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Faculty Association of
the University of Waterloo

Faculty Association (FAUW) Response to Final Report of the Course Evaluation Project Team

Submitted 30 May, 2017

FAUW would like to thank the Course Evaluation Project Team for their continued time and effort on this project. We recognize the investments made by team members to complete this endeavour. We also recognize many positive changes in the latest version, including the name change to Student Course Perceptions. The report's acknowledgment of potential alternatives to Student Perceptions to evaluate course quality is a welcome and meaningful development.

Nevertheless, FAUW believes many of the issues we have raised remain unaddressed. Most notably, the continued use of a student survey as a teaching evaluation tool for the purpose of merit and promotion remains unchanged. This is despite substantial criticism from key stakeholders, including University of Waterloo experts on psychometrics. We highlight five core unaddressed areas below.

1) Invalidity of Student Surveys to Assess Course Quality:

Student feedback has value for the purpose of formative assessment, to help instructors better understand the experiences of students, and to guide changes to improve those experiences. Current scholarly research shows that student perceptions do not serve as an indication of course quality or teaching effectiveness (Stark & Freishstat, 2014; Uttl et al., 2016). As such, it is inappropriate to use student perceptions as a means to evaluate course quality. If a Student Course Perception Survey is used to evaluate teaching (for purposes of merit and tenure), this directly contradicts accepted research.

2) Student Ratings Contain Unavoidable Bias:

Bias remains an ongoing concern. We appreciate that the final report continues to acknowledge the presence of bias and its role in evaluation in Section 2.5.1, but reject the claim that “...it is possible to reduce the potential for bias, in its many potential forms, through careful design of the instrument.” (p. 6). A growing body of peer-reviewed research demonstrates that bias is pervasive and unavoidable in student perception surveys (Sinclair & Kunda, 2000; Stark, 2015). This is the conclusion arrived at by experts on psychometrics from the psychology department at the University of Waterloo, by the Status of Women & Equity Committee, and is reflected in two CAUT policy statements (CAUT, 2016a; CAUT, 2016b).

The continued acceptance of, and reliance upon, the potential for ‘careful design’ and so-called ‘toolkits’ and ‘orientation and training’ sessions to mitigate bias is concerning as these efforts to reduce bias are unproven. FAUW encourages a critical exploration of issues of bias and supports a baseline investigation into the existence of bias in current UW course evaluation practices before any new system is considered.

3) Using Surveys to Evaluate Teaching for the Purpose of Merit and Promotion:

Given that Student Course Perceptions are invalid measures of course or instructor quality, and contain pervasive and unavoidable bias that disadvantages vulnerable individuals in particular, FAUW asserts that student surveys should be decoupled from any evaluation process involving merit or promotion.

4) Adequacy of eValuate to Remove Abusive Comment Phrases:

While the report states that the use of the online system *eValuate* could be used to identify and remove student comments that are abusive or otherwise in violation of university policy, to date, the use of *eValuate* in this way has not been tested. FAUW encourages a deeper investigation into relying on algorithms or banks of pre-identified phrases or words to identify inappropriate or threatening comments.



5) Potential Privacy Violations with Publication of Survey Results:

Section 3.2.2 states “*summary/overall ratings about individual courses (i.e., core questions) should be made available to all students.*” FAUW rejects this recommendation due to concerns related to instructor privacy, as instructor anonymity cannot be guaranteed for all courses, particularly those courses taught exclusively by one instructor or that are taught infrequently. A published rating of an individual course is effectively a published rating of an individual instructor, except in the case of multi-section courses. Additionally, as discussed in #1 above, student ratings of a course are not related to course quality or teaching effectiveness, making the publication of these ratings of questionable value for students.

Conclusion:

The approach to course evaluation as laid out in the final report runs contrary to scholarly research and should be completely de-coupled from all decisions regarding faculty salary, tenure, promotion and career progression. FAUW sees little evidence of any major changes between the November, 2016 report and the April, 2017 revisions, despite consistent feedback from, and concerns expressed by stakeholders impacted by this proposed system. The report leaves the impression that the views for and against these approaches to course evaluation are relatively balanced. As the many submissions made to the committee in December make clear, this is not the case (<https://uwaterloo.ca/associate-vice-president-academic/information-instructors/course-evaluation-project>). Student course evaluations are wholly unsupported by CAUT, OCUFA and members of the UW psychology department who, in their submission to the committee in November, described the ways in which they harm both instructors and student learning.

As a concluding point, we wish to underline the statement on page 1 that, “*the team strongly advocates for a subsequent university team being struck that continues the discussion about how methods such as peer evaluation, teaching dossiers and other approaches can be applied in a consistent, systematic manner campus-wide to evaluate teaching, course-design and delivery*”. As the current CEPT mandate comes to a



close, FAUW encourages this new team to take a broader look at potential instruments and approaches that reach beyond biased student evaluations of course quality or teaching effectiveness, and provide true actionable feedback to instructors to improve both their teaching and student learning outcomes. We have a wealth of expert advice available on this campus, particularly members of the Psychology Department. We encourage future course evaluation efforts to work closely with these experts and to subsequently act on their recommendations.

References

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