

## **Student evaluation - why wait until it's too late?**

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### **Abstract**

Student response systems (SRS) are becoming increasingly well used in higher education (Walklet et al., 2016; Heaslip et al., 2014), although usually for eliciting student engagement in classes, this project extended SRS use to evaluation and enhancement of the student experience more widely and hopes to contribute to the limited literature on the topic.

The 2017 NSS results for business programmes in the institution identified areas of concern for students in assessment and feedback, organisation and management, learning resources and student voice. Programme staff decided that, in future, earlier and more open communication could identify the specific needs and expectations of both staff and students, developing a greater understanding of one another.

A pilot study was designed, therefore, to unpick the causes of student dissatisfaction before they deepened. Poll Everywhere (PE) voting software was used in classes across the Undergraduate Business Management Programme area, asking students questions around key aspects of their experience. Responses were analysed, and the results for each module were presented on the VLE, along with an action plan to demonstrate that staff were listening.

The results indicated that the key areas to be addressed related to developing more coherent messages within teaching teams, clarity on the provision of timely assessment support, and timetabling challenges. Nonetheless, the needs of students needed to be balanced against the capabilities of resources and practical considerations which students may not always be fully aware of.

In conclusion, I will demonstrate how we introduced and managed an early response exercise, and what we hope to change as a result. I will identify the questions that were asked, how and when to ask them, and the best practice for delivery.

### **Introduction**

Current evaluation of student experience within modules has tended to take place at the end of the teaching period. In addition, the class representative system which is used as a forum for students to address concerns also has a tendency to have prescheduled meetings towards the latter part of a semester.

The current systems enable teaching staff to consider changes in the next period but may fall short of addressing concerns for the current cohort. Using an earlier review system alongside existing mechanisms enables additional opportunities for students to address concerns before they become more serious and for staff to respond more quickly. Final reflections are still incorporated, as end of module evaluations are retained. Therefore, this approach is an enhancement rather than a replacement of current systems.

### **Approach**

Addressing the previous NSS results was viewed as a matter of urgency by the staff team at an initial programme leaders meeting in the early part of semester one. It was important to have a very clear view about what the key concerns of students were so that informed

decisions could be made and resolutions rolled out based on evidence rather than the perceptions of staff.

The use of Poll Everywhere (PE) voting software in the early part of the teaching semester was therefore instigated as a pilot project to gather evidence in the first instance. The Poll Everywhere (PE) voting software enables a presenter (lecturer in this case) to collate live information from participants via a web address and a device such as a mobile phone, laptop or tablet.

Given the relative urgency, student reps were not consulted about the roll out of this project as the meeting is much later in the semester. Instead, students were advised prior to the poll taking place the reasons why it was happening and what the next steps would be. Students were informed that the activity would shortly be taking place (a week prior) and to ensure that they had access to a device that could access the internet.

Based on a twelve-week teaching semester for level one modules and only eight weeks for final year modules, teaching weeks 5-7 were targeted across all three modules that the student would be taking. Ideally, modules were to be surveyed in week 5 but in some cases this was not possible (guest speakers or class trips). In the second semester, week 4 was targeted as being the most desirable week to conduct the evaluation given lessons learned from the previous semester.

As previously noted, the previous NSS indicated that the key areas of concern were in assessment and feedback, organisation and management, learning resources and student voice. The programme team decided that it would be sensible to develop questions within these core areas and aligned to those within the NSS. This would seek to provide a much clearer indication of what the NSS score may look like to staff and with ongoing review, students would become more familiar with the questions and continued improvements and challenges could be monitored.

Module evaluations conducted online via the virtual learning environment (VLE) have had very low response rates and therefore the alternative and preferred method of data collection was within class time, specifically lectures as opposed to repeated throughout different seminar groups. Some staff expressed concern for how much time the activity would take out of the scheduled teaching session which is a concern noted by Masikunas et al. (2007). The survey was kept relatively short to minimise disruption to classes, target the key areas noted and achieve a maximum response rate.

