On-line, on-target and on-message Course evaluation enhancements at a regional university

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Abstract

CQUniversity has seen a step change in its response rates for course evaluations, rising from 3.8% in term 1 2010 to 48 % in term 2 2012, based on a current target of a response rate of 50% in all courses. This target aims to enable the University to hear about the learning experience of the majority of its students across all courses and offerings.

Student evaluation of courses, termed 'course evaluation' at CQUniversity, is an essential component of course operation. Course evaluations provide information to assist academic staff in their enhancement of the development and delivery of courses. They provide the University with feedback from its key stakeholders, with the aim of providing a learner-centric view across all courses and programs, at all locations and in all modes of delivery. Without feedback from students on their learning experience, academic staff would be missing a vital component in assessing the effectiveness of course delivery, from the perspective of the learner.

Course evaluation is undertaken for every offering of a course, in each term and year and at every location, including distance education. The mode of delivery of the course evaluation survey is online, through the learning management system (Moodle), through a customisation of the Moodle 'survey' software. An integral component of the process of course evaluation is that staff provide a response to students on enhancements that have been made as a result of student feedback as part of the process of annual course enhancement reporting, closing the feedback loop with students via the course profile. This ensures that past and future students can be aware of enhancements that have been made as a result of student feedback.

A whole-of-University engagement strategy underpinned by a consolidated approach to course evaluations from Term 2, 2010 has been successfully embedded in practice across CQUniversity, with substantially enhanced response rates. An important aspect of the approach has been the automated addition of the course evaluation survey link within the learning management system, so that students and staff are aware of its consistent location across all courses.

Key words: course, evaluation, response rate, targets

Introduction

The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley Review) in 2008 asked: *How good is the teaching and learning in Australia's higher education institutions?* Since the Bradley Review, there have been numerous discussion papers and reports regarding performance measurement instruments and reporting such as through the funding agreements, portfolios and the *MyUniversity* website. Surveys and evaluation instruments have become a proxy measure of quality. Students experience of their course and learning satisfaction is crucial in providing valuable information to the University, from the perspective of the learner (Nair & Shah 2011).

CQUniversity is a member of the Regional Universities Network, offering courses at 12 locations across Australia. The University prides itself on being one of the nation's most inclusive universities, offering higher education to 20,000 students, with around 45% of the domestic cohort being from low Socio-Economic Status background and 68% regional and remote, who would not otherwise have the opportunity to experience higher education. Of the total student enrolments in 2012, 29 % are international, many being taught at the University's metropolitan campuses, through collaboration with CMS staff.

Academic programs are offered across a broad range of disciplines and qualification levels including enabling, undergraduate and postgraduate coursework and higher degree research programs. Delivery of programs is offered face-to-face on campus or via distance education and the University's aim is to provide equivalent learning outcomes and appropriate academic standards for all students, regardless of their location or the mode of delivery. CQUniversity offers courses across three terms per year and has a high enrolment of domestic students in part-time distance education.

The practice of administering course evaluations has been in place since March 2001 and is governed by specific policy and procedures. Student evaluation of courses, termed 'course evaluation', is an essential component of course operation. Course evaluations provide the University with feedback from students, with the aim of providing a learner-centric view across all taught courses, at all locations and in all modes of delivery.

The evaluation of teaching is an essential activity within the teaching practice of each member of academic staff and of academic Performance Review, Planning and Development (PRPD). The evaluation of teaching is covered by a separate policy and procedure to that of course evaluation, and is the joint responsibility of members of academic staff and their line managers.

In 2009, under the leadership of the newly appointed Vice-Chancellor the University embarked on a Renewal Plan which created a sense of re-invigoration and purpose. Organisational restructures resulted in the establishment in 2010 of the Office of Learning and Teaching with the appointment of senior executive

leadership with a focus on an enhancement-led student-centred approach to learning and teaching. Course evaluation is regarded as a central feature of such an approach.

The CQUniversity Renewal Plan focussed on core activities and provided performance targets for aspects of learning and teaching, including course evaluations. The impending audit in 2010 by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) required the University to reconsider the recommendations of the Report of an Audit of Central Queensland University by AUQA in February 2006.

