

## Module evaluation and feedback

Improving module evaluation and feedback to students on actions planned and taken

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### Introduction

The need for greater accountability and improvement in the quality of teaching has become a major issue in higher education in recent years (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998, Ramsden 1991). In response to this need, both governments and universities have attempted to institute policies and practices designed to measure, encourage and reward 'good teaching' (Ballantyne 2000).

Since 1992, when the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) and the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) were created, increasing importance has been placed upon obtaining students' views on the quality of provision in HEIs. The HEQC was replaced by the Quality Assurance Agency in 1997, which continued its mission to promote public confidence and to see that quality is enhanced. The QAA subject review – *Business & Management of 2001–2002* – revealed that 'quality management and enhancement was the weakest aspect and most in need of further improvement.'

This paper explores weaknesses in the module evaluation process, addressing the question of 'improving module evaluation and feedback to students'. Marsh's (1987) review of the measurement and use of student evaluations of teaching effectiveness indicated that feedback should lead to an improvement in the quality of teaching. Therefore there is a need to identify best practices and find solutions for various problems with the evaluation process.

A review of relevant literature has raised a wide range of questions about the reasons for obtaining feedback, methods of collecting it, the main stakeholders in the process, and students' perception of the process.

With the expansion of the university sector and concerns with quality and the growing 'consumerism' of higher education, there has been a significant growth and sophistication in processes designed to collect views from students (Harvey, 2001). Students' views are now regarded as key elements in the process of effective monitoring of quality in teaching and learning.

### Defining the subject area

While '*feedback*' refers to the expressed opinion of students about the service they receive as students, '*evaluation*', by contrast, is intended to refer to the process by which all the various feedback information assembled is systematically scrutinised and weighed in coming to a rounded overall judgement of effectiveness (Hounsell & Tait & Day, 1997).

Feedback is collected from students on different levels:

- Institutional level satisfaction with the total experience at the university
- School/faculty-level satisfaction
- Course/programme-level satisfaction with learning and teaching
- Module-level on the operation of a specific module/unit
- Teacher-appraisal by students.

This paper examines evaluation at the module level only.

## Methodology

This research is underpinned by a review of the previous work and visits to selected universities and colleges with low and high QAA rating for 'Quality management and enhancement':

- Gloucestershire College of Arts and Technology
- Westminster Institute of Education
- Coventry Technical College
- Nottingham Trent University
- Tanaka Business School, Imperial College
- CASS Business School, City University
- Leeds Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University
- Oxford Brookes University

Twenty senior academic staff and managers involved in quality assurance were interviewed between March and July 2005

Structured interviews were chosen as the best way of obtaining meaningful opinions and in-depth analysis of the current situation in business schools. The respondents had also to answer three ranking questions (*see below*). The mixture of qualitative and quantitative data should be useful in the diagnosis of the current situation and stakeholders' perceptions.

## Literature review

Over the past decade, the practice of seeking regular feedback on courses and programmes of study has become firmly established throughout higher education. With the advent of quality audit and quality assessment, departments and institutions have been compelled not simply to articulate the standards they espouse, but to explain how they go about ascertaining that these standards have actually been achieved.

The stimulus to change, however, has not been wholly external in its origins. Growing numbers of academic staff have begun to see feedback as an integral element in any effective teaching strategy, and therefore essential in its own right, whatever the external pressures might be. (Hounsell & Tait & Day, 1997).

The literature review identified a number of interrelated purposes for evaluation:

**Hounsell & Tait & Day, 1997**

- To ascertain how well a course or programme of study is doing, and thus to evaluate the extent to which it meets its stated aims and objectives or learning outcomes.
- To identify both its chief strengths and its main weaknesses (neither of which may necessarily be those most readily perceived by the course team) so that strengths can be appropriately acknowledged and capitalised upon, while weaknesses can be remedied or at least ameliorated wherever possible within the constraints of staffing, timetabling, facilities and other resources.

**Harvey, 2001**

- Internal information to guide improvement.
- External information for potential students and other stakeholders.

**CNAA Report, 1992**

- Accountability, management data.
- Enhancement of students' ability to evaluate and reflect.

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- To improve teaching quality and students' learning experiences.
- To inform decisions on course content and delivery.
- To feed into central decision-making.
- To increase student involvement in their education process.

**Ranking Question 1: Why do we evaluate modules?**

- To satisfy institutional requirements (faculty, QAA)
- To improve my teaching
- To improve the students' learning experience
- To identify staff development needs
- Other.

