

# Enhancing Student Feedback and Improvement Systems in Tertiary Education

Mahsood Shah  
&  
Chenicheri Sid Nair

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# Introduction

The **CAA Quality Series** comprises occasional publications, about two or three per year, on topics of interest to practitioners of quality assurance in higher education.

**Specifically, the intent of the CAA Quality Series is:**

- To contribute to the enhancement of quality practices in higher education in the UAE and more widely;
- To provide a means for sharing insights, research and analysis that is responsive to identified or emerging needs of those with responsibility for quality in higher education;
- To stimulate discussion and reflection on directions, evolution and progress in quality improvement relevant to UAE higher education;
- To provide contributions to the literature on quality assurance in UAE higher education that would otherwise not be available to a wide audience;
- To enhance public knowledge of QA, for agencies, for institutions and for the general public.

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Anyone interested in contributing may contact the series editor, David Woodhouse, on [david.woodhouse@moheer.gov.ae](mailto:david.woodhouse@moheer.gov.ae).

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# Acknowledgement

The main aim of this volume is to share practices in the measurement, reporting and enhancement of student experience at national, institutional, course, and unit of study level. This publication includes contribution from Australia, United Kingdom, and United Arab Emirate (UAE) universities. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) of UK has also kindly contributed a chapter. While the measurement and use of student experience data is well known in some countries, such developments are emerging in UAE region and contributing to quality assurance.

The experience of Australia and United Kingdom is valuable with different levels of development in both countries. This publication will assist UAE universities and other tertiary education institutions in strengthening the measurement, reporting, and enhancement of student experience. The two editors of this volume would like to thank the universities and the HEA for contributing a chapter. We would like to thank the Commission of Academic Accreditation (CAA) for considering our proposal to publish on this important topic.

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# Introduction

# The Prominence of the Student Voice in Tertiary Education

Mahsood Shah, University of Newcastle, Australia

## Preamble

The student voice is increasingly used as a measure of educational quality. Universities have a long history of using external and internal instruments to enhance the quality of student experience including the classroom and outside experience. Governments on the other hand have in recent years introduced policy instruments to strengthen the measurement and reporting on student experience. While enhancements have always been the role of universities and autonomous individuals, significant shifts have taken place to ensure transparency and increased accountability on universities. Some key shifts include the publicising of results in public domain to influence prospective student choice; using the results in ranking and league tables, and linking the results of the survey in academic staff performance reviews.

In Australia, the government introduced performance based funding in 2005 which used student experience measures including the course experience questionnaire (CEQ) results to assess and reward universities. In 2012, the Australian government introduced the new University Experience Survey (UES) which measures first and final year undergraduate student experience with onshore students. The government is also reviewing the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) which includes the CEQ and the graduate destination survey (GDS). It is envisaged that the results of both surveys will be publicly available on MyUniversity website for public access.

The renewal of quality assurance in Australia and other countries such as the United Kingdom has resulted in the increased use of the student voice in measuring and assessing the quality of student experience. Government policies to use student survey results in assessing quality and in some cases linking the results with performance funding have increased the value and use of student survey results. While universities in Australia have a long history of collecting, analysing, and reporting student feedback as part of internal quality assurance, the external driver has resulted in rapid change. Some of the notable changes in the Australian context as a result of using student surveys in external quality assessment and performance based funding include:

- The inclusion of student survey results as a key performance measure of learning and teaching and other areas in the strategic plan;
- Setting of targets in the strategic and operational plans on student experience measures;
- Embedding student surveys in the institutional quality assurance frameworks;



- Appointment of senior academic staff such as Pro Vice Chancellor or Director (Student Experience) with explicit responsibility for the enhancement of student experience;
- University wide policy and procedure on collection, analysis, and reporting of survey results;
- Development of annual planning timelines with student surveys included as a key activity;
- Dedicated staff in faculties to coordinate end of semester evaluations;
- Increased communication and promotion of student surveys using posters, online learning portal, reminders in lectures and tutorials, and promoting the surveys in orientations and graduation ceremonies;
- The engagement of students and student unions as participants in external quality audits between 2001-2011;
- The alignment between standard national surveys with internal instruments such as end of semester teacher and unit evaluations;
- The use of end of semester evaluations in annual academic staff performance reviews;
- Enhanced and meaningful reporting of results using business intelligence tools to provide results at university, faculty, course, unit of study and teacher level;
- In some cases sub-sorting the analysis of results at campus, offshore, partner, and other demographic level; and
- Increased use of qualitative data.

In recent years, some Australian universities have increased focus on using student survey results and working with associate deans and other staff in faculties, schools and administrative units to identify areas needing improvement. A few universities are now working in partnership with student unions to communicate the results and actions taken with all students. While the measurement and reporting of student survey results have been enhanced in some universities, limited work is done across the university sector on using the results of the surveys to renew curriculum, assessments, and pedagogy. The focus on improvement is evident in non-academic areas e.g. library, however limited work is done to engage autonomous individuals in faculties to use the survey data in changing course content, assessments, and teaching methods.

A recent study by Shah and Nair (2012) highlighted that the assessment of quality using student survey results and performance based funding have resulted in the following changes in the end of semester evaluation surveys:

- merger of two separate instruments into one single survey tool aimed to measure teacher and unit evaluations;
- university wide policy on the use of teaching and unit evaluation results and accountability at various levels;
- a move from voluntary to mandatory evaluations which is conducted at the end of each teaching period;
- linking the findings of the survey to annual academic staff performance review and academic promotions;
- rewarding academic staff in terms of teaching awards;

- increased accountability on associate deans and academic staff to improve teaching quality outcomes;
- implementation of university wide survey and improvement framework with focus on data collections, analysis, reporting and closing the loop;
- use of both traditional paper and online survey methodology with increased emphasis on online methodology; and
- consistent use of the survey at all teaching locations including offshore; various modes of learning and with university pathway colleges.

Despite years of monitoring the student experience in Australia including government policies such as performance based funding to reward universities, and student experience being part of annual institutional performance assessment by the government, the level of student satisfaction measured via the CEQ is low. Study by Shah (2012) suggests that 10 years of external quality audits which included the monitoring of students experience, and engaging representative sample of students in external quality audits have had limited impact on improving the satisfaction level. His study also suggested that performance based funding using CEQ results have had limited improvement despite millions of dollars rewarded to some universities, with elite universities benefiting from the largest share of the reward (Shah et al, 2011). Similar observations were also outlined in the review of higher education in 2008 with a full chapter outlining issues, challenges and way forward on student engagement and student experience. The review found limited improvement in student satisfaction using CEQ data. The review benchmarked CEQ with the National Student Survey (NSS) used in the United Kingdom and found different levels of satisfaction (Bradley et al, 2008). The report on the review suggested that some of the contributing factors affecting the quality of student experience include student to teacher ratio, the influence of information and communication technology in learning, teaching and administration, and the removal of compulsory non-academic fees (pp. 72).

Although the government has introduced a number of recent policies to increase the voice of students such as development of the new University Experience Survey (UES), review of the current Australian graduate Survey (AGS), using student experience results in the assessment of quality by the external agency, and the publication of the results on MyUniversity website, there are gaps in the current policy directions.

First, the current policies related to the measurement and assessment of student experience is aimed at universities only. The new UES and the current AGS are aimed at measuring student experience in universities. The policy does not require the 170 burgeoning private higher education providers to be part of the survey. The current policy does not enable public and private institutions to benchmark results, and neither does it allow the quality agency to identify risk related to student experience with the private providers. This is despite a number of thematic analysis of external quality audit reports undertaken by the former Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) which identified the measurement, reporting, and enhancement of student experience as an area needing significant improvement (Winchester 2009; 2010) with private providers.

The second area of limitation is the lack of rationalisation of student surveys. In Australia the five dual sector universities who offer both vocational and higher education qualifications are required to participate in two additional surveys as part of vocational education compliance requirement in addition to the UES and AGS. Limited attempts have been made to rationalise student surveys which could reduce the current duplication with the view to using a few standard national surveys to assess the quality of student experience with different types of providers.

Third, there is a significant gap in the assessment of student experience with offshore students studying outside Australia. Neither the AGS nor the UES is targeted to offshore student cohort, despite offshore operation seen as high risk by the new national regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Some universities are using internal instruments to assess the experience of offshore students; however the practice is patchy with very low student participation. While the government and universities see offshore as a potential source of income generation, limited attempt have been made to develop policies to systematically monitor the experience of offshore students.

The fourth area of concern is the participation of students in external quality assessment. The external quality audits undertaken between 2001-2011 engaged student unions and a representative sample of students in the interview process with the review panel. The participation of students enabled the audit panel to identify areas of good practice and recurring areas raised by students as needing improvement. The new quality and regulatory framework introduced by TEQSA does not engage students in the external review process. Instead it provides for students to forward written submissions to TEQSA. TEQSA places the onus on universities and other kinds of providers to engage students in the student surveys, and internal review processes as part of quality assurance. The lack of student participation in the external review process limits the genuine commitment of the government and the national regulator to listen to the voices of many students on a wide range of areas impacting the student experience. It also labels students as opponents rather than partners in the assessment and enhancement of quality. While student surveys may trigger areas with low satisfaction, it does not necessarily inform the real causes of low satisfaction. The growing diversity of students with different expectations and experience brings the need to listen to the voice of different cohorts of students such as students who are studying off campus, online learning, partner institutions, international onshore and offshore, higher degree research students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and other disadvantaged groups who have different needs.

The reliance on internal and external student survey results only to assess the level of risk related to student experience may result in institutions showcasing areas of good practice and withholding low performing areas identified in internal surveys with fears that institutions may be identified as high risk on student experience related risk indicator in a highly regulated environment with legal powers of the national

regulator to take immediate action such as placing conditions for re-registration, or penalty and sanctions on institutions.

The measurement and enhancement of student experience in UK higher education is somewhat different from Australia. For example performance based funding has never been used to reward universities using student experience measures. One of the key drivers on the increased emphasis of student experience in the UK is the use of rankings and league tables which ranks universities using student experience measures. For example, the NSS results are publicly available on Unistats website for public access and the Times Higher Education Student Survey results are used in rankings which is widely published in the newspapers, websites, and other media. High performing institutions celebrate their standing which is used in marketing materials, corporate documents, and also on the home page of the university website. Vice Chancellors and senior staff eagerly wait for the results and add marketing pitch in meeting, speeches, and other avenues to inform stakeholders on how great the university is for prospective students, researchers, and other stakeholders.

Institutions who do not do so well are engaged in the review of various aspects of student satisfaction including pre and post survey processes, student engagement in surveys, design, collection, and analysis of results, engagement of academic and non-academic units in communicating and closing the loop on student feedback, accountability on key leaders to act on the results, and monitoring the impact of actions taken as a direct result of survey findings. In some cases low performing institutions that are in the bottom of the league table are questioned by various stakeholders on whether their reputation is at risk if the institution continues to perform at the bottom of the league table. The low performance fosters debate and discussions (Buckley, 2012) around the university on the role of academics and other staff in enhancing the student experience, and whether changes need to be made to renew curriculum, assessments, pedagogy, and the resourcing of various support services, and teaching and learning infrastructure. Some institutions start to have dialogue with peers from high performing institutions on the strategies deployed which has resulted trend improvement in the ranking, and how such strategies could be implemented in their institutions.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the prominence of NSS in UK higher education has threatened autonomous individuals (Furedi, 2012) to improve teaching quality with some items of NSS used in the end of semester evaluations which is used in academic staff performance review. In many cases academics are also asked to change the teaching content and assessments as a direct result of student feedback. Several limitations of NSS include the lack of recognition of institutional diversity, resourcing, and the student body with elite universities dominant with high scoring students, and some institutions with the mission of equity and widening participation with different student characteristics. There is evidence to suggest that the NSS and the Times Higher Education Student Survey has resulted in coaching students on how to fill the survey and communicating the implications of low ranking on employability outcomes.

On the other hand the NSS has played a vital role in improving the engagement of students and student unions with the university. Institutions are increasingly working in partnership with students and student unions pre and post student surveys with increased communication about the survey to optimise response rates, and working closely with the study body to implement improvements. UK higher education has made significant progress in using student survey results to close the loop on areas needing improvement. Posters, postcards, social media, online learning portals, and student unions are some of the many strategies used to communicate improvements with students. The engagement of students in external quality audits by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has also increased the prominence of student voice in UK higher education with students playing an important role in the assessment and enhancement of quality.

The increased assessment of quality by external agencies have played a key role on developing systems and processes of measuring, reporting, and improving student experience in United Arab Emirates (UAE). There is evidence to suggest that universities in UAE are building internal capacity to assess and improve student experience with various initiatives in place. It is apparent though that in Australia and UK, governments have played an important role in using the student voice to improve the reputation of universities in a highly competitive environment.

## Author bio

**Mahsood Shah** is an Associate Professor with the Centre for English Language and Foundations Studies at the University on Newcastle, Australia. In this role Mahsood is responsible for strengthening the research capacity of the centre on a wide range of areas including access, participation, academic outcomes, and quality and standard of education delivery with diverse groups of students. Prior to joining the University of Newcastle, Mahsood was the Principal Advisor Academic Strategy, Planning and Quality at RMIT University. Mahsood has also worked with University of Canberra and University of Western Sydney in strategy, planning and quality roles.

Apart from working with universities, Mahsood has worked with seven private for-profit higher education providers on a wide range of projects including accreditation and re-accreditation with Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Mahsood has led the former Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) audits in three universities and seven private for-profit providers. Some of his work related to quality assurance, benchmarking, and student experience is included in AUQA Good Practice database.

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# Section I: Australian Experiences

# Development of a student evaluation quality culture: the eVALUate experience at Curtin University

Beatrice Tucker, Curtin University, Western Australia

## Abstract

The successful development and use of an online student evaluation system has required a significant cultural transformation in teaching and learning at Curtin. An effective quality culture was achieved through leadership with a focus on communication, education and involvement of all stakeholders. All aspects of the system were informed by relevant pedagogy and research into student evaluation of teaching within a university-level outcomes approach to learning. Open and transparent student feedback about student learning informs quality improvement and university-wide strategies to continually improve the student experience at Curtin.

**Keywords:** student evaluation of teaching and learning, student experience, quality improvement, academic leadership

## Background

The student experience in higher education is a culmination of all aspects of university experienced by an individual. This experience includes all aspects of engagement throughout the student life cycle (Coates, 2006; Harvey, 2006; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005), and may include the distinct cultural experience promised by an institution (Baird & Gordon, 2009). Multiple approaches are used in the sector to identify and evaluate the student experience and establish quality improvement approaches. Student, graduate and employer surveys of experiences and outcomes, student progression data (such as retention and pass rates), and employment data are some measures of teaching and learning quality used by universities. In 2009, the Australian Federal Government established the Transforming Australia's Higher Education System policy position as a result of a Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). This review highlighted the need for a strong focus on measuring and monitoring student engagement with a focus on the connection with student's achievement of learning outcomes. New performance indicators have been proposed and a new regulatory body, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) was formed in 2011. With the advent of TEQSA, the Australian sector is currently debating the teaching and learning measures of quality relating to the student experience. The sector is also discussing measures for assuring student's achievement of learning outcomes relative to whether these are quantifying inputs, processes or outputs.



Measures that have been proposed include a new survey (the University Experience Survey), refinement of the Graduate Destination Survey, the assessment of learning outcomes and admission testing (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2012; Coates, 2010; Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011) and institutions are focusing on evidencing academic and graduate standards using tools and processes.

Student evaluation has been integral to the quality improvement process in universities for over 20 years (Blackmore, 2009; Harvey & Williams, 2010). The use of surveys for quality assurance and enhancement has received mixed responses (Anderson, 2006; Geall, 2000; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008) and whilst there has been a general lack of agreement over the meaning of quality and how it is measured (Brown, Carpenter, Collins, & Winkvist-Noble, 2007; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Houston, 2008) student feedback is considered vital in the quality assurance process (Barrie, Ginns, & Prosser, 2005; Blackmore, 2009; Harvey & Williams, 2010; McCormack, 2005; Morgan, 2008; Young, McConkey, & Kirby, 2011). Within the quality improvement framework proposed by Baird and Gordon (2009), student evaluations of their teaching and learning are regarded as a standard assurance mechanism (referred to as normative quality assurance), a process measure which informs the mitigation of risks.

Curtin University is Western Australia's largest and most multi-cultural university with over 47,000 students and including Australia's third largest international student population (more than 40% of students study on or offshore). The University operates out of 16 locations, including Sydney, Malaysia and Singapore and is a major shareholder provider for Open Universities Australia. This chapter describes the events and factors responsible for successfully developing, implementing and embedding Curtin's online student evaluation system (called eVALUate) for the purpose of improving the student experience and for quality assurance. It is well recognised that the development of a quality culture requires organisational change and development (Mustafa & Chiang, 2006). To ensure positive organisational change, the research literature informed all aspects of the process. The following principles outline key features, identified in the literature, that were used to lead the change of Curtin's teaching and learning quality culture: 1) development of a vision and strategy; 2) establishment of a sense of necessity; 3) creation of a guiding leadership team; 4) communication; 5) development of a shared commitment; 6) generation of early successes; 7) consolidation and embedding; and 8) re-evaluation of the system (Mustafa & Chiang, 2006). These principles enabled the successful and largely positive adoption of eVALUate namely: the development of a vision and a need for change; leadership; pedagogy; improving the student learning experience; communication and education; recognition of early successes; consolidation; and evaluation.

## Development of a vision and a need for change

A number of events provided the impetus for Curtin to develop a university-wide

evaluation system. The University recognised that quality monitoring should be concerned with improvement and enhancement of student learning (Hodgkinson & Brown, 2003) and that the goal of higher education is to enable the transformation of students, providing them with the skills and abilities to actively contribute to a rapidly changing world (Ramsden, 2003). In Western Australia, a shift in the secondary education system to outcomes-based education and a focus in student-centred learning in the higher education sector provided Curtin with a renewed focus. Curtin developed a learning outcomes philosophy: Excellence in teaching and learning at Curtin (Curtin University, 2003). The tenets within this philosophy articulate Curtin's commitment to student learning through an outcomes-focused approach whereby learning experiences are designed to help students achieve the learning outcomes at unit and course level. The tenets specified that teaching and learning is a partnership between staff and students and that systemic evaluation of teaching and learning is used to ensure quality. The development of the University's stated goals in teaching and learning was at the centre of the vision for developing eVALUate.

In 2000, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), formed by the Australian Ministerial Council on Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, was established as an independent, national quality assurance agency. AUQA was involved in the promotion, auditing and reporting on quality assurance in institutions using a process of institutional self-evaluation (Chalmers, 2007; Woodhouse, 2003). A recommendation from Curtin's first AUQA audit was "that Curtin develop efficient mechanisms for tapping student opinion, translating the feedback into action, and informing students of outcomes and changes made" (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009; Sarah, 2003, p.35). At this time, Curtin had no uniform system or instrument for gathering student feedback on units or teachers for university-wide reporting. The University employed a number of instruments (online and paper-based) for student feedback on teaching and learning, aligned with the industrial agreements of the day. Adaptations of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) were implemented by Curtin Business School (called the Unit Experience Survey) and the School of Physiotherapy (called the Course Experience on the Web) for gathering feedback on units (Dixon & Scott, 2003; Tucker, Jones, Straker, & Cole, 2003). Curtin's Annual Student Satisfaction Survey included some CEQ items to gather feedback on students overall experience of their course. Feedback on teaching was gathered using the Student Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) paper-based survey on a voluntary basis and the results were confidential to the requesting teacher. The AUQA panel reported that students did not value the survey and felt over surveyed (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009; Sarah, 2003, p.35).

Fortuitously, the Australian government announced performance based funding in 2003 with the introduction of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) using graduate feedback on teaching and learning, graduate outcomes (employment and further studies), and student progress and retention rates (Department of Education Science and Training, 2004). Eligibility for the LTPF was that universities were required to have a systematic student evaluation system including the reporting of student feedback to the general public. Curtin's failure to be eligible for LTPF

funding in the first round of the scheme and poor ranking within the Australian sector provided the impetus for change within the University and a renewed focus on teaching and learning. These factors provided the sense of necessity and urgency to develop and instigate eVALUate.

## Leadership

In order to build an effective institutional online evaluation system, Curtin recognised that a cultural transformation was required. The research literature states that the essential criteria for building an effective quality culture in teaching and learning and evaluation include: leadership, policy and planning, information and analysis, people, client focus, key processes and outcomes (Marshall, Orrell, Cameron, Bosanquet, & Thomas, 2011; Sorenson & Reiner, 2003). The complex roles and skills demonstrated by the leaders in managing the development and implementation of eVALUate were consistent with the managerial leadership capabilities described within the Competing Values Framework (CVF) (Amey, 2006; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Zulu, Murray, & Strydom, 2004) and are highlighted within this paper.

In 2005, a Student Evaluation of Learning and Teaching (SELT) Steering Committee was established to lead the development of a university-wide evaluation system comprising: the Pro-Vice Chancellor Academic (PVCA) (Chair); Deans of Teaching and Learning; academic representatives from each teaching faculty; a Student Guild representative; academic experts in survey design; an elected academic representative; support services and key staff from the Office of Teaching and Learning. The academic staff from the Office of Teaching and Learning formed the guiding leadership team who led the developments, and communicated continuously with the wider university community. The SELT Steering Committee met fortnightly and reported to the University Teaching and Learning Committee and subsequently to Academic Board. The task of the Committee was to oversee the development and implementation of a university-wide system for gathering and reporting student perceptions of learning and teaching. Consistent with most universities, the system was designed for: 1) the purpose of quality improvement, 2) informing professional development, 3) rewarding academic performance, 4) informing promotion processes, and 5) as key performance measures for university executive and those discharged with leadership in teaching and for learning outcomes (Barrie, Ginns, and Symons, 2008; Shah and Nair, 2012).

The leadership team focused on the enhancement of the student experience using a transformational quality approach: putting the student at the heart of the process, using a transparent bottom-up approach to continuous improvement and being responsive and open as a means of gaining trust (Wilson, Lizzio, & Ramsden, 1997). In order to enact transformational change, the leadership had to ensure they understood the culture and values of the organisation (Amey, 2006). A major feature to the success of the leadership team was their extensive experience as teaching academics in higher education giving credence to their work. Adequate resourcing and funding ensured the successful development of the system, subsequent system

enhancements and ongoing operations. Consultation and input with multiple service areas ensured interconnections between the university systems and technologies were successfully integrated to ensure the useability for students and staff. These interconnections and the relationships built across the university provided the basis for leveraging change in all contexts of practice, that is, at the university, faculty, school, course and unit level (Amey, 2006; Marshall, et al., 2011). The creativity and communication skills to bring about a change in culture and to acquire adequate funding were examples of the innovator and broker CVF leadership roles demonstrated by the leaders (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Zulu, et al., 2004). Most notably, the leadership team:

- ensured eVALUate integrated with the University's internal data gathering and reporting systems and other related systems;
- liaised with Information Management Services to construct the online system within the student portal, ensuring the useability and reliability of data gathering and reporting facilities; and
- worked with central operational areas such as Staff Services to ensure all teaching staff (sessional and contract teachers), on and off-shore have equitable access to eVALUate.

Leadership by the PVCA was essential in negotiating with the staff union in establishing the procedures for reporting student feedback (Den Hollander, Oliver, & Jones, 2007). The union expressed concerns over the ownership and reporting of student feedback data (qualitative and quantitative), identification of teaching staff in reports and the privacy of student feedback for use in academic performance. Considerable effort was made to ensure a focus on quality enhancement and the transparency of reports for all relevant stakeholders. A commitment to close the feedback loop for students also guided the values and procedures that shaped the system and practices. The focus on getting the task done, whilst ensuring people were cared for and developed are examples of the developer and monitoring roles demonstrated by the leaders (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Zulu, et al., 2004).