The 2006 AUQA Report of an Audit of CQUniversity recommended: "*that Central Queensland University review its student evaluations of teaching and course systems with a view to maximising their strategic benefits*". In Term 1, 2006, Academic Board approved a move from paper-based surveys to online, with the link to the survey being distributed to students via email. From Term 2, 2006, online questions were provided through the student portal website, with quantitative results available on the Statistics and Analysis website. A 2006 review led to amendment of the survey questions in May 2007, informed by outcomes from the Accessing the Student Voice (CEQuery) Project (Scott 2005).

This paper presents a critically reflective case study of embedding a culture of practice at CQUniversity that has enhanced the course evaluation outcomes for the mutual benefit of students and the University.

On-line

In 2009, teaching evaluations were implemented through the LMS and course evaluations through a customised website. Student response rates for course evaluations averaged 4.7% in Term 2, 2009. To counter this low response rate for course evaluations, two different approaches were trialled as follows:

1. A pilot evaluation of a course evaluation survey embedded within Moodle was trialled in over 40 courses in Term 1, 2010. Students were asked to indicate their level of agreement based on one quantitative question (overall satisfaction with course quality) using a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (1 being strongly disagree to 5 being strongly agree) and one qualitative question which enabled students to provide additional feedback in text format. This pilot also focused on closing the feedback loop, with staff within the trial providing a response back to students via their course Moodle site. The response rate for the pilot courses was promising, at 24%, in contrast to the non-embedded survey, which achieved 3.8% response rate.

2. A combined course and teaching evaluation was concurrently piloted at the University's metropolitan campuses with CMS staff. While the questions were more complex than those within the Moodle pilot, the outcomes were presented in a readily understandable format, enabling detailed comparison and benchmarking with other courses/staff/metropolitan campus locations.

As a result of the pilot evaluation in Moodle, the student evaluation of courses policy was amended in October 2010 to evaluate each course offering, in each term and year, online through Moodle. Throughout 2011, CQUniversity's Office of Learning and Teaching continued to develop and revise strategies to enhance the course evaluation message. These strategies included a 'back to basics' approach to the development of the whole-of-University survey; the inclusion of six questions

additional to the overall satisfaction question, focussing on key themes in student feedback; plus the separation of text-based responses for 'best aspects' and 'needs improvement' (in line with the Australian Graduate Survey Course Experience Questionnaire); and regular reporting of course evaluation response rates, satisfaction score and comments to staff and students. During this period, weekly response rates were monitored and an automated 'pop-up' was introduced in Moodle in week 3 of the survey period – this 'pop-up' appeared each time a student logged in to Moodle encouraging them either to (i) complete the survey, (ii) postpone until later or (iii) provide feedback only for the overall satisfaction question. From time-based monitoring, a six-week evaluation period was determined to be adequate to provide academic staff with information close to the end of term, just before the certification of grades.

Course evaluations are completely anonymous and students are informed that individual attribution of student comments is not provided to staff. To maintain anonymity, the survey has been set up in Moodle to prevent the release of responses from any location with a single enrolled student, to ensure anonymity in relation to campus location.

On-target

The Renewal Plan is supported by a Strategic Plan and associated performance targets that are revised on an annual basis. In 2011, the course evaluation targets were set at a 30% response rate and an overall satisfaction score of 3.5. To consolidate the embedding of an internal evaluation culture the targets for 2012 were raised to 50% response rate and an overall satisfaction score of 4.0.

