

Faculty Association (FAUW) Response to Course Evaluation Project Report

Submitted January 18, 2017

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the draft Course Evaluation Project Report and commend the team's extraordinary effort and commitment undertaken over a very lengthy period. Our response is informed by scholarly research and policy positions prepared by CAUT and OCUFA, consultation with on-campus experts, and consultation with our membership at large.

The desire of faculty members to engage with this topic resulted in the highest turnout to a FAUW meeting in recent memory. At our December 6 general meeting, our members expressed concerns with both the existing and proposed uses of course evaluations, and gave FAUW a strong mandate to engage with the University on the need to evaluate teaching and courses in a manner that is fair, meaningful, and scientifically sound.

We therefore offer the following feedback on the questions posed by the Course Evaluation Project Team (CEPT):

1. **Cascaded model.** There are substantial differences between disciplines and Faculty cultures at the University of Waterloo, making the value of university-wide questions minimal. In addition, some Faculties have established valuable datasets by using consistent questions over long periods of time. FAUW does not support the imposition of mandatory university-wide questions.
2. **Sample questions.** Before considering specific questions, we believe that it is necessary to agree on the purpose and use of course evaluations. The Report highlights several different ways that they are used, including: (i) reporting student perceptions of the classroom experience and course; (ii) evaluating the course and its design; and (iii) evaluating the instructor and the quality of their teaching.

FAUW's position is that course evaluations can be a valid tool for informing the instructor of student perceptions so that the instructor may work to improve their course and its delivery. We recognize the importance of the second and third purposes, but take the position that course evaluations are not an appropriate mechanism for achieving these purposes.

This is consistent with CEPT's recommended principle six, which states that "evaluation questions should focus on instructional elements that students can reliably evaluate and avoid ones they cannot reliably evaluate." See, for example, the literature provided by the Psychology Department in its response to the Report, which tells us that there is little evidence that questions can be redesigned to be validly used for (ii) and (iii) above.

3. **Access to course evaluation information.** FAUW supports CEPT's recommendation (and the University's official position) that written comments are for the instructor's use only. The impacts of publishing numeric scores will differ greatly across programs and we therefore believe that the Faculties should be responsible for deciding whether or not to make numeric scores available beyond the instructor.
4. **Additional comments.** We recognize and value the importance of student input about their perceptions and experiences within courses in order to support ongoing improvement in

instructional quality. However, our assessment of the current state of knowledge on the topic is that course evaluations incorporate biases that disadvantage equity-seeking groups in ways that cannot be effectively remedied. We reject the Report's claim that "it is possible to reduce the potential for bias" as unsubstantiated.

FAUW's position is supported by a growing body of peer reviewed research, which has been thoughtfully presented and analyzed by survey research experts in the Psychology Department and by the Status of Women & Equity Committee. It is also reflected in two CAUT policy statements and expert reports commissioned by OCUFA.

FAUW Recommendations

FAUW recommends that the University make clear that these instruments are surveys of student experience and abandon misleading "course evaluation" terminology.

FAUW further recommends that student survey data should cease to be used to evaluate teaching for faculty merit evaluation or career progression purposes. We strongly support the CEPT's call for discussion about methods that could be applied in a consistent and systematic manner to evaluate both teaching, and course design and delivery. We look forward to participating in that process.

References

CAUT Policy Statement on Use of Student Opinion Surveys (<https://www.caut.ca/about-us/caut-policy/lists/caut-policy-statements/use-of-student-opinion-surveys>)

CAUT Policy Statement on Evaluation of Teaching (<https://www.caut.ca/about-us/caut-policy/lists/caut-policy-statements/evaluation-of-teaching>)

Department of Psychology Response to the CEPT Report (https://uwaterloo.ca/faculty-association/sites/ca.faculty-association/files/uploads/files/cept_psychfacultystatement.pdf)

OCUFA commissioned two expert reports on Student Evaluations of Teaching in fall of 2016 by Richard L. Freishtat and Philip R. Stark. These reports are not available for public distribution, but we understand that they were provided to and reviewed by CEPT.

Status of Women & Equity Committee Response to the CEPT Report (https://uwaterloo.ca/faculty-association/sites/ca.faculty-association/files/uploads/files/swec_feedback_for_the_cept_report_jan_15th_2017.pdf)