



Effective Course Evaluation

The Future for Quality and Standards in Higher Education

A summary report from interviews among
senior academics and student representatives





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- **Alex Nutt**, current Academic Affairs Officer, University of Leicester Students' Union.

INTRODUCTION

The 2011-12 academic year is a big one for the Higher Education sector. This is the year when, more than at any previous point at time, UK universities will have to provide clear evidence of the 'value' of studying at their institution.

Universities are digesting the implications of the Higher Education White Paper, published in June 2011, which has asked institutions to be more accountable to students on teaching quality and to provide greater transparency in areas such as the student experience. Specifically the paper says that “universities will be expected to publish online summary reports of student surveys of lecture courses, aiding choice and stimulating competition between the best academics”. Therefore, gaining effective student feedback on courses and lecturers to enable transparent reporting is a must.

At Electric Paper we work with over 600 universities in the UK and worldwide to help them to evaluate their courses through effective student feedback via our automated paper and online survey management system EvaSys. We hope that this report will draw attention to the latest issues and trends around effective course evaluation which, in turn, will help us to develop our support for the Higher Education sector. But why is it so important that we get this right?

Firstly, and most importantly, with the increase in tuition fees from 2012, universities can no longer afford to leave teaching and learning quality in the hands of academics alone. The University's executive needs to have visibility around the quality of the course and lecturer, and establishing the best way to tackle the 'process' of getting student feedback is crucial.

Secondly, the National Student Survey (NSS) is currently the primary method of gathering feedback on the quality of students' courses in order to contribute to public accountability and help inform the choices of future applicants. Gaining comprehensive, instant, feedback on courses and lecturers can assist universities in improving overall quality, and NSS scores.

Thirdly, as many universities have taken the decision to charge the full £9,000, it will become even more important for students to distinguish between institutions on issues of quality. Quickly capturing feedback across all courses, providing students and their parents with evidence-based feedback about the quality of teaching and learning, will be a big advantage.

Fourth, individual universities need to stand out from the crowd. With the introduction of 'Key Information Sets' universities need to do everything they can to provide indicators of quality. Capturing, and responding positively to, student feedback on course evaluation can only help boost recruitment targets and reputation.

Finally, implementing an effective process for capturing student feedback around courses and lecturers is a money-saver for universities. Institutions spend a huge amount of time and money on survey administration, and approaches are inconsistent (e.g. with management of surveys sitting centrally in one university, and departmentally in another). An effective process for course evaluation can offer significant cost and efficiency savings, addressing the hidden costs in survey administration and freeing up staff expertise for other areas.



Eric Bohms, Managing Director, Electric Paper Ltd

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to examine the latest issues and trends in course evaluation. In-depth interviews have been conducted with 10 senior academics and student representatives to draw out a general sense of how universities are currently approaching the 'process' of student surveys, and what improvements need to be made to gain more effective student feedback on courses and lecturers.

This qualitative research is particularly relevant in the context of the 2011 Higher Education White Paper, which has asked universities to be more accountable to students on teaching quality and to provide greater transparency in areas such as the student experience. Rising tuition fees in 2012 mean that gaining (and responding effectively to) student feedback on courses and lecturers is increasingly important for universities as they have to provide clear evidence of the 'value' of studying at their institution.

This report finds that:

- Many universities seeking feedback on courses and lecturers via surveys struggle to achieve a meaningful response from students, which is partly due to students being inundated with requests to complete surveys.
- Student representatives have indicated that students are not effectively engaged in the feedback process and, for some, providing feedback can even be intimidating.
- Universities need to work harder at feeding back to students the actions they will be taking as a result of input provided for course and lecturer evaluation surveys.
- End-of-module evaluation is a particular stumbling block in the provision of feedback to students - and feedback can be slow - but moving to mid-module evaluation can help to improve the process.
- Ideally students want the opportunity to express their views on course improvements at a time that their feedback benefits them directly.
- Universities need to embrace new technologies to improve turnaround time - but effective feedback can be gained via a combination of paper and online surveys.
- Universities should establish a more consistent (centralised) approach to survey administration - including a standard set of survey questions - to enable effective benchmarking at course and institutional level. However, individual departments should have the flexibility to include bespoke questions for particular courses.
- In-class student involvement in survey administration can increase commitment as they are stakeholders in the process.
- Effective course evaluation is necessary for universities to provide a clear evidence base to demonstrate their 'value' to students.

THE NEED TO... IMPROVE RESPONSE RATES

Many universities seeking feedback on courses and lecturers via surveys are still struggling to achieve a meaningful response from students - that is, a response rate of over 50% that will ensure statistical validity in order to evaluate teaching quality and make improvements.

