 2012. A summary of the key themes that emerged from these papers is provided below.

- *Traditional paper-based student evaluation vs. online evaluation.* Paper-based evaluation is seen as problematic in terms of costs (Donovan, Mader and Shinsky 2007; Miller 1987), time management (Kronholm et al. 1999), delays in providing feedback to the faculty (Layne, DeCristoforo and McGinty 1999), occupation of large quantities of storage space (Donmeyer et al. 2004), and unsustainability in terms of the environment (Anderson, McCain and Bird 2005).
- *Many universities are moving away from the traditional paper-based surveys towards online survey implementation.* The increasing use of online-based surveys has been documented in many studies (for example, in the USA 45% of universities are engaged in online-based surveys (Hoffman 2003). The changing trends from face-to-face to online surveys may be explained by the behavioural changes in current students known as 'generation Y' (Morton 2002). Online student evaluations are also increasingly used in evaluation practices in universities across Australia (Appendix B). A review of their practices suggests that different strategies have been used in online student evaluation to increase response rates. Table 2 below provides a summary of the literature on strategies for enhancing online survey response rates.
- *The increasing use of online surveys in university teaching and learning evaluation systems (Donmeyer et al. 2004; Seal & Przasnyski 2001) has the capacity to influence university quality assurance.* The application of online survey evaluation methods, where the design, delivery and management of the survey was undertaken in the online discourse, 'bypass many of the bottlenecks in the evaluation system' (Watt et al. 2002).

- *Online evaluation surveys have greater flexibility and can be completed outside of class time.* The implementation of online student evaluation surveys saves valuable time without compromising teaching (Bennett & Nair 2011; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Sorenson & Reiner 2003). Similarly, an online evaluation system may save administrators time associated with workload in survey design and delivery, data collection, input and analysis (Andrews et al. 2003; Llieva, Baron and Healey 2002; Donovan, Mader and Shinsky 2007; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Kronholm et al. 1999). Online evaluations represent real-time reporting on results (Donovan, Mader and Shinsky 2007; Kuhtman 2004). Surveys can also be administered more frequently (Ardalan et al. 2007), allowing the results to be used to modify teaching and course while the course is still in progress (Hmieleski & Champagne 2000).
- *High response rates depend upon the extent of students' engagement in the evaluation process (Coates 2006).* A number of factors may affect the engagement of students, such as survey design, timing, privacy and confidentiality, communication methods, types of incentives, policy and technical support. It is more likely that the greater the number of strategies employed, the more students will be engaged, and consequently, the higher the response rate (Nulty 2008). In particular, communication methods and providing incentives were considered the most successful strategies for increasing online response rates.
- *Planning and the implementation of a comprehensive communication strategy (Bennett & Nair 2010).* Research suggests that more effort is needed in planning and implementing a comprehensive communication strategy designed to ensure high response rates (Table 2).

Table 2: Review of online survey strategies to increase response rates

Factors	Strategies suggested to increase response rate
Survey design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make research topics interesting and engaging (Gaiser & Schreiner 2009); • Avoid fragmented and varied questionnaires (Witmer et al. 1999); • Format responses in a way that makes it easy for participants to complete (Gaiser & Schreiner 2009); • Keep survey instruments brief (Gaiser & Schreiner 2009; Quinn 2002); • Keep questions short and easy to answer (Gaiser & Schreiner 2009). • Involve students in the choice of optional questions (Quinn 2002).
Survey timing, period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A few weeks before the final exam (Dommeyer et al. 2004); • Available to students for three weeks (Perrett 2011); • Open for one month during the request period (Crews & Curtis 2011); • Extend the duration of a survey's availability (Quinn 2002).
Privacy and confidentiality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a set of access codes for the web site survey and randomly distribute the access codes (Dommeyer et al. 2004); • Assure students of the anonymity of their responses (Quinn 2002).
Multiple communication methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Push the survey (Quinn 2002); • Reminder emails employed at the central level (Bennett & Nair 2010); • Pre-notification message (Krishnamurthy 2004; Gaiser & Schreiner 2009); • Repeat reminder emails to non-respondents (Nulty 2008); • In-class demonstration on how the evaluations are used (Anderson, Cain and Bird 2005; Dommeyer et al. 2004); • 'Closing the loop' (Leckey & Neil 2001); • Students need to be convinced that change has occurred based on their feedback (Harvey 2003); • Contacting non-respondents by telephone between two and three weeks

