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CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP: ENSURING EFFECTIVE ACTION FROM STUDENT FEEDBACK

ABSTRACT. Feedback from students can inform improvement in higher education institutions and be part of the students' role in university management. To be effective it is important to 'close the loop': from student views, through identifying issues and delegating responsibility for action, to informing students of the action resulting from their expressed views. The focus of this paper is the Student Satisfaction Approach, an institution-wide survey used internationally. The paper explores the different ways universities feed back information to students following institution-wide surveys, including the different presentation styles and the types of issues that are presented to students, drawing on international examples.

INTRODUCTION

The paper focuses on feedback from students that informs improvement in higher education institutions. This type of feedback is processual, in which student views are collected and reported to institutional staff, with necessary and feasible improvements or investigations then made. A key stage of the process is to ensure that student views are translated into action and subsequently that students are informed of the improvements. This process of 'closing the loop' is probably the most demanding aspect of seeking student feedback (CRQ 2001). The scope of this paper is restricted to an examination of the way that the loop is currently closed, although it is necessary to think of other options of closing the loop than the forms currently used by institutions. Any improvements that can be made to closing the loop will improve the likelihood of students providing feedback in the future.

For any survey, or piece of research, that is conducted, providing feedback to respondents and other stakeholders performs a number of functions: it encourages participation in further research, as it demonstrates the value of individuals' responses and the importance of their participation; it increases confidence in the results and worth of the research if tangible action is evidenced; and it is ethical to de-brief respondents. For student satisfaction surveys, providing this type of feedback also encourages the university management to explain how they will deal with the shortcomings that emerge from the survey.

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This paper aims to explore the different ways universities feed back information to students following institutional-level student surveys. It will explore both the different styles of presenting the feedback and the types of issues that are presented to students.

The paper will consider different types of student feedback but will focus specifically on the Student Satisfaction Approach (Harvey et al. 1997), as this approach is used by a number of universities internationally.

WHY COLLECT FEEDBACK FROM STUDENTS?

UK higher education institutions prioritise the improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, indicated, for example, by the recently created Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT).[1] ILT is a professional body for all who teach and support learning in higher education. It is becoming the main source of professional recognition for teaching and learning support staff. ILT accredits programmes of training in learning and teaching in higher education, organises events and produces publications to support its members in teaching in higher education. On behalf of the UK Funding Councils, ILT also hosts the Programme Executive and Generic Centre of the Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)[2] and implements the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. The LTSN promotes high quality learning and teaching through its 24 subject centres based in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the UK and a single Generic Centre. It aims to share good practices and provide learning and teaching resources and information. The LTSN has links with the Technologies Centre, which is investigating the application of new technologies in higher education. The LTSN is funded by the four higher education funding bodies across the UK.

Since 1992, when the Higher Education Funding Councils and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) were created, there has been an increasing importance placed upon obtaining students' views of the quality of provision in HEIs. The HEQC was replaced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in 1997, which continued HEQC's mission to promote public confidence that quality of provision and standards of awards in higher education are safeguarded and enhanced. The QAA audits HEIs, management of the quality of their provision, academic standards and the quality of learning and teaching in each subject area. Their reports are publicly available, along with its statements of subject benchmark standards. The UK Higher Education Funding Councils take into account the student learning experience in their assessment of whether an institution's objectives have been met.

The importance of student views is on the agenda worldwide, for example the Australian Technology Network of Universities (UTS, Curtin, University of South Australia, RMIT University and Queensland University of Technology) is currently benchmarking uses of student feedback and the Swedish government has recently passed a law that students should be represented on decision-making bodies and be involved in the preparation of their decisions. McDowell and Sambell (1999: 108) argue that despite the difficulties with the concept of meeting customer needs in higher education, "the recognition of a range of stakeholders whose views should be taken into account is much more widely accepted." These stakeholders include students, parents, employers of students, prospective employers of graduates, professional bodies, academics, government and communities.