Professor Glenn Burgess, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Learning and Teaching at the University of Hull, said the problem was that students were simply inundated with requests to complete surveys. “A key issue facing universities in relation to gaining effective course feedback from students is around achieving significant response rates to any questionnaire-based approach. Students are increasingly overloaded with surveys - from the National Student Survey downwards - so you need a good reason to encourage participation. It’s also important to appreciate the qualitative/quantitative divide in surveys. Often the most useful information is gained through qualitative feedback, but this is also the most difficult to achieve as it requires more time from respondents.”

This is a view shared by Professor Susannah Quinsee, Director of Learning Development at City University London, who said that “a lot of course evaluation” is geared towards the National Student Survey. “Ideally you want to engage in dialogue with students, because this is more useful than knowing that half the class love a module and half the class hate it. You want to know more about what the middle group think. You also need more open questions rather than tick box, but students are not so keen on these questions. So there is an issue over student engagement, and an associated issue around the extent to which students engage in the language used in evaluation surveys.”

Alex Smith, former Academic Affairs Officer at the University of Leicester’s Students’ Union, and a member of the

Quality Assurance Agency Board of Directors, agreed that there is a need for universities to ensure that students are “properly engaged” and even “incentivised” to take part in the process. However, “providing feedback can be intimidating for students,” he said. Alex Nutt, who succeeded Smith at Leicester’s Students’ Union added that “despite the process being anonymous some students feel intimidated by the idea of giving negative feedback in case it reflects on them”.

“We introduced mid-module surveys and went back to paper and the response was super”

Coventry University has managed to increase its response rates by using paper and moving to mid-module surveys. “Historically universities conduct end-of-course, or end-of-module surveys, but by the time the feedback has been analysed and results published the students have gone away,” said Professor Ian Marshall, the University’s Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). “We moved to online surveys, but the response was dreadful, so last year we introduced mid-module surveys and went back to paper. The response was super, and we are now able to turn around feedback in two weeks maximum.” He added that if a module is perceived to be underperforming “we will focus on those”.

At Coventry University mid-module surveys are handed out in class by 120 senior student representatives who are interviewed and selected by the University’s Students’ Union. The University of Hull is also working closely with its Students’ Union to develop its approach to improving response rates. “What we have found is that students are tolerant of problems, but they want us to listen, feed back quickly, and respond,” said Professor Burgess.

THE NEED TO... IMPROVE STUDENT FEEDBACK

Through this research a clear gap has emerged around the extent to which UK universities currently feed back to students the action they will be taking as a result of input provided in course and lecturer evaluation surveys.

“Students need to provide feedback, then the universities need to take that on board and do what they can with it, and then provide clear feedback to the students on the actions and outcomes,” said ex-University of Leicester Students’ Union Academic Affairs Officer, Alex Smith. “The feedback loop must underpin everything.”

Alex Bols, Head of Education and Quality at the National Union of Students (NUS), said that “in the majority of cases” students who participate in course evaluation surveys, in his experience, are then not told what happens as a result of the process. “It’s important for universities to close the loop and tell students what has happened - or hasn’t happened - as a result of the feedback provided and why. This should not be an autopsy at the end of a course, but a process embedded through the learning experience so that it is of benefit to the student giving the feedback and their experience.”

“It’s important for universities to close the loop and tell students what has or hasn’t happened”

End-of-module evaluation appears to be a particular stumbling block in the provision of feedback to students. For example, City University London is three years into a JISC-funded four-year project on curriculum design, and staff have looked at the issue of effective course evaluation. “What we’re finding is that evaluation for a lot of students is not meaningful because they are being asked to give feedback on a course or module they are just completing, and are therefore

not going to feel the benefits of any improvements made,” said City’s Professor Susannah Quinsee. “Ideally you would want to explore in-module evaluation, which we are doing, but that takes a lot of time both in terms of implementation and analysis.”

Student representatives agree that end-of-module evaluation is no longer sufficient. “It’s a flawed system,” said Smith. “In my experience universities often ask for student feedback at the end of a course, but by then it’s too late, and the students do not see any results from the feedback they’ve given. Universities often profess a need to get the feedback system right but I don’t think this has necessarily happened yet as, by only asking for feedback at the end of a course, they are gathering entirely new opinions from a different cohort of students and therefore cannot compare like-for-like.”

Professor Alan Speight, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience and Academic Quality Enhancement) at the University of Swansea, and a member of the Quality Assurance Agency Board of Directors, said that establishing an effective system for student feedback was vital for universities’ reputation. “There is a need to dig down to obtain feedback as it does not take much to make students feel disgruntled. Universities are only as strong as their weakest link and poor delivery by a subset of staff that goes unchecked could make a lot of difference to the overall teaching reputation of an institution.”

