



# Students' Perception of University's Student Feedback Survey (SFS)

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## ABSTRACT

### CONTEXT

Most universities use the Student Feedback Survey (SFS) to gauge students' perceptions of their learning. Stroebe (2020) states that the original intention behind SFS was for formative purposes. However, the ease of use and administration have resulted in the widespread adoption of SFS for evaluating teaching quality. The subjective nature of students assessing teaching quality is sometimes influenced by the teacher's ability to keep students engaged and entertained rather than by measuring the teaching quality. Therefore, the student's perception of SFS requires examination to determine if SFS is fit to evaluate teaching quality.

### PURPOSE OR GOAL

One of the key focus areas for universities is to provide students with the best possible education and student experience. To evaluate the teaching quality and aid in this pursuit, SFS is widely adopted (Stroebe, 2020). This paper provides details of work conducted to examine the students' perceptions of SFS and whether they believe that their feedback impacts the quality of their learning experience. This study is part of an extensive research that examines teaching quality evaluation. The SFS serves an essential role in evaluating teaching quality by understanding the perceptions of students, one of the key stakeholders and thus could provide recommendations for improvement. This function is contextualised by Australian regulatory requirements, such as the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF), even though the SFS itself is not explicitly defined by TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency).

### APPROACH OR METHODOLOGY/METHODS

This paper presents findings from the "survey phase", where a specifically formulated questionnaire was distributed to Faculty of Engineering and IT (FEIT) students at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). The survey was designed to elicit students' perceptions of SFS, including its purpose, benefits, and shortcomings. The "survey" phase is part of a larger sequential explanatory mixed-methods research project that will later include focus groups and interviews to provide further qualitative insight.

### ACTUAL OR ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

The quantitative and qualitative analyses of the specifically formulated survey provide a baseline view of how students regard SFS and their understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. The study also highlights areas of alignment or divergence in the students' perceptions of SFS and the intended purpose.

### CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS/SUMMARY

The evidence from this research shows that students have mixed perceptions of SFS. Students view SFS as a valuable tool for feedback but as a burden with an uncertain impact on teaching quality. These findings necessitate a critical examination of SFS in its current form to either enhance SFS to evaluate teaching quality or recommend alternative evaluation methods to supplement SFS, especially when using the results for summative decisions.

### KEYWORDS

Student Feedback Survey, SFS, Teaching Quality

## Introduction

Flodén (2017) asserted that it is standard practice for university academics worldwide to receive student feedback regarding their teaching and learning experiences. Most universities use a form of SFS to gauge students' perceptions of their learning and teaching quality. Stroebe (2020) states that the original intention of SFS was for formative purposes. However, the ease of use and administration have resulted in the widespread adoption of SFS for both summative and formative purposes. SFS is used to evaluate teaching quality, and sometimes even for academics' performance management, remuneration, or promotion decisions (Boring, 2017; Centoni & Maruotti, 2021).

However, a significant concern is that non-teaching factors such as the academic's gender, looks, ability to keep the student cohorts engaged/ entertained, grade inflation, can unduly influence the students' evaluation of teaching quality as opposed to evaluating the core quality of teaching (Bi, 2020; Feistauer & Richter, 2017). Therefore, the student's perception of SFS as currently used require examination to determine if SFS is truly fit to evaluate teaching quality.

Universities worldwide and in Australia have incorporated some form of SFS to obtain direct input from students about their educational experiences, teaching quality and overall quality of courses to achieve teaching excellence (Bi, 2020). Thus, SFS offers a unique perspective on teaching quality from those (students) directly affected by it. Although SFS is easy to administer, it has been controversial (Bi, 2020) due to concerns regarding its reliability, validity, and potential for unconscious bias. This paper provides details of work conducted to examine students' perceptions of SFS and whether they believe that their feedback impacts the teaching quality. This study is the first part of an extensive research project that examines the evolution of SFS and the perceptions of various stakeholders (students, academics, and SFS administrators), aiming to provide recommendations on how SFS can be improved to evaluate teaching quality.

