

## Recommendations of the SETC Improvement Project

### Summer 2022

#### Process and Summary of Recommendations:

In Summer 2021, the Vice-Provost, Learning and Teaching, with the Learning Experiences Assessment and Planning (LEAP) group launched the SETC Improvement Project. The aims of the project were to:

- Re-examine the utility of the cascading framework by engaging with Faculties, departments, and instructors.
- Review the questions to ensure they are consistent with the purpose of understanding and improving the student learning experience.
- Engage explicitly with students about the purpose of the program to improve response rates.
- Investigate the concerns expressed by instructors, including concerns about the questions and the potential for bias in student responses.

LEAP considered SET [frameworks](#) across Canada, consulted with instructors, [students](#), and Associate Deans, and examined SETC student responses to both understand which [aspects](#) of their learning experience are important to them as well as for [signals of bias](#). In addition, LEAP conducted analyses of which [students](#) and [instructors](#) are engaging with SETC and to what extent. In addition, a [literature review](#) on SET response rates was updated from a previous 2016 version of the report. Lastly, a [thematic analysis](#) was conducted to provide an overview of what our current surveys ask students about their experiences of instructors and courses.

Our main finding is that the program is highly valued by instructors and leadership because it collects student feedback about their learning experience. The benefits of a centralized, online, survey program have only become more evident during the pandemic when receiving feedback became not only critical but also difficult. However, we can improve the program by replacing the current cascading framework with a more agile model and ensuring all aspects of the program align with a unified purpose. Increasing student engagement with the surveys, both in terms of the number of students who respond as well as the quality of response is the most significant challenge.

More specifically, we recommend the following for implementation in fall 2022:

**Recommendation 1:** Explicitly define the purpose of SETC

At present, there is not a clearly defined purpose for the SETC program. Without a tightly defined purpose, the survey lacks cohesion, purpose, and as such, demonstrating instrument validity is difficult.

**Recommendation 2:** Align survey items with the purpose of SETC

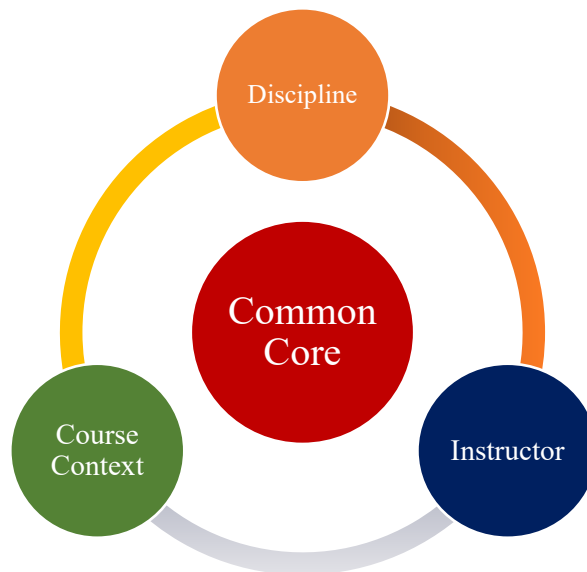
LEAP can work with units to ensure alignment between items and appropriate SETC use. Items will be added to the survey only after careful consideration of the purpose of gathering such information and on approval/recommendation by the AVP, Learning and Teaching.

**Recommendation 3:** Support Educational Goals assessment using means other than SETC

One way that questions are sometimes mis-aligned is their use in an attempt to assess Educational goals. SETC should not be used for this work. Instead, LEAP can support programs during their self-studies and other program-level assessments by collecting data and feedback from students. LEAP has the capacity to employ methodologies such as, surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc., to capture this much needed and useful information.

**Recommendation 4:** Change to a Module Framework

A module framework does not have a hierarchy structure and thus represents a more relational representation of stakeholder interests. There would be four modules: Common Core, Discipline, Instructor, and Course Context. The benefits of this model include flexibility and better alignment with the academic organization at SFU.



**Recommendation 5:** Provide rationale documentation for standard items on the survey

Students reported confusion over the purpose of the surveys and some of the items. Similarly, report interpretation guides are not readily available for instructors and leadership because the reason an item was selected has been lost.

[Recommendation 6:](#) Create and implement a communications plan aimed at students  
Raise the profile of SETC by working with Student Services to publicize the purpose of SETC, the effects of implicit bias, and how to provide constructive feedback.

[Recommendation 7:](#) Review common core questions to include aspects of the learning experience that are important to students

By asking questions that are relevant and important to students, the surveys will connect with their experiences and provide more meaningful information and better-quality feedback.

