

Qualitative Analysis of Student Course Perception Survey's Open-Ended Comments: *Insights into Student Perceptions of the Learning Experience*

Authors:

Sonya Buffone, PhD, Director, Teaching Assessment Processes

Karmvir Padda, PhD Candidate

Kathy Becker, Specialist, Teaching Assessment Processes

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	5
Introduction.....	5
Background.....	5
Key Findings.....	5
1. Constructive Feedback Dominates:	5
2. Alignment with Teaching Effectiveness Framework (TEF):.....	5
3. Consistency Across Comments:	5
4. Broader Audience for Feedback:	5
Methodology	6
Recommendations.....	6
1. Reassess Access to SCP Comments:	6
2. Leverage SCP Comments for Formative Development:	6
3. Leverage SCP Comments for Course and Program Improvement:	6
4. Implement Safeguards to Protect Faculty from Abusive Comments.....	6
5. Engagement and Training with Relevant Groups:	6
Conclusion	6
Introduction.....	7
Background.....	7
Initial Research Purpose & Objectives	7
The Research Pivot: Revising the RQ.....	8
Methodology	9
The Data.....	9
Data Analysis Approach.....	9
Phase One.....	10
Phase Two	11
Phase Three	11
Key Findings.....	11
1. A Note on Positive Comments	12
2. Frequency, Nature & Context of Abusive Comments.....	13
3. Significant Alignment with Teaching Effectiveness Framework (TEF)	15
Rapport and Responsiveness.....	15
Engagement and Learning	16

Diversity and Inclusion	18
4. Consistency of Student Comments	19
5. Perceived Audience of Comments: Beyond the Course Instructor	22
Negative Comments: Student Complaints	22
Beyond the Course: Course Type & Program Concerns	25
Next Steps	27
Recommendation: Reassess Access to SCP comments.....	27
Program Improvement	27
Inform Course Changes	27
Leverage SCP Comments for Formative Development	28
Peer Mentoring and Support	28
Leverage SCP Comments for Course Improvement and Design	29
Institutional Policy and Strategic Planning	30
Implementation Strategies	31
Establish Clear Access and Use Guidelines for SCP open-ended Comments	31
Consider strategies to support faculty in utilization of student comments	31
Invest in secure AI software (e.g., MLE by Explorance) for Analysis Purposes & for Pre-Screening Abusive Comments	31
Develop Best Practice for Dealing with Abusive Comments	31
Definition of Abusive Comments:	32
Detection and Flagging:	32
Review and Resolution Process.....	32
Support and Resources.....	33
Preventative Measures:	33
Regular Review:.....	33
Train Relevant Groups on Feedback Utilization.....	33
Train Students on how to Provide Useful Feedback	33
Monitor and Evaluate the Impact.....	33
Appendix A	34
Student Course Perception Survey.....	34
Appendix B	35
Codes	35
Appendix C	38

University of Waterloo’s Teaching Effectiveness Framework 38

Executive Summary

Introduction

At the University of Waterloo (UW), Student Course Perceptions (SCP) surveys are a vital tool for gathering student feedback on their learning experiences. This report presents findings from an in-depth qualitative analysis of all 82,829 open-ended comments from the Winter 2023 SCPs. Over the course of a year, two researchers conducted a thorough, three-phase analysis to uncover insights into how students perceive their courses and how this feedback can be leveraged for continuous improvement.

Background

At present, only instructors at Waterloo have access to the open-ended SCP responses, which limits the potential of this valuable data. These comments offer rich insights that could significantly enhance various processes, such as teaching assessments by Chairs, departmental performance reviews, and evaluations by Tenure, Permanence, and Promotion Committees (TPPCs). The Course Evaluation Project Team (CEPT), in its 2010 report to Senate, recognized the importance of these qualitative comments in contextualizing quantitative SCP scores, recommending a review of the practice of restricting access. This analysis aims to support that review by demonstrating how students use open-ended responses to communicate their learning experiences, assessing the occurrence of inappropriate comments, and identifying relevant groups who could benefit from these insights. By broadening access, academic leadership could unlock the full potential of this data to drive meaningful and continuous improvements.

Key Findings

1. **Constructive Feedback Dominates:** The analysis found that overtly biased comments were exceedingly rare, with the majority of student feedback being constructive. While some comments were critical or harsh, they were generally not abusive and did not demonstrate bias. But even the small number of overtly abusive comments suggests that safeguards are needed to protect instructors from abuse in these rare cases.
2. **Alignment with Teaching Effectiveness Framework (TEF):** Student comments consistently reflected the key elements of the TEF, including rapport, responsiveness, engagement, and learning. Students emphasized the value of supportive environments, clear communication, and engaging teaching methods, underscoring the positive impact these elements have on their learning experience.
3. **Consistency Across Comments:** Feedback was consistent within specific courses, indicating that learning experiences were often perceived similarly - and commented on - by several students in a class. This consistency suggests that SCP comments could provide valuable insights for informing broader curriculum and programmatic decisions.
4. **Broader Audience for Feedback:** The analysis revealed that students often write comments for an audience beyond the course instructor, indicating a desire for “higher authorities” (e.g., Chairs, Deans) to address their concerns. This includes feedback on course design, program structure, and broader institutional policies.

Methodology

Following a detailed presentation on the study's structure at Deans Council in October 2022, the Deans granted the TAP office permission to access the open-ended comments from the Winter 2023 Student Course Perception Surveys. This approval was contingent upon adhering to strict protocols designed to maintain the confidentiality of the instructors involved. The data was drawn from the Winter 2023 SCPs, encompassing 82,829 comments from 44,732 student surveys. The analysis was conducted in three phases: Phase One involved identifying potentially comments that were negative in either content or tone, Phase Two focused on thematic coding, and Phase Three included reflection and synthesis of the findings.

Recommendations

1. **Reassess Access to SCP Comments:** Broaden access to SCP comments to provide Administrators with context for quantitative scores and student input on program improvements. Consider the use of specialized software to identify and summarize themes in student comments.
2. **Leverage SCP Comments for Formative Development:** SCP comments offer a valuable resource for guiding targeted professional development, particularly in areas related to the TEF. This approach is intended to support instructors in their continuous growth and success, thereby contributing to improved student experiences.
3. **Leverage SCP Comments for Course and Program Improvement:** Leverage SCP feedback to refine course materials, teaching methods, and program structures to improve student experiences.
4. **Implement Safeguards to Protect Faculty from Abusive Comments:** Implement process for detecting, flagging, and addressing abusive comments to protect faculty while maintaining the integrity of constructive feedback channels. Establish clear criteria for what constitutes an abusive comment. Consider the use of specialized software to identify abusive content in student comments.
5. **Engagement and Training with Relevant Groups:** Train faculty, administrators, and students on how to effectively interpret, utilize, and provide constructive feedback through SCPs to foster a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration.

Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of Winter 2023 SCP comments reveals that this student feedback provides significant insights that have value beyond the individual instructor. By leveraging these comments, UW can enhance teaching quality, inform program development, and better align teaching practices with student needs. This collaborative approach will contribute to a more effective and responsive learning environment, benefiting instructors, students and the teaching culture at UW.

Introduction

At the end of every term the University of Waterloo (UW) collects student feedback on their course experiences through the Student Course Perceptions (SCP) surveys. The findings shared in this report are drawn from an exploratory qualitative analysis of student responses to open-ended SCP questions at UW. Over the span of about a year, a team of three researchers engaged in a three-phase line-by-line qualitative analysis of 82, 829 individual comments submitted by students as part of the Winter 2023 SCP survey process.

Background

When reviewing results of SCPs, current institutional practice is that [only] instructors of courses can access student responses to the open-ended SCP questions. As a result, no Faculty administrators (such as Deans or Chairs) and other members of tenure, permanence and promotion committees can access these responses. In their final report, the first-phase Course Evaluation Project Team (CEPT1) recommended that this practice be reviewed and, if necessary, altered. As part of their mandate, the second-phase Course Evaluation Project Team (CEPT2) performed a preliminary review of this practice including the following:

- An extensive review of the literature and practices surrounding open-ended questions,
- Detailed discussion with other U15 institutions where qualitative comments are made available to all parties involved in the assessment of teaching,
- A review of governance practices and strategies for screening comments made in “bad faith,”
- Consultations with Chairs, and
- Discussions with the Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism (EDI-R).

This preliminary review revealed one consistent theme: **the open-ended responses to SCP surveys are widely viewed as important because they provide necessary context to help interpret the quantitative (numerical) values derived from the SCP scores.** Without access to this crucial contextual information, the numerical averages available to Chairs and TPPCs are difficult to interpret fairly. For example, if several students note frustration about external factors like noisy construction outside the classroom, it can explain why an instructor’s ‘learning environment’ score may be unusually low for a specific course. The current practice of restricting access to open-ended responses has therefore been identified as a significant concern, as it limits the ability to fully understand and fairly assess teaching performance. Following a detailed presentation on the study’s structure at Deans Council in October 2022, the Deans granted the TAP office permission to access the open-ended comments from the Winter 2023 Student Course Perception Surveys. This approval was contingent upon adhering to strict protocols designed to maintain the confidentiality of the instructors involved.