A growing number of individual courses are meeting the University's performance targets of 50% response rate and 4.0 overall satisfaction score. Figure 1 illustrates the positive change in response rates since term 1 2010, when the response rate was around 4%.
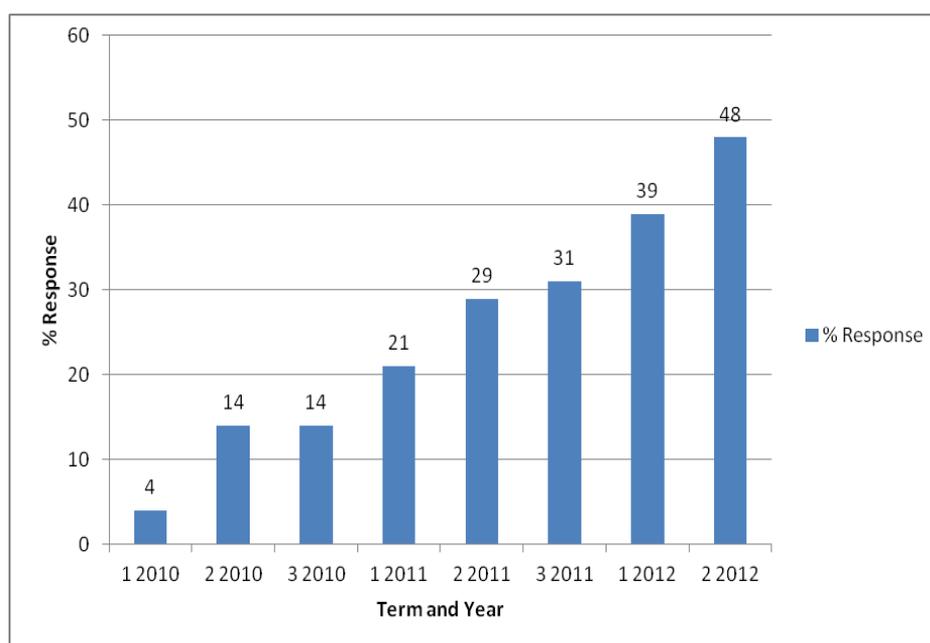

Figure 1: *Course evaluation response rates (%) per term and year 2010-2012*

Within the Office of Learning and Teaching, monitoring of the evaluation process and outcomes has allowed many myths to be dispelled. Some myths dispelled included: that there is a negative relationship between class size and response rate or between class size and overall satisfaction, that one cohort of students responds more or less than another, or that students are more likely to respond after results are made available (the latter was confirmed by keeping the survey open until after certification of grades, with only a small number of additional responses and with no change in overall satisfaction scores). Figures 2 and 3 shows that there is no strong relationship between student enrolments and response rate or overall satisfaction score with a low regression coefficient in both cases.
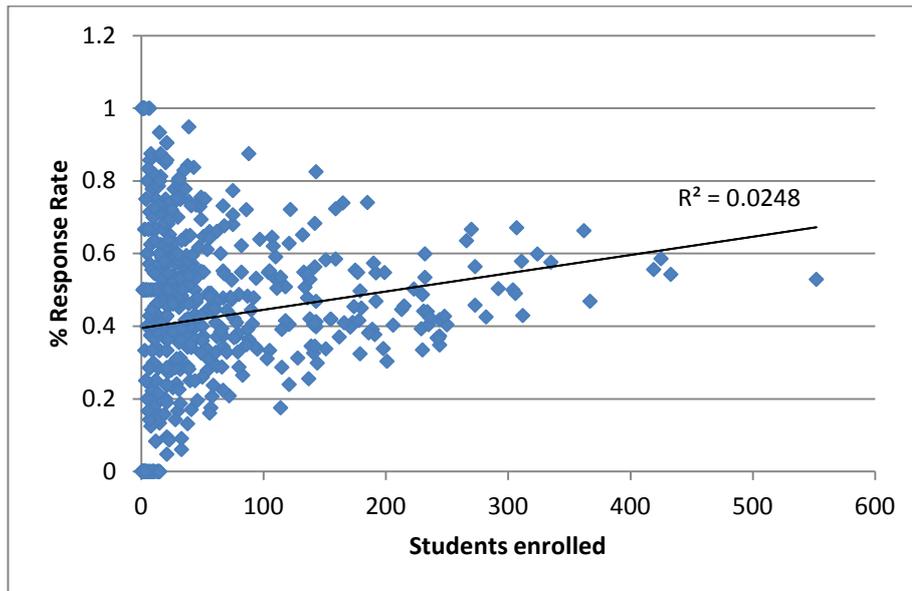