Answers *b* and *c* are related, but the main difference demonstrates the primary focus in the module evaluation process. The question's aim was to establish if the process is student-centred (*answer c*) or educator-centred (*answer b*).

The eight respondents whose primary reason for evaluation was 'to improve my teaching' pointed to the relation between their performance as lecturers and job satisfaction. As one respondent said,

*I want to know students' opinion about my teaching and my module, to satisfy my ego*

In most cases respondents evaluate modules in order 'to improve students' learning experience'. This shows that a student-centred approach is widely accepted.

Answers *b* and *d* are also related. However, in some institutions module evaluation is linked to the appraisal system and staff development which is recommended by line managers. Institutions with standardised systems also use module evaluation for appraisal purposes. It is interesting that no respondents recognised the primary purpose of the evaluation as 'identifying staff development needs'.

## How do we evaluate modules? Summative versus formative evaluation

In all institutions the summative evaluation was the most common approach. Summative assessment collected at the end of the module was seen as more appropriate because it:

- gives students the opportunity to express views after the whole experience of the module; sometimes students realise the value of the module only at the end;
- is not possible, half-way through the module, to suddenly change the teaching formula or assessment
- gives module leaders a chance to take into consideration not only students' feedback, but also input from external examiners, the teaching team and the school's committee.

The majority of respondents agreed that formative evaluation in the middle of the semester/term is useful and important, but not feasible considering the time pressure. Some of its benefits, and examples of informal ways of getting feedback during the module include:

- Students can express their concerns during the course at student–staff committees.
- Formative assessment gives you an idea if the module is going well.
- Students can give feedback through student administrators, or the programme director.
- The culture is very open, so students can express their concerns without waiting until the end of term, allowing reaction during the term and taking appropriate action.
- The continuous informal dialogue with students is important in any case.
- Students could write brief feedback at the end of each session.

## How do we evaluate modules? Standardised and diversified systems

With standardised systems, a standard questionnaire which can be applied to all modules is designed by the management team responsible for quality assurance. They collect, process and analyse all the data. In diversified systems, different methods of evaluation may be used for different modules, at the discretion of the module leader or teacher. This person has ownership of the data and is generally responsible for its collection and analysis, and any action to be taken as a result of findings.

### Findings from Institutions with standardised system

#### Institution A

In Institution A, the Teaching Committee designed one standard questionnaire for undergraduate modules and one for postgraduate modules. Staff can get a score ranging from 1 to 5 overall. Anybody with a score below 3.5 will have to talk to a line manager or a Deputy Principal to discuss the strategy to improve the scores for the next year. Then the Programme Director will follow up the subject related issues raised by students, and the Section Head will follow up the staff development needs.

*It is appropriate to have one standard questionnaire, because our questions were designed in that way that they cross all different subjects (...) The module evaluation process is detached from the module leader. The questions are not designed by the module leader, and are not collected by the module leader.*

### Institution B

Institution B used one standardised questionnaire for undergraduate, one for postgraduate, and one for the MBA programme. However, development work was in progress to create one generic questionnaire for all courses, across the school. On each questionnaire the student would read that:

*Student feedback is a vital part of the monitoring of the quality of the teaching and learning experience. Your views will contribute to the management courses and rewarding promotion of staff.*

In Institution B, the main driver for the introduction of a centrally administered standardised questionnaire was that the staff should be rewarded for a good teaching.

*You cannot be asking different questions on different modules. Questions have to be set on one set of criteria. In order to make comparison, and make judgement on the staff performance you cannot use different criteria. We want to treat individuals equally.*

The undergraduate or postgraduate administration always organises collection of feedback before students receive their results. It is not collected by the lecturers themselves.

### Institution C

In November 2004 Institution C moved from diversity of module evaluation forms and module evaluation practices to nine standardised questions that all students answer on-line in class at the end of each unit (module). The excellent IT resources allow all students to give feedback on-line. Institution C invested in a special software that facilitates creation and processing of questionnaires very efficiently.

*It has got an instant analysis of the results, which is available for the tutors and students straight away. Standard questionnaires are better as they allow you to compare the quality of module. (Respondent 5)*

### Findings from institutions with diversified system

#### Institution D

In Institution D a module leader decides which method is the most appropriate for collecting student feedback. This allows module leaders to collect data in a more creative way, for example focus groups, plenary discussions, posters. The majority of module leaders use questionnaires as the quickest and most reliable way to collect and process data and to have a record of a student feedback, which is required by quality assurance processes. The data is analysed by a module leader and then incorporated into the Module Evaluation Form (MEV) with recommendations for actions to be taken in order to improve the module next semester.

