Involving students more effectively in quality assurance processes

A literature review for the Quality in Business Education Project

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1 Why do we want to involve students?

There is a belief in Higher Education that the more students are involved in a course the better the quality of that course. This review will explore what has been said about that idea in the literature, concentrating on aspects that might particularly apply to Business and Management. Some issues that do not seem to have been addressed in the literature will also be noted.

By student involvement we mean that students are encouraged to comment on and influence the delivery and development of their course. The national report on the Business subject review for the Business Education Support Team (BEST) by Ottewill and MacFarlane (Ottewill 2004) in its section on QME emphasised the need for widespread involvement of stakeholders including involvement of students:

> Such a strategy needs to foster a strong sense of ownership on the part of all the key stakeholders (i.e. tutors, managers, students, employers, professional bodies and external examiners) by requiring their full involvement in managing, assuring and enhancing quality

The usual connotation of involvement is that of getting student feedback. There are other possibilities for the meaning of involvement such as creating a collegial atmosphere where students and tutors interact freely. If student involvement is promoted in that way it does not seem to have surfaced in the literature. It is considered briefly in this review.

If we equate student involvement with getting feedback from students then the purpose of collecting that feedback must be established. In a review of student feedback Harvey (Harvey 2003) saw two major functions. One was for purposes internal to the institution where the feedback would help to improve the quality of the offerings. Another was for external audiences, where the institution wished to establish its standing with potential students and external agencies. Increasingly institutions are being required to publish evidence of such involvement. In a project that consulted some 20 UK HE institutions (Brennan 2004), this same internal/external split was found, with some other related purposes being cited.

Both Harvey and Brennan note the possibility of using student feedback for staff appraisal or review. The feedback might be used to help teachers to improve their performance or to be a factor in performance assessment for promotion. Student feedback is not widely used in the UK in this way. In the US there is a tradition of rating teachers through student evaluation. There are obvious difficulties, some of which were identified in Felton 2004. This was an investigation of anonymous student critiques of their professors at the website RateMyProfessors.com. The findings, which examined the relationships between perceived quality, easiness and “sexiness”, raise significant doubts as to precisely what it is that students are evaluating. This use of student feedback will not be considered further here.

2 What kind of involvement?

We can get feedback from students in many ways: individually or in a group, formally or informally, and asking questions about individual units or the whole institution. In this section we explore some of these possibilities.

2.1 At what level in the institution

Today student views are sought (Harvey 2003, Leckey 2001) about most aspects of the running of UK HE institutions and the means varies from institution-wide satisfaction surveys to module or unit feedback forms. It is probably easiest to conceptualise the range of approaches taken to getting feedback in terms of institutional hierarchy. Sometimes the form and/or substance of the evaluation process are determined at a higher level of the hierarchy for lower levels, at other times the lower levels have more freedom.

The policies and actions of the institution have a major impact. Many have an institution-wide student satisfaction survey. Some of the items surveyed (e.g. parking, catering, library facilities) relate to the whole institution. They are not directly related to an academic subject and so are not relevant when we consider involving students on business courses. Other items however are subject related and there may be questions about academic matters. The sampling is often not adequate to get information about student perceptions as they relate to a course or module. More typically students are grouped by faculty, school or subject. The responses allow management to get information about the state of student satisfaction, perhaps down to the level of a subject but not down to the level of a programme or module. An example of an institution-wide survey is that at Oxford Brookes University (Oxford Brookes 2004) which follows the methodology developed at the University of Central England (Harvey 2003). There are 25 questions about student perceptions of learning and teaching and 17 about student perceptions of course organisation. Students are grouped by school (in the business area this is the School of Business and Hospitality Management). So there is no record of the variation, if it exists, of the perceptions of students on different courses within the School of Business and Hospitality management.

Questions specific to individual modules are rarely asked; it is the institution or faculty which determines the form of the questionnaire (*see 2.2.1*).

Moving down the hierarchy, it has been said (Harvey 2003) that faculty-level surveys are not really needed because they replicate what is done by an institution-wide survey (or at programme or module level). This may be true but it will depend on the extent to which a faculty operates as a single unit, offering closely related courses in a single discipline. Many Business Schools are the size of a faculty and may operate as a faculty within an institution. We would expect there to be a significant degree of coherence between the courses they offer. To the extent that there are common, discipline specific issues affecting all students in a Business School it may be that it would be fruitful to explore these issues with a single survey. At present this does not seem to be done, but it would be interesting to find examples.

