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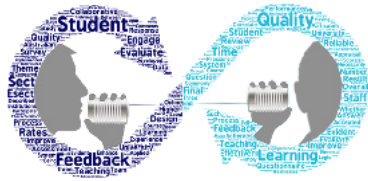
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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Surveys conducted both routinely and ad hoc are increasingly implemented in higher education in many parts of the world as a means to collect student feedback (Harvey, 2003). Along with this upward trajectory in survey numbers and types is the often lamented decline in survey response rates (Palermo, 2004; Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004). A concern expressed by many stakeholder groups is that the data collected through surveys may be unreliable in the circumstances where there are not a statistically relevant number of survey responses. Consequently, practitioners in the broad field of quality assurance seek to develop and enhance student engagement in the survey processes (Palermo, 2004; Symons, 2006). This paper discusses some of the strategies that have been employed in an Australian university, and highlights the importance of executive leadership in promoting student engagement.

The Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a national university with approximately 30,000 students enrolled in courses (units/subjects) offered across seven campuses located in four states and a national territory. The distribution of campuses over a large geographic region adds to the usual complexities of conducting a survey to collect student feedback. Prior to 2012, the method of collecting student evaluation of courses and teaching (henceforth referred to as SECT) utilised the paper-and-pencil system and was managed through a central unit located in one of the campuses. The SECT process involved: informing staff to request SECT survey forms on time; printing and photocopying a sufficient number of forms using a special paper; distributing bundles of forms to staff members located in all campuses; informing staff members of the relevant policies and processes; receiving and recording completed bundles of survey forms; manually sorting and electronically scanning completed survey forms; data processing and generating reports; disseminating electronic reports (via email) and completed forms (via ordinary mail) to relevant academics; and finally creating and distributing SECT reports at school, faculty and university levels.

In order to increase the efficiency of SECT processes, an online system to collect student feedback was piloted in 2011 and introduced university-wide in 2012. The online system enabled the following processes in a systematic manner:

• All course offerings (with a minimum of 10 students) were evaluated every time they were taught. These surveys are compulsory for all courses, except for courses with nine enrolled students or below.
• All educators (lecturers and tutors) involved in the course were included in surveys.
• In addition to the standard SECT surveys, all educators were given the opportunity to opt-in for their individual teaching strategies to be evaluated.

Challenges

A key challenge that emerged upon transferring to an online system was a sudden increase in the total number of surveys and a corresponding survey fatigue among students. Survey fatigue refers to the over-surveying of a given population sample, which is known to lead to unproductive outcomes, including declining response rates (Palermo, 2004; Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004).

There are two survey cycles in a year (i.e., First Half-cycle and Second Half-cycle), and each cycle includes all of the teaching periods (e.g., summer term, MBA terms, trimester and semester one) for the particular half of the year. In the early cycles, the increase was exponential for lecturers and tutors who opted-in to collect student feedback on their individual teaching strategies. However, when student responses provided through the online system were compared with the paper-based system, the following trends were observed:

• Overall response rates for surveys decreased
• Qualitative feedback (comments for open-ended survey items) increased.

These outcomes are consistent with other universities' experience of transferring from a paper-based to an online evaluation system (Crews and Curtis 2010). This appears logical, because the vast majority of students completed the online surveys in their own time, rather than in class time. Thus, as surveys were online there was no longer a captive audience of students to complete surveys in class time.

The final challenge concerned the qualitative comments provided by students. While most student comments were found to be valid and written in an appropriate language style, there were a few that appeared invalid (e.g., commenting on aspects that were not requested), and occasionally the feedback was not provided in a professional manner (e.g., use of inappropriate language).

In response to these challenges, a vital method employed at ACU was engaging the staff and student population through the support of executive leadership.

Executive leadership

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor - Students, Learning and Teaching (DVC-SLT) at ACU played a critical role in communicating and engaging with staff and students, through emails and newsletters, on various aspects of SECT. Previous studies indicate that engagement extending from the executive is an effective means of enhancing student engagement and increasing survey response rates (Crews and Curtis 2010). Figure one highlights some of the key messages communicated to staff and students by the DVC-SLT relating to Student evaluation.

Figure One: Communication from the DVC- SLT

To staff	To students
Encourage student participation in SECT surveys during class time, via the Learning Management System and emails.	The DVC-SLT emphasised the importance of student feedback in the quality assurance and quality enhancement processes of the University.
Discuss the uses and importance of student feedback to improve the learning and teaching quality.	The DVC-SLT highlighted how student feedback has been used in the past to improve the learning environment.
Convey individual and university-wide actions undertaken based on student feedback, If no changes were made, then explain to students why this was not feasible.	The DVC-SLT confirmed that students are partners in the education process, and that students' constructive feedback is welcomed.
Maintain communication to the whole class. For example do not contact any individual students directly about a particular comment, even if the staff member is convinced which student provided the feedback). This is to assure students that their engagement in the SECT process will not affect them adversely.	The DVC-SLT encouraged students to convey their feedback in a professional manner. For example, not to use inappropriate language which may be common in various blog sites on the internet.

In addition to directly communicating with staff and students, the DVC-SLT also communicated to the Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) in each faculty. Associate Deans, Learning and Teaching were encouraged to inform staff and students in their respective areas regarding the importance of collecting and using student feedback, and to encourage student engagement in the SECT process through whatever means available in the Faculties and Schools. Each Faculty is required to report to the DVC-SLT on the Faculty's actions and responses to student feedback. The DVC-SLT uses the results of SECT surveys when discussing with the Executive Deans of Faculties, and to inform the Senior Executive Group of the university.

A number of new initiatives aimed at increasing student engagement with the feedback process have been endorsed by the University's executive leadership to be implemented in the near future. Among these initiatives are strategies that are expected to support the process of closing the feedback loop, for both staff and students.

Conclusion

The support of executive leadership is crucial to promoting student engagement through course evaluations. ACU continues to develop the professional practice of students and staff members when engaging with student evaluation, through maintaining an open line of communication and promoting best-practice strategies.

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