

THE RHODES UNIVERSITY POLICY ON THE EVALUATION OF TEACHING AND COURSES

1. Policy Particulars

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2. Policy Statement

2.1 Policy Declaration

In the contexts of the goals and objectives identified in Rhodes University's Institutional Development Plan, the evaluation of teaching and course design has a critical role to play. Not only does evaluation provide us with a means of developing insights into the way teaching and course design function, but it also allows us to reflect on what we have learned in order to ensure that our approaches to teaching and the design of our courses allow us to achieve the goals and objectives we have identified for ourselves. In this respect, evaluation can be seen to be central to what is often termed 'transformation'.

Evaluation is critical to the development of the type and quality of learning valued by the University. Evaluation can not only provide academics with insights into the kind of learning their teaching and course design is developing but, when well executed, can also provide a means for students to think about their own learning and their roles as learners.

Evaluation is a complex process involving more than the collection of feedback from students on teaching and course design. Students' experiences and perceptions offer just one perspective on an academic's teaching or the design of a course and thus need to be balanced by those of others. A robust evaluation will therefore involve eliciting a number of perspectives in order that they may be considered against each other to arrive at any judgements and decisions that are made about the teaching or course design in question. This means that, typically, perspectives need to be elicited from academic experts (for example, external examiners or academic peers) as well as from students. In the case of student perceptions, it can be useful to canvas the views of students other than those who are currently enrolled in a course or who are currently experiencing an individual's teaching, since experiences are often tempered by hindsight, maturity and the ability to reflect back on the basis of subsequent experience. Importantly, it is also necessary to take into account the perspectives and perceptions of those responsible for the teaching and course design itself.

This kind of data can be complemented by insights from other sources. Empirical data related to course success and throughput rates over a period of three or more years can, for example, provide insights into the way a course has functioned as a student body has changed. Similarly, the use of theory and research can be used to challenge or affirm assumptions that underpin course design or teaching itself.

Part of the complexity of evaluation also relates to the tensions inherent within it. Evaluation aims both to assure and enhance quality. As a means of assuring quality, evaluation calls on the need for individuals and departments to be accountable whilst at the same time requiring that both are protected from its misuse.

When used in relation to teaching, evaluation aims to contribute to the ongoing professional development of individuals, who are the most valuable resource in a university. This requires 'safe spaces' to be created for academic teachers to try out new approaches without fear that evaluation will be detrimental to them as individuals

and, critically, for support to be made available not only for the development of those new approaches but also for problems that may arise as a result of their implementation.

As well as being complex and fraught with tensions, evaluation is also an enormously time and resource consuming process. In a context where time and resources are scarce, pressure is exerted to ensure that evaluative work is planned and executed efficiently and effectively.

2.2 Policy Objectives

This policy aims to:

- Promote evaluation as a means of contributing towards Rhodes University achieving the goals and objectives it has set for itself.
- Take account of the complexity of evaluation and ensure that it is understood as a form of research intended to enhance the educational experiences offered to students. It does this by making a distinction between data (for example, student feedback data or data related to success or throughput rates) and evaluation itself;
- Manage tensions inherent to evaluation by making a distinction between the evaluation of teaching and the evaluation of course design. The evaluation of an individual's teaching is understood to be aimed at on-going professional development and should thus allow an academic teacher to evaluate her/his practice without fear of reprisal provided action is taken where shortcomings are identified. The evaluation of course design, on the other hand, is understood to be a process where elements of the curriculum are evaluated in a systematic manner. This is a more public process aimed at ensuring minimum standards are met as well as enhancing the overall experience of the student.
- Ensure that time (of staff and students) is used wisely and that resources (especially in the form of paper-based questionnaires and other means of eliciting students' perceptions) are used effectively and efficiently.

2.3 Definitions

Course Review refers to the internal self evaluation procedures undertaken within a department.

Course evaluation refers to the elicitation of perceptions of a course or module from a number of perspectives (for example, students, peers, external examiners, self). These perceptions are then balanced against each other in order to try to identify strengths and weaknesses. Empirical data related to success or throughput rates and theory and research are also used in this process.

Teaching evaluation refers to the elicitation of perceptions of an individual's teaching from a number of perspectives (students, peers, self). These perceptions are then balanced against each other in order to try to identify strengths and weaknesses.

Course refers to either a year or semester long period of teaching directed at a particular year level.

Module refers to a portion of a course. Modules may vary in length.

Evaluation Report refers to a reflective document in which insights from data are balanced against each other in order to arrive at a more complete understanding of the object being evaluated.

3. Policy Implementation

3.1 The actions and processes by which the objectives of the policy will be achieved

Given the complexity and tensions inherent to evaluation, the University recognises that evaluation tools which take the form of ‘one size fits all’ surveys that attempt to measure courses against a single set of criteria or to rank individuals against each other are not able to probe the diversity of course design or approaches to teaching within the institution.

Evaluation is therefore best conceived as a process of:

- 1) academics identifying salient aspects of their teaching or course design along with the beliefs and theories which underpin them
- 2) designing and asking questions which will allow them to observe the impact of teaching and course design and the validity of the assumptions about learning which underpin them
- 3) reflecting on the implications of what they have learned from analysis of the data for both practice and its underpinning theory.