## Pedagogy

Leadership and pedagogy was provided by key academics from the Office of Teaching and Learning. Evidence-based practice informed all aspects of the system; the development of the instruments, reporting of data and method for closing the feedback loop with students. A comprehensive scan of successful evaluation systems in Australia and internationally and a comprehensive review of the literature in the field of higher education pedagogy in outcome-focused education, student learning and evaluation systems was undertaken to determine best practices in student evaluations. The literature indicates that, in order to evaluate the quality of teaching, the quality of learning and subsequent achievement of learning outcomes should be evaluated (Barrie, 2000; Carey & Gregory, 2003; Huba & Freed, 2000). This learning outcomes principle and the acknowledgement of the teacher and learner partnership in student-centred learning were at the heart of all developments (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999; Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Candy, Crebert, & O'Leary, 1994; Coates,

2005; Fenwick, 2001; Pintrich, Roeser, & De Groot, 1994; Ramsden & Entwistle, 1981; Scott, 2005; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

An effective evaluation model and quality culture for improving teaching and learning had operated in the School of Physiotherapy since 1999 (Tucker, et al., 2003) and the experiences learnt from this model were exploited. This online system featured a culture of student and staff reflection on teaching and learning, transparency of results (student comments were available to all students and academics at the School), open discussion and sharing of teaching and learning strategies, closing the feedback loop and a shared commitment to quality improvement. Sizable improvements in graduate feedback on teaching quality, attainment of generic skills and overall satisfaction were achieved in CEQ and were directly attributed to the culture of improvement within the school (Tucker, Jones, & Straker, 2008). Experiences gained from the Physiotherapy evaluation system strengthened Curtin's decision to adopt a system that: asks students what they bring to the teaching and learning partnership; is transparent in reporting results; closes the feedback loop and commits to quality improvement.

## Improving the student learning experience using the eVALUate system

Students can give feedback about their unit and their teacher(s) using two separate surveys: the eVALUate unit survey and the eVALUate teaching survey. The development and validation of each survey, including pedagogical underpinnings have been published elsewhere (Tucker, Oliver, and Gupta, 2013 in press; Oliver, Tucker, Gupta, and Yeo, 2008). Unlike most student evaluation of teaching surveys, the eVALUate unit survey focusses on student perceptions of what is helping or hindering their achievement of learning outcomes (Oliver, Tucker, Gupta, & Yeo, 2008).

In brief, the eVALUate unit survey is automatically available online for all undergraduate and postgraduate coursework units at all Curtin's Australian campuses and all major offshore campuses. Students enrolled on a full time basis normally enrol in four units each teaching period. Each year there are six main eVALUate events with additional events created to cover almost every teaching study period. All units are evaluated each time they are available in any study period. The teaching survey is only available for student feedback when requested online by the teacher seeking feedback. For any unit, there may be one or more teachers, and students can give feedback for as many teachers as they choose within the one unit.

Online aggregated reports are available to all students, staff and the general public at various levels (unit or program) and more detailed reports containing quantitative and qualitative feedback for each teaching location and mode is available to the unit coordinator and head of school. Curtin executive are provided with the analysed data with recommendations for improvement to influence student learning. Course and

unit eVALUate reports are used in all Annual and Comprehensive Course Reviews. The eVALUate reports are disaggregated so that students from different campuses, locations and modes of study are represented. This provides unit coordinators and heads of schools with fine grained information about all student experiences so that improvements are focused (Den Hollander, et al., 2007; Jones & Oliver, 2008). Additional reports are produced manually for senior executive, faculties, schools, offshore locations for monitoring and reporting on teaching and learning quality and for school reviews.

The effective implementation of eVALUate ensured the success of course review and led to a subsequent university-wide project of curriculum renewal called Curriculum 2010. Both eVALUate and the processes that have been developed as part of Curriculum 2010 are now integral to quality improvement at Curtin (Den Hollander, et al., 2007; Jones & Oliver, 2008; Oliver & Ferns, 2009; Oliver, Jones, & Ferns, 2010; Oliver, Jones, Tucker, & Ferns, 2007). A full description of the system, how it works, reports available online, the mechanism for closing the feedback loop with students and the use of qualitative and quantitative feedback to improve the student experience is published elsewhere (Tucker, In press).

University policy and procedures were developed to provide a framework in which teaching and learning is evaluated using eVALUate. The procedures outline the access to reports and use of eVALUate results to for improving the student experience, for staff reflection and scholarship, benchmarking, evidencing teaching performance and recognising teaching excellence.

## Communication and education

The leadership team communicated continually with the wider community throughout the development and implementation stages of the system. The framework developed by the International Association for Public Participation best describes the factors resulting in a high level of impact for Curtin community; that is, to inform, consult, involve, collaborate with and empower students and staff (IAP2, 2012). In particular, communications focused on the shared commitment and vision, strategy and pedagogy. A series of open forums were conducted at the university to ensure widespread dissemination of information, foster discussion and to listen to concerns that could be fed back to the Steering Committee. Information papers were disseminated regularly and progress reports presented at University, Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Committees. Such strategies were paramount in ensuring staff understood the internal and external demands for quality and could respond optimally to the cultural change associated with the new evaluation system (Zulu, et al., 2004).

By ensuring staff and student were adequately informed, consulted and involved in the development and implementation of the system, concerns and aspirations raised by the University community were acknowledged. Where possible these concerns were acted on and feedback was provided back to the community to ensure

stakeholders were advised on how their involvement had influenced decisions. The participatory decision-making strategies undertaken ensured collaborative partnerships whereby stakeholders (students and staff) were involved in advising and formulating recommendations and innovative solutions to the eVALUate system.

When piloting eVALUate, online surveys for students and staff were undertaken to gather feedback on the system and tools. The team worked with student groups to ensure that the survey items were valid and reliable, comprehensive yet sufficiently succinct to ensure student participation. The team worked with senior executive, heads of schools, and deans of teaching and learning to ensure eVALUate fulfilled accountability requirements and the data was usable for the demands of continuous quality improvement. Consultation with statisticians ensured the statistical validity and reliability of the survey instruments. Communication and collaborative partnerships with senior executive and providers in offshore locations ensured the successful rollout of eVALUate offshore. This involved visits and meetings with students and staff at Australian and key offshore locations.

The coordination and management of eVALUate is situated within the Office of Teaching and Learning at the University. This unit provides leadership and support for teaching and learning through its activities in academic professional development, research and scholarship, course management, curriculum design and review. The organisational position of this unit is vital for the creation of a culture of support and continuous improvement for academics in the evaluation process. Leadership within the university is provided from the Office through the development of teaching and learning strategic plans, collaborations with national and international leaders in the field of teaching and learning, and scholarly activities resulting in strong networks with multiple areas of the university and the empowerment and support of academic staff.

Professional development and support is provided to academic staff in multiple ways. Comprehensive resources have been developed to provide guidelines for unit, course and faculty staff on their roles and responsibilities on the: use of eVALUate reports; interpretation of results and response rates (representativeness of sample); and how they might assist teaching colleagues to use eVALUate results to improve student learning. Similar guidelines were also developed for promotion panel members. Resources have been created for improving practice associated with each eVALUate unit survey item. The University's Teaching and Learning booklet, an annual publication which updates staff on all teaching and learning matters, includes a dedicated chapter on eVALUate, ways to close the feedback loop for students and practical tips for improving teaching practice using eVALUate results. Professional development for all staff is provided regularly through the Foundations of Teaching and Learning Program and a range of leadership programs (Unit Coordinator, Course Coordinator and Heads of Schools Programs). Professional development for leadership was essential in effecting cultural change in teaching and learning that would effect evaluation adoption and use (Marshall, et al., 2011).

## Recognition of early successes

An important strategy in changing culture is the recognition and reward of early achievements. Curtin celebrated a number of achievements resulting from the implementation of eVALUate. Most notably, early success was the improvement in Curtin Ranking in Australia in 2007 and 2008 and the success in LTPF, receiving \$500,000 funding from the Federal Government in 2007 (Armitage, 2006). Significant improvements in student satisfaction were evident at course, faculty and whole of university level and publicised through the achievement of a University and National Citation Award (Amey, 2006).

Curtin was commended by AUQA in 2009 for the development and implementation of the student evaluation system, eVALUate, to improve learning and teaching. The Panel commended the University for developing robust evaluation instruments, their systematic use across the University and acting on the results to sustain continuous quality improvements in a range of areas at the University (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009). The 2009 AUQA Panel confirmed the positive impact which the eVALUate unit survey had on learning and teaching. Specifically, the AUQA comments affirmed: 1) the system's capacity to obtain student feedback (from all campuses and students from partner institutions; 2) the mandatory use of eVALUate; 3) the publication of unit results for all Curtin students and staff; 4) the online system for closing the feedback loop for students; 5) reporting through university, faculty, school and campus level committees; and 6) the use of eVALUate results for academic staff work planning, promotion purposes and rewards to staff. The Panel confirmed the use of student feedback for the purpose of quality improvement: from addressing poor teaching through the use of the 'traffic light' system, for making curricular and pedagogical changes in units, to its use in annual and comprehensive reviews. The Panel also confirmed the processes established for quality assurance: the regular reporting mechanisms, monitoring and assessment of progress against the Strategic Plan and annual Operational Plan and the achievement of key performance indicators. The Panel noted the monitoring of key performance indicators by the faculties that were reported regularly at Academic Board, and the active, systematic and comprehensive approach to the monitoring of student feedback and academic standards at open forums such as Academic Board monitoring meetings.

## Consolidation

The acceptance of eVALUate is largely positive, although misconceptions and concerns are sometimes expressed by individuals. To address these concerns and to further contribute to the knowledge on student evaluation of teaching and learning, research on the system and data is ongoing. To date, the research has focused on the validation of the instruments (Tucker, Oliver, and Gupta, 2011; Oliver, Tucker, Gupta, and Yeo, 2008), which students give feedback and what they report in evaluation systems (Oliver, Tucker, and Pegden, 2007; Pegden and Tucker, 2009; Pegden and Tucker, 2010), student motivation and engagement (Tucker, Oliver, and Pegden 2007;



Tucker and Pegden, 2008), and relationships between student feedback and graduate feedback (Jones and Tucker, 2005) and student outcomes (Tucker, Pegden, and Yorke, 2012). Biannual University Aggregated Reports are accessible online for all students and staff. This report provides a full analysis of the response rates, quantitative and qualitative results of the eVALUate unit survey at the University and Faculty levels for each semester and includes five year trends. This analysis details which demographic subgroups participate in eVALUate, the percentage agreement for each subgroup and reports on the CEQuery analysis of the comments made by students on the best aspects of their learning and what they believe should be improved (Oliver, Tucker, & Pegden, 2006, 2007; Scott, 2005). Key research findings from the eVALUate data are also outlined in this report and have resulted in increasing confidence and acceptance by staff in the eVALUate surveys and tool.

Promotion of student evaluation to students and staff is relentless within the University (via presentations, student publications, Curtin diaries and calendars, postcards, posters, emails, workshops and Curtin websites) and to the wider community (particularly at conferences and through journal publications). eVALUate reports were embedded into subsequent University-wide initiatives, such as Curriculum Quality Enhancement and Curriculum 2010, and are now integral to indicators which focus on improving student learning within in the Teaching and Learning Enabling Plan.

## Evaluation

eVALUate has influenced students' overall academic experience of higher education because it focuses on learning, it shows that student feedback is valued, and ensures that every student has the opportunity to engage in evaluation. Engaging students in the partnership of teaching and learning has provided them with the opportunity to give anonymous feedback on their learning. Students feel they have a voice, that collectively they can make a difference to their learning experiences and that their views are respected:

- The scope of eVALUate ensures a wide range of issues can be accessed and then improved on or continued by tutors, lecturers and university management to provide the best service for students (Student Guild).
- eVALUate is an easy way to get our views across and you know that you'll be heard (Student)
- I think eVALUate gives the opportunity for students to have a say and facilitate change where needed and also to acknowledge the good things as I believe in both positive and constructive criticism (Student).

Since the implementation of eVALUate, students are reporting that their learning experiences have improved (from 2006 to 2012). Aggregated scores for Item 11 (Overall, I am satisfied with this unit) from more than 40,000 survey submissions each semester show that there has been a steady and significant increase in student agreement by 5.7% over the six year period. The eVALUate unit survey also asks students to reflect on their contribution to learning (Items 8-10). Students have

reported a significantly higher percentage agreement with these items, particularly in student motivation (I am motivated to achieve the learning outcomes in this unit) where there has been an increase of 7.1%. Item 5 (Feedback on my work helps me to achieve the learning outcomes) has made the greatest improvement over time (8.3%) and Item 7 (The quality of teaching) is notably higher (6.0%).

Student response rates are also increasing. The target response rate (35%) set by Senior Executive was achieved in two years and since 2008, University-wide student response rates for the unit survey are typically 43-46%. The focus for Curtin has been on achieving representative response rates at unit level. In 2012, 58% of units with enrolment numbers greater than 100 achieved a representative response rate (that is, staff can be 95% confident that the actual percentage agreement is within 10% ( $\pm$ ) of the observed percentage agreement for the total student group enrolled in the unit).

The following statements represent the views of Curtin students and senior executive:

- eVALUate acts to enhance the student learning experience at Curtin by providing accurate feedback to all levels of the university. This has benefited the university by indicating the changing needs of students faster, allowing for more accurate adjustments in the learning culture and ensuring that Curtin is at the cutting edge of tertiary education (Student Guild)
- The eVALUate reports are fantastic and have made a huge impact on my role and the constructive work I am now able to do with staff regarding teaching and learning. eVALUate is so objective and easy to use. I am able to discuss with each staff member their unit's performance, and offer feedback and suggestions on areas which can be improved. Together we are able to identify why a particular aspect of the unit has either improved or where improvements are needed based on the previous semesters results and this discussion is positive, non-judgemental and developmental. In some areas in the School we have already been able to make improvements for student learning and I have found the staff respond well to the reports. Lecturers are including documentation of their changes to the units, based on the feedback they have received through eVALUate, in their next unit outline, so that students can see feedback is worthwhile (Head of School).
- At our Offshore Campus, staff have recognised the great potential of eVALUate to assist them in responding to student feedback on units of study. eVALUate enables staff to review and separate unit design issues (units which are designed by the Bentley home campus) from those of teaching quality and delivery of units at the offshore campus. Staff are now able to conduct unit reviews using eVALUate as a basis to provide suggestions for design change and at the same time identify strategies to improve teaching and learning to assist student achieve stated learning outcomes (Dean of Teaching and Learning, Offshore Campus).
- I am writing to comment on the impact of eVALUate. In my view, this program has been the most important macro development at Curtin in Teaching and Learning. The design of the system is excellent and implementation has been very smooth. It gives us for the first time a way of identifying major weaknesses and correcting them (Pro-Vice Chancellor, 2006).

The uptake of academic staff requesting teaching surveys is increasing annually. Currently nearly 2000 teaching surveys are requested each semester and in 2011, over 19,000 teaching surveys were submitted by students in a semester event. For the unit survey, over 45,000 surveys are submitted each semester. Continued monitoring, system enhancements and innovations ensure that eVALUate continues to meet the needs of Curtin stakeholders (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Zulu, et al., 2004).

Although there is considerable variability in systems and instruments used for surveying the experience of students in their units across the higher education sector (Barrie, Ginns, & Symons, 2008), the recent uptake of eVALUate by other Australian universities will enable the benchmarking of students reported experiences in teaching and learning and cross-institutional research into teaching and learning.

## Future Challenges and directions

Curtin has now been using the eVALUate system for seven years and data from the system is embedded within the quality culture. Higher institutions are currently exploring new and innovative ways to transform teaching and learning in response to global trends particularly related to the rapid increase in the availability of interactive learning technologies. Learners are increasingly embracing independent learning opportunities through free, online educational offerings. Students' perceptions of their learning through new approaches, settings, technologies and pedagogies will be essential to direct future teaching and learning practices.

Whilst student feedback is an important measure that informs quality, there is considerable debate within the sector about other measures of student performance, engagement and outcomes particularly in relation to student transformation through learning (Gvaramadze, 2011). Understanding student perceptions of their learning and teaching will provide universities with a better understanding of the connection between their experience and student outcomes (Arthur, Tumbré, Paul, and Edens, 2003; Davidovitch and Soen, 2009; Duque and Weeks 2010; Mustafa and Chiang 2006; Spooen and Mortelmans, 2006; Stark-Wroblewski, Ahlering, and Brill 2007; Tucker, Pegden, and Yorke, 2012). A systematic approach will be needed to determine the effects of educational initiatives, innovations and pedagogies. An evidence based approach, including best practice, pedagogy and analytics on current and past practices will not only ensure appropriate decision making in the development of future teaching and learning strategies, but also better understand and optimise learning and educational transformation in the environments in which it occurs.

## Conclusion

eVALUate, an online student evaluation system has been adopted and embedded at Curtin and has brought a significant cultural shift in thinking and practice in teaching and learning. That shift is centred on moving away from thinking about specific teaching practices, to focussing on student learning. Students are reporting increased

levels of satisfaction in their learning experiences and greater student engagement and motivation. The implementation of this system has been informed by, and contributed to, research into student evaluation of teaching within a university-level outcomes approach to learning. Open and transparent student feedback about student learning has provided a strong focus for quality improvement at Curtin and the development of strategies to improve the student experience.

## Author bio

**Beatrice Tucker** is the Evaluation Manager in the area of Curtin Teaching and Learning and has been integral to the development, validation, implementation and evaluation of eVALUate, Curtin's online student evaluation system since 2005. She provides leadership for the area and is responsible for the educational guidance and support at all levels for academic staff at Curtin. Her research publication areas include the evaluation of teaching and learning, undergraduate student sources of stress, cardiopulmonary physiotherapy science and its clinical application.

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# Enhancing the Measurement and Reporting of Student Experience

Carolyn Newbigin, Martin Hanlon, Alberto Mendez and Michael Rothery

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

## Abstract

From its inception, the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) has valued the student voice and has been measuring and reporting on the student experience. UTS has developed a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Framework to support evidence-based decision making, using student feedback on the quality of teaching, administration and support services, social activities, the learning environment and academic support services.

The university uses a number of key survey tools to gather this feedback, namely; the Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) and similarly the Research Student Satisfaction Survey (RSSS) which provide measures of the student experience outside the classroom; the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) which is an externally administered measure of course satisfaction completed at the time of graduation; and the Student Feedback Survey (SFS) which provides a measure of satisfaction with teaching and learning and the subject level. The university aiming to enhance the ways that the results of these surveys are used to improve the student experience, including 'closing the loop' strategies and student cohort tracking.

**Keywords:** quality assurance, institutional reporting, learning and teaching, student evaluations of teaching (SET), 'closing the loop'.

## Introduction

The University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) was established in 1990, combining a number of institutions, namely the NSW Institute of Technology, the Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education (CAE) and the Institute of Technical and Adult Teacher Education. UTS is considered a mid-sized university in Australia, and is a part of the Australian Technology Network (ATN) group, which is an alliance of five universities across each mainland Australian state. The purpose of the group is to build strategic partnerships and undertake cross-institutional research and benchmarking.

UTS has always valued measurement and reporting of the student experience. In the 1990s UTS commenced developing an integrated suite of tracking mechanisms at the institutional performance, learning environment, course (program) and subject (unit) levels. These mechanisms include regular surveys of students and reports to university

management. An independent review of official UTS student surveys administered by the Planning and Quality Unit (PQU) commissioned by PQU in 2011 confirmed that the suite of surveys were essentially serving the university well, although there were opportunities for strengthening the suite (Southwell, 2011). The main mechanisms used as of 2012 are outlined later in this chapter.

## The National Context

As is the case for all higher education institutions around the world, UTS administers and refines its internal measurement and reporting mechanisms in the context of national mechanisms. In Australia this is a dynamic space at present. In 2011 the Australian Government committed to develop and introduce a suite of government endorsed surveys over the student life cycle to improve transparency and enhance quality in higher education teaching and learning.

This commitment will involve engaging an independent organisation to centrally administer a suite of surveys over the student life cycle commencing from 2013. Results from the Government endorsed suite of surveys will be published on the Government's MyUniversity website to enhance the value of teaching and learning in universities and better inform student choice.

Three national surveys are being developed:

### **University Experience Survey**

In 2012, the Australian Government funded the largest ever survey of current university students, including students from UTS, with over 100,000 students responding to the University Experience Survey (UES). The 2012 UES measured five facets of student experience: skills development, learner engagement, quality teaching, student support and learning resources. The Australian Government will report the results of the University Experience Survey on MyUniversity from 2013. The intention is for the UES to become annual from 2013.

### **Graduate Outcomes Survey**

From 2014, the Australian Government will fund the development of the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) to examine the labour market outcomes of students as they exit higher education. The Graduate Outcomes Survey will build and improve on the existing Australian Graduate Survey (AGS). For the first time, the survey will be conducted on a uniform methodology under central administration to improve efficiency, data quality and timeliness.

### **Employer Survey**

The Australian Government will undertake a pilot study in 2013 of employer satisfaction with new graduates. This will ensure that the demand driven funding system in operation is responsive to labour market and employer needs. A full scale survey of employer satisfaction with graduates will be undertaken from 2014.

## **UTS Tracking and Feedback Mechanisms**

The main student-focused surveying and reporting mechanisms currently in use at UTS are outlined below.

## **Tracking and Feedback Mechanisms at the Institutional Performance Level**

### **University Key Performance Indicators (KPI)**

The UTS Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Framework has been developed to support internal evidence based decision making within UTS. The KPI Framework incorporates around 20 university-wide KPIs and associated targets over five interdependent performance domains, which map directly to the University's strategic plan. The domains are UTS Reputation, Learning and Teaching, Research Performance and Standing, University Environment and Engagement, and Organisational Sustainability and Capability. Many of these KPIs are based on student survey results, as noted later in this chapter. Reports against the Framework provide information to the University Council, senior executive and senior management for strategic planning and performance tracking purposes biannually.

The aim of the KPI Framework is to give informative insights into how the university is performing based on national and internal benchmarks, as well as alignment with government funding initiatives. Many of the KPIs in the framework are used nationally across multiple universities, i.e. where data is available UTS compares its performance against national and Australian Technology Network (ATN) benchmarks as well as other Sydney metropolitan universities. Internally, where appropriate, faculties are also benchmarked against each other. International benchmarking based on these KPIs is a work in progress, being limited by the need to monitor specific performance metrics customised to the local context. KPIs are reviewed regularly for alignment with the university's strategic direction, national policy objectives and data availability.

## **Tracking and Feedback Mechanisms at the Learning Environment Level**

### **The Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS)**

The Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS) is the main survey used by UTS to gain an overall understanding of student views on the performance of the university's services, facilities and learning environment, i.e. the student experience outside of the classroom. A version of the SSS has been in use since 1994, and in 2005 it underwent substantial restructure. It is administered annually online to a representative sample of the UTS student cohort. The SSS currently comprises close to one hundred core evaluation statements across six separate interest areas, as well as two open-ended questions in each of these six sections. A separate section for current 'topical issues' was added, most recently gathering student views on the UTS campus redevelopment

program which involves a substantial amount of disruptive construction work. In addition to evaluating the performance of each item, an importance scale is also included periodically. This determines the level of relative importance students place on individual services/facilities and assists the university to prioritise services. The SSS provides student feedback data for management staff (in faculties, service units, the UTS Union and Students' Association) who are responsible for monitoring and improving services to students. At present aggregated SSS item subsets support two UTS KPIs: 'Student Satisfaction with Facilities and Services' and 'Commitment to Diversity'.

### **Research Student Satisfaction Survey (RSSS)**

Analogous to the SSS, the Research Student Satisfaction Survey (RSSS) is used to gauge how postgraduate research students rate the level of assistance and support provided by the university to help them adapt and fit in into the research culture. Additionally it measures their level of satisfaction with the services and learning environment support provided by the university to all students (as per the SSS). The survey is administered annually to the entire postgraduate research student population.

## **Tracking and Feedback Mechanisms at the Course (Program) Level**

### **Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)**

Given the other internal student surveys in operation and the existence of a national survey at the course level, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), UTS has chosen not to administer an internal survey on satisfaction with courses. The CEQ is a sub-section of the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) which is administered to coursework students upon graduation. The Australian Graduate Survey is considered a 'national census' of graduates of tertiary education in Australia, with the AGS results representing the only nationally consistent measure of graduate outcomes in Australian higher education. The Course Experience Questionnaire comprises 19 multiple-choice items which are part of four scales: Generic skills, Good teaching, Graduate qualities, and Overall satisfaction. UTS utilises AGS data in the annual Course Performance Reports (CPR) which are described below.