“Students are more interested in outcomes - so it’s important for universities to be very clear on what they are able to do, and equally be honest on what they are not able to,” added Coventry’s Professor Ian Marshall.

THE NEED TO... IMPROVE TURNAROUND TIME

Relating to the issue of student feedback is the challenge that universities face in turning around the findings of course evaluation surveys.

Professor Andy Pitsillides, Chair of the Teaching Quality Committee at the Royal Veterinary College, University of London, admitted that the process can be “very slow” in Higher Education. “As academics we know that students want quick feedback as it helps their learning, yet we are restricted by the annual cycle of surveying. The exercise is also paper-driven, so it is more cumbersome than we might like, and we are looking at a process of electronic feedback to augment this approach.”

“As academics we know that students want quick feedback as it helps their learning”

It’s a major issue facing the sector, according to Swansea’s Professor Alan Speight. “Turnaround time is vital, but a big problem at the moment. In some areas surveys may be paper-based and manually processed, which means that someone has to physically input the results and is open to human error. Also the feedback may come back when it is too late for the staff to do anything about it as they are, by that time, already committed to a teaching pattern for the next academic session, which in turn makes the students wonder why their thoughts have not been listened to.”

A survey of 100 university administrators by Electric Paper, conducted in 2011, found 74% of respondents agree that both paper and online surveys is a requirement in Higher Education. It’s not a question of either/or, the respondents said, because both methodologies can provide high response rates and efficiency savings for the right surveys in the right context. However, turnaround time is key as

universities need this for both instant feedback and for internal benchmarking leading to organisational improvement.

Student groups agree. “By examining the process and proving that they are interested, and capable of acting upon, the feedback they receive in a timely manner universities could build partnerships with their students to add value all-round,” said the NUS’ Alex Bols. “Students should be able to express how their course could be improved while it impacts on them.”

Exploiting innovative new technologies could support the requirement to improve turnaround time, according to Professor Huw Morris, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at the University of Salford, who in his previous role as Dean of Manchester Metropolitan University Business School led the trial of course surveys via mobile phones. “Going forward I anticipate the Higher Education sector will need to utilise online devices to capture student feedback, but at the same time ensure this is not done in an intrusive manner. Some element of compulsion for students in providing feedback will also be helpful in ensuring that the results are representative of underlying views.”

In addition to module evaluation, there is a clear need for feedback on the underlying quality of the students’ educational experience, Professor Morris said. “The National Student Survey and, to a lesser extent, the International Student Barometer, are helpful and most universities respond to these. But while we know about student happiness and satisfaction, we don’t know that much about how their educational experiences prepare them in the longer term. Here there is a need to draw on evidence from other tools which assess the contribution of the students’ educational experience to their career prospects and personal and social development in the future.”

THE NEED TO... IMPROVE SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

To improve response rates, student feedback and turnaround time, universities need to have a more consistent approach to survey administration. Through this research it has become clear that the management of surveys sits centrally in one university, and departmentally in another. In addition, a 2011 Electric Paper survey found that academics are managing their own survey administration at 1 in 3 institutions - and that most universities are facing 'absolute chaos' around survey management.

What is clear from interviews with senior academics is that centralisation of course evaluation feedback analysis is required. Following the arrival of Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paul Curran, City University London has introduced a centralised modular evaluation system. "We now have a standard set of questions for surveys, managed centrally, which individual schools can add to if they wish, and the results of these are now part of staff appraisals," said City's Professor Susannah Quinsee. The scheme being rolled out by Coventry University is managed by a central unit based in student services, while the University of Salford has established standard questionnaires for module, level and programme-centred evaluation which are co-ordinated by a central planning and performance department.

Professor David Coates, Dean of the School of Life Sciences' Learning and Teaching Division at the University of Dundee, said "the process of receiving and then disseminating feedback needs to be clean to ensure that those doing the teaching will receive the knowledge they need". He added: "Firstly, there needs to be consistency in the feedback the institution receives as a whole, but equally courses should not always be compared like-for-like. A hub-and-spoke model works best where individual departments are evaluated but then this feeds into a holistic view of the institution."

Other universities are making moves towards centralisation, such as the University of Hull. "We have a central code of practice for survey administration which provides the foundation for all modular and programme surveys," said Hull's Professor Glenn Burgess. "But within the University there is currently no consistency on the level of approach and questions being asked locally, and we have plans to change that. This brings a pressure on resource for central processes and for us to introduce a particular way of working. It also links to wider policy issues - for example, how is feedback linked to staff appraisal, what happens in terms of responding to poor feedback, and how public do you make this information."

