AASUA Position Statement on USRIs

AASUA notes that a system of Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI) is endorsed by GFC policy (§111.3) as part of a “multi-faceted approach” to the evaluation of teaching (§111.2.2).

AASUA's Collective Agreement for Academic Faculty (13.06) and Collective Agreement for CAST (12.05 b) mandate that USRIs are not to be used as the sole measure of teaching performance.

The CAUT Policy on the Use of Anonymous Student Questionnaires in the Evaluation of Teaching echoes this position:

“Procedures for the evaluation of teaching should take into account all relevant sources of information about teaching. Anonymous student ratings should never be the primary measure of teaching performance and no evaluation of teaching performance may rely exclusively or primarily upon student opinions alone” (CAUT November 2006).

The University of Alberta's GFC §111.2 indicates that USRIs are intended to provide summative (performance) and formative (feedback) information; summative information is intended to be used as “a basis for rewarding excellence, as well as the basis for withholding reward,” whereas formative information “provides helpful feedback to teachers by identifying teaching strengths and weaknesses and, in so doing, giving guidance for the improvement or refinement of teaching skills”.

In contrast, the CAUT policy indicates that surveys of student opinion about teaching should not be characterized or described as if they measure teaching effectiveness, because students “are not in a position to assess all of the components of teaching effectiveness” (CAUT, November 2006).

In 2011, AASUA conducted a survey of members, in which the following questions were asked:
1. Is formal teaching part of your current required duties?
2. Do you support FEC practice of using USRIs as the main (or sole) measure of teaching performance?
3. Have quantitative scores from student evaluations been helpful in improving the quality of your teaching or provide you with helpful information?
4. Have qualitative comments from student evaluations been helpful in improving the quality of your teaching or provided you with helpful information?
5. In the space below, please provide any other comments on teaching evaluation, including how the process might be improved.

Among the 564 respondents who completed the survey; 63.9% answered “No” to question 2 (17.1% answered “Yes”), 49.5% of respondents answered “No” to question 3 (30.4% answered “Yes”), 69.2% of respondents answered “Yes” to question 4 (16.4% answered “No”), and 402 respondents provided written comments.

The written comments revealed that most thought USRIs were flawed and they identified various reasons for this opinion. Overall, there was a wide range of comments (summarized and categorized in Appendix A) from supportive to critical of the design and use of USRIs, but with a preponderance of negative comments. Many respondents criticized the use of summative USRI scores by many FECs as a sole measure of teaching performance, with major consequences for the awarding of tenure, promotion and incrementation. Respondents noted that many FECs use the statistical distribution of USRI scores relative to faculty averages to evaluate teaching, thus disregarding GFC policy §111.3 G iii, which states:

The 25th and 75th percentiles provide information about the spread of individual scores around the median. By definition, half of the scores in distribution are below the median and 25 percent of
these scores are below the 25 percentile. Since this occurs “by definition”, these values should not be used to determine whether a particular score is “good” or “bad”.

A potential result of using the statistical distribution as a measure of teaching performance is that individual scores of 3 or 4 could be classified as unsatisfactory, because they are below average, despite these scores having descriptors which mean the student responses were “neutral” or “agreed” with positively worded questions. USRI scores of 3 or 4 should be considered as an acceptable measure of teaching effectiveness.

On the basis of this survey, specific recommendations from the AASUA Teaching and Learning Committee in relation to USRIs and teaching evaluation are:

- After a broad-based assessment of teaching performance, the outcome should be identified as “outstanding”, “satisfactory”, or “unsatisfactory” (in keeping with CAUT Policy 2.9).
- Any comments made on USRIs by students should not be anonymous so as to encourage their professionalism; with the names of commentators confidential (i.e. not released to the Instructor) but kept on record (in keeping with CAUT Policy point 1 - that anonymous student evaluations of teachers may serve as vehicles for transmitting popular misconception, expectations and prejudices, to the disadvantage of, for example, women and visible minorities).
- The opportunity to rebut or explain USRI scores and comments should be present for all AASUA members, such as in their Annual Report and annual meeting with their Dean/Chair.
- If the goal of USRIs is to improve teaching on campus, more opportunities are needed for teacher training (and with recognition of these efforts by the member's FEC), peer consulting, mentoring, and other forms of constructive professional feedback.
- USRIs should not be considered as a measure of teaching effectiveness, as students are not in a position to assess all components of teaching effectiveness (CAUT Policy, point 3).

Note
84.5% of the respondents identified themselves as Academic Faculty or Contract Academic Staff (Teaching). The total number of respondents represents approx. 20% of AASUA members for whom a major part of their work is teaching (i.e., Academic Faculty and CAS:T), and so the results may not be fully representative of the views of U of A teaching staff.

AASUA Position Statement on USRIs

AASUA neither endorses nor dismisses the use of USRIs as a summative and formative measure of teaching quality, but rather recognizes that a system of Universal Student Ratings of Instruction (USRI) is mandated by GFC policy (§111.3) as part of a “multi-faceted approach” to the evaluation of teaching (§111.2). AASUA acknowledges that USRIs have the potential to provide useful formative information, and can be useful as one of several measures of teaching performance, provided that it is recognized that the USRI measures student experience rather than learning. AASUA encourages FECs to use the descriptions of scores when assessing responses, rather than the statistical scores, and reminds FECs that small differences in (the numerical) evaluation scores should not be considered as meaningful.

AASUA endorses GFC policy, which states that evaluation of teaching shall be multifaceted (§111.2.2) and that FEC decisions concerning tenure, promotion or unsatisfactory teaching performance must be based on more than one indicator of the adequacy of teaching (§111.2.3). AASUA expects that FECs will follow this policy. AASUA also reminds its members that the Collective Agreements for Academic Faculty (13.06) and CAST (12.05 b) mandate that the standards for evaluation of teaching performance shall be broadly based, and encourages its members to insist that a variety of information be taken into account.