



Exploring student motivations and perceptions towards Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) systems: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis

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Abstract

Student Evaluations of Teaching (SETs) are commonly used to provide overall course feedback regarding teaching approaches and the learning experience. However, these surveys consistently demonstrate low validity in the literature, particularly due to low response rates and bias. Yet, SETs are used for high-stakes curriculum and staffing decisions. Limited research has explored student perceptions and motivations to complete SETs, particularly within an Australian university context. In this study, nine students participated in focus groups, which were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Analyses were guided by a critical realist approach and explored through the Theory of Planned Behaviour. Students explained that they are motivated by a desire to improve the learning experience for future students, but also discussed that the initial motivation to complete SETs is initiated through a negative experience. They believe the ratio of positive to negative comments about the course is therefore distorted, and not a true reflection of the overall course experience. Students express a lack of transparency about how (and whether) feedback is used, which results in less motivation to complete the survey. Opaqueness around the audience of SET feedback (I.e., who reads them) was believed to result in less 'useful' comments. Students co-created a set of recommendations for increasing SET engagement, including a range of potential incentives and evaluative judgement training. Questions should be framed as if they were written by the educator seeking feedback, as this will encourage comments with maximum utility. It is hoped that this framing may reduce harmful comments and lead to effective feedback on teaching quality.

Practitioner Notes

- 1. To foster a collaborative approach to course improvement: (1) state that the instructor is the audience, and (2) encourage students to address educators directly (using "you" or their name).
- 2. Enhance students' evaluative judgment through feedback training and short activities where they practice teaching, allowing them to experience the skills needed for effective instruction
- Acknowledge SETs potential for teacher harassment and students' fear
 of identification. Consider authentic feedback alternatives, such as inclass discussions.
- 4. Demonstrate the value of student feedback by explaining how previous feedback has led to specific improvements in the course.
- 5. Avoid SETs during major assessments or examination periods to increase rates of completion

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Introduction

Student course evaluations have been utilised for decades within higher education institutions internationally, with an increasing emphasis on educational quality (Vargas-Madriz & Nocente, 2023). SETs (Student Evaluations of Teaching) are commonly used to provide overall course feedback regarding course content and individual feedback for teachers involved in each course (Lai et al., 2020). However, low response rates and incomplete surveys are a pervasive challenge, prompting research exploring ways to improve SET survey processes (Adams & Umbach, 2012; Chapman, 2017; Lai et al., 2020; Medina et al., 2019). Strategies implemented as a result of this research include introducing mid-semester evaluations, and delivering surveys earlier in the teaching period (Cone et al., 2018; Medina et al., 2019). Other strategies include keeping surveys short, using scales with 'not applicable' options (when there is uncertainty), and the addition of questions unique to each course (Medina et al., 2019; Cone at al., 2018). Some authors critique the inherent validity of SETs, with research suggesting these tools fail to measure teaching effectiveness and are plagued with biases related to factors such as gender, and race/ethnic identity (Heffernan, 2022; White et al., 2023). Minority teaching staff are more susceptible to the effects of intersectional biases amongst SET, with the growing literature suggesting that amongst women and people of colour, on average, they are more likely to receive lower ratings as opposed to their white, male counterparts (Chávez & Mitchell, 2020; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022; Lamba et al., 2023). As a result, poor perceptions, diminished professional confidence and disengagement of the teaching evaluation process were more likely to affect women and ethnically diverse teachers (Aragón et al., 2023; ; Hutchinson et al., 2024). With disengagement of faculty in the SET process brought on by doubts of validity and effectiveness, as highlighted by Lakeman et al. (2022), "...SET needs urgent reform" (p.154), and the attainment and maintenance of positive SET outcomes is the balancing of commitment to quality and standards by both students and staff. With potential changes and mitigation towards issues associated with SETs, the tool could emerge as more useful and effective to staff (with the hopes of re-engaging both parties and making it more valuable). Others have aimed to mitigate instrumentation bias to improve SETs and have used approaches such as implementing bias awareness training, bias intervention messaging, and avoiding using SETs as a singular measure of teaching effectiveness (Kim et al., 2024; Stoesz et al., 2022; Tsangaridou & Charalambous, 2023; White et al., 2023). However, there is a lack of research exploring the perceptions of students completing these surveys. As Sullivan et al., (2024) states "...knowledge and attitudes about the value of SET are essential factors in motivating students to engage and complete SET" (p. 1). Harris and Twiname (2012) noted that student's perceptions have often been overlooked in the research into course evaluations, yet they remain deeply involved in the process. Thus, it is important to explore students' views about SETs.

