

LCQ2: Student opinion survey mechanisms of universities

Following is a question by the Hon Tommy Cheung and a reply by the Secretary for Education, Mr Kevin Yeung, in the Legislative Council today (September 1):

Question:

Currently, some universities have put in place an anonymous student opinion survey mechanism to collect students' opinions on course contents and teaching staff's teaching performance, and the opinions so obtained will be used for evaluating the work performance of teaching staff. It is learnt that due to differences in political opinions or dissatisfaction with the scores received for a course, some students gave, in retaliation, the teaching staff concerned extremely low scores in such surveys, and some teaching staff, being apprehensive about such a situation, lowered the standards as far as possible when giving students scores for courses. In this connection, will the Government inform this Council:

- (1) whether it knows if the managements of various universities received, in the past three years, complaints from their teaching staff about the student opinion survey mechanisms; if they did, of the details of such complaints and the follow-up actions taken;
- (2) whether it knows if the various universities evaluated, in the past three years, the effectiveness of such mechanisms; if they did, of the details; and
- (3) whether it will recommend the various universities improve such mechanisms so as to eliminate any negative effect; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that?

Reply:

President,

The eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities have all along attached importance to the quality of teaching and learning. They have put in place rigorous, comprehensive and clear policies and measures, and collect information and data from various sources for assessing teaching and learning effectiveness and for continuously monitoring teaching and learning quality with a view to improving the standard of teaching and learning in the universities.

We are given to understand from the eight universities that in the process of quality assurance of teaching and learning as mentioned above feedback from students on their learning experience is proactively collected and valued by the universities, and student survey is a common approach which has been widely adopted by tertiary institutions in Europe and America.

Besides, as universities generally adopt an "outcome-based" approach for teaching and learning, student surveys can be a means to gather students' perspectives and self-evaluation in addition to mainstream assessments such as examinations and exercises so as to facilitate a more holistic assessment of teaching and learning outcomes.

The questionnaires currently adopted by universities normally include universally applicable standard questions and supplemented with questions specific to individual courses, as well as quantitative questions and open-ended questions, covering areas such as teaching and learning quality, teaching and learning environment, learning result and overall learning experience.

Same as other types of survey, student survey involves subjective elements. It is possible that certain students may, owing to factors other than the curriculum and teaching performance, provide comments that are less than objective. That said, the existing mechanisms of the universities can already deal with situations whereby individual students give out unreasonable response. For example, upon receipt of the completed questionnaires, the universities will consolidate and organise the relevant data with focus on the overall and average situation as well as trend analysis, and suitably handle the impact of unreasonable response. The universities will also compare the results of open-ended and quantitative questions for cross reference in order to analyse the causes of changes and interpret the results with caution. If necessary, the universities will also arrange focus groups for individual courses to collect further views and concerns from students.

The findings of surveys are provided to the university management, schools, faculties, course coordinators, teaching staff, etc. for reference after processing and analyses. The universities indicated that student survey is contributive to their gathering views from students and improving the universities' overall quality of teaching and learning, and plays a role in pedagogy development, curriculum design, professional development of teaching staff, student engagement, etc.

That said, student survey is merely one of the sources of reference for teaching and learning quality assurance. The universities also have other measures for rigorous and comprehensive assessment of teaching and learning quality, including peer assessment, external assessment and consultative meetings for teaching staff and students. These measures involve different stakeholders and are conducted in different ways and at different times to the effect that universities can fully get hold of various feedbacks while avoiding bias.

Besides, the universities have all established units led by relevant vice-presidents, such as teaching and learning committees or quality assurance committees under the Senate, to formulate, assess and review quality assurance-related policies and detailed arrangements at the university level, including student surveys. We believe the universities can make use of the established mechanism to continuously improving arrangements

in collecting student feedbacks in view of actual circumstances and needs.

Moreover, teaching and learning only constitute part of the assessment of the overall performance of teaching staff. Universities have well-established policy and mechanism for human resources management. Depending on the nature of the position and scope of work of the teaching staff, the universities also take into account performance of individual staff in a balanced manner, including aspects such as academic achievement, research outcome and management skills. All in all, universities would not judge the performance of individual teaching staff merely based on extreme feedbacks obtained from relevant surveys.

It has been the responsibility of the universities to uphold the quality of teaching and learning which is within their institutional autonomy. The Education Bureau and UGC have never mandated the adoption of specific mechanism for assessing teaching and learning performance. In the event of the universities' teaching staff filing complaints against student surveys, it should fall upon the universities' management to handle according to the established mechanism, and we do not have figures of these cases. Should there be any views about the assessment mechanism, the Government is happy to relay these views to universities for consideration and follow-up as appropriate.

Thank you, President.