Initial Research Purpose & Objectives

Qualitative comments, in conjunction with SCP scores, provide a more nuanced perspective of student’s perceptions of their experience in a course. Open-ended responses provide a lens to understand *why* a given numerical response has been assigned, helping create a clearer picture of

student course experiences, while also highlighting strengths and weaknesses in a course as experienced by the student (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Klenke, 2008).

On the other hand, it is also pertinent to acknowledge that open-ended comments can be egregious, or made in bad faith, and when flippant may fail to provide useful feedback for instructors or administrators. Presumably, it is concerns of this sort that led the University to adopt its current access practices. Whether the practices make sense clearly depends, at least in part, on the prevalence of abusive, bad faith, or flippant responses.

In general, research on these issues is extremely limited. Preliminary findings from a large-scale study done at the University of Toronto (2021) reveals that explicitly egregious or abusive comments were relatively rare, consisting of about 0.18% of total comments submitted on their course evaluation instrument. Given these considerations, a better understanding of how UW students are using SCP comments is necessary. The purpose of this study was to:

- Understand how students are using open-ended responses to convey their course experiences and ratings at UW
- Shed some light on the extent and nature of inappropriate comments in SCPs at UW
- Guide decisions about who should have access to the responses
- Inform instructional material for students about what sorts of comments are helpful and appropriate.

This analysis occurred over the course of three coding phases (explained in detail below). Initially, three key research questions guided the qualitative analysis:

1) What is the underlying nature of concerning comments? a) Are they attributed to the student being at fault? b) Are they attributed to the instructor being at fault? c) C) What are the most common issues with open-ended responses?	2) What is the underlying nature of the comment if it is deemed to be inappropriate? a) Inappropriate/offensive? How? b) Bullying/harassment c) Discrimination (racial, ethic, sexuality, gender identity etc.) d) Health and safety concerns (threats, including those to self or other)	3) What features do inappropriate comments possess that make them unique in comparison to appropriate comments? a) Are they textually longer? b) Are they more likely to include offensive language?
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The Research Pivot: Revising the RQ

Inductive research processes are rarely linear. As the analysis unfolds, new information can take researchers down new paths resulting in the need to pivot and refocus the research questions to allow the data to ‘tell the narrative.’ As we explain later in this report, initial analyses in Phase One revealed that the quantity of explicitly egregious or abusive comments made by students

was extremely low. As a result, our initial research questions did not fit the data appropriately. Several team discussions led us to pivot and the guiding research question for Phase Two & Phase Three was amended to better reflect the data and the goals of this study:

RQ: What information do open-ended comments reveal about student learning experiences?

- a) How can this information help inform coaching/intervention opportunities?
- b) How can this information help inform course/program development/revisions?

Methodology

The Data

Data for this study are drawn from the open-ended student responses to Winter 2023 SCPs. All written student comments from the 1,562 Winter 2023 courses are included in this study. In total, students submitted 44,732 complete survey responses, resulting in a total sample size of 82,829 comments. The SCP survey asks students to provide open-ended responses for three questions: 1) The most important thing I learned in this course was... 2) What helped me to learn in this course was... 3) What changes, if any, would I suggest for this course? In addition, students can provide written feedback for any of the quantitative questions asked ($n=7$; see appendix for scale items). Each individual student comment (or single response to a survey question) is counted as a single response. Therefore, *one student can provide multiple comments and each of those responses was coded as a single response* resulting in a total of 82,829 comments drawn from 44,732 completed student surveys.

Data Analysis Approach

The qualitative data analysis occurred in three phases. For all phases of the analysis, the researchers independently coded each student's response line-by-line. To ensure intercoder reliability was achieved the research team engaged in weekly-bi-weekly meetings to discuss emerging categories, and a shared codebook was developed and reflected upon throughout the coding process. Throughout the coding process, we also maintained a "coding journal" to document our emergent thoughts, challenges, and reflections, ensuring that we practiced reflexivity and acknowledged the diverse lived experiences we each brought to the research. To provide context on the varied perspectives within our team: one member is a cisgender, native English speaker of European descent who identifies as LGBTQ2S+; another is a cisgender, racialized immigrant woman and PhD candidate; and the third is a gender nonconforming (she/they), neurodivergent native English speaker of European descent.¹ These diverse identities enriched our analysis, allowing for a more nuanced and inclusive interpretation of the data.

¹ Although the third member of the coding team was involved in the majority of meetings and discussions about the project, due to logistical considerations (it was very difficult to split the coding across three coders in excel), the third coder was involved in coding data in Phase Three (explained in detail below) but did not code in Phase One or Phase Two.

Phase One

Phase One of the research process involved a content analysis of all Winter 2023 open-ended comments. A total of 82,829 student responses were uploaded in Microsoft excel. One row in the excel sheet corresponded with a single student's collective responses, but as outlined above, students can provide up to 10 comments per row (where each column corresponds to a comment associated with an independent SCP question). Initially, our focus was on determining whether any individual student comment could be considered concerning across a row. A comment was flagged as 'concerning' if it was negative in content or tone. To this end, the entire row would be coded to identify whether any comment made by a single student respondent was either 'concerning' or 'not concerning.' Typically, we found that if a student made one comment that was negative in content or tone, all of the comments provided by that student tended to be negative in content and tone. Conversely, positively worded comments (which made up the majority of comments we read) were consistently positive across a row.

Initially, the research was heavily focused on identifying potentially concerning or abusive student comments. A concerning comment was defined as any comment that was negative in content or tone and especially with the potential to be 'abusive' towards an instructor either explicitly (e.g. *'Although a bright individual, [Profname] has no teaching capabilities what so ever. In my entire education career ive never had a worst experience with a course'*), or more implicitly (*'I taught myself in this course'*). As the analysis unfolded, we observed that overtly abusive comments were extremely rare in the data (we observed less than a handful of such comments). To ensure we captured nuances in the negative student comments we observed, throughout Phase One coding, we considered each comment from two perspectives: 1) the instructors' perspective (i.e., if I was teaching this course and I read this comment, might I interpret it negatively?); and 2) the students' perspective (i.e., is this comment a reflection of a negative course experience for the student?). During this phase of our coding process, we intentionally adopted a very broad and inclusive approach, deliberately over coding 'negative' comments, to ensure that we captured as many relevant themes and nuances as possible. Throughout Phase One, we co-developed a codebook based on emergent themes in the data. At the end of this coding process, we had identified a total of 7452 comments that were negative in content and or tone.

Table 1 *Classification of Student Comments (by row)*

Classification (negative in content or tone)	Count	Percent Total
Lacks Negative Content or Tone	37,281	0.83
Negative in Content/Tone	7,452	0.16
Total	44,733	100

Phase Two

During Phase Two of our coding process, we uploaded the 7452 negative comments (this constitutes less than 20% of the 44,733 rows of student responses)² into NVivo. The research team met, discussed, and revised the codebook created during phase One (see Appendix B). There was strong agreement between both researchers on the coding categories and subcategories. Additionally, the categories developed were mutually exclusive which made the coding process run smoothly. Phase Two involved a thematic coding approach with inductive line-by-line coding of each student comment. Each comment was coded into relevant thematic categories as defined in our codebook. Throughout Phase Two, the research team continued to meet bi-weekly to discuss coding and reflections on the coding process. At the conclusion of this phase the researchers agreed that data saturation had been achieved, no new findings emerged, and the thematic categories developed fit the data well. Upon completion of this process, independently, each researcher took a two-week period to reflect on the analysis and thematic categories and to determine how the data could be further synthesized.

Phase Three

The research team met for a half-day retreat to reflect on the research questions and discuss observations and synthesis of the data. At this meeting, it was determined that we had reached theoretical saturation of the data. At this time, we brought in a third coder to survey a sample of the data. The purpose of this was two-fold: 1) to ensure that we had, in fact, reached theoretical saturation and 2) to look specifically for negative comments, or comments that might be more implicitly biased.

Key Findings

The comprehensive qualitative analysis of over 80,000 SCP student comments revealed four significant insights: First, explicitly abusive comments or comments made in bad faith were remarkably rare, with the majority of feedback being highly constructive in nature. Second, SCP comments were closely aligned with the University of Waterloo's Teaching Effectiveness Framework (TEF) (see Appendix C), reflecting students' focus on meaningful aspects of the learning experience. Third, SCP comments consistently highlight key aspects of a course, with positive feedback occurring far more frequently than negative. When an instructor excels in certain areas, students often express their gratitude and praise, which is echoed by many. Conversely, when issues arise, they tend to be mentioned by multiple students rather than being isolated remarks.³ Fourth, SCP comments appear to be crafted for a broader audience beyond the course instructor. These findings suggest that by limiting access to SCP comments, we are

² It is important to note that we analyzed a total of 82,829 individual student comments and a single row in the excel sheet corresponded with a single student's collective responses, but as outlined above, students can provide up to 10 comments per row, this is why the total number in this table is less than the total number of comments.

³ In this sense, without reading any contextual information about the course, all three coders agreed that the consistency of the comments was so significant that they could identify when a new course was being discussed.

missing out on valuable data that has potential to inform a wide range of relevant groups. The following sections will delve deeper into each of these insights.

