

THE STUDENT VOICE

*How can UK universities ensure that module
evaluation feedback leads to continuous
improvement across their institution?*

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Foreword

Policy changes mean that UK universities are having to take a more robust and strategic approach to course and module evaluation.

The National Student Survey (NSS) poses questions on how students have the opportunity to give feedback and how their feedback is acted on – and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), which provides a resource for students to judge teaching quality in universities, draws on data from the NSS. All this points to student engagement rising higher up on universities' priority lists than ever before.

Student satisfaction, informed and ultimately supported by an engaged student population, is fundamental to the future of Higher Education Institutions and the strategic goals of Vice-Chancellors and Deputy or Pro Vice-Chancellors directly responsible for this agenda.

For too long student evaluation data has been underutilised. Universities have tended to focus on improving the process, for example by automating rather than using the data for improvement. There has also been too much focus on the scores that come back from the data and whether an individual score is better or worse than the average. While this is helpful, it does not facilitate an understanding of the issues and trends with students. So the discussion is becoming a more strategic one.

There are five key areas that universities need to consider, in my view, in the development of teaching-led student engagement strategies:

1. How to engage modern-day students through new technologies they have grown up with – and how to engage Faculty in utilising such technology (not relying on traditional approaches to teaching and learning).
2. How to enable prompt action to address students' issues and concerns prior to traditional end-of-semester evaluations (and before they complete their NSS scores or communicate negative views and feelings via the growing number of online forums).
3. How to engage 'quieter' students who may not be comfortable asking questions or sharing concerns,

and therefore may be unhappy or thinking of dropping out of university altogether (which impact on TEF-assessed continuation rates sourced from the Higher Education Statistics Authority).

4. How to really understand which approaches to teaching and learning have the highest level of student engagement – and plan for the future based on this evidence.
5. How to create a culture of continuous improvement (with an enhanced focus on data analytics) – which informs immediate staff and student development – one that is consistent and benchmarked year-on-year.

Feedback matters: and we all have a responsibility to help universities respond to this shift, not least in terms of how module evaluation feedback is gathered and used. This report explores the views of senior leaders in UK universities who are tasked with devising strategies which effectively capture the 'student voice' and ensuring that module evaluation feedback leads to continuous improvement across their institution. It also highlights 'live' current practice, including case studies drawn from across the UK as well as Australia and the USA.



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Strategic necessity

UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are under the spotlight, arguably more than at any other point in their history, for their approaches to enhancing the student experience. The firmly-embedded National Student Survey (NSS), now including questions around the 'Student Voice', means that effectively capturing and responding to student feedback has taken on a whole new meaning for institutions. Throw in annual league tables and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), which sees universities being similarly ranked for their teaching as they are for research, and there is a perfect storm brewing.

A key component of gathering student feedback, and helping to support these wider institutional drivers, is course/module evaluation. Module evaluation surveys have, of course, been undertaken by most universities for many years – but now the pressure is being intensified on senior leadership teams to sharpen up their practices in this area. "Module evaluation gives students the valuable opportunity to express how things are going from their perspective, and gives us enough time to act on their feedback for how the module can be improved or developed", said Ian Dunn, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) at Coventry University. "It is also an opportunity for students to express their thanks, gratitude, and appreciation to module leaders. Over time, and underpinned by evidence, my theory is that module evaluation is a strong indicator of NSS outcomes. Our module evaluation questions are directly linked to those in the NSS – and if we can spot issues and trends through our evaluation, we can take action on these before the NSS".

Professor Wyn Morgan, Vice-President for Education at the University of Sheffield, agreed: "There are two elements here around the necessity for module evaluation: firstly, to get the student voice and capture what they are experiencing in – and how they are feeling about – their module and the teaching of it; and secondly, to reflect, as individuals, departments, faculties and the University as a whole on where we are doing well and where we need to improve and enhance our teaching. We need the student feedback through module evaluation as key information in understanding what is going on from their perspective. My mantra is that the focus should be on getting the student experience right – and feedback is a vital part of that. In

doing this, it also supports our preparation for external measures, such as the NSS and the TEF, by helping us to monitor, refine and improve our practices which will ultimately have an impact on how we perform in those metrics".



"My mantra is that the focus should be on getting the student experience right – and feedback is a vital part of that"

- Professor Wyn Morgan

"Fundamentally, student module feedback is important to understand as part of the cycle to institutional enhancement", explained Professor Karl Leydecker, Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) at the University of Dundee and designate Senior Vice-Principal at the University of Aberdeen. "Having a two-way relationship with students is key, but the consistency of approach to feedback and evaluation is especially important. To understand what is really going on in teaching we need to go beyond broad-brush surveys and results and gather specific data from individual modules. Getting this right – gathering feedback and acting on responses – is fundamental in achieving high levels of student satisfaction (for example in the NSS), especially for teaching and assessment feedback, as well as newer areas around the student voice. It is also important for NSS questions around learning community because it explores those ideas of bringing people together".



