Student Survey Quality Guidelines

This document provides survey developers with guidelines to assist them in the development of high quality student surveys, enabling more effective data capture and providing students with a more cohesive and gratifying feedback experience.

Contents

Introducing the survey

The introduction to a survey is usually provided to participants through both the body of an email and in the introduction section of the survey tool itself. Often this introductory text is identical or similar in both areas. The Federation University Student Survey Policy determines mandatory text that must be included with every Quality Assurance Survey distributed to students. This text is provided in the *Mandatory elements of a Federation University Australia Quality Assurance Survey* document which is available through a link from the Student Survey Policy and Student Survey Procedure. This mandatory text should be included wherever introductory text is provided.

Types of Surveys

Surveys can be used to report on:

- Perceptions (satisfaction) – e. g. How satisfied are students with the level of service provided?
- Behaviours (frequency of) – e.g. How often do you visit a service in a month?
- Observations – e.g. Do you think that our campus is a safe place?
- Learning outcomes – e.g. After participating in this workshop, is your ability to perform the task improved?

Having a clear purpose for your survey will help drive what question types are required to achieve your objectives. Surveys can also be designed to gauge current opinions / behaviours or changes to opinions / behaviours as outlined below:

Cross-sectional Surveys

Cross-sectional surveys attempt to uncover participants' responses at a **single point** in time. When cross-sectional surveys are conducted, employing a short time frame is important so that responses are not influenced by external changes over time.

For example: student perceptions following the completion of the first academic year; student behaviour following a promotional campaign; students' understanding of learning outcomes following an activity.

Longitudinal Surveys

Longitudinal surveys are designed to assess **change over time** and therefore must be administered at least twice. For example:

- Trend study – two groups surveyed at different times to capture change
- Cohort – a survey administered to the same sample to establish changes within a cohort

Survey Design

The following guidelines are provided to assist in the overall design and flow of the survey:

- Only ask questions that link directly to the purpose and intended outcomes of the survey and that are intended for analysis. For example, do not ask for the gender of a student if there is no intention to categorise the survey analysis by gender.
- The simpler and shorter a survey, the more likely respondents are to answer all questions and answer them honestly. Longer, more complex surveys can annoy respondents and cause them to abandon the survey part-way or begin to pick arbitrary answers to speed to the end.
- Surveys that skip respondents over questions that are not relevant feel shorter and more pertinent to the respondent.
- Consider the following in the overall page design?
    - is the visual layout clean, simple, and consistent?
    - is there too much information per page?
    - do you have enough spacing between each question and section?
    - is your font size big enough?
    - if your survey is web based, how does it look on mobile devices?
    - do you have a progress bar for respondents to know how far along in the survey they are?

Length of Survey

The length of the survey needs to achieve a balance between asking the appropriate amount of questions to achieve the required outcomes and avoiding a survey that is too long.

As a guide, student surveys should not take more than 10 minutes to complete and should have a maximum of 20 questions.

The consequences of a long survey can include non-completion of the survey, poorer quality answers and student frustration. It can also have the implication that a student will be reluctant to complete further Fed Uni surveys should their experience with previous surveys be ungratifying.

Question Design

The following guidelines are provided to assist in the development of appropriate questions within the survey:

Question Types

- **Open-ended** questions, such as free text areas, allow for respondents to potentially contribute more in-depth answers to questions. However, leaving room for open-ended responses makes it more difficult to compare answers, look for trends and measure responses against each other. Open-ended questions can also cause some respondents to avoid answering the question altogether.
- **Objective** questions make comparisons across responses much easier and can make a survey of a large number of people much more manageable. However, respondents are limited by predetermined responses and do not have much freedom to provide the most detailed and accurate response.

Question Structure

- Use simple sentences and vocabulary appropriate to your audience. This is especially important if any portion of your respondents might not be native speakers of the language your survey is written in.
- Ask one question at a time (avoid double-barreled questions). An example of a double-barreled question is *How satisfied are you with our products and services?*
- Ensure questions are not biased towards one answer or another (e.g. Don't you agree … ?).
- Response categories should reflect a comprehensive array of choices, including "not applicable," "don't know" and/or "other" where appropriate.
- Limit the use of open-ended questions; as much as possible, position these at the end of the survey instrument.
- Ensure questions are not too broad in that they will not give you specific, actionable information? "Overall satisfaction" type questions often fall into this category. If you ask yourself what you will learn from the responses you will know whether they are too vague.
- In general, it's a good idea to ask the most important & interesting questions early in the survey (before the subject gets too bored or impatient with the questionnaire).

Response Scales

Designing questions with response scales are useful for providing both direction and intensity of responses. They are also useful as a method for grouping similar questions together.

When scaled questions are employed, they can be provided with coded values to enable statistical analysis, mean/median response etc. It is important that scales be kept consistent to allow the comparison of responses across other scaled questions of the survey.

The scale should be balanced so that the results are not skewed and an equal number of responses sit in the negative as in the affirmative.

Response scale options may also need to provide for the neutral response, e.g. 'not sure', as well as an 'N/A' response for instances where the question is not applicable to the responder.

