Student Engagement the Key to Better Response Rates

Chenicheri Sid Nair, Phillip Adams, Stefano Ferraiuolo & Andrew Curtis
Centre for Higher Education Quality, Monash University, Vic 3800, Australia

Abstract

Monash University has experienced a steady decline in its response rate to the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and Course Experience Survey (CEQ) since the late 1990's. In 2005, Monash posted an all-time low in its response rate of 36.6% for the GDS and 26.5% for the CEQ. With much riding on this for Monash, in January 2006, a review of the process was undertaken that resulted in changing strategies so as to improve response rates. For any evaluation data to be of value an important prerequisite is that response rates are sufficiently high to be representative of the student cohort. With results from evaluations playing an increasingly critical role in quality assurance and improvement activities in Australian universities, there is increasingly mounting pressure to better response rates, if not to simply maintain survey response rates. Drawing from the changes made to the collection of data for the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) at Monash, this paper provides practical applications that promote an increase in participation rates. The results show that student engagement and the need to recognize the needs of the cohort surveyed are some of the key elements needed to achieve effective participation of non respondents. The end product of this exercise is that response rates for the CEQ have increased by 100% to just over 53% with GDS responses increasing by 50% to approximately 55%.

Keywords: *response rate, engagement, evaluation*

Introduction

In more recent times many providers in the higher education sector have realised that they need to re-evaluate their approach by placing greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of their stakeholders (eg. Cheng & Tam 1997; Griffin, Coates, McInnis & James, 2003; Ramsden, 2005). One way many universities have approached the process of better understanding and meeting the needs of their students is through student evaluations which serve numerous purposes. These include: diagnostic feedback to faculties about their teaching that will aid in the development and improvement of teaching; useful research data to underpin further design and improvements to units, courses, curriculum and teaching; a measure of teaching effectiveness that may be used in administrative decision making, e.g., performance management and development appraisal; useful information to current and potential students in the selection of units and courses; and, a useful measure for judging quality of units and courses increasingly becoming tied into funding. The first two purposes are recognised universally as the basis for many evaluations (Fraser 1998; Nair & Fisher, 2001; Webb, 1994). The latter three purposes are relatively new to many universities especially in the Australian context. For Monash the usefulness of measures related to the quality of the units, courses, programs and student experience are reflected in the values, aspirations, strategic documents and the nature of the organisation (Monash University, 2004, 2005).

For evaluation data to be of value an important prerequisite is that response rates are sufficiently high to be representative of the student cohort. Clearly evaluation data have become a critical function of institutional research and planning offices in most higher educational institutional. Senior administrators often use evaluation data for informed decision-making. With results from evaluations playing an increasingly critical role in quality assurance and improvement activities in Australian universities, there is increasingly mounting pressure to better response rates, if not to simply maintain survey response rates.

Further, the importance of a good response rate has been recently highlighted at the national level with the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) which presently is a critical component to qualifying to the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF). The purpose of the LTPF is to reward higher education providers that best demonstrate excellence in learning and teaching. The funding is approximately $250 million allocated over 3 years (2006-2008). The CEQ/GDS is a national survey, which is mailed to every student completing an undergraduate qualification in Australia. CEQ/GDS are administered in two cycles each year, once in October and then again in April. This paper focuses on strategies that were employed to increase response rates for these surveys.

Research has shown that there are numerous factors that could affect response rates. Some of these factors affecting responses are using multiple contacts, survey length, incentives, salience, confidentiality, survey sponsorship, engagement of students and deadlines (Coates, 2006; Dillman, 2000, Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman, 2004; James & Bolstein, 1990, Porter, 2004).
Literature in evaluation has clearly established that there some variability in response rates with mailed questionnaires and this is dependent on the population, the questionnaire and procedures (eg. Heberlin & Baumgartner, 1978). Research work has also consistently shown that there is an increased response rate with multiple contacts in this case not only by multiple mail outs but by personal contact via the telephone (Heberlin & Baumgartner, 1978; Coates, Tilbrook, Guthrie, & Bryant, 2006).

There is also considerable research that indicates that response rates are falling but also that participants are becoming more disengaged with surveys (eg., Coates, 2006, Porter, 2004). Coates (2006) and Porter (2004) research suggests that students are more likely to participate if they feel that their feedback contributes in a meaningful way. This would encompass not only student perception that their voice is critical and provides valuable information to the institution but that the feedback they provide is acted upon by the institution.

