Student evaluation questionnaires and the developing world: An examination of the move from a hard copy to online modality

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ABSTRACT

Universities typically use student evaluation questionnaires (SEQs) as tools for gathering data for course improvement. Since 2002 SEQs have predominantly been used in online modalities in the developed world. However, the developing world has historically had issues with the reliability of information communication technology (ICT), such that this is the first generation to experience ICT as a dependable commodity. This research is located in a university in Trinidad and Tobago where further historical and contextual matters are at play. Results from a pilot online student evaluation system found that students were just as likely to use online SEQs as they were their hard copy equivalents, and that future students are more likely to favour the online format.

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Introduction

The significance of the student voice has grown in recent years such that student perspectives are now considered valid insights into the teaching and learning experience (Cook-Sather, 2006). Universities typically collect such information through a student evaluation questionnaire (SEQ). SEQs are an important means of assessing courses and lecturers and providing formative feedback for future improvement and, as such, their worth should be evident. SEQs predominantly collect quantitative and qualitative data that show how the student body has assessed courses, teaching and lecturers. Kember, Leung and Kwan (2002) report that feedback can improve the quality of the teaching and that universities should feel an obligation to hear the voice of their students. SEQs are stable formats (Piccinin, Cristi & McCoy, 1999) that offer valid indicators of the quality and effectiveness of teaching practice (Greenwald, 2002; Marsh & Bailey, 1993); however, if an evaluation system is not working to its full potential, the significance of the student voice may be diminished. The challenge for universities is for there to be an evaluation system that allows students’ voices to be heard and for lecturers to feel empowered to act on such feedback (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008) and for all this to be to the betterment of each individual actor and the organisation as a whole.

The problem with student evaluation data is in knowing the influence that it may have on practice. Schön (1987) suggests that reflection can enhance practice and that two of the key ways this can happen are through reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action involves practitioners making reflective judgements whilst they are teaching. Reflection-on-action happens after the fact and allows practitioners to look back over what has happened with an eye to improve future practice. From this perspective, SEQs are tools that inform reflection-on-action and can, therefore, lead to pragmatic change where the power and agency of the student voice could be used as ‘'the motor that drives staff development’ (Verill, 2007, p.79) and offer significant contributions to curriculum development (Campbell, Beasley, Eland, & Rumpus, 2007).

The importance of giving prompt feedback has been noted as being beneficial to development and motivation in students (Draper, 2009; Jordan & Mitchell, 2009) and since most positions in the behaviourist-constructivist spectrum hold that teaching is a learning activity, the same is likely to be true in regards to the use of feedback to support the development and motivation of lecturers. Here evaluation systems need to be timely procedures so that resultant data can be reported to lecturers whilst it is still relevant. Delaying feedback means there is no real closure of the feedback loop and that errors in practice are repeated and established (Scheeler & Lee, 2002). Evaluation data may eventually be returned to lecturers but attempts to close the feedback loop can be exacerbated by a process where action and feedback are separated by a significant period of time (Watson, 2003); therefore, the sooner formative information is provided the more effective it
is (Phye & Andre, 1989). Indeed, Azevedo and Bernard (1995, p. 122) state that ‘immediate delivery of a feedback message provides the best instructional advantage’ a view that is also supported by Kulik and Kulik (1988).

For a student evaluation system to work it needs to hold a certain value. If students don’t see the impact of their feedback (through improvements in courses and in teaching) then they are less likely to complete future feedback forms (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002). If lecturers have to wait a significant period of time before their data has been analysed and returned, there might be a disconnect between the course as it was taught and the feedback. This disconnect might lead to the devaluing of the returned data such that remedial actions are not implemented as suggested. In such an instance, the lack of closure of the feedback loop ‘creates a climate in which students do not take the existing feedback mechanisms seriously’ (Tucker et al., 2008, p. 283). One measure that is part of the higher education zeitgeist is that of ‘impact’ and we might consider, in this instance, that the impact of an evaluation system may be challenged if a lengthy turn-around-time (TAT) leads to feedback that is disconnected from its source.

