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Widening participation, narrowing perspectives: rethinking student evaluations in law teaching

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges and opportunities in adapting student evaluations of teaching (SETs) to enhance fairness, inclusivity and effectiveness, with a special emphasis on law teaching within increasingly diverse student bodies. While SETs are used widely, they often fail to adequately capture teaching quality and may disadvantage both students and educators inadvertently. This study critiques traditional SET practices, identifying how factors such as student background, unfamiliarity with legal concepts and cultural sensitivities can influence feedback, leading to incomplete or skewed evaluations. Recognising these limitations, the article advocates for a more multifaceted approach to teaching evaluation that integrates SETs with alternative methods such as open-ended questions, focus groups, reflective portfolios and peer reviews. By fostering continuous engagement, self-reflection and lifelong learning, this more nuanced framework supports both student development and teaching effectiveness. The article highlights the importance of tailoring evaluations to the unique demands of legal education, including assessing students' legal reasoning and application of principles. It also proposes actionable strategies for improving peer review processes and enhancing student preparation for giving feedback. Ultimately, this article calls for a shift toward collaborative and human-centred evaluation systems that promote deeper learning and fairness in a diverse academic landscape, enriching the legal education experience for all stakeholders.

Keywords: Legal education, Widening participation, Cultural diversity, Student evaluation of teaching.

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Introduction

As universities embrace widening participation initiatives, the fostering of diverse, inclusive learning environments takes centre stage in legal education. Yet, ensuring fairness and effectiveness in this endeavour presents unique challenges, particularly when it comes to assessing teaching quality. Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have long been a mainstay, but their application both generally and within diversifying student bodies requires careful consideration. This article considers the potential pitfalls and hidden biases lurking within traditional SET practices, in general and in the context of widening participation, drawing upon insights from recent research to expose the limitations inherent in over-interpreting minor fluctuations in evaluations. While the inclusion of new groups of learners brings unique perspectives, it also highlights broader limitations in traditional evaluation practices.

This study explores how certain factors - which may be heightened among those who are less familiar with higher education - like student background, unfamiliar legal concepts and cultural sensitivities can influence feedback, potentially skewing interpretations and overshadowing the true picture of teaching effectiveness. A nuanced approach that embraces context, alternative explanations and qualitative insights is proposed. Utilising open-ended questions, focus groups and peer review alongside SETs allows the rich tapestry of student experiences to be captured, unveiling the broader narrative behind numerical evaluations. A multifaceted approach that prioritises fairness, inclusivity and meaningful feedback over arbitrary statistics is preferred to reliance on traditional SETs in a widening participation context. Only by acknowledging the limitations of existing practices and embracing innovative evaluation methods, can a learning environment where diverse voices are heard, understood and valued be built.

In UK higher education, data for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning for the most part seems to take the form of surveys and questionnaires that tend to focus on performance-based criteria such as assessment results and levels of student satisfaction. Tennant and others[1] note that there is nothing in the National Student Survey (NSS), for example, that relates to the value of the content itself or the students' level of understanding – what is being measured

[1] M. Tennant, C. McMullen and D. Kaczynski, *Teaching, Learning and Research in Higher Education: A critical approach* (Routledge, 2010) 13.

is student satisfaction rather than teaching quality.[2] In most higher education institutions formal evaluation data takes the form of SETs that measure students' levels of satisfaction with individual courses and tutors. The typical SET consists of forms that ask students to rate their perception of course teachers, often on 5-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Students are asked to give overall ratings of both their tutor and their course. In addition, they are asked to rate specific characteristics of the tutor (e.g. knowledge, fairness, helpfulness) and of the course (e.g. organisation, difficulty, informative). Mean ratings are then computed across all students and for each rated item, as well as across all rated items. These mean ratings are often used to evaluate a tutor's teaching effectiveness by comparing them with ratings received by other tutors in the department or in the faculty.[3]

Across the sector there is, by and large, low student engagement with the evaluation process. Dommeyer and others[4] reported average response rates within a cohort of 70% for in-class surveys and 29% for online surveys and Ling and others[5] have found similar results. Often, at an institutional level, no meaningful attempt seems to be made to use or interpret this data beyond the surface statistics, which tends to give the impression that the exercise is done for auditing purposes rather than in a genuine effort to improve teaching and learning within universities.

Although a great deal of research has been published with regard to students' evaluations, hardly any of this has been in the context of teaching law students or widening participation. The focus of this paper is two-fold: first, to explore how the process of evaluating teaching and learning at university law schools can be improved to enhance both student learning and teaching quality while ensuring fairness to educators; and second, to address the unique challenges posed by increasingly diverse groups of learners. This discussion draws on relevant literature to propose evaluation methods that are both inclusive and impactful, fostering a more equitable and effective framework for assessing

[2] Tennant and others (n 1) 26.
[3] B. Uttl and D. Smibert 'Student evaluations of teaching: Teaching quantitative courses can be hazardous to one's career. (2017) 5 Peer J e3299.
[4] C. J. Dommeyer, P. Baum, R. W. Hanna and K. S. Chapman, 'Gathering faculty teaching evaluations by in-class and online surveys: Their effects on response rates and evaluations' (2004) 29 Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 611.
[5] T. Ling, J. Phillips and S. Weihrich, 'Online evaluations vs in-class paper teaching evaluations: A paired comparison' (2012) 12 Journal of the Academy of Business Education 150.

teaching in higher education. As such, this discussion will begin by considering the need for evaluation of teaching and learning in general before identifying both the challenges inherent in the process and potential solutions. For example, a wide range of alternative forms of module evaluation other than surveys and questionnaires, including focus groups and reflective portfolios, are discussed by Light and others,[6] who also put forward the propositions that teaching students how to reflect should include teaching them how to give feedback and that evaluation should not just be about assessing teachers, it should be a process which itself contributes to teaching.

Tennant and others[7] highlight the benefits of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the USA, which goes beyond simply capturing levels of student satisfaction to assessing their wider development as learners. The importance of collecting and interpreting appropriate evaluation data at institutions that have a very high proportion of students from widening participation backgrounds with little experience of formal/UK education, and the need for them to understand how to give effective feedback in order to improve their learning experiences, will also be considered. Gelber and others[8] suggest that relying solely on student evaluations can be problematic in diverse contexts; law schools should therefore consider complementing SETs with other measures like peer reviews, teaching portfolios and focus groups. The final issue that will be explored is student evaluation within the discipline of law. Law schools can, for example, adapt evaluations to assess aspects like legal reasoning skills, case analysis and application of legal principles, catering to the specific learning objectives of legal education.

