Student evaluations of teaching: The students' perspective

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Abstract

Consultation with all stakeholders is required to embed an evaluation culture effectively within an education institution. One of the groups deeply involved in any institutions evaluation process, but routinely overlooked during such consultations and discussions are the students. Even the evaluation literature is limited on this subject.

Evaluations are implemented at most tertiary institutions as part of performance appraisal and promotion processes. Therefore, there is an added imperative that we understand students' views and perceptions around evaluation processes. At a New Zealand University a teaching initiative has been developed which enables students' to gain insight into the complex world of performance appraisal. They do so by designing an instrument which allows them to conduct a performance appraisal of their lecturer. One of the outputs of this teaching initiative is a reflection by students on their views of evaluation as part of performance appraisal processes in universities.

Unlike previous studies around student perceptions, this paper uses a thematic analysis of students' reflective comments to show that the students value evaluation as an important process, predominantly for the development of the paper and the teacher. However, the students have noted that in terms of performance appraisal processes there is very little evidence of follow-up processes, or feedback to students, by faculty and the institution.

Key words: Student feedback; evaluation; performance appraisal

Introduction

The context for this paper is a teaching initiative in a third year undergraduate Human Resource Management (HRM) course at a New Zealand university. As a rule, this course is the students' first introduction to studying HRM in a tertiary institution. The students come from a variety of backgrounds, some with HR experience and others as novices. Our initiative enables students' to gain insight into some of the underlying complexities of performance appraisal and the use of surveys to collect information around performance. Over a number of classes, our

students develop and refine an instrument, which they use to evaluate the effectiveness of their lecturer. We share the data that they generate, model appropriate feedback mechanisms and invite in class discussions regarding all aspects of the development of the survey and performance appraisal.

Using an action research methodology, we developed this initiative over a number of iterations of the paper. At the end of each iteration we asked the students to undertake a reflective piece of work on the use of evaluation as part of the performance appraisal process within their institution. While this assessment was reflective in nature we used a semi-structured approach to provide a guide. The questions are as follows:

- What are your views of the current university evaluation system?

- How important are student evaluations?

- What should happen to the evaluation data (who should see the evaluation data? How should the data be used? What decisions should be based on it?)

This paper looks at the student's responses to our questions, to determine their views and perspectives on evaluation as part of performance appraisal processes at their university. This data is supported by relevant literature around student perceptions of evaluation. The method and methodology for collection and analysis of the data are outlined, followed by a discussion of the findings in terms of the literature.

Literature review

The focus of this paper is on the use of student evaluation for performance appraisal. That is, the impact of student feedback on teacher performance. Human Resource Management has a number of different approaches to performance appraisal. Hegar (2012) provides an example of a process focussed approach where the performance appraisal cycle has minimum energy dedicated to the feedback discussion process. However work by Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) is indicative of an interpersonal approach to performance appraisal and highlights "aspects such as skills, motivation and loyalty of employees and business partners". Work by Cox et al. (2011) is also consistent with this position as they found that feedback is central to both individual and organisational performance, while Kaymaz's (2011:131) findings suggest that such an approach is more likely to "improve the productivity of personal".

At most tertiary institutions performance appraisal and promotion processes include evidence provided by student evaluations of teaching. Therefore, there is an added imperative that we understand students' views and perceptions around evaluation processes .While there is a plethora of literature concerning student evaluation of teaching (SET) much of it is concerned with the validity of student ratings (McKeachie, 1997; Theall & Franklin, 2001), the reliability of the survey instruments (Apollonia & Abrami, 1997; Marsh, 1984); and response rates (Dommeyer et al, 2004; Nulty, 2007). There is also quite a range of literature on staff perceptions. Indeed, Stein et al's. recent study (Stein et al., 2012) across three New Zealand institutions found that academic staff perceive that students are not engaged with evaluation processes. However, there is very little published work which relates to student views and perceptions of evaluation. A brief review of some of the published work that uncovers student thoughts and perceptions around student evaluation of teaching is presented below.

Martinson & Ryan's (1981) research surveyed Journalism students regarding their role in the evaluation process. Half of the students who were enrolled (144 respondents in total) completed the survey. In terms of the evaluation process itself, the findings from the survey suggest that students take evaluations seriously and that they try to be fair in their responses. Indeed, the students were very clear that they did not give good evaluations to popular teachers, or to those who entertained them during class. Nor did they give good evaluations to easy graders. These findings are also supported by a more recent study by Spencer & Schmelkin (2002).

