



# The Problem of Performance Appraisals: What Junior Academics Think About Student Course Evaluations and Peer Ratings?

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## Abstract

*The perceptions of early career Canadian education professors (referred herein as ECCEP) on the following performance appraisals: (1) student course evaluations and (2) peer ratings have not been studied to date. Considering this lack, the present paper explored what these academics think and feel about aforesaid evaluations. Commensurately, it answered the question on whether ECCEP are dissatisfied by these appraisals' process. And it also answered the question on whether they intend to leave their institutions as a result of their dissatisfaction. In response to the two questions, its findings show that ECCEP think that student course evaluations and peer ratings are biased and arbitrary. But at the same time, they do not intend to depart from their institutions because of identified paucities.*

**Key words:** *Performance, Student course evaluations, Peer evaluations, Turnover intentions.*

## Introduction

Existing studies indicate that student course evaluations and peer ratings are not entirely objective (Iqbal, 2014; Beran et al., 2005). In light of this rationale, the present study is conducted to explore the perceptions of early career Canadian education professors (referred as ECCEP) on aforementioned performance reviews. Additionally, it also determines whether or not their perceptions on these two performance reviews lead them to develop turnover intentions. It is significant to explore their perceptions in that regard because there is no study in the literature that has determined whether or not on student course evaluations and peer evaluations' processes and outcomes cause dissatisfaction and turnover intentions among them. Parallel to that, Badali's (2004) study on faculties of education in Canada indicate that education professors are concerned that they are not always adequately rewarded for their academic work. For clarity purpose, the scope of the present study is limited to the two aforesaid performance evaluations

because they are the ones that ECCEP recurrently undergo during annual reviews and prior to applying for tenure. In the present study, the concept of turnover intentions refers to voluntary or involuntary departure intentions. It refers to whether an employee intends to leave his or her organisation (Telly et al., 1971).

### **Background statement**

Limited research has been conducted in Canada to address issues of turnover intentions among ECCEP. Whereas in the US, these issues have been extensively studied. For instance, Ochola's (2008) study of faculty members' attitude across American universities, emphasised that junior professors were more likely to actually leave their institution than tenured professors. When perceiving that their chance of achieving tenure was minimal, they were more prone to involuntarily develop departure intentions (Rosser, 2004; Zhou et al., 2004). Likewise, Baldwin's (1990) career stage stratum showed that early career professors often intended to leave their institution because of job dissatisfaction and attrition. Paradoxically, mid-career and late-career professors were more self-actualised or satisfied than their junior colleagues. Caplow and McGee (1958) also argued that assistant professors in the US were more likely to develop turnover intentions than associate and full professors. Ipso facto, aforementioned studies on US academics provide a rationale for the present study.

### **The paucity of student course evaluations and peer evaluations**

The reason why perceptions on student course evaluations and peer evaluations are explored in this study, is because of critiques raised in existing literature. The first concern is that the outcome of student course evaluations is one of the factors taken into consideration during university tenure evaluations (Luppicini, 2015; Berk, 2003; Hoffman, 2003). But, they are not always objective, and free of any bias and paucities. Researchers have questioned the fairness and accuracy of student evaluations of teaching (Marsh, 1987) on the ground that they are ill prepared to do so. At the same time, Boring, Ottoboni and Stark also opined that students cannot accurately rate the teaching effectiveness of their professors (Boring et al., 2016). Often dissatisfied students use course evaluations as means of retribution against professors (Beran et al., 2005). According to Herbert Marsh (1987), such ratings should not be considered as the only metric to measure teaching effectiveness. He and other critics argued that it will be too simplistic to accept such ratings because there is no single criterion of effective teaching (Driscoll & Cadden, 2010). Student course evaluations are subjective and influenced by gender and classroom interactions (Cramer & Alexitch, 2000). Crawford and MacLeod (1990) pointed out that faculty members who teach in larger classes were more likely to be negatively rated by students than those teaching in smaller classes. Those with more teaching experience, and who scheduled more office hours with students, receive more positive evaluations from students (Cramer & Alexitch, 2000).

