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How does quality assurance make a difference?

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Title: Gathering student feedback: how does it make a difference?

Abstract: Student engagement in quality systems, in particular feedback from students on their experiences, forms a central part of quality systems throughout Europe. Yet, in order for feedback to make a difference it needs to be collected with the right purpose in mind and appropriate use of the findings needs to be made in order to inform decision-making. This paper discusses the purpose and use of student feedback by UK Higher Education institutions. Two surveys were conducted: one external survey of UK institutions and one internal survey in the University of Edinburgh. The purpose of the study was to understand the range of feedback methods used, perceptions of effort versus value, the intended purpose of feedback surveys, survey content and approaches to analysis and distribution of findings. A key goal of the study was to benchmark Edinburgh's own approach for gathering feedback from students with the sector and to make recommendations.







Text of paper:

INTRODUCTION

Student participation in quality processes underpins the validity and reliability of both internal and external review processes (Gvaramadze, 2011) and has been demonstrated to be a value-adding factor for improving quality in higher education (Coates, 2005). Student participation occurs in a variety of ways, but one of the central pillars of most European quality systems is the collection of feedback from students on their experiences of higher education.

In recent years the amount of such student surveying has increased and students in the UK are now expected to complete surveys issued both from within the institution and externally. Experience at Edinburgh suggests that on average, students participate in 6–8 standard surveys conducted by the university on an annual basis.

A number of key factors have contributed to the increase in student feedback surveying including: the expansion of the higher education sector, expectations by quality assurance agencies, increased consumerism and marketisation, and increased concern over the quality of education. Enabling factors such as the advent of web-based survey tools have made it easier to administer surveys to students. On the whole, however, there has been the realisation that in order to improve the quality of the educational experience institutions need to take account of the experiences, attitudes and opinions of those who are on the receiving end of the education – the students – and enhancement is a partnership approach.

Although feedback from students is widely collected in institutions, it is not always clear how fit for purpose it is (Williams and Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2007) or that it is being used to its full potential (Harvey, 2003). Harvey (2003) notes that feedback from students serves two main purposes: (1) internal information to guide improvement; (2) external information for potential students and other stakeholders, including accountability and compliance requirements. Data collection is one of the key stages in quality enhancement and this has long been a focus of evaluation systems in the higher education sector (Young, McConkey and Kirby, 2011). However, Harvey (2003) notes that the move from data collection to meaningful reports that assist with decision-making and targeted actions for improvement has proved a challenge for many institutions.

A vast amount of data is gathered by institutions via student feedback surveys, but how much of it is being transformed into effective management information? To what extent does it have the potential to make a difference to the student experience? Set against this background, the University of Edinburgh embarked on a study to explore the methods used across the HE sector to gather feedback from students and in particular how those methods are being used, in order to benchmark its own practice and identify areas for improvement. This paper reports the findings of the study and the recommendations arising. The study provides a template from which other institutions can benchmark their own practice.

METHOD

In order to ascertain the range of methods used by HEIs in gathering feedback from their students and using this as a means of benchmarking the University of Edinburgh's own practice, two comparable surveys were developed: one aimed at external institutions in the UK HE sector and one aimed at internal Schools/Support Units within the University of Edinburgh. The surveys were designed to capture the following information: the range of survey methods used (survey in this context is not restricted to questionnaires, but includes a range of methods both qualitative and







quantitative, formal and informal for surveying the student voice); the perceived effort involved in administering the surveys and the relative value attached to the information derived; the purpose of the surveys (and key motivations); the survey content; methods of data analysis, distribution of findings and how findings are used. The survey ended by asking open questions about respondents ideal methods for surveying students and whether they had discontinued use of any particular methods and the reasons for this.

The surveys were administered via Electric Paper's EvaSys software. The external survey was distributed to quality professionals via key Quality Assurance networks in the UK. The precise number of institutions in the population is not possible to ascertain, but 28 respondents in total from a range of HEIs in the UK completed the survey: 75% completed the survey on behalf of their institution. Most of the others (21%) completed on behalf of a support service.

The internal survey was distributed to quality practitioners within each of the University's 3 college offices, 22 schools and various support services. 33 respondents in total completed the survey: 33% in the College of Humanities and Social Science (HSS), 18% in the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine (MVM) and 24% in the College of Science and Engineering (CSE), broadly consistent with the relative size of each College. The remaining 24% of respondents were from Support Services. Within schools, most respondents completed the survey on behalf of their school as a whole (63%) with a significant proportion completing on behalf of a programme (20%). Colleagues in Support Services completed the survey either on behalf of the service as a whole (56%) or on behalf of a key service sub-unit.

