Getting student satisfaction

Lee Harvey

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In the wake of the announcement by Ron Cooke's committee on information requirements for quality assurance in higher education, student satisfaction feedback has, at long last, become a serious element of the quality process in higher education. "Feedback" in this sense refers to the expressed opinions of students about the service they receive as students. This may include perceptions about the learning and teaching, course organisation, learning support and environment.

The deliberations of the committee drew on my report, which presented examples of current practice and argued that satisfaction surveys could be used for both internal improvement and external information. What is required is a professional approach and the bravery to accept the public validity of one's own students perceptions of their learning experience.

Information
What do student satisfaction surveys reveal that other forms of quality monitoring do not? The answer is, of course, an insider view from those at the sharp end of higher education. Until now the student view has been given only nominal exposure and minimal credence in current evaluations. Of course, the view of students is not the only perspective and there may be areas where a student perspective is limited. However, the student perspective has three great advantages. First, it is the view of the learner not the teacher, manager or external reviewer, but the person participating in the learning process. Second, it is direct and, if presented correctly, cuts through the convoluted verbiage that characterises other external reporting. Third, satisfaction surveys can provide richer information by providing ratings on a range of items relevant to prospective students rather than just composite scores on macro-dimensions.

Learning
However, it is important that the information provided by student surveys should be about student learning and the resources that support it. Satisfaction surveys should not be about scoring teacher performance. Information needs to be about how courses are organised, what knowledge students learn, what abilities they develop, how well they are prepared as lifelong learners and what the learning support infrastructure is like. Based on 15 years' experience of satisfaction surveys in the UK and abroad, it is clear that there are a set of generic questions that recur in diverse settings that form the core questions for such a survey. These can provide the basis for comparison (Diagram of a questionnaire).

Accessible data
Satisfaction surveys can provide the basis for comparisons between programmes of

study and for longitudinal benchmarking over time. It is important, though, to ensure the reporting of results is easy to understand and interpret for comparative purposes at programme and university level. Rather than tables densely packed with statistics, data should be converted to a simple grading from A to E that makes it easy for readers to identify areas of excellence and areas for improvement. Not only could results be on institutional websites but it would also be a simple matter to compile reports that compare similar programmes across the sector.

Improvement
Student data is not just about information. Indeed, public information is a spin-off from a much more important process of improvement. Although some collection of student views has been cosmetic, where student views have been collected professionally and consistently they have invariably been linked to a process of continuous quality improvement. Furthermore, in this context, student feedback plays a very important role in the improvement process. However, effective improvement requires integrating student views into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback. It is essential to ensure the closing of the action and feedback loop. This requires professional data collection and clear reports that identify areas for action, delegating responsibility for action, encouraging ownership of plans of action and ensuring feedback to generators of the data.

Establishing this is not an easy task, which is why so much data on student views is not used to effect change, irrespective of the good intentions of those who initiate the enquiries. At UCE, there is a clear process that has developed over the year that involves the vice-chancellor and senior managers in a top-down strategic approach paralleled by a bottom-up module-level feedback that coalesce in the programme-level planning process. Reporting is to the level that effective action can be implemented. For example, programme organisation is reported to the level of programmes, computing facilities to the level of faculties, learning resources to the level of libraries.

Student surveys have a dual function. The core items provide information for external comparative purposes and strategic information for internal improvement purposes. But each institution has its own unique improvement needs and so it is important that apart from the core items, universities should tailor the satisfaction surveys to fit the improvement needs of the institution, but only if they have the infrastructure in place to ensure effective use of the data. Making use of student inputs helps ensure additional items are locally relevant.

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