Following the Cooke Committee's (HEFCE 2002) announcement on information requirements for quality assurance in higher education, student satisfaction feedback has become an important element of the higher education quality process (see also, Harvey 2001a; HEFCE 2001). A HEFCE report on the proposals for a national survey of students or graduates, including a review of ways individual HEIs currently collect and use student feedback, is expected this year. Baty (2001) suggests that universities will not welcome the publication of student feedback, although many already make results available on their websites. Harvey (2001b) argues that the student perspective, although it is not the only perspective, has three advantages: it is the view of the person participating in the process, the learner; it is direct; and it can provide ratings on a range of items relevant to prospective students. Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002) argue that student satisfaction surveys provide institutions with a tool to understand the complexity of the total learning experience and include the institutional leadership more directly in quality development issues. They suggest that a further bonus of identifying issues that could be improved is that satisfied students are less likely to drop-out.

Changes in the provision of higher education have encouraged the collection of feedback from students, such as the variety of teaching methods and forms of assessment. Widened access and modular systems have altered the student body, making it more necessary to gain knowledge about the experiences of these different groups of students. In addition, as fee-paying students may behave like consumers and expect 'value for money', they may be more demanding of aspects of their student experience and of having their voice heard. As Green et al. (1994: 101) argue:

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992, and the subsequent charter, marked an important change in the relationship between students and their place of study; as *consumers* of higher education, they are now expected to have views about the quality of the services offered. The importance of this change can be gauged by the growing interest in student satisfaction by higher education institutions (HEI) seeking to gain or maintain a competitive edge.

Regarding students as consumers is much-debated and many academics view this as contrary to the purpose of higher education, as do some students (Jobbins 2002).

Students will have a range of expectations of their course and institution's resources. When collecting feedback, the emphasis should be on responding to students' expectations rather than meeting them directly, that is, even if expectations cannot be met, there is a need to feedback to students following a consideration of their views. The Teaching and Learning Unit (1999) of University of Leicester shows that student evaluations of their teaching and learning provision are more likely to be based upon their expectations than their actual level of satisfaction. They suggest that teachers hold discussions with their students about their expectations so that both groups are aware of what is expected and likely to be attained. At the 1999 Teaching and Assessment Network meeting, it was agreed that there is strength in dialogue and that students would benefit from increased confidence and involvement.

As Leckey and Neill (2001: 25) argue, "closing the loop is an important issue in terms of total quality management. If students do not see any action resulting from their feedback, they may become sceptical and unwilling to participate." The key, then, to effective institution-wide surveys is ensuring that the loop is effectively closed. Closing the feedback loop is also important for course- or programme-level surveys of teaching and learning. Powney and Hall (1998: 19) recommend that a reflexive approach to learning and teaching is required, with both informal and formal methods of student feedback embedded in courses and teachers and learners agreeing "that understanding learning processes makes a necessary and valid contribution to higher education". Narasimhan (2001) explores how the gaps between expectations and perceptions of teaching sessions, of both students and instructors, can be closed *during* the term or semester. In this way, the closing of the loop in course-level feedback benefits the current batch of students. As the Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning (FDTL) project at Loughborough University illustrates, at course-level, students prioritise receiving timely and sufficient feedback that would enable their future improvement, which should also be a priority for institution-wide surveys. The Student Satisfaction Approach encompasses more than aspects of teaching and learning, although in most

surveys this constitutes a significant portion of the questionnaire. Any methods of collecting student feedback need to be examined for their usefulness for both the institutions and the students.

STUDENT-CENTRED

The Student Satisfaction Approach has proven to be an effective method of collecting feedback from students and provides strategic-level information while being student-centred. The student-led survey aims to understand the satisfaction of students within a particular institution. This is achieved by designing the questionnaire using focus group data. The focus groups with students identify the issues that concern them. In this way, the questionnaire reflects students' concerns and is relevant to the respondents.

At the University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE), the quantitative data is analysed and presented in easy-to-read tables, representing the ratings of both satisfaction and importance, as the readership of the report includes students, administrative and support staff, academics and senior managers. The anonymous qualitative comments are passed onto the deans of each faculty for their own information and analysis.

Following the dissemination of the report, which is used as a basis for discussion at faculty planning meetings, the Deans report to the Vice-Chancellor on their responses and the subsequent actions they will be taking. These actions are then reported back to students. The approach thus, importantly, includes student feedback into management information and provides students with a role in monitoring subsequent action.

