

Closing the loop

Dr Helen Higson, Associate Director of Undergraduate Studies at Aston Business School, is responsible for all aspects of undergraduate teaching and learning. Part of her role involves being a first point of contact for students' problems and persuading students to give feedback by various means. In this capacity she has recently overhauled student feedback procedures to improve their effectiveness, including closing the loop to students.

The effort of collecting and recording feedback data means that sometimes the students who actually provide the data are forgotten. Aston Business School is trying improve the situation and has recently redesigned the system to co-ordinate reporting of actions from feedback data. The next step is to inform students of actions taken, by increasing the perceived remit of student representatives and improving mechanisms to close the loop to students.

Previously the activities of departmental student reps were focussed on staff-student committees, and there was a lack of awareness of the need to liaise more generally between students and staff. Consequently, reps did little to gather students' views between meetings and they were not active in feeding back after the meetings. In some cases, students were not even aware of the existence of their rep, while reps complained of feelings of isolation.

Dr Higson's solution was to devise a one hour training course within the Business School for reps on "How to complain constructively". The Guild of Students already provided training but reps felt that the half day session would take up too much of their time. The one hour sessions are well attended, and improvements in reps' effectiveness have been dramatic.

The training addresses the following:

- Liaison between reps to solve the problem of isolation.
- Encouraging reps to make themselves known to the student body.
- Understanding where staff-student committees fit into the university committee structure.
- Gathering feedback before meetings and feeding back afterwards.
- Informing reps of what is appropriate to bring up in meetings. This helps to avoid frustrations, for example in not being able to change institutional policy.
- Developing a process before meetings to discuss issues to be raised with the Year Tutor. Staff whose teaching is discussed can be invited to the meeting. If issues are capable of being solved immediately, the solutions can be brought to the meeting. This is more constructive than using the meetings as a forum for complaints.

The results are that student reps work more effectively and devise their own innovative solutions. They

communicate with students in 'student language' and have become more closely involved in the School's quality processes. Another welcome result is a decrease in Dr Higson's workload, as students' problems are now channelled through reps.

However, even with improved training of reps and minutes of staff-student committees being circulated to students through notice boards and e-mail, some crucial information was still not getting to students. The ^{School} department felt that students needed to know about its recent efforts in systematising actions on feedback and also that student feedback was listened to and valued.

Dr Higson's latest proposal is to publish an annual report to students, to be included in each year's enrolment pack. A one-sheet newsletter seems a suitable format. The content of the report will focus on actions taken from feedback, rather than the detail of the data, since this needs to be handled more sensitively. The intention is to provide a regular channel of communication with students and to raise the profile of student feedback in Aston Business School.