Course Evaluation Interpretation Guidelines for Academic Administrators
Faculty of Arts & Science

These guidelines are designed to assist academic units in the Faculty of Arts & Science in the interpretation of course evaluation reports. Data from course evaluations contributes important information for the processes of Progress Through the Ranks (PTR), tenure, and promotion.

Information in these guidelines is adapted from information provided by the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation (CTSI) with additional information that addresses the Faculty of Arts & Science context.

Information for instructors about interpreting the results of their own course evaluations is available on the CTSI website at http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/Assets/CTSI+Digital+Assets/ce-report-instructors.pdf. Reviewing these instructor guidelines will provide academic administrators with an understanding of how results may be interpreted and used by individual instructors.

This document provides details on the following topics:

1. **Overview of the questions on the course evaluation form**
2. **Drawing conclusions from course evaluation data**
3. **Use of course evaluation results in the evaluation of teaching**

**Appendix: Transitioning to the new course evaluation framework**

**Contact and Information Resources**

1. **Overview of the Questions on Course Evaluation Forms**

As noted in the *University of Toronto Policy on the Student Evaluation of Teaching in Courses*, “Course evaluations are part of an overall teaching and program evaluation framework that includes regular peer review, instructor self-assessment, cyclical program review and other forms of assessment, as appropriate.” The new course evaluation framework collects data on the multiple factors that shape students’ learning experiences, and reflects institutional, divisional and, optionally, unit-level teaching priorities.

**Institutional Items:** All course evaluations in the university include the following items:

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<th>Items:</th>
<th>Assesses:</th>
<th>Questions:</th>
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| Institutional Core Items    | students’ average ratings of the extent to which each core institutional | 1. I found the course intellectually stimulating.  
                              |                                                | 2. The course provided me with a deeper |

1 As described in the March 2010 *Course Evaluation Working Group Report*, the 8 questions outlined in this section were developed to align with institutional teaching priorities. These were developed in draft form by the Faculty of Arts & Science Committee on Teaching & Learning, and affirmed and finalized through an institution-wide consultative process. Draft questions were tested with Arts & Science students through student focus groups, online submission of student comments, consultation with student groups, and test evaluations in particular courses that included the opportunity for students to provide feedback on the questions. Test and pilot versions of the questions were assessed by the Course Evaluation Support Officer and were determined to meet high standards of validity and reliability.
(Items 1-5): teaching priority was part of their learning experiences in the course understanding of the subject matter.

3. The instructor created a course atmosphere that was conducive to my learning

4. Course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams improved my understanding of the course material.

5. Course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams provided opportunity for me to demonstrate an understanding of the course material.

Scale (Questions 1-5):
Not at all >> Somewhat >> Moderately >> Mostly >> A great deal

Institutional Composite Mean: students’ overall average rating of institutional items 1-5

| Item 6: | student’s overall quality of the learning experience in the course | 6. Overall, the quality of my learning experience in this course was.
|        |                                                                 | Poor >> Fair >> Good >> Very good >> Excellent |

| Item 7: | students’ written comments about the quality of instruction in the course | 7. Please comment on the overall quality of instruction in this course.
|         |                                                                          | Open-ended |

The institutional core items (Items 1-5) can help units understand the source of the overall ratings provided by the composite mean of institution-level questions and Item 6 (Note: Institutional Composite Mean is not the mean of the 5 Items across the entire U of T institution; it is a composite mean of the instruction-level Items 1-5). Any item with a rating substantially above or below the institutional composite mean suggests that that component of the course deserves further consideration.

Additionally, one more priority will be included on institutional course evaluation instruments but should not be used for summative review of teaching. Instead, data from this question may be used to provide information to instructors, departments, divisions and the institution about academic support mechanisms.

