Engaging Staff and Students With Data

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Whose data is it anyway?

Anecdotally, we know that our students don't know how seriously we take their feedback. They are probably also unaware of how much data – both about them and from them – is collected and used by the university. Although student reps may be involved in processes to interpret and apply that data, such as course committee and planning meetings, the average student probably completes the odd survey, and doesn't think too deeply about what happens next.

On the flip side, Programme Leaders are inundated with data (retention rates, pass rates, NSS results, module survey results, learning analytics) and frequently these data tell apparently conflicting stories: positive survey results for modules with low pass rates; high attrition rates for programmes who perform well in the NSS. From the vast range of available data, it is difficult for staff to ascertain whether or not a module or programme of study is going well, or requires attention; and difficult to identify which aspects ought to be focused on for enhancement.

Figure 1: (l-r) Keith Smyth from the Learning and Teaching Academy and Sorcha Kirker from HISA open the event.

Mind the gap

Bringing staff and students together can potentially bridge the gap between the people and the data, and this was the aim of a one-day event held by the University in February 2019. Academics, professional services staff and student representatives, together considered the range of data that the University uses to make decisions. Co-hosted by the Students' Association, HISA and the University's Learning and Teaching Academy, we particularly wanted to open up a conversation between class reps and their respective Programme Leaders.

Old chestnuts

Two key sessions held on the day considered some familiar questions: How do we engage more students with surveys? How do we close the feedback loop? At the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), low survey response rates are perhaps more of an issue than at other institutions given the small numbers of students that we have. A survey response rate of 30% for a module often equates to three or four students, and therefore in a data set upon which staff are reluctant to base any significant revisions to teaching or assessment. This can mean that there is _no_ loop in some academic years as it's unclear how to respond to the limited amount of feedback. This in turn can lead to a downward spiral in response rates where students have not observed any impacts from their prior engagement with surveys.

Discussion around how to successfully engage students with surveys clustered around four themes:

1. **Providing incentives**: vouchers, discounts, prizes, pizza.
2. **Improving the survey**: shorter, gamified, relevant questions.
3. **Enhancing publicity**: including the use of students as 'engagement champions'.
4. **Closing the feedback loop**: demonstrating the impact of filling out surveys.

In responding to these suggestions, our Programme Leaders are key to enhancing publicity: this is something that we believed we were doing quite well (personalised emails, VLE banners and tiles on the student portal all linking directly to the surveys) but ownership of the surveys by both Programme Leaders and student reps have the potential to engage students beyond these more mechanistic and institutional methods. Similarly, closing the feedback loop effectively could also impact positively on survey response rates.

The loop of closing the feedback loop

Like many other institutions, UHI uses a 'You said… we did' campaign to tell students how their feedback has been listened to. Some student reps have objected to this terminology as too 'transactional', so we devoted part of the event to consider how to close the feedback loop more effectively. Fruitful

Figure 2: Staff and student delegate discussion.

Enhancement Themes
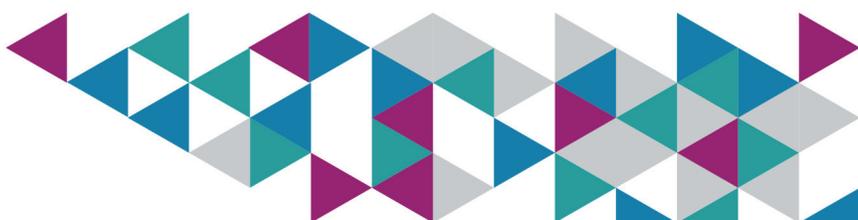
discussions were had about the need for a personal 'you said *I* did' from staff, rather than the more impersonal 'we' on the posters, so that students feel that their individual contributions are valued. Also of importance to our students was the need to balance the local and the regional; many are enrolled on programmes taught across the region at a number of our Academic Partners, yet with certain aspects of their experience (libraries, student support) being locally based. Although the UHI organisational model has its challenges, Programme Leaders play a key role in devising region-wide programmes of study, and communicating with individual Academic Partners.

Figure 3: Icebreaker activity.

Another, more surprising theme to the discussions was that students did not expect everything to change, and they did not expect immediate change. For me, this was an unexpected and refreshing message, and a potential solution to the 'data overload' felt by Programme Leaders who may feel that they have to react to every piece of student feedback.

Over the session delegates identified some key principles to closing the feedback loop:

- **Communication:** Dialogue, meeting students, being approachable, giving updates, involving everyone.
- **Flexibility:** Multiple opportunities for students to give feedback (workshops, VLE discussion boards, anonymous comment boxes). Local and regional in scope.
- **Frequency:** not too often, but often enough. Once per semester seemed about right.

Pivotal to achieving the above is dialogue between staff and students and which we hope that this event has initiated.

Have we bridged the divide?

I started this thinkpiece by musing that students are unaware of the importance of their feedback, and the data that is used about them, and that Programme Leaders were inundated with data which sometimes suggested conflicting narratives, and certainly did not always help to point to enhancements. I believe that bridging the gap between staff and students can strengthen student feedback data: first, by increasing survey responses resulting in a larger and more robust data set; second, by providing a context for the feedback data through dialogue between staff and students. However, this will not be achieved by a one-off event and is something that has to become standard practice. This does, of course, require additional time and effort in a period of ever decreasing resource. However, if this is regarded as the responsibility of both staff and students, it is something that we hope we can achieve.