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Assessing the Effectiveness of Students Evaluation of Teachers: A Qualitative Analysis of Pakistan's Higher Education

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Abstract

This study assesses the effectiveness of Students Evaluations of Teachers (SET) in the context of Pakistan's higher education. It explores various factors and drawbacks that exist in SETs' administration. The study aimed to investigate the relationship between grade inflation and SET ratings. Teachers and faculty's perceptions of SETs and lower response rate from students towards SET was also investigated. It was also attempted to unearth the effectiveness of SETs in the online mode of administration. A qualitative research methodology has been adopted to carry out the study. Data for the study was attained from 24 respondents which include university teachers, administrators, and students of two public sector universities. Purposive sampling technique was used to choose respondents for data collection. An interview guide was used to collect data from the respondents. Collected data was coded and clubbed together to develop meaningful themes. This study's findings affirmed that SET's validity is partly influenced by the physical attractiveness of the teachers. The findings further suggest that administrators are more confident than the faculty concerning SETs' validity and its usage in administrative decisions about teacher appraisals. The relationship between grade inflation and SETs was found genuine, however, the interplay of two other determinants was also found significant. First, the teachers do not buy good ratings from students intentionally. Second, visiting faculty is more vulnerable to inflating grades than regular faculty. Contrary to the findings of early studies on online or electronic evaluations, it was found that online evaluations have not decreased the response rate of students. However, the effectiveness of SETs in online mode can be realized if the anonymity of the respondents is preserved. We propose that students should be offered open access to the evaluations portal.

Keywords: SET, Assessments, Effectiveness, Evaluations, Higher Education

Introduction

Student evaluations of teachers (SETs) are universally practiced techniques to assess teachers' performance. It remains a fundamental tool for attaining information regarding various indicators of quality teaching (Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans 2013). Previously, the evaluations were conducted at the end of an academic session within the classrooms. A questionnaire would be used to collect responses from students for statistical analysis of teaching skills (Avery et. al., 2006). However, technological advancements have decreased the practice of paper-based or physical methods of conducting SET. Innovations in communication technology have popularized the practice of online assessments in which students use electronic channels (i.e. emails, and online portals) to evaluate their teachers (Barkhi and Williams, 2010; Crews and Curtis, 2011). Both online and paper-based evaluations have advantages and disadvantages concerning the efficacy of measuring teaching quality. SETs' efficacy is a matter of crucial significance for academia as these evaluations are used by administrators to make their decisions regarding the salary, promotion, and tenure of teachers (Walstad and Saunders, 1998).

Researchers have always remained critical of the administration of SETs and their shortcomings in serving the purpose for what they were primarily designed. SETs have been identified as facing the issues of financial costs and time limitation, which ultimately affect their validity (Morrison, 2013; Spooren et. al., 2013) Moreover, it has been observed that faculty members

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influence students' responses before it reaches the administration office (Ory, 1990). The effectiveness of SET is also being compromised through grade leniency and manipulation of class activities (Simpson and Siguaw, 2000).

Considering these loopholes, this study attempts to critically analyze the efficiency of SETs in measuring teaching skills. The advantages and disadvantages of the online mode of evaluation and its influence on the validity of SETs have been explored. The difference in perceptions of Faculty and the administration associated with the accuracy of SETs have been detailed. This study also offers newer insights into the relationship between SETS and Grade inflations- an increase in students' grades inconsistent with their increase in knowledge.

Literature Review

SETs have remained and will continue to remain a widely researched area across the globe. Around 2000 research studies have been conducted on SETs since 1920 (Wilson, 1998). Previous research studies covered multifaceted aspects of SETs i.e. validity of SETs, response rate, the efficiency of online evaluations, and the association between grade inflation and SET. Reviews of some of the crucial studies have been outlined in the following section.

