

Closing the loop

Are universities doing enough
to act on student feedback from
course evaluation surveys?

A summary report from qualitative and
quantitative research among senior academics
in UK and international universities

Acknowledgements

The editors of this report, Hannah Murray and Phil Smith at Communications Management, would like to thank the following people who were interviewed for this report:

- Dr. Valda Bunker, Director of Curriculum and Quality Enhancement, University of Portsmouth, UK
- Professor Suzanne Cholerton, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), Newcastle University, UK
- Professor Frank Coton, Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching), University of Glasgow, UK
- Madame Sylvie David, Head of the Observatory of Student Life, University of Aix-Marseille, France
- Dr. Tina Harrison, Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance, University of Edinburgh, UK
- Drs. Peter Hoekstra, Director of Institutional Research, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Professor Philip Martin, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Sheffield Hallam University, UK
- Dr. Lukas Mitterauer, Deputy Head, Unit for Quality Assurance, University of Vienna, Austria
- Professor Richard Reece, Associate Vice-President for Teaching, Learning and Students, University of Manchester, UK
- Bella Sattar and Julian Vooght, Director and Quality Specialist at the Centre for Quality Promotion and Assurance, Durban University of Technology, South Africa
- Dr. Edit Szűcs, Head of Quality Assurance, University of Debrecen, Hungary
- Mark Thomson, Head of the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Contents

Foreword Professor Sir Christopher Snowden, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Surrey	02
Introduction	03
Executive summary	04
Changing objectives	05
Improving teaching quality	06
Feeding back to students	08
Internal quality checks	10
In conclusion	11
The last word Professor Stephanie Marshall, Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy	12

Foreword

Professor Sir Christopher Snowden, President and Vice-Chancellor, University of Surrey

The Higher Education sector in the UK is going through a period of great change. Students have become the main funders of teaching in the sector following the Government's White Paper and the introduction of a new financial model for higher education. Despite the emotive debate about whether students are now consumers, universities nevertheless find themselves under increased pressure to adopt a more customer-focused approach.

The business world has long recognised the value and importance of customer feedback as a key driver in their success. If collected and acted upon effectively, feedback can help an organisation better understand their customers' needs and concerns, promote valuable improvements, raise reputation and ultimately improve efficiency.

Since 2005, final-year students have been asked to rate the quality of their academic experience through the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS is proving to be an effective tool in the sector's greater accountability to higher fee-paying students and it provides a tangible assessment of the overall relative performance of universities from the student perspective as evidenced in the ubiquitous league tables.

More recently the results have formed part of the Key Information Sets (KIS) which give prospective applicants comparable data about the teaching and learning quality at respective institutions, aiding an informed decision about where to study. The importance of KIS and NSS in attracting students has encouraged the sector to take student surveys and evaluation methods very seriously.

Many universities have launched Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQ). These questionnaires give students the opportunity to comment anonymously on the various aspects of their modules, and allow universities to rapidly collect data on the level of student



satisfaction with their specific learning experiences. My own experience at the University of Surrey, where we are pursuing a number of initiatives to improve the student experience, illustrates the sense of direction in the sector as a whole.

This report explores best practice around student evaluation and is a welcome exploration of the challenges faced by many institutions in finding a robust system that will encourage a greater response rate, gather the information efficiently, analyse and disseminate the data to the right people, and use the findings effectively to have an impact on the quality of courses. It finds that the major barrier to student evaluation surveys is the perception of teaching staff that they will have a detrimental impact on performance appraisals.

The success of the University of Surrey's MEQ is due in large part to the active cooperation of colleagues in getting their students to respond in large numbers and so demonstrates the importance of staff support for these questionnaires. Relationships built on trust are vital in any customer-focused operation and universities must also fully appreciate the relationship with their staff if we are to really 'close the loop' on student evaluation. ■

"DESPITE THE EMOTIVE DEBATE ABOUT WHETHER STUDENTS ARE NOW CONSUMERS, UNIVERSITIES NEVERTHELESS FIND THEMSELVES UNDER INCREASED PRESSURE TO ADOPT A MORE CUSTOMER-FOCUSED APPROACH."