**The following recommendations require further research and analysis and should be considered for possible future implementation:**

[Recommendation 8:](#) Explore whether it would be appropriate to create a discrimination and harassment policy for student comments

Several universities have implemented a protocol by which instructors can request to have an inappropriate comment removed, along with the entirety of the student's responses. The student is notified of such an event and, depending on their conduct, disciplinary action is considered.

[Recommendation 9:](#) Explore the feasibility of a grade pathway in the Student Information Management System (SIMS) to improve response rate

A digital pathway could be built in which the grade release date depends on whether the student has completed all of their course surveys. Students may have the option of opting-out each term from filling out the surveys.

[Recommendation 10:](#) Investigate extending the survey period into the exam period.

Tremendous effort is put into preparing for final exams by both students as well as instructors. However, at present, the SETC survey period comes to an end before the exam period begins, and thus an opportunity to gather valuable feedback about a critical course component is missed. If recommendation 9 is adopted (building a grade pathway), then we must allow students to complete surveys into the exam period.

## Recommendations for Fall 2022 implementation

### Recommendation 1: Explicitly define the purpose of SETC

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the purpose of SETs from evaluating teaching effectiveness to capturing student experience. Consensus has been building that students are not best situated to evaluate instruction as their knowledge and experiences are limited. “Evaluation implies judgement of worth and requires relevant expertise or credentials....Considering student ratings as data rather than evaluation puts them in a proper perspective.” (Benton & Li, 2015, p.3). Furthermore, as the arbitrator in *Ryerson University v. Ryerson Faculty Association* notes “[these] results provide information about the student experience, and, contextualized, are appropriately considered for tenure and promotion although, to repeat, not for reaching conclusions about teaching effectiveness.” However, students can provide feedback and information about how they experienced the course and about such issues as whether the instructor was engaging, organized, and helpful.

In response, the SETC program’s name has changed from Student *Evaluation* of Teaching and Courses to Student *Experiences* of Teaching and Courses. However, there was never a clearly defined purpose for the program. Without a tightly defined purpose, the survey lacks cohesion, purpose, and demonstrating instrument validity is also difficult.

#### **Proposed Statement of Purpose**

Simon Fraser University is committed to providing effective and engaging learning experiences for students. Gathering feedback on a regular basis from students is beneficial information for instructors, departmental and Faculty leadership, as well as the institution. The SETC (Student Experiences with Teaching and Courses) program collects, analyzes, and disseminates student feedback about their learning experiences in courses. It is intended to capture critical student feedback and provide voice to students in how they experience academic programs at SFU, and is used by members of the SFU community to:

*Provide information to instructors for the purposes of reflection on how they can improve their students’ learning experiences.* Instructors play a critical role in how students engage with the course, which in turn impacts how well they learn. Instructor choices (i.e., how they interact with students, facilitate learning activities) can assist learning, but can also impede learning. SETC should help instructors determine the areas of their practice that could be improved, and which areas are their strengths.

*Present academic leadership (Chairs and Directors, Deans) with information about how a particular course was experienced by students.* This information can guide future course assignments, student recruitment, or highlight issues that may require follow-up. Information in SETC reports should offer academic leadership insight into how students experienced the course (i.e., teaching and assessment practices).

*Provide programs with information about student perspectives regarding how the course contributes to their program of study.* SETC reports can be useful in understanding student perceptions of course design and assessment decisions (i.e., difficulty, work load, relationship between courses, relevance or inclusivity of topics/authors). However, SETC reports cannot provide programs with information about academic or educational goals achievement.

*Allow students to reflect on their own learning.* When we prompt students to think about what aspects of a course helped them learn, we are not only opening a dialogue with them, we are also encouraging them to think about their own learning process. By providing an opportunity to critically examine their experience, students could further strengthen and develop their metacognition and self-awareness skills and gain insight into which learning strategies work well for themselves.

*Provide Senior Leadership data about strategic educational initiatives.* By combining data across the university, Senior Leaders will be able to get a sense of how students are experiencing broad ranging efforts to improve academic quality and curriculum.

*Submit information to Tenure and Promotion Committees (TPCs).* SETC can be used in biennial review and tenure/promotion decisions through providing information about how students experienced an individual's teaching, and providing an opportunity for instructors to reflect on and adapt their practices in response. This reflection and iterative engagement in adaptation of teaching practices is considered to be at the core of what makes an excellent teacher.

## **Recommendation 2: Align survey items with the purpose of SETC**

Much of the current SETC question set is written for the implicit purposes of evaluating teaching effectiveness or gathering student perspective about academic achievement. For example, students are asked to rank their agreement with the following statement "The course instructor explained course concepts clearly", or "This course made me more aware of the challenges and opportunities for creating a more just and/or sustainable world." The questions aimed directly at student perspectives about program-level academic achievement or educational goals are not appropriate for this type of a course-based learning experience survey. Applying SETC results to an entire program would create confounding results for reasons such as students having varying levels of experience with the program (i.e., there would be a difference between students who are majors and those who are taking the course as an elective) and the same student could receive several surveys about the same program.

