Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching in Higher Education
Theory and Practice
Balasubramanyam Chandramohan, Stephen Fallows

Chapter 9: Student feedback on interdisciplinary programmes : Lee Harvey

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Student feedback on interdisciplinary programmes

As student feedback in the UK is about to shift into its fourth phase it is noticeable how little attention has been paid to the collection and analysis of views of students on interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary or combined studies courses.

The first phase, up to the 1990s, saw little or no formal feedback mechanisms in higher education institutions that were designed to obtain student views. Where student feedback impacted on the student experience it came, usually, as a result of direct conversations, or even action, on the part of individuals or groups of students. In the pre-mass higher education, this *ad hoc* engagement worked up to a point but did not engender a sense of student-centredness or responsibility, on the part of the teacher, to address concerns of the students. The latter had to sink or swim in the system as it was.

The 1990s saw the flourishing of formal student feedback, overwhelmingly through the medium of questionnaires. Much data was collected, some of it was analysed, little of it was reported back to students and very little of it resulted in any meaningful action. Change that occurred tended to bypass questionnaires and was the result of direct feedback, via conversations over coffee or in corridors, course committees or by dint of students voting with their feet. The main reasons for the relative impotence of the feedback in phase two was that questions were framed from the point of view of the teacher (or worse, manager), often limited to a standardised set of module-based items relating to teacher performance. These failed to address student learning, failed to address student concerns, became tokenistic accountability rituals, the outcomes of which were usually deemed confidential and thus inaccessible. At root, the impotence was compounded by an entire lack of structure designed to act upon the results. Data was collected and mostly shelved; eventually it became obvious to all concerned that the ritual was alienating students and becoming counterproductive.

The third phase, which continues today, overlapped the second and saw some pioneering institutions start to develop a structured mechanism for dealing with, as well as collecting student feedback. Lines of responsibility for action were developed with appropriate, although not bureaucratically burdensome, reporting and sanctions. In the main, these developments operated at the level of whole institutional feedback surveys: student satisfaction surveys that acted as a barometer of the total student experience. In some places, the development of these centrally-run surveys was also

co-ordinated with locally (unit or module) owned surveys of teacher capability and with service departments own 'customer' feedback. However, this continues to be a logistic and organisational problem for larger institutions. Alongside this tendency to develop total student experience surveys, some institutions stuck to module-level data collection but developed a more co-ordinated approach to acting on the outcomes. However, this is still relatively rare and an assumption that instituting an institution-wide module survey, asking everyone the same set of questions, constitutes a co-ordinated approach remains prevalent. The key to any student feedback is not the collection of data but the creation of mechanism for using it to implement improvements.

The fourth phase, which is upon us in the UK, undermines the concerted improvement approach of the third phase. The National Student Survey, with its trivial set of questions not only takes us back to phase two but shifts the emphasis from internal quality improvement to external profile, from substance to image and from clearly useful data to superficial indicators designed for spurious comparative purposes rather than as valuable management information. As the struggle for student feedback unfolds, the concerns of interdisciplinary students continues to be ignored.

Students on non-standard programmes are usually perceived as a problem when it comes to collecting their views, analysing and reporting them. They do not, of course, fit standard categories, they have to be slotted into categories of their own and generally make the whole reporting messy. However, the tendency to bulge out of pre-set categories is but the least of the issues. Much more important is that the views expressed by interdisciplinary students are frequently ignored because it is not clear who is responsible for doing anything about them. Even worse, no one asks questions, in the first place, that are germane to interdisciplinary students. Student feedback questionnaires, explored below in more detail, tend towards a generic set of issues that are premised on the single subject model.

Student feedback processes

Most higher education institutions, around the world, collect some type of feedback *from* students about their experience of higher education, particularly the service they receive. 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 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. Indeed, 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 needs to be transformed into information that can be used within an institution to effect change. Experience going back to the late 1980s shows that 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, thus, more important to ensure an appropriate action cycle than it is to have in place mechanisms for collecting data.

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, Sheffield Hallam and a few other institutions are unusual in publishing their institution-wide student feedback survey (which reports to the level of faculty and major programmes). The results are available on a public web site as well as published as a hard-copy with an ISBN number, which has been the case, at UCE, since its inception in the late 1980s.

The National Student Survey (NSS) will provide information but unfortunately the wrong information presented in the wrong way. In comparison with the sophisticated and relevant analyses of institutional student surveys, the NSS items are trivial, imposed irrespective of relevance, designed for comparative purposes based on standardised subject codes and providing no sensible information on what is necessary to improve the situation. It operates at a distance from the very feedback and action cycles so important in ensuring effective outcomes and, of course, totally ignores the situation of interdisciplinary students.

