



**RHODES UNIVERSITY**

**A Brief Guide**

**to**

**The Evaluation of Teaching and Courses**

**Academic Development Centre**

## Introduction

The introduction of the Policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses (see Appendix 1) at Rhodes University in 1998 was in response to national policy requiring universities to ensure the quality of the teaching and learning experiences which they offer to students. In introducing the policy the intention of the university was not to police against a campus-wide model of 'good' teaching but to encourage staff to engage in a process which has become known as reflective practice.

Reflective practice, put simply, involves using evaluation to look at what one does in order to develop and enhance one's teaching and students' learning. To reflect on practice one first needs to set down what one does in the name of practice. This involves thinking about: "What do I do when I teach?"; "How is my course structured?"; "Why is my course structured in this way?"; etc. And then evaluating the efficacy of what you do.

Having decided what it is that is salient about your practice, evaluation involves taking a 'picture' of the thing to be evaluated from as many different angles or perspectives as possible. The four angles or lenses which can be used to evaluate teaching and courses are each discussed below under the following headings: Eliciting evaluation from students; Peer evaluation; Research and theory and Self evaluation. The data obtained from each kind of evaluation, when considered together should give you a balanced picture of your courses and how you teach them.

### 1. Eliciting evaluation from students

There are many different ways of accessing student perceptions of your courses and teaching. The method you choose depends on things like the nature of the feedback sought; the nature of the discipline; the level of study and the size of the class.

#### 1.1 Questionnaires

The most common way of eliciting student feedback is by administering questionnaires. The ADC has developed a web-based teaching and course evaluation tool called the **Evaluation Assistant** (EA) which can be accessed at <http://ea.ru.ac.za/>. (First time users will have to obtain a username and password from the Evaluation Administrator ([adc-admin@ru.ac.za](mailto:adc-admin@ru.ac.za) or extension 8171/3). Through the EA a lecturer can construct a survey questionnaire to suit his/her needs. ADC staff are available to support staff in the process of developing a questionnaire. Some of the questions on the EA require a ranked response and some require a free-form response. A ranked response requires the student to respond to a statement (e.g. The outcomes for the course were clearly communicated to the students) by selecting one of the following options: strongly disagree; disagree; neutral; agree; strongly agree; not applicable. These type of questions generate percentage type feedback and give the lecturer a broad indication of students' perceptions. Free-form responses, on the other hand, require students to respond in their own words to a question (e.g. What did you think of the assessment procedures used in the course?). Free-form responses are analysed qualitatively and often provide more detailed feedback. To construct a questionnaire the lecturer can select questions from a bank of questions but can also submit his/her own questions if those in the bank do not meet his/her needs. Once the questionnaire has been completed the lecturer will receive the required number of questionnaires through the internal mail. Ideally the lecturer will appoint a facilitator to administer the questionnaire rather than doing it him/herself.

Students may well be more open and honest in their responses if they aware that the facilitator seals their responses in an envelope for return to the ADC. The ADC analyses the data and a confidential report is sent to the lecturer involved. Lecturers are encouraged to discuss the feedback with colleagues or staff at the ADC who are available to collaborate with them in the development of improved teaching and learning strategies.

Surveys and questionnaires are an efficient way of receiving feedback especially from large classes but they do have shortcomings such as that the data is often very broad; 'meanings' are not always shared by all the participants; students may suffer questionnaire 'fatigue'; and they tend to be used at the end of course (providing summative feedback) rather than during the course (that is, they don't always provide ongoing developmental, formative feedback). If student numbers in a course are low, we recommend that other forms of evaluation are used.

## 1.2 Other strategies for obtaining feedback from students

There are many other educationally sound strategies for obtaining student feedback. A technique that has been found to be very effective is **Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGID)**. SGID is a whole class interviewing technique (developed at the University of Washington) designed to gather consensus-based student data that enables lecturers to make informed decisions about their teaching and courses.

SGIDs are done in small groups and facilitated by someone other than the lecturer. When the groups report back to the whole class the facilitator has the opportunity to delve more deeply into important issues that are raised. It is a very effective method of eliciting data which focuses on areas of specific concern to a lecturer. ADC staff are available to consult with lecturers and to facilitate SGIDs. In addition, ADC staff are available to facilitate **Structured Group Interviews** with students. In these the ADC staff member meets with a group of students and asks them a set of questions drawn up in consultation with the lecturer. These are most effective with small groups of learners.

