



# A Guide to Increasing Course Evaluation Response Rates

Insight and Top Tips from Universities





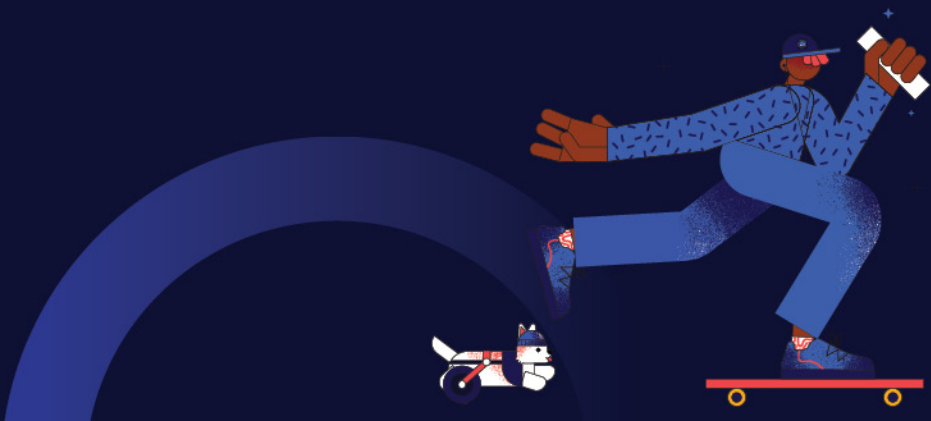
Explorance, renowned for its student Feedback Analytics solutions, helps Higher Education institutions improve teaching effectiveness and student learning worldwide.

From module and course evaluation surveys to student experience surveys about academics and the broader student experience, **25% of the QS top 100 Higher Education Institutions** currently use Explorance Blue to capture and analyze feedback. Explorance also works with nearly 100 universities in the EMEA region, including around 25 in the UK & Ireland.

In this guide, **How to Increase Course Evaluation Response Rates**, we share insight from Higher Education leaders who have achieved an 'uplift' in levels of student feedback on course evaluations and their tips for increasing response rates.

Our contributors provide practical guidance on the following:

- Key steps, from initial question planning to communications and engagement, are taken to support student and staff engagement.
- How streamlined course evaluations and changes to survey methodology support interaction.
- The importance of creating time for in-class feedback and examples of innovative incentives for completion.
- Ways that integration with their institution's LMS/VLE can impact response rates.
- Approaches to continuous communication, including closing the feedback loop.



# Eight Steps to Increasing Course Evaluation Response Rates

## 1 Focus on asking the right questions

Designing the course evaluation questionnaire is paramount as it is the foundational tool for gathering valuable student feedback that can drive meaningful improvements in the educational experience. A well-crafted questionnaire ensures that the institution collects comprehensive and relevant information about various aspects of the course, allowing for extracting actionable insights that lead to informed decisions and enhancements that can positively impact the overall quality of education provided. Moreover, an effective questionnaire encourages students to express their thoughts openly and constructively.



## The University of New South Wales

Streamlined surveys at UNSW Sydney have helped boost the institution's response rates to over 50%. The university uses a shorter questionnaire, which is a plus when it comes to promoting course evaluations to students.

"In the past, surveys were conducted at class, not course level, so the challenge was that one-course students would receive four survey links and some students as many as 12 fill-out tasks," explains Paul Keitley, Manager, Student Survey Systems. "We needed to do something about that, so in 2018, we moved to course-level surveys and compressed all the classes into a single entity. There is no such thing as a lecture or tutorial survey now."



# The University of Newcastle Australia

The annual Student Feedback on the University of Newcastle (SFUN) survey sheds light on the entire university experience. But with almost 200 questions, which typically took around 30 minutes to complete, how do you continue to top response rates year after year?

“We knew we couldn’t sustain a strong feedback culture when we were still over-surveying students,” says Emma Dawes, Survey Insights Analyst. “We needed to reduce the number of student surveys (so now we only have one SFUN rather than five) and the survey length but still get the same or more value from our data.”

Emma continues: “We changed our survey methodology. If a student says they are ‘overall satisfied’ with a particular area, we don’t need to ask them more questions; only when they are not satisfied will they be asked additional questions so we can pinpoint what the issues are. So, while we still have 200 questions in the Explorance Blue system, the average student will only see 30, meaning it will take up to 10 minutes to complete the survey.”



