

# Exploring the Data Landscape from the Programme Leaders' Perspective

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Organisations are now able to use a variety of data sources to inform strategic and operational decisions, and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are no exception. While requirements to engage with these vary across and within institutions, there are few individuals working in an academic context who are immune to the pressure to base their actions on available evidence. Imperatives for improved use of data exist both internally with a view to quality enhancement, and externally in terms of justifying ongoing financial support (Voorhees & Cooper, 2014). As Daniel (2017, p. 20) notes, "With limited resources and continuous pressure to achieve more with less, institutions are obliged to make informed decisions based on thorough examination of alternative outcomes and minimise risks using available data." What follows is a discussion of the data landscape from the vantage point of a particular position in the university: Programme Leadership.



## Programme Leaders and the data landscape

While the role of Programme Leaders is vast and ill defined, it has been argued that their primary remit in the context of enhancement is to improve the student experience (Cahill, Bowyer, Rendell, Hammond, & Korek, 2015). Moreover, engaging with data to this end has been identified as something which is important to those in this role (Ellis & Nimmo, 2018). In order to do so effectively, Programme Leaders must navigate the wide range of available data about their programmes, often termed 'academic analytics' (Tulasi, 2013). This information provides insight into the current state of a given programme and its students, with the potential to highlight any problems or challenges. It may include but is not limited to: National Student Survey (NSS) results, module evaluation questionnaire responses, module performance data, module leaders' end of year reports, external examiner feedback, recruitment and retention statistics, Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data. With existing evidence about Programme Leaders themselves highlighting that they often feel ill prepared for their roles (Briggs, 2005) it is unsurprising that this data landscape proves daunting. It appears that Programme Leaders simultaneously have capacity and desire to influence programme quality and in turn shape the student responses which form a significant chunk of programme level data, while being less than confident in engaging with that data themselves. This situation has prompted calls for discussion on the use of data by this group (see Ellis, 2019) and leads us to consider the following questions:





- How can we make data relevant, useful and not overwhelming for Programme Leaders?
- How can we move from institutional processes to enhancement and meaningful change?
- How do we know if we have been effective?

The discussion thus far does not aim to suggest that data is not useful. Taylor (2014) highlights a variety of reasons, both philosophical and pragmatic, for collecting and utilising data in HEIs, including the provision of information for stakeholders, measuring the efficiency of practice, and as a means of monitoring quality. Although challenges exist at programme level, data and the predictive tools it gives rise to can be employed as a means of ensuring that the curriculum meets student needs (Daniel, 2015). In this sense, data can provide an extremely useful bolster for enhancement activities by Programme Leaders, particularly to support and justify the time and resources required for innovation. Central to data proving useful for enhancement is the need for transparency and agreement (Taylor, 2014). Clear communication from Programme Leaders on how and why data matters is essential for support for enhancement at both institutional level and among programme teams. Engaging with data in this way can help Programme Leaders to secure 'buy in' when making changes and ultimately help those in this role to feel more empowered when making decisions.

### Challenges in using data for enhancement

A key challenge in using data for the purposes of enhancement is posed by the competing priorities in HEIs. Programme Leaders arguably have a number of people to appease in this context, including students, module leaders and lecturers, internal and external quality assurance bodies and university business planning teams. This begs the question: Who is enhancement for? Stakeholders are likely to have varying perceptions of quality making this difficult to measure objectively in data (Gruber, Fuß, Voss, & Gläser-Zikuda, 2010) and staff-student perspectives of what constitutes 'enhancement' may therefore be divergent. The collection and management of data also presents difficulties, as it is often stored across numerous systems which are unlikely to be interoperable. The EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) implemented in 2018 add a further layer of complexity to this process, requiring Programme Leaders to take significant precautions when handling students' personal data.

Where relevant data is identified and accessible, how we go about turning its results into meaningful enhancement at programme level is also complex. Taking the example of module evaluation questionnaires, these tend to indicate the existence of a problem and where it may lie but do little to advise us of how to 'fix it' (Harvey, 2011). Where a solution does present itself, it may be difficult to deliver these results if the issue lies with the specific cohort of students; the moment to make a change based on the data has passed and the students who have responded to the survey are not benefitted. Often then, data about our programmes provides us with measures of satisfaction rather than enhancement. Institutional policies may also be at odds with the actions which the data about a specific programme suggests should be taken, therefore preventing the resolution of problems or attempts to improve provision. Finally, criticisms have been advanced of the over reliance on data, arguing that this data could serve to disempower Programme Leaders, if their intuition and knowledge of their own programmes is undermined due to pressure for enhancement to be evidence based. Using data to support tangible change is therefore an area for development in the Programme Leader skillset.





