

THE CONVERSATION

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Read the student survey responses shared by academics and you'll see why Professor Hambling is justified in burning hers

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If you've watched the Netflix sitcom *The Chair* you'll remember the scene in which Professor Joan Hambling burns her student evaluations, after admitting she hadn't read any of them since the 1980s. Many of us in academia whooped in delight when Professor Hambling lit that match.

We know exactly how she feels. For LGBTIQ+ people in particular, student experience or satisfaction surveys can be a source of distress as they provide students with an anonymous means to discriminate against and harass queer academics. At times, these surveys are little better than university-facilitated hate speech.

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An unreliable guide to teaching quality

Adding salt to the wound is that universities then use these surveys to assess academics' teaching performance, despite growing evidence they are not fit for this purpose. The University of New South Wales has even proposed to publish these survey results.

Research shows student evaluations of teaching are not accurate measures of teaching effectiveness. Other research shows these surveys do not lead to higher teaching quality or better learning outcomes and are not trusted by students as a means of giving them a voice. In contrast, such surveys are linked to poorer teaching, grade inflation and to racism, sexism and homophobia.

A number of studies have shown grade satisfaction is a major factor in survey results – the higher the student's grades the better the feedback they give. Students at prestigious universities are also more likely to positively rate their lecturers because the university and its courses are seen as "world class". Most damningly, student evaluations are often little more than veiled bias about their lecturer's personal traits, especially gender, race and sexuality.

The Chair Season 1 | Official Clip: Evaluations | Net...



Despite what she tells the chair of the department, Professor Joan Hambling has resisted reading her student evaluations.

Sharing the best and worst feedback

I recently asked a dozen academics from universities across Australia to share their worst and best student feedback stories. A common thread in these stories was students using the surveys to voice homophobic and transphobic sentiment. These are real student responses to questions about teaching quality:

I couldn't concentrate because I couldn't tell if the teacher was a man or woman.

I found it extremely frustrating that a lot of examples and theories all revolved around sexuality/gender/identification and how it affects him. Speaking to a number of students in this topic, a lot of us felt like it was over the top.

This lecturer has no empathy for students not supporting the LGBTQ ideology.

She looks like a man professor not a woman one.

He made me uncomfortable because gays and lesbianism are against my religion.

There are only two genders, men and women!

Some other comments were so offensive they were unpublishable.

There was also a strong thread of sexism. Research shows women receive lower ratings than male academics for doing the same thing. Women academics were judged harshly for being feminist or not conforming to stereotypical gender norms. One academic copped abuse for both in a single comment:

*Question: Do you have any other comments to add about this teacher in this unit? Answer:
You look like 13 year old boy but the brain of a woman power bullshit and your (sic) a germ.*

The academic in question had a short, Pixie-style haircut at the time. Here we have the student's perception of her gender non-conformity negatively impacting the academic's teaching quality score.

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These surveys provide two forms of so-called data, a numeric score and qualitative data in the form of student comments. To assess teaching performance, or to decide if an academic will be appointed or promoted, the numeric score alone is normally used. This means an academic given a poor score accompanied by a discriminatory comment is being evaluated without proper context.

That being said, neither the numeric score nor the comments necessarily reveal the student's true motivation for the feedback. Students are discouraged from openly venting their racism, homophobia and sexism but this does not mean their attitudes change. They are just cleverer about how they express it. Anonymous surveys enable them to rate an academic harshly without having to justify the rating or say why.

Many responses have nothing to do with teaching

Research also shows students are often not even answering the question they are asked, as the comments above show. They often base their scores and comments – both positive and negative – on things outside the classroom and beyond the academic's control. Here are some examples:

It would've been nice not to have to miss so many classes due to public holidays due to the classes being on a Monday.



Library access sometimes confusing - not everything available online.

IT help at this university is terrible, nothing ever works how it should and they never fix it.

One academic I contacted received a positive score and comment because of her wardrobe:


Question: What was good about the course? Student comment: I like your shirts 😊

Another academic received a low teaching quality score because the classroom did not have a nice view and the student found that depressing.

Ross Renton 
@Ross_Renton 

"In 2020 higher education student satisfaction with their 'entire educational experience' hit its lowest point since Australia's national survey of current students began in 2011" by [@andrewjnorton](#)

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Although academics generally value and respect their students, it would be foolish to pretend that as a group they will give objective feedback with the sole aim of improving teaching. About one in ten students routinely cheats on their assessments. Half of British university students experience assault and harassment on campus from other students. Another UK study showed close to a quarter of LGBTIQ students had been a victim of homophobic harassment or discrimination, including threats of physical violence, at university.

Most students are good people, but enough harbour sexist, racist and homophobic views to distort survey outcomes.

Read more: Sexual abuse, harassment and discrimination 'rife' among Australian academics

What are the impacts on academics?

Having positions of relative authority in the university system does not make LGBTIQ academics immune to homophobia on campus. If anything, they may feel like they have targets on their backs that force some back into the closet. Giving students an anonymous means to vent their bias and purposely harm academics' careers and well-being just makes things worse.

Foregrounding student evaluations of teaching over other ways of assessing teaching performance — such as peer review and actual student learning outcomes — also leads some academics from vulnerable communities to self-censor in classes. Some queer academics, especially those on precarious casual contracts, try to be “less queer”. One non-binary academic adopted a “cisgender-friendly way of dressing” for the classroom after student comments. Having to wear more normative clothing made the academic feel they were “in a form of prison, wearing an inmate’s uniform”.

Obviously, having to hide who we are is not conducive to a productive teaching environment nor to our well-being.

Furthermore, for surveys to be statistically relevant and represent the majority attitudes of any given class the response rates need to be at 60% or higher – a benchmark routinely expected of survey data. Often students participate in these surveys at much lower rates. These low rates give a louder voice to those who wish to use the surveys to punish academics for their non-conformity to hetero-patriarchal values.

We already have better ways of assessing teaching quality and student learning, and ensuring those processes are authentic and fair. They're called assessment outcomes.

In contrast, student evaluations of teaching are not fit for purpose and commonly discriminate against LGBTIQ+ and women academics. Perhaps Professor Hambling had valid reasons for burning her student feedback evaluations.