

A look into the minds of first-year chemistry students

Alexander Hedlund
(Academic Executive, Heriot-Watt University Student Union)



“ [Using evidence provides an] opportunity to effectively gauge the student perspective and understand the issues they face, which informs me on challenges impacting the Student Learning Experience. ”

The project

This project uses surveys which are distributed at the start and end of each semester to measure how and understand why first-year Chemistry students' perspectives on their course, change over the year. The results are analysed, published, and distributed to university committees by the Students' Union. This provides the university and the Students' Union with an understanding of the challenges facing these students and provides information on when interventions are most needed, with the potential to increase overall engagement and retention at the earliest stage.

Benefits

The surveys ask a wide variety of questions around expectations, confidence, competence, support (peers and staff), stress, enjoyment of lectures and engagement. The surveys also ask about students' feelings on coping with further years of study and what could have been done better in their current course. The survey design means students are given a forum to provide feedback on any issue that affects them, not just on the pre-set questions. This qualitative information can be shared with staff, who can then use it to improve the student learning experience for future years.

Challenges

The main challenge in this work is student participation and so-called 'survey-fatigue'. We try to overcome this by utilising class representatives to encourage their peers to participate. For example, the elective-based class representatives posted reminders in their WhatsApp group chat, which resulted in a significant increase in participation.

Working with your institutional colleagues

We work with the Course Leader and Head of Discipline to obtain the necessary access to students for distribution of the surveys and to secure buy-in from staff. The Head of Discipline supports us by feeding into the design of the survey questionnaire before distribution. Besides this, it is an entirely student-led activity.

What impact has this had on the student experience?

The project is new, and many of the issues raised by the feedback require time to resolve, so it won't be until the next academic year that we begin to more directly measure the impact on student experience.

What advice/top tips would you give to others who might try something similar?

Ensure the survey is anonymous and that students are made aware of this, as this appeared to be the biggest concern when participating. When engagement is low, ask student representatives to encourage their peers to complete the survey as this intervention seemed to result in greater participation. If participation is low, ensure that your analysis and conclusions account for this.