There are two ways in which the TAT of any evaluation system might be reduced: through an increase in manpower and through a review of the process itself. The former is likely to be an expensive way of addressing the development and the latter involves the challenge of the new.

Improvements in information communication technology (ICT) have seen SEQs move from hard copy to online formats, such that in 2002 Thorpe reported online SEQs to be the norm in higher education (Thorpe, 2002). This has meant that the physical administration of paper-led processes has been slimmed down, leaving the focus of the evaluation system fixed on completion, analysis and reporting rather than administrative and procedural tasks (Dommeyer, Baum, Hanna, & Chapman, 2004). Not only has the movement to using online SEQs sharpened the focus of the evaluation process but it has brought significant improvements in the time it takes for the process to be completed (Kuhtman, 2004).

Further, in attempting to close the feedback loop through reducing turn-around-time, we might consider the quality of the data that is produced by both hard copy and online modalities. Here we find that there is no real difference in quantitative sections of the evaluation questionnaires but that students tend to provide more detailed qualitative responses when using an online evaluation system (Hnieleski & Champagne, 2000; Layne, DeCristoforo, & McGinty, 1999).

In considering a move from hard copy to online modalities, it is worth considering the challenges that online systems face. In general online surveys tend to have low response rates (Henderson, 2001) which can mean that they might not be able to produce a viable body of evidence. Another challenge takes a semi-Luddite form where labour-saving technology is shunned simply because it is new. But, in the digital age, such technologies are not really ‘new’ and the move to an online evaluation system is actually a chance to keep in step with modernity. Research into online student evaluations of university teaching has produced a wealth of literature that tends to pivot around two key points: online systems are quicker but response rates are not always as high as might be hoped (Dommeyer et al., 2004; Henderson, 2001). A useful baseline measure was established in a meta-analysis of online surveys where Sheehan (2001) noted that the average response rate to an online survey was 36.8%. Also, in an age of austerity, Dommeyer et al. (2004) offer some condolence and the ‘risk’ of adopting a new model is somewhat sweetened by the prospect of reduced running costs. Once an online evaluation system is established, many of the costs of hard copy methods can be avoided, i.e. the costs of printing, distributing, collecting, scanning and storing the paper based questionnaires. The online method of gathering student evaluations has numerous advantages over the traditional in-class method; however, the move from hard copy to online SEQs should also be considered in relation to the learning context.

**Student evaluation questionnaires in context**

With the movement to online SEQs, the developed world has, for the last decade, moved the focus of student evaluation systems from process to impact, but in developing nations the movement from hard copy to online modalities has only recently been problematised (Akkaba-Altun, 2006). Whilst the developed world embraces Web 3.0 and 4G mobile technology, in much of the developing world ICT has only recently emerged as a stable and reliable entity (Agbele, Nyongesa, & Adesina, 2009) and, for many developing nations, this is the first generation that has been able to truly embrace ICT usage (Andrade & Uruquhart, 2010). Technology, primarily in the form of mobile technology, has now become commonplace within private life but many developing nations have identified skills gaps in relation to the steering of emerging digital technologies at the national and regional level (Mutula & van Brakel, 2007) and established institutions have found it difficult to move to ICT-enabled practices (Ganpat, Ragbir, & de Freitas, 2009).