## Temasek Polytechnic

Temasek Polytechnic in Singapore has introduced a number of key strategies to overcome survey fatigue and achieve a desirable response rate.

“Questions were streamlined in a new Teaching Evaluation and Subject Survey System (TESSy) powered by Explorance Blue,” reveals Deputy Manager Dr. Andy Yeo. “There was a 38% reduction overall on questions being asked for each semester, 204 questions down to 126 – and we have achieved a high survey response rate of more than 80%.”

In-class evaluations ensure a higher response rate, resulting in more comprehensive and representative feedback. Real-time completion also minimizes procrastination and offers instructors an opportunity to address any immediate concerns or queries, fostering a collaborative and transparent learning environment. In essence, dedicating class time to evaluations promotes accountability, enhances feedback quality, and strengthens the overall educational experience.



## University of Bristol

The University of Bristol had an initial 30% response rate target but is continually reviewing those targets and striving for improvement to better understand how things are working for students and create a culture around listening and acting on the student voice.

"In-class feedback has definitely supported response rates," comments Dr. Mark Allinson, Associate PVC (Learning and Teaching). "For one of my classes, for example, we increased response rates from seven to 78% by allowing 10 minutes for these in person."

This supports a wider move the university is taking to reduce the amount of content delivered in class and have more dialogic experiences to reflect on learning. Like much of the sector, the university is also finding that students have a different approach to in-person attendance, and that is driving some of their strategies on how they use in-person classes.

Mark continues: "This has an implication for unit evaluation too. If students are not in class, we may not hear from them. We also want to hear from students we don't normally hear from. Feedback must be representative for it to truly reflect a cohort. So, in terms of participation rates, we are looking at both quantitative and qualitative measures."



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

# University of Minnesota

Since returning to in-person instruction post-Covid, where all Student Ratings of Teaching (SRT) are now collected only digitally, the Carlson School of Management consistently has average response rates of 15-25% higher than the University of Minnesota Twin Cities campus average.

“There are two primary ways you can drive higher response rates - one is an in-class approach, which works really well because you don’t have to do a lot of planning, and I always say give the course evaluation just after the beginning of class (but not right at the beginning,” says Amie Norden, Senior Instructional Designer, Carlson School of Management. “If you carve out time in class, they are more likely to fill it out, and you will get higher response rates. The second approach is using a whole-class incentive to reach your target.”

Amie provided the following tips:

- Plan for the SRT as an intentional and prioritized course activity (carve time in your class for students to do it; don’t make them do it out of class or after class).
- Early in the semester:
  - Tell your students when you will provide time for the SRT.
  - Tell your students how you are going to use the feedback.
  - Decide if you will use a whole-class incentive.
  - Decide whether you will do in-class or outside-of-class administration.
  - Put a placeholder activity in SRT Week’s LMS materials as a marker.
- On the SRT Administration Day:
  - Remind students that you care and value their comments.
  - Step ‘outside’ the classroom (honour their space and neutralize the power dynamic).
  - Monitor the class ‘response rate’ in Explorance Blue.

# UNSW Sydney

UNSW surveys are opened in the last couple of weeks of class while there is teacher-student contact.

“We ask the teaching staff to promote the survey to the students in class,” adds Paul Keitley. “A lot of them do, and the ones that do and are proactive about it get amazing response rates in the 90s. We close the surveys just before the commencement of the examination period. Reports are only provided to staff once the students receive the grades, so we can also let the students know that their feedback will not impact their grades.”

### 3 Incentivize to boost engagement

Incentives can make students more willing to engage in the evaluation process, especially if they perceive a tangible benefit for their participation. However, it's essential to strike a balance and ensure that the incentives do not compromise the honesty or quality of the feedback. Additionally, clear communication about the purpose of the evaluations and how the incentives work can enhance their effectiveness.



# The University of Newcastle Australia

By implementing Explorance Blue and a creative student engagement plan, including incentives, the University of Newcastle has doubled response rates.

"We started by asking ourselves, 'What do we have that students can't get anywhere else?'," says Survey Insights Analyst Emma Dawes. "The answer to that was our day-to-day activities. We have these world-class facilities that only students in particular programs can access. But that doesn't mean those spaces and facilities aren't interesting for other students. So why not create tours and experiences that they would never otherwise get to do?"

