DOI 10.47176/sjmshm.8.2.12

Review Article

SRPH

SJMSHM, 2026; 8(2): 12-15

Contextual and Operational Challenges of Student Evaluation of Faculty in Medical Education: A Narrative Review

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Received: 14 February 2026
Revised: 24 April 2026
Accepted: 10 June 2026
Published: 29 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Faculty evaluation is a key component of quality assurance and continuous improvement in higher education , particularly within medical education. Student evaluation of faculty is one of the most commonly used methods to assess teaching performance. Despite its widespread application, it faces numerous contextual and operational challenges that can compromise its validity, fairness, and effectiveness. This study aims to identify and analyze these challenges and provide evidence-based recommendations for improving evaluation practices. A narrative review was conducted by systematically searching studies published between 2010 and 2026 in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Persian databases SID and Magiran. Following a three-stage screening process (title, abstract, full text), 33 studies were selected from 215 identified articles and analyzed descriptively and conceptually. Findings were categorized into contextual and operational challenges. Contextual challenges included academic culture and social norms, institutional policy and governance, and systemic biases, such as power distance, faculty reputation, and demographic factors influencing ratings. Operational challenges encompassed instrument design, administration, and data analysis/utilization. Issues such as poorly validated questionnaires, inappropriate timing or method of administration, low participation, and superficial responses were identified as threats to evaluation reliability and usefulness. Student evaluation of faculty is influenced by multidimensional and interrelated contextual and operational factors. Focusing on student learning outcomes, employing validated, context-sensitive instruments, and integrating multi-source evidence can enhance fairness and effectiveness. This review emphasizes the need for evidence-informed policies and practices to improve the credibility, utility, and impact of faculty evaluation in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Faculty evaluation; Student evaluation of faculty; Higher education; Contextual challenges; Operational challenges; Quality assurance

Introduction

Evaluation is a fundamental component of quality assurance in educational systems, defined as a systematic process for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information to judge the value, effectiveness, and efficiency of programs, processes, or individual performance.

In higher education, faculty evaluation serves not only as a tool for monitoring teaching quality but also plays a crucial role in continuous teaching–learning improvement, institutional accountability, and professional development [1,2]. Recent decades have seen the emergence of modern evaluation approaches emphasizing educational quality, deep learning, and social accountability. These approaches conceptualize evaluation as a dynamic, participatory, and multidimensional process aimed at providing actionable feedback to stakeholders [3]. Faculty performance, as a key determinant of educational quality, requires continuous and valid evaluation.

[DOI: 10.47176/sjmshm.8.2.12]

Publisher: Scientific Research Publishing House (SRPH), Shirvan, Iran
http://srpub.org
Email: sjmshm@srpub.org

Evaluation methods in higher education are diverse, including observation-based assessment, self-evaluation, peer review, student learning outcomes analysis, and student evaluation of faculty. Each method has strengths and limitations, and no single method can provide a comprehensive picture of instructional performance [4]. Among these, student evaluation of faculty is widely used due to direct access to teaching experiences, ease of data collection, and broad implementation. However, its validity is frequently debated, as multiple factors may influence outcomes [5].

Student evaluation of faculty involves students assessing teaching based on their direct experiences of content delivery, instructor–student interaction, and classroom management. It assumes that students, as primary recipients of instruction, are reliable sources for judging teaching quality [6]. Typically, student evaluation of faculty uses structured questionnaires with Likert scales and sometimes open-ended questions, evaluating aspects such as clarity, content organization, instructor–student interaction, fairness, and instructional support. Instrument quality is a decisive factor in result validity [5]. Despite these benefits, student evaluation of faculty faces challenges such as response bias, non-instructional influences, and misuse of results, which, if unaddressed, can transform the evaluation from a quality enhancement tool into a punitive or unfair instrument [3].

In many countries, standardized student evaluation of faculty questionnaires are implemented electronically and anonymously, and results are statistically analyzed and shared with faculty and administrators. Transparency, constructive feedback, and formative use of results are key features of these systems [7].

Given the increasing emphasis on quality assurance in higher education and the central role of faculty, identifying and analyzing barriers to student evaluation of faculty is essential. This narrative review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of contextual and operational challenges, identify gaps and inconsistencies in the literature, and propose practical recommendations for improving evaluation policies and practices in higher education institutions.

Methods

This study is an applied research with a narrative review design. A comprehensive search was conducted for articles published between 2010 and 2026 using English keywords: *Faculty evaluation, Student evaluation of faculty, Higher education, Operational challenges, Contextual challenges*, in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and ScienceDirect. The Persian equivalents were searched in SID and Magiran databases.

Two researchers independently reviewed the articles' title, abstract, methodology, and results to ensure methodological rigor, quality of data, and minimize potential biases. A three-stage screening process (1) title review, (2) abstract review, and (3) full-text review was used based on inclusion criteria: (1) content related to the research topic, and (2) published in reputable journals. Exclusion criteria included: (1) unrelated content, (2) non-English texts, (3) conference abstracts, letters to editors, and (4) inaccessible full texts.

