

TICK TICK TICK FEEDBACK

Saji K Mathew, Associate Professor, Management Studies

What should be an appropriate focus of assessment for Institutions of higher learning, seeking to maintain and improve quality of teaching? This question is ever interesting from all stakeholder perspectives: teacher, student and the Institute. There are two dominant views on this, first one stressing the importance of program level feedback and a second on course level feedback. Institutes of higher education in UK and Australia predominantly follow the first view and use Course (program) Perceptions Feedback (CPQ) instrument whereas in North America where the second view is dominant and Students' Evaluations of Educational Quality (SEEQ) instrument is widely followed. Typically SEEQ has 9 dimensions: learning value, enthusiasm, organization, group interaction, rapport, breadth, examination, assignment, workload with 35 items used to measure them. Since higher education in India tends to follow the North American model, I focus more on teacher and course feedback. As a teacher course feedback mechanism is intended to improve quality of teaching, the first question in this article could be split into two: (a) does our mechanism in IIT Madras serve the objectives quality improvement? (b) how could it improve further?

According to Marsh and Dunkin (1992)¹, scholars in the field of education, a teacher course feedback mechanism must serve four objectives

- i. Diagnostic feedback to teachers about the effectiveness of their teaching.
- ii. A measure of teaching effectiveness to be used in administrative decision making.
- iii. Information for students to use in the selection of courses and teachers.
- iv. An outcome or process description for use in research on teaching.

It appears that our mechanism serves the first two objectives somewhat well, the availability of feedback to successive batches as input in their choice of elective courses is quite limited. Our feedback system is highly metric driven where we assume that our administration of instrument will give us unbiased and useful numbers that will speak to instructors and administrators. So we could see the tendency sometimes to be a nine pointer and still discriminating in decimal points with competing faculty members as an induced culture in some of our Institutions.

¹ Marsh, H. W. & Dunkin, M. J. (1992) Students' evaluations of university teaching: a multidimensional perspective, in: J. C. Smart (Ed.) *Higher education: handbook of theory and research*, volume 8 (New York, Agathon Press).

However previous research has shown that results from the measurement are subject to systematic biases. For example John Richardson² in his review of instruments for obtaining student feedback has reported high +ve correlation when same students rate courses taught by the same teacher and little or no correlation between ratings of the same course taught by different teachers. He concludes that *students' ratings are a function of the person teaching the course rather than the particular course being taught*. This review has also highlighted the following:

- ▶ No systematic changes in students' ratings of 195 teachers over a 13-year period
 - Students' evaluations may change teachers' self-perceptions even if they do not change their teaching behavior
- ▶ Students' evaluations of teaching were subsumed by a single overarching construct defined as "*general instructional skill*"
- ▶ A *positive* relationship between students' expected grades and their overall ratings of their teaching

The study also reported certain tactics followed by Instructors to influence their feedback through inflated mid-term grades.

The above findings provide us some insights for improvement. Instead of relying on a purely metric driven approach, we must place due emphasis on qualitative feedback. One excellent example is that of Harvard University where the author could access an instrument used for teacher course feedback. The instrument does not use any scale to quantify, but poses very thoughtful questions to students. The instrument has a question to help prospective future students: *to choose wisely, what advice would you give to students who are thinking of taking this course (about its level, the amount of work required, any prior training needed, ways to get the most out of the course, etc.)*. As required by a good mechanism for effective feedback intended to inform Instructor, administration and future students, descriptive feedback would serve better particularly in minimizing the biases. Students also get an opportunity to do reflective writing at the end of the course, instead of ticking digits- tick tick tick. In some Intuitions of higher learning teacher course feedback will be a compiled report running upto 50 pages with rich written contents. To do better next time. Do we have some clues to move forward from tick tick tick feedback?

² Richardson, J. T. E. (2005). Instruments for obtaining student feedback: a review of literature, *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 387-415