



## Reasons for responding in student evaluation of teaching

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### ABSTRACT

Nowadays, a systematic student evaluation of teaching (SET) is common at many universities. However, not all students evaluate all relevant courses and, as a consequence, feedback from a substantial number of students is missing. The current study examines response behavior with respect to demographic, motivational, and situational variables. Based on an online survey, data of  $N = 640$  participants were analyzed. Using regression analysis based on multiple imputation, no significant effects for the reported participation in SET were found for demographic variables or opportunity costs. However, experienced salience of SET, aspects of social exchange, survey mode, and the general willingness to participate in surveys were all identified as significant predictors of SET participation. The results of our study can be helpful for evaluation managers to reduce non-response, especially stressing the importance of feedback and communication in SET.

### 1. Introduction

For many years student evaluation of teaching (SET) are a common part of higher education (e.g., Clayson, 2008; Spooren, Brocx, & Mortelman, 2013). Issues in research that relate to SET dealt with the question how they should be conducted, which problems may appear using commonly applied measurements, which bias variables do exist and how valid SET are in general (e.g., Clayson, 2008; Marsh, 1984; Morrison, 2013; Narayanan, Sawaya, & Johnson, 2014; Spooren et al., 2013). Such scientific work addressing SET facilitated the improvement of the evaluation processes in universities, emphasizing the importance of high quality evaluation instruments and the feedback of results (e.g., Nowakowski & Hannover, 2015; Penny & Coe, 2004; Schmidt & Loßnitzer, 2010). Nowadays, measures do exist even for special requirements, for example the evaluation of written exams (see Froncek, Hirschfeld, & Thielsch, 2014). Yet, the participation rate in SET is a general problem. Fluctuating rates between only 30% and 70% are often reported (Morrison, 2013; Spooren et al., 2013). In addition, various authors found lower response rates for online-based methods of data collection as compared to paper-based methods (e.g., Bacon, Johnson, & Stewart, 2016; Ling, Philipps, & Weihrich, 2012; Morrison, 2011; Stowell, Addison, & Smith, 2012). Consequently, a substantial part of the targeted students may not give an opinion leading to a risk of systematical sampling errors. This issue is commonly referred to as non-response-bias (Adams & Umbach, 2011; Bacon et al., 2016; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). The aim of the present work is to examine possible reasons and influence factors for response behavior in SET.

#### 1.1. Response behavior in SETs

The fact that not all participants are able or willing to participate in a survey is a typical effect in empirical social research (Bosnjak, 2001; Groves, 2006). Generally, when the focus is on non-response, persons behavior can be roughly separated in two categories (see Bosnjak, 2001; Sax et al., 2003): a) non-response to single questions of a questionnaire (called “item non-response”) and b) persons that do not take part in the survey at all (called “unit non-response” or “total non-response”). The present study deals with students’ response behavior with respect to their participation in all SETs for which their participation was actually requested. In this context, it is important to understand possible reasons for non-response and how its detrimental consequences, such as bias, unfolds (Groves, 2006; Sax et al., 2003). Yet, high rates of participation are not automatically the key to a successful avoidance of bias effects and under certain circumstances low rates of response can still lead to reliable data (see Groves, 2006; Sax et al., 2003).

However, recent research in the field of SET fuels the idea of possible systematical bias-effects: Some authors report a higher rate of participation of women and students with good grades (Estelami, 2015; Reisenwitz, 2016). Bacon et al. (2016) assume on the basis of an analysis of around 8800 courses that if response rate is low students who were more committed and interested in the class were giving their opinions. This causes more accented data patterns: in SET with lower participation lecturers with positive evaluation receive even better scores and lecturers with bad evaluations are rated worse. When the

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response rate increases also less committed students participate in the survey and both groups of lecturers will be rated rather in the direction of the scale mid-point. However, the commitment of the students was not directly measured in the study of Bacon and colleagues (2016). Hence, it is questionable in which way further aspects next to demographical characteristics play a role in SET participation. This will be discussed in the following section on a theoretical level and connected to the question of the current work.

### 1.2. Predictors of response behavior in SET

Several subjective-motivational and situational factors may influence response behavior in SET. In order to extend the work of Adams (2010), five of them are in the focus of the current study: (1) perception of SET as social exchange, (2) SET salience, (3) opportunity costs, (4) survey mode, and (5) general survey participation.

The social exchange theory (Emerson, 1976) posits that social interactions rely on a certain reciprocity or a cost-benefit relation (Dillman, 1978). In addition, costs and benefits are taken into account before social interactions. Thus, if a person expects to receive a benefit investment in costs will be more likely. Groves, Cialdini, and Couper (1992) assume an influence of the social exchange theory in response behavior. In SET, the necessary personal effort and dislike to evaluate courses can be considered as the costs. However, the students may experience a benefit from having learned something during the term in their courses – and feel obliged to honor this by SET participation.

