

OCUFA report reveals systemic discrimination and harassment in use of university student questionnaires

TORONTO, February 6, 2019 – A new report published by a working group of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations exposes substantial issues with student questionnaires on courses and teaching (SQCTs), including endemic bias and systemic discrimination. These end-of-term student questionnaires are common practice at universities across Canada.

The report finds that student questionnaire scores fail to accurately reflect teaching quality and that their results are not suitable for determining faculty pay, promotion, tenure, or contract renewal. Student questionnaire results are skewed by many factors outside an instructor's control, including class size, time, subject, and the professor's race, gender, or accent. Additionally, the report finds that current SQCT practices facilitate the harassment of faculty, compromise educational quality, and are not an appropriate metric for determining university funding levels.

“Faculty understand that student feedback is vital for improving teaching and course development,” said Gyllian Phillips, President of OCUFA. “But, as this report clearly demonstrates, using student questionnaires to evaluate faculty performance is counterproductive and harmful, and it raises serious equity questions. The goal of student questionnaires should be to inform a better understanding of the teaching and learning experience, not to penalize faculty for their class size, instructional innovations, gender, or skin colour.”

The report is one of the most exhaustive of its kind in Canada and examines the methodological, research ethics, and human rights implications of student questionnaires. It finds that:

- Women, racialized, and LGBTQ2S+ faculty, as well as faculty with disabilities, receive lower scores than their white male colleagues. Using SQCTs to determine pay and promotion risks marginalizing these equity seeking groups even further, impacting their career prospects and limiting academic diversity.
- It is impossible to adjust SQCT scores to account for their bias.
- Anonymous SQCT comments are regularly used to target faculty members with abusive, harassing, and harmful comments.
- Students are not adequately informed about how SQCTs are used, or how their information can be shared.
- Using SQCT scores to evaluate teaching discourages innovation and undermines student learning.

“Given the serious problems with student questionnaires detailed in this report, it is evident that universities must stop using these questionnaires to make decisions about promotion, tenure, or the reappointment of contract faculty,” said Phillips. “Instead, our universities should invest in more effective and accurate, qualitative methods for evaluating teaching, particularly peer evaluation. The government should abandon any idea of using these flawed metrics to determine university funding levels – research has clearly shown that SQCT metrics not only don’t work, they perpetuate inequity.”

The report proposes several recommendations for refocusing student questionnaires so they can be used to improve student learning and education quality. First and foremost, the report recommends limiting the use of student questionnaires to formative purposes to provide instructors with student feedback on how to improve their teaching and course development. The report also recommends using peer evaluation, where trained faculty members audit classes and evaluate instructors.

Putting these principles into practice will require resources and the willingness of both the provincial government and university administrations to support faculty and students and invest in the effective evaluation of teaching as a vital component of the academic mission.

OCUFA thanks the members of the working group for their hard work in putting together this comprehensive report. The full report can be downloaded here:

<https://ocufa.on.ca/assets/OCUFA-SQCT-Report.pdf>

Founded in 1964, OCUFA represents 17,000 faculty and academic librarians in 29 faculty associations across Ontario.