The students in the Martinson and Ryan (1981) study believed that teachers did not use evaluations to improve their teaching. The students also believed that faculty did not pay attention to the results of the evaluations. The students also expressed concern with the evaluation instrument, its validity and timing. Interestingly, Martinson and Ryan did not allow students to make comments. Consequently they were not able to explain their views.

Marlin's (1987) study built on the work of Martinson & Ryan (1981). Marlin conducted a survey with Economics students at two institutions to explore their perceptions of evaluation. His findings mirrored those of Martinson & Ryan (1981) above, but he also asked for student comment and sought information from the chairpersons of each Department. In most cases, the students thought evaluation was worthwhile, with the majority of their comments reflecting this viewpoint. Some interesting differences were noted regarding the instrument, namely that students felt there should be more room for comments, and the surveys did not reflect what the students wanted to say (for a discussion regarding sharing power with students see Twiname and Harris 2012). In the students' view, the timing of evaluations did not allow the students to benefit from, or observe, changes as a consequence of their feedback. Further, students did not observe faculty engaging with the evaluation data. In contrast to the students' responses, the Chairpersons' response showed that the majority of chairpersons did read the students' comments, and that the results from the evaluations were primarily used by administrators for promotion and tenure processes.

Chen & Hoshower's (1998) research provides a different perspective on student perceptions of evaluation. Using expectancy theory, they were able to determine students' intrinsic motivations for completing evaluation forms. Their data generated from 208 students responses showed that students completed evaluation forms to improve teaching; they were not concerned with professional tenure, promotion or salary increases. However, their research also highlighted that students' need to (1) know how their feedback was going to be used and (2) to see that their feedback is acted upon.

A study by Ravelli (2000) used an online survey tool to research students and staff perceptions of evaluation. While the survey tool was open throughout the semester, the number of responses made by students dropped as the semester progressed. Through focus groups for students and faculty respectively, it was found that students would not complete an evaluation if a teacher was doing well. Conversely, the faculty equated good teaching with the number of responses made by students.

Ravelli (2000) produced some interesting findings around student views of evaluation, which supported the work of Chen & Hoshower (1998). Ravelli found that the students appreciate being able to comment on a class when still in it. Students seemed to equate early evaluations with teachers wanting to improve their teaching. In some cases the students were also able to see the benefits of their

feedback. The use of student feedback to improve teaching generated further discussions, where students became part of the teaching and learning process.

Brown's (2008) research is consistent with that of Ravelli (2000). Brown showed that students believed that a teacher who uses Mid Semester Evaluations (MSEs) "has clear teaching goals, is committed to teaching, is fulfilling his responsibility and has a desire to see students succeed". Brown's work (2008) also showed that students who completed the MSEs were more positively disposed towards the official student evaluations run at the end of the semester.

In the next section we will outline the methods used for data collection and analysis.

Method

This paper discusses part of an action research initiative, which explores the role of performance appraisal in HRM processes. During the course of this initiative the students were asked (in their role as HR managers) to design an evaluation instrument that would be used to collect data for a performance appraisal of their lecturer. This included (1) identifying the main characteristics of good teaching which enabled them to learn and (2) the development of questions and appropriate scales that would allow them to measure how well their teacher had achieved these characteristics.

At the end of the initiative, the students were asked to reflect on the current university evaluation system and its role in performance appraisal. A number of questions were provided as a guide:

1. What are your views of the current university evaluation system?

2. How important are student evaluations?

3. What should happen to the evaluation data (who should see the evaluation data? How should the data be used? What decisions should be based on it?)

This piece of work produced a large number of comments from the students. Overall, 59 students submitted reflective pieces. For questions, 1 and 2 the main themes from the students' comments were identified using a thematic analysis. For question 3, the data analysis identified the 'who' or 'what' the students thought were the most crucial elements in the follow up processes to ensure appropriate use of the evaluation data. Once the relevant themes were identified, the comments associated with each theme were counted and recorded. The data from the thematic analysis are presented in the next section.

Findings

This section looks at the findings from the thematic analysis. For ease of access to the data, the findings have been presented under each of the questions asked.

What are your views of the current university evaluation system?

