

# A Whole Team Approach to Embedding a Culture of Feedback Between Student & Staff Partners in First Year Chemistry


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# ► Introduction and Aims – Enhancing a Culture of Feedback and Evaluation



The Chemistry Department represents the Faculty of Science and Engineering in the Maynooth University Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative, and is well placed to do so. We teach in a variety of settings– lectures, tutorials, and laboratory classes, and contribute to the Faculty through the Maynooth Science Degree (MH201) and specialised Degrees including Pharmaceutical and Biomedical Chemistry (MH101) and Science Education (MH212). Our first-year group of over 300 students includes those taking denominated programmes like Biotechnology, and Physics with Astrophysics, as well as the general Science Degree. This cohort represents a wide variety of students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities, about half of whom have taken Leaving Certificate Chemistry and half have not. All first-year Chemistry students take the modules General Chemistry CH101 (semester 1) and General Chemistry CH102 (semester 2). These multicomponent modules involve input from a number of academic staff, technical staff and laboratory demonstrators.

This pilot initiative sought to explore approaches to further enhancing a culture of feedback and evaluation in the MU Department of Chemistry.

Specifically, we chose to focus on first years because the first year is the corner stone of a degree, involving a transition in pedagogical approaches from school to university that students must become familiar with in order to succeed in their studies. By initially focusing on improving engagement processes for first years, we hope that this will help us to embed a culture of staff-student dialogue in students' university experiences from the start.

We also wanted to ensure that the methods piloted would provide student feedback that would enable us to evaluate and further enhance our teaching methodologies, and help to create Departmental structures that would support student learning. To do this, we gathered a team together that included the full range of Departmental staff who support the first-year experience – academic staff, technical staff, laboratory demonstrators, and (newly employed for this initiative) feedback facilitators. Our involvement in this initiative builds on our interest in continuously enhancing our teaching. Members of the Department team previously participated in the 3U Partnership “Peer Observation of Teaching” Initiative. This allowed individual staff members to engage in peer observation of teaching with colleagues from other Higher Education Institutions and allowed them to develop specific aspects of their classroom-based teaching practice. In this initiative, we were also eager to further consider ways of evaluating our teaching but, as our first-year Chemistry modules involve a variety of staff members who teach or support teaching both inside and outside the classroom, we opted to move away from peer observation of individual teaching. Instead we use a group evaluation process that would allow the examination of the broader structures and processes that support the first-year curriculum, in particular the continuous assessment components of the course (laboratory practical classes and workshops).

The key objectives that we wished to achieve through our initiative were to:

- Investigate structures and approaches that would allow us to gather feedback from students on first-year modules in an efficient and inclusive manner.
- Provide a framework that would foster a culture of student-staff conversation, promote engagement and enrich the teaching and learning experience of all parties involved.

We hoped that by working with the first-year Chemistry cohort, and focusing on evaluating how we organise continuous assessment activities, we would produce a framework that could be developed into the future and would allow feedback and evaluation activities to be ongoing and embedded across all of our Departmental teaching and learning structures. We wanted to (i) explain the value of feedback to students, (ii) identify the most effective channels for gathering and employing student feedback in experimental subjects, and (iii) create a feedback culture with students as partners in the teaching and learning process. This pilot was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic. In that context, while our objectives were unchanged, we needed to adjust the format and implementation as we went along, so that we could adapt to the changing remote teaching context during 2020 and 2021.

# ▶ A Multi-faceted Approach to Feedback and Evaluation

## Feedback Activities

The project investigated effective ways for gathering, analysing and closing the loop on students' feedback on their teaching and learning experiences in first-year Chemistry. We chose this multi-stranded approach to encourage as many students as possible to participate.

Framed around continuous assessment activities, we piloted four feedback processes:

- (i) **Scheduled Weekly Feedback Sessions** – Compulsory small-group online meetings were held via MS Teams and led by postgraduate 'feedback facilitators' who were specially employed for this purpose. The sessions involved three elements – a pre-lab talk to prepare students for the forthcoming laboratory/workshop class, general feedback from staff to students on students' academic work (laboratory/workshop submissions), feedback from students to staff on their experiences of teaching and learning. We sought to embed the collection of student feedback into the newly introduced weekly sessions where students also received academic feedback to highlight that student feedback is part of a wider dialogue between staff and students. In so doing, we wished to reinforce that feedback is necessary for the improvement of both teaching and learning, and that gathering feedback from students is a core academic activity.
- (ii) **Weekly Drop-in Centre** – Weekly online drop-in centres were held in which students could opt to attend and discuss any aspect of their academic Chemistry work. Attendees were requested to fill in an anonymous online Moodle survey on their experiences of teaching and learning during the session. Again, we sought to connect feedback from students with the discussion of academic matters to highlight the central academic importance of student feedback.