FINDINGS

Methods used

Table 1 shows the range of survey methods used. Overall, the most used methods are electronic questionnaires, paper questionnaires and formal meetings. The University of Edinburgh survey revealed findings broadly consistent with the sector respondents in terms of use of formal meetings and paper questionnaires, but showed a substantially higher reported use of informal contact and a slightly lower reported use of electronic questionnaires. Table 1 presents the range of methods used, but does not indicate how much use is made of each method.

Method	Sector response (%)	UoE response (%)
Paper questionnaires	64.3	61.8
Electronic questionnaires (using external open access	78.6	58.8
survey software)		
Electronic questionnaires (using bespoke software)	42.9	29.4
Social networking: Facebook, blogs, Twitter	21.4	17.6
Electronic dialogue: bulletin boards, web-based response	17.9	44.1
forms, WebCT		
Formal meetings: focus groups, one-to-one meetings,	75.0	79.4
staff-student liaison meetings		
Informal contact	46.4	82.4
Personal response systems (i.e. clickers in class)	21.4	20.6
Other	3.6	11.8

Table 1: Survey methods used







Respondents were asked to indicate the method that they made the most use of. Electronic and paper questionnaires clearly emerged as the most used methods. While formal meetings seem to be widely used (in Table 1) only 15% in the internal survey and 7% in the external survey use them as their main method. The findings indicate that there is a distinct bias towards questionnaire types of data gathering with much less focus on qualitative data gathering methods, such as meetings/focus groups, which may have an impact on the nature of data gathered and its potential effectiveness.

Effort versus Value

Respondents were asked to rate the methods they use in terms of the amount of effort taken and the value derived, on a scale from low effort/value to high effort/value. In terms of effort, both the internal and external surveys rated paper questionnaires (81% external and 50% internal) and formal meetings (70% external and 59% internal) as high in effort. Additionally, the external survey rated electronic dialogue as high in effort (60%).

The survey methods rated lowest in effort were informal contact (43% external and 63% internal) and social networking (43% external and 57% internal). Additionally electronic questionnaires were rated low in effort by almost half the respondents to the external survey.

In terms of value, none of the methods were deemed to offer no value at all. The methods rated highest in value across both external and internal surveys are formal meetings (89% internal; 90% external), informal contact (82% internal; 78% external), electronic questionnaires (79% internal; 74% external) and paper questionnaires (66% internal; 80% external). Social media and electronic dialogue both received mixed responses, suggesting that some value is being derived in pockets, but not consistently.

Overall, the findings suggest that methods are used based primarily on effort over value, which raises some concerns over the usefulness of information derived. There seem to be opportunities to make greater use of methods that are perceived to offer greater value.

Purpose of Surveys

The use of surveys for understanding the student experience of the programme and its units/modules is clearly seen as the primary purpose and highly important (see Table 2): rated important by more than three-quarters of respondents. The use of surveys to understand the wider student experience beyond the programme of study is perceived to be important but less important than understanding the student experience of programmes. Externally surveys do not seem to be regarded as very important as management information tools to understand the usage of services and are considered to be unimportant for the purpose of staff performance review.

Method	Sector response	UoE response (mean)
	(mean)*	
Students' experience of the overall programme of study	1.6	1.4
Students' experience of a module/unit of a programme	1.8	1.5
Students' experience of a key stage or level of the	2.0	2.0
programme of study (e.g. the first year)		
Students' experiences of other services/facilities not	2.3	2.2
directly provided by their programme (e.g. library, IT,		
Careers. Accommodation)		
Information/opinions from staff	2.6	1.9

Table 2: Purpose of surveys







Providing management information relating to usage of	3.0	2.1
particular services/facilities		
Providing management information for the purposes of	3.7	2.5
staff performance review		
Fulfilling the requirements for Quality Assurance	2.4	1.6

*Based on a 5-point scale 1= very important, 5= not at all important

A key concern is whether surveys are being used to understand enough about the wider student experience, in particular those aspects of the student experience that cut across programmes and courses (such as student support, careers etc). With so much surveying being conducted at the module/programme level, there is the risk that information is being generated in silos without obtaining a holistic overview of the student experience.

Question format and content

Three key findings are evident in terms of (1) the format of questions used, (2) the degree of standardisation of questions and (3) the extent of benchmarking or reference to external surveys. In terms of question format, closed questions tend to be used more than open questions, although open questions seem to feature as a more major component at Edinburgh compared to the external sample.