This research uses a mixed-methods methodology, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to provide numerical and qualitative insights into students' perceptions of SFS. To obtain a baseline view of students' perception of SFS, including its purpose, benefits, and shortcomings, researchers designed a specific survey for Students from the Faculty of Engineering and IT (FEIT) at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). This data's quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal how students view SFS and their understanding of its strengths and weaknesses. The study also highlights areas of alignment or divergence in the students' perceptions of SFS and its intended purpose.

## History of Student Feedback Survey (SFS)

SFS, also known as Student Evaluation of Teaching (SETs), has a long history in the tertiary education sector. Stroebe (2020) reports that an SFS was developed simultaneously by Herman H. Remmers at Purdue University and psychologist Edwin R. Guthrie at the University of Washington in the 1920s. The authors designed SFS to capture students' perspectives so that academics can adapt their instructions to match the students' needs to improve learning outcomes. However, the authors cautioned that the survey is not an indicator of teaching quality evaluation.

### The Purpose of SFS

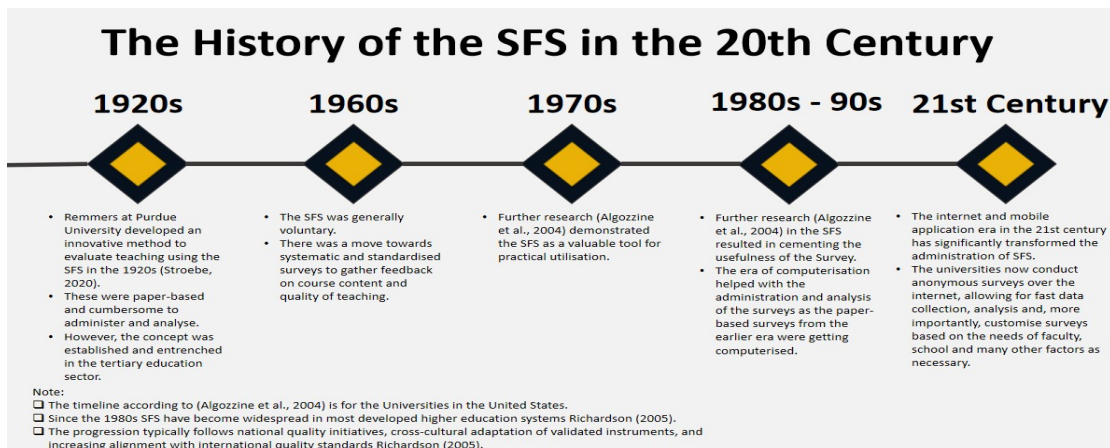
Building on its origins, Hornstein and Law (2017) also state that the initial intention of SFS was for 'formative evaluations' and not 'summative evaluations'. Formative evaluation supports teaching development, while summative evaluation aids hiring and promotion decisions. Algozzine et al. (2004) have chronologically documented the history of the SFS in the 20th Century. Figure 1 below shows the timeline.

### Evolving Roles and Conflicting Objectives

Over time, the role of SFS has become more complex and, at times, conflicting. According to Mendzheritskaya et al. (2025), SFS is a common practice for improving teaching but serves conflicting objectives, such as:

- **Individual Teaching Improvement:** SFS can offer valuable information to individual academics about how students engage with their courses, serving as a basis for teaching enhancements.

- **Institutional Quality Management:** SFS often serves as a management tool to monitor teaching quality within educational institutions.



**Figure 1: The History of SFS in the 20th Century - Adapted from (Algozzine et al., 2004)**

### **Adoption and Expansion of SFS**

The dual purpose has fuelled ongoing debates. With the widespread adoption of SFS, debates around SFS expanded. Concerns arose around the very purpose of SFS and the interpretation of the survey results. As SFS evolved and became widely used by several universities worldwide, Miklich (1969) and, more recently, Mendzheritskaya et al. (2025) questioned whether students possessed the skills or subject matter expertise to evaluate teaching.