### **Course Performance Reports (CPR)**

The Course Performance Report (CPR) is linked to university KPIs, and based on an agreed set of performance indicators and minimum standards sourced from a range of surveys and other student-related data. The indicators currently used to assess the performance of each course cover student demand for the course, student load, student pass and retention rates, SFS results, average salary and employment rates for graduates of the course, and results from the CEQ completed by graduates.

The annual Course Performance Report (CPR) cycle uses benchmarked standards and targets set by senior management (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Teaching Learning and

Equity and the Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor) and the deans of each faculty to examine the performance of all award courses at UTS. The cycle generally goes through the following process:

- **Distribution:** The CPR is distributed by the Planning and Quality Unit to the faculties, as well as to a Teaching and Learning Committee. The CPR is an annual report on the performance of UTS award courses. This report aims to improve course quality by enhancing the University's use of course performance data. The CPR accomplishes this by classifying courses in each faculty as either "commendable," "acceptable," or "of concern, to be closely monitored."
- **Broad Analysis:** Committees, Boards, senior management and faculties investigate which courses should be continued, or reconsidered on the basis of the data provided by the CPR and other feedback from within faculties.
- **Feedback from Faculties:** The deans from each faculty submit reports to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching, Learning and Equity) outlining the future planned actions for the courses of concern.
- **Recommendations:** The Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching, Learning and Equity), assisted by a committee, provides recommendations to the faculties and others on suitable actions to be taken.

## Tracking and Feedback Mechanisms at the Subject (Unit) Level

### The Student Feedback Survey (SFS)

The Student Feedback Survey (SFS) is the main, systematic tool for collecting student feedback on subject (unit) and teaching quality at UTS. Previously separate, paper-based subject and teaching surveys were combined in 2005 to form the SFS. It is currently composed of nine core evaluation statements: six subject-focused and three teaching-focused, as well as two open-ended questions. In 2009, an online SFS System was implemented UTS-wide after extensive work in development and trialing the system in 2007 and 2008. The SFS Vice-Chancellor's Directive of 2009 states that all subjects (including those offered offshore) are required to be surveyed via the SFS at least once a year and preferably in each of the two major teaching periods (Autumn and Spring semesters). In practice the majority of subjects (more than 90%) in a given period are evaluated using the SFS.

The SFS provides student feedback data on teaching and learning for faculties, course coordinators, subject coordinators, and teaching staff to inform continuous review and improvement of learning and teaching. It seeks to provide teaching staff with useful data for professional development and is a requirement for their teaching portfolio when applying for promotions or awards. Student feedback on the quality of teaching is reviewed by the teacher and their supervisor as part of the performance review cycle. Additionally, SFS data supports one of the UTS (KPIs, namely 'Teaching Quality.' SFS data is also aggregated and reported in the Course Performance Report (CPR) and the Subject Performance Report (SPR). Most importantly, faculties and

individual teaching staff are encouraged to report all improvements made as a result of feedback back to their students.

### **Subject Performance Reports (SPR)**

Subject Performance Reports (SPRs) are also linked to UTS KPIs and are based on a similar set of performance indicators and standards as the Course Performance Reports. The indicators are student load for the subject, student pass rate for the subject, distribution of grades for the subject, timetabled hours or Equivalent Full Time Student Load (EFTSL) for the subject, and results for each question of the SFS.

## **External reviews of the UTS approach**

### **Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) University audit in 2005-2006**

In 2005 the then Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) appointed an Audit Panel to undertake a quality audit of the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) as part of its first cycle of institutional audits of Australian universities. The major aim of the audit was to consider and review the procedures that the organisation had in place to monitor and achieve its objectives. The Audit Panel spoke with over 350 people during the Audit Visit, including industry partners, employers, external members of Council, alumni, other external stakeholders, the Vice-Chancellor and senior management, academic and general staff and undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as the broader university community.

There was a long list of commendations and affirmations of UTS practices at the time of the audit in 2006, including: the well-considered development and use of the KPI Framework; the effective presentation and development of the CPR; the quality of the policy and processes for course accreditation and reaccreditation; and the commitment to monitoring student satisfaction with services relevant to their overall experience at UTS (as well as for acting on this feedback).

In terms of strategic planning and quality management, the audit report commended the university's KPI Framework. In particular, the Planning and Quality Unit was commended for their considerable efforts towards improving the quality of reports available for senior management, as well as for the range of information available through the business intelligence (BI) portal. A range of analyses and reports are produced through this portal, including the CPR reports, which were commended as an effective and immediately meaningful way of presenting performance management information to relevant groups within the university.

In terms of teaching and learning, the audit report commended the policy and management of processes for course accreditation and reaccreditation of programs, with the proviso that there was room for improvement in relation to off-shore courses. The report also recommended that UTS should develop a more standardized approach for course reviews, which has now been actioned through the development of the CPR cycles. In terms of the student experience, the report commended UTS for its commitment to monitoring student satisfaction and for acting on student

feedback. Students are represented in many important decision making bodies across UTS. They are represented on UTS Council, on the Student Matters Committee, on the Academic Board and related Committees, as well as on each of the Faculty Boards. In addition, UTS has an active Student Association and Union, and has access to the Vice-Chancellor should they wish to raise an issue of importance. The university also has a Student Ombudsman for handling and reporting on any serious student grievances.

### **Review of Official UTS Student Surveys, 2011**

In 2011, the Director of PQU commissioned Dr Deborah Southwell to conduct an independent external review of the official UTS student surveys outlined earlier in this chapter. The main aims of this review were to ensure that the suite of surveys administered by UTS aligned with the university's strategic plan, as well as gathering suitable evidence for external auditing purposes. The secondary aims were to review the purpose, content, packaging and timing of the surveys, and to review strategies for improving following through on survey outcomes for staff and students and to recommend any improvements.

The review examined surveys relating to teaching, learning and student experience from a range of Australian higher education institutions, and found a wide variation in the dimensions measured. It was found that UTS had much in common with the survey activities being used by the other universities in the Australian Technology Network (ATN). The review made a series of recommendations for UTS to consider around improving the administration of each official survey and internal surveys as a whole, and for reporting survey results and follow up actions back to students. The section below on 'New directions' outlines how many of these recommendations have begun to be addressed by the university, and in particular (quite proactively) by the Planning and Quality Unit.

## **New directions**

### **Enhancing engagement with faculties, increasing the use of student feedback**

In late 2011 through early 2012, a small team made systematic visits to each faculty's Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) in order to begin a cycle of engagement. The team comprised staff from PQU (the Survey Coordinator, the newly appointed Social Research Specialist, the Manager of Strategic Intelligence) and a Senior Lecturer from the central teaching and learning support unit, Institute of Interactive Media and Learning (IML). The aim of these visits was to determine which strategies were currently being used by each faculty to analyse student feedback data (predominately SFS results), and what was being done to complete the feedback loop with students – informing them of the actions taken as a result of their input. Specific requests for more in depth analysis of particular subjects, themes or courses were made, and a series of faculty specific reports were prepared in 2012, including recommendations for improvements to subjects and courses. A second round of visits will take place in early 2013, and a process is currently being drafted for consultation and report delivery cycles on an annual basis.



### **Reviewing the SFS with teaching staff**

In late 2012, a survey of a large number of teaching staff at UTS was run in an effort to incorporate their feedback into a broader review process for the SFS. Based on recommendations from the 2011 review of official student surveys, teaching staff were asked for their views on: the desirability of flexible timing for the administration of the SFS, as well as the potential usefulness of a number of specific questions which may be added to the SFS in future years. The results have recently been presented to the Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning) and well as the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Teaching, Learning and Equity). Future changes to the SFS may occur after additional analysis on the results is completed, as responses tended to differ between faculties.

### **Maintaining confidentiality while enabling student cohort tracking**

There are a number of official UTS processes which may require adjustment in order to enable improved tracking of specific student cohorts while still maintaining a desirable level of confidentiality for students, students will need to be assured that their responses will remain anonymous and secure, and thus be comfortable in providing honest feedback on their university experiences. Reviews of the Vice-Chancellor's Directive on the Student Feedback Survey and the official UTS Student Declaration are underway to assist in achieving this goal. Technical challenges also exist in enabling meaningful cohort tracking, including data integrity issues, necessary upgrades to the business intelligence system and negotiations for cross-unit collaboration and data sharing arrangements. The Planning and Quality Unit will be able to perform more complex analyses on integrated data sets once these become available.

### **'Closing the loop': Feedback mechanisms used at UTS**

There has been an increasing focus in recent years on the need for universities to 'close the loop' with students on the results of teaching evaluations and university experience surveys and on improvements instituted by universities in response. This means providing commentary to students on the main issues which emerged from their feedback (either collected earlier in the semester, or from a similar student cohort in a previous semester or year). This activity is important because if students perceive that their voice is not valued, or that little is being done, they may become cynical and reluctant to engage with future surveys or with the university more generally. There are two areas where the use of student feedback data has the potential to differ considerably between providers. The first is how universities communicate to students on the actions taken on the basis of their feedback. The second is how faculty and teaching staff actually engage with student feedback data for improvement purposes. Presently, UTS is investigating these strategies in order to improve the way that results from the SFS, SSS and UES are communicated.

The first step taken in this process was to visit each faculty to meet the Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning to develop a cross-faculty assessment of how student feedback data was being utilised. The second step was to provide faculties with greater levels of analysis of student feedback through custom-made reports of

courses and subjects. The faculties selected a number of subjects in a particular course of concern, or a course which was due for reaccreditation, or a particular theme they were interested in exploring from student comments. With faculty interest in the utilisation of student feedback piqued, a communication strategy is currently in development to relay 'faculty level' feedback to students in the form of posters, digital media and other on-campus publications. For each faculty, a 'best aspects' and 'in need of improvement' list will be drawn up, given to faculty leaders for action, and then changes which are made as a result will be reported back to students at the beginning of each semester.

## Conclusions

In common with all Australian and international education institutions, UTS values the insights that ensue from the systematic measurement and reporting of the student experience. Over two decades, the university's suite of student feedback mechanisms (surveys and management reports) has become integral to the institution's performance management system. A strategy-focused, whole-of-institution approach to performance tracking enables the monitoring of student experience from an executive-level, where a small set of strategically important measures is tracked, to "drill-down" on an expanded set of performance measures at the faculty, course (program) and subject (unit) levels. This allows a variety of perspectives and analyses to inform strategic and operational decision-making, curriculum design, campus development and service improvement. The periodic review of official surveys is integral to the university's planning framework and helps ensure that survey activity continues to serve the university's interests and aspirations, as they in turn evolve and change over time.

The approach is reinforced by emerging national policy and regulatory arrangements. Australia's new higher education standards and risk indicators, specifically require institutions to systematically "monitor and act on" data on the performance and experience of their students. These provisions are driving a critical assessment and rejuvenation of the national suite of student feedback mechanisms. This guarantees the perceptions of students, staff and stakeholders will continue to have considerable influence on institutional planning and management in the higher education sector.

## Author bios

**Carolyn Newbiggin** is the Social Research Specialist at UTS, working in the Planning and Quality Unit. Her current work includes: qualitative analysis of student feedback to inform faculty lead subject and course improvement activities, assisting with evaluation strategies for widening participation and first year experience programs, investigating effective strategies on 'closing the loop' on the use of student feedback data, and other process improvement projects. Her main research interests include social identity, risk and resilience in adolescents, gender psychology, evaluation

methodology and psychometrics. Carolyn is also a consultant in social and educational interventions and evaluation.

**Martin Hanlon** is Director of the Planning and Quality Unit at the University of Technology, Sydney - a role he has held since 2004. During his time at UTS, Martin has overseen preparations for two AUQA audits, development of a new strategic plan and implementation of a KPI Framework and accompanying Business Intelligence solution. Martin joined UTS after being in a similar role at the NSW Environment Protection Authority. He is on the Federal Government's Project Advisory Group for the new University Experience Survey, and is a member of the Board of Directors of Youth Challenge Australia, a non-profit organisation.

**Alberto Mendez** is the Survey Coordinator with the Strategic Intelligence team at the UTS Planning and Quality Unit. He is responsible for the administration, analysis, and information reporting stemming from PQU's teaching and learning quality tracking instruments, as contributing to UTS' strategic decision making and planning processes. He manages a range of official UTS survey instruments including the Student Feedback Survey (SFS; which targets all UTS students and covers subject and teaching performance), the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS; which targets all UTS and national graduates and covers course performance and employment/further-study situation), the Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS; which targets a representative sample of the UTS student population and covers the broader university experience, in particular services and the learning environment) and the UTS Image Survey (targets commencing students and covers their perceptions of UTS' image and reputation). Alberto previously worked in physics education research and has extensive knowledge of the tertiary education sector.

**Michael Rothery** is Strategic Intelligence Manager, Planning and Quality Unit at the University of Technology, Sydney. Michael has 20 years of experience in higher education administration and business intelligence. Michael currently has a leadership role in the development of the university's KPI Framework and Business Intelligence solution.

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## **Section 2: The UK: The National Student Survey**

# The not so “Holy” Grail: the impact of NSS feedback on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education in the UK

Paulo Charles Pimentel Bótas, University of Bath  
Roger Brown, Liverpool Hope University

## Introduction

As the marketisation of higher education proceeds (Brown, 2011a; 2011 b), increasing use is being made of student evaluations of teaching and learning as a means of informing consumers. Britain has had a National Student Survey (NSS) since 2005. In this chapter we offer an analysis of the NSS and its role in the UK higher education landscape.

**Keyword:** national student survey, student experience and enhancements

## Background

According to D’Andrea (2007) the student movement of the 1960s brought about student evaluations of teaching, so that their voice could be heard to improve their learning experience and bring about changes in the curriculum, and ‘in response to students’ demands for public accountability’ (Ory, 2000: 13). The assessment of the quality of students’ experiences in higher education has been around since the early 1980s and the focus of students’ feedback from teachers’ teaching has changed to the students’ experience itself (D’Andrea, 2007). According to Ory (2000), teaching evaluations in the 1970s were carried out for more developmental reasons, while in the 1980s and 1990s they were driven by the administrative needs of universities. He argued that teaching evaluations have become formalised and systematic in higher education institutions. In the first decade of the 21st Century, the student experience discourse and debate have ‘acquired the aura of a sacred utterance in the UK higher education policy’ (Sabri, 2011: 657).

Australia and North America have been leading the world on such surveys. In Australia, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), and the University Experience Survey (UES) are used to collect data on student experience and engagement. In the United States, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is used to collect data on student engagement in participating institutions. In the United Kingdom, the National Student Survey (NSS) and The Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey (THESES) are used to collect students’ feedback on their experience. The aims of all these tools are

to give university students a voice, improve their experience, and help to shape the “University of the Future”. The main reason provided by higher education institutions for collecting feedback data from their students is that it will be used to support quality enhancement in their institutions (Richardson et al., 2007), that is, to identify areas that need improvement and, therefore, provide professional development for their teaching and support staff. It is assumed that such data can be used to identify weaknesses and strengths in the student experience as well as to identify areas for improvement.

In the UK, following the recommendations of the Browne Report (2010), and the subsequent near-trebling of the full-time undergraduate fee from 2012, students are contributing more and more to their education. Collecting feedback on the quality of their experience is seen as an essential mechanism for informing the potential customers about the educational ‘product’ being provided. According to Brown (forthcoming), in the UK we are in an era where there is an officialised need for providing ‘robust, reliable’ (HEFCE, 2010a: 6; 2012a), ‘authoritative, publicly accessible information on academic quality and standards in higher education’ (HEFCE, 2009a: 7; 2010a: 30) to prospective consumers. This information has to be ‘well-informed by objective information about what different courses involve, and their implications for future career prospects [so that] students are better informed about what their higher education choices will involve’ (BIS, 2009: 70). Their choices of what higher education institution to go to should be based on this information. This is in spite of repeated independent surveys showing that many prospective students do not look for such information even when they recognise it would be very useful to them (for example, HEFCE, 2010b).

## The National Student Survey

The NSS was launched in 2005 to gather feedback from final-year undergraduate students about the quality of their course experience and degree programs in higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (for an account of its origins, see Brown, forthcoming, Chapter 6). It was based on the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) used to collect similar data in Australian universities for many years (Ramsden, 1991). It is conducted by Ipsos MORI on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The results are used to compile comparative data which is made publicly available on the Unistats website (<http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>). The NSS scores are also seen and used as an indicator of teaching quality in the institutional rankings published annually by leading newspapers.

The Government claims that as well as helping applicants to make informed choices of subject, program and institution, the NSS contributes to public accountability for teaching. The threshold for publication of the results is 50 per cent of respondents for institutions and at least 23 students for subjects (HEFCE, 2009b). The Survey has three parts with 71 questions in total. The scales of the answers vary from N/A (Not applicable), 1 (Definitely disagree), 2 (Mostly disagree), 3 (Neither agree nor disagree), 4 (Mostly agree) to 5 (Definitely agree). The first part has 24 questions

measuring students' perceptions of: the teaching on their course (4); assessment and feedback (5); academic support (3); organisation and management (3); learning resources (3); personal development (3); overall satisfaction with the quality of their course (1); and two open questions asking the students to highlight the positive and negative aspects of their experience. The second part has 41 optional questions for students to measure their satisfaction with: careers (3); course content and structure (3); work placements (6); social opportunities (3); course delivery (5); feedback from students (3); the physical environment (2); welfare resources and facilities (2); workload (4); assessment (2); learning community (5); and intellectual motivation (3). The third part is aimed only at National Health Service-funded students, with five questions related to their practice placements; this part was included for the first time in 2007.

The minimal number of 23 students per subject is rather small for courses with large class sizes that are oversupplied and popular, but too large for courses with small class sizes that are undersupplied and less popular. Moreover, when collecting and analysing this type of survey data, one has to take into account the intentions and the purposes of students in taking part and for not taking part. Taking into account the effect of non-participation, one is obliged to ask the following questions: How representative is the rate of participation? What happens to the data when the "at least 23 students" do not respond? What happens to the data when the number of students in a course is lower than 23? What impact does this omission of data have on how courses and institutions are perceived in the higher education market? To what extent does the rate of participation impact on the findings and conclusions? And how representative are the findings? Some students perceive the benefits and the impact of providing a "good" and "positive" feedback on the quality of their experience to their institutions, as this can impact on the its ranking [of their institution] in national and even international league tables. This in turn will impact on prospective employers' perception of the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) and human capital (Becker, 1993) of their prospective employees, as well as on the perceived value of their diplomas and certificates.

According to Clarke (2007), in the USA students are aware that the rank of their school, faculty and university may affect their employment possibilities, and they are naturally trying to increase the standing of their program to widespread rumours of schools coaching students on how to fill out the surveys, with students sending back suspiciously upbeat surveys as they know that it is better to graduate from a top-ranked school than from a mediocre one. Such cases are far from unknown in the UK (see for example, Attwood, 2008, Newman, 2008). Universities, faculties, schools and departments use subtle ways of getting their students to give them high scores in the NSS. From the first day of induction, students learn how well the university, faculty, school and department is doing in the NSS. They are told that employers use the NSS scores in their decisions on which university's students to employ. They learn that their feedback in the NSS will impact on their employability. According to Strathdee (2009), graduates earn a premium as a consequence of attending an elite institution for no reason other than that the institution has such a reputation, and this is seen to



confer advantage in the labour market. As Morley and Aynsley (2007: 243) stated, employers in the UK 'are less interested in detailed knowledge about quality and standards, but prefer the aggregated, summarised 'at-a-glance' data of league tables'. This practice has important long-term implications, as these patterns could well produce a closer fit between social hierarchy, educational hierarchy and employment opportunities.

Other intentions and purposes of students for taking part in these types of surveys might be their real concern for their experience: they are probably more likely to complain, that is, provide "poor" or "negative" feedback on the quality of their experience. This may be part of their tactical exercise of power in order to get institutions to provide them with what they want, for example, more guaranteed contact hours at the University of Sussex, or managing to extend library and learning resources at the University of Arts, London (Streeting, 2008). However we argue that the NSS does not collect relevant data that can be used to identify high quality teaching in higher education, nor does it provide evidence of the quality of students' experience, as high quality teaching and the quality of students' experience are different and very complex. In any case we know from many surveys that the chance of high quality teaching is not the only criterion on which students' choices are based. There are many different factors or mixes of factors that influence students' choices, such as the perceived reputation of the institution, academic quality, infrastructure, employment prospects, quality of social life, etc., as well as factors related to their "perceived" identity, that is, race, gender, religion and social class (Ball et al., 2002a, Ball et al., 2002b, Reay et al., 2001). In one of the most authoritative studies so far, Reay et al. (2005: 58) 'found very little of the calculative, individualistic, consumer rationalism that predominates in official texts'.

## The NSS, league tables, rankings and the market

Dill and Soo (2004: 63) argue that 'efficient market competition presumes that consumers have perfect information about price and essential characteristics of a service such as its quality'. In the UK, the NSS findings are being used to stimulate market competition between universities. Most higher education institutions in the UK, and especially the research-intensive universities, are using the NSS results as a tool for marketing their institutions, including through the Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey (THESES). Yet it is well established that neither national nor global rankings and league tables identify the colleges where students are likely to have the best experience due to effective educational practices, but rather that they favour colleges with more resources and reputation (for example, Dill, 2007; Pascarella, 2001a). In earlier research, Pimentel Bótas (2008a) found no direct relationship between institutions with the best resources and facilities and students having the best educational practices, support and experience, that is, high quality teaching and learning in those institutions (for other UK experience, see Brennan and Patel, 2011 and Ashwin et al., 2011).

Some institutions are also using the NSS 'strategically as an aid to planning and target-setting' (Machell and Saunders, 2007: 12). Some are using it as a tool for improving their students' experience. The NSS is seen as a tool for managing and enhancing the quality of their provision by diagnosing areas where they are not performing well as well as areas where they are (Machell and Saunders, 2007). There is an implicit official belief that "good practice" can be disseminated across the whole higher education sector in the UK, even though the NSS data do not provide particular examples that can be identified and used. The NSS does not provide institutions with important information at program level to influence institutional policy and practice (Machell and Saunders, 2007) because 'it ignores important institutional differences, especially demographic and discipline related ones' (Williams, 2011). Nor does the data provide students with a voice in order to shape their course. According to Harvey (2008), the NSS is a 'hopelessly inadequate improvement tool' and 'improvement is ignored [...] because the survey's generic questions suit no specific context'. Some institutions are in fact using the NSS results as a mechanism for getting rid of teaching staff who are not performing well; others are dismissing the NSS results as they do not reflect the culture of learning in their institutions (Machell and Saunders, 2007). It is assumed and expected that the NSS will provide "perfect" and "complete" information about students' experience.

Ramsden (1991: 135) claimed that there are associations between the quality of student learning and students' perceptions of aspects of teaching in the CEQ scales. If that is true, the same claim would apply to the NSS. However, the data collected through the NSS, and the CEQ, fails to provide sufficient evidence of these "aspects" of teaching to warrant intervention in the teaching practice or dissemination of good practice of academics at any department, school, faculty and university, and that brings into question their validity. As Dowell and Neal (1982) point out student ratings of teaching are influenced by the student's situation, therefore, the validity of student ratings is modest at best and also quite variable.

