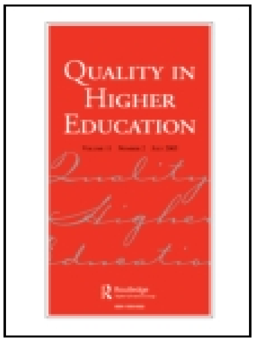

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Editorial

Student Feedback [1]

LEE HARVEY

In the 1980s, feedback from students about their experience in higher education was a rarity. With the expansion of the university sector, the concerns with quality and the growing 'consumerism' of higher education, there has been a significant growth of, and sophistication in, processes designed to collect views from students. Following the Cooke Committee's (HEFCE, 2002) announcement on information requirements for quality assurance in higher education in the United Kingdom, student satisfaction feedback has become an important element of the higher education quality process (Harvey, 2001a; HEFCE, 2001). This has been reinforced in the recent White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), which proposes better information for students including a new annual student survey. Other countries have versions of national student feedback including Australia, where the course experience questionnaire has been used for several years.

Most higher education institutions, around the world, collect some type of feedback *from* students about their experience of higher education. 'Feedback' in this sense refers to the expressed opinions of students about the service they receive as students. This may include perceptions about the learning and teaching, the learning support facilities (such as libraries, computing facilities), the learning environment, (lecture rooms, laboratories, social space and university buildings), support facilities (refectories, student accommodation, health facilities, student services) and external aspects of being a student (such as finance, transport infrastructure).

Student views may be collected in a variety of ways, including:

- informal discussion or conversations;
- formal qualitative sessions, such as focus groups, facilitated discussions or suggestion boxes;
- representative or consultative committees;
- questionnaires.

This review will focus primarily on the last of these. Questionnaire-based feedback is usually in the form of 'satisfaction' surveys; students reported satisfaction with their learning experience. Sometimes there are specific attempts to obtain student views on how to improve specific aspects of provision or on their views about potential or intended future developments but this is less usual.

Ironically, although feedback from students is assiduously collected in many institutions, it is less clear that it is used to its full potential. Feedback from students has two main functions:

- internal information to guide improvement;
- external information for potential students and other stakeholders, including accountability and compliance requirements.

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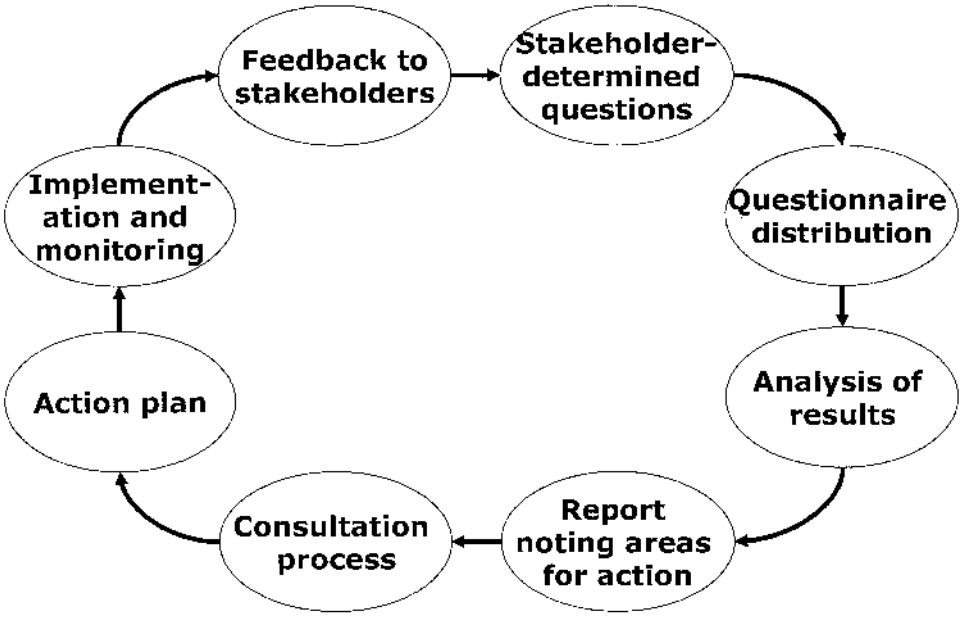

FIG. 1. Satisfaction cycle.

Improvement

It is not always clear how views collected from students fit into institutional quality improvement policies and processes. To be effective in quality improvement, data collected from surveys and peer reviews must be transformed into information that can be used within an institution to effect change.

To make an effective contribution to internal improvement processes, views of students need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback (Figure 1). In many cases it is not always clear that there is a means to close the loop between data collection and effective action, let alone feedback to students on action taken.

For this to happen requires that the institution has in place a system for:

- identifying and delegating responsibility for action;
- encouraging ownership of plans of action;
- accountability for action taken or not taken;
- feedback to generators of the data;
- committing appropriate resources.

Establishing this is not an easy task, which is why so much data on student views is not used to effect change, irrespective of the good intentions of those who initiate the enquiries. Williams (2002) noted that, to gain support and trust, the student feedback process must be transparent and senior management must be committed to the approach. Action should result to improve the student learning experience: resources must be made available and the agenda for change must be progressive rather than recriminatory (Harvey *et al.*, 1997). Without evident action, students grow cynical about the process and are less willing to take part in the quality enhancement process (Powney & Hall, 1998).

