University of South Australia

Guidelines for evaluation activities involving UniSA students and staff

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Table of Contents

1 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.

1.1 Cross references

- A-34.2 Access to UniSA staff, students and data
- A-35A Quality assurance and improvement: programs, courses and teaching arrangements
- A-46 Confidentiality of students' personal information
- C-5.0 Public statements and representation by university staff and students
- C-22 Acceptable Use of Information Technology (IT) Facilities
- RES -2.3 Human Research Ethics
- Code of conduct for students
- Guidelines on Electronic Communications with Students
- Guidelines for staff on use IT facilities including email and the Internet
- Australian Privacy Laws and Principles

2 Principles

The following provides a guideline for evaluation activities involving students or staff at UniSA[1]. 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, student experience, research projects, or services and facilities. They include corporate evaluation instruments used to evaluate courses, programs, teachers or university products or services. Although this guideline document is focused on the aforementioned topics, the policy and procedure for evaluation is applicable for research student methodology.

2.1 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 Evaluation which is conducted solely for the purpose of internal quality assurance, and which will not be published or presented externally, does not require formal ethics approval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 online 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):

[1] See appendix 1 for evaluation flowchart

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 (HREC) prior to commencement. The University's research policies are consistent with these guidelines and state and federal legislation. Under national guidelines the UniSA HREC is obliged to gather certain information before ethics approval can be granted. Please note that ethics approval cannot be granted retrospectively.
6. The use of corporate evaluation data (e.g. myCourseExperience) for external publication and/or presentation requires written permission from the Provost and Chief Academic Officer, 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 minimise its staff and students from being over-researched and protect them from unsolicited emails. In view of that, the University 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.

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. This permission should be sought from the appropriate Senior Staff Member, see *3.6 Approvals*.**

Approval to access UniSA staff, students or evaluation data is outlined in policy A-34.2 and takes 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.

3 Process for conducting an evaluation activity at UniSA

Recurrent evaluation is an essential component of the University's quality assurance and informs planning for quality improvement. Annual evaluations are monitored through the Evaluations calendar on BI Hub. '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, the following would be considered to be examples of large-scale/sensitive evaluation activities:

- a survey of all students based at one campus
- an evaluation activity involving a particular cohort, such as international students or alumni
- 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:

- providing a University-wide systematic approach to evaluation activities involving students and/or staff
- ensuring processes used to gather feedback are consistent with University policies and ambitions, particularly the ethics approval process
- promoting strategies to review existing evaluation schedules to minimise the impact upon UniSA students and staff
- maximising the utility of the data gathered through evaluation activities.

3.1 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
- What is the best way to collect this information? This is not always limited to surveys – often interviews or analysis of existing data could provide the desired results. See Appendix 1 – Resource and Reference Guide
- Should an incentive be offered?
- Is approval from the Research Ethics Committee and/or the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research and Enterprise required to approach the participant group?
- Who will conduct the evaluation and analyse results? Numerous surveys are conducted in the university, throughout the year
- Are there limitations on access to preferred datasets or participant groups? Is timing an issue for optimal data collection? i.e. during study periods
- What are the likely outcomes and how will the information collected help us to improve?
- Are the results likely to produce a statistical relevance?
- How will the identified improvements be implemented?

- How will the evaluation be promoted and the subsequent results and intended improvements be communicated to participants? Refer to the Student Feedback and Complaints website for example.

3.2 Ethical issues and consultation

The involvement of human subjects requires consideration of a range of ethical issues at each stage in the evaluation process, including planning and design, conducting the evaluation and reporting on results. All potential evaluation activities should be assessed against the University's research ethics approval guidelines and unless the evaluation is for reasons outlined in *2.1. General Principles* – **research involving human participants must not proceed without ethics approval**.

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 (including location and timeline requirements)
- 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 area 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
- possible benefits or risks to participants (if applicable)
- 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.

3.3 Identify evaluation scheduling for the forthcoming year

During annual planning discussions, include identification of evaluation activities for the forthcoming year. These evaluation activities should relate to objectives and priorities for the University (Enterprise25). Additionally, Corporate Planning documents can be accessed from the BI Hub.