This study reports the results of an online SEQ pilot at a university in Trinidad and Tobago. The university is divided into five faculties with 12,472 undergraduate students (4449 males and 8023 females) and 4985 postgraduate students (1957 males and 4025 females) enrolled either full-time or part-time during the period under study (2012/13). Undergraduate programmes last three years and entry is free to students as fees are paid directly to the university by the Government. During the Academic Year 2012/13, 97.5% of the students were from the Caribbean region and 92% were Trinbagonian (home) students. This means that the predominant ‘culture’ of the university reflects that of the nation. The university’s recently established evaluation system was a major step forward in allowing the student voice to be heard but had been developed as a hard copy process and, as such, faced issues of lengthy TAT and (possibly) reduced impact. A pilot was undertaken to ascertain whether an online format would not only reduce TAT and help to close the feedback loop but would be a format that students would be willing to adopt. Trinidad and Tobago has been an independent nation since gaining its independence from Britain in 1962; however ‘colonialism does not end with political independence’ (London, 2002, p. 68) and many of the practices put in place whilst under colonial rule remain woven through the national fabric. Signs of the former coloniser remain evident in the bureaucracy and officialdom that permeate all levels of society (Brown & Conrad, 2007; George, Mohammed, & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003) with much official business being recorded in ledgers and ‘legal’ paper (in triplicate, quadruplicate and even nonuplicate). While the developed world looks towards the paperless office nirvana, the workflow in Trinidad and Tobago is paperful and the systems centralised and hierarchical (Amadio, 2009; Rampersad, 2010). The education system of Trinidad and Tobago is likewise a product of the colonial past (Brown & Conrad, 2007; Jules, 2008) and shows a predisposition for ‘traditional’ teaching and didacticism (Jennings, 2001; Roberts, 2003). Within such a context it is no surprise to find that student evaluation systems are still in their infancy and were (recently) designed as hard copy formats.

The implementation of the hard copy SEQ at the university was fully established in the Academic Year 2010/11 and involves gathering student evaluations of each course taught during each semester. Typically each year of an undergraduate programme of study is made up of 12 courses, six in semester 1 and six in
semester 2, and students evaluate courses at the end of each semester. Student feedback on the SEQs items are provided using both a Likert rating scale and qualitative responses. The quantitative section of the forms is read by an electronic reader and the qualitative section is manually scanned. The quantitative and qualitative responses are then collated and results are fed back. From beginning to end the whole student evaluation system takes 6–7 months (with over 900 courses surveyed each semester of the Academic Year 2012/13).

The TAT of the pilot could easily be tracked but the focus was on getting a purposeful average response rate. Student response rates are tracked by the university. Response rates are measured by counting the number of students in a course who complete a SEQ against the number of students enrolled on that course. This tracking has shown that the response rates in 2011/12 across the university can be quite variable (ranging from 8.5 to 100%) with an average response rate across the university of 52.9%. The challenge here was to create an online evaluation system that could maintain this response rate, allow for a quick turnaround, and be accepted as an appropriate data gathering tool.

Research aim

The aim of this pilot was to determine whether an online SEQ offered a pragmatic alternative to the hard copy version and whether the students in this developing nation were ready for the shift to an online modality. This was done by analysing pilot data against three success indicators:

1. That the average student response rate should be maintained.
2. That the TAT should be improved.
3. That student satisfaction should be increased.

Methodology

Data gathering system

An online student evaluation system using the same SEQ questions as the hard copy version was developed and initial in-house testing showed the process to be fit for purpose and speedy. From these internal reviews it was estimated that an online system would have a TAT of eight weeks – an estimate developed by examining the number of courses and the time needed to compile detailed records and databases, as well as considering the other duties of the various staff involved. It was hoped that such a swift TAT would make the resultant data more pertinent and encourage greater practitioner reflection and engagement in self-development. The online system ran using Qualtrics survey software (http://www.qualtrics.com): an established piece of software for conducting surveys electronically. Once the survey was designed, Qualtrics produced a hyperlink that worked as a gateway to the online survey. By clicking this hyperlink, students could access and complete the online survey at any time during the pilot.

Outlining the process

After gaining initial consent from the Deputy Principal (who acted as a gatekeeper) letters were sent from the research team to Deans outlining the process and outlining the courses that had been selected for the pilot. Information was also emailed to Heads of Department, lecturers and course administrators, informing them of the pilot process. It was also explained that these changes did not affect all courses and that students may be asked to complete hard copy SEQs for one course and online for another. It was also emphasised that the questions asked in each instance were the same; that all data would be treated sensitively, and that the online system would offer the same level of confidentiality as the hard copy system. It was also explained that the role of the lecturer was to post a hyperlink to the online SEQ on their course’s site on the university’s virtual learning platform. This hyperlink was supplied by the research team and allowed students access to the online SEQ.