Validity of SETs

Most of the researchers have questioned the validity of SETs. One such study termed the students' evaluations as the most consistent and yet controversial means of information to assess teachers' competency i.e. Simpson (1995). Morgan et al. (2003) detailed 45% of their respondents as stating that SETs are more indicative of a teacher's personality than his/her teaching skills. Anderson and Miller (1997) added that faculty members are critical of validity and are reluctant to its usage in tenure and promotion-related decisions. However, few of the researchers approve of the validity of SETs although they are outnumbered by those who are critical of SETs' efficacy. Timpson and Andrews (1997) argued that there is strong agreement in the literature over the validity and reliability of SETs. They stressed that existing literature dominantly appreciates SETs in truly evaluating effective teaching. Further studies suggested that only properly designed student evaluations can provide reliable information about the characteristics of quality teaching (Marsh, 1987; Murray, 1983; Seldin, 1984). In this study, the validity question has been reemphasized within the context of Pakistan's higher education.

Administrator and Faculty Perception

Administrators and faculty are two of the key stockholders in any educational institution. While discussing the effectiveness of SETs, their perceptions cannot be overlooked. Morgan et al. (2003) examined the perceptions of both administrators and faculty relating to the validity of student evaluations. Their findings suggested that administrators are more confident than the faculty in believing that SETs genuinely assess teachers' effectiveness. They also revealed that the faculty's lack of confidence in SETs is embedded in their thinking that evaluations are primarily influenced by the teacher's personality. Simpson (1995) also revealed that the faculty is critical of SETs and are not ready to consider SETs as a valid measure of their capabilities. Further review of studies suggests that the administration's perception of SETs varies from that faculty. Calderon and Green (1997) stated that the majority of department chairs believe the SETs to be valid measures. They further reported that 95 % of department (accounting) chairs are utilizing SETs to assess teaching effectiveness. The varying perceptions of administration and faculty are troublesome and require immediate attention. Mason et al. (1996) alarmed that if the administrators do not address the teachers' reservations, it may influence the behavior of teachers. The teacher may attempt to improve their ratings by lowering educational standards. Calderon et al. (1997) further substantiated it by stating that faculty members will improve their ratings by compromising on the academic rigor and standards of their courses. They stressed the need for further research to determine the degree of the differences between the views of faculty members and administrators over SETs' validity. This study thus attempted to go deep further and analyzed the faculty and administrators' views and underlying factors that contribute to the inefficacy of SETs.

Grade Inflation and SETs

Grade inflation is the increase in students' grades without a corresponding increase in their knowledge, skills, and academic competency. There is a positive relationship between SETs and grade inflation (Wahid, 2020). Ewing (2012) attempted to know the existence of an incentive for instructors to buy good ratings from the student by inflating their grades. His study affirmed the

correlation and described that there is an increase from 0.167 points to 0.701 in the SET score for every point increase on the relative expected grade scale. Krautmann & Sander (1999) claimed that instructors can "buy" better evaluations by inflating grades. They maintained that the better grade a student expects to receive in a course, the higher he or she rates the instructor. McPherson (2006) conducted a study where he analyzed students' grades expectation from a teacher and students' ratings of that teacher. His study further cemented that expected grade is a significant determinant of good ratings from students. Many other studies affirmed the influential relationship between grade and SETs i.e. Mehdizadeh, 1990; Nelson and Lynch, 1984 & Zangenehzadeh, 1988. Nevertheless, very few exceptions exist where researchers didn't affirm the grade and SET rating relationship i.e. Seiver, 1983; Decanio, 1986. Inflating grades for good student evaluation is not a voluntary action. There lie compelling factors that drive teachers' behaviors to compromise the purpose of SETs. Those factors need to be emphasized in future explorations.

Online versus Paper Evaluations

The rapid advancement in Information and computer based technologies has changed the administration of SETs across the globe. The adaptation of computer or web-based evaluations have outpaced the traditional paper-based evaluations. Researchers have different opinions on the efficacy of online evaluations. They generally differ with the opinions of each other over the aspects anonymity and response rate in online evaluations.