Further down the hierarchy, feedback can be sought at the programme or subject level. The means may be a survey for some specific purpose. An example is the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), widely used in Australia (Wilson 1997, Richardson 2005). This has been used to measure teaching quality in a survey of all graduating students in the country. Surveys of graduating students about their experience throughout their programme are increasingly used. The UK National Student Survey has been inaugurated in 2005 (Richardson 2005, Higher Education Funding Council for England 2005). The results of this survey of all graduating students are due to be published in 2005. The main purpose of this generic survey is to provide information to prospective students about the teaching quality of subjects in institutions. Business schools may be helped in their quality improvement by this data but it will be rather limited. To give a picture of utility to the subject a more extensive leavers' survey will be needed, but this additional survey risks 'questionnaire fatigue'. Rather than surveys or questionnaires, at this level feedback is often sought through regular, formal programme or subject committees (Harvey 2003, Brennan 2004).

Module level feedback is most often collected by a module questionnaire at the end of the module. The module teacher will obviously be receiving, to a greater or lesser extent, informal feedback throughout the module. Although possibly extremely useful (Harvey 2003) by providing in-depth student views, this informal information is not readily in a form that can be presented to programme and quality committees. The result is that students on almost all modules are now asked to complete a module questionnaire. The form of this questionnaire may have been determined at the institutional level, or the composition and processing may have been left to the tutor or subject. Feedback at the end of the module is not going to influence the experience of students who have just completed it. So increasingly student views on the module are sought at the midpoint of the module, especially if the module is for the whole year.

2.2 How?

There are many methods of getting student feedback; see for example the student themes website (Enhancement themes 2005). Here we consider a selection of them.

2.2.1 Formal

Formal methods of getting student feedback include surveys through questionnaires, staff-student committees and focus groups.

Questionnaires

The content of questionnaires varies from the simple, with a few questions written by a module teacher, to an extensive and nationally determined questionnaire. A questionnaire written by a module teacher will address the concerns of that teacher specific to their module. In more wide-ranging surveys the questions will focus on more generic issues. It is unlikely that the questions on a single module will have been tested for reliability and validity, whereas a national survey will have been constructed taking these factors into account. One way of determining the questions is to seek student views on matters of concern to those originating the questionnaire. Alternatively, as illustrated by the UCE methodology (Harvey 2003), the questions may arise from student feedback via focus-groups, telephone interviews and other comments. Students are asked not only to raise an area of concern but also the importance they attach to it.

In practice most questions are of one of two types. Firstly there are those about the institutional facilities such as the library, IT and general services. Secondly there are questions about teaching and learning and course organisation. There are few examples in the literature of subject specific questions. Most questionnaires also include some open–ended questions. The idea of student engagement (Coates 2005) has been proposed as another aspect of quality about which student feedback should be sought. What is meant by 'student engagement' can best be seen from the following extract from an American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

> The NSSE groups the good practices which it takes as indicative of engagement into five benchmarks: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment. (Coates 2005)

As yet the idea of student engagement does not seem to have been taken up in the UK.

The administration of an institution-wide survey is a major task. Increasingly this may be done electronically. At the module level questionnaires need to be distributed, collected and processed. Sometimes this may be done by some central agency to explicitly exclude the module teacher from the process. This is supposedly to convince the students of the independence of the process. It may, however, lead to the teacher becoming disengaged from and sceptical about the feedback process and thus decrease its effectiveness (Brennan 2003, Richardson 2005). The processing of the simple ordinal scale data usually requires no more than summarisation of frequencies and percentages. The calculation of means is usually not appropriate. The answers to open-ended questions can be read by the module teacher to gain an understanding of student concerns. To get a more systematic view of the responses content analysis, at various levels of sophistication, may be applied. Even relatively simple techniques may give useful results (Lapham 1999).

The utility of the feedback questionnaire has been questioned. For example Johnson (Johnson 2000) sees such questionnaires as supporting managerial interests to the detriment of the professional development of teachers. Such concerns are presently those of a minority but they usefully raise questions about the limitations of questionnaires, especially centrally imposed ones.