### **Balancing Formative and Summative Use**

In parallel, Husbands (1996) discussed the challenges of balancing formative (designed to inform and enhance the learning and teaching development for both students and academics) and summative use of SFS (such as hiring, promotions and other career decisions of academics) . Despite the ongoing discussions, universities widely accept SFS as an integral part of tertiary education noting that some countries mandate its use by national government agencies.

### **Ongoing Value of SFS**

Despite criticisms, Linse (2017) asserts that SFS inherently provides good value in evaluating teaching quality and challenges that complete realisation of the value is when interpreting the SFS results correctly. For example, consider consistent free-format feedback with a few vitriolic outliers. Linse (2017) suggests ignoring the outliers and focusing on the remaining comments. Universities continuously monitor and improve to get feedback from the students. The history and development of SFS are reminders of its potential and importance. The ongoing discussions are about the use of SFS and how SFS can become more relevant in pursuing teaching excellence in the tertiary education sector.

Given the complex background, understanding the historical development and ongoing debates around SFS provides a logical need to explore how the key stakeholders, namely the students, academics and administrators, understand the role of SFS in evaluating teaching quality. This paper focuses on understanding how students perceive SFS to evaluate teaching quality.

### **Role of SFS in Evaluating Teaching Quality**

SFS are primarily employed to improve teaching and reflect on instructional effectiveness by providing valuable insights to individual academics regarding how students engage with their courses, providing a foundational starting point for improving teaching quality (Mendzheritskaya et al., 2025).

### **The Reality of SFS in Practice**

While SFS is prominent, its direct impact on evaluating and improving teaching quality remains controversial. Stroebe (2020) highlights that SFS was initially designed for formative purposes—to provide insights for academics to adapt their instruction. However, the ease of administration has led to their widespread use for summative evaluation, including performance management and promotion decisions (Boring, 2017; Centoni & Maruotti, 2021).

## **Persistent Concerns about SFS**

Despite the widespread use of SFS and the potential to evaluate teaching quality to improve, persistent concerns regarding their validity and susceptibility to biases continue to exist. Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of teaching quality makes it challenging for one tool to capture all the essential facets. These limitations and the generally low participation rates in SFS underscore the need for additional methods to evaluate teaching quality.

## **Enhancing SFS Impact**

Despite the challenges, some researchers highlight the potential benefits of SFS when used effectively. Aleamoni (1978) explains that the SFS can be beneficial when university academics know and understand the feedback and then can use the information obtained to tailor the course content and thus improve the teaching quality. However, this benefit is significantly enhanced with external support. For instance, Piccinin et al. (1999) found concrete evidence that improvement in teaching quality scores occurs when specialised and supportive consulting complements the results of SFS.

Supportive consulting serves as a key factor in maximising the usefulness of SFS. Marsh and Roche (1993) noticed a massive increase in academic ratings when the academics made additional efforts to offer consultation specific to the students' needs. Stevens and Aleamoni (1985) recommend tailored consultation to increase student satisfaction and, thus, the SFS results. Cohen (1980) also found that, when augmented by supportive consultation, the SFS leads to measurable gains in teaching quality.

Beyond external support, academics can also drive internal improvements. Furthermore, Kember and Wong (2000) recommend that academics adopt innovative teaching methods and develop specific methods to evaluate teaching qualities. Martens and Prosser (1998) categorically state that high-quality teaching directly results in high-quality learning. Therefore, the authors suggest designing SFS to measure aspects of teaching directly related to learning.

## **Students' Perception of Feedback**

Finefter-Rosenbluh et al. (2021) concluded in their research that students are generally sceptical about the outcome of the SFS. The authors found that students do not have great faith that the teachers would take their feedback and implement any of the suggestions or take the criticisms constructively to devise a viable solution to address such concerns. The authors also noted that such concerns are prevalent in schools with an established culture of feedback in general, and this could only mean that scepticism around the SFS will be more prevalent in those schools where such feedback from students' culture is yet to be embedded. Leckey and Neill (2001) argue that if students do not observe noticeable action resulting from their feedback, their trust in the process erodes. This misplaced trust can significantly reduce participation rates, rendering the SFS less relevant and undermining its intended purpose.