The need for evaluation

Identifying the rationale for student evaluation of teaching and learning is vital before any discussion of the challenges and suggestions for improvement of this process can be embarked upon. The relevant literature identifies five broad themes in terms of the need for evaluation, which will be expanded upon below. They are that satisfaction correlates with improved learning; that accountability improves professionalism; providing quality assurance for potential students;

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[6] G. Light, R. Cox, and S. Calkins, *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (Sage, 2nd Edition, 2009) 235.
[7] Tennant and others (n 1) 28-32.
[8] K. Gelber, K. Brennan, D. Duriesmith and E. Fenton, 'Gendered Mundanities: Gender Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching in Political Science' (2022) 57 Australian Journal of Political Science 199.

creating a culture of continuous improvement and, finally, identifying student difficulties/issues. It is not suggested that any of these evaluation aims has priority over any of the others and, as will be illustrated, they may overlap and contradict each other in some respects.

Researchers such as Zabaleta[9] have argued that positive student feedback on teaching correlates with improved student learning. However, Darwin[10] argues that such conclusions are neither clearly quantified in research outcomes nor established in situated practice. In Darwin's view, while student-based evaluation may influence teachers to align self-perceptions with those of their students, it cannot be assumed that this will actually lead to changed teaching behaviours or enhanced student learning outcomes.[11] Whilst it may be attractive for those who support evaluations of teaching to argue that student satisfaction correlates with improved learning, Darwin's argument is compelling, particularly when it comes to those students who are new to higher education. New students are likely to need both training and experience in order to give the sort of feedback on teaching that will improve their learning. This is vital not just for successful study at university but also to the development of successful lifelong learning skills throughout a student's subsequent professional career.

Hammonds and others[12] argue SETs can provide valuable insights into student learning experiences and perceptions of teacher effectiveness, as well as encourage tutors to reflect on their teaching practices and identify areas for improvement. Darwin however identifies the argument that 'Institutional accountability improves professionalism'[13] as one of the contestable assumptions around student feedback-based evaluation. This assumption is contestable, in Darwin's view, because it is based on an autonomy (and by extension an ability to enhance one's own practice) that may not always in reality exist among teachers. It may well be frustrating for a tutor to be in a position where they cannot make the sort of changes required in response to

[9] F. Zabaleta, 'The use and misuse of student evaluations of teaching' (2007) 12(1) Teaching in Higher Education 55.
[10] S. Darwin, 'Moving beyond face value: re-envisioning higher education evaluation as a generator of professional knowledge' (2012) 37(6) Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 733.
[11] Darwin (n 10) 735.
[12] F. Hammonds, G. J. Mariano, G. Ammons and S. Chambers, 'Student Evaluations of Teaching: Improving Teaching Quality in Higher Education' (2017) 21 Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education 26.
[13] Darwin (n 10) 736.

student feedback due to institutional restrictions. For example, individual tutors are likely to have very limited control over the final format and administration of SETs, although they may have the opportunity to provide feedback to their line managers on what worked well and not so well about the process.

A related argument by Blackmore[14] is that generic student evaluations of teaching are more about accountability and marketing than about improvement of teaching and learning. In her view, the explanation for this lies largely in the increasingly commodified nature of higher education, which has seen universities become market-driven because of the need to recruit students, and has in turn made them highly vulnerable to consumer perception and satisfaction.[15] This view is substantiated by the fact that the widespread use of SETs coincided with the introduction of tuition fees, at the end of the twentieth century. In this light, collection of evaluation data may appear to mainly be an auditing exercise, done to satisfy external monitoring requirements rather than in a genuine effort to improve the student experience, especially when it is not clear what use is to be made of this data. This perhaps also misses the main point of the evaluation process, which is surely to improve teaching and learning.

There seems to be a clear link between collection of evaluation data and quality assurance for potential students. Light and others highlight the role of internal and external incentives for teaching and course evaluation.[16] In the UK, the evaluation of teaching is linked to institutional audit by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), formal accreditation of teaching through the Higher Education Academy (Advance HE) and often to hiring, retention, promotion and salary decisions by institutions. The NSS, which is conducted annually and is delivered to final year undergraduates in British higher education institutions on a voluntary basis, is part of the formal quality assurance framework in the UK.[17] Blackmore also discusses the role of evaluating teaching in quality assurance by providing a 'paper trail'[18] that allows both external assessors and potential students to find evidence of what is actually happening in an institution. This justification for evaluation seems to centre mainly on the role

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14 J. Blackmore, 'Academic pedagogies, quality logics and performative universities: evaluating teaching and what students want' (2009) 34(8) Studies in Higher Education 857-872.
15 Blackmore (n 14) 857.
16 Light and others (n 6) 238-241.
17 Tennant and others (n 1) 24.
18 Blackmore (n 14) 864.

of such data in providing an assurance to students that the institution that they are joining, and in particular the teachers by whom they will be taught, meet the quality and standards to be expected. This is an important function of evaluation data and indeed it is difficult to think of other methods of assuring quality and standards, in terms of teaching and learning for students, which are as effective and consistent nationwide.

Fisher and Miller[19] argue that teaching evaluations play an important role in creating a culture of continuous improvement for educators. They stress, however, the need for such evaluation to be carried out throughout a teaching semester rather than in the final stages of courses, as is traditional in higher education. Their arguments in this regard will be considered further below. The role of teaching evaluations in improving courses also seems to be accepted by Moore and Kuol,[20] who point out that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that students can provide useful information about the effectiveness of teaching methods. For example, Ulker[21] recently demonstrated that well-designed and administered student evaluations potentially lead to teaching quality improvement. In this study, which compared the perspectives of tutors in Turkey and the USA, participants identified areas for improvement based on feedback and implemented changes to enhance their teaching practices. Harvey[22] goes further in saying that the long-term effectiveness of evaluation is entirely dependent on the development of a culture of continuous improvement.[23] These arguments seem to address some of the main concerns regarding the evaluation process in higher education. A system of end-of-course evaluation does not appear to contribute to continuous improvement of the curriculum and therefore needs to be adapted so that courses can be enhanced while they are being delivered, in direct response to feedback from current students (and staff for that matter).

