UQAIB

Good Practice Guide

Student feedback

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What is the purpose of this guide?

This guide is intended to inform institutions about the ways in which Student Feedback could be developed in the Dubai context. The guide does not expand the scope of the UQAIB requirements and addresses an issue already contained in the *UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual*. It is not prescriptive and provides exemplar options to suit different circumstances that can be adapted by each institution to meet their individual requirements.

Introduction

Any initial or renewal application to the KHDA requires submitting 'Details of the institutional transnational quality assurance system and processes' (*Appendix C, UQAIB Quality Assurance Manual*).

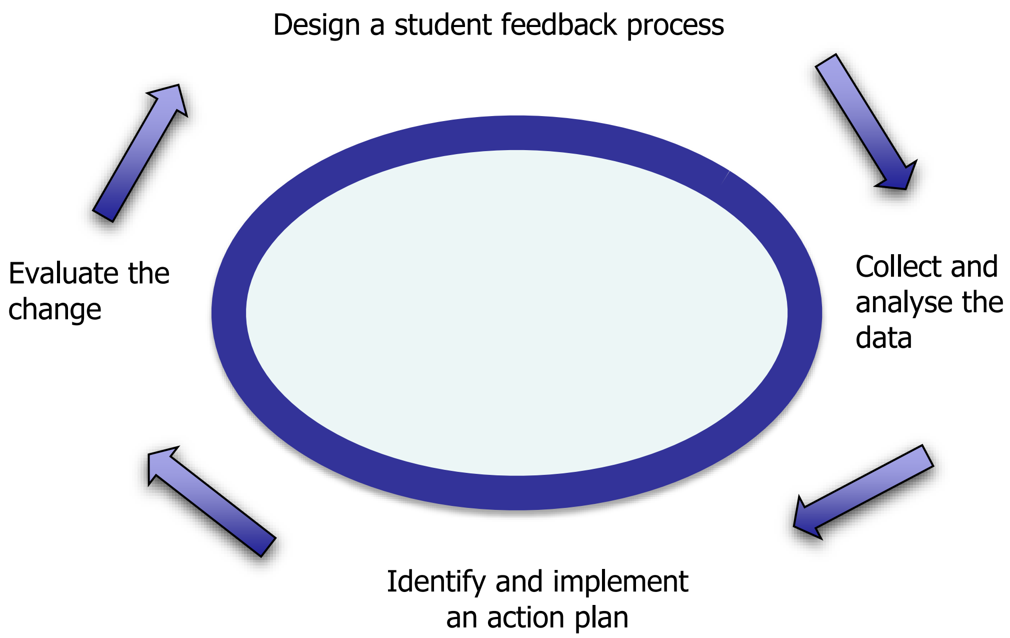
It is expected that student feedback will constitute one important set of data that will be collected and analysed and acted upon by the Dubai Branch as part of the quality assurance process.

Student feedback would normally:

- identify the issues pertinent to students from formal and informal feedback, complaints and focus groups;
- collect data to explore the nature of the concerns or issues;
- analyse the data to examine the scope and nature of the issues;
- identify what needs to be done: where, how, by whom, by when;
- make appropriate changes at different levels (from classroom procedures through to structural issues at the institutional level): this requires considering different time scales from immediate to annual planning cycle;
- evaluate the changes (go back to the start of the cycle).

This cycle is represented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: The feedback cycle



Student feedback is usually collected through both formal mechanisms (for example, a written questionnaire, student participation on committees) and informal means.

One of the challenges to both structured and unstructured feedback is the impact of cultural and societal norms. Institutions are expected to ensure that their student feedback processes are understood by the students and are appropriate for the students and the institution. This means that institutions formulate their own coherent approach to student feedback, which is clearly understood and accepted by students, academic staff and their managers. Above all, the processes for collecting feedback from students are expected to be robust, defensible and useful.

This document provides principles to guide this process and examples to illustrate the variety of ways that these different approaches are used.