"Having a two-way relationship with students is key, but the consistency of approach to feedback and evaluation is especially important"

- Professor Karl Leydecker

Professor Sarah Speight, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning at the University of Nottingham, said that their surveys were set up to "make sure that decision-making is guided by evidence" and to "reward, recognise and motivate our staff". "We have consciously linked our surveys to the latest NSS questions and

modelled them on those”, she revealed. “Some of our questions are identical to questions used in the NSS; some are similar. This gives us a cross-check – it enables us to look for consistent responses and also to see if the open comments provided by students give us further detail about an issue. Some information can be used for TEF, especially subject-level data around the module. We take care to contextualise this according to discipline, topic and cohort: for example, the difference between large-lecture modules versus smaller intakes of students being taught seminar-style. Overall, what we are after is feedback that we can use to ensure we provide our students with a robust, rigorous and stretching learning experience”.

Other universities are embedding module evaluation in student experience enhancement strategies – adapting their approaches as needed to reflect the make-up of the specific needs of their own institution. “We have quite a few smaller specialist courses, so NSS can be a little fickle because we can get large variations year on year, often depending on how well students work together”, said Dr Becky Schaaf, Vice-Provost for Student Experience at Bath Spa University. “However, module evaluation is a lead indicator of the NSS, and this feeds into TEF. Internally we have reporting processes for all courses, including feedback in all forms which feeds into our annual reporting and aligns with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requirements. We are also looking at first-year retention rates so module evaluation surveys could be used to understand the effectiveness of the wider range of support we provide. Ultimately, it is about being able to offer good quality courses that students can enjoy, and module evaluation is an important tool within that”.

Professor Liz Mossop, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Development and Engagement at the University of Lincoln, said that her institution’s main strategic driver for effective module evaluation is the delivery of an excellent student experience and outcomes. “Module evaluation is an important component of this because we need to hear directly from students about their learning experiences, but it is just one piece of the jigsaw”, she insisted. “It can be quite dangerous, I think, to see it in isolation – and we ask our staff to look more holistically at the student experience, and importantly, outcomes. This is where engaging with our students is crucial, and we ask our students to engage beyond the curriculum and feed into all sorts of processes, such as programme reviews and validations: evaluating the student experience is more than results in a questionnaire. We also need to ensure colleagues have the opportunity to do everything they can to put in place the processes to allow engagement

to happen – the culture has to support these types of activities”.

The University of Salford has taken a strategic direction around the development of Industry Collaboration Zones (ICZs), which involve students, staff, and partners. “A key element of this work is our ability to have very agile, honest conversations and active student feedback loops which develop modules and programmes”, said Dr Sam Grogan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience). “Module evaluation is a key part of this active feedback loop. This is not about mid or end-of-module evaluation, nor necessarily so much about ‘You said, we did’. It is about the co-creation of module content and a key part of the environment of co-production that we are developing through the ICZs. Whilst I am always mindful of external metrics related to the student experience, I know that by driving distinctive co-creative and co-productive working, behaviours, and responsibilities through the ICZs, we will positively affect the experience of our students, and prepare them well for employment in an increasingly uncertain and changing world of work. This will continue to have a positive knock-on effect on, for instance, TEF”.

Reflecting on 25 years’ experiences of module evaluation, Lancaster University’s Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education), Professor Sharon Huttly, added: “I believe that data collection practices have remained broadly the same. It is how we are using the data that has evolved, and my view is that the importance attached to module evaluation has changed, especially since 2012 with the move to higher undergraduate tuition fees. Going forward, one area that I do feel is important for module evaluation is that we need to consider provision beyond full-time undergraduate programmes and how best to capture student feedback. For example, whilst currently the part-time market has declined, it will re-emerge in a different way as people need to reskill and learn new areas. This will not necessarily be done in the classroom – online is important, especially at postgraduate level. The challenge is how to keep delivering module evaluations through channels that work for everyone especially as surveys are not the only answer; other dialogue is important”.



“Going forward, one area that I do feel is important for module evaluation is that we need to consider provision beyond full-time undergraduate programmes and how best to capture student feedback” - Professor Sharon Huttly

Effective engagement

One of the major challenges facing UK universities is engaging students, and indeed Faculty members, in module evaluation. Ensuring that the 'process' contributes to a dialogue between Faculty and students, and enabling prompt action to address students' issues and concerns prior to end-of-semester evaluations are among the biggest headaches facing university leadership teams. However, given the deeper institutional drivers around student satisfaction, engagement and the student experience, overcoming these challenges is becoming a must.

"The HE environment has entered a different phase over the last couple of years", said Dr Sam Grogan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) at the University of Salford. "We are in a fundamentally changed, more 'marketised', operating environment than that of even five or six years ago. Within this wider environment, the position of the student has inevitably shifted to incorporate and develop the notions and some values of consumerism. Students are actually producers or, better still, co-producers – hence our institutional emphasis on co-production and co-creation as strategically enabling behaviours for staff and students alike. The approach of co-production, currently embedded in the creation of our modules, in our partnerships with industry and in the significant increases we are seeing in our interdisciplinary practices, now needs to extend into the development of our approaches to module evaluation. Improving our module evaluation practice is fundamentally about feeding the conversation with better evidence and information in a consistent manner".