It is more important to ensure an appropriate action cycle than it is to have in place mechanisms for collecting data. At the University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE), for example, there is a clear mechanism for dealing with and acting on the data at an institutional level, which involves top-down discussions between the vice-chancellor, the pro-vice-chancellor and each dean and director of service. At Edinburgh University, for example, the focus is on reporting action taken in response to the feedback obtained. There is no fixed approach, but rather there is encouragement for the collection of feedback using a variety of sources and methods, as seems appropriate at the course, department or school level. This is backed up by procedures such as faculty-based audits of annual course monitoring returns. At Auckland University of Technology, the senior management team met collectively to discuss the findings and formulate action plans. At Lund University, the students invite the university management to a conference to discuss the results of the student barometer and identify appropriate action (Nilsson, 2001). The vice-chancellor at Lund discusses the results and the possible action with the deans and then informs the general public. Lund University is a large institution in a small town and therefore the wider community has an interest in the quality of the education and facilities.

External Information

In an era where there is an enormous choice available to potential students, the views of current students offer a useful information resource (Hodges, 2002). Yet very few institutions make the outcomes of student feedback available externally. UCE, for example, is unusual in publishing their institution-wide student feedback survey (which reports to the level of faculty and major programmes). It is available on a public website and is published as a hard-copy document with an ISBN number, which has been the case since its inception in the late 1980s. Institutions abroad that have implemented the Student Satisfaction approach (Harvey *et al*., 1997), including Auckland University of Technology and Lund University, have published the results. However, the norm in Britain is to consider that student views are confidential to the university.

If the data is to be useful as an information resource, it is important that it is seen to be collected professionally and impartially, preferably by a unit outside the faculty structure.

Baty (2001) suggests that universities will not welcome the publication of student feedback. As Williams (2002) notes, opposition to the use of student feedback as a key element in any future quality assurance policies has been based largely upon the fear that, once made public, it may have the effect of ‘potentially compromising the rigour and candour of those processes if these are to form the basis of public information’ (Johnson, 2001, p. 3). Elsewhere, Harvey (2001b) has argued that the student perspective, although it is not the only perspective, has three advantages: it is the view of the person participating in the process, the learner; it is direct; and it can provide ratings on a range of items relevant to prospective students.

The intention, in the United Kingdom, is to have student views made public beyond the sphere of the institution to which they relate so as to provide prospective students with more transparent information. At the graduate level this already occurs in Australia with the course experience questionnaire (CEQ). One might suppose that CEQ provides useful information to prospective students but, given the convoluted process of reporting, the limited number of items and the fact that public reporting appears only to be to the level of the institution, CEQ results are not much use to a student looking to choose between programmes of study. The plans are to extend the CEQ, although public reporting is unlikely to be at the level of programmes.

The intention appears to be to have a public graduate survey across the United

Kingdom, again reporting to institutional level. As Peter Knight, vice-chancellor of UCE, recently pointed out, the time-lag on such a survey would have graduates commenting on a programme devised many years previously that would, in all likelihood, have already changed beyond recognition. It seems that such surveys will simply add to the league tables of statistics without in any way providing useful information or, more importantly, informing the continuous improvement process.

The question of whether undergraduate surveys should be public hinges on the balance between more information for prospective students and internal quality improvement. Currently, institutions who undertake institutional surveys do not directly compare outcomes of student views with other institutions at the institutional level, let alone at the level of the programme. Apart from the lack of public information, such comparisons might be conceived as ill-advised because institutions face different issues, have different types of students, and have different expectations.

To be of use for prospective students, like would need to be compared with like at the programme level. This could only happen if there was a core of questions that institutions asked students and reported at the programme level (for a suggested set, see Harvey, 2001a). Then the data could be collated by a central agency and published. This could occur in two ways. First, by having a special centralised survey of students. Given the plethora of surveys and the problem of getting co-operation and a reasonable response rate, this is an unlikely option. The second option is to use the surveys that institutions already undertake for improvement purposes. This would mean encouraging all institutions to include the core set of questions in their tailor-made surveys, which otherwise focus on their own issues. The results pertaining to the core set could be extracted out and sent to a central agency for publishing, or each institution could publish the results of the core set, broken down by programme of study, on its own website, with direct links from gateways such as the UCAS site in the United Kingdom.

The problem with this, other than response rates and getting every institution to provide the data, is the issue of honest and accurate reporting. If the institution considers that the reputation of, and recruitment to, its courses will be harmed by the results, then they will not reveal them, which would make the whole process pointless.

However, there is a more profound issue here. Taking an improvement process, which is internally benchmarked over time, and using it to make comparisons between institutions and programmes converts an improvement tool into an accountability or compliance tool. Furthermore, the original point is to improve and the feedback cycle is about showing what improvement action takes place as a result of a poor rating. If the only thing in the public realm is the rating devoid of the follow-up action, then prospective students only have half the information they need: and the least useful half at that!

Types of Satisfaction Surveys

The predominant 'satisfaction' survey takes five forms:

- institution-level satisfaction with the total student experience or a specified subset;
- faculty-level satisfaction with provision;
- programme-level satisfaction with the learning and teaching and related aspects of a particular programme of study (for example, BA Business Studies) [2];
- module-level feedback on the operation of a specific module or unit of study (for example, Introduction to Statistics);
- teacher appraisal by students.