Principles for student questionnaires

Student questionnaires have become a popular tools to collect student feedback. They vary enormously from the rather ineffective satisfaction questionnaires that purport to measure teacher performance at the end of a class, [1] through module surveys of student learning, and the most useful—the exit surveys of the students' whole experience when they graduate.

All these surveys have become an unavoidable part of the institutions' quality assurance system and require careful design. The most important element is what is done with the results (see Figure 1). The following are standard questionnaire design principles.

1. Before even starting to design a questionnaire, it is important to identify its purposes. Is the focus on the individual module (individual unit of study) or course (composite of units that constitute the degree award) and if so what is the questionnaire trying to find out? Or, for example, is it about the student's (learning) experience as a whole? Is it focused on the programme or the institution; on the teaching, the resources, the learning or the total package? The purpose will be the primary factor in determining the nature and frequency of the questionnaire. Student and staff input into the questionnaire design will be important in establishing the aim and purpose and thus content.
2. The frequency of the questionnaire should be thought through: a single questionnaire that is used too frequently for all classes every term will bore students and probably result in a very low response rate. Thus, taking an institution-wide approach ensures that students are not over-surveyed. This may mean that not every module is surveyed in every semester it is delivered.
3. As in any survey, questions should be meaningful to the students, unbiased and unambiguous. Staff should feel that the questions are fair and useful. Therefore, student and staff input during the design phase is important.
4. The questionnaire should be piloted before it is rolled out.

Apart from standard design issues, the institution might also consider the following important principles and issues.

5. A focus on learning, rather than just teacher performance, will encourage students to think about their engagement in the learning process.
6. While a standard questionnaire is often used across an institution, it is important to have a flexible instrument, adapted to the different disciplines. One way of achieving this goal

[1] Research has shown that the satisfaction questionnaires about a teacher's performance are limited in their ability to control such factors as class size and type (large classes or theory courses usually receive low ratings).

is to give the different disciplines the opportunity to add or adapt some of the questions to specific teaching practices (for example, clinical training *versus* mathematics education).

7. Online questionnaires are convenient to score but may result in a lower return rate than the paper version. Appropriate solutions to ensure a meaningful response rate are important. This usually requires communicating about the confidentiality of the process and finding a way for students to easily access the online questionnaire at an opportune time.
8. Measurement is important but so is the use of results:
   - ✓ One of the critical parts of feedback to students is to explain that their contributions through surveys and other means are designed to improve student learning and their success. Therefore, a useful technique is to inform students about how the data is used for enhancement, to motivate them to provide meaningful feedback.
   - ✓ Without equating student feedback with remedial activities for staff, it is a good idea to develop training and advisory services to teachers who are interested in improving their teaching skills. An academic development structure such as a "Leaning and Teaching Unit" would offer workshops and individualised training to interested teachers, as well as a library of relevant material and equipment. It could also provide a tutoring service for students (group and individual sessions) to help students improve their study-skills, time management, computer skills and discipline-based skills. The combination of these two functions within a single unit would serve to ensure synergy and cross-learning.
   - ✓ The quality assurance officers and senior office holders would normally look at emerging themes and identify what needs to be done, how, by whom, and when. This would be appropriate to the level and scope of the issue: ranging from action by individual teachers and heads of departments through to major decisions at institutional board level. It is expected that the most serious problems and how they have been addressed should be reported to the Head of the HEP Branch and HEP Home.

Examples of questionnaire format and use

The following examples illustrate ways in which questionnaires are developed and used in four institutions.

1. One institution developed an electronic system that requires teachers to give feedback to the students. The questionnaire has three university-level questions. A faculty or a

department may add some questions, which are the same for all feedback collected by that faculty or department. Teachers can then add their own questions. The university has limited the questionnaire to 12 questions. The results are collected and analysed by the teacher who must respond to the students with feedback, and explain what s/he will do to change or why s/he does not think that a student's recommendation is worth pursuing.

