STUDENT FEEDBACK

A report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England

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In the 1980s, feedback from students about their experience in higher education was a rarity. With the expansion of the university sector, the concerns with quality and the growing 'consumerism' of higher education there has been a significant growth of, and sophistication in, process designed to collect views from students.

Most higher education institutions, around the world, collect some type of feedback *from* students about their experience of 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, the learning support facilities (such as, libraries, computing facilities), the learning environment, (lecture rooms, laboratories, social space and university buildings), support facilities (refectories, student accommodation, health facilities, student services) and external aspects of being a student (such as finance, transport infrastructure).

Student views are usually collected in form of 'satisfaction' feedback. Sometimes there are specific attempts to obtain student views on how to improve specific aspects of provision or on their views about potential or intended future developments but this is less usual.

Ironically, although feedback from students is assiduously collected in many institutions, it is less clear that it is used to its full potential. Feedback from students has two main functions:

- **internal information to guide improvement;**
- **external information for potential students and other stakeholders.**

Improvement

It is not always clear how views collected from students fit into institutional quality improvement policies and processes. To be effective in quality improvement, data collected from surveys and peer reviews must be transformed into information that can be used within an institution to effect change.

To make an effective contribution to internal improvement processes, views of students need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback (Figure1).

In many cases it is not always clear that there is a means to close the loop between data collection and effective action, let alone feedback to students on action taken.

For this to happen, requires that the institution has in place a system for:

- identifying and delegating responsibility for action;
- encouraging ownership of plans of action;
- accountability for action taken or not taken;
- feedback to generators of the data;
- committing appropriate resources.

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.

It is more important to ensure an appropriate action cycle than it is to have in place mechanisms for collecting data. At UCE, for example, there is a clear mechanism for dealing with and acting on the data (see Appendix 1). At Edinburgh University, for example, the focus is on reporting action taken in response to the feedback obtained. There is no fixed approach, rather there is encouragement for the collection of feedback using a variety of sources and methods, as seems appropriate at the course, department or school level. This is backed up by procedures such as faculty-based audits of annual course monitoring returns.

External information

In an era where there is an enormous choice available to potential students the views of current students offer a useful information resource. Yet very few institutions make the outcomes of student feedback available externally. UCE, for example, is unusual in publishing their institution-wide student feedback survey (which reports to the level of faculty and major programmes). It is available on a public web site and is published as a hard-copy document with an ISBN number, which has been the case since its inception in the late 1980s.

Institutions abroad, that have implemented the UCE Student Satisfaction approach, including Auckland University of Technology and Lund University have published the results. However, the norm in Britain is to consider that student views are confidential to the University.

If the data is to be useful as an information resource, it is important that it is seen to be collected professionally and impartially, preferably by a unit outside the faculty structure.

Types

The predominant ‘satisfaction’ survey takes five forms:

- institution-level satisfaction with the total student experience or a specified sub-set;
- faculty-level satisfaction with provision;

- programme-level satisfaction with the learning and teaching and related aspects of a particular programme of study (for example, BA Business Studies)[1];
- module-level feedback on the operation of a specific module or unit of study (for example, Introduction to Statistics)
- teacher-appraisal by students.

Institution-level satisfaction

Systematic, institution-wide student feedback about the quality of their total educational experience is an area of growing activity in UK higher education institutions. It is also a growing concern in other countries around the world.

Institution-level satisfaction surveys are almost always based on questionnaires, which mainly consist of questions with pre-coded answers augmented by one or two open questions. In the main, these institution-wide surveys are undertaken by a dedicated unit with expertise in undertaking surveys producing results to schedule.

Institution-wide surveys tend to encompass most of the services provided by the university and are not to be confused with standardised institutional forms seeking feedback at the programme or module level (discussed below). In the main, institution-wide surveys seek to collect data that provide:

- management information designed to encourage action for improvement;
- a descriptive overview of student opinion, which can be reported as part of appropriate accountability procedures.

The derivation of questions used in institution-wide surveys varies. The UCE approach uses student-determined questions, usually via focus groups. In other institutions, management or committees decide on the questions. Sometimes, institutions use or adapt questionnaires developed at other institutions.

The way the results are used also varies. In some cases there is a clear reporting and action mechanism. In others, it is unclear how the data helps inform decisions. In some cases the process has the direct involvement of the senior management, while in other universities action is realised through the committee structure.

Feedback to students of outcomes of surveys is recognised as an important element but is not always carried out effectively, nor always produces the awareness intended. Some institutions utilise current lines of communication between tutors and students or through the student unions and student representatives. All of these forms depend upon the

[1] In some institutions programmes of study are referred to as ‘courses’ or ‘pathways’. However, ‘course’ is a term used in some institutions to mean ‘module’ or ‘unit’ of study, that is, a sub-element of a programme of study. Due to the ambiguity of ‘course’, the terms ‘programme of study’ and ‘module’ will be used in this paper.

effectiveness of these lines of communication. Other forms of feedback used include: articles in university magazines, posters and producing summaries aimed at students.

There are many variants as the following brief review of a small sample illustrate.

Examples

The satisfaction approach developed at UCE is the market leader and has been adopted by many institutions in the UK and abroad. As implemented at UCE it provides a basis for internal improvement in a top-down/bottom-up process that involves the vice-chancellor and deans and directors of services. There is a well-developed analysis, reporting, action and feedback cycle. The results of the student feedback questionnaire are reported to the level of faculty and programme. The report is written in an easily accessible style, combing satisfaction and importance ratings, that clearly shows areas of excellence and areas for improvement. The report is published (with ISBN number) and is available in hard copy and on a public website. The action that follows the survey is reported back to the students through an annual publication. (See Appendix 1 for details.)