Moore and Kuol highlight the role of student evaluations of teaching in identifying subsets of students who may be encountering certain difficulties, such as challenges with understanding course materials or adjusting to new

[19] R. Fisher and D. Miller, 'Responding to student expectations: a partnership approach to course evaluation' (2008) 33(2) Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education 191.
[20] S. Moore and N. Kuol, 'Students evaluating teachers: exploring the importance of faculty reaction to feedback on teaching' (2005) 10(1) Teaching in Higher Education 57.
[21] N. Ulker, 'How Can Student Evaluations Lead to Improvement of Teaching Quality? A Cross-National Analysis' (2021) 26 Research in Post-Compulsory Education 19.
[22] L. Harvey, 'Evaluation for what?' (2002) 7(3) Teaching in Higher Education 245.
[23] Harvey (n 22) 257-258.

teaching methods.[24] This justification is particularly relevant in the context of widening participation. Some university law undergraduate students who come from widening participation backgrounds have had little experience of formal education (a number join on successful completion of access courses for which no formal qualifications are required). Consequently, while they may have a need for greater support than students from more traditional backgrounds (e.g. 'A' level students), they can be reticent in requesting such support. Evaluation is one valuable method for students to raise concerns; however, it is questionable whether the most commonly used evaluation tools (e.g. anonymous surveys and questionnaires, which lack detailed context) provide the best mechanism for widening participation students to do so. It may even be the case that students tend to prefer to give informal feedback in settings where they felt fairly relaxed e.g. in a one-to-one academic counselling session, at the end of a tutorial or even while passing staff in a corridor or canteen. It seems important to somehow capture and carry forward such feedback as part of the evaluation process, perhaps by using technology, mobile phones, pulse surveys and so on (as long as this does not end up excluding those students who are less comfortable with such innovations).

In view of the above it seems clear that there is a need for student evaluation of teaching; the salient issue is rather how this can actually contribute to improved academic practice and a better student experience**.** Gauging the satisfaction of students, improving the quality of teaching, increasing the accountability of educators, creating a culture of continuous improvement and identifying particular issues or students who are in difficulty are all good justifications for continuing to collect and use evaluation data, even in spite of the practical difficulties highlighted by academics and summarised above. While it is therefore important to ensure that collection and use of evaluation data fulfils the aims that have been identified, there may be challenges in doing this, as outlined below.

Challenges of evaluation

There is a commonly held view among legal academics that student evaluation in the form of questionnaires and surveys is an irrelevant auditing exercise that has little relevance to enhancement of teaching and learning.[25] This view seems

[24] Moore and Kuol (n 20) 60.
[25] S.J.F.J Claessens, 'The role of student evaluations in a PBL centred law curriculum: towards a more holistic assessment of teaching quality' (2020) 54(1) The Law Teacher 43.

to be reflected more widely among faculty in higher education. Several reasons for this general disenchantment are identified in the relevant literature. As Darwin comments: '…student feedback… is widely perceived by academics to be inherently narrow and potentially superficial in analysing and responding to the complex contemporary expectations on academics of generating high quality learning for growing, heterogenous and increasingly remote student populations.'[26] Arthur[27] highlights the current feeling among some lecturers that not only do student evaluations of teaching not help to enhance their professional skills or improve teaching and learning, they are almost seen as a potential tool to undermine lecturers and their professionalism.[28] SETs can generate stress and anxiety for academics, influencing their teaching styles and potentially hindering creativity.[29] Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that, while students perceive SETs as important and want their feedback to be valued and acted upon, they often feel their evaluations lack depth and fail to capture their nuanced experiences.[30]

Criticism of student feedback questionnaires also tends to relate to non-standardisation of evaluation criteria,[31] the cost of such evaluations in terms of time and administration[32] and the potential for questionnaire responses to be biased by students' flawed conceptions of learning.[33] Edstrom[34] has pointed out that this form of course evaluation is mostly teaching- and teacher-focused and that course development often tends not to be in the foreground.[35] Pounder[36] has questioned student evaluation of teaching as the sole measure of classroom performance on the basis that this process alone cannot capture the

[26] Darwin (n 10) 734.
[27] L. Arthur, 'From performativity to professionalism: lecturers' responses to student feedback' (2009) 14(4) Teaching in Higher Education 441.
[28] Arthur (n 27) 453.
[29] O. G. Kayas, C. Assimakopoulos and T. Hines, 'Student Evaluations of Teaching: Emerging Surveillance and Resistance' (2022) 47 Studies in Higher Education 1.
[30] S. J Stein, A. Goodchild, A. Moskal, Adon, S. Terry and J. McDonald, 'Student Perceptions of Student Evaluations: Enabling Student Voice and Meaningful Engagement' (2021) 46 Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 837.
[31] Tennant and others (n 1).
[32] Light and others (n 6).
[33] D. Kember and A. Wong, 'Implications for evaluation from a study of students' perceptions of good and poor teaching' (2000) 40 Higher Education 69.
[34] K. Edstrom, 'Doing course evaluation as if learning matters most' (2008) 27(2) Higher Education Research & Development 95.
[35] Edstrom (n 34) 95-96.
[36] J. Pounder, 'Is student evaluation of teaching worthwhile?' (2007) 15(2) Quality Assurance in Education 178.

quality, richness and diversity of what happens in a typical classroom.[37] Boysen[38] argues that relying solely on statistical significance in interpreting SETs can be misleading. He recommends a more nuanced approach that considers the magnitude of score differences, alternative explanations and the potential influence of cognitive biases. Esarey and Valdes[39] urge caution against overreliance on SETs, even when seemingly well designed, due to inherent limitations and inaccuracies. In light of this, their recommendations for more effective evaluation emphasise the need to utilise multiple evaluation methods like peer review, teaching portfolios and student focus groups alongside SETs for a more comprehensive picture.

