Student Assessment of Teachers (SAT): Towards a Basket of Approaches

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ABSTRACT

In some institutions of higher learning, one of the approaches to successful governance is through student assessment of teachers, dubbed Student Assessment of Faculty or Student Evaluation of Teaching and extensively used in the United States of America (USA). In schools and colleges, the usual largest bloc and primary stakeholders are the students. Students should therefore assess teachers for the purpose of improving the system for all stakeholders including themselves. Teaching is a service in a marketing framework and where it is offered, the buyer is in the best position to assess the offering for better performance. This paper advocates for student assessment of their teachers at the end of each teaching cycle and suggests a basket of approaches to reduce the dissonance that accompanies the exercise where applied. A template is suggested in the paper.

KEYWORDS: Students, Assessment, Teachers, Governance, Approaches

INTRODUCTION

The concept of education has meaning in the context of transmission of knowledge from the person who has it to someone who does not. The person – the custodian – can transmit knowledge in various formats. In a formal setting such as a classroom, the custodian is the teacher.

The teaching enterprise can among several perspectives, be seen as a commercial transaction in which there is a direct relationship between the teacher as supplier of service and the student as consumer of such service. The administrators of the institutions may be likened to regulating agencies which moderate the relationship. The question then arises, how does the
consumer of the education offering express to self and third parties (those that can make changes to the performance of the object of consideration) that desired outcome has been achieved? Is it not the direct beneficiary that can best express usefulness or otherwise, of the process of education delivery? Can third parties including administrators in the offices as some writers hold, accurately determine teaching effectiveness?

While bias cannot be ignored and is evident in several studies, assessment of teaching effectiveness is not just being student-centered; it is in fact a marketing tool to ensure better service delivery. If manufacturers of goods and providers of services are willing and, in many cases, encourage pre-purchase trails as well as provide feedback mechanisms, then the school system should be willing to accept post-teaching evaluation by the primary and direct users of the service provided by teachers in schools. If teachers send feedback on the goods and services they consume, why would they resist feedback from those that consume the services they provide for a fee?

Can evaluation of teaching effectiveness by students be justified? The first plank is that the exercise is based on the philosophy of pragmatism. This concept “emphasizes the practical application of ideas by acting on them to actually test them in human experiences (Gutek 2014). It includes performance measurement which is the process of quantifying the efficiency and effectiveness of past actions (Neely, Adams, and Kennelly 2002) or “the process of evaluating how well organizations are managed and the value they deliver to other customers and other stakeholders” (Mullin, 2002). Students are the customers; parents, guardians, the society are the stakeholders. All these deserve to be assured that education is delivered as expected and the sure way is by getting the direct consumers or customers to comment on the process.

The second plank is that student evaluation is indeed the equivalent of formative evaluation which teachers’ subject students to. The justification of formative evaluation is that it allows the teachers or supervisors to arrest deficiencies or inadequacies early. What is wrong with correcting a teacher who is not doing well after a period of teaching, early enough to stop further damage to both self and the students as well as the institution and the general society? If a teacher in a civil engineering class is misleading the students who are expected to obey and accept everything taught without questioning, when a building or a bridge or a dam collapses, who loses? What about a teacher in a surgery class; what will happen to someone who requires surgery when the misled students graduate and go into practice? It should not be a surprise to anyone if the cases of collapsed bridges and medical doctors who have terminated lives as a result of unprofessional practice are products of teachers whose skills were developed by teachers who are not good at their jobs and their performances were not evaluated by students on time.

What, indeed, is the central issue or rationale for student assessment of faculty? It is a better society: students that are exposed to teachers that exhibit professionalism as a composite term; the institution by way of attractive image which should attract more financial inflows as in
endowments; and a society that is blessed with persons that have knowledge and skills for societal growth and development.

In essence, SAT is a win-win concept although teachers may see it as being an attack on them based on the ego argument: the average teacher should feel that because ‘knowledge is power,’ he/she should ipso facto be the senior partner in the student-teacher relationship and therefore the ‘lower level’ partner should not be assessing him/her. If however the relationship is seen from a business-professional perspective in which the teacher is a service provider while the student is the customer, SAT as a feedback mechanism should be seen as a desideratum.