Institutions that have used the UCE model include Sheffield Hallam University, Glamorgan University, Cardiff Institute of Higher Education, Buckingham College of Higher Education, University of Greenwich as well as overseas institutions such as Auckland University of Technology (New Zealand), Lund University (Sweden), City University (Hong Kong) and Jagiellonian University (Poland). All of these institutions have a similar approach, collecting student views to input into management decision making. Where they vary, to date, is in the degree to which they make the findings public and produce reports for students outlining actions that have resulted from the survey.

At the University of Greenwich, the institution-wide survey is a census of students on half the campuses each year. The 16-page questionnaire covers all aspects of the student experience and is based on items determined by students**.** The printed report and executive summary (which commend excellence and details the areas for improvement) go through the committee structure; the learning and quality office is responsible for liasing with heads of department and schools to produce an action report and then an end-of-year implementation report, which is also circulated to committees. All results, action reports and implementation reports are available on the website to all staff and to all students and a mid-year newsletter is produced. Staff and students are kept informed of action via e-mails and via articles in the student newspaper and staff magazine. There are many outcomes as a result of the survey. The schools and campus management groups have increasingly taken these results seriously. For instance, between 1998 and 2000, the School of Education made lots of changes, which resulted in considerable improvement in the four unsatisfactory ratings for teaching and learning. These changes were noted by the external reviewers.

Southampton Institute has had an annual questionnaire since 1993, which endeavoured to capture the ‘total’ student experience. This has evolved over the years to include wider issues and, in the last two years, has addressed the question of importance. The Institute currently has two main student experience surveys, one for undergraduate students and another for postgraduates. They are annual and the questionnaire items are selected by an Institute working group whose members are drawn from across the institution. The survey is reported at faculty and programme-level and the individual results are sent to course leaders. Faculty summaries are sent to the deans for their response and then the Institute-level summary response is sent to the senior management group for theirs. A full report is then published with summary extracts in the Student Union's newsletter. Many outcomes that can be linked to the survey such as more IT resources, improved catering facilities and streamlined enrolment processes. The annual course monitoring exercise and trend analysis contained in the annual reports ensures that action followed the surveys. Each course leader must include the feedback from the survey in their annual course report. Action that ensues is reported back to students via the Student Union's newsletter and the student representatives.

UEL had a annual institution-wide student feedback questionnaire during the1990s and after a break will reintroduce it. The five-page questionnaire had many standard questions that repeated from year to year about the overall quality of student experience of the 'would you recommend UEL to a friend?' type. Each year specific issues were identified for inclusion on the questionnaire. These could arise from discussions at Quality Assurance & Enhancement Committee (QAEC), or at its Services Quality Sub-Committee (SQSC). The overall process was overseen by the UEL Quality Assurance Department. The analysed responses from the questionnaire were widely circulated within the University to inform the Annual Quality Improvement/Annual Monitoring process in academic schools and central service departments. It also went to QAEC and issues raised requiring an institutional response were incorporate into QAEC's annual report to Academic Board. This typically results in a reference to a senior postholder, or head of department with a requirement for a response on actions taken or to be taken to come back to Academic Board. The summary analysis from the questionnaire also went to the Student/Staff consultative committee as did responses from senior management.

In 1996, the University of Portsmouth first produced a student satisfaction survey, which covered most aspects of the student experience, and reported it to the level of faculty. However, reporting was in the form statistical tables that did not make it easy to identify where action may be required for improvement. The report was regarded as a 'significant input to quality improvement' and the intention was that' action for improvement follows from discussions'.

The University of Nottingham, four-page, 'Omnibus Survey' has, since 1994, been used to survey all student cohorts on their experiences as a student, measuring their satisfaction with the range of services offered. Although relating to many services, the survey is dominated by questions relating to choice of Nottingham as an institution at which to study, its reputation, the induction process and the general facilities, including accommodation and computing. There is nothing about the learning and teaching situation or course organisation, which are consigned to module and optional course surveys. Each student cohort is surveyed biennially. The items on the questionnaire have evolved since 1994 through a consultation process with the Students' Union, the academic secretary's department, the registrar and the pro-vice-chancellor for student affairs. There are fixed questions that are retained for longitudinal analysis and these are important. However, some space on the questionnaires is used for focusing on different subjects as appropriate. Reports are produced and distributed to staff and managers. The results are also put on the web site. The reports are broken up into service provisions and service providers are asked to respond to the findings. If they are negative they are expected to outline the problem and strategies for tackling the issue. There have been outcomes that could be linked to the omnibus survey results, for example, the abolition of single sex halls and changes in residential hall meal times. The survey office does not always know what changes are made as a result of the omnibus but do know the findings are taken very seriously and changes do occur as a result.

The University of Limerick undertook an institution-wide survey in 2000, including satisfaction with course organisation, teaching, learning resources and self-development. The final report was only at the institution level although the research objectives were to evaluate by department and course as well.

A number of universities have undertaken institution-wide surveys, often on a census basis, exploring a limited number of areas of student opinion. These are often only reported internally and are not explicitly tied to a process of feedback and action. The surveys undertaken at Liverpool John Moores and Leeds Metropolitan appear to be of this type. Leeds Metropolitan University (LMU) used academic committees at different levels to interpret the results and indicate future action. At Liverpool John Moores (JMU) breakdowns were provided at school and programme levels and should feed into action planning. A number of these institutions report that it is difficult to pinpoint specific action resulting from the survey findings.

The University of Plymouth has been running an institution-wide undergraduate Student Perception Questionnaire since 1995. This was extended to include partner colleges from 1998, and a pilot postgraduate questionnaire was run in 2000–01. Topics regularly covered include various aspects of the programme of study, support for learning (including library and computing services), student union services, policy awareness (for example, equal opportunities, disability) and awareness of other services included in the University's Student Charter commitment (for example, medical centre, childcare services). Approximately 20000 forms are distributed each year, with an average 46% return rate last year. Each year an institutional report is given to the University's Quality and Standards committee (QSC), which includes a summary of prioritised areas and an action plan. Faculties and partner colleges then respond to QSC on the action taken, as part of the faculty monitoring of programmes. Programme-level reports are also distributed, with a faculty summary for comparison. The annual programme monitoring report requires a response to the SPQ, which is discussed at programme committees where student representatives are present. The institutional reports and action plans are available on the University's intranet, where it can be accessed by staff and students. Summaries of findings and actions taken are also disseminated to staff and students via presentations and poster displays.