There are also a number of more informal strategies which lecturers can use themselves in their classes, which are particularly useful to inform their ongoing teaching and course development in a particular course. Lecturers can:

- ◆ Pose **questions** directly to the class which can either be responded to orally or in writing (either individually or in groups). For example:
  - What was the most useful thing you learned today?
  - How did today's task help you to understand the concept of ....?
  - How could I change my teaching to help students learn more from this class?
- ◆ Use **Critical learning statements**: Students are asked to write down three points which, at the end of lesson/ section are 'clear' and three which are 'muddy'. Recurring themes will provide useful formative information.
- ◆ Ask students to draw a **concept map** showing what they have learned in a particular class or about a topic.
- ◆ Ask students at the end of class to do '**freewriting**', i.e. give them a topic and ask them to write, without lifting their pens, for three minutes, in response to a topic or question you have posed.

- ◆ Administer a **Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire** (see Appendix 2 for an example).
- ◆ Get students to elect a few **representatives**, meet with them weekly to discuss how the course is going.
- ◆ Generate and administer **student-devised questionnaires**.
- ◆ Ask to borrow a few students' **lecture notes** and compare to your lecture notes. One of the aims in introducing the policy on the Evaluation of Teaching and Courses was to create a 'culture' of evaluation in the university; to encourage students to see their participation in evaluating teaching and courses as part of their role as active learners. In order to do this, it helps to feed back what you have found out from your students to them and to discuss with them how you are going to act on the information which you have received.

Student ratings can and do provide valuable information but they cannot always tell individuals everything needed to make valid and reliable assessments of teaching effectiveness. They thus need to be used along with information from other sources (much like 'triangulation' in other forms of research).

## 2. Peer evaluation

Getting feedback from one's peers, if it is well managed, can contribute not only towards an individual teacher's professional and educational development but also promote conversations on 'good teaching' based in disciplines/faculties and improve teaching *across* those disciplines/faculties. A testimonial letter written by a colleague, such as one usually finds in a *curriculum vita*, does not constitute developmental peer evaluation. Research has shown that in order to increase the reliability and validity of peer evaluation it can be helpful for departments to set up a system of peer evaluation which works for their particular circumstances. We recommend a **Five-step peer observation strategy**:

- Step 1: A **pre-observational meeting** between the lecturer and the peer observer to establish
- rapport
  - the context of the teaching (nature of the course; aims and learning outcomes for course & specific lectures; number and composition of students; material covered; teaching materials used, etc.)
  - the purpose of the evaluation
  - which aspects of the teaching are to be evaluated
  - the form of the evaluation instrument
  - who is going to see the report
  - practicalities (when/where/will observer's status be announced?/where will the observer sit?)

- Step 2: The **observation** in which the observer *records* what happens in the class(es).
- Step 3: A period of **analysis** in which the observer analyses what he/she has seen in relation to:
- the terms of the pre-observational meeting
  - other matters arising out of the observation.
- Step 4: A **post-observation** meeting in which
- the observer reports on 2& 3
  - the lecturer ‘talks back’ to the evaluation
  - the observer and the lecturer discuss strategies for development/management of problems
- Step 5: The **report** which is usually given only to the lecturer concerned and remains confidential. (The report is only sent to other people if the person being evaluated requests it.)

The lecturer needs to be involved in the selection of a peer reviewer and the main criteria for selection should be that the reviewer is committed to the primacy of staff development over summative evaluation and that the lecturer feels comfortable with him/her. A peer reviewer could be a lecturer from your own department, from a cognate discipline or a member of the ADC. It is the role of the peer reviewer

- to listen to what the lecturer wants him/her to do
- to focus on providing feedback that will foster development
- to give feedback that is descriptive rather than evaluative (this reduces defensive reaction and builds metacognitive knowledge). For example, “I like the way you ‘framed’ your lecture by recapping what was covered in yesterday’s class and then explaining what your intended outcomes for today’s class were”
- provide specific rather than general feedback
- to direct comments towards behaviour which the lecturer can change
- to provide prompt feedback
- to try to be unobtrusive in the class.

