

# ***Online Teacher Evaluation by Students - Upgrading or Downgrading of the Process? Case study: West University of Timișoara***

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**Abstract:** In this article we analyse the main consequences of replacing the pen-and-paper questionnaires used for teacher evaluation by students with an online version, at West University of Timișoara. The students' feedback is a legislative requirement, is carried out every semester starting from 2007 and, as of 2016, in our university, was transferred to an online platform. We are going to make a sociological analysis of this transformation, following two variables: the number of evaluator students and the level of the marks. Even though the online evaluation is more accessible for students, the general trend is a decrease in their involvement, with direct consequences on the validity of the feedback. Is it only a lack of interest of the digital-born students? Are other socio-cultural dimensions of the academic culture involved? What can be done to exceed the critical level of 30% participation? These are just a few questions that we will try to answer in our paper, with a rather more descriptive approach than a theoretical or conceptual one.

**Keywords:** students' feedback, online, evaluation

## ***Introduction***

Nowadays, quality assurance in higher education is not just optional anymore, but certainly a very consistent field, assumed by each institution that intends to meet European criteria and standards. On the basis of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG2015) adopted by the ministers for Higher Education, across the EU a common framework for the implementation of quality assurance in higher education institutions was defined. The feedback generated by the students' evaluations of the teaching process is one of the most relevant components of quality assurance, due to its main function of adjustment and control.

West University of Timișoara (WUT) is one of the top ten Romanian universities with 13,800 students in the academic years 2017-2018. Starting from 2007, in WUT, the semesterly teacher evaluation by students with pen-and-paper anonymous questionnaires was implemented. Starting with 2016, the process was updated to an online dedicated platform, accessible via Internet from any device, based on the university student ID. Even though personal data is not recorded on the platform, the fear of losing anonymity can be a main factor of decreasing participation to half, from around 5,000 students respondents to the offline questionnaire to around 2,500 respondents to the online version. In this paper, we will try to make a comparison between the last two semesters when the teacher evaluation were carried out on paper (2015-2016) and the first two semester of online evaluation (2016-2017).

From a theoretical point of view, we understand quality as a complex multidimensional concept that involves the following meanings (Schindler et. al, 2015): purposeful, exceptional, transformative and accountable. Quality in higher education activities is first a purpose in itself, as all involved processes are structurally oriented to achieve a high level of performance for upgrading the professional status of the students with very accountable competences. This approach is directly correlated with the purposes of higher education established by the Council of Europe in 2007: active

citizenship, employability, personal development and research and innovation (2016-2017).<sup>1</sup> To reach these goals, first it is necessary to develop a culture of quality in each higher education institution and thus to transform that which is compulsory into a real need. In other words, it is very important to follow the qualitative standards and criteria not because of a formal request but for specific institutional and personal purposes.

Concerning the teacher evaluation by students, this is a very important part of the quality assurance in higher education system that has been included (detailed to a bigger or smaller degree) into the formal legislation all over Europe. There are various ways to implement this request, from evaluations carried out every semester to evaluations once per study cycle (once every three years for bachelor degrees or once every two years for master programmes). In many countries (the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia and others) the participation of the students in this process is compulsory and represents a condition for accessing an exam session. In the West University of Timișoara, in 2016 an internal procedure was adopted by the University Senate, that makes this evaluation a compulsory one for students in order to gain access to the exams. They have at least to login into the platform and to mark the option “I don’t want to fill in the evaluation for this semester”, but due to a very low rate of participation, this rule is not yet fully operational. We now have the experience of four semesters of online evaluations and we can already draw some conclusions about the upgrading of the process.

In this paper, we will focus on the last two semesters of offline evaluation (pen-and-paper) and the first two semesters of online evaluation, namely the academic years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. The offline evaluation usually was organised in the penultimate week of each semester with teachers and students from different departments. They were going to classes and applying the questionnaires but not in the presence of the teacher who taught that specific course or seminar. The questionnaire was filled-in anonymously, and it was filled only by the students who attended that class of the course/seminar, without the

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/PublicResponsibility/Explanatory%20Memorandum%20public%20responsibility\\_EN.asp](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/PublicResponsibility/Explanatory%20Memorandum%20public%20responsibility_EN.asp)

possibility of including other answers at a later date. Moreover, the students had to give 10 different marks for each course and seminar and thus, for an average programme with seven subjects, that meant 14 educational units to be evaluated and 140 marks to be given in a very short time (around 15 minutes). Of course, in all these questionnaires, there were very few variations among the marks for a course/seminar. The implementation of the online evaluation has come with a slightly different approach; first, the students have to choose whether they want to carry out or not the evaluation. If they choose to do it, then they are taken to a second window with a list of their subjects and teachers and they have to give a general mark. Also, they can write a message/comment for the teachers for each subject and, furthermore, they can go to an in-depth evaluation if they want to. Thus, the marks on the nine distinct criteria (similar with the content of the offline questionnaire) are optional and we assume (as a sociological presumption) that they are filled-in only when the students really want to give a feedback on a basis of relevant participation. The online platform can be accessed from anywhere via an Internet connection and it is optimised for any kind of devices and OS.

