Background and purpose

This project was prompted by two reports:

- The “Evaluating How We Evaluate” report (Senate Committee on University Teaching and Learning (SCUTL, 2009), which called for a review of SFU’s process for evaluating teaching and courses; and
- The “Task Force on Teaching and Learning Recommendations Report” (2010), which repeated the call.

The purpose of the project is to review and update the instrument used for student evaluation of teaching and courses at SFU and to provide documentation to support faculty, administration, and students in their use of the new instrument and in the interpretation of instrument data.

This project did not arise from dissatisfaction with teaching and learning at SFU. Rather, it comes from a desire to take advantage of new understandings from educational research on the use, nationally and internationally, of student evaluation of teaching and courses.

Context: Broad issues identified in the research

In the past 30 years, student evaluation of teaching has become widely adopted internationally, and evaluation of universities has become of increasing importance as accountability for post-secondary institutions and concerns regarding student learning have drawn the attention of researchers in the field of higher education, of governments providing funding to universities, of industry and community organizations employing university graduates, and of students (as well as parents) investing time and tuition dollars in postsecondary education.

An important part of quality assurance for universities is in the area of teaching or instruction, and student feedback is the most common and significant form of assessing this area. As a consequence, a significant research literature on student evaluation of teaching (and courses) has formed. An overview of key issues affecting the discussion from the research literature is presented in the report.

The question of “good teaching”

The complexity and multi-dimensionality of teaching are widely recognized and there is not a universally accepted definition of what constitutes “teaching excellence” or a “good teacher.” Underlying the various characterizations of teaching are assumptions and perspectives not only about the purpose of higher education, but also, about the roles and responsibilities of both teacher and student. In recent years there has been a notable shift in higher education from a “teacher-centred” to a “learner-centred” classroom and curriculum.

Shift to learner-centred pedagogy

A learner-centred approach requires teaching assessments to take into account the role of students, since students are understood to be active participants in the learning process. It also requires changes in post-secondary teaching practice. For example, students who have become dependent learners in teacher-centred learning environments may need to learn how to become independent, autonomous learners, and
both teachers and students need to acquire an understanding of the responsibilities of the teacher for teaching and the learner for learning. Some level of student resistance can be expected in shifting from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred classroom.

Validity and reliability/student bias

Validity in student evaluation of teaching and courses can be defined as “the effectiveness of the test in representing, describing, or predicting the attribute that the user is interested in.” The concept also encompasses the issue of student bias. Reliability studies generally address the question “Are student ratings consistent both over time and from rater to rater?”

Research demonstrates that tools used for faculty evaluation, particularly student rating forms, “can be designed to be valid and reliable,” although challenges remain in terms of development and implementation. The issues of validity and reliability will be discussed in more detail in a separate report. However, it can be noted that SFU faculty, students, and administrators will need to determine what components of effective teaching to address in questions. Reliability will be a key consideration during the test phase of the development of the instrument, and use of studies identifying sources of student bias and showing what areas students are not equipped to evaluate will be essential.

Ultimately, it is important to be aware that in the absence of formal and careful evaluation, faculty “will be evaluated by hearsay evidence, gossip, and other shoddy means.” Although a perfect process may not be attainable, the SFU community is encouraged to hold in sight the purpose and promise of the project, which is to support faculty, administrators, and students in creating an environment that is rewarding and conducive to successful teaching and learning.

Need for a set of evaluative processes

One of the key findings that surfaces repeatedly in the research literature is the importance of using a set of evaluative processes. Two approaches to teaching evaluation that are most often used to complement student evaluation of teaching and courses are peer evaluation of teaching, most commonly conducted through classroom observations by faculty in the same department as the faculty member being evaluated, and teaching portfolios, which contain a careful selection of material collected and developed over the course of a faculty member’s career.

Key issues around student evaluation of teaching and courses

Faculty perspective

The research literature suggests that faculty have two main concerns about student evaluations:

- Validity and the effect of student bias; and
- Use of data for tenure and promotion decisions by personnel without a sophisticated understanding of how to interpret the data.

Research indicates that some faculty members see student evaluations as a “popularity contest” that can lead to potentially unsound educational outcomes; for example, leniency in grading in order to obtain more positive evaluations. Such flaws and abuses can exist, but it must also be noted that careful instrument design can reduce “noise” and guidelines on interpreting the data can provide considerable support for responsible, effective and instructive use of student evaluation of teaching and courses.

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2 See Arreola 2007, p. 99 (citing Thorndike and Hagen 1969, pp.163-177)
3 See Arreola 2007, p. 98
4 See Seldin 2006, p. 7
Similarly, student bias can exist for many reasons, from class size to time of day to gender of the instructor or student. Again, carefully chosen questions and proper instructions for interpreting and using data can reduce the impact of such variables.

**Administrator perspective**

Administrators need to be aware of the perception by faculty that bias may exist in the interpretation and use of data for tenure and promotion decisions.

A second concern involves the capacity and commitment of the university administration to using the data produced by student evaluation to provide training and development that supports faculty teaching.

Effective and responsible use of student evaluation of teaching requires that staff undertaking administrative roles in the process be familiar with and sensitive to a number of issues that can distort the results.

Beyond the responsible and informed collection and interpretation of data produced from student evaluation of teaching, it is important for administrators to use the data to identify where support is most needed by faculty and to provide faculty career development accordingly.

**Student perspective**

One of the most significant findings from the research on student perceptions of teaching evaluation is that “improvement in teaching” is the outcome that students consider to be most valuable in their participation in such evaluations.

The shift to a learner-centred classroom and curriculum presents challenges to students, as it does for teachers. Although a shared understanding between faculty and students about their respective roles (and responsibilities) in teaching and learning is invaluable, knowledge of the reasons students give for their high and low evaluations of teaching is useful for identifying student views on effective teaching.