Literature

The Student Perspective of SET

The limited literature on student's perceptions of SETs (and their motivations for completing these evaluations) suggests that students are misinformed about the purpose of course evaluations and perceive them as having little-to-no importance (Hoel & Dahl, 2018; Vargas-Madriz & Nocente, 2023). Research has shown that students often lack awareness of the processes involved in

SETs, including the ultimate use of their data (Hoel & Dahl, 2018; Sullivan et al. 2024). Students may also hold inaccurate perceptions about the appropriateness of SETs, with some using the surveys to punish educators for poor grades, or to provide anonymous offensive comments that cannot be traced back, thereby avoiding repurcussions (Page & Charteris, 2021; Tucker, 2014; Zabaleta, 2007). These inappropriate comments tend to impact visible minority faculty more frequently, with non-constructive feedback disproportionately impacting women and those from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Adams et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2019). It is important to highlight how the student perspective (and the inappropriate use of SETs) can harm the wellbeing and/or career prospects of under-represented academic faculty (Cunningham et al., 2023). Thus, this issue ties directly into broader discussions regarding the effectiveness, fairness, and purpose of SETs in higher education. Also, how the student perspective can heavily influence the feedback received, and the reprecussions of this feedback (Cook et al., 2022).

Perceptions and Motivations for completing SETs

A recent scoping review of SETs noted several key themes related to student motivations for completing course evaluations (Sullivan et al., 2024). These themes illustrate that student motivations for completing SETs are influenced by factors such as the perceived value of SETs in shaping teaching and learning, the clarity of their purpose and potential to effect meaningful change, the degree of trust in the anonymity and confidentialy of their repsonses, the presence of extrinsic incentives, and practical considerations like the design of the evaluation tool.

Research by Vargas-Madriz and Nocente (2023) confirms these findings, noting that "...the better the views about the evaluation process, the better the perception of usefulness of evaluation, and the lesser the potential biases affecting students' responses, [the] more willing students were to give feedback" (p. 5). These results reflect an important relationship between students' perceptions of SETs and their motivations to complete them.

According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 1991), a student's decision to complete a Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) is influenced by three key beliefs:

beliefs about the likely consequences of the behavior (behavioral beliefs), beliefs about the normative expectations of others (normative beliefs), and beliefs about the presence of factors that may facilitate or impede performance of the behavior (control beliefs). (Bosnjak, Ajzen & Schmidt, 2020, p. 353).

Applied to SETs, these beliefs shape the student's overall attitude toward SETs. Behavioural beliefs may include students' attitudes about the consequences of completing the evaluation. Normative beliefs include their perception of social expectations to complete evaluations. Also, control beliefs: whether they have enough time, remember the deadline, or can access the online evaluation system (factors that might help or hinder the process). If the net outcome of these beliefs results in a positive attitude, then they are likely to hold the perception that their institution and peers will expect completion of SETs. TPB posits that if students hold a positive attitude towards completing SETs, and have a perception of control over their ability to complete them, their intentions to complete the evaluation will be carried out (the 'behaviour' of completing SETs).

Study rationale

Understanding students' perceptions of SETs is important due to the impact of SETs on precariously employed (casual) academic staff. Sessional staff make up a large proportion of the academic workforce in Australia and are disproportionately impacted by insecure job contracts and report limited access to professional development (McComb & Eather, 2024). Also, their employment is heavily reliant on positive SETs. Employment precarity adds pressure on staff to conform to student satisfaction metrics, such as SETs, to maintain their employment (NTEU, 2024). Given the significant impact on the livelihoods of some academic staff, it is important to understand why and how students engage with these evaluations. This understanding is important due to staff possibly feeling pressured to garner positive responses at the expense of authentic and constructive feedback (McComb & Eather, 2024). A deeper understanding is needed to determine how students perceive SET processes and what motivates them to provide the feedback they do.

This study was conducted at the University of Adelaide. The university has employed comprehensive online course evaluation systems for many years to support quality assurance and enhancement of teaching. Although student evaluations at the University of Adelaide are referred to as SELTs (Student Experiences of Learning and Teaching), the term SET is used predominantly in the literature. As such, we refer to SETs throughout this study, except in direct quotes form participants where SELT or SELTs are used.