**Student Assessment of Teachers**

It appears that it is in the USA that student assessment of teaching is most dominant and extremely controversial. The primary reason is that student assessments affect tenure and promotion of teachers particularly at the tertiary level. The Association of American University Professors (AAUP) is still against student assessment of teaching (Lawrence 2018; Vasey and Carroll 2016) but, like the annual publication of the US News and World Report on ranking of colleges and universities, it has been sustained.

Student assessment of teachers simply implies collection of data on student perception of faculty (teacher) performance (Nowell, Gale, and Handley 2010). Nowell et al (2010) indicate that the results are used in American universities and colleges for evaluative and developmental purposes. The evaluation aspect has to do with merit salary, reappointment, promotion, and tenure, all of which are regarded as ‘summative’ evaluation while faculty or teacher self-improvement is regarded as ‘formative’ evaluation (Trinity University 2007). Trinity University therefore lists the following as the purposes of course teacher evaluation:

i) To furnish information for the individual faculty member to use in assessing his/her course content and presentation.

ii) To provide the individual student with an opportunity to offer constructive criticism to his/her instructor.

iii) To provide the individual faculty member with data that may be used in support of his/her considerations for promotion, tenure, and salary increments.

iv) To provide the student body with a voice in developing and maintaining an effective faculty and curriculum.

v) To provide data that may assist in making curricular decisions.

Although student assessment of teachers continues to attract controversy particularly with respect to how data are collected, how the data are used, and in fact the value of the entire process (Shao, Anderson and Newsome 2007) there can be no doubt that above-listed objectives are noble,
well-meaning, and potentially useful to the primary stakeholders – the teachers, the students, and the general society.

The literature, and the research thereof, on the issue of student evaluation of faculty is over seventy-five years and counting, much of it trying to justify the call to abandon it rather than the need for it. An international conference on the issue has actually indicated that teachers themselves accept the need for student evaluation (Stewart 2013).

Student evaluation is akin to quality control in manufacturing which take place during the process and after by way of feedback from the users or consumers. This places teaching in the parish of pragmatism which implies that what is taught should be applied in daily living. Students should not just be passive recipients of what the system offers but active participants, an issue often highlighted as negative in the lecture method of teaching. They should give a feedback on the effectiveness of teaching, indicating the usefulness or otherwise. If consumers of some manufactures and services are allowed pre-trial purchase of goods and services, the university which hires or purchases the services of professors should have a direct way of determining the quality of what they are paying for. Thus, student evaluation of faculty is also a governance tool in the portfolio of university administrations.

Some questions are germane: how does the system determine the performance of a teacher? Must the society wait for say, four to six years to determine the possible end-product? Is it not possible for the system to determine during the process, whether the expected outcome will be the actual and terminal outcome? It is important to note that it is practically impossible for the head of an educational institution to determine the perceptions of students with respect to the teaching capacity of each teacher; it is also practically impossible for a university administration to determine the performance of every teacher in the institution.

Using the example of failed bridges across the world, this paper argues that there is collateral responsibility of teachers particularly where such failures arise from construction errors. Is it possible to minimize such failures via closer monitoring of teachers’ performance?

There are several discordant notes as the anti-SAT voices continue to rise. The hue and cry is based on perceived biases by student assessors on their teachers as their positions are regarded as being based on subjective factors such as race and gender (Ganon 2018). Research on the issue of bias with respect to gender, specifically highlighting a new dimension – bias towards junior female faculty - has also been carried out (Mengel, Sauermann, and Zolitz 2019).

One possible way of determining whether a teacher has met expectations should be through a review of the academic performance of students taught by each teacher being assessed. However, one of the meta-analyses of faculty teaching effectiveness by Utti, White, and Gonzalez (2017)
concluded that ratings arising from student evaluation of teaching cannot be justified when evidence of their academic performance is matched.

Should student evaluation of teaching be formative or summative? The Association of American University Professors recommends that it should be formative rather than summative. The association also warned against encroachment of “corporate forms of governance” and the growing reliance on numerically based evaluation (Vasey and Carroll 2016).