## **Ongoing Impact and Challenges**

Given these perceptions, students remain the key stakeholders in the feedback process as the teaching quality directly impacts their learning experiences. Therefore, most students appreciate opportunities to provide feedback and value methods that allow anonymity and candour (Hee & Jing, 2018; Jing, 2024). However, there is pervasive scepticism about the actual impact of their feedback (Charli et al., 2022). Finefter-Rosenbluh et al. (2021) categorically state that without visible, meaningful change, students are not motivated to participate. Consequently, understanding student views on feedback as a process is crucial for optimising its usefulness. Despite the efforts and widespread adoption of feedback to improve teaching quality, its usefulness is hindered by persistent challenges. Issues such as student scepticism, response biases, and students' ability to provide constructive feedback due to their limited understanding of pedagogical principles and their engagement with the course undermine the reliability and impact of the information gathered from SFS.(ref?)

## **Research Methodology**

This paper presents findings from the survey phase of a broader sequential explanatory design, a mixed-methods (Charli et al., 2022) research project that includes focus groups and interviews in the subsequent phases. The survey employed in this phase contains quantitative questions

designed to capture measurable student perceptions alongside qualitative, open-ended questions that provide rich contextual insights.

## **Findings & Discussions: Students' Perceptions of SFS**

Although the overall project aims to integrate multiple data sources, this paper focuses exclusively on the survey data to offer an initial, nuanced understanding of student perceptions regarding SFS and its use in evaluating teaching quality. Including quantitative and qualitative questions within the survey enables a more comprehensive analysis of student attitudes. The results presented here lay the groundwork for further in-depth exploration through subsequent qualitative phases in the overall study.

### **Survey Participant Description**

The survey was sent to all students enrolled in FEIT courses during 2024 Spring. The target student population represented a diverse mix of single and combined degree programs, including Engineering, Information Technology, Science, Business, Medical Science, Creative Intelligence and Innovation, International Studies, and Law. The study prioritised qualitative depth and mixed-question insights over broad demographic representativeness, consistent with the research design emphasising thematic exploration rather than population generalisability.

### **Survey Participation Rates**

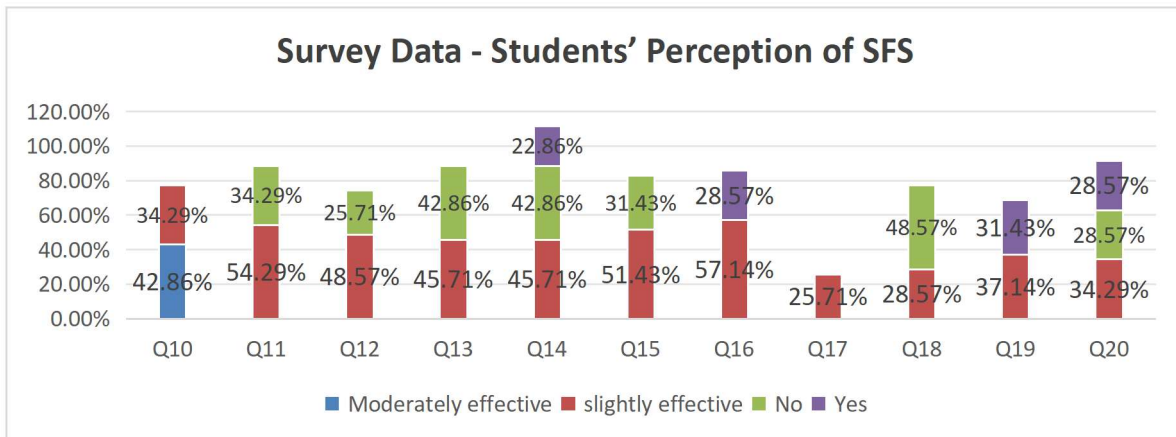
The survey was distributed to 1,000 students in the FEIT, with 62 responses received and one invalid response discarded. While this response rate is low relative to the total student population, it emphasises collecting detailed and nuanced perceptions through both quantitative and qualitative questions rather than prioritising broad participation. The mixed-question format used in the survey allows an initial assessment of student attitudes toward the SFS, setting the stage for deeper examination in forthcoming qualitative phases of the research.