Pro tem, Denisi, Randolph and Blanco's critique (1983) on the paucity of peer evaluations in organisational settings raised the same issue ascribed to student course evaluations. In particular, peer evaluations are often arbitrary, subjective (Obeng, 2005; Shaw, 2004) and cause dissatisfaction among employees who feel that they have been unfairly assessed by colleagues (Denisi et al., 1983). According to Schachtsiek's (1994), peer evaluations cannot be entirely accurate because reviewers are not always trained in best evaluation practices. Findings of his study on the nursing professors of Illinois' universities indicated that peer

evaluators are not always trained in best assessment techniques. Sharing the same concern, Isabeau Iqbal (2014) argued that across Canadian universities, faculty members are conducting peer reviews "blindly", without any objective (i.e., research-informed) criteria or standards upon which to base their evaluations (Iqbal, 2014). Considering the aforementioned issues raised in existing higher education literature, it is salient to explore whether early career Canadian education professors observe the same issues and share the same discourse embedded in the aforementioned literature.

### **Adams' Equity Theory of Motivation in Organizations**

Concerning the analysis of interview findings, Adam's equity theory was employed. Equity theory was chosen over other organisational theories, because one of its arguments on the attitude of employees, insinuates that there is a correlation between job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions (Adams, 1965). It contends that employees are motivated by fairness, dissatisfied by unfairness, and may leave their organisation because of paucities in the rewards system (Adams, 1965; Christensen et al, 2014). Turnover intentions and retention intentions are subjected to their own judgment of fairness (Dittrich et al., 1985). As contended by researchers (Long, 2014; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992), the higher an individual's perception of fairness, the more committed to the organisation he or she will become (Adams, 1965). If the perception of unfairness is higher, the more dissatisfied the individual will become, the higher turnover intentions will develop. Likewise, Taylor and Moghaddam (1994) also argued that equity theory presents a conceptualisation of the individual as a rational being; a being who works through estimates of inputs and outcomes in order to calculate ratios and then compare his or her ratio with that of others in order to arrive at the notion of justice. It does not endorse egalitarianism (Walsh, 2014), and contends against favoritism and reward unfairness. It supports procedural justice (Williams, 2016) in performance evaluation processes (Anderson; 2014). While this theory has been widely employed in exploring the perceptions of employees in non-academic organisations, it has not been yet used to explore the perceptions of ECCEP. To date, there is no study in the Canadian higher literature which has explored ECCEP's perceptions on the fairness of student course and peer evaluations from this organisational theory's angle.

### **Method**

Prior to collecting interview data, an ethic approval certificate was issued by McGill University's Board of Ethics. Interview data for this study were generated from a modus operandi of semi-structured interviews. The interview questions guideline was designed on the basis of the aim and rationale of this study. Participants were asked to give their perception on the following performance evaluations: student course evaluations and peer ratings. The representative sample was comprised of 20 early career Canadian education academics. The recruitment process consisted of randomly sending letters of consent to assistant professors via their workplace-emails. The interviews of these participants were conducted through telephone and face to face formats. For clarity purpose, early career Canadian education professors solely refer to full time assistant professors, teaching at Canadian universities' education faculties. Interview findings were collected in order to answer the following research questions: What ECCEP think about the process of student course evaluations and peer ratings? Are they dissatisfied or satisfied with student course evaluations and peer ratings?

Do they intend to leave their department because they are dissatisfied with the process or outcomes these performance appraisals?

The aforesaid questions were designed in relation to the rationale of existing literature on student course appraisal and peer ratings. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze interview data. Interview data was coded through Nvivo and produced a kappa value of 0.66 ( $p < .0001$ ). Sample participants agreed 68 per cent of the time that student course and peer evaluations are somewhat biased. Interview data were coded and analysed on the basis of four nominal themes: ECCEP think that student course evaluations are biased and not objective enough ECCEP think that peer ratings are somewhat arbitrary, biased and not objective ECCEP are frustrated with the paucity of student course evaluations and peer ratings. ECCEP intend to leave their institution because of the paucity of student course evaluations and peer ratings.

