
Student Feedback Surveys: An Holistic Approach to Maximising Their Value to Staff and Students.

ANNE YOUNG, KEVIN MCCONKEY AND MARK KIRBY

The University of Newcastle, Australia

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Abstract

Student feedback surveys are an important component of the continuous improvement cycle at the University of Newcastle. This article describes a recently adopted holistic approach to collecting, analysing, reporting and acting on student feedback on courses (units of study), programs (collection of courses leading to an award) and the student experience. The approach demonstrates the value to staff and students of an integrated system of reporting, based on clear definitions of purpose, well designed data collection instruments and analysis, and an unambiguous and prompt feedback system to all participants. It is supported by ongoing consultation and conversations about the survey processes, outcomes, and ways of addressing the survey findings.

A focus has been placed on follow-up support to assist academic staff and their supervisors to respond to findings. Reports summarising quantitative and qualitative data have been designed as well as communication guidelines for managers, developed in consultation with academic staff, and through ongoing dialogue with them, resulting in a more transparent and collaborative approach to measuring and improving quality. Survey instruments have been revised following extensive consultation and are now administered online. Reporting back to students has been improved with survey results and actions communicated in a multiplicity of ways.

The development of this approach has seen a rise student engagement with surveys and escalating engagement with student feedback by academic staff. Students and staff are developing stronger links to their university communities as they both participate in and benefit from this more consultative and coordinated approach to collecting and acting on student feedback.

Keywords: surveys, continuous improvement, organisational culture

Data collection is one of the key stages in quality enhancement and this has long been a focus of evaluation systems in the higher education sector. However, the move from data collection to meaningful reports that assist with decision-making and targeted actions for improvement has proved a challenge for many institutions. This may be, in part, due to the perception that continuous improvement is more about accountability and assessment, rather than striving to add value by improving processes and systems (Lomas, 2004). Furthermore, as Houston (2008, p. 62) states, there is often a gap between the ‘rhetoric of quality and the practice of improvement’.

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Correspondence to: Anne Young, Director, Planning, Quality and Reporting, The University of Newcastle, Australia. E-mail: anne.young@newcastle.edu.au

In higher education institutions, with their various subcultural norms and values, attempts to embed processes of critical reflection and actions towards continuous improvement without a holistic approach based on negotiated consensus-building, will often fail (Houston, 2008; Trowler, 2005). Indeed, improvement processes must take into account and reflect this divergence of needs and interests by developing accessible interventions, if an appreciation of quality enhancement principles is to become commonplace and influence practice.

In recognition of this, the University of Newcastle has developed six principles to assist with embedding a culture of continuous improvement: consultation, communication, encouragement, celebration, integration, and innovation. These principles offer all stakeholders the opportunity to discover tangible and accessible activities that extend beyond the rhetoric of quality. This article will begin by outlining the role of data collection in the quality enhancement cycle, with mention of how failure to complete the rest of the cycle can lead to stakeholder backlash and negative outcomes. We will then explain our six principles and illustrate the holistic approach using our Student Feedback on Courses survey. We have made substantial changes to the type of data we collect, and how it is reported and communicated in a collegial and collaborative way to inform decisions and actions that enhance the student and staff experience. The example encapsulates how notions of quality have translated into tangible actions and manifested in improvements in student engagement and increased staff cooperation and collaboration across the university.

Data Collection Within a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Regular monitoring and review of activities are key processes towards the goal of embedding a culture of continuous improvement. The four quadrant quality enhancement cycle (see Figure 1) begins with development of a strategic plan that defines an organisation's vision, purpose and goals. This, in turn, determines the nature of actions and information required, followed by implementation of a monitoring system, analysis and reporting of results, and recommendations for improvements that align with the overarching strategy.

Traditionally, many institutions and businesses focus on the first half of this model, with the development and deployment of a strategy. However, while the literature shows the importance of the latter half of the quality enhancement cycle (see Houston, 2008; Lomas, 2004; Trowler, 2005), there is little evidence in the higher education sector to demonstrate that institutions fully capitalise on the information once collected.

Implicit in improvement is the necessity for change. Hence, motivation for completing the quality enhancement cycle has largely been contingent upon existing subcultural norms and the degree to which these are threatened by change, or indeed, consulted and challenged (Houston, 2008). Consequently, the quality enhancement cycle rarely comes to fruition. Instead, a system of high-level planning, communicating the plan, and collecting data and feedback tends to fragment as results are interpreted and filtered at the local subcultural level that often acts as 'a brake on change' (Houston, 2008, p. 75).