### **Quantitative Findings: Students' Perspectives of SFS to Evaluate Teaching Quality**

To understand students' perceptions of SFS as a tool for assessing teaching quality, students from FEIT were asked a series of questions based on their last SFS participation. Some of the questions were quantitative, which aimed to gauge whether SFS adequately captured key dimensions of teaching quality as identified in the literature (Jing, 2024; Voss et al., 2011). The responses, originally multiple-choice, were normalised into four aggregated categories: (1) Don't know, (2) No, (3) Sometimes, and (4) Yes. The findings for each specific aspect of teaching quality were:

- 1) Teacher's ability to explain complex concepts (Q10): Most students found SFS "Moderately effective" (42.86%) or "Slightly effective" (34.29%) in capturing this, suggesting moderate confidence but also ambiguity in how well this aspect is captured.
- 2) Teacher's use of a variety of teaching methods (Q11): SFS was considered to reflect this "Yes, occasionally" by 54.29% of students, while 34.29% said "No" indicating perceived inconsistency.
- 3) Teacher's thorough understanding of the subject matter (Q12): 48.57% found SFS "Somewhat" effective, and 25.71% said "No" indicating moderate recognition but notable doubt about SFS's ability to capture this teaching quality dimension.
- 4) Relevance and up-to-date nature of course materials (Q13): SFS was "Somewhat" effective for 45.71%, but 42.86% felt it was "No" reflecting a divided perception on whether the survey adequately assesses the currency and applicability of course content.
- 5) Classroom environment's conduciveness to learning (Q14): This was captured "Somewhat" for 45.71% and "Yes" for 22.86%, while 25.71% said "No" suggesting a generally mixed but broadly positive view of SFS's coverage of the learning atmosphere.
- 6) Teacher's effectiveness in managing time and maintaining discipline (Q15): 51.43% said "Somewhat," and 31.43% said "No" implying moderate confidence but also substantial uncertainty in SFS's reflection of classroom management skills.
- 7) Teacher's ability to create opportunities for class discussions and active participation (Q16): A majority (57.14%) found this captured "Somewhat," with 28.57% saying "Yes" indicating that students generally perceive SFS as moderately effective in capturing interactive teaching methods.

- 8) Fairness and relevance of the assessments (Q17): A notable 42.86% of students felt SFS did not capture this, while 25.71% said "Somewhat" and 28.57% said "Yes" highlighting concerns about the survey's usefulness in evaluating assessment quality.
- 9) Students' motivation to attend class and complete assignments (Q18): 48.57% felt SFS did not measure this, and 28.57% said "Sometimes" revealing skepticism regarding the survey's ability to capture motivational factors influencing learning engagement.
- 10) Teacher's effectiveness in providing valuable feedback on assessments (Q19): 37.14% said "Sometimes," and 31.43% said "Yes" reflecting a split perception of SFS's success in documenting feedback quality.
- 11) Teacher's commitment to ongoing learning and improvement (Q20): Responses were split, with "Sometimes" at 34.29%, and "Yes" and "No" both at 28.57% indicating uncertainty and mixed views on whether SFS adequately reflects this dimension of teaching quality.



**Figure 2: Survey Data - Students' Perception of SFS**

These patterns suggest students find SFS to be partially effective in capturing some aspects of teaching quality but less so in others, echoing wider debates on the limitations of student evaluations in representing the complexity of teaching (Boring, 2017; Centoni & Maruotti, 2021).