The extent of the research field was only limited to Canadian public research universities' education faculties. Thus, the implication and significance of the present study are circumscribed to early career Canadian academics employed at public research universities. The study was limited to those who have been teaching less than three years at the professorial level, and are still undergoing annual reviews as part of the tenure process. Sampled ECCEP's perceptions on the paucities of student course evaluations and peer ratings were interpreted through the lens of Adams' organisational behavior definition. Considering that performance review can infer many definitions, in the present study, its definition was only limited to the practices of student course evaluations and peer evaluations at Canadian universities' education faculties.

## **Findings and Conclusion**

Interview participants stated that student course evaluations are often biased and influenced by grades received by students. According to them, the course rating process is not axiomatically objective. And that dissatisfied students often use course evaluations as a tool of vindication against professors. For example participant 4 complained that "students often under-rate their professor because they don't like the professor or the course. There is a correlation between the grades that students receive and the rating itself. The ratings provided by them are not entirely unbiased and don't always reflect the teaching input of their teacher." To some extent, interviewees were dubious about considering student course evaluations as the sole metric of measuring teaching effectiveness. Though, they voiced their frustration against biased evaluations, they still believe that feedbacks provided by students can be useful to improve their teaching skills and courses design. As stated by participant 9, "students do not have the right credentials to evaluate teaching courses. Still their ratings provide feedback that can help us to improve our teaching skills and course design." But interviewees stated outcomes of such teaching appraisals should not be considered for tenure decisions. They stated so because they think students are not the teaching experts who can evaluate the teaching performance of professors. Students are not well equipped for such task because they are learners, and not fully aware of course materials.

Another argument evoked by interviewees against considering the outcomes of student course ratings for tenure evaluations is the issue of responses rate. The current online format of evaluations has lowered students' responses rate. Few students file their course ratings through online based evaluations. Thus, interviewees think that current course ratings are less reliable for conducting a summative assessment on professors because not all students respond to online ratings. As contended by participant 17, "online evaluations lower student's participation rate,

and are less objective and accurate because not all students who attend a particular course fill out online based course evaluations.” Some interviewees recommended that paper based evaluations should replace current online formats in order to increase students’ responses rate. To some extent, interviewees’ discourse on course ratings infuse the assumption that these ratings should be considered for formative evaluations and not primarily for summative evaluations. Meaning that student course evaluations are judged as appropriate for providing feedback for professional development, and not reliable to measure teaching performance. They would like to have other rating approaches to supplement current student evaluations. For instance participant 3 opined that “student course ratings should not be considered in the process of tenure and promotion evaluation. These reports should be use as indicators of performance but not for tenure and promotion decision. Student course evaluations should be supplemented by other models of teaching assessment.” When asked if they believe that their senior peers are better appraised by students than they are, interviewees responded that based on their socialization in academe, all professorial clusters voice the same concern. Junior and senior education professors alike are somewhat frustrated with the paucity of student course evaluations. When asked if they have already intended to depart from their institution because of receiving arbitrary course ratings that did not accurately reflect their teaching inputs, most interviewees responded that they have never intended to leave. In addition, they stated that although dissatisfied, unfair course ratings have not led to attrition. For them, academia is not just about teaching, it is also about scholarly publications.

In regard to peer evaluations, interview findings reveal that interviewees are not entirely free of any bias. They think that peer ratings are often arbitrary and orchestrated in a competitive academic workplace climate. As pointed out by participant 12, ‘for some education professors, peer evaluations represent an opportunity to settle a score against a colleague by under-rating him or her’. Plus, it transpires that colleagues when acting as evaluators often use their own subjective standards. Such behavior exists because they are not informed enough by the department on what the appraisal standards are. Conjointly, the lack of detailed feedbacks from peer evaluations causes dissatisfaction among those in the pursuit of tenure and full professorship. As contended by participant 15, “feedback from peer reviewers are not detailed and critical enough in order to contribute to my professional development.” Congruently, the majority of interview respondents stated that they are not satisfied with the process of peer ratings because of the aforesaid paucities. When asked whether they have already intended to leave their current institution because of unfair and arbitrary peer ratings, they expressed no plan to voluntarily or involuntarily depart from their current department. Instead, they stated that they will stay because the probability of achieving tenure was higher, about 95 per cent. Yet, at the same time, they are frustrated with tenure process because it is too demanding and strenuous. In conclusion, study findings indicate that ECCEP are somewhat dissatisfied with the paucity of student course evaluations and peer evaluations. In particular, procedural unfairness in these ratings transpires as their main concern. The process of aforesaid appraisals is judged as somewhat unfair because these evaluations are often biased and arbitrary. Yet, such paucity does not enkindle ECCEP’s workplace attrition. Procedural paucities do not deter ECCP from holding retention intentions. Ipso facto, the present study induces that findings do not fully align with Stacy Adam’s definition of employees’ attitude against procedural injustice. Unlike Adam’s (1965) argument that employees’ dissatisfaction against unfair rewards or appraisals can lead to turnover, above findings indicate that there is no relationship between ECCEP’s dissatisfaction and turnover intentions. ECCPE’s output comparison with senior colleagues does not show any differential treatment. Both professorial clusters are exposed to risks of encountering arbitrary