Table 1 below outlines the thematic analysis of the students' comments to the above question. From the 59 students there were 184 comments that were coded into themes. It was evident, quite early during the coding process, that there were

three predominant themes emerging from the comments. The first theme is composed of those comments which were positive or provided affirmation of the current university evaluation system, the second theme is composed of negative views and the third theme is composed of those comments that do not fall clearly into the two previous themes.

44.6% of the students' responses to this question are quite clearly positive regarding the evaluations process. Primarily, students value student evaluation for its capacity to improve teaching and the paper (25.5%); for communication between teacher and student (13.6%); and for the benefits to the students (5.4%).

Alternatively, 35.3% of students take the negative view of the current university evaluation system. The main reasons cited for these negative views include questions regarding: the Validity of the instrument (20.1%); students are unaware of the implications of the performance appraisal process (8.2%); and that it is an ineffective process (7.1%) in their view.

The third theme (10.3%) provided by the students', looks not so much at the pros and cons of the evaluations process, but to possible improvements. These included possible discipline specific questionnaires, and student involvement in the design of the evaluation. Finally, a small percentage of students (9.8%) provided comments that were difficult to code to a theme.

Table 1: *Coding for the question: What are your views of the current university evaluation system?*
Total number of responses to this question = 59 Total comments coded = 184

Theme codes for Qu 1		Total Count	Total %
1. Positive/affirmation of the University evaluation system		**82**	**44.6**
1a. Improvement in paper and teaching/quality	Personal development of teachers .Improve learning experience/paper. Maintaining quality /performance of teachers. The use of evaluation means performance is measurable. User friendly evaluation , concise, consistent. Evaluations are an important tool	47	25.5
1b. Communication	Two- way communication with students/teachers. Provides student perceptions of lecturers. Allows constructive criticisms/praise of teachers. Evaluations gives timely and effective feedback. Student voice/feedback	25	13.6
1c. Benefits to students	Benefit to future students. Allows students to comment on their education. Students constantly see teaching staff so are able to make judgements. Retention/students at risk. Anonymity	10	5.4
2. Negative views of the University evaluation system		**65**	**35.3**
2a. Validity of evaluations	Students rushing feedback/not spending time/extra work/high workloads/recency effects. Timing of evaluations/attendance at final lectures. Ability of students to comment/ students making judgements on their learning & skills of teachers. Personality of students and teachers/likes/ dislikes. Limitations to the questions that can be asked/use of appropriate scales.	37	20.1
2b. Unaware of the wider implications of the evaluations process	Implications of use of evaluation/ unaware of importance of evaluation. Reputation of Uni at stake if teaching poor. Used for promotion/career enhancement. Effects of negative comments on teachers will hinder development. Lack of formal mechanism for professional development or paper refinement	15	8.2
2c. Ineffective process	Evaluations are ineffective for teaching and learning. Class reps are ineffective, because students will not raise concerns. Teaching not valued. Lack of personal benefit to the students	13	7.1
3. Possible improvements		**19**	**10.3**
3. Possible improvements	Specific to classes/discipline. Student involvement with question development/ownership. Other forms of evaluation e.g focus groups. Online evaluations would be more effective. Education of students around evaluation. More qualitative questions to give reasons. Conduct evaluation earlier/mid semester	19	10.3
4. Not coded to a theme		**18**	9.8
4a. General comments	Referred to the running of system	9	4.9
4b. No comments made to this question	Referred to generalised evaluation systems	9	4.9

How important are student evaluations?

Table 2 provides the thematic analysis data for responses to the question 'How important are student evaluations?' For this question there were 189 comments coded from the 59 students. From the comments, there are two main themes evident in the data. It is clear to see that the themes tend to be very similar to those outlined in response to Question 1. What is interesting to note here is that the sub-themes identified are subtlety different. The two main themes are *Reasons why evaluations are important* which make up 65% of the comments, and *Reasons why evaluations are not important*, which correspond to only 25.9 % of the comments. The remaining themes cover general comments around evaluations and those comments that could not be adequately coded.

In comparison with the findings from question 1, Theme 1, the two top sub-themes are very similar, but the distribution of comments has moved slightly giving a much larger percentage of the comments to *Improvement in paper and teaching* (31.2%) and *Communication* (16.4%). We now have the emergence of two further sub-themes namely *Quality/consumerism* (14.8%) and *HRM processes* (2.6%).

In terms of Theme 2, while the number of comments related to this theme is much smaller, we also have a consolidation around what the students perceive to be the limitations of the evaluations process. We now see specific comments around the *limitations of the system*, *the instrument* and *validity*.

