

# Enhancing Teaching & Learning

## Focus on: Feedback from Students

### What do we mean by Feedback from students?

Feedback from students on their experience of a module/course or programme can be very useful for identifying issues which might need to be resolved and for getting ideas for improvement both for a specific module in the short-term or as part of a wider programme enhancement. There are multiple methods and approaches which can be used to gather feedback and it is important that those selected are appropriate to the intended purpose. Taking a strategic overview of the range of surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, discussion sessions, class rep meetings, ISSE<sup>1</sup>, etc., and how they might connect holistically across a programme is worthwhile and a valuable part of programme management that will help to reduce wasted effort whilst increasing the likelihood that such feedback is useful and able to be acted upon.

### Challenges

Traditional feedback surveys can sometimes cause suspicion or anxiety, for either the students or the members of staff whose courses are under review. It is crucial therefore, to remove any misconceptions by being clear about the purpose of the feedback data and also acknowledging that each method has its own intrinsic limitations.

ISSUE	CONCERNS
<b>Participation levels</b>	Multiple factors influence the extent to which students will complete surveys or participate in other feedback opportunities. A low rate of return/response is sometimes argued to indicate little dissatisfaction with the course. However, it could also be interpreted as little sense of engagement! Some of the other issues listed below are strong influencers of participation.
<b>Trust &amp; anonymity</b>	In order to get open, honest opinion there needs to be belief by respondents that the process is either confidential (as, say in focus groups) or anonymous (as should be the case with surveys). An associated responsibility of such however is that students treat the process with courtesy, dignity and contribute constructively <sup>2</sup> .
<b>Survey fatigue</b>	We all are bombarded with requests to complete surveys at work and in our personal lives. Sometimes incentives are used, or we are repeatedly pressed for a response. There needs to be consideration given as to whether yet another survey is needed, how many are being asked of students, how these relate to other forms of feedback, and timing and sequencing. If there are ways of replacing a suite of questionnaires with a more targeted combined instrument, or of

<sup>1</sup> The Irish Survey of Student Engagement – the national, annual, survey of students across all Irish HE institutions <http://studentsurvey.ie/>

<sup>2</sup> Respondents to surveys and feedback mechanisms should understand that any comments which are personal, offensive, or discriminatory are a violation of the *Code of Conduct* and not acceptable. In addition, those who oversee the feedback process should act with discretion when examples of biased or personal comments have been made, ensuring that names of lecturers and other details are redacted/discarded where appropriate and not part of any wider circulation of results/outcomes.

	integrating small, quick feedback within routine course activity, then these can help reduce such a burden.
<b>Data management</b>	It is absolutely vital that we take care with any data gathered from students and that all required steps are taken to make sure that the data is secure, not shared with anyone who is not appropriately authorised, and not gathered using any tools that are not compliant with data protection requirements, etc. This is even more important given the GDPR <sup>3</sup> and its implications for institutions. Locally, also, it should be clear who gets access to such feedback and how it is reported through any processes or structures in the institution. Any data which is gathered must only be used for the initial intended purpose and not used for other reasons or by other groups.
<b>Gender bias</b>	It has been established that traditional feedback surveys used in education, particularly those which emphasise 'evaluation of teaching', are subject to gender bias, typically providing lower ratings for courses taught by female staff. It is important, not only to ensure that this is given attention in the design of survey/feedback instruments, but also that it does not skew the analysis of, and response to, the feedback.
<b>Method, scale, and administration</b>	The specific tools being used are often selected on the basis of resource limitations and not necessarily on the basis of the most appropriate method for the particular area of enquiry. Even so, with large classes, it can be difficult to administer, manage, analyse, and respond to the feedback obtained. Often, qualitative comments and reflections can provide richer insights into the student experience, but might be unfeasible to analyse 'at scale'.
<b>Responding to feedback</b>	'Closing the feedback loop' is used to refer to ensuring that students are made aware of the results of any feedback exercise, such as listing changes that have been made to courses as a result of feedback, or explanations why particular changes are not necessary/merited. Of course, many suggestions will not be feasible and might reflect the students' narrow perspective/knowledge of the discipline at that particular stage of their programme. A more challenging issue for Heads of School or Programme Leaders, however, might be what to do in cases where the feedback is strongly negative and/or those cases in which comments are made about the professional skill or approach of individual staff members or course teams.