Machell and Saunders (2007: 25) found that some of their participants 'criticised the rating scales used, the wording of some of the survey questions and the limited "stand-alone" validity of the quantitative data'. It is interesting to observe that a report for HEFCE (2010b), in which Paul Ramsden, the creator of the CEQ was one of the principal researchers, pointed to major limitations on the use of NSS for comparative purposes as its validity in comparing results from different subject areas and for drawing conclusions about different aspects of the student experience is very restricted. SurrIDGE (2006) earlier warned us about making comparisons using the NSS data. She emphasised:

*The need to take into account student profiles when making any comparisons using the NSS data, as 'raw' figures do not take into account the characteristics of students, their courses and the institutions in which they study may produce at best misleading and at worst invalid measures of teaching. (SurrIDGE, 2006a: 132).*

The academic community in the UK is not unified in their support for the NSS. Institutions have been reacting in different ways towards their lower-score results in

the NSS yet their results tend to continue lower or even get worse, for example, the University of Arts, London (Fearn, 2009). Such institutions may not understand that changes to meet the feedback from a previous group may not suit the learning needs and styles of a new and different group (Pimentel Bótas, 2008a, 2008b, 2012). In fact, attention needs to be given to both teachers and students, bearing in mind the fact that student groups are becoming increasingly diverse in their learning and teaching approaches, styles and preferences. When one takes into account the fact that students in the UK are financially contributing more for their education, a pertinent and legitimate question is: is it about time we had a survey measuring academic staff engagement with students in our universities? The higher priority given to research over teaching in many institutions and departments may also be a factor here.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have provided a critical review of the purpose and use of the National Student Survey in the UK higher education landscape. We have argued that the survey is not an instrument for improving the quality of teaching and learning. It is not a useful tool for helping universities to identify areas that may need improvement, because it does not point to any clear and particular aspect of the educational experience of students. It lacks the detailed items needed to allow deeper analysis of issues specific to the institution.

We have also argued that the NSS is disrespectful to teachers and students because it does not recognise the complexity of the teaching and learning process and the demanding nature of teaching and learning, taking account of the social context of teaching and learning as well as disciplinary differences: between-subject differences in scores continue to be far more 'significant' than between-institution ones. It is also disrespectful to students in the sense that it does not cater for their individuality and learning needs. Moreover, it does not recognise that there are differences in perceptions and opinions between students who are currently taking their courses, those who are finishing, and those who have finished their courses, not to mention those who may have failed. Nor does the NSS provide students with a meaningful voice: if any voice is given, it is a voice which provides HEIs with a "surface" and limited understanding, rather than a "deep" and full one, of their own policies and practices. Finally, we have argued that the NSS results cannot be indicators of educational quality and should not be used as such, whether by institutions, commercial publishers or official bodies.

# Appendix A: Items in the National Student Survey Questionnaire

## **The Teaching on My Course**

1. Staff are good at explaining things
2. Staff have made the subject interesting
3. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching
4. The course is intellectually stimulating

## **Assessment and Feedback**

5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance
6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt
8. I have received detailed comments on my work
9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand

## **Academic Support**

10. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies
11. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to
12. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices

## **Organisation and Management**

13. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.
14. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively
15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly

## **Learning Resources**

16. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs
17. I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to.

## **Personal Development**

19. The course has helped me to present myself with confidence
20. My communication skills have improved
21. As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems

## **Overall Satisfaction**

22. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

## Author bios

**Paulo Charles Pimentel Bótas** is a Research Officer at the International Centre for Higher Education Management (ICHEM) – School of Management, University of Bath. He holds a PhD in Sociology/Policy Studies from the Institute of Education, University of London. He has carried out research on home and international students' perceptions of quality teaching in higher education in the UK, academic labor market in the UK, assessment of students' experience in higher education in the UK, Australia and USA, higher education governance, modernization of higher education, ERASMUS students experience, international students experience of teaching and learning in the UK, students as customers/consumers in higher education, and mobile students' development of social and cultural capital. He has published articles in peer reviewed journals. His interests are: quality, teaching and learning, new managerialism, marketisation, critical and feminist pedagogies, cognitive psychology and psycho-analytical perspectives of teaching and learning, social and cultural capital, and power relations in higher Education.

**Roger Brown** is Professor of Higher Education Policy and Co-Director of the Centre for Research and Development in Higher Education at Liverpool Hope University. He was previously Vice Chancellor of Southampton Solent University, Chief Executive of the Higher Education Quality Council, Chief Executive of the Committee of Directors of Polytechnics and Secretary of the Polytechnics and Colleges Funding Council. He has served on many national committees and boards. He has written books on: Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The UK Experience since 1992 (2004), Higher Education and the Market (2011) and Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education (Forthcoming), as well as many articles and lectures on different aspects of HE policy. He is currently a Visiting Professor or equivalent at London Metropolitan University, Napier University Edinburgh, the University of East London and the University of Southampton. He was elected a Vice President of the Society for Research in Higher Education in 2007.

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# Transforming the Student Experience in the UK from 1989

David Kane, Luke Millard and James Williams

Birmingham City University

## Introduction

This chapter outlines the evolution in the United Kingdom since the mid-2000s of ways in which students' feedback on their experience of higher education impacts on academic work. The extent to which feedback is used to enhance the student experience through areas such as course design, assessment and teaching methods is examined with particular reference to the years since the implementation of the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005. Until this time, much significant work was carried out on student feedback (see Richardson, 2005; Harvey, 2003; Harvey, 2001). This chapter, therefore, discusses the key themes of collecting feedback in the light of more recent developments in the context of an established NSS. Although much of this work has remained relevant to today's discussions of student experience surveys, it is important to explore the extent to which the almost total focus on the NSS in the UK has influenced the ways in which institutions listen to what is often referred to as 'the student voice'.

The NSS is clearly an important, if controversial, feature of contemporary UK higher education. Its results are eagerly awaited, eagerly reported by the media and cause a great deal of discussion and heart searching at all levels of the sector. It is controversial, attracting negative commentary from various parts of the sector but also tacit acceptance from other quarters as the genuine representative of the students' collective voice (Curtis, 2008). However, despite the importance of the NSS, little research has been carried out to investigate its impact on institutional quality enhancement processes, either on the changes made to the student experience as a result of listening to the student voice through the NSS or on the processes themselves. One important exception is a recent report by Buckley (2012) for the Higher Education Academy, which explored the impact of the NSS on institutional, student and staff attitudes to engaging students in the NSS.

This chapter is therefore based primarily on a wide range of literature on collecting student experience feedback from before and after the implementation of the NSS. The literature includes a range of both published and 'grey' material. It comprises reports by government agencies, reports commissioned by government agencies and published academic work. Material from national media, including the profession press (for example, the Times Higher Education) has been reviewed for current concerns. In addition, opinions and experiences of officers with a role in the management of the NSS at several institutions were canvassed by e-mail and telephone. Whilst not intended as a piece of scientific research, this paper is intended

as a 'think-piece' to stimulate discussion and thought on the development of institutional student feedback processes.

## Background

There has been a significant body of research carried out on the role and development of student feedback in the United Kingdom over the last twenty five years (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007; Richardson, 2005; Harvey, 2003; Harvey, 2001). However, significant reviews have only been undertaken at moments when governments have been interested: in particular, this occurred in 2001 to 2002, when the British government commissioned the Cooke Committee to report on the most effective ways of providing the public with reliable, up-to-date valuable information about higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. As a result, Harvey's important 2001 review was undertaken as part of the Cooke Committee (2001 to 2002) and the 2003 report by the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information on student feedback (Williams and Brennan, 2003) was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) in the wake of the Cooke Report (2002). Reviews of student feedback by Harvey (2001) and Richardson (2005) were the last significant academic reflections on the broad evolution of student feedback on their experience of higher education in the United Kingdom. As in most other countries, there is a clear need for such work.

## Information needs of students

The establishment of the Cooke Committee in 2001 demonstrates that over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, student feedback had become increasingly viewed as an important element in the information that management needed to support their decisions (Cooke, 2002). By 1990s, most higher education institutions were collecting feedback assiduously (Harvey, 2003). Feedback was collected on a range of different aspects of the students' experience of the institution such as core aspects of learning and teaching, facilities and services such as catering and accommodation. Most, if not all, academic courses were subject to routine student evaluations. However, as Harvey argued (2003) such feedback was collected, usually in the form of questionnaire surveys and the institutions generally had little clear idea of what to do with the resulting data.

The evolution of feedback processes in the course of the 1980s and 1990s was uncoordinated and developed under a range of different influences. Although there were more developed student feedback processes being undertaken in US universities, where such models as total quality management (Deming and others) and the Noel-Levitz satisfaction index were popular, this seems to have had little real impact on British universities in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the implementation of so many student feedback surveys indicates that this was an attempt to demonstrate accountability, as required by the Thatcher governments of the 1980s and increasing managerialism that engulfed the sector (Richardson, 2005; Harvey, 2003).

## The Student Satisfaction Approach

The exception to this was the model of student feedback which developed from the late 1980s at the University of Central England, a method that became known as the Student Satisfaction Approach (Harvey et al., 1997). It was unique in the United Kingdom and was adopted by many other institutions at home and abroad. It was designed both to engage students in the feedback process, developing questions from 'group feedback strategy' and to provide reliable, valid and up-to-date information from the students on their experiences at the institution to provide easily accessible data for senior managers (Green et al., 1994). Similar to the Noel-Levitz satisfaction index, it combined satisfaction and importance allowing senior managers to identify items that were considered as most important and focus resources on improving those items (Richardson, 2005, p. 392; Harvey et al., 1997).

## Growth in interest in student feedback

An explosion of interest in student feedback occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Harvey, 2001). Student feedback became the core of discussions of the Cooke Committee in 2001 to 2002, which was concerned with how to encourage higher education institutions to provide valid, useful information to stakeholders. Arguably, the underlying driver behind the government's commissioning of the Cooke Committee was the imposition and expansion of tuition fees for students in England and Wales from 1998. The principle concern of the government and thus of the Cooke Committee, was to provide reliable information to parents and potential students so they could make informed choices about which program to apply for. These choices would, after all, result in the payment of significant tuition fees. The Cooke Report (2002) led to the commissioning of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) study on student feedback and eventually to the piloting of a national student survey in 2003.

## The National Student Survey (NSS)

The development and implementation of the National Student Survey (NSS) from 2005 had an immense impact on how institutions viewed the 'student voice'. It is clear that institutions began to take the NSS extremely seriously, especially the older established universities: now, UK universities no longer ignore the 'student voice'. The NSS has forced institutions to take student feedback more seriously and stimulated a discussion about student engagement that was simply not there before. At one institution, for example, 'the major enhancement from the annual NSS results came perhaps not from the statistics, but from the debate and discussions that came from the evaluation of results' (Buckley, 2012, p. 4). However, there are many criticisms to be made of the NSS. First, it could be argued that institutional focus on the NSS has led to the marginalisation of other, existing feedback processes. Where feedback processes already existed that were home-grown and relevant to the institutions which created them, the NSS began to take over: existing surveys were often amended to reflect the NSS structure. Second, the NSS has led to a league tabling of

institutions and increased competition between institutions and study programs. Third, there has been a significant impact on institutions themselves and how they relate to their staff and students (Furedi, 2012). In particular, when NSS scores are low, the tendency of institutions is to threaten the existence of lower scoring programs and departments rather than implementing effective improvement plans. There is much anecdotal evidence that individual staff feel more pressure (real or imagined) after a poor departmental or program rating: they feel under pressure even without a poor result.

## A controversial tool

From its inception, therefore, the NSS has been extremely controversial. It has been criticised, though seldom properly critiqued, for a wide range of reasons. As early as 2007, critics noted that it is primarily designed as a measurement tool rather than one for quality improvement (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007), although managers and policy makers have assumed that it can be used to improve the student experience. Secondly, there were concerns that it did not allow for the variety of institutions that it covers. The NSS cannot reflect key institutional issues: all institutions are measured against each other despite differences of institutional culture and resources, as well as the nature of the student body. Student experience varies according to the type of institution that they attend, the type of program they study on, their educational attainment and the disciplines they study. Third, the survey is often (anecdotally) thought to be a 'crude instrument'. It is too short and broad to focus on specific institutional issues. As Harvey argued (2003), the then proposed NSS supposedly measured mathematically proven 'concepts' such as teaching and learning, even though for most of us, such notions are preposterous. Finally, and more recently, critics have argued that the NSS also fails to provide any real information about the quality of learning and teaching activities (Buckley, 2012, p. 7; Gibbs, 2012).

The NSS, however, has been a central part of the United Kingdom's higher education landscape for nearly a decade and shows little sign of being replaced in the near future, despite calls as early as 2003 for its abolition (Harvey, 2003). It has become a routine part of the UK's higher education calendar and the questions that are asked have been developed to include broader issues relating to the wider student experience and, importantly, to make it more relevant to individual institutions. Indeed, a sign of its permanence is that consultations have recently been held by HEFCE and the HEA that indicate that it may be extended to other student groups.

## Institutional surveys and improvement

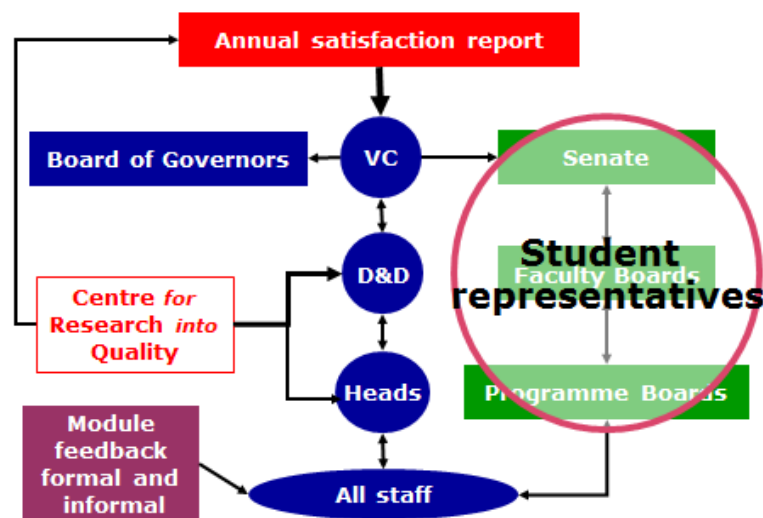
The NSS, therefore, is an important, if controversial, instrument and institutions are unable simply to ignore it. Practically, it forms a central element in the collection of data that institutions provide for potential students known as the key information set (KIS), introduced in 2012. However, more invidiously, it forms an influential part of the

development of the reputation of UK institutions. It is important, therefore, to explore the ways in which the NSS and other feedback instruments are used by institutions to improve the quality of learning and teaching. At most universities in the United Kingdom, the NSS, as the dominant student feedback survey, is used by senior managers in their quality improvement processes. Key messages from the NSS are raised at senior management level and action is taken to address the concerns.

## The consultation process

Harvey's model of the student feedback and consultation process at the University of Central England in the period 1992 to 2007 illustrated how the student satisfaction survey fitted into the existing structures of authority at the University. It shows clearly not only how the annual student satisfaction survey was reported back to the vice chancellor and senior management (including faculty deans and directors of service, heads of departments), all academic staff and the representative bodies, but also how the students were included. It also shows how the student satisfaction report was produced by a unit outside the structure of the management: the Centre for Research into Quality (see below, Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Consultation process at University of Central England, 1992-2007**

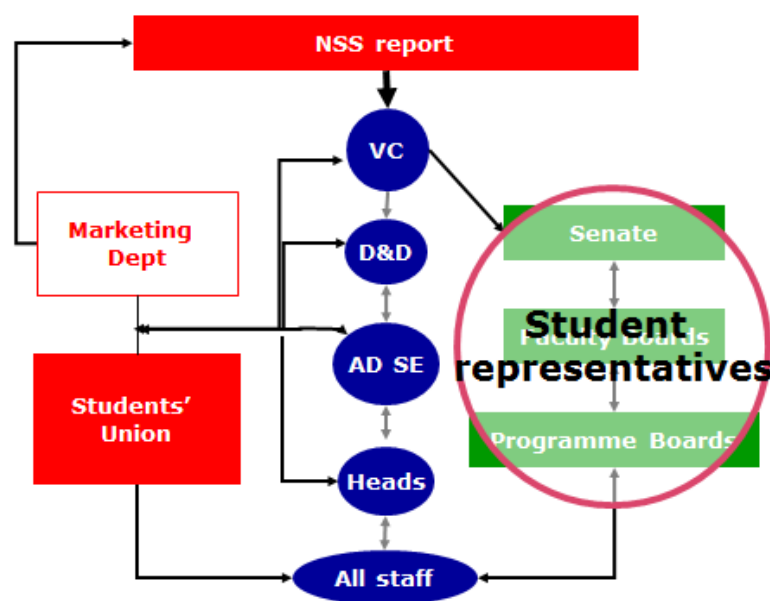


**Source: Harvey, L. 2003, 'Editorial', *Quality in Higher Education*, 9 (1), pp. 3-20**

Since the implementation of the NSS, this model has slightly but significantly altered. The NSS process varies across the institutions but a generic model is common. The starting point is now a particular contact person within each institution. In several institutions, this appears to be an officer of the Marketing Department. The NSS is distributed and managed by the University's Marketing Department, in a partnership (varying between institutions) with the Students' Union. When responses have been

received and analysed, the analysis reports are delivered to the faculties. The Associate Dean circulates the results to the course directors. The Associate Deans with responsibility for the student experience meet with course directors to identify issues for improvement. Special monitoring is established for courses that are underperforming. This can be illustrated by a revised version of Harvey's model but it is now a far less tidy and clear process (see below, Figure 2). The key difference between the two models is that the management of the institutional survey process is no longer the responsibility of an autonomous unit within the University (in the case of UCE, the Centre for Research into Quality) and becomes part of the institution's corporate function.

**Figure 2: Generic NSS feedback process**



Adapted from Harvey, L. 2003, 'Editorial', *Quality in Higher Education*, 9 (1), pp. 3-20

## Activities additional to the NSS

However, other work is done to collect data from students about their experience that can be used in the quality enhancement process. Harvey's 2003 paper was fairly comprehensive in this respect and much remains the same except in scale and attitudes. The scale of gathering student feedback appears to have increased significantly since the time Harvey was writing: institutions gather vast amounts of feedback from their students. Attitude changes are more difficult to identify but it seems clear that there are broadly two intertwined approaches: first, some institutions seem to be genuinely concerned to engage their students as partners in an improvement process; second, feedback processes are largely driven by the NSS and the need to drill down at different levels to identify issues emerging from the NSS or in an attempt to rectify problems before the NSS picks up on them.

Other student feedback surveys exist largely to service the concerns that are raised by the NSS. For example, at Birmingham City University, the new Student Experience Survey (SES) of the experience of first and second year students is very similar in format and type of questions to the NSS (and by coincidence is also managed by IPSOS MORI, the organisation that also manages the NSS). Issues that emerge during the SES are likely to be the same as those emerging in the NSS. The SES, therefore, allows managers to address students' concerns early in their studies rather than leaving it until the final year when it is too late to improve anything for them. The SES is a regular survey carried out annually and replaced the earlier Student Satisfaction Survey. A key principle has changed however: where before, the Student Satisfaction Survey aimed to complement other data that was regularly collected, now, surveys are closely co-ordinated with the NSS. In addition, some institutions are also engaging with students outside of the survey context and seeking more immediate feedback and solutions. Student engagement activities, through schemes such as Student Academic Partners at Birmingham City University, see students and staff working in partnership to identify problems and co-create solutions that provide immediate impact on the student experience and the institutional context.

In addition to university-wide experience surveys, UK universities employ a range of other surveys which are of varying value, notably modular feedback surveys and user surveys for facilities and services. These have long been in use and have continued despite the development of the NSS (Harvey, 2003). 'Tick-box' surveys have long been a preferred approach for many institutions, perhaps because they are both easy to produce and the data provided by them is easier to analyse (being simple, quantitative data collection instruments). Indeed, experience indicates that senior management is uncomfortable with analysing qualitative data in the form of student comments. Quantitative surveys are clearly appropriate in particular cases.

Modular feedback is used almost comprehensively to assess the quality of individual courses. Use of this approach shows an upward trend, perhaps because it is easier than using alternative modes. However, they are much criticised by staff, who often feel that they are not only useless in providing information for improvement but also have a negative effect: a single negative point raised by a student, for example, can be presented as representative of all the students' views. This is particularly problematic when there are small numbers of students. Alternatives are occasionally suggested, such as using focus groups or managed class discussions, in which direct feedback is given by the students to the tutor. Surveys in this case are clearly inappropriate.

A more valid category of surveys which is often to be found in contemporary UK universities is the facility user survey. Such service user surveys often include Library surveys, Union surveys, sports facilities surveys etc. They are used to gauge the use of the facility and user satisfaction with a view to improving the service. User surveys will reflect on a range of issues, mainly practical, for which there should be a solution. The key to successful user satisfaction surveys, however, is to ensure that action results from collecting the feedback. Otherwise, the process loses its credibility and response

rates plummet. In this case, it is important that users are asked only questions to which there is a solution.

## Accountability for Improvement: impact of NSS

Ultimately it is the universities who are responsible for addressing issues raised in the NSS. This is especially true of specific issues that arise owing to students' particular concerns with their institution. When university scores appear on Unistats, the host for the NSS results, there is a rush to identify where the problems are. However, there is sector-wide support, if not formal responsibility, on some broader issues, particularly core issues such as feedback and assessment, where the sector explores different ways in which an issue can be addressed. By 'the sector' we mean representative and support organisations such as the Higher Education Academy. In order to support institutions address issues raised in the NSS, the HEA offers advice through workshops and other, targeted activity.

## The NSS: causing a stir in the sector

Data from the NSS has huge impact at institutional and sub-organisational levels. There is anecdotal evidence that suggests near panic can ensue on receipt of poor NSS results. Poor results in the NSS can be picked up by the national media, as for example, when it was noticed in 2007 that assessment and feedback had 'routinely scored the lowest satisfaction rates in UK HE'. Publication of NSS results are followed by serious internal discussion. Most staff seem to be aware of the NSS and have an established view on the survey and its results. It appears to be one of the most talked about items in UK HE. This, however, is largely the 'noise' but is there any evidence that it has any real effect in improving the students' experience? Some would say that it does not. However, the NSS, despite its faults, is the only nationally based tool for gathering student data that we have in the UK, so in this sense, we know more about the student experience of HE nationally than we have ever done. This has proved a shock for many institutions (in particular, arguably, for the pre-1992 universities) but in several cases, the results are merely what many people thought all along.

## The NSS: stating the obvious

On key elements of NSS, there is actually very little that is surprising. The most controversial issue: assessment and feedback scores, are a case in point. Scores for the two items in the NSS, 'promptness of feedback' and 'usefulness of feedback' have been consistently low in comparison to other core elements of the survey, such as course organisation and teaching and learning (Williams and Kane, 2009). However, there is much evidence to show that in fact, these items have always scored less well than others: indeed, research has shown that the NSS score was not much different from those in many long standing institutional surveys. In some cases, the 'poor' score achieved in the NSS turned out to be the result of many years of improvement: the score had been much lower in the 1990s. What this indicates is that assessment



and feedback, as one Associate Dean recently observed, are not easy to resolve and, as research has shown, takes time and consistent attention. On a more positive note, the concern that was raised as a result of this controversy seems to have stimulated a much more concerted attempt to address issues around this issue and the NSS results have shown an improvement in scores.

## Focusing responsibility for change

The NSS has also forced institutions to think carefully about who is responsible for implementing improvements as a result of concerns revealed in the survey. All staff are made aware of the NSS scores and are expected to encourage students to complete the NSS questionnaire when it is made available in late January each year and are similarly expected to engage in processes addressing NSS concerns. All staff are exhorted by senior management to play their part in improving the 'student experience', a rather vague term that has as yet been satisfactorily defined. Arguably, the proliferation of officers with the phrase 'student experience' in their titles since the introduction of the NSS reflects the national obsession with the NSS. At some institutions, there are now pro-vice chancellors for the student experience and/or, associate deans for student experience. This may also reflect a misplaced belief that giving a single individual responsibility for the 'student experience' will solve the issue. More importantly, however, the creation of such posts does at least demonstrate that the 'student experience' (whatever that may actually be) is deemed to be of importance sector wide. Students are now viewed as key stakeholders in higher education whereas even until the mid-1990s, they were not. However, an extension of this move to viewing students as customers has not really taken hold in the sector with the counter argument of students as partners in this joint endeavour taking the fore. Perhaps this is best exemplified through the Higher Education Academy's Students as Partners Change program which in its first year supported 10 universities seeking to embrace this new approach (Higher Education Academy, n.d.).

## Engaging staff and students in the feedback process

Engaging students and staff in the process of collecting feedback from students on their experience of higher education has always been a fundamental concern in any feedback process. For any survey to be valid, it must attract sufficient responses; staff are regarded as an important factor in encouraging students to complete questionnaire surveys. This has been an issue for all surveys and is just as much a concern in the implementation of the NSS. The issue is further complicated by the requirement of the NSS that at least 50 responses must be received from each program for it to be reported. It is generally thought, perhaps erroneously, that if more students complete the survey, the better will be the results.