"Students are actually producers or, better still, co-producers – hence our institutional emphasis on co-production and co-creation as strategically enabling behaviours for staff and students alike"

- Dr Sam Grogan

Against this backdrop, many universities are delivering more holistic approaches to student engagement, which in turn have the potential to support engagement in module evaluation surveys. Professor Liz Mossop, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Development and Engagement at

the University of Lincoln, said that student feedback was "an essential component of how we deliver teaching and assessment. I have always worked to ensure students are at the heart of everything", she explained. "We have a strong partnership with students, and involve the Students' Union in the evaluation of teaching and processes around teaching and learning. This model is a little unique in the sense that we do work very closely with the Union, but I find that quite refreshing. Our approach means that there is a commitment from students to tell us what is wrong – we can help them if there is an issue – but equally, our Faculty has a responsibility to recognise and react to challenges. Co-creation is the process – if there is a problem, we work together to address it".



"We have a strong partnership with students, and involve the Students' Union in the evaluation of teaching and processes around teaching and learning"

- Professor Liz Mossop

The University of Dundee, which works with the Students' Association to develop an annual Student Partnership Agreement to enhance the experience of its students further, also points to wider engagement. "We have student voice support officers within Schools, employed by the Students' Association, who work with the elected School presidents and are now looking to take a similar approach to module evaluation", said Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching), Professor Karl Leydecker. "The NSS is not capable of identifying areas of excellence or underperformance at a module level, and we need the data to get that, which is why we want to introduce a systematic approach to module evaluation".

It is a similar picture at Bath Spa University. "The issue in terms of student engagement is that they feel we do not do anything with their feedback", revealed Dr Becky Schaaf, Vice-Provost for Student Experience. "I think we do act on feedback but are not very good at telling students about it, and this was played out in the last NSS. Each area of the University is now developing a student experience action plan because different parts of the institution have a role to play. Anything that provides insight into what the

student experience is, and what can be done to enhance it is captured and includes module evaluation”.

“Limited engagement diminishes the quality of the data gathered”, added Professor Wyn Morgan, Vice-President for Education at the University of Sheffield. “This is something we recognise is centrally important to gathering rich and deep information. There is more work to be done, but students need to have a sense of ownership of the process, and this is important within our overall approach. We currently frame the overall discussion in terms of the impact on current student learning as much as helping the next cohort. This is because the surveys are not the only vehicle to provide feedback and are part of a wider set of channels such as course and Faculty meetings, which mean that any issues and concerns can be raised at any time. We are also very conscious of survey fatigue, so position these in the context of how they influence teaching and assessment generally”.

At the University of Nottingham, Students’ Union officers were part of the University’s surveys working group. Students and staff were consulted on changes to the institutional bank of questions and student representatives were asked when an evaluation should be conducted and how many times a module is evaluated. “Our students were not concerned about being over-surveyed, they were more interested in the feedback loop being closed”, explained Professor Sarah Speight, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. “There is now an institutional requirement to publish module evaluation results on our Virtual Learning Environment, which all students and staff can see. Staff also have to publish their response to module evaluation – thereby helping to close the feedback loop. Our academic community supported the strategic decision to tie survey questions to NSS consciously, and they are supportive of the publication of module evaluation results. They use the evaluation data to support applications for promotion, teaching excellence awards or other career development activities, but always as part of a range of evidence”.

Other universities are also taking a proactive approach to Faculty engagement and promoting best practices. “We conduct annual reviews of teaching in which departments reflect on a range of data including module evaluations, NSS and Destination of Leavers from HE survey”, said Professor Sharon Huttly, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) at Lancaster University. “It is all about identifying key data to work with. To support this, we have developed teaching data packs which give departments’ relevant data. Their Faculty then considers departmental reports

and Faculty-level reports go into a central committee. Within our review, we are giving thought to the wider use of approaches already used in some modules. For example, module evaluation could include weekly ‘check-ins’ with students to ask how things are going and whether there is a need to go over some of the learnings from the previous week, and so on. We could approach this more holistically”.

“With Faculty, it is all about communication”, said Lincoln’s Professor Mossop. “We have a strong leadership team at different levels with College directors of education, then School leads for teaching and learning, then programme leads. We have student engagement leads too, who are working with the Students’ Union, through our student engagement network. Communication is the biggest challenge for any institution – you can never do enough – but we are always looking to improve, and at Lincoln, we have Faculty sharing best practice and Faculty being supported if they need help. We are always looking for ways to do things better, and need to have our ears open in all directions in case we need to take a different approach; it is a process of continuous improvement”.

Coventry University estimates that 95% of students now engage in module evaluation surveys. Ian Dunn, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Engagement, said: “We undertake a combination of quantitative and qualitative module evaluation through three approaches: formal student committees within the structure of the University; a formal student representative system which mirrors the academic structure, whereby course leaders meet with elected students on a weekly basis to discuss how things are going; and focus groups and surveys. We have a centrally agreed approach to module evaluation – an internal system with a data dashboard – which is focused on module performance, not individual academic performance. Academics often use the system to make the case for progression or promotion. We do not have benchmark data, but I am more interested in driving group behaviours around teaching and learning within the institution”.