Institution-Level Satisfaction

Systematic, institution-wide student feedback about the quality of the students' total educational experience is an area of growing activity in UK higher education institutions, and is probably now undertaken in one-third of all universities (Leckey & Neil, 2001). It is also a growing concern in other countries around the world. Wiers-Jenssen *et al.* (2002) argue that student satisfaction surveys are a tool by which institutions can comprehend the complexity of the total learning experience and include the institutional leadership more directly in quality development issues.

Institution-level satisfaction surveys are almost always based on questionnaires, which mainly consist of questions with pre-coded answers augmented by one or two open questions. In the main, these institution-wide surveys are undertaken by a dedicated unit with expertise in undertaking surveys producing results to schedule.

Institution-wide surveys tend to encompass most of the services provided by the university and are not to be confused with standardised institutional forms seeking feedback at the programme or module level (discussed later). In the main, institution-wide surveys seek to collect data that provide:

- management information designed to encourage action for improvement;
- a descriptive overview of student opinion, which can be reported as part of appropriate accountability procedures.

The derivation of questions used in institution-wide surveys varies. At UCE and Sheffield Hallam University, for example, questions derive from focus groups with students. In other institutions, management or committees decide on the questions. Sometimes, institutions use or adapt questionnaires developed at other institutions.

The way the results are used also varies. In some cases there is a clear reporting and action mechanism. In others, it is unclear how the data helps inform decisions. In some cases the process has the direct involvement of the senior management, while in other universities action is realised through the committee structure.

Feedback to students is not just telling them the results, but telling them what action has followed. This is not as easy as it sound and completing the loop is not always carried out effectively, nor always produces the awareness intended. In a recent article, Watson (2003) draws on international examples and identifies several approaches, including using leaflets, newsletters, articles in university magazines, posters, the intranet, campus radio and direct communication with groups of students. Some institutions utilise current lines of communication between tutors and students or through the student unions and student representatives. There are many issues related to feedback, and Watson equates good feedback to students with debriefing.

There are many variants as the following brief review of a small sample illustrate. As this is a dynamic area of development, it is not possible to guarantee that the current situation in the institutions cited is as described. However, the description reflects the recent situation in each setting.

Examples. The satisfaction approach (Harvey *et al.*, 1997), developed at UCE over 15 years, is the market leader and has been adopted by many institutions in the United Kingdom and abroad. The approach was designed to be an effective tool with which to obtain, analyse and report students' views of their total university experience in order to effect change and improvement. The methodology continues to evolve and allows the surveys to be flexible to address the pressing concerns of students. The methodology can be easily

	Very un-satisfactory	*Unsatis-factory*	*OK*	*Satisfactory*	*Very satisfactory*
Very important	E	D	C	B	A
Important	e	d	c	b	a
Not so important	(e)	(d)	(c)	(b)	(a)

FIG. 2. Satisfaction and importance grid.

adapted to different situations. It has been used to explore the views of a variety of stakeholders: taught and research students, staff, employers, placement supervisors and even football supporters.

The student satisfaction approach is unique in combining the following four elements:

- Stakeholder-determined questions: the student satisfaction research focuses on the total learning experience as defined by students.
- Satisfaction *and* importance ratings: the research examines student satisfaction with aspects of provision and then identifies which of those areas are important for students.
- Management information for action: those areas that are important to students but where students are dissatisfied are priority areas for management intervention.
- A clear feedback and action cycle.

The areas of concern, about which students are asked to rate their satisfaction and importance derive from prior consultations with students, who determine the questions on the basis of feedback from focus-group sessions, telephone interviews and from comments provided on the previous years' questionnaires.

The inclusion of importance ratings provides a clear picture of where to focus effort to ensure maximum improvement. For external stakeholders, importance ratings indicate clearly what students on a programme consider to be important elements of their learning experience.

The statistical data collected through the survey research is mapped on a satisfaction and importance grid (Figure 2). Those areas that fall into Sectors E and D, high importance to students but low satisfaction, are priority areas for management intervention. A central feature of the report is the composite rating tables and trend graphs. These are accompanied by a commentary, which identifies the main issues. Although the survey is based on student-determined questions, many issues recur over time, which permits monitoring of trends and benchmarking over time.

At the centre of the process is the action and feedback cycle (Figure 1). The intention is that there is a process that identifies responsibility for action and subsequent follow-up to ensure action takes place. The outcomes of action are reported back to the originators of the data—the students.

Each institution develops its own processes for ensuring this process. At UCE, which has been doing it longest, there is a top-down/bottom-up process of internal consultation that reviews action from previous years and prioritises action based on student views, which is linked to budget allocation letters (Figure 3). The vice-chancellor and the pro-vice-chancellor (academic) interview all the deans and heads of services about the outcomes of the

FIG. 3. Consultation process at UCE.

report. The deans and heads of services are expected to account for any areas where students are dissatisfied but regard as important and find ways of overcoming them. Deans are required to indicate what action they are intending to take and what has happened as a result of the previous year's agenda. The replies are made available to senate for discussion and, like senate papers, are semi-public documents. Before responding to the vice-chancellor, the faculties make use of the detailed data available from the Centre *for* Research *into* Quality, which conducts the survey, to look more closely at any Sector Ds or Es. They also undertake local analyses.

