

Listening to the student voice at the University of Sydney: Closing the loop in the quality enhancement and improvement cycle

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Abstract

The Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ)¹ and the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) are tools used to gather information on the current student experience at the University of Sydney. This information contributes to quality enhancement and improvement processes, inputs into strategic planning at both institutional and faculty level, and closes the loop in the quality enhancement cycle, by providing students with evidence that their comments are reaching the intended audience and validating the time and effort that they dedicate to completing the surveys.

In this paper, I will argue that for optimal use of the data, and the time and energy spent in its collection and analysis, it is necessary to work at two levels – institutional and faculty. Data collected through the SCEQ and SREQ is analysed, evaluated and reported to faculties, administrative units, and senior management thus contributing to both institutional and faculty responses to student feedback. Dissemination of the analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement in the student experience, gained through listening to the student voice, takes place through the preparation of individualised reports, presentations at general and specifically focussed staff forums, and inclusion as agenda items at meetings of strategic working groups. The final stage in the process is ensuring that this information is made publicly available through our website.

Introduction

The lecturers always listen to our comments and suggestions and do their best to accommodate our concerns. They are often changing their initial guidelines to help students. This is a very good thing about my degree.”
University of Sydney undergraduate student: 2005 SCEQ

The University of Sydney is a learning organisation which recognises the importance of feedback, audit trails and information loops in the assessment of quality in teaching and learning (Morley, 2003). Its aim is to improve the effectiveness of its core activities of teaching and learning and knowledge production through the promotion of quality enhancement as an integral part of the academic enterprise. Quality enhancement is driven by staff who are active in teaching, research and administration, rather than from a central unit. Processes are evidence-based, collegial, equitable and efficient, the subject of continuous review and improvement; and tightly linked through the analysis, reporting and action on student feedback. The University understands the importance of listening to the collective student voice and considers their views to be a valuable, and necessary, input into the quality enhancement agenda.

The Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) and the Student Research Experience Questionnaire (SREQ) are the tools by which evidence about the current student experience is gathered. The qualitative and quantitative data from the questionnaires contribute to quality enhancement and improvement processes, input into strategic planning at both institutional and faculty level, and close the loop in the quality improvement cycle, by providing students with proof that their comments are reaching the intended audience, and validating the time and effort that they dedicate to completing the surveys.

¹ A full list of abbreviations used is available at the end of the paper.

In this paper I will argue that for optimal use of the data, and the time and energy spent in its collection and analysis, it is necessary to work at two levels – institutional and faculty. Qualitative data collected through the SCEQ and SREQ is analysed, evaluated and reported back to faculties, administrative units and senior management thus contributing to both institutional and faculty responses to student feedback. Dissemination of the strengths, weaknesses and areas of improvement gained through listening to the student voice, takes place through the preparation of individualised reports, presentations at staff forums, and inclusion as agenda items at meetings of strategic working groups. The final stage in the process is ensuring that this information is made publicly available through our website, thus fulfilling DEST Learning and Teaching Performance Fund requirements.

The university has a number of challenges to face in this process: continuing to adapt and respond to student feedback and employer and community needs² communicating student feedback to all stakeholders; and sustaining people's interest and ownership, and hence their willingness to change.

Harnessing the power of the student voice

Poindexter (2006) argues that for a higher education institute to be successful, it must listen to the voices of the students and incorporate what they are saying about their experiences into their priorities. He further maintains that if it does not effectively use this information it risks failure in meeting student satisfaction and expectations. At the University of Sydney we believe that the student voice is a powerful instrument which should be harnessed to provide us with information on their total university experience. The often forthright narratives available through qualitative data, not only complement and confirm the quantitative data, but also provide us with a better understanding of the issues that are important to students (Palermo, 2004; Scott, 2006). The repeated pattern of themes occurring within comments reflects shared experiences for each group of students (Richardson, 2003), presents an important insight into both faculty and institutional practices and procedures, as well as inputting into quality enhancement and improvement processes.

Parker (2005) likens the university to a Greek stage with the students taking the part of the chorus, who have "the responsibility to themselves and their community to think about, experience, engage with, and in some way come to internalise complex explanations; to question, contextualise and finally comment on what they see for the wider community". Taking this analogy a bit further, if the university is a stage, and all the people in it merely players, then all participants can be critics or be subject to the comments of critics. We know that actors, playwrights and other artists avidly read critics notices after the first night of a new show or film – so should we, as participants in the university stage, take note of our critics – the students. For it is their voice that is important in deciding the way forward; they are the ones directly experiencing the performance of our university stage; and whose impressions and reports will determine our future and our funding. Just as we prefer seeing star performers rather than understudies or impressionists when we attend plays, operas or concerts, so students also expect more for their money – they pay high fees for their courses, and expect just returns for the investment they make in their education.