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- Professor Sarah Speight

Dealing with the data

Universities are often criticised by students for not acting on the feedback they receive from module evaluation surveys. Yet a bigger challenge for many institutions is developing a wider system which allows them to gather students' learning experiences and then use these for both quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes. Institutions have an opportunity to utilise the data received from these surveys to understand the issues and trends amongst their students, both the student population as a whole but also specific demographics, and use the data to analyse the wider student experience.

"Academic schools know that this is part of building trust with students and often evaluation is more important for how it is used than what it says", explained Professor Sarah Speight, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning at the University of Nottingham. "We know the data is being used and acted upon; we know there are action plans for how the results are being used, and we have an annual monitoring process and review of the Schools every three years that enables conversations about the use of our surveys. Importantly students are aware of how the data is being used".

Other senior leaders highlighted the need to incorporate and directly link module evaluation data into their wider institutional planning. "Module evaluation is not done in pure isolation", insisted Professor Wyn Morgan, Vice-President for Education at the University of Sheffield. "We have an annual reflection process, analysing what students are saying, how we respond to it and the impact of any changes that have come about from responding to prior feedback. Student evaluation is, of course, not unique to the UK but in very general terms the way models work does vary between different countries. The variety in approach is manifest in how the data are gathered and reviewed when questionnaires are distributed and also the way the evidence is used at local or institutional level".

Despite the variety in approaches to module evaluation data across the UK Higher Education sector, many universities are approaching this from a strategic perspective. "Through our annual teaching review processes we reflect on what has worked and what we might need to change", said Professor Sharon Huttly, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) at Lancaster University. "It

is a mixed picture in terms of how much of this review process is of interest to students, but certainly for student academic representatives and union officers, it is helpful to them. However, outside of module evaluation surveys, there are mechanisms at department and Faculty level which can also be used to prompt and act on feedback, and we utilise these too". Coventry University's Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) Ian Dunn added: "We act on the data at multiple levels: Faculty, School and course, but also institutionally through trends on teaching and learning. Course reports are built around module evaluation surveys and are also mapped into annual reporting".



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- Ian Dunn

Nottingham's Professor Speight also described both evaluation and enhancement as "continuous processes" and said that changes made in one year would be evaluated and may be changed again: "If a tutor has made changes to a module, we can see the impact of these in the next set of evaluations. If things are still not working, there will be a further iteration. We encourage an ongoing, iterative process of development and enhancement – and it has to be like this because student cohorts vary, tutors vary, and so does the response to the needs of the individual cohort and labour market you are preparing students for. This is the strength of an electronic evaluation system – we can look at our data over time, by discipline, by module and cross-correlate against other data sets too".

"Data gives us an overarching view of what is going on at School level, and the ability to benchmark between areas – this can be helpful but, again, we need to think within a broader context", said Professor Liz Mossop, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Development and Engagement at the University of Lincoln. "A core set of data such as module evaluation, National Student Survey

(NSS) and others are available for programme leads, but they need to understand what is behind the numbers and why challenges occur. We need quality data as this feeds into our reputation nationally, via league tables, and clearly NSS and TEF are headliners in this respect. I suspect this will change again when TEF subject tables are published because we already know that parents and students to an extent make university choices based on league tables. However, it will still be important not to look just at the metrics, and to know and understand the reasons for why something is happening, and continue to talk to our students and employers about outcomes as well as processes. The measurements we are taking also need to evolve over time”.

However, senior leaders admit this agenda is still a challenge for many institutions. “Whilst the University has been in the top 10 of the NSS for the past three years, and generally our approach to the student experience is well regarded, there is more that could be done”, explained Professor Karl Leydecker, Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) at the University of Dundee. “We are striving for a more consistent approach to module evaluation and benchmarking across the University. We are looking at learning analytics, and data on retention and progression, but currently we do not have this depth of understanding. Schools engage in annual monitoring and periodic programme reviews, which highlight how they capture and act on feedback, but these do not provide detail of what is actually going on. We receive high-level reports at a programme, not module, level and there is nothing as yet on module evaluation. The lack of institutional approach to module evaluation means we are not being consistent from one area to another. We also know there are opportunities to generate live feedback and lighter touch mid-module reviews along with end-of-module surveys which the sector has traditionally relied on, moving towards feedback that can make a difference now rather than for the next cohort of students”.

Returning to the issue of ‘immediate’ response to student feedback, Lancaster’s Professor Huttly said: “Currently students are undertaking end-of-module evaluations when they have not necessarily completed all their assessments, or have the scope to compare one module to another. That is one reason why we are refreshing programme evaluation, rather than silo module evaluation, which gives students that opportunity to compare and contrast module experiences. There are also challenges around evaluating and making changes while a module is running – you can do this to some extent but not root-and-branch changes to delivery, which have to wait until it

next runs. Communicating to students that their module is based on peer feedback from previous years can be helpful. Sometimes feedback on particular matters can be contradictory from one year to another: generally, I encourage academics to use their judgement – for example, look at patterns emerging over time unless there are clear indicators that something is not working. Therefore it is important to explore other ways to respond to feedback during a module”.