Most questionnaires are anonymous. In some ways this limits the value of the results. There is often a lack of any attempt to collect demographic data because it might compromise anonymity. So this means there is no analysis by gender or age. When students from different pathways attend the same module, some compulsorily, some optionally, their responses are not differentiated. This anonymity also means that there is no way of correlating responses with academic ability. It also presupposes a lack of trust by students of their teachers.

Formal Meetings between staff and students

Questionnaires alone can not capture all aspects of students' views. There are also staff-student committees operating at the level of the programme, subject or faculty which include student representatives. There are also student representatives on the institution's general committees. Staff-student committees are seen as having several advantages (Brennan 2004). They provide a forum for dialogue, for staff to express their concerns and to feed back on the actions they are taking.

The main limitations on these committees are the representativeness of the student representatives and their ability to communicate with their fellow students. Although desirable it may not be easy to organise an election. In large groups students may not know each other well, and students with other commitments outside of their education may be reluctant to take on this role. These problems can be addressed through various support mechanisms. The student unions in many institutions have part of their websites for representatives and also run training schemes. A typical example is that at the University of Winchester (Winchester Student Union 2005). The subject or department can also support student representatives by providing time for representatives to meet with other students and email lists and web space for communication. In at least one university there is a module specifically for student representatives (University of Wolverhampton 2005).

2.2.2 Informal

The informal contact between staff and students is seen by many authors as a good means of student feedback (Brennan 2003, Harvey 2003). It is particularly important at the module level, giving immediate feedback and the prospect of prompt remediation in the event of difficulties. Issues can be raised on a confidential basis. There is, however, a downside. Views expressed informally may not be widely shared and without a record their impact is likely to be limited to few staff.

Another way in which students can be involved in a course is through student societies. These are societies run by students to provide events for other students such as lectures, business games, and visits from companies. Although unnoticed in the literature they would seem to provide another informal route for contact with staff and also personal development of the students involved. This is an example of collegiality, with staff and students jointly involved in activities. It may be that collegiality should be fostered as a way of increasing student involvement.

2.2.3 Electronic feedback

Increasingly formal feedback is obtained electronically and there are considerable advantages to this (Richardson 2005). Besides the savings in paper, administration costs and time taken from teaching the responses to open-ended questions can be analysed automatically. Besides the obvious issues such as costs of establishing the system, one big disadvantage seems to be that the response rate is significantly lower. This needs to be addressed, perhaps by the completion of the questionnaire as an integral part of the course. There are also some means of obtaining informal feedback electronically, such as forums and chat rooms. These are now part of most virtual learning environments (VLEs) so it should be possible to use them for feedback purposes fairly readily. However the questions of anonymity and processing the responses may limit the rate of adoption of such methods.

2.2.4 Does size matter?

It may be that the size of the subject group or institution should play a part in deciding how to gain feedback from students, but this does not seem to have been discussed in the literature. For example in a small group informal feedback might be readily obtained, although students might, in certain circumstances, feel constrained in giving it. Similarly in a small group, anonymity of response to questionnaires might be difficult to maintain. In large groups where subgroups have to be formed, that difference of experience may be difficult to capture. In UK higher education the number of students taking undergraduate business degrees in any one institution may vary from well over a thousand to fewer than a hundred. The latter are usually FE colleges. This is a question that could usefully be explored further.

2.2.5 Service Quality

So far this review has considered questionnaires that provide student feedback on their perceptions of, amongst other matters, the quality of teaching and learning. There are somewhat different approaches employed commercially to measuring the quality of service received by customers. If higher education provides a service to its customers (students) then these methods should be of relevance. In fact several authors have described applying such methods to investigating the quality of courses – for example Clewes (2003), Narasimhan (2001), Oldfield et. al. (2000) and Tan et. al. (2004). One of these approaches is the SERVQUAL methodology in which service quality is seen as the difference between the customer's perception of the service they receive and their expectation of that service. Tan et. al. applied the methodology to measure student satisfaction of students studying the same subject at two neighbouring universities. Narasimhan extended this approach to include the expectations and perceptions of the staff as well as the students, as well as suggesting that feedback be obtained during the semester. There are difficulties with the approach. The

SERVQUAL methodology itself has been questioned on the grounds that it is not necessary to include expectations and that an alternative methodology, SERVPERF, based upon perceptions alone is preferable.