Many interviewees believed that different methods should be used to evaluate different modules. For example, new modules should be evaluated differently from established modules, or modules where students have to use special software for business simulations should be evaluated in a different way to modules where students do not use IT.

*The style of the evaluation should follow the style of the module. If your teaching style is flexible, a questionnaire would not be appropriate. If you have very structured seminars with planned activities, and then you ask them to write feedback on flip charts, or make a poster, students would feel very uneasy about it. That is why methods should be different.*

*The standardised questionnaire would lead to even more questionnaire fatigue, that is why there needs to be some variety in the module evaluation.*

#### Institution E

In the past, according to University policy, every module leader had to collect feedback from students and write a report. The module feedback report would feed into the programme report, this would feed into the Faculty report, and in turn this would feed into the central university report. Because of the quantity of reporting, it was decided that the module feedback reports should be dropped because of time pressure and bureaucracy. The new university policy focused on programme level feedback.

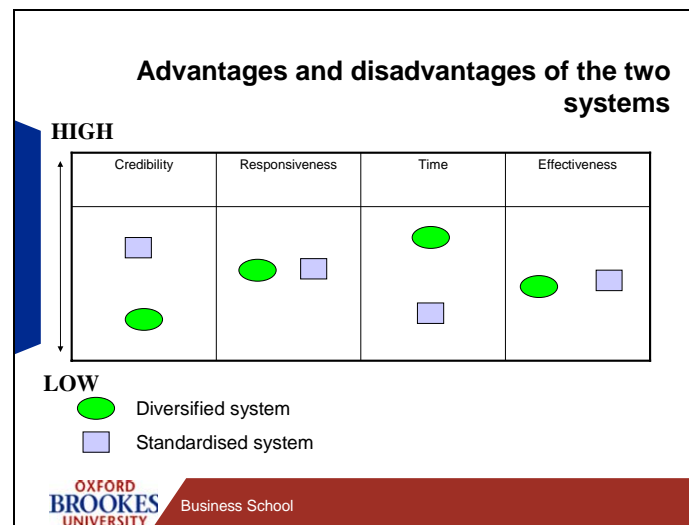
*The School policy is that every module leader has freedom how to collect the feedback. But there is no mechanism to know if they do it and if they do something about improving the module. This is not satisfactory.*

#### Institution F

There was neither a standardised questionnaire nor a standardised process of module evaluation. Module leaders were supposed to collect feedback from students at the end of the module, but the outcomes of the feedback was not discussed within the institution. It was considered preferable to have different methods of evaluation. Some modules were small so using qualitative questions was seen as manageable and appropriate. Evaluating using qualitative questions was deemed impossible with a group of more than 70 students, so methods depended largely on the size of the module.

*It also depends on the level of module. If there is a new module, you want to have many open questions and more specific questions, because it is likely that you would like to review and make appropriate changes.*

#### Comparison of the two systems



#### Advantages of the standardised system

- Objectivity/credibility of feedback.
- Comparability across the modules.

- Lecturers do not spend time designing, collecting and processing data.
- Ownership by management team increases credibility of the data.
- More effective monitoring system.
- Data can be used for marketing purposes.
- Data can be used as a benchmark against other institutions (in the case of an external body conducting the process).
- Students feel more comfortable giving feedback to administrators than to module leaders (more anonymity).
- Lecturers are rewarded for 'good teaching'.
- Effective system for quick identification of serious problems with modules.

#### **Disadvantages of the standardised system**

- The process is too remote from a module leader, who is the key stakeholder in the process. If lecturers feel less ownership of the process, it is more difficult to make changes and improve quality.
- One standardised questionnaire is not appropriate for a wide variety of modules, ranging from accounting and economics to strategy and business ethics.
- Mechanistic attitude towards the process.
- Negative impact on staff morale. Many respondents said 'We are employed as professionals, so we should be treated as professionals'.
- Student fatigue – students can become bored answering the same questions.
- Not possible to ask specific questions, which may be especially relevant for new material.

#### **Other problems and opinions raised by respondents**

- Students do not know how to evaluate modules. So is the data credible?
- Time pressure.
- University policies do not provide the resources to support the process.
- Module evaluation may identify areas for staff development, but what if there is no budget for staff development?
- Students get 'questionnaire fatigue'.
- Dilemma when to collect versus the response rate.
- International students do not believe in anonymity and do not want to give negative feedback.
- Lack of administrative support in collecting and processing data.
- Web CT offers anonymity, but some students do not believe it.
- Cultural differences – Asian students would not criticise tutors.
- Standardisation and quality assurance tools are 'the enemy'.
- Time consuming for large modules – a sample may suffice?
- Different motivation for students to give an answer (meaningfulness of data).
- There is no strong culture of student involvement.