The standard question set (including the Common Core questions) should be reviewed to ensure it aligns with the purpose of SETC. LEAP will also work with units to ensure alignment between items they choose to add to the surveys and appropriate SETC use. Items will only be added to the survey after careful consideration of the purpose of gathering such information and on approval/recommendation by the AVP, Learning and Teaching. Collecting information without a clear use violates SFU privacy guidelines. Questions that do not adhere to the purpose of a survey like SETC also add to student confusion about the surveys, which may contribute to low response rates.

For the purposes of instrument validity, the items that appear on the surveys must:

- relate to the student's learning experience in the course
- use simple and clear language to avoid broad/complex concepts with multiple or ambiguous definitions (e.g., no jargon, vague terms, complicated sentence structures)
- be relevant and meaningful to students
- inquire about only one aspect of a student's experience
- be reasonably answerable by the student at the present time (i.e., within their experience and expertise)
- be applicable in all learning contexts in which it will be used (e.g., year-levels, course concepts)

- gather responses which lend themselves to meaningful, actionable, and important feedback about teaching practice or course design
- value student time by asking questions for which there is no other source of information

Our definition of “learning experience” refers to an educational interaction in which the goal results in learning (UNESCO International Bureau of Education, 2013). Learning experiences include how, when, where and why a learner interacts with information, develops skills or expertise, engages in practice, application and reflection, etc. This interaction is not fixed to a space and can occur in traditional academic settings (i.e. classroom), or non-traditional environments (i.e. online, field school). Nor is this interaction limited to exchanges between instructors and students; they can occur between students or learners and interactive software programs, applications, games, equipment etc.

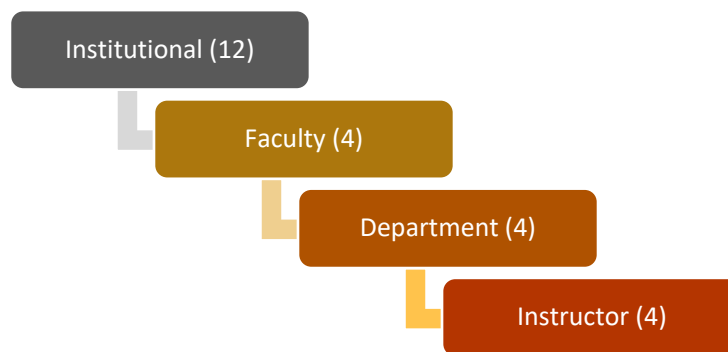
A well-designed learning experience generates positive emotional states, such as accomplishment, connection, and confidence. It can be a truly transformative experience and alter the learner’s attitudes, conceptual understanding, and nurture the acquisition of knowledge, skills and abilities.

### Recommendation 3: Support Educational Goals assessment using means other than SETC

There is a clear need across campus for Educational Goals assessment support. To this end, LEAP can support programs during their self-studies and other program-level assessments by collecting data and feedback from students. LEAP has the capacity to employ methodologies such as, surveys, focus groups, interviews, etc., to capture this much needed and useful information. Using a course-based survey, such as SETC, is not appropriate in assessing student perspective about program-level educational goals achievement.

### Recommendation 4: Change to a module framework

SFU currently uses a cascading framework in which there are 4 tiers. The framework outlines ownership or the ability to select/create questions and guides reporting of the data.



Issues with the cascading framework:

- Reviewing all SETC related Senate documents and prior reports, no rationale for the difference between Faculty- and Department-level was found. Since each portion of the survey form is written by a different unit or person without this rationale, the overall form lacks cohesion and at times contains repetitive questions.

- The implementation of the cascading framework is inconsistent across SFU. SFU's academic units are organizationally diverse and not all SFU Faculties are departmentalized. Therefore, some forms have three-levels, while others have four. Likewise, professional or specialized programs want to select their own questions. These discrepancies lead report viewers and leadership to be confused about their role/responsibilities in the SETC program.
- A common issue brought up by Deans and Associate Deans is that the Faculty-level SETC reports are very difficult to act upon. Aggregated scores across diverse courses from various academic units are challenging to interpret and determine a "real-action".
- Faculty-level questions that are applicable to all courses, yet precise to the learning experience, can be difficult to craft. This item set often ends up vague and similar in specificity to the institution-level questions.
- It is rare to find the measurement expertise needed within a department or Faculty to design valid items that lend themselves to rigorous statistical testing and actionable analyses. This leaves the LEAP team with little control over their own analytical capacity to enrich the program, or even to support a department or Faculty in meeting the goals they might have to understand the student learning experience.