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<tr>
<th>Item:</th>
<th>Assesses:</th>
<th>Question:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Item 8:</td>
<td>the availability of support for student learning both from instructors and from</td>
<td>8. Please comment on any assistance that was available to support your</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Divisional items

The Faculty of Arts & Science has selected three divisional questions to provide further contextual data for analyzing course evaluation results. The first two questions were requested by students and are intended primarily to support students’ course selection. The final question is intended to support the Faculty’s transition to an online system, and will be used to analyze the relationship between self-reported attendance and evaluation responses.

9. Compared to other courses, the workload for this course was: Very heavy >> Heavy >> Average >> Light >> Very light

10. I would recommend this course to other students. Not at all >> Somewhat >> Moderately >> Mostly >> A great deal

11. I attended class: Almost always >> More than half of the time >> Half of the time >> Less than half of the time >> Almost never.
   (In courses offered fully online, this question will be reworded to read: Overall, I participated in the available online course activities: Not at all >> Somewhat >> Moderately >> Mostly >> A great deal)

Unit items

Units may have selected up to 3 additional unit items from the institutional bank of questions, and may wish to consult the CTSI Course Evaluation Support Officer for guidance in using these questions to assess courses and instructors. In choosing unit-level items, academic administrators should consider how the selected items will be used for understanding the curricular needs of the unit, the pedagogical issues of the courses taught, and/or the performance of individual instructors.

Unit-level questions were not implemented during the 2012-2013 evaluation cycle, but will be available in the near future.

Instructor Items

Instructors may have selected up to 3 additional items from the institutional bank of questions. The inclusion of instructor-selected items is meant to support reflection and enhancement of pedagogical and curricular issues of their choosing. It is important to note that results for instructor-selected questions are only available to individual instructors for viewing and will not be viewed by departmental administrators; instructors may choose to share the results of those items with academic administrators if they wish.

2. Drawing conclusions from course evaluation data

Results on all items must be considered in the context of the following issues:
- **Response Rate:** Absent a response rate of close to 100%, there is no guarantee that the responses reflect a representative sample of students in the course. It should be recognized that responses from a small percentage of students may be biased in some manner, and judgment is required in the interpretation of such responses. That said, any student responses, especially free-form comments, can yield useful information about the experiences of those students in the course, though they should be interpreted in the context of the response rate.

The response rate itself should not be taken as an indicator of the quality of students’ learning experiences in the course. That is, there is no indication that a particularly high or low response rate consistently reflects students’ experiences. However, a low response rate does suggest that further action could be taken to encourage student participation in the evaluation process. In general, instructors are encouraged to communicate to their students during the student response window about the important role of student evaluations in assessing the quality of teaching and courses, and in making improvements to them.

Courses with fewer than five evaluation responses: In courses that receive fewer than five student evaluation responses, reports will include response distributions, but no summary statistical information will be provided. This is because information such as question means may not draw on a sufficiently large student sample to be representative of the learning experience provided in the course. In reviewing these reports, you may wish to treat individual student responses in much the same way you would consider individual student responses on open-ended questions, that is, as an important source of information that is not necessarily representative or generalizable.

- **Distribution and Standard Deviation:** The distribution of responses and standard deviation are provided for each item. A high standard deviation, or response distributions that are unusually dispersed along the response scale, indicate that different students had very different responses to the issue or priority being evaluated. For example, if the mean response to question 1, *I found the course intellectually stimulating*, was a 3 (mostly), but there was a strong divergence between students who responded “a great deal” and “not at all,” then this question may be flagged as requiring more in-depth analysis. Student written responses can often provide particular insight into the reasons for such variations.

- **Course characteristics:** A relationship between course characteristics and student ratings may reflect differences in students’ experience of their learning (e.g., students may generally find that upper-level courses are more intellectually stimulating). Units may identify particular course characteristics that are associated with higher or lower student ratings (for example, course size, course level, and role of course in program, teaching approach). Units may also wish to record such assumptions to provide consistent guidance for PTR committees and Teaching Committees for tenure and promotion cases.