Peer feedback can also be obtained from other sources, such as:

- external examiners
- alumni

### 3. Research and theory

Another way of obtaining insights into one’s own practices is through critical reading of what lecturers at other universities have written about their research into the teaching of their disciplines. It might be useful to look at Web sites of universities such as Nottingham and Oxford Brookes and at journals such as *The South African Journal of Higher Education* and *Teaching in Higher Education*. Through reading theoretical literature, lecturers’ existing beliefs regarding ‘good’ teaching can be confirmed. In addition you may find theories and practical ideas which could be used to improve your practice as a teacher.

## 4. Self evaluation

Self-evaluation is probably the most effective strategy for improving the teaching skills of lecturers. Self evaluation involves critical reflection on information gathered in the process of looking at one's teaching through the other 'lenses'; it involves 'talking back' to what your students and peers have said about your teaching and your courses.

Self-reflection means deciding which of the feedback given by others you need to take on board to help you to develop your teaching and your courses. It also means justifying why some of their comments are not valid and why you feel you do not need to respond to them.

One of the ways of ensuring regular self-reflection is through keeping a diary or journal in which you record your reactions to or interpretations of events in your teaching life. In addition, the feedback on your teaching and courses from peers and students is only really valuable if you have reflected critically on it in the light of your own experiences and beliefs.

A way of documenting the feedback from others as well as your self-reflections and your responses to all of these is in a **portfolio** (see the ADC's *A Brief Guide to the Development of a Teaching Portfolio*). Teaching portfolios are a means of documenting good teaching at both institutional and personal levels. In addition, building a portfolio is particularly valuable in developing oneself as a teacher.

## Conclusion

This brief guide has attempted to help you see evaluation as a process which involves your looking at your teaching and learning context from many different angles. you have been encouraged to:

- use a variety of means of eliciting on-going formative and summative feedback from your students
- inform your students of how you intend responding to their feedback
- elicit developmental feedback from your peers
- read literature and research on teaching and learning
- reflect critically on your teaching and on the evaluations you received on your teaching and courses
- document these processes in the form of a portfolio.

### **The ADC is available to assist you with:**

- devising a questionnaire or survey using the Evaluation Assistant
- conducting SGIDs and other focus group/ interviewing techniques to elicit more specific and detailed feedback from students
- setting up peer review systems in your department
- providing peer reviewers
- finding literature on teaching and learning
- deciding how to respond to feedback you have received
- building a portfolio

# Appendix 1



## RHODES UNIVERSITY

### THE RHODES UNIVERSITY POLICY ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING AND COURSES

#### 1. Policy Particulars

Date of approval by the Teaching and Learning Committee	14 October 2004
Date of approval by Senate:	29 October 2004
Date of approval by Council:	9 December 2004
Commencement date:	1998
Revision History:	First revision effective 1 January 2005
Review Cycle:	Every three years
Review Date	June 2008
Policy Level:	All academic staff
Responsibility:	
▪ Implementation and Monitoring:	All academic staff Academic Development Centre Academic Review Committee
▪ Review and Revision:	Teaching and Learning Committee
▪ Reporting Structure:	➤ Academic Development Centre ➤ Teaching and Learning Committee ➤ Senate ➤ Council

## 2. Policy Statement

### 2.1. Policy Declaration

Evaluation of teaching and of courses is essential as a foundation for continuing professional and educational development within the University and as a base for institutional and national quality assurance systems. In order to assure the quality of its teaching and courses and to ensure the University is able to fulfil its mission, the University needs to be able to demonstrate:

What we do and why we do it



How we know what we do and why we do it is valid



If appropriate, how we will change what we do and how we do it

University lecturers are expected to be intrinsically motivated to teach well as a matter of professional duty and pride. The University places responsibility for the evaluation of teaching and course design on lecturers and departments. In addition, the University recognizes that evaluation is a complex activity which needs to be understood as a form of research into teaching and course design rather than a bureaucratic necessity.

In designing evaluations, departments/individuals need to be cognizant of the tension between the need to be accountable, the need to protect individuals from the misuse of evaluation and the need for evaluation to contribute to on-going professional development and the enhancement of quality. In order to balance this tension, the University makes a distinction between the evaluation of courses and modules and the evaluation of teaching.