## ***Methodology***

For this primary descriptive analysis, we have taken the average marks for each teacher for the period 2015-2017 (four semesters) and several personal variables: faculty, academic position, age and gender. All the data will be presented in an aggregate manner, without any possibility of identifying a personal evolution. Our research question tries to identify whether there are patterns in the evaluation concerning the consistency and the level of marks on the basis of the type of study, gender and age of teachers. The main hypothesis is that there are significant differences in the level of marks between the offline and online evaluations. We will investigate also the differences between fields, and in the age and gender of the teachers for the two types of

evaluations. For this, we used a simple database that included the faculty affiliation, the gender, age and the four marks for each teacher.

## ***Results***

The descriptive statistics for the investigated case study are presented in the following table (data for the academic year 2016-2017):

	Teachers	%	Students	%	Students / Teachers	Field
Department for Training of Teaching Staff	23	3.5	-	-		SS & H <sup>2</sup>
Faculty of Art and Design	55	8.5	691	5.1	12.6	Arts
Faculty of Chemistry, Biology and Geography	48	7.4	730	5.4	15.2	Science
Faculty of Economics and Business Administration	134	20.6	3692	27.2	27.6	SS & H
Faculty of Law	40	6.2	1455	10.7	36.4	SS & H
Faculty of Letters, History and Theology	102	15.7	1511	11.1	14.8	SS & H
Faculty of Mathematic and Informatics	49	7.5	1299	9.6	26.5	Science
Faculty of Music and Theatre	38	5.8	333	2.5	8.8	Arts
Faculty of Physics	26	4	207	1.5	8.0	Science
Faculty of Political Science, Philosophy and Communication Science	38	5.8	1042	7.7	27.4	SS & H
Faculty of Sociology and Psychology	68	10.5	1838	13.6	27.0	SS & H
Faculty of Sport	29	4.5	761	5.6	26.2	SS & H

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<sup>2</sup> Social Sciences & Humanities.

Gender	%	Age (2016)	%	Academic title	%	Profile (teachers)	%
female	52.5	< 35	16.5	Assistant Lecturer	9.1	SS&H	66.8
male	47.5	36-45	42.0	Lecturer	41,5	Arts	14.3
		46-55	25.8	Associate Professor	34	Science	18.9
		56<	15.7	Professor	15.4		

As a descriptive comparison, the total numbers for each analysed semester were as follows:

	1st Sem 2015-2016 (offline) S1	2nd Sem 2015-2016 (offline) S2	1st Sem 2016-2017 (online) S3	2nd Sem 2016-2017 (online) S4
No. of evaluator students	4.850	4.650	3.124	1.860
No. of marks	611.874	585.928	30.284	18.687
No. of free messages	12	10	492	468

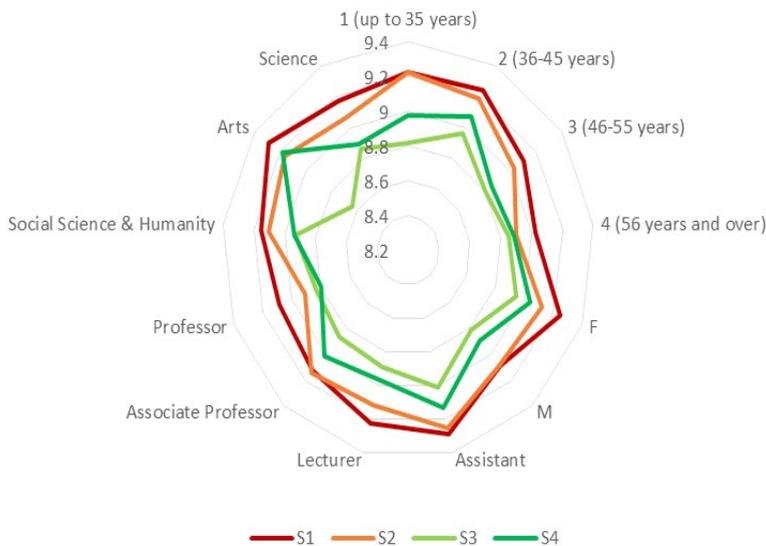
It can be observed a quite significant decrease in the number of evaluators once the questionnaire was upgraded to its online version, but, at the same time, the volume of free-text messages has massively increased. The main reason for this improvement was that the students have the possibility to send any type of message, not only concerning ethical aspects.

