Feedback processes in higher education and the development of the National Student Survey

What is the background to the research?

In 2000, HEFCE agreed that the sector would publish key data to enable prospective students to make more informed judgements on where to study. Because of concerns about the adequacy of existing data, HEFCE commissioned the project Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE. This was carried out by a joint project team consisting of members of academic staff from The Open University, staff from SQW Limited and members of the NOP (National Opinion Polls) Research Group.

Working collaboratively across the different areas of the project, the team aimed to:

- identify good practice in obtaining quantitative and qualitative student feedback
- make recommendations to institutions concerning the design and implementation of feedback mechanisms
- make recommendations on the design and implementation of a national survey of recent graduates, the results of which would be published to assist future applicants to higher education.

A number of outputs resulted from this work, including a literature review on ways of obtaining student feedback (Richardson, 2005). This concluded that student feedback provides important evidence for assessing quality, and it can be used to support attempts to improve quality. However it identified concerns with the interpretation and variable response to feedback. Empirical work followed, including the analysis of documentary evidence from all HEIs in England, and visits to a sample of 20 institutions where discussions were held with staff and current students. The report documented the range of mechanisms in place within the sector to collect student feedback. Whilst there was variation in approach it identified considerable commonality to the topics covered. However, in many institutions analysis of the feedback data was quite limited. There were opportunities for greater comparative analysis to be undertaken within institutions and for students to be informed of the outcomes. The project’s main finding showed that it would be feasible to introduce a uniform national survey to obtain feedback on teaching and learning from all recent graduates about their programmes of study (Brennan et al., 2003).

HEFCE then commissioned a pilot study to explore the implementation and value of such a survey. This was carried out during 2003 by Open University researchers. The results suggested that it was possible to design a short, robust instrument that would measure different aspects of the quality of the student experience. However, the timing of this survey was thought not to be optimal because the results would only inform students seeking to enter university two years later. HEFCE resolved to
address this and other issues by exploring the idea of a national survey of final year undergraduate students. The same Open University team was commissioned to undertake another pilot study early in 2004 to investigate the feasibility of such a survey. The results confirmed its feasibility, and HEFCE resolved to proceed with a full NSS early in 2005 and annually thereafter (Richardson et al., 2007).

Later work by Locke et al. (2008), at The Open University, carried out in collaboration with staff from Hobsons plc, examined the composition and impact of five national and international league tables on HEIs in England. Whilst they conclude that the league tables do not provide a full picture of the sector they do influence institutions’ actions and policy making. The research demonstrated that league tables which incorporate the NSS data in their ranking methodologies had a major impact on institutions' strategic planning, and there is widespread evidence of institutional actions and initiatives arising from NSS results.

Ashby et al. (2011), also at The Open University, extended the earlier work by examining anomalous patterns of responses that affected NSS ratings obtained from distance-learning students. It identified problems in the ways in which these students had responded to questions that related to learning activities that were not relevant to their programmes. They suggest that distance-learning institutions need to advise their students about the importance of only rating items they have actually experienced or to negotiate changes to the questionnaires themselves if they are to ensure that their activities and achievements are properly represented in national student feedback surveys.

What were the impacts?

The National Student Survey that emerged from this work now encompasses final year students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland funded by HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. Most Scottish universities have opted to join the NSS, as has the private University of Buckingham. In total 287,000 students responded to the 2012 survey, an increase of 20,000 on the previous year.

A report for HEFCE by Ramsden et al. (2010) indicates: ‘The NSS forms part of the national Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for higher education … Although the NSS was originally conceived primarily as a way of helping potential students make informed choices, the significance of the data it collects means that it has become an important element in quality assurance (QA) processes and in institutional quality enhancement (QE) activities related to the student learning experience … We found striking the emphasis that institutional managers placed on the way the NSS findings allowed them to identify potential problems in the student experience, and to act on them quickly’ (p. 3).
The National Union of Students reports that the NSS has encouraged institutions to take student opinion more seriously and has campaigned to encourage institutions to improve their ratings in the area of assessment and feedback. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) supports institutions in using NSS results to enhance the quality of the student experience, see http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/nss. A recent report for the HEA by Buckley (2012) described the pivotal role of NSS data in institutional quality enhancement and its impact on staff and students. New HEA-funded research (2013) by Pegg at The Open University is examining cases of cross-institutional curriculum change and has identified NSS results as one of the key drivers for change.

Who was involved?

Key researchers at The Open University who were involved include: John Brennan, William Locke, John Richardson, John Slater, and Ruth Williams.

References