## Encouraging a good response

Students are encouraged by the institutions to complete the NSS. Encouraging students to complete questionnaire surveys is never easy and many commentators have drawn attention to the problems of low response rates. There are several factors that are taken into account by NSS implementation teams. Such factors are not new: institutions have learnt from many years of experience of implementing student surveys, as well as well-known issues affecting survey responses.

Harvey and Williams (2007) outline eight key steps to maximise responses. Surveys should be:

- relevant to students, using student-determined questions;
- mailed to term-time addresses/active e-mail addresses (up-to-date, accurate database);
- carefully timed to avoid questionnaire fatigue;
- mailed smartly with multiple mailshots/reminders;
- provided with an incentive (perhaps a prize draw);
- long enough to be useful but not too long;
- confidential/data protected;
- clear about purpose and action.

These steps remain fundamental to undertaking a survey as can be seen in the range of activities pursued to promote the survey in order to achieve substantial responses. A brief review of institutional and National Union Students Union guidelines, which are easily accessible online, demonstrates that a range of approaches to promoting the NSS are being encouraged (most appear to be closely derived from the Ipsos MORI guidelines), some of which relate closely to Harvey and Williams's steps but others are different.

One of the key lessons learnt from conducting student surveys has been that of 'survey fatigue'. The key point here is that experience shows that students, as with other groups of respondents, are asked to complete several different questionnaire surveys and this makes them less likely to wish to do so, even if the survey is an important one. This has been particularly problematic as questionnaire surveys became the preferred option for collecting feedback. It is important to 'determine the survey window so as not to clash with other surveys' (Respondent 2).

It is vital to advertise any survey effectively and a great deal of effort goes into advertising the NSS each year. There is some centralised advertising, provided by IPSOS MORI. Similarly, the University of Sussex notes in its guidelines: 'Use the promotional materials provided. Ipsos-MORI usually provide us with a range of promotional materials (posters, postcards, pens, post-it notes; as well as a range of electronic media). Display posters in prominent areas in your buildings' (University of Sussex, n.d.).

However, as Respondent 2 observed, most campaigns are developed and undertaken by the institutions themselves and are thus specific to the interests of the institution. This respondent's institution has used a campaign in which the NSS logo is displayed

in icing sugar as a decoration on fairy cakes which are then distributed to students on the campus. The same institution also has a campaign in which students shout about the survey in public places. These relate closely to the National Union of Students' tip 'Think of a theme' which may include using popular motifs (National Union of Students, n.d.). At Birmingham City University, a 2013 campaign to reward student participation through a donation to a set of designated charities produced immediate and significant increases in survey completion rates. The reason for increased engagement has been suggested as student altruism and this approach was strongly supported by the Students' Union.

Experience indicates that students respond better to surveys when responses are directly related to immediate results. At Institution 2, the survey link gives out results as the students open the link. The University of Brighton suggests that staff 'demonstrate changes that have been made in response to student feedback and highlight improvements in the course, school or university' (University of Brighton, n.d.). The University of Sussex encourages the same approach: 'Keep students and staff in your department up-to-date with the latest response rates, when you receive them.' Interestingly, the guidelines note that 'the element of friendly competition amongst departments, as well as the visibility of the impact their individual response could make on the overall response rate, did seem to encourage students' (University of Sussex, n.d.).

It is quite common for institutions to attempt to make it easier for students to complete the survey, through the use, in particular, of mobile devices. For example Institution 2 enables students to complete the survey on iPads positioned at strategic places on campus. Institution 3 has, in the past, opened 'completion points' around the campus: computer terminals placed in strategic areas that are designed to be used by students to complete the survey. The University of Sussex good practice guide notes: 'Make sure that laptops and/or computer rooms are laid on for students so that they can easily complete the survey whilst it is fresh in their minds' (University of Sussex, n.d.).

A personal touch is regarded as important. 'Email students encouraging them to complete the survey (and thanking those who have).' (University of Brighton, n.d.). The University of Sussex notes: 'Send an email to all students, thanking those who have completed it and asking those who have not to do so. Limit the amount of times that you do this for maximum impact. Some found that quite close to the deadline worked well' (University of Sussex, n.d.)

It is important to be aware of key information about the NSS and appropriate links. One institution guideline urges: 'Make sure you know the right websites' (University of Sussex, n.d.); whilst another suggests: 'Add a link to the NSS from your course page' (University of Brighton, n.d.). The available institutional guidelines urge staff to encourage students to respond but not how to respond. This is a particular concern of HEFCE and high profile incidents of inappropriate encouragement by staff have been reported in the media (Paton and Dobrik, 2011; Coughlan, 2008). Ipsos MORI

guidelines note that HEFCE and other authorities believe it is appropriate to remind students to complete the NSS and to consider their answers carefully but inappropriate to make links 'between the NSS, league tables and the perceived value of students' degrees'. These are closely followed by two available university guidelines. The University of Brighton takes a more positive line: 'Speak to your students about the survey, how it is used and why it is important' (University of Brighton, n.d.).

Early engagement with students is regarded as important. The University of Sussex guidelines note: 'Speak to students about the survey at an early stage'. The guidelines also emphasise the need for clarity of purpose: 'discuss the methodology, explain how important it is for students and the University, and make sure that there is a clear understanding of its purpose' (University of Sussex, n.d.).

Respondent 2 referred to the value of a 'whole institution approach' to engaging all stakeholders with the NSS. For the NSS to be valuable, it was argued that experience at Institution 2 indicated that all stakeholders had to be engaged with the NSS process. This is reflected in the University of Sussex guidelines: 'Involve all staff – academic and non-academic – in the process of promoting the NSS. Make sure they are all briefed about the survey, and why it is important, and that they are actively encouraging students to respond' (University of Sussex, n.d.).

Experience indicates that surveys that are more relevant to the students themselves are more likely to attract responses. For this reason, most, if not all institutions engage the students' union in advertising the NSS. The role of individual students' unions varies, although institutions tend to refer to a 'partnership' between the two bodies. Respondent 2 argues that the students' union is involved at every stage of the implementation of the NSS because it is felt that a 'whole institution approach' is vital to the successful implementation of the survey.

Engagement of student representatives to promote the NSS is encouraged in three available guidelines: 'Engage student representatives in the promotion of the NSS' (University of Sussex, n.d.); 'Engage student reps and student societies within your academic area' (University of Sussex, n.d.); 'Engage with student representatives and allow them time at the beginning or end of lectures to explain what the NSS is about and to encourage all students to complete it' (University of Brighton, n.d.). These reflect the National Union of Students' tip: 'Course Reps are a great way to make students aware of the NSS – get your key, engaged reps, train them up, or arm them with promotional materials' (National Union of Students, n.d.).

The National Union of Students has committed itself to promoting and supporting institutional unions to promote the NSS. It provides a range of promotional materials for the use of institutional students' unions such as screensavers, logos, posters, t-shirts and flyers which are 'automatically sent to the NSS Contacts within institutions' (NUS, 2013). This relationship was thrown into sharp focus in 2012 when an additional question was added to the NSS which asked students to rate the effectiveness of their

Students' Union: 'I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution'. This aligned the two organisations and potentially resulted in Universities taking a greater interest in Students' Union operations and their support for the student body. It also meant that the Unions saw more value in engaging students in NSS completion.

Partnership with the students is increasingly regarded as a successful model in higher education in the UK. At a strategic level the National Union of Students' Manifesto for Partnership (NUS, 2012) highlights the benefits of partnership as a vehicle for dispensing with any notion of the consumer student, but also as opportunity for significant change in the sector. At a more local level at Birmingham City University have adopted the partnership approach through a series of student engagement activities that have sort to create the opportunities for student voice to inform and lead academic innovation and developments at the University. This has led to the development of substantial other feedback activities such as a Student Advisory Board at the Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences. Over 200 student engagement projects have been co-developed by students and staff over the past four years and these have resulted in a significant impact on institutional and sub-institutional decision making processes.

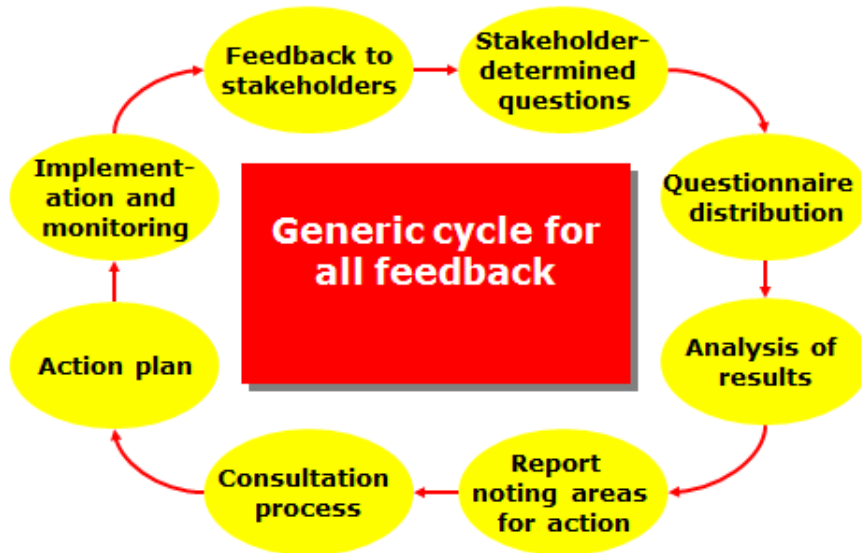
## Closing the loop

It has long been believed that one of the key factors in encouraging potential respondents to complete any survey was the ability of the surveyors to provide effective information about how the results were used. This process of informing respondents about what happens to the results of any survey is called 'closing the feedback loop'. How to close this loop effectively has been an issue that many other institutions have wrestled with since the 1990s (Watson, 2003; Purcell and Hall, 1998).

## The feedback and action cycle

'Closing the loop' is predicated on the notion that there is a cycle of feedback and action. Harvey long ago eloquently illustrated the generic cycle with associated key moments (see below Figure 3).

Figure 3: The cycle of feedback



Source: Harvey, L. 2003, 'Editorial', *Quality in Higher Education*, 9 (1), pp. 3-20.

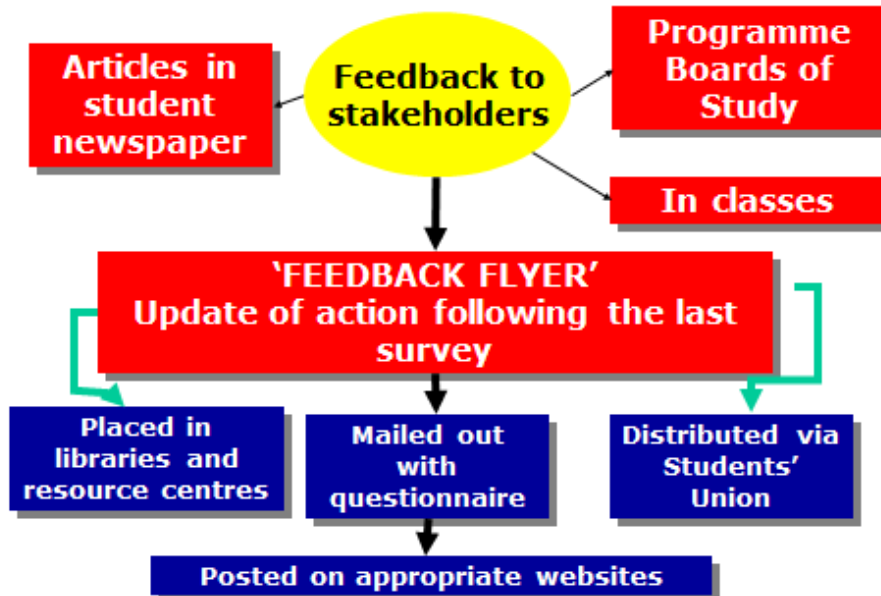
## Approaches to closing the feedback loop

When the Student Satisfaction Approach was in operation at the University of Central England, the institution fed back information to students about action taken as a result of the previous year's survey through a flyer that was included with the questionnaire. The flyer, known as Update, was an attempt to demonstrate that the survey was taken seriously by the institutional authorities and that action resulted from the student feedback process. It also served as a useful encouragement for students to complete the survey. The approach proved influential amongst other institutions that conducted similar survey processes but no systematic research was ever conducted into the effectiveness of the approach. Anecdotal evidence indicates that some students believed that the survey had no effect, but consistently healthy response rates indicate that the approach encouraged large numbers of students to respond.

In addition to Update, posters were distributed around the University's campuses in an attempt to advertise the survey. The posters, which used the phrase 'You said; We did', were an attempt to demonstrate that the questionnaire was worth completing because action resulted. Unfortunately, no internal research was conducted to explore the effectiveness of this, or other methods of advertising. In the age of online bulletin boards, information was transferred to electronic media. During the last years of the Student Satisfaction Approach at UCE, faculty boards were used to display messages

about actions taken as a result of the survey. It is common now to use a wide range of electronic media to deliver messages about the NSS, including social media.

**Figure 4: Closing the Feedback Loop**



**Source: Harvey, L. & Williams, J., 2007, 'Student Feedback', 2nd European Quality Assurance Forum, Rome, November 2007**

It is interesting to note that the NSS uses a similar phrase to emphasise that action is taken on the basis of the results of the NSS. Although the 'You said... We did' format has been commonly used, some institutions are moving away from it because of 'the tension between its perceived consumerist tone and the increasingly widespread sense that students are partners in the educational process, and that genuine dialogue is more appropriate than responding to demands' (Buckley, 2012, p. 25).

The vital part of the NSS feedback process from September 2012 has been the Key Information Set (KIS) that all prospective students are to receive from institutions. The KIS is a collection of data provided to enable students to make up their minds about which institution to choose: 'It gives prospective students access to robust, reliable and comparable information in order to help them make informed decisions about what and where to study' (HEFCE, n.d.). The KIS contains a wide range of data including results from specified questions in the NSS, but also information about the amount of time spent in learning and teaching activities, types of assessment, accommodation, fees, bursaries available, graduate employment, potential earnings of graduates etc. as it ties the NSS to information that students require in order to make what is now an extremely expensive choice. In a sense, this could be the most effective element of the NSS closing the feedback loop. KIS was implemented as a result of recommendations from independent research (Oakleigh Consulting and

Staffordshire University, 2010). The KIS has been widely reported in the national press, with critics arguing that it is part of an accountability agenda, that it suits the government and that it is part of the out-of-hand number crunching process. At the time of writing, it is too early to evaluate its success (see, for example, Underwood, 2013; Tubbs, 2012a; Underwood, 2012b).

## Working in genuine partnership with students

Delivering messages electronically or by traditional formats are easy enough but it is likely that such messages are of limited effect. A more personal and effective approach to demonstrating that a survey is important may be through activities such as the Student Advisory Boards and other peer-to-peer based activities referred to above. This is a way of engaging students directly with the institution (in this case the faculty) to identify what needs changing and what has changed. It is an example of senior management engaging with students directly leading to a feeling of being listened to, or, as one respondent recently observed, 'belongingness'.

## Conclusion

The NSS has been a routine part of the UK's higher education landscape for eight years and has clearly had an important impact on the sector, although there has still been very little research into the impact of the survey on the sector and its processes. Many of the principles of collecting and using student feedback that were identified in the 1990s and early 2000s still clearly apply, even though the focus is now the NSS rather than autonomous institutional surveys. Above all, the key to providing a student feedback survey that is useful to institutional improvement processes is that it is both relevant to students and engages them in a conversation between partners. Buckley's (2012) argument that the NSS has stimulated the higher education sector to consider different ways of 'listening to the student voice' is controversial because several institutions were already taking this very seriously before the introduction of the survey in 2005. However, since 2005, there has been a growth in the ways in which institutions attempt to engage their students with different aspects of higher education, perhaps as a result of the NSS, or perhaps as a result of unique institutional developments. Student engagement has become a key element in higher education policy at all levels, through methods such as the Student Academic Partner scheme. The NSS is now viewed as the primary measure of student experience in the UK and, rightly or wrongly, this is unlikely to change. The least desirable elements, such as league tabling, might become less significant if the move towards other methods of engagement continue to develop.

## Author bios

**David Kane** is a Senior Researcher with the Social Research and Evaluation Unit (SREU) within the Faculty of Education, Law and Social Sciences at Birmingham City University. David has a keen interest in all areas of higher education policy and



practice, particularly the student experience of higher education. He has presented several papers at international conferences on this subject and has worked on institutional student satisfaction surveys for a number of HEIs since 2005 with colleagues at SREU. David is also interested in the application and use of technology, including social media, in learning and teaching and is currently developing this interest with colleagues across the University.

**Luke Millard** is Head of Learning Partnerships at Birmingham City University and leads on the University student engagement initiatives. In 2010 the Student Academic Partners scheme won the Times Higher Education award for outstanding support for students and in 2012/13 he acted as an external consultant to the UK Higher Education Academy's Students as Partners Change program. Luke's academic interests focus on educational leadership and the impact of student engagement on student success.

**James Williams** is a Senior Researcher in the Social Research and Evaluation Unit at Birmingham City University, UK. His main focus of interest is the student experience and the use of student feedback in higher education. He has published widely on the student experience, graduate employability, widening participation and the history of higher education. He is Associate Editor of the international journal, *Quality in Higher Education*.

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# The National Student Survey and its Impact on UK Higher Education

John T. E. Richardson, The Open University, UK

## Abstract

Although controversial when first introduced in 2005, the National Student Survey (NSS) has become widely accepted as a major feature of the UK higher education landscape. It is now an influential and widely cited source of information about the experience of students in higher education: around 287,000 students at more than 300 institutions responded to the 2012 NSS. Institutions are regularly led to take actions and initiatives aimed at improving the student experience arising from their standing in the NSS and in league tables based on NSS responses and other data.

**Keyword:** national student survey, impact on universities, student experience

## Introduction

In the 1990s, the principal mechanism of quality assurance in UK higher education was that of subject review. Panels of specialist and non-specialist assessors visited departments, inspected documentation, and attended teaching sessions. They also interviewed teaching staff, current students, graduates and employers. At the conclusion of their visits, the panels evaluated each department on several dimensions and published a formal report giving the reasons for their evaluation. The experience of subject review was often arduous and sometimes distressing for the relevant departments. The system was also expensive: the annual cost to the UK higher education sector was estimated to be £50 million.

Following representations from the sector, in 2000 the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) proposed to abandon this in favour of a 'light touch' system based on the evaluation of whole institutions. In return, the institutions would publish relevant data to enable prospective students to make more informed choices on where to study. Because of concerns about the adequacy of existing data, the HEFCE commissioned a project on Collecting and Using Student Feedback on Quality and Standards of Learning and Teaching in HE [higher education]. This was carried out by a joint project team consisting of researchers from the UK Open University, staff from SQW Limited and members of NOP Research Group.

The project team aimed: (a) to identify good practice in obtaining student feedback; (b) to make recommendations to institutions concerning the design and implementation of feedback mechanisms; and (c) to make recommendations on the design and implementation of a national survey of recent graduates, the results of which would be published to assist future applicants to higher education. Several

outputs resulted from this work, including a literature review on ways of obtaining student feedback and a guide to good practice in this area, but the project's main finding was that it would be feasible to introduce a uniform national survey to obtain feedback from recent graduates about their programs of study.

This conclusion was not particularly surprising, since a national survey of this sort had already been operating for several years in Australia. The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was devised as a performance indicator for monitoring the quality of teaching on individual programs of study. In the light of a successful (Australian) national trial, it was agreed that the Graduate Careers Council of Australia should administer the CEQ on an annual basis to all new graduates through the Graduate Destination Survey, which is conducted a few months after the completion of their degree programs. The survey of 1992 graduates was carried out in 1993 and yielded usable responses to the CEQ from more than 50,000 graduates from 30 institutions. Subsequent surveys covered all Australian universities and typically obtained usable responses to the CEQ from more than 80,000 graduates, reflecting overall response rates of around 60%. Research studies have shown that the CEQ is a robust tool that can be used in a variety of countries, in a variety of institutions, in a variety of academic disciplines and with a variety of student populations.

## The National Student Survey

In the light of the findings of the project on Collecting and Using Student Feedback, the HEFCE commissioned a pilot study to explore the implementation and value of a national survey of recent graduates from UK institutions of higher education. This was carried out during 2003 by researchers at the UK Open University, and it was very much influenced by the Australian experience with the CEQ. The results suggested that it was possible to design a short, robust instrument that would measure different aspects of the quality of the student experience. However, the timing of this survey was thought not to be optimal, because the results would only inform students seeking to enter university two years later. The HEFCE resolved to address this and other issues by exploring the idea of a national survey of final-year undergraduate students. The Open University team was commissioned to undertake another pilot study early in 2004 investigating the feasibility of such a survey. The results confirmed its feasibility, and the HEFCE resolved to proceed with a full National Student Survey (NSS) early in 2005 and annually thereafter. This is administered to all final-year students taking full-time undergraduate programs and to part-time students deemed to be at a comparable stage in their studies.

The NSS questionnaire contains 21 items presented in six sections: the teaching on my course; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; and personal development (see Appendix A, end of paper by Botas & Brown). For each item, respondents are asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or their disagreement with a particular statement. The response alternatives are labelled 'definitely agree', 'mostly agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'mostly disagree', 'definitely disagree', and 'not applicable'. There is a 22nd item in

which respondents are asked to say whether they are satisfied with the quality of their course overall. This is not strictly part of the NSS questionnaire but is included to assess the validity of the other 22 items as indicators of students' perceptions of the quality of their course. Respondents may choose to complete the survey online or on paper.

Responses to the NSS can be coded and analysed in many different ways, but it is conventional to calculate the percentage of students who have responded 'definitely agree' or 'mostly agree' to each item, ignoring the students who have responded 'not applicable'. These percentages are sometimes referred to as 'satisfaction ratings', although the core items in the NSS do not explicitly mention the idea of satisfaction. Aggregate results are published on the HEFCE website. Results for each institution offering programs in different subject areas are published on a separate website for prospective students, together with information about the first destinations (i.e., employment, education or training) of recent graduates. From 2012 the information is being supplemented by Key Information Sets concerning individual institutions. Finally, anonymised data sets are returned to institutions for further analysis locally.

Although controversial when first introduced, the NSS has become widely accepted as a major feature of the UK higher education landscape. It is now an influential and widely cited source of information about the experience of students in higher education: around 287,000 students at more than 300 institutions responded to the 2012 NSS. The survey currently encompasses final-year students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland funded by the HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. Most Scottish universities have opted to join the NSS, as has the private University of Buckingham. Students taking programs in medicine and paramedical subjects funded by the relevant Departments of Health are also included. The results are highlighted on universities' websites and are used in the construction of rankings or 'league tables' of higher education institutions by national newspapers and other media. These are known to have a major impact on institutions' strategic planning.

## The Role of the NSS in Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement

However, it was soon appreciated that the results of the NSS would also be relevant for the purposes of institutional quality assurance. The report of a recent study commissioned by the HEFCE concluded: 'The NSS forms part of the national Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for higher education. . . . Although the NSS was originally conceived primarily as a way of helping potential students make informed choices, the significance of the data it collects means that it has become an important element in quality assurance (QA) processes and in institutional quality enhancement (QE) activities related to the student learning experience'. The study included interviews with a variety of stakeholders, and the report listed a variety of ways in which respondents had reported the use of NSS results for QE purposes.

The UK Higher Education Academy (HEA) supports institutions in using NSS results to enhance the quality of the student experience. The HEA website comments: 'The NSS provides not only a useful and important focus for attention, discussion and debate about learning and teaching, but is also a beneficial tool for identifying areas for further investigation'. The HEA has sponsored investigations of issues arising from NSS results in particular subject areas, such as art and design and social work and social policy. Together with the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs, the HEA has sponsored the Teaching International Students project. This included an analysis of NSS data which found that international students tended to give less favourable ratings of their programs than did home students.