McClain et al. (2018) attempted to know the preferences of students for online and paper-based evaluations. Their finding informed that 33% of students preferred evaluations in class, while 48% of students preferred online evaluations. Their studies also revealed that students think of in-class/paper evaluations as the best mean of preserving their identity. Another study contended the view that online evaluation has more advantages than paper-based traditional evaluations. The advantages included timely feedback, cost-saving, time-saving, and faster displaying of results (Donovan et al., 2007). Besides other advantages and disadvantages of online evaluations, the response rate caught the attention of the majority of academicians. Avery et al. (2006) found a lower response rate in web-based evaluations, however, they further argued that it did not affect mean evaluation scores. Layne et al. (1999) also claimed that the response rate in electronic evaluations is lower (47.8%) than in paper-based evaluations (60.6). Avery et al. (2006) further substantiated the claim that online evaluations produce a lower response rate than traditional evaluations. The results of their study maintained that electronic evaluations are likely to produce a lower response (43%), which is shorter than percentages reported in other studies for paper evaluations. Cartwright (1999) preferred electronic evaluations in his distance learning course. He found 20% response rate upon the first e-mailed request to students and 43 % response rate upon the second request. Contrary to previous studies, Rosenberg et al. (2001) reported a higher response rate for electronic evaluations. Their response rate was reported between 81 and 92 percent. Similarly, Ewell (2000) further revealed that 90% of students think that online evaluations are easy to use, and slightly over 50% of students believe that online evaluations are anonymous. Avery et al. (2006) argued that the continuous usage of online evaluations in successive semesters can result in an increased response rate. They found a 68.1 % response rate for web-based evaluations in the fall 2003 semester. Reviews of the key studies indicated that reporting lower response rates for online evaluations is not a very recent finding. Technology has advanced too fast in the recent past. It is essential to reproduce research on the response rate of online evaluations.

Materials and Methods

The qualitative research method was preferred for the conduction of this study. It was favored for the reasons of grasping deeper subjective perceptions of the stockholders -students, teachers, and administrators related to SETs' effectiveness. In-depth interviews were conducted with all the respondents. Two public sector universities were chosen as the area of study. Respondents were purposely sampled for the interviews on the predetermined criteria. Among the students, only those from Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST) and International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) were chosen who have extensive experience (3 to 5 years) of involvement in SETs. Among the teachers and administrators, preferences were given to those of the respondents who remained involved in SET administration for a period of not less than 5 years. Overall, 25 interviews were conducted before we reached the point of saturation. 12 of the 25 participants belonged to IIUI whereas 13 were students, administrators, and teachers from KUST. The interview guide was used to

collect the data, which was informed by the insights of previous studies as well as by our observations and experiences. The collected responses were clubbed together, and meaningful themes were drawn by using the thematic analysis technique.

Results and Discussions

On Validity: The validity of SETs is influenced by various factors. 70% percent of respondents belonging to the faculty were critical of SETs' validity. The reasons stated by teachers have been summed up as under;

> SETs are biased because it is filled by students based on their personal biases. They are not valid because students rate badly when they find any course challenging. Students often fill out evaluation questionnaires without considering the worth and importance of SET. They treat them as routine activities. They are more interested in getting access to their terminal results, which they cannot do without filling out SET questionnaires. Few of our colleagues are liked for unknown reasons, and they always receive good ratings from students.

The likeability of a few teachers for unknown reasons was further investigated in follow-up interviews to extract genuine causes. One of the visiting faculty members offered a meaningful expression. During a follow-up interview, he responded that "The unknown reasons for essentially good ratings for a particular teacher could be his/her physical attractiveness. Morgan et al. (2003) and Fisher et al. (2019) also substantiated that physical attractiveness has a significant influence on SETs. Evaluation questionnaires do not ask for responses related to personality; hence statistical relations between physical attractiveness and good SET scores cannot be drawn. However, respondents' confusion is not unusual, given that previous studies have already explored a significant relationship between physical attractiveness and good SET scores. Our study's respondents belonging to the faculty were reluctant in agreeing upon the usage of biased evaluations in promotion and rewards decisions. It is asserted that such issues, if not taken care of by administrators, will not only reduce the effectiveness of SETs but it may also impact overall educational standards.

Grade Inflation and SETs: The relationship between SETs and grade inflation has been discussed by various researchers in the past i.e. Isely & Singh (2005). Students and instructors have been found using the SETs to provide unjustified leniency to each other. Consequently, grades and SETs are losing their significance in the academic environment (Wahid, 2020). Attesting the relationship established between SETs and Grade Inflation by previous research, we further extend that the faculty's involvement in this trade is not intentional. Rather, there are certain circumstances that push the faculty to improve their ratings by compromising on quality. The excerpt of the responses to this question is offered below;

> We think that SETs are influenced by many factors other than teaching effectiveness. Everyone is aware of this fact. Despite that, they are still used in determining the candidate for the best teacher award. Further, they can also affect teachers' reputations. Administrators need to abandon its use in decisions making unless validity issues are resolved. Without readdressing the validity issue, few of the faculty members shall go for grade leniency. They also choose to give tasks less challenging than a course requires.

