

Problematic anonymous student feedback on teachers

January 10 2022, by Richard Lakeman, Deb Massey, Dima Nasrawi, Jann Fielden, Marie Hutchinson, Megan Lee, Rosanne Coutts



Credit: Katerina Holmes from Pexels

Student evaluations, in the form of anonymous online surveys, are [ubiquitous](#) in Australian universities. Most students in most courses are

offered the opportunity to rate the "quality" of their teachers and the course they take.

The original intention of student surveys was to help improve the learning experience. But it's now become [much more](#). Student surveys are often the only measure of teaching quality (along with pass rates). For lecturers, positive ratings and comments are often required to ensure continued employment or promotion.

But these anonymous surveys have also become a platform for defamatory, racist, misogynistic and homophobic comments against staff.

We surveyed 791 Australian academics from different universities about their experience of anonymous [student evaluations](#). The participating academics shared verbatim some of the non-constructive feedback students gave them. We collated examples of this feedback and published these in the journal [Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education](#).

We grouped the feedback into five broad themes: attire, appearance and accent; allegations against character; general insults; projections of blame; and threats or calls for punishment.

1. Attire, appearance and accent

Often the comments about appearance were gendered, misogynistic or racist with variations on being "too fat," "ugly" and "old."

One student wrote: "You look like something the cat dragged in."

Another said: "People who's [sic] mother tongue is not English should not be employed as lecturers."

2. Allegations against character

These typically accused the lecturer of incompetence, racism or having negative attitudes towards students: "She is really rude which is why everyone hates her. You are a cultural Marxist, your Wokeness undermines everything you do. Not all your students are left wing nut jobs like you. You seriously need to lose some weight."

3. General insults

Most insults were clearly designed to wound the teacher and there was no pretense about the comments having anything to do with teaching—although the following was an exception: "What the fuck did you think you were doing to take a couple of days off for your grandmother's funeral when we had an assignment due? "

Apart from variations on "I hate everything about you," most insults were a combination of unimaginative adjectives or name calling including "bitch," "bitter," "crap," "devil's spawn," "dick," "dog," "dinosaur," "idiot," "loser," "mentally unstable," "mole," "Nazi," "needs to chill," "out of control," "pathetic," "psychotic," "senile shit," "smiling assassin," "trash," "unhappy" and "useless."

4. Projections of blame

Most student evaluation surveys are done before grades are released but many students anticipated failure and blamed the teacher: "That fucking dyke bitch failed me she's fucking useless that's why I failed."

5. Threats and punishment

Hand-in-hand with projection of blame were threats or calls for

punishment. Most often these called for the teacher to be sacked but also included far more harsher measures:

"I'd like to shove a broom up her arse."

"She should be stabbed with a pitchfork."

"If I was X, I would jump off the tallest building and kill myself if I was that dumb."

Some managed to combine themes to achieve maximum offensiveness:

"Stupid old hag needs a good fucking. "

"This bitch should be fired immediately. Why is someone this ugly allowed to teach? She better be careful I never see her in the car park. She needs to get a better fashion pick. Her clothes are hideous."

The impacts are serious

An [analysis of research](#) on university student evaluations of teaching, published in March 2021, found they were influenced by factors that have nothing to do with teaching quality. These include student demographics, and the teaching academic's culture and identity. It also found evaluations include increasingly abusive comments.

While much of the criticism may seem like playground-level name calling, the [impacts can be serious](#).

As part of our survey we asked teachers how anonymous student evaluations of their teaching affected their well-being, mental health, and professional and personal relationships. From our ongoing analysis of the [survey](#) data (yet to be published) a profile is emerging of a highly

traumatized workforce. Early career academics, casual staff, women and minorities are disproportionately affected. Many appear to be triggered by every round of [student](#) evaluations.

If Australian universities persist in employing anonymous surveys, university teachers can continue to expect to receive racist, misogynistic, defamatory comments, threats of censure and even death.

Even the Australian government is taking action against anonymous hate speech by announcing an [inquiry into trolling](#) on social media. But universities still protect people who want to insult, defame and make baseless accusations about others protected by a veil of anonymity.

Perhaps it is time to unmask the anonymous online trolls in the university sector, or require students to be potentially identifiable. The risk of being identified might at least reduce exposure to hate speech and increase [civility](#) in the corridors of higher learning.

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