

LTC14D156

Title: Maximising student participation in Online End of Module Evaluation
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Issue

This is a paper on 'Maximising student participation in Online End of Module Evaluation'. Whilst the down-turn in student participation in online End of Module Evaluations appears to have been reversed between 2013/4 and 2014/15, there is considerable scope for increasing participation rates, and it is likely that Schools will need to take deliberate steps to achieve continued increases. All Schools should aim for a target of 70% participation in 2015/16, and this paper sets out recommendations for how this goal could be achieved.

Recommendation

There are a series of recommendations for LTC to 'approve' at the end of the paper.

Resource Implications

No significant resource implications.

Risk Implications

No risks

Equality and Diversity

It is not envisaged that any of the recommendations contained in the report will impact on groups with protected characteristics. Quite the contrary – increased participation will ensure that the needs and feedback of all students are used to drive future enhancements in modules.

Timing of decisions

The report contains a series of recommendations for approval. These can be implemented immediately following LTC approval.

Further Information

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Background

Student engagement – especially with regard to their involvement in quality enhancement – is a key focus of Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code. Ensuring increased participation rates is an important means of building this engagement and ensuring that student feedback results in positive change in modules in future.

Discussion

The paper is for discussion and contains recommendations for approval.

Maximising Student Participation in Online End of Module Evaluation

By Adam Longcroft (ADTP)

Introduction

It is important that student engagement – as reflected in student input into quality enhancement – is maximised, in accordance with the requirements of Chapter B5 of the UK Quality Code. It is also important that the concept of ‘partnership’¹ (as expressed in the opening quote from Dunne and Zandstra) informs the University’s approach. A key aspect of student engagement in quality enhancement is student participation in end of module evaluation. At UEA, we use an online system for module evaluation which is administered by LTS Hubs, though in some areas, staff have utilised other methods.

In order for this form of student engagement to work effectively, it is important that levels of student participation in module evaluation are high. This is in the best interests of students, module organisers and the University. LTS has provided data for autumn semester modules in 2014/15, looking at participation rates by School, and data for both semesters in the previous academic year 2013/14 for the purpose of comparison. The picture for 2013/14 is presented in **Appendix 1**. That for autumn 2014/15 is presented in **Appendix 2**. The latter is colour coded to show the following:

Red = Decrease since 2013/14

Green = Small increase since 2013/14

Yellow = Large increase of more than 10% points since 2013/14.

Analysis

Overall, the picture is a positive one, with most schools showing an increase of 0-10% points.

There are factors which should cause us to be cautious in drawing conclusions from the data. Firstly, the total number of responses between Appendix 1 and 2 are not consistent since the latter only includes data for a single semester. The reorganisation of schools in HUM and FMH also means that it is problematic to draw ready comparisons between schools.

In 3 schools – EDU, HUM, NAT – participation rates have increased by more than 10% points. It would be particularly interesting to hear from these schools as to how/why they believe these increased participation levels were achieved, so that practice/strategies can be shared with other schools. Generally speaking, participation levels in HUM schools appear to have remained fairly static. Far from disengaging with online evaluation methods it is clear that students are increasingly

¹ The Higher Education Academy, *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education* (July 2014). See:

https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Engagement_through_partnership.pdf

likely to complete an evaluation and to provide their views on the modules they have taken. This is a very welcome development.

In FMH, MED has seen a significant growth in participation, but the figure for HSC is lower (44%) than NSC/RSC in the previous year (roughly 50%). It is unclear how the reorganisation of NSC/RSC into a single school impacted on student completion of online evaluations, but this is an issue for HSC to reflect on.

In three schools – CHE, LAW and PHA – figures for 2014/15 are lower than those in the previous year. It would be interesting to understand the factors that influenced this decline. It is noteworthy that only 3 schools have achieved a participation rate of 50% or higher – MED, EDU, NAT. In the interests of ensuring robust student engagement, the ADTP believes that all Schools should aim to achieve a 50% participation rate in spring semester 2014/15, with an expectation of consistently achieving a 70% participation level in 2015/16.