1. A Note on Positive Comments

To try to prevent misunderstandings, **it is important to first emphasize that the vast majority—83%—of the student comments we analyzed were positive.** While this report highlights comments that were more critical in tone or content, this focus was deliberate to address areas for teaching improvement. However, it is essential to recognize that positive feedback was far more common, than negative feedback. Students consistently expressed their appreciation for instructors, particularly when they felt engaged, saw clear alignment between assignments and learning outcomes, and experienced a supportive learning environment. Therefore, while the following sections concentrate on specific challenges students noted, these should be understood within the broader context of overwhelmingly positive student experiences. To illustrate the nature of the more than 30,000 positive comments, we provide a few examples below:

Course 1
Very engaging prof with interesting stories and examples incorporated into lectures. Broke topics down into digestible lectures so students didn't feel overwhelmed with content.
Because [prof name] is such an authority in this field, the wealth of knowledge he has evokes boundless interest in this area of study.
Course 2
Honestly, given how much I learned on each assignment, wish there was a 5th assignment in there for another learning opportunity. Unironically. Another assignment going deeper on [topic] perhaps.
Cannot praise [prof name] more. Truly the trifecta of an excellent course. In person lectures are engaging, presentation/slides are top notch. Accessible, highly legible, extremely well put together notes available ahead of time. Assignments covered the course content and were interesting, fair, and useful.
I had [prof name] for [course name] which was one of the best courses I've taken in my [program name] undergrad. Saw the opportunity to take another class with him and I was not disappointed.
Hope to see [prof name] teaching more [program name] courses in the future. Truly, a shining example of an excellent professor throughout my whole undergrad degree. Hope we can get more profs like him in the future.
Course 3
I believe the assessments were very fair, especially considering the weighting of everything.
- the reading responses made for a good summary of what was learned each week - the essays were a good opportunity to examine in-depth the theories of rhetoric paired with our own ideas - the lectures were well-organized and concepts were explained in a way that was easy to understand - the readings weren't too hard to understand and the lectures helped with that - there were a lot of connections made between the theories we learned in the past - the professor's comments on the discussion board and assignments are very helpful and is clearly passionate about the subject
Course 4
Overall comments - technical summaries were great

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- participation in this class was not stressful, prof was very nice about it- I needed more help for how to structure cases at the beginning of the term |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- the professor was very passionate, engaging, supportive, and made sure that we understood the course content- the class environment was very comfortable and encouraged a good relationship with peers- the professor prioritised the wellbeing of students- most of the things we've covered in class were memorable which helped with furthering our learning- The coursework wasn't too much but I was still able to learn a lot through readings and contributing to the weekly lecture notes, glossary, and summary.- the workload wasn't stressful and instead helpful like with the weekly readings and occasional notes, which made it a comfortable class to take and I could focus more on the learning aspect instead of the pressure of doing all the assignments well and on time. it made me happy and excited to learn |

2. Frequency, Nature & Context of Abusive Comments

One of the key findings of our research is the rarity with which students made explicitly abusive comments in SCPs. It's important to note that while some comments may be critical or harsh, not all fall under the traditional understanding of 'abusive.' In fact, many students used SCP feedback constructively. Concerns about potential abuse in anonymous feedback systems are valid, and steps should be taken to protect instructors from personal attacks and to address any such comments appropriately (e.g., by removing responses from an offending student). However, our data shows that such extreme instances are exceedingly rare.

Some of the comments we reviewed, though framed negatively, often included additional context from students to justify their reasoning. For instance, in the following example, while the student criticizes the instructor for negatively impacting their course experience, the comment remains focused on the teaching approach rather than constituting a personal attack:

[Prof name] single-handedly ruined my experience in this program. He was dismissive, condescending, attacking, and did not foster an environment conducive to learning. I would like an opportunity to discuss my experience with [Prof name]'s boss or someone who can ensure the same experience is not had by future students.

This comment, while negative in tone, is an example of how students often provide reasoning for their feedback, focusing on their course experience rather than engaging in direct personal attacks.

In another example, a student expresses frustration with their course experience, attributing their dissatisfaction to various issues, including the professor's notes, assignments, teaching strategies, the textbook, and the course's relevance to the real world. The student shares:

This course is single handedly the worst course in the [program name] degree so far. the professor does not know how to take notes properly; each of their slides looks like notes that i would write on the back of a napkin. it's like they have a special ability of scribbling all over the page while saying pretty much nothing. the textbook is unnecessarily complicated, which isn't actually surprising since I couldn't find any online resource explaining this hardware stuff at a deep enough level [...] what pains me about this course is that we don't even use any real tools to design the hardware and circuitry and get a feel for real-world applications of this content. who the fuck thought that forcing people to do

tedious multiplications for half the course was a good way to teach students hardware? This content is only useful if you can actually secure a coop job where you develop cutting-edge hardware, but no one is hiring Imfao.

In the rare cases where comments could be interpreted as explicitly abusive—specifically those that focus on personal characteristics of the instructor rather than their performance—these tended to be isolated incidents and not reflective of broader trends. For example, among other criticisms about their course experience, the following student expresses frustration with a professor’s accent:

In the beginning, I was quite excited about this course, as I've always wanted to learn the theory behind [course name]. However, on the first day, I was met with utter disappointment at how poorly taught the lectures are. Given that it was a large lecture hall, [Professor name] *spoke in a tiny, monotone voice with an unintelligible accent*, making it impossible to understand what he is saying. On top of that, the questions in the problem sets were very poorly written, as the prof even had to make regular updates on the assignment to give clarification. There were times, when I was stuck on a question for an entire day, not knowing that there was missing information. I am not usually one to hate, but this is quite possibly the worst course I have ever taken at Waterloo. TLDR: prof sucks [emphasis added]

One striking finding is the difference observed between SCP comments and those on unofficial student surveys that some Waterloo students sometimes complete.⁴ Comments made on unofficial surveys are more often personal, gendered, and of little formative value to the instructor. The table below illustrates this in a side-by-side comparison of comments about the same instructor from different sources.

Table 2 Comparison of Quality of SCP Comments vs. Unofficial Survey Source Comments

SCP	Unofficial
Assignments felt a bit disorganized and confusing since portions had to be re-written after the assignment was already released	Great guy but a terrible teacher honestly.
Some of the findings seem to just fall out of nowhere. Would help to get a stronger background on how they happen.	She’s a sweet person, and she deeply cares about her students- and wants them to succeed.
Make electronic notes or videos of the lectures to post on learn. It is extremely difficult to learn the course material if you cannot attend class which is quite inconvenient.	Flat out sucks. Should not be teaching. I’d lose focus 10 minutes into a lecture because this guy seems like he is regurgitating a textbook.

Although infrequent, comments that target instructors on grounds protected by human rights legislation—such as race, gender, or other personal characteristics—can have a profound impact

⁴ We completed a very brief scan of an unofficial survey source. This review was not extensive, but the difference we observed in the quality of comments was so striking we decided to include it here. We have not named the unofficial source to protect the identity of instructors.

on vulnerable faculty. Even one such comment is one too many. While the frequency of explicitly abusive comments in this study was low, most students appear to respect the purpose of SCPs, using them to offer meaningful and constructive feedback, as opposed to personal attacks. The rarity of abusive comments also highlights the importance of preserving these feedback channels, as they overwhelmingly provide valuable insights into how teaching and learning experiences can be improved.

3. Significant Alignment with Teaching Effectiveness Framework (TEF)

Another key finding from this analysis is the strong alignment SCP comments have with the university's Teaching Effectiveness Framework (see Appendix C). Below, we outline how students' comments consistently address several key features of the TEF, including rapport, responsiveness, engagement, and learning. Student comments also reflect important aspects of diversity and inclusion in teaching practices.

Rapport and Responsiveness

Students emphasized the importance of developing a positive rapport with their instructors. They appreciate when instructors are approachable, supportive, and genuinely interested in their success. Similarly, responsiveness to students' questions and concerns is frequently mentioned. Rapport with students is developed in many ways, but a repeated theme centered on a desire for instructors to foster a safe space to ask questions and provide thoughtful responses. When this does not happen, students express an overall poorer course experience and lack of engagement in the course, as evidenced in the following comment:

In my entire education journey I don't think I have ever felt uncomfortable attending a class before this one. The way the lecturer would blatantly inform students (myself included) their answers were wrong in a way that would make us feel horrible for even attempting to answer did not create a supportive environment. I understand the questioning was to help us learn how to do proper analysis better but it could be done in a way that would encourage a student to continue to participate in class. This was our first time doing a course like this, so there is a learning curve and the lecturer's high expectations made me feel inadequate especially when they were not willing to properly teach technical and instead say to "read the standard."

Another student, in a different course, shares a similar sentiment, reflecting on their fears in the course:

I found the classroom environment to be very intimidating at times as I felt that the professor sometimes made students feel bad for answering a question incorrectly or made students feel pressured to answer questions in class. I sometimes felt scared to come to class or to answer questions.

