Conducting End of Semester Surveys in the Classroom

Keywords: Surveys, Response Rates, Student Engagement

Joanna Zawadzka
RCSI University of Medicine & Health Sciences

RCSI UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE AND HEALTH SCIENCES

Introduction

Between 2020 and 2022 there was a significant decrease in student survey response rates. Therefore, in 2023, the RCSI Quality Enhancement Office (QEO) undertook an evaluation of activities to increase student engagement in surveys. This resulted in a proposal that the QEO, with support from academic staff, pilot the conducting the end of semester student surveys during scheduled in-person sessions. Conducting surveys in the classroom is an attempt to combat the ongoing survey fatigue among students and increase engagement in student feedback.

Initiative

The Quality Enhancement Offices in RCSI Dublin and Bahrain undertook to support in-class survey sessions. This included providing a pre-survey presentation on the importance of student feedback and how to provide effective feedback. Students were invited via email and completed the survey on their laptops or phones during the session. In most cases, survey response rates increased significantly, achieving as much as 51% in Semester 1 and up to 80% in Semester 2, compared to an average of 25% for email-only surveys.

At the RCSI Quality Committee, a question was raised about the quality of responses from in-class surveys e.g. would additional respondents see this as a box-ticking exercise. Therefore further analysis was completed to compare two surveys conducted with the same cohort of students at different times, using different methods (in class vs. email only).

Some survey quality indicators, such as completion rates and the coverage of students' demographics, were compared between the two surveys. Both surveys were conducted with the same cohort of 35 students, the response rate to Semester 1 survey conducted via email was 43% (N=15) and the in-class survey in Semester 2 was completed by 86% of the class (N=29). This means that the response rate doubled when the survey was brought into classroom

Surveys taken in class were more complete and students were less likely to skip survey questions, out of all response opportunities, the in-class survey had 75% non-blank responses to a longer survey instrument (54 questions) whereas the email survey was shorter (43 questions) and resulted in 71% non-blank responses[1]. Also, with the same number of free-text comments in each survey, a greater proportion of comments were completed for the in-class survey (67%) compared to the email survey (52%).[2] The length of comments was comparable with a mean number of words of 42.1 (email) and 42.9 (in person) and a median of 22 (email) and 31.5 (in person).

Conducting surveys in class is an opportunity to reach out to students who might be less engaged with self-directed opportunities such as surveys sent via email. While the class size was small, results seem to indicate that conducting surveys in the classroom supports a better coverage of some student demographics, such as gender and international student status. These preliminary results indicate that in class surveys could assist with achieving a better representation of some student demographics.

In-class survey process

Before the session

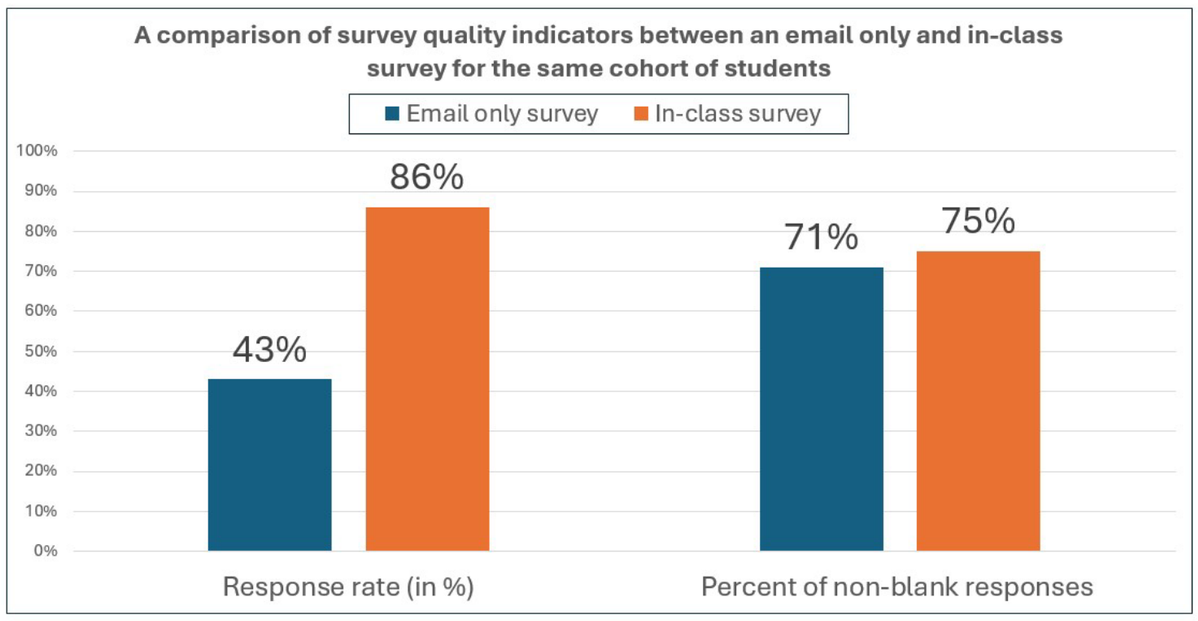
- A suitable in-person teaching session is selected by the School – 15 minutes of the session is reserved for survey
- The session is added to students' timetable
- Students receive an email with a survey invitation on the morning of the session

During the session

- Pre-survey briefing is delivered by an academic staff member supported by the QEO
- Students complete an online survey during the teaching session on their devices

After the session

- A reminder is sent to those who missed the in-person session, and the survey remains open for a week
- Results are collated and reported by the QEO



In general, the quality of responses to surveys conducted during a teaching session was not different to surveys distributed via email. Results indicate that students tend to answer more questions and are open to longer surveys. By improving the overall response rates, in class surveys enable a broader coverage of different demographics.

Outcome

In class surveys present many benefits. Having dedicated time to complete a survey in the classroom highlights the importance of collecting student feedback as an integrated part of the learning process. As mentioned above, it engages those who do not respond to emails. The pre-survey presentation is an opportunity to preview the survey content, educate students on how to give effective feedback and close the feedback loop by providing examples of actions taken in response to feedback. Students also have an opportunity to ask questions while completing the survey. The timing of the survey is an important consideration, for example surveys completed during breaks in the timetable and sessions just before lunchtime were not very successful and well attended by students.

Additionally, sessions led by academic staff (known to students) seem to have a greater impact, compared to those led solely by QEO staff. Following a successful pilot, the QEO (with the support of academic colleagues) is progressing with a broader implementation of the in-class approach, with more cohorts and programmes being added in the academic year 2024-25. Some challenges are yet to be overcome, for example it is difficult to replicate this practice for students on placement and those attending online programmes.