Evidence for Enhancement:
Improving the Student Experience

Benchmarking exercise

1   Introduction

The University of the Highlands and Islands is running three projects as part of its work for the 2017-2020 Enhancement Theme following the broad timeline given below.

- Year 1: Formulation and shaping of project plans
- Year 2: Project implementation
- Year 3: Project evaluation

During Year 2 of the Theme, pilot initiatives will be taken forward with institutional teams, each of which will be evidence-based in nature. As part of the background and preparation for this phase of the Theme a benchmarking exercise was undertaken in relation to each project with the aim of:

- Briefly surveying the recent academic literature relating to each project area
- Reporting on related initiatives and projects within the HE sector

The outcomes of this exercise are reported in the sections below, taking each project in turn.

2   Project 1: Linking evidence to learning

The overall aim of project 1 is to improve staff capacity to analyse, contextualise, and act upon student feedback data, with subsidiary aims of improving quality of, access to, and understanding of, student feedback data.

2.1   Scope and use of student feedback

Within the literature, student feedback has been defined as the gathering of students' views of various aspects of their experiences including: student *satisfaction* with programmes, modules or services; student *views* about whether their objectives have been met; student *accounts* of their own learning and study methods (Williams and Brennan, 2003, my emphases). This definition immediately reveals the broad and varying nature of student feedback, however the focus of this project is on students' feedback relating to their learning and teaching experiences, and mainly that which is gathered by surveys such as end of module/unit surveys and the National Student Survey (NSS).

The main purpose for gathering student feedback is to inform institutions' quality assurance processes, although this is an area of some contention, particularly concerning NSS, with the popular perception being that student surveys are not reliable indicators of teaching quality, and should

therefore not be used as such (Williams, 2015). However, in a 2003 review of student feedback practices, most institutions stated that they used student feedback as part of their quality assurance processes, albeit within the context of other information (e.g. external examiners reports, progression and attainment rates etc.) (Williams and Brennan, 2003: 46). The same review also noted the different 'levels' at which student feedback can be gathered, and how this feedback might serve different purposes for different users (and the potential for tension, given these differences):

Users of feedback	Uses of feedback	Level
A teacher	To improve teaching	Module
A programme team	To check that learning objectives have been met, to check coherence of a programme as a whole, and to improve the student learning experience in general.	Programme, plus individual modules
A department or faculty	To help satisfy responsibilities for quality and standards and to help plan future provision	Programme
Leadership/senior academic committees	To help satisfy responsibilities for quality and standards and to help plan future strategy	Programme, subject and institution
Current students	To inform module choices	Module
Prospective students	To inform choice within and between HEIs	Programme, subject

From Williams and Brennan (2003: 48)

With this in mind, the authors recommend that there is clarity of purpose behind the gathering of feedback, and that the needs of the different users, and the students giving feedback, are taken into account when designing mechanisms for feedback.

In relation to the Enhancement Theme project, the following questions are worthy of consideration: Do the current student surveys deliver the right data to the right people at the right time, and at an appropriate level of aggregation? If not, then what changes to student feedback processes could be made to ensure that this is the case?

Staff engagement with student feedback

In addition to the question of the purpose and use of student feedback (and putting issues of its reliability to one side for a moment) another relevant area explored in the literature concerns whether or not the use of student feedback actually improves the quality of teaching.

Several studies conclude that student evaluations have no effect on the quality of teaching (Kember *et al.*, 2002; Nasser and Fresko, 2002; Blair and Valdez Noel, 2014) recognising that the extent to which staff engage with student feedback and evaluation systems is pivotal in establishing a connection between feedback and enhancement. Many studies show that such systems are 'accepted' by staff but deeper levels of engagement may vary. Moskal *et al.* (2015) classify staff engagement into three levels (my labels):

1. Compliance: Staff merely comply with mandated evaluation policies.
2. Instrumental: Staff see formal evaluation systems as useful for informing institutional processes, such as promotion, and they use them for these purposes.
3. Genuine engagement: Staff see formal evaluation systems as useful for informing and developing teaching and learning, and they use them for these purposes.