Finally, findings also highlight that students desire a degree of responsiveness from instructors that recognizes the learning process can be difficult. As one student explains, the response from

some professors to students struggling with learning new concepts has felt hurtful and unsupportive:

Something I have noticed from a lot of professors [...] this term is that they are often condescending when students ask questions or do things wrong that they did not understand. I think something that is important to keep in mind is that, while we do miss things just like you guys in your course planning, almost all of us really are trying our best. Something that seems common knowledge to you know may be something the majority of us have never even heard of, and shouldn't really be expected to if its never been taught. If it should have been taught but most of the class still doesn't know or understand, then that also isn't completely our fault and another explanation without judgement is more encouraging/supportive than a lecture about not knowing how we messed up.

The findings from the analysis illuminate that establishing rapport with students and providing understanding and thoughtful responses to their questions can help create a conducive learning environment and foster a sense of trust and respect.

Engagement and Learning

The analysis also revealed the importance of student engagement. Students value interactive and dynamic teaching methods that keep them actively involved in the learning process, as the following student explains:

I feel like during lectures, I'm not learning as much because the instructor is simply reading from the slides. If there was some way for the instructor to have more engaging examples, that might incentivize me to attend to lectures, since I stopped attending lectures by around week 5.

When it comes to class engagement, students find reading off slides undermines their ability to engage with the course or understand the material being taught. The following comment captures this sentiment well:

The lectures delivered by the professor were of very poor quality. He would read off the slide and then try to explain in his own words but most of the time would end up confusing himself and the class. He could not understand the questions that students were asking and would go off on unrelated tangents. It was very frustrating to be in the class because I felt like I would understand more if I just read the slides than listening to him teach. So to make this course better the professor needs to get a better understanding of the real world applications related to the course material and be able to explain the topics more succinctly.

Students also consistently stress the importance of clear and organized content delivery, which they believe is crucial for their understanding and retention of the material. As one student observes, perceived disorganization in a course appears correlated with poor attendance:

The instructor has no idea what he is doing and he is completely out of his depth. His lectures are highly disengaging and poorly structured. It is very hard to follow the pace of

the lecture for more than 10 minutes. The class attendance rate is about 40% which is an indication of that. In my opinion, He should be replaced by someone competent.

Similarly, another student explains how his confusion with lecture material resulted in frustration, which in turn contributed to a growing sense of disengagement with the course:

His lectures were confusing and inconsistent. His examples did not make sense and I found myself confused and lost throughout the entire term. There were many classes that I left early or did not attend at all because I was so confused and frustrated with how poorly the material was being presented. There were also many times when I felt as though the professor himself did not understand the material and was simply coasting along and hoping nobody would point it out.

This student's experience is not an isolated case; confusion stemming from the way course material was delivered emerged as a recurring theme in the data. Another student provides an even more detailed account, describing the challenges they faced in trying to grasp broader course concepts:

The content in the slides was hard to tie together without visual connections or institution. Since the course content is partially subjective. It was hard to understand concepts and frameworks without proper summaries and the connections. The additional articles were helpful, but I wish the important information was summarized and connected better in class. In class teaching was very hard to follow as a jumped around and not covered concepts were discussed at random. In addition, teaching on the chalkboard was written in all abbreviations in small print. Hard to see and hear and I sit in the second closest row to the board. Instructor spoke towards the board when writing, and was not clear to the point she was making most of the time. It felt as if I was always playing catch-up even coming to class prepared by reading the chapter I wouldn't know the abbreviations she was using or the point of what she was writing as it was hard to see the big picture (that was not taught yet). This class might be organized better by teaching theory through a model like top hat online and doing one class a week focussed on analyzing a case or example with the theory learned. Having to cross reference a try to connect parts you think are important from the textbook and lecture slides and case studies and additional articles was way too much on the student to do alone. I recognize the course content is hard to connect until the end when you see the big picture. However, throughout the term it was hard learning each piece at a time without an instructor summarizing and showing the end goal or big picture. it felt like we were all lost with no direction, but she knew the end result, and wouldn't let us in. It always felt like we were missing something and she would talk ahead about things we had never covered yet. I would read the textbook. Think I understand what's going on and then get more confused during class with the incomplete summary slides, abbreviated thoughts on the board and discussions without known directions.

These findings underscore a key takeaway: Well-structured courses and classes are fundamental to facilitate learning and maintain student engagement and participation. Students provide rich and detailed comments to explain what led to disengagement in their courses. When students feel

course content is presented in a coherent, organized manner, they are more likely to remain motivated and connected to the material. Conversely, when the delivery of content is perceived to be disjointed and confusing, it can lead to disengagement and a sense of frustration, ultimately hindering the learning process. These findings highlight the importance of thoughtful course design and effective teaching strategies in enhancing both student engagement and learning outcomes.

Diversity and Inclusion

Comments related to diversity and inclusion reveal students' appreciation for a learning environment that respects and values diverse perspectives. These comments highlight the importance of inclusive teaching practices that recognize and address the varied backgrounds and experiences of all students.

The analysis revealed students often used SCP comments to express feelings that an inclusive learning environment was not fostered. In many cases, these comments were consistent across different students within the same course, indicating that these negative experiences were not isolated incidents. For example, one student shared a troubling experience where aspects of their identity made them feel unsafe in the classroom:

Not only did I not feel valued in class due to aspects of my identity, [Professor name] made me feel unsafe and unwelcome in class because of my identity, through his in-class lecture content and general demeanor towards marginalized communities. In addition, he only spoke from one point of view, which is that of a straight, cis, christian, white man, and refused to respectfully acknowledge views of those who do not conform to that point of view, such as when he proclaimed that the race of the author does not matter when reading papers about indigenous issues in Canada, and that reading a paper about Indigenous issues written by an Indigenous person would be the same as one written by a white person.

Another student from the same course shared a similar sentiment:

I think many of us were left feeling pressured to tailor the content of our class discussion answers and assignments to consider what the instructor believed to be valid and objective, as opposed to what we really thought, wanted to explore or what would have benefited our learning and research development most. It was fairly clear by the end of the term what the professor thought was a sound methodological and epistemological foundation for methods work and what fell outside of that category was scrutinized or dismissed. The following video was shown as a "joke" at the end of class but was provided no context or comment to say "this is obviously not what I really think about [...] methods" and the unfortunate message across the duration of the course and the comments around [...] work was that the instructor did more or less agree with the message of the video and that is why he thought it was funny. It also seems unprofessional and inappropriate to show a video depicting Hitler and Nazi Germany without any context or warning. Video Link here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIIdN8NKjqt> To add, there was an entire discussion critiquing Indigenous methodologies, painting them as an Indigenous rebrand of classic

[...] methods and describing how they were gate-kept. There was no content provided from Indigenous scholars to allow the class to critically think and come to their own conclusions about Indigenous methods and "ways of knowing." I would have learned more from listening to reading from Indigenous scholars than from listening to [Prof name] pick apart Indigenous methods without providing a source or example to back his arguments.

Another student expressed discomfort with how cultural and religious identities were addressed in the course:

I would have the professor [Prof name] keep her personal opinions to herself. I found it unacceptable that she shamed different religions and cultures throughout the course. She also discouraged student from going to class and threatened to kick students out even though these were the students doing the best in the class [...]. She made multiple comments that were completely unprofessional and unnecessary (shaming Asian parents for being stereotypically more strict, shaming Catholics for their beliefs) that made the classroom an unsafe space. It was completely possible to teach the course content in an unbiased fashion so all students could make their own opinions without being told their own culture is bad.

These findings highlight the importance of promoting diversity and inclusion, ensuring that all students feel safe, valued, and respected. By addressing these issues, instructors can create a more equitable and enriching learning experience for everyone.

4. Consistency of Student Comments

One of the key findings from our analysis is the remarkable consistency observed in student feedback within specific courses, even when our research team lacked contextual information about the course itself. Without knowing which course the comments referred to, we could still detect when feedback shifted from one course to another due to the clear patterns in student experiences. This consistency highlights the reliability of the feedback, demonstrating that when issues are identified, they are rarely isolated incidents but are instead shared by multiple students in the same course.

Students often provided similar insights related to course design elements such as assignments, tests, and grading. For example, when commenting on aspects like instructional methods or the learning environment, students frequently echoed the same sentiments, whether expressing praise or concerns. If a course was perceived as disorganized or confusing, it wasn't just one student's opinion—this theme appeared repeatedly across multiple comments, further supporting the validity of the feedback. As one student remarked:

The lectures themselves were very disorganized, I often was not sure what the overall purpose of each class was. It felt as though the professor was not sure of this either. He often went on his own tangents and covered every topic under the sun, without going into sufficient depth in anything. The professor even admitted to the class that he could not stop and explain or answer questions because there was simply too much to cover in such

a short amount of time. What is the point of covering all these topics, if we do not end up understanding anything? There were also many typos in the slides, so it seems as though they were created in a rush without any effort. I would attend lectures to ask questions that I could not find information on anywhere else, such as when assignments were due (as we never received a proper course outline), not to learn the material itself.