At the University of Sydney the open response comments from the SCEQ and SREQ are our equivalent of first night notices, written by those who are directly experiencing the performance not only of academics, but also student support services and administration. We recognise the importance of these 'notices', and actively collect the data supplied by our harshest critics – the students.

Collecting and analysing the student voice

Together with all other Australian universities, Sydney collects data about the experiences of its recent graduates through the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ). In addition to these externally instituted and designed survey instruments, the University uses its own student satisfaction surveys, administered while students are still at the university: the SCEQ which evaluates the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students, and the SREQ, which evaluates the quality of research higher degree students' experiences.

² *University of Sydney Learning and Teaching Plan 2007–2010: Priorities*, http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/planning/uni_plan.shtml

These surveys are distributed to a stratified sample of students – from all degrees, all faculties, all student groups, and all levels of study. A response rate of over 50% is achieved. Students are asked to respond to statements linked to the SCEQ and SREQ factors using a 5 point Likert Scale to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with each statement. In addition to the closed questions, students are asked to provide comments on their perception of their experiences of teaching and learning, and research training.

The complexity of any student feedback system, and the requirement to maintain validity and reliability of the data collected, necessitates the establishment of a central mechanism to coordinate and monitor survey content and conduct (Palermo, 2004), as well as to provide an unbiased reporting system. To this end, the University's Institute for Teaching and Learning is responsible for the analysis and reporting of the quantitative data, whilst the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) is responsible for the analysis and reporting of the open response comments (qualitative feedback).

These comments are kept in a searchable database which currently consists of 76,470 individual comments which range in length from short phrases of up to five words to one and a half A4 pages of text. The number of comments received each year is growing – from 4,500 in 2000 to 19,629 in 2005, thus providing a complex and unique database of information about students' perceptions of their University experience. A measure of the importance that is placed on these comments, and the possible realisation by students that their opinions are valued, is found in the high percentage of students who are taking the time to provide constructive and worthwhile observations on their experiences – an average of 75-80% of all respondents.

Palermo (2003) and Scott (2006) both argue that collecting students' comments in itself is not sufficient to provide information on what these in-house critics are saying about their experiences, and more importantly, on how we are performing as a university. Vital to the dissemination of these comments to interested parties, is their analysis into meaningful data for the actors in the drama that is the university.

At the University of Sydney, we realised that simply providing a list of student comments to each faculty would not provide them with adequate information on the student experience. Few faculties have the time or the resources to thoroughly analyse and study the comments to ascertain their strengths, weaknesses and areas in need of improvement. Additionally, if the analysis were to be undertaken by a single academic staff member within the faculty, concerns may be raised about the neutrality of the reports. Therefore, we have developed a centralised system for analysing, evaluating and reporting student feedback. Based on the manual analysis of comments using an in-house taxonomy developed specifically for the purpose. (Symons, 2004 and 2006), it allows each faculty to receive its own unbiased individual report, together with a comparison from previous years; and provides cross-institutional perspectives on the student experience at both faculty and institutional level.

However the time and energy spent in the collection and analysis of this valuable information would be wasted if it was simply filed away and not disseminated to those who could use it at both faculty and institutional level.

Disseminating the student voice

Reporting the results of the analysis to our stakeholders is an integral part of quality enhancement at the University. We recognise that there are many ways in which this data can be utilised in quality enhancement and improvement processes at all levels of the university (Scott, 2006), and have designed our reports to accommodate the following needs:

- ensuring that issues that are identified by students as either best aspects or areas for improvement are reaching their intended audience;
- inclusion in documentation for internal and external accreditation processes;
- highlighting areas of concern that require follow up, as well as emerging areas of best practice; and

- confirming that our approaches to quality management for learning and teaching and research training are on the right track.

Since 2002, each faculty at the University has been provided with a report on the most common aspects of the student experiences for each student group. A comparison is provided with previous years, and sample comments from the reporting year are included. Student confidentiality is maintained by excluding comments that may identify students, particularly in faculties with small student numbers. Evidence of improvements in the student experience, as exemplified by a reduction of adverse comments and/or an increase in positive comments, or the absence of concerns raised in previous years, are highlighted in the executive summary of the report.

Faculties may use these reports to supplement their own internal analysis, and include them in documentation prepared for external accreditation visits. They can also be used to respond to government and community criticism about the programs at the university. Recent examples include justification for the relevance of the curriculum in business courses; input into the debate about the capability of teachers entering the public education system, and their expertise in teaching literacy skills; and documentary evidence of teaching and learning practices for accreditation panels in professional areas such as Veterinary Science, Accounting, and Nursing.