The aim of this study is to investigate students' perceptions and motivations for completing SET surveys, through the lens of TPB (Ajzen, 1991). Research questions were constructed per Braun and Clarke's (2021) practical guidelines; ones that consider the wider context, existing empirical scholarship, and the scope and potential of the dataset. Our research questions consisted of:

- 1. What motivates students to complete Student Evaluation of Teaching (SETs) within an Australian University context?
- 2. How do students perceive Student Evaluation of Teaching (SETs), and how does this affect their participation within an Australian University context?
- 3. What approaches could lead to further improvements in the teaching evaluation process within an Australia University context?

Method

Study Design

The study utilised an exploratory qualitative methodology using focus groups, guided by a critical realist framework, to gain an understanding of student's perceptions of and motivations for completing SET surveys. The ontological position of critical realism involves the acknowledgement of an 'authentic' reality that exists, while recognising the social contexts that may shape this reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 27; Fryer, 2022). Through this position, knowledge is viewed as socially-influenced and reflects a separate reality that researchers can only *partially* access (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 27). This approach allowed us to explore students' perceptions and motivations for completing SET surveys while acknowledging the influence of social contexts on their experiences and responses. The project considered Sullivan et al.'s (2024) and Ernst's (2014) themes in the approaches and construction of the focus group guide. Overall, this study aimed to address the gaps in the existing research, specifically

exploring students' perceptions of and motivations for completing SETs in the context of an Australian University.

Personal Reflexivity Statement

Reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process by all authors to improve the interpretations of the data, promote rigour and depth, and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2024; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). In Braun and Clarke's (2024) *Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines* (RTAG) (informed by the values from their original works), the authors present approaches to reflexive openness and methodological coherence. The RTAG were used in this study to shape our approaches and reflexivity throughout our research process; from our introduction to our data collection and analysis, right through to our discussion.

The first author is a long-term student at the University of Adelaide who holds an 'insider' status. This status ensured knowledge on the topic and allowed participants to voice their opinions without fear of scrutiny. As focus group facilitation, this was believed to enhance rapport and trust. As such, the data collected may reach deeper contextual understanding and reflect the genuine perspectives and feelings of the participants. The second and third authors are senior lecturers at the same university. We acknowledge that our professional experiences have inevitably shaped our perspectives on the subject of SETs. Over the course of our careers, we have received a range of SET feedback, from highly constructive and affirming to feedback that was negative (or lacked utility for improving our teaching practice). These experiences have given us an understanding of how SETs can impact academic staff - professionally and personally.

Our insider status as both student and staff members completing and receiving SETs helped guide the construction of the focus group questions, moderation of the focus group conversations, and interpretation of results. Thus, an audit trail was kept to maintain reflexive practices and to document thoughts during the study.

Ethics

This study was granted approval by the School of Psychology's Low Risk Ethics Sub-committee at the University of Adelaide (HREC-2024-0043). All participants provided written consent. Participants were offered opportunities to ask questions throughout the recruitment process, with options to withdraw their participation at any point. Participant identifiers were redacted from transcripts and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality was upheld.

Data Collection

An exploratory qualitative methodology using focus groups was chosen to facilitate group interaction (Kitzinger, 1995). Focus groups have the ability to access forms of conversation that other methods cannot (such as interviews and surveys). In focus groups, participants can generate elaborate and detailed accounts in the form of a "real-life" interaction (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 110). The focus group methodology was designed to meet Tracy's (2010) Big-Tent Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research, particularly addressing the criteria of rigour and credibility. Rigour was achieved by collecting abundant and detailed data. Credibility was supported through having a student researcher host the focus groups, thereby establishing an environment in which participants felt comfortable to share their perspectives.

The research team planned and conducted the focus groups following the guidelines set by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2024) with the student research acting as the facilitator. Focus group questions were informed by findings from Sullivan et al. (2024) and Ernst (2014) (see Appendix A). Two focus groups were conducted face-to-face and on-campus, with five participants in the first, and four participants in the second. These focus groups were conducted in July, 2024.

Participants

Inclusion criteria for this study required participants to be students currently enrolled at the University of Adelaide, aged 18 years or older, and to have completed at least one semester of study at the university. Recruitment was conducted using convenience sampling, with research flyers distributed across the university campus and digital versions shared on student Facebook and Instagram accounts affiliated with the university.