Introduction

In the context of the steep rise in tuition fees, and the Higher Education White Paper calling for increased transparency in teaching standards, Electric Paper commissioned a timely report around the issue of how universities are handling course evaluation surveys, aptly named ‘Effective Course Evaluation - The Future for Quality and Standards in Higher Education’.

Fast-forward two years and the initial cohort of students paying up to £9,000 in tuition fees have completed their first year of study. So how has the debate moved on? Are universities any closer to ‘closing the loop’ with effective course evaluation? With recent revelations that a record number of UK students are opting to study abroad, in this new report we explore how the topic is being addressed internationally as well in the UK.

In his Foreword, Professor Sir Christopher Snowden pinpoints just a few of the vast array of challenges facing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as they strive for robust and effective student evaluation processes. Indeed, these challenges aren’t inherent to institutions in the UK, but are being faced

by universities globally.

Whilst the economic, societal and political context may vary, one common theme is of paramount importance: course evaluation quality and its influence on accountability from universities towards their student bodies.

As HEIs look to better utilise the rich data sets captured from surveys completed by students at course level, it is important to remember three main points. Firstly, that the results from course evaluation are important to multiple stakeholders, with the ultimate aim of optimising the learning impact and outcomes of the course offerings from the institution. Secondly, that the results captured from the survey process are only meaningful if they are representative and statistically valid. Thirdly, that the results from the feedback process are most relevant and useful if they are turned around quickly to the various stakeholders including the student.

The findings of this report confirm the requirement for offering a balance between consistency and flexibility in approach. Thus, allowing for instant feedback reporting and encouraging higher response rates in order to complement a more holistic approach for evaluating the student experience. In conducting ongoing research as well as our continued focus on product innovation based upon the demands of the sector, we commit to work in partnership with HEIs to really ‘close the loop’ on effective student feedback. ■

“WHILST THE ECONOMIC, SOCIETAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT MAY VARY, ONE COMMON THEME IS OF PARAMOUNT IMPORTANCE: COURSE EVALUATION QUALITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ACCOUNTABILITY FROM UNIVERSITIES TOWARDS THEIR STUDENT BODIES.”

Executive summary

This report commissioned by Electric Paper Ltd is a follow-on publication to *Effective Course Evaluation: The Future for Quality and Standards in Higher Education*. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with 13 senior academics and quality assurance managers, and a quantitative survey of UK Pro-Vice-Chancellors, this report explores how universities in the UK and internationally are 'closing the loop' on course evaluation; how the data is being used, who is involved and what the impact is.

The report finds that:

- a) Universities are increasingly implementing evaluation surveys which combine 'standard' questions and 'module-specific' questions, enabling comparisons to be made across the institution whilst allowing flexibility for individual courses.
 - The primary objectives for gathering course evaluation data are to improve teaching quality and/or the student experience; however, sharing the data at an institutional level for broader quality assurance remains important.
 - In many universities it appears that only summary results focusing on broader trends and issues are shared beyond faculty level. Detail is being used by individual lecturers for their own reflective practice.

- b) Course evaluation surveys are increasingly being considered within the context of overall teaching quality and lecturer performance management.
 - 70% of UK Pro-Vice Chancellors reported that their institution gathers student feedback on individual lecturers.
 - Concerns remain among universities about making direct links between student feedback and teaching quality so this data is generally used as part of a wider discussion in performance management processes.

- c) Response rates remain a huge challenge for universities - as it appears that students are not always sure that their feedback will be acted on - but steps are being taken in individual universities to foster greater engagement in the process.
 - The priority is to provide full data as quickly as possible to individual lecturers who are able to act on the feedback - and establishing a supportive environment that promotes professionalism and responsibility among both staff and students is a key factor in allowing universities to effectively 'close the loop'.
 - Going forward, 90% of UK Pro-Vice-Chancellors believe that full results should be fed back to students alongside details of how the institution is going to respond. Currently only one in ten do so.