Significance
For Monash, improving response rates for CEQ is critical. Since the late 1990s the University has experienced a steady decline in its response rate to the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and Course Experience Survey (CEQ). In 2005, Monash posted an all-time low in its response rate of 36.6% for the GDS and 26.5% for the CEQ. With much riding on this for Monash, in January 2006, a review of the process was undertaken that resulted in changing strategies so as to improve response rates. This paper focuses on

- how a large institution such as Monash approached the falling response rate for the CEQ and GDS,
- the effectiveness on student engagement in response rates, and
- the possible outcomes to sustain effective response rates.

Methodology
In line with research, prior to the administration of the GDS/CEQ surveys, there was a pre-survey planning to develop strategies to better engage students with the survey. To this effect, a Call Centre was established with the intention of contacting non-respondents. The approach utilized at the Call Centre was a follow-up phone call 2-3 weeks after the mail out. In the process students were asked whether they had completed the survey and then provided with the options to complete the survey over the phone, be sent another survey copy, or complete the survey online. No messages were left on

answering machines nor were messages left with other people if the student was not available. A combination of landline and mobile numbers were called. If no answer was received in the first instance, up to three calls were made to each available number to try to make contact. The Call Centre operated Monday to Thursday between 4 pm and 8 pm. Friday and weekend calls were not included as these were particularly seen as social times and it was an attempt to reduce any "ill-will" (real or perceived) from people receiving survey calls.

A total of 3329 students received their initial mailing in mid-December 2005. The Call Centre commenced operations in mid February 2006 and continued through to the end of March 2006. During this period 2692 non-respondents were contacted via the telephone. During this time a subsequent mailing was made to non-respondents. As the mailing and calls progressed the calling lists were updated to account for those that had responded.

Findings and Discussion

Of the 2674 non respondents the call centre could only make contact with 50.3% (1345) of former students. The remaining 40.7% students had not updated their student details to give up-to-date phone numbers. These students were re-mailed the survey in an attempt to get more responses. Of those that were contacted by the call centre just over 20% of respondents indicated for one or more reason that they were not interested in completing the survey. Approximately 42.8% of respondents preferred to complete the survey online while just 21% asked that the survey be re-mailed to them for completion. The statistics show that just about 16% of participants who were contacted actually completed the survey over the phone.

Table 1: Data from Call Centre

	Number	%
Survey completed	216	16.1
Survey mailed	282	21.0
No further contact requested	272	20.1
Email web link	575	42.8
Total number called	1345	100

The results provide an insight as to why engagement is integral to better response rates. Response rates for the first time in many years are approaching 55% for Monash with the use of the simple methodology outlined. The findings can be broken down to a few critical factors which in essence define student engagement in the context of this paper. These factors are the need for pre-notification so that students have some knowledge of the upcoming survey, personal contact to non-respondents to ensure importance of participants in the survey process, explanation of the value of student feedback to the university, motivation to complete the questionnaire and the preferred methodology to complete the survey.

A key finding from the calls was that students were not aware of the survey though they had received the questionnaire. The comments from students suggest four possible reasons. First they had not read the cover letter sent with the questionnaire thinking that this was not important as they had parted company with the institution. Second, students had simply forgotten about the survey due to work and personal commitments. Third, student reported the deadline on the covering letter that was forwarded to them with the questionnaire implied that they had missed their chance to give feedback once this timeline had passed. Finally, students had clearly enunciated that they had no idea prior to their departure from the University that they would be asked to give their feedback on their course experience. This seems to be in line with recent research that to better response rate pre-notification would be of benefit (Coates, Tilbrook, Guthrie, & Bryant, 2006). Such a strategy is now part of Monash's approach where an information sheet is planned for distribution prior to students leaving the university as well as a short letter sent to the students about the questionnaire prior to an official mail out.