For example, the university offered students an Anatomy Lab tour, iDome virtual reality experience, and playing soccer with autonomous humanoid robots in the Engineering department. Different prize ideas meant they could get different students engaged in a very different way.

Emma continues: "The next thing we considered was, 'What could we give away that doesn't have a financial impact?' That was time, and we had a meet and greet with a leader of your choice in your field of interest, leading to internships and employment opportunities. We also offer lunch with the Vice-Chancellor – and no one could have anticipated how popular this would be. Students can speak to our Vice-Chancellor and see how engaged he is with student feedback, which is a great promotional point and a point of interest for students."

"Then we asked what we could 'buy' that could be invested back into the University?" Emma shares. "The answer was anything on campus, so annual free parking pass, gym membership, campus food and retail vouchers. How do we know that students like all these prizes? Because we ask them, and they tell us. Students select which of these 50 prizes they are interested in at the end of the survey, and then we refine the list for the next year. The students are telling us how to hook them in to complete our surveys, and they are driving that incentive strategy."



# UNSW Sydney

Incentives do not work in every institution, of course, and at UNSW Sydney, there are no incentives for participating and no penalties for not participating.

“We have in the past offered incentives for students, including free Gelatos and even a pre-paid (£500) visa card promotion, but that was unsuccessful,” recalls Paul Keitley. “I had to convince one student to collect his prize because he didn’t want to get a visa card. The promotions and incentives didn’t affect our response rates much, so we dropped those about a year after I joined UNSW.”

## 4 Integrate surveys with LMS/VLE

Integrating course evaluations with the university’s Learning Management System (LMS) or Virtual Learning System (VLS) enhances the overall evaluation process by improving accessibility, increasing participation rates, streamlining administrative tasks, ensuring data security, promoting consistency, offering robust analytics, and facilitating better communication with students.

# University of Worcester

The University of Worcester ran its first surveys through Explorance Blue in 2021-22 and reported rising response rates and improved reporting.

“An immediate impact was that VLE students could access the survey immediately,” reveals Student Surveys Manager Carolyn Moir. “Before, we had to rely on students clicking on a link in their email, and you could not share them with anyone as they were all individualized, so with the first survey, we saw an improvement in response rates and picked up 1,000 more responses than we had in the previous year. Then, in our bigger evaluations project, we got a 32% response rate, which was better than we were getting in the old system for online modules, and within that, about a quarter of the modules were getting a 50%+ response rate.”

As of February 2023, further progress has been made.

“Our response rates on our early feedback survey increased from 32% to 36%, and our first-semester module evaluations were 42% against 32% last year,” Carolyn says. “We ran a module evaluation pilot with a couple of schools (using a single survey across the course rather than for each module), which had a 30% overall response rate by then, with one pilot group achieving a 52% response rate. The value of Explorance Blue is it allows us to try these things out fairly easily.”



# UNSW Sydney

“We thought we were going to be fixing things by reducing the links and making them a lot easier to promote, but we were still seeing a decrease in responses,” explains Paul Keitley. “So, we have developed the LMS integration, which resulted in an immediate and sustained impact on response rates. At the end of 2021-22, our response rates were back to around 52%.”

# Northumbria University

Since adopting Explorance Blue in 2019-20, Northumbria University has made several changes to increase engagement with surveys for students. These include Blackboard Ultra integration and pop-ups when students log into the portal, which has made a “massive difference to student engagement with module evaluations,” according to the University’s Quality and Teaching Excellence Coordinator Emma Watson.

## 5 Constant communication is needed



# Temasek Polytechnic

In moving to TESSy in January 2022, Temasek Polytechnic saw a dip in response rates in its first round of evaluations to 81%, compared to 87% with the former system. However, this was still deemed respectable given the target 80% response rate.

“We identified some possibilities as to why we may not have enjoyed a higher response rate,” says Dr Andy Yeo. “For example, we stopped SMS reminders to students, which have previously served us well in bringing up response rates. There were also some requests from staff that they want the report fast because they can make more prescriptive actions to be given at a rapid turnaround. So, we had no option but to shorten our response gathering time; from a two-month lead time, we changed it to one.”