Recommendations

- Institution-wide surveys should provide both data for internal improvement and information for external stakeholders.
- If the improvement function is to be effective it is first necessary to establish an action cycle that clearly identifies lines of responsibility and feedback.
- Surveys need to be tailored to fit the improvement needs of the institution. Making use of stakeholder inputs (especially those of students) in the design of questionnaires is a useful process in making the survey relevant.
- Importance as well as satisfaction ratings are recommended as this provides key indicators of what students regard as crucial in their experience and thus enables a clear action focus.
- For improvement purposes, reporting needs to be to the level at which effective action can be implemented. So, for example, programme organisation needs to be reported to the level of programmes, computing facilities to the level of faculties, learning resources to the level of libraries and resource centres, and so on.
- Reports need to be written in an accessible style. It is recommended that, rather than tables densely packed with statistics, data should be converted to a simple grading (that incorporates satisfaction and importance scores where the latter are used). This makes it easy for readers to identify areas of excellence and areas for improvement.
- If the survey is to provide information for external stakeholders then surveys need to include a generic set of questions to enable some comparison of student perceptions.
- Experience of many surveys in the UK and abroad shows that questionnaires derived via consultations with students contain a core set of questions. (There is a set for taught students, that covers both undergraduates and postgraduates (Appendix 2) and another set for research postgraduates)
- Reports need to be published, or at least the responses to the generic questions need to be made available either on the institutions' web site or in a central location (or both).
- For external information purposes, reporting of the responses to generic questions needs to be to the level of programmes or subject areas.

Faculty-level satisfaction with provision

Faculty-level surveys (based on pre-coded questionnaires) are similar to those undertaken at institution level. They tend to focus only on those aspects of the experience that the faculty controls or can directly influence. They often tend to be an unsatisfactory combination of general satisfaction with facilities and an attempt to gather information on satisfaction with specific learning situations.

In most cases, these surveys are an additional task for faculty administrators, they are often based on an idiosyncratic set of questions and tend not to be well analysed, if at all. They are rarely linked into a meaningful improvement action cycle.

Where there is an institution-wide survey, disaggregated and reported to faculty level, faculty-based surveys tend to be redundant. Where faculty surveys overlap with institutional ones, there is often dissonance that affects response rates.

Examples

Edinburgh University, for example, has no institution-wide survey but one or two faculties have their own tailor-made feedback questionnaires, available to course directors as an option.

Recommendations

- Faculty-level surveys are not really necessary if well-structured institution-wide surveys are in place.
- If faculty-level surveys are undertaken they should not clash with institution-wide surveys, where both coexist, it is probably better to attempt to collect faculty data through qualitative means, focusing on faculty-specific issues untouched by institution-wide surveys.
- If faculty-level surveys are undertaken they must be properly analysed and linked into a faculty-level action and feedback cycle, otherwise cynicism will rapidly manifest itself and undermine the credibility of the whole process.

Programme-level satisfaction with the learning and teaching

Programme-level surveys are not always based on questionnaires although most tend to be. In some cases, feedback on programmes is solicited through qualitative discussion sessions, which are minuted. These may make use of focus groups. Informal feedback on programmes is a continuous part of the dialogue between students and lecturers. This should not be overlooked as it is an important source of information at this level for improvement.

Programme-level surveys tend to focus on the teaching and learning, course organisation and programme-specific learning resources. However, in a modularised environment, programme-level analysis of the learning situation tends to be ‘averaged’ and does not necessarily provide clear indicators of potential improvement of the programme without further enquiry at the module level.

The link into any action is far from apparent in many cases. Where a faculty undertakes a survey of all its programmes of this type, there may be mechanisms, in theory, to encourage action but, in practice, the time-lag involved in processing the questionnaires by hard-pressed faculty administrators tends to result in little timely improvement following the feedback.

In a modularised environment, where modular-level feedback is encouraged (see below), there is less need for programme-level questionnaire surveys.

Where the institution-wide survey is comprehensive and disaggregates to the level of programmes, there is also a degree of redundancy in programme-level surveys. Again, if programme-level and institutional-level run in parallel there is a danger of dissonance.

Examples

The satisfaction survey used at the Open University (OU) is primarily aimed at the programme level, although it does cover some wider, university, issues. In many respects, OU students are more firmly focused on their course than students in conventional universities. The OU aims to be able to give information on student views at the programme level and to encourage action amongst programme teams. Programmes are re-surveyed, following action, to see if student satisfaction increases in responses to any changes made.

The standardised programme evaluation approach reached its nadir in Australia with the development of the Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) based on Paul Ramsden's well-known work. This was a national survey aimed at graduates of Australian higher education institutions. It has been claimed that the CEQ provides some useful, although limited, information about teaching and learning across Australia.

At the University of East London the 'University Policy on Student Feedback on Teaching & Learning' requires each school to publish a policy on the evaluation of courses, units and pathways. UEL policy specifies that 'at pathway, or subject area level, an anonymous questionnaire should normally be administered at intervals not exceeding two years'. The reference is to pathway or subject areas, rather than programme, to reflect the fact that much of the undergraduate teaching in the university is operated through the University Degree Scheme. Pathway or subject area questionnaires are particularly common for final year students coming to the end of their studies with them being asked to reflect back on the whole degree.

The University of Nottingham makes available a 'Course Experience Evaluation' questionnaire, which can be used to evaluate programmes, although such evaluation is optional.