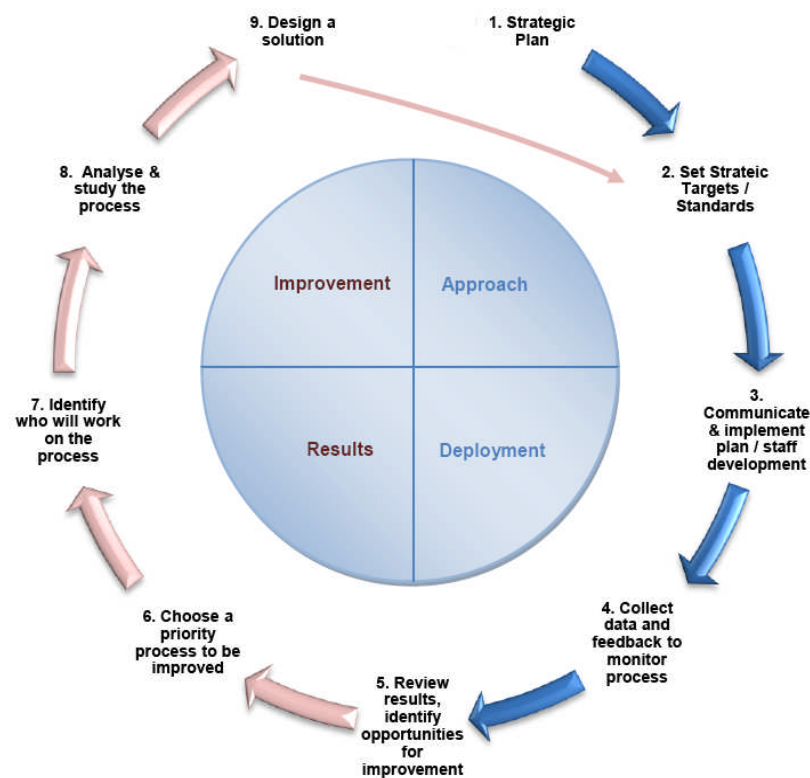


Figure 1

The quality enhancement cycle.

Engagement of Staff and Students With Quality Enhancement

Integral to embedding a culture of continuous improvement in higher education institutions is the establishment of a total organisational focus where the motivation to continually improve processes and outcomes is derived via consensus and becomes normalised and commonplace. In this sense, an institution's culture, or, 'the way we do things around here' (Deal & Kennedy, 1988, cited in Lomas, 2004, p. 159) needs to have quality embedded within underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, intentions, conversations, and processes, rather than coming from decree or focusing on outcomes and/or deficits alone (Houston, 2008; Lomas, 2004).

In isolation, without closure to each evaluative process, data collection can be cumulatively detrimental to the culture of the organisation. When a student perceives that completion of a survey is the end of the process, there is a detrimental effect on sustained response rates, and may result in student disengagement from issues that are topical of the evaluation conducted, reinforcing any existing sense that the university does not care about them. Furthermore, negative feedback on teachers or courses can result in a culture of blame shifting, where disenfranchised staff members feel that change is beyond their scope or responsibility (Anderson, 2006; Moore & Kuol, 2005).

A developed 'local definition' of quality (Carmichael et al., 2001 cited in Houston, 2008) incorporating a consultative and inclusive process of determining the objectives of feedback, and then providing it to key stakeholders in a positive and affirming way, can assist in redressing combative reactions to entrenched subcultural perceptions of the purposes and outcomes of evaluation systems.

The University of Newcastle has recently experienced early success in implementing a culture of continuous improvement that has resulted in a positive shift in perceptions from the academic staff towards quality and hence greater cooperation. Our focus was largely centred on ‘consensus building as a pre-requisite to successful change’ (Houston, 2008).

The University of Newcastle approach

The holistic approach taken at the University of Newcastle includes a strong focus on the phases of communicating results and strategies to develop strategic activities and implement change. We are involved in assisting the teaching staff to develop effective practices for responding to feedback and communicating the responses to students.