The comparative analysis among the average marks from the four semesters is presented into the following tables:

		S1	S2	S3	S4
Age	1 (up to 35 years)	9.2233	9.2245	8.8187	8.9747
	2 (36-45 years)	9.2436	9.1840	8.9601	9.0718
	3 (46-55 years)	9.1055	9.0300	8.7992	8.8508
	4 (56 years and over)	9.0290	8.9023	8.8498	8.8881
Gender	F	9.2479	9.1231	8.9439	9.0400
	M	9.0912	9.0844	8.8126	8.8942
Academic title	Assistant lecturer	9.2902	9.2505	9.0104	9.1352
	Lecturer	9.2223	9.1184	8.8922	8.9678
	Associate Professor	9.1247	9.1431	8.8655	9.0145
	Professor	9.0851	8.9108	8.8344	8.7963
Field	Social Science & Humanity	9.1514	9.1058	8.9276	8.9394
	Arts	9.2917	9.1614	8.6403	9.1862
	Science	9.1727	9.0643	8.8584	8.8874
Faculty	Department for Training of Teaching Staff	9.1920	8.9135	9.0735	9.2853
	Faculty of Art and Design	9.0633	9.1232	8.2497	9.1546
	Faculty of Chemistry, Biology and Geography	9.2753	9.2323	8.8532	8.9454
	Faculty of Law	9.4767	9.2442	9.1197	8.9779
	Faculty of Economics and Business Administration	9.1446	9.0348	8.7047	8.6547
	Faculty of Sport	9.4700	9.4377	9.3057	9.2645
	Faculty of Physics	9.6242	9.6005	9.2433	9.3538
	Faculty of Letters, History and Theology	9.0871	9.1106	9.3760	9.2634
	Faculty of Mathematic and Informatics	8.8338	8.6202	8.6433	8.5782
	Faculty of Music and Theatre	9.6480	9.2069	9.0066	9.2361
	Faculty of Sociology and Psychology	9.2345	9.2354	8.6855	8.8715
	Faculty of Political Science, Philosophy and Communication Science	8.6786	8.8450	8.4962	8.7094
Total		9.1720	9.1049	8.8793	8.9696

It can be directly observed the decrease in the average mark of offline evaluations (S1 and S2) compared to the online evaluation (S3 and S4). Moreover, a similar decrease can be observed according to the age variable; in this case, a significant statistical negative correlation was identified (the younger teachers received higher marks). This distribution is also supported by the negative significant correlation between the age and the marks for S1 (-0.89, sig<0.037), S2 (-0.158, sig<0.001) and S4 (-0.121, sig<0.006).

The same situation is valid for academic titles that are directly connected to age (the assistant lecturers have a better evaluation than the professors do). Last but not least the female teachers received better marks than male teachers. The difference between offline and online average marks (S1&S2 offline mean 8.6280, SD 2.22383 and S3&S4 online mean 8.0616, SD 2.72889) is statistical significant (t=4.617, Sig <.001). Thus, the moving to online evaluation has generated a decrease in the level of marks, as it is shown in the next graphic:



## ***Discussion***

Even though the multiple regression model was not relevant for explaining the teachers' socio-demographic impact on the level of the marks, there are several trends that were identified: the moving of the questionnaire online meant a downgrade for the level of marks, especially for young male teacher (younger than 35), especially the lecturers, from the field of arts. This situation can also be understood as an improvement of the validity of the evaluation due to a decrease in the level of social desirability generated by a pen-and-paper questionnaire.

Additionally, moving the evaluation online has decreased the volume of marks required from students, from nine marks for each course and seminar to at least one. Thus, the effort of the students was significantly reduced and, more importantly, the tendency to assign the same marks without discrimination among criteria and educational units was eliminated.

In conclusion, the online evaluation carried out under the protection of full anonymity has a higher relevance, especially if the number of students reaches a minimum level of 30% participation. Thus, their feedback can become more accurate for each course and seminar and can have a strong impact towards improving the quality of academic activities.

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