He continues: "However, the Explorance Blue interface system can promote more student engagement and allows us to reach out to students more effectively. The email invitation to students is not done blindly, so they know exactly why they are doing the survey, and this has been personalized because the software allows us to address the students individually. Students get it, and they know that it is addressed to them, but at the same time, they see the purpose of why they are doing the survey. We also use all of the five reminders in the system.

Explorance Blue's mobile interface also allows students to complete surveys on their phones. In addition, Temasek made the troubleshooting guide and a three-minute self-help video available in their correspondence to students via email.

"We also have an MS form through Power Automate where we receive pop-up alerts from students, such as a technical or system-related request, so that we can attend to the student's problem more promptly. We believe this direct engagement with the student and the shorter turnaround will retain the student's interest in wanting to finish the survey. This, in turn, would influence the survey response from students. The response rate monitor is useful, providing staff with real-time updates."



# The University of Newcastle Australia

"Previously, we had a close-the-loop feedback process where we created a report for students with all the key outcomes," comments Emma Dawes. "That report has been valuable, and it is 'warts and all,' we don't hide any data. We have to own this data and be transparent with the students because otherwise, we can't build trust with them. They are unlikely to complete another survey if we just put out a report saying how great we are and hide everything else."

“Our survey runs in March each year, so we had built up all this momentum with the incentives and promotion campaign, and then it would close, and everything would stop. Then, students would have forgotten about SFUN the next year. We realized closing the loop is not good enough in this situation; we must keep students ‘in the loop.’ It has to be a continuous promotional campaign that goes throughout the year, celebrating that success and showing students the change we are making.”

## 6 Bring staff with you on the journey



**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE

# Northumbria University

At Northumbria, they have found staff buy-in when it comes to the success of Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQs), primarily academic staff because they are the touch points for students.

“Having them take 10 minutes out of a lecture or sending a direct email can really boost our engagement,” says Quality and Teaching Excellence Coordinator Emma Watson.

“Since the return to near full-time campus-based learning, we have been working with academic staff on their views on MEQs and how to make them work for them, including an MEQ working group that reports back to the education committee. The principles from the working group were then incorporated into our procedure, which helped staff feel that their contributions were respected and valued by the institution while still agreeing to that key level of data collection. Module evaluation is now a core element of a new review process, Continuous Programme Performance Review (CPPR), within the University. Surveys form a key component of this regulatory review process.

Emma continues: “This is critical for increasing staff buy-in as staff are asked to use their module evaluation results as part of their module review and create actions based on that data alone. They are also asked to close the loop with students and demonstrate how they have acted on the feedback received in the CPPR process. We have a response rate threshold of five responses to generate a report. This urges staff to positively engage with MEQs to obtain that level of responses, which will give feedback on how they answer CPPR questions.”

# The University of Newcastle Australia

A combination of improved survey methodology and intensive promotion has increased response rates from 15% in 2019 to 35% in 2023. However, this could not have been achieved without significant staff buy-in at all levels.

“We put the call-out to all staff, via our all-staff newsletter, for ideas on incentives,” reveals Survey Insights Analyst Emma Dawes. “We explained that we don’t have any money for incentives, but we need student feedback, and our response rates are low. Suddenly, we have 50+ prize ideas, genuine interest, and investment from staff, including what students say about their area.”

With this approach, it is not just the University of Newcastle Australia leaders who are interested in that data. Now, staff at all levels are interested in that data. This is important because the number one thing that motivates students to complete a survey is knowing their voice is being heard.

“Staff needs to be prepared to listen to the feedback and then formulate action,” says Emma. “Our Vice-Chancellor is super engaged with this process, and he heads up a committee that meets regularly to discuss SFUN-inspired projects and their implementation. This has also created accountability for staff because they have to report progress.”

Emma adds: “Something significant for engagement is seeing how much engagement you get. Module leaders, FPVCs, DFPVCs, Heads of Departments and Directors of Education can access dashboards to monitor the response rates of their relative groups in real-time. This allows them to target messaging to achieve better responses in areas where they feel lacking.”