There are arguments against abandoning SET, and by extension, retention of it. Ganon (2018) quoting Barre (2018) submits that the tool should not be abandoned because “We have not yet been able to find an alternative measure of teaching effectiveness that correlates as strongly with student learning. In other words, they may be imperfect measures, but they are also our best measures.” Indeed, much of literature on student evaluation appear to lean towards the negatives of the tool with minimal attempt to proffer alternatives. Rodriguez (2019) writing in the Journal of Academic Freedom which is a publication of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) states:

Student evaluations of teaching (SET) can be utilized as an institutionally legitimised weapon to bully untenured and contingent faculty and compel conformity to the whims of tenured colleagues. They can also be used to stifle efforts to diversify higher education, foster interdisciplinarity, and undo long-standing hierarchies.

It appears the fight against SET has gone beyond faculty versus university to faculty versus faculty. The paper by Rodriguez is unabashed and a direct attack on a named senior tenured colleague in a “journalistic prose style” as the journal notes of its inclination. As usual, not one line of the paper proffered an alternative to SET. Probably it is high time something is worked out that will suit both the students and faculty?

It is instructive that a meta-analysis of 41 independent validity studies reporting on 68 multi-section courses showed an average correlation between .43 and .47 which led the researcher (Cohen 2018) to conclude that there is strong support for the validity of student ratings as measures of teaching effectiveness.

Hornstein (2017) has however put forward an alternative to SET by way of a phrase, “Observation is necessary.” He used the phrase thrice in three sentences that follow each other (Hornstein 2017). Colleagues or administration in the opinion of the researcher can better evaluate teaching by getting into the classroom to observe. This should be seen as controversial. Observation by colleagues or university officers is like administering drugs on a sick person and expecting that the person observing the process is in a better position to speak on the potency of the drug than the sick person who took the drug.
SAT should in fact be legislated in countries around the world as a governance tool in education. The results should however not be used as a sole determinant of teacher overall performance. This is the position of Trinity University (2007) which states, “Student evaluation of instruction is a necessary but incomplete mechanism for evaluation of the total performance of an instructor.” Each institution has to determine the weight to be assigned to the result of student evaluation.

It is also necessary to note that the method of administration of the instrument is important. This is an aspect of communication of which face-to-face administration is regarded as eliciting a higher response rate than online administration (Stanny, Arruda and James 2017. Young, Joines, Standish, and Gallaher 2019). The caveat here must be that students should not be requested to indicate their names on the form for doing so could influence their assessment because of fear of possible victimization by a lecturer whose assessment is not good.

**SAT – Some other Countries**

The word that is most associated with critics of student evaluation of teaching is ‘bias.’ Writing on the use of the tool in four European countries (United Kingdom, The Netherlands, France, and Germany, Husbands and Fosh (2006) note that there are evidences of bias in student evaluations. They define bias as “aspects of evaluation unrelated to the intrinsic characteristics of the teaching” effort.

Higher educational institutions in the United Kingdom employ student evaluations in managing their teaching corps. Hedges and Webber (2012) indicate that it is used to improve individual and departmental teaching quality. They state that the tool is more useful when combined with other indices both qualitative and quantitative, for example, evaluation by mentors, buddies, and peers. The tool is not commonly used for assessment of departmental performance. Coffey (2001) highlights the importance of the instrument – the questionnaire – in the outcomes. He recommends use of Student Evaluation of Educational Quality Questionnaire (SEEQ) common in the United States by higher educational institutions in the United Kingdom because the SEEQ is based on a “robust factor structure, excellent reliability, and reasonable validity.”

In Germany, mentoring is also recommended particularly in medical education. Mentoring is used along with student evaluation consultants are invited to handle the analysis of the questionnaires. The consultants first observe the teacher in the class and then analyze the questionnaires “for meaningful feedback to the teacher” (Wibbecke, Kahmann, Pignotti, Altenberger, and Kadmon 2015).