2. In another institution, teachers can choose which questions to ask from a bank of 25 questions. They are encouraged not to ask more than five to ten questions and to vary their questions in order to keep students interested. They are also encouraged to use the results of the questionnaire to make immediate changes, if needed. The questionnaires, the results and follow-up are posted online. The open comments, which sometimes deal with personal issues regarding a teacher, are not public. The students are asked how much time they have spent working on a specific course as opposed to other courses. This allows the administration to judge if the course workload is adequate in relation to the credit units assigned.

3. In a third institution, each teacher gets the relevant results of the student questionnaires and summarises the main strengths and the weaknesses that he/she plans to address. This is posted online. Every new semester, the teachers use the results of the questionnaires from the previous cohort and inform the current cohort of the changes they brought to the course in response to the students' evaluations.

4. Another institution used student focus groups to identify all issues pertinent to students across the institution, ranging from teaching and learning, through information technology and library resources, to perceptions of learning spaces, social and sports provision and availability of accommodation and quality of food. The questionnaire, based on the focus group responses, was analysed and the results communicated to managers who were expected to identify appropriate actions to improve the situation and communicate the changes to the student body in various ways.

Informal mid-term questionnaires

In addition to the formal questionnaires, it is useful to encourage academic staff to conduct their own evaluation during the term in order to re-orient their teaching if necessary. This is usually done a few weeks within the term. An instructor would, for example, stop class a few minutes early and asks students to respond anonymously and in writing to questions such as:

- What was the most important thing you learned during this class?
- What important question remains unanswered?
- What classroom activities or assignments have been most/least effective in helping you learn this term, and why?

Each teacher would normally be able to develop the mid-term questionnaire to suit their needs and the needs of the students. The results need not be communicated to the administration. In some cases the mid-term feedback may be a discussion with the teacher rather than a questionnaire, depending on such factors as the size of the class, the level and nature of the module and the purpose of the feedback process. It is important, however, to stress students' anonymity and safety. They should be safe from recriminations, either personally or as a class. Students must be advised about their responsibility to take the surveys seriously, and the rewards for doing so (a better learning experience).

Oral and informal feedback

Informal discussions with students can be an effective way to elicit feedback from them. These can be organised in a variety of ways as the following examples illustrate:

1. The deans and vice deans would meet regularly with student representatives.
2. A faculty could organise three feedback meetings a year to which all academic and administrative staff are invited. The meetings would be focused on a specific theme but allow the student representatives to extend the agenda by voicing any student concerns.
3. Teachers should have office hours and consult students informally. Fly-in teachers should be encouraged to establish email contact with their students.
4. An external teacher could meet with a group of students, at the end of a module or the beginning of a semester, to discuss what they liked and did not like and their recommendations. The actual teacher would not be present during these conversations but would get a summary of the discussion.
5. Many institutions are establishing education-specific social media, allowing them to communicate informally with students, while respecting the privacy of students' use of other social technologies.

Student participation in committees

The questionnaires would normally be part of a package of instruments for evaluating teaching and learning: a package that would include analyses of written instructional materials (for example, course descriptions that include learning targets, reading material, description of activities, assignments and examinations). These are usually examined in curricular committees that could include academic staff, students and external stakeholders (for example, employers).

In addition, students would normally be part of the self-study groups when the institution undertakes an external evaluation or accreditation or in any internally-organised quality review that is focused on aspects related to learning and teaching.

Additional resources

Sursock, A., 2011, *Examining Quality Culture II: Processes and Tools; Participation, Ownership and Bureaucracy*, Brussels: European University Association, **http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications/eua_eqc_ii_web.pdf?sfvrsn=2**

Vettori, O, 2012, *Examining Quality Culture Part III: From Self-Reflection to Enhancement*, Brussels: European University Association,
http://www.eua.be/Libraries/publications-homepage-list/Examining_Quality_Culture_EQC_Part_III.pdf?sfvrsn=2

Macquarie University, 2015, *Student Evaluation and Feedback* describe different ways that student feedback is gathered at the institution. Available at

http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/evaluation/evaluation_methods/student_feedback/
Macquarie University, 2015, Student Evaluation and Feedback describes different (accessed 4 November 2015)