Evaluative data can be generated using a variety of procedures including survey questionnaires, focus group interviews, observations of teaching by peers and other more informal methods. Some data (for example, the reports of external examiners or analyses of student performance) becomes available as the result of routine academic tasks.

Evaluations need to be captured in the form of a written report that identifies problems that need to be addressed and strengths that need to be built upon and which makes a plan for achieving these. In the case of evaluations of teaching, these written reports can be included in the evidence provided in support of applications for personal promotion or the confirmation of appointment. In the case of course design, evaluations can be stored to provide departmental records of the way a course has been developed over the years and as evidence of the way a department has attempted to ensure that course design remains relevant and responsive to the University’s niche and location. Evaluations of course design can also be used as evidence of curriculum development in evidence submitted for personal promotion and probationary purposes.

Eliciting the opinions and perceptions of others necessarily takes of their time. This means that it is important to feed back information and insights gained from evaluation to the people who have been consulted. This is especially the case for students who might otherwise not be motivated to complete questionnaires or take part in other forms of evaluation.

For evaluation to be conducted in a thoughtful and rigorous manner, it is necessary to provide support for the design of evaluations and evaluation instruments and for their analysis. In addition, staff need to be supported in addressing problems and issues arising from evaluation. The University undertakes to provide this support by means of the services of the Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning.

3.1.1 Review of Courses

Course/module design and delivery is a relatively more public activity often shared by two or more people. The evaluation of courses is therefore acknowledged as having an accountability function, and is therefore open to public scrutiny. Course/module evaluation needs to be both formative and summative. Formative evaluation, which takes place while the course is still being offered or teaching is still taking place, allows problems and issues to be addressed while there is still time for students to benefit from improvements. Summative evaluation is aimed at gaining an overall picture of the course or teaching after the event so that decisions can be made for the future. Course/module evaluation will normally be designed and implemented by course co-ordinators in collaboration with academics offering the modules that make up those courses. This means that a co-ordinator of a semester-long or year-long course needs to ensure that the course is evaluated as a whole. This can be done by evaluating individual components of the course and using these to look at overall coherence and quality.

Heads of Departments (or delegated individuals or committees) are responsible for:

- Ensuring that courses are evaluated as a whole *at least once* every three years.
- Ensuring that courses or modules which have undergone development or in which problems have been identified are evaluated on a ‘need to’ basis.
- Ensuring that insights arising from evaluation are acted upon to enhance and assure quality in course design both by exerting their accountability function and by functioning as mentors to those involved in course design.
- Ensuring that insights from evaluation and the actions that will result from them are communicated to students and other stakeholders.
- Ensuring that evaluations are captured and stored to provide a ‘course history’ and to inform future evaluative work.

Individual academics are responsible for:

- Evaluating the modules or parts of courses that they teach when this forms part of the overall course evaluation strategy.
- Responding to insights from evaluation.
- Making results from evaluation of modules or courses available to course coordinators and HoDs when requested.
- Informing students of the insights from evaluation and the actions that will result from them.

Heads of Departments can:

- Request course evaluations to be conducted where deemed necessary.
- Ask to see evaluation reports *accompanied by raw data* where deemed necessary.

The Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning is responsible for providing support for:

- Designing evaluations.
- Collecting evaluation data.
- Analysing the data from the evaluations.
- Providing written reports on those evaluations.
- Providing support for course development based on insights from evaluations.

Deans are responsible for:

- Ensuring that course design is evaluated as specified by the policy by calling for reports from HoDs on the extent to which evaluation has taken place. Such reports should include developmental measures put in place to address problems.

3.1.2 Evaluation of Teaching

Individuals are required to evaluate their teaching in an on-going manner and to provide evidence of having done so to Heads of Departments. This evidence can be used in support of applications for personal promotion or confirmation of tenure.

Individual academics are responsible for:

- Designing evaluations that will allow them to test the validity of their assumptions about teaching and their practice as teachers on a continuous basis.
- Making plans and taking action to address any problem areas identified in their teaching and to build on teaching strengths.
- Providing evidence of the quality of their teaching to Heads of Departments in the form of an evaluation report or a teaching portfolio when required to do so.

Heads of Departments are responsible for:

- Monitoring the evaluation of teaching by ensuring that it takes place. HoDs can require an individual lecturer to evaluate his/her teaching of a particular course or module as deemed necessary. In addition, HoDs can ask for a discussion of the evaluation or request an evaluation report.
- Ensuring that mentorship is available to members of their department as they develop their capacity as academic teachers.
- Ensuring that, where appropriate, support from CHERTL is requested.

The Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning is responsible for providing support for:

- Designing evaluations.
- Collecting evaluation data.
- Analysing the data from the evaluations.
- Providing written reports on those evaluations
- Providing support to individuals as they seek to work with insights from evaluation to enhance their teaching.

Deans are responsible for:

- Guiding HoDs on the need to provide support and guidance for staff members as they develop their capacity as academic teachers.

3.2 Policy review procedure

The Teaching and Learning Committee shall review the policy every 3 years. Any proposed revisions would need to be considered by faculties before approval by Senate and Council. As and when the policy is revised, the latest version will be distributed by the Secretariat to all Heads of Departments who shall be responsible for communicating the changes to staff in their departments. The Committee Secretariat will also ensure that the web version remains updated.