### Using the National Student Survey for enhancement

When reflecting on the landscape of data for Programme Leaders, few sources of information hold such weight as evidence as the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS seeks to gather final year students' opinions of their time at university and its results are communicated to prospective students, its primary function being to inform their course choice. This positions the NSS with clear implications for student recruitment and gives it significant status as a source of evidence across the sector. Institutionally, it is understood that a lack of engagement with NSS is likely



to see continued falling performance (Pickford, 2013). The NSS is especially important to Programme Leaders as it presents a programme level evaluation and provides comparison with similar degrees at other institutions. It is also important as each year, in spite of inevitable variation between cohorts, there is an expectation that Programme Leaders will consistently improve these scores (Bell & Brooks, 2018).

At surface level, the NSS can be seen to provide helpful data for Programme Leaders. It can be used to identify areas for enhancement, and as evidence of strengths and achievements of the programme which can ultimately encourage applications. It also provides an impetus for enhancement and innovation to improve the student experience which might not be initiated in the absence of this annual review. However, academic work has documented its contribution to the increasingly transactional and commodified nature of HE (Taylor & McCaig, 2014), suggesting that responses may be gestural rather than considered attempts at enhancement. While the NSS can lead to esteem for institutions whose programmes score favourably, this does not come without pressure for Programme Leaders to develop their own NSS strategies, which can in turn lead to a culture of micro-management rather than enhancement. An important consideration then, is to what extent NSS data can be considered to evidence programme quality, and how Programme Leaders use NSS data to enact change.

The NSS is likely a better measure of programme *satisfaction* than programme quality, as it collects data about subjective understandings of the university experience rather than objective standards of teaching and learning. Significantly, responses do little to give insight into the various phenomena which underpin them. As an instrument in itself, the overall satisfaction score has been criticised as too vague, with research suggesting that students may draw on a small number of recent experiences which stand out to provide an answer (Elliot & Shin, 2002). Specific aspects of the student experience have also been found to have more weight in shaping NSS results, with programme management being of particular importance and subjects with 'yes or no answers' receiving higher scores. Perhaps most significantly, even the more specific questions are open to various interpretations, making it difficult to gain a full picture of what the student means in answering them (Bennet & Kane, 2014).

While the NSS is perceived to provide an indication of the situation at programme level, this activity does not exist in a vacuum and many other aspects of university life will impact on scores (Bell & Brooks, 2018). Institutional policies are likely to shape aspects of the student experience, such as timetabling or marking and feedback turnaround times, yet these





decisions are often perceived to be at programme level and reflected in student responses. More widely still, individual student dispositions could influence how they engage with the NSS. Higginson (2016) highlights that higher performing students are more likely to be pleased with their programme experience and therefore to respond positively. Demographic characteristics such as socio-economic status could also shape responses, particularly in the context of the commodification of HE, students' sense of satisfaction is likely linked to a perception of getting 'value for money' in their courses (Burgess, Senior, & Moores, 2018). Overall, while school leavers rely on NSS results for reliable accounts of the quality of courses, and Programme Leaders look to them as evidence for enhancement, often there is very little done to engage with this data source beyond its surface level.

### Beyond the NSS: Engaging student voices

It is somewhat rare that Programme Leaders are given the opportunity to look beyond the main institutionally recognised sources of data to explore other sources of evidence for enhancement. The Enhancement Themes three-year focus on the use of data within the Scottish HE sector and its explicit emphasis on enhancing the role of Programme Leaders has to date afforded space and time for such discussion. While the NSS often dominates debates among those in this role, what has also emerged is a focus on what we hear outwith these structured feedback mechanisms and how we respond to it. It has been argued that these more fluid and immediate forms of feedback, such as emails or conversations after class, are more useful as accurate representations of the student voice (Harvey, 2011). Innovative resources developed by Jones-Devitt and LeBihan (2017) in their *Use and Abuse of the Student Voice* project further evidence the challenges faced by academic leaders in managing student evaluations and provide specific insight into the complexities of the day to day scenarios in which we receive feedback. They specifically highlight the nuanced approach which Programme Leaders are required to develop when responding to difficult scenarios arising throughout the academic year.