The sample size was determined by Malterud et al.'s (2016) model of "information power", which provides guidance on adequate sample sizes for qualitative studies. This model considers five factors: the study aim, sample specificity, theoretical background, quality of dialogue, and strategy for analysis. In the current study, dense sample specificity and strong dialogue between participants and the facilitator were prioritised to ensure robust data collection. Considering these factors, the study was assessed to have moderate to high information power, indicating that a medium to slightly smaller sample size would be sufficient for robust analysis (Malterud, 2016). This requirement was met with a sample of nine participants.

Participant demographics are presented in Table 2. Nine University of Adelaide students participated in the study. Participants were aged 18 - 48 years (M = 25.3), with three men and six women. All but one of the participants were students within the School of Psychology; the additional participant was an engineering student.

 Table 2

 Participant identification table

| Participant | 0 1 | Δ. | | Years Spent at |
|-------------|--------|-----|--------------|----------------|
| (Pseudonym) | Gender | Age | Program | University |
| Charlie | M | 25 | Psychology | 6 |
| Jacquie | F | 27 | Psychology | 6 |
| Bethany | F | 25 | Psychology & | 4 |
| | | | Anthropology | |
| Alice | F | 18 | Engineering | .5 |
| | | | (Electrical) | |
| Ella | F | 21 | Psychology | 4 |
| Katie | F | 48 | Psychology | 8+ |
| Lachlan | M | 19 | Psychology | 2 |
| John | M | 22 | Psychology | 4 |
| Tina | F | 23 | Psychology | 5 |

Data analysis

Transcripts were transcribed verbatim and Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024; Clarke & Braun, 2013). For data analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2021) six iterative phases were closely followed, as well as the steps highlighted in the RTAG (Braun & Clarke, 2024). Data familiarisation was achieved by reading and re-reading each transcript individually to gain a deeper understanding of the information shared by participants. The audit trail was used during this step to record any preliminary thoughts and note patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Wolf, 2003). Nvivo was used to conduct initial coding using an inductive process. This process involved exploring patterns and recurring ideas across the transcripts. Once these codes were created, the authors collaboratively worked to develop potential themes, engaging in ongoing discussions to ensure consistency and clarity in their interpretations. During these discussions, five themes were refined. The review process emphasised the importance of ensuring that each theme was distinct, standing independently while maintaining meaningful connections with other themes to reflect the complexity of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Results/Discussion

Reflexive Thematic Analysis resulted in the development of five key themes relevant to the study's three research questions. The first theme of 'the feedback façade' captures how the feedback process can be distorted through students' concerns about anonymity, and their propensity to prioritise negative feedback. The second theme, 'opening up the dialogue', describes the need for more communication with (and education of) the student population about the purpose and processes of SET. The third theme, 'a value proposition', illustrates the need for institutions to cultivate a culture where students perceive their input as important and applicable; then, students may be more likely to prioritise their completion. This theme also details the need for incentivising participation in SETs. The fourth theme, 'driven for change', highlights how students feel motivated to make positive changes to courses for the benefit of future students, with a genuine desire to make meaningful changes within the institution through SETs. The final theme, 'built-in constraints of the tool', centres on how the survey itself can hinder students' ability to complete them, with factors such as time, the survey's timing, framing, and structure, all representing barriers to successful completion. These themes offer valuable insights into how students perceive the surveys, and what drives their participation. The findings and implications of the research are discussed below with reference to TPB (Ajzen, 1991).

It is important to note that although the findings in this study are drawn from a population of students at one institution, it is the belief of the research team that they are representative of the experience of students across Australian universities (and many other institutions, globally). This is because Australia is largely homogenous in how institutions employ SETs in terms of online delivery and the use of anonymity for student responses.

Theme 1: The Feedback Façade

Participants voiced numerous concerns about the process of completing SETs, focusing on issues related to the anonymity of their feedback and the potential consequences of their responses. These concerns often influenced the way they approached completing SETs, as

participants weighed the implications of their comments on the validity of the results and the potential for personal identification. For example, one participant shared her anxiety about how specific feedback might compromise her anonymity:

I also worry that certain situations that are spoken about in SELTs are able to be pinpointed to you as well. That changes the anonymity of them, and it should be addressed because I also said some stuff that could tie it back to me. Now I'm like, 'Oh, my God, who's read this?' (Ella, female, 21, Psychology, 4 years).