The Student Satisfaction Approach is cyclical as students' views, on the various aspects of their student life that they deem to be important, are reported to all institutional staff and the action that follows is then fed back to the students. The students' views can impact on policies of university management, particularly as poor satisfaction ratings reflect on the operation of the university. At UCE, the Student Satisfaction Survey is now instilled into the institutional culture and is an annual process in which faculties report to senior management.

FEEDBACK AND QUALITY

Collecting feedback from students to aid quality improvement decisions and measures is not clear-cut. As Green et al. (1994) highlight, this is partly due to the ambiguity in the definition of quality in the context of higher education. It has long been debated whether concepts from the

private sector, related to consumers, can be applied to higher education, both because of the nature of the process and product of higher education and because students, who are not a homogenous group, are not the only stakeholders in institutions. Green et al. (1994: 107) suggest that it is perhaps more useful to regard student feedback data as "quality indicators", allowing students a voice in their educational experience and its potential improvement.

As Harvey (2001b) argues, effective improvement in the quality of HEIs requires integrating student views into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback. Powney and Hall (1998) argue that formal surveys can contribute to quality assurance if the response rate is sufficient to support its conclusions. The establishment of this cycle is not a simple task, which is evidenced by those cases where there are satisfaction surveys with no indication of action and feedback. At UCE, the Vice-Chancellor and senior managers support the cycle and find both the yearly satisfaction ratings and longitudinal data useful in their planning. Not all institutions and staff within each institution have the same ideas and priorities regarding student feedback. Indeed, even amongst those academics that are in favour of collecting student feedback there are different ideas about for what purpose the feedback should be collected and how the information should be used. There are therefore different ways of collecting information from, and feeding back to, students. Powney and Hall (1998) found that the methods of collecting feedback can be fragmented, with little coherence between information collected at programme-level and at the institutional level. A poorly structured set of feedback collection methods is likely to result in poorly structured, if any, methods of feeding back to students.

As part of their wider study of the collection of student feedback about the quality of their educational experiences, Powney and Hall (1998) demonstrate that the loop was seldom closed, particularly as there was a lack of co-ordination between departments about the consequences of the students' feedback. Leckey and Neill (2001: 26) argue that "getting *all* staff in *all* departments in *all* universities to engage fully with a feedback system will never happen, but many can be persuaded of its worth." From my informal enquiries to various institutions, both in the UK and abroad, it was evident that the set-up of some student surveys do not allow for the loop to be closed. This is partly a resource issue, indicated not least by the sporadic conduct of the surveys in some institutions. In addition, some institutions simply have not thought of providing feedback to students following the survey and some do not have the full support of senior management throughout the institution (either within or

outside of faculties) to enable actions to follow from the survey results. At UCE, the Student Satisfaction Survey was initially viewed sceptically but it is now a part of the institutional culture. Overcoming the initial suspicions was undoubtedly helped by the independent nature and openness of the research centre conducting the survey. Senior management strongly support it and have found that it is a useful tool when audits are conducted, saving them the additional work required to demonstrate their commitment to including students' views when seeking to improve quality. This indicates that although resources are required to implement a student survey, these resources can partly be offset against the resources required for audits.

Powney and Hall (1998) suggest that in institutions where staff are not concerned about student opinion, student apathy towards the completion of feedback questionnaires is more apparent. Students are less likely to take the time and effort to complete questionnaires if they feel that it is simply a meaningless, result-less, ritual that the institution goes through in order to meet quality assurance procedures. Quality Audit reports in the UK show evidence of the resistance and confusion caused by quality assurance procedures that have been merged with existing departmental and institutional procedures, despite favourable reports on the efforts to enable students to raise concerns. In Powney and Hall's study, they found that where there were agreed procedures for systematic collection of feedback that is treated seriously, students cooperate in providing feedback.

As the current literature demonstrates, not all university staff and managers are working in the same way or place the same significance on the purpose and usefulness of obtaining student feedback. Managers and academics within universities may have different understandings of the significance of the feedback that is provided to students. This will, therefore, affect the content and style of feedback.

Presenting Feedback to Students

Powney and Hall (1998) argue that students were not aware of action that institutions may have taken as a result of their feedback and that if the loop is not closed, any resultant changes may not be clearly associated with the feedback the students provide. There are several methods that institutions can use to present feedback to students, some of which that would reach more students than others.