LEAP summarized the [SET frameworks](#) that are used across Canada and found that the module framework was the most flexible.

### **Proposed Module Framework**

A module framework does not have a hierarchy structure and thus represents a more relational representation of stakeholder interests. While different institutions have implemented this framework in various ways, we suggest the following four modules:

#### **Common Core**

Questions reflect aspects of the learning experience all students should have in each course. They are selected by the Provost and appear on each survey.

#### **Discipline** *Optional*

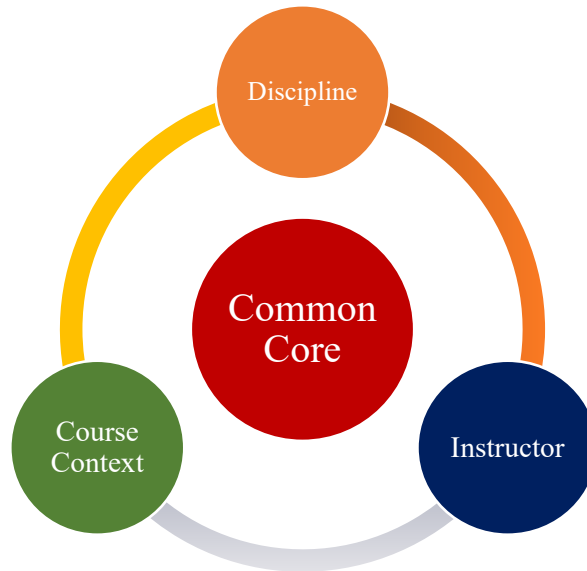
These questions reflect discipline specific pedagogies (i.e., discussion, problem solving, case studies). They are selected by the course program lead (i.e., Chair, Director) in consultation with other faculty members.

#### **Instructor** *Optional*

Questions reflect instructor inquiry and responses are only reported to the instructor.

#### **Course Context Modules** *Optional*

Questions which reflect university/faculty strategic initiatives, the academic plan or delivery models. Examples modules could include experiential education, indigenizing the course, writing, wellbeing, open textbook, community engagement, blended courses, etc. These questions may not be asked as frequently as the other three modules, and may be applied to a subset of course types (400-level, or lab courses) or only for particular initiatives on a temporary basis. Reports will only be created in aggregate as the modules represent initiatives across courses and be sent to appropriate leadership (Chairs, Deans, Provost, etc.) and those tasked with carrying out the initiative.



The benefits of this model are:

- Simpler structure that matches the academic organization at SFU.
- By removing the Faculty- and Department-levels and replacing them with discipline, question selection becomes more closely tied with the course, which increases the utility of the reports.
- Reports are also shorter; survey length was flagged as an issue during our consultation.
- Course context questions allow SETC to be used to collect feedback about department, Faculty, or university educational initiatives. This model is flexible and able to adapt to changes in the academic plan or other initiatives over time. These modules would only be used in specific course offerings.
- Since the questions will be more aligned with the “classroom” experience, students will be able to engage better with the form.

#### **Recommendation 5: Provide rationale documentation for standard items on the survey**

The most frequently discussed challenge at our instructor and Associate Dean consultations was response rate. The general consensus was that the SETC program response rates are too low and making inferences about the entire class from the received feedback is difficult.

In addition, the overall SETC response rate has been falling over the past two years, with Spring 2022 having the lowest (Figure 1). This trend holds true across Faculties as well (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Overall SETC Response Rate since Fall 2019

