



Guidelines: Evaluation activities involving USQ staff and students

Research Integrity and Ethics
Office of Research

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1. Overview

Evaluation activities at the University may take the form of surveys, focus groups, interviews or web-based forms. The University is committed to ensuring that the burden that these activities have on students and staff is not onerous.

The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) has produced the [Ethical Considerations in Quality Assurance and Evaluation Activities](#) guide which “recognises the important contributions that quality assurance (QA) and evaluation activities make to better outcomes, and more efficient and effective work processes. However, there can be uncertainty about what level of oversight QA and evaluation activities require and there can be confusion about whether an activity is research or evaluation or QA. This can be because QA and evaluation activities may include the use of methods or approaches also used in research such as surveys and observation”. Furthermore, the guide indicates that “Evaluation is a term that generally encompasses the systematic collection and analysis of information to make judgements, usually about the effectiveness, efficiency and/or appropriateness of an activity”.

It is recommended that you review and use this NHMRC guide and the information contained within these University ‘Guidelines for evaluation activities involving USQ staff and students’ when undertaking quality assurance and evaluation activities at USQ.

The principles, procedures and approval processes for evaluation activities involving USQ students or staff contained within this document is intended to assist students or staff undertaking evaluations with peers or colleagues.

These guidelines **do not** replace the University’s formal [Human Research Ethics approval](#) process. The University’s Human Ethics Process is conducted in accordance with the requirements outlined in the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research \(2007\) - Updated 2018](#).

2. Principles

The following provides a guideline for evaluation activities involving students or staff at the University. For the purpose of these guidelines ‘evaluation activities’ could include methods such as surveys or focus groups and are often related to teaching and learning, student experience, research projects, or services and facilities. They include corporate evaluation instruments used to evaluate courses, programs, teachers or university products or services.

These general principles have been defined in accordance with the NHMRC the Ethical Considerations in Quality Assurance and Evaluation Activities guide which recognises that “QA, evaluation and research exist on a continuum of activity, and work that begins as one form of activity can evolve into another over time. Importantly, QA and evaluation commonly involve minimal risk, burden or inconvenience to participants, and, while some level of oversight is necessary, Human Research Ethics Committee

(HREC) review processes are often not the optimal pathway for review of these activities”.

2.1 General Principles

1. Evaluation which is conducted solely for the purpose of internal quality assurance, and which will not be published or presented externally, **does not** require approval from the USQ Human Research Ethics Committee
2. Evaluation data gathered internally may be included in internal publications and presentations without formal ethics approval provided:
 - The data was gathered on-line or in writing;
 - The responses were provided voluntarily;
 - The anonymity of the respondents is maintained; and
 - Respondents were advised of the possibility that the data could be used for evaluation purposes.

Suggested statement:

Data collected through this survey will be used to inform improvements at USQ and could also be used in internal publications and presentations. Individual responses will remain confidential and no individuals will be identified.

3. Data gathered verbally (e.g. through focus groups, interviews) in which the anonymity of the respondents is compromised requires approval from the USQ Human Research Ethics Committee in order to be included in external publications and presentations.
4. The use of evaluation data relating to more than one staff member requires written permission from all relevant staff members in order to be included in external publications and/or presentations.
5. All other research requires approval from the USQ Human Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement. Ethics approval cannot be granted retrospectively, and research with or about human participants that is conducted without approval will be regarded as a potential breach of the USQ Research Code of Conduct Policy.
6. The use of USQ corporate evaluation data (e.g. My Opinion) for internal publication and/or presentation requires written permission from Head (Students and Communities), who may consult with other relevant senior managers as appropriate.

In addition to ethical approval, anyone (including Research Workers external to USQ) wishing to contact USQ students and/or staff for research purposes (e.g. surveys, interviews, focus groups) needs to obtain approval. Details on the approval process are available on the [Human Ethics website](#).

2. Evaluation activities at USQ

Recurrent evaluation is an essential component of the University's quality assurance and informs planning for quality improvement.

The following guidelines have been designed to assist staff undertaking large-scale or potentially sensitive evaluation activities involving students or staff. The following would be considered to be examples of large-scale/sensitive evaluation activities:

- a survey of all students based at one campus
- an evaluation activity involving a particular cohort, such as international students or alumni
- a focus group with students from a particular equity group (e.g. students with a disability)
- a survey of all academic staff.

These guidelines have been developed to inform and assist evaluators in their activities by:

- providing a University-wide systematic approach to evaluation activities involving students and/or staff
- ensuring processes used to gather feedback are consistent with University policies and ambitions, particularly the ethics approval process
- promoting strategies to review existing evaluation schedules to minimise the impact upon USQ students and staff
- maximising the utility of the data gathered through evaluation activities.

3.1 Problem, purpose or rationale for evaluation

Identify which areas will be evaluated and the reasons for choosing these areas.

Questions to consider:

- What do we need to know?
- Why do we need to know this?
- Has anyone evaluated this before? What is the existing knowledge on the topic?
- What is the best way to collect this information?
- Should an incentive be offered?
- Is approval from the USQ Human Research Ethics Committee and/or the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation) required to approach the participant group?
- Who will conduct the evaluation and analyse results?
- Are there limitations on access to preferred datasets or participant groups? Is timing an issue for optimal data collection? i.e. during semester
- What are the likely outcomes and how will the information collected help us to improve?
- Are the results likely to produce a statistical relevance?
- How will the identified improvements be implemented?
- How will the evaluation be promoted and the subsequent results and intended improvements be communicated to participants?

