SCCE Proposal to Establish a Committee for Reviewing the CEQ and the Policies and Procedures for the Administration and Publication of CEQ Data

Background to Memorial University’s Course Evaluation Questionnaire

Since 2001 Memorial University’s student evaluation of courses has been done by means of a Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ). CEQs were implemented after the Student Union requested better information to guide students in their course selection and from faculty’s need for feed-back to be used in the design and delivery of courses. Subsequently their incorporation into faculty teaching dossiers for promotion and tenure review has increased their institutional importance. A Senate steering committee comprising faculty, staff and students devised the CEQ process.

The Centre for Institutional Analysis and Planning (CIAP) assumed the tasks connected with administering the CEQ. It continues in this role by preparing, distributing and publishing the summary reports of evaluations. The Senate Committee on Course Evaluation (SCCE) was formed on the steering committee’s recommendation. It is an eleven-person committee constituted to reflect student, faculty, administration and CIAP interest in course evaluation and its progress at Memorial. As a Standing Committee of Senate the SCCE acts as the Senate’s monitoring instrument for the CEQ, and it reports annually to Senate. Secretarial assistance is provided to the Committee by the CIAP, and there is a CIAP member of the SCCE.

The CEQ is the mandated course evaluation instrument at Memorial’s two largest campuses. At the Marine Institute (MI) diploma and certificate courses are evaluated differently and undergraduate courses are delivered online under circumstances in which the current CEQ cannot be used. Hence, CEQs are not administered at the MI. At both St. John’s and Corner Brook campuses, approximately eighty per cent of classroom-based undergraduate courses are evaluated with a CEQ. Some graduate courses use CEQs; however, the proportion is smaller primarily due to the class size at this level. There are several criteria for exemption from the CEQ process. Where fewer than ten students are enrolled courses are CEQ exempt because of a concern to preserve the confidentiality of respondents. Team-taught courses constitute another category of exemption since the instrument is not appropriate for courses with multiple instructors. One of the more important consequences is that courses taught in Medicine have not been CEQ evaluated. Courses offered online by Distance Education and Learning Technology (DELT) and its predecessors have also never been evaluated by the standard CEQ because the on-campus presence of students is required for its administration. In recent semesters, however, an on-line version has been pilot-tested by DELT. Further to this, one unit (Nursing) devised and continues to administer a customized CEQ in collaboration with CIAP. It is important to note that where classroom CEQs are administered they receive comparatively good student response rates. Historically approximately two-thirds of the students enrolled have completed CEQs.

The standard CEQ form is broadly unchanged from the format devised by the original steering committee (a copy of the form is attached to this memorandum). It has two substantive parts. In
the first part there are ten standard questions (sometimes referred to as the core questions) together with space for up to ten optional instructor-generated questions. Students answer these questions on a numeric or response-option scale. Their responses to the ten mandated questions are the basis of the statistical CEQ returns (summary reports). In the second part of the form students are asked to do two things: to identify the best aspects of the course and to suggest course improvements. Instructors may request further feedback in this section as well. The standard format of the first part of the CEQ permits longitudinal (through time) and across-the-board comparisons of results. But whether standardization has limited feedback on non-standard course-delivery methods is now a pressing question.

CEQs are administered by units under CIAP supervision in the last two weeks of instruction each full semester and in the last week of the Summer and Intersession terms. In approximately the eighth week of the following semester the results are published for student viewing and are distributed to instructors. Data processing and reporting practices were all designed by CIAP in consultation with the SCCE. Reporting is done for three different user-groups. For students the summary reports by course are posted on the Memorial self-service website, though none is available where the instructor has taken up the provision afforded under privacy legislation of opting-out (this is the case for approximately twenty percent of courses), nor are reports available for non-mandated courses in which CEQs might be voluntarily administered. Instructors receive the summary report for their courses in hard copy, plus the original CEQ forms that include student comments. The Administrative Head receives a compendium of the unit’s instructors’ CEQ summary reports, but not a copy of the individual student responses. CIAP provides some aggregate statistics on the summary report for comparative purposes.

Data processing for CEQ has evolved over the years. At the start it was a manual process that was labour intensive and the main report generation was done through the statistical package SPSS. Subsequently the entire process was streamlined and now the scanned data are uploaded to Banner for report generation and on-line reporting. Every year, CIAP has evaluated procedures and made changes in consultation with the SCCE. However, perfection has proven to be a moving target. Not only have expectations of the CEQ process changed relatively frequently, but data processing and reporting are still very time-consuming. Unforeseen in the early days of the CEQ are, for example, the rather elaborate arrangements for faculty to opt out of online publication of CEQ results. Moreover, the work occurs seasonally and at times of the year when clerical support is not easily secured on a temporary basis. CIAP tries to make summary reports available to students and faculty with timeliness because this is important to the selection and re-design of courses, yet the CEQ process is ever more complex.