Dr Becky Schaaf, Vice-Provost for Student Experience at Bath Spa University, added: “We find that mid-module evaluation can be more useful than end-of-module evaluation as it enables within-module changes to be made if necessary. We also know that students perceive that providing mid-module feedback might affect their marks. The problem with a flexible approach within course teams is the inability to generate institutional reporting mechanisms – there is no oversight or opportunity for comparison – therefore we need a central tool delivered consistently and are currently exploring a new system”.

“Module evaluation, and the tailored data and information contained within form part of the evidence base used to help us continually improve our performance”, summarised Dr Sam Grogan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) at the University of Salford. “It is not the whole picture, nor should it be, but it is an important part of a wider data and information set which helps us assess and manage the performance of our teaching and learning endeavours. We are interested in approaches that ensure consistency in response rates and data efficacy”.



“We find that mid-module evaluation can be more useful than end-of-module evaluation as it enables within-module changes to be made if necessary”

- Dr Becky Schaaf

Institutional improvement

With universities investing time and money into module evaluation, the expected outcome is that they will be able to better understand which approaches to teaching have the highest level of engagement – and plan for the future based on evidence. Many institutions are now seeking to create a culture of continuous improvement, with an enhanced focus on data analytics, which informs immediate staff and student development and teaching and learning improvement; one that is consistent and can be benchmarked.

“I am theme leader for the 2017-2020 Scottish sector-wide enhancement theme ‘Evidence for Enhancement: Improving the Student Experience,’” revealed Professor Karl Leydecker, Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) at the University of Dundee. “As a sector, we are precisely trying to find answers to these kinds of questions. At Dundee, we can point to overall areas of excellence in teaching and learning but cannot always point to clear evidence at a granular level on why we are doing well or not doing well. We still need the evidence and markers, which is where data analytics comes in. A central approach to module evaluation and benchmarking will support continuous improvement”.

So are institutions monitoring progress, and how do they know it is working? “We have an academic development reporting tool which encourages programme teams to embed a continual focus on enhancement”, said Dr Becky Schaaf, Vice-Provost for Student Experience at Bath Spa University. “This tool brings together a variety of data, including module evaluations, National Student Survey (NSS), graduate outcomes, recruitment, and retention information. To support this, we are strengthening our business intelligence tools and developing a clearer and simpler reporting system for staff. They will be able to look at a dashboard to see how their module and the wider course is performing against key indicators, including student recruitment, retention, and employability. It is all part of a bigger understanding of the evolution of the subject”.

“The integrity of data is so important”, explained Dr Sam Grogan, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Experience) at the University of Salford. “We have always had the tools and mechanisms for module performance management, and

we now have a much more consistent practice around the data-driven identification of problematic assessment or modules. This then results in appropriate consideration of how to change aspects of the learning experience for the better. We look to correlate in-flight feedback and mid-module reflections and then develop solutions for any arising issues. Ultimately, our vision is to have easily accessible data on performance, naturally including module evaluation, which connects the various aspects of module data with a wider set of information towards developing a holistic view of the student experience, attainment and success. This connected information allows the answers and insight to be shared by colleagues and helps them give an increasingly tailored intelligent student experience which nudges a student towards improvement”.



“We have always had the tools and mechanisms for module performance management, and we now have a much more consistent practice around the data-driven identification of problematic assessment or modules” - Dr Sam Grogan

Senior leaders point to external and internal success measures for universities around effective module evaluation. “For any teaching activity, we need to ensure we have evidence of the impact it has on students and their learning”, said Professor Wyn Morgan, Vice-President for Education at the University of Sheffield. “This can be directly via questionnaire survey, staff-student committees or informally in class or indirectly, it can be via students outcomes e.g. performance in exams. Both are important in helping to understand what works and what does not work. Reviewing the evidence will help inform future activity. Another proxy is NSS outcomes. For example, if we were to receive feedback that the student voice is awful or a department is not listening, we need to be able to act on that. Right now, I am not hearing anything like that, and generally, we perform pretty well in the NSS. An agenda for continuous improvement at institutional level is focused on enhancing the student experience rather than hitting metric targets, although data are vital in supporting this ambition; if the data are patchy, we are not going to get where we need to be”.

Professor Liz Mossop, Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Development and Engagement at the University of Lincoln, added: “Externally, success is what the government and Office for Students deem to be success – but for me, it is more than that, and institutional awards, ribbons and medals. It is about the individual student. Working with someone who has maybe had an issue, solved that issue, and helped them complete their education and gain employment rather than dropping out. It is also the success of colleagues. There are some extremely hard working people out there, and we need brilliant people to do things for us, so it is about how they are fulfilled in their job and being rewarded. Finally, it is about more than teaching – we must not forget that we are here to deliver research outcomes too, and linking the two together can help us achieve great things”.