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## University of Minnesota

“Students want to feel motivated, and they want to feel that instructors value what they are saying,” explains Amie Norden, Senior Instructional Designer. “So, if they are going to take time to fill out the course evaluation, they want to know it makes a difference and that instructors/program leaders are listening. Tell your students why you care and demonstrate that you care by carving out time in your class for students to do this, as they are swamped, and once they leave the classroom, it is too difficult for them to remember. You can also do this by telling students what you have changed based on what they have written in their course evaluation.”



## University of Louisville

“The challenge is showing the value proposition of completing those surveys,” says Robert Goldstein, Vice Provost, Assessment and University Decision Support/Analytics. “And the challenge for students is that they don’t always see change happen because they are already beyond that course. So, we encourage faculty to explain how they use feedback data for instructional improvement, and we do see that. Faculty who explains how they incorporate the feedback data into instructional improvements get the best response rates.”

Dr. Gail DePuy, Senior Vice Provost, adds: “We have a very active student government association on campus, and we always have representation from them on anything we do around students. They can spread the word quickly, so we rely on them often. Speaking as an instructor, I found the students very open to paying it forward. That ‘I’m not going to benefit from this, but the next class will’ – and they were very generous and very receptive to that.”

# Northumbria University

“Students have been asking what happens to their feedback once it has been received, so sending a quantitative report to them is our first step,” comments Dr. Danielle Grenade, Governance and Enhancement Coordinator. “It will be interesting to see what happens over time if sending out these reports engages students further. We are also using the email accompanying the report as an education piece back to the students to advise them of how important their feedback is and to inform them of the University target response rate, hoping they will engage further with module evaluations going forward. When we send out surveys to students, we tell them they will get a report if there are enough respondents, so this communication piece loops again.

She continues: “As part of our partnership with the Students’ Union, SU Sabbatical Officer reports have also been sent at Undergraduate and Postgraduate taught level. Working with the SU will help us drive responses with our student body.”

## **7** No single approach is enough



# The University of Newcastle Australia

“What we are talking about is not necessarily coming up with some cool prizes or changing your survey methodology; it is not a single magical unicorn solution,” says Survey Insights Analyst Emma Dawes. “It needs to all work together to make that change to create a cultural shift. It’s not quick and not necessarily easy, but it is something you can work towards, and you can see your response rates, like we did, double. We didn’t necessarily set out to increase response rates; that was a side effect of this cultural shift.”



# Northumbria University

As well as Blackboard Ultra integration, pop-ups and closing the feedback loop, Northumbria University also pointed to several other small changes which are leading to significant gains, including a new data policy and reducing the number of questions, academic support team liaison to identify suitable teams to deliver MEQs for different parts of the University, and increasing engagement by using different schedules in Explorance Blue.

“If you look at 2015-16 when we first began to look at electronic surveys, we had a 15% response rate for semester one,” says Quality and Teaching Excellence Coordinator Emma Watson. “We came on board with Explorance in 2019-20 (13% response rate) and are making big inroads now. Fast forward to 2022-23, we have a response rate of 32%, which for us is a massive journey. While we know this falls short of our target number of responses for the size of our institution, it is a step in the right direction, especially when introducing surveys to new campuses and new areas we haven’t worked with before. We hope that response rates will continue growing as they become more used to the survey function.”





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# University of Minnesota

The Carlson School of Management has achieved an approximately 60% class response rate to course evaluations, significantly higher than the campus average.

Daniel Glover, University Survey & Assessment Services, suggests the need to “find the champions” (administrators, staff, instructors, students) and “high engagement at each of these levels helps drive participation in course feedback.” The University has developed ‘A Guide to Improving Response Rates’ which encourages instructors to value student input and includes the following:

- Group incentive (as policy, this was allowed for the first time in 2015).
- Take time in class.
- Remind students when data collection is closing.
- Enable the Canvas link.
- Check response rates (and follow up if necessary).

## At-a-glance checklist

- Agree on your response rate targets.
- Define your survey methodology.
- Streamline your surveys, reduce or re-structure your question sets as needed.
- Integrate surveys with your institution’s LMS/VLE to enhance visibility/promotion.
- Decide if you are going to use incentives for completion.
- Block out time in your lecture/seminar for students to complete their evaluations.
- Tell your students how you are going to use their feedback.
- Encourage your teaching staff to promote the survey.
- Close the feedback loop (actions taken/not taken).
- Share reports with more comprehensive student representatives.
- Continue promotion outside of survey windows.

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