Similarly, another student observed,

He neither explained course concepts well (or at all), or answered questions in any satisfactory way. During the class when he would lose his train of thought or could not recall something, he would get students to google random acronyms as a "method of teaching," which is completely ludicrous. [...] There was absolutely nothing interesting about anything that happened in this course. The course had the potential to be [t]he assignments were completely useless, simply following ready-made (not made by the professor) tutorials that didn't help us understand the concepts. In addition, the lectures were very dry and incredibly confusing.

This pattern suggests that the issues highlighted by students are pervasive and likely impact the overall learning experience of the entire class.

Table 3 *Consistency in SCP Comments Within Courses*

Course 1
Requirements were very high, and we didn't know assignment expectations
Too many assignments [...]. The assignments felt disconnected from the course learning.
Course 2
Prof was not responsive, did not answer emails, or questions, or discussion boards.
More interactions with students, offer more office hours times to help students. Be more responsive with discussion posts to answer our questions.
For the prof to be actually responsive to students.
This course felt like I was just learning it by myself, need more interaction with the professor.

The consistency in feedback also extends to specific elements of course design, such as assignments, tests, and grading. Students frequently provided aligned commentary on these elements, pointing out when they felt overwhelmed by the workload or when assessments did not align with the learning objectives. For example, one student expressed, "In most cases, there were no clear rubrics or expectations for deliverables, which made it hard to understand expectations and identify what I should be learning."

Another student echoed this sentiment, stating:

100% no. the assignment was marked in a manner where i do not even know where the mark came from. we were given learning outcomes but looked like the prof used completely different outcomes to mark. no matter how many times i met with the prof to go over my assignment, i would also receive a poor grade with no justification.

The recurring nature of these comments indicates that such concerns are deeply felt and broadly recognized among the student body.

Moreover, the consistency observed in student comments provides further evidence that SCP feedback has the potential to be useful beyond the course instructor, as it reflects collective experiences that could inform broader curriculum and programmatic decisions. When multiple students raise the same concerns, it provides a strong reason for departments/programs to consider revising certain aspects of course delivery or structure. It may also point to opportunities for providing additional support or professional development for instructors. For instance, some students have noted areas where they believe instructors could benefit from support. One student shared the following:

I would recommend the current professor takes a semester to learn the content he is teaching, as well as understanding that students don't expect profs to be perfect, if you admit to the many mistakes you made, we would have respected you as the professor because we understand you're human. As it stands, the inability to acknowledge when you are wrong, the consistent reminder of your great ratemyprof reviews, and the constant blaming of us for misunderstandings you created, lost you more respect than "oh yea - I see how what I said was misleading, sorry about that" ever would have. I want to reiterate, I feel comfortable with my grade, I'm not one of those students that doesn't put any effort in and then complains about her performance. I'm also a fifth year, I have no problem questioning a prof when I know a mistake is made, I'm writing this so that hopefully, a third year taking this course who might not feel comfortable calling him out, doesn't have to worry that their grade will suffer because of his poor communication and self awareness.

Another student suggested, “Improve training for the course instructor, or replace him. There seems to be a big disparity in the difficulty of this course between this instructor and the other one who teaches the online version of the course.”

At the department or faculty level, another area of interest emerges from the consistent pattern in student responses to Question 8, which asks, “What was the most important thing you learned in this course?” In cases where students felt their learning experience was subpar, the responses were strikingly similar. The table below provides examples from three different courses where multiple students conveyed that they had learned “nothing.” This consistency across different courses suggests in some cases, a deeper understanding of the issues raised by students and a more systematic approach to addressing these concerns may be necessary. By systematically addressing these concerns, departments can proactively improve course quality to ensure all students have a meaningful learning experience.

Table 4 Consistency in Student Responses to Q8 “What was the most important thing you learned in this course...”

Course 1
nothing he repeated course work
Nothing
It was online, I learned basically nothing from this course and I am honestly quite mad that it was moved to be online. Originally we were supposed to have this be an in person course, but then because of a reason that we were not told. It was moved online and we the students lost out because of that. MAKE OUR COURSES IN PERSON FOR FUCKS SAKE. I'VE ALREADY GOTTEN 2 YEARS OF FUCKALL FROM ONLINE LEARNING AND I JUST WANT TO BE IN PERSON SO I CAN ACTUALLY GET SOMETHING FROM MY COURSES
Course 2
nothing really
NOTHING.
Nothing. This course is a recycled version of [Course name and code].
Nothing
Nothing. I did not learn a single concept in this course. Graded assignments could be accomplished without looking at a single piece of information from the course content.
Course 3
How to teach myself since I was taught nothing in class
Absolutely nothing because i wasn't taught anything.
I learned absolutely nothing. The professor simply reads the textbook and does not teach. He serves no purpose at all as the textbook does all the work for him. He also ends the lecture 20-40 mins early on a regular basis because it is clear that he dislikes teaching and does not care about the students of this course.
Nothing, our prof taught us nothing.

In general, these comments illustrate the importance of recognizing when additional support or training might be beneficial. Addressing these concerns in a supportive and constructive manner can lead to improvements in course delivery and a more positive learning experience for students, while also helping instructors feel more confident and equipped in their roles.

5. Perceived Audience of Comments: Beyond the Course Instructor

Negative Comments: Student Complaints

Our analysis identified several significant themes in cases where student feedback was particularly critical and negative in both content and tone. Notably, the data suggest that students often direct their negative feedback to an audience beyond the course instructor, implying a desire for intervention from departmental or institutional leadership. This feedback frequently revolves around perceptions that the instructor's behaviour falls short of expected professional, respectful, or inclusive standards. What is particularly striking is that these more critical comments often include detailed explanations, offering substantial context to clarify the concerns being raised. Consider the following feedback, where the student appears to be addressing someone in a position of authority who could take action regarding the instructor:

Remove [Prof name] from teaching this course. He may be mostly polite when in person (although sometimes his poor attitude shows through), but his written communications are

extremely defensive, hostile, and unhelpful. I am afraid to include specific examples as I genuinely fear that he may retaliate in some way [...]

His answers to questions are vague and his explanations unclear, when he even bothers to fully understand the question (most of the time he doesn't listen through and just says "we did this in class" or "well, when have we ever done a question like that? The answer is no, so it won't be tested" or "I don't understand the question." dismissively, or something else unhelpful) and he refuses to admit his mistakes or even to check if he made any.

If this course review is only seen by him, I guarantee that nothing will change and instead he will only react defensively. I can only hope that someone with the power to dismiss him will see and believe this review, and actually investigates "particularly his written communications" and take action to improve the course. I also saw that the first Google search result for [Prof name] consists of hundreds of student complaints (many of which were from 7 years ago, when it seems a similar fiasco occurred and he was dismissed from teaching [name of program] courses). Although the organization of the course seems to be better than what these reviews described, it remains true that [prof name] has a terrible attitude and is unfit to continue teaching.

In another example, also writing for an audience beyond the course professor, this student shares concerns about classroom environments at UW:

Something I have noticed from a lot of professors including [Prof name] this term is that they are often condescending when students ask questions or do things wrong that they did not understand. I think something that is important to keep in mind is that, while we do miss things just like you guys in your course planning, almost all of us really are trying our best. Something that seems common knowledge to you know may be something the majority of us have never even heard of, and shouldn't really be expected to if its never been taught. If it should have been taught but most of the class still doesn't know or understand, then that also isn't completely our fault and another explanation without judgement is more encouraging/supportive than a lecture about not knowing how we messed up.

Even in cases where student feedback was negative but textually shorter, comments are still written for someone other than the course instructor, as evidenced in the following three examples:

Course 1
As a male, I felt supported, but I do wonder how females in the class felt. The jokes that were given in lecture were often directed at the males in the audience and made light of females. I am not sure that was the best choice on the instructors behalf.
Course 2
The retirement of [Prof name] or have her take sensitivity training so she can learn to respect her students.
Course 3
[Prof name] is unbelievably rude and she should not be a professor and does not care about the well being of students.

Another theme characteristic of highly critical SCP comments centered around feeling ‘unsafe’ to engage in classroom discussions. In the following examples, *students from three different courses* express feeling disempowered to ask questions in class:

Course 1
I would also hope that the prof becomes more open minded to discussion as I found he was often very ignorant and narcissistic throughout all of our lectures. I would ask that he complains less about the sensitivity of our generation but attempt to understand the importance of the black lives matter movement or me too movement rather than seeing them as a direct attack to his job.
Course 2
I did not feel comfortable asking questions in this class. One time someone answered a question that she asked, and she was not satisfied with the answer so she laughed at them in front of everyone. When people do not want to answer a question, she makes blanket statements like "Come on, how do you not know this?" I consistently felt frustrated with her teaching and treatment of students in this class.
Course 3
[Prof name] often dismissed his students' questions and made them feel belittled. I felt scared to ask him a question because he has a history of making sarcastic comments and humiliating students in front of the class.