### 2.2. Policy Objectives

This policy aims to ensure that:

- Courses and teaching are evaluated on an on-going basis in a thoughtful and rigorous manner in order to **both** assure and enhance quality.
- Evaluation of courses is available to feed into programme review cycles.
- Staff are aware of their responsibilities regarding evaluation, and of the support available to them through the Academic Development Centre.
- Feedback is provided to students and staff appropriately.
- Uninterpreted raw evaluation data should not be used to the detriment of individuals.



## 2.3. Definitions

**Course Review** refers to the internal self evaluation procedures undertaken within a department.

**Programme Review** refers to the internal self evaluation procedures undertaken at institutional level. At Rhodes this relates to the academic review procedures in which entire departments are reviewed.

**Course evaluation** refers to the elicitation of perceptions of a course or module from a number of perspectives (for example, students, peers, external examiners, self). These perceptions are then balanced against each other in order to try to identify strengths and weaknesses.

**Teaching evaluation** refers to the elicitation of perceptions of an individual's teaching from a number of perspectives (students, peers, self). these perceptions are then balanced against each other in order to try to identify strengths and weaknesses.

**Course** refers to either a year or semester long period of teaching directed at a particular year level.

**Module** refers to a portion of a course. Modules may vary in length.

**Evaluation Report** refers to a document in which the sets of data from different sources are balanced against each other in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the course being evaluated than if only one set of data (student perception surveys, for example) were considered.

## 3. Policy Implementation

### 3.1. The actions and processes by which the objectives of the policy will be achieved

In South Africa, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) places primary responsibility for quality with institutions of higher education and sees its own role as the validation of self-evaluation reports (HEQC Founding Document, 2001). This means that the ability of an institution, and of individuals within that institution, to evaluate performance forms the core of all quality assurance procedures.

Evaluation activities have to be designed in a way which will take account of the need to assure minimum standards as well as of the need to acknowledge that teaching and course design are often highly individualized activities dependent on diverse disciplinary and local contexts as well as on characteristics inherent to lecturers/course designers themselves. The University therefore recognizes that evaluation tools which take the form of 'one size fits all' surveys are unlikely to be able to probe the diversity of course design/approaches to teaching in use within the institution. Although some questions designed to ensure that minimum standards are met will need to be answered on a regular basis, evaluation is best conceived as a process of (1) lecturers identifying salient aspects of their teaching or course design along

with the beliefs and theories which underpin them (2) designing and asking questions which will allow them to observe the impact of teaching and course design and the validity of the assumptions about learning which underpin them (3) reflecting on the implications of what they have learned from analysis of the data for both practice and its underpinning theory.

Although the elicitation of students' perceptions of teaching and course design will probably comprise the primary evaluation mechanism, it is important to balance the opinions of students with those of peers (including external examiners) and those of the course designers or individual teachers. The University therefore makes a distinction between *data* which, in this case, is defined as the perceptions of one perspective and an *evaluation* in which different perspectives are balanced against each other in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the teaching or course being evaluated.

Evaluation can be accomplished using a variety of procedures including survey questionnaires, focus group interviews and other more informal methods of collecting data. Ideally, evaluations need to be captured in the form of a written report which identifies problems which need to be addressed and strengths which need to be built upon and which makes a plan for achieving these. These written reports could be included in teaching portfolios or, in the case of course evaluations, could be stored in a box file with other documentation related to the course for use in programme reviews.

Eliciting the opinions and perceptions of others necessarily takes of their time. This means that it is important to feed back information and insights gained from evaluation to the people who have been consulted. This is especially the case for students who might otherwise not be motivated to complete questionnaires or take part in other forms of evaluation.

For evaluation to be conducted in a thoughtful and rigorous manner, it is necessary to provide support for the design of evaluations and evaluation instruments and for their analysis. In addition, staff need to be supported in addressing problems and issues arising from evaluation. The University undertakes to provide this support by means of the services of the Academic Development Centre.

In order to ensure that the University is able to monitor and review the overall quality of its teaching and courses, departments are required to report on the implementation and outcome of this policy during the regular academic reviews of departments which are held every 3 to 5 years.