Recommendations

- Programme-level questionnaire surveys are probably not necessary if the institution has both a well-structured institution-wide survey, reporting to programme level, and structured module-level feedback.
- If programme-level surveys are undertaken they should not clash with institution-wide surveys or module-level feedback.

- If specific programme-level information is needed for improvement purposes, it is probably better to obtain qualitative feedback on particular issues through discussion sessions or focus groups.
- If programme-level surveys are undertaken they must be properly analysed and linked into a programme-level action and feedback cycle. This tends to be a rarity in most institutions.
- At a national level, programme-level questionnaires provide insufficient information to assist potential students in selecting appropriate universities and programmes of study.

Module-level feedback

Feedback on specific modules or units of study provide an important element of continuous improvement. The feedback tends to focus on the specific learning and teaching associated with the module, along with some indication of the problems of accessing module-specific learning resources. Module-level feedback, both formal and informal, involves direct or mediated feedback from students to teachers about the learning situation within the module or unit of study.

The primary form of feedback at this level is direct informal feedback via dialogue. However, although this feedback may often be acted upon it is rarely evident in any accounts of improvements based on student feedback.

In most institutions, there is a requirement for some type of formal collection and reporting of module-level feedback, usually to be included in programme annual reports. In the main, institutions do not specify a particular data collection process. The lecturer(s) decide on the appropriate method for the formal collection of feedback. Often, though, institutions provide guidance and formal questionnaire templates, should the module leader(s) wish to use them.

There is a tendency to use ‘feedback questionnaires’ at this level: sometimes standardised questionnaires across the institution, sometimes faculty-wide and sometimes constructed locally. Module-level questionnaire feedback is usually superficial, results in little information on what would improve the learning situation and, because of questionnaire-processing delays, rarely benefits the students who provide the feedback. The use of questionnaires tends to inhibit qualitative discussion at the unit level.

Direct, qualitative feedback is far more useful in improving the learning situation within a module of study. Qualitative discussion between staff (or facilitators) and students about the content and approach in particular course units or modules provides a rapid and in-depth appreciation of positive and negative aspects of taught modules. Direct feedback might take the form of an open, formally-minuted discussion between students and teacher(s), informal feedback over coffee, or a focus-group session, possibly facilitated by an independent outsider. If written feedback is required, open questions are used that encourage students to say what would constitute an improvement for them, rather than rating items on a schedule drawn up by a teacher or, worse, an administrator.

However, qualitative feedback is sometimes seen as more time-consuming to arrange and analyse and, therefore, as constituting a less popular choice than handing out questionnaires. Where compliance overshadows motivated improvement, recourse to questionnaires is likely.

In many instances, questionnaires used for module-level feedback are not analysed properly or in a timely fashion. Although most institutions insist on the collection of module-level data the full cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback to originators of the data rarely occurs.

Examples

Southampton Institute has an institutional form for module feedback but it is optional and some subject groups design and use their own. Module-level feedback is used to evaluate and review the unit of study.

Similarly, at the University of Nottingham, module-level feedback is managed by the schools themselves. There is a university module questionnaire for schools to use if they wish but they can use their own design. The module questionnaire focuses on organisation and student learning rather than teacher performance. Module and course evaluation is for curriculum development. Module evaluation is left up to individual schools to manage and in line with the University quality manual this data must be fed back to students.

There is a formal requirement at UEL for each module co-ordinator, supported by the subject area co-ordinator, to produce module-level feedback. There is no standard questionnaire although standard templates are available and support for analysis is provided by the quality assurance department. UEL policy recognises that students get overloaded with too many questionnaires and thus it is recommended that a variety of feedback mechanisms be used. It is the responsibility of the subject area co-ordinator, or course tutor to ensure that students are informed of the results of any data collected as part of a feedback exercise and of any action taken as a result of feedback. This is done through an oral report within a teaching session, a subject area newsletter, a posted notice, a discussion at course committee or by e-mail or the web page. The policy requires that summary data from unit level feedback is made available at the annual quality improvement process. Issues requiring action at school level can thus be identified, as can issues requiring action at institutional level which can be transmitted via QAEC to Academic Board.

The module feedback form used by Loughborough University's Business School is a mixture of module evaluation and teacher performance appraisal (see below).

Recommendations

- Module-level feedback is vital for the ongoing evolution of modules and the teaching team need to be responsive to both formal and informal feedback.
- Both formal and informal feedback should be included when reporting at the module-level.
- Module-level feedback is necessary to complement institution-wide surveys, which cannot realistically report to module-level.
- Module-level feedback should be tailored to the improvement and development needs of the module. There is no need for standardised, institution-wide, module-level questionnaires.
- As with any other feedback, module-level feedback of all types must be properly analysed and linked into a module-level action and feedback cycle.
- Module-level feedback does not need to be reported externally but should form part of internal programme reviews.

Appraisal of teacher performance by students.

As a result of government pressure in the 1990s, institutions went through a period of collecting student views on the performance of particular teachers, known as 'teacher assessment'. Many institutions use standardised programme- or module-based surveys of student appraisal of teaching.

The use of student evaluations of teacher performance are sometimes part of a broader peer and self-assessment approach to teaching quality. In some cases, they are used as part of the individual review of staff and can be taken into account in promotion and tenure situations (as at Wellington and Otago Universities in New Zealand and in many institutions in the United States).

Teacher-appraisal surveys may provide some inter-programme comparison of teacher performance. However, standardised teacher-appraisal questionnaires tend, in practice, to focus on a limited range of areas and rarely address the development of student learning. Often, the standardised form is a bland compromise, designed by managers or a committee, that serves nobody's purposes. They are often referred to by the derogatory label of 'happy forms' as they are usually a set of questions about the reliability, enthusiasm, knowledge, encouragement and communication skills of named lecturers.