The analysis also revealed that in cases where students felt the professor’s behaviour undermined an inclusive classroom culture, the experience was a shared one. For example, the following comments are made by *three students in the same course*:

Student 1
The amount of jokes made during lectures is horrendous. Every other thing he says is a joke. Also many of them can be offensive, he made some jokes about homeless people that really offended me.
Student 2
Questionable classist and sexist remarks were made as jokes throughout the course. People in jobs of maintenance were portrayed poorly at times [...]
Student 3
[Prof name] made a ridiculous amount of anti-homeless jokes throughout this course. It became so shocking there are multiple students who refuse to go to his course. He is a bigoted, old

fashioned instructor. The University of Waterloo cannot state that they are an inclusive space while there are faculty members like this in the community. I suggest that this professor is given a large amount more of inclusivity and sensitivity training.

What is clear from this analysis is that when students voice concerns, the comment is often written for an audience other than the professor teaching the course and based on the quantity of comments made seems reflective of a collective experience in a given course. Overall, this analysis underscores a need for feedback mechanisms that ensure ongoing concerns are appropriately directed, effectively addressed, and utilized for continuous improvement within the university.

When SCP feedback is only seen by the professor, inaction may result from a lack of support or resources to address systemic problems highlighted by students. Systemic or widespread issues that affect multiple students may remain unidentified and unaddressed, hindering potential improvements that could benefit the entire academic community. Without a structured process for addressing feedback, individual concerns might not result in meaningful changes, leading to recurring problems that affect student learning experiences and both instructor and student morale.

Beyond the Course: Course Type & Program Concerns

The analysis continually revealed that SCP comments are a rich source of data containing useful information extending far beyond the individual course or instructor. Comments often contain information that would be informative for Chairs, Deans, program reviewers, and instructors of pre-requisite courses. As evidenced in Table 5, students provide valuable insights into course formats, utility of courses, student mental health, etc.

Table 5: Beyond Course Feedback

Course 1
This course is useless for grad students as it doesn't bring them to pace with other students. Either modify it in a way we also take the prerequisite or give grad students their own course.
Course 2
The classes cover material way too fast especially because grad students did not take the prerequisite course.
Course 3
Please provide students with a prerequisite course before taking that course because it is impossible to follow honestly.
Course 4
Please provide students with a prerequisite course in which they learn the fundamentals of this course
Course 5
I also think that a lot of students in the course had extremely different backgrounds in terms of experience and knowledge so perhaps there should be more prerequisites required for the course so that students enrolling are adequately prepared for the class and the content they need to already know.

Student comments also frequently cite course format concerns (e.g., online vs. in-person), and the number of complaints related to online courses was striking. While some of this may have had to do with residual “emergency online” offerings developed during the pandemic, and so caution is needed before drawing conclusions about courses fully developed for online delivery, these remarks do illustrate that there may be information of interest to program leadership in

student comments. For example, this student shares strong feelings of frustration [implied by the use of all caps] with online courses:

It was online, I learned basically nothing from this course and I am honestly quite mad that it was moved to be online. Originally we were supposed to have this be an in person course, but then because of a reason that we were not told. It was moved online and we the students lost out because of that. MAKE OUR COURSES IN PERSON FOR FUCKS SAKE. I'VE ALREADY GOTTEN 2 YEARS OF FUCKALL FROM ONLINE LEARNING AND I JUST WANT TO BE IN PERSON SO I CAN ACTUALLY GET SOMETHING FROM MY COURSES [emphasis original]

Another student shares feeling their online experience fails to offer value for their money: “Teach it in person, [course name] is not a course that should be online - I feel like I'm paying thousands just to watch a bunch of videos by someone who isn't even the professor.” In a similar vein, this student expresses frustration with their online course experiences in general: “Never select an online course in Waterloo again, materials weren't helpful, had to look for extra(better) course materials outside of school.” Finally, in a similar vein, this student echoes feeling slighted paying for online experiences:

A lecture where the professor teaches you the material which we are paying thousands of dollars to learn would have made more sense rather than a confusing online course I can get anywhere online. Make it normal in-person classes again for this course.

Complaints about course type were not the only theme of interest to audiences outside of the course instructor. Negative comments often were also related to broader program concerns. For example, the following student questions the utility of this course in the program:

This course needs to be removed. It could absolutely be combined with 216 into one course. I can only imagine that 346 will be more of the same issue. Not enough new information is presented for this class to be its own dedicated course. Other second year courses are so densely packed into not enough lecture hours, while [department name] is moving at a snails pace presenting info we already learned last year.

Similarly, another student shares thoughts about the value of this course: “The [name of course] (245 and 255) and [program name] courses (261) deserve way more lecture time per week and this course could be completely removed.” Finally, this student explains feeling their course was not challenging enough:

I would suggest that this course is a much lower level course, or that it gets removed or revamped entirely. I am a 4B student, and I knew absolutely everything already, and I am not even in [program name] (which most of the students in the course seem to be). The course introduced material that was so basic and common knowledge that I found it way too easy. I feel like I wasted my money knowing that I learned nothing in this course that is supposed to be a 300 level.

In general, more critical student comments, suggest that students believe their feedback should reach a broader audience. The analysis indicates that expanding access to these comments –

while protecting instructors from potentially harmful remarks – could more effectively leverage student feedback to enhance program improvements related to the student learning experience. This is especially relevant when considering student concerns about instructor behaviours perceived to be unaligned with professional, respectful, or inclusive standards, the course format (online versus in-person), the difficulty level of courses, and feedback within specific programs.

Next Steps

While the original impetus for this study was the potential for student comments to enhance the fairness of the assessment of teaching at the University, the analysis of SCP comments reveals significant insights extending beyond the immediate context of instructor evaluation. This study discovered strong evidence that SCP comments are being underutilized as a potential institutional resource to enhance not just individual instructor performance, but also things like program design. In the current political and financial climate—characterized by cuts to international student enrollment and ongoing fiscal constraints—understanding and enhancing the student experience at all levels of the institution is more critical than ever for recruitment and long-term sustainability.

Our research demonstrates that SCP comments contain valuable information that can drive improvements across multiple levels within the institution, including individual courses, programs, and overall teaching strategies. Based on these findings, we recommend adjusting current practices to allow broader access to SCP comments for relevant groups, such as Chairs and Deans. Below, we outline various ways SCP comments can be leveraged to enhance the student learning experience at UW:

Recommendation: Reassess Access to SCP comments

Wider access to student comments for:

Program Improvement

By analyzing SCP comments at a program level, administrators and curriculum developers can identify areas needing revision, additional support, or new or revised course offerings to better meet student needs and expectations.

Inform Course Changes

SCP comments can offer valuable insights into the strengths and weaknesses of existing courses (taken individually, or as part of an academic program), providing a nuanced understanding of how students perceive their learning experiences. This qualitative data can highlight specific areas where a course might excel, such as engaging content or effective teaching strategies, as well as areas needing improvement, like unclear course materials, inadequate pre-requisites, or insufficient support for diverse learning needs.

By analyzing these comments, academic departments can make more informed decisions about curriculum adjustments, including revising course content, updating instructional methods, or integrating new technologies. Additionally, this feedback can inform broader program reviews,

ensuring that the curriculum remains aligned with institutional goals and learning standards. We trust that it goes without saying that SCP feedback is only one piece of information, and that decisions about things like prerequisites are multi-factorial. Our point is simply that this is a useful source of information that the University is currently not making use of.)

For quality assurance purposes, SCP comments could be used as a tool in identifying trends across courses and programs, helping to ensure that the curriculum evolves in response to student needs and emerging educational practices. For example, if students consistently note a lack of real-world application in a particular course, this feedback could prompt a revision of that course to include more case studies, projects, or industry partnerships. Similarly, if feedback reveals that certain pedagogical approaches are particularly effective, these methods can be adopted more widely across the program, enhancing the overall quality of learning.

Leverage SCP Comments for Formative Development

Context for Quantitative SCP Scores & Targeted Professional Development

Granting Chairs access to SCP comments provides context for understanding the quantitative scores students assign on SCPs. These comments often clarify the reasons behind specific scores, as they frequently align with the feedback provided.

Alignment of student feedback with the teaching effectiveness framework provides valuable opportunities for coaching and development for instructors. When Chairs and instructors consider student perspectives on key areas within the TEF, they can pinpoint specific aspects of teaching that are going well as well as areas that may benefit from improvement. Recurring themes in the feedback can reveal areas where an instructor may benefit from additional training or support, such as communication skills, engagement strategies, or course design. Importantly, SCP comments can also help to identify areas where targeted coaching or intervention might be necessary—for example, intervention may be necessary in cases where repeated concerns about diversity and inclusion arise, or when a classroom environment is continually perceived to be hostile (or unsupportive).

Most importantly, alignment between student comments and the TEF framework validates that Waterloo's framework captures key institutional teaching and learning priorities. In fact, given that students are unlikely to have been exposed to the TEF framework, the alignment we observe suggests students recognize, value and desire many priorities outlined in the TEF in their learning experience.

Peer Mentoring and Support

Departments can leverage shared SCP feedback to create peer mentoring opportunities that foster a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement among instructors. By identifying instructors who consistently receive positive comments in specific areas—such as student engagement, innovative teaching methods, or effective communication—departments can match these individuals with colleagues who are seeking to enhance their skills in those same areas. This celebrates quality teaching within a department/Faculty and allows instructors to learn directly from one another's experiences and best practices in a supportive environment. Mentors

can provide practical advice, share successful strategies, and offer constructive feedback, helping their peers to overcome challenges and refine their teaching techniques. For instance, an instructor who is praised for their ability to create an inclusive classroom environment could mentor a colleague looking to better address diversity and inclusion within their courses.