**The SCCE’s Recommendation Concerning a CEQ Review**

The steering committee evidently foresaw the time that the fruits of its work might be systematically evaluated. Under SCCE terms of reference the Committee is able to recommend that Senate consider a recommendation concerning a review. The current committee first raised this matter in spring 2009 with the result that the SCCE Chair, Vice-Chair and the Director of CIAP attended a meeting of the Senate Executive Committee. The outcome of that meeting (held in September 2009) was a request to the SCCE to “…provide advice on possible revision of the
Policies and Procedures and the Core Evaluation Questionnaire [and] … the reasons for such a review, the scope of the review as well as the composition and terms of reference and other related matters for a Committee to conduct the review.” This memorandum constitutes the SCCE’s response.

The ability to account for the form and process of course evaluation mandated for use at Memorial is a salient part of justifying our claims to provide a high quality undergraduate and graduate education. And yet over the ten years of its existence the CEQ has not been subject to a review of any systematic kind to determine whether new educational philosophies and practices could be better reflected in the scope and nature of the course evaluation. The SCCE believes it is time for the University to undertake to review the questionnaire and the administrative and reporting process. It requests Senators to consider the case from the following summary arguments.

Faculty and student expectations of course evaluation have evolved beyond what could have been anticipated in any educational institution ten years ago. The content, nature and organization of instruction has changed in far-reaching ways over the same period. The proven efficacy of the CEQ is vital to the confidence with which students make choices about programs of study and instructors modify their pedagogies. Furthermore, with teaching competency assuming a larger part in professors’ careers, faculty require robust and comprehensive information for inclusion in teaching dossiers. Other web-based teaching evaluations are available and, despite the fact that they are compiled on a narrower basis than the institution’s mandated evaluation, they compete with the CEQ for student attention.

In light of these comments, the following is a list of pressing matters identified for review:

- the adequacy of the current standard CEQ questions and rating scale in measuring student perception of effective teaching;
- the adequacy of the ten standard CEQ questions for current methods of course delivery;
- the feasibility of electronic administration of the CEQ (in both on-campus and distance courses);
- the extent of student, faculty and administration awareness of the CEQ results.

**Composition of the Review Committee and Arrangements for the Review**

The SCCE has detailed knowledge of the CEQ and it is composed of individuals with a strong commitment to high quality teaching at Memorial; nevertheless, if Senate decides in favour of a review it should do so in the knowledge that the SCCE recommends a committee be established specifically for the purpose. An effective review is best achieved by a committee (hereafter the Review Committee) conducting its enquiries autonomously of the SCCE. Thus, none of the current members of the SCCE are to be nominated to the Review Committee. It needs members recruited for an expertise of the kind the SCCE does not routinely access and its composition should answer Senate and University concerns for appropriate and balanced representation. There will be an element of consultation involved in its work – we anticipate some of this will happen in open meetings at the three campuses – and thus the University community (faculty, students and administrators) should be able to place full confidence in this committee.
In advance of making our recommendations for the composition of the Review Committee and arrangements for the review, the Chair of the SCCE sought and received advice from the Office of the VP Academic, individual Senate Officers and Members, CIAP and from faculty who participated in the original deliberations that formalized the CEQ process. The SCCE subsequently discussed composition, reporting responsibilities and considered the resource requirements of the review. It recommends Senate to consider a Review Committee that will be a sub-committee of the SCCE constituted as follows.

- One (1) Undergraduate student member of the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies.
- One (1) Undergraduate student Senator from the Corner Brook campus.
- One (1) Graduate Student member of the Academic Council on Graduate Studies
- One (1) Faculty member of the Senate Committee on Undergraduate Studies.
- One (1) Faculty member of the Academic Council on Graduate Studies.
- One (1) member of the Senate Committee on Educational Technologies
- One (1) IDO/DELT staff member
- One (1) Faculty member with research experience in [teaching] evaluation
- Chair (1) Individual with demonstrated commitment to excellence in university teaching.

Following the review, the committee’s report will be delivered to the SCCE which will then report to Senate.

Senate should consider resources in light of these recommendations. We advise that teaching remission be provided to the Committee’s chair. For the plan for consultation to be effective, the Committee will have to spend some time in situ in three different locations meaning that allowance should be made for travel and accommodation expenses. The Director of CIAP will consider how staff time can be reorganized to make an individual available to the Committee on an occasional basis.

The SCCE is not currently authorized to establish sub-committees. It thus seeks a one-time amendment by Senate of SCCE Terms of Reference to permit the establishment of a Review Committee on the basis set out above.

Pending Senate’s agreement to this procedure the Review Committee will ideally be in place by Fall 2010. On the plan that it completes its work in the course of that semester, a report will be available to Senate in Winter 2011. We stress that the SCCE does not assume that change will necessarily be the outcome of a review of the CEQ process. Rather, an undertaking to review allows the University to consider whether the form of the CEQ and the procedure involved with its administration and reporting measure up to the current needs of the University. Thus the SCCE makes the following procedural recommendations:

- The Review Committee will be charged with making a recommendation on whether the current CEQ instrument should be retained in its existing form, or whether it requires modification or replacement.
In the case of modification or replacement, the Review Committee will make recommendations concerning an instrument-construction working group to be formed for the purpose of designing and pilot-testing a revised instrument.