The schedule of evaluation activities is available via Evaluations Hub. Consultation with other areas that may have conducted similar evaluation activities is recommended 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, advice can be sought from the resources listed in Appendix 1 of these guidelines.

3.4 Methodology

Decide the most appropriate method that will yield results that can assist institutional 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. Consideration of a combination of evaluation activities, for example a focus group, followed by a larger survey can also assist to obtain appropriate results. A more informative and exhaustive list of research methods available through the UniSA libraries can be found in Appendix 1.

3.5 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 depending upon the method chosen and the survey population.

Data collected from evaluations can often be compiled in Excel or Word and analysed using tools such as SPSS or NVivo. SPSS and NVivo are available for download for university staff members on both their work and personal devices.

3.6 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 Academic Unit, approval should be sought from the Executive Dean, or delegate
- for access to staff or students within different Academic Units, or if the University itself is the object of research, approval should be sought from the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research and Enterprise
- approval to access information held in University databases should be sought from the Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research and Enterprise, who may consult with other senior managers as appropriate

3.7 Implementation

Ensure that ethical requirements are adhered to prior to implementation and that relevant details about the evaluation are explained to participants[2]. The University owns the data collected during evaluation activities. All relevant University policies concerning the use and publication of data apply.

3.8 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. The information collected from staff and students provides a valuable resource to assess our performance, identify improvements, and inform strategic planning.

3.9 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 and included in strategic planning processes. The outcomes of actions are communicated as appropriate, for example as a new initiative included on the student experience webpage.

3.10 Reporting on outcomes

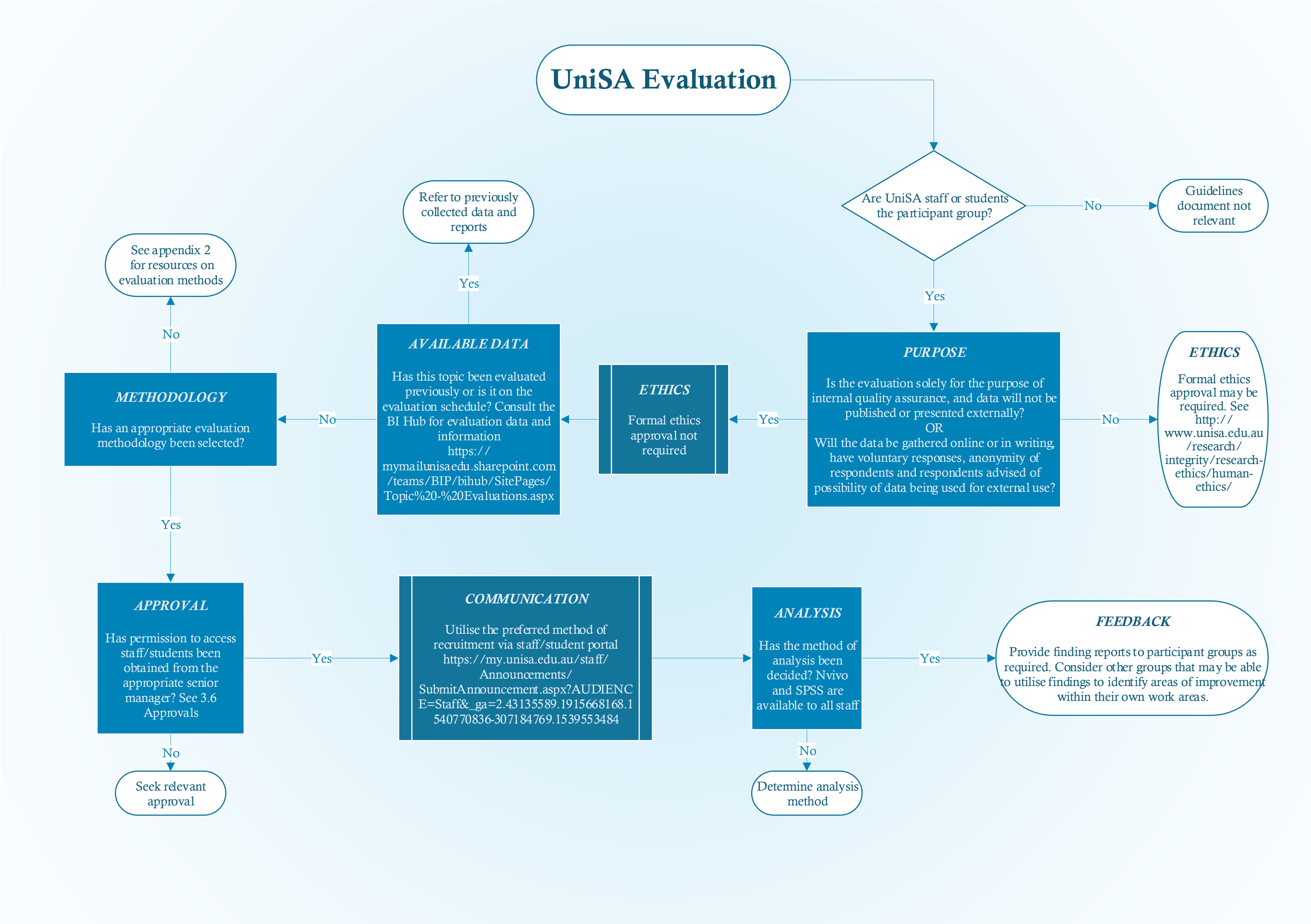
As part of reporting on outcomes of an evaluation activity, consider other groups that may be able to utilise findings to identify areas of improvement within their own work areas or provide additional feedback about the issue that has been evaluated. Committees and working groups are also useful forums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