Sustaining students' interest in the survey is also integral to the completion of the questionnaire. Just over 12% of students reported that they had no knowledge nor had they been informed of the importance of the survey to the university, that their feedback was valued or that substantial funding was tied into to their feedback. Once again, this reinforces that communication is an essential tool in transforming non-respondents to respondents. Example of comments are:

> *Would like to know what is so important about this survey and what is the relevance of them answering it.*
>
> *What purpose does this survey have and why do you want me to do this.*

An interesting finding was that there were repeated requests (25.4% of students) for rewards in return for completing the questionnaire. Research on incentives for improving response rates are varied with some indicating a moderate increase in response rate and in others recognizing that the type of incentive (eg an additional mark in the unit) is the key to participation (Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman,. 2004; Porter, 2004). Examples of such comments made by students on incentives are:

> *What's in it for me? Do you offer any incentives?*
>
> *What is the university going to give me for my feedback since I have just spent a fortune on my course.*
>
> *Do I get anything for my time for doing your survey.*

The feedback suggests the students are expecting some type of reward in return for their time to complete a questionnaire. However, this trend seems less apparent for internal questionnaires when students are progressing through the course. In the unit evaluation process paper-based surveys average around the mid 50% whereas web-based survey have an overall average of 35% with some faculties reporting as high as 84% (Bennett, Nair & Wayland, 2006). The statements made by students on receiving some type of reward support research literature on the changes in behaviour patterns of those born around the 1980s the so called 'Y Generation', one finding being the expectation of having something in return to the individual (Sheahan, 2004; Morton, 2002). This finding also suggests that with incentives better response rates could be achieved especially among those who are reluctant to complete the survey (the group that requested that they not be contacted further regarding the survey).

Students also reported that the personal contact resulting from the calls added a dimension of importance that their feedback was valued by the institution. This factor alone seemed to provide encouraging returns from students.

Finally, though the personal contact is important in the process, the methodology chosen by over 42% of non-respondents contacted in completing the survey provides further evidence as to the changing trends in collecting survey data. Of the 42% who opted for this form of survey completion approximately 50% completed the online survey in the first week that the web link emailed. This tendency to complete surveys via the web is a characteristic of the 'Y generation' who are very tech savvy and are mainly communicated through the email and instant messaging system (Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil, 2004; Sheahan, 2004).

Conclusion

This paper has explored why engagement is a primary consideration for maximizing response rates. Engagement in terms of the paper includes not only multiple contacts (pre-notification, multiple mailouts, emails, telephone contacts) with participants but the need to communicate appropriate information to participants (eg explanation of the value of student feedback to the university) but also to understand the needs of the cohort that is sampled (Bennett, Nair & Wayland, 2006; Morton, 2002). Morton's (2002) work clearly shows that "Traditional marketing doesn't work with these young consumers who have an aversion to status quo."

Further this paper also presents practical applications to increase participation. One factor that has been debated in institutions for the decline of response rates has been the over-surveying of students, the so-called 'survey fatigue' syndrome. Research in this area is varied but clearly suggests that a major influence on responses is the student belief that their feedback is a contribution that is recognized by the university (Coates, 2006; McCrindle, 2003; Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004).

An important consideration that seems to be arising is that in a survey that seeks participation from students when they have parted with an institution is the recognition of the needs of the cohort. In this case students from so called 'Y Generation' have clearly responded that there is a need to reward them for their service to the institution. Though there has been considerable debate on the inclusion of incentives the findings here suggests that the cohort drives the agenda as to the need for rewards. However, there was no indication by students as to the type of rewards they were expecting in exchange for completing the questionnaire. Equally the data suggests that there must be recognition for the preferred mode by which this generation prefers to complete their surveys, via the web interface.

Clearly the results suggest that there is a critical need to understand the needs of the respondents and how they will perceive and react to a survey. Inclusive in this recipe is the need to establish a link between evaluation, quality and engagement thus embedding in the mindset of students that their feedback provides valuable information that the institution will act upon to meets the needs of the students. This is best summarized by the McCrindle (2003): "Organisations must do more than just observe the changes—they must understand the changes. The ever-changing customer is today more empowered, informed and educated.

Biographies

Chenicheri Sid Nair

Dr Nair is a Quality Adviser with the Centre of Higher Education Quality (CHEQ) at Monash University. Currently, he heads up the evaluation section for the Centre. His research has been in the area of quality in the Australian Higher Education system and classroom and school environments.

Phillip Adams

Phillip joined Monash University's Centre for Higher Education Quality as Evaluations Manager in 2006. He has had a variety of roles, in the public and private sector, in project management, computer system design, computer programming, and secondary teaching.