What should happen to the evaluation data (e.g. who should see it? What decisions should be based on it?)

The results of the data analysis from this question are outlined in Table 3. From the 59 students, 208 comments were coded for this question. What is quite clear is that for the three sub-questions presented to the students more comments were made regarding *Who should see the data* (52.7%), while *What use should be made of the data* (30.5%) and *What should be done with the data* (14.3%) both have quite significantly lower numbers of comments.

In terms of *Who should see the data?* the largest number of comments suggested that the Lecturers should see the evaluation data (22.7%), while 13.8% of the comments suggested that the evaluation data should also be reported to Chairpersons. What is interesting to note here is that only 3.9% of the comments suggested that evaluation data should be reported to students.

For the sub-question *What use should be made of the data?* the number of student comments identified 'To develop the paper/teacher' (11.8%), and 'To plan and support teaching' (8.4%) as the two main uses of evaluation data. Again, it is interesting to note that 'For students to decide whether to take a paper' was the use of evaluation data that received the lowest number of student comments.

What should be done with the data?, this sub-question was concerned with the types of reports that should be generated using evaluation data. The numbers of student comments concerning this question are very low. However, the majority of the comments were for 'Summary reports of evaluation data by department/ schools or degree' (4.4%). The lowest number of comments concerned 'Reports to individuals', Comparisons with academic results of students' and 'Follow up process to address issues', all with 1.5% of the students' comments.

Table 2. *Coding for the question: How important are student evaluations?*
Total number of responses to this question = 59 Total comments coded = 189

Theme codes for Qu 2		Total Count	Total %
1. Reasons why student evaluations are important		**123**	**65.1**
1a. Improvement in paper and teaching	Influencing/Development of paper/teacher. Shape overall structure of the paper. Improve quality of instruction. Summarises the course and teaching. Students as the other half of the teaching relationship, taken into account by organisation. Part of teaching and learning process. Students ability to determine good teaching. Student perceptions of teachers - lecturer effective. Students observe lecturer behaviour throughout paper. Benefit of future students. Evaluations cause change in teacher behaviours	59	31.2
1b. Communication	Feedback/communication from students/Engagement with students/two way process. Student voice/students have the right to give feedback. Only way for students to comment about paper/lecturer/tutor. Safe & anonymous. Feedback from students	31	16.4
1c. Quality/consumerism	Upholding of standards/quality - Staff accountable. Students as consumers/client and the reason for courses/service orientation. Competitive market place, UoW needs to improve competitive advantage. Important to find out student needs	28	14.8
1d. HRM processes	Use for promotion and career advancement	5	2.6
2. Reasons why student evaluations are not important		**49**	**25.9**
2a. Limitation of system	Timing/affected by changes from evaluation/Little power to change/improve paper. Understanding the questions/scales used. Lack of benefit to current students	21	11.1
2b. Validity of process	Subjectivity/personality can cause problems/ Halo effect/Personal attacks. Quality of feedback from students/Not taken seriously	18	9.5
2c. Limitations of instrument	Questions must measure relevant and specific attributes. Limitations of current evaluation instrument/more qualitative. Other measures of teaching effectiveness (including validity and bias)	5	2.6
2d. The institutions use of evaluation	Effect on Teaching and learning questionable. Not good for promotions. Comparisons between disciplines difficult	4	2.1
2d. Effects on teachers	reactions to receiving feedback/negative impact	1	0.5
3. General comments		**9**	**4.8**
3. General comments	More important in higher level papers- more thought given to learning than in 1st year. Education of students. Feedback in mid-semester. Didn't know how important they are	9	4.8
4. Not coded to a theme		**8**	**4.2**
4a. No comments made to this question	Referred to generalised evaluation systems	8	4.2

Table 3 *Coding for the question: What should happen to the evaluation data?*
(who should see it/what decisions should be based on it?)
Total number of responses to this question = 59 Total comments coded = 208