Figure 2*: Scatter graph: Linear regression of variables – response rate (%) and students enrolled for term 2 2012*
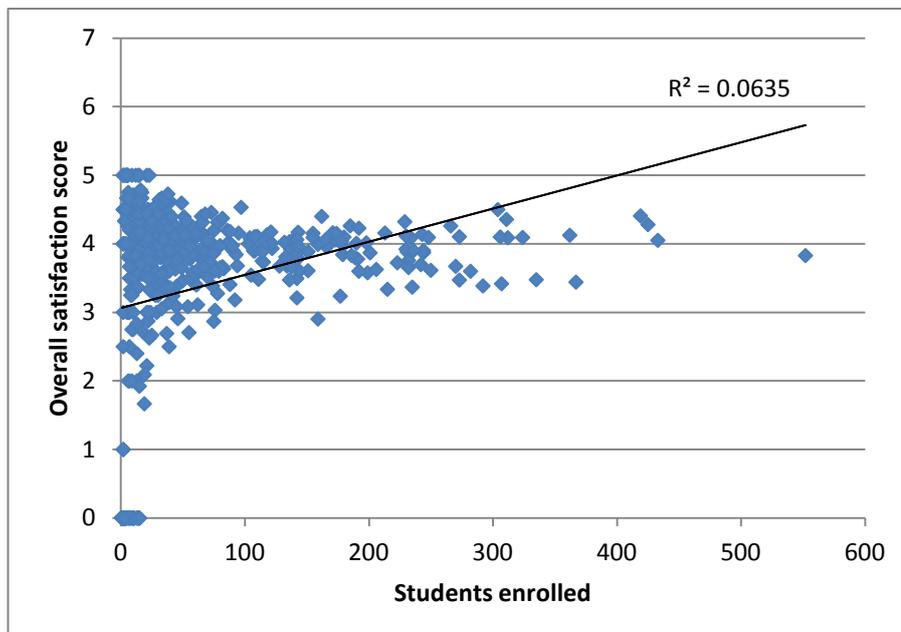

Figure 3*: Scatter graph: Linear regression of variables – Overall satisfaction score and students enrolled for term 2 2012*

Figure 4 demonstrates that there is little variation in response rates of the various cohorts of students, with those on Metropolitan campuses showing a slightly lower response than the other three cohorts.
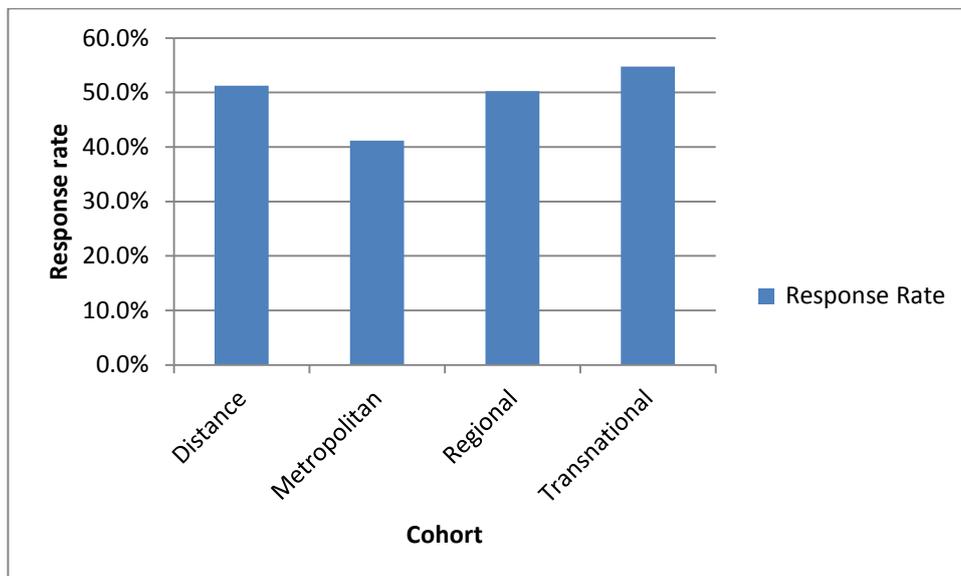