3.11 Implementing improvements

Following the identification of improvement strategies via analysis and reporting of results, and, if appropriate, further discussion with those people who participated in the evaluation activity, the applicable area 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.

[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.

Appendix 1 – UniSA evaluations flowchart



Appendix 2 – Resource and reference guide

Library resources

Allen, P. & Bennett, K. (2008). *SPSS for the health & behavioural sciences*, South Melbourne, Victoria: Cengage Learning.

Babbie, E. (2016). *The practice of social research* (14th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burns, R. (2000). *Introduction to research methods* (4th ed.). Frenchs Forest: Longman Cheshire.

Guthrie, G. (2010). *Basic research methods : An entry to social science research*. Delhi ; London: SAGE.

Hammond, M. & Wellington, J. (2012). *Research methods: the key concepts*. Florence: Taylor and Francis.

Hughes, J. & Goodwin, J. (2012). *SAGE internet research methods*. London: SAGE.

Martin, W. & Bridgmon, K. (2012). *Quantitative and statistical research methods: from hypothesis to results* (1st ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

May, T. (2001). *Social research: issues, methods and process* (4th ed.). Blacklick: McGraw-Hill Companies.

Mukherjee, S., Sinha, B. & Chattopadhyay, A. (2018). *Statistical methods in social science research*. Singapore: Springer.

Neuman, W. (2004). *Basics of social research: qualitative and quantitative approaches*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Porter, S. & Whitcomb, M. (2005). Non-response in student surveys: the role of demographics, engagement and personality. *Research in higher education*, 46(2), March 2005, 127-152.

Rossi, P., Freeman, H. & Lipsey, M. (2004). *Evaluation: a systematic approach* (7th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

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

Walliman, S. & Walliman, S. (2011). *Research methods: the basics*. London: Routledge.

Walter, M. (2013). *Social research methods* (3rd ed.). South Melbourne: Victoria Oxford University Press.

Watson, S. (2003). Closing the feedback loop: ensuring effective action from student feedback. *Tertiary and Education Management*, 9 (2), 145- 157.

Electronic resources

- Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research: https://nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/australian-code-responsible-conduct-research-2007
- Web Center for Social Research Methods: https://socialresearchmethods.net/

University resources

- Teaching and Innovation Unit and ISTS are responsible for overseeing the University's myCourseExperience website: https://i.unisa.edu.au/staff/teaching-innovation-unit/tiu/ email: TIU@unisa.edu.au
- Development and management of research projects – includes information about engaging with partners, identifying funding opportunities, formal closures of projects, etc. http://i.unisa.edu.au/staff/research/