The Evaluation Practice at a Sino-British University

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ABSTRACT

As an institution, Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University (XJTLU) is unique in China. It is the only Chinese institution that awards students both UK degree and Chinese degree, so it has two sets of control, one of which is to meet all the requirements of the UK Higher Education (HE) standards and the other is to go through all the requirements of Chinese degree awarding powers. Due to its specific relationship with University of Liverpool (UoL), XJTLU is also under close scrutiny from UoL. All of these are reflected in the XJTLU internal and external Quality Assurance (QA) frameworks and procedures. This article focuses on describing and analysing how XJTLU monitors the teaching and assessment processes to meet the UK HE QA standards. Generally, the monitoring system is robust and multidimensional, involving students and peers as observers/reviewers. To understand students’ perspectives on the teaching quality and their learning experience, the university provides official channels for students to provide ratings and/or qualitative comments on modules and instructors at the middle and the end of semester, while module instructors are expected to do reflection and revision of their teaching accordingly. In addition to that, each module instructor has to observe a peer’s class annually and engage in dialogues with the peer reviewer before and after the observation. To ensure the quality of assessment tasks and marking standards, module leaders have to actively communicate with internal moderators, UoL moderators and external moderators in the Assessment Preparation Review (APR) and Marking Moderation Review (MMR) processes. In general, the evaluation practice of teaching and assessment plays an important role in ensuring the educational quality is maintained and enhanced at XJTLU and is comparable with international best practice. So far, many disciplines at the university have been certified by international professional organizations, which strengthens the university’s global positioning, and directly improves the competitiveness of graduates in the global job market. The author hopes to provide some insights of the QA practice at XJTLU to help teachers and education administrators in different contexts to understand the benefits and progress to be made in terms of teaching and assessment evaluation to ensure the high quality of student training.

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1. Introduction

At XJTLU, the learning and teaching evaluation measures seek information about course design and delivery, instructor behavior and assessment practice, which is primarily used for formative purposes, such as providing constructive feedback to facilitate improved teaching, course and assessment development, and enhanced learning, as opposed to summative purposes -- intended to
serve as indicators to personnel decisions, such as promotion, hiring and tenure. XJTLU has adopted more than one form of evaluation methods because each of the evaluation measures has its own restrictions and limitations. The evaluation findings are to help teachers and leaders at XJTLU to understand the gains and progress to be made in order to benefit students’ learning. Student evaluation includes an end-of-semester questionnaire and a mid-semester feedback collection. Peer evaluation includes on-site peer review of teaching, internal and external review of assessment setting and marking. This article will briefly describe and evaluate these different evaluative practices at XJTLU. The main purpose is to help teachers and administrators to choose the most appropriate quality assurance measures.

2. Students’ Evaluation towards the Teacher and Module

The End-of-semester Questionnaire

The university student end-of-semester questionnaire requests quantitative ratings and provides space for additional qualitative comments from students. As the university highlights, “Module questionnaires are a valuable source of student feedback.” It is good evaluation practice to combine the quantitative ratings and qualitative sources of feedback on the questionnaire. On one hand, we could not leave out student ratings as they are very time efficient and the introduction of technologies and electronic data processing made it possible to make comparisons of quantitative data across departments and over time. Many have argued that there is no other option that could provide the same sort of quantifiable and comparable data. On the other hand, as noted by Harper and Kuh (2007), qualitative measures of assessment can often bring to light issues that cannot be identified through conventional quantitative measures. “The higher the response rate, the more meaningful the feedback is.” XJTLU has been trying hard to increase the questionnaire response rate each year.

Mid-semester Feedback Collection

Because the end-of-semester questionnaire is scheduled near the conclusion of the semester and its results are released after the semester is finished, any subsequent changes would only affect the following semester or the next delivery of the module if it is a semester-long module. It is necessary and valuable to have a mid-semester feedback session which could be acted upon timely. At XJTLU, the mid-semester feedback is collected during the Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC) meeting. Only formative comments and suggestions are presented by student representatives and module instructors are required to give quick response and take necessary actions in the following teaching sessions. In addition to this, many teachers have employed student needs survey questionnaires at the beginning of the semester, and collect students’ feedback comments often in class informally. The questions in the needs survey would help to capture students’ attention and to develop their meta-cognitive skills such as the ability to think holistically and to identify the information gaps. The student comments can reveal what students do not understand and can therefore serve as an important course development tool.

Challenges

Part of the success of quality teaching support depends on acceptance by the teachers and the use of the instruments at their disposal in their teaching activities. One challenge with using the student module questionnaire, as argued by Marsh (2007), is that most teaching staff are not trained in data analysis and are therefore less likely to be able to interpret the ratings. If resources exist in assisting the interpretation as well as the implementation of evaluation data, teaching evaluations could be extremely useful. The university has been making continuous efforts in providing teachers useful data analysis results, such as scores of different but comparable modules and from last year’s, and is still trying to find better ways to present the results.