### Qualitative Insights: Common Themes from Student Feedback

Qualitative analysis of the survey results by examining the verbose answers to open-ended questions revealed the following recurring themes, providing deeper context to the quantitative findings.

- **Quality Vs. Quantity:** Many students believed that voluntary participation in SFS should continue as the responses tend to be from students with experience and strong opinions. Although fewer students may participate, the feedback is often more insightful than that generated from mandatory surveys. This supports the assertion by (Aleamoni, 1978) that richer feedback often emerges from motivated volunteer respondents, though representativeness may be compromised.
- **Student Burden:** A significant concern raised by students was that SFS adds to their workload, particularly since surveys are often circulated at the end of semesters, a peak time for assignments and exams. This perception of SFS as an additional burden can negatively affect both the participation rates and the quality of feedback (Finefter-Rosenbluh et al. 2021).
- **Impact on Teaching and Learning:** While there's an acknowledgment that mandatory SFS could provide more data, students expressed uncertainty about whether increased data volume would genuinely lead to significant improvements in teaching and learning. This aligns with the broader scepticism about feedback's impact (Leckey & Neill, 2001).
- **Data Quality:** Both mandatory and voluntary SFS were perceived to have potential drawbacks regarding data quality. Mandatory SFS might lead to lower-quality, less thoughtful feedback, while voluntary SFS might not be representative of the entire student population, thus raising concerns about the representativeness of the feedback.

## Motivation for Participation in SFS

Based on the survey responses, it was clear that Students' motivation for participating in SFS varied:

- A significant proportion of students (44.62%) were primarily motivated to provide constructive feedback, driven by an overarching goal to improve teaching and learning. This motivation aligns with SFS's formative purpose as a reflective educational enhancement tool.
- Incentives, such as gift vouchers or contributions to a chosen charity, also motivated participation, suggesting that extrinsic motivators can effectively increase survey engagement. However, reliance on such motivators risk influencing the authenticity of responses.
- Some students (20.00%) reported feeling an obligation to participate, indicating potential compromise in authenticity and thoughtfulness of the responses provided.
- A small percentage (9.23%) indicated a motivation to provide negative or "hurtful" feedback, highlighting a minority who may use the survey as a channel for venting dissatisfaction, which could influence the overall quality and tone of the data collected.

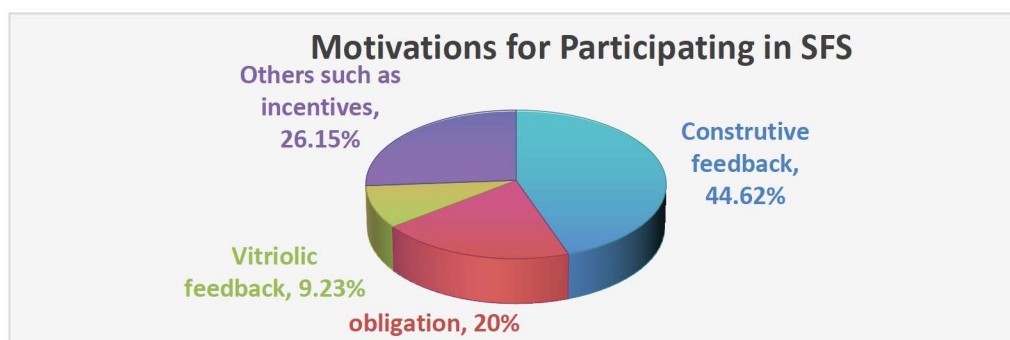


Figure 3: Survey Data - Students' Motivation for Participating in SFS

These varied motivations affect data interpretation since obligatory or negatively motivated participation may risk bias in survey results (Boring, 2017).