Peer mentoring not only benefits individual instructors by providing personalized, relevant guidance but also contributes to the overall teaching quality within the department. As instructors collaborate and share their insights, effective practices can be disseminated more widely, leading to a more cohesive teaching culture grounded in continuous development. Moreover, this type of mentorship can build stronger professional relationships, creating a community of faculty committed to mutual growth and the continuous improvement of the student learning experience.

Leverage SCP Comments for Course Improvement and Design

Refinement of Course Materials and Methods

As highlighted throughout this report, SCP comments frequently provide detailed suggestions on specific aspects of course materials, teaching methods, and assessments. Comments often reveal areas where students may struggle or where the material may be unclear. For example, if multiple students comment on the complexity of a particular textbook or the lack of clarity in assignment instructions, instructors can respond by simplifying explanations, offering supplementary materials, or providing additional guidance.

Incorporating SCP feedback allows for targeted improvements that directly address student concerns. For instance, if students express that certain lecture formats are disengaging or that they benefit more from active learning strategies, instructors can adjust their teaching methods by incorporating more interactive activities, discussions, or problem-solving activities. Similarly, if assessments are frequently mentioned as being too challenging or misaligned with the course content, instructors can revise the assessments to better reflect the course objectives and ensure they appropriately measure student learning.

SCP comments often reveal student preferences and expectations, providing valuable insights into what keeps them engaged. For example, students might suggest more real-world applications of theoretical concepts or request more opportunities for group work. By responding to these suggestions, instructors can create a more engaging learning environment that resonates with students and fosters deeper understanding.

Continuous Improvement Cycles

Establishing a regular review cycle where SCP comments are systematically analyzed at the department or Faculty level offers substantial potential to strengthen the University's continuous improvement efforts. This process can be integrated into existing Quality Assurance (AQuE) processes, adding a new dimension of data-driven insights. For example, alongside traditional metrics like student performance and course completion rates, SCP comments can provide qualitative data that highlights specific areas for improvement, such as course content, teaching effectiveness, and student engagement.

The TAP office and other Academic Support Units (e.g., Centre for Teaching Excellence) can support instructors by providing training on how to effectively interpret and use SCP feedback. This might include workshops on analysis techniques or guidance on best practices for revising course materials and teaching methods based on student feedback.

Incorporating SCP feedback into regular review cycles ensures ongoing maintenance of courses that are continuously evolving in response to student needs. For instance, departments could establish a biannual review process where SCP comments from all courses are aggregated, analyzed, and discussed at the departmental level. The results of these discussions could then inform department-wide initiatives, such as updating curriculum standards or developing new teaching resources.⁵

This continuous improvement approach aligns with broader institutional goals, such as enhancing student learning experiences, improving learning outcomes, and fostering a culture of excellence in teaching. By systematically using SCP comments to drive course improvements, the institution can demonstrate a commitment to responding to student needs and maintaining high standards of teaching quality.

Institutional Policy and Strategic Planning

Data-Driven Decision Making

Expanding access to SCP comments allows institutional leaders to make more informed, data-driven decisions that influence resource allocation, strategic planning, and policy development. Insights drawn from SCP comments can help guide the prioritization of initiatives aligned with both student needs and institutional goals. For instance, SCP feedback can be instrumental in shaping the development of training programs by CTE, ensuring that these initiatives address the most relevant areas for instructor development.

Engagement and Training with Relevant Groups

Engaging a wider range of relevant groups, including faculty, administrators, and student representatives, in the review and discussion of student feedback can foster a more inclusive and collaborative approach to addressing issues raised by students. Research consistently shows that students are more likely to complete SCP surveys when they perceive their feedback is valued and used to make tangible improvements. For example, a study conducted by the University of British Columbia found that response rates for course evaluations increased significantly when students were informed about how their feedback had been used in the past to improve courses (UBC Student Evaluation of Teaching Response Rate Report, 2010).⁶

⁵ We note that leading such analyses can be an educational leadership opportunity for faculty members who successfully make this one of their specialized skills, thus allowing them to enhance the culture of teaching on campus in ways that the recently revised Policy 77 counts as a teaching activity.

⁶ See <https://seoi.ubc.ca/files/2020/10/Student-Evaluations-of-Teaching-Report-Apr-15-2010.pdf>

Implementation Strategies

To effectively utilize SCP comments for the purposes outlined above, the following strategies should be considered:

Establish Clear Access and Use Guidelines for SCP open-ended Comments

Define who can access SCP comments and for what purposes, ensuring that the data is used ethically and responsibly. Guidelines should also include provisions for addressing abusive comments or comments made in bad faith.

Consider strategies to support faculty in utilization of student comments

Many of our most vulnerable faculty members, who have faced negative or biased SCP comments, avoid reviewing SCP feedback fearing further harm. To address this issue, other institutions have implemented supportive mechanisms to help faculty navigate student evaluations constructively.

For instance, at Queen's University, a collaborative initiative supported by their EDI-R office facilitated a group of racialized female faculty members coming together to review and discuss their course evaluations. This communal approach allowed them to share their reflections and experiences, fostering a supportive network that mitigated the impact of negative feedback.

Similarly, UW could benefit from adopting strategies to protect and empower faculty members when engaging with student comments. The TAP office might partner with EDI-R and the Office of Indigenous Relations to develop tailored support systems. Such systems could include peer review groups, training sessions on interpreting feedback, and dedicated counseling services. These measures would help create a safer and more constructive environment for faculty to utilize student evaluations while minimizing potential harm.

Invest in secure AI software (e.g., MLE by Explorance) for Analysis Purposes & for Pre-Screening Abusive Comments

The volume of SCP comments on a termly basis is significant. Qualitative analysis software can help code and sort comments to highlight pre-defined areas of improvement and concern for instructors (grounded in the TEF), Chairs, Deans etc. to focus on. In addition, qualitative analysis software can facilitate identification of instances where comments are abusive (explicitly racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.), and prevent faculty from being subjected to these types of comments in the first place.

Develop Best Practice for Dealing with Abusive Comments

One important finding from this study is the extreme rarity of genuinely abusive comments targeting instructors. Based on our analysis, the frequency of such comments is exceedingly low—so much so that establishing a review or response committee would likely encounter only a

handful of cases per year, if any. For example, institutions like McGill report dealing with fewer than a handful of these incidents annually, suggesting that while the impact of abusive comments can be serious, they are not a frequent occurrence.

Given this rarity, it is crucial to maintain perspective on the overall value of SCPs. While abusive comments do exist and warrant attention, they are isolated incidents, not reflective of broader trends. The vast majority of student feedback is constructive and valuable for improving teaching and learning experiences. Establishing safeguards to manage the rare occurrence of abusive feedback is important, but these measures should not overshadow the overwhelmingly positive and helpful insights that SCPs provide

To address the issue of abusive comments in SCPs effectively, it is crucial to establish a comprehensive policy or set of best practices. This policy should clearly define what constitutes an abusive comment and outline a structured process for handling such feedback. Key elements to consider include:

Definition of Abusive Comments: Clearly define what constitutes an abusive comment. Some comparator institutions frame this definition narrowly around protected grounds under the human rights code. However, it may be advisable to adopt a slightly broader definition, such as language that is discriminatory, harassing, or personally attacking. For example, comments containing racial slurs, sexist remarks, or personal insults should be categorized as abusive. A clear definition is essential to distinguish abusive feedback from simply negative but constructive criticism.

Detection and Flagging: Implement mechanisms for detecting and flagging potentially abusive comments. If the evaluation software does not automatically identify such comments, investing in software that can do so might be worth considering. Additionally, some institutions allow faculty to flag problematic feedback themselves, a system that could be easily implemented. This could involve adding a feature within the SCP platform or establishing a designated email address for reporting flagged comments.

Review and Resolution Process: Create a transparent process for addressing flagged comments. This process should include:

a) Initial Review: A designated individual or team (e.g., a member of the TAP office, EDI-R, or another relevant body) reviews flagged comments to determine if they meet the criteria for abuse. Comparator institutions take different approaches, with some placing the decision with the Associate Provost for Teaching and Learning (at Waterloo, the AVPA is a comparable role), others involving a member of the EDI-R office, or a small committee comprising academic leadership and a student representative.

b) Faculty Notification: Once a decision is made, faculty should be informed about the status of their flagged comments and given options for addressing their concerns."

Support and Resources: Offer support to faculty members affected by abusive comments. This could include counseling services, workshops on dealing with negative feedback, and peer support groups.

Preventative Measures: Implement preventive measures to reduce the occurrence of abusive comments. This might involve educating students about respectful communication and the impact of their feedback.

Regular Review: Periodically review and update the policy to ensure it remains effective and relevant. This could involve gathering feedback from faculty and students on the process and making necessary adjustments.

By establishing these processes, the University can create a more supportive environment for faculty members, ensuring they can address abusive comments constructively and maintain focus on their professional growth and teaching effectiveness.