Salience in the context of teaching evaluation is the quality of an upcoming or running SET to stand out and to draw attention. This could be done by making SET-related information available and vivid in the minds of the students. Salience is an important characteristic of SET that can motivate students to participate (Adams, 2010). Implementations of SET may vary in how they prompt students to participate (see Berk, 2012) and, moreover, there are differences regarding the specific characteristics of an evaluation that motivate students (Groves & Peytcheva, 2008). This is why we investigate several factors of salience which possibly influence participation: the evaluation behavior of the fellow students and also awareness of the consequences of the SET. Furthermore, salience can be supported by lecturers constantly reminding the students of the evaluation and, thus, expressing appraisal towards SET. Finally, general importance of SET at the respective department was considered.

Furthermore, students experience opportunity costs – those are reflected by little time resources or in attractive alternative activities (Adams, 2010). For some students, the present education system in western countries comes with a high level of perceived stress caused (amongst others) by challenges in this new stage of life, the mere number of exams or a subjective experienced pressure to perform (e.g., Bechler & Thielsch, 2012; Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009; Rayle & Chung, 2007). We assume that responding decreases when time resources are little and experienced opportunity costs are high. In the present study, we measured experienced time pressure beyond regular studies as indicators for opportunity costs. These were side jobs of the questioned students, or the distance between their home and their university which implicates travel time (Couper, Kapteyn, Schonlau, & Winter, 2007).

A prominent issue in SET research is the question to what extent an online-based survey can be compared to a paper-based SET and which of these modes yields better results (for a review see Morrison, 2013). Some studies found evidence for comparable results and return rates (e.g., Perrett, 2013; Venette, Sellnow, & McIntyre, 2010), other studies observed reduced return rates for online-based SET (e.g., Fike, Doyle, & Conelly, 2010; Ling et al., 2012; Stowell et al., 2012). Consequently, we will consider survey mode as a possible predictor of response behavior in the present study.

Finally, survey fatigue appears to be relevant in this context due to the high number of surveys among students, which is also caused by a

raising amount of web-based studies (Adams, 2010; Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004). These surveys are not only related to teaching at universities. For example, students receive invitations for studies of market, social, and opinion research, or commercial providers, asking for ratings concerning (online) shopping, journeys or hotel visits. The constant request to take part in such surveys can lead to an excessive exposure and, as a consequence, students refrain from participation (Porter et al., 2004). In SET, according to Adams (2010), this effect is more likely when the number of the current courses which are to be evaluated is high or the students are in higher semesters and have already taken part in a lot of evaluations in the past.

### 1.3. Aim of the present study

The present study examines which of these five subjective-motivational and situational factors described above – (1) social exchange, (2) salience of SET, (3) students' opportunity costs (4) survey mode, and (5) students' general survey fatigue – next to demographical variables such as age and gender have an influence on the participation in SET (see Table 1). We expected that several factors influence the participation in SET and tested this assumption by means of hierarchical multiple regression.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample

A total of 867 persons started the survey,  $N = 218$  (25.14%) dropped out without providing information for any of the relevant study variables;  $N = 9$  (1.04%) denied permission to use the data. Thus, the final sample – including missing values (see treatment below) – consisted of 640 students, among them 439 females (68.59%) and 197 males (30.78%), 4 participants (0.63%) gave no information on gender. The participating persons were aged between 16 and 52 ( $M = 24.19$ ,  $SD = 4.42$ ). Altogether, German-speaking students from 118 different universities participated in the study. One-third (29.38%) studied at the University of Münster. Two further universities which were often named are the University of Koblenz-Landau (4.53%) and the University of Leipzig (3.44%). The most often named major was psychology (32.50%), followed by medicine (7.66%) and teaching (6.41%).

Importantly, the sample included the full range of evaluation behavior (see Table 2). There were participants who – according to their self-report – never took part in an SET (4.38% of the sample) and also those who reported that they never had missed an SET (24.84%). On average participants reported they had participated in 68.34% of their SETs.

### 2.2. Material

The items of the questionnaire were conceptually based on each of the mentioned theoretical aspects. Additionally, fifteen German universities – those with the highest scores in terms of the criteria 'involvement of students in evaluation of teaching' (for example, general distribution of SET results, informing students with about SET results) rated by the CHE university ranking 2012/2013 ([www.che-ranking.de](http://www.che-ranking.de)) – and all departments of the University of Münster were contacted via e-mail in order to obtain information regarding their currently used methods of evaluation. The provided information captured a variety of different methods which served as a basis for item inclusion. This procedure justified applicability of the questionnaire for a wide range of participants. The questionnaire consisted of items regarding the reasons for response behavior, concerning the behavior of evaluation, and attitudes towards evaluation (for specific items see Table 1).

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