The UK National Union of Students claims that the NSS has encouraged institutions of higher education to take student opinion more seriously, and it has campaigned to encourage institutions to improve their ratings in the area of assessment and feedback. The National Union of Students provided the recent study commissioned by the HEFCE with case studies from eleven institutions to illustrate how students' unions had used NSS results to campaign for improvements in their institutions' policies and practices in areas such as feedback on assessment, personal tutoring, library facilities and student representation.

There are several published accounts where NSS results have prompted institutions to implement initiatives aimed at enhancing the student experience, especially with regard to assessment and feedback. The institutions in question include Sheffield Hallam University, London Metropolitan University, Swansea Metropolitan University, Oxford Brookes University, Leeds Metropolitan University and the University of Reading. Most of these initiatives provided evidence of changes in teachers' behaviour, but some also provided evidence of changes in institutional policies while others provided evidence of changes in students' expectations and behaviour. Other initiatives of this sort can be found described on institutional websites: institutions that have linked their strategic plans to future NSS results include Coventry University and the University of Exeter.

## The NSS and the UK Open University

The Open University was established in 1969 to provide degree programs by distance education across the United Kingdom. Originally, nearly of all its courses were delivered by correspondence materials, combined with television and radio broadcasts, video and audio recordings, tutorial support at a local level and (in some cases) week-long residential schools. In recent years, however, the University has made increasing use of computer-based support, particularly CD-ROMs, dedicated websites and computer-mediated conferencing. It accepts all applicants over the normal minimum age of 16 onto its courses without imposing formal entrance requirements, subject only to limitations of numbers on certain individual courses.

In distance education, it is difficult to obtain student feedback in any other way than

through questionnaire surveys. The Open University has a long history of collecting student feedback in this manner and has highly efficient survey facilities of its own. Consequently, the idea of the University's participating in the NSS was not seen as problematic. In fact, the University regularly falls near the top of the aggregate NSS results, and this outcome is fully exploited in the University's marketing activities. Nevertheless, there seem to be some anomalies in the results. In the 2005 NSS, for example, the Open University was ranked either first, second or third out of 128 institutions of higher education on teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, and overall satisfaction, but it was ranked only 21st on personal development and only 33rd on learning resources.

This was investigated in an in-house survey where current Open University students were asked to complete the NSS questionnaire and to add open-ended comments to elaborate on their responses to each of the questionnaire items. It was found that many students had responded 'neither agree nor disagree' to items in the sections concerned with personal development and learning resources when, according to their open-ended comments, 'not applicable' would have been more appropriate. For instance, one student responded 'neither agree nor disagree' to Item 16 (concerning library resources) but added the comment: 'I don't really use the library. I rely on the course books.' Another responded 'neither agree nor disagree' to Item 19 (regarding personal development) but added the comment: 'I'm doing the course for personal development and intellectual stimulation and satisfaction. Not for development.'

Distance-learning students are typically older than campus-based students, and their needs with regard to learning resources are different. When the NSS was developed, it was recognised that certain items, particularly those relating to learning resources and personal development, might not be appropriate for distance-learning students, and this was one reason why the 'not applicable' response alternative was included. Indeed, 69.5% of the respondents to the in-house survey responded 'not applicable' to one or more of the items in the NSS questionnaire. In the national NSS surveys, these would have been counted as valid responses and would have brought down the University's overall satisfaction rating for those items.

Why should these participants have chosen an inappropriate response alternative? Dillman et al. described an unpublished study in the United States which found that the location of a neutral response alternative in a questionnaire survey affects how often it is used. In a short postal survey, the participants used an 'undecided' option 13% of the time when it was located in the middle of the response scale but only 5% of the time when it was located at the end of the scale. Dillman et al. suggested that the participants had read through the available options from left to right until they found one that broadly matched their opinion. When the 'undecided' option was at the end of the scale, the respondents were effectively being encouraged to use one of the substantive options, and only those who were genuinely undecided chose that option instead. By the same token, respondents to the NSS are likely to choose one of the other five response alternatives and ignore the 'not applicable' option. Amending the design of the NSS questionnaire would probably be unacceptable to other



stakeholders, because it would invalidate any year-on-year comparisons of NSS data. A different solution would be to encourage Open University students to make more use of the 'not applicable' response option when it was appropriate to do so. Concern has been expressed at the possibility that institutions might seek to manipulate their students responses to the NSS, and institutions are warned that 'encouraging students to reflect in their answers anything other than their genuine perceptions . . . is not acceptable'. Even so, they are allowed to remind students that they should consider their responses carefully. Accordingly, it was agreed that the Vice-Chancellor's message to Open University students asking them to take part in the 2009 NSS would include the advice that they should select the 'not applicable' option if any of the items was not relevant to their experience of the Open University. In fact, this advice had relatively little impact on responses to the relevant items.

## Conclusions and Prospects

Some researchers have put forward methodological criticisms of the NSS, but thus far these seem to have had little or no influence on how the findings of the NSS are used. They may have more purchase in the ten-year review of the NSS that is scheduled to be carried out in 2015. Even so, there is clear evidence that the NSS and the data that it generates have changed the behaviour of institutions of higher education, their teachers and their students. One can be confident that it will remain a permanent fixture in UK higher education.

The NSS was intended to be administered to final-year undergraduate students in order to provide information for potential students choosing first-degree programs. In Australia, the CEQ is also administered to graduates from taught postgraduate programs and also to students completing research degrees. In the UK, it has been recommended that a version of the NSS should be introduced for postgraduate taught programs. In fact the HEA has been running a Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (for taught students) and a Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (for research students) over the last few years. This is an obvious area for further investigation in the future.

Even so, it is clear that distance-learning students may respond in an inappropriate way to feedback questionnaires. Instructing the students seems to have only limited impact, whereas amending the response scales may well be unacceptable to other stakeholders. Nevertheless, as Ashby and colleagues concluded: 'Institutions that are responsible for delivering higher education at a distance should still try to ensure that their activities and their achievements are properly represented in national student feedback surveys'.

## Author bio

John T. E. Richardson is Professor of Student Learning and Assessment in the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University. His main research interests are concerned with the relationship between students' perceptions of their courses of

study in higher education and the approaches to studying that they adopt on those courses. He is also responsible for institutional research on the evaluation of both courses and programs of study at the Open University. In 2002-2003, he contributed to the report of the Student Feedback Project Steering Group to the Higher Education Funding Council for England on Collecting and Using Student Feedback on Quality and Standards of Learning and Teaching in HE, and in 2003-2005 he was part of a team based at the Open University that carried out a pilot study for the Funding Council towards the National Student Survey. He was a co-director of a project on the social and organisational mediation of university learning funded under Phase III of the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme from 2004 to 2008. In 2008, he completed a literature review on the role of ethnicity and gender as predictors of degree attainment as part of the HEA/ECU Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment Project and was a member of the team that produced a report for the Funding Council on league tables and their impact on higher education institutions.

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# Closing the feedback loop: Tensions and Challenges

Alex Buckley, Higher Education Academy, UK

## Abstract

Providing information to students on the impact of their feedback is a crucial part of using institution-wide surveys such as the National Student Survey. The most common approach is to provide information about concrete changes made to course provision in explicit response to requests or complaints discerned in student feedback. Whilst that method is clear and direct, it is arguably unsuitable for those institutions who wish to promote the idea that students are partners in an educational process, rather than consumers of an educational product. For those institutions, new approaches are needed. This chapter suggests that Arnstein's ladder of participation may offer a suitable alternative, by helping institutions to create and communicate an interconnected set of opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making at a number of different levels.

**Keywords:** national student survey, student feedback, student engagement

## Background

Of all the elements in an effective use of student feedback, it is perhaps the provision of information to students on the value, application and impact of their feedback that is most often felt to be missing; what has come to be known as 'closing the feedback loop'. Closing the loop is crucial for any process of gathering and using student feedback, whether it is through focus groups, student representation in discussions, informal conversations in class, or any other method. This chapter will focus on the process of closing the loop when the feedback has been gathered through institution-wide census-style surveys. The impersonal, automated and large-scale nature of those surveys, and the common pressures on institutions to achieve high response rates and high levels of positivity, combine to make closing the loop particularly challenging for those feedback mechanisms.

The negative consequences of not closing the loop are largely obvious. For internal surveys, high response rates are important both for the reliability of the data and for engaging academic staff with the results. For external surveys, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) in the UK, a low response rate can mean that data is not made publicly available, which can have ramifications for marketing and recruitment. Survey respondents are less likely to participate in future surveys if they do not feel that their responses have been used (Leckey and Neill 2001, Watson 2003, Brennan and Williams 2004, Nair et al 2008, Young et al 2011).

*If students do not see any action resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate. (Leckey and Neill 2001, p.25)*

Secondly, there is evidence that survey respondents are likely to be more positive (or conversely, less cynical and disillusioned) in their future responses if their previous feedback has been seen to have an impact (Powney and Hall 1998, Watson 2003, Williams and Brennan 2003, Symons 2006).

*The longitudinal satisfaction trends clearly reveal a general increase in satisfaction as a result of the transparent approach adopted. (Watson 2003, p.154)*

Thirdly, providing information on how survey responses have been used is good practice in terms of the ethics of survey research (Watson 2003).

The negative consequences of failing to close the loop make it an essential part of gathering student feedback, and the challenge it poses is concerning. As Williams and Brennan (2003) warn, “[t]here is a real danger that student cynicism may endanger the potentially very valuable functions that student feedback data can perform” (p.71).

In the UK, the introduction of the NSS, and the powerful pressures both to meet publication threshold response rates and to achieve high levels of positivity (HEFCE 2008, Little et al 2009, Buckley 2012, Gibbs 2012) has appeared to have a pronounced impact on the extent to which institutions close the loop. Change has been rapid. As recently as 2007 it was considered innovative to produce “You said.... We did....” leaflets, containing information about actions taken in response to student feedback (Flint et al 2009). This kind of activity is probably almost universal in large universities at the present time, and is certainly common practice (Buckley 2012), to the extent that formal quality assurance procedures now include an expectation that institutions will close the loop (QAA 2012).

## Changing Tones

There is some evidence that the tone that institutions are using in their centralised attempts to close the loop is changing. The earliest examples described in the literature all utilise a similarly direct approach – the provision of information about concrete changes made to course provision in direct response to requests or complaints discerned in student feedback (Powney and Hall 1998, Harvey 2001, Watson 2003, Palermo 2004, Shah and Nair 2009, Bennett et al 2006, Flint et al 2009):

[S]taff were asked to inform students of the changes to the course and units that have been introduced as a result of previous student feedback (e.g. changes to assessment due date schedules to spread the student work load...) (Bennett et al, p59)

This direct method has become codified in the ubiquitous phrase “You said.... We did” and its variations. While that approach is still popular, a recent report (by this author) drawing on the experiences of 21 institutions presents some evidence that a shift is occurring. Some institutions are moving away from providing information about how student requests (extracted from feedback data) have been directly responded to, and towards something less committal and transactional:

A common approach is ‘You said...we did’ a form of words that succinctly communicates the existence and nature of a specific action taken in response to student views. However, some institutions have moved away from that tone, feeling that it expresses a sense of responding to consumer demands. Institutions have tried a number of alternative approaches... ‘listening to you’, or ‘you said... we listened’ (Buckley 2012, p.25)

The report suggests that an explanation for this shift lies in “increasingly widespread sense that students are partners in the educational process, and that genuine dialogue is more appropriate than responding to the demands” (p.25).<sup>1</sup>

Several serious challenges to the process of closing the loop have been documented, including the often indirect path from student feedback to decisions about changing provision (Brennan and Williams 2004, Buckley 2012), the retrospective nature of much student feedback (Leckey and Neill 2001, Williams and Brennan 2003, Scott et al 2008), and the fundamental difficulty of ensuring action follows from feedback at all (Kember et al 2002, Brennan and Williams 2004, Harvey 2011). The shift from the “You said... We did” model towards something less transactional and more similar to a dialogue highlights a new, additional challenge; how do institutions close the loop without communicating the sense that student feedback consists of demands, requests or complaints to be satisfied?

## Tensions and Challenges

The standard approach, described above, is to provide information to students about the actions taken in direct response to feedback, where the term ‘action’ is taken to mean changes to the provision of services (e.g. increased library opening hours) or changes to systems and processes (e.g. reduced feedback turnaround times). The feedback is taken to constitute, or contain, a request on the part of the student body in the form of ‘low’ survey scores however construed (in comparison to other institutions, in comparison to previous scores, etc.), potentially supported by qualitative data. The institution then provides information about how it has satisfied

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<sup>1</sup> *It is possible that some institutions employ different tones and approaches for closing the loop on feedback related to different issues (e.g. feedback on learning activities vs feedback on accommodation services), however the focus of this chapter is the unified, centralised, institution-wide messages rather than any sub-institutional level messages.*

that request: "It is important to ensure that action takes place on the basis of student views and that action is seen to take place" (Harvey 2011, p.18, emphasis original).

This approach is effectively communicated by a formula such as "You said... We did...", for instance employed in "a leaflet describing a selection of work the University is undertaking in response to previous student feedback" (Flint et al 2009, p.617). This approach to student feedback allows for clear, direct and explicit feedback to students, of the kind that can be presented relatively easily via leaflets, posters, emails and webpages. There are clear connections between that kind of direct response to student feedback and the process of modifying a service in response to consumer requests, demands, complaints, expectations or desires. This apparent link between "You said... We did..." approaches and the idea of students as consumers is explicitly recognised by several authors (Williams 2002, Symons 2006, Shah and Nair 2009).

[I]n the current atmosphere of the higher education marketplace, there is a new moral prerogative: students have become 'customers' and therefore can, as fee payers, reasonably demand that their views be heard and acted upon. (Williams 2002, p.3)

In some cases this link is taken to be indirect, in that institutions are required to respond to new regulatory frameworks that themselves have evolved due to perceived consumer pressure from students (Nair et al 2009). If student feedback is understood as consumer satisfaction or opinion data, institutions who wish to convey a flexible, consumer-oriented service need to demonstrate to students that their concerns are being addressed. The standard approach fulfils that requirement.

The debate about whether we should think of students as consumers (or customers) of an educational product, or as partners with a shared responsibility for the educational process, is a traditional topic of discussion in the UK, and has intensified in recent years due to the introduction and subsequent increase of tuition fees, particularly in England (e.g. McCulloch 2009, Streeting and Wise 2009, Molesworth et al 2011, Woodall et al 2012, Carey 2013). While the consumer model is powerful, there is also a longstanding view that effective learning requires students to be actively engaged in their own education, and the concept of 'student engagement' is becoming increasingly popular. Whereas in the US and some other parts of the world 'student engagement' is understood in terms of the quality and level of effort that students invest in educational activities (Astin 1984, Kuh 2009, Trowler 2010), in the UK – although the US meaning is recognised – it is normally understood in terms of students' involvement in governance, quality assurance, quality enhancement, and decision-making, and is approximately synonymous with the concept of 'student voice' (e.g. Little and Williams 2010, Bovill et al 2011, Dunne and Zandstra 2011, Rodgers et al 2011, Van der Velden 2012, Carey 2012).

*...the participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience (QAA 2012, p.2)*



On that model, the involvement of students in the evaluation and improvement of learning and teaching is not restricted to expressing their levels of positivity towards aspects of their experience. Instead, the emphasis is on in-depth dialogue between students and staff about the learning process, joint decision-making about changes that need to be made, and collaboration on activities designed to lead to improvements.

Where institutions adopt that kind of student engagement model, it would seem inappropriate to respond to student feedback as if it constituted a set of demands or expectations to be met unilaterally by the institution. In line with the idea that students are co-responsible partners, their feedback is presumably to be interpreted as an element in an ongoing conversation, not a final statement. And not only that, it would need to be demonstrated that the involvement of students has gone beyond consultation, to include information regarding how students have been involved in collaborations with staff on how the feedback should be responded to:

*Drawing on current literature about student engagement and on a growing body of student voice research, we contend that academic staff should not only consult students but also explore ways for students to become full participants in the design of teaching approaches, courses and curricula. (Bovill et al 2011, p.133)*

The impact of the idea of students as partners is virtually absent from the literature on closing the loop. Whilst some proponents of the Student Satisfaction Approach (Harvey 2001) comment that student feedback should not be interpreted as customer satisfaction data, any implications of this for closing the loop are largely unexplored (Harvey 2011, Watson 2003, Williams 2011). In the literature as a whole, Powney and Hall (1998) appear to be alone in referring to the implications of the partnership model:

*Perhaps as suggested in the findings from this study, staff feel obliged to explain why they do not react to student feedback whereas an alternative model is to see students as collaborators in programme planning, taking major responsibility for their own learning. (Powney and Hall 1998, p.11)*

Despite this lack of attention, it is clear that for those institutions who adopt the student engagement model, there are profound implications for how they are to close the loop on the use of student feedback gathered by large-scale surveys. The challenge still exists, in that the existence of such surveys requires the loop to be closed, for all the reasons described earlier. The existence of wider partnership working between staff and students does not mitigate the need to feed back to survey respondents on the consequences of their feedback. In fact, the challenge is made more difficult by the fact that the standard “You said... We did” model, which provides an effective way of communicating clearly and directly that feedback has had a direct impact, is unavailable. This renders the task of closing the loop, already

considered “probably the most demanding aspect of seeking student feedback” (Watson 2003, p.145), even more difficult. In short, new approaches to closing the loop are required, approaches more accommodating of the idea that students are partners in, rather than consumers of, their education.

## The ladder of participation

What solutions to this challenge are available? Some people may conclude simply that the use of the kinds of large-scale surveys that are the focus of this chapter should be discontinued. Freeman and Dobbins (2011) argue that such mechanisms are flawed as they promote a passive consumerist attitude on the part of students, and they recommend the use of “evaluation activities that involve discourse between students and educators” (p.5). Even if surveys are inappropriate for a partnership model, there are overwhelming practical reasons for institutions to employ them, and indeed the NSS is compulsory for all institutions in the UK except Scotland. But one might wish to reject the idea that surveys are intrinsically damaging to student engagement; there are in fact promising signs emerging that, while the NSS has in the past strengthened the consumer model, it is now beginning to support wider partnerships between staff and students (Buckley 2012, Gibbs 2012).

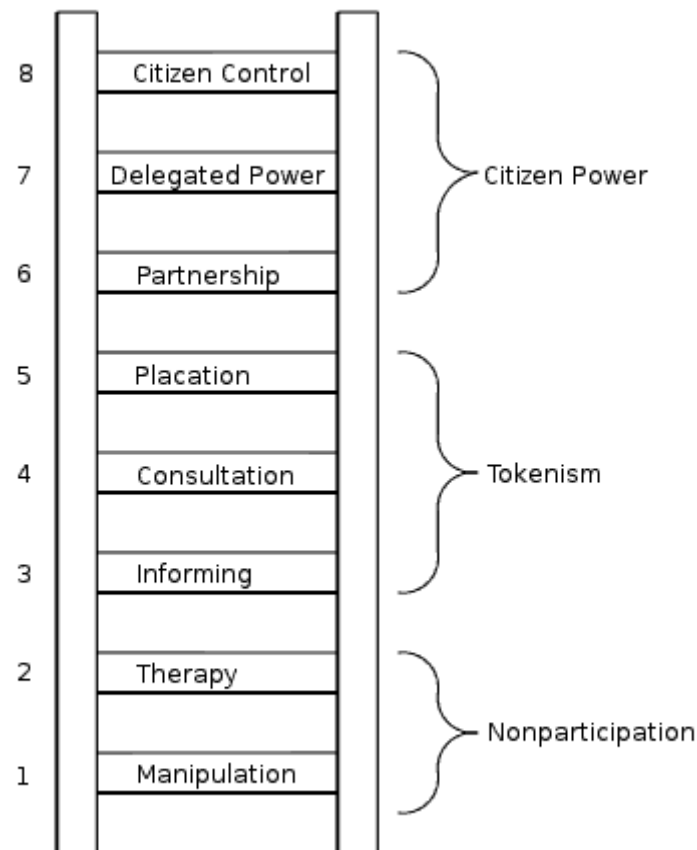
*While there is a sense in which students are being treated as consumers of a product, institutions with good and improving NSS scores often have initiatives that engage students as co-producers of knowledge, or partners in an educational enterprise (Gibbs 2012, p.11)*

A more promising and realistic approach to the challenge of closing the loop in a context of partnership is suggested by the ways in which some institutions have connected their use of survey data to other aspects of student feedback and participation. The use of student representation structures to close the loop are relatively well-documented (Williams and Brennan 2003, Brennan and Williams 2004, Little et al 2009); some institutions provide student representatives with information about how student feedback has been responded to during meetings and forums, with the expectation that those representatives will then pass the information on to their fellow students. Other ways in which institutions have attempted to connect the use of survey data with student representation structures are cited in Buckley (2012), and focus on involving students in the analysis and discussion of NSS results, and in the decisions about how to respond to the feedback. A recurring idea in the literature is the wholesale transfer of responsibilities for the collection and interpretation of survey data to students (Williams and Brennan 2003, Little et al 2009, Gibbs 2012).

The benefits of connecting student surveys with other feedback and participation mechanisms are clear. Student participation (and in particular the participation of the students’ union) can be crucial for improving response rates to institutional surveys (Richardson et al 2007). And to be used effectively, survey data needs to be triangulated with other sources of information in order to yield a richer, more contextualised picture of the student experience (Brennan and Williams 2004, Buckley

2012). By commenting on survey results in program committees and staff-student liaison meetings, student representatives can help to provide that context.

Survey data can also enhance the process of student representation. One of the core criticisms of the standard student representation system (highlighted in Little et al 2009) is the fact that the representatives themselves are insufficiently representative; there are concerns both about the demographic representativeness of the representatives themselves, and also about the extent to which they are aware of the views of the students that they represent. The use of other sources of information, such as the results of surveys, could help those students to better represent the views of their constituents. Little et al (2009) recognise these kinds of benefits of a joined-up system when they state that “one way of improving the effectiveness of student engagement processes would be for institutions and student unions to review, in a systematic manner, all the interlocking aspects of their current student engagement processes” (p.4, emphasis added).



**Figure 1: Ladder of participation, from Arnstein (1969)**

A common current complaint is that explicit consideration is rarely given as to why and how institutions are attempting to promote and support student engagement (Little et al 2009, Pabian and Minksova 2011, Rodgers et al 2011). A corollary is that there has been little consideration of how to connect together the different feedback

and engagement mechanisms (such as surveys and student representation) that have been usually created independently, to serve different immediate needs. To facilitate that kind of consideration, what is required is a model of how the different kinds of student feedback and participation activities that exist in institutions may usefully connect together in order to maximise their benefits. One such model is the 'ladder of participation' developed by Sherry Arnstein in the 1960s (Fig 1). Although it was developed to apply to citizen involvement in planning decisions, the way in which it portrays progressive states of involvement in decision-making and power-sharing makes it useful as a model of student engagement, as others have noted (Rudd et al 2006, May and Felsing 2010, Freeman and Dobbins 2011).

Arnstein's intention was to provide an outline of the path to genuine partnership, a purpose which resonates with current attempts to involve students in decision-making in ways that go beyond providing their consumer satisfaction:

*There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process. (Arnstein 1969, p.216)*

On Arnstein's model, the gathering of student feedback through a survey would constitute 'consultation', at the approximate mid-point of a scale with "each rung corresponding to the extent of citizens' power in determining the end product" (Arnstein 1969, p.216). Above consultation would lie partnership, delegated power and students' control; the kinds of activities that exist through student representative structures and other processes of dialogue and collaboration cited in the (UK) student engagement literature (e.g. Healey et al 2010, Trowler and Trowler 2010, Bovill et al 2011, Dunne and Zandstra 2011, HEA 2012). Arnstein's model therefore provides a useful way of structuring the student feedback and participation mechanisms; ensure that there are opportunities for student participation at each level (of student power over the 'end product'), and ensure that mechanisms are connected together. Just as survey feedback (as 'consultation') can feed into student representation, so the results of staff-student liaison committees can be fed into university-level governance with student representation, or into small-scale learning and teaching projects where students collaborate with staff.