Train Relevant Groups on Feedback Utilization

Provide training sessions (i.e., through CTE) for faculty, administrators, and other relevant groups on how to effectively interpret and utilize student comments to drive improvements. This training should focus on best practices for analyzing qualitative data and translating insights into actionable strategies.

Train Students on how to Provide Useful Feedback

Provide training/education for students to provide useful and actionable feedback on their SCPs. Ensure students understand that abusive comments are unacceptable.

Monitor and Evaluate the Impact

Regularly assess the impact of broadening access to student comments on course and program improvements, instructor development, and overall student learning experiences (i.e., TAP Office). Use this evaluation to refine and enhance the feedback utilization process.

Expanding access to SCP comments beyond the course instructor offers significant opportunities for enhancing teaching, course design, program development, and advancing strategic goals at the Faculty level and beyond. By implementing the strategies outlined above, the institution can better leverage student feedback to create a more responsive and effective educational environment.

Appendix A

Student Course Perception Survey

Seven items rated on a 5-point scale with *No Basis for Rating* option and open text

1. The instructor(s) helped me to understand the course concepts.
2. The instructor(s) created a supportive environment that helped me learn (Supportive environments enable students to feel included and valued regardless of any aspect of their identity).
3. The instructor(s) stimulated my interest in this course.
4. The intended learning outcomes were identified (Learning outcomes/objectives articulate what students should be able to know, do, and/or value by the end of a course).
5. The course activities prepared me for the graded work.
6. The intended learning outcomes were assessed through my graded work.
7. The workload demands for this course were...
8. *The most important thing I learned in this course was ...*
9. *What helped me to learn in this course was ...*
10. *What changes, if any, would I suggest for this course?*

Appendix B

Codes

Name	Description	Example(s)
Course	General 'course sucking'	"Nothing. I didn't learn anything in this course." "[Program Name] is a joke" "Get rid of it"
Assignment/midterm/exam complaints	Anything related to assignments	"A little overkill to have 2 midterms. i would rather have weekly or biweekly quizzes instead that are worth less towards my final mark, and then shift the remaining marks to the final."
Grades	Anything referring to grading in general/feedback on assignments	"Its evil to fail a student just because they got less than 50 in final. Get better TA's the marking on the assignments were horrible. I put a negative sign wrong and they gave me a zero and did not change it. Most of them don't know the course well so if my answer is calculated differently than the professors answer even if they are the same I get a zero."
Offering	online/in-person (related to style of delivery <i>outside</i> of instructor control)	
Structure or organization issues	Anything related to course, program structure (e.g., pre-requisite) (**refinement necessary)	"Course notes didn't seem to complement the lecture materials, as instructors used different definitions for terms when they thought the course notes version was insufficient. This makes it harder to review course content. If possible, improved adherence between the course notes and lectures would be helpful." "The tutorials could be structured better, rather than practically reading the solutions."
Syllabus issues	Changes to contractual agreement (specific to syllabus)	"Syllabus was changed spontaneously."
Workload		
Too easy	Not enough	"...however I did not find that it was sufficient to enrich my knowledge or skills."

Too Heavy	Overwhelming, too much work, too difficult	
Instructor	General comments about instructor that don't fit clearly in other areas.	"I do wish that he would lessen the number of times he self-deprecates himself; he's a very smart man, and has a good breadth of knowledge." "Change the instructor"
Instructor comparisons	Instructor comparisons (i.e., instructor Y vs. instructor X)	"Change your deliverable style. Should probably take more notes from [prof name] offering. After talking to many of his students, his offering seemed like a far better deal than this mess of a course."
Engagement	Boring/Waste of time/Useless	"Don't always read directly from the slide, be more engaging." "This course was boring. perhaps it is due to your monotone voice. sometimes it looked like you weren't interested in teaching this course. however, I understand that lots of people in this course aren't interested in this course either, so I don't blame you for acting so unengaging."
Prof Unorganized	Specifically referencing the prof being unorganized	"The professor was extremely unorganized. There were an unreasonable number of deliverables for the course, and they did not help with understanding course content. The professor had very unrealistic expectations of what could be accomplished in class time and what should be expected from students"
Lacks Supportive Environment		
Lack of Guidance	Instructional, office hours, online platforms, prof availability	"Very little weekly office hours, piazza replies were slow and sometimes ignored, follow-ups are also sometimes ignored, often difficult to have questions answered." "Google maybe? there were no places to get help.(Piazza and office hours did not help at all)"
Perceived Inappropriate Behaviour	e.g., yells, racist comments, feedback related, negative attitude	"I do not feel that I learned anything in this course I did not already know, due to the fact that [prof name] allowed for harmful conversations and comments to exist within what was loosely labeled as a sharing circle." "When this issue was addressed on piazza, the [professor name] replied very rudely. It feels like he assumes we have all of the time in the world to spend on this course. We all have at least four or more

		courses, while applying for coops, and participating in extra curricular activities. We were not prepared for the midterm AT ALL. “
Stressful and Anxious Environment	This also includes incidents where students feel intimidated by the professors. Approachability, afraid to ask questions	“[Prof name] still creates an environment where I feel intimidated when I voice an opinion or question something that I would like to examine from a different perspective.” “I was constantly stressed and uncomfortable in this course, largely as a result of the way [prof name] interacted with students and [prof name]. It seemed like there was not a mutual respect between the professors and between the professors and students.”
Lecture Related	Miscellaneous comments about lecture (use of projector, whiteboard tools in classroom)	“Please don't write in the red chalk, it's almost impossible to read (I'm color blind)”
Poor Lecturer	Comments specific to lecture issues	“The lectures were absolutely unbearable. It honestly felt like you were better off reading the textbook or other profs notes after the fact. Need to find a way to make the content in lectures more interesting and more focused on content that is tested.” “Absolutely nothing. The instructor was horrible, and I struggled to comprehend anything said during the course. The course was set up where one-half of the cohort did more than the other half but obtained the same credit. On top of having other concerns and problems, this course became another major stressor in my life.”
Talking Fast or rushed	Referencing speed of lecture (style of lecturer),	“Sometimes (not always) we would go through the content on the slides very fast and then end the class early. I felt that I didn't have time to digest the information, it would've been nice to have a bit more time with each concept.”
Unprepared or mistakes		“the creation of clear lecture slides. most were copied from other American universities. uwaterloo [program name] could do better. also the assignments should be proof read before releasing, there was always multiple updates and corrections being released as we were working on it”

Appendix C

University of Waterloo's Teaching Effectiveness Framework

	Design	Implementation	Learning Experience	Professional Development
Overview	Work at the planning level	From design to action	Student perceptions of their learning experience	Activities supporting growth as an instructor/supervisor
Areas of focus	Planning • Builds course around evident design framework • Clearly defines course-level and activity-level learning objectives • Includes learning material that is relevant and/or current scholarship from the field • Structures material in a logical and coherent order • Includes experiential and/or professional connections, when possible • Sets workload and performance standards appropriate for the course level and topic • Plans a variety of teaching/learning strategies to promote student engagement and deep learning Framework/Alignment • Aligns program expectations, course objectives and learning outcomes with course content, delivery of course and learning activities, and assessments	Communication • Describes and explains material clearly using an appropriate pace • Demonstrates enthusiasm for the subject • Uses technology and/or media effectively Student engagement • Promotes student participation, peer interactions, and engagement with course content • Uses teaching/learning strategies that encourage student engagement and deep learning Variety of teaching strategies and practices • Adapts to evolving classroom contexts • Adopts a range of teaching strategies, methods, and/or modalities that recognize diverse talents and ways of learning Assessments and feedback	Rapport • Is approachable • Builds appropriate rapport with students Responsiveness • Provides opportunities for student contact inside and outside of class • Responds to student inquiries and questions in an appropriate timeframe Engagement and learning • Generates and maintains student interest • Fosters intrinsic motivation • Seeks student input on course learning experience • Provides evidence of student learning Diversity and inclusivity • Promotes inclusivity and diversity by acknowledging variety of experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds	Reflection • Reflects on and assesses teaching and learning practices • Engages in a scholarly approach to teaching and learning through determining and implementing best practices • Takes an iterative approach to continuous improvement and growth. Continuous improvement • Participates in professional development activities • Makes changes to practices and/or develops innovations • Regularly revises or updates course content, assessments, format, or teaching strategies Collaboration, mentorship, and leadership • Leads activities to promote teaching and learning • Interacts and works with colleagues around teaching

	• Develops appropriate and sufficient assessment methods that align with course objectives and outcomes	• Prepares students for assessments by delivering content • Communicates clear expectations and instructions for assessments • Provides performance feedback in a timely manner • Provides directions for student improvement individually or collectively		• Provides and receives mentorship related to teaching • Contributes to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)
Examples of sources of evidence	• Learning objectives • Learning materials • Learning activities • Teaching philosophy	• One-on-one/small group/large group interactions • Synchronous/asynchronous instructional activities	• Learning environment • Interaction with instructor/supervisor	• Refinement of instructional materials and approaches • Workshops and conferences (participation and/or leadership) • Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) • Mentorship with colleagues and/or students