



# The case for eVALUate

by Julie Hare

**A** new online system of student evaluation is having a grassroots impact on how courses are taught at Curtin University. Dissatisfied with existing student evaluation systems, the university set about creating its own more responsive and detailed system which has now been fully implemented for four semesters, says Associate Professor Beverly Oliver, Curtin's head of course and teaching development.

"A lot of universities have taken the CEQ and developed it into a unit experience questionnaire, though it was never really intended for that. We lined up CEQ, all the derivatives of CEQ and a previous version called SEEQ but none measured what we were trying to instigate as our teaching and learning philosophy – that we are going to focus on the outcomes of student learning, we correctly assess those outcomes, all our teaching is engaging and so on.

"Nothing actually did the job so we created our own."

However, it hasn't been an easy path convincing colleagues that online feedback is as useful, sometimes even more useful, than paper-based systems."

While there was resistance to the online, voluntary nature of the questionnaire, Oliver says it successfully overcomes some of the standard problems to paper-based systems.

"When you put things online you move them out of the classroom and out of control of the unit coordinator," she says. "In a paper-based system, the downside is the 'pesky factor' – it could be the 20th time the student has filled in a form. It's always in a hurry, it's always in the last week of lectures."

Online surveys, she says, are done in students' own time, and therefore must be brief and clearly understandable. The eVALUate unit survey has 11 quantitative items which ask students to say what helps their learning, how motivated and engaged they are, and their overall satisfaction. There are also two standard qualitative items about the best aspects of the unit, and how it might be improved.

"It's not the perfect survey – that's yet to be invented – but it does give clear and statistically defensible

indications about student perceptions."

The biggest bugbear with online surveys is response rates, which has been partly overcome by the use of incentives (a car park spot proved very popular).

"We have a growing response rate at the same time as an increasing number of students eligible to use the eVALUate system. This is encouraging, but only units that get representative response rates can really be used to make definitive judgements about how a unit could be maintained or improved. So the quest to improve response rates to levels that endure the rigour of statistical validity is ongoing."

One of the greatest benefits of the system is eVALUate calculates results on the fly: When a staff member accesses a report, the results are generated dynamically and a downloadable PDF file is available. eVALUate results are reported as percentage agreement with the quantitative items, and verbatim comments can be read only by restricted staff. One of the huge benefits of online systems is that students type their comments, and so this richest source of data can be mined (using software such as CEQuery and SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys) to uncover overall trends and emphases at unit and course level.

While many assume students only respond when they are unhappy about something, Oliver says this is not the case. Nor are they particularly rude or abusive.

"Human nature being what it is, it's impossible to make everyone use the language that we find inoffensive. That said, students are often blunt, but rarely rude – only 0.3 per cent of comments according to our research," she says.

Those most likely to use the system are female, those with a higher semester-weighted average, and those in some disciplines (health students respond more often than the engineers, for example).

"We now have better and accessible pointers to guide us in enhancing the student experience of learning. And knowing that there are fewer dead trees in the world is no small bonus!"

**More information at [evaluate.curtin.edu.au](http://evaluate.curtin.edu.au)**



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Page: 4

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