### **Strategy & Policy**

*These and other related issues should be addressed by a combination of the institutional Policy on Module/Programme Feedback and local College/School policies or guidelines. It is important to have the various roles, responsibilities and rationale for whichever processes are adopted clearly stated and understood by all parties. Fundamentally, it must be clear to all what the purpose of any feedback exercise is and how the information garnered will be used.*

*The overall purpose of standard module or programme feedback processes should be to identify opportunities for: (a) improvement of the delivery of courses, (b) enhancement of programmes, (c) promoting student academic engagement.*

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.dataprotection.ie>

As discussed earlier, some staff, however, may have concerns about the relationship between student feedback and judgements about their individual professional performance. It is important to be clear that the Head of School (or whoever has official responsibility for the feedback process) will use their professional judgement when dealing with feedback which identifies specific individual staff members (see also footnote 2) and where necessary may seek to discuss such with the individuals concerned, doing so on a confidential basis and recognising that most feedback tools only provide very limited, opinion-based snapshots of the student experience, subject to bias (such as those listed previously) and do not capture the entirety of effort, skill, or rationale embedded within course design, organisation, and delivery.

Staff 'performance issues', where such apparently arise, should be dealt with through the established and appropriate mechanisms in place within the institution (e.g. appraisals, career review) and not as part of the module/course feedback process. Misuse of data gathered for module/programme enhancement will undermine trust and the value of engaging in the process.

### Feedback Instruments

There is no one feedback method that will suit all purposes and ideally students will be given a number of opportunities to communicate their experiences of individual modules, programmes and the student experience overall. A strategic overview of the feedback processes over a programme will help towards building a picture of the student experience on a programme, while avoiding some of the issues outlined above.

Instrument	Advantages	Considerations
<b>Survey (online)</b>	Ease of distribution Quick to collate and process	Tend to have a low take-up rate Can be limited in depth of information
<b>Survey (paper/in-class)</b>	Better completion rate than online, especially important for small class sizes	Can be limited in depth of information (depending on design) Sometimes considered a low value tick-box exercise
<b>One-minute papers (Stop-Start-Continue)</b>	Ideal for mid-semester feedback Often welcomed by students as more meaningful/useful with immediate responses possible	Time needed to read and process.
<b>Grouped Student Evaluation</b>	More considered responses from groups of students	Higher processing cost Potential to organise locally
<b>Class representatives &amp; staff student liaison committees</b>	Potential for rich feedback Can be timed to allow early intervention Encourages dialogue	Some reps worry that being 'the messenger' may impact their academic results. Class reps need training and support

## What do we do with feedback?

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Feedback is a chance to enter into dialogue with and between colleagues and students, and to promote a positive work and study environment.

To encourage engagement from students, one of the most important actions on receipt of feedback should be communication back to the students, often called 'closing the feedback loop'. It is recommended that a summary is presented in some form to students and a proposed response, in the form of what can and cannot be acted on and the reasons why.

To encourage engagement from staff, a strategic approach to feedback across programmes with clear purposes and processes (collection, analysis, and response) outlined is key.

## Resources:

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Williams, James (2016), *Quality assurance and quality enhancement: is there a relationship?*, *Quality in Higher Education* Vol. 22, Iss. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2016.1227207>

Noha Elassy, (2015) "The concepts of quality, quality assurance and quality enhancement", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 23 Issue: 3, pp.250-261, <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-11-2012-0046>

Boring, Anne, (2017) *Gender biases in student evaluations of teaching*, *Journal of Public Economics*, Volume 145, January 2017, Pages 27-41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2016.11.006>

THE Article: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/growing-evidence-anti-female-bias-student-surveys>

Guardian article: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2015/feb/13/female-academics-huge-sexist-bias-students>

## Organisations and Initiatives

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Quality & Qualifications Ireland (QQI): <http://www.qqi.ie>

The QQI, adhering to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, develop and publish guidelines for providers for the quality assurance of their programmes and services. QA policy and guidelines are available from <http://www.qqi-qaaguidelines.com>.

National Student Engagement Programme: **NSTEP** is a collaborative initiative, seeking to enhance institutional practices and student involvement in quality enhancement, quality assurance and student engagement, being developed by the USI, HEA and QQI. <http://usi.ie/nstep/>