## Ranking question 2: Who is the evaluation for?

**Ranking Question: Who is the evaluation for?**

Please rank each of the factors listed below in order of importance to you.

- a. Professional bodies
- b. Lecturer
- c. External examiners
- d. Students
- e. Course managers/Faculty members
- f. Employers
- g. QAA
- h. Other.....

Answer	Ranking								N/A	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7			
a)	0	0	0	3	1	3	0		13	20
b)	13	7	0	0	0	0	0			20
c)	0	3	8	2	3	1	0		3	20
d)	11	5	2	2	0	0	0		0	20
e)	1	5	9	4	0	0	0		1	20
f)	0	0	0	2	3	1	2		12	20
g)	0	2	2	9	5	0	0		2	20
h)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		20	20

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In the literature, the main stakeholders in the module evaluation process were identified as students, lecturers, employees, QAA, course managers, faculty deans and professional bodies (Day & Jackson 1993; Harvey, 2001). It was important to identify the most important party in the process and whom the evaluation process should serve in the first place. Respondents had to answer the following ranking question:

### Who is the evaluation for?

- Professional bodies
- Lecturer
- External examiners
- Students
- Course managers/faculty members
- Employers
- QAA
- Other

Identification of the main stakeholders in the evaluation process seems to be crucial for effective improvement of students' learning experience. The more sources from different parties are used in the evaluation process the more credible and effective the process is. The stakeholders' perception is important for identification of weaknesses in the module evaluation process in the context of quality enhancement.

The majority of respondents perceive lecturers and students to be the most important stakeholders in the process.

In contrast to the literature reviewed, the majority of respondents did not recognise employers and professional bodies as stakeholders in the process.

Lecturers were identified as key stakeholders in the module evaluation process. Therefore full engagement of lecturers is essential for achieving required improvements.

The advantage of the diversified system in this situation is that module leaders have to design the feedback form themselves or to apply another innovative method of collecting data. The designing phase forces the module leader to reflect on the module before the

module starts. Standardised questionnaires give comparability and measurable outcomes, but the module leader is not a key element of the process. As one respondent said, “Module leader is detached from the process”.

Even if the standardised questionnaire is used in an institution, the module leader should be more involved in its design, or should be better informed about the purpose of the process.

### **Ranking question 3: What would be the most effective way of communicating with students on actions planned and taken?**

The majority of interviewees identified lack of effective communication with students as a weakness of the evaluation process.

There was no consensus among respondents as to the most effective way of communication with students. The most popular option was the face-to-face communication with new cohort of students. Information about actions taken posted on a website was also regarded as effective system, but only if the site was linked to other websites which students had to visit (for example PIP or module description). Incorporating the statement on the actions taken in the module guide was recognised as the easiest option to implement, but this solution assumes that students read module guides. Notice boards used by some respondents did not work very well. Induction for new students and end-of-programme social events were recommended as very good places to communicate with students about module evaluation.

### **Actions taken to improve modules**

The evaluation process is fruitless if we are not able or willing to formulate actions and implement them in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning. In the majority of institutions actions were taken in order to improve modules, but in most cases there was no formal mechanism that would assure implementation and monitoring of the appropriate actions. In one institution Module Evaluation Form (MEV) was used to monitor the implementation of actions decided in the previous term/semester.

The limitation of the form is that

- the actions are decided solely by the module leader based on the personal reflection and analysis of students’ feedback;
- the implementation of an action and its outcome is monitored solely by the module leader, who is the subject of evaluation.

In other institutions where feedback was linked with appraisal, there was a more informal mechanism including meetings/discussions between lecturer and line manager to agree on the actions needed to improve the module.

In one institution it was argued that financial constraints did not allow it to take appropriate action.

## Other issues

### Credibility of students' responses

The respondents agreed that not all comments are valid and sometimes it is difficult to make a judgement. For example, sometimes students give negative comments, after attending only few sessions.

### Credibility of module leaders' reports on feedback from students

Institutions giving module leaders ownership of the module evaluation process face a danger of falsification of student feedback or ignoring negative feedback. In some institutions the module leader is the only person with access to student feedback, therefore there is scope for potential misrepresentation.