Often, staff fail to engage beyond the first level, meaning that student feedback does not translate into changes to learning and teaching practice. Stein *et al*. (2012) identify three 'domains of influence' that can impact on staff engagement with evaluation practices:

- Institutional context: The purposes that evaluation serves for the institution
- Individual perceptions: Staff beliefs about and perceptions of learning and teaching, and evaluation
- Practical implementation: How an institution implements its evaluations, the evaluation instruments used, the timings of the evaluations and how results are reported and disseminated

So, for example, where student evaluations are used as a proxy for teaching quality within an institution, staff attitudes towards the reliability and validity of the survey instrument would influence their level of engagement with the evaluations. There is evidence that making changes to any of the three domains can have a corresponding effect on staff engagement with evaluation: so altering the practical implementation of the evaluation (introducing an online system, and reducing the time taken to process survey data) improved staff perceptions of evaluation, and increased engagement with it (Moskal *et al*., 2016); refocussing the content of the evaluations to inform course development rather than 'rate the teachers' also improved staff perceptions (Edström, 2008).

In relation to the Enhancement Theme project, the following questions are worthy of consideration: What is the institutional purpose of student surveys? Is this purpose one that academic staff also wish to pursue? How might academic staff's views of the current evaluation practices be impacting on their engagement with the results of these evaluations?

2.2   Enhancement Theme projects across the sector

Several other Scottish institutions mention a review of available feedback data as part of their institutional strands (Abertay, Dundee, Glasgow) with the accompanying observation that universities collect or hold a lot of data, but do not always use this effectively, or bring it together into one space. NSS is mentioned as a key source of feedback data, along with internal surveys (Dundee, GSA, QMU) as is the issue of closing the feedback loop with students (Dundee).

Many institutions are also looking to bring disparate sources of data together into 'dashboards' which unite student feedback data with other learning analytics (Edinburgh, QMU). They also propose the upskilling of staff to understand and work with this data (Strathclyde, OUiS), along with the benchmarking of data (GCU) and aligning it to annual quality monitoring processes (Abertay).

In all of the institutional projects, there is an acceptance of current methods for gathering student feedback, with the focus on using situating these data alongside other analytics concerning the student learning experience.

In relation to UHI's Enhancement Theme project 1, there is an opportunity to engage in original work reviewing the student feedback mechanisms themselves, and staff engagement with these, rather than focusing on more technical solutions that may not overcome any underlying barriers to staff engagement with feedback data.

2.3 References

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3 Project 2: Linking student representation to enhancement

The overall aim of project 2 is to engage student reps as creators and users of evaluation and feedback data, with subsidiary aims of reviewing the current student rep system, using student reps to raise awareness of feedback mechanisms, and improve engagement between academic staff and student reps.

3.1 Literature

Sparqs are a key source of best practice in Scotland concerning student engagement and representation. One of their five key elements of student engagement is 'Students working with their institution in shaping the direction of learning' (sparqs, 2012) which relates to the ways in which students can comment on their learning experiences. There are, of course, degrees of student engagement, and sparqs' 'Ladder of engagement' provides a useful framework to consider the different ways in which student reps might be creators and users of evaluation and feedback data (Figure 1, below). It may be, for example, that student reps are currently 'actors', collating feedback on behalf of their module or programme and passing this on to academic staff. There is the possibility to engage student reps more deeply by involving them in planning and/or implementing changes on the basis of this feedback (Experts), or by getting the students to design and undertake the evaluations themselves (Partners. See Bovill, n.d. for an example of this).
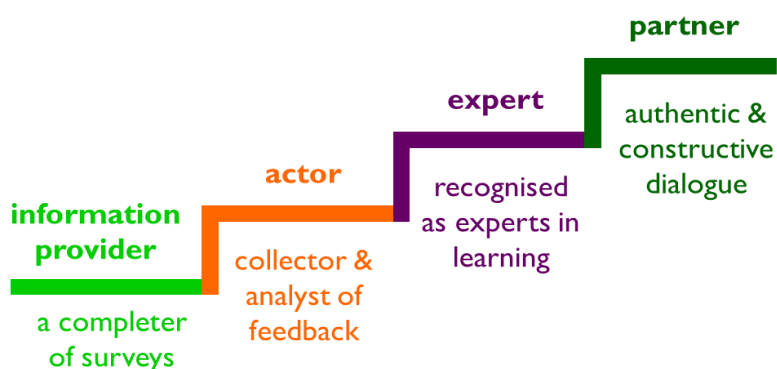