There are also spin-off benefits from having stronger, more robust, module evaluation data, according to Professor Sarah Speight, Associate Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning at the University of Nottingham. “We are exploring whether there is consistency in our evaluation data, how our survey results relate to student marks for example”, she said. “We are also doing equality impact assessment – can we see a difference in the feedback given to women and men, international and UK lecturers, and junior and senior academics to see if there are any internal biases in the questions set and answers given? Through a baseline of average scores across the institution drawn from our surveys and other data, we can also identify individual tutors who may be struggling. For example, they may be new lecturers who need more support, they may be teaching in their second language or delivering a traditionally difficult module. We can then put in place a programme of support for the individual academic, which will then be followed up to see if evaluation data shows an increase in student satisfaction. Equally, if an individual tutor is receiving top scores in their feedback, they will be congratulated and acknowledged. If it is clear why they are doing so well, we will seek ways to share that practice more widely”.

However, challenges around fostering institutional improvement through data analytics remain, according to Professor Sharon Huttly, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education) at Lancaster University. “Benchmarking in module evaluation is a challenge”, she admitted. “Information at this level is just not published. One of the challenges facing subject-level Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) is the level of granularity at which sufficient data are available. There are insufficient data at a disaggregated level (programme and module

even less on). Internally, we can benchmark by comparing and contrasting module data, but I also encourage the longitudinal picture because it is difficult to rely on single-year data. We also need to triangulate and not see module evaluation surveys as a single source of data”.

Professor Huttly also emphasised that traditional barriers to student engagement in surveys still need to be acknowledged and confronted. “We have done a lot of work to ensure that the feedback we seek from students is approached collectively”, she said. “For example, we need feedback on our core services such as IT or careers, so we make sure these topics are covered by different data collection means and then aim to draw responses together in an integrated plan with priorities identified. We recognise that some issues are not a quick fix, so whilst student representatives may change every year, we are working to ensure that the communication around these issues is transferred from year to year, for example through a collective submission led by the Students’ Union. We also need to recognise that students like to give feedback in different ways – some students will engage with long essay-like responses, some by ticking the boxes, and others will engage in a room through verbal discussion”.

Innovative approaches to student engagement should absolutely be prioritised, added Salford’s Dr Grogan: “It is also important that students can see this data, as the emphasis again will be on co-creation and co-production of solutions. It is about being informed – what we should know. What does this lead to? Better data, better-connected intelligence for students and ultimately, better outcomes”.



“We also need to recognise that students like to give feedback in different ways – some students will engage with long essay-like responses, some by ticking the boxes, and others will engage in a room through verbal discussion”

- Professor Sharon Huttly

Conclusion

It is clear from this report that, driven by external pressures around the National Student Survey (NSS), Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) and other metrics, it is a strategic necessity for UK universities to ramp up their approaches to capturing and responding to student feedback.

Module evaluation surveys are recognised as playing a strategically important role in the 'student voice', providing institutions with the opportunity to respond to any issues and concerns before the NSS is completed. They also enable a valuable opportunity for individuals, departments, faculties, and universities as a whole to reflect on their teaching practice and the student experience within that.

As such, many universities are embedding module evaluation within their wider strategies around student engagement and student experience – surveys are perceived to support broader initiatives around student retention too.

More generally, the principles of 'co-creation' and 'co-production' are being championed in some universities to foster greater engagement between students and staff – and these principles are being applied in module evaluation.

Good practice has been identified around student engagement in module evaluation activity, both in its planning and in follow up. Faculty engagement is also recognised as important.

There is a sense that module evaluation surveys are particularly valuable for identifying areas of excellence or underperformance at a module level – the 'detail' of what is going on – and that the NSS is not capable of giving this insight.

There are, however, issues with the consistency of approach to feedback and evaluation within institutions and across the sector more widely. When undertaken well, surveys can be used to ensure that decision-making is guided by evidence and that they can support staff in being recognised and rewarded for their good practice.

Yet senior leaders also recognise that module evaluation surveys are just one form of gathering student feedback, and these need to be supported by more holistic approaches.

The real challenge facing most universities is developing a wider system which allows them to gather students' learning experiences and then use these for both quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes. Some institutions are making advances in this area; others are at the start of their journey and are restricted by the absence of consistent, institutional approaches to module evaluation.

There are also gaps in the ability to benchmark, and historical issues around engagement remain. However, the value of formative feedback, as well as summative evaluation, is generally recognised, and being actioned in places.

Many institutions expressed a commitment to creating a culture of continuous improvement, with an enhanced focus on data analytics, with the objective of teaching and learning improvement and student and staff development.

A combination of external and internal success measures was identified, all in line with institutional priorities around the student experience.

Opportunities have also been identified to consider approaches to module evaluation feedback in postgraduate and part-time programmes.