Changing objectives

A new rationale for student evaluation surveys

“EVALUATION IS NOT USED AS AN ABSOLUTE ‘CONTROL’, RATHER IT IS USED AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AND STUDENT LEARNING.”

**Madame Sylvie David,
Head of the Observatory
of Student Life,
University of Aix-Marseille**

Overall there are three core objectives for universities in gathering student course evaluation data:

- 1. To improve the quality of teaching**
- 2. To improve the student experience**
- 3. To provide information for university decision-makers**

Institutions may previously have used student evaluation either as an institutional quality assurance tool or kept it within schools to improve teaching, but now seem to be taking a more holistic approach. Universities which previously allowed schools or faculties to do their own thing are now introducing standard mechanisms to allow for comparison at an institutional level, whilst universities which had taken an institutional view are now giving more control to teachers.

Professor Richard Reece, Associate Vice-President for Teaching, Learning and Students at the University of Manchester, said: “We have changed the focus of student feedback from an institutional level - ensuring institutional quality - to one that is really focused on improving teaching quality.”

This is a view echoed by Madame Sylvie David, Head of the Observatory of Student Life at the University of Aix-Marseille: “Evaluation is not used as an absolute ‘control’, rather it is used as a tool to improve the quality of education and student learning. A secondary objective is to ensure that the results obtained promote a dialogue within schools and with students.”

This idea of student surveys being used as a tool to promote dialogue and engage in discussion with students was supported by many of the institutions and seen as a pivotal part of the student experience. Mark Thomson, Head of the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office at the London School of Economics, said that student evaluation “helps to build a genuine partnership between teachers and students.”



Madame Sylvie David

Whilst teaching quality and student experience were always seen as primary concerns, supporting this was the need to be able to report higher level trends and issues at an institutional level.

For institutions to get accredited in the Netherlands the way quality assurance is dealt with is assessed. For this reason, as Drs. Peter Hoekstra, Director of Institutional Research at the University of Amsterdam explained, there are many reports that are fed back to the directorate. Drs. Hoekstra said: “It is important for the board to demonstrate that they are in control. They don’t necessarily need to know the specific detail of individual modules but they do need a good overview of what is going on.”

Dr. Edit Szűcs, Head of Quality Assurance at the University of Debrecen, views student evaluation processes as playing an important role in the overall business objectives of the institution: “The only way for us to develop and to remain competitive is to see whether the level of our education is to the satisfaction of the students and to the labour market.” ■

Improving teaching quality

An increasingly open culture of evaluation

“AT AN INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL I WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE POSITIVES MADE MORE OF AS WE DO GET SOME VERY POSITIVE FEEDBACK FROM OUR STUDENTS.”

**Bella Sattar, Director,
Centre for Quality
Promotion and Assurance,
Durban University of
Technology**

The most commonly referenced objective for gathering student evaluation was to improve quality of teaching. Feeding back results to individual lecturers either as part of their own reflective practice or more formal performance management is therefore an important part of ‘closing the loop’.

In an indicative survey of UK Pro-Vice-Chancellors 70% said that their institution gathered feedback on individual lecturer performance from students. The most common reason for doing so was to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching within modules.

The approach taken by the London School of Economics is consistent with what is happening in many other institutions; where student feedback results are just one element of performance management. Mark Thomson explains: “We are careful not to conflate ‘student satisfaction’ with ‘teaching quality’. Those are two different things. But the former, together with other indicators, helps the School to form a judgment about the latter. We would be wary about jumping to conclusions based solely on teaching survey results. Those results would need to - and do - form part of a wider discussion to be used for performance management.”

Mr. Thomson also picks up on the importance of contextualisation. A view shared by Professor Richard Reece at the University of Manchester: “One lecturer could be teaching a very difficult subject and students may not like it but they have to take it as an essential part of their degree. The lecturer may not be popular for teaching it, but they may teach it very well. It is not just a numerical calculation that decides teaching excellence, this data needs to be looked at in the wider context.”

