

University of Waterloo mulls standardized course-evaluation system

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REPORTER

The University of Waterloo will decide this fall whether a standardized system for course evaluations can balance student demands for more feedback on their classroom learning with faculty concerns about the impact of bias and evidence that such surveys may not improve student outcomes.

Since 2014, the university in Waterloo, Ont., has been studying how to harmonize different course evaluations across its six faculties. If approved by the university's senate in the fall, a new system would ask students to respond to the same questions across campus, while giving individual departments the power to design a secondary part of the survey.

The strategy recognizes that students have long advocated for a greater voice in the classroom, said Mark Seasons, the chair of the committee responsible the course evaluation project and a professor in the planning department.

"Out of 36,000 students, 30,000 are undergrads and 6,000 are grads, and they all have the right to a good-quality education," Dr. Seasons said.

But debate at Waterloo has been robust, as it has at other Canadian universities that have redesigned their course evaluations over the past several years – including Simon Fraser, the University of Toronto or the University of Windsor. The school's faculty association and some departments argue that student perceptions of teaching effectiveness do not actually recognize good teaching and are so tainted by bias that they should not be considered in decisions on promotions.

Students consistently rate female and racialized professors lower than white male professors, research has shown, even when female professors are more effective in teaching, said Jay Michela, a professor in the department of psychology. Dr. Michela wrote a critical response to the Waterloo committee's work that was signed by almost 20 members of the psychology department.

Given that reality, the only role student evaluations can play is to help instructors design or assess assignments and course materials and to give students a chance to reflect on how they learn, he argues. Otherwise, major gaps in pay and advancement can build.

"No amount of bias is tolerable," Dr. Michela said. "A woman can have, in year one, a little decrement. In year two, another decrement. Do the compounding analysis over a 30-year career," he said.

Course evaluations can even hamper innovation, he suggested.

"Why would you have professors looking over their shoulder if they want to try something new in the classroom because it could have a negative impact in their ratings?" he asked.

Critical voices, however, are swimming against a tide of student demands and increasing government intervention in the university experience.

Students have long advocated for standardized course evaluations at the university. Linking student opinions to merit pay increases is the only incentive for the university and professors to pay as much attention to teaching as to research, they say.

“If the purpose of higher education is theoretically to help you move up the social ladder, to give you tools to move into roles you would not otherwise, you have to actually start looking at outcomes,” said Sacha Forstner, a former member of Waterloo’s student federation who wrote a report on teaching culture at the university.

From Ontario to Britain, governments are determined to make universities give teaching and student learning outcomes as much attention as research. That’s particularly the case because research reputation and success do not seamlessly line up with teaching effectiveness. Britain was shocked last month, for example, when a number of its top research universities, including the London School of Economics and the University of Liverpool, achieved the lowest score in the first-ever national ranking of teaching excellence.

In three to five years, universities in Ontario may be in for a similar surprise. That is when a new funding model should be in place in which more of postsecondary institutions’ funding will depend on how well they do on employment and learning outcomes.

“On the horizon there is conditional funding tied to some sense of learning outcomes, that seems to be a nationwide trend,” Dr. Seasons said.

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