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2 Similarly, student-reported estimates of attendance (Item 11) should not be assumed to indicate the quality of their experience; these responses may vary significantly for reasons that do not reflect student learning or degree of satisfaction with the course.
In the future, units will be able to request an analysis of their unit data based on such characteristics from the Course Evaluation Support Officer in order to determine how these assumptions are actually reflected in the data. Units may request comparative data about particular types of courses (e.g. means across the unit for Items 1-5 based on level of course) to provide additional contextual information for the assessment of individual instructors and for informing the unit about curricular development. Patterns of student responses based on particular course characteristics can also provide important information for program review and planning.

If you have any questions about using course evaluation data in your unit, please contact Dr. Cherie Werhun at the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation. Dr. Werhun can provide additional comparative data or a specialized analysis of your unit course evaluation data.

**Other special considerations:**

**Team taught courses**

In assessing team-taught courses, units or instructors may have opted to:

1. Issue a single online course evaluation at the conclusion of the course which repeats Q3, *The instructor (INSTRUCTOR NAME) created a course atmosphere that was conducive to my learning*, for each instructor, and each instructor’s name will appear in the question. In this option, each instructor associated with the course is able to select up to three additional instructor-level questions, all of which will be presented to students in the single online form.

2. Issue a single online course evaluation at the conclusion of the course which omits Q3, *The instructor (INSTRUCTOR NAME) created a course atmosphere that was conducive to my learning*, for all associated instructors. In such cases, the online evaluation is supplemented by paper evaluations, produced by the administering unit, which includes Q3 and up to 3 instructor-level questions chosen by the instructors from the [question bank document](#).

3. Issue paper evaluations at more than one point in the course. For example, in full-year courses where the first semester of the course is taught by one instructor, and the second by another, evaluations may be issued at the end of both fall and winter semesters. Instructor-level questions will be selected as outlined in option #2.

   (Please note that, if a unit wishes to administer multiple iterations of a course evaluation, this decision must be communicated to the Course Evaluation Support Officer well in advance of the conclusion of the first module, and ideally prior to the beginning of the semester in which the course begins.)

In assessing the results from evaluations in team-taught courses, please consider the point in the course at which the evaluation was completed. If evaluations are issued at more than one point in the course, it is important to keep in mind that students in early modules have only completed a portion of the course (and therefore may be less able to provide effective feedback on particular issues, such as projects, assignments, tests and/or exams), while students in later modules will consider the course as a whole (not simply the module of the course taught by the later instructors) in their responses.
Similarly, students completing a single evaluation for all instructors at the conclusion of the course will provide responses that reflect their learning experience in the course as a whole. Students’ responses to open-ended Item 7, Please comment on the overall quality of instruction in this course, may provide insight into students’ experiences with individual instructors as well as their experiences with the team-taught environment.

3. Use of course evaluation results in the evaluation of teaching

As noted in the Policy on the Student Evaluation of Teaching in Courses, “Course evaluations are part of an overall teaching and program evaluation framework that includes regular peer review, instructor self-assessment, cyclical program review and other forms of assessment, as appropriate.” Data from course evaluations should be considered in the context of other forms of information and feedback on an instructor’s teaching, many of which are described in the Provostial and FAS Guidelines for Developing Writing Assessments of Effectiveness of Teaching in Tenure and Promotion Decisions (for tenure cases) or Guidelines for Evaluation of Teaching Activities and Pedagogical/Professional Development (for promotion to Senior Lecturer).

3.1 An initial analysis of an instructor’s course evaluation results

In any assessment of teaching, units should take care to ensure that more than one data point or source of data is used for the assessment of teaching. Triangulation is a means of validating evidence on teaching by considering input from a number of different sources – for example, by using course evaluation data, information about teaching activities submitted by an instructor, and peer assessment where available. A simple ranking of instructors within a unit according to one or more course evaluation data points is generally not appropriate practice: distinctions between similar evaluation scores (e.g. between a 4.2 and a 4.3) do not represent a meaningful variation in teaching assessment, and ranking instructors therefore tends to overinflate minor differences between very similar scores.

Some guidelines to support an initial assessment of course evaluation data are listed below.

