



Guidelines for evaluation activities involving UniSA students and staff

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Introduction

Evaluation activities at UniSA can take the form of surveys, focus groups, interviews or web-based forms.

UniSA is committed to ensuring that the burden that these activities have on students and staff is not onerous.

This document provides the principles, procedures and approval processes for evaluation activities involving UniSA students or staff. It is presented as a guide to assist students or staff undertaking evaluations with peers or colleagues.

The guidelines do not replace the University's formal ethics approval processes outlined in detail at <http://www.unisa.edu.au/res/ethics/human.asp>.

Cross references

A-46 Confidentiality of students' personal information

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/policies/academic/A46.asp>

C-5.0 Public statements and representation by university staff and students

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/policies/corporate/C05.asp>

C-22 Acceptable Use of Information Technology (IT) Facilities

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/policies/corporate/C22.asp>

Guidelines on Electronic Communications with Students

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/codes/miscell/ecomstudents.asp>

Guidelines for staff on use IT facilities including email and the Internet

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/codes/miscell/it-staff.asp>

C34.1 Access to UniSA students, staff and data

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/codes/academic/default.asp>

1. Principles

The following provides a guideline for evaluation activities involving students or staff at UniSA. For the purpose of these guidelines 'evaluation activities' could include methods such as surveys or focus groups and are often related to teaching and learning or the student experience. They include corporate evaluation instruments used to evaluate courses, programs, teachers or University products or services.

1.1 General principles

1. Evaluation which is conducted solely for the purpose of internal quality assurance, and which will not be published or presented externally, does not require formal ethics approval
2. Evaluation data gathered internally may be included in external publications and presentations *without* formal ethics approval provided:
 - the data was gathered on-line or in writing
 - the responses were provided voluntarily
 - the anonymity of the respondents is maintained
 - the respondents were advised of the possibility that the data could be used for such purposes see suggested statement below):

Suggested statement:

Data collected through this survey will be used to inform improvements at UniSA and could also be used in external publications and presentations. Individual responses will remain confidential and no individuals will be identified.

3. Data gathered verbally (e.g. through focus groups, interviews) in which the anonymity of the respondents is compromised requires formal ethics approval in order to be included in external publications and presentations
4. The use of evaluation data relating to more than one staff member requires written permission from all relevant staff members in order to be included in external publications and/or presentations
5. All other research requires formal ethics approval from UniSA's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement. Please note that ethics approval cannot be granted retrospectively.
6. The use of corporate evaluation data (e.g. CEI and SET) for external publication and/or presentation requires written permission from the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic, who may consult with other relevant senior managers as appropriate.

The University strives to preserve the privacy of its staff and students and maintain confidentiality of data and other information held by the University. The University aims to protect its staff and students from unsolicited emails and minimise staff and students being over-researched. The University therefore discourages the recruitment of its staff and students and the collection of data and other information for research purposes unless the nature of the research is beneficial to the University and/or staff and students. The University also discourages the use of email as the method of recruitment of its staff and students for research purposes¹. The staff and student portals are the preferred format for announcements.

¹ Acceptable Use of Information Technology (IT) Facilities <http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/policies/corporate/C22.asp>, Guidelines on Electronic Communications with Students <http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/codes/miscell/ecomstudents.asp>, Guidelines for staff on use IT facilities including email and the Internet <http://www.unisa.edu.au/policies/codes/miscell/it-staff.asp>

Note that formal ethics approval for projects involving access to UniSA staff, students or data means only that there are no ethical objections to that project. It does not mean that the researcher has approval to access UniSA staff, students or data.

Approval to access UniSA staff, students or evaluation data will take the following into consideration:

- The reputational risk of the University
- Privacy and/or confidentiality concerns, particularly in relation to personal information of students/staff
- The burden that the evaluation activity might have on students or staff
- The amount of effort required to extract or produce the data versus the return on this investment of time
- Maintaining openness and the need to engage with the University's communities.

2 Process for conducting an evaluation activity at UniSA

Regular evaluation is an essential component of the University's quality assurance and informs planning for quality improvement. 'Evaluation' in this context is defined as a process whereby stakeholders (students and staff) are asked for feedback. Information from the feedback is then analysed and reported to decision-makers and underpins a continuous improvement cycle.