But aside from the benefits of having a coherent system of student feedback and participation, Arnstein's ladder also assists institutions in communicating the impact of student feedback. If new approaches to closing the loop are required, as institutions increasingly wish to view students as partners rather than consumers, something like the ladder of participation may be useful. It may serve not only to help institutions create coherent and "interlocking" (Little et al 2009) systems of student feedback and participation, but also help to communicate the existence of such systems.

It is important to note that the emphasis of formal quality assurance mechanisms is not on engaging with every student, but in providing a range of ways for students to engage:

*All students should have the opportunity to be involved in quality enhancement and assurance processes in a manner and at a level appropriate to them. (QAA 2012, p.3, emphasis original)*

This idea that there should be a range of opportunities, with different levels of expectation in terms of students investment and responsibility, coheres well with the ladder of participation. By presenting the existence of different levels of involvement, from consultation through to partnership and ultimately student-led collaboration – i.e. from student surveys through to student representatives, student involvement in curriculum design, participation in the students' union etc. – an institution can present a set of opportunities more easily than if they exist in isolation. The National Union of Students and the Higher Education Academy has recently collaborated on a tool to support reflection on the efficacy of student representation mechanisms, that (implicitly) makes this kind of use of a modified version of Arnstein's ladder (NUS 2011).

If that kind of model can help to communicate the existence of a coherent system, it can also help with the particular task – and the focus of this chapter – of communicating the impact of student feedback gathered through institutional surveys. If the challenge for institutions is to communicate that such feedback is not responded to as if it constituted a set of consumer demands, but is considered and discussed as part of a wider dialogue between staff and students, then communicating the existence of an interlocking series of student engagement mechanisms may offer a solution.

This idea is not without its difficulties. As Williams (2011) points out, the fact that the result of the feedback is further discussion, rather than action, may be seen as unsatisfactory:

*Such 'actions' include announcements that issues will be discussed at an indeterminate point in the future. Although this indicates that issues have not been ignored, the survey has little impact if it is not followed up by definite action. (Williams 2011, p.148)*

Perhaps this complaint is alleviated if those future discussions have direct and substantial student involvement. But it is also possible that the complaint highlights the extent to which a coherent system of student feedback and participation may require a substantial shift in expectations. It may be the case that students expect that messages that close the loop will be of the direct "You said... We did" variety discussed earlier. In which case, institutions who desire to avoid the consumerist overtones of such messages will need to address and modify their students' expectations of what closing the loop looks like, as well as finding effective methods

of communicating a partnership-based response to survey feedback. Current evidence on students' expectations in this area is inconclusive (Williams and Brennan 2003, Little et al 2009, Williams 2011, NUS 2012).

On a fundamental level, it may transpire that the problem lies in the fact that the challenge of closing the loop has standardly been thought of as the challenge of answering the question, "how do we let [students] know that we are listening to their comments?" (Symons 2006, p.5). For institutions who seek to pursue a partnership model, the distinction – inherent in that phrasing of the challenge – between the students as 'them' and the institution as 'us' is not entirely appropriate. The challenge of closing the loop may therefore need to be reframed. If students are involved not only as respondents to surveys, but also by being involved in the exploration and discussion of the results, in the discussion about how to respond to the feedback and other performance management data, in the design of curricula and assessment methods, and in governance at a senior level, then the question of how the 'institution' has responded to 'student' feedback becomes less meaningful. Rather, the question is how consultation with students through the use of surveys has fed into the other (student-involving) decision-making stages. Arnstein's ladder of participation will help to structure and communicate the existence and interconnection of those stages, but perhaps the larger challenge will be in changing students' expectations of how their feedback should be acted upon.

## Section 5: Conclusion

Providing information to students on what use has been made of their feedback is of prime importance for avoiding student cynicism and disengagement. To date, most central institutional attempts to close the loop have adopted the direct approach exemplified by the phrase "You said... We did...", in which information is provided about substantial changes made in direct response to requests or complaints preferences extrapolated from student feedback. That kind of approach has the benefit of being direct and explicit, and is suited to delivery via leaflets, posters and websites, but it has a key drawback. It embodies a demand-response approach to student feedback that some institutions, who wish to promote the idea of students as partners rather than consumers, seek to avoid. The apparent current shift towards a partnership model at some UK institutions therefore poses a challenge for their attempts to close the loop.

This chapter has suggested that a promising avenue for exploration is the use of a model, such as Arnstein's ladder of involvement, that allows institutions both to structure and connect their student feedback and participation mechanisms in a coherent way, and to communicate the existence of that kind of coherent system.

## Author bio

**Dr Alex Buckley** works on student feedback at the Higher Education Academy, and leads on their activities around the contribution of the National Student Survey to the

enhancement of learning and teaching. His work also includes data reporting, and research on student surveys, student engagement and the connections between the two. Before joining the HEA, Alex taught applied and professional ethics at the University of Leeds, after gaining a PhD in philosophy from the same institution in 2008.

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## **Section 3: UAE Experiences**

# Monitoring the Student Experience: Case Study of the University of Sharjah

Esam Agamy and Ahmed Alhakim  
University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates

## Abstract

The University of Sharjah developed an integrated institutional effectiveness plan with the aim of ensuring the University's ability to achieve and maintain quality in learning and teaching, student experience, and support facilities, in addition to enhancing a university-wide quality culture.

This paper is an overview of the design, development and implementation of the University of Sharjah quality assurance system and its impact on enhancing program and learning and teaching activities and student experience. The paper focuses on the impact of current quality-related processes on university cultures, considers alternative strategies and synthesizes recommendations for action from related literature. Implementation of the quality-assurance plan has led to improvements in many areas, including the University's organization, internship, IT applications, student advising, community service, student services, academic support services, curricula, and community service. These improvements have enhanced the University's academic programs, as well as the learning and teaching process and the student's experience. Qualitative and quantitative measures were used to assess the performance and the actual enhancement to the programs and activities.

**Keywords:** higher education, student feedback, student experience, quality enhancement

## Introduction

The issue of quality assurance is firmly on the agenda for higher education institutions (Becket and Brookes, 2005). Both quality assurance and quality enhancement are now considered essential components of most quality management programs (Brookes and Downie, 2002; Stensaker, 2005; Vettori et al., 2007). National and institutional systems for evaluation, assessment, accreditation and audit are now a routine in the many countries (Harvey, 2006; Harvey and Stensaker, 2008). Quality assurance refers to the 'planned and systematic actions [deemed] as necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for quality' (Borahan and Ziarati, 2002). For higher education institutions, this requires them to demonstrate responsible actions in their professional practices and demonstrate the results they achieve with the available resources (Jackson, 1998; Harvey, 2006).

The actual measurement of quality is also approached differently by various stakeholders. While some prefer to use quantitative data to produce quantitative ratings, others prefer to adopt a qualitative approach. While quantitative ratings facilitate performance comparability, especially on a longitudinal basis, they generally fail to provide any clear explanation as to why certain ratings are given. As such they may be more suitable for quality assurance initiatives. Qualitative data, on the other hand, often provides richer data (Powell et al., 1997), which can more readily inform decision making for quality enhancement purposes. However, it may prove less beneficial when benchmarking performance. A quality management program that uses a mixture of both types of data would seem most appropriate for both quality assurance and enhancement purposes (Brookes, 2003; Becket and Brookes, 2005).

For many universities, creating an effective learning culture means overcoming a considerable number of barriers including rigid hierarchies, functional divisions and stratified knowledge bases (Avdjieva and Wilson, 2002). D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) argue that collecting data about the student experience of teaching interactions and sharing practices with colleagues must take place in an environment free from the fear of punitive outcomes. Most importantly, developing a real culture of quality through effective learning means moving away from preserving what higher education already is towards an aspiration towards what it could be (Stensaker, 2005). In Europe, approaches to quality involve the ideal of searching for excellence through the demonstration and sharing of the best practices (Gordon and Owen, 2008).

Student views are considered a crucial component in the comprehensive framework of quality assurance and enhancement in higher education, as feedback from students remains one of the most common sources of evaluation data on both teaching and course quality (Keane, 2005). Student engagement with quality assurance processes has gone beyond "student involvement" in institutional structures at higher education institutions (Elassy, 2013). According to that study, student engagement "takes into consideration quite a broad range of issues including design of the curriculum and the learning environment, approaches to teaching and learning, transformation of processes on the institutional level, changes at the level of the course and program". Higher education institutions that achieve student satisfaction can benefit in a number of ways. Satisfied students are less likely to drop out, more likely to achieve higher grades, engage in positive word-of-mouth communication and collaborate with the institution after they graduate (Wilkins et al, 2013).

Teaching and course evaluation could be used for four different purposes (Marsh and Dunkin:1992), including: (1) Diagnostic feedback to teachers about the effectiveness of their teaching (formative feedback), (2) A measure of teaching effectiveness to be used in administrative decision making (summative feedback), (3) Information for students to use in the selection of course units and teachers, and (4) An outcome or process description for use in research on teaching. Roche and Marsh (2002) found that teachers' perceptions of their own teaching became more consistent with their students' perceptions of their teaching as a result of receiving feedback in the form of students' evaluations. Other authors (Tomasco, 1980; Calderon et al., 1996) have also stressed the value of ensuring that such feedback does not focus solely on the

performance aspects of lecture delivery, but also asks crucial questions about the students' level of engagement, commitment and interest in their programs of study. Cooper (2007) stresses that educational success primarily depends on the efforts of both students as consumers and professors as service providers. Therefore, the overall comprehensive concept of student satisfaction should be examined in several multi-level and overlapping areas, including curricular and extracurricular activities as well as non-academic services offered to the students. Chahal and Devi (2013) assert that service failure in higher education may relate to teaching, examination, library, laboratories, administration, infrastructure and miscellaneous such as canteen and hostel facility.

Therefore, in their continuous striving to achieve quality education, universities worldwide have obligations for gathering and analyzing student feedback, delegating responsibility for improvement actions, and engaging the students in the actions resulting from their expressed views.

## Institutional Profile: University of Sharjah

The University of Sharjah is a comprehensive University offering, at the present time, 82 programs at the Doctorate, Masters, Bachelor and Diploma level. The University operates in four cities, namely Sharjah, Khorfakkan, Kalba, Meleha, and Debba. In Sharjah there are four campuses, the main campus, the Fine Arts and Design complex, the Medical and Health Sciences complex and the Community College.

The institutional effectiveness system aims at ensuring consistency throughout the institution while taking into account the varied nature of the programs based upon delivery methods and intended outcomes. While all programs offered are outcome-based and student-centered, the University categorizes its programs according to the following:

- Programs that follow a subject-based credit hour and semester system (the majority of offered programs at the present time are in this category);
- Programs that implement an integrated curriculum and consider Problem-Based Learning and Team-Based Learning approaches as integrated methods within their curricula; these programs operate on a yearly system (i.e. the College of Medicine and College of Dentistry);
- Programs that include more studio and exploration or experiential work (i.e. College of Fine Arts and Design);
- Programs that offer more hands-on student experience (diploma programs in the Community College).

The institutional effectiveness framework allows for flexibility in each category of program to properly use a variety of program evaluation and student assessment tools; quantitative and qualitative methods are used to assess student performance and program effectiveness. The results of these processes are then used as input that leads to further action and program renewal.

## University Institutional Planning and Policy Related to Student Feedback

In 2004 the University of Sharjah developed an integrated five-year institutional effectiveness plan. The aim of the plan was to ensure the University's ability to achieve and maintain quality in learning and teaching and support facilities and services. One important input for developing the plan was analysis of student feedback.

### UoS Strategic Plan (2009-2014)

The UoS Strategic Plan (2009-2014) aims to position the University of Sharjah as it emerges from its early stages of growth and enters the second decade of its young and dynamic existence to take its place as a prominent academic institution in its region and in the Arab World. The University is committed to offering specialized, professional and multi-disciplinary academic programs of the highest quality, covering a comprehensive platform of disciplines and fields of study. The University is committed to the success of its students within a learning environment enriched by research, community and international experience and leadership opportunities to allow the students to reach their maximum potential. The University attaches top priority to working with its external communities in full partnership to enhance the socio-economic development of its region and for its communities. The University is also embarking on innovative and progressive approaches to advanced studies and research with the aim of addressing the complex needs of modern society and the numerous challenges facing humanity.

The central goal of the University's strategy in institutional assessment processes is to improve student learning experience in academic programs and supporting services. Assessment of the University's effectiveness involves a wide variety of surveys, forms, and reports, which leads to recommendations for both short and long-term improvements. Recommendations may also include changes to the existing plans as appropriate. This dynamic and continuous process is integrated into the administrative and governance structure, academic departments, programs, and academic support services and into institutional planning and budgeting, with administrators, committees, faculty and staff assuming specific responsibilities for assessment in the various units. Assessment tools used at the University include faculty and staff feedback, annual evaluations, internal and external auditing bodies, and student feedback.

### Types of student surveys and their purposes

Student data at the University of Sharjah are collected using five main types of surveys, namely: (1) course experience surveys, (2) senior student exit surveys, (3) student satisfaction surveys, (4) freshmen student surveys and (5) alumni surveys.



### **Course experience survey**

Course experience surveys are conducted every semester to gather student feedback in areas related to teaching and learning with relevance to a particular course. This survey is divided into two sections, namely instructor evaluation and course evaluation. The survey also gives students the opportunity to express their satisfactory and dissatisfactory aspects of the course taken in addition to suggestions for future improvement.

### **Senior student exit survey**

The purpose of this survey is to gather information about your experience at the University of Sharjah. This information is used to continuously improve the university programs and learning environment, to help recruit new students and to better prepare students for the workplace. Areas covered in this survey include career employment experience, experience at the university, academic issues and skills development, academic program outcomes, information resources, student services, and overall satisfaction.

### **Student satisfaction survey**

The Student Satisfaction Survey is a comprehensive yearly-based survey that aims at assessing student satisfaction in areas related to the University academic programs, facilities and services. Questions of this survey include areas such as faculty and staff, physical facilities, student affairs, academic support, services, communication and outreach, administrative services, and overall satisfaction.

### **Freshmen student survey**

The freshmen student survey is a part of the on-going efforts to improve the experience at the University of Sharjah, and find better ways to serve the new students. This survey is done annually and allows students to give their perception of their high school experiences, how often they expect to participate in certain activities during their first year of college and their expectations of how to benefit from the University experience. The freshman survey covers areas such as high-school academic experience, readiness for college life, and university expectations and challenges.

### **Alumni survey**

The alumni survey is an important source of information to better understand the current employment and educational status of graduates. It also measures the attitudes and satisfaction of graduates concerning faculty, curriculum, facilities, services and campus life at University of Sharjah. The alumni survey assesses feedback in areas such as campus life, communication with the University after graduation, career preparation, professional training, role of University experience in improving the overall quality of graduate's life, role of University in continuing education, first job experience, academic/professional relevance, and post-graduation challenges.

## Reporting Survey Data to Faculty Members and Administrative Units

Once surveys are conducted, the Directorate of Quality Assurance, Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation analyzes the data gathered and translates them into meaningful numbers, graphs and figures. Analysis of course experience, senior student exit surveys, and freshmen students surveys are communicated with the Deans, Chairpersons, and Directors so that any recommendations for improvement and/or changes are made. In addition, faculty members have access to all data related to the courses they teach through the electronic University portal.

Standing and ad-hoc councils and committees hold regular meetings with different stakeholders, academic, and administrative units as part of the on-going continuous improvement policy adopted by the University. During such meetings, related data results can be shown to both internal and external University advisory bodies and discussed transparently in order to enrich the decision-making process and help close the gaps on any academic or administrative issues that may rise.

A University-wide progress review is generated annually from reports of academic and administrative units which complete outcome-based assessments in order to evaluate their performance and strive for continuous improvement. Those annual reports usually include appropriate student feedback data and analysis in addition to other assessment tools and performance indicators.

## Using Survey Results to Improve Student Experience of Academic and Non-Academic areas

One of the main elements of the University's institutional effectiveness cycle is to direct the use of assessment results to improve processes and review plans. During the previous institutional effectiveness cycle, analysis of the faculty and student survey responses and other available data resulted in the need for many improvement actions. Among them were:

- revising the University organization structure to cope with the developments;
- revising and updating the existing curricula;
- updating the University's General Education Program;
- the establishment of student career development services;
- stimulating extracurricular activities;
- stimulating and improving educational support services, such as library resources, IT;
- creating a culture of quality assurance and quality enhancement with all stakeholders;
- the need for more effective communication throughout the campus.

Such dynamic and consistent approach in data collection and analysis prompted the implementation of several improvement plans at the academic, administrative, and institutional levels. Some of the major improvements adopted were as follows.

### **General Education**

The University's General Education Program has been reviewed over two years using feedback from student surveys, employers, alumni, and departments. Student feedback analysis showed repetition in the content of some courses as well as unsatisfactory overall feedback in others. As a result, an updated general education program was implemented that is thought to overcome the issues addressed and better achieve the mission of the University and its programs.

### **Student Advising**

Improving student advising, publication of advising guidelines and organizing awareness events has enhanced intervention strategies and support for "at-risk" students; and assisted in the development of academic support specifically targeting sophomore students. The newly offered "Advising and Guidance" course has ensured that all new students receive proper information on the University's processes, facilities, and regulations, in addition to their gaining some personal skills. Preliminary feedback from faculty and students indicate that this course has enhanced student performance.

### **Student Success**

The Student Success Center (SSC) was established to provide services and programs that are essential to the intellectual, cultural, physical, social and moral development of students. Student success encourages students to realize their potential as individuals and as prepared, enlightened, responsible members of an increasingly complex and diverse global society. The SSC works in concert with the educational processes, and is responsible for many programs and services outside the classroom designed to enhance the development of UoS students.

### **Student Academic Performance**

Comparative analysis of student grades and GPA over the last four years has shown interesting results. There was a decrease of 1.4% of the average grade "excellent" at the university level. At the program level, some programs showed an increase in the grade "excellent", while other programs showed a decrease. This can be considered as demonstrating corrective action because the increase in these grades occurred in programs with very low "excellent" grades and vice versa. In addition, student satisfaction was good even in the programs that showed a decrease in the grade "Excellent".

### **Internship**

The newly formed internship and career office improved the internship process as an integral part of academic programs at the University. Successful internship enriches the student's learning with professional practice and fulfills important learning

outcomes. Students were generally satisfied with the quality of training achieved in the UAE and abroad.

### **Library and Learning Resources**

The introduced learning resources, including online databases and books enriched the teaching and learning process and contributed to improving student performance. Orientation programs organized for faculty and students satisfied library users and encouraged them to visit the library more frequently. The University libraries extended their working hours to meet the students demand and curriculum requirements.

### **Information Technology**

Significant improvements were achieved in the IT infrastructure and applications thereof. These include enhancing IT awareness, IT equipment in more than 85% of the classrooms with considered instructor smart units with internet access, increasing the data storage by above 250%, doubling the email capacity for faculty and students, and upgrading the network infrastructure. The University also implemented the Banner "Integrated Campus Management System" and Blackboard. These facilities have enhanced many aspects of teaching and learning, including student engagement in self learning, student faculty communication, and a better classroom environment. In addition, the University implemented the online survey system and electronic assessment management system to facilitate communication between students and faculty and give students easy access all university resources.

### **Community Service**

Students have become engaged in wide variety of community service activities through graduation projects, career development services, internship and others. These activities significantly enhance student learning and career experience as evidenced from student feedback.

### **Engaging Students and Student Council to Optimize Response Rate**

One of the main challenges faced during implementation of the University's institutional effectiveness cycle was the low response rate from student surveys, especially after the implementation of the online survey system. In order to improve student engagement and activate their role in the University's administration, the Advisory Academic Council was formed in 2011. This council allows student council members and student representatives to communicate directly with the University deans and faculty members. In addition, students are represented in department and college councils. Student representatives give their feedback on issues of interest to them and also understand the importance of such feedback for the continuous improvement of educational activities. This stimulated students understanding and engagement in different University processes and activities.

### **Communicating Improvements with the Students**

The University adopts an active communication policy with its students to improve their educational experience. Once student feedback results are analyzed and

improvement plans are approved, decisions are communicated to the students through multiple channels. Announcements are made through the University website, Blackboard system, student portal, and direct emails. In addition, the student union and student representatives play a vital role as an intermediary between the University administration and its students to keep them updated with ongoing improvement processes.

## Using Survey Results to Recognize and Reward Excellence in Learning and Teaching

The University of Sharjah is keen on providing a performance-based faculty reward system in order to promote and help retain excellent faculty at UoS, keep UoS competitive with UAE-based universities that provide merit-based incentives, and encourage and recognize strong contributions that serve a particular program and college, while meeting University goals. The “Annual Bonus Award for Outstanding Faculty” recognizes academic faculty members that have distinguished themselves through outstanding academic achievements. One of the main criteria for identifying outstanding performance in teaching is the outcome of the student surveys. The award provides an incentive for UoS faculty to excel in their academic work and to continuously strive to improve the quality of their contributions in teaching, research, administrative and community service areas. Moreover, this award can support faculty members’ application for promotions.

### Author bio

**Dr. Esam Agamy** is currently Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation at the University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. He has Ph.D. in Embryology from Britain. Throughout his university career Dr. Agamy has been teaching, doing research and taking administrative responsibilities. During the last ten years he was appointed as Vice Dean, Dean, Director of Institutional Research and Assistant Chancellor. He established the Institutional Research Unit, then the Directorate for Institutional Effectiveness and Accreditation at the University of Sharjah. He is teaching Biology and giving workshops on teaching and learning methodologies, assessment and institutional effectiveness.

**Mr. Ahmed Al-Hakim** is the coordinator of institutional effectiveness and accreditation in the directorate of IE and accreditation at the University of Sharjah. He has got B.Sc. in Biology from UAE University and eMBA from Preston University - California, USA. He has experience in medical and business research.

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# Evaluation of Course Evaluations: Views from Students, Staff and Senior Management

Maryam Khan

United Arab Emirates University, UAE

## Abstract

This study is about students' and faculty perceptions of the Course Evaluation Survey and how these perceptions affect the feedback given. For this study, senior students, faculty members and senior academic managers were surveyed. Such studies have previously been conducted in the USA, UK, Europe, and Australia. However, we could not find any such study conducted in the countries that form Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This region has its own unique culture even in higher education and it is important to investigate how the students and faculty are responding to the course evaluations and how the results are being used.

**Keywords:** course evaluations, student feedback

## Introduction

Documented history of course evaluations can be traced back to as far as 1920 (Purdue University). However, it was not until 1970 that the teachers started feeling the impact of these ratings not only on their promotions and benefits but also on their overall perception as a teacher. Hence, many of them started questioning the validity of such ratings. The survey tools and the whole process of conducting the survey came under scrutiny and criticism. Course evaluations became an interesting topic of research applying research methods from psychology, statistics, learning theory, neuroscience, computing etc and this trend still continues.

Some interesting studies during this time helped point out the loopholes in the process. 'Dr. Fox' (Naftulin, 1973) study was an interesting study to prove that personality traits and charisma of the teacher can affect the ratings more than the learning contents of the course. Although later research showed this study to be invalid, it is still quoted by the opponents of the course evaluation process. Rodin & Rodin (1972) tried to prove that students are less than perfect judges and hence the ratings derived from their feedback are not reliable enough. Chocolate study (Youmans, 2007) showed how incentive and an event unrelated to a course could increase student evaluations. The researchers gave chocolates to students of three sections out of the six sections of a course. The 'Chocolate' group gave more favourable feedback for the instructor!



Course evaluation research is complex due to diversity of survey tools being used, diversity of the course evaluation processes and procedure, different instructional methods and even the diversity of the education systems across the world. Countless number of studies have been conducted to see the impact of grading practices on feedback, gender impact, presence or absence of the instructor in class during the survey, online vs hard copy course evaluations. There are almost an equal number of opponents and supporters of the process. The opponents cite the side effects of course evaluations; grade inflation, instructors discouraged to design a challenging course or be innovative in course design etc. Supporters argue that although the course evaluations might not be the perfect way but some measure of teaching effectiveness is necessary. One of the main research themes has been the contribution of course evaluations to student learning. The majority of researchers in the field agree that student feedback does contribute to teaching effectiveness (Abrami, 2001; Beran et al, 2007; Marsh et al, 1997; Schmelkin et al, 1997).