	<p>after the survey has been posted (Nair 2008);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about the purposes and the subsequent use of evaluations needs to be provided in the quality process (Bennett & Nair 2010); • Online system can be programmed to send reminder notices to those students who have not yet responded to the survey (Crawford et al. 2001; Ha & Marsh 1998; Ha et al. 1998; Ku 2003). • Educating students on the evaluation process (Murphy 2004).
Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of enticements to elicit greater interest (Coates et al. 2006; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Porter 2004); • Modest grade increase (Dommeyer et al. 2004); Extra credit (Murphy 2004) • Prizes for respondents awarded through a lottery (Nulty 2008), such as a gift certificate, an iPod, or a memory stick (Gaiser & Schreiner 2009); • Generating a 'proof of completion' certificate (Dommeyer et al. 2004).
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counting the evaluation as an assignment (Anderson, Cain and Bird 2005); • Withholding early access to grades (Anderson, Cain and Bird 2005; Murphy 2004); • Practice of requiring students to complete surveys before they can get access to online registration of new courses or obtain other information from the institution's web pages (Coates et a. 2006; Dommeyer et al. 2004; Porter 2004); • Note the importance of course evaluations (Crews & Curtis 2011); • Provide formative evaluations throughout the course (Crews & Curtis 2011).
Technical support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving students' computer literacy; • Reliable internet connections; • Updated browsers; • Accessibility to computers at convenient times for the students (Dommeyer et al. 2004; Cummings et al. 2001; Ravelli 2000; Sorenson & Reiner 2003); • Familiarise students with online environments by using online teaching aids/methods (Quinn 2002; Richardson 2005).

The iterative process of the policy review during Phase 1 is currently being completed. Two key recommendations have already been identified during this phase. Firstly, there was a need for more financial resources to update the current student online evaluation system at UTAS. A recommendation was put forward to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students & Education) that a budget proposal be put forward for the development of an online student survey portal. A desktop review of Australian universities showed that a majority are moving away from a survey system to an online student portal (Appendix C). This pattern reflects the need for Australian universities to be more transparent, not unlike their UK counterparts, with students and staff being able to see the results of how student feedback is addressed and actioned. The second recommendation was more organisational in nature in that there was a need to link the SETL process with the newly developed Student Evaluation, Review and Reporting Unit (SERRU). External and internal student surveys need a common approach to survey implementation, management and analysis as well as a university-wide communication process.

Phase 2 & 3: Policy review

The next stages of the policy review include a planned consultation with key stakeholders across the university (end of May-early June, 2012) and consultation with key university committees. Recommendations for action will be made during the 2nd Phase of the review process after consultation has been completed. Finally,

the third phase of the policy review phase will include the implementation of the revised SETL Policy and Procedure and the Survey Policy across the university.

Conclusion

Student evaluation can be rigorously embedded within the university environment when there is a comprehensive review of student evaluation policies to ensure policy and practice are aligned. The methodological approach used to frame the UTAS SETL policy review (Duck & Hamilton 2008; Gill & Saunders 1992) has been instrumental in realigning student evaluation policy and practice with the external and internal environments. A recommendation from Duck and Hamilton (2008) sums up the process:

‘Policy review should be an iterative process providing multiple opportunities for reflection, piloting changes and evaluation.’