The following guidelines have been designed **to assist staff undertaking large-scale or potentially sensitive evaluation activities** involving students or staff. To clarify this further the following would be considered to be examples of large-scale/sensitive evaluation activities:

- a survey of all students based at one campus or Division
- an evaluation activity involving a particular cohort such as international students
- a focus group with students from a particular equity group (e.g. students with a disability)
- a survey of all academic staff.

These guidelines have been developed to inform and assist evaluators in their activities by:

1. providing a University-wide systematic approach to evaluation activities involving students or staff
2. ensuring processes used to gather feedback are congruent with University policies (particularly ethics) and ambitions
3. promoting strategies to review existing evaluation schedules to minimise the impact upon UniSA students and staff
4. maximising the utility of the data gathered through evaluation activities.

2.1 Getting started – What is the problem, purpose or rationale for the evaluation?

Identify which areas will be evaluated and the reasons for choosing these areas. A few questions to consider are:

- What do we need to know?
- Why do we need to know this?
- Has anyone evaluated this before? What is the existing knowledge on the topic? BI Hub contains links to evaluation data and information <https://teamsites.unisa.edu.au/res/par/bireportinghub/default.aspx>
- What is the best way to collect this information?
- Who will conduct the evaluation and analyse results?
- What are the likely outcomes and how will the information collected help us to improve?
- How will the identified improvements be implemented?
- How will the results and intended improvements be communicated to participants? Refer Student Experience Committee Terms of Reference and the We're Listening website <http://www.unisa.edu.au/feedback/> for example.

2.2 Ethical issues and consultation

The involvement of human subjects requires consideration of a range of ethical issues at each stage in the evaluation process, planning and design, conducting the evaluation and reporting on results. Details about these considerations are described in the University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) guidelines <http://www.unisa.edu.au/res/ethics/human.asp#guidelines>.

The following ethical considerations need to be addressed in the planning and design of evaluation activities:

- confidentiality of responses

- identifying who is responsible for the evaluation activity (ownership) and storage of data
- explaining the purpose (objectives), nature, process for recording information during the evaluation (methodology)
- who will have access to information collected
- how the information will be used and the likely impact on clients
- reporting arrangements to evaluation participants (feedback).

Information on these factors must be provided to respondents before they participate in the evaluation activity. Potential respondents need to be provided with written information which includes the following:

- name of University and Division/School/Institute/Unit/Centre conducting the evaluation
- name and details of the contact person
- title of evaluation
- purpose of evaluation described using simple terms
- criteria used to select potential participants
- invitation to people to participate
- voluntary nature of participation
- what is expected of participants
- assurance regarding confidentiality of responses
- any benefits to be offered to participants
- information on how outcomes will be reported
- recording of data e.g. use of video or audio tape
- information on how records will be stored and who will have access to these records.

If interviews are to be held and recorded, it is also necessary to inform participants that they can read through the transcribed interview before information is used and the tape is destroyed.

HREC approval must be sought prior to the commencement of the evaluation where the results are to be used as part of a research degree or where there is an intention to publish or present the results at a public forum. In all other cases the ethical considerations outlined in Appendix 1 should be addressed.

2.3 Identify evaluation scheduling for the forthcoming year

During annual planning discussions, identify evaluation activities for the forthcoming year. Evaluation activities should relate to objectives and priorities for the University (Horizon 2020 is available from <http://www.unisa.edu.au/horizon2020/default.asp>). Corporate Planning documents can be accessed from BI Hub <https://teamsites.unisa.edu.au/res/par/bireportinghub/corporateplanningresources/Forms/AllItems.aspx>), Divisions, Centre for Regional Engagement, Schools, Institutes or Unit.

The schedule of evaluation activities is available via Evaluations Hub <https://teamsites.unisa.edu.au/res/par/bireportinghub/Topics/Evaluation%20Hub.aspx>. Consulting with other areas that may have conducted similar evaluation activities may also be useful and may help to reduce duplication of effort or provide a valuable insight into those methods that may have been successful in the past.

In the absence of any similar evaluations, the Division, Centre for Regional Engagement, School, Institute or Unit may like to seek advice from the resources listed in Appendix 1 of these guidelines.

2.4 Methodology

Decide the most appropriate method that will yield results that can assist improvement. There are a number of approaches including: focus groups, in depth interviews, telephone surveys, online surveys, postal surveys, email, suggestion boxes, web parts on the student portal etc. You may want to refer to the contacts listed in Appendix 1.