There are contrasting views as to the value of numerical data gathered from student evaluation. Drs. Peter Hoekstra at the University of Amsterdam believes that the data



Bella Sattar

is useful for performance management because it is “one of the few things that provides hard data to contribute to discussions.” Whilst Dr. Tina Harrison at the University of Edinburgh highlighted concerns from academics over the “variable and low response rates to surveys” if the data is used to “make decisions about individual performance”.

For Professor Philip Martin, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at Sheffield Hallam University, the challenge around individual lecturer evaluation is making sure it doesn't turn into a popularity contest as “you don't want lecturers compromising their academic standards to appease the interest of students”.

There is also a positive side to student evaluation and this is an important part of closing the loop; sharing and celebrating success. Bella Sattar, Director at the Centre for Quality Promotion and Assurance at Durban University of Technology, said: “At an institutional level I would like to see the positives made more of as we do get some very positive feedback from our students. I think it is partly a kind of mindset from lecturers that

they see the questionnaire as looking at faults rather than the more holistic picture that they are designed to provide.”

Indeed many interviewees acknowledged the role that testimonial from student evaluation has to play in supporting applications for promotions, teaching fellowships and other awards. At the University of Vienna, for example, student feedback is taken into consideration when lecturers are applying for tenure.

Creating the right environment was an important element of establishing an effective mechanism for using student feedback to improve teaching quality. Drs. Peter Hoekstra said: “We want to create an open culture of learning where both students and lecturers evaluate each other’s learning and progress. All teachers want to perform well and they need feedback to inform their practice. We just need to create a safe environment to do that in.”

To achieve this at Newcastle University they are “developing guidance for staff as to how to interpret the data and also setting guidelines for students about how to approach module evaluation in an appropriate manner.” Professor Suzanne Cholerton, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), hopes that by establishing a professional environment for evaluation to take place students will “provide feedback in a form which is most useful to staff and help students develop a useful skill.”

At the institutions that didn’t use this data for



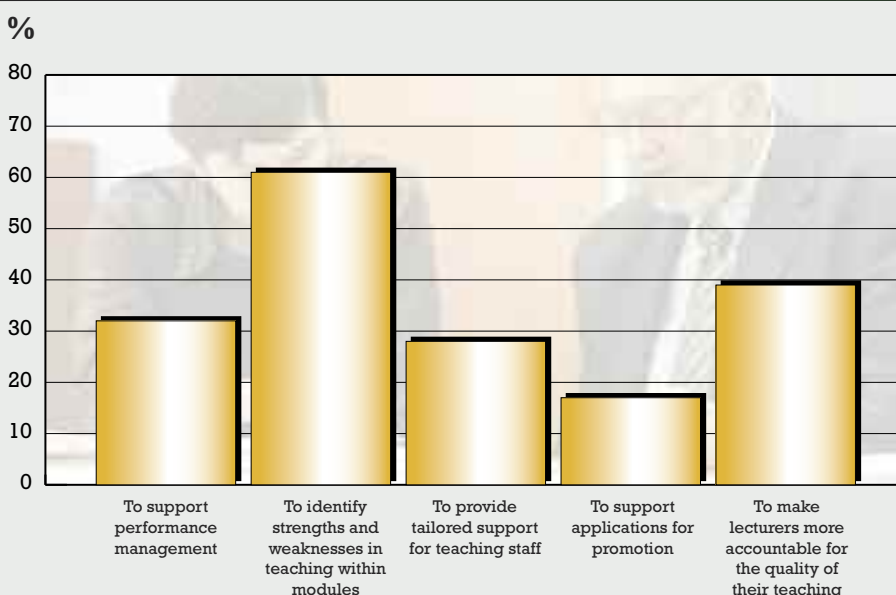
Drs. Peter Hoekstra

“ALL TEACHERS WANT TO PERFORM WELL AND THEY NEED FEEDBACK TO INFORM THEIR PRACTICE. WE JUST NEED TO CREATE A SAFE ENVIRONMENT TO DO THAT IN.”