Our findings also add that regular faculty can somehow manage to tackle the pressure of invalid SET rating, however, visiting faculty or contractual teachers are under immense pressure. Most of the respondents held that the visiting teachers offered lenient grading to improve their SETs. Putting together, it is asserted that the relationship between SETs and grade inflation exists. However, it is further added that (I) the teachers' involvement in this relationship is not intentional (ii) the visiting faculty is more vulnerable to grading their students leniently than the regular faculty. The obvious reason for visiting faculty's vulnerability is their feeling of insecurity about losing the opportunity to teach courses the very next semester.

Response Rate: The response rate of the SETs is one of the most debated aspects initiated by previous researchers. Generally, the response rate has increased after the transition from paper-based evaluations to online evaluations. However, the lower response still exists in the institutions where SETSs are not online or they are not mandatory to be filled by students. We asked students and faculty of the departments with the low response rate to detail the reasons for the lower response rate. The majority of the students (65%) were of the view that filling SETs has never helped them in improving the quality of teaching. An excerpt from the responses stated that:

> We are being provided with the evaluation questionnaires since we are admitted here. At the start of our degrees, we treated and filled it with seriousness. We would think that it will improve the performance of the particular teacher. However, we find it a completely useless activity as we have not witnessed any concrete outcomes of the evaluation practice.

This particular concern of students was also addressed in a study conducted by McClain et al. (2017). Students' pessimism about the outcomes of SETs was inquired further in the follow-up interviews with administrators. One of the respondents from admin added that: "We cannot increase the response rate by just letting the students know the result of their ratings. Because students sometimes deal with it in unprofessional manners. The faculty members were also inquired about the reasons behind the low response rate. The crux of the responses is as under:

> Teachers don't agree that SETs have no implications for the teachers at all. In case of receiving a bad rating, the Head of Department of the particular department may call that instructor and instruct him\her to revise his or her method. On the positive side, they may get the best teacher award and some other remuneration or appraisals. The reason behind the low response rate is that they are not treated as mandatory proceedings across all departments. There are only a few departments where filling SET is considered mandatory and there we have a higher response rate. We should make it compulsory for students of every department to fill it out every semester.

To conclude the discussion, it is appreciated that students' perception is instrumental. Nevertheless, we have not found it a potential threat to the low response rate. The introduction of web-based evaluations in the majority of the department has constrained the students to fill the evaluations necessarily. Because students cannot check their terminal exam results as long as they have not filled out those evaluations.

Traditional/paper versus Online Evaluations: Respondents were exclusively asked about the effectiveness after the transition from traditional paper evaluations to web-based online evaluations. The majority of the respondents appreciated the transition from traditional to online evaluations. The crux of the responses (administrators) are summed as under:

> Paper evaluations were costly. They were comparatively expensive in terms of stationary costs and time. They were also more difficult to be administered than online evaluations. Online evaluations are prompt and easy to be administered. Students are convenient with online evaluations as they can fill them everywhere and anytime they want. Consequently, online evaluations have increased the response rate of SETs.

The preference for online evaluations was observed in previous studies as well. Donovan, Madar, and Shinsky (2007) found that 88.4% of all respondents were supporting the online method compared to 11.6% who were against it.

Technical complications and access to the internet have been found issues of concern for previous researchers. We inquired our respondents and found the majority of them as satisfied with issues related to technical or the internet. One of the students responded that "I can access MIS (software used by students for accessing services) everywhere. I can log in and fill out the evaluation form easily. Internet might be an issue at home but at the campus, it is certainly not". While interviewing students from many departments we found the majority of them were fully literate in MIS usage. Some of them were not availing the Mobile Internet packages, but that too could not keep them from filling evaluations online because they could ask their friend for hotspot sharing when they require. This is contrary to what Crews & Curtis (2011) speculated in their article. Based on our findings and observation of students, we induce that internet issues and other related technical complexities pose no potential threat to the efficacy of SETs.