Report sponsor: Explorance

Explorance helps universities to improve teaching and learning through the way they capture, analyse and respond to student feedback. We work with hundreds of institutions around the world, providing solutions for formative feedback (which gives lecturers the opportunity to seek feedback through bespoke, non-standard questions, during a module) and summative evaluation surveys at the end of semester (which provides standardisation on questions enabling comparisons across the institution).

Our standard Blue product is generally used for end of term and mid-term evaluations and provides a huge amount of valuable quantitative, qualitative and demographic data. Through our Bluepulse platform we engage in feedback and the evaluation of teaching during a module – not just at the end of it. Lecturers have a way to communicate with students to gain feedback prior to end-of-semester evaluation. They can ask questions at any time, and students can give feedback at any time. It enables Faculty to build teaching and learning strategies that receive a welcome response from students and, because this is done in collaboration with the students, increases participation and engagement.

Here are some examples of universities that we are working with to move the conversation away from modular feedback being a ‘process’ to one where the insight provided directly informs the strategic objectives of those institutions.

University of Aberdeen



The University of Aberdeen's School of Biological Sciences has adopted Explorance's Bluepulse to create a more dynamic feedback environment and close the feedback loop.

The School's commitment to formative, or ongoing, feedback is championed by Senior Lecturer (Scholarship) Dr Martin Baker. "Formative feedback is important because students cannot learn in isolation", Martin said. "Stronger students often need to have the quality of their work validated and confirmed, whilst weaker students usually need to know what they can do better and what to focus on in their learning. Formative feedback provides a reference point so that students gain a better understanding of how their work compares with what is possible or expected at their stage of academic development, and also gives me a chance to see how (or even whether) my comments are understood".

Under Martin's leadership, the School has used Bluepulse since the 2017-18 academic year. "The impact of good feedback to students can be seen in good feedback from students", he explained. "We know when feedback is working because we establish a dialogue with students and we know what or how they are thinking. That is why Bluepulse has so much potential in helping students and

staff understand each other. It allows tutors to ask for very specific feedback during, and immediately after, seminars and for many this can only be achieved by facilitating anonymous feedback".

Martin added that feedback from students could often be more useful and dynamic when it is formative. "If we know about the student experience while the course is still running we can do any mid-course corrections", he said. "Otherwise, we are unlikely to have a full understanding of students' experience of a course. For students who are feeling unengaged or disconnected with their university experience, there is a risk that their voice is not heard. It is probably no exaggeration to conclude that formative feedback to, and from, students can help to raise student satisfaction and retention".

"Formative feedback is important because students cannot learn in isolation" - Dr Martin Baker

Durham University

Durham University's institution-wide implementation of Blue to replace an older, de-centralised system for managing and automating course evaluations, has seen Durham reap the rewards from its investment during its first full year.

The University tested the system in a 12-month pilot programme with the Business School. Once this was successfully completed, they deployed Blue to the rest of the schools the following academic year. "We sent out 365,000 evaluations to over 9,000 undergraduate students taking 1,009 courses", said Julie Mulvey, a Learning Technologist at the Durham Centre for Academic Development (DCAD) and the lead for the team tasked with finding the right technology for their course evaluations. "During 2018-19, we will begin to evaluate standard postgraduate courses as well as some courses with non-standard start and finish dates".

Whilst the University has been using online course evaluations for many years, Blue represents the first real automation of their course evaluation processes. "Being able to deliver reports to key stakeholders as soon as the evaluation process is completed has been of great benefit", said Dr Malcolm Murray, Head of Digital Learning at Durham. "Our module leaders have very tight timelines: they need to analyse course evaluation data, provide a five-point action plan on how to improve the course, and deliver this to Boards of Studies as well as to Student-Staff Consultative Committees – all before the end of final term. In the past, we had to compile these reports manually – it was a tremendous amount of work with fewer reporting options. Teaching and Administrative staff were quick to praise the quality of the new Blue reports when they were released."

Now they are on a centralised system, the University is also able to see data at an institution-wide and Faculty-level. "We now have a report on institutional questions on every course taught, as well as providing data at a Faculty-level (Arts and Humanities, Science, and Social Science and Health). We also have statistics on questions that we have never had before", Julie said.

Today Durham students are able to see reports summarising the feedback on their modules, which

means they are more involved in the evaluation process. The University's next steps are to use Blue to add more information to the reports (including demographic data) which hasn't previously been easy. Blue will also close the feedback loop – helping staff generate responses to this feedback and develop action plans for continuing enhancement.



"Being able to deliver reports to key stakeholders as soon as the evaluation process is completed has been of great benefit" - Dr Malcolm Murray

Liverpool John Moores University

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) has been using Blue, Explorance's flagship product, since the 2014-15 academic year – and in the process has overcome challenges around module leader engagement in evaluation surveys.

“Historically, engagement of staff and students with module evaluation surveys was relatively low – module leaders/teams felt that the ‘centrally-owned’ survey was not delivering information they needed and low response rates diminished credibility of the results”, explained Professor Clare Milsom, Director of the University's Teaching and Learning Academy. “Following an institutional pilot of two survey platforms in 2014-15 and an extensive evaluation of both instruments, we decided to adopt Blue as our institutional platform for module evaluation. One of the attractive functionalities of Blue is the ability to add module/course-specific written questions – offering the opportunity to explore different evaluation perspectives better and giving academics more ownership of the process”.

