The following guidelines provide advice on the interpretation of one type of student feedback data, the Unit of Study Evaluation (USE) at The University of Sydney. Most of these suggestions also apply to feedback collected using other surveys.

The Institute for Teaching and Learning (ITL) advises against using only USE results in any decision about improving or judging the quality of teaching. Evidence of reflection on and improvement in teaching is just as important as relevant student feedback data showing evidence of quality, and evidence should be derived from a range of sources: students, peers, self-reflection, and the current literature on effective teaching and learning in higher education.

GUIDELINE 1 - INTERPRETING NUMERICAL DATA
Mean scores can be misleading and it is more useful to focus on the percentage agreement (agree + strongly agree) and disagreement (disagree + strongly disagree) for each USE item. Agreement of greater than 70% on an item indicates a strong positive learning experience for students, while disagreement of 30% or more on an item indicates an area for further investigation and possible improvement. Compare units on percentage agreement and disagreement for each item, but be wary of contextual factors that may influence the results. Only compare units in the same discipline area with similar class sizes at the same year or program level.

GUIDELINE 2 - MAKING USE OF Student Comments
Students’ written comments can provide insight to their learning experience, and clarify quantitative results. It is helpful to consider comments under categories or themes which explain the positive results, and those areas that may require improvement. Use and identify sources of comments that are representative of numerical data. Be wary of investing too much significance in any single comment. Anonymity can occasionally tempt some students to write unhelpful comments. Recognise that pressures unrelated to students’ learning experience may also underlie unhelpful comments.

GUIDELINE 3 - RELIABILITY OF QUANTITATIVE DATA
Results are best collected over an extended period (e.g., several semesters or at least two years). Results with response rates lower than 60% should be treated with caution, relative to a particular Faculty context. For small class sizes greater response rates are required; for very small classes focus more on collecting qualitative data and/or collect numerical data over several semesters.

GUIDELINE 4 - CONTEXTUALISING THE RESULTS
Results should be interpreted within a meaningful context, including (and not limited to) the aims and objectives for the unit; role(s) and contribution(s) to teaching in the unit (if applicable); the size and year of the class; any major local disruptions during teaching the unit; and the changes made to the unit in response to previous student and/or peer feedback. USE data should always be triangulated with other data sources.

GUIDELINE 5 - DISCUSSING FEEDBACK
It is helpful to interpret results by sharing them in conversation with a trusted colleague, discipline-specific educational consultant or a colleague from the ITL. Where units have more than one teacher, results should be shared with the whole teaching team (including Sessional staff) and discussed and interpreted together. It is helpful to agree to this process before collecting the data. Key areas for improvement should be targeted and action plans could be devised for addressing these issues.

GUIDELINE 6 - CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP
After their exams, students enrolled in units that were surveyed with the USE automatically receive an email with access to the electronic summary report for the surveys they participated in. Unit of study coordinators also have the option of providing students with a short summary of their interpretation of the results, and information on any actions to be taken in response to the feedback. See http://sydney.edu.au/itl/use/feedback_response.htm

For advice on specific contexts, see over
TEACHING INSIGHTS - 6
MAKING USE OF UNIT OF STUDY EVALUATION DATA

FOR SOME SPECIFIC PURPOSES ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS APPLY

TEACHING IMPROVEMENT

• Use the ITL USE summary template (or your Faculty’s version) to reflect on teaching and record evidence from other sources, and plan any improvements. This template is also helpful for documenting your recommendations to others. See GUIDELINE 1 & GUIDELINE 2. http://sydney.edu.au/itl/use/reports.htm
• Both peer observation, including observing others in their teaching, and mentoring provide useful sources of ideas for teaching improvement. See GUIDELINE 5.

TEACHING AWARDS AND PROMOTION

• It is helpful to include positive changes in percentage agreement from one semester or year to another, because this shows evidence of improvement in your unit. It is also helpful to show how excellent results have been maintained. See GUIDELINE 1.
• Quote from de-identified student comments (or other unsolicited feedback) to support your case. Use key quotes sparingly. See GUIDELINE 2.
• Show what you have done with your feedback: explain how you have reflected on your USE results, and used them to improve your teaching and enhance your unit. See GUIDELINE 6.
• Effective judgements about the quality of individual units of study must be based on and draw on a wider range of evidence consistent with USE results, including (and not limited to) self-reflection, other sources of student feedback (e.g., focus groups), peer feedback, and student learning outcomes. See GUIDELINE 3 & GUIDELINE 4.
• Use the USE results and other sources of evidence to ‘tell the story’ of your achievements and show how they are distinctive. See pages 9 and 10 in the University of Sydney promotions guidelines http://www.usyd.edu.au/provoat/docs/2010_Policy/Guidelines_for_Applicants_2010.pdf for more ideas about what other kinds of evidence you could include in your application. See the ITL website for suggestions about how to structure your awards application and other sources of evidence about quality teaching.

TEACHING MANAGEMENT AND PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

• Faculties use USE data to monitor overall quality of students’ experience using agreed University minimum standards. Benchmarking can also lead to program improvement through collaborative review of course and unit documentation by program teams. See GUIDELINE 5.
• Overall, USE results should be considered in relation to alignment of program goals and learning outcomes as well as in relation to other program data such as Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) results. See GUIDELINE 4.
• Effective judgements about the quality of individual units of study must be based on and draw on a wider range of evidence consistent with USE results, including (and not limited to) self reflection, other sources of student feedback (e.g., focus groups), peer feedback, and student learning outcomes. See GUIDELINE 3 & GUIDELINE 4.
• Recognise that change and enhancement in the quality of a program takes time!

For general guidelines, see over

“Teaching Insights” should be read in conjunction with Academic Board Policies: http://sydney.edu.au/policies/

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