Each survey asked the same questions and sought to collate quantifiable information as well as an opportunity for qualitative comments should a respondent wish to add them.

### **Information on how the work was carried out**

In order for all colleagues to have PE accounts, coordination with the appropriate learning technologist colleagues was required. Learning technologist colleagues could then ensure that teaching colleagues are grouped with one another, which enables those within the group to share polls as well as be able to develop their own polls. From an efficiency point of view, sharing polls helps avoid wasteful duplication and create a consistency in terms of the poll delivered. The only issue that was created when sharing a poll was that the ordering of the questions was randomised. A quick drag and drop enables the questions to be restored into their original order in the new account.

In practice, whilst the technology is very simple to use, some training was required to ensure that colleagues can present the survey within a class with ease. Notably, when multiple polls

exist within a single account (which became apparent given colleagues delivered polls on behalf of others) it was important to ensure that the correct poll was open, otherwise the results from other polls can inadvertently be combined into one another.

There are various functions available within PE to control what is displayed to participants. The decision for the pilot was that the results would not be displayed live unlike the work of Mazur (1997) to enable discussion at that point amongst the student body. The purpose of this was two-fold. Firstly, to ensure that responses were not influenced by the comments made by others and secondly that staff expressed concern about potential inappropriate comments. Therefore, the compromise was that there would be an open and transparent display of the results with a response within a short window, which was agreed by staff members to be one week. This gave staff an opportunity to review any (potentially inappropriate) comments and have time to present a written response which would be displayed on the VLE with the original data.

Whilst the live results were not displayed, the staff member and students were able to view progress via a bar chart indicating how each respondent was progressing. Completion of all the bars acts as an indicator to the presenter that the survey has been completed by all participants and enabled the class to move on thereafter. At this juncture, it should also be noted that the poll can be left open for respondents to complete at a later time if they wished. This was not commonly used (and cannot be used if the account was being used for multiple modules within a similar timeframe).

Whilst a number of staff already had PE accounts which they had been using for other classroom activities, additional accounts were ideally required to ensure all staff could participate in the pilot without assistance. The alternative was that colleagues ran a poll via their own account on behalf of a colleague and in fact this approach was more commonly adopted. Effectively the handful of colleagues who had been using PE for some time acted as “champions” for the technology. Positive experiences of how easily the technology could be used and specifically how little time it would take from the class were particularly important in terms of “buy in” from other colleagues.

It became apparent rather quickly was that the “buy-in” from colleagues was highly variable. Colleagues who were keen to use the technology and participate, organised accounts to be set up. Other colleagues who had reservations or perhaps were more nervous about adopting new technology (or the activity) relied on colleagues with existing accounts to run their polls. There was perhaps a sense that as it was a pilot, it was an activity which could be opted into, rather than a coordinated activity which all were required to participate in as it wasn't a formal policy directive.

Within the class a PowerPoint slide was shown to the students with the web address of the poll. Upon accessing this webpage, their device confirms the module name, code and lecturer delivering the module. Students were advised to work through the short survey at their own pace and that it would take no longer than ten minutes. In a small number of cases, students did have some difficulties accessing the link due to the strength of the wifi signal within the various teaching rooms and some students consequently used their data packages or a fellow classmates device.

In response to the question “*the module is well organised and running smoothly*” and the next question “*materials are easy to find on the VLE area*” the responses were positive across levels one to three in general with final year students providing the most positive results in terms of these two issues. An ongoing debate within the team has been whether we have a “standard” layout for the various VLE module pages to aid navigation. The results did not

provide any evidence that this was something for the team to consider as a matter of urgency and as such it remains a debated topic within the team at the current time. An issue that did arise in conflicting ways was the use of team teaching. Teams which worked well together were appreciated and recognised by students. In contrast in others, a lack of clear communication between colleagues was highlighted by students. This has led to a discussion with the staff team about the size of teaching teams within the programme to seek to ensure that messages are more consistent to alleviate the anxiety that can be created from conflicting/unclear messages.