A study of Business Schools in 50 European and non-European countries coordinated in France also favours a multi-pronged approach. As reported by Park (2019) student evaluation should be
seen as a process which implies that the one-off approach of evaluating after a teaching cycle is not appropriate. Park (2019) submits that student evaluation of teaching so far is centred around reliability, validity and bias. The study on the selected Business Schools arrived at the following conclusions:

- Use of multidimensional instrument for assessing teaching effectiveness and quality rather than one global measure.
- The questionnaire should not be too complicated; the authorities should use core dimensions and a minimal number of items per dimension to guarantee reliability. This will also increase response rates.
- Reliability should be checked regularly and systematically. This will counter bias.
- Problems with response rates can be countered by making sure that either the sample is sufficiently representative, or SET should be made mandatory and an integral part of a course or module.
- When SET is used for human resource purposes such as tenure and promotion, additional sources of information should be available and used.
- The quality of SET will greatly improve if SET is seen as a process with linked, coherent stages, and when it forms a closed loop. One ‘actor’ should be appointed as accountable for the whole process.

It is pertinent to reiterate that during the 2013 International Summit on the Teaching Profession held in the Netherlands, the need for student evaluation of teaching was emphasized. The summit, sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the Dutch Ministry of Education, and Education International (umbrella body of global teachers’ unions) focused on evaluation of teachers and emphasized the need for use of multiple approaches including peer review along with review by parents, superordinates, students evaluation, and student test scores (Stewart 2013). The report also noted the variations among countries, ranging from informal conversations between principals and teachers in Finland, through peer review in the Netherlands, to highly structured systems in Singapore and Japan.

The practice of student assessment of teaching in Africa ranges from being non-existent to the interesting case of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. While the tool is used for determine faculty tenure and promotion in the United States, in the University of the Witwatersrand (2019) teachers are ‘encouraged’ to administer questionnaires which are returned to them so that they can use the information to improve their teaching. It is therefore not a personnel management tool. In Jordan, a study in the Oman Medical School showed that student evaluation is used both for improvement of teaching and staff promotion (El-Sayed, Simon, El-Wasify, and Nambiar 2018). The case of Nigeria is discussed here under.
A new development in Canada has been of deep interest to the argument for or against student evaluation of teachers. Farr (2018) reports that a case filed by the Ryerson Faculty Association of Ryerson University in Canada in 2009 has been ruled in favour of the teachers. An arbitrator held that evaluation of faculty by students should not be used for tenure and promotion decisions in the university because the evaluations are generally flawed. The teachers had argued that the assessments lack validity and reliability and are often skewed by factors such as individual characteristics including race, gender, accent, age, physical attractiveness among others. Other sources of bias include use of innovative pedagogy as against traditional methods by the teachers as well as course characteristics as for example, subject matter and class size. If other countries follow this example, the days of student evaluation of teaching may be numbered.

Assessment of Teachers in Higher Education in Nigeria

SAT has not been introduced into the Nigerian educational system (Adomi 2007. Mordi 2002). Tertiary education teachers are evaluated based on qualifications, teaching, current research, publications, and service to university/country. In private schools below tertiary level, SAT is being used but in few cases.

Trials on the applicability of two American evaluation instruments were carried out in some universities in Nigeria (Watkins and Akande 1992). The result led to a doubt about cross-cultural validity of a multi-dimensional model of teaching effectiveness. Urua (2011) carried out a pilot study on the use of SAT and concluded that few universities in Nigeria use the tool, specifically, two universities out of 116 accredited by the National Universities Commission (NUC) by 2011. As at 2019, the Commission has accredited 174 universities - 43 Federal, 52 State, and 79 privates (NUC 2019). It is very doubtful if the umbrella workers union, Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) will accept introduction of student evaluation of teachers in public universities in Nigeria.

In an empirical study in some high schools it was found that use of student achievement scores as a basis for assessing teachers’ instructional effectiveness was not favorably received by teachers (Joshua, Joshua, and Kritsonis 2006). The attitude of teachers was found to be negative when the purpose is summative, and significantly more negative when the purpose is formative. The researchers therefore advised caution in the use of this approach. Tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria have very strong academic staff unions which sometimes appear to shield their members even when they are going the wrong direction.

Generally, a number of instruments are used to assess lecturers at the higher education level in Nigeria. Assessment is normally done once a year for purpose of promotion to higher status; assessment hardly affects tenure. The tools include:

1. Annual Performance Evaluation Report (APER) – this is a format which is used for assessment of both academic and non-academic staff. There are provisions for information
on the work history of the staff in the institution; qualifications before and during the assessment period; and scores on twenty items from punctuality to work to orientation towards team work. These scores, on a scale of 0 to 5, sum up to 100. The supervisor, in this case the Head of Department, sums up with a recommendation for promotion or otherwise. For ‘transparency’ the entire entries up to that level are handed to the staff to agree or disagree. However, the Dean completes a part, agreeing with either the Head of Department or the staff. The Dean’s recommendation is not available for sighting by the staff and may be the deciding factor in the staff’s promotion because it is the Dean that attends the Appointments & Promotions Committee (A&PC) meeting. This system obtains in Colleges of Education and universities; in Polytechnics, the office of the Dean does not exist.