## Course Evaluation Process at UAEU

Student course evaluations have been going on since the first course was taught in the University in 1976. The process and the survey tool has gone through the necessary evolution during the last 36 years. According to the latest University policies and procedures, the course evaluations are conducted each semester. They are administered online after the midterm results are announced and before the final exams. The survey has two parts. First part is more focused on course objectives, teaching methods and alignment of teaching methods with course objectives. The second part is more about the classroom atmosphere and how the instructor facilitated learning. Personality traits of instructor have an enormous impact on the class atmosphere. The feedback to the second part takes this fact into account. Learning cannot be facilitated if the instructor-student interaction is limited for any reason (lack of office hours for example).

The survey is designed based on the latest research on course evaluations. Our survey approach is quite similar to that used by Idea Centre ([www.theideacenter.org](http://www.theideacenter.org)). UAEU has a unique cultural settings in the Middle East, therefore the surveys designed and implemented in United States of America , United Kingdom , Europe or any other region of the world cannot be used without adapting to our regional requirements.

## Evaluation of Course Evaluations (EvCE) Study

It was during early 2013 that the Evaluation of Course Evaluations (EvCE) study was conducted at the university. This was the first time that such a study was conducted. EvCE used two surveys. One survey was sent to level three and level four students (enrolled in final two years of their programs). A second survey was sent to all instructors and senior academic managers. This survey had two sets of questions. Set 1 questions were for faculty only and set 2 questions were only to be answered by

academic managers. Faculty who also hold academic administrative positions had to answer both sets of questions.

The aim of the EvCE study is to evaluate the impact of the course evaluation process and what value it brings to improvement in teaching, if any. The study examined the faculty, management, and the students' perceptions of the course evaluation process at UAEU. While a lot of research on this topic has been conducted in USA and UK, the data and research studies on this topic are rare in GCC.

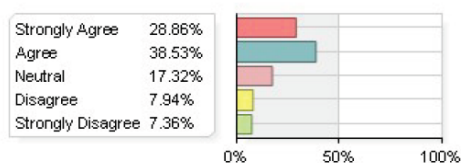
UAEU comprises nine colleges. The senior management of each college is required to regularly review the faculty course evaluations and take actions as necessary. Course evaluations also form an important part of faculty portfolio during annual reviews and promotions. Regular course evaluation reports are delivered by email to faculty members. Reports are also available through an online portal. Individual faculty reports are available to the department chairs, Deans, Provost and the Vice Chancellor depending on the reporting hierarchy.

## Student Feedback

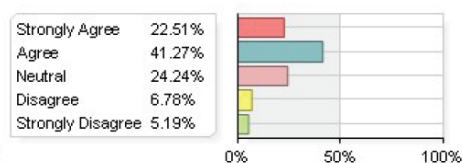
Student perceptions are very important because their feedback forms the foundation of the course evaluation process. If students do not believe in the process then no matter how sophisticated the survey tool is, students will not be thoughtful enough and will not give the required attention and time when filling the survey. Although course evaluations have been a topic of research for a long time, the studies on students' perceptions of teaching evaluations are limited (Beran et al, 2005; Campbell, 2008; Wachtel, 1998). These studies show that students consider the process of course evaluations to be useful but they are not aware of how the data is used at the institution or its impact on personnel decisions. Most of the institutions keep course evaluation data confidential and make it only available to the faculty and the senior management. Even at the universities where the ratings are available to the students, only a minority makes use of the ratings data to select courses based on instructor rating.

The following graphs give results of the survey sent to the students.

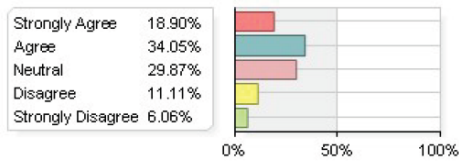
1. The Course Evaluation survey adds value to teaching and learning at UAEU



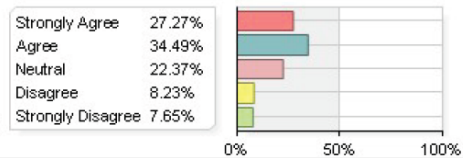
2. Course Evaluation feedback is carefully considered by the College management



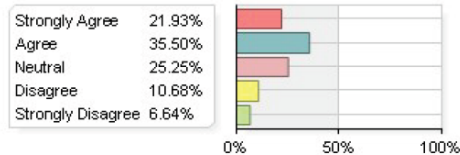
3. College management takes action based on course evaluation survey



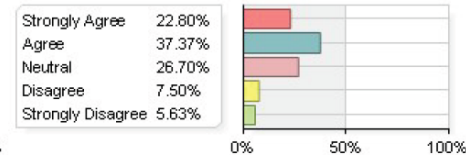
4. I feel confident that course evaluation survey is completely anonymous and faculty cannot see how I rated him or her



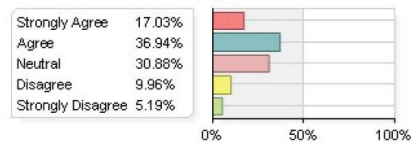
5. Other students also provide honest feedback when filling course evaluations



6. My Course Evaluations can impact the promotions of the teacher



7. Teachers take into account the students' feedback provided through the course evaluations



The findings of the student feedback on the course evaluation process is positive. Students (around 66%) feel that the course evaluations add value to teaching and learning. They also agree that college management reviews the feedback (63%) and takes actions if required (52%). One thing to note is that 'neutral' feedback is fairly significant as well for all of these questions.

Although the quantitative results give an overall positive results, students' comments give us a different picture. Many students commented during the EvCE study that they usually are skeptical in giving honest feedback. They are scared that if the instructor finds out that the student has given less than positive feedback then this might affect the final grade the student will receive.

*"Every semester I want to write everything in my mind about my teachers but I can't do that because I am afraid that this will affect my final grade or even the final exam. Some teachers told us that they can see the students name who put the comments about them. Is it really confidential information or what" (student comment)*

It seems that the students are not well informed about the process because the evaluation reports are sent to the faculty after the final grades have been submitted. Some students outlined that they do not take the evaluations seriously as they see that nothing is being done about the teachers who are generally known for being not effective teachers.

*"We wish to see improvements in the teachers and the course management in the future. We would like to feel that our evaluation is not just a waste of time. In recent semesters I didn't answer the questions honestly because I thought*

*that they were not taken seriously. However I will take it more seriously from now on. Thank you very much."*

*"I've seen many teachers where they got horrible feedbacks from at least "two third " of the class several semesters, and no single action were taken. Actually, the students had the bad feedback in their marks!!" (students' comments)*

Students discuss teachers among themselves and each teacher has a campus 'reputation'. Course evaluations are meant to capture this repute but do not always succeed in this especially when the students are skeptical about the confidentiality of their feedback and the effectiveness of the process. The feedback collected during EvCE indicates that the university needs to communicate clearly to the students that the confidentiality of their feedback is guaranteed and their honest feedback will not impact their marks.

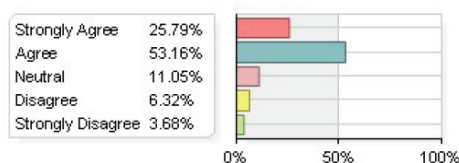
## Faculty Feedback

If a university gives some weightage to course evaluations during annual or promotional reviews of faculty members then the faculty members might not have a very healthy view of the course evaluations. Many research studies have shown that course evaluation could lead to a feeling of anxiety among faculty members (Hodges, 2007; Ryan et al, 1980; Franklin & Theall, 1989). Other studies (Eiszler, 2002; Feldman, 1976; Baldwin & Blattner, 2003) suggested that the evaluations can be biased due to various factors (e.g. expectation of grades) further fostered feelings of anxiety among faculty members. Several research (Nasser & Fresko, 2002; and Ryan et al, 1980) have suggested that students are not 'competent evaluators', and thus further negatively affected faculty and management perceptions. Theall & Franklin (2000) observed that "these negative perceptions of evaluations can lead faculty to discount their importance and can hinder teaching and course development efforts". According to (Abrami, 2001; Centra, 1993; Nasser & Fresko, 2002; Theall & Franklin, 2001; Wachtel, 1998) majority of faculty feel negatively towards course evaluations. Ryan et al (1980) suggests that use of course evaluations can decrease faculty morale.

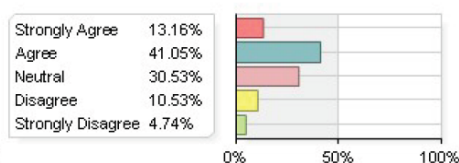
As part of EvEC study UAEU faculty held similar perceptions about the course evaluation process at the University and how they use the course evaluation reports in their teaching.

The following graphs show the results of the feedback collected from the faculty members.

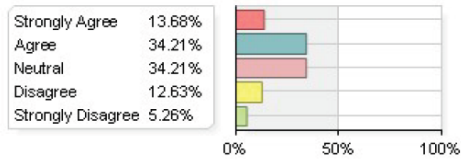
1. The Course Evaluation survey adds value to teaching and learning at UAEU



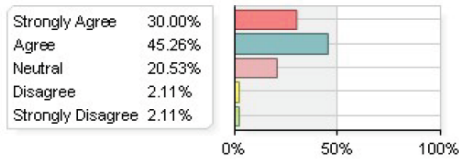
2. Course Evaluation feedback is carefully considered by the College management



3. College management takes actions based on Course Evaluation survey



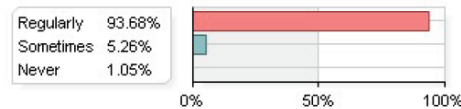
4. Course Evaluation feedback forms an important part of my portfolio during promotions



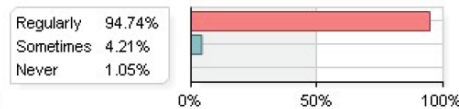
**Have you ever received feedback from college management on the results of Students' evaluation of your teaching**



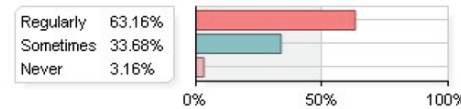
1. I read summary data provided in the Course Evaluation reports



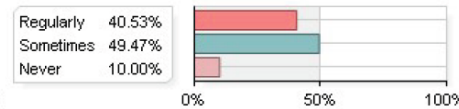
2. I read students' comments provided through the Course Evaluation reports



3. I adapt my teaching style and teaching methods based on students' feedback



4. I change my course material based on Course Evaluation feedback



The feedback indicates that most staff review the quantitative as well as qualitative part of the course evaluation reports and make changes to their teaching style and the course material based on the evaluation reports. Around 63% of respondents (faculty members) indicate that they regularly adapt their teaching style and teaching methods based on the evaluations. Only 3% never make changes to their teaching style based on course evaluation and around 34% only sometimes make the changes. It is interesting to note that 50% of faculty members sometimes make changes to the course materials based on the student feedback. Another 40% regularly make changes to course materials and 10% never make any changes based on student feedback.

The qualitative part of the survey gave us valuable insight into the faculty perceptions of course evaluations. Faculty members point out their apprehension that student's expectation of grades could negatively affect the way students will evaluate the instructor.

*"When assessing our teaching performance, the administration should take a look at the grades and the seriousness of our assessment tools, but they don't (Boosted grades = Satisfied students = Cheering administration = Corrupted system)"*

*"Many students give good evaluations to instructors who give them good grades and do not proctor the exams seriously. Those Instructors are known as " Student Entertainers". So we need to design the evaluations in a way that the evaluations affect the teaching process positively."(faculty comments)*

Faculty members expressed concern that students do not take the course evaluations seriously as the students feel it will not lead to any change. In order to make students take the evaluations more seriously the evaluations should be conducted in the class during a fixed week monitored by a peer. Faculty members expressed frustration that while some department chairs use the evaluations for punitive actions when the ratings are not good the administration never rewards or acknowledges good teaching in any way. The faculty members also expressed apprehension with the way university administration might be using the course evaluations:

*"There is a rumour that the evaluations are used for firing decisions, which seems to be putting a lot of power in the students hands".  
Annual Evaluation.*

*"Our department head is unfair at all times and impressionistic in his evaluation. I wish the College will take consideration of this and puts an end to this as this has led to the resignation of many faculty members after being treated and evaluated unfairly by their Heads !" (faculty comments)*

Similar to what previous studies in the field indicated the faculty members at UAEU would like the evaluations to be used for faculty development only and should not be linked to promotions or annual reviews. When the evaluations are linked to promotions and reviews, they give rise to the 'Student Entertainers'- teachers who will give out more A's and easy assessments to make students happy to get an A grade rating. Such subjectivities should be removed from the evaluation process. The faculty members reiterated the skepticism also suggested in previous research that students are not good evaluators because

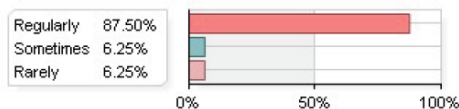
*"As soon as they don't get A, they use the survey to revenge for what they think is an injustice and the faculty member can't reply".*

## Academic Administration Feedback

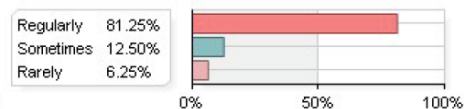
Depending on the policies at a university, the academic management can use the evaluations in two main ways; as development tool only or link it with promotions and annual reviews. Although a university's policies might dictate a certain way of using the evaluations, it is generally observed that the academic administrators bring their own perceptions of course evaluations into play when using them to improve teaching and learning. Feedback was also collected from the management team on course evaluation feedback. The results of the survey are in the following graphs.

**As a Deans, Vice/Associate/Assitant Dean, Department Chairs:**  
**Following questions pertain to the Course Evaluation feedback for the faculty reporting to you. Please select the most appropriate answer:**

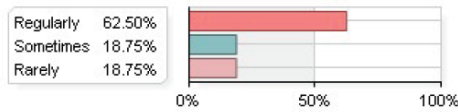
1. I review summary data provided in the Course Evaluation reports



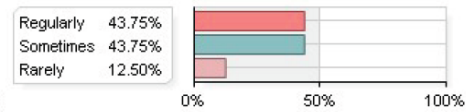
2. I read students' comments provided through the Course Evaluation reports



3. I discuss students' feedback with the instructor if any issues are identified



4. I take appropriate action based on students' feedback



A significant majority of the senior academic administrators indicate that they regularly review summary data and student comments provided through course evaluation reports. 62% say that they regularly communicate with the faculty if any issues are identified. However, only 43% take action regularly to address the issues and another 43% only sometimes take actions. The university requires the college administration to regularly review course evaluations and have interactive discussions with the faculty members on their course evaluations. However, 47% of faculty members indicate that the college management does not provide them any feedback on student course evaluations.

**Is there any requirement by your senior management to review the Course Evaluations regularly?**



The graph above shows that when asked if there is requirement by the senior management at the college level to regularly review the course evaluations, around 30% academic managers indicated that there is none. It comes as a surprise that around 40% academic managers are not sure if the University requires them to review the course evaluations regularly. Despite this, as previously noted, a significant number of senior academics do review the course evaluations. The comments from senior academic administrators indicate that students are reluctant to give honest feedback fearing repercussions from the faculty members. Although course evaluations form an important part of faculty portfolio during annual faculty review and the promotion reviews, there is no university level prescribed weightage for course evaluations. Hence, the weightage assigned becomes subjective to the reviewers perspective.

## Conclusion

The EvCE study provides evidence that overall stakeholders are taking the course evaluations seriously and there is a general feeling that this process contributes towards improving teaching and learning. However, we also notice that there is a strong need to change student perceptions about the process. The students are generally not comfortable giving an honest feedback fearing that a negative feedback could negatively impact their grades. Chen & Hoshower (2003) observed that Students' motivation to participate in teaching evaluations is also impacted

significantly by their expectation that they will be able to provide meaningful feedback". EvCE study results agree with Chen & Hoshower findings. Students' feedback suggests that they would take course evaluations more seriously if they knew more about how the ratings are used and that their opinion has an impact.

It seems that the University could benefit more if the course evaluations are purely used as a faculty development tool and any weightage to promotion and annual reviews are avoided. This will also help avoid grade inflation which often is a by-product of course evaluations. The Course evaluation tools are regularly revised at UAEU to take into account latest research in the field. The University is implementing new curriculum management system which will provide an opportunity to connect course evaluations directly to the course objectives wherever required. The plan is to move to a new course evaluation model based on academic learning time and first principle of learning (Merill 2002); similar to but not exactly the same as TALQ model (Frick & Wang 2010, Frick & Zlatkovska 2010).

Research indicates that while the Active Learning Time (ALT) depends on student learning capacity, the instructor can make changes to the course to impact learning through first principles of instruction. For example, by making classes more interactive, having more multimedia learning content, having students practically solving real world problems. Many of these evaluation strategies are content dependent though. For example, a Law course may not require as much multimedia content as Engineering. Hence, there is need for some course content based customization to the course evaluations which will be made possible through an integration of our course evaluation platform and our new curriculum management software.

## Author bio

**Ms. Maryam** is the Director of Institutional Effectiveness & Planning Support Unit at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU). She has 20 years of experience in higher education; out of those 10 years work in the Middle East. She has expertise in strategic policy and planning, knowledge management/business intelligence, technology in education, and performance excellence. She has helped implement higher education quality assurance models in various higher education institutions and have worked on accreditation projects with key accrediting agencies (ABET, AACSB, NCATE, IChemE, SACS, WASC etc.)

Maryam Amir Khan obtained a Masters in Computer Science and Mathematics from University of Waterloo, Canada and MBA from London Business School. In addition, she is also working on Ph.D. in Autonomic Computing.



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# Conclusion

# What's next: Measurement and Enhancement of Student Experience – 20 years and beyond

Chenicheri Sid Nair

University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia

## Abstract

The future of student experience may not necessarily be in the hands of institutions as there is a push to standardised surveys across the sector within a nation. The advantages of such a move will no doubt be the ability to benchmark and learn from other higher education providers. Though this seems to be the approach at least for the next two decades or so, the weakness in the model comes back to what was identified nearly one and half decades ago, namely the lack of systematic engagement to make changes based on the student voice.

## Introduction

The concept of student feedback on teaching and learning is not new but dates back to the early 1920s (e.g. D'Apollonia & Abrami, 1997; Mckeachie, 1990). But early studies were focused on the reliability and validity of the instruments (e.g. Marsh, 1987) instead of understanding the teaching and learning from the perspective of the teacher and the students.

With the concept clearly entrenched in the academic literature, the importance of student feedback in many parts of the world made its debut of importance only in the late eighties. This was a result of many factors but primarily to the internationalisation of higher education and the hunger of the world population to access higher studies. With this massification, stakeholders became more prominent in the quality cycle of institutions to ensure high quality teaching within major institutions. With this push, student feedback tools made a stronger entry to the higher education market place where input of their experience played a key role in designing the classroom environment.

The importance of student experience data is clearly enunciated in the academic literature (Bennett and Nair, 2010; Marsh and Dunkin, 1992) and it includes:

- diagnostic feedback to faculties about the teaching taking place that will aid in the development and improvement of teaching;
- useful research data to underpin further design and improvements to units, courses, curriculum and teaching and services;

- a measure of effectiveness of the learning and teaching environments that may be used in administrative decision-making, e.g. performance management and development appraisal, resource funding;
- a source of useful information for current and potential students in the selection of units and courses and possibly the institution; and
- a measure for judging quality of units and courses which is increasingly becoming tied into external funding formulas.

## Student Experience to Date

In terms of measurements, Australia has a longer history of collecting student experience data on teaching and learning than most countries. This is exemplified in relation to the Course Experience Questionnaire which was administered first in 1993. In addition, in the Australian context many higher institutions had made further inroads by developing their own surveys to measure student feedback in the early 1990s, with the introduction of the national quality agency, Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)

Student experience measures in other countries also made their entry to the market place around the same time. One such tool that is dominant in the North American context was the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which is used in a number of universities in North America and has been extended to other countries in the world. Around 1997, the United Kingdom had a first experience survey (Yorke & Longden, 2007) and in 2005 the National Student Survey (NSS) made its entry to the universities of England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

## Where are we Heading with Student Experience?

Student evaluations have no doubt been embedded as critical quality tools in the higher education arena to measure the student experience (Shah & Nair, 2012). But the approaches to how student feedback is collected and used in the institutions will undoubtedly have to change. The predications or approaches below are based on the author's experience in designing and reporting student feedback for the last two and half decades, observations, and the literature on student experience data.

## Administration and Type of Surveys

Over the last decade surveys in general have moved from paper based administration to web based administration (Bennett & Nair, 2009). Though administration seems straight forward to keep abreast with the technological changes the literature suggests that survey methodology in terms of survey design is also changing.

The current approach in many institutions especially in the Asia Pacific region is that higher education institutions have a number of their own surveys to measure the student experience, personalised to their teaching, learning and service environment.

Though there is some merit to this approach, the current push suggests that standardised surveys are much more useful to institutions. There are distinct advantages to such a move, which include the ability to benchmark data with like institutions, use data to show performance across the sector within a nation, the ability to share and learn from other institutions so as to improve service and the teaching and learning environment, and the possibility to extend the benchmarking internationally, such as the practice with NSSE.

Though this approach seems to be embraced by institutions to streamline the survey approach within their own institutions, there are arguments in favour of institutions adding their own items of measurement as each institution has differing characteristics compared to others. What would be the logical approach here? Perhaps national surveys where useful information can be exchanged? There is merit in the use of the core items in the questionnaires to inform funding bodies and stakeholders of the 'real' student experience faced within each institution before students decide where they would enrol.

## Use of Data

Though all this (administration and survey design) seems like a change for the better, what is questionable is the use of data for improvement. Current research (Coates, 2006; Nair, Adams, & Mertova, 2008) suggests that though data on student experience is collected there is little evidence that such data is used systematically to improve the student experience. Such research which dates back to the 1990s pointed out that student feedback is not being used systematically for change and nearly one and half decades later, there is still no evidence this has changed for the better. What needs to happen here is that such matters have to be nationally relevant so that funding bodies are able to seek evidence of engagement of data and change but as well relevant stakeholders need to demand that such data when collected are acted upon.

## Reports

Reports will be generated in real time and the criticism that such data is out-dated will be in the past. But data would need to be presented in such a way that it is easily understood and those responsible are able to take appropriate actions where necessary. This would mean that staff within the institutions must engage with the data and develop strategies that can be accessed by staff to help achieve the outcome of change. This means institutions of higher education must resource academic developers who are trained in the pedagogical domain to help improve the student experience of teaching and learning.

## Training Needs

All staff will need to be trained how to engage with data and put in action plans to address changes. This becomes crucial as most academics and professional staff have little to no training to handle student voice data. Relevant training and support is essential to accommodate changes to the student cohort and their expectations.

## Research

The research on student experience is based primarily on face to face education. Higher education has moved on from face to face studies as the primary form of delivery to a mixed mode in some instance and in others as primarily online delivery. The demand seems to be for greater online delivery. Research of the student experience and how institutions would enhance this experience is new and the academic world is grappling with the change and the student experience associated with such change. Research needs to inform change, in other words a better understanding would mean more effective pedagogical changes to ensure a more positive teaching and learning environment.

## Concluding Remarks

If we are to look to the future and see what would occur in the student feedback domain, it can be safely argued the feedback loop is here to stay. There is also a need to have an open and transparent approach to collecting and using student experience data which in turn will inform quality improvements in the higher education sector. One factor that will drive this change is the academic leadership within each institution where there is clear recognition of the importance of staff in the engagement of student voice and the transparency with which the data is dealt with to have the changes implemented. But experience shows such leadership is driven by a national agenda where reputation is one factor of consideration and another is funding tied in to such feedback.

## Author bio

**Sid Nair** is Professor of Higher Education Development at the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL). His current role looks at the quality of teaching and learning at UWA.

His research work lies in the areas of quality in the Australian higher education system, classroom and school environments, and the implementation of improvements from stakeholder feedback. Recent book publications include External Quality Audit: Has it improved quality assurance in universities?, Leadership and Management of Quality in Higher Education and Student Feedback: The Cornerstone to an Effective Quality Assurance System in Higher Education. He has extensive

lecturing experience in the applied sciences in Canada, Singapore and Australia. He is an international consultant in quality and evaluations in higher education.

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