

Carrots, sticks and academic ethics: The use of incentives to increase evaluation response rates

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Abstract

Questions are often raised about whether evaluation response rates and results reflect students' perceptions of the value and quality of their educational experience. How can academics be confident that students respond with honesty and objectivity to evaluations? Are responses influenced by factors such as workload, grade and prior experience of evaluations? Can educational priorities be lost when incentives are offered? This paper will explore concepts related to the use of incentives as a strategy to enhance evaluation response rates and in particular examines the position against the use of incentives to solicit enhanced response rates from students. Incentives and penalties applied to academic staff themselves will also be considered. The paper concludes that the use of incentives that are not based in moral and ethical practice are contrary to the principles of ethical practice and academic integrity.

Introduction

By definition the word incentive is understood as something used as a motivating influence (Oxford University Press 2012). For the purposes of this paper it can be considered a stimulus that motivates students to participate in online teaching evaluations and, based on the current practice of CQUniversity and other universities, that stimulus is a prize or reward for participation.

The use of incentives in academe to encourage students to participate in online unit evaluations at the end of each term is varied but well established in practice. For example CQUniversity Australia offers, at a divisional level, an iPad and vouchers each term as incentives for students to complete the online course evaluation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that academics have offered such things as textbooks, vouchers and the like to enhance student participation in order to ensure they meet student participation key performance indicators (KPIs) for their units of study.

In order to understand this activity in a broader context, other universities have reported varying examples of the use of incentives. Virginia Commonwealth University (2012) offers pizzas to groups of students who collectively meet participation KPIs, and Princeton University (n.d.) only releases grades to those students who have participated in evaluations. The California Baptist University suggests that allowing students to take notes into an exam could be used as an incentive to increase participation rates (Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment 2012). Examples of the use of incentives in Australia are not widely available however the National Tertiary Education Union (2010) in their paper on student evaluation and teaching surveys, cites a 2009 University of Newcastle study of Australian universities in which it was found that most universities do not include incentives or penalties in either paper-based or online surveys of subjects and teaching. With the increasing need for reporting around quality improvement and evaluation however, it is likely that more Australian universities have moved to online student unit evaluation and have resorted to the use of incentives to increase participation.

Influence of incentives on students and academics

It is posited that incentives promote what may be termed the ‘me factor’. The me factor is that element of ourselves that exhibits the part of our psyche termed the *selfish utility maximiser*, who is not inclined to help others (Meier & Stutzer 2008) but rather participates for reasons that are self-focused. In the context of this paper the selfish utility maximiser is unleashed within the student and academic cohort via the aim of winning the prize offered as incentive. This outcome happens at two levels. Academics may be offered an incentive for achieving the highest student participation rate in their course evaluation, thereby increasing the ‘whatever it takes’ attitude and offering their own incentives to students – thus creating an uneven playing field amongst academics all competing for the attention of students to complete their course evaluations. The use of language that is designed to promote an emotional response with students’ including phrases such as – ‘I need your help’ and ‘I really need 75 % of you to complete this evaluation’ has been declared by academics in part to promote participation and position themselves to win the incentive prize. So while an academic may articulate altruistic reasons to participate, for example informed decision making for course changes and the like, the language they use is coercive. While they may not offer an incentive per se, the implied incentive is that student will be helping the academic to win. It is suggested that this is coercive and an example of the ‘me factor’ at work.

Students who are faced with a growing number of evaluations to complete will generally participate when they really have something to say about a course. Those who are indifferent may be more likely to participate in evaluations that increase their chances of winning a prize. Either way, from the perspective of the academic or student it becomes a competition that culminates in being all about ‘me’ and engaging students who are not motivated for the right reasons. Hodgson (2012) contends that while individualists insist incentives are important, evolutionary theory suggests that motivation should be driven by the consideration of others and the limitation of greed and policymakers, such as educational administrators, should not appeal to avarice that satiates the self-interest of the individual. The authors of this paper contend that incentives may act as a corrupting influence that can blind students and academics

from the principles of academic integrity, ethical practice and furthermore may encourage behaviour that is not consistent with society's expectations. The following discussion is an exploration of these principles as they relate to the use of incentives to increase student participation in online course evaluations.

Academic Integrity

Bretag, Mahmud and Wallace et al. (2011) state that at its core, academic integrity requires honesty. McCabe and Pavela (2004) elaborate on the notion of honesty and academic integrity and provide a framework of 10 points that provide guidance around a definition of academic integrity. The following three points most pertinent to this debate are explored with reference to the focus of this paper.

- 1. That academics recognise and affirm academic integrity as a core institutional value.*

'In order to do this, universities must provide the framework for academic integrity when they commit themselves to the pursuit of truth.'

Academics and researchers understand that the use of incentives in respect of research participants raises ethical issues that must be addressed. Why then, in the context of unit evaluation do we not consider this? In unit evaluations the truth, as expressed from individual perspective, may not necessarily be revealed when a student responds to an evaluation based on the desire to win something. Truths should not be coerced; indeed truths must be given freely and without payment. If only one student half-heartedly engages in an approach to participation in evaluation, driven by the selfish utility maximiser within themselves, then the 'truth' of the responses is diluted. If truth is a core element of academic integrity then the 'me factor' tarnishes the lustre of academic integrity.

- 2. That we should encourage student responsibility for academic integrity*

'The student experience should occur in communities where competition is fair, integrity is respected, and cheating is punished.'