2. The next stage is the review of the publications of the lecturer. An elaborate system of scoring is used depending on the status of the lecturer starting from Assistant Lecturer to Chief Lecturer (Colleges of Education and Polytechnics) and Assistant Lecturer to Professor in universities. At the level of Chief Lecturer or Associate Professor/Professor, the publications and related documents are sent out to external assessors. If two of three assessors recommend that the staff be elevated, there is hardly any reason for the A&PC to say otherwise. Use of publications is the basis of the ‘publish or perish’ concept in higher education. It does not apply in the case of non-academic staff.

3. The recommendations of the A&PC are sent to the Governing Council for review and approval.

4. A recent development, used by the Rivers State University of Education, Port Harcourt is the preference for Google Scholar reports and specifically, number of citations. This has made assessment more global for the ranks of Associate Professor and Professor.

At no stage in the process is student assessment considered, reason institutions of higher learning in Nigeria do not bother with the exercise. Yet SAT should be seen as a sine qua non for various reasons:

   i) As a demonstration of a student-centered approach to teaching.

   ii) As a tool for accountability. Some teachers are known as ‘visiting Professors’ because of their penchant for ‘last minute’ teaching. They appear for lectures a week or two before examinations, rush through the course outline, burden students with assignments and tests for continuous assessment, and rush off to continue their other mostly secondary income engagements.

   iii) As a tool for professional development. Teachers that post low aggregate scores but who have potentials for growth can be assisted to develop themselves. Student evaluation can be used to determine a trend; more experience appears to mean better teaching (Clayson 2009). It appears there is no other means of determining the professional strength or weakness of a teacher except through the reaction of those they have taught. That is what happens to any other product or service – it is the users that
give an indication of the usefulness and, or effectiveness following use. This is in spite of the biases that are often evident in SAT.

iv) Empirical studies conclude that quality assurance and continuous evaluation of higher education study programs are major tasks set for higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area for instance. Dorta-Gonzalez and Dorta-Gonzalez (2009) note that, “The process of academic quality improvement necessarily involves the evaluation of teaching staff as it is an important element in developing a suitable culture of internal evaluation in universities.” They therefore developed improved instruments for use by higher education for assessment of teachers by their students.

A proposed SAT template is annexed to this paper. It lists twenty questions that can be administered on students at the end of every semester. The thrust of the questionnaire is improvement of performance by the teacher. It is also structured to be simple, using a 5-point Likert scale format. The need for simplicity is due to the fact that several higher educational institutions particularly in developing countries operate with low level of technology. The results from simple analyses can still lead to useful conclusions.

To minimize bias if the scores are to be used, they should be an average for a period of at least three years. If for instance in three years, say 75% of three groups of students submit that a particular teacher’s performance is poor, such a teacher should be told to stay one more year and improve on professional performance before being promoted. University administrations should also be equipped to provide ameliorative actions so as to improve the performance of the teacher with low student evaluation scores. It is important to emphasize that evaluation would likely be more reliable better if the template makes no provision for name of the student evaluating.

A Basket of Indices

Two desiderata are evident in the case of teachers versus establishments in institutions of higher learning with respect to the use of student assessment of teachers particularly for tenure and professional growth. The first is about the institution, the whole, and the need for approaches to ensure corporate survival and growth. The second is about the teachers – one of the parts, the key part – and the need for security of tenure and professional growth. Both are existential in nature and therefore deserve more than a passing consideration.

