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Research

# Student and faculty perceptions of student evaluations of teaching in a Canadian pharmacy school

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## Abstract

**Objective:** This qualitative study investigated motivators and barriers to student and faculty engagement with an online student evaluation of teaching (SET) process.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 students, who self-identified as either “completers” or “non-completers” of SETs, and 12 faculty members. Interview transcripts were coded and analyzed thematically.

**Results:** Students were motivated to complete SETs when they perceived that results would be used and/or considered by instructors. Timing and number of surveys presented barriers to student completion. Faculty members were motivated to engage with SETs when the response rate was high and when senior administrators acknowledged survey results.

**Conclusions:** Implementing processes whereby students are assured that instructors have read and considered their feedback may improve student engagement. Faculty members’ engagement may be augmented when they better understand what an adequate response rate is for their given class size. Senior administrators must regularly acknowledge and discuss SETs with faculty members to confirm their importance in academic careers.

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**Keywords:** Student evaluations of teaching; Qualitative research; Students; Faculty members

## Introduction

Student evaluations of teaching<sup>1</sup> (SETs) are the most commonly used method of assessing teaching effectiveness

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, the term “student evaluations of teaching” includes both instructor and course evaluations.

in post-secondary education and are increasingly being conducted online and out-of-class.<sup>1</sup> While the use of alternative methods of evaluating teaching (e.g., peer reviews of teaching, self-evaluations, reviews of teaching portfolios, and student interviews, or focus groups) has markedly increased in the past two decades, SETs still remain the most popular tool employed by schools of pharmacy.<sup>1</sup> SETs have enjoyed a rich history of research in post-secondary contexts. Within pharmacy education, studies have examined the validity of SET results, student perceptions of SETs, and factors affecting SET response rates.<sup>2–5</sup> Though many stakeholders remain wary about the validity of SETs,<sup>6,7</sup> the use of these tools remains wide-spread for guiding teaching improvements, informing tenure, promotion and merit decisions, and providing evidence for institutional accountability.<sup>1,6–9</sup> Less

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frequently, they are used to guide assignment of teaching responsibilities and curriculum decisions.<sup>1,8</sup>

### *SET studies outside pharmacy*

To date, the majority of studies about SETs have examined the validity of the survey instruments.<sup>7</sup> However, a number of studies<sup>3,4,10–16</sup> have also looked at students' and faculty members' perceptions of the SET process.

Studies examining student perceptions indicate that students understand that SETs are important for improving teaching,<sup>16</sup> but are often pessimistic about professors taking their comments seriously.<sup>14</sup> That is, when instructors do not inform students about the feedback received and its impact on course design, students interpret this to mean that their instructors have not read and/or considered the SET results; accordingly, this has a major impact on students' motivation to participate in the evaluations.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, research indicates that students are unsure of how senior administrators and institutions use the collected data and are unaware of the impact of the data on personnel decisions.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the administration of SETs, students overwhelmingly prefer online to paper-based SET surveys for reasons of convenience, anonymity, and privacy, and the time available to think about responses.<sup>10</sup> However, some students do not fully trust the anonymity of online systems while others simply forget to complete the evaluations when left to do this on their own time.<sup>10</sup> In addition, students commonly complain that they are over-surveyed and, as a result, sometimes ignore requests to complete SETs.<sup>18</sup>

Studies examining faculty perceptions of the SET process have reported that instructors are often skeptical about the validity of SETs, voicing concerns about poor response rates and the representativeness of the survey results.<sup>11,12,19</sup> Faculty members also worry about the emphasis put on SETs by senior administrators making career advancement and merit decisions<sup>11,19</sup> and have noted the lack of institutional guidelines and supports for interpreting and using SET results.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, research has found that faculty members sometimes think students have a misguided or naïve view of effective teaching, which compromises the overall value of SETs.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, faculty members generally believe that SETs play an important and useful role in teaching development.<sup>11,12,15</sup>

### *Pharmacy-specific SET studies*

Few pharmacy-specific studies have been conducted on student and faculty perceptions of SETs in Canada and the United States.<sup>3,4</sup> One such study found that students believe the following: (1) they are the best judges of effective teaching; (2) all teachers, regardless of seniority, should be evaluated; (3) SETs are necessary for accountability and must be taken into account in tenure and promotion decisions; and (4) students complete the SETs whenever they are given the opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with the broader

literature, pharmacy students felt that their responses were not carefully read and/or acknowledged by instructors.<sup>3</sup>

In a separate study examining student and faculty perceptions of online versus traditional paper-based SETs, Anderson et al.<sup>4</sup> noted that the timing of survey administration and student forgetfulness limited their participation in SETs; faculty members, however, enjoyed the convenience of online SETs and found the quality of students' comments improved with online administration. Though the aforementioned studies provide some insight into students' and faculty members' engagement with SETs, there is relatively little research reported on this topic in the context of pharmacy education, particularly within Canadian institutions.

Given the importance of SETs, for reasons ranging from the enhancement of teaching to career progress decisions, we assert that, in spite of discord over the value of SETs, a stronger understanding of students' and faculty members' engagement<sup>2</sup> with these surveys will help schools of pharmacy better administer, implement, and interpret SETs. Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to develop a more in-depth understanding of student and faculty perceptions of SETs within a Canadian school of pharmacy. With respect to the student population, we examined the experiences of students who complete the surveys and those who do not, as we believed this would give us a more nuanced understanding of their perceptions. The second aim of this study was to add to the scant pharmacy education research literature reporting SET processes, policies, and outcomes with the hope of bringing attention to the importance and value of SETs in the education of contemporary pharmacists.

### *Study context*

This study took place in the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences at the University of British Columbia, a large research-intensive institution. The faculty admits 224 undergraduate students each year and had 43 faculty members at the time of the study. The curriculum includes a number of small credit-value lecture, tutorial, and laboratory courses, many of which are taught by teams of two or three faculty members. As a consequence, students are called upon to complete a large number of SET surveys each year. For example, PY3 students typically have 20 or more surveys to complete per term.

Aligned with trends aimed at improving teaching quality and the student experience in post-secondary contexts, the University of British Columbia has developed and implemented university-wide policies requiring teaching

<sup>2</sup>For students, the term engagement is taken to mean the extent to which they complete the surveys and write qualitative comments. For faculty members, the term engagement encompasses activities such as reading and responding to survey results, sharing the results with students, and discussing results with colleagues.

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