In some institutions this appraisal has been undertaken institution wide, in others delegated to faculties. In some institutions, or parts of them, appraisal questionnaires persist.

Student appraisal of teachers tends to be a blunt instrument. Depending on the questions and the analysis it has the potential to identify very poor teaching but, in the main, the results give little indication of how things can be improved. Appraisal forms are rarely of much use for incremental and continuous improvement.

In the vast majority of cases, there is no feedback at all to students about outcomes. The views on individual teacher performance is usually deemed confidential and subject to closed performance-review or development interviews with a senior manager. At Auckland University, for example, the process was managed by the lecturers themselves and the results only passed on to managers in staff development interviews if the lecturer wanted to. Copenhagen Business School is a rare example of an institution that, in the 1990s, published the results within the institution.

Students appraisal of teacher performance has a limited function, which, in practice, is ritualistic rather than improvement-oriented. Any severe problems are usually identified quickly via this mechanism. Repeated use leads to annoyance and cynicism on the part of students and teachers. Students become disenchanted because they rarely receive any feedback on the views they have offered. Lecturers become cynical and annoyed because they see student appraisal of teaching as a controlling rather than improvement-oriented tool.

Examples

Student Evaluation of Courses and Teaching (SECAT), initially developed at Auckland University, is a somewhat more sophisticated approach to standardised evaluation of teachers and modules. The system aims to identify student perceptions of the quality of teaching and to improve teaching through staff development linked to the issues identified by students. An institution-wide data base of 100 questions relating to teacher performance and module organisation and structure was devised. Each lecturer was required to select any 30 items to construct a questionnaire suited to his or her circumstances. Responses were analysed centrally and a report provided to the lecturer. The report of findings was also sent to the tutor's line manager, as the basis for staff development discussions if the lecturer so wished.

The University of Nottingham has compulsory teacher evaluation, using standardised forms that have five fixed questions on teacher performance, used to evaluate all teachers. They are collated centrally and the results fed back to teachers and heads of schools confidentially. Heads of schools also receive a school mean. Teaching evaluation is for career development.

The London School of Economics has teacher appraisal questionnaires to 'assess students' opinions of course teaching' and a separate one to 'assess students' opinions of teaching of part-time class teachers'. They contain specific questions on performance of teachers prefaced by a few questions on library provision and lectures.

Recommendations

- Use of student appraisal of teaching should be sparing.
- If used, avoid endlessly repeating the process.
- If used, ask questions about the student learning as well as the teacher performance.

- Ensure that action is taken, and seen to be taken, to resolve and monitor the problems that such appraisals identify.
- Only report outcomes as necessary to ensure improvement.

Multiple surveys: cosmetic or inclusive

Institutions often have a mixture of the different type of student feedback, to which might be added graduate and employer surveys. The information gathered is, far too often, simply that — information. There are many circumstances when nothing is done with the information. It is not used to effect changes. Often it is not even collected with a use in mind. Perhaps, far too often, it is a cosmetic exercise.

There is more to student feedback than collecting data. In general,

- If collecting student views only collect what can be made use of.
- It is counterproductive to ask students for information then not use it; students become cynical and uncooperative if they think no one really cares about what they think.
- It is important to heed, examine and make use of student views.
- If data from surveys of students is going to be useful then it needs to be transformed into meaningful information.
- The information needs to be clearly reported, fed into systems of accountability and linked to a process of continuous quality improvement. The whole process must be accountable and part of a culture of improvement.
- It is important to ensure that action takes place on the basis of student views and that *action is seen to take place*.
- This requires clear lines of communication, so that the impact of student views are fed back to students. In short, there needs to be a line of accountability back to the students to close the circle. It is not sufficient that students find out indirectly, if at all, that they have had a role in institutional policy.

Conclusion

Students are important stakeholders in the quality monitoring and assessment processes and it is important to obtain their views.

Institution-wide surveys, reported to programme level can be very useful aids to improvement.

However, more needs to be done to ensure that the results are communicated to potential students.

It is quite feasible, for comparative purposes, to identify a set of generic questions that can be used to gauge satisfaction with institutional provision and programmes of study (see Appendix 2), which could form the basis of information to external stakeholders.