### **3.1.1 Review of Courses**

Course/module design and delivery is a relatively more public activity often shared by two or more people. The evaluation of courses is therefore acknowledged as having an accountability function, and is therefore open to public scrutiny. Course/module evaluation, moreover, needs to form part of more wide scale evaluation and audit procedures intended to assure quality at higher levels. Course/module evaluation needs to be both formative and summative. Formative evaluation, which takes place while the course is still being offered or teaching is still taking place, allows problems and issues to be addressed while there is still time for students to benefit from improvements. Summative evaluation is aimed at gaining an overall picture of the course or teaching after the event so that decisions can be made for the future. Course/module evaluation will normally be designed and implemented by course co-ordinators in collaboration with lecturers offering the modules which make up those courses.

**Heads of Departments (or delegated individual or committee) are responsible for:**

- Developing an evaluation strategy which, as a minimum, ensures that courses are evaluated as a whole once every three years as a means of ensuring quality. (Delegated individuals or committees have to provide details of evaluation plans to HoDs and inform them when any additional evaluations are conducted).
- Ensuring that courses or modules which have undergone development or in which problems have been identified are evaluated on a 'need to' basis.
- Ensuring that insights arising from evaluation are acted upon to enhance and assure quality in course design.
- Ensuring that insights from evaluation and the actions which will result from them are communicated to students and other stakeholders.
- Ensuring that evaluations are written up in a way which will allow them to feed into academic reviews and institutional audits.

**Individual lecturers are responsible for:**

- Evaluating the modules or parts of courses that they teach when this forms part of the course evaluation strategy.
- Responding to insights from evaluation.
- Making results from evaluation of modules or courses available to course coordinators and HoDs when requested.
- Informing students of the insights from evaluation and the actions which will result from them.

**Heads of Departments can:**

- Request course evaluations which are additional to those identified in the evaluation strategy to be conducted where deemed necessary.
- Ask to see evaluation reports *accompanied by raw data* where deemed necessary.

**The Academic Development Centre is responsible for providing support for:**

- Designing evaluations.
- Collecting evaluation data.
- Analysing the data from the evaluations.
- Providing written reports on those evaluations.

### **3.1.2 Evaluation of Teaching**

The University understands the evaluation of teaching to be aimed primarily at individual professional development which then contributes to the assurance and enhancement of quality. Individuals are required to evaluate their teaching in an on-going manner and to provide evidence of having done so to Heads of Departments in the form of an evaluation report or a teaching portfolio which describes and documents evaluation processes and which details plans to address weaknesses and build on strengths.

Evaluation of their teaching enables lecturers to identify areas for improvement and also strengths which can be built upon. Regular evaluation of teaching also assists lecturers to make realistic claims about the quality of their teaching when applying for confirmation in a post or promotion.

#### **Individual lecturers are responsible for:**

- Designing evaluations which will allow them to test the validity of their assumptions about teaching and their practice as teachers on a continuous basis.
- Making plans and taking action to address any problem areas identified in their teaching and to build on teaching strengths.
- Providing evidence of the quality of their teaching to Heads of Departments in the form of an evaluation report or a teaching portfolio when required to do so.

#### **Heads of Departments can:**

- Require an individual lecturer to evaluate his/her teaching of a particular course or module as deemed necessary.
- Ask for a discussion of the evaluation or request an evaluation report.

#### **The Academic Development Centre is responsible for providing support for:**

- Designing evaluations.
- Collecting evaluation data.
- Analysing the data from the evaluations.
- Providing written reports on those evaluations.

## **3.2. Review procedure**

The Teaching and Learning Committee shall review the policy every 3 years, by June of the relevant year. Any proposed revisions would need to be considered by faculties before approval by Senate and Council. As and when the policy is revised, the latest version will be distributed by the Secretariat to all Heads of Departments who shall be responsible for communicating the changes to staff in their departments. The Committee Secretariat will also ensure that the web version remains updated.

## **Appendix 2**

### **The classroom critical incident questionnaire**

Please take about five minutes to respond to the questions below. Don't put your name on the form - your responses are anonymous. On xxx (a certain date) I will be sharing the responses with you. Thanks for taking the time to do this. What you write will help me make the class more responsive to your concerns.

1. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in the class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (student or lecturer) took in the class this week did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action that anyone (student or lecturer) took in the class this week did you find most puzzling, confusing or hurtful?
5. What about the class surprised you the most?