The results of the student feedback questionnaire are reported to the level of faculty and programme. The report is written in an easily accessible style, combing satisfaction and importance ratings, that clearly shows areas of excellence and areas for improvement. The report is published (with ISBN number), available in hard copy and on a public website. The action that follows the survey is reported back to the students through an annual publication.

At UCE, feeding back information on action to students is important as students need to be aware that the process includes action, that the information is collected for a purpose. Details of the action taken is collated and a feedback report is produced. This is sent to students who are asked to respond to the survey (50% of all students at UCE) and made available via libraries and resource centres for other students. Direct feedback is also made available to student representatives on senate, faculty boards and course boards. In addition, short articles are usually published in the university newsletter and students' union magazine.

Institutions that have used the UCE model include Sheffield Hallam University, Glamorgan University, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Buckingham Chilterns University College, University of Greenwich, University of Central Lancashire as well as overseas institutions such as Auckland University of Technology, Lund University, (Nilsson, 2001), City University, Hong Kong, University of Port Elizabeth, South Africa (Oosthuizen, 2001) and Jagiellonian University, Poland. All of these institutions have a similar approach, collecting student views to input into management decision-making. Where they vary, to date, is in the degree to which they make the findings public and produce reports for students outlining actions that have resulted from the survey.

At the University of Greenwich, the institution-wide survey is a census of students on half the campuses each year. The 16-page questionnaire covers all aspects of the student experience and is based on items determined by students. The printed report and executive summary (which commend excellence and details the areas for improvement) go through the committee structure; the learning and quality office is responsible for liasing with heads of department and schools to produce an action report and then an end-of-year implementation report, which is also circulated to committees. Results and action are communicated via the university intranet, newsletters, e-mails and articles in the student newspaper and staff magazine. The survey is increasingly part of the culture of the university and has resulted in numerous improvements, including some, for example, in the school of education, which were noted by the external quality assessment reviewers.

Southampton Institute has had an annual questionnaire since 1993, which has evolved and, in the past 2 years has addressed the question of importance. Southampton Institute has separate surveys for undergraduate students and postgraduates. The questionnaire items are selected by a working group. The annual survey is reported at faculty and programme level, the individual results are sent to course leaders and faculty summaries are sent to the deans for their response. A full report is published with summary extracts in the Student Union's newsletter. Each course leader must include the feedback from the survey in their annual course report. Action that ensues is reported back to students via the Student Union's newsletter and the student representatives.

University of East London (UEL) had an annual institution-wide student feedback questionnaire during the 1990s and is intending to re-introduce it this year. The previous five-page questionnaire had many standard questions that repeated from year to year about the overall quality of student experience of the 'would you recommend UEL to a friend?' type. Each year specific issues were identified for inclusion on the questionnaire as a result of discussions at the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. The overall process was overseen by the UEL Quality Assurance Department. The results were widely circulated within the university to inform the annual quality improvement process in academic schools and central service departments. Heads of department or services were required by academic board to identify actions taken or planned. The summary analysis from the questionnaire and the action plans went to the student/staff consultative committee.

In 1996, the University of Portsmouth first produced a student satisfaction survey, which covered most aspects of the student experience, and reported it to the level of faculty. However, reporting was in the form statistical tables that did not make it easy to identify where action may be required for improvement. The report was regarded as a 'significant input to quality improvement' and the intention was that 'action for improvement follows from discussions'.

The University of Nottingham, four-page, 'omnibus survey' has, since 1994, been used to survey all student cohorts on their experiences as a student, measuring their satisfaction with the range of services offered. Although relating to many services, the survey is dominated by questions relating to choice of Nottingham as an institution at which to study, its reputation, the induction process and the general facilities, including accommodation and computing. There is nothing about the learning and teaching situation or course organisation, which are consigned to module and optional course surveys. Each student cohort is surveyed biennially. The items on the questionnaire have evolved since 1994 through a consultation process with the students' union, the academic secretary's department, the registrar and the pro-vice-chancellor for student affairs. There are fixed questions that are retained for longitudinal analysis. Reports are distributed to staff and managers and put on the website. Service providers are asked to respond to the findings with appropriate action plans. The omnibus survey has led to action; for example, the abolition of single sex halls and changes in residential hall meal times.

The University of Plymouth has been running an institution-wide undergraduate student perception questionnaire since 1995. This was extended to include partner colleges from 1998, and a pilot postgraduate questionnaire was run in 2000–01. Topics regularly covered include various aspects of the programme of study, support for learning, student union and other university services as well as policy awareness (for example, equal opportunities, disability). Whereas most institutions sample, Plymouth includes most of its students. An institutional report goes to the university's Quality and Standards Committee, which includes a summary of prioritised areas and an action plan from faculties and partner colleges, available on the university's intranet. Programme-level reports are also distributed, with a faculty summary for comparison. They are discussed at programme committees where student representatives are present. Summaries of findings and actions taken are also disseminated to staff and students via presentations and poster displays.

The University of Limerick undertook an institution-wide survey in 2000, including satisfaction with course organisation, teaching, learning resources and self-development. The final report was only at the institution level although the research objectives were to evaluate by department and course as well.

A number of universities have undertaken institution-wide surveys, often on a census basis, exploring a limited number of areas of student opinion. These are often only reported internally and are not explicitly tied to a process of feedback and action. The surveys undertaken at Liverpool John Moores University and Leeds Metropolitan University appear to be of this type. Leeds Metropolitan University used academic committees at different levels to interpret the results and indicate future action. At Liverpool John Moores University, breakdowns were provided at school and programme levels and fed into action planning.