## Belief in SFS and Suggestions for Improvement

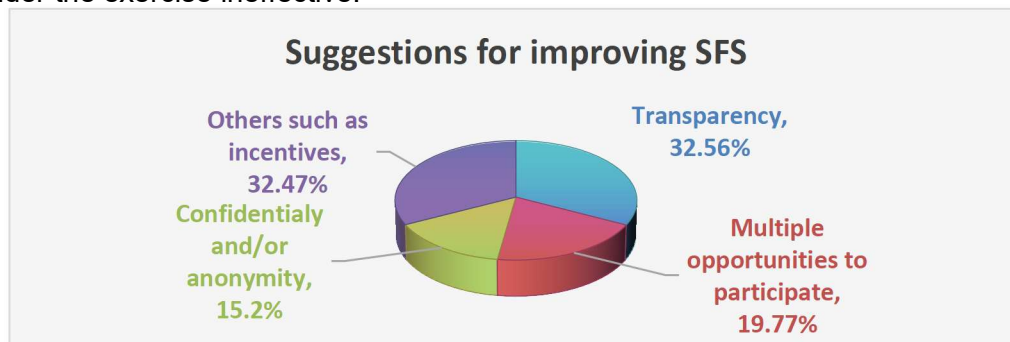
Survey results revealed that the students lacked faith in the system. Regarding their belief that SFS contributed to positive changes, the findings were mixed, aligning with the scepticism noted in the literature.

- 43.14% of students found SFS "Somewhat valuable, made some difference", suggesting a moderate level of confidence in the usefulness of SFS as a feedback tool when it leads to observable change.
- However, a combined 41.17% expressed a lack of tangible impact, categorising their experience as "Somewhat valuable, no tangible difference" (17.65%), highlighting a significant trust gap and points to frustrations with SFS.
- Qualitative data further revealed a sense of futility among some students who described their feelings as "screaming into the void". This vivid metaphor indicates a lack of visible action, leading to a demand for transparent communication about how responses to SFS result in notable action including improvements in teaching quality.

As Leckey and Neill (2001) explain, these perceptions highlight the critical importance of transparent communication regarding how student feedback is used. The universities must prioritise closing the feedback loop by visibly acting on responses and clearly communicating these actions to students. As part of the survey responses, the students offered several key suggestions for improving SFS to solicit constructive feedback. Some of the key findings are:

- **Publishing survey results and actions taken:** This was the most popular suggestion (32.56%), indicating a strong student desire for transparency and visible implementation of changes.
- **Providing multiple opportunities and ample time to fill feedback:** 19.77% of students suggested this, specifically highlighting that SFS should remain open until after assignment due dates due to workload concerns at the end of semesters.

- **Assuring and re-emphasising confidentiality and/or anonymity:** 18.60% of students emphasised this aspect, which is crucial for fostering candid feedback.
- **Explaining the purpose of SFS and how feedback leads to action:** 15.12% suggested that more transparent communication on the utility and impact of SFS is essential to reinforce the survey's formative intent.
- **Incentives:** Students noted that incentives, such as charity donations, were positive motivators for participation, although this raises questions about potential influences on response authenticity.
- **Mandatory participation:** While mandatory SFS will increase participation rates, concerns around diminishing utility of the feedback due to "dummy responses" could render the exercise ineffective.



**Figure 4: Survey Data - Suggestions for Improving SFS**

The survey findings reveal ambivalence and limited trust in SFS as an instrument for evaluating teaching quality, confirming the critiques in the literature about the limitations of SFS in capturing most dimensions of teaching quality (Boring, 2017; Centoni & Maruotti, 2021). This study deepens theoretical perspectives by demonstrating that student feedback must be seen as an interactive, socially and institutionally embedded process and not just as a number on a survey.

## Conclusion

There is a complex interplay of perceptions surrounding SFS. Students are motivated to improve teaching and learning, but are apprehensive about using SFS to evaluate teaching quality. This study's key contribution highlights a theoretical gap between SFS's intended purpose and the students' lack of trust and perception of it as a burden, as the obligation to complete surveys during the peak academic periods is often burdensome. These findings reveal a critical need for universities to shift their approach from merely collecting data to actively fostering a feedback culture built on transparency and trust. Ultimately, SFS in isolation is an incomplete tool and must be complemented by other formative evaluation methods to assess teaching quality comprehensively.

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