Ella's comment reflects a broader apprehension among participants about the anonymity of SETs and its potential implications for personal identification. This anxiety appeared to influence how students approached providing feedback, with some feeling constrained in their ability to offer honest and constructive evaluations. The concern that specific feedback could be traced back to them highlights a tension between students' desire to contribute honest feedback and their fear of potential repercussions. But, if students fear such repercussions, it raises questions about the type of feedback they wish to leave (suggesting they may have critical or negative insights they feel unable to express openly). According to the TPB model (Ajzen, 1991), this has implications for their 'behavioural beliefs': students are less likely to complete SETs when they perceive negative consequences from providing feedback.

These findings are congruent with Sullivan et al.'s (2024) scoping review, citing that anonymity was critical due to the fear of reprisal by academic staff and potential adverse effects on their grades if they were to be identified. This may reflect a broader psychological phenomenon where individuals feel a stronger urge to express dissatisfaction than praise. Reasons for this might include that it serves as an emotional release, there is more vivid memory to negative experiences, or the social responsibility held to prevent others from undergoing similar issues.

Students reported that the threshold of a positive experience and for leaving a positive review was much higher to achieve than for a negative experience within a course. Students appear to have separate reporting thresholds; positive experiences are expected as the 'norm', thus do not motivate the student to complete SETs. Contrastingly, a negative experience (however small) is likely to trigger a student to complete SETs Participants went on to further describe the tendency for SET feedback to sit at the extremes:

I just think SETs is pretty much like any feedback mechanism out there, things like Google reviews or yelp, it's only really, when you're at those extremes. I feel like you're actually more motivated when you've got that little bit of a negative experience. If I had a negative experience, I probably maybe would be a bit more motivated to do SETs. For me, when I thought about doing it, what I wanted to talk about, and it was mainly the bad course. (Jacquie, Psychology, 6 years)

In the same vein, anonymous SETs have perceived implications for staff wellbeing. Rather than viewing it as tool for providing constructive feedback to improve teaching and learning, some students perceive it as an avenue for personal critique, and they acknowledge the negative effects on staff wellbeing. Students acknowledged that staff claimed to receive critical/judgemental, and often mean comments (to which the students felt obliged to complete SETs from a place of positivity), with one participant stating that:

I've tried to do them in the past since first year, but after hearing a lecturer talk of some not-so-good experiences with SETs, she said students were very mean, and because it's anonymous, I was like "okay maybe I will try to balance this out a bit". (Charlie, Psychology, 6 years)

This perception appears to create a conflict for some students who feel pressured to balance their honest experiences with a desire to avoid causing harm. This exemplifies the apprehension around potential consequences (behavioural beliefs), but also 'normative beliefs' in the TPB model (Ajzen, 1991). The concern for how others' may perceive the student as a result of providing feedback ultimately discourage SET completion.

The way SETs are framed and named (e.g. "students' ratings of instructors", "students' evaluations of teaching", or "students' experiences of learning") further shapes these perceptions. If the emphasis is on rating the staff, then students may interpret the process as an appraisal of the individual, rather than feedback on their broader learning experience. Conversely, naming the process in terms of "experience" may foreground students' reflections on the learning environment (rather than the person delivering it).

Such ambiguities also suggest that students may not fully grasp the importance of framing their feedback in a constructive and professional manner. The views shared by students' risk diminishing the potential for constructive feedback that drives meaningful improvement, as SET's utility depends on students understanding how to provide thoughtful and professional evaluations (Marychurch et al., 2023). If students are not guided both in *how* to give constructive feedback and in *what* the process is intended to evaluate, it could possibly deter students from completing the surveys altogether. A participant further illustrated how these considerations influence their overall approach to SETs:

If I am constantly worried about keeping my answers nice, I might just delete the whole thing, I don't want to hurt anyone and I don't want anyone reading this. (Tina, Psychology, 5 years)

Despite this polarisation of responses, participants generally claimed that they were more motivated to leave negative feedback. The tendency for students to complete SETs when they perceive even a minor negative experience may result in misleading conclusions. These conclusions may ultimately impact career progression or course improvements (Adams & Umbach, 2012; Boring & Ottoboni, 2016; Uttl et al., 2017). Overall, these findings point to concerns about the validity of the tool itself. Students often prioritised leaving negative feedback or editing their comments to avoid identification. This tendency echoes findings that student comments are often superficial or focused on things other than teaching quality (Spooren, 2013). The findings raise doubts as to whether SETs are capturing meaningful aspects of teaching effectiveness.