Most institutions indicate that it is difficult to pinpoint specific action resulting from the survey findings, which probably reflects some fuzziness at the latter stages of the feedback cycle.

Recommendations.

- Institution-wide surveys should provide both data for internal improvement and information for external stakeholders.
- If the improvement function is to be effective, it is first necessary to establish an action cycle that clearly identifies lines of responsibility and feedback.
- Surveys need to be tailored to fit the improvement needs of the institution. Making use of stakeholder inputs (especially those of students) in the design of questionnaires is a useful process in making the survey relevant.
- Importance as well as satisfaction ratings are recommended as this provides key indicators of what students regard as crucial in their experience, and thus enables a clear action focus.
- Institution-wide surveys are best directed at the student learning experience. They are

not good vehicles for assessing teacher performance and so items related to programmes should focus on learning development not teaching competence.
- For improvement purposes, reporting needs to be to the level at which effective action can be implemented. So, for example, programme organisation needs to be reported to the level of programmes, and learning resources to the level of libraries and resource centres.
- Reports need to be written in an accessible style. It is recommended that, rather than tables densely packed with statistics, data should be converted to a simple grading (that incorporates satisfaction and importance scores where the latter are used; Figure 2). This makes it easy for readers to identify areas of excellence and areas for improvement.
- If the survey is to provide information for external stakeholders, then surveys need to include a generic set of questions to enable some comparison of student perceptions.
- Experience of many surveys in the United Kingdom and abroad shows that questionnaires derived via consultations with students contain a core set of questions.
- Reports at the institutional level need to be published, or at least the responses to the generic questions need to be made available either on the institutions' website or in a central location (or both). At module level, the results of surveys should remain for internal consumption.
- For external information purposes, reporting of the responses to generic questions needs to be to the level of programmes or subject areas.

Faculty-Level Satisfaction with Provision

Faculty-level surveys (based on pre-coded questionnaires) are similar to those undertaken at institution level. They tend to focus only on those aspects of the experience that the faculty controls or can directly influence. They often tend to be an unsatisfactory combination of general satisfaction with facilities and an attempt to gather information on satisfaction with specific learning situations.

The purpose of most faculty-level feedback surveys seems to be far from clear. In most cases, these surveys are an additional task for faculty administrators, they are often based on an idiosyncratic set of questions and tend not to be well analysed, if at all. They are rarely linked into a meaningful improvement action cycle.

Where there is an institution-wide survey, disaggregated and reported to faculty level, faculty-based surveys tend to be redundant. Where faculty surveys overlap with institutional ones, there is often dissonance that affects response rates.

Examples. Edinburgh University, for example, has no institution-wide survey but one or two faculties have their own tailor-made feedback questionnaires, available to course directors as an option.

Recommendations.
- Faculty-level surveys are not really necessary if well-structured institution-wide surveys are in place.
- If faculty-level surveys are undertaken they should not clash with institution-wide surveys; where both co-exist, it is probably better to attempt to collect faculty data

through qualitative means, focusing on faculty-specific issues untouched by institution-wide surveys.
- If faculty-level surveys are undertaken they must be properly analysed and linked into a faculty-level action and feedback cycle, otherwise cynicism will rapidly manifest itself and undermine the credibility of the whole process.

Programme-Level Satisfaction with the Learning and Teaching

Programme-level surveys are not always based on questionnaires, although most tend to be. In some cases, feedback on programmes is solicited through qualitative discussion sessions, which are minuted. These may make use of focus groups. Informal feedback on programmes is a continuous part of the dialogue between students and lecturers. This should not be overlooked as it is an important source of information at this level for improvement.

Programme-level surveys tend to focus on the teaching and learning, course organisation and programme-specific learning resources. In the United Kingdom, a majority of universities will have some form of programme-level feedback, although this may not be consistent across the institution. However, in a modularised environment, programme-level analysis of the learning situation tends to be 'averaged' and does not necessarily provide clear indicators of potential improvement of the programme without further enquiry at the module level. Where modular-level feedback is encouraged (see later), there is less need for programme-level questionnaire surveys.

The link into any action is far from apparent in many cases. Where a faculty undertakes a survey of all its programmes of this type, there may be mechanisms, in theory, to encourage action but, in practice, the time-lag involved in processing the questionnaires by hard-pressed faculty administrators tends to result in little timely improvement following the feedback.

Where the institution-wide survey is comprehensive and disaggregates to the level of programmes, there is also a degree of redundancy in programme-level surveys. Again, if programme-level and institutional-level run in parallel there is a danger of dissonance.

Examples. The satisfaction survey used at the Open University is primarily aimed at the programme level, although it does cover some wider, university, issues. In many respects, Open University students are even more firmly focused on their course than students in conventional universities. The Open University aims to be able to give information on student views at the programme level and to encourage action among programme teams. Programmes are re-surveyed, following action, to see whether student satisfaction increases in responses to any changes made.

The standardised programme evaluation approach reached its nadir in Australia with the development of the CEQ based on Paul Ramsden's well-known work. This was a national survey aimed at graduates of Australian higher education institutions. It has been claimed that the CEQ provides some useful, although limited, information about teaching and learning across Australia (Aungles, 2002). A student CEQ, for current students, is also in use in institutions.