TPPG members have also, rightly, drawn attention to the fact that low response or participation rates do not necessarily indicate that students are dissatisfied with their modules. In some cases, students may be quite happy, or feel that they have little to criticise or complain about, and may feel that completion of evaluations is therefore unnecessary. This is, indeed, entirely possible. However, the University should be taking deliberate steps to increase participation since it is important that we understand better how students feel about the education they are receiving, and we should encourage them to participate in module evaluation regardless of whether they are blissfully happy with their experience, or have constructive criticisms to feedback to Schools.

TPPG members felt there were a number of other issues that might currently be impacting on participation rates:

- ❖ HUM felt that there were structural problems with when the evaluation was completed as the cut-off date for a response was often before the students had received their marks and feedback.
- ❖ SCI felt that with the response rates were so low as to be statistically insignificant and that there was little point to collecting data if it was not actionable or led to a change.
- ❖ FMH stated that for mature and part-time students or for those involved in post Registration courses it was difficult to engage them in online module evaluations.
- ❖ The Union of UEA Students argued that those students who did engage were entitled to air their views and that Students needed to know that such evaluations effected change.

The Research Literature on Maximising Student Participation

The literature on student evaluation has identified a number of effective strategies within the sector. These include:

- Making students believe that ‘it matters’ – that their responses will be read and acted upon
- Making some attempt to follow-up non-respondents – for example, asking class attendees to take questionnaires for their missing colleagues.

- Sending out reminders with electronic or posted questionnaires (but if responses are anonymous, then all students will need to be sent reminders).
- Using a well-designed (and reasonably short) questionnaire.
- Providing adequate class time for their completion.
- Keeping the number of questionnaires to the minimum necessary to achieve their purposes – i.e. in order to avoid questionnaire fatigue.

See: John Brennan and Ruth Williams, *Collecting and using student feedback: A guide to good practice*, Learning & Teaching Support Network (Based on HEFCE funded research) 2004. See: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/id352_collecting_and_using_student_feedback_a_guide_to_good_practice.pdf

In terms of the publication of student feedback, the following QAA principles may serve as a useful guide:

- Student feedback should be obtained at module level, as this is the primary unit of delivery in terms of the learning experience.
- Evaluations should be conducted using a range of mechanisms, determined by the provider and fit for purpose for the intended student cohort (for example, online for part-time or distance learning students).
- Current students should be given the opportunity to respond at the appropriate time.
- Providers should publish their responses to student module evaluations.
- Student satisfaction data should inform internal review processes and influence future planning.
- Collection, publishing and responding to student feedback should promote the enhancement of the learning experience.

QAA, Responding to Feedback from Students. Guidance for providing information for students (2013). See: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/responding-to-feedback.pdf>

Practice in the sector

Across the sector there are a variation of approaches to module evaluation both in its collection, analysis, evaluation and impact. Improving module evaluation processes is nothing new, as far back in 2011 The Guardian published a piece questioning practices that were current at that time and in many cases are still practiced in some parts of the sector. <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2011/dec/20/higher-education-course-evaluation-feedback>

One of the challenges the sector is facing as a whole is that of maintaining healthy student participation in module evaluation whilst increasingly shifting to an online process. In terms of the collection of module evaluations a number of institutions (Anglia Ruskin University, University College London, Kings College London and The University of Bedfordshire) reported a fall in the response rates when evaluations were changed to solely online. This is consistent with the experience at UEA.

The most effective method for a good response rate is normally a system that allows module leaders to locally decide if they believe a better response will be achieved through paper based or online evaluations. Paper based evaluations tend to achieve higher response rates. However this could be influenced by a number of other factors. Paper based evaluations can

also be much more time-consuming to analyse since the data has to be 'processed' manually.

Whilst one can acknowledge that paper-based module evaluations have a place – perhaps in Mid-Module evaluation contexts where the amount of data collected is deliberately limited – **a shift towards paper-based quality systems and away from online seems fundamentally at odds with the development of the kind of online learning environments and paperless systems** that are increasingly employed within the sector as a whole to support the student experience.