One medium to feed back to students is leaflets or newsletters. Sheffield Hallam University has produced glossy marketing-type leaflets that are given to students in the following year's survey pack ('You talk, we listen')

and also used the same information in their prospectus ('We listen, and act, on what students say'). Their leaflets were one side of A4 on which one half was text and one half was colour photographs of students and facilities. UCE produces a lengthier feedback-flyer. Although the UCE flyer is glossy and has colour headings, all of its four pages are full of text. This flyer is given to the following year's survey sample with the questionnaire. The Auckland Institute [now University] of Technology (AIT) produced a similar 'update' leaflet, being four pages of text on non-glossy paper. In these cases, the students that are informed about any action would be only those that have been sampled to provide feedback. As one advantage of feeding back to students is to encourage them to respond to questionnaires, this method of feedback is effective in this respect. A number of other institutions use the student or departmental newsletter to disseminate information to staff and students, for example, at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) in Australia, Lincoln University in New Zealand and the University of Greenwich, England. Lincoln University also produce articles for the staff newsletter, to which postgraduate students have access. In these cases, those students that read the newsletters would be informed of action but all others would be unaware.

Another method of presenting feedback is the use of the internet. At University of Portsmouth, where the university-wide survey is not conducted annually, they used the web to provide feedback to students and UCE's feedback flyer is available on their website in addition to its paper form. UTS are also considering putting an item on their 'What's New' section of their home page and sending a batched e-mail of results and actions to all active student e-mail accounts. At Sheffield Hallam University, the report is summarised on the student intranet, the full report is also downloadable, and there is also a link to an electronic version of the feedback flyer, which outlines action that has taken place. Posting feedback on a website requires students to be interested and active in finding the feedback, although using the internet is an easy and accessible form of providing information and sending e-mails may reach more students within an institution. Virtual-learning environments provide a means of alerting students to feedback on action.

A third channel of feeding back to students is direct communication with groups of students. For example, the University of Portsmouth used the Student Representative Forum to disseminate information; Lincoln University forwarded the report and resulting memos to the students' association and other bodies, such as the University Council and Academic Board, on which students are represented. Reporting to student representatives does rely on them relaying the information to their peers, which

will be more reliable in some cases than others, this could be overcome by UTS's idea of asking all staff to announce in the first class of the new semester what they found out last semester and what they are doing about it. At Lund University in Sweden, following the University's Student Barometer, the students invited the university management to a conference to discuss results and action (Nilsson 2001). The students are clearly very involved in the process. At Lund University, the Vice-Chancellor discusses the results of their Student Barometer and the possible action that should follow with the Faculty Deans and then informs the general public. Lund University is a large institution in a small town and therefore the wider community has an interest in the quality of the education and facilities.

Other methods include: the use of posters, as at the University of Plymouth; and using the campus radio, which is an option being considered at the Vaal Triangle Technikon in South Africa.

Types of Issues Presented

The types of issues that are presented in feedback to students can also vary. For example, some institutions only deliver copies of the report containing results from the survey to staff and students. This type of feedback would not constitute closing the loop, as it does not include the responses to students' views nor the resulting action. The feedback on action tends to be faculty-based or issues-based and reports on action taken or action planned.

Feedback following programme-level surveys will clearly always be faculty-specific, which perhaps explains why most institution-wide surveys tend not to report back in this manner, aside from not wanting to make comparisons between faculties. At the University of Plymouth, posters are displayed within faculties during the start of year induction period, drawing students' attention to the action taken in response to a key issue identified for each faculty.

The leaflets produced by UCE, Sheffield Hallam and AIT contain issues-based feedback. That is, headings such as 'learning and teaching', 'financial circumstances' and 'library services' frame the information. In all three of these examples, the issues presented in the feedback leaflets report on action taken and action in progress.

The timing of the survey, report and feedback will affect whether institutions can report on what has happened as a result of the survey. That is, there needs to be time for action to be taken before the next survey and the feedback is produced, otherwise the feedback would only be able to contain recommendations or vague plans rather than concrete action.

