A Revised Peer Review of Teaching Protocol: A Case Study at the National University of Singapore

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Extended Abstract

Providing a high quality educational experience to the students is a key mission of the National University of Singapore (NUS). In this mission, reliable teaching appraisal plays a vital role in rewarding good teaching performances and enhancing the status of teaching. As a part of the teaching appraisal process, peer review of teaching (PRT) was implemented at NUS in the academic year 2001/2002. Since then, it has become an important instrument in the University’s promotion and tenure process, the selection of teaching award winners, and re-appointment of faculty members. Peer review of teaching, together with self-appraisal by the faculty member and student feedback, provides much needed data triangulation necessary to holistically and objectively appraise a faculty member’s teaching performance. Peers provide much-needed observation and assessment of teaching, which students may not always recognise.

Despite the usefulness of PRT, it has been recognised (see Chism, 2007; Harris, Farrell, Bell, Devlin & James, 2008; Hubball & Clarke, 2011) that this process does not always deliver the intended outcomes. For example, at NUS the reports on PRT have tended to return quantitative scores of 4 and above (on a scale of 5), with 4 being awarded for the overwhelming majority of the reviewees. This was documented in a paper put forward by the Faculty of Science (Wee, Wong & Yong, 2008). In most cases, the qualitative comments were short and lacking insight. It thus became a blunt instrument unable to provide differentiation in summatively assessing teaching performances. Kong (2002) attributes these problems and the tendency towards “inflationary rhetoric” to the lack of honesty among reviewers and the lack of anonymity in the review process. Pan and Ip (2006) saw the problem as being rooted in a lack of consistency in review standards and criteria, lack of motivation among reviewers, and lack of training in review skills and reporting.

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The NUS Teaching Academy (NUSTA) undertook a project to review the University’s PRT process. A subcommittee within the NUS Teaching Academy (NUSTA) was tasked to conduct the study. The subcommittee in its report recommended several changes to the PRT process to improve the aforementioned situation where the process has become practically non-functional. The key changes are:

1. **Changes to the PRT procedure**
   a. Peer reviewers are expected to have attended workshops designed and conducted by CDTL to prepare reviewers and to enhance the quality of PRT reports.
   b. Though peer reviewers are encouraged to observe the reviewee at the same teaching sessions wherever possible and to confer about the review results, they are to fill out individual and separate reports to allow for more independent and objective assessments.
   c. Peer reviewers are strongly encouraged to hold pre-observation meetings with reviewees for an overview of their teaching as well as post-observation meetings to provide feedback.
   d. Deans and Heads should ensure that the quality of the reports is good. Inadequate reports should be returned for rewriting.

2. **Changes to the PRT report form**
   a. An online peer review report system has been set up for the reviewers to submit their reports electronically.
   b. Evaluation items in the PRT report have been reorganised and reformulated. Some items have been replaced or deleted.
   c. Quantitative scores have been totally removed. Reviewers are expected to provide adequate qualitative comments in the report.
   d. Reference notes to explain selected evaluation items have been drafted and added to the form as an appendix to aid reviewers.

The University accepted most of the recommendations and the revised PRT process was implemented in August 2013. The subcommittee is currently collecting quantitative and qualitative data from various sources to analyse the effectiveness of the new PRT process. These data include:

- Frequency of peer reviews conducted under the revised system and frequency of accepted/rejected review reports.
- Reviewers’ review comments as well as Heads and Deans’ comments in accepting/rejecting review reports.
- Questionnaire data on the implementation of the revised peer review system.
- Interview data on key stakeholders’ perceptions of the revised system.

We will present some of our initial findings at the conference. The implemented changes and their effectiveness will be the focus of the discussion. The methodologies adopted to arrive at the recommendations and measure the improvements, if any, brought about by the changes will also be discussed.
References