appraisals in their workplace setting. Inferring that seniority and tenure status in Canadian universities' education faculties do not immune tenured education professors from unfair appraisals. Yet, in absence of interview data pertaining to the perceptions of senior Canadian education professors, the present study is limited to make such assertion as a fundamental truth. Consequently, it suggests that further studies on Canadian senior education professors' perceptions on the objectivity of aforesaid performance evaluations should be engaged by other researchers. Meanwhile, it contributes in the field of Canadian higher education studies by revealing that turnover intentions are not intrinsic to the organisational behavior of ECCEP. All things being equal, it addresses some issues of evaluation paucities. It recommends that university administrations may consider developing institutional mechanisms in order to limit the risks of biased student course evaluations and peer ratings. In relation to existing literature, present findings contribute to the literature by revealing that biased student course evaluations and peer ratings affect the perception of ECCEP, but not to the same extent as defined by Adams' equity theory. ECCEP's frustration with aforesaid performance reviews does not translate into departure their intentions. It does not translate into a rejection or an anti-discourse against summative evaluation. The main problem is not ascribed to the outcomes of these ratings but the process wherein they are engineered. Implying that not all evaluation practices at the institutional level align with the ethos of fairness. The mechanism by which the teaching effectiveness and merit of some academics are assessed by students and peers shows that the academic rewarding system is somewhat politicised and biased. Yet, it does not quell the belief that university tenure systems are a meritocracy wherein tenure achievement and career advancement are earned on the basis of individual merit.

Though, findings in this study substantiate one of the conclusions stipulated by contemporary higher education researchers (Acker et al., 2012; Gravestock, 2011; Brown & Sherry, 2010). There is a general consensus among these scholars that the process of tenure is strenuous, and is not entirely fair and transparent (Henry & Tator, 2012, Jones et al., 2012; Gravestock, 2011). Not only that, study findings also denote the same discourse transpiring in existing higher education literature. Like Boring et al (2016), Obeng, (2005), and Shaw (2004)'s critical discourse on the paucity of student course evaluations and peer ratings, the present findings raise the same issue. They point out that aforementioned performance evaluations are biased and are not objective enough. While study findings fall in the same discourse held by higher education researchers, they make an extra analytical contribution. Precisely speaking, they establish that the paucity of mentioned appraisals is not a determinant of turnover intentions among ECCEP.

The narrative that emerges from the perceptions of ECCEP is not only peculiar to them. Studies done on the perceptions of public employees on performance appraisals also reveal the same type of frustration (Kim & Holzer, 2016). Based on such narrative, it is logical to assume that course and peer evaluations are often flawed. Thus, the outcomes of these evaluations should not be taken for granted as being absolutely objective, particularly when making tenure decisions. Overall, present findings suggest that the procedural paucity of aforesaid appraisals is a demotivator, but not to the extent of causing turnover intentions among ECCEP. Yet, the absence of a causal relationship between cited appraisals and ECCEP's propensity to leave their department does not necessarily mean that other types of appraisals do not. That is why the present study suggests that the impact of the following performance evaluations on ECCEP's perceptions: (1) external evaluations, and (2) tenure and promotion dossier assessments deserve to be explored as well.

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