At UCE, the Pro Vice-Chancellor meets with each faculty and service department at the beginning of the first semester for information on what action they have taken, or have planned, since last year's survey. The minutes from each of those meetings are used for the production of the feedback flyer mid-semester, to be included in the survey that is posted at the start of the second semester. An emphasis is placed on the action actually taken and in progress. Some faculties discuss their plans to further examine, monitor or discuss certain issues raised by the Student Satisfaction Survey, which is not included in the feedback flyer. The aim is to provide information on the action that has occurred, either as a direct result of the Student Satisfaction Survey, or related to issues that were of concern to students in the survey. Similarly, UTS in Australia reports back to students on the key improvement priorities and what they are doing about them.

By concentrating on action that has already been taken or is planned for that year, feedback to students can provide them with a benchmark by which to measure improvement and help to shape their reasonable expectations.[3] The action taken throughout an institution may have happened regardless of any student feedback, but at least by collecting the feedback and then informing students of recent or planned actions, the issues of concern to students are recognised and any solutions in relation to those are reported back.

In the above examples student feedback, and the efforts to close the loop, have had an impact on student life, and on faculty culture and institutional policy in some cases. For example, at Sheffield Hallam University it was a result of the student survey that the library extended to 24 hour opening; and in cases where faculty staff and managers are required to report their proposed actions to Vice-Chancellors, the survey has affected accountabilities and responsibilities. There have been many improvements at UCE over the last 15 years prompted by the survey. The longitudinal satisfaction trends clearly reveal a general increase in satisfaction as a result of the transparent approach adopted.

BEST PRACTICES

Not all institutions conduct institution-wide surveys and of those that do, not all provide feedback. There was, therefore, not a wide enough sample from which to draw conclusions on what might be considered best practices. The 'best' style of presentation and issues that should be presented depends upon an institution's size, students, the facilities available, and the courses and aspects of student experiences that were surveyed. For

example, a small college with a fairly homogeneous group of students may only need to provide feedback using one method, whereas an institution with a large number of faculties and a diverse student body would be wise to use a variety of methods to ensure that as many students as possible are aware of the results and actions of the survey. As in all research, it is important to debrief respondents and in the case of Student Satisfaction Surveys and other student feedback collection methods it is preferable to close the feedback loop for as many students as possible.

Student Satisfaction Surveys are only one tool available to senior management in assuring quality in higher education. Indeed, they are only one tool available for gaining student feedback; it is one method of gaining information from one group of stakeholders in higher education. Student Satisfaction Surveys are not intended to replace all other methods of hearing the student voice or be an all-inclusive method of gaining student feedback.

Developments in learning technologies will hopefully assist in the collection of student feedback and in feeding back to students. Indeed, both the new possibilities of the methods of feedback and the issues that will be of relevance to those students taking on-line courses will be different to traditionally taught courses. Aston University already use their 'Blackboard' learning environment to collect information from, and report back to, students for module-level feedback. This managed learning environment (MLE) contains the possibilities of integrating the process of data collection, analysis and feedback across modules, programmes and an institution. MLEs enable appropriate reports to be sent to appropriate actors on a more regular basis, thus requiring and enabling them to provide continuous feedback on action.

Further research on the impact of technological developments on closing the feedback loop would be worthwhile. Other useful research would include expanding this initial examination of current methods of student feedback to a comprehensive study examining the benefits of feeding back to students, perhaps comparing institutions that provide feedback with those that do not. More international comparisons would also be of benefit in developing knowledge about the experiences and worth of providing feedback to students following an institutional survey.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored one aspect of the feedback loop of institution-wide surveys of student satisfaction, providing examples of the different methods currently used to feed back information on action to students.

The examples will hopefully encourage staff and managers to implement the *whole* Satisfaction Approach cycle, which will in turn encourage students to participate in the surveys. An increase in response rates will also increase staff's confidence in the results and further encourage their participation in the cycle, at the action and feedback stages, as well as when they encourage students to complete the surveys. Simply by presenting the current practices of some institutions may provide others with enough ideas and incentive to implement their own feedback cycles.

Some methods of presenting feedback to students are more effective in communicating to large numbers of students than others. To inform the maximum number of students of the action taken on issues with which they feel dissatisfied would best be achieved by using multiple methods of feedback. In this way, more students will be aware of the importance of their involvement in the quality assurance of their institution.

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NOTES

1. http://www.ilt.ac.uk
2. http://www.ltsn.ac.uk
3. Although, as Powney and Hall (1998) note, it can lead to a 'culture of expectation of improvement' amongst students, as with each improvement, expectations may rise.

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