Figure 1: Sparqs' 'Ladder of engagement' (Varwell, 2017)

An alternative model is provided by Dunne and Zandstra (2011) (see Figure 2 below) as a map of the different ways in which students can act as 'change agents' within an institution. There are four quadrants within the model (Students as evaluators, Students as participants, Students as partners, Students as agents for change) outlining the different modes of student engagement depending on whether the emphasis is on student voice, or student action, and whether the university or the student is the driver for change.
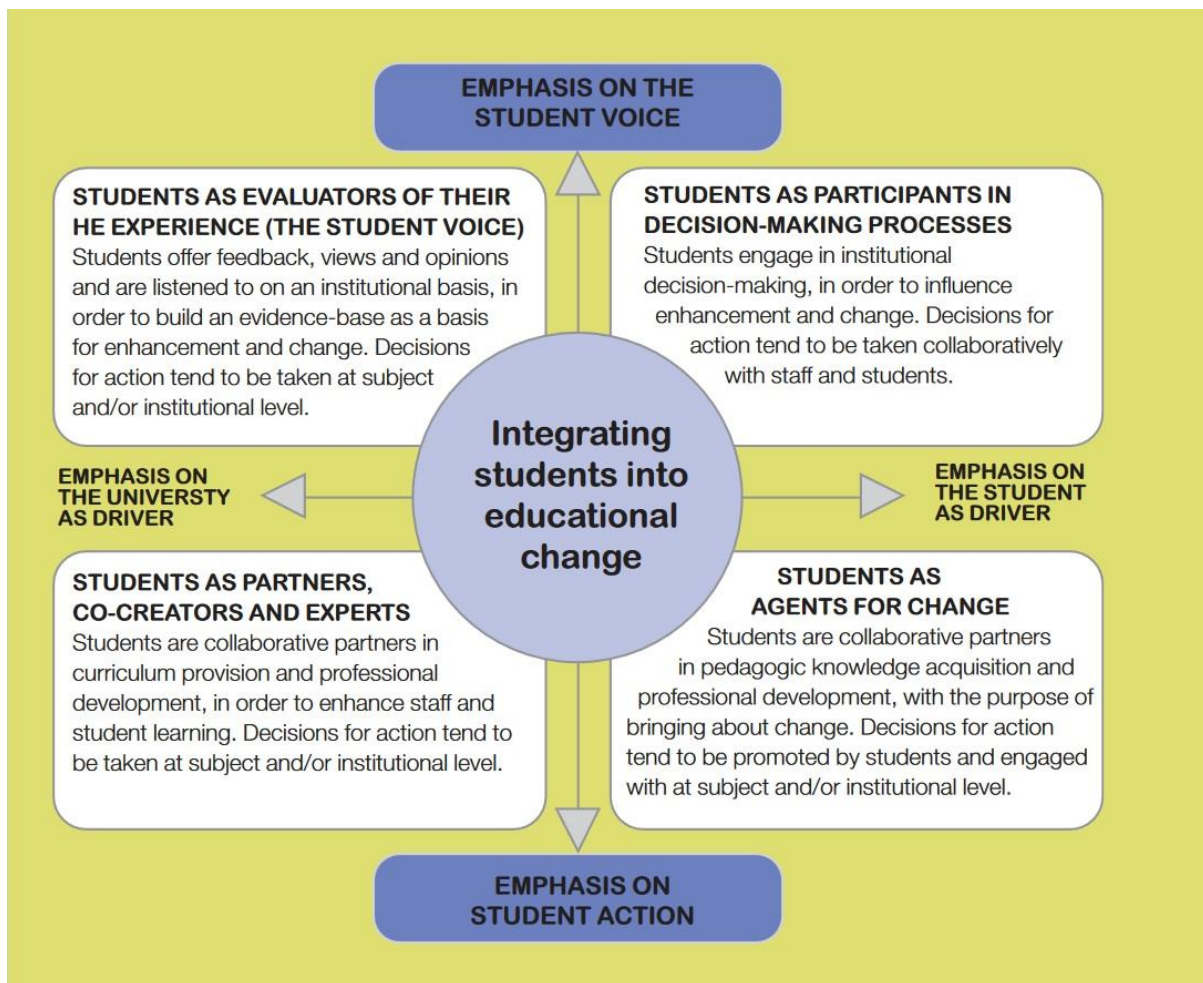
Figure 2: Theoretical model for students as change agents (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011: 17)