Another challenge, as highlighted by Douglas and Douglas (2006) in their study, is the teaching staff generally has very little faith in student evaluation because they are not competent assessors. Several studies have demonstrated that students are reliable at measuring in-class instruction (for example, teacher’s presentation, clarity and organisation), the ease or difficulty of their learning experience, the workload of the module, the validity of the assessment, and the amount they have learnt, several other researchers argued that students are not well-qualified at evaluating the level, amount and accuracy of module content and an instructor’s knowledge of his or her discipline. It has also been pointed out that students are unable to evaluate instructor’s methods of delivery, appropriateness of materials selected as well as instructor’s grading practices. Based on the above discussions in the literature, some items on the XJTLU student module questionnaire shall be reviewed. For example, “the teacher was knowledgeable about the subject” “The assigned course readings (e.g. textbooks, articles) were helpful”. Furthermore, students’ qualitative comment should be used with discretion and leaders shall avoid building casual links between what’s reported by a few
students and teachers’ performance.

3. Peer Evaluation of Teaching and Assessments

Peer Review of Teaching

Besides students’ evaluation, at least one teaching session is reviewed and evaluated by an experienced colleague as peer reviewer on a yearly basis. Peer teaching review is a means to give feedback to teachers on their good teaching practice and areas need improvement. For each observation, one or two areas will be focused and formative feedback will be provided afterwards. It is not the content and but the way of teaching gets observed and feedback on. It is good practice as it not only raises awareness among teaching staff about the importance of quality teaching, but also helps teachers to reflect upon the problems in their teaching and provides ways to tackle them. For example, the peer reviewer identifies the training needs and informs the department training manager or university Academic Enhancement Centre (AEC) to address those needs. Whatever stimulates reflection on the role of teaching in the learning process and provides effective support contributes to quality teaching and enhanced learning.

For evaluation to be truly effective in improve teaching, Hau (1996) stated that, “the level of teaching must continue to be assessed very regularly -- indeed quality teaching’s goal is the continual improvement of the teaching level and the continual ‘removal of learning defects’.” Ory (2001) also noted that evaluation should be both formative and continuous and in line with an instructor’s personal goals for teaching improvement. As there is only one session being reviewed a year, to reinforce the concept of reflection and encourage more self-reflection, there is Annual Performance Review (APR) which employs reflection journals to help teaching staff document and reflect on their efforts in teaching. However, it is controversial whether this personal reflective documentation shall be used as the basis of the performance review which directly affects one’s salary increase.

Moderation of Assessment Setting and Marking

The mechanism of assessment evaluation is very active and engaging at XJTLU. As discussed earlier, XJTLU has to meet the quality standards of UoL and QA procedures and regulations of both Chinese and UK degree awarding powers. Basically, each module involves two or three layers of assessment evaluation -- internal moderation, UoL moderation, and external moderation. Such evaluation is required at two stages, the first one during the assessment preparation period, and the second one during the module marking process. Generally, all moderators have to review the coursework and exam papers, check whether they can meet the relevant learning outcomes and pitched at the right level as specified in the module aim, followed by a revision of the markings to ensure the scripts are correctly and fairly graded. UoL and external examiners act more at the institutional level: “to assist XJTLU and UoL in monitoring the standards of awards and to ensure these awards are comparable in standard with those for similar subjects and awards (in UoL) and other UK Universities and that the performance of students is consistent with those awards”. Module examiners have the responsibility to maintain the information flow by responding to moderators’ comments and suggestions and make necessary changes accordingly.

Although quite complicated and sometimes may cause a bit of confusion to teaching staff new to the UK HE system, such diagnostic assessment evaluation is indeed valuable and effective as teachers involved in this QA process would become more aware of the teaching aim pursued beyond their own knowledge area, they would understand their role as individual teachers and as components of a collective mission, and they can better relate their own expectations of the module to the programme or institution’s expectations in terms of learning outcomes. Since it is a collective mission, any party involved has to respond following the assessment timeline to ensure a smooth moderation process.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the evaluative practice at XJTLU is robust and comprehensive. The university strictly monitors the teaching and assessment processes, and teachers actively participate in the processes. It has been demonstrated an effective practice, evident in several schools and programs being certified by international professional organizations, and the majority of the graduates being admitted to postgraduate programs at world renowned universities or positioned well in global industry and international business organizations, all of which attracts more students to XJTLU as well. Hopefully, this article could inform institutions and educators in different contexts of useful approaches to drive improvement and excellence in their own quality assurance practice.

References