Figure 1: Satisfaction Cycle

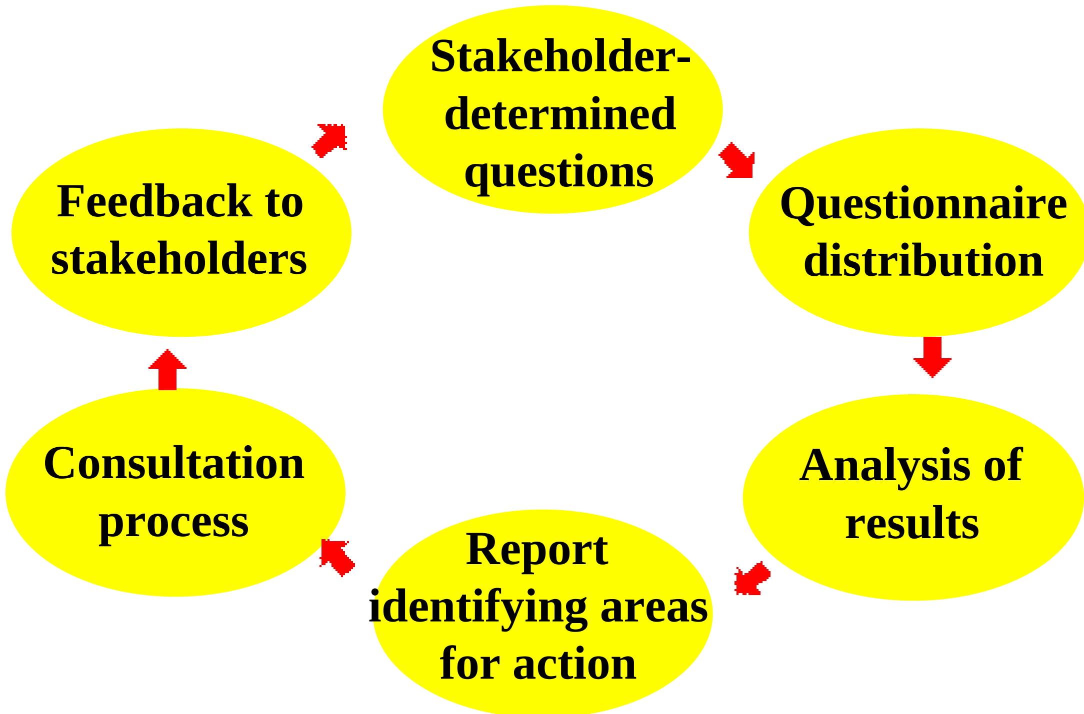
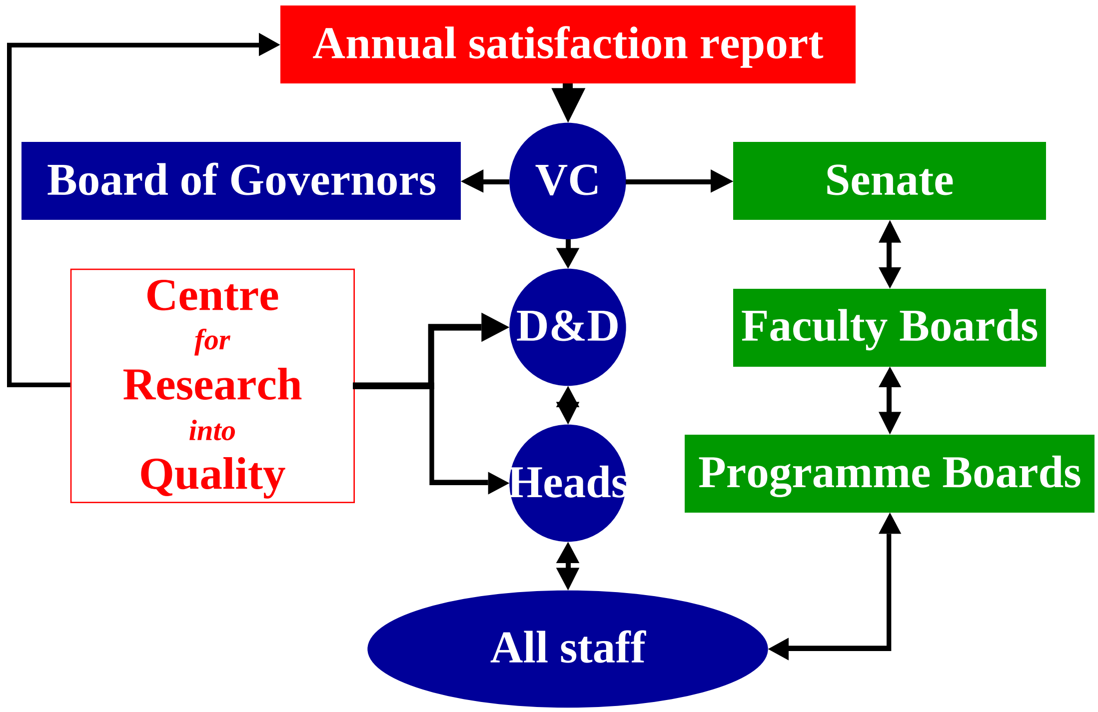


Figure 2: Satisfaction and importance grid

	Very un-satisfactory	*Unsatis-factory*	*OK*	*Satisfactory*	*Very satisfactory*
Very important	E	D	C	B	**A**
Important	e	d	c	b	a
Not so important	(e)	(d)	(c)	(b)	(a)

Figure 3: Consultation Process at UCE



Appendix 1: The Student Satisfaction Approach

The Satisfaction Approach has been developed at the Centre *for* Research *into* Quality over the last 15 years. The approach was designed to be an effective tool with which to obtain, analyse and report students' views of their total university experience in order to effect change and improvement.

In its original 'mission statement', UCE's short Statement of Purpose had three central sections, one of which was headed 'Quality and Satisfaction', it asserted:

> The University of Central England recognises that students are its customers and that they are free to choose where they study. The University of Central England is committed to enhancing further its reputation for teaching quality as assessed by its students. This will be measured against increasing satisfaction of students and subject to external testing by academic and professional peers.

Student feedback was, and continues to be, an important element of UCE's quality monitoring and the University pioneered an institution-wide process of feedback that links directly into management strategic decision-making at the most senior level. The Student Satisfaction research undertaken by CRQ goes beyond the *Statement of Purpose* by focussing on the total learning experience of students covering the complete range of student activities across all aspects of the institution rather than just student satisfaction with teaching.

The Student Satisfaction approach is clearly the market leader and has been emulated and adapted by a number of higher and further education institutions both in Britain and overseas (including New Zealand, Sweden, Australia, South Africa and Poland). The methodology is summarised briefly below. Further information and reports can be found on the Centre for Research into Quality (CRQ) website at www.uce.ac.uk/crq. In addition, the methodology has been published, in self-help form, through the Open University Press as the *Student Satisfaction Manual*. *Student Satisfaction Manual* (Harvey *et al.*, 1997).

The methodology continues to evolve and allows the surveys to be flexible to address the pressing concerns of students. The methodology can be easily adapted to different situations. It has been used to explore the views of a variety of stakeholders: staff, employers, placement supervisors and even football supporters. The Centre undertakes the following satisfaction surveys on an annual or periodic basis for UCE: taught students; research postgraduates; UCE students in partner colleges; staff; non-medical education placement supervisors.

