

Title: **Lessons to be Learned From an Online Questionnaire Survey of Students' Expectations of a Research-based Curriculum**

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Appreciate the difficulties of framing opinion questions in questionnaires
- Recognise some of the key features of different ways of contacting students to complete questionnaire surveys
- Pinpoint the ethical issues involved in surveying students
- Detect and consider how to allow for the bias that results from low response to surveys
- Evaluate some of the relative advantages of quantitative and qualitative approaches to student evaluation
- Understand the importance of establishing the objective of a questionnaire survey
- See the different methods that might be used to process and analyse the returns from a questionnaire survey

Session Outline

The session will take participants through the investigative process that is followed when conducting an evaluation of the student experience. The session will present a range of questionnaire designs that were reviewed as part of the process of carrying out an online survey of students' expectations of a research-based curriculum. (See Smith and Rust, 2007). Different ways of framing opinions will be looked at in order to expose the difficulty of framing such questions in order to produce reliable information. The alternative methods of contacting students to secure returns will be discussed, including email, online, postal. The issues of sample size, low response and ethics will be investigated and attention will be given to the purpose of student evaluation and how this influences the methods of analysis that are used. The value of using statistical software such as SPSS will be established and there will be discussion of the use of questionnaires alongside qualitative methods such as focus group discussions and in-depth interviews.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

There will be three separate 15-minute activities followed by discussion

Activity 1: Designing student questionnaires

Examine a number of questionnaire survey forms which students have been invited to complete in order to evaluate their learning experience. The forms will be drawn from national surveys and from surveys used in pedagogic research. Workshop participants will be asked to complete one of the forms

as a respondent and this will be followed by a discussion of the merits and limitations of the different forms and the ways in which questions have been set. Discussion questions will include:

- How many questions should be set in a questionnaire?
- Should questionnaires make use of questions from previous surveys?
- Should questions use forms of words in an institution's learning strategy?
- Should the same evaluation questions be used year after year?
- Should opinion questions offer two, three, four or five (or more) options to answer from?
- Should a set of opinion questions contain a mix of positive and negative questions?
- Should the survey ask for students' personal and course characteristics?
- Should questionnaires include boxes in which students can make comments?

Activity 2: Conducting student questionnaires

Examine a number of methods of conducting questionnaires surveys, including postal, online and distribution in a teaching class. Some brief scenarios will be presented to workshop participants. Each participant will be asked to read one of the scenarios or 'stories' of a questionnaire survey and there will be a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches, including response rates and ethics. Discussion questions will include:

- What are the merits of carrying out a questionnaire by distributing in a class?
- What are the merits of allowing students to take a questionnaire away and hand in later?
- What are the merits of emailing students with an attached survey form to complete?
- What are the merits of directing students to an online survey form to complete?
- How many students need to answer for the results to be valid?
- Which survey method is best from an ethical point of view?
- Which survey method will gain the best level and accuracy of response?
- Should the survey returns be keyed in to an electronic file for statistical analysis?
- Who should do the hands-on work of student questionnaires?

Activity 3: Analysing student questionnaires

Examine some returns from a student survey and determine how the returns should be analysed and presented. Workshop participants will be presented with some research questions that could potentially be addressed with a questionnaire survey. The questions will include 'to construct an overall indicator of student satisfaction', 'to explain the reasons for student views', 'to identify the consequences of a particular learning strategy'. Participants will be asked to put forward ways in which the data should be processed and how effectively the research questions can be answered. Discussion question will include:

- What are the merits of charting the results?
- What are the merits of examining the extent to which answers to questions are correlated?
- What are the merits of comparing the results with previous surveys?
- How can allowances be made for non-response?
- How can open-ended comments in a questionnaire be analysed?
- What is the purpose of student questionnaires?
- Are students being over-surveyed?
- How much notice do students and lecturers take of questionnaire results?
- Are there better ways than questionnaires of conducting student evaluations?

References

De Vaus D. A. (2002), *Surveys in Social Research* (Fifth Edition), Routledge

Fielding J and Gilbert N (2006) *Understanding Social Statistics* (Second Edition), Sage

Smith, P. and Chris, R. (2007), 'Students' Expectations of a Research-Based Curriculum: Results from an Online Questionnaire Survey of First Year Undergraduates at Oxford Brookes University', <http://bejlt.brookes.ac.uk> 2, 2,