

Literature Review – Executive Summary

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► Maynooth University Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative

The Maynooth University Student Feedback and Teaching Evaluation Initiative is funded by the HEA in partnership with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning under the Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement Funding in Higher Education 2019 (SATLE). It is an interdisciplinary project that examines how qualitative and quantitative student feedback and evaluation of teaching methods, at module and programme level, can help to enhance student learning and contribute to the continuing professional development of staff who teach.

Fostering genuine student partnership is at the heart of the project and student involvement is a necessary requirement at all stages. The Initiative partners are the Centre for Teaching and Learning (Lead), the Institutional Research Office, Maynooth Students' Union, and three academic departments representative of the three Faculties and chosen following a call for expressions of interest: Applied Social Studies, Chemistry, and Music. By working closely together, the Initiative partners have established project priorities that reflect both specific disciplinary interests and matters of concern across the University. Applied Social Studies, Chemistry, and Music have documented and shared information on their existing feedback practices, and from September 2020 each department will pilot a variety of new feedback approaches. By assessing the value of different feedback and evaluation methods in a variety of disciplinary contexts, the Initiative will provide a detailed insight into what is successful in different circumstances and why. Given the recent changes to teaching and learning required as a response to Covid-19, the project will also give attention to methods for seeking feedback on remote and blended teaching and learning.

The literature review associated with this executive summary was produced to ensure that the Initiative's outputs are informed by the latest scholarly research. The review focuses on student feedback. We hope that the review will also prove to be a useful resource for those working in related fields.

Other project outputs will include a series 'how to' guides. These guides will provide practical advice on a range of feedback approaches to staff and students. They will be informed by this literature review, practices used at other Higher Education institutions, and by the practice-wisdom and expertise of the project partners. The guides will be employed in the feedback pilots that each discipline will undertake.

The Initiative partners are also making connections beyond the project in order to learn from and support others working in the same space, while avoiding unnecessary replication of existing work. We also hope this will ensure that the Initiative promotes accessibility, authentic student partnership, and a supportive approach to the professional development of staff who teach.

For more information about this initiative, please visit the [Maynooth University Centre for Teaching and Learning website](#).

▶ Executive Summary

This review provides an analysis of the recent Higher Education (HE) literature about student feedback on teaching and learning. It has been conducted to inform Maynooth University's Enhancing Teaching and Learning through Programme and Module Evaluation Initiative. The review defines feedback as information, formal or informal, that is provided by students on their experiences of teaching and learning.

Reflections on the Philosophies and Practices of Student Feedback

Recent trends in student feedback are situated in the wider philosophical and ethical debates on the topic. These include concerns that a focus on economic matters is encouraging universities to gather superficial feedback from students via quantitative surveys. A desire to counter these trends has fueled a range of student partnership activities at HE institutions which has encouraged the use of more qualitative feedback methods. In turn, both quantitative and qualitative approaches to student feedback have been used for quality assurance and teaching enhancement. These processes have different objectives. The necessity for clarity around these objectives reinforces the need to know what feedback will be used for, in order to know what questions to ask students. Knowing *what* questions to ask will be most effective if we also know *how* to approach student feedback especially in the context of teaching evaluation. While some teaching evaluation methods have encouraged an adversarial 'rate the teacher' and 'blame the student' culture, the development of more supportive evaluation processes is recommended.

Overview of Approaches to Student Feedback

A wide range of approaches have been used to seek feedback from students. These include quantitative surveys, as well as more qualitative forms of feedback such as focus groups, reflective essays, dialogue days, and the employment of students as quality monitors.

Quantitative Approaches

Within the literature the pros and cons, as well as many instances of application, of the various quantitative approaches abound; quantitative feedback surveys in particular have been heavily studied. Two themes which persist across the research into quantitative surveys are the issues of bias and of response rate. With regards the former, the extent to which teaching evaluation surveys are subject to various biases has been frequently investigated. However, these studies do not give consistent answers about the existence of such biases, which raises questions about the use of quantitative surveys in processes with pay and promotions implications. With regards to response rates, researchers have indicated that surveys used for quality monitoring purposes may require higher response rates than those achieved by online instruments. Survey fatigue also reduces response rates. The scholarship provides recommendations with regards to quantitative approaches which include the following points:

- The results of quantitative surveys must be used with caution, especially if they are to inform HR policies.
- Adding open-ended questions to quantitative surveys may be valuable.
- Using a portfolio of methods including but not limited to quantitative surveys will provide broader perspectives on student views of teaching and learning.
- More needs to be learned about how students perceive feedback processes.

Qualitative Forms of Feedback

Specific qualitative approaches have received attention in the literature, with many articles championing their value.

Group methods employed to gather feedback include focus groups and nominal groups. These two approaches, which are usually only designed to accommodate a small number of participants, are seen as providing rich data and ranked priorities respectively as a result of the group's response to predetermined questions. The methods also allow participants to raise topics that might not have been considered by the organisers.