Above position implies the need for a resolution which then implies a dialectic: the existence of the whole takes precedence (thesis); the part - core players - have to exist if the whole is to exist (antithesis); a middle ground because the two need each other for the two to exist (synthesis). The middle ground should be such that none of the stakeholders should have an absolute advantage or absolute disadvantage. A basket of approaches could justify this position if weights are assigned to two indices – primary duties and secondary duties.
The primary duties for teachers particularly at the tertiary level are teaching and research. The instrument most appropriate for teaching is student assessment which can be assigned a weight of 40%. Research is best determined through publishing and other useable outcomes of laboratory and studio engagements of which 40% should be assigned. The balance of 20% should go for secondary engagements such as administration, committee work, and community service among others. It is assumed that Chief Executive Officers of the institutions have reached the apogee of the teaching profession and therefore do not require promotion and can thus concentrate their effort on administration though they may teach if they so wish.

The basket of approaches described above would among other things, imply that no one index can fully stop an academic from career growth although any one of the primary scores can substantially affect outcome if say, a minimum or cut off point is 60%. It also implies that academicians should do more than teaching after all, they have the mental capacity to do so.

Who wants teachers to subject themselves to performance assessment by students? It is the management of the institutions. Who stands to benefit from the approach? The primary beneficiaries are the students who expect a change in their capacities after interacting with a teacher during a semester. Certainly, there are other beneficiary stakeholders such as the management, families of students, sponsors of the institution, the general society, and indeed the teachers themselves.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Before SAT is introduced, there is need for thorough work and discussions with the principal stakeholders – the teachers, the students, and the administrators of the institutions. The following should be considered:

1. **Purpose** – the primary objective should be to improve teacher and student performance. The approach must not be regarded as punitive in orientation by any of the parties concerned.
2. **The design stage should involve the teachers and each institution’s peculiarities have to be considered.**
3. **Approaches to analysis and interpretation of results have to be agreed upon prior to use.** This, as well as the second recommendation above, implies a research agenda in the institution.
4. **The instrument should provide for possible interaction with students, allowance being provided for bias from the students’ perspective with respect to fear of being victimized.**
5. **The results should not be used as a sole determinant of teacher effectiveness. Each institution has to determine the weight to be assigned to the result.**
6. **Whatever weight is used also has to make for a trend.** As promotions in most institutions of higher learning take place after a minimum of three years on each position, three-year averages would be more appropriate.
7. It will be very necessary to give both the teachers and the students some orientation on the purpose and use of the instrument before it is administered.

CONCLUSION
Student assessment of teachers is a desideratum for higher education. It is a controversial tool of which the din evidently clouds the possible usefulness of the exercise. However it should be part of a comprehensive approach to teacher personnel management. Use of a basket of indices is therefore recommended for use by higher educational institutions.

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<td>Regularity in attendance to lectures</td>
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<td>Punctuality to lectures</td>
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<td>iii.</td>
<td>Ability to effectively communicate (grammar)</td>
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<td>iv.</td>
<td>Ability to effectively communicate (audibility)</td>
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<td>v.</td>
<td>Empathy or sympathy with students (e.g. appreciates slow learners; tolerates questions; is supportive)</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>vi.</td>
<td>Class control</td>
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<td>vii.</td>
<td>Content or subject matter (lectures are comprehensive and relevant)</td>
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<td>viii.</td>
<td>Content or subject matter (use of live cases, local examples)</td>
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<td>ix.</td>
<td>Content or subject matter (conforms with Minimum Standards or course outline provided)</td>
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<td>x.</td>
<td>Content or subject matter (lecturer’s level of grasp)</td>
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xi. Methodology (use of acceptable teaching methods; creative) 1 2 3 4 5
xii. Use of teaching aids/instructional materials 1 2 3 4 5
xiii. Quality of tests (simple and relevant) 1 2 3 4 5
xiv. Quality of assignments (simple and relevant) 1 2 3 4 5
xv. Discusses tests and assignments after marking 1 2 3 4 5
xvi. Makes each lesson interesting and memorable 1 2 3 4 5
xvii. Provides notes 1 2 3 4 5
xvii. Interaction with students (harsh or pleasant) 1 2 3 4 5
xix. Usually submits results promptly 1 2 3 4 5
xx. Counselling of students on general issues 1 2 3 4 5
xxi. Moral integrity 1 2 3 4 5

Overall assessment: Very Poor ☐ Poor ☐ Fair ☐ Good ☐ Excellent ☐

His/her strengths:
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

His/her weakness(es):
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________