Figure 4: *Response rate (%) by cohort*

Teaching staff are able to view their student feedback through the Moodle course site at the close of the course evaluation period. Quantitative and qualitative reports, once validated, are made available through the University's Course Evaluation Dashboard and Staff Portal. These dashboards enable staff to view course evaluation data at different levels, from course through to School/Faculty/Campus. The quantitative data for course evaluations are also available to staff and students through their respective portals, using a purpose-built 'course evaluations' portlet. The Course Evaluations Dashboard is also used to focus on performance against targets with a specific tab in the Dashboard to report on those courses that either (i) have or (ii) have not met the course evaluation targets set out in the 2012 Corporate Plan (50% response rate and 4.0 overall satisfaction).

Text comments are available in Moodle for the teaching team, and are also sent to Deans of School, or equivalent, so that they can have oversight of the full range of comments across all courses within the School. The Office of Learning and Teaching has provided analysis of the text comments at the University/School level using CEQuery, to enable staff to see common themes from the text-based responses.

An integral component of the process of course evaluation is that staff provide a response to students. Enhancements that have been made as a result of student feedback ('closing the feedback loop') are provided through the Annual Course Enhancement Report and the text within this section of the Report is published in the course profile when the course is next offered. Following consideration and approval through the Program and Faculty committees, in the event of changes to academic outcomes or resource requirements as a result of student feedback being identified in the Report, a Course Change Proposal must be submitted by the Course Coordinator for approval, thereby ensuring appropriate academic governance of the process.

Through the course evaluation and Annual Course Enhancement Reports, students are able to see the contribution that their feedback plays in the review and improvement of educational practices. It also provides an opportunity for students to be actively engaged with the learning and teaching process at the University. Ramsden (1998) notes that: '*the insights which results from hearing students enables staff to effect enhancements in learning ... to benefit the students*.'

On-message

A comprehensive communications strategy evolved during the process of addressing course evaluations in 2010-2011 and as part of the broader engagement of staff and students in the strategic direction of the University. The Vice-Chancellor implemented a blog and twitter, and commenced an 'I'm All Ears' tour of all campuses, with online web sessions for distance students; these sessions enabled students to engage in dialogue with the Vice-Chancellor, which emphasized the importance of hearing the student voice. This communication strategy was supplemented with student newsletters and articles, posters and videos. The senior leadership also encouraged staff to view student feedback as an opportunity to engage in the enhancement of their courses and programs at CQU, as part of the process of addressing one of the recommendations of the 2011 AUQA Report of an audit of CQUniversity, namely: '*AUQA recommends that Central Queensland University foster a culture of reflective practice among academic and administrative staff to enhance a culture of continuous quality improvement*.' This recommendation was complementary to the (urgent) affirmation that '*AUQA affirms Central Queensland University's plans to address student evaluation instruments and the low response rates, and to make strategic use of the resulting data to achieve quality learning and teaching improvements*' enabling the University to maximise the benefit of the 2010 AUQA audit through an on-going process that focussed on course evaluation and reflective practice.

A poster series to appeal to students was developed in consultation with the Divisions of Corporate Communications and Marketing to engage students but also to be informative. The poster series included 'Have your say', 'What you said' and 'What we did'. The language was also consistent with that used in the survey, where the link to the course evaluation was 'badged' as a 'big red button' displaying 'Have your say', as shown in Figure 5.
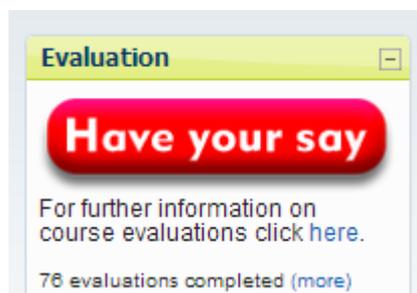

Figure 5: *The link to the Moodle survey for course evaluations*

Students are offered incentives to participate in the course evaluation survey, with a prize draw for an iPad and iTunes vouchers. In response to concerns about potential bias to responses resulting from personal gain as a result of participation in the incentive prize draw, the Vice-Chancellor has approved the option of students nominating their place in the incentive prize draw being allocated to one of two nominated charities from term 3 2012 onwards. This option will embed

corporate social responsibility and may reduce some of the concerns around offering personal incentives.