The fourth of sparqs' Five Key Elements of Student Engagement relates to engaging student in the formal mechanisms for quality and governance via institutional structures and processes. Again, the 'ladder of engagement ' is helpful in framing the various ways in which students can be involved in these formal mechanisms; as members of committees providing student feedback to these committees (information provider→ actor), or taking a more active role within committees as a taker and shaper of strategic decisions (expert → partner). Giving students access to institutional performance data such as NSS and other survey data, and undertaking joint staff-student change projects are given as examples of activities that can help to facilitate student engagement in this area.

3.2 Relevant work within the HE sector

A few other institutions' Enhancement Themes plans mention the involvement of student reps. Some proposed activities aim to enhance students' access to and understanding of feedback data through training (Dundee) or closer involvement in data analysis (Edinburgh). Some institutions also propose reviewing their student rep and feedback system in order to capture the student voice more effectively (Glasgow). There is also an emphasis on involving student reps more closely in the enhancements that are planned as responses to student feedback: by closing the feedback loop more effectively following student evaluations of teaching (Glasgow) and co-producing workshops for the enhancement of learning and teaching which are informed by student feedback (Dundee).

Outside of the Scottish sector, there are several examples of students being active participants in, or leaders of change programmes:

- University of Bath (https://www.thesubath.com/change-champions/)
- University of Exeter (https://www.exeter.ac.uk/academic-skills-engagement-team/student-engagement/change/)
- University of Nottingham (https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/currentstudents/studentopportunities/students-as-change-agents/index.aspx)

In relation to UHI's Enhancement Theme project 2, the various theoretical models on offer could be helpful in mapping current practice within the student rep system, and also to help frame how deeper engagement might occur. While sparqs do mention the use of institutional data by student reps, this does not feature highly in many examples of current practice, so there is an opportunity for the University to undertake original work in this area, by harnessing student reps as gatherers and analysts of feedback data, and even as co-designers and co-implementers of evaluation strategies.

3.3   References

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4 Project 3: Linking feedback to progression

The overall aim of project 3 is to support student progression through innovative and effective use of assessment feedback with subsidiary aims of supporting students to use feedback cumulatively and collectively, and helping students to understand when they are receiving feedback

4.1 Literature

Several authors have argued that feedback fails to support student progression (Price *et al*. 2010; Sadler, 2010; Nicol, 2010). Students can often fail to engage with feedback, with three reasons often cited:

- The discourse of feedback: Feedback may be given in a language which is part of the professional practice of the discipline, and which students may not understand.
- The tacit dimension of feedback: Markers may draw on a range of 'tacit' knowledge to make judgements about assessed work, and these cannot be represented within a small set of assessment criteria (Sadler, 2009). Terms used in feedback may have different meanings within different contexts and disciplines e.g. 'critically analyse' (Carless, 2006). Moreover, tutors may not have a clear idea of what 'quality' or 'success' in an assessment looks like at the time they set the assessment (Sadler 2010) and so fail to articulate this in explicit assessment criteria that are made available to students.
- The transmissive/monologic nature of feedback: Feedback tends to be a one-way communication from tutor to student so students rarely query feedback, and may misunderstand what tutors are trying to say. Or students may understand the feedback on the surface, but not recognise how to respond to it in order to improve, e.g. where feedback tells them to 'critically analyse', students may have no understanding of how to go about doing this.