Theme 2: Opening up the dialogue

Participants voiced their concerns over the need for more transparency surrounding SETs and more education on its intended purpose within the university. Students expressed questions about who the feedback is being delivered to, and who had access to the feedback they provide:

Something I was questioning myself while I was doing the SETs was, who's actually reading these and implementing any changes. Like, who's delivering it as feedback? Who's reading it? Are they [the teachers] just reading it? Or is somebody kind of reading it and compiling and then coming with the feedback? I'm very curious. (Bethany, female, 4 years)

Students' curiosity suggests a genuine eagerness to understand these processes. The time and effort that students invest in evaluations (and the perceived compensation or benefits they receive in return) was identified as a significant motivator influencing their decision to complete SETs. This view aligns with the TPB model (Ajzen, 1991), where there must be a positive assessment of their 'control', 'normative, and 'behavioural' beliefs, for the student to demonstrate intention to complete the survey. The literature supports this finding, with Stein et al. (2021) reporting that students were more likely to complete course evaluations if they were confident that the teaching staff would use their feedback to improve teaching and course content. One student highlighted the importance of increased transparency in the SETs process, emphasising that greater clarity could foster trust and encourage participation:

It would be nice to know the specifics, to be transparent in the procedures. So that way I can make an informal decision, I have the information and I can make a decision if I want to complete the SETs. There is these hidden traps in our minds, like unknown things. I think the more transparent it is, the more it will motivate people. (Katie, Psychology, 8 years)

Students consistently expressed a desire for more information to feel empowered in their decision to complete SETs. Katie's mention of "hidden traps in our mind" highlights the perceived lack of transparency in the process. This lack of clarity can lead to apprehensive and mistrust, leaving students feeling disconnected and, in some cases, discouraged from participating in SETs altogether. The views expressed by Katie indicate that she is holding negative 'control beliefs' towards SETs (Ajzen, 1991). With a lack of understanding of how the data/feedback is used, students feel they have less control over the outcome. According to the TPB model, students holding negative control beliefs will be less motivated to complete SETs.

Similarly, the purpose of SETs and its utility was discussed. Students questioned of the role that SETs played at the university, questioning whether it held any purpose at all:

Most classes I've had, especially psych, they give you stats, so I am sure all the professors know how good or bad their classes are, if there's a lower grade on an assessment, they know about it. Even the percentages of people that log into [the Learning Management System] every day, they know all of this. So, if SETs is just this disregarded forum for angry people to blow their heads off, then what is the worth in all of this? It doesn't seem to serve anything. So yes, that is the first thing to figure out, what it actually does. (John, Psychology, 4 years)

A recurring finding in the current literature is that students typically feel unaware of the processes and purpose behind SETs within their institutions. Studies report that students' lack of understanding (about how SETs are conducted and utilised) serves as a barrier for completion (Cone et al., 2018; Hoel & Dahl, 2019; Stein et al., 2021; Stein & Harris, 2012). These findings

lead to further questions about the validity of the tool itself: how can we be confident the tool is measuring what it purports to measure, if students are unclear about its' purpose?

Theme 3: A value proposition

Participants shared perspectives on the SET process and their roles in the feedback loop, with concerns over their participation not being valued. One participant stated:

It's the fact that the perception that it's not useful comes from the fact that students, the people doing it, don't really know the outcome, like what's changed. For example, if you look at tax time, they send you a report after you do your taxes highlighting where your tax has gone, and at least they show you where all your money is going. So, well, where's all our feedback going? What's changed? What's happened between the years? We don't know. (Jacquie, Psychology, 6 years)

Jacquie's comparison of SETs to paying taxes highlights a strong desire for accountability and transparency in how their feedback is used. The analogy highlights a clear expectation that the time and effort students invest in completing SETs should lead to tangible outcomes, similar to how taxpayers receive a report detailing where their contributions have been allocated. This sentiment reflects a broader demand for universities to communicate the impact of SETs by demonstrating the changes implemented based on student feedback. Although many educators express what has been changed in the next iteration of the course (in response to previous feedback), there are limited opportunities to communicate these actions to previous cohorts.

At the same time, Jacquie's framing also illustrates the wider consumerisation of higher education, where students position themselves as consumers evaluating a service (see also Molesworth et al., 2009). Recent research shows that students often perceive themselves in this way, which can downgrade their participation in quality assurance processes into more evaluative (or even complaining ones), rather than collaborative ones (Uludağ et al., 2021). Within the TPB framework, this consumer orientation is significant: it informs the attitudes students hold toward SETs (seeing them as transactional exchange), influences the subjective norms around whether feedback is expected or valued, and ultimately shapes their behavioural intentions to complete SETs.

