



Report on Student Evaluation Review

1. Background

The Quality Committee at its meeting of the 15th March 2016 considered the Council approved policy in respect of mandatory student evaluation on an annual basis of all undergraduate modules delivered. The meeting felt that the implementation of the policy raised issues around survey fatigue, survey timing, evaluation methods and perception of impartiality, all of which it was felt warranted further investigation. As a result of these discussions, staff in Trinity Teaching & Learning conducted desktop research on existing practices in peer institutions as well as a high level literature review of research in the area. Following discussion on this research at the Quality Committee and the Undergraduate Studies Committee in Michaelmas 2016 and a subsequent discussion at the University Council that raised concern about compliance with the policy on module evaluation in some schools, it was recommended that the Academic Secretary and the Students' Union Education Officer visit schools to assess whether and how undergraduate modules were being evaluated. The visits took place during Michaelmas and Hilary terms 2016-17.

2. Introduction

Focus group meetings, lasting from 60-90 minutes, were held with a total of 157 staff and student class representatives (reps) across twenty schools. The conversations were frank, open, respectful and, importantly, very productive and informative for all involved.

From the start, however, it was clear that there are differing levels of engagement and interpretation of the Council approved policy on student evaluation and, importantly, there are multiple examples of excellent practices and strong commitment across the college to improving the learning experience. We undertook as part of the exercise to engage staff and students on identifying ways to improve the student evaluation process and this became a focus of the meetings with schools.

There is poor knowledge of college policy on student evaluation. Many class reps were unaware that student evaluation is mandatory and many staff were unaware that the school had discretion on the approach used. The format of the focus groups was in itself an exercise on awareness as many class reps, and especially the Junior Freshman reps, felt informed and empowered to represent their class following the conversations.

There was agreement that the 'complain and comply' approach to evaluation defeated the purpose of trying to improve the teaching and learning culture of the school; though it would be fair to say that many students felt that the absence of dialogue and feedback pushed students towards a 'complaint' culture. Some staff felt that the 'compliance' culture 'imposed from the centre' was a 'false' one as they felt the majority of student complaints related to poor space and teaching facilities, overcrowding and poor services. They further felt there was a mismatch between the 'quality rhetoric' from the 'centre' and action to address the systemic problems identified not only in student evaluation surveys but also by school quality reviews.

Surveys currently conducted by Schools can have as few as five questions and as many as 20, all include an option for open comments. Many staff felt that information received from the open

comments provided useful constructive feedback and best capture the student's experience of the modules. There is a preference across schools for paper-based questionnaires, administered in-class, because the experience is that response rate for online surveys is low. The administration of paper-based questionnaires is resource intensive, especially for large class sizes; one Head of School, who uses paper-based questionnaires, advised that he can spend up to two days each term assessing and collating outcomes, addressing changes and providing feedback. The same school, however, places considerable value on the process in its effort to improve the teaching and learning culture.

Participants' view on the purpose of module evaluation

Members of the Quality Committee and of the Undergraduate Studies Committee questioned the usefulness of module evaluation on the grounds that the response rate was, on the whole, very low and the administration involved was resource intensive and time-consuming for academic staff.

Staff and students interviewed were asked separately to comment on the purpose of module evaluation. The following views, or variations thereof, were expressed by staff with respect to the purpose and value of module evaluation:

- serves as a channel for students to engage in their learning and to contribute constructively to improving the learning environment for themselves but also for future students of the course;
- contributes to the School's overall quality assurance and improvement agenda;
- helps to surface issues that may not be easy for students to address directly or face-to-face with staff;
- serves to assess whether the module achieves the outcomes expected and provides the opportunity to change, if necessary, for future years;
- students' views on the balance of work/assessment across the courses' modules;
- helps to keep lecturers on track and aware of what's working and of students' needs/concerns;
- helps staff understand where to improve their teaching and be more effective;
- offers students the opportunity to comment on their learning, and provides staff feedback on their teaching;
- continuously renew the teaching and learning experience for students;
- student voice is pivotal in curriculum formation;
- increase the overall quality of the learning environment; though Schools are often not in a position to address the deficiencies in the physical environment;
- provides the opportunity to identify and disseminate good practices;
- opens the space for dialogue between students and staff;
- chance to anonymously critique teaching, to acknowledge exceptional teachers, and highlight deficiencies;
- helps implement changes that have positive benefits;
- contributes to enhancing module design / revision;
- informs course committee meetings of what needs to be addressed and possible inequities in workload across modules;
- students are key stakeholders and should be given the opportunity to comment on their learning;
- helps to improve the overall coordination of the module.