3.2 Ethical issues and consultation

The involvement of human participants requires consideration of a range of ethical issues at each stage in the evaluation process, including planning and design, conducting the evaluation and reporting on results. All potential evaluation activities should be assessed against the University's Human Research Ethics Committee approval process and unless the evaluation is for reasons outlined in 2.1. General Principles it must not proceed without ethics approval.

Ethical consideration which need to be addressed in the planning and design of evaluation activities:

- confidentiality of responses
- identifying who is responsible for the evaluation activity (ownership) and storage of data (including location and timeline requirements)
- explaining the purpose (objectives), nature, process for recording information during the evaluation (methodology)
- who will have access to information collected
- how the information will be used and the likely impact on clients
- reporting arrangements to evaluation participants (feedback).

Potential respondents need to be provided with written information which includes the following:

- name of university and area conducting the evaluation
- name and details of the contact person
- title of evaluation
- purpose of evaluation described using simple terms
- criteria used to select potential participants
- invitation to people to participate
- voluntary nature of participation
- what is expected of participants
- possible benefits or risks to participants (if applicable)
- assurance regarding confidentiality of responses
- any benefits to be offered to participants
- information on how outcomes will be reported
- recording of data e.g. use of video or audio tape
- information on how records will be stored and who will have access to these records.

If interviews are to be held and recorded, it is also necessary to inform participants that they can read through the transcribed interview before information is used and the recording destroyed.

3.3 Evaluation scheduling

During annual planning discussions, evaluation activities for the forthcoming year should be identified. A schedule of evaluations should be maintained in each responsible area and consultation with other areas that may have conducted similar evaluation activities undertaken. This is recommended to reduce duplication of effort and/or provide a valuable insight into those methods that may have been successful in the past.

3.4 Methodology

Decide the most appropriate method that will yield results that can assist institutional improvement. There are a number of approaches including: focus groups, in depth interviews, telephone surveys, online surveys, postal surveys, email, suggestion boxes, web parts on the student portal etc. Consideration of a combination of evaluation activities, for example a focus group, followed by a larger survey can also assist to obtain appropriate results.

3.5 Compiling Data

As part of discussions about the evaluation activity, consider any potential financial and staffing implications. This may be particularly significant depending upon the method chosen and the survey population.

Data collected from evaluations can often be compiled in Excel or Word and analysed using tools such as SPSS or NVivo.

3.6 Approvals

Before an evaluation activity proceeds it **must** receive the approval of the relevant senior Manager/Head/Centre Director. The evaluator needs to address all aspects of the planning process as described in these guidelines and provide this information to the relevant senior manager.

3.7 Implementation

Ensure that ethical requirements are adhered to prior to implementation and that relevant details about the evaluation are explained to participants. The University owns the data collected during evaluation activities. All relevant University policies concerning the use and publication of data apply.

3.8 Assessing outcomes

Information collected needs to be compiled and recorded accurately. The purpose of evaluating activities is not simply to collect information or data about our activities. The information collected from staff and students provides a valuable resource to assess our performance, identify improvements, and inform strategic planning.

3.9 Feedback to stakeholders and participants

The process for providing feedback to stakeholders and/or participants is part of planning an evaluation activity. It is important that those people who took the time to participate in the evaluation are informed of outcomes and any actions to be taken as a result of the evaluation activity. It is also useful as part of this feedback to discuss potential improvement strategies with stakeholders and participants. This may assist in refining the suggested improvements before they are implemented. It may also assist future evaluation activities as people are more likely to want to be part of an evaluation activity if they believe their involvement will lead to positive action.

3.10 Outcomes

As part of reporting on outcomes of an evaluation activity, consider other groups that may be able to utilise findings to identify areas of improvement within their own work

areas or provide additional feedback about the issue that has been evaluated. Committees and working groups are also useful forums for disseminating information.

Following the identification of improvement strategies via analysis and reporting of results, and, if appropriate, further discussion with those people who participated in the evaluation activity, the applicable area can then implement changes to work processes or services, or put in place new services in response to 'client' needs. At a later stage the activities are evaluated and the planning cycle begins again.

4. Resources

4.1 Internal

1. USQ Research Code of Conduct: <https://policy.usq.edu.au/documents/142208PL>
2. USQ Human Ethics process: <https://www.usq.edu.au/current-students/academic/higher-degree-by-research-students/conducting-research/human-ethics/process>
3. Permissions to access USQ students and staff for research purposes: <https://www.usq.edu.au/current-students/academic/higher-degree-by-research-students/conducting-research/human-ethics>
4. Human Ethics forms and resources: <https://www.usq.edu.au/current-students/academic/higher-degree-by-research-students/conducting-research/human-ethics/forms-resources>
5. Resources for applicants: <https://www.usq.edu.au/current-students/academic/higher-degree-by-research-students/conducting-research/human-ethics/forms-resources/hrec-applicants>
6. Human Ethics review: <https://www.usq.edu.au/current-students/academic/higher-degree-by-research-students/conducting-research/human-ethics/review>

4.2 External

1. National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) - Updated 2018: <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/publications/national-statement-ethical-conduct-human-research-2007-updated-2018>
2. Ethical considerations in quality assurance and evaluation activities: <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/about-us/resources/ethical-considerations-quality-assurance-and-evaluation-activities>