Importantly this highlights the tension between SETs as a consumer-driven accountability mechanism ("show me what I'm paying for") and SETs as a collaborative process that could enhance the collective learning experience. If reframed as a participatory dialogue where feedback loops are closed and students are shown the changes resulting from their input, SETs may be perceived less as surveillance of staff and more as a shared process of improvement and growth.

Another approach to increasing student participation in SET involves the use of grade-based incentives, such as bonus marks or extra credit. This idea was raised during discussions as a potential way to encourage engagement and motivate students to complete the surveys, as one participant articulated:

I think the grading thing could be used as an extra credit thing. Give credit to people that need percentages made up in a course along with replacement assessments or exams. I

think if this process could be incentivised more. This way they can keep us engaged. (Katie, Psychology, 8 years)

This response highlights the perceived link between tangible rewards and the effort students are willing to invest in completing SETs. In the TPB model (Ajzen, 1991), rewards may support the development of positive 'behavioural beliefs' (the assessment of consequences from completing SETs). Positive behavioural beliefs increase the likelihood of students developing an intention to complete their surveys. By suggesting extra grading credit, Katie frames SETs as an opportunity to provide additional support for students who may need to boost their performance in a course. The mention of "keep us engaged" reflects a belief that embedding incentives into the process could foster a greater sense of involvement and purpose. It also indicates a desire for SETs to be seen as mutually beneficial: where students not only contribute to feedback but also feel rewarded for their participation. This perspective suggests that when students view the process as valuable and personally relevant, they may be more motivated to actively participate in shaping meaningful changes through their feedback.

Theme 4: Driven for change

Participants frequently stated their primary motivator for completing SETs was to contribute to meaningful change. All participants shared the view that the student cohort has good intentions to improve courses and to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning:

I ultimately want the people that come after me, that are taking this course, to not face what I had to go through. (Tina, Psychology, 5 years)

This statement suggests an altruistic motivation among students, as Tina expresses a desire to improve the course experience for future students. However, her words also reflect a somewhat negative connotation toward SETs, indicating that her own experiences have left a lasting adverse impression. These views suggest a desire for improvement, driven by good intentions and a willingness to contribute to meaningful change. Enhancing the SETs process to better align with the students' motivations and providing clearer guidance on how their feedback drives change may be a key step in encouraging students to complete SETs.

Theme 5: Built in constraints of the tool

A common topic of discussion within the focus groups was the survey tool itself. Students were surprised to learn that it is standard practice in Australian institutions to send SETs results directly to the academic staff being evaluated. While their line managers have access to SET results and review them for the purposes of ensuring academic standards are being met, detailed scrutiny of the SETs results by line managers or additional staff members tend to occur when quantitative results fall below a set threshold. This knowledge led students to criticise the third-person framing of the questions. One student details that:

I feel like its slightly misleading, in a way. It sounds like you are reporting to some sort of boss. The questions use 'they' in the questions. It's the way it's framed, that's my problem. (Charlie, Psychology, 6 years)

The framing of SET questions emerged as a significant concern for students, as it shaped their perceptions of the process and the intended audience for their feedback. Charlie's comment

reflects a sense of disconnect between the way the questions are worded and the actual flow of feedback. In this instance, the participant is referring to the wording of questions in the university's SET surveys such as "What is the best thing about *their* teaching?" The use of third-person language, such as "they" or "their', creates an impression that students are reporting to a supervisor - rather than directly addressing the staff member being evaluated. This disconnect not only causes confusion about where their feedback is directed but also fosters a sense of 'reporting' rather than 'collaborating'. Participants requested clearer framing of SET questions to align with the actual purpose of the feedback. This suggests that improvements to the survey design could enhance engagement and trust in SETs.

There was also considerable discussion surrounding the timing of SETs and how this affected completion. One participant describes:

I was very motivated, and I had like a big thing, and I did it all, and that's the first time I've done a [SET] in a while, because I just keep missing them. Mainly cause they just close and I was too busy with my last assignment or exam. (Ella, Psychology, 4 years)

Participants indicated a strong desire to engage with and complete SETs in a meaningful way, but described barriers to completing them associated with the timing of their release to students for completion. Participants discussed improvements and ways around the inconvenient timing, with recommendations to increase the time window and to receive SETs after the examination period:

Most classes only run one semester a year, other [universities] run the same class for both semesters, so it makes sense to churn out SETs to make quick, acute changes but when sitting on the possibility of reform for six or seven months, what difference does a couple weeks make? So, I definitely think it could be moved at little consequence, definitely post exam. (John, Psychology, 4 years)