At the University of Newcastle we promote a culture of continuous improvement using six guiding principles:

- Consultation—implies recognition of the needs of all stakeholders in the endeavour to achieve organisational goals. It involves coordination, engagement, collaboration, and continually informing and providing feedback about a process (Houston, 2008).
- Communication—focused on the use of positive language, knowledge sharing, closing the feedback loop, and using best practice dissemination methods (Houston, 2008; Johnson, 2003; McCormack, 2005; Morgan, 2008).
- Encouragement—creation of an environment that supports: measured risk-taking, an individual’s ability to change, professional development, reflective practice, peer review, peer support, and mentoring practices (Houston, 2008; Lomas, 2004). It also encompasses targeted recruitment of staff whose values align with the quality culture paradigm.
- Celebration—a focus on highlighting successes, sharing successful stories within communities of practice and providing genuine recognition of these efforts (Lomas, 2004).
- Integration—addressing quantitative bias (see Anderson, 2006) by supplementing statistical trends with qualitative data that identifies perceptions and experiences (Morgan, 2008). Integration also implies a total organisational focus on quality that reaches across faculties, units and services to engender cooperation and collaboration that transcends subcultural needs (Lomas, 2004).
- Innovation—led by students’ identification of strengths and weaknesses through feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups (Lomas, 2004). Likewise, consultation with staff, as well as staff surveys and other forms of input, can further lead innovation.

A culture of continuous improvement will also help engage staff in assessing progress against the key goals of our strategic plan ‘Building Distinction 2011–2015’. The first strategic priority of the strategic plan is promoting and improving a positive student experience and quality teaching and learning. The strategic plan has clear targets and measures for student satisfaction. We will continue to build strongly in this area, improving our capability to transform data into information and then communicate this for appropriate decision-making that meets improvement objectives.

Our revised student feedback on courses process applies the principles of the quality culture system developed at the university and provides a case study that exemplifies the holistic approach taken to ensure coverage of all four quadrants of the quality enhancement model.

Continuous Improvement in Action: A Case Study

A fundamental component of embedding a culture of continuous improvement is to recruit or assign staff to positions of responsibility for developing and implementing the improvement processes. This is also where we began to improve the way that student feedback was collected, analysed, reported and acted on (see Figure 2).

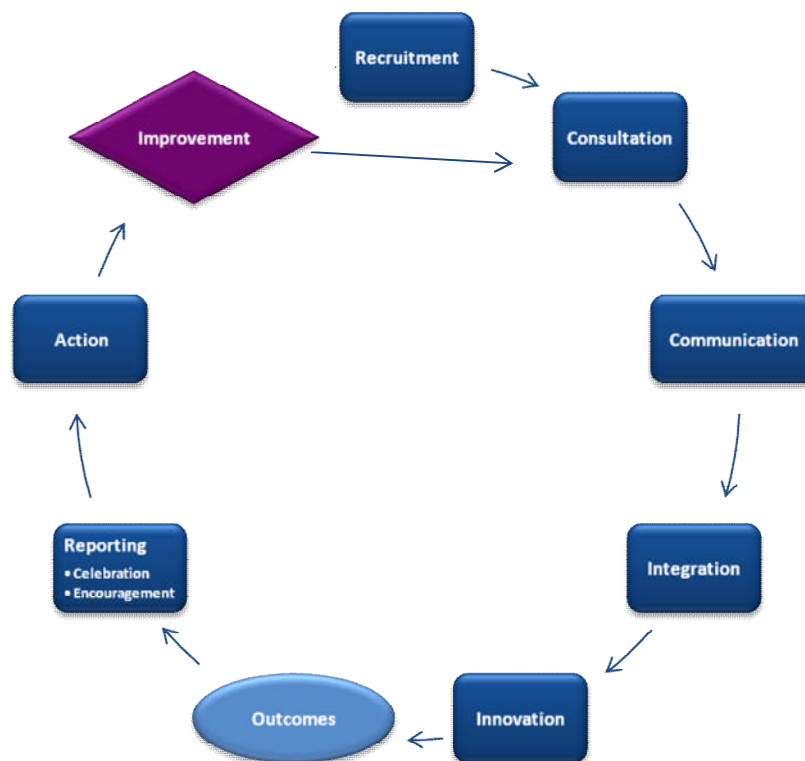


Figure 2

Student feedback on courses continuous improvement cycle.