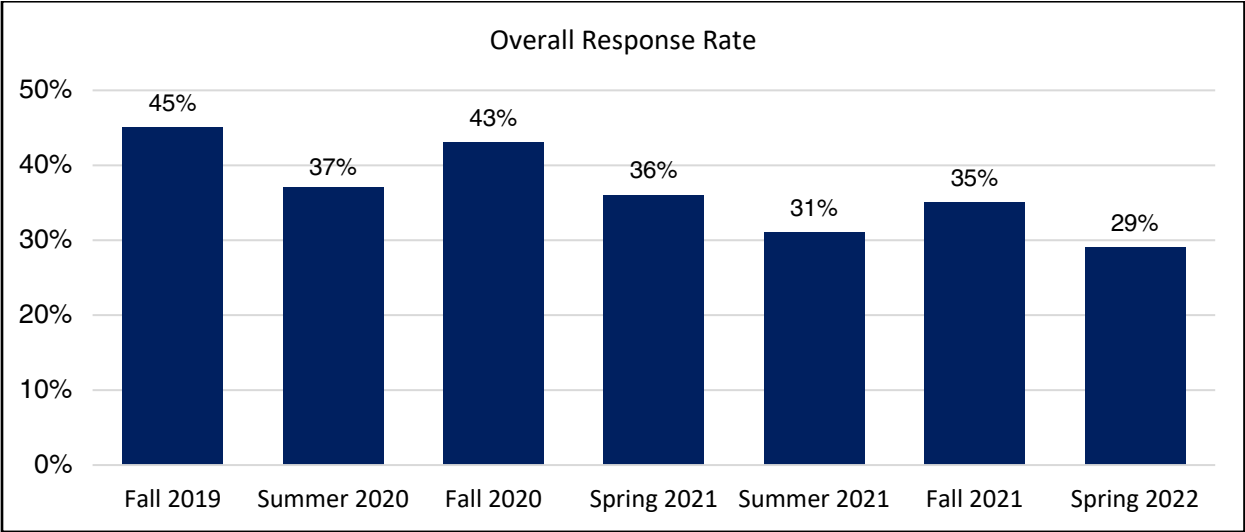
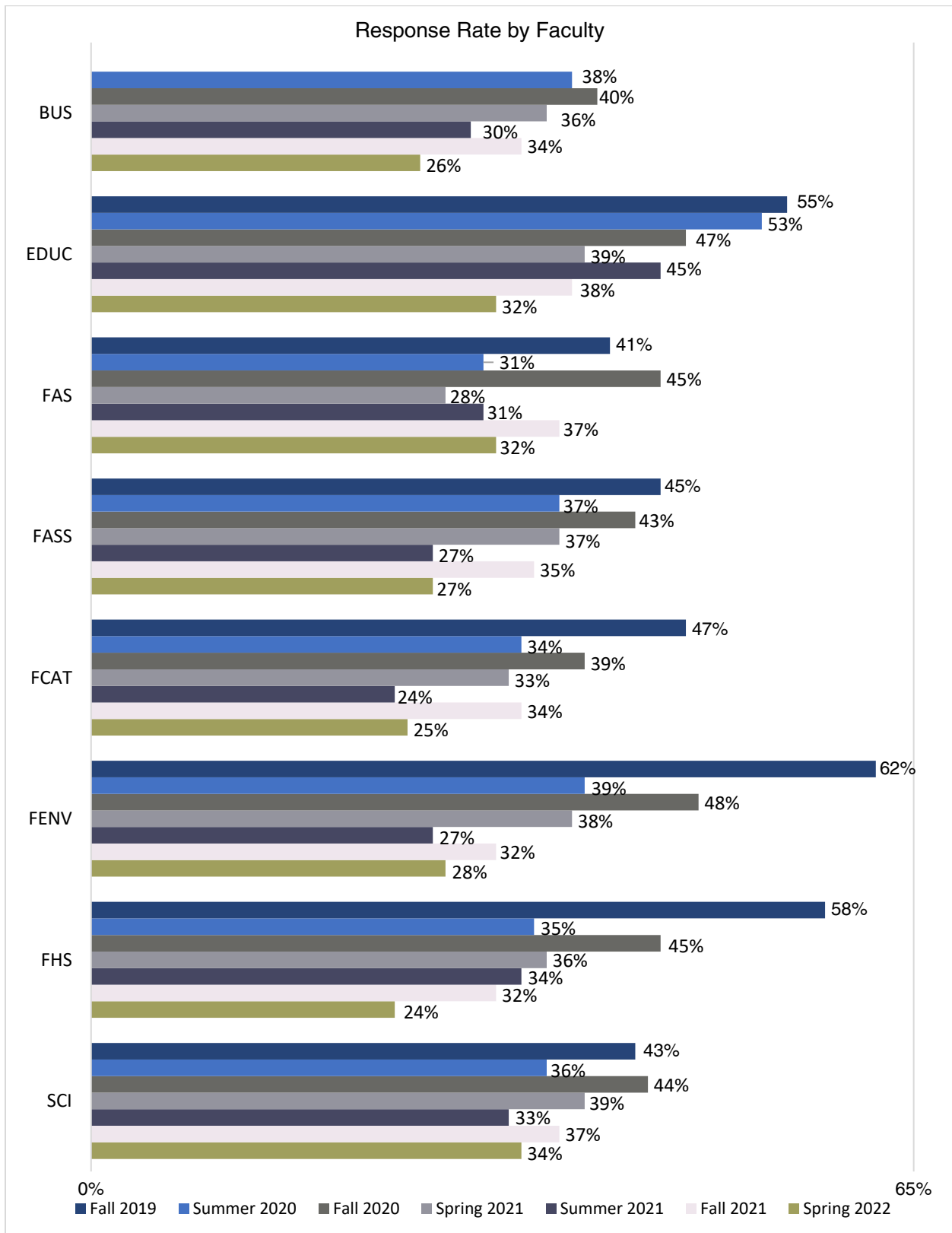


Figure 2: SETC Response Rate by Faculty since Fall 2019



Note: SETC was not administered in Spring 2020; BUS (Beedie) joined SETC in Summer 2020.