Stefano Ferraiuolo

Stefano has over 20 years of business experience spanning in the fields of Information Technology, Real Estate and Hospitality, and is currently Evaluations Officer at CHEQ. Stefano is an advocate of professionalism and quality customer service that continually strives to attain the best in all tasks of work and life.

Andrew Curtis

Andrew has a technical IT background and has been involved in IT consulting for small to mid-size clients in industries such as manufacturing, real-estate, government, and finance. Currently he is employed as an Evaluations Officer in the evaluation unit at CHEQ, Monash University.

Address for correspondence

Chenicheri Sid Nair,
Centre for Higher Education Quality,
Monash University,
Melbourne,
Australia.
Email: Sid.nair@adm.monash.edu.au

References

Bennett, L., Nair,C.S. & Wayland, C. (2006). Love it or Hate it: Participation a Key Ingredient in Closing the Loop. *Paper presented at the 2006 Australian Universities Quality Forum*, Perth, Australia

Cheng, Y. C. and Tam, M. M. (1997). “Multi-models of quality in education.” *Quality Assurance in Education*, 5, 22-31.

Coates, H. (2006). Student Engagement in Campus-based and Online Education: University connections. London: Taylor and Francis.

Coates, H., Tilbrook, C., Guthrie, B. & Bryant, G. (2006). Enhancing the GCA National Surveys: An examination of critical factors leading to enhancements in the instrument, methodology and process. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training. (in press).

Dillman, D.A. (2000). Mail and Internet Surveys: The tailored Design Method. New York: Wiley.

Dommeyer, C.J., Baum, P., Hanna, R.W. and Chapman, K.S. (2004). “Gathering faculty teaching evaluations by in-class and online surveys: their effects on response rates and evaluations.” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29(5), 611-623.

Fraser, B.J. (1998). Science learning environments: Assessment, effects and determinants. In B.J. Fraser & K.G. Tobin (Eds.), *The international handbook of science education*, pp. 527-564, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.

Griffin, G., Coates, H., McInnis, C., & James, J. (2003). “The development of an extended course experience questionnaire.” *Quality in Higher Education*, 9(3), 259-266.

Heberlein, T.A. & Baumhartner, R. (1978). Factors affecting response rates to mailed questionnaires: A Quantitative analysis of the published literature. *American Sociological Review*, 43(4), 462.

James, J.M., & Bolstein, R. (1990). Large Monetary Incentives and their Effect on Mail Survey Response Rates. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 54(3), 346-361.

Jonas-Dwyer, D & Pospisil, R (2004). In 'Transforming knowledge into wisdom : holistic approaches to teaching and learning. In F Sheehy and B Stauble (Eds.), the proceedings of the 2004 Annual

International Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), 194-205. Milperra NSW : Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.
McCrindle, M. (2003). Understanding Generation Y. available at: http://www.learningtolearn.sa.edu.au/Colleagues/files/links/UnderstandingGenY.pdf#search=%22understanding%20Generation%20Y%20%2B%20mcCrindle%22
Monash University (2005). *Monash Direction 2025*. available at http://www.monash.edu.au/about/monash-directions/
Monash University (2004). *Excellence and Diversity*. available at http://www.monash.edu.au/about/monash-directions/excellence.html
Morton, L. P. (2002). *Targeting Generation Y*, Public Relations Quarterly; Summer2002, 47(2), 46-53.
Nair, C.S., & Fisher, D.L. (2001). Learning Environments and Student Attitudes to Science at the Senior Secondary and Tertiary levels. *Issues in Educational Research*, 11(2), 12-31.
Proter, S. R. (Ed) (2004). Overcoming Survey Research Problems. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
Porter, S.R., Whitcomb, M.E., & Weitzer, W.H. (2004). Multiple Surveys of Students and Survey Fatigue. In Porter R.S. (Ed), Overcoming Survey Research Problems. Wiley Perdiocals: San Francisco.
Ramsden, P. (2005). *Using Research on student learning to enhance educational quality, Deliberations,* [Retrieved July 15 2005 http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/deliberations/ocsld-publications/isltp-ramsden.cfm].
Sheahan, P (2004). Are you ready for Generation Y? http://www.generationy.com.au/
Webb, G. (1994). *Making the most of Appraisal: Career and Professional Development Planning for lecturers*. Kogan Page Ltd: London, UK.