The following views, or variations thereof, were expressed by students with respect to the purpose and value of module evaluation:

- highlights what is working and not working;
- improves the teaching and learning environment and benefits students in following years;
- provides a vehicle to channel complaints/concerns anonymously;
- useful communication tool between staff and students and communication is strengthened if staff close the feedback loop by responding to concerns raised;
- bridge between staff and students;
- a vehicle that gives students a voice and supports constructive engagement in their learning;
- ensures Trinity's high standards are continuously reviewed and improved;
- student voice is heard, they feel listened to and can see tangible results; evidence of being taken seriously;
- driver for self-reflection of a student's learning, opening dialogue and offering an opportunity for students to be partners in the teaching and learning process;
- evaluates students' own way of learning and helps to approach learning more pro-actively;
- get most out of the modules when students engage in the process;
- feedback helps to improve relationship between student and lecturers;
- encourages student engagement and staff student dialogue;
- anonymity encourages students to raise concerns; not always easy to ask a lecturer to change how they teach;
- professors don't always appreciate what's happening outside the lecture theatre;
- school can address issues that individual lecturers cannot;
- staff are aware of students' views;
- students feel they are taken seriously and their views valued.

Neither staff member nor student supported the suggestion to discontinue the practice of module evaluation.

3. Existing Practices

(i) Online and paper-based questionnaires

There is a variety of module evaluation practices in place across the Schools, and the majority of Schools administer questionnaires, online or/and paper-based. On the whole, paper-based questionnaires are administered in-class during the penultimate module class, and a student rep collects the completed questionnaires on behalf of the lecturer. With the exception of a few schools where the response rates are impressively high, the response rates for online surveys are poor. Where there are high response rates to online and paper-based, it appears that the Schools involved invest considerable effort and resources in the process and view evaluation as embedding a quality culture within the school. The School of Mathematics, for example, has developed its own online evaluation tool that has significantly reduced the administration burden and the response rates are high (40-50%); the School of Medicine has a dedicated staff member for student evaluation and quality assurance. The Schools of Law, of Social Sciences and Philosophy, of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences report that they have embedded student evaluation into their learning culture.

(ii) Staff and student meetings/committees

Staff and student rep meetings are common practices in some disciplines in many Schools and they can serve a useful purpose in dealing with logistical and one off issues, but students feel that these are not sufficient in themselves as a means of evaluation or giving a voice to all students. Students are represented on school governance committees and can raise student matters at these fora; however, student attendance at these meeting can be low and some students report that they can feel intimidated as the balance of power is not equal and the ratio of staff to student is often in favour of the former.

There are several instances of student:staff liaison committees across several programmes/courses and usually students have an input into the agenda. They are chaired by a staff member and on the whole are student focused: while students appreciate the opportunity to participate in committees and student-staff meetings, some complained that the meetings can be 'over their head' and not always student-focused.

This academic year the School of Chemistry introduced a Fresher and a Sophister staff: student Liaison Committee, replacing module evaluations; class reps and staff attend the meeting, which takes place three times a year, the student school convenor chairs the meeting, and administration is provided by the school. While students speak very favourably of this approach, they nonetheless feel that some form of module evaluation should also take place.

(iii) Clickers

'Clickers' are used in some courses in the Faculty of Engineering, Mathematics and Science and the Faculty of Health Science, (School of Business indicated at their focus group that they intended to use this device for large classes). Clickers provide real time information and the lecturer can tailor the questions to suit the module content. There are mixed views about the usefulness of clickers as an evaluation tool, but this tool may be more widely available in 2017-18 on a College-wide trial basis.

4. Feedback

While practices differ, module evaluation feedback is normally compiled by the Director of Undergraduate Teaching and Learning or the course co-ordinator/director and issues raised are addressed at the school, department, and/or course committee level. The method for providing feedback to students varies, and include; the lecturer(s) in question providing direct feedback to the class either by email or verbally; changes communicated to the class reps who inform the class; postings on the school web page or the individual lecturer's web page; changes communicated to the staff:student liaison committees and class reps inform their class. In many instances, changes made to the module are communicated to the new cohort of students (who sometimes don't appreciate the changes), and in other instances it was not entirely clear how students receive feedback on issues raised.

The biggest concern expressed repeatedly was the low survey response rate, and some staff expressed frustration with participating in a process that requires a lot of administration for no apparent value. The vast majority of staff want to hear, indeed welcome, their students' views on their learning, but they argue that concerns/issues raised in a survey where the response rate is 10% and below, which appears to be an average response for online questionnaires, are not representative of the class and can be difficult to address. Students, on the other hand, contend

that the issues raised are still valid and should be addressed, and further they believe that if they received constructive feedback on the issues raised in a survey, the response rate would improve. The view was also expressed, repeatedly, that actions or changes to modules arising from student feedback benefit subsequent years and not the class in question and consequently there is little incentive to complete as many as ten module evaluations each term when there is no immediate gain. Being a 'good citizen' has its limits.