Participants

Initially stratified random sampling was used for selecting the courses for this study. This sample comprised a selection of 44 undergraduate courses from Years 1, 2 and 3 from four of the five faculties (one faculty was not selected for participation as it used a slightly different SEQ format). These courses were also selected as they were taught in both 2011/12 and 2012/13, allowing for like-for-like analysis. After initial discussion, seven courses were deselected as the lecturers involved reported that they did not use the virtual learning platform where the hyperlinks would be hosted. This meant that, in the end, 37 undergraduate courses took part in the pilot. During the Academic Year 2011/12 1267 undergraduates were enrolled on these 37 courses and, in the subsequent year 1518 students were enrolled. This means that the data represents over 10% of the undergraduate student population.

Participants for the focus groups, that would be used to determine the level of student satisfaction, were members of the Student Guild – one faculty representative from each of the four faculties, the president, the vice-president and the secretary. These individuals were selected as they were in a position to offer a voice for the students they represented. It was intended that these seven participants be revisited at the end of the pilot; however, at that stage the Guild members were involved in student elections, so a second focus group was convened. This second focus group was made up of seven students selected through purposive sampling to represent a range of students from across the four faculties and the three academic year groups. The need to change the make-up of the focus group turned out to be rather serendipitous as the discussion during the first focus group might have led to the introduction of an element of bias in the mind of the participants. The second focus group has no such bias.

Measures of success

In setting out the online pilot it was important to consider what success would look like. Since this pilot aimed to maintain the average response rates that the courses involved in the pilot had achieved in the previous year, the actual target that was set was in excess of that established in the literature. Finally, in adopting a student-centred approach and working within a paradigm where the student voice is valued, it was felt important that some data be captured that encapsulated the student perspective.

The pilot was assessed against three measures of success of which the first one was determined to be the most significant and the other two would supplement this.

1. That the average student response rate should be maintained

The average student response rate was set by examining the average previous response rate that the 37 courses achieved in Academic Year 2011/12 in order to generate a like-for-like target. From this analysis the target average response rate, in relation to the hard copy SEQs, was set at 54.4%.

2. That the TAT should be improved

The previous hard copy student evaluation system had taken 6–7 months to be fully administered. This was measured from the moment blank SEQs were sent out to the moment completed reports were sent to Deans, Heads of Department and lecturers.

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Analysis of the student evaluation system from Academic Year 2011/12 showed that, although the mean time taken for this process was just over 15 weeks, the mode was 13 weeks. For the benefit of a target the lower time was taken. This meant that the pilot had a target TAT of 13 weeks.

3. That student satisfaction should be increased

Before and after the online pilot student focus groups were held in order to garner qualitative data regarding the student experience of the online evaluation system. The comments developed from these focus groups are fair expressions of the student body’s experience. The target in this case was that there should be increased satisfaction.

Data analysis

The data drawn from Qualtrics was entered and analysed using both Microsoft Excel and SPSS to show general trends. In order to look for further nuances within the data, the mean participation rates and the number of students enrolled were examined across the three academic year groups to generate ‘overall’ data as well as year-by-year data. Three tests were conducted using the above mentioned raw data components, in order to determine which survey performed better. Performance was based on the student response rate, the frequency of participation for each year group, and the correlation coefficient values. The first test examined the total response rate for all 37 undergraduate courses then examined this for each of the three academic year groups. The second test examined the mean and the standard deviation of hard copy and online modalities by comparing the average number of participants for each of the year groups. The final test performed a Pearson correlation on the data in order to determine the strength of association between student enrolment and student participation in the hard copy and online surveys. In others words, the extent to which students are willing to complete either survey based on enrolment. By establishing the strength of association between these two variables this test was also useful in predicting future trends.

Results

Average student response rate

Overall, the average student response rate of the online pilot was akin to the target rate. The hard copy SEQ had an average response rate for all courses of 54.4% and the online survey produced an average response rate of 53.9%. However these figures only give overall percentages and do not show specific trends within the data. Table 1 illustrates a breakdown of the overall response rates for each year group.

Table 2 represents the average participation rate for hard copy and online SEQ modalities for each of the three year group.

