

Investigating Staff Opinion of the Module Evaluation Process

Two main themes are evident in the literature concerning student feedback on teaching; the validity of the feedback received, and the method of obtaining that feedback. In a recent study on staff perception of student feedback, Cahill et al (2010, p. 289) questioned the validity of the feedback due to “factors such as the survey design, timing, method and context of administration”, while Moore and Kuol (2005, p. 59) present an extensive discussion suggesting that students are not in a position to evaluate teaching methods and that their “perspectives and motivations may give rise to their evaluating lecturers on the basis of their own sense of comfort and satisfaction”. With regards to the mode of collection there are opposing views. Leckey and Neill (2001) suggests that the method of obtaining student feedback is of little importance compared to what is done with that feedback. Darby (2007) however argues a strong case for considering how the method of collecting student feedback, particularly through the use of paper based surveys, impacts upon the responses given. She goes further to state that “overall favourable or unfavourable response patterns on a Likert scale reflect a halo effect rather than student views” (2007, p53).

This initial search helped define the scope of this study to consider the following questions:

1. *What are the main issues surrounding the process of module evaluation and feedback?*
2. *In what ways can the feedback process be improved?*

Methodology

To elicit academics' views about the module evaluation process, focus groups were used so that the participants (undergraduate teaching staff) could share and compare experiences, develop and generate ideas and explore issues of shared importance (Breen, 2006), and to enable a number of different perspectives on a common topic to be obtained in the participants own words (Litoselliti, 2003), whilst allowing colleagues to relate to each other and discuss issues “within the various and overlapping groupings within which they actually operate” (2008, p. 105). The focus group questions were directed via a topic guide to ensure coverage of the key areas in the study, with the additional benefit of permitting a certain level of consistency to be achieved (Krueger and Casey, 2009). In looking for themes in the responses, the extensiveness, intensity and specificity of each theme was examined, with greatest importance placed on comments which were refuted or repeated within the course of the discussion (Breen, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

The main concerns raised within the context of module evaluation centred around whether the process reported on the holistic module experience, the individual module

leader or external factors such as policies or resources; the validity of student opinion, especially around assessment issues where it was felt to have the potential to undermine staff authority; qualifying any quantitative rating system and the variability within the sample of students who provide feedback, mostly as a consequence of when the evaluation was deployed. If the evaluation was left too late in a module, there were concerns over multiple survey fatigue, stress over assessment submission or revision and attendance drop-off or surges. If the evaluation was deployed too early, concerns centred on whether a sufficiently holistic experience had yet to be had to comment fully, especially if there was outstanding assessments to be completed or returned. The method of deploying such evaluations divided opinion, with advocates of paper-based questionnaires citing benefits of higher response rates when undertaken in a classroom setting, whilst those backing online methods countering with arguments of inclusivity and access to a wider array of student opinion. Overall, whilst staff valued the opportunity to receive feedback, there was agreement that as the process focused on areas for development to improve the module experience this was at the expense of encouraging areas of good practice to be discussed, and greater emphasis should be placed on eliciting examples where the experience was positive.

Implications for practice are to provide areas of consideration when implementing or updating a module evaluation process.

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