**Drs. Peter Hoekstra,
Director of Institutional
Research, University of
Amsterdam**

performance management, and weren’t considering introducing an evaluation of individual lecturers, the main concern was that it would contradict the ethos and culture of the university. At the University of Edinburgh this approach was seen to clash with the University’s ethos of “giving responsibility to individuals within the institution to be reflective about their own practice”. Whilst at the University of Portsmouth Dr. Valda Bunker, Director of Curriculum and Quality Enhancement, said that the institution “respects the professionalism of unit and course owners to review and act on the feedback they receive”. ■

‘What is the main reason for your institution gathering feedback on individual lecturer performance from students?’ Survey of Pro-Vice-Chancellors, May 2013



Feeding back to students

Acting on the results of course evaluation surveys

“THE MAIN BARRIER FOR UNIVERSITIES IS JUST GETTING INTO THE MINDSET AND THE CULTURE THAT THIS IS AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM.”

**Professor Philip Martin,
Pro-Vice-Chancellor
(Academic), Sheffield
Hallam University**

“The first part of the circle is done - we have the data and it is used in an effective way to inform improvements and feedback to teachers. The second part of the circle is feeding back to the students...we just need to find an institutional approach to get consistency here,” said Drs. Peter Hoekstra at the University of Amsterdam.

This issue can be seen in many of the institutions featured in this report. As universities begin to place more importance on the role of student evaluation to help improve student experience, how to effectively feed back responses and engage with students is a big challenge. Dr. Tina Harrison, Assistant Principal Academic Standards and Quality Assurance at the University of Edinburgh, adds: “Most people know it is important to provide feedback to students on the results of the surveys; it is just a question of finding an easier, more efficient way of doing this.”

In an indicative survey of UK Pro-Vice-Chancellors 90% of respondents agreed with the statement that ‘full results from student module and/or lecturer evaluation surveys should be fed back to students alongside details of how the institution is going to respond’. Yet only one in ten actually reported providing full results with details about how the institution is going to respond. Most institutions provide a broad summary of results, focusing more on any changes that will be made as a result. Concerns about confidentiality are the main barrier to achieving full disclosure.

The most common ways for providing feedback to students include posting information on the Virtual Learning Environment and/or website, feeding back through staff-student committees and adding results to course guides.

The University of Glasgow has recently



Professor Philip Martin

established a new student voice platform to help improve how the University feeds back to students. Operating like a social network the platform connects students to their class representatives. Professor Frank Coton, Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching) explains: “This takes the discussion out of the committee cycle to make it more responsive. Each student has their own profile set up for the courses they are taking so that it is all relevant.”

A lack of consistency across a university is a challenge, with different faculties, schools or departments adopting different mechanisms to feed back results and responses to students. Julian Vooght, Quality Specialist at Durban University of Technology, recognised that there is some really good practice in places throughout the University but that there were also “a lot of people just going through the motions”.

Professor Suzanne Cholerton at Newcastle University believes that “whilst a consistent approach to what is fed back to students is important, there are a number of

mechanisms which can effectively close the loop with the student cohort and the use of these should be encouraged.”

Challenging established cultures within institutions is one of the biggest challenges facing individuals with responsibility for student evaluation. As Professor Philip Martin at Sheffield Hallam University suggests there needs to be a culture of engagement between the institution and its students: “The main barrier for universities is just getting into the mindset and the culture that this is an important part of the university system. We need to engage with our students to make changes, not just pump messages out at them.”

In Austria student evaluation is a relatively new concept, with the University of Vienna only introducing course evaluation around ten years ago. “The culture of most continental universities is that a course is an individual thing between a lecturer and a student and no-one should look in or interfere,” explained Dr. Lukas Mitterauer, Deputy Head, Unit for Quality Assurance at the University of Vienna. “Over the last ten years we have worked hard to introduce a new culture and now on the whole lecturers recognise the importance of feeding back to students, we just haven’t identified an optimal system yet.”