On reflection, the UTAS SETL review process has identified another key dimension to the work of Gill & Saunders (1992) and Duck and Hamilton (2008) which is the *importance of aligning internal policy with the external environment (i.e. current public policy and practice (refer to Table 1).*

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APPENDIX A – Table 1: Benchmarking national student evaluation policies

Table 1: Benchmarking of Australian Student Evaluation Policies

Universities	Name of Policy/Policies	Approval (A)/Review Date (R)
Australian Catholic University	Policy on Evaluation of Learning and Teaching Policy on Unit Evaluation	A: 2008 R: Dec 2011 A: Dec, 2011
Australian National University (ANU)	Student Feedback on Teaching and Learning Guideline: Student Surveys on Teaching and Learning	A: 18 Aug, 2010 R: 19 Aug, 2012 A: 18 Aug, 2010 R: 19 Aug, 2012
Central Queensland University	Student Evaluation of Courses Policy Teaching Evaluation Policy and Procedures	A: 14 Feb, 2001 R: 14 Oct, 2013
Charles Sturt University	Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching	A: 2 June, 2004 & 1 Sept, 2004
Curtin University of Technology	Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning Policy	A: 1 Jul, 2008 R: 27 Jul, 2009
Edith Cowan University (ECU)	Student Evaluation of Units and Teaching Policy UTEI Administration Guidelines Survey Policy Survey Guidelines	A: 9 Oct, 2007 R: Dec, 2013 A: 20 Feb, 2009 R: Feb, 2012
Flinders University	Policy on Evaluation of Teaching Policy on Course and Topic Evaluation, Monitoring and Review	A: 25 Oct, 2001 R: April, 2003 A: 1991 R: Sept, 2005
Griffith University	Student Evaluation of Course (SEC) and Teaching (SET)	A: 14 Apr, 2011 R: July, 2012
	Student Evaluation of Course (SEC) and Teaching (SET)	A: 14 Apr, 2011 R: July, 2012
La Trobe University	Surveys Policy Electronic Surveys Software Procedure	A: Oct, 2009 R: Oct, 2011 A: Oct, 2009 R: Oct, 2011
Macquarie University	Student Feedback on Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Policy	A: 1 Jun, 2010 R: Mar, 2013
Melbourne University	Surveys Policy	A: 7 Jul, 2008
Monash University	Student Evaluation Policy Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU) Procedures University Student Survey Policy University Student Survey Procedures	Policy only: A: 12 Oct, 2011 R: 12 Oct, 2014 Policy only: A: 22 Apr, 2010 R: 28 Dec, 2010
QUT	Evaluation of courses, units, teaching and student experience	Under Review
RMIT	Student Feedback Policy	Not available
University of Canberra	University Survey Policy and Procedure Survey Register	Not available
University of Queensland	Course and Teacher Surveys Student Survey Framework -Guidelines	A: 16 Jun, 2011 R: 21 Oct, 2013
University of Sunshine Coast (USC)	Student Evaluation of Teaching and Courses (SETAC)-Academic Policy	A: 4 Oct, 2011 R: 1 Jan, 2017
University of Southern Queensland	Evaluation of Teaching, Courses and Programs	A: 1 April, 2009 R: 1 April, 2011
University of Technology Sydney (UTS)	Student Feedback Survey Vice-Chancellor's Directive	A: 24 Dec, 2009 R: 24, Dec, 2014
University of Tasmania (UTAS)	SETL Policy SETL Procedure	R: April, 2010; April 2014 R: Mar, 2011; Mar, 2014
University of Western Sydney	Student Feedback on Units and Teaching Survey Policy, Procedures, Guidelines	R: 1 Jun, 2006
Victoria University	Student Evaluation Survey (SES)	A: 9 July, 2007

APPENDIX B – Table 2: Comparison of student evaluation delivery methods in Australian universities

Table 2: Comparison of student evaluation delivery methods and response rates in Australian universities