The University of East London requires each school to publish a policy on the evaluation of courses, units and pathways, and expects that an 'anonymous questionnaire should normally be administered at intervals not exceeding two years'. Pathway or subject area questionnaires are particularly common for final-year students coming to the end of their studies with them being asked to reflect back on the whole degree.

The University of Nottingham makes available a 'course experience evaluation' questionnaire, which can be used to evaluate programmes, although such evaluation is optional.

Recommendations.
- Programme-level questionnaire surveys are probably not necessary if the institution has both a well-structured institution-wide survey, reporting to programme level, and structured module-level feedback.
- If programme-level surveys are undertaken they should not clash with institution-wide surveys or module-level feedback.
- If specific programme-level information is needed for improvement purposes, it is probably better to obtain qualitative feedback on particular issues through discussion sessions or focus groups.
- If programme-level surveys are undertaken they must be properly analysed and linked into a programme-level action and feedback cycle. This tends to be a rarity in most institutions.
- At a national level, programme-level questionnaires provide insufficient information to assist potential students in selecting appropriate universities and programmes of study.

Module-Level Feedback

Feedback on specific modules or units of study provides an important element of continuous improvement. The feedback tends to focus on the specific learning and teaching associated with the module, along with some indication of the problems of accessing module-specific learning resources. The primary purpose of module-level feedback is to assist the teaching staff to modify the module to enhance student learning. If the feedback process does not provide useful insights that enable such modifications, then it tends to be data collection for its own sake.

Module-level feedback, both formal and informal, involves direct or mediated feedback from students to teachers about the learning situation within the module or unit of study. The primary form of feedback at this level is direct informal feedback via dialogue. However, although dialogue may often result in changes, it is rarely evident in any formal reporting of action on feedback.

In nearly all British institutions, there is a requirement for some type of formal collection and reporting of module-level feedback, usually to be included in programme annual reports. In the main, institutions do not specify a particular data collection process. The lecturer(s) decide on the appropriate method for the formal collection of feedback. However, there is a tendency to use 'feedback questionnaires' at this level: sometimes standardised questionnaires across the institution, sometimes faculty wide and sometimes constructed locally. Module-level questionnaire feedback is usually superficial, often overemphasising tick-box responses at the expense of qualitative comments. Often the results provide little information about what would improve the learning situation. Furthermore, because of questionnaire-processing delays, it rarely benefits the students who provide the feedback. The use of questionnaires tends to inhibit qualitative discussion at the unit level.

Direct, qualitative feedback is often far more useful in improving the learning situation within a module of study. As one of Jethro Newton's (2000, p. 161) respondents noted:

> I find I get a better feedback from students … just by talking to them on an informal basis and from the course team meetings where there are student

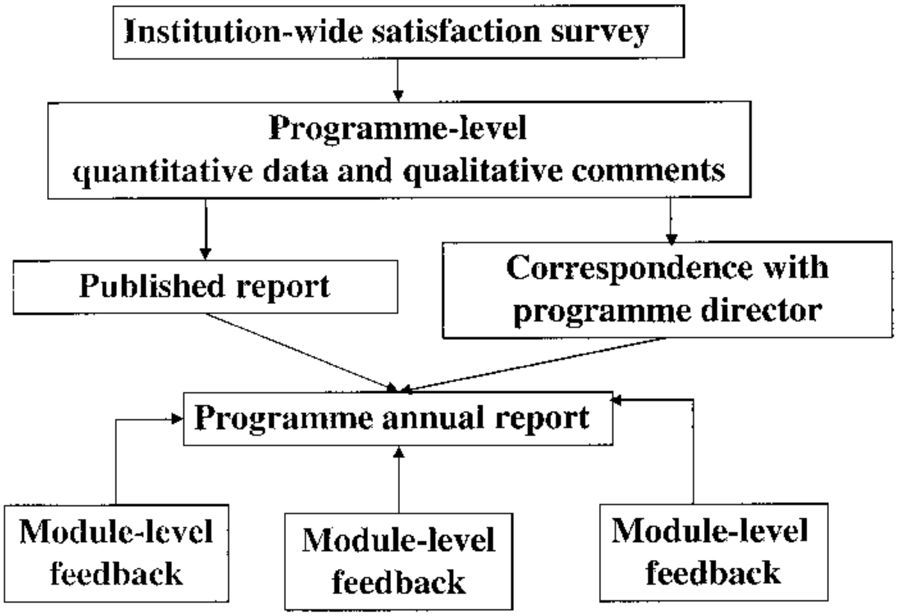

FIG. 4. Integrating institution-wide and module-level feedback.

> representatives rather than having them all fill in a form. If anything, from the form the only bits worth having are the bits at the bottom where it says 'any other comments'. The rest of it—I mean it may seem useful but really it isn't, and it is time consuming … taking time out of class to get them to fill it in, 'cos if you just give it to them and send them away you don't get them back so you have to do them in class. (Respondent 25)

Qualitative discussion, between staff (or facilitators) and students about the content and approach in particular course units or modules, provides a rapid and in-depth appreciation of positive and negative aspects of taught modules. Direct feedback might take the form of an open, formally minuted discussion between students and teacher(s), informal feedback over coffee, or a focus-group session, possibly facilitated by an independent outsider. If written feedback is required, open questions are used that encourage students to say what would constitute an improvement for them, rather than rating items on a schedule drawn up by a teacher or, worse, an administrator.