One mechanism which provides some insight into these issues, as well as what shapes NSS responses, is the Student-Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC). These are conducted at programme level within most institutions and are therefore generally the remit of Programme Leaders. They provide a forum in which lecturers, students and programme leaders come together to look at feedback (Roxa & Martensson, 2011), yet beyond this there is a great deal of variation within and across institutions in how they are managed. Given that they are a source of more contextualised, qualitative accounts of what is happening within a course, Programme Leaders should seek to ensure that their potential to provide meaningful data for enhancement is optimised. Significantly, SSLCs also have the potential to shed light on whether enhancements we have implemented have proven effective and to build on these collaboratively with students.

Discussions suggest that several issues present sources of tension for Programme Leaders in the running of SSLCs. This exists in the balance between consistency at institutional level and individuality at programme level. HEIs may have terms of reference specifying how SSLCs are run, yet what is set out may not allow Programme





Leaders to maximise their use. Engaging students in the Programme Representative role can also prove difficult and a challenge faced by Programme Leaders is enabling students to see that participation in enhancement is valuable and worthwhile. SSLCs provide a more informal environment for feedback, therefore engagement and comments may be less shaped by some of the dispositional and demographic characteristics mentioned earlier in relation to online approaches. However, the issue of power in the SSLC setting has not gone unnoticed, and the importance of providing inclusive forums for students and staff to discuss feedback is evident (Nair, Adams, & Mertova, 2011). The concept of trust in this context and the development of a collaborative approach to these meetings has also emerged as a priority. Overall, further consideration of how we might use SSLCs as a means of building cultures of enhancement within programmes is warranted.

### Recommendations for Programme Leaders: Navigating the data landscape for enhancement

What follows are practical suggestions for Programme Leaders and those with responsibility for strategy and policy related to the student experience at institutional level. They seek to go some way to addressing the questions posed earlier and to assist in navigating the challenges highlighted throughout this paper:

- Institutions should exercise caution in assuming that all data is useful or supports enhancement. There is a need to ensure that the data available is accessible and actionable – Programme Leaders should be able to ‘do’ something with the evidence they are given.
- Institutions should foster a culture of enquiry, evidence gathering and innovation (Voorhees & Cooper, 2014, p. 27). Particularly where evidence does not give a clear ‘diagnosis’ of the problem or lead to an obvious action, Programme Leaders should be encouraged to look beyond the ‘usual’ sources of evidence, to collect qualitative accounts, to think more widely in terms of what data is and how or when it can be collected.
- Time in the Programme Leader role should be protected for collecting and engaging with evidence for the purpose of enhancement in a meaningful way. To ensure that Programme Leaders don’t simply become administrators, evaluation and pedagogic research should be encouraged and rewarded.
- Training and induction for Programme Leaders should ensure that data and systems for engaging with evidence are prioritised. This will help Programme Leaders to see data from a fresh perspective. Rather than evidence being something that Programme Leaders perceive to be opaque and inaccessible, or used as a ‘stick’ for change, it can become something that they take ownership of in support of innovation on their own programmes.
- While a strategic overview is required, institutions should allow flexibility within programmes in use of evidence and how Programme Leaders respond to it. Too much consistency or rigidity might not reflect the needs of programmes and Programme Leaders should have scope to discuss policies which might not enhance the experience of their particular cohort of students.
- Programme Leaders should be encouraged not to view large scale sources of data such as the NSS in isolation from the day to day feedback received informally from students. Activities which support Programme Leaders in reflecting on how they





engage meaningfully with comments or concerns from students should be implemented within institutions.

- Good practice in the management of SSLCs should be shared among Programme Leaders and innovations such as the implementation of a co-developed charter for how the meetings will run, or production of a final action grid should be explored.
- Programme Leaders should take opportunities to address students directly about issues raised in data, and practice closing the feedback loop. When responding to feedback, strategies should not be reactive or gestural, and Programme Leaders should also be encouraged to develop strategies for engaging with students when their requests cannot be accommodated.

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