Feedback then from both staff and students is an area that needs to be tackled across the board. A few schools are actively addressing this matter by focusing on developing a teaching and learning culture that, among other things, encourages staff:student dialogue and engagement, and the administration of some form of mid-module review. The School of Social Sciences and Philosophy provide feedback to students via their webpage in a section titled '*You said... We did*' and both positive and negative comments are addressed, and this is greatly appreciated by the students.

In exploring ways to improve student feedback, suggestions included that module evaluation should be made compulsory, and offer incentives such as credit or some other academic allowance. While the suggestions were actively discussed, they received very little traction for two principal reasons; namely, the need to protect the student's identity, and the possibility that students may only 'tick boxes' for compliance purposes thereby reducing the reliability of the feedback. Some staff felt that students should email their lecturers if there was an issue with a module, but students felt that there would need to be a cultural change to support this type of dialogue. It was suggested that if students were informed by the lecturers about the purpose of the evaluation, there would probably be greater levels of engagement.

5. Anonymity

Anonymity in the student evaluation process is considered very important for students, even for those who feel confident in their relationship with lecturers. Students in small group classes commented on the difficulty of being critical in their questionnaire responses as they feared that criticisms may be easily attributable to individuals and they feared that this would impact negatively on their grades; this concern was particularly present when module evaluation was by means of a student focus group facilitated by a staff member. Some students felt these focus groups and the staff:student meetings were very 'polite' and they felt 'nervous' about raising issues – this, however, depended on the lecturers involved. It was suggested, on several occasions, that where focus groups are used as the principal method for module evaluation that these should be facilitated by someone not connected to the course in question. Many student reps who participated in the meetings commented on how the dynamics of the focus group meetings with an external facilitator was more positive and empowering.

While class reps do their best to represent the whole class, it was commented that not all students want to be 'represented' and many prefer the anonymity of the survey evaluation to raise their concerns.

6. Mid-Term Module Review

Some schools administer a mid-module evaluation in the form of an online or paper-based questionnaire; in other schools, the lecturer invites students to indicate the things that are working and what could be improved; this can be administered through 'blackboard', the lecturer's website, paper-based (class rep collects on behalf of the lecturer). The mid-module review takes place

typically before reading week and the lecturer reviews the comments and provides feedback to the class when teaching recommences.

The timing of module evaluations was considered important especially in terms of initiating change, where required and possible, that benefits the students taking the module. In the course of our discussions, we explored attitudes to the practice of administering mid-module reviews. There are several instances of this in place and staff and students who have experienced the practice found it beneficial. The School of Mathematics administers mid-module evaluation and staff and students interviewed preferred this timing as it was more responsive to students' here-and-now needs and the school has the opportunity to address problems that exist just in time. There was, however, a guarded response from many schools to the implementation of this practice on top of existing methods of evaluation as there is little scope for taking on additional evaluation administration. The vast majority of staff interviewed, however, felt that some information in the earlier stages of module delivery would be useful but there was no consensus on the method to employ. The following were explored:

- Class reps to agree and organise best methods for collection of mid-module feedback:
- Use of the virtual learning environment, Blackboard, or some other social media forum;
- Lecturers could include a mid-term module review into their module schedule and take 15 minutes or so to engage with their students on what's working and what could be improved;
- Use 'post-its' to capture class consensus on what could be improved; 'one thing to keep, one thing to lose, and one thing to propose';
- Administer a short online or paper-based survey seeking only three comments on how the module could be improved; class reps could compile these and discuss at the staff: student liaison meeting and reps update the class by email or social media.

Perceived benefits of a mid-module review:

- Mid-module reviews would encourage student participation and feedback from lecturer(s), thereby increasing confidence in the evaluation process.
- Students would receive the benefits of any changes made to the module, and if told why changes cannot take place there would be a greater sense of 'being heard'.
- Offers the possibility for real dialogue and engagement, reducing the 'complain-comply' culture of quality assurance.
- More responsive to the needs of current students and issues that can be addressed are addressed just-in-time.
- Very useful for highlighting logistical issues such as whether lecturers 'can be heard', appropriateness of the workload, problems with Blackboard, timetables, attendance/missed /cancelled classes.
- Mid-term evaluation provides an early assessment of how students are coping, especially in Fresher years.
- Changes made to modules arising from end-of-module student feedback are not always welcomed by the next class.
- Increase students' confidence and ability to approach the lecturer(s).
- More immediate impact for both students and lecturers.

Perceived weaknesses of mid-module reviews:

- Mid-term module reviews might not be appropriate for all modules.
- Not always possible to make curriculum, staff or space changes to a module in train.
- Limiting as students' view on the curriculum in general would not be complete.
- Contributes to 'survey-fatigue' if added to existing school quality processes.