However, qualitative feedback is sometimes seen as more time consuming to arrange and analyse, and therefore seen as constituting a less popular choice than handing out questionnaires. Where compliance overshadows motivated improvement, recourse to questionnaires is likely.

In many instances, questionnaires used for module-level feedback are not analysed properly or in a timely fashion. Although most institutions insist on the collection of module-level data, the full cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback to originators of the data rarely occurs. Thus, it is important that students' views collected at module-level have the same cycle of reporting, action, and feedback to students as institution-wide surveys. In addition, where both occur there needs to be articulation between module-level and institution-wide surveys (Figure 4).

Examples. Southampton Institute has an institutional form for module feedback but it is optional, and some subject groups design and use their own. Module-level feedback is used to evaluate and review the unit of study.

Similarly, at the University of Nottingham, module-level feedback is managed by the schools themselves on condition that results are fed back to students. There is a university module questionnaire for schools to use if they wish but they can use their own design. The module questionnaire focuses on organisation and student learning rather than teacher performance and is for curriculum development.

There is a formal requirement at UEL for each module co-ordinator, supported by the subject area co-ordinator, to produce module-level feedback. There is no standard questionnaire although standard templates are available and support for analysis is provided by the Quality Assurance Department. UEL policy recognises that students get overloaded with too many questionnaires and thus it is recommended that a variety of feedback mechanisms be used. It is the responsibility of the subject area co-ordinator, or course tutor, to ensure that students are informed of the results of any data collected as part of a feedback exercise and of any action taken as a result of feedback. This is done through an oral report within a teaching session, a subject area newsletter, a posted notice, a discussion at course committee or by e-mail or the webpage. The policy requires that summary data from unit level feedback is made available at the annual quality improvement process. Issues requiring action at school level can thus be identified, as can issues requiring action at institutional level.

Recommendations.

- Module-level feedback is vital for the ongoing evolution of modules, and the teaching team need to be responsive to both formal and informal feedback.
- Both formal and informal feedback should be included when reporting at the module level.
- Module-level feedback is necessary to complement institution-wide surveys, which cannot realistically report to module level.
- Module-level feedback should be tailored to the improvement and development needs of the module. There is no need for standardised, institution-wide, module-level questionnaires.
- As with any other feedback, module-level feedback of all types must be properly analysed and linked into a module-level action and feedback cycle.
- Module-level feedback does not need to be reported externally but should form part of internal programme reviews.

Appraisal of Teacher Performance by Students

As a result of government pressure in the 1990s, UK institutions went through a period of collecting student views on the performance of particular teachers, known as 'teacher assessment'. Many institutions use standardised programme-based or module-based surveys of student appraisal of teaching. However, this has waned somewhat in the United Kingdom, with probably fewer than one-tenth of all universities doing this on a systematic basis.

The use of student evaluations of teacher performance are sometimes part of a broader peer and self-assessment approach to teaching quality. In some cases, they are used as part of the individual review of staff and can be taken into account in promotion and tenure situations (as at Wellington and Otago Universities in New Zealand, and in many institutions in the United States). In some institutions, this appraisal has been undertaken institution wide; in others, it is delegated to faculties.

Teacher-appraisal surveys may provide some inter-programme comparison of teacher performance. However, standardised teacher-appraisal questionnaires tend, in practice, to focus on a limited range of areas and rarely address the development of student learning. Often, the standardised form is a bland compromise, designed by managers or a committee, that serves nobody's purposes. They are usually a set of questions about the reliability, enthusiasm, knowledge, encouragement and communication skills of named lecturers.

Student appraisal of teachers tends to be a blunt instrument. Depending on the questions and the analysis, it has the potential to identify very poor teaching but, in the main, the results are rarely of much use for incremental and continuous improvement. In the vast majority of cases, there is no feedback at all to students about outcomes. The views on individual teacher performance is usually deemed confidential and subject to closed performance review or development interviews with a senior manager. At Auckland University, for example, the process was managed by the lecturers themselves and the results only passed on to managers in staff development interviews if the lecturer wanted to. Copenhagen Business School is a rare example of an institution that, in the 1990s, published the results within the institution.

Students' appraisal of teacher performance has a limited function, which, in practice, is ritualistic rather than improvement oriented. Any severe problems are usually identified quickly via this mechanism. Where institutions, or parts of institutions, rely on large numbers of part-time teachers, with high turnover, then student appraisal of teachers provides a rough-and-ready insight into where there may be problems. Tuiuti University in Parana, Brazil used a simple 'target' diagram to obtain rapid feedback from students on its non-permanent staff. Repeated use of student appraisal of teachers leads to disenchantment on the part of students because they rarely receive any feedback and lecturers become annoyed because they see the process as about managerial control rather than improvement. There have been suggestions that student appraisal of teachers should inform performance-related pay. This is so ill-thought through as to warrant no further comment here.

Examples. Student evaluation of courses and teaching, initially developed at Auckland University, is a somewhat more sophisticated approach to standardised evaluation of teachers and modules. The system aims to identify student perceptions of the quality of teaching and to improve teaching through staff development linked to the issues identified by students. An institution-wide database of 100 questions relating to teacher performance and module organisation and structure was devised. Each lecturer was required to select any 30 items to construct a questionnaire suited to his/her circumstances. Responses were analysed centrally and a report provided to the lecturer. The report of findings was also sent to the tutor's line manager, as the basis for staff development discussions if the lecturer so wished.