Four years on, and Blue is playing a crucial role in LJMU's overall student engagement strategy. “Blue has a range of functionalities that can be employed to enhance student engagement”, Clare said. “For example, many module leaders are sharing module evaluation results with students in the next cohort and thus closing the feedback loop. The level of detail enabled by Blue reporting allows staff to identify the needs of specific groups of students (e.g. mature, international or those from a ‘minority’ programme) and address them. High-quality information, and the usability of that information, presented in the reports is mentioned formally and informally by academics and senior management”.

For LJMU, the Blue surveys are “a key indicator in our institutional enhancement and quality assurance processes and a required element of the evidence base for programme annual monitoring and validation/review”. Clare added: “Module evaluation is the most strategically important student survey. Blue achieves the right balance between central administrative control and delegated

responsibility, delivering both institutional oversight and academic ownership. For staff, it provides the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice based on more specific feedback; and for students, it leads to a more tailored learning experience”.



“One of the attractive functionalities of Blue is the ability to add module/course-specific written questions – offering the opportunity to explore different evaluation perspectives better and giving academics more ownership of the process” - Professor Clare

Milsom

University of Louisville

The University of Louisville (UofL) invested in Blue to implement campus-wide module evaluation in 2010 following two successful pilot projects and enabled the institution to end the varied approach taken by its 12 academic units.

“Prior to working with Explorance our processes were completely decentralised and required many hours of resources”, recalled Robert Goldstein, UofL’s Vice Provost for Institutional Research, Effectiveness and Analytics. “Most academic units used a paper/pencil administration; the process resulted in some students receiving up to 40 links to different evaluations each semester and Faculty reports were published approximately three months after the end of the semester. Now we have a centralised process that allows students the opportunity to provide feedback electronically.”

With over 200 course-end dates in an academic year, programmes with multiple instructors, and cross-listed courses, UofL has over 20 different questionnaires. However, Blue has significantly reduced the manual intervention required to administer module evaluation. “Students have the ability to provide feedback at any time during the evaluation period, whilst they can access the evaluations using their mobile devices, by logging into the Blue portal or through links in Blackboard”, Robert said. “Faculty monitors their response rates in real-time, and reports are received within two weeks after the course grades are posted. The reports created in Blue allow for comparison statistics as well as trend analyses. UofL takes advantage of Blue’s many features that automate the process”.

UofL is also using the data captured by Blue to inform its wider institutional enhancement programmes. “Blue is used to administer campus climate questionnaires, Faculty/staff exit surveys, decanal reviews of university administrators, to assess satisfaction with campus dining services and to gather feedback from alumni and current students on their perceptions”, Robert revealed. “For example, the results of the campus climate questionnaires are provided to university leadership as part of a committee-led initiative to improve campus culture. Meanwhile, the results of student perception surveys are provided to each academic unit and used in UofL’s

accreditation submission to support the requirements of course assessment”.



“Prior to working with Explorance our processes were completely decentralised and required many hours of resources. [...] Now we have a centralised process that allows students the opportunity to provide feedback electronically” - Robert Goldstein

University of New South Wales

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) Sydney commissioned Explorance to help it deliver better quality institutional and Faculty-level course and teaching survey data to support key decision-making at all levels of the organisation.

In an institution comprising over 50,000 students and 6,000 staff members, this was no small feat, but the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic at UNSW took on the task of improving the quality of data from surveys. Previously, faculties were using different methods to conduct evaluation; some surveys were still on paper, and others were using a custom-built online system. The lack of consistency meant much of the data could not be used for institutional, Faculty or even School-level analysis.

The Office, under the direction of General Manager Rachel Abel, launched a project to implement a centralised, more consistent survey system that would capture student feedback and relay meaningful information. “We simply could not reach our higher goals without a deeper understanding of our student experience of learning and teaching”, Rachel said. “Explorance has tremendous experience in managing change in an academic environment when implementing a new institutional-level system and demonstrated their commitment from the outset. They offer a unified suite of products for gathering feedback in an academic setting, including leading-edge tools such as Bluepulse for instant feedback and Blue Text Analytics for large-scale analysis of open-ended comments”.

Having started with a small ‘soft launch’ with only a few schools, Blue was soon rolled out across the University, and immediately response rates increased by 22% compared to the previous year. Students had complained about too many emails from previous survey campaigns, so UNSW integrated Blue surveys into their learning management system for easier access and reduce the number of email reminders. It has also helped to meet the goal of getting better, faster reports to Deans, Faculty supervisors and Heads of Schools so they can access information and implement change.

“Explorance shared best practice from other institutions, which not only made sure we had good implementation

but also reassured our community about their credibility”, Rachel added. “They really were our ‘coach’ throughout this initiative”.



“Explorance has tremendous experience in managing change in an academic environment when implementing a new institutional-level system and demonstrated their commitment from the outset”

- Rachel Abel



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