### Students do not have evaluating skills

The respondents recognised that postgraduate students and final year undergraduate students give much better quality feedback. "The first year student would not have the foggiest idea how relevant the module content is to the carrier, how this fits together to their programme of study, whether the learning outcomes have been achieved"

### Response rate

Some interviewees claimed response rates were poor because

- students who give feedback will not benefit from it
- students do not know if any actions are taken as a result of their comments
- evaluation fatigue sets in, as students are asked to fill questionnaires to evaluate modules, programmes, and the whole experience at the university.

The response rate was also very low when collected on-line/WebCT.

### Collecting feedback on big modules

Module leaders sometimes have to manage 100-500 students on one module. Analysis of feedback collected from such a large number of students is labour-intensive, so workload can be a problem.

### Anonymity of International students

The proportion of international students in business schools is significant, so it is necessary to recognise cultural differences which might have an impact on module evaluation. Asian students, in particular, do not feel comfortable giving negative feedback if they are not assured anonymity.

## The 'Quality Culture'

A quality culture can be fostered in the following ways:

- Staff development days to promote genuine concern for 'good teaching'
- Invest in staff development activities to meet particular needs of individual lecturers
- Introduce buddy system where poor performing lecturers could learn from peers
- Promote research in 'teaching and learning'

- Employ new staff with excellent reputation for 'teaching and learning'
- Introduce more effective monitoring system of feedback collection process
- Support staff in the module evaluation process by administrative support (distribution, Optical reading) or by academic support ( database with module evaluation forms, best practices)
- Create a forum (Quality review committee with student representatives) where outcomes of the module evaluation are presented and discussed (make the process more transparent)

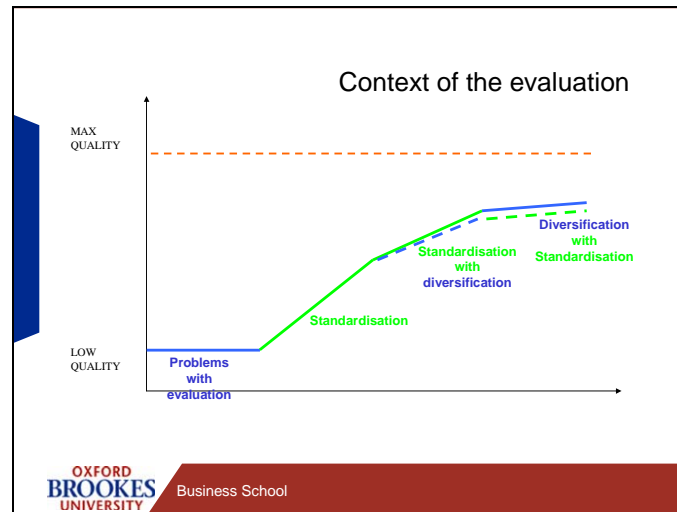
However, promoting a 'quality culture' requires more investment, time and effort, and the result may not always be satisfactory. Introducing a centralised, standardised system of QA is an easier option, but is more mechanistic.

One of the respondents said:

*I am very bored with mechanistic paper tick-boxes of quality assurance. I find it boring and I don't find it effective. You can go to an institution where they ticked all the boxes and they still do not give students a very good learning experience. What is important is the culture of the teaching team, the culture of the institution. Here we are reflective, talking to each other on how to improve things, how we could do it better the next time, reflecting on what we have changed, and keeping track on good and bad changes. Reflection is very important, but it is not about ticking boxes, it's about the culture of an institution.*

*Some people think that quality is about checklists, while I think, that I can walk through the door and I know whether the quality is there or not. You can smell the quality. Quality is not mechanical, it is people-oriented.*

### Conclusion – using the right type of evaluation for the context



The model illustrates that introduction of standardised questionnaires, administered centrally, should improve the quality of modules because:

- the management team will be able to identify poor lecturers.
- an immediate action would be taken in agreement between lecturer and the line manager.

- the progress will be easily monitored by the line manager.
- students would appreciate external monitoring by management team.
- there will be more transparency and comparability of the process.
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As the quality of modules improves the management team should consider transferring part of the responsibility and ownership of the module evaluation to module leaders. This could be achieved by introducing a standardised questionnaire with three questions designed by module leader to address the specific aspects of a particular module. This should encourage a module leader to greater reflection and involvement in the process.

Over time, when the management team is generally satisfied with the process and the quality of the modules, module leaders can be given more responsibility for the quality assurance and more ownership of the process. All respondents agreed that the more ownership of the process by the module leader, the better involvement and responsiveness. If the quality is high there is no need for rigorous control systems by the management team. However, retaining some generic questions for all modules would be useful to maintain a degree of control and comparability across modules.

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