Gelber and others'[40] recent study challenges the reliability of SETs as a neutral measure of teaching quality. Their findings suggest that gender bias can influence student evaluations, even unconsciously, impacting career advancements for female academics. Existing societal stereotypes about women can unconsciously influence evaluations in traditionally male-dominated fields like law, disadvantaging female law teachers especially. O'Donovan[41] has also pointed out that male and female tutors often receive differing evaluations, with female tutors potentially penalised for stereotypically 'feminine' traits. Stroebe similarly highlights the potential for other factors that are irrelevant to teaching to impact upon SETs, such as teachers' physical attractiveness, likeability and minority status.[42] The influence of SETs on hiring, retention, promotion and salary decisions by institutions is therefore problematic. Fisher and Miller point out that creating such a nexus has the risk of turning data collection into a 'popularity rating.'[43] This is a risk that needs to be taken very seriously, both because popular lecturers are not necessarily the best ones and because lecturers (and the institutions they work for) may thus be incentivised to take shortcuts or

[37] Pounder (n 36) 186.
[38] G. A. Boysen, 'Statistical Knowledge and the Over-Interpretation of Student Evaluations of Teaching' (2017) 42 Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 1095.
[39] J. Esarey and N. Valdes, 'Unbiased, Reliable, and Valid Student Evaluations Can Still Be Unfair' (2020) 45 Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 1106.
[40] Gelber and others (n 8).
[41] R. O'Donovan, 'Missing the Forest for the Trees: Investigating Factors Influencing Student Evaluations of Teaching' (2023) Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education 1.
[42] W. Stroebe, 'Student Evaluations of Teaching Encourages Poor Teaching and Contributes to Grade Inflation: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis' (2020) 42(4) Basic and Applied Social Psychology 276.
[43] Fisher and Miller (n 19) 192.

otherwise manipulate the teaching syllabus for the sake of increasing their popularity. This seems to defeat the quality assurance role of the evaluation process, which was one of its main purposes as identified in the preceding section i.e. how can evaluation data be trusted if it is open to such manipulation? The answer may lie in avoiding the purely quantitative criteria that seem at present to dominate evaluation tools and to move towards a greater reliance on qualitative criteria that encourage student reflection and more detailed feedback (as opposed to 'box-ticking').

Another problem with evaluation mentioned above is that it commonly occurs at the end of the course, when it is too late to make improvements for the benefit of current students and staff. This is an issue that may be a large part of the reason why, as stated above, students often seem reluctant to engage with the evaluation process i.e. if they are not going to receive any benefit from changes made to the module that they are currently studying, then what is the point of their filling in module evaluation questionnaires? Bacon, Johnson and Stewart's study[44] highlights that non-response rates in SETs can be surprisingly high, sometimes exceeding 50%, which raises concerns about the representativeness of the data and its potential to misrepresent teaching quality. There cannot be a culture of continuous improvement if course evaluation is structured in such a way that it does not result in the institution reacting dynamically to the need for change, as identified by students (and this is doubly the case if students are not motivated to engage in the process). There is also the further risk, as pointed out by O'Donovan[45] that courses with assessments administered during the evaluation period tend to receive lower ratings, regardless of teaching effectiveness.

Darwin's view, based on extensive research conducted on student evaluation, is that it is inherently 'highly fragile and susceptible to multiple forms of influence.'[46] These influences – including timing of feedback, student expectations and levels of ability, relative class sizes and electives compared with compulsory subjects – make the results of student evaluation highly subjective and potentially inconsistent. Allred and others[47] recently explored the potential impact of tutors memorising student names on SETs. Their

[44] D. R Bacon, C. J. Johnson and K. A. Stewart, 'Nonresponse Bias in Student Evaluations of Teaching' (2016) 26 Marketing Education Review 93.
[45] O'Donovan (n 41).
[46] Darwin (n 10) 733.
[47] A. T. Allred, S. King and C. Amos, 'Can Recognizing Students by Name Influence Student Evaluations of Teaching?' (2022) 97 Journal of Education for Business 69.

research argues that name recognition can trigger a 'halo effect', where positive feelings associated with being remembered by name bias students' overall perception of the tutor and their teaching, leading to inflated SET scores. This study utilised an experimental design with two groups: one where the tutor made a concerted effort to learn and use student names and another where the tutor did not. The results suggest that name recognition indeed creates a halo effect, positively influencing SET ratings across various evaluation categories. This highlights the potential for SETs to be influenced by factors beyond the direct quality of teaching, raising concerns about their validity as a sole measure of tutor effectiveness.

Research by Ramsden[48] has found that some of the biggest disparities in student ratings are between different disciplines, with social sciences rated above the natural sciences but below the humanities. These variations may stem from differences in teaching styles, student expectations or the nature of the material itself – such as the abstract reasoning often required in the natural sciences versus the subjective interpretation common in the humanities. This context makes the effect of distorting influences particularly pertinent to the discipline of law, where the combination of critical reasoning, case analysis and practical application may pose unique challenges for both teaching and evaluation. Law differs from many other degree subjects, both because of the high entry criteria and the volume and complexity of the material. This inevitably makes comparison between student feedback on law degrees versus other programmes very difficult i.e. are student feedback scores for law modules lower than those on other modules due to defective teaching or other factors such as student frustration with the difficulty of the subject? As Reverter and others[49] have noted, new students might lack the knowledge to assess the complexities of legal teaching accurately, potentially undervaluing effective instruction or misinterpreting certain teaching styles. For these reasons, it seems clear that feedback needs to some extent to be tailored to both the students' subject area and the level of their studies.

Law also faces a unique challenge in terms of evaluation because the vast majority of first-year undergraduates will have had no prior exposure to the subject before university (unlike fields such as history, where students often build on foundational knowledge from secondary education). Legal education

[48] P. Ramsden, *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2003) 209-232.
[49] A. Reverter, C. Martinez, P. Currey, S. van Bommel and N. J. Hudson, 'Unravelling Student Evaluations of Courses and Teachers' (2020) 7 Cogent Education 1771830.

introduces students to complex, discipline-specific reasoning that is fundamentally different from other areas of learning. For instance, students must navigate abstract legal principles, interpret case law and apply these to hypothetical scenarios – skills that demand analytical rigour and precision. This divergence from prior educational experiences means students often lack a frame of reference to assess the quality of legal education they are receiving, making evaluations of teaching more complex and potentially less reliable. Students who have never had any experience of law teaching prior to their first year at university may therefore not always be particularly well placed to judge the quality of the legal education that they are receiving, given that they often have nothing to judge it against. New students might not fully understand the purpose and implications of SETs, making them more susceptible to external pressures to please tutors.[50] Even for non-law students, evaluation of university teaching may be a difficult task at first, given the greater emphasis in higher education on developing critical thinking skills, for example, rather than on retention and reproduction of knowledge, which tends to be the focus of further education. Without some guidance, therefore, students attending university for the first time may be at a loss as to how to give effective feedback on their teaching.