Institution	Survey Instrument	Frequency	Delivery	Online Survey Response rate
Australian National University (ANU)	Student Experience of Learning Support (SELS) measures unit	Each unit is required to undertake both an SELS and SET every second offering	Online	Not available
	Student Experience of Teaching (SET) teaching evaluation instrument can be selected according to primary mode of teaching		Online	
Bond University	Electronic Teaching Evaluations (eTEVALS)	-	Online	85%
Charles Sturt University (CSU)	Online Evaluation of Subjects (OES) measures unit teaching items are included in optional item bank	Every offering	Online	21.52% 2010 20.83% 2009
Curtin University of Technology	eVALUate unit survey	Automatically every offering	Online	45% 2008 22% 2005
	eVALUate teaching survey	As requested*	Online	
Deakin University	Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU)	Every offering	Online	41% Trimester 1, 2011 42% Trimester 1, 2010
Edith Cowan University (ECU)	Unit Teaching and Evaluation Instrument (UTEI)	All units and their teaching staff every offering	Online Central Online by School Paper-based by School (by exception)	45% 2011
Flinders University	Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) measures both unit and teaching within the unit (lecturers and tutors)	Every 2 years	Online	33% 2009
Griffith University	Student Evaluation of Courses (SEC)	Every offering	Online	-
	Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET)	Every 2 years OR every second time they teach the unit (whichever is sooner)	Online	

Monash University	Student Evaluation of Teaching and Units (SETU)	Annually	Online	42.8%
Murdoch University	Surveys of Units Surveys of Teaching	Every 2 years	Online	47% 2005
University of Tasmania (UTAS)	Unit SETL Evaluation Teaching SETL Evaluation	Every 3 rd offering (or every 2 nd offering for alternate year units) Every 2 years	Paper-based OR online Paper-based OR online	14.3% 2011 16.7% 2010 (Sem2)
University of Western Australia (UWA)	Students' Unit Reflective Feedback (SURF) Student Perceptions of Teaching (SPOT)	Every offering As requested*	Online Paper-based (Online is on trial)	50%

APPENDIX C – Online student portals

Online Student Survey Portal:

Institution	Name of System	Website
Curtin University of Technology	eVALUate	http://evaluate.curtin.edu.au/

Online Student Portals:

Institution	Name of System	Website
Australian National University (ANU)	Wattle*	https://wattle.anu.edu.au/
Bond University	Student Portal	http://www.bondstudents.com/
Charles Sturt University (CSU)	my.csu student portal	http://www.csu.edu.au/division/dit/services/service-catalogue/for-students/access-and-logins/student-portal.htm
Curtin University of Technology	Oasis*	http://hr.curtin.edu.au/oasis.cfm
Edith Cowan University (ECU)	Student Portal	http://www.ecu.edu.au/web-portals/student-portal
Flinders University	Flinders Learning Online (FLO)	https://flo.flinders.edu.au/
Griffith University	Griffith Portal	http://www.griffith.edu.au/griffith-portal-support
Monash University	my.monash portal	http://monash.edu/portal/
RMIT University	MyRMIT**	http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/Current%20students%2FStudent%20services%2FIT%20services%2FAbout%20myRMIT/
Sydney University	MyUni*	http://sydney.edu.au/current_students/student_administration/index.shtml
University of South Australia (UniSA)	MyUniSA	http://w3.unisa.edu.au/sas/systems/myunisastudent/default.asp
University of Western Australia (UWA)	Student portal	http://www.extension.uwa.edu.au/page/65
University of Western Sydney	My UWS Student Portal	http://corpapps.uws.edu.au/media/eupdate/view.phtml?a_id=2358&catcode=it
Victoria University	MyVU*	https://login.vu.edu.au/cas/login?service=http://myvuportal.vu.edu.au/uPortal/Login?enableDefaultRole

* indicates a Student Portal where student surveys are also administered.

** does not appear to currently include student surveys, but good layout of site.