"A common set of questions should be owned institutionally, with subject areas able to select from optional additional questions"

The University of Swansea's Professor Alan Speight said that there were historic challenges to overcome for many institutions in order for the feedback process to become centralised. "The difficulty has been that surveys carried out by different departments have evolved organically and been developed in silos that are tailored just to the needs of one faculty. This results in a lack of core information across the institution, mixed responses and no consistent use of data. There should be a unified approach that includes core questions and specifies the way the feedback is processed - which allows benchmarking and consistency. A common set of core questions should be owned institutionally, with subject areas able to select from a bank of optional additional questions."

As with the Coventry University model, Professor Speight suggested that students could be brought on board to help co-ordinate the process.

THE NEED TO... IMPROVE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The volatile Higher Education landscape - the increase in student tuition fees and the focus on student-led decision-making - means that universities are under pressure to be more accountable and transparent on issues of quality.

Alex Nutt, Academic Affairs Officer at the University of Leicester Students' Union, said that prospective students and their parents "will want to know as much as possible" in order to make their university decision, citing examples from the quality of lectures to resources in the library. "I also think they will want to know that institutions take the concerns of students seriously and that education is seen as a collaborative partnership between the university and the students, not just a business transaction."

"It's brilliant news for students who to all intents and purposes are consumers and have the right to know this information"

"There is a going to be a race to improve in Higher Education and the results will be there for all to see, whereas previously things that were not done as well may have been brushed under the carpet," explained Nutt's predecessor, Alex Smith. "It's brilliant news for students who to all intents and purposes are consumers and have the right to know this information."

Universities are only too aware of the need to provide a clear evidence base to demonstrate their 'value'. "Of paramount importance in the future will be the student experience as this will determine how to promote the institution to the outside world and potential students," said Dundee's Professor David Coates. "With the National Student Survey, and the introduction of 'Key Information Sets', it is vital that there is an effective course

and lecturer feedback method so there can be constant improvements that will determine a student's opinion of their institution based on direct experience."

A wider issue beyond module evaluation is the need for UK universities to move towards surveying "all student groups", according to Salford's Professor Huw Morris. The National Student Survey and International Student Barometer do not, he said, cover UK and other EU second and third year students at Levels 4 and 5, taught postgraduate UK and other EU students at level 7, or UK and other EU postgraduate research students at levels 7 and above.

The UK may also wish to take note of developments across the Atlantic, Professor Morris said. "In the USA there are other survey methods which are more comprehensive and which focus more clearly on contribution. For example, Pew studies and the National Survey of Student Engagement provide more comprehensive and possibly more candid and easily accessible measures of student experiences in particular institutions and particular colleges, schools and departments. With the changes in tuition fees, I think we will see more information of this kind being expected by students and their parents because they will want to measure return on investment."

However, City's Professor Susannah Quinsee, said she had "difficulty" with the overall notion of students as consumers. "That implies a customer-supplier relationship where education is about partnership and dialogue. Universities do need to get students more involved in programme design, and evaluation and feedback is all part of that, but students also need to work with universities to tell us what data they find useful, what they expect, and above all what they find meaningful."

CONCLUSION

Interviews with senior academics and student representatives for this report have uncovered a strong feeling that universities need to improve their approach to student feedback on courses and lecturers via module surveys.

The core perspective coming out of universities is that they have difficulty in achieving a “meaningful” response from students to surveys, and turnaround time from response to feedback is not as quick as it could or should be.

From the student perspective there is an issue around the extent to which students feel engaged in the feedback process, not least because universities do not do enough to feed back the outcomes of their survey input, and the extent to which they feel the benefit of any actions taken as a result of their feedback.

Some universities are moving from end-of-module evaluation to mid-module evaluation, which may help to address these issues. Universities also recognise the need for a more consistent, and centralised approach to survey administration which will potentially enable more effective institutional benchmarking.

However, universities also recognise that current evaluation processes need development - there is a clear need to support academics in improving the quality of a course by providing comprehensive, instant, student feedback - and research indicates that a combination of both paper and online surveys is a requirement in Higher Education survey administration.

What is clear is that all universities need to embrace this agenda. Prospective students (and their parents) applying for degree programmes from 2012-13 will be looking for detailed and transparent information to help them distinguish between Higher Education institutions on issues of quality and standards in relation to courses.

Individual universities need to stand out from the crowd - and providing clear baseline reporting about the quality of teaching and learning is going to be critical going forward.