Another issue is the experience of students from widening participation backgrounds. At institutions that operate a policy of widening access many of the students there may, for example, be the first generation of their family to enter higher education, may have qualifications other than the traditional GCSE's and 'A'-Levels on entry and may be from low-income backgrounds. Again, the issue for many of these students when it comes to giving effective feedback on teaching may be unfamiliarity with the institutions, goals and processes of higher education. Students unfamiliar with traditional academic settings might be more apprehensive about providing critical feedback, fearing repercussions.[51]

O'Donovan[52] has pointed out recently that students new to higher education might misinterpret certain teaching styles or communication approaches, leading to unfair evaluations. These students might also be more susceptible to the halo effect associated with name recognition due to their unfamiliarity with

[50] Kayas and others (n 29).
[51] Kayas and others (n 29).
[52] O'Donovan (n 41).

academic settings and possible concerns about belonging.[53] For students new to higher education, the act of a tutor remembering their name might be perceived as exceptional personal attention, leading to biased evaluations. Feeling less connected to the academic community, students from underrepresented groups might value personalised interactions like name recognition more, potentially inflating their evaluations of tutors. While recognising students as individuals can be a valid and meaningful aspect of building connections and fostering engagement, it raises questions about the extent to which this factor outweighs others in evaluations. For instance, if such personal gestures lead to disproportionately high evaluations, it may obscure other key aspects of teaching effectiveness, such as the clarity of content delivery, the ability to foster critical thinking or the depth of subject expertise.

Ulker[54] highlights concerns like cultural differences and course difficulty influencing SETs. Interpretations of evaluation questions and overall attitudes towards feedback may vary across cultures – international students, particularly those unfamiliar with the evaluation system, are less likely to participate, potentially lowering overall scores.[55] Difficulty level of the course can influence ratings more than actual teaching quality. These biases can be even more pronounced in widening participation contexts, where students might be more susceptible to such factors. In the absence of any context-setting or specific training, surveys and questionnaires requesting feedback by reference to categorised scores may well prove irrelevant or meaningless to the majority of widening participation students. Since such students are often the ones who will need the greatest support when they first start university, this is a serious issue that needs to be addressed within their institutions. In the next section, therefore, potential solutions to the challenges involved in collecting and using evaluation data will be considered, with the specific issues affecting both law students and those from widening participation backgrounds to the fore.

Suggestions for more effective evaluation

While it seems from the discussion above that the need for evaluation of teaching and learning is well established, the issue for higher education institutions is how to collect and use evaluation data effectively in light of the

[53] Allred and others (n 47).
[54] Ulker (n 21).
[55] O'Donovan (n 41).

many practical challenges in doing so. Many of the problems generally across the sector appear to stem from the particular mode of evaluation that has been employed i.e. end-of-course surveys and questionnaires. As has been highlighted in the preceding section, such evaluation data is prone to a number of problems, including non-standardisation of evaluation criteria; the timing, subjectivity and inconsistency of feedback; and the issues specific to the institution and discipline (e.g. the students' unfamiliarity with the feedback process and the complex, unique nature of law as a subject). There is a need for alternative evaluation tools that give a more accurate and comprehensive picture to be considered and a number of options present themselves.

Light and others, put forward the compelling argument that teaching students how to reflect should include teaching them how to give feedback and that evaluation should not just be about assessing teachers, it should be a process which itself contributes to teaching.[56] They suggest a wide range of alternative forms of module evaluation other than surveys and questionnaires, including focus groups and reflective portfolios.[57] In doing so, Light and others do not necessarily discount questionnaires altogether, recognising that their benefits for evaluation purposes include broad coverage of opinion, anonymity (inviting honesty of feedback), quantifiability for comparison and systematic coverage of themes. Light and others do, however, make the suggestion that if questionnaires are used then someone should sit with the students when they fill them in for the first time.[58] This is echoed by Cowan,[59] who suggests that a more specific emphasis should be placed in undergraduate education on the explicit development of the higher-level cognitive ability to make evaluative judgments. These suggestions would appear to address the problem identified above of students not knowing how to give effective feedback without guidance. Gelber and others' emphasis on gender-neutral evaluation tools becomes crucial in a widening participation context.[60] Evaluations should therefore be designed to utilise non-gendered language and focus on objective aspects like clarity, organisation and effectiveness of instruction, as far as possible removing room for subjective interpretations based on gender bias. More generally, questions should be culturally sensitive and avoid biased or

[56] Light and others (n 6) 269.
[57] Light and others (n 6) 242.
[58] Light and others (n 6) 266.
[59] J. Cowan, 'Developing the ability for making evaluative judgments' (2010) 15(3) Teaching in Higher Education 323.
[60] Gelber and others (n 8).

ambiguous language that might disadvantage students from diverse backgrounds.[61]

Boysen[62] suggests alternative evaluation methods like student portfolios to complement SETs and provide a more comprehensive picture of teaching effectiveness. Getting students to reflect on their learning experience by giving feedback on teaching in the form of a written portfolio is one of the solutions that has particular relevance to widening participation students. Learning how to learn is something that students who have had little formal experience in an educational setting may need help to master at an early stage in their studies. This mode of evaluation by portfolio also allows the students' work to be closely linked with the feedback process and in doing so enables students to learn vital self-evaluation skills. The ability to make evaluative judgements is identified by Arthur[63] and Cowan[64] as the foundation for successful personal and professional development throughout education and in lifelong development. Being able to reflect on their own learning is also a skill that is particularly important for aspiring lawyers, who will constantly have to adapt to changes in the law and legal practice throughout their professional careers. Focusing on qualitative feedback and dialogue beyond numerical scores also helps ensure SETs serve their intended purpose of improving teaching, not as tools of surveillance.[65]

Another solution put forward by Light and others is informal feedback, particularly through focus groups, where sample student groups identify aspects of personal interest.[66] This has the advantage, with minimal time and effort, of potentially inviting more honest feedback from students in a relatively relaxed environment. Focus groups with diverse student groups can offer deeper insights into their learning experiences and potential biases in traditional evaluations.[67] The value of focus groups as an evaluation tool is, however, limited by the fact that they lack one of the main benefits of questionnaires i.e. broad coverage of opinion. For this reason, the findings of focus groups may be skewed by personal bias on the part of individual students to a far greater extent than questionnaires. Also, focus groups might not be the

[61] Kayas and others (n 29).
[62] Boysen (n 38).
[63] Arthur (n 27) 441.
[64] Cowan (n 59) 323.
[65] Kayas and others (n 29).
[66] Light and others (n 6) 242.
[67] O'Donovan (n 41).

most inclusive environment for some widening participation students who might lack the confidence to feel at ease in such contexts. The most compelling aspect of focus groups as an evaluation tool is the opportunity it presents for tutors and students – particularly struggling students – to develop an intimate dialogue in an informal setting concerning their views on teaching and learning. This represents a valuable chance for students to explore their own learning issues and interests at a personal level, to get to know their teachers better and to develop their understanding of the course that they are on, its aims and learning outcomes through a constructive discourse. As Ulker[68] suggests, focusing on formative feedback and facilitating dialogue around evaluations becomes particularly important in widening participation contexts. This allows tutors to understand student perspectives, address specific concerns and adapt their teaching accordingly. Additionally, acknowledging and accounting for potential cultural differences in interpreting feedback is essential for effective communication and building trust with students from diverse backgrounds.