On the question of anonymity of students in the online mode of evaluations, the majority of students were not aware. They were having no certain knowledge of whether the administration preserved the confidentiality of their names or not. We asked the administrators about the anonymity which they responded in affirmation. However, there is no harm in implementing the suggestion detailed by Ballantyne (2003) and Dommeyer et al. (2004) that students should have the facility to access online evaluation forms without inserting their login addresses. This will bring confidence in students for expressing themselves autonomously while evaluating their teachers online.

To summarize the above-held discussion, it is asserted that online evaluation has been welcomed by students and administrators alike. Technological lag and lack of internet access do not

reduce the response rate. Nevertheless, to attain effective and unbiased evaluations, confidentiality must be guaranteed. Further, students must be given open access to the evaluation portals.

Administrator and Faculty's Perceptions: Administrators and faculty members have an instrumental say while assessing the effectiveness of SETs. Their perceptions about the effectiveness varied from each other. Previously, it has been affirmed that faculty have always expressed their reservations about the usage of SETs in promotion, reappointments, and tenure decisions. Administrators, however, have always supported the validity of SETs (Calderon and Green, 1997). While conducting interviews for this study we remained attuned to the varying perceptions of the stockholders- faculty, and administrators. We found the majority of administrators (90%) satisfied with the effectiveness of SETs and their usage in administrative decisions. This is in line with the findings of Calderon and Green (1997) who detailed in their study of the accounting department that 95% percent of department chairs are using Student evaluation for assessment of teaching quality. Teachers on the other hand, often remain critical of students' evaluations. They think of SETs as Popularity contests. The responses of the majority of the faculty members are summed up as under:

> Students do not always rate quality teaching. It has been seen that most of the time the students give bad ratings for the tough courses. Therefore, SETs are influenced by many reasons other than assessing quality. Students' prejudices cannot be overlooked in this regard. Students' ratings are also negatively influenced by the workload and class size.

The above crux of teachers' responses is also substantiated by the study of Marsh and Overall (1981). Our respondents of the study further argued that the policy of using SETs for tenure decisions, promotions, and reappointment should be informed of existing biases. Without considering the existing biases, the evaluations may lead to another issue which is a compromise on quality by the teacher. The same concern was stated by one of the faculty members that if administrators continue to use biased SETs in their decisions making, we will be left with no other choice but to give up on challenging and quality teaching. By doing so, we can avoid the negative outcomes of using biased SETs in decision-making.

The discussion highlights that faculty and administrators have differing opinions regarding the SETs and their efficiency in measuring quality teaching. Teachers are relatively more conscious than administrators about existent biases, hence reluctant to support its usage in the administrative decision. To have effective evaluations, there must be coordination between the two key stockholders. Biases can be avoided by training students to assess their teachers rigorously and faithfully. Additionally, the administrator should not merely rely on SET's to assess teachers' performance. They can also conduct assessments of their own to assess teachers' quality reducing the chances of any possible biases.

Conclusion

The article outlined various factors that lead to the in-effectiveness of Student evaluations of teachers. It is concluded that the validity of the SETs is exposed to various biases such as; likeability for a teacher, lack of seriousness of students, essentially bad rating for challenging courses, etc. It is suggested that universities must add elements in evaluation forms related to teachers' physical attractiveness to know its influence on SETs validity. The relationship between grade inflation and SET was also confirmed. Our findings support the findings of the previous research that expected grades may influence SETs. It is further argued that teachers' involvement in inflating grades for getting good students evaluation is not intentional rather it is determined by external pressure. They inflate grades due to the usage of biased SETs in administrative decisions. It is also concluded that visiting faculty is more inclined towards buying good ratings by inflating grades than regular faculty. This study found varied perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding SETs' effectiveness. Faculty was found more critical of SETs than administrators. This research excavated the reasons for the lower response rate of SETs. Students' lack of seriousness emerged as one of the main reasons. It is therefore suggested that students must be given special training related to the significance of SETs. The training must inform students of how to avoid biases while evaluating their teachers. Our findings challenge the argument of a few previous studies that online evaluations have lowered the response rate. Rampant technological innovations have enabled students and administrators to avail online sources for evolutions conveniently. However, for the effective and genuine online evaluations the students should be given open access to evaluation portals.

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