- (iii) **First-year Experience Focus Groups** – Focus groups were facilitated by a colleague from the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) and designed to gather in-depth qualitative feedback from a small number of student volunteers. Students were asked questions about their general experiences of teaching and learning in first-year Chemistry, but the focus groups also provided some insights into the success of this initiative by asking students about their experience of (i) and (ii) above.
- (iv) **Suggestion Box** – The suggestion box was designed to gather anonymous feedback and was placed in the laboratory as it was initially thought this environment might make it easier for students to submit suggestions and ideas outside of scheduled feedback activities.

We chose this multi-strand approach to encourage as many students as possible to participate.

- (v) **Staff Review** – We established a process whereby the student feedback collected by the facilitators was reviewed by selected members of the team weekly; also, the complete technical and academic staff team met regularly to consider the wider teaching and learning issues raised (see ‘Analysing Feedback and Evaluating Teaching’).

### How it Worked in Practice – Feedback Processes

Templates on how to structure and report on the (i) scheduled weekly feedback sessions and (ii) drop-in centre activities were designed and shared with all staff members involved in these processes (an example of the templates used can be found in the appendix). Weekly records of the feedback activities were made that included a short summary of the feedback discussions, and relevant numerical data, e.g. attendance numbers and level of engagement. The results of (i) and (ii) were analysed and responded to by staff using the method detailed below.

It was important not simply to schedule the feedback activities but to explain to students how they would work and why they were important. The first-year academic coordinators and laboratory senior technical officer introduced the project activities to students, outlined how they would work, and provided instruction on how to enrol in mandatory weekly feedback sessions. Students were also told about the focus groups, the weekly drop-in centre, and the suggestion box, and informed that participation in these activities would be voluntary.

### (i) Scheduled Weekly Feedback Sessions

- The module team designed a semester timetable to incorporate weekly meetings into the first-year course activity framework.
- Feedback facilitators were recruited from the Chemistry Department postgraduate student cohort, and trained by technical and academic staff members.
- The first-year academic coordinators and laboratory senior technical officer gave students information about the project's feedback activities and provided instruction on how to enrol in the mandatory weekly feedback sessions.
- Students self-enrolled, via Moodle Choice, in one of the meeting groups, each group having up to twenty-five student participants, however, because of the diversity in student availability once classes not centrally timetabled were taken into account, it became necessary for the Lab technician to finalise group membership.
- Feedback facilitators liaised with teaching academics and with laboratory, workshop, technical and demonstrating staff to identify teaching and learning topics for development. The first-year demonstrators were important contributors and shared content for academic discussions at the weekly meetings.
- Each week academic feedback was provided to the first-year students alongside the opportunity for them to discuss aspects of the first-year course.
- Within the meetings we used a range of feedback engagement apps (TurningPoint, Padlet) and Moodle questionnaires to allow students to answer feedback questions anonymously, enabling teaching and learning issues to be explored during these sessions. For example, students were also asked to indicate their preference for which learning activities they would like to see continued in the next year.

### (ii) Weekly Drop-in Centre

- Online drop-in centre sessions were delivered by one of two facilitators each week.
- Sessions were held online via MS Teams at 3pm and a non-traditional time of 7pm – to provide flexibility to students. In practice we found that the early session had higher attendance.
- Students were invited to attend the drop-in sessions to seek support on a range of academic topics.
- Attendance was optional.
- Short, anonymous, voluntary Moodle-facilitated questionnaires were provided to attendees at each of the drop-in sessions – attendees were given a link via Chat to encourage them to fill in the survey online, there and then.

### (iii) First-year Experience Focus Groups

- Volunteers from each weekly feedback session, were invited to participate in the focus groups. Two focus groups of three participants each, took place in February 2021. Most volunteers were female.
- Once volunteers were identified a focus group facilitator from CTL informed them of how the focus group process would work – including details of the questions that would be asked.
- The CTL facilitator facilitated and recorded the focus group.
- The facilitator transcribed and anonymised the focus group according to the Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative Transcription Protocol, and also produced a short report detailing the main points raised by participants in relation to each focus group question.
- Participants reviewed the focus group transcript and report.
- Participants signed off the focus group transcript and report.
- The facilitator sent the anonymised transcript and report to Chemistry Department staff.
- Academic staff involved in the initiative analysed data from focus group report and included findings with those from drop-in questionnaires and weekly feedback meetings. They were acted upon and feedback loop closed.