The idea of students and their teachers being 'partners' in the evaluation process is one that is expanded upon by Fisher and Miller.[69] In the model tested by Fisher and Miller, tutors were available for student feedback on a weekly basis. This feedback was then passed on to other tutors at regular intervals throughout the course. An active effort was made to capture as much qualitative data, in particular, from students as possible. Students were encouraged to reflect on matters such as their attendance patterns, preferred individual learning styles, the reading that they had found useful and suggestions for innovations in teaching. Attempts were then made where possible to introduce tailored improvements in response to this student feedback. While recognising the greater time and costs involved in this approach as compared with other means of evaluation, Fisher and Miller cite one of its benefits as ensuring that '[p]otentially all students on a course have a voice in making the course responsive…'[70] Given Allred and others' emphasis on the importance of building rapport with students beyond name recognition,[71] this is also crucial in widening participation contexts, where students might need additional support and encouragement to feel comfortable and engaged in the learning process. This could take the form of offering introductory modules or support

[68] Ulker (n 21).
[69] Fisher and Miller (n 19).
[70] Fisher and Miller (n 19) 201.
[71] Allred and others (n 47).

resources to ensure all students feel equipped to provide meaningful feedback on legal instruction.

Stein and others[72] have also called for a paradigm shift in student evaluations, advocating for practices that empower students as active partners in the learning process and provide valuable insights for improving teaching quality. The 'partnership approach' to evaluation seems attractive because it envisages both students and their teachers learning from each other and being active participants in the evaluation process (as opposed to, all too often, perhaps, both being equally unwilling). By incorporating such recommendations, universities can create a more inclusive and engaging evaluation culture that benefits both students and tutors. Bovill[73] has identified that historically it was relatively uncommon for evaluation of courses to include any requirement for students to evaluate their own role in the learning experience. In the past there also seemed to be little emphasis on course development in the most commonly used evaluation tools.[74] The partnership approach, however, seems to ensure that course improvement remains in the foreground of the evaluation process. Another benefit of this approach is its heavy emphasis on genuine self-reflection on the part of staff and students, rather than the evaluation process being seen purely as a 'box-ticking' exercise. The encouragement of self-reflection is vital to the development of students as learners throughout their professional lives, not just while they are at university. Self-reflection is equally important for those who educate students, as they can similarly benefit from reflecting on their professional practice in order to improve their skills as tutors and lecturers.

Tennant and others point out that there is a clear 'performative discourse'[75] to questionnaire-based means of evaluation such as the NSS in the UK, concerned as it is with measurement, satisfaction, standardisation and the need to make comparisons across the system. It can be argued that the same discourse surrounds most SETs, which adopt similar criteria, emphasising the performance of individual lecturers in fulfilling their duties as teachers as well as the performance of the institution in fulfilling its role in supporting students. This format not only makes surveys and questionnaires too narrow as an

[72] Stein and others (n 30).
[73] C. Bovill, 'Sharing responsibility for learning through formative evaluation: moving to evaluation as learning' (2011) 6(2) Practice and Evidence of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 96-7.
[74] Edstrom (n 34) 95-96.
[75] Tennant and others (n 1) 26.

evaluation tool, it has the potential to miss out on capturing valuable feedback from students which goes beyond their levels of satisfaction with the institution and its staff. It is clear that not all surveys and questionnaires need to adopt such narrow, performance-based criteria. Tennant and others highlight the benefits of the NSSE in the USA, which goes beyond simply capturing levels of student satisfaction to assessing their wider development as learners.[76] If questionnaire-based evaluation is retained at higher education institutions, then it seems that there are many useful lessons to be learned from the NSSE.

The NSSE is a broad-ranging survey, focusing on the educational experiences of the students rather than just on their levels of satisfaction with the course. Many of the questions on the NSSE are concerned with how students spend their time outside the classroom – something that is vital in the competitive job market of today, where potential employers (in particular increasingly selective law firms) will be keen to see evidence of extra-curricular activities that set apart students that otherwise achieve similarly in purely academic terms. At present there is nothing explicitly concerning extra-curricular activities on most SETs, and it would be difficult to adapt them to do so given that they occur at module level. However, the omission of such questions on the NSS is perhaps more notable, and also easier to remedy, which is worth consideration given the potential benefits. The nature of the NSSE, with its focus on attempting to capture the educational experiences of students rather than just the performance of their teachers, seems to be geared towards developing the essential skill of self-reflection. In filling in the form, students are encouraged to reflect on their entire experience at university. This goes beyond learning experiences, such as memorising, synthesis and critical thinking, to also include their wider political and community engagement. In turn, tutors who read the forms are encouraged to reflect on their role in the total development of the student, not just as a learner but, for example, '…by supporting them to develop social networks, engage in the political process and contribute to community life.'[77] This has particular relevance to widening participation students. Such students are often likely to need as much assistance in order to gain the necessary 'cultural capital,'[78] i.e. those attributes and skills most highly valued by potential

[76] Tennant and others (n 1) 28-32.
[77] Tennant and others (n 1) 32.
[78] H. Morgan and A. Houghton, Inclusive Curriculum Design in Higher Education - considerations for effective practice across and within subject areas (Law) (Higher Education Academy, 2011) 4.

employers to succeed in their careers beyond university, as they will in their development as learners.

An holistic approach to student evaluation based on teaching observations

The suggestions for more effective evaluation of teaching considered in the preceding section have largely related to adjusting the format of existing questionnaires and surveys of teaching and learning completed by students. Although SETs are potentially biased, as discussed above, totally abandoning them would not only deprive students of their voice with regard to teaching quality but also tutors of information they might find useful. Given this potential for bias, however, there is a need for SETs to be supplemented by additional measures to enhance the evaluation of law teaching. As Reverter and others[79] have noted, there is a need for a shift towards a more qualitative and holistic approach to evaluating teaching. In order to appraise and assess staff with regard to their teaching qualities what will be proposed below is a mechanism wherein using teaching portfolios and seeing each other teach in observations (followed by discussion and reflection) would take a central role in ensuring a more holistic, rather than piecemeal, approach to evaluation that can also include SETs.