The next question was "*the timetable for this module is working well for me*". Timetabling concerns were raised at all levels and were not unexpected based on verbal comments already made. Predominately the issues are concentrated around spacing of classes and avoidance of sessions in the early morning and the end of the day. An important response to this from the staff team was that we have similar feelings about timetabling. Timetabling is something out with our control and generating a timetable takes into account a mix of things that students probably aren't aware of. Acknowledging the frustration and explaining the factors that make timetabling so complicated is not a solution but enabled staff to demonstrate an understanding of the frustrations perhaps for the first time in a formal response.

Views about the library and access to resources were neutral in levels one to three in response to the question "*library resources are supporting my learning well*". The qualitative comments were predominately around access to ebooks, the number of physical copies of books and ease of finding resources. The library run classes for literature searches but these are not embedded within the modules themselves. What this raised for the staff team is whether targeted and aligned classes would be beneficial for students in relation to assignments. Final year students commented on specialised sessions that had been set up to support them with their honours dissertation and how useful such sessions would have been at earlier points within other modules. Staff on one particular module (law) felt that there could be potential to include a practical library session within their module in future.

Assessment was a key area of investigation. The question that was asked was "*I have received written information about the assessment for the module*". In the vast majority of cases students indicated that they had received written information about the assessment (assessment specifications are supposed to be on the VLE by the end of the first week of teaching). However, the open ended question that followed highlighted that some students were at times unclear about what was really being looked for within an assignment. This led to a discussion on whether time should be spent explaining the different modes/particulars of assessment in more detail and whether "model" answers should be given. This was a controversial issue and one without resolution. Effectively the debate centred on how to create independent learners whilst ensuring that there was sufficient support to create independence as a student progressed throughout the academic years. Students also noted that they felt in cases that too much time was being spent on assessment briefing. Some colleagues have used drop in sessions specifically targeting assessment. The responses really demonstrated the diversity in each cohort and the team questioned whether we make presumptions about prior knowledge and understanding.

Setting aside the issue of whether assessment discussions should even take place, if they are to, the next issue was about when this should be. The results and subsequent discussion with the staff team indicated that if the discussion was too early then the feeling was that students "forget" the guidance provided by the time the assessment drew closer. Equally however, if such a session is deemed too close to the deadline then the feeling is it's too late within the student replies. The only consensus that came from these discussions was that the staff team

need to be more explicit about when these discussions would take place (if at all). That way it was felt that students would be informed that there would be an information session and when that would be in relation to the assignment deadline and this could help to alleviate anxiety. However, it was very clear from discussions that there is no perfect solution for this but clarity would be helpful.

Feedback was another important area for exploration. The specific question posed was “*we have been receiving feedback on our progress so far in lectures and seminars*”. In level one students felt rather neutral about whether they were getting feedback or not. In level two, it was much clearer that a third of the cohort felt they were getting feedback on their modules and in final year what came through was that feedback they were providing to the staff team was being acted upon when asked “*if you have provided feedback on the module, has your feedback been acted on*”. It also opened up a discussion by some of the team that they felt they were giving feedback and whether it wasn’t being identified as such. One colleague indicated that they had been specifically told in a previous role to explicitly state “this is feedback” every time feedback was given in order to make it as clear as possible what constituted feedback. The sense amongst the team was that a more explicit approach might be required. All colleagues stressed in their responses that students could contact them to discuss matters. However, it was also highlighted by many colleagues that if the student did not attend classes and use the VLE then they would miss important information.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This was the first time any sort of early check on student experience has taken place. Students took to the activity well and we did not receive any negative feedback on the activity itself. An issue raised by some colleagues was whether we learned anything new or unexpected. This feeling was primarily indicated by staff who received negative comments on their module and/or who were reluctant to take part in the activity in the first instance. Implementation as a formal part of the student experience in future would require engagement from all parties and stronger buy-in from staff.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to show (and not just say) that we act upon the information provided where feasible and show understanding and explanation where we cannot. Roll out in class time was not overbearing and did provide some useful information which enabled staff to make minor tweaks where necessary and open a dialogue which may have not taken place. Whether this activity is taken forward into the next academic year remains a matter of debate.

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