As well as examining the response rates across the three year groups the data was examined to determine an individual’s likely response. Table 3 represents the Pearson correlation coefficients for all year groups where the closer the coefficient tends to +1, the stronger the relationship between the variables. This table shows the strength of association between student enrolment and the likelihood of a student completing the SEQ in either hard copy or online modality.

From the above output, it can be seen that the coefficients have a very strong positive value and are also significant at the 0.01 level. The outputs marked with a single asterisk indicate a confidence level of 95% and the outputs marked with double asterisks indicate a confidence level of 99%. Thus, the relationship is strongest between the number of students enrolled and the participants using the online survey.

Turn-around-time (TAT)

The hard copy format had taken 6–7 months to be fully processed. This was measured from the moment the blank questionnaires were sent out to the moment the completed reports were sent to Deans, Heads of Department and lecturers. Analysis of the SEQ process from Academic Year 2011/12 set a target time of 13 weeks for the online survey. Because of the nature of the survey software, the moment the online pilot closed (the last day of the semester) the data was available to be downloaded. The only factors that limited immediate download were: inexperience with the system; the volume of pilot data, and regular work commitments. However, all the reports were put together, logged and sent out to lecturers, Heads of Department and Deans within seven working weeks.

Student satisfaction

When participants in the first focus group were asked for their perspectives on the hard copy survey, participants reported that despite the completion of the forms being seen as ‘rushed’ there was a perception that it ‘gave the opportunity to voice opinion’. One participant felt that the questionnaire was ‘pointless’ but that, if the TAT was shortened ‘then students will value it more’. Participants offered some other ideas on closing the loop through having staff/student liaison committees, discussion forums and open forums – all of which are means by which immediate feedback can be given in the hope that it is acted upon. In all, the first focus group painted a picture that was in line with key concepts in the literature: that they valued a feedback system, that the system needed to be closed, and that they felt a shorter TAT would improve the ability of lecturers to act on feedback.

The second focus group took place after the online pilot had ended. This group was asked about the online survey in the hope that their responses might correspond to those from the first focus group. Of the seven students in the second focus group only one had taken part in the pilot, two of the others reported that they had heard about it from peers and four had no knowledge about the pilot at all. When asked what they thought about the hard copy SEQ they remarked that there was ‘no feedback’ and that completing it felt like ‘wasting class time’. However, they did feel that the hard copy SEQ allowed ‘more students to participate’ and allowed for ‘anonymity’. Others (who had not completed the online SEQ) felt that the online format sounded ‘more convenient’ but they shared two main concerns – they were not sure if as many students would complete the survey online and they were still concerned whether comments from the survey would actually be used by lecturers to improve their practice.

Discussion

The aim of this pilot was to examine whether an online SEQ was a pragmatic alternative to the hard copy version and whether the students in this developing nation were ready to shift to an online modality. This was done through examining a stratified sample
that represented around 10% of the undergraduate students. A review of current practice and extant literature led to the creation of the three measures of success: key amongst them that the response rate be maintained. It was also felt that data regarding turn-around-time and student satisfaction would help triangulate the findings. When placed alongside the contextualisation of the pilot it can be seen that the student body appears to be at the tipping point: they are just as likely to complete the online SEQ as they are to complete the hard copy SEQ – although the data suggests that each new cohort of students will be more likely to embrace the online modality. This implies that students in this particular university may be on the cusp of a cultural shift in the way that information is communicated as each new generation becomes more digitally aware.

The pilot’s response rate of 53.9% is 0.5% lower than the target hard copy SEQ but higher than the rate established in the literature (Sheehan, 2001). In examining the overall response rate for each year group (see Table 1) it can be seen that, of all the year groups, Year 1 was the most willing to complete the online survey. Table 2 confirms that students in Year 1 were the most responsive to the online survey by expressing the significance of the difference in the mean value in the hard copy and online modalities. Table 3 shows that, when one extra student is enrolled the participation rate for the hard copy SEQ increases by 0.842. On the other hand, when one extra student is enrolled, the participation rate increases by 0.91 for the online SEQ. This suggests that, for all year groups, students would be more willing to complete the online SEQ than the hard copy on a year-on-year basis, which will lead to increased participation. As more students are predicted to be enrolled year-on-year, the participant rates are therefore predicted to increase. This suggests that the student body is ready for the SEQ in an online modality and that students entering the university are the most likely to prefer online SEQ modalities. Particularly, it was found that, for Year 1 students, the online SEQ had a higher overall response rate than its hard copy equivalent and data analysis also predicted that there was a greater likelihood of future undergraduates preferring to complete an online SEQ as opposed to the hard copy version.