### (iv) Suggestion Box

- A suggestion box was intended to be left at the exit point in the laboratory. Students would have been invited to submit suggestions/comments on any aspect of their learning in Chemistry, suggestions made would have been analysed using the same process as for the feedback sessions and drop-in centre surveys. In practice using a suggestion box did not prove to be very successful due to the restrictions on laboratory teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. We believe, however, that this approach may prove valuable in the future or if it is not possible, a virtual suggestion box/dedicated webspace to provide anonymous feedback outside scheduled activities might be useful for complementing other feedback methods.

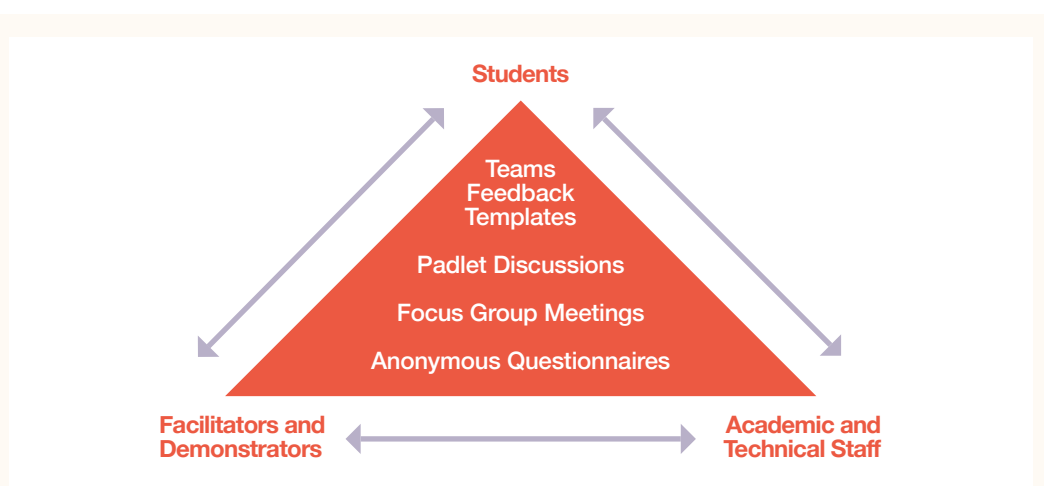


# ► Analysing Student Feedback and Evaluating Teaching

The project activities prompted staff reflection and subsequent improvement of our teaching practices. The feedback meetings and drop-in sessions allowed us to receive student feedback on a weekly basis from two independent sources; although we got feedback from a much higher number of students via the weekly sessions, very similar issues were raised during each activity (see below).

In order to streamline the communication between academic and technical staff, and feedback facilitators, several templates (see appendix) were developed and dedicated MS Teams spaces were created (see Fig 1). Communication also involved regular emails, online meetings, and extensive use of dedicated shared documents. This enabled student feedback to be examined and the appropriate responses to it discussed by the relevant staff members. Considering student feedback together as a group, provided staff with an opportunity to think more broadly about and evaluate the relative success of many aspects of their teaching and to consider potential changes to teaching practice in the future.

► **Figure 1: Graphical representation of partners and stakeholders in the project and communication flow/decision making mechanisms. It indicates the importance of Facilitators, Demonstrators, Academic, and Technical staff working together to analyse and respond to student feedback, as well as to use this feedback to reflect on, evaluate and enhance future teaching. See also material in the appendix.**



A system for effective flow of information from students to facilitators and then on to other staff was devised to enable staff to discuss and reflect on their teaching. This allowed staff to close the feedback loop in the short term, and enabled them to think about longer term teaching and learning matters. The involvement of technical staff introduced a critical interface between students, demonstrators, facilitators, and academic staff, especially when it came to making changes in laboratory-based teaching and learning:

- Facilitators completed templates detailing student responses to specific topics on a weekly basis and added any other matters that students had communicated during feedback activities.
- The selected members of the team reviewed the completed templates, analysed the student feedback and considered any immediate changes to be made in response to it. The technician also contacted the relevant staff members (e.g. first year coordinators) to respond to feedback if required.
- Demonstrators who conducted laboratory practical classes and workshops, and marked students' laboratory write-ups, also had critical input into technical aspects that were addressed in the weekly feedback sessions. The demonstrators identified recurrent errors and/or misconceptions in students' weekly write-ups (for example, errors in calculations or laboratory report format). Highlighting these key points enabled facilitators to clarify them to students in subsequent feedback sessions. Communication between demonstrators and facilitators was through documents held in the Chemistry initiative team's MS Teams space and assisted by those who held both roles.
- Academic and technical staff also met together regularly to review the feedback received from students, evaluate teaching practices, and to discuss more long-term teaching and learning enhancement plans.