The university established the Planning, Quality and Reporting (PQR) unit in January 2009. The recruitment strategies of this unit focused on employing staff who had a collegial, consultative style, experience in higher education and an understanding of the cultural challenges faced in that environment. The staff comprised a multidisciplinary team who quickly saw the potential for change and had the interpersonal skills to effectively promote and promulgate a way forward. One of the first moves was to put all student surveys online and to invite students to provide open-ended comments about aspects of their programs and courses that worked well and areas for improvement, in addition to the multiple-choice items that had been in use for several years. A project officer was employed in the team to code all comments and prepare reports at the course and program level for senior management to use in their faculties and schools. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results in a single report for academic staff—summarised to school, faculty and university level with comparative data—is not commonplace in the sector. More than 1500 individual Student Feedback on Courses reports were prepared during 2009 alone, incorporating 55,000 comments that had been coded and summarised according to the broad themes of course design, staff, assessment, support and outcomes.

The PQR unit then assessed the results and drafted reports in consultation with academic staff and students. One of the early outcomes was the realisation that the survey instruments required updating to make the questions more meaningful to the students and the results more useful to staff. A new survey instrument was drafted and revised during ongoing consultation with staff and students, resulting in an instrument that allowed the university to better understand the students' views on important aspects of their courses and assisted teaching staff to know where to make changes to their courses.

The process involved successful cross-unit cooperation and direct interaction between students, academic staff, administrative support staff and senior leadership as well as PQR officers responsible for administering and analysing the survey and preparing reports. In order to develop an evaluative tool that integrated the expectations, needs, and outputs of all stakeholders (teaching staff, students, data analysts and managers), the instrument itself needed to be pilot tested. Course coordinators in courses delivered by four schools across two trimesters volunteered to be involved in the pilot testing phase. Students in these courses were aware that they were being asked to test the new instrument and were encouraged to provide comments on the length, the clarity and ease of completion of the survey. The email invitations to students to complete the survey were also pilot tested with students to ensure the language was upbeat and student friendly.

Our focus during this time was on creating a culture of continuous improvement and ownership of the process, using positive language in our conversations and correspondence that was reflective of that used in the instrument, and providing affirming and encouraging feedback. The draft survey and reporting structure was sent to the Faculty and School Teaching and Learning Committees, Faculty Boards, Academic Senate and Executive Committee for feedback and eventual endorsement.

Student feedback instruments have sometimes been criticised for not reflecting sound survey design and not being rigorously tested for validity and reliability (Anderson, 2006; Barrie & Ginns, 2007). The processes followed by the university adhere to good survey design and development principles. The components of the new Student Feedback on Courses forms have strong face validity and assess: expectations, support, learning activities, teaching, structure, organisation, resources, content, challenge, assessment, criteria, feedback, relevance, satisfaction, overall satisfaction, and a self-evaluation of effort made to succeed in the course. Students are invited to add comments at the end of each question and there are two final open-ended questions asking about best aspects of the course and areas for improvement. Further analysis of validity and reliability is being undertaken.

The innovative approach taken to promote continuous improvement in our student feedback processes identified not only the need for a new instrument but also the need for delivery in a new medium. In consultation with staff from IT Services, a comprehensive software review was conducted in tandem with the instrument's design. The aim was to implement a system that would support the depth, breadth and complexity of the new instrument and enable meaningful analysis and reporting, as well providing a seamless, user-friendly experience for students.

Several software systems for delivering online surveys were investigated and assessed. The objectives of the project were to:

- capture a more representative sample of students by administering surveys online
- reduce the amount of manual handling and scanning required for paper surveys

- provide a confidential way for students to provide open-ended comments
- enable students to use their usual login to access surveys
- provide a single portal for each student to access their surveys
- reduce the turnaround time for providing survey results to staff and students
- ensure the survey software system was compatible with our current IT systems and knowledge base.

The system called Blue from eXplorance™ (Canada) satisfied our selection criteria and has been implemented and tested in trimester 2 for roll out across all courses from semester 2 2010.

Developing and encouraging a culture of continuous improvement requires willingness to think beyond the present and the way things have always been done, while building on the best aspects of organisational knowledge and wisdom of the past. The design and selection of both the survey instrument and the software to deliver it were the product of creatively addressing local needs as reported by students and staff and using sound research and business practices. The ongoing consultation between PQR and academic staff to monitor actions and progress is a critical element of the approach.

From Data to Information to Improvement

Senior management require reports that assist with decision-making at a strategic level. In consultation with the senior leadership group, the PQR unit designed several university-wide reports showing results across all faculties and schools, areas of excellent practice and areas requiring focused support. Several additional pieces of information, such as class size, attrition and grade point average have been incorporated into the reports so that decisions can be made about where best to focus resources to achieve maximum gain in improving teaching and learning quality and the student experience. Once again, the language of these reports is reflective of a quality culture that supports and encourages improvement.