Because teaching ability is an important factor in decisions about merit increases or promotions, university administrators could use alternative sources of information. Instead of just using SETs, they could ask teachers (and not just students) to compile portfolios in which they give detailed descriptions of how they develop their courses and which issues they emphasise. The portfolio should also contain lists of recommended reading and exam questions. Tutors can thereby showcase their teaching philosophies, materials and achievements, providing a more holistic picture of their effectiveness.[80] This would at least ensure that a course on a given area covers the content (i.e. theories, research) considered central to that area and is based on up-to-date literature. This would also be particularly helpful in adapting evaluation tools in the context of law teaching, to emphasise the suitability and currency of the materials and the activities that students are being asked to engage with.

[79] Reverter and others (n 49).
[80] O'Donovan (n 41).

Given their subjective nature, a portfolio could be supplemented by an independent peer observation of teaching (indeed the observation might be included as part of the portfolio). Structured observations by colleagues, with well-defined criteria and standardised rubrics (see below), can provide a balanced perspective, especially when student evaluations might be influenced by biases. Hornstein has emphasised the importance of teaching observations: 'If one truly wants to understand how well someone teaches, observation is necessary. In order to know what is going on the classroom, observation is necessary. In order to determine the quality of tutors' materials, observation is necessary.'[81] Hornstein's argument that, if the actual desire is to see improvement in teaching quality, then attention must be paid to the teaching itself is a compelling one. Certainly a teaching observation would be preferable in this regard to the average of a list of student-reported numbers that 'bear at best a troubled and murky relationship to actual teaching performance.'[82] The benefit of law teachers visiting each other's classrooms and looking at each other's teaching materials routinely is similar to that derived from teaching portfolios. Not only can accurate and up-to-date teaching of the subject be checked, law teachers can also learn from one another, exchanging pedagogical ideas and practices in the process.

Traditional student evaluations often rely on subjective feedback and can be susceptible to bias. Therefore, incorporating teaching observations into the evaluation process can provide a more objective and multifaceted perspective, especially if lessons from other professional fields such as medicine, dentistry and social work are taken on board. An holistic approach would, for example, involve multi-dimensional observations, covering classroom performance, student interactions and learning outcomes. The peer observer would therefore need to judge the tutor's delivery, organisation, clarity, engagement techniques and interaction with students; assess how well the teaching aligns with learning objectives and course materials; evaluate how the tutor interacts with individual students, addresses questions, fosters classroom discussions and creates a safe and inclusive learning environment; consider evidence of student learning beyond numerical assessments; and analyse

[81] H. A. Hornstein, 'Student evaluations of teaching are an inadequate assessment tool for evaluating faculty performance' (2017) 4(1) Cogent Education 5.
[82] Hornstein (n 81) 5.

student work samples, course projects and portfolios to determine how effectively the tutor facilitates knowledge acquisition and skill development.[83]

There is also a need for a structured observation protocol, with a clear rubric outlining key aspects of effective teaching observed during the session. This rubric should cover elements like classroom management, content delivery, student engagement and learning outcomes. Such a protocol would also utilise standardised rating scales to ensure consistency and reduce subjective bias in evaluation, as well as allowing for open-ended comments to capture specific strengths, areas for improvement and noteworthy observations beyond the rubric categories. Having multiple observers would involve diverse faculty members or trained educational advisers in the observation process to enrich perspectives and minimise individual bias.[84] Rotating observers throughout the semester would capture variations in teaching styles and student engagement across different sessions. Similarly, considering feedback from student representatives, particularly within a widening participation context, would capture diverse student experiences and perspectives. A post-observation conference with the tutor after the observation would allow for constructive feedback and suggestions for improvement based on specific observations, encourage open dialogue and reflection on the tutor's strengths and areas for development and provide an opportunity for professional development and support, rather than solely for judgment or evaluation.[85] Lastly, the observation should be integrated with student evaluations. It is important to combine data from teaching observations with student feedback obtained through traditional surveys or open-ended questionnaires; use observations to triangulate and contextualise student evaluations, providing a more complete picture of teaching effectiveness; avoid relying solely on quantitative scores from either source; and prioritise qualitative insights and narratives over aggregated numbers.

There are many potential benefits to the holistic approach outlined above. These include objectivity and reduced bias, in that observations provide a more objective measure of teaching practices compared to student self-reported

[83] J. Yiend, S. Weller and I. Kinchin, 'Peer Observation of Teaching: The Interaction between Peer Review and Developmental Models of Practice' (2014) 38 Journal of Further and Higher Education 465.
[84] S. Hatzipanagos and S. Lygo-Baker, 'Teaching Observations: Promoting Development through Critical Reflection' (2006) 30 Journal of Further and Higher Education 421.
[85] M. Heron, H. Donaghue and K. Balloo, 'Observational Feedback Literacy: Designing Post Observation Feedback for Learning' [2023] Teaching in Higher Education 1.

feelings. This approach also observes specific teaching behaviours and techniques, allowing for targeted feedback and professional development; incorporates diverse viewpoints from multiple observers and students, ensuring a more comprehensive evaluation; and fosters open communication and collaboration between tutors and peers, creating a supportive environment for improvement. Overall, an holistic approach to student evaluation that incorporates teaching observations offers a valuable step towards a more nuanced, objective and supportive assessment system. By focusing on specific teaching behaviours, encouraging dialogue and providing constructive feedback, this approach can contribute to enhancing teaching effectiveness and improving the overall learning experience for all students.

Practical guidance for implementation

There are however a number of practical challenges to consider in relation to the preceding proposals, such as resource limitations, observer training and tutor buy-in. Implementing regular observations might require additional faculty or staff resources, effective observations require trained personnel familiar with the rubric and evaluation principles and gaining faculty support and engagement with the observation process is crucial for its success. An important consideration is how changes would be managed within standard institutional processes when the scope for school-level approaches is limited in practice. However, even within such restrictions, working within the existing framework, focusing on incremental changes and collaborating to build partnerships can pave the way for progress. Running pilot schemes, engaging with curriculum committees and other stakeholders, promoting alternative evaluation methods alongside SETs, emphasising staff development and training, gathering data and sharing evidence-based best practices, can all gradually influence institutional processes and move towards a more inclusive and effective system for evaluating teaching effectiveness.