Types

Feedback can take various forms, including formal classroom discussions, informal discussions over coffee, facilitated focus groups, web discussion boards, course committees as well as the invidious questionnaire. While all the abovementioned forms of feedback operate in most settings, they tend to attract less official weight than the formal survey of student views; although, ironically, in most cases change is more likely to occur as a result of direct discussion than from the analysis of questionnaire responses. The latter, in many cases, serves only to legitimate the *status quo*.

We are, however, in an era of student feedback surveys and, if handled appropriately, they can be effective given the appropriate support infrastructure. There are, broadly speaking, five forms:

- institution-level satisfaction with the total student experience or a specified sub-set of that experience;

- 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. Such 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 (either internal or external) with expertise in undertaking surveys and 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 Student Satisfaction Approach developed at UCE and adopted at Sheffield Hallam, UEL, Oxford Brookes, Buckingham Chilterns University College among others, 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. It is, though, very important to include the student voice in the determination of questions. This is particularly the case if one wants to capture and include the concerns of interdisciplinary students. It is, therefore, vital to include at least one interdisciplinary student focus group.

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. Again, there is a danger of interdisciplinary students falling down the cracks. Reporting of views of students who do not fall into simple subject groupings often results in their views being sidelined or ignored altogether. Even when they are reported, it is not always clear who is then responsible for taking up the concerns of such students. This compounds the problem of a general lack of questions specific to the interdisciplinary experience — not least the issues of interconnectedness, progression and coherence.

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[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 s, 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.

Feedback to students of outcomes of surveys is an important element of institution-wide surveys 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 effectiveness of these lines of communication; which as interdisciplinary students will be aware are strewn with hazards. Other forms of feedback used include: articles in university magazines, posters and producing summaries aimed at students but these tend to be very generalised and liable to focus on the spectacular and newsworthy rather than the local but important concerns of specific student groups.

Good practice in institutional surveys suggests that 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. Furthermore, 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.

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. 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 for improvement at this level.

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. 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. However, if there are interdisciplinary programmes, specific programme feedback could be an effective way of complementing more generic survey results.

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.

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. There is, of course, considerable potential, at module level of exploring issues pertinent to interdisciplinary students. However, this requires an imaginative and creative approach. Using standardised questionnaires is unlikely to be much use as they will probably not include relevant questions. Most useful for interdisciplinary students, is likely to be the open-ended questions that are often appended to module tick-box surveys. Indeed, it might be argued that, in general, this is the most useful feature of module feedback, although sadly under-analysed in many cases.

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. Making comparisons between modules is trivial and far less effective than year-on-year monitoring of trends in student views about the module. 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.

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 (although this is, as yet, rare in the UK).

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, which 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.

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. 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.

Good practice suggests that surveys of student appraisal of teaching should be used sparingly, without continually repeating the process. It also helps to ask about the student learning as well as the teacher performance. Ensuring that action is taken, and seen to be taken, to resolve and monitor the problems that such appraisals identify is important. However, this focus is usually not helpful in exploring the subtleties of student learning issues, such as those experienced by interdisciplinary students.

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;
- data from different sources needs to be co-ordinated and triangulated.

Students are important stakeholders in the quality monitoring and assessment processes and it is useful to obtain their views. In doing so, it is important not to inadvertently sideline the views of specific groups, of which interdisciplinary students are a group often rendered invisible.

Significant differences

There is, as was noted at the start of this chapter, little research on the differences in perspectives between interdisciplinary and single-subject students. Despite all the surveying, reported results ignore this dimension in most cases and thus hard evidence of differences in perception is in short supply.

One London university that undertook an institution-wide survey in 2004 separated out the responses of 90 combined honours students. Their views, on issues designed for all students, were very similar to the university average on most of the 100 or so items. The areas where they diverged hint at some underlying issues that might be germane to any collection of interdisciplinary student views. Results were reported on an A to E scale (very satisfactory (A) to very unsatisfactory (E)) with very important items represented in upper case and less important ones as lower case.

- Availability (b) and support from course representatives (c) were less important than for the university overall (B & C respectively).
- Promptness of feedback on assignments was more satisfactory (B) than for university overall (C).

- Development of analytical (A) and of critical skills (A) were more satisfactory compared to the university overall (B in both cases).
- Aspects of course that prepares you for employment was