In order to encourage students to engage with their assessment feedback, the feedback process has been reconceptualised as dialogic and participatory, rather than transmissive and monologic (Nicol, 2010; Boud & Molloy, 20130). Carless (2016) suggests five ways in which feedback processes can operate dialogically:

- Integrated cycles of feedback: for example, using PATs to schedule regular reflection on feedback as part of a student's normal academic calendar
- Peer feedback: getting students to feedback on each other's work
- Technologically-facilitated feedback: Using technology such as VLEs to store feedback from assessments, and encouraging students to apply it to subsequent modules
- Internal feedback: encouraging students to self-evaluate. This may be a natural side effect of engaging in peer feedback, or can be encouraged by, for example, getting students to 'mark' their own work against assessment criteria
- Teacher-generated written feedback. 'Traditional' written feedback can be made more dialogic by, for example, asking students to specify (on a cover sheet) which aspects of the assessment they would like to receive feedback on, for the teacher's feedback to summarise how students have addressed comments on previous assessments to help students "build a cumulative sense of the feedback they are engaging with" (Carless, 2016: 4)

The use of peer feedback is also advocated by McConlogue (2015) who suggests that students *giving* feedback to their peers can benefit in particular as the process helps them:

- Understand what constitutes quality in assessed work (accruing 'tacit' knowledge of their own) and apply this to their own work
- Understand the assessment process
- Become 'active constructors' of feedback (Nicol, 2010)
- Become independent learners (not dependent on tutors, Yorke 2003)

Providing appropriate training for peer markers, such as tutor-led rehearsal marking sessions, can consolidate the skills and understanding listed above; for example, by giving students verbal clarification of tutors' tacit assumptions. Effects were less positive, however, for recipients of peer feedback due to its perceived lack of quality; the fact that students did not understand some of the comments or felt they were vague, and felt that peers comment on 'basic' aspects of the assessment (spelling, irrelevant details) and not on ways that students could improve (Nicol *et al*., 2014; McConlogue, 2015)

4.2   Relevant work within the HE sector

Within the current Enhancement Theme, the issue of assessment feedback is only mentioned within one other institution's plan (Edinburgh Napier). They plan to run School-based workshops and activity to enhance focus on assessment as learning to support student engagement with feedback for learning. Napier's plan also states that they will be "Amplifying learning from innovative practice in engaging students with feedback" although does not elaborate on what this innovative practice is.

There are also useful and relevant outputs from the previous Enhancement Theme on Assessment, and the subsequent 'mini' Enhancement Theme which focussed on 'integrative assessment' (bringing the different strands of assessment together in a coherent way):

- Resources to help students understand feedback produced by GCU: https://www.gcu.ac.uk/futurelearning/studentinformation/studentresources/
- Guide on student-friendly feedback produced by QAA Scotland: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaas/focus-on/student-friendly-feedback-report.pdf?sfvrsn=7160f481_6
- Guide on the balance between assessment of, and assessment for learning produced by QAA Scotland: http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/docs/ethemes/integrative-assessment/guide-no-2---balancing-assessment-of-and-assessment-for-learning.pdf?sfvrsn=8e2cf981_10)

In relation to UHI's Enhancement Theme project 3, there is a lot of literature outlining principles for effective and innovative practice within assessment feedback. The current theme provides an opportunity for the University to pilot some of these practices and evaluate their impact, perhaps in a range of disciplinary contexts. There is definite potential for original research and publishable material within this area.

4.3   References

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