Rather than reverting back to a paper-based system for module evaluation, it would seem sensible, instead, to explore and **implement methods which encourage the continued increase in engagement in online evaluation** that we have seen at UEA in the past year. The data presented in Appendices 1 and 2 demonstrate that UEA is able to increase student participation in module evaluation, so the question is how we maintain the momentum in this area. Sharing good practice that already exists within the University and exploring strategies that have been employed effectively in other HEIs is likely to be critical to success.

Analysis of the sector suggests the following strategies can be effective:

- **Incentives** - An example of incentivising the completion of module evaluation takes place at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) where for each completed evaluation the institution makes a donation to a charity.
- **New technologies** - Exploiting innovative new technologies has helped some Universities to enhance participation by students. At the University of Salford innovative use has been made of mobile phone technology, and the VC has been quoted as saying: "Going forward I anticipate that the higher education sector will need to utilise online devices to capture student feedback, but at the same time ensure that this is not done in an intrusive manner".
- **Explicit link to enhancement** - It is widely agreed that the most effective way to encourage student participation in module evaluation is by making clear its impact on the student experience, and to build the analysis of module evaluation into existing, regular processes such as SSLCs and Course Review.
- **Mid-module evaluation** – This is being more widely used in the HE sector. Normally carried out in a much less stringent way, mid-module evaluations galvanises early thoughts about a module and also, if changes are made, demonstrates to students in a concrete manner how they can influence their programme of study. By demonstrating a commitment to using the student voice as a driver for enhancement, strong use of mid module evaluation can increase participation in end of module evaluation.
- **Timing of the end evaluation** - This has also been raised as a key issue for students. Leaving it too late in the process, particularly where mid-module evaluation is not present, can lead students to seeing no value to their personal experience, particularly if they are leaving a particular area of study. Equally, asking for end of module feedback too early can lead to students questioning how this will be able to feedback on the remainder of the module. Requiring students to complete online evaluations before they have completed their summative assignments and, more importantly, received feedback on the latter, and had a chance to 'unpack' this feedback in peer groups or with their module tutors or advisers, is arguably of limited value. The 'problem' here is the danger of making the assumption that students always give truthful, objective feedback. This has been contradicted by four separate studies conducted since 1999, each showing that if students evaluate lecturers after grades have been awarded, there

is a direct link between good results and satisfaction scores. See:
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/education-and-satisfaction-are-antithetical/2016329.article>

- **Openness in sharing of module evaluation data** - Robust consideration and sharing of module evaluation data and quality enhancement actions is increasingly the norm in the sector, with information of this kind routinely shared with SSLCs (or their equivalent), thereby ensuring an effective 'closing of feedback loop'. Once a culture of 'openness' in the use of such module evaluation data is established, student engagement in the module evaluation process increases.
- **Allowing 'space' for completion of module evaluation** - Building-in the module evaluation process into taught sessions (e.g. allowing 10 mins in final session for students to complete online process using smart devices or an IT Lab etc) sends out both a powerful message to students – namely, that their views are valued – whilst also ensuring that students have a 'space' in which to engage with the process.

A cautionary note on the use of student 'satisfaction' scores

It is important to seek the views of students on their experience. The principle of seeking student feedback on their learning is rightly enshrined in the UK Quality Code and in our existing quality processes at UEA. However, research suggests that Universities should be cognisant of the dangers of becoming overly reliant on this data as a measure of 'quality'. Recent research suggests that the oft-assumed link between student satisfaction and good academic performance is actually far from proven².

Recommendations for LTC to consider:

The following are recommended as actions which are likely to increase participation rates in End of Module Evaluation.