Further examination of the student responses shows that, not only are students more likely to want to complete an online survey but that they are more likely to give qualitative feedback when using an online format (Layne et al., 1999). An examination of the qualitative responses offered in the hard copy survey shows that just under half of the students who completed the SEQ offered any qualitative comments but that almost all of the students who completed the online survey offered qualitative responses. This meant that the quality of feedback was improved as many more formative comments were offered. Therefore lecturers have a wider range of evaluation data to use when attempting to close the feedback loop.

In examining the overall average response rate it can be seen that there was some success here. This overall average response rate was only 0.5% under its target in relation to the corresponding hard copy surveys of the 37 participating courses in the previous academic year but it was 17.1% over the rate that was predicted in the literature. Further, when the data is stratified by academic year group, Year 1 online SEQ outperforms its hard copy equivalent. Finally, data correlation suggests that the online survey is more likely to increase future participation across all year groups than its hard copy equivalent and that the online survey is significantly more likely to produce qualitative student feedback.

It was estimated that a total of 40 person hours had been spent designing the survey: 16 hours packaging the survey results and two hours sending out the files. Over 900 SEQs are sent out each semester. It can be inferred from this that it would take around eight working weeks to complete online surveys for all undergraduate courses and that this measure for success was clearly met. Further the reduced TAT means that reports can be returned to lecturers in a timely fashion and that the comments contained

![Table 2](image)

**Table 2**
Average participation rate for Years 1, 2 and 3 for both hard copy and online SEQ (2012/13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard copy</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Hard copy</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>Hard copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>Y1</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>Y2</td>
<td>Y3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of courses</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>13.0909</td>
<td>26.1818</td>
<td>27.8889</td>
<td>25.4444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Std. deviation</td>
<td>8.39589</td>
<td>31.15066</td>
<td>19.38069</td>
<td>23.93278</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Table 3](image)

**Table 3**
Overall strength of association between student enrolment and participation in both the hard copy and online SEQ using Pearson correlation coefficients (2012/13).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Correlation coefficient</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Correlation coefficient</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Correlation coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard copy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Online</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hard copy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td></td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correlation coefficient</td>
<td>.402**</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.842**</td>
<td>.335</td>
<td>.639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig.</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
therein will be relevant and useful and their timeliness will make them more likely to lead to pragmatic change (Azevedo & Bernard, 1995; Kulik & Kulik, 1988). Since the focus groups reported that they did not currently feel the feedback loop was closed, this area will need further scrutiny and perhaps some intervention, otherwise students may lose faith in the system (Tucker et al., 2008). Normally online surveys have lower response rates than their hard copy equivalents. Here it is interesting to see that this was not the case and that the two rates were about the same. This could be connected to the ‘newness’ of SEQs (in any format) in this context. The education system of Trinidad and Tobago is still very teacher-led and formal lectures tend to be the normal mode of educational delivery on campus, which means that the notion of drawing on the student voice is still novel. If this is the case then the ‘novelty’ factor may have overshadowed the hard copy online debate. Either way, these response rate figures show that students are keen to give their evaluations and are skilled enough to do so using ICT.