**Closing the Feedback Loop** – The actions generated in response to student feedback were communicated to the students in the weekly sessions. This ongoing communication was of critical importance, as it reinforced the culture of partnership between students and staff that we are seeking to develop as a key objective of this initiative. Moreover, closing the feedback loop is essential for making students aware that their feedback is valued, and of the impact it has on their own learning. This empowers students to own and construct their experience through a conversation with staff, where they can feel their voices are heard.

# ▶ Student Feedback Findings, Staff Responses and Impacts on Teaching

The feedback approaches we piloted allowed us to engage with and respond to a wide range of issues raised by students including:

- Workload: students were feeling overwhelmed with assignments and closely-packed deadlines. Deadlines were extended and assignment calendar reviewed.
- Pandemic support: students needed more support to make up for having to complete laboratory learning online. Additional skills/techniques' videos were made available through Moodle.
- Students were able to keep up with work and became comfortable with VLE-Moodle.
- Use of technology to support engagement and online teaching: some used in weekly sessions and drop-in centres were Padlet, MS Teams, and Moodle. We focused on a small number of tools to ensure students would not become overwhelmed through use of too many platforms.
- Students requested solutions online for workshop assignments: We considered this but concluded that it would have no pedagogic value, we, however, explained our conclusions to students to allow them to better understand why this was the case.
- Clarity and communication: Students requested greater clarity about levels of required commitment and about assignments, in response staff introduced a weekly planner and used Moodle Messenger to communicate with students about these issues.
- Our integration of student feedback approaches into academic sessions allowed us to identify gaps in knowledge or concepts that were not clear: e.g., some calculations (pH, balancing equations) were revised and explained in subsequent sessions.
- Difficulties with marking scheme: the marking scheme was revised, and explained to students in labs and feedback sessions, and is now also included in students' lab manuals.

- Some students commented on how long it takes them to go over class material. It was explained to students that, other than lecture contact time, independent study time is an essential part of their learning and the guidelines for a 7.5 credit module were clarified. The importance of independent study in the transition from school to higher education was also highlighted. As a longer-term action point, this made us aware of the importance of managing students' expectations about what is required in higher education, and that in our future first-year teaching, clarification of this, along with what is required/expected for the different learning activities (i.e. lecture, tutorial, workshop, practical) may be beneficial from the onset.
- Students commented on the challenges they faced when trying to interact with peers in an online environment, and how important peer-to-peer (face-to-face) teaching and learning is. We set up break out rooms during workshops to improve students' communication with each other, but also recognised that these cannot completely replace face-to-face interactions.

### Student Responses to Pilot Feedback Approaches

- Students have indicated that they appreciate the drop-in centres as an extra measure of support.
- Students clearly preferred anonymity when providing feedback. We used anonymous settings in Padlet and Moodle questionnaires. We found a consistent desire for anonymity across our student feedback activities and would suggest efforts to maintain anonymity in feedback be continued in the future.

Our feedback facilitators also provided staff with their assessments of the feedback activities. Overall, they highlighted that:

- The level of engagement in the sessions depended on the group dynamic (some groups were more interactive/chatty than others).
- It is challenging for students to interact in an online environment and they have a strong preference for anonymous methods to gather feedback/express opinions (e.g. Padlet or questionnaires).
- The students are very positive about the feedback activities provided through this initiative and feel it has benefited their teaching and learning. Offering the questionnaires/Padlet discussions during the sessions enhanced the response rate.

The feedback received from students has indicated that they value and appreciate the feedback structures that we embedded in their first-year programme. In order to promote a culture of engagement in the Department, staff have evaluated the sustainability of these activities in terms of (i) which feedback activities we can retain in future years for first-year students and (ii) which activities can be successfully introduced in second year.