At the University of Portsmouth creating a culture that supports and encourages feedback both from students to the institution and vice-versa is at the heart of a new student charter. Dr. Valda Bunker explains: “We are aiming to develop a culture of responsibility that is written into our new student charter. We have made it clear that it is the student’s responsibility to provide us with feedback and that it is our responsibility to act on that feedback and to communicate how we are responding. If students don’t feel listened to - and not only listened to but that actions are being taken as a consequence of what they have said - then there is no incentive for them to provide feedback at all.”

Professor Cholerton agrees: “It is essential



Dr. Lukas Mitterauer

that students know that their feedback is being considered as without this there is no incentive for them to participate in the process”. ■

“OVER THE LAST TEN YEARS WE HAVE WORKED HARD TO INTRODUCE A NEW CULTURE AND NOW ON THE WHOLE LECTURERS RECOGNISE THE IMPORTANCE OF FEEDING BACK TO STUDENTS, WE JUST HAVEN'T IDENTIFIED AN OPTIMAL SYSTEM YET.”

**Dr. Lukas Mitterauer,
Deputy Head, Unit for
Quality Assurance,
University of Vienna**

Internal quality checks

Filtering the 'right' information to the 'right' people

The final objective for collecting evaluation data is to provide information to university decision-makers to affect change across the institution. This raises an important question; is the data seen and acted upon by the right people at the right time?

The most important thing for all interviewees was that full results were provided, quickly, to individuals involved in delivering the course or module with either full results or detailed data summaries being shared at a school or faculty level. As Professor Richard Reece at the University of Manchester said: "I am keen that this is not a top level report, I want the detail of the information received from the students fed back to teaching staff quickly to allow them to act upon it."

To be effective for use by individual lecturers it is important that questionnaires meet their needs, requiring a balance between institutional questions and a flexibility to add course specific questions. Madame Sylvie David from the University of Aix-Marseille said: "A single questionnaire for all modules does not always allow a distinct and therefore useful assessment. A lecturer must be able to adapt questions."

However, for Professor Philip Martin at Sheffield Hallam University, it is important that the feedback is not kept at this localised level: "I think we need to know as much about our courses and our offer as the students do and we can't have this knowledge if the feedback is not shared beyond the faculty level."

At this level the data provided is generally not given in great detail, but focused on wider trends and issues or highlighting particular areas for focus. As Professor Frank Coton at the University of Glasgow notes "the key thing is feeding back the right information to the right people, not everyone needs to know everything," with Bella Sattar at Durban University of Technology acknowledging that



Professor Richard Reece

providing too much information "can be overwhelming".

One of the biggest challenges faced in reporting at a higher level is establishing a system which produces comparable data from across the institution. At the University of Edinburgh and Sheffield Hallam University varieties in survey mechanisms and reporting styles are currently being addressed by bringing in a more consistent, institutional approach to student evaluation.

Two institutions featured in the research do not share any data beyond the teaching staff and their respective Head of Department or Director of Study. Both the University of Vienna and the University of Aix-Marseille attach great importance to guaranteeing the confidentiality of the details of results as a measure of trust in their teaching staff. ■

"I AM KEEN THAT THIS IS NOT A TOP LEVEL REPORT, I WANT THE DETAIL OF THE INFORMATION RECEIVED FROM THE STUDENTS FED BACK TO TEACHING STAFF QUICKLY TO ALLOW THEM TO ACT UPON IT."

Professor Richard Reece, Associate Vice-President for Teaching, Learning and Students, University of Manchester

In conclusion

Are universities - generally - getting better at 'closing the loop', feeding back and acting on the results of student course evaluation?

"YOU DON'T JUST STAND AND DELIVER INFORMATION IN THE HOPE IT WILL SINK IN, IT NEEDS EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT."

Professor Frank Coton, Vice-Principal (Learning and Teaching), University of Glasgow

"It would be inconceivable to claim that you are a world-class institution without a strong established student feedback mechanism. Learning is a two-way process, you don't just stand and deliver information in the hope it will sink in, it needs effective engagement. This can only be achieved if lecturers understand the learning experience from the perspective of the student," says Professor Frank Coton at the University of Glasgow.