Designed from the outset as a management information tool, the approach integrates student views into management strategic decision-making. At UCE, the student and staff satisfaction surveys are used by decision makers as a management tool, shaping policy at an institutional level.

The Student Satisfaction approach is unique in combining the following four elements:

- Student-determined questions: the Student Satisfaction research focuses on the total learning experience as defined by students.
- Satisfaction *and* importance ratings: the research examines student satisfaction with aspects of provision and then identifies which of those areas are important for students.
- Management information for action: those areas, which are important to students but where students are dissatisfied, are priority areas for management intervention.
- A clear feedback and action cycle.

Student-determined questions

The areas of concern, about which students are asked to rate their satisfaction and importance, derive from prior consultations with students. Students, in effect, determine the questions in the questionnaire on the basis of feedback from focus-group sessions, telephone interviews and from comments provided on the previous years' questionnaires.

The usual approach with taught students is to convene focus groups of students to identify those elements of their experience they regard as important, which are then used as a basis for drawing up the questionnaire. The groups are selected to reflect the variety of provision within the institution. They include groups from each of the faculties, ensuring that a representative number of full and part-time courses are selected and that, where appropriate, undergraduate and taught postgraduate provision is covered.

Satisfaction and importance

Three kinds of questions are asked about each main topic:

- satisfaction ratings — students are asked to rate, on a seven-point scale, their satisfaction with a range of sub-topics under each main heading;
- importance ratings — students are asked to rate, again on a seven-point scale, how important the set of sub-topics are to their learning experience;
- patterns of use of facilities — students are asked to indicate the extent of their usage of various facilities (for example, which computer operating system they use or frequency of library use, and so on). Usage questions are only asked where they can provide a basis for analysing the adequacy of service provision. Satisfaction surveys are not market research surveys.

The inclusion of importance ratings provides a clear picture of where to focus effort to ensure maximum improvement. For external stakeholders, importance ratings indicate clearly what students on a programme consider to be important elements of their learning experience.

Management information

The statistical data collected through the survey research is transformed into management information designed to identify clear areas for action. It does this by identifying student satisfaction with a wide range of aspects of provision and then identifying which of those areas are important for students. The outcomes are mapped on a satisfaction and importance grid (Figure 2). Those areas that fall into Sectors E and D, high importance to students but low satisfaction, are priority areas for management intervention.

Production of a report

In most cases the outcomes are reported to the Vice-Chancellor (or Pro-Vice-Chancellor), who usually makes them available to Senate and the Board of Governors/University Council. They are subsequently published in an annual report (in some cases with an ISBN number). Usually, all management, academic and senior administrative staff receive a copy. In most cases, such reports are also published on the University Intranet, although to date few have made them available on the Internet for public consumption.

A central feature of the report are the composite rating tables and trend graphs. These are accompanied by a commentary, which identifies the main issues. Although the survey is based on student-determined questions, many issues recur over time which permits monitoring of trends.

Benchmarking

The longitudinal data collected through the survey allows for benchmarking of improvement in student satisfaction year by year. Although the methodology ensures that current concerns of students primarily determine the nature of the questionnaire, there are invariably items that recur, sometimes with minor modifications of wording.

Over time, more longitudinal data allows for clear indications of trends in student perceptions of the service provided by the University. The inclusion of significant numbers of trend graphs allows for detailed analysis of the changes in student perceptions over time, in many cases items can be tracked back to the early 1990s. This decade-long, detailed longitudinal data is unique to UCE.

Action and feedback

At the centre of the process is the action and feedback cycle (Figure 1). The intention is that there is a process that identifies for responsibility for action and subsequent follow-up to ensure action takes place. The outcomes of action are intended to be reported back to the originators of the data — the students.

Each institution develops its own processes for ensuring this process. At UCE, which has been doing it longest, there is an internal consultation process that reviews action from previous years and prioritises action based on student views, which is linked to budget allocation letters (Figure 3).

The Vice-Chancellor and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) interview all the deans and heads of services about the outcomes of the report. The deans and heads of services are expected to account for any areas where students are dissatisfied but regard as important and find ways of overcoming them. Deans are required to indicate what action they are intending to take and what has happened as a result of the previous year's agenda. The replies are made available to Senate for discussion and, as Senate papers, are semi-public documents. Before responding to the Vice-Chancellor, the faculties make use of the detailed data available from CRQ to look more closely at any Ds or Es. They also undertake local analyses.

At UCE, feeding back information on action to students is important as students need to be aware that the process includes action, that the information is collected for a purpose. Details of the action taken is collated by CRQ and a feedback report is produced. This is sent to students who are asked to respond to the survey (50% of all students at UCE) and made available via libraries and resource centres for other students. Direct feedback is also made available to student representatives on Senate, faculty boards and course boards. In addition, short articles are usually published in the University newsletter and Students' Union magazine. (Copies of reports and feedback flyers are available).

Quality Culture

The Student Satisfaction approach, along with the other forms of quality monitoring at UCE, go hand-in-hand with the development of a culture of continuous quality improvement (CQI). The Student Satisfaction report does not herald an annual upheaval. Rather, it identifies areas for potential action and contributes to incremental improvement — from the point of view of students.

To be effective, staff must be convinced that the satisfaction survey is part of the CQI process and not a vehicle for recrimination. Distrust can be minimised if everybody knows what is going on and that something actually happens, to improve the institution, as a result of the survey. In summary, to gain support and trust:

- the process must be transparent;
- senior management must be committed to the approach;
- action should result — resources must be made available;
- the agenda for change must be forward-looking (not recriminatory).

An effective approach involves encouraging a bottom-up quality improvement process alongside a top-down accountability requirement. Management, in this approach, has six strategic functions in respect of quality improvement:

- setting the parameters within which the quality improvement process takes place;
- establishing a non-exploitative, suspicion-free context in which a culture of quality improvement can flourish;
- establishing and ensuring a process of internal quality monitoring;
- disseminating good practice through an effective and open system of communication;
- encouraging and facilitating teamworking amongst academic and academic-related colleagues;
- delegating responsibility for quality improvement to the effective units that are going to deliver continuous improvement at the staff-student interface.