An annual report on strengths, weaknesses and areas for improvement in learning and teaching at the University is provided to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching). This informs future strategies and priorities for the Learning and Teaching portfolio, especially in the area of enhancing the student experience. Together with the faculty reports, it feeds into the Academic Board review process, a collegial and collaborative process which provides constructive feedback on the quality of a faculty's educational provision; and the University Learning and Teaching Plan, which forms the basis for faculty plans, and provides strategies and key performance indicators for the provision of quality learning and teaching across the University.

Trends Analysis Reports link together the quantitative and qualitative data from the SCEQ/SREQ, with commendations and recommendations from Academic Board Faculty Reviews, to provide a picture of the student experience in the faculty from 2000 to the date of the report. Since individual faculties do not have the time to create the trends analysis themselves, the reports are proving valuable in identifying the areas that are consistently under-performing and those in which they are performing well.

Staff concerns about the validity of individual comments, and whether they express the view of the vocal minority are allayed when supporting evidence through linkage with other data is supplied in one document. As one staff member expressed it:

The analysis is most useful when it provides an additional, semi-quantitative perspective on areas of concern that can be identified from the numerical results... particularly when it is linked to Academic Board commendations and recommendations. Another very useful aspect is the discussion of trends over time.

The *Analysis of student research experience questionnaire (SREQ) – areas of best practice and suggested improvements (2006)* prepared by the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies, in conjunction with the Institute of Teaching and Learning, and the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), is a variation on the trends analysis report. It presents comparative institutional and faculty information on the quantitative and qualitative results of the SREQ from 2002 to 2005 in a single document. The report was presented to members of the Academic Board, sent to the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA), and used as the basis for a series of forums which discussed the results and suggested future strategies to improve the experience of postgraduate research students.

Ensuring that our international students have a worthwhile experience at the University, and that favourable reports are made to the many countries from which they come, is paramount. Therefore, a separate analytical report on their experiences is prepared annually and distributed to the International Office, the DVC (International), and faculties. Comparative information on the international and local

student experiences is included in reports to strategic working groups, and faculties with large international student numbers.

Regular reports are prepared on the student experience in cross-university aspects of the student experience including: Library services; eLearning; Research-led teaching; and Student Services. These reports are used to inform strategic planning processes, input into reviews, and provide evidence of the success of working group projects.

The Learning and Teaching Portfolio at the University of Sydney regularly holds best practice forums focussing on specific aspects of the student experience. Evidence from student feedback is used to inform the content of these forums, and form a basis for discussion. Recent forums have included: Assessment and Student Feedback, and Curriculum Reform and Renewal. Similarly comments from postgraduate coursework students on the curriculum have been input into the review of postgraduate coursework currently being undertaken at the University.

Data from the analysis of the SCEQ and SREQ qualitative data is presented to and discussed at collegial forums such as the Evaluation and Quality Assurance Working Group, and the Postgraduate Coursework Pedagogy Working Group. These discussions form the basis for institutional and faculty actions to improve the student experience across the university. Members of the Working Groups report back to their faculties, who are then responsible for acting on the feedback.

The above strategies ensure that the student voice is reaching some of its intended audience – the academics, administration and support services. That we are not 100% successful is acknowledged, and each year we incorporate additional communication channels for disseminating the student voices to their intended audience.

Just as important as ensuring that staff are alerted to student feedback, and that they address the issues that emerge promptly, is that students are shown directly that their feedback is being listened to by those who can implement suggested changes. This final step in ‘closing the loop’ in the quality enhancement cycle is critical (Scott, 2000). Over the past year, we have come to realise that not only do we need to complete the cycle as far as the students are concerned, but also for members of the academic staff who are not privy to the reporting and committee structure within their own faculties. To this end, we have developed a number of strategies to ensure that the loop is closed successfully.

Closing the loop

The importance of ‘closing the loop’ cannot be understated. If students do not see action being taken from the feedback they provide on their experiences, they become sceptical, and less likely to respond to future surveys (Watson, 2003). This has major implications in the current funding climate in Australian higher education, where distribution of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund is based on results from the CEQ and GDS. A culture of feedback, and visible response to this feedback needs to be inculcated in all areas of the evaluation and quality enhancement process starting with Unit of Study Evaluations (USE) at faculty level. Recent discussions at the University Evaluation and Quality Assurance Working Group centred on this problem – how do we get students to respond to the CEQ; and how do we let them know that we are listening to their comments, or at the very least passing them to their intended audience? With our large number of faculties, and a diverse student body, it is imperative to use a range of methods to ensure that as many students as possible are made aware that their feedback is being not only listened to, but also acted upon (Watson, 2003).

Best practice is exemplified by those faculties that include information on improvements about current curriculum offerings which have emanated from student feedback; where student comments are posted on faculty intranet sites; or where students themselves, in their comments, refer to the fact that they appreciate being listened to and knowing that the course has been improved as a result of their feedback. It is this best practice that is being disseminated to the rest of the University community through collegial forums, faculty committees, and other communication channels.