Theme codes for Qu 3	Total Count	Total %
1. Who should see the data?	**107**	**51.4**
1a. Lecturer	46	22.1
1b. Chairperson	28	13.5
1c. Students	8	3.8
1d. Evaluations administrator	7	3.4
1e. Deans	7	3.4
1f. HR	6	2.9
1g. Seen by all staff who have stake in paper	3	1.4
1h. All staff	2	1.0
2. How should the data be used?	**29**	**13.9**
2a. Summarised by dept/school or degree	9	4.3
2b. Comparison with other evaluation methods	6	2.9
2c. Self-reflection	4	1.9
2d. Compared to academic results of students	3	1.4
2e. Reported by individuals	3	1.4
2f. Follow up processes to address issues	3	1.4
2g. Reports flag good/bad areas	1	0.5
3. What decisions should be based on the data?	**62**	**29.8**
3a. To develop the paper/teacher	24	11.5
3b. To plan/support teaching	17	8.2
3c. To carry out job evaluations/promotion	14	6.7
3d. To maintain quality	4	1.9
3e. For students to decide whether to take a paper	3	1.4
4. Not coded to a theme	**5**	**2.4**
4a. No comments made to this question	5	2.4

Overall, the findings from this study show that the students have a generally
positive disposition to the evaluations process. The implications of the findings will
now be discussed.

Discussion

The work by Martinson & Ryan (1981), Marlin (1987) and Chen & Hoshower
(1998) all suggested that student's main motivation for completing evaluations was
for the development of the paper and the(ir) teacher. The findings reported in this
study, also support this view. Indeed, for questions 1 and 2 the largest number of
student comments were for this purpose. Question 2, which asks of the importance

of evaluations, prompted the largest number of student comment. Indeed, there was a wide range of comments made by the students under this sub-theme, but most focussed on the developmental aspects of evaluation, whether it was for the teacher, the paper or for future students.

Communication between students and teacher was raised in both questions 1 and 2, with the greatest number of comments occurring for Question 2 on the importance of evaluations. This finding is consistent with Ravelli (2000) and Brown (2008), who both suggested that the use of evaluation throughout the semester could increase discussion between the students and their teacher, but would also allow the students to have input into the teaching and learning experience.

The timing of evaluations is a factor that the students identified in both Questions 1 and 2. For them it was a problem if only end of semester evaluation systems were used. They also suggested that this issue of timing means that students very rarely see any change as a result of their feedback and that changes to teaching can only benefit future students. This finding is also consistent with those of Ravelli (2000), Brown (2008) and Marlin (1989).

Another reason that the students might consider their evaluations rarely affect change, is because of their lack of power to change or improve a paper, especially if staff do not engage with evaluation results. This is interesting especially if you compare these findings with those by Stein et al. (2012) who showed, that teachers have the perception that students are not engaged with evaluation processes.

While the work by Marlin (1987) suggests that administrators and Chairpersons do read the evaluation data, any follow up processes that are in place are not evident to the students. Indeed, in the research reported here, quite a few students commented on the fact that they knew very little of the uses of the current evaluation system, or that it was used for staff promotion decisions. Obviously, we are not very good at communicating evaluation processes, or at closing the feedback loop to those who provide data. This is not consistent with high quality HRM or organisation practice as outlined by Cox (2011) and Kaymaz (2011).

Question 3 asked the students to look at follow-up processes after the evaluation had been conducted. As already identified by the students many did not know whether there were any formal follow up processes as a consequence of student evaluations. As the course discussed here, and the teaching initiative, were predominantly concerned with performance appraisal, this question was intended to elicit student thoughts regarding what should occur. It is clear that across the three sub-questions, the students believe that the main reason for carrying out performance appraisal around teaching at university is predominantly for the development of the paper and teacher. In terms of who should see the evaluation data both lecturers and chairpersons should have access, and that the data should also be summarised by department/school and Faculty to provide guidance. What is interesting to note from our study is that similar to Chen & Hoshower's (1998) work the students' rated providing feedback to students third after lecturers and chairpersons. However the number who suggested that evaluation data should be provided to students simply to provide information on courses was very low. Therefore we can conclude that students want to see the overall evaluation data, but not necessarily to help with decisions around course selection.

Conclusion

Using an action research approach, a performance appraisal teaching initiative has provided interesting insights into students' views and perceptions around evaluations. Using thematic analysis, this paper has shown that students generally feel positively disposed towards the use of evaluation.

The students believe that the main use of evaluation is for (1) development of the paper and the teacher, (2) the benefit of future students, and (3) to enhance communication between students and their teacher regarding teaching and learning.

However, the students noted that there are limitations to evaluation systems, especially in terms of feedback mechanisms which should occur as part of the performance appraisal process. These include: timing around end of semester evaluations –students rarely see any changes to the paper or teaching; lack of staff engagement with evaluations, and students' lack of knowledge of evaluation and associated follow up processes.

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