From an initial pool of 215 references, 33 articles were selected for their direct relevance to contextual and operational challenges, methodological quality, and geographical/disciplinary diversity. These articles formed the basis for a detailed narrative analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of student evaluation of faculty challenges and propose improvements.

Findings

1. Structural–Contextual Challenges

1.1 Academic Culture and Social Context

Academic culture and social norms significantly influence student evaluation of faculty. Cross-cultural studies indicate that national cultural dimensions, such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance, correlate with how students respond to evaluation questionnaires and interpret results [8,9]. In Iran, high power distance produces hierarchical student–faculty relationships, causing students to provide cautious, uniformly high ratings [10]. Interpersonal faculty characteristics, including kindness, leniency, age similarity, and communication style, often outweigh instructional content and depth. Faculty reputation and administrative position also influence ratings [11,12], consistent with cross-cultural evidence of perceived instructor personality and halo effects [13,14]. Ignoring these cultural contexts undermines cross-cultural validity and introduces hidden biases [15].

1.2 Institutional Policy and Governance

At the macro level, institutional policies and governance practices affect student evaluation of faculty. Use of this evaluation for high-stakes decisions such as hiring, promotion, tenure, and compensation exerts pressure on faculty and can distort both design and interpretation [16]. Overreliance on student evaluation of faculty may disadvantage underrepresented groups, including women and ethnic minorities, reproducing structural inequities [17]. Vietnamese studies reveal administrators often focus on compliance rather than using evaluation data for instructional improvement [18]. Lack of clear policies, limited faculty participation in design, and procedural control further weaken legitimacy and effectiveness [19-22].

1.3 Systemic Biases

Student and instructor characteristics, gender, age, attitudes, strictness, physical attractiveness, systematically influence evaluation outcomes [1, 5, 10, 12, 16, 20, 23]. These factors cause grade inflation, social desirability bias, and fairness concerns. Uniform instruments across disciplines, especially clinical fields, without adaptation to specific learning characteristics, further reduce content validity [5, 20].

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2. Operational–Implementation Challenges

2.1 Instrument Design Issues

Instrument quality is central to reliable results. Tools lacking rigorous validation for factor structure, reliability, and content validity cannot support credible decision-making [5,24,25] In Iran, challenges include long questionnaires, ambiguous items, conceptual overlap, and use of researcher-developed instruments with insufficient psychometric evidence [19,20,22]. Ambiguity in construct definitions and inconsistent dimensions reduces stakeholder confidence in evaluation adequacy [26].

2.2 Administration and Implementation

Timing, administration mode (in-person/online), and environment directly affect data quality. Rushed administration, student fatigue, unclear instructions, and late-class distribution produce superficial responses [13, 21, 27]. COVID-19 experiences showed that suspending punitive consequences can promote innovative instructional practices and policy reflection [28]. Online systems introduce participation challenges, while inadequate technology infrastructure threatens data credibility [18, 29, 30].

2.3 Data Analysis and Utilization

Low response rates and self-selection bias reduce data representativeness (27, 30). Student distrust and minimal engagement further challenge reliability [27]. Weak analysis, non-transparent reporting, and purely administrative use can render student evaluation of faculty symbolic rather than constructive for organizational learning [18,20].

Discussion and Conclusion

Challenges in student evaluation of faculty are intertwined across structural–contextual and operational–implementation dimensions. Academic culture strongly shapes student responses, with hierarchical relationships promoting caution and uniform ratings [8,9,13] Faculty interpersonal traits and reputation influence outcomes beyond instructional quality [11,12,14]. Ignoring cultural contexts undermines validity and fosters hidden biases [15].

Institutional policies often shift student evaluation of faculty from developmental to control-oriented purposes, risking gender and ethnic inequities and limiting improvement opportunities [16-18]. Poor instrument design, flawed administration, and inadequate data utilization further compromise reliability and utility [5,19,20,22-26,31].

To address these issues, student evaluation of faculty must prioritize learning outcomes over general satisfaction, ensuring that instruments measure students' understanding, skill acquisition, and achievement of course objectives. Evaluations should be evidence-based, integrating multi-source data including peer review, classroom observation, teaching portfolios, and learning outcomes, thereby mitigating cultural and demographic biases and promoting fairness [31-33].

Combining these approaches in a context-sensitive, integrated framework transforms student evaluation of faculty into a valid, reliable, and effective tool for improving teaching quality, guiding faculty professional development, fostering innovation, providing constructive feedback, and enhancing educational equity. Consequently, it evolves from a purely summative, control-oriented process into a learning-oriented, empowering mechanism benefiting students, faculty, and institutions.

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Citation: Rafat Z, Karimi moonghi H. Contextual and Operational Challenges of Student Evaluation of Faculty in Higher Education Institutions: A Narrative Review. SJMSHM. 2026;8(2):12-15

https://doi.org/10.47176/sjmshm.8.2.12

[DOI: 10.47176/sjmshm.8.2.12]