## Impacts on Teaching

With exception of the suggestion box, which could not be fully implemented because of Covid-19 restrictions, the activities planned in the project were implemented and completed. As a result of our findings, a series of recommendations are being considered for implementation at module and Department level, i.e. revising student workload overlaps, revising communication with students around marking schemes, supporting learning activities with audio-visual resources, integrating the use of interactive learning software (e.g. Unidoodle) in more course activities; improving clarity and communication through signposting of activities and assignments in a weekly planner. We are also currently considering the possibility of extending the last adjustment into higher years.

This initiative has helped us to reflect on, and as appropriate adapt/change our teaching practices to respond to student feedback. The students have shared very valuable ideas and concerns, and on the basis of some of these we made adjustments to the module that have indeed improved aspects of teaching and learning practice and course organisation. Student feedback has also encouraged us to review/reinforce some of the messages that we want to communicate to students more generally e.g. taking time to revisit the significance of independent study for university students.

In addition, the initiative pilot has sparked our own reflection on some of the components of the first-year Chemistry course. The feedback from the students has prompted us to think about, discuss, and revise our practices, and our awareness of the need to act upon the feedback, drove the changes and improvements. In response to the challenges students experienced in keeping up with course work and establishing study routines, the first-year coordinators considered how they could better support students' planning. The coordinators decided to introduce weekly schedules and check lists and these have been well received by the students.

Our involvement in this initiative has prompted us to evaluate our approach to the organisation, delivery and management of continuous assessment activities. Traditionally, we would not have availed extensively of the affordances provided by the virtual learning environment (VLE, Moodle in this case) to deliver and support teaching, learning and feedback activities and most of them would have operated manually/face-to-face. The pandemic, and the logistics of implementing some of the activities planned for the feedback initiative (i.e. weekly sessions), enforced a move to the VLE and as a group, we considered the extent to which this might be continued in the future. While our findings suggest that moving continuous assessment activities fully online would not be optimal, we recognise that some organisational aspects of these activities have been streamlined due to the use of online platforms. Moreover, the VLE provides a richness in terms of resources that is very helpful for supporting learning and engagement. We will adapt this for use with the first year modules in the future, and we are also likely to extend its use to other modules for other year groups.

## Value of the Whole Team Approach and the Group Evaluation Processes

The team assembled for this initiative spanned all staff in the Chemistry Department: it included the Head of Department, four academic staff (two of whom are first-year Chemistry Coordinators), one technical staff member, and four postgraduate students (as feedback facilitators). The reflections and conversations brought about via the whole team evaluation process that we established for this initiative, sparked a transition towards a blended approach to some components, through the use of technology to effectively support teaching and learning, and organise the module more clearly and efficiently. As mentioned above, weekly schedules and check lists have been introduced. To facilitate the students' transition from secondary to higher education, it is important to encourage independent learning. Therefore, clarification of what is expected from students and what the different requirements for the different learning activities are (i.e. lectures, tutorials, laboratory sessions, workshops, class-level feedback, independent study) should be part of the first-year modules. We found that building a team that involves all staff that support these varied aspects, assisted us in evaluating teaching and in planning future changes. Using a well-structured system of templates enabled us to ensure the communication necessary for this was maintained, though this required significant time commitment from all staff involved.

# ► Overall Reflections and Recommendations to Other Departments

Our findings will be brought to future Departmental meetings and we will seek to maintain channels that have promoted student-staff conversation. These structures have brought about positive change in our practice and student community. Several of the recommendations and actions that have arisen as a result of our initiative can be implemented for other years and modules in the Department to benefit students in later years. In addition, it is anticipated that the recommendations students made will also be of value for future first-year students. Importantly, the value of the feedback from the students in improving our teaching practices is a key outcome and a Departmental culture that promotes this should be sustained in the long term.

The feedback framework created through this initiative has encouraged a culture of inclusion, partnership and dialogue between all involved in the teaching and learning process. The first-year students have benefited from a set-up embedded within their teaching and learning activities, that allows them to share opinions and engage in conversation with feedback facilitators and student peers. We have gained valuable insights into how to improve our teaching practices, as well as how to enhance the student experience through the feedback gathered, and through our own reflections on our teaching that a whole team response to student feedback has brought about. Moreover, we have designed structures to facilitate ongoing conversation with students and have explored the technologies that facilitate this more efficiently (i.e. anonymous and easy to use methods such as Moodle questionnaires, Padlet).