The university representatives interviewed - who all have responsibility for overseeing quality assurance and quality enhancement - all recognise the importance of closing the loop on student course evaluation. This means feeding back results and responses to the right people, at the right level and at the right time.

Of the three objectives for gathering student feedback, universities are making good strides in terms of effectively disseminating higher level information at an institutional level and using student feedback as a part of performance management for lecturers. The issue that many universities are still trying to crack is how to feed back to students in a way that keeps them engaged and gives them the opportunity to be an active partner in the development of the institution.

The culture, environment and ethos of an institution can be the toughest barrier, but also the greatest driver in the move towards closing the loop. Changing the culture at any organisation as large and diverse as a typical university is difficult, and as Dr. Tina Harrison at the University of Edinburgh notes: "It is important to recognise that whilst what we need to do sounds simple, the volume of courses to be reviewed means that it is a difficult task."

However, from these interviews it is clear to see that there is a real desire amongst universities to address this issue of closing the



Professor Frank Coton

loop. Whilst it is as yet unclear as to what best practice looks like in terms of processes and approach, it is promising that in all universities featured in this report steps are being made to ensure that the data gathered is used in the most effective way to impact on the quality of the learning experience offered to students. ■

The last word

Professor Stephanie Marshall, Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy

The importance of student feedback is amplified by two very different forces at work in the UK: the increasingly consumerist position of students, and a growing emphasis on students being seen as partners in higher education. Perhaps the only issue where these two contrasting trends pull in the same direction is in the area of student feedback; whether as consumers or as partners, students' views need to be taken seriously.

The presence of those two different drivers does unsurprisingly create strains. As we found when researching our recent report Making it count: Reflecting on the National Student Survey in the process of enhancement, many institutions are struggling with the tension between using surveys as a means of gauging customer satisfaction and – as Mark Thompson says in this report – using surveys as a mechanism for creating dialogue and partnership.

One manifestation of this tension is the difficulty of finding an appropriate way of communicating to students the actions that have taken place in response to their feedback. Doing this effectively is crucial for achieving both good response rates and goodwill, but the most direct methods (such as the ubiquitous 'You said, we did') tend to treat survey data as a set of student demands, rather than one part of an on-going conversation between partners. How to close the loop – visibly, explicitly – without relinquishing an ethos of partnership, is a growing challenge.

There are no simple solutions. As Sylvie David points out, the need for standardisation across the institution has to be balanced with lecturers' ability to gather bespoke data. If lecturers are to find survey data genuinely useful, they need to have a key role in determining what that data looks like. There are further challenges with comparing results between different modules, when what we know about



Professor Stephanie Marshall

“HOW TO CLOSE THE LOOP - VISIBLY, EXPLICITLY - WITHOUT RELINQUISHING AN ETHOS OF PARTNERSHIP, IS A GROWING CHALLENGE.”

**Professor Stephanie Marshall, Chief Executive,
Higher Education Agency**

student surveys tells us that comparisons between subjects should only be made with caution.

One of the most fundamental questions about student surveys is the extent to which they shine a light on the quality of learning and teaching. Different surveys have different claims to validity in this regard, and the compelling evidence base behind the National Survey of Student Engagement is one of the reasons that we are coordinating a national pilot, due to report in October 2013. But regardless of the strengths and weaknesses of the survey, the results will always need interpretation, contextualisation and triangulation.

The challenges posed by the effective use of student surveys are significant, but the pressures on institutions to gather and use student feedback are unlikely to diminish. Reflection on these challenges has done a lot to improve how institutions explore and improve how their students learn. There are no easy answers, but if institutions want to improve the student learning experience, they need to continue to explore the effective use of student surveys. ■

Electric Paper Ltd
19 Silvermills Court,
Henderson Place Lane,
Edinburgh, EH3 5HF
Telephone: 0131 285 7970
Email: enquiries@evasys.co.uk
www.evasys.co.uk