We also investigated whether the respondent sample is representative of all student demographics by analyzing Fall 2019 data. A representative sample, even if smaller than desired, can be used to make inferences. Overall [results](#) show that across the university, female students, domestic students, and students in upper-level courses are more likely to complete SETC compared to their peers. These results are statistically significant, and the trends are mostly uniform across Faculties. Thus, our smaller than desired sample is also not representative of all voices in the classroom.

One issue that came up consistently in our data was the lack of understanding about the purpose of each item. This held true for students, instructors and leadership.

The vast majority of students who participated in the [interviews](#) wanted to be provided with a clear explanation of how SETC data is or will be used. Students were probed about both what they thought SETC was currently used for as well as how they would like to see the tool used in the future. Student perceptions of SETC were varied, with students generally falling into one of four groups. Students who think SETC is:

- designed to help instructors and improve the learning experience for future students (35%)
- an assessment exercise, allowing department- and university-level administrators to conduct formal evaluations of instructors (35%).
- designed to help instructors and be an assessment exercise (15%).
- a program with no clear purpose (15%).

Notably, all students that believed SETC had no clear purpose respond very infrequently.

Similarly, instructors at the consultations discussed how they only focus on the instructor-level question responses as they are not sure how to interpret the responses for the other levels. Lastly, as there is regular turn-over in academic leadership positions, many incoming Chairs/Directors are unsure as to why a specific item was selected or how – thus using the data for action virtually impossible. LEAP can work with academic units to write-up such documentation. Question rationales will help instructors and leadership make meaning from the reports and provide continuity between leaders.

### **Recommendation 6: Create and implement a communications plan aimed at students**

From our [interviews](#) with students, it is clear that many students do not have a complete understanding of the SETC program purpose. This includes information about who can view the reports and how the information is used. This lack of understanding contributes to low response rates. Working with Student Services, a communications plan could be implemented that includes newsletters, orientation events, and social media channels.

Additionally, students would benefit from training in implicit bias and how to provide constructive feedback. Quality feedback relies on students having a sense of how to convey their thoughts in a positive and impactful manner. A full training program is beyond the scope of SETC, but awareness could be improved; for instance, short videos included in the survey invitation emails or as part of the communication plan

## Recommendation 7: Review common core questions to include aspects of the learning experience that are important to students

At present, students have had little to no input on the survey form. By asking questions that are relevant and important to students, the surveys will connect with their experiences and provide more meaningful information and better-quality feedback. As we review the common core questions to align with the purpose of SETC (Recommendation 2), we should additionally consider edits to the questions to reflect relevance to students. A better connection to the items would also increase response rates.

A [thematic analysis](#) was conducted on our standard question set (University, Faculty and Department/School-level) to provide an overview of what our current surveys ask students about their experiences of instructors and courses. The following results are noteworthy:

- 1 out of every 4 questions asks students to self-evaluate whether they met an educational goal, or increased proficiency in a skill. Furthermore, 5% of questions ask students to rate whether the course provided them with the opportunity to work towards an educational goal. Educational goals are currently set for programs, not courses, and in very few cases would we expect all courses would address all educational goals (see Recommendations 2 and 3).
- 10% of all questions ask students to rate the clarity of their instructors' conceptual explanations
- 8% of all questions ask students to provide a general rating of their learning experience
- 6% of all questions are about student perceptions of course workload.

During the [interviews](#), we asked students to identify components that they feel make a significant impact, be it positive or negative, on their learning experience. The five most discussed factors are listed below and framed for a positive learning experience.

- Instructor rapport
  - Informal relationship-building with students was cited as a factor, particularly if instructors conveyed that they were invested in student growth and academic success.
  - Approachability of the instructor outside of the classroom (i.e. over email, in office hours).
- Instructor communication
  - Clear expectations, particularly with regard to how those expectations aligned with the course syllabus.
  - An engaging communication style during learning activities and lectures were cited. It was important to students that instructors be able to maintain their attention throughout the class, either through passion or enthusiasm for the course materials, or employing active learning teaching strategies (i.e., asking questions of students in lectures).
- Assessments
  - Assessments reflecting the learning materials covered throughout the course.
  - Some students discussed an appreciation for varied assessment formats that accommodated different communication styles (i.e. assessed presentations vs written examinations).
- Course workload
  - Manageable and appropriate workloads
  - Some students observed that the workload has increased since the beginning of the pandemic and has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.
- Experiences with Teaching Assistants

- Particularly in larger courses, some students discussed teaching assistants as being a critical factor in their learning experience.
- Students highlighted organization and engagement styles of teaching assistants as being important, and also noted that cohesion between teaching assistants and instructors was essential to ensuring a smooth experience in a course.