An interesting contextual point was found in the focus group data where the hard copy SEQ was felt to maintain anonymity but there was a slight concern as to whether this would still be true of the online version. Perhaps this is an indication of a cultural bias in Trinidad and Tobago–where hard copy systems are an established norm–but is also suggestive of data not yet logged in general to the users of secure locations (banks, offices, government buildings etc.). But the beginnings of a cultural shift to online communication can also be seen in the focus group data where the online SEQ was described as ‘more convenient’–language that suggests that these particular students are working/living with technology and are comfortable communicating through ICT. Further to this, it was clear that students felt the feedback loop had not been closed through the hard copy modality as they reported that there was no perceivable impact on the practice of lecturers. This could be a result of the lag between the collection of data and the sending out of compiled results and students felt that an online system was ‘a very good idea’ that could help speed the process up. Most of the remarks made in the focus groups are aligned to discussions within the literature but one student, who had completed the online SEQ, felt that the main advantages it had were that ‘you can take your time’ and ‘change your answers more easily’. These two remarks are interesting and raise new points that were not found in the literature – both of which are linked to the online format being slightly more personalised. Despite some concerns, students were positive about a move to an online modality and were keen to know if their courses would be using it. In all, students seemed satisfied with the concept of the online SEQ: they felt it was more user-friendly, and showed a very slight preference for online hard copy.

Andrade and Urquhart (2010) suggest that the developing world has only just started to accept ICT as a reliable and accessible tool and that this is particularly evident in mobile technology usage–especially amongst the younger generation. The data here supports this point and it can be inferred that with each new cohort of students enrolling at the university their familiarity with ICT will mean that an online SEQ will increasingly seem more and more convenient. For much of the developing world, this is the first generation to have instant multi-media access to global information. Such access might affect established hierarchies and traditional means of information flow. For Trinidad and Tobago this new generation of digital natives is likely to be influenced by wider perspectives and philosophies and, as such, embrace a ‘modern’ perspective where deference is earned and there is a greater democratic awareness. In such a situation, the voice of those who have been ignored in the past (those who are perceived to be at the bottom of the hierarchy) is given greater power and agency.

Limitations of study

There are certain limitations of this study that must be acknowledged. Firstly, despite the scale of participation this pilot is still specific to one case and the data is, therefore, not easily generalisable. Further research is needed as to the longer term reliability of this pilot. There were only 37 courses involved in the pilot and, while these offer a level of representation across the university, this is still quite a small number. Although data was drawn from the same 37 courses in 2011/12 and 2012/13 the actual make up of these courses had changed as new students had enrolled. Therefore the sampling is based on synthetic rather than tracked cohorts. Another limitation is linked to the role of the lecturer in this pilot. Seven courses were deselected as the lecturers did not use the university’s virtual learning platform – this means that the courses that did take part were those that had already made some movement towards using online resources. Whilst it is important to recognise these limitations, it is not felt that they significantly impact upon the data and its analysis, which are presented here as a true representation of the situation as it was encountered.

Conclusion

Online SEQs have been the norm in the developed world for over a decade (Thorpe, 2002) but this study suggests that, despite the likelihood of each generation of students in Trinidad and Tobago preferring online to hard copy SEQs, there is still work to be done before online SEQs can be considered the norm in this developing nation. This research, and the surrounding literature, suggests that Trinidad and Tobago is at least ten years behind the developed world in relation to the use of online SEQs. Whilst a gap in ICT usage remains between the developed and the developing world, the general trend for year-on-year ICT unit costs to drop means that this gap may narrow over time and that, despite its slow start, the developing world will have the opportunity to catch up as access to technology becomes more equitable. The culture of education in Trinidad and Tobago is such that hearing the student voice is a relatively new concept but there is evidence here that students want to be heard and that, as time moves on, online SEQs will be the preferred option for doing so. Online SEQs allow institutions to move from centring their time and energy on procedural issues to focusing on the analysis and impact of SEQs and the movement to online SEQs highlights the start of a cultural shift in the education system of Trinidad and Tobago as university systems begin to move from the bureaucratic to the purposefully active.

This pilot study hopes to move the debate forward by suggesting that not only are the students in developing nations ready for online SEQs but that online SEQs will allow them to have a greater freedom of expression. This freedom of expression is still quite new in parts of the developing world and there should be some problematisation of how systems can be established such that student evaluations are normalised. Beyond this, in both the developing world and the developed world there needs to be renewed focus on what to ‘do’ with the student voice so as to help close the feedback loop.

References


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