It would be fair to say, that the students interviewed were overwhelmingly in favour of mid-module evaluation and staff on the whole appreciated the benefits. Many students felt that they received too many end of module evaluations at a time when they were busy preparing assessments or for examinations. However, some schools were not in favour of replacing end-of-module evaluation with mid-module evaluations because they value feedback on the totality of the module. One professional course noted that their accreditation body looks for evidence that module learning outcomes were understood. Many students, however, do not connect learning outcomes with their experience of the module.

The overall perceived value of a mid-term module review was its relevance to the students in the here-and-now and the possibility that it would improve student engagement.

7. Student – Staff liaison committees

Without exception, all of the schools interviewed that didn't currently have a staff:student liaison committee were open to establishing one. While there are different structures in place in different schools to facilitate student input, the model in place in the School of Chemistry won favour with the students, and staff were open to imitating the model in their school. Staff were also open to the idea of a student-led agenda and a student chair; while students on the whole supported the idea of a student-led agenda, they differed in opinion about a student chair. Some students favoured a staff member as chair as they felt the committee would have more weight, while others favoured co-chairing as this allowed students to gain confidence in the role.

Whatever model is put in place for chairing, the experience of the School of Chemistry is that the administration is provided by the school; the agenda set by the students with input from the school; actions from the meetings are agreed and followed through; and attendance is compulsory. School convenors, class reps and the new academic senators should attend the meetings as well as the Director of Undergraduate Teaching and Learning, the course and module coordinators and other relevant staff. There should be a minimum of three meetings a year, agreed in advance by students and school staff.

8. Student involvement in the design of questionnaires and methods of evaluation

There is virtually no student involvement in the design of module evaluation questionnaires. Best practice suggests that questionnaire designs should be piloted before being administered but with the exception of a few modules, there has been no student engagement in the design of the questionnaires used. Many schools were of the opinion that they did not have discretion in the design of the questionnaire.

The suggestion that students be involved in designing the evaluation questions was positively received by all the schools interviewed.

9. Programme Evaluation

The poor response rates and the fragmented nature of module evaluation mean that student evaluation does not necessarily contribute to improving the quality of the programme. Some schools have begun to survey students on a suite of modules at the end of term/year in order to achieve a more complete picture across the year, and to reduce survey fatigue and the administration burden. Some schools are very wedded to module evaluation and make great efforts to achieve a high response rate. However, many feel that programme evaluation, not only by students but also staff, provides a more complete picture of what's working and what can be improved. All of the professional courses are externally accredited, and these courses are evaluated as part of that process, which is normally every five years. Since 2014 College has begun to evaluate programmes (e.g. BESS, Science, Law) and it is expected that all programmes will now be evaluated once every five to seven years.

Module evaluations provide real time inputs and schools and students place a high value on them, while programme/course reviews have more curriculum and market relevance. There is a place for both.

10. Dialogue and engagement

Students felt that their learning experience would be greatly enhanced if the evaluation process supported a culture of dialogue and engagement. The staff:student liaison committee modelled on the School of Chemistry's liaison committees was envied by some students and a model that the majority of students interviewed would like to see in place in their school. Staff interviewed were positively disposed to the idea. Mid-module review was also viewed as a process that could support greater staff and student dialogue and greater student engagement in their learning process. Some students, especially Freshers, felt that they needed more support in negotiating the college structures and it was expressed that students coming from the Irish second level system were not accustomed to engaging in dialogue with their teachers, making it more challenging to engage constructively with university professors. Science (TR071) Freshman students reported feeling isolated as unlike the Sophister years they had no 'home' as such and it was more difficult to engage in the evaluation process.

12 Conclusion

We can confirm that many schools value student module evaluation as an important contribution to improving the teaching and learning culture of a school, and both the staff and students interviewed support its continuation. We can also confirm that the majority of modules taught are evaluated in some form, and those that are not are normally for change in staff or resources.

The staff interviewed want and welcome student feedback and the student reps want a system that supports engagement and students as partners in their learning. While many schools make valiant efforts to create the conditions for open dialogue, a 'complain – comply' culture of quality is evident in others.

A number of proposals, that will need further consideration, have emerged as an outcome of our discussions, namely: the introduction of mid-module evaluations; the establishment of student:staff liaison committees in all schools; and facilitation of a culture of students-as-partners in their learning through greater dialogue and engagement.

It is recommended that:

1. Pilot study with a number of schools and the TR071 Science
 - ✓ Introduction of mid-module evaluations and/or
 - ✓ Establishment of student:staff liaison committees similar to the Chemistry model.
2. Develop a structure to introduce independent facilitators for small class focus-groups on module/course evaluation.

Patricia Callaghan
Academic Secretary

Dale Whelehan
Students' Union Education Officer (2016-17)

June 2017