To incorporate reflective portfolios, peer observations and focus groups systematically into existing evaluation frameworks, institutions can adopt a phased approach by first piloting these methods within select departments to gather initial feedback and refine processes. For example, reflective portfolios could be introduced in a first-year law module, with students guided to document their learning progress and critical reflections on teaching methods. Peer observations, meanwhile, could involve faculty members observing colleagues using structured rubrics focusing on key teaching dimensions such

as clarity, engagement and assessment design. Focus groups could be conducted mid-semester, facilitated by trained moderators, to capture nuanced insights into student experiences.

While implementing alternative evaluation methods may initially appear resource-intensive, several cost- and time-efficient strategies can be adopted. Peer observations can be embedded into existing professional development schedules, ensuring minimal disruption. Reflective portfolios, though requiring initial faculty training, can be streamlined by providing template prompts for students and utilising digital platforms for submission and review. For focus groups, institutions could schedule them during designated 'feedback weeks' and utilise graduate teaching assistants or administrative staff as facilitators. Scaling these initiatives can be achieved through phased implementation, starting with high-priority courses or programmes and expanding over time as resources allow.

A study by Martin and others, which offers insights from a non-UK perspective, explores the use of focus groups in an American context as a supplement or alternative to traditional SET questionnaires.[86] Their research provides an empirical basis for how focus groups can yield more nuanced insights into teaching effectiveness, overcoming some of the biases and limitations associated with standard SETs. Martin and others discuss the logistics of implementing focus groups, including their design, facilitation and data analysis, providing more concrete guidance on how alternative evaluation methods can be integrated systematically into existing frameworks by carefully defining their purpose and outcomes, identifying participants, formulating questions and writing a report. While the study focuses on management education, its methodology and findings are broadly applicable to other disciplines such as law. This suggestion addresses the need to include cost- and time-effective ways of measuring student learning, as opposed to satisfaction and engagement alone.

One suggestion to address the need for assessing student learning outcomes is integrating learning-focused metrics into evaluation frameworks. Pre- and post-course assessments could provide quantitative data on learning progression, while rubrics designed to evaluate specific skills, such as legal

[86] L. R. Martin, R. Dennehy and S. Morgan 'Unreliability in Student Evaluation of Teaching Questionnaires: Focus Groups as an Alternative Approach' (2013) 10(1) Organization Management Journal 66.

reasoning or case analysis, could be used to assess coursework. Additionally, embedding learning-focused questions into existing surveys can yield insights into how teaching methods support knowledge acquisition. For instance, students might be asked, 'What teaching practices have most contributed to your understanding of [specific legal concept]?' These measures would provide a clearer picture of how teaching impacts student learning, beyond satisfaction and engagement.

Engaging students in the evaluation process is essential, but practicality must remain a priority. Streamlined tools, such as concise surveys with a mix of quantitative and open-ended questions, can balance comprehensiveness with ease of completion. Involving students in the co-design of evaluation tools can ensure their relevance while fostering ownership and active participation in the feedback process. Faculty training on interpreting and acting upon evaluation data can further enhance the practical utility of these methods, ensuring feedback leads to meaningful improvements in teaching and learning.

Conclusion

The evaluation tools considered in this paper are by no means an exhaustive list – just the ones that appear most relevant to teaching law in the context of widening participation – and a range of others exist that have not been mentioned above e.g. Advance HE's professional standards framework, reflective triads, formal appraisals, one-to-one discussions, journals and session reports etc. The lens that has been used in order to focus this study relates both to the particular nature of the students, specifically ones that come primarily from widening participation backgrounds, and to the discipline of law. It was observed in the introduction to this paper that there seemed to be little adaptation of the evaluation tools used in higher education for the particular needs of students. In spite of this, one conclusion that has been reached is that improvement in the evaluation process can be achieved to a large part by adaptation rather than wholesale change of the existing feedback system. It appears that a great deal can be learned from the NSSE in the USA, and that it would be useful for both the questionnaires used within institutions and the UK-wide NSS to be much more wide-ranging in nature, inviting detailed commentary from students on their development as a whole. It also appears appropriate for such questionnaires to be distributed in the middle of the course rather than at its end, in an effort both to engage existing students

more effectively and to allow improvements to be implemented on an ongoing basis.

Whilst it has not been suggested that questionnaires be scrapped, there is a need for this formal means of evaluation to be supplemented by more informal feedback that takes place throughout the academic year, scaffolded by the use of teaching portfolios and peer observations of teaching as suggested above. Both students and staff need to be actively and continuously engaged in the process of self-reflection in order to improve their teaching and learning i.e. the partnership approach to evaluation espoused by Fisher and Miller.

A final point that may be made is that there is no need for the evaluation process to end once a student leaves university. During their professional careers students will continue to grow and learn, often by using the skills and knowledge acquired at university. It would be useful to capture and feed back on such application in order to further enhance the experience of existing students, as well as demonstrating to them that effective learning is a lifelong process to which effective evaluation, both of one's self and others, is integral.

By advocating for a multifaceted approach that embraces context, alternative explanations and qualitative insights, the way can be paved for a more inclusive and equitable evaluation system. Open-ended questions, focus groups and peer review offer windows into the rich tapestry of student experiences, unveiling the narratives behind the numbers. Through such diverse methods, we can begin to understand the unique challenges and successes faced by students from various backgrounds, fostering a learning environment that caters to their individual needs. This transformative approach demands active participation from all stakeholders. Law schools must champion cultural sensitivity and provide faculty with the training and resources necessary to interpret feedback within a widened participation lens. Students, empowered by trust and transparency, should engage actively in the evaluation process, voicing their concerns and offering constructive suggestions. The path towards fairness and inclusivity requires collaboration, open communication and a willingness to embrace new perspectives. Ultimately, rethinking student evaluations in a widening participation context is not simply about tweaking methods or chasing statistical significance. It is about reorienting our focus towards the human element at the heart of education. By listening to the diverse tapestry of voices echoing within our classrooms, we can weave a richer, more inclusive learning experience, enriching the legal education journey for all students and

tutors alike. This is not just an imperative for widening participation; it is a necessary step towards achieving what is arguably the true mission of legal education: preparing a generation of lawyers not just for legal practice, but also for responsible citizenship and leadership in a complex and diverse world.