An alternative qualitative approach which features in the literature is *Reflective Feedback*. Under this heading, a 'one question' feedback method where students write an anonymous essay-style answer to a broad question about their experiences of teaching and learning, has been promoted by some authors. They argue that the freedom of the process produces nuanced answers with actionable recommendations. Other 'creative' methods such as asking students to produce drawings, have also been used to gather feedback. These methods often require significant interpretation, but they may help to make feedback a less judgmental process. The extent to which they are transferable between disciplines needs to be investigated.

Other qualitative approaches can be grouped under the broad heading of *Dialogue and Partnership*. There have been several attempts to make feedback part of a dialogue rather than a one-off, one-way process. These include inviting staff and students to discuss academic issues at 'dialogue days' managed by neutral facilitators, as well as the employment of students as advisors on HE teaching and learning processes. These initiatives are intended to break down barriers between staff and students and provide a greater amount of time for students to express their views, than allowed by traditional feedback methods. Although they are becoming increasingly popular, student partnership processes have not been universally welcomed. Some authors claim partnership excludes some students by privileging verbal forms of communication over other kinds of engagement.

Inclusion and Diversity

A key theme in the literature is that of inclusion and diversity. There are potential tensions between processes designed to foster deep participation and those that encourage the broadest possible involvement. It has been argued that student partnership schemes often attract only 'elite' students who are already involved in many university activities.

Recommendations for improving inclusion and diversity include:

- Maintaining flexible schedules for partnership activities to ensure those with outside commitments can take part.
- Providing payment to participants of student partnership schemes.
- Connecting student partnership activities with other projects designed to promote diversity.
- Ensuring that some feedback takes the form of anonymous written comment.
- Providing students with training about the feedback process to boost their confidence.

Technology, Online Environments and Remote Teaching

An increasing number of electronic technologies are becoming available that help us gather feedback in faster and more convenient ways.

As with other quantitative methods, response rates are a concern for online surveys as rates are often considerably lower than those achieved by their paper counterparts. One potential solution offered in the literature to address this problem is to set aside class time to allow completion of electronic surveys.

Given the particular circumstances at the time of compiling this review, reflection on how feedback on online teaching should be collected was also considered. When assessing the literature in this space we must remember that most of it relates to courses that were purposely designed to be online.

The recommendations include:

- Setting specific questions on technical matters, as this helps to clarify issues around the role of instructor/tutor/lecturer.
- Acknowledging issues related to students' broader lives, such as caring responsibilities, and asking students how the university might better support them when learning at home.
- If adapting an existing feedback method, ensure that all of the questions are relevant to online classes.
- Asking students if they find the methods introduced to mimic the perceived positives of classroom-based environments, such as discussion boards, valuable.

Discipline Specific Considerations

While there are some generic approaches with broad parameters which are applicable across disciplines, there is also value in identifying discipline specific considerations:

- Feedback questions should be relevant to the programmes that students study. Providing students with generic surveys that contain questions about class or assessment types not used in their programmes, is likely to promote survey fatigue.
- Reflecting more on how the methods used for assessment and communication in a particular discipline affect the feedback gathered is beneficial, as some approaches may not have the desired complementarity with the discipline.
- The setting in which student feedback is gathered may also influence the feedback obtained. Different kinds of class environment can be associated with different kinds of anxieties such as those related to practical work, performance, or discussion. The ways in which these different kinds of anxieties affect student confidence may need to be addressed to promote inclusive feedback environments in different class types.
- Care must be taken when making comparisons in evaluation results across disciplines and between modules. Some subjects consistently achieve low 'teaching evaluation ratings' despite providing the necessary foundations for advanced modules which are more favourably received.

Student Perceptions of Feedback Processes and Closing the Feedback Loop

Although an increasing number of authors have argued that we need to know more about how students view requests for feedback, there have been few in-depth studies of this topic.

The information that we have indicates that time pressures and a belief that feedback would not result in improvements are the main reasons that students say they do not participate in feedback processes. Some students have noted their frustration at not receiving responses to the ideas they put forward, especially if they are, at the same time, being frequently asked for their opinion on different topics. The research also indicates that students were willing to give their opinions when they felt that they had the expertise to do so and that their views would be listened to.

This research topic and its associated findings link directly with the idea of ‘closing the feedback loop’ – that is, meaningfully responding to student feedback. This concept is at the heart of much of the literature discussed above, and several specific recommendations have been made to achieve it including:

- Provide training to assist students in giving constructive feedback.
- Ensure feedback is gathered early enough in the semester to allow staff to respond to it.
- Ensure feedback is responded to and encourage dialogue-based forms of feedback.

Key Themes

Taking the literature review as a whole, recurrent themes may be identified. A few which are revisited time and again and thus merit particular mention, are noted here:

- The value of using a portfolio of feedback methods.
- The advantages of feedback processes that encourage course enhancement.
- The importance of providing training about feedback for students.
- The necessity of closing the feedback loop and responding constructively to feedback.
- The importance of making feedback part of an ongoing process of dialogue between students and staff, and the need to hear more about how students perceive requests for feedback.
- The need to be aware of the biases that can affect feedback processes and to combat factors that exclude some students’ voices.
- The necessity of seeing student feedback as a central part of a university’s academic activities, not an optional extra. The gathering and use of student feedback should be embedded in processes designed to improve teaching and learning.

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