

Nurturing learning development through student feedback

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Presentation abstract

Student evaluations of both teaching and student services are increasingly embedded into higher education. There is debate surrounding the reliability, effectiveness, and bias of such evaluations (Hefferman, 2022) and National Student Survey (NSS) results show that students typically respond poorly to questions relating to their learning community and their opportunities to give feedback on their experiences (student voice) (Office for Students, 2022).

After receiving ethical approval to conduct research on evaluations, four students and a member of staff worked together to address how staff and students within the School of Mathematics and Statistics engage with student evaluations. Two surveys were conducted, the first aimed at staff (63 responses, 90% response rate) and the second at students (53 responses, 17% response rate). The results suggested that both staff and students agreed that evaluations are necessary and useful in building relationships. While staff implement the feedback they receive, students currently do not see it, and their learning may not benefit from being part of this process.

When asked to describe the purpose of student evaluations, participating staff expressed that they provide students with opportunities to have direct input to courses, influence their

learning environment, and feel part of the school. Students expressed that their feedback could improve a course's content, quality and delivery, and provide a learning opportunity for lecturers. Students indicated a preference for informal mid-term feedback since they could see their feedback acted upon in real time. In response, we propose the use of student evaluations as a feedback dialogue tool to encourage and enhance relationships between staff and students and help develop self-regulated learning. We will exemplify a feedback system that uses short, direct, and frequent surveys that students complete at the time of learning (Rowland, 2021), providing time to reflect on learning and creating a line of dialogic communication with the lecturer who can respond to the feedback to inform future learning. The system is applicable to any continuous student-staff learning-focused interaction.

Keywords: student evaluations; feedback process; student engagement.

Community response

Previous research on the wider concept of feedback and evaluation has tended to focus on the feedback that HE teaching staff and practitioners give to learners, rather than the feedback that learners give to their teachers. This has ranged from studies which explore the format of feedback (Whistance, 2014), how students respond to feedback (Bailey, 2009), and responses from practitioners at perceived dissatisfaction around feedback (Burns, 2013). Where feedback relates to students evaluating the practices, teaching and provision offered by the university, there is perhaps a less intense focus. Kinsella and Kaye (2022) have scrutinised the latter half of the student feedback process, and stated that it often leads to changes that are 'easily packaged and publicised' by HE institutions. The earlier stage, then, of seeking student feedback might be assumed as a ubiquitous and thereby less scrutinised process. The ALDinHE community responded that the research by Mair, Brown, Beekman, Olowe and Macaulay was both pertinent and timely, feeding into wider discussions in the sector on the concept of student voice. A member commented: 'I was quite interested to hear about the student view on the purpose and effectiveness of providing feedback on teaching'.

The research gave insight into how the staff and student perception of reasons for gathering feedback on teaching differed, with timeliness of feedback being a particular

point of discussion in focus groups. One community response noted that the research by Mair et al. fills a gap in explorations of the student feedback process, referring to this with the broader term of 'student voice': 'While the student voice has gained prominence in many areas of teaching and learning, understanding the way students feel about (sometimes constantly) giving feedback remains an area that I feel is under-researched'.

The comment that students are 'constantly' giving feedback reaffirms that this is an area of daily practice in HE settings which does not tend to be critically scrutinised. One member suggested that this research has had an impact on them and may prompt future action within their own practice: 'As feedback is a topic that I have been trying to explore in my own research and practice, lots of food for thought from this presentation'.

Authors' reflection

Having both staff and students present together was really at the core of this project. Student engagement is generally a topic of conversation within higher education, but ultimately the best way to engage students is to take the initiative to engage with them. The comment 'the way students feel about (sometimes constantly) giving feedback remains an area that I feel is under-researched' I think is largely under-explored too, which may be seen as a lost opportunity. Survey fatigue, something that I am sure many of us have felt, is very real and evident. A comment during the session said 'I see feedback as such an underestimated opportunity to reflect on one's learning' which I think summarises the current state of course evaluations and highlights that while survey fatigue is happening, learning is not through this process. This presentation aimed to open discussion around how to better engage staff and students with course evaluations and ultimately found that the current systems, that are certainly present at the hosts' institution, are missing the key components of reflection and communication. Another comment was 'how much difference does providing an additional incentive make'. It certainly didn't hurt to open these discussions with students over pizza, as an informal chat!

This conference gave us the opportunity to present this project remotely and mainly from a student perspective. We highly appreciated the conference being spread over two days with one day in-person and the other online. It was extremely helpful to learn from the experiences of those who attended this session and compare notes. It was reassuring to

see that many others were trying out similar initiatives within their own practices, including discussion sessions with lecturers and students in-person and at the time instead of waiting to email a link to the student, and understanding what worked, and what didn't work so well.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience. Special thanks go to Arina Cirstea from De Montfort University.

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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Emma Beekman is a student at the University of Glasgow studying Mathematics and Statistics. She found the project to be very enlightening and a great way to give back to the community. Emma is going into a trainee actuarial position after graduating next year.

Esther Olowe is a student at the University of Glasgow studying Statistics. She found learning about the importance of evaluation processes in the educational system very illuminating. She is currently undertaking a placement in Public Health Scotland and is hoping to continue work in health and medical statistics after her degree.

Calum Macaulay is a fourth-year joint Statistics and Psychology student. He is writing his dissertation on the unconscious mechanism which underlies mental representations of magnitude. Ultimately, he aims to work as a football statistician.

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