- The first section of the course evaluation report includes an executive summary of evaluation data for each section. PTR committees may wish to begin by reviewing the composite mean of the institutional questions, which represents an average of the results of Items 1 through 5. The institutional questions that inform the composite mean are rated on a scale from 1 to 5; higher scores represent more favourable student responses.
- By reviewing the individual means associated with Items 1 through 5, units can identify any areas of particular strength or concern (for example, low scores associated with Questions 4 and 5 may indicate a problem with course projects, assignments, tests and/or exams).
- The results from Q6, Overall, the quality of my learning experience in this course was... also provides a broad overview of student learning experiences in the course. Q6 is rated on a scale of 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent).
- Units should consider student responses to unit-level questions if they have selected questions that are relevant to assessing the quality of instruction in the course.
- Comparative data (for the Division and Unit) for each quantitative question is available in Section 3 of the report.
- Units may also wish to review responses to open-ended comments, available in Section 2 of the course evaluation report. Similarly, detailed response distributions are available in Section 2 of the report.

3.2 Further analysis of instructor’s course evaluation results

Further steps in the analysis of course evaluation results include:
- Thoroughly review the results of all institutional, divisional, and relevant unit-level questions (with the exception of Item 8, discussed below) to identify areas of particular strength or potential challenges. All results should be considered in light of overall contextual information (including data reliability, distribution and standard deviation, and particular course characteristics) described above.
- Review all responses to the open-ended Item 7, Please comment on the overall quality of instruction in this course.
- Recognize that course evaluation reports represent just one element of the teaching committee’s overall portfolio for evaluating an instructor’s teaching.

Please note that responses to the open-ended Item 8, Please comment on any assistance that was available to support your learning in this course, are NOT intended to be included in a summative assessment of an individual instructor’s teaching. Instead, data from this question can be used to provide information to instructors, departments, divisions and the institution about academic support mechanisms available to students.

Appendix: Transitioning to the new course evaluation framework.

Background to the development of the new course evaluation framework is available at http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/teaching/essentialinformation/evaluation-framework/about.htm.

Please note some of the most significant changes to the course evaluation framework, including information about how these changes might affect the interpretation of evaluation results, as outlined below.
- The core institutional questions in the new course evaluation framework focus on students’ experience of their learning in the course. Unit-selected\(^3\) and instructor-specific questions may focus on specific elements of students’ learning experiences, particular course components, or students’ interactions with the course instructor and other members of the teaching team.
- The response scale ranges from 1 to 5, rather than 1 to 7.
- Past practices sometimes exhibited an over-reliance on a limited set of indicators. The new online framework provides a rich set of data which can support a fuller assessment of teaching.

\(^3\) Unit-level questions were not available in the course evaluation surveys for the 2012-2013 academic year
The new course evaluation system provides much richer data to instructors and units. Specifically:

- Comparative data is reported to units and instructors, including unit- and divisional-means for institutional-, divisional- and unit-level questions.
- In the future, academic units may request customized reports reflecting aggregate or individual data by course or instructor from institutional, divisional, or academic unit questions. Such reports will support the unit in monitoring teaching effectiveness and in working with curriculum committees and instructors to ensure a strong learning experience for our students.

As the Faculty of Arts and Science transitions to the new course evaluation framework, the documentation provided by candidates for Tenure, Promotion, and Advancement may include evaluations conducted under both the previous and the current course evaluation framework. In such cases, academic administrators should take into consideration the relevant similarities and differences of the two frameworks when interpreting the results of course evaluations.

**Contact and Information Resources:**

Dr. Cherie Werhun, Course Evaluation Support Officer
Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation (CTSI)
course.evaluations@utoronto.ca

Website for University of Toronto information on course evaluations:
http://www.teaching.utoronto.ca/teaching/essentialinformation/evaluation-framework.htm

Website for course evaluation updates within the Faculty of Arts & Science:
http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/faculty-staff/teacher-info/course-evaluation-update