Reference

Harvey, L. *et al.*, 1997, *Student Satisfaction Manual* (Buckingham, Open University Press).

APPENDIX 2

Centre *for* Research *into* Quality

INDICATIVE GENERIC STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

2002

The Student Satisfaction Survey is designed to provide an opportunity for you to comment on your whole experience of your university

Data protection statement...

We welcome all the information that you are able to provide and assure you that it is treated confidentially.

Please return your questionnaire as soon as possible using the pre-paid label .

The results of the survey will be acted upon to improve the student experience at your university

COURSE DETAILS

Type of course:

Foundation / HND / HNC ☐ Undergraduate degree (e.g., BA, BSc, BMus, BEd) ☐
Taught postgraduate (e.g., PGD, MSc, MA) ☐ Professional development course/modules ☐
Other ☐ *Please specify*

Year of course:

1st ☐ 2nd ☐ 3rd ☐ 4th ☐ 5th+ ☐

Mode of study:

Full-time at a UCE site ☐ Sandwich (thin or thick) at a UCE site ☐
Part-time at a UCE site ☐ Work-based or distance learner ☐
Other ☐ *Please specify*

COURSE ORGANISATION AND ASSESSMENT

'Course' includes the programme or set of modules that you are studying this year.

Please rate the extent to which you are *satisfied* with the following aspects of your course, and then rate how *important* they are to your experience as a student.

	SATISFACTION (Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied)							IMPORTANCE (Not at all important – Very important)							
Course organisation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NA
Knowing what you can expect from your course and your tutors	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Knowing what is expected of you as a student	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Prior notification of changes to course arrangements	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The way your timetable is spread over the day/week	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Range of topics covered in your syllabus	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Workload and assessment															
Time-tabling of assignments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of information about assessment dates	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Clarity of information about assessment criteria	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Consistency of application of assessment criteria	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Usefulness of tutors'/lecturers' feedback	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Promptness of feedback on assignments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

UNIVERSITY FACILITIES AND STUDENTS' UNION

Please rate how *satisfied* you are with the following aspects of the Union of Students and social life at university, and then rate how *important* they are to your experience as a student.

	SATISFACTION (Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied)							IMPORTANCE (Not at all important – Very important)							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NA
The general appearance of your campus	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Security measures at your campus	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Range of Union clubs/societies	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The availability of sports facilities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Value for money in the Union shop	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Appearance of Union bars	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
University residential accommodation *(students in university accommodation only)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

LEARNING AND TEACHING

Please rate the extent to which you are *satisfied* with the following aspects of learning and teaching, and then rate how *important* they are to your experience as a student.

	SATISFACTION (1 Very dissatisfied – 7 Very satisfied)							IMPORTANCE (1 Not at all important – 7 Very important)							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NA
Learning															
The course has developed your subject knowledge															
You are learning what you hoped to learn															
Your confidence to learn has been enhanced															
There are sufficient opportunities to learn with others (peers) on your course															
Aspects of your course that prepare you for employment															
The opportunities to go on work experience															
The opportunities to make links with professionals															
The suitability of work experience															
The organisation of work experience															
The development of skills and abilities required for your future employment															
The development of your problem-solving skills															
The development of your interpersonal skills															
The development of your team-working skills															
The development of your communication skills															
The development of your practical skills															
The development of your analytical ability															
The development of your critical ability															
Teaching															
Opportunities for informal discussion with staff															
The extent to which teaching staff are sympathetic and supportive to the needs of students															
The extent to which teaching staff treat students as mature individuals															
The general reliability of teaching staff i.e., keep time/don't cancel classes															

STUDENT SERVICES

Please indicate whether you have *used* the following services at UCE. If you have used the services please also rate how *satisfied* you are with the service you received.

	USED SERVICE		SATISFACTION (1 Very dissatisfied – 7 Very satisfied)							
	YES	NO	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NA
Careers										
Chaplaincy										
Child care										
Counselling										
Disability services										
Financial services										
Health care										
Availability of information about Student Services										

LIBRARY

Please rate how *satisfied* you are with the following aspects of the university library you *mainly* use, and then rate how *important* they are to your experience as a student.

	SATISFACTION (Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied)							IMPORTANCE (Not at all important – Very important)							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NA
Range of books	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
'Up to-dateness' of books	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Multiple copies of core books	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Range of journals/periodicals	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Helpfulness of library staff	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Opening hours	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Noise levels	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of photocopying facilities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access and range of services for students with disabilities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Usefulness of CD ROMs	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Adequacy of individual workspace	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Adequacy of group study space	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

COMPUTING

Please rate how *satisfied* you are with the following aspects of the computing facilities you *mainly* use at UCE, and then rate how *important* they are to your experience as a student.

	SATISFACTION (Very dissatisfied – Very satisfied)							IMPORTANCE (Not at all important – Very important)							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	NA
Opening hours of computer rooms	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
User-friendliness of computing facilities for students with a disability	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of computers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Maintenance of computers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
'Up-to-dateness' of computers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
'Up-to-dateness' of software	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to the Internet/e-mail	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Reliability of the network	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Training in the use of computers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Helpfulness of support staff/technicians	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of printers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Quality of printing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Maintenance of printers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

YOUR EVALUATION

Please write in the boxes below an estimate of your overall satisfaction with the following aspects of your university education.

A rating of 0% means you are totally dissatisfied and a rating of 100% means you are totally satisfied.

University as a whole	☐ %	Your Department or School	☐ %
University management	☐ %	Your course	☐ %
Your Faculty	☐ %	Potential career prospects	☐ %