Examples of response scales employed for higher education students by the Quality Indicators of Learning and Teacher (QILT) include:

- Strongly disagree / Disagree / Neither agree nor disagree / Agree / Strongly agree
- Not at all / Very little / Some / Quite a bit / Very much / Not applicable

- Never / Sometimes / Often / Very often
- Poor / Fair / Good / Excellent / Not applicable

Selecting a Sample of Students

Consider how the sample of students selected for the survey should be generated. Consider the following methods of selecting a sample:

- Simple Random Sample – random selection of participants from a sample
- Stratified Random Sample – random sample selected from a subpopulation (ex: based on year of study)
- Systematic Random Sample – random selection based on a specific ordering of sample selection (ex: every third student on a list of students)

Your sample should be specific, i.e. target only the relevant group of students and not all students. Sample only as many students as needed to ensure a reasonable sampling error.

The following URL may be useful in determining an appropriate survey sample size: http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm

It is important to make sure that you do not report results for very small groups. For example, if your intended report would break out responses by faculty, but only 4 people responded from one faculty, then reporting those responses could jeopardize the privacy of those respondents' answers. As a guideline, only report on cohort sizes of 5 or greater.

The sample size should also be large enough for your results to be considered representative. If you are interested in the responses of women in Mathematics, and you only receive 5 responses from women in Mathematics, (out of 20 women in Mathematics, for example) you could not report with confidence that their summary responses as representative of all women in Math.

Selecting the appropriate sample size will also assist the University in reducing student survey fatigue by helping control the number of times students are asked to complete surveys. Also, students are more likely to respond when they understand the relevance and importance of the survey questions to them.

Incentives

Two guidelines to consider are that the incentives must be positive (i.e. no negative consequences for non-respondents) and should be relevant to the topic of the survey (e.g., if you are conducting a transportation survey with the purpose of encouraging public transit, free parking passes would not be an appropriate incentive).

Surveys that offer incentives to respondents must track respondent identities in some way. If identifying information (such as names, e-mail addresses, or student identification numbers) are collected with the survey responses, the survey must follow the Student Survey Procedure for de-identifying the data by separating personal information from survey responses.

Legality of offering prizes for survey participation.

In Victoria, as of 20 June 2015, the governing principles for Trade Promotions changed so that businesses, charities and community organisations no longer need to apply to the Victorian Commission for Gambling and Liquor Regulation (VGLR) for a permit to conduct a trade promotion lottery (Game of Chance). However, if a decision is made to run a competition involving chance and is accessible from outside Victoria, then the competition will need to comply with any State or Territory laws in which the competition is able to be accessed; this means that, even though you are located in Victoria, if the competition can be accessed by entrants from other States, then it will need to comply with all of the relevant State and Territory Laws – many of which are similar, but not identical.

As a short summary, if the competition is to be conducted Nationwide, and there is an element of chance, then a permit will be required for the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales regardless of the prize pool. If the trade promotion offers an instant prize (not drawn later or at the end of the competition period), then a permit will also need to be obtained for South Australia.

Where prizes are randomly awarded exclusively to Victorian students as part of participation in a survey, the draw is considered a *Trade Promotion Lottery* under the Victorian Gambling Regulation Act 2003 and Gambling Regulations 2015. Entry to the prize draw must be voluntary and the following information must be provided in the survey:

- the closing date of the lottery
- if applicable, where and when the lottery will be drawn
- the name and date of the publication in which winners' names will be published
- the entry requirements, if any.

The names of winners of all prizes over $1000 must be published by one of the following methods:

- in a newspaper circulating generally in Victoria
- on the internet, for a minimum period of 28 days
- if the lottery was advertised solely through a trade journal, promotional magazine or similar publication, in that publication.

Other conditions applicable to surveys in the context of conducting a trade promotion lottery include:

- The winners of prizes must be advised in writing of the prize
- Certain records must be kept for a period of three years after finalisation of the lottery
- If the trade promotion lottery is to be drawn, the method of the draw must allow each ticket in the draw a random and equal chance of being drawn
- The winner of a prize must not incur a cost to accept a prize (other than a trivial cost)
- If information about entrants is to be used for a purpose other than the conduct of the lottery, this must be stated in the conditions of entry
- A person who conducts a trade promotion must not use entrants' information except in accordance with the purposes stated in the condition of entry
- A person who conducts a trade promotion lottery must obtain written agreement from the business, that the business will not use the entrants' information except in accordance with the purposes stated in the conditions of entry
- An entrant is not required to be present at the drawing of the lottery in order to be eligible to win a prize (unless the entry and draw are to occur on the same day and in the same place)
- The prize must be paid or transferred to the winner within 28 days after the draw
- The winner of a prize may only be substituted via a second draw, and only if the conditions of entry allow it and if reasonable efforts were made to identify the winner that were unsuccessful

- A trade promotion lottery must be conducted in a manner that is not offensive and that is not contrary to the public interest
- A prize may only be substituted if the substituted prize is of the same or greater value than the original prize and the winner either agrees in writing, or the original prize is unavailable due to circumstances beyond the control of the person conducting the trade promotion lottery and reasonable attempts are made to reach agreement with the winner that are unsuccessful.

Testing

Thorough testing of the survey should be conducted before delivery to the student body.

The purpose of testing is to obtain feedback regarding the wording, structure, format and timing of the survey. As a guideline, in addition to yourself at least another two people should test the survey.

During testing, you should ask respondents to complete the survey and time how long it took them. Feedback from testers will enable you to modify the survey prior to distributing it to a larger audience. As part of this process, it is good practice to test the online survey and underlying data prior to conducting the survey to ensure it works and flows correctly.

Data Security

The Student Survey Procedure provides instructions for ensuring the security and anonymity of data surrounding survey respondents and responses.

Anonymous data do not include names, addresses, student identification numbers or any other personal information that would make it possible to associate a response with any given individual.