John's comment demonstrates a disconnect between the timing of SETs completion and the implementation of changes, particularly for courses that only run once a year. His suggestion to shift SETs to a post-exam period reflects a desire for a more thoughtful and student-friendly approach, arguing that such a change would have minimal impact on the timing of reforms while potentially increasing student participation. Research indicates that when SETs is released during quieter periods, such as outside of examination periods, students are more likely to complete them (Cone et al., 2018; Gupta et al., 2020). This exemplifies the concept of 'control beliefs' in the TPB model (Ajzen, 1991): when students feel as though they have the required resources (time, energy, mental capacity) to engage in completing SETs, then they are more likely to hold positive control beliefs. Positive beliefs (behavioural, normative, and control), along with a supportive culture that encourages their completion, increase the likelihood that students' engage with SETs.

Recommendations

The most significant implication of this study is the need for institutions to close the feedback loop by implementing clearer communication between academic staff and students. Instructors and lecturers should initiate intentional discussions around the purpose of SETs, who reviews the data, and how student feedback is used to improve the student experience. Providing students with clarity about who handles their feedback, how this information is used, and how evaluations are assessed, could empower them.

The findings also suggest that students need to be educated in evaluative judgement; how to provide accurate and actionable feedback, and how their feedback has contributed to changes within courses and teaching practices (Chapman, 2017; Hoel & Dahl, 2019). Participants requested changes to the framing of the questions from third person to first person. Framing questions in first person language would reinforce that their responses should be directed at (and are primarily read by) their educator.

Additionally, students expressed a desire to receive information about changes implemented in their past courses that highlights the changes that have been made that year (in light of their feedback). Finally, the results suggest extending the time period for SET completion, ensuring that surveys are open during less stressful periods, such as throughout the semester and after examinations. This approach may increase response rates and encourage more thoughtful and balanced feedback. The aim is to reduce the likelihood of negatively skewed results due to student stress.

Findings suggest that students strongly recommended incentivising the SETs feedback process, expressing that rewards for their time and effort would make the experience more fulfilling. This notion extends throughout the literature, where incentivisation has frequently been identified as a strategy for motivating students to complete SETs. However, previous studies, such as those by Cook et al. (2000), caution that the use of incentives can lead to an increase in the rate of homogenous responses, potentially undermining the quality of feedback. Therefore, while incentives may serve as an effective motivator, they should not be relied upon as the sole solution. Rather, they may be integrated among other strategies to encourage participation.

The final theme detailed the issues with the SETs tool itself, and how these issues impact student motivation to complete them. Participants expressed concerns about the timing of SETs. While SETs are deliberately scheduled at the end of the teaching to reassure students that responses will not influence their grades, the timing does not fully alleviate apprehension. As theme 1 illuminated, students like Ella expressed fears of being identified through specific feedback, leading them to edit or withhold critical comments. When combined with low response rates this apprehension heightens the risk that individual voices can be pinpointed, undermining both students' willingness to provide candid feedback (and the validity of the data collected).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study offers valuable insights into the perceptions and motivations of students with SET course evaluations, although it remains important to recognise limitations of the research. Although SETs are administered in a fairly homogenous way among Australian institutions, future research could engage students from other institutions. These studies could include institutions from around the world, and from a wide range of faculties/disciplines (Creswell, 2014, p. 110; Patel Gunaldo et al., 2022). In addition, many students in our study expressed that they wanted to share their negative experiences via SETs, but there was little discussion of what defines a negative experience for students. Future researchers should explore what constitutes a negative experience and the thresholds that motivate students to complete SETs. Further research should

focus on identifying the true mechanisms of SETs and how institutions can improve experiences for students to create a tool that best serves both parties.

Conclusion

This study provides an exploration of the perceptions and motivations of students for completing SETs in the context of Australian universities. To enhance the effectiveness of SETs, higher education institutions should prioritise educating students about the purpose and process of SETs ('who' reads them, and 'why'). The changes initiated by student feedback should be communicated back to the cohorts that provided the suggestions. Importantly, the questions that are posed to students should be reframed in a first-person format, to reinforce the reader and the purpose of SETs. Institutions should consider altering the timing of surveys to less stressful periods (avoiding major assessment periods). These strategies have the potential to transform SETs into a more constructive tool that benefits students and supports staff wellbeing.

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