The scale of this initiative (involving over 300 students) has been a major challenge: while we have engaged with a significant number of students, the logistics required to implement and manage some of the different activities have been time and resource intensive. Our ability to manage weekly feedback sessions for such a large number of students was made possible in part by the employment of postgraduates specifically to facilitate the feedback sessions, and by the self-enrolment of the students into the sessions most convenient to them. The commitment of the initiative team also made the smooth running of the initiative possible at this scale. The use of templates, and dedicated Teams space together with the development of clear instructions for staff, and frequent meetings between all team members enabled efficient communication. One potential solution to the challenge of large numbers would be to develop the structures explored in this initiative for a smaller cohort of students (for example from denominated degrees), this may allow us to consider some issues in more depth though perhaps at the expense of the breadth of opinion gathered here.

As a Department we aim to reinforce the beneficial effect that feedback has on all partners involved in the teaching and learning process in the future, and will strive to communicate to the students that their feedback has driven the implementation of a number of changes in teaching and learning that have beneficially impacted on their experience.

The initiative has identified the value of involving students as partners in teaching and learning. The feedback gathered through this pilot will help to support incoming students in their transition to higher education and encourage them to feel a part of the Chemistry learning community. Current students have benefited from the activities developed, which (i) support their learning and (ii) enable feedback channels for them to be active partners and to shape their own learning experience. In addition to the student engagement, we found that the whole team approach with participation across the Department from Head of Department, academic and technical staff, facilitators (from postgraduate students cohort) and demonstrators, was critical for the implementation and smooth running of the initiative activities. More generally, we have found that the group review method that we established to examine the broader implications of student feedback and to reflect on our teaching, is a particularly valuable way of evaluating teaching for team-taught modules, and for collectively deciding on enhancements for improving this type of teaching.

We believe this initiative has allowed us reach our first-year cohort in a very unique and especially valuable way in the Covid-19 environment. With so much off-campus time it was particularly important in 2020-2021 for us to hear the first-year student voice, to get a direct insight into their concerns and establish a firm line for communication between themselves and the Department. Whilst our pilot involved an intense programme of activities, we believe it was a very appropriate structure for this academic year. However, in the post Covid-19 environment, cognate departments may see the value in piloting such a project initially with a smaller cohort of students within a year group e.g. denominated degree students. This approach would reduce the scale of the resources and logistic complexity needed to take it to completion. On the other hand, a smaller cohort may not afford the diversity encountered in the larger classes and limit significance of the results.



# ▶ Appendix

Typical Template for recording feedback at scheduled weekly sessions (attendance mandatory).

Please record all your findings on a single sheet.

Weekly Meeting – Date – Your Name (e.g. Weekly Meeting – 2nd November – John McName)

Facilitator \_\_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Academic content recorded **Yes/No** and made available **Yes/No**

Discussion NOT Recorded

Session No \_\_\_\_\_ No of Students Expected \_\_\_\_\_ No in attendance \_\_\_\_\_ % attendance \_\_\_\_\_ No of active participants \_\_\_\_\_

Session No \_\_\_\_\_ No of Students Expected \_\_\_\_\_ No in attendance \_\_\_\_\_ % attendance \_\_\_\_\_ No of active participants \_\_\_\_\_

Session No \_\_\_\_\_ No of Students Expected \_\_\_\_\_ No in attendance \_\_\_\_\_ % attendance \_\_\_\_\_ No of active participants \_\_\_\_\_

Mode of engagement: Tick all that apply.

Oral  Interactive tools/hand or emoji show  Turning Point  Padlet

Other (please state) \_\_\_\_\_

### Facilitator Led Discussion

Topic	Student responses  Facilitators will summarise the student input and confirm deposit here	Who is looking at the feedback facilitators deposit pull out summary of points for action		Actions Taken/or not Short summary		Has the loop been closed with the Students	
		Laboratory Senior Technical Officer Lab & Logistics related	First Year Coordinators Workshop & Academic	Laboratory Senior Technical Officer Lab & Logistics related	First Year Coordinators Workshop & Academic	By whom and where	Date
Do you think the weekly feedback session is the right length (too long/too short)?							
For you, would a feedback session be better online or face-to-face?							
For you, what would be the best way to get academic feedback on your lab/workshop reports.							
Do you think the class level academic feedback you got at these sessions last semester had any impact on how you did in future lab/workshop reports.							
When you get your individual report back on Moodle how much attention do you pay to the grade vs the comments?							
	Responses deposited to First Year Feedback Initiative Team Yes/No			Actions relayed to First Year Feedback Initiative Team Yes/No			

## Schematic representations of project management and organisation



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## About this study

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