Externally the extent of standardisation of questions seems to be higher. This may contribute to the perception of lower effort reported above. The findings suggest that a degree of standardisation exists within a survey in order to enable comparisons from year to year and identify trends, but that standardisation perhaps forms a lesser role across surveys within an institution. However, the content of surveys externally does tend to closely mirror the National Student Survey (NSS) categories which means that a high proportion of external surveys contain questions directly comparable to NSS.







Analysis of data

Differences in the analysis of data are evident between in the internal and external surveys. The internal UoE survey suggests that more use is made of automated statistical analysis and presentation, but that less attention is paid to comparing the data to key benchmarks, in particular external benchmarks: 68% of the external survey respondents reported comparing survey data to annual internal benchmarks and 59% to external benchmarks whereas 68% of internal survey respondents reported comparing survey data to internal benchmarks but 81% do not compare data to external benchmarks. Benchmarking may be facilitated by greater standardisation of questions and closer alignment of questions to the NSS survey.

Distribution and use of survey findings

In both the external and internal UoE surveys respectively only 21% and 26% of respondents reported that the survey results were retained by the author of the survey. Almost all (96% and 94% respectively) reported making results available to all with management responsibility for the activity to which the survey relates. 79% externally and 50% internally reported making the results available to management outside the immediate academic unit or service section. Fewer (63% and 40%) make the results available to all the respondents of the surveys. Only 25% and 13% make the results publicly available and 27%/21% make the results available to external bodies (such as external examiners and Professional Bodies).

The distribution of results shows a fairly consistent picture between the internal and external surveys: distribution of findings is mostly among those involved in conducting and managing the teaching. Smaller proportions overall make the results available to students or make them publicly available.

The primary uses of the findings are for QE and QA: to inform local decisions on changes in teaching and to satisfy QA requirements (54% externally and 77% internally reported this as important). Secondary uses appear to be to inform Department planning (27% in both surveys noted this as important). 50%/48% overall reported that the results were not important in the appraisal or personal development process.

Ideal surveys

Respondents were asked to indicate their ideal survey method and the reason. Similarities across both surveys are evident in terms of the desire for greater use of electronic surveying and also the desire to make surveying more efficient. A small proportion of respondents in both surveys still want to use paper methods. Triangulation seems to be a key feature, in particular ensuring that different methods feed into a common purpose and being able to derive greater value from existing (high effort) mechanisms like staff-student liaison meetings and student representatives. The general trend seems to be the abandonment of paper surveys for electronic, although some report returning to paper surveys because of lower response rates with electronic surveys.

Conclusion

The findings clearly indicate that despite a range of survey methods being used, most institutions in the sample make heaviest use of questionnaires, in particular electronic questionnaires. The findings seem to suggest that the choice is based on effort over value which raises concerns about the overall potential of the surveys to achieve the primary functions noted by Harvey (2010). The key driver in the shift from traditional paper surveys to online has been cost implications and timeliness of data coding and reporting. Despite this, findings clearly indicate that there is room for improvement in the analysis and reporting of feedback results and its use as management information. Whilst both







surveys suggest that results are being used effectively for QA and QE purposes within institutions, there are still gaps in the extent to which results are being reported externally. The focus on questionnaires suggests an over reliance on quantitative measures; whilst such methods may highlight problems, they are not always effective in helping to understand the potential solutions to the problems. In the spirit of partnership, institutions need to make greater use of the ongoing dialogue with students through both formal meetings and informal contact. On the basis of the study the following recommendations are made:

- Ensure feedback mechanisms provide a holistic overview of the student experience from the student perspective.
- Consider ways to triangulate feedback from different feedback mechanisms. Questionnaires are just one method and should not be mistaken as the only method. They need to be considered in the wider context of the student voice. Also need to ensure that the outcomes are known to student reps and that the conversations around how to address the feedback are channelled through regular formal meetings with students, and reps.
- Consider ways to increase the value of "high effort" feedback mechanisms such as formal meetings, perhaps using them to discuss feedback results and suggest potential actions.
- Consider ways to increase opportunities for benchmarking both internally and externally.
- Make results more widely available in particular to students. Consider ways to make results more widely available externally.
- Consider student feedback surveys as key evidence in planning decisions in particular in teaching resourcing decisions.

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Questions for discussion:

- (1) What methods are used to gather feedback from students and how does this impact on the value of the information derived?
- (2) In what ways and how effectively are results used?
- (3) To what extent is student feedback used as a means of internal information to guide improvement?
- (4) To what extent is student feedback used as external information for potential students and other stakeholders, including accountability and compliance requirements?
- (5) Does student feedback in your institution make a difference to the student experience?