Increasing the awareness of quality enhancement among staff and students, particularly regarding the quality of teaching and learning, not only invests measurability in achieving improvement but also adds recognition and support in less quantifiable but equally important ways, and ‘in higher education, [it] places student learning “at the heart of quality”’ (Carmichael et al., 2001 in Houston, 2008, p. 69.).

Communication guidelines have been developed to assist heads of school to act on the survey findings and communicate findings and resultant actions to their staff and students. For example, heads of school are encouraged to prepare summaries identifying recurring themes across the school or discipline, to encourage faculty-wide discussion and collaboration and, where appropriate, to enable an integrated and holistic approach to addressing issues and sharing exemplary practices. Where there are sensitive issues that need addressing, the guidelines suggest that heads of school organise a discrete conversation with the appropriate staff first, before any course-specific comments are distributed. This will enable the talking through of issues, in a calm and safe manner, and facilitate assessment of their validity or otherwise. Students can be informed of survey results in a multiplicity of ways through the web, Blackboard®, email, posters, in course outlines and by sending summaries of actions to student representatives to give them the opportunity to feedback to the student groups and associations.

Of further import, a culture of inclusive and holistic reporting of results has been undertaken using positive language that celebrates success and contextualises criticism in a constructive framework. This obviates any need for blame, but rather creates a supportive base for change. Using templates designed by the PQR unit for reporting on actions, dialogue has started with academic teaching staff, course coordinators and heads of schools about identifying areas for positive action. These tools reinforce the concept of supported change rather than the negatively framed ‘areas of deficit for redress’.

Through faculty teaching and learning committees, the courses with overall satisfaction scores in the lowest 20% and the programs with scores in the lowest quartile have been selected for attention. Course coordinators and program convenors are working with PQR staff to identify why the courses and programs scored less well (informed by the qualitative data) and what actions can reasonably be taken to have the best impact on improving the student learning experience. Reports on actions and outcomes are prepared for the Teaching and Learning Committee and reports are available at a university level to allow sharing of good practice.

Student feedback reporting at program and course level facilitates conversations that are relevant at the local level and encourages the culture shift. When feedback on teaching is incorporated as a tool for reflective practice and targeted professional development, rather than as a ‘witch-hunt’, a culture of continuous improvement is more likely to develop. The new data collection, reporting and dissemination process not only allows, but requires celebration of those courses that have rated highly, and the noting of the positive aspects most commented on by students. It is for the benefit of all to celebrate the successes and adopt good models across discipline boundaries.

The holistic approach includes an ongoing schedule of face-to-face meetings between PQR and academic teaching staff and heads of schools. These conversations celebrate the great work achieved and provide an environment that is encouraging and affirming and narrows the perceived gap between academic and administrative areas of the university.

Currently, the suite of evaluative processes at the university includes surveys, focus groups and student forums. These processes seek students’ experiences at program and course level, including their perceptions of the quality of teaching, the range of services available to them and how accessible and useful the services are. Our quality enhancement initiatives have included a comprehensive revision of our policies and procedures for our external review of programs and our annual reporting on programs. More meaningful and actionable results from these revised quality enhancement processes have led to collaborative workshops, such as the Student Experience Workshop, where senior academic and support staff from areas across the university discussed issues, proposed solutions and developed action plans with measurable outcomes and targets.

Conclusion

The University of Newcastle’s growing awareness and implementation of a culture of continuous improvement is exemplified in the redesign of our student feedback on courses procedure. Through a process of consultation, communication, encouragement, celebration, integration and innovation we have been able to complete the quality enhancement cycle and achieve improvements. Along the way we have strengthened relationships, cross-institutional collaboration and communication, and ultimately embedded notions of quality into underlying assumptions, values, beliefs, conversations and actions. Our principles recognise

and address subcultural needs and interests while also bridging the divide between quality rhetoric and quality implementation. Overall, our approach has seen improvement in processes and practices, which has ultimately led to increasing student engagement with the student feedback process. Students report that they now believe that someone is actually listening to them and acting on their feedback. Senior managers now have the tools and information they need to lead change.

The development of this approach has seen an increase in the coverage and response to internal, national and international surveys and escalating engagement in the value of the feedback process by academic staff. Students and staff are developing stronger links to their university communities as they both participate in and benefit from this more consultative and coordinated approach to collecting and acting on student feedback.

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