The University of Nottingham has compulsory teacher evaluation, using standardised forms that have five fixed questions on teacher performance, used to evaluate all teachers. They are collated centrally and the results fed back to teachers and heads of schools confidentially. Heads of schools also receive a school mean. Teaching evaluation is for career development.

The London School of Economics has teacher appraisal questionnaires to 'assess students' opinions of course teaching' and a separate one to 'assess students' opinions of teaching of part-time class teachers'. They contain specific questions on performance of teachers prefaced by a few questions on library provision and lectures.

Recommendations.

- Use of student appraisal of teaching should be sparing.
- If used, avoid endlessly repeating the process.
- If used, ask questions about the student learning as well as the teacher performance.
- Ensure that action is taken, and seen to be taken, to resolve and monitor the problems that such appraisals identify.
- Only report outcomes as necessary to ensure improvement.

Multiple Surveys

Institutions often have a mixture of the different type of student feedback, to which might be added graduate and employer surveys. The information gathered is, far too often, simply that—information. There are many circumstances when nothing is done with the information. It is not used to effect changes. Often it is not even collected with a use in mind. Perhaps, far too often, it is a cosmetic exercise.

Furthermore, there is a considerable problem of questionnaire overload and response fatigue. Often, individual teachers, service centres, faculties and the institution undertake surveys with little or no regard for what other surveys are taking place. The resulting dissonance leads to small response rates and a degree of indifference or cynicism, especially when the feedback cycle is not completed.

In the main, feedback surveys still tend to be paper based, although there are increasing attempts to introduce electronic versions, especially web-based surveys. Some countries are well ahead in this respect; City University, Hong Kong, has been successfully surveying first-years students electronically since the late 1990s. In the United Kingdom, however, most experiments seem so far to have been plagued by response rates significantly lower than for paper-based surveys. It seems that the lack of engagement with electronic surveys are due to four factors. First, not all potential respondents are sufficiently 'switched on' to web-based technology. Even where they are, the problem is often one of communicating the survey to the student body given a tendency to prefer free external e-mail systems rather than the dedicated university system, thus the university often has no record of the e-mail that the student actually uses. Second, there is a residual suspicion that electronic surveys are not sufficiently confidential or anonymous. Third, paper-based surveys can usually be much longer and, hitherto, have tended to be more complex than electronic surveys, which tend to be simplistic so as to encourage a 'quick-and-dirty' engagement by the student, whose concentration on-line is assumed to be short lived. Fourth, the arrangements to establish an electronic survey are often far more complex than they might initially appear as a result of concerns about confidentiality, data protection and security. Often, with the best will in the world, electronic surveys are aborted because establishing a fire-wall-protected site and mailing out the electronic link to students makes electronic surveys prohibitive, despite appearing to be a cheaper option.

As engagement with electronic communication continues to grow, it seems inevitable that student feedback will be electronic. This will be facilitated by the growth of virtual learning environments (VLEs), especially as students increasingly log-in to their own virtual space in the VLE. There is a danger that the increasing use of VLEs will see a mushrooming of electronic surveys. On the other hand, it will be possible to use the VLE to co-ordinate competing survey demands. Instead of an array of overlapping and uncoordinated surveys, the VLE could be used to get student feedback on different aspects of their experience at different times, in a rather more continuous way than can be accomplished by paper surveys, which take much longer to process. However, the continual electronic surveying needs to be linked into a continuous set of cycles of reporting, action and feedback.

Conclusion

Students are important stakeholders in the quality monitoring and assessment processes and it is important to obtain their views. Institution-wide surveys reported to programme level can be very useful aids to improvement but they need to be complemented by module-level feedback that emphasises qualitative comment.

It is feasible, for comparative purposes, to identify a set of generic questions that can be used to gauge satisfaction with institutional provision and programmes of study (Harvey, 2001a), which could form the basis of information to external stakeholders. However, there are serious problems of ensuring that an emphasis on information provision does not end up subverting the internal improvement process to which student feedback so clearly contributes.

It is important to remember that there is more to student feedback than collecting data.

- If collecting student views, only collect what can be made use of.
- It is counterproductive to ask students for information then not use it; students become cynical and uncooperative if they think no one really cares about what they think.
- It is important to heed, examine and make use of student views.
- If data from surveys of students is going to be useful then it needs to be transformed into meaningful information.
- The information needs to be clearly reported, fed into systems of accountability and linked to a process of continuous quality improvement. The whole process must be accountable and part of a culture of improvement.
- It is important to ensure that action takes place on the basis of student views and that *action is seen to take place*.
- This requires clear lines of communication, so that the impact of student views is fed back to students. In short, there needs to be a line of accountability back to the students to close the circle. It is not sufficient that students find out indirectly, if at all, that they have had a role in institutional policy.

Notes

[1] This editorial draws on L. Harvey's *Student Feedback: a report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England* (October 2001).

[2] In some institutions, programmes of study are referred to as 'courses' or 'pathways'. However, 'course' is a term used in some institutions to mean 'module' or 'unit' of study (that is, a sub-element of a programme of study). Due to the ambiguity of 'course', the terms 'programme of study' and 'module' will be used in this paper.

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