Each SETC survey has one university-wide open-comment question, “Do you have any further comments?”. A thematic analysis was conducted on the responses to this question from the Fall 2019 dataset. Almost half of all students provided a comment about the teaching team. Students showed particular interest in commenting on instructor rapport with students, ability to communicate concepts clearly and engagement style (ability to present information to maintain attention or interest). One in five students brought up assessments in their response, primarily focused on the grading and difficulty of their evaluations.

In conclusion, there is a mismatch between the questions that appear on the surveys and the aspects of their learning experience that students find important. An important aspect of validity is to ensure that the questions align with what the program is trying to assess. An important aspect of validity is to ensure that the questions align with what the program is trying to assess. If the purpose of the program is to gather feedback about how students feel about their learning experience, then the factors that they believe have the most impact on their experience should be represented in the question set, in addition to those factors that instructors and leadership are interested in understanding.

## Recommendations to consider for long term improvement and action

### Recommendation 8: Explore creating a discrimination and harassment policy for student comments.

Findings from the Teaching Assessment Working Group (TAWG) Report state that instructors have concerns about the accuracy and validity of SETC responses; believing them to be affected by variables such as instructor’s sex and ethnicity. As such, LEAP [investigated](#) the validity of SETC at SFU with particular attention to issues of instructor sex. The 9 questions that appear on every survey pertaining to course and teaching (on a scale of 1-5, for a total maximum score of 45) from the fall 2019 term were analyzed: the last complete term prior to the shift to remote teaching due to Covid-19. Overall, LEAP found no substantive difference in average overall SETC scores between male and female instructors. Across Faculties, instructor average course scores were comparable between males and females and did not typically differ by more than 2 points at the overall scale level.

However, student comments did contain discriminatory or harassing language. Although very rare, comments that were hateful or discriminatory based on attributes such as gender, sexual or gender identity, race, ethnicity, religion or disability are wholly inappropriate. Understandably, these comments can have an impact on the instructor’s wellbeing and push them towards avoiding reading them in the future.

Several universities have taken steps to create a process for student comment removal and notification to the student of such an event. Although each institution has a slightly different process, the basics are the same. Instructors can make a request for the removal of the comment if it violates a discrimination and harassment policy (often these are already outlined in the standards for student conduct and/or the

use of computing and communication infrastructure. This request may be sent to a person, as is the case at the [University of Saskatchewan](#) where it is sent to the Vice-Provost, Teaching, Learning and Student Experience or at the [University of Alberta](#), where it is sent to the Vice-President, Academic. Or the request can be sent to a committee, as is the case at [Dalhousie](#) where it is sent to a review committee comprising the Vice-Provost Equity and Inclusion, the Vice-Provost Student Affairs, the Associate Vice-President Human Resources, the Chair of the Senate Learning and Teaching Committee, and the University General Counsel (or their designates). If the request is accepted, the comment and the entirety of that student's feedback is removed and the student is notified. The nature of the comment could be such that disciplinary action is considered.

This type of a process is consistent with SFU's [Bullying and Harassment](#) policy and work towards a more inclusive and equitable work environment. It would also be beneficial to students who make such comments to receive a response as it affords them the opportunity to learn.

### **Recommendation 9: Explore the feasibility of building a grade pathway in the Student Information Management System (SIMS)**

Even if we adopt Recommendations 5 (providing question rationales) and 6 (including questions that students find important), our response rate may still not be at a desirable level. For example, Nederhand, Auer, Giesbers, Scheepers, van der Gagg (2022) investigated the effects of providing the intervention group with a summary of students comments and how the teacher will use these to improve the course. The hypothesis was that student motivation to participate in SET would be boosted when they felt their feedback is being used and thereby increase the meaningfulness and faith of the evaluation process (Chen and Hoshower 2003; Macfayden, Dawson, Prest, & Gasevic, 2002; Hoel and Dahl 2019). However, they examined student participation on subsequent course surveys and found no significant improvement in response rates nor in response quality between the intervention and control group. This study indicates that while students may claim that understanding what will happen with the SET data will motivate them to participate more fully, it may not actually make a difference.