The Review Committee will make recommendations on the administration of the CEQ process, and the appropriate dissemination of CEQ data.

The Review Committee will be constituted with reference to Senate guidelines on equitable representation and with reference to the experience and expertise of potential faculty and staff members in matters of instruction and evaluation.

In conducting its review the Committee will:
- interview members of the Memorial community (instructors, administrators, researchers and students);
- research best practice student evaluations;
- poll other universities concerning their procedures.
- consult the SCCE and the staff of CIAP

With the broad categories of review defined and the general reasoning behind our argument explained, the remainder of this document identifies some specific questions that arose in the SCCE discussions leading up to this report: a review panel might consider these during the review process.

**Scope of the CEQ review**

**CEQ Questions**

- Is the question format the best approach, or would some other survey method be better?
- Are the categories of questions adequate, and do they continue to be appropriate? Are there too many questions, or conversely too few?
- What are the questions assessing? Do they assess what we think they are assessing? Are they clearly worded?
- CEQ scores are generally high: is this an effect of how the questions are phrased? Are the questions sufficiently discriminating to distinguish between levels of teaching effectiveness?
- Are handwritten responses appropriate?
- Less than 2% of courses added optional questions in winter 2008
  - Should this facility be continued?
  - Does the addition of instructor-generated questions affect the validity of the results?
  - Can course specific optional questions be asked in some other format outside of the CEQ?

**Course Delivery Methods**
• How might evaluation respond to the need for students’ active involvement in their own learning? And how might more reflective responses in general be encouraged?
• Should there be scope for questions that inquire about more experiential methods of course delivery: field work, kinesthetic learning, co-op, service learning, etc.?
• Approximately 400 courses are now delivered by distance methods to students at Memorial. An online form of the course evaluation questionnaire is required for distance courses, but should this duplicate exactly the hard copy CEQ (this is currently the case with the pilot survey)? Are additional questions necessary for distance courses?
• ‘Blended learning’ is also on the increase. This refers to the larger technological component incorporated into face-to-face classes (Desire 2 Learn). How might the CEQ provide for students to respond to this experience?
• What are the advantages and, conversely, disadvantages of the University adopting several variants of the standardized CEQ? How convincing are the arguments that new pedagogies require new forms of assessment, and how do they stack up against the persuasion that across-the-board comparisons are important?

CEQ Administration, Completion Rates and Consultation of Results

• Does the CEQ receive appropriately considered treatment by students, faculty and administrators at the point of its classroom administration and subsequently when the results are available? Might we collect better data on how students intend the information they provide to be used by instructors? Similarly should we know more about what changes instructors make on the basis of their CEQ results? Do expectations vary between the two parties? Are there better ways to use the data gathered by the CEQ to enhance instruction?
• What information are students seeking when they consult the on-line CEQ reports? How do Administrative Heads use them? Do junior faculty consider the CEQs adequate for P&T files, and likewise contractuals in their applications for positions? What do nominees for teaching awards make of the CEQs? Are there ways in which units as a whole might use the CEQ results?
• The academic units all have a role in the administration of the CEQ and liaising with CIAP during package preparation and return. What are their views on the process?
• Student response rates might be improved all round, but the dismaying low rates of response to the on-line CEQ (only one-third of enrolled students have been responding in the pilot survey) should be a matter for investigation. This is the easiest form of the CEQ to administer, but the one that affords least confidence of being representative. There is electronic technology that has been demonstrated to improve response rates: can it be investigated? Might the factor of students missing from campus at the time of CEQ administration be overcome by electronic delivery?
• Should the exemption of courses based on low class size continue and how might team-taught courses be assessed? Should there be any courses at all exempt from using the CEQ?
• What lessons can we take from the survey procedures reported in research, and from evaluation methods adopted in other institutions?
• Should the existence of other rating tools for professors be acknowledged? Are there lessons to be learned from the format of websites like ‘Rate My Professor’? When do students value other students’ comments, and what are the privacy implications of reporting individual comments made on the CEQ online?

• Might there be changes in how the information is presented to students: should we consider an “At a glance” review of CEQ data (averages etc) with more detailed statistics made available at a second level review?

CIAP: Reporting Practices and Data Processing

• Do the sub-policies and practices for aggregate statistics and publication continue to be appropriate?
• What can be learned from previous CIAP and SCCE efforts to revise and streamline the content of the reports and to make them more accessible to students?
• How much work will be required to modify the current system to make it work, particularly if any proposed changes result in multiple versions of course evaluations? Does CIAP have the capacity and resources to support these changes?
• While time and effort has gone into the development of the data processing and reporting systems in-house are there now other options available to further streamline data management?