Current examples of the use of the SCEQ reports by faculties can be illustrated by the activities of two faculties where there is a culture of the use of evaluation and feedback in their quality enhancement processes.

The Faculty of Economics and Business used results from the 2003 SCEQ in the development of at least one Teaching Improvement Fund application (group work and eLearning). They also provide information to new students on how previous students' feedback have been used to improve learning and teaching within the faculty, and post the reports on their website.

In the Faculty of Veterinary Science reports are used as another source of gathering feedback and gaining insight into student perspectives on their experience. They are placed on the intranet on the Teaching and Learning Committee site and discussed at Teaching and Learning Committee meetings. Course or year coordinators are asked to reflect on results and come up with strategies to address areas that need remediation; and they are summarised and discussed at faculty meetings twice a year. Together with USE data and SCEQ quantitative results, they are used to plan curriculum reform and review.

Recognising that reports on the student experience do not reach all members of the university community, and responding to LTPF requirements to have student feedback publicly available, the University has posted current and retrospective SCEQ and SREQ reports (2003–2005) on its Learning and Teaching Portfolio website (<http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning>).

However this does not answer the problem of ensuring that students know that their comments are being taken seriously, and that they are not writing them simply to have them filed away on a dusty shelf in an office, never to see the light of day. Therefore, SUPRA was informed that reports relating to postgraduate students were available online and asked to inform their members. At forums where student feedback is discussed and strategies developed to enhance the student experience, attendees are advised of the value of informing students that these were the direct consequence of their responses to the SCEQ and SREQ.

The above strategies ensure that student feedback inputs into both institutional and faculty quality enhancement processes. However we are conscious that there are still challenges in feeding back the results to the initiators in a meaningful and purposeful way (Palermo, 2004).

Challenges

The university acknowledges that it has a number of challenges to face before it can claim that the loop in the quality enhancement and improvement cycle has been closed, and that the whole university community is aware of what students are saying about their experiences, and that actions are resulting from their comments on suggested improvements. These include: communicating student feedback to all stakeholders; continuing to adapt and respond to student feedback and employer and community needs; and sustaining people's interest and ownership in the process.

We need to continue to discuss and develop methods for harnessing the student voice, and ensure that reports on their experiences are disseminated in a meaningful way to faculty learning and teaching and research committees, to strategic working groups, and to other stakeholders. The importance of allocating resources, not only to the collection, analysis and reporting of the student experience, but also to ensuring that these reports are made publicly available to all stakeholder, should not be forgotten. Whilst it is imperative that faculties, administrative units, and senior management are the ones who act on the student voice, the middle man between the commentator and their audience should continue to be staff within the Learning and Teaching Portfolio, thus ensuring unbiased or neutral reporting.

One of the strategies in the University Learning and Teaching Plan, 2007–2010, is *To continue to adapt and respond to student feedback and employer and community needs*. Whilst we recognise the importance of the student voice, and that they are at the coal face, recipients of learning and teaching, and research training, we need to ensure that their experiences continue to be worthwhile, and that they will leave the university as ambassadors for our university programs and courses. It is imperative that we continue to adapt our policies, practices and procedures to meet student demands and expectations. This means that we have to

respond to their feedback, and realise that they expect value for money, best practice in teaching and supervision, up to date technology, and high standard facilities.

Finally, having raised people's interest and ownership in the evaluation and feedback process, and the necessity of responding to student issues and concerns, we need to sustain this interest. Promotion of the work being undertaken by the Institute for Teaching Learning, and the Office of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) in the collection, analysis and reporting of student feedback needs to continue. More importantly, best practice in the use of this feedback needs to be disseminated across the university, not only at meetings of strategic working groups, but also at other forums, and made publicly available on the university website. Faculties and senior management, and staff in positions where change can be made, need to be continually reminded of the value of listening to the student voice and its importance in the university quality enhancement and improvement processes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of listening to, and responding to, the student voice cannot be underestimated. Students are the harshest critics on the stage that is the modern university, and will soon become sceptical and disenfranchised with their experiences if they do not witness the results of their feedback. It is essential that universities incorporate analysis, evaluation and reporting on the student voice at both faculty and institutional level, that they continue to sustain interest in the process and, most important of all, that the communication loop is closed by using a variety of means to let students know that their comments are valued. Only by closing the loop, and thereby encouraging students in the feedback habit, can we improve practice and student experience.

Glossary of abbreviations

CEQ	Course Experience Questionnaire
DEST	Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
GDS	Graduate Destination Survey
LTPF	Learning and Teaching Performance Fund
PREQ	Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire
SCEQ	Student Course Experience Questionnaire
SREQ	Student Research Experience Questionnaire
SUPRA	Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association
USE	Unit of Study Evaluation

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