To better understand the student perspective on response rates, we conducted a set of [interviews](#) with undergraduate students. Student response patterns were used to identify "high" and "low" responders based on whether they responded above or below the average-response rate for SETC across Fall 2020, Spring 2021 and Summer 2021 (35%). The purpose of this categorization was to intentionally recruit low responders or students who may provide us with better insight as to how to boost response rates. Students were asked to reflect on when they had completed SETC surveys and what had motivated them to do so.

The high-responder group, more frequently, reported intrinsically motivating factors, such as a desire to help improve the learning experience for others in the future. On the other hand, the low-responder group often reported that they were more likely to complete SETC when incentives were offered (such as an extra percentage point) or when class time was given to complete the survey. Participants across all response groups cited feeling too busy or forgetting to complete by the deadline as the main reason for skipping a SETC survey. The low-response group also reported having a lack of understanding as to the purpose of such surveys as a reason to pass over participation.

Response rate and quality of feedback is affected by the barriers and motivational factors students encounter when asked to complete the surveys. Barriers include procedural issues, such as missing or not checking emails, issues related to the survey form itself, such as the inclusion of jargon, and issues

related to student experience, such as lacking the skills to provide constructive feedback (Nederhand et al. 2022; Berk 2012). On the other hand, motivational factors include rewards, such as a bonus mark, having a strong opinion (Hoel and Dahl, 2019), and feeling that the feedback is valued.

To encourage higher response rates, instructors could be encouraged to provide class time for completing the survey, although motivation to do so would likely vary among instructors. Staff could attend classes to provide class time for survey completion, similar to what used to occur with paper forms; this has the benefit of not relying on individual instructors but is a cost in terms of staff workload.

A SIMS Pathway, referred to as a “grade pathway” in the literature, is a common approach to motivate students to participate in online course surveys. A digital pathway is built in which the grade release date is dependent on whether the student has completed all of their course surveys, so students who complete the surveys get their grades earlier. Student may have the option of opting-out each term from filling out the surveys, to reduce the grade pathway introducing bias in student responses.

Since the action would be taken through SIMS, the implementation is centralized and automated. The inconsistencies and gaps that occur when the responsibility for increasing response rates is distributed across many stakeholders (i.e., instructors, Chairs, Department Administrators, LEAP) is reduced. Similarly, the functions of SIMS allow for many students to be reached simultaneously through one action every semester. The voice of all students, regardless of demographic profile, will be captured. Implementing such a pathway would require technical support, resources, and prioritization from ITS.

We updated a [literature review](#) we conducted in 2016 about SETs and response rates with a particular focus on grade pathways. There are several American universities that use this approach. For example, in 2016 the University of Louisville introduced priority grade access to address a low response rate problem. At this institution, students who either completed all SETs or completed an “opt out” form were able to view their grades before their peers who had not done so. A similar approach is also taken at the University of Texas Permian Basin. Washington State (2019) indicated that to address low response rates, they may begin to consider giving students who have completed all evaluations priority access to see their grades either a few days or a week before their peers. Outside of the USA the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik also used grade pathways in eXplorance Blue to incentivize response rates.

The University of Oregon, who had previously used grade pathways, moved away from this practice in 2019, citing issues for students, advisors, and the Registrar’s Office Staff as a reason for this change. Response rates subsequently fell, however other contextual issues including shortening of the survey period and the introduction of a mid-way survey could have been factors that impacted response rates.

#### **Recommendation 10: Investigate extending the survey period into the exam period.**

Tremendous effort is put into preparing for final exams by both students and instructors. For students, assessments are a culmination of the work they have put into the course all term and their grading will impact future opportunities and possibly even career paths. Conversely, developing and grading assessments are one of the main duties for instructors and Teaching Assistants. However, at present, the SETC survey period comes to an end before the exam period begins, and thus an opportunity to gather valuable feedback about a critical course component is missed.

The majority of students interviewed wanted the surveys to remain open into the final exam period. The reasons for the extension include: 1) the ability to provide feedback about the final exam, and 2) more

time to provide feedback. The students who did not want the survey to be open into the exam period were only concerned that response rates may decrease as students will go on holidays.

The desire to push the survey period into the exam period was mirrored by many instructors who attended the SETC consultations. They would like to be able to gather student opinions on end-of-course assessments in order to inform future offerings. Another portion of instructors felt ambivalent towards changing the survey period as they felt they could gauge student sentiment through other means. A small group of instructors did not want to change the survey period because they felt it would increase instructor anxiety about student "evaluations".

If Recommendation 9 is adopted (building a grade pathway), then we must allow students to complete surveys into the exam period.



## References

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