Is there integrity in students exercising the 'me factor' to participate when others choose not to? It is argued that competition cannot be fair in a moral sense when some students participate in evaluations for the right reasons (driven by the desire to do good) and others may participate to win a prize (driven by the 'me factor'). The question then arises - Is there integrity in academics offering their own incentives to boost participation to meet KPIs when others can't or don't? Again we question whether the 'me factor' dilutes the level playing field both morally and practically and results in the evaluation environment becoming unfair and competitive. It could be argued that this is poor role modeling by academics that does nothing to encourage academic integrity in students.

- 3. That academics help define and support campus wide academic integrity standards*

‘An important aim of academic integrity should be to serve as a foundation for other efforts that enhance student ethical development.’

It is suggest that if academics demonstrate academic integrity and ethical practice and remove the ‘me factor’ from their practice, this will in turn promote the same attitude in students. Indeed Hodgson (2012) argues that the evolution of morality (as expressed through the academic integrity of faculty) undermines the utility maximizing framework and demonstrates their “inherited and enlargeable capacities to consider others and limit their greed’ thus role modeling correct behaviors and attitudes to student” (p. 272).

Ethical Practice

So why is *this* issue so important? It’s important because the ability for academics to foster the traits of academic integrity and ethical practice in students is central to our practice. This notion is reflected in the understanding that, as part of their practice, academics will foster generic graduate attributes in students, beyond that that required as core discipline specific core knowledge, and that we must foster within our students as core values for practice. As an example CQUniversity Australia has articulated eight graduate attributes (CQUniversity 2011) that its graduates must possess when graduating, that are developed over the course of a student’s enrolment from introductory to graduate level. The graduate attribute of CQUniversity that is of relevance to this debate is that of ‘Ethical Practice’ in which, at a graduate level, students should be able to ‘articulate an appropriate personal value system, in terms of social behaviour and civic responsibility’ (CQUniversity 2011). It is proposed that the ‘me factor’ alluded to earlier in this paper is incompatible with the aspiration of this graduate attribute. So why do we promote it by offering incentives?

The question then raised is how do we engage students in evaluations without using incentives and encouraging a value system in students that is consistent with contemporary societal moral values? While the preceding discussion questions the morality of incentives for course evaluation, it is impossible to render the process of increasing students’ participation without such inducement. The authors of this paper contend that helping students understand that they can make a meaningful contribution to the development of courses is incentive enough. Such an argument is dependent on students having an appreciation of the value of unit evaluations as expressed by the academics themselves. Academics should articulate the absolute importance of unit evaluations both while teaching and in course materials. Highlighting improvements made to the unit of study based on previous student feedback communicates to students that their feedback is fundamentally important (Teaching and Learning Services 2012) and will be acted on in the process ensuring quality improvement in learning and teaching. This incentive is of course the only one that should be offered – the incentive to do the right thing. Here we refer to a concept known as the moral incentive.

Moral incentives are said to exist where a particular choice is widely regarded as the right thing to do; it is drawn from a sense of social duty to participate (Seymour 2012). A person acting on a moral incentive can expect a sense of self-esteem, approval or even admiration from their community. This belief rests on the perception that participation that is altruistic and morally driven affirms the notion that the

participant is making a social contribution (Seymour 2012). Responding to moral incentives is a concept embedded in the goals of correct social behaviour and civic responsibility that are part of our graduate attributes.

This perspective is reinforced in data from research that examined Online Student Course Evaluations (The Advisory Board Company 2009). This research examined the practices of 10 universities in the USA – all Research or Doctoral Research Universities as per the Carnegie classification. Of note is a comment from one of the participating institutions who has adopted a charity based incentive program and found that:

“Most students will not bother filling out their course evaluations if it means entering a raffle to win an iPod. Make the incentive a positive contribution, and students will view course evaluations positively.”

(The Advisory Board Company 2009 p.14)

Dickinson (1989) wrote on the detrimental effects of extrinsic reinforcement on intrinsic motivation and found that culturally, intrinsically motivated acts that have no extrinsic reward are praised by society whereas actions that receive a tangible reward, for example an iPad, are not praised as highly. The suggestion from this finding is that actions that have a tangible reward receive less praise thus undermining their intrinsic motivation to complete the task. In the process of expanding on the Cognitive Evaluation Theory (Deci 1975), Deci and Ryan (1985) proposed that participating in events that promote greater perceived competence enhance intrinsic motivation, whereas those that diminish perceived competence decrease intrinsic motivation. From this perspective it is argued that participation in course evaluation as a result of reasons that are morally and ethically sound enhance the competence of the individual by promoting the enlargeable capacities of consideration of others and the limitation of greed as discussed by Hodgson (2012). The intent of the graduate attribute of ethical practice discussed earlier is that graduates, and by default academics, should demonstrate competent behaviour that fits societal norms and expectations. Therefore if students and academics can be encouraged to move away from a ‘what’s in it for me’ attitude and focus on the rewards inherent in acting with integrity and morality, we are more likely to produce graduates and academics that reflect the correct social behaviour and civic responsibility that society expects from universities and their graduates.

Conclusion

This paper has explored whether the use of incentives that are not based in moral and ethical practice are contrary to the principles of ethical practice and academic integrity. The authors accept that any line of inquiry can be incentive free by virtue of the fact that when we do human research we must indicate to participants the value of their participation, as this is the ethically correct thing to do. Similarly, in academic evaluation we must explain to students why their participation is important. If one takes the view that moral incentives, academic integrity and ethical practice, as role modeled by academics, can positively influence student attributes and behaviour in a way that is consistent with the higher aspirations of correct social behaviour and civic responsibility, then it is argued that incentives can and should be subliminal,

motivation to participate intrinsic and the process completely devoid of the 'what's in it for me' contagion that may sully the aspirations of academic excellence.

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