
Student feedback on Facebook could be 'very useful' for regulators

Study reveals feedback on social media sites closely correlate to measures of quality such as England's TEF

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By [Chris Havergal \(/content/chris-havergal-0\)](#).

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Source: Getty

Students have a fondness for sharing their views about their universities online, whether they are sounding off or singing its praises. And a new study suggests that, far from being meaningless chatter, this feedback offers a remarkably accurate guide to an institution's performance.

The research, presented at the annual conference of the UK's Quality Assurance Agency this week, even suggests that monitoring students' online feedback could form an important part of higher education's regulatory regime.



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Alex Griffiths, a research officer at LSE's Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation, collected more than 200,000 anonymised student ratings that score UK higher education providers on a one-to-five scale from three data sources: Facebook, Whatuni and StudentCrowd.

Not only did these reveal a relatively positive view of institutions' performance – the average score on the platforms was 4.33, 4.11 and 4.08 respectively – the creation of an overall "collective judgement" score revealed that the ratings were closely correlated with established measures of quality in the sector.

For example, the average rating for English providers that met requirements in their annual provider review, formerly operated by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, was 4.19; while the mean for institutions that needed an action plan to pass was 4.05.

Meanwhile, the average score for institutions that secured a "gold" rating in the teaching excellence framework was 4.32; while for "silver" providers it was 4.17, and for "bronze" campuses it was 4.13.

Dr Griffiths also found a correlation between the ratings and providers' overall satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey.

He suggested that unsolicited online feedback could play an important role in sector regulation in an era when there is strong demand for student-focused and timely information on sector performance, but there is little appetite for new, burdensome data collections.

Dr Griffiths, whose previous research (<http://qualitysafety.bmj.com/content/early/2017/09/25/bmjqs-2017-006847>) has revealed how social media feedback could predict the results of UK hospitals' Care Quality Commission ratings, was even able to calculate month-by-month averages of student ratings. These revealed that students are most satisfied with their universities over the summer and in the first weeks of term, before slumping around Christmas, rising through January and February, and then hitting their lowest point during March and April, coinciding with institutions' examination and assessment periods.

Dr Griffiths told *Times Higher Education* that his findings reflected the theory of the "wisdom of crowds" which states that, even if the majority of people in a group are not especially well-informed or rational, large groups can be remarkably insightful under the right circumstances.

He argued that online feedback could be a “very useful guide” for a regulator, or for a university seeking to improve its performance.

“We would never suggest that this gets used in isolation by a regulator to take action, but it could be one part of their toolbox,” Dr Griffiths said. “It can certainly throw up suggestions of where there might be concerns.

“What is advantageous is that this data is available on a daily basis, so you don’t have to wait for a whole year for data.”

Will Naylor, the QAA’s director of colleges and alternative providers, said that, while online data were “unlikely to supersede the need for formal measures” of standards, “they may give universities and colleges more opportunities for organisational learning and improving the student experience”.

But Mr Naylor added: “First we need to do more work, including to assess whether students would accept the use of feedback data for this purpose.”

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