Enhancing module evaluation feedback reporting at Northumbria University

Institution:
Northumbria University

Location:
Newcastle

Details:
~27,000 students

Solution:
Blue course evaluation

Challenge:
Improving the reporting of module evaluation feedback to internal stakeholders. Extracting data at Department and Faculty level was particularly troublesome. Blue is helping to overcome these long-standing blockages.

Key Benefits

→ Consistent approach to capturing student feedback

→ Improved reporting across all levels of the University

→ Integration of Blue with existing University systems

→ Opportunity for question personalisation

→ Response rates gradually increasing

Overcoming historical challenges

Northumbria University is the largest higher education institution in North-East England. It appointed Explorance to enhance its approach to how it receives and acts on feedback from students through module evaluation surveys, and support what the University deems a required element of the evidence base for programme annual monitoring and review.

The University historically had a range of formal and informal mechanisms for obtaining student feedback of which module evaluation is a crucial component. The 2016-17 academic year saw the institution change from paper to electronic surveys and move to a centralised professional services team, including student governance and enhancement. It is this team that operates the module evaluation surveys.

"We had been doing surveys for a number of years but had a number of issues, particularly on the reporting side," explained Dr Ann Macfadyen, University Director of Learning and Teaching. "Systems are often built around module feedback at a programme level and we found that extracting data at a Department or Faculty level was more challenging, as was the aggregation of data into wider reporting. We started working with

Explorance in May 2019 and wanted to embed Blue quickly – over a matter of weeks/months. We were so positive about the support we received during integration. We had one individual leading the process, but training was provided by Explorance for all the professional services team, and they came up with solutions to whatever we were struggling with."

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> *Dr Ann Macfadyen, University Director of Learning and Teaching, Northumbria University*

Improved, and consistent, reporting mechanisms

Having sought a complete student evaluation solution to create consistency and improved reporting, the University has identified a number of benefits following the implementation and roll-out of Blue. "First and foremost, it has led to improved reporting," Dr Macfadyen said. "We can take what has been done at a module level and report at programme, Department and Faculty level – and design the format of reports to support ease of access for different stakeholders (for example, we produce different reports for module leaders to those for our Deputy Vice-Chancellor). We have certainly had a positive response from heads of departments and Faculty leaders on the format."

She continued: "Not only do we now have more accessible, visible reporting, we also have the ability to combine modules with low response rates and report these as well. This is important to Northumbria University as we have many smaller modules with less than 10 students, and due to confidentiality we do not report less than five responses to the module leader. However, these general responses can still be incorporated by aggregating the feedback. Blue's integration with SITS (student record system) and Blackboard (virtual learning environment) means that data is always current."

The move to Blue has facilitated discussion with colleagues on what questions to ask and how to feedback to students. "We can easily ask students different questions based on the module type – e.g. studio-based, dissertation, placement, distance learning – and these are differentiated by module code," Dr Macfadyen revealed. "Staff also have the option to add their own questions. Not only can staff access reports via email links which are sent to them but they can log directly into Blue to see response rates and reports once they have been generated. Feedback can be instant or delayed, depending on the time of year. For example, as a result of this we have changed our feedback deadline to January."

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Dr Ann Macfadyen, University Director of Learning and Teaching, Northumbria University

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An impact beyond the feedback data

Student opinion of academic programmes and modules is highly valued by the University, as is the ability of the institution to respond in a timely and effective manner, and for Dr Macfadyen Blue's impact will extend beyond internal reporting. "We want to capture the voice of all students," she said. "With paper, yes we were getting 100% responses but that was for those in the classroom only, and students own words beyond that data can be more powerful. All this informs the National Student Survey, alongside other student voice strategies, and also how student feedback impacts on the course."

Whilst response rates through Blue are "gradually increasing", Dr Macfadyen acknowledges that reporting back to students on what can and cannot be done is going to be key to securing future participation in surveys. "If we are not able to change everything then a discussion around what could be done or what we will ask to be done can help – the students' role in influencing the process is particularly important," she said. "We know we cannot change the world overnight but if something is not achievable then we know we need to explain why."

Finally, Dr Macfadyen reserved praise for the ongoing support from Explorance. "They were excellent in embedding Blue in our systems initially and importantly they are willing to work with other providers supporting those systems in aligning to the institutional specification going forward. Customer support is always prompt and the team are positive in finding solutions to challenges. I find they are always happy to listen and are also very creative on workarounds when these are needed," she added.

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