As one interviewee for this report summed up: “There is a lot of activity in the sector around understanding the student better and communicating with them - and this could be a crucial differentiation for universities in the next five years.”

POTENTIAL FOR PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

In this report senior academics and student representatives have expressed an interest in improving course evaluation practices in universities.

Electric Paper Ltd, a software solution provider to the education sector based in the UK, Germany and Switzerland, has developed EvaSys Survey Management Suite, a hybrid paper and online survey automation system which enables Higher Education institutions to improve and efficiently manage their module evaluations and other student feedback surveys.

By managing the process centrally through the web-based system, institutions are able to reduce administration time and costs whilst distributing detailed analysis to stakeholders in a timely manner. Using both paper and online surveys, EvaSys utilises in-class evaluations to maximise response rates and therefore validating results.

In July 2011 Electric Paper announced its latest product release, EvaSys Education V5.0.

At the time this report was published in August 2011 Electric Paper was working with over 600 universities worldwide, and examples of its UK university partnerships are below.

London School of Economics and Political Science

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) required a system which would allow it to quickly and efficiently survey its 9,000 students and gain feedback on its courses and teaching. LSE turned to Electric Paper's EvaSys survey management system, which allows the flexibility to evaluate modules using both online and paper-based surveys automatically and without the need for manual data entry. "There were two main goals when introducing EvaSys at the School," explained Mike Page, Head of ARD Systems and Business Processes at LSE. "We wanted to improve the timeliness and accuracy of survey results, and to encourage

higher response rates." Between 2009 and 2010 more than 45,000 questionnaires were completed, surveying over 400 graduate teaching assistants, 600 courses, and 700 permanent teachers. Once the completed surveys were received Electric Paper scanned up to 3,000 a day, providing an instant, individual, daily report for each course/teacher combination. Whereas previously some staff had to wait weeks, turnaround times improved dramatically with results returned quickly and in an easy-to-read format. "The swift turnaround of clear and accurate results was a key requirement for the new system and EvaSys more than met expectations," Mr Page said. "EvaSys was selected after an extensive tendering exercise because it offered the most flexible yet dedicated system for our needs - it's a clear winner in our eyes."

Queen Mary, University of London

As part of its five-year strategic plan Queen Mary, University of London (QMUL) required a system which would allow central collection and analysis of student evaluations for its 16,000 students to ensure rigorous monitoring and assessment of taught programmes. In 2010 QMUL contracted Electric Paper's EvaSys product, which provides flexible and automated course and module evaluations including paper and online surveys and detailed reporting. "We wanted to ensure that all students are invited to give anonymous feedback on every module and that such feedback is collated and used systematically to assure and enhance the quality of QMUL's taught provision," said Emma Wynne, Assistant Academic Registrar at QMUL. In the initial pilot roll-out, nine out of 17 schools participated, surveying over 380 modules. Results were completed within three weeks with an average response rate of 59%, with some modules as high as 73%. As the EvaSys system fulfilled the

POTENTIAL FOR PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

objectives of the scheme, senior staff responsible for taught programmes and QMUL's Vice-Principal recommended the adoption of EvaSys throughout the University commencing in October 2011. "The feedback from the schools was that the reports generated by EvaSys are rapid, informative and clearly presented," Ms Wynne said. "From a programme management and quality enhancement perspective, the presentation of results in graphical format - including School and College averages - was particularly useful in identifying areas of concern and examples of excellent practice."

University of St Andrews

The University of St Andrews in Scotland has established a reputation as one of Europe's leading and most distinctive centres for teaching and research. Previously, while run centrally, academics requested their own individualised questionnaire resulting in over 1,000 unique versions with ensuing difficulties in longitudinal comparison of the quality of delivery and content of the module. The University established that a review of the feedback system and an

overhaul of the process was needed. As a result, Electric Paper's EvaSys was purchased by St Andrews in November 2010 and used to produce that semester's module evaluations. In addition, a core set of questions was developed to include compulsory questions relating to modules, individual lecturers and individual tutors, supported by a maximum of eight optional questions from a pool of 16. Once completed, the questionnaires were scanned and instant analysis reports produced. Reports were automatically emailed to module coordinators and to lecturers to receive individual feedback tied to the internal review of teaching and learning. This alerted senior management to any areas of concern, and to identify good practice that deserved commendation and dissemination. "The introduction of EvaSys has simplified the module feedback process immensely," said Carol Morris, Director of the Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development at St Andrews. "Results are now available in days rather than months allowing more time to monitor quality and implement enhancements to teaching and learning."

Need help in implementing centralised module evaluation?



Electric Paper works with over 600 universities to
provide effective student feedback systems

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