2.3 When?

A questionnaire is most often administered at the end of an activity e.g. end of module and end of course questionnaires. How we define 'end' can have an influence here. For a module the questionnaire often comes in the last teaching session. Many institutions have their examination periods after the end of the teaching. So students are completing their questionnaires before knowing the results of their assessments. There is some evidence (Richardson 2005) that students may give higher ratings in their answers to questions about teaching and learning as an expression of their satisfaction with the grade they have received. By contrast it can be argued, and has been argued in discussion by some students, that without knowing the outcomes of their assessments they are not in position to make a fully informed judgement on the quality of their teaching. Similar caveats might be raised in relation to the National Student Survey. Situating the questionnaire at the end (however defined) of the activity is helpful to those wanting to use the results to improve future performance. As this summative function does not help existing students, the importance of intermediate feedback (mid-module reviews, staff-student committees, informal contact) to give formative feedback is emphasised.

3 Responding to feedback

It is generally accepted that responding to student feedback is an important and necessary part of the process (Watson 2003, Harvey 2003, Brennan 2004). To respond effectively requires that the feedback is processed so that it can be readily understood, that there are established routes for it, that these routes are part of an 'action cycle' and that students are informed about the feedback that has been given and the action that has resulted from it. We examine each of these aspects.

The response to feedback is influenced by the speed with which it is processed. A well-found central unit may give a prompt response, but may require that the questionnaire conforms to a centrally determined format. Within a faculty or subject support, staff may be asked to process programme and module questionnaires. The presentation of the resulting information needs to be considered carefully as it must satisfy the needs of managers, academic staff and originating students. Information given in formal committees must be accurately minuted.

The concept of an 'action cycle' (satisfaction cycle, feedback cycle) occurs in one form or another in several sources, including those quoted above. The cycle is seen as a continuous process, starting with the formulation of the questions to be asked. The results are processed to produce an action plan that is implemented and monitored. The originating students are then informed as to what were the results of their feedback, what action has been taken and what have been the results of that action. These results are then taken into account in formulating a new set of questions as the cycle continues for another iteration. This general action cycle can be applied to each of the feedback levels, although the specific actions taken at each stage will vary.

Watson (2003) has highlighted some specific aspects of the cycle. Letting students know what were the results of their feedback, especially of questionnaires, can be done electronically via email and web sites or by newsletters. A summary report can be made available directly and a full report in downloadable form. The availability of this information can be advertised on a VLE. Student representatives need to be able to communicate with their fellow students about matters arising at formal meetings. This can be done (see 2.2.1.2) by using email lists and web space provided for them. At the module level a module could start with a response to the feedback given the last time the module was run. Overall it seems that responding to student feedback is the least developed part of the whole process.

4 Issues specific to business

Where research has been reported on students of a specific subject, that subject has often been business but the results have been presented as generic, applying to all students. There do not appear to have been research findings that business students require a specific kind of feedback process or course involvement. It is hoped that as the QuBE project develops, some guidelines can be formulated that will be of help to Business Schools in their operation of feedback specific to business education.

5 Feedback from 'non-standard' students

This review has concentrated on full-time students who in the main come from the UK. It should be remembered that there is a significant minority that does not fit this mould. Getting feedback from them in a way that recognises their special circumstances is important in ensuring that all students are involved in their courses, but this has not been discussed to any great extent in the literature. There are three categories of student whose feedback may be of especial relevance: postgraduate students, part-time and distance learning students, and international students. Feedback from postgraduate students has been considered in various ways. Harvey 2003 shows that in some institutions there are separate surveys for postgraduate students, and Clewes' (Clewes 2003) application of the SERVQUAL model was to a course for postgraduate students. An example, one amongst many, of a single institutional survey covering both undergraduate and postgraduate students is that of Oxford Brookes (Oxford Brookes 2004). The special problems of distance learning students are referred to in Richardson 2004. There seems no cognisance taken that getting feedback from international students might need additional procedures.

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