Students and staff are informed of the course evaluation survey each term through the Office of Learning and Teaching. The Moodle Technical Support Team insert the course evaluation 'Have your say' (big red button) link into all Moodle courses. There is an additional link under the button (see Figure 2) that directs students to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on course evaluations along with the count of completed evaluations as a 'running total'. The Vice-Chancellor has also recorded a short video explaining the value of providing effective feedback and this is included within the survey in Moodle.

The Office of Learning and Teaching provides resources to staff to support increasing response rates and closing the loop. These include:

- Course Evaluations 'Ten Top Tips' – a single A4 sheet that gives practical advice on how to improve response rates, etc.

- Short videos highlighting strategies that some CQUniversity course co-ordinators have taken to help maximise either response rates or overall satisfaction.

- A range of related information, including journal articles and references.

- Individual support and further analysis, on request.

Student evaluations form one of the Vice-Chancellor's priorities for Engaged Learning and Teaching within the Corporate Plan. Listening to and responding to the student voice was a priority for 2011, and during 2012 the priority has been to hear and use the student voice to further enrich the curriculum and to close the loop through the quality enhancement process. This approach emphasises the genuine value provided through the contributions that students make to learning and teaching through their feedback.

Reflection

It is probably worthwhile to consider the course evaluation journey, in terms of the reasons for the increase in percentage response rates on a term-by-term basis, shown in Figure 1.In term 2 2012, 24% of courses are met the University's 2012 performance targets of 50% response rate and 4.0 overall satisfaction score. Teaching teams within courses/programs/campuses are encouraged to discuss what works to improve response rates for courses with low percentage responses, sharing their good practice with those whose courses have achieved the target, and enabling the dialogue to be framed in the positive context of sharing good practice rather than seeing the non-achievement of targets in a negative light. Discussions with course coordinators whose courses have high response rates indicate that the process begins on day 1 of week 1, and involves on-going interaction and dialogue with students, which then results in a high response in end-of-term course evaluations. Actively seeking and using feedback as part of the process of scholarly reflective practice, and explaining this to students, is also part of the process of achieving positive outcomes. Examples of good practice can be included in Annual Course Enhancement Reports which can then be shared with colleagues during program meetings, as a key part of collegial reflective practice. The data shown in Figure 1 point to the success of the process of embedding course evaluations as a key aspect of on-going academic practice for students and staff at CQUniversity.

The strong increase in response rates in course evaluations from 2010 to 2012 has enabled the University to change the conversation from one around the problems of the earlier survey (staff views included: 'it's broken' and student views included: 'no-one cares') to one where response rates can be viewed as a proxy measure of how student engage with the course. The University has effectively engaged the students as change agents in this process, through the work of the Vice-Chancellor and other staff, including all Course Coordinators.

Conclusion

CQUniversity's commitment to embedding an internal evaluation culture has been demonstrated by the 'back to basics' approach of the development of a whole-of-university survey embedded in its learning management system, via active leadership and through engaging in dialogue with staff and students. A reciprocal relationship now exists between the University and its students that will require continued support and nurturing in order to continue and extend the good work of the past two years. This on-going process is fully in alignment with the strategic direction of the University into the future, with its commitment to engagement and partnerships that result in mutual benefit (Engagement Strategy 2011 -2014). In terms of what other institutions might learn from this experience, three key messages are:

1. A whole-of-University approach is effective, involving the Vice-Chancellor, senior executives, staff and students, with the Office of Learning and Teaching and Information Technology Directorate playing an enabling role.

2. An embedded approach through the Learning Management System ensures that course evaluation is not seen as an 'add on' by staff and students.

3. An on-going focus on the value of student feedback, with staff closing the loop as part of the annual operational process of course delivery ensures the sustainability of the system.

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