1. **Incentivise student participation** – TPPG was of the view that UEA should be cautious in encouraging incentives built around 'donations to charity', and should focus, instead on ensuring that students are incentivised by Schools demonstrating that student feedback **is taken seriously and results in changes to the way modules are delivered**. Research and practice in the sector demonstrates that this is by far the most effective incentive.
2. **Ensure that anonymised End of Module Evaluation data is shared with students via BB and/or SSLCs** – openness in the sharing of data and subsequent quality enhancement actions is likely to incentivise students to engagement in future online module evaluations.
3. **Employ a simple yet effective method of mid-module evaluation** - Strong engagement in the former is likely to result in enhanced participation in end of module evaluation. There is little evidence to suggest that effective use of Mid-Module evaluation results in a decline in participation in End of Module Evaluation. Indeed, the opposite seems to be the case.
4. **Build online evaluation into the final session(s) of a module** – this can be facilitated using either mobile smart devices/phones or an IT Lab. Students

² Times Higher Education, October 2014. See:
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/education-and-satisfaction-are-antithetical/2016329.article>

who do not possess a lap-top or portable smart device can always use their PCs at home afterwards. If Module Organisers notify students in advance that they will be building-in an opportunity to complete the module evaluation, and request that students bring appropriate devices, the completion rates are likely to be high.

5. **Schools with participation figures for 2014/15** above 50% and those who saw an increase of more than 10% this year (EDU, MED, ENG, HUM, NAT) should be invited by LTC to provide a brief summary of the factors/actions they believe have influenced this improved/high level of student participation. LTS have agreed to collate responses into a single document for circulation to all Teaching Directors/Heads of Schools and Assoc Deans for L & T.
6. **Monitoring participation rates** – participation in End of Module evaluation is such an important aspect of student engagement that LTC should require that participation rates are carefully monitored by FLTQCs in future, with the issue included as a Section A standing item at the first FLTQC of the academic year.

The recommendations suggested above are underpinned by an important principals:

- 1) Maximising student participation in online evaluation ensures that students have an opportunity to:
 - reflect on their learning within modules.
 - provide constructive feedback on their modules.
- 2) Unless we have feedback from students it is difficult to drive future enhancements and to make modules more effective in driving deep learning, building complex skill-sets, and in meeting the learning needs of students.
- 3) Strong participation in evaluation reflects a robust level of student engagement, and that is in best interests of students and the University.

ADTP
9 March 2015

Appendix 1

Student participation rates for Module Evaluation (By School) for 2013/14 (Both semesters combined)

2. 2013/14 Data

2013/14 SEM 1 and 2

School	Participation Rate	Total Students	Total Responses
AMS	34.8%	1386	483
ART	42.6%	734	313
BIO	27.4%	3850	1053
CHE	26.9%	2442	658
CMP	33.3%	2409	801
DEV	38.6%	2030	784
ECO	34.8%	3134	1091
EDU	39.1%	138	54
ENG	44.9%	127	57
ENV	37.0%	3009	1113
FTM	36.7%	1556	571
HIS	36.1%	2599	939
HUM	23.5%	430	101
LAW	29.2%	3751	1094
LCS	38.9%	2036	792
MED	43.6%	117	51
MTH	24.3%	1886	459
MUS	21.4%	173	37
NAT	40.0%	15	6
NBS	28.9%	12305	3553
NSC	51.1%	2709	1383
PHA	40.6%	2579	1047
PHI	31.4%	684	215
PSI	37.0%	2825	1044
RSC	50.2%	315	158
SCI	44.4%	36	16
Total	33.5%	53275	17873

Appendix 2

Student participation rates for Module Evaluation (By School) for 2014/15 (autumn semester only)

1. 2014-15 Data at 11 February 2015

2014-15 SEM 1 ONLY

SCHOOL	Participation Rate	Total Students	Total Responses
AMA	38.0%	1631	619
BIO	30.1%	1514	455
CHE	23.2%	591	137
CMP	36.5%	1033	377
DEV	40.5%	780	316
ECO	36.7%	1018	374
EDU	51.5%	171	88
ENG	50.0%	26	13
ENV	39.3%	1198	471
HIS	41.1%	1079	443
HSC	44.1%	1239	546
HUM	34.7%	173	60
LAW	29.1%	1585	462
MED	52.9%	17	9
MTH	27.5%	433	119
NAT	50.0%	22	11
NBS	36.7%	1709	627
PHA	14.5%	76	11
PPL	38.7%	2546	986
Total	36.4%	16841	6124

Red = Decrease since 2013/14

Green = Small increase since 2013/14

Yellow = Large increase of more than 10% points since 2013/14.