2.5 Consideration of resources - e.g. how will data be compiled

As part of discussions about the evaluation activity, consider the financial and staffing implications. This may be particularly significant if sending out a questionnaire to a large sample. Calculating the costs may also be useful for discussions following the evaluation when the Division, Centre for Regional Engagement, School, Institute or Unit reflects on the cost/benefit of the evaluation activity.

In 2012 the University will launch a new online evaluation tool. This tool will provide greater functionality than previously available.

Data collected from evaluations can often be compiled in Excel or Word and analysed using tools such as SPSS or NVivo <http://www.unisa.edu.au/ists/ithelpdesk/faqs/applications/>.

2.6 Approvals

Before an evaluation activity can proceed it must receive the approval of the relevant senior manager. The evaluator needs to address all aspects of the planning process as described in these guidelines and provide this information to the relevant senior manager.

Permission to access UniSA staff or students for the purpose of evaluation should be sought according to the following levels:

- for access to staff or students in one school, approval should be sought from the Head of School
- for access to staff or students in more than one school within the same Division, approval should be sought from the Pro Vice Chancellor of that Division
- for access to students within different Divisions, or if the University itself is the object of research, approval should be sought from the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research
- for access to staff within different Divisions or the University as a whole approval should be sought from the Vice Chancellor who may refer the matter to the Director: Human Resources.

2.7 Implementation

Ensure that ethical requirements are adhered to prior to implementation and that relevant details about the evaluation are explained to participants². The University owns the data collected during evaluation activities. All relevant University policies concerning the use and publication of data apply.

2.8 Assessing the outcomes

Information collected needs to be compiled and recorded accurately. The purpose of evaluating activities is not simply to collect information or data about our activities. It is an important way of assessing our performance using information collected from students or staff and identifying improvements.

2.9 Feedback to stakeholders and/or participants

The process for providing feedback to stakeholders and/or participants is part of planning an evaluation activity. It is important that those people who took the time to participate in the evaluation are informed of outcomes and any actions to be taken as a result of the evaluation activity. It is also useful as part of this feedback to discuss potential improvement strategies with stakeholders and participants. This may assist in refining the suggested improvements before they are implemented. It may also assist future evaluation activities as people are more likely to want to be part of an evaluation activity if they believe their involvement will lead to positive action. Actions in response to issues identified by evaluation instruments used at the corporate level are monitored by the Student Experience Committee. The outcomes of actions are regularly reviewed and reported by the Committee to Heads of School and published on the We're Listening <http://www.unisa.edu.au/feedback/> website.

² Section 1.2 includes a statement that is to appear on all survey instruments used to collect internal evaluation data which could be used in publication or presentation outside of the University.

2.10 Reporting on outcomes

As part of reporting on outcomes of an evaluation activity, consider other groups that may be able to utilise findings to identify areas of improvement within their own work areas or provide additional feedback about the issue that has been evaluated. Committees and working groups are also useful forums for disseminating information. Examples of reports can be obtained from the Evaluations folders in BI Hub <https://teamsites.unisa.edu.au/res/par/bireportinghub/default.aspx>.

2.11 Implementing improvements

Following the identification of improvement strategies and, if appropriate, further discussion with those people who participated in the evaluation activity the Division, Centre for Regional Engagement, School, Institute or Unit can then implement changes to work processes or services, or put in place new services in response to 'client' needs. At a later stage the activities are evaluated and the planning cycle begins again. This cycle of continuous improvement is fundamental to the University's quality improvement system.

Appendix 1 – Resource and reference guide

References

The following references are available from the University of South Australia library.

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Sproull, Natalie (1995) Handbook of research methods: a guide for practitioners and students in the social sciences, 2nd edition, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, N.J.

Watson, Sarah (2003), Closing the feedback loop: ensuring effective action from student feedback, Tertiary and Education Management, Vol. 9, No 2, pp. 145- 157.

Electronic Resources

Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/publications/r39>
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/>

University Resources

Learning and Teaching Unit and ISTS are responsible for overseeing the University's CEI and SET surveys website: <http://www.unisa.edu.au/ltu> email: unisanethelp@unisa.edu.au

Planning and Institutional Performance <http://www.unisa.edu.au/pip/> can provide advice on the development of appropriate evaluation instruments and protocols within the context of the program experience or improving services.

NHMRC guidelines, UniSA HREC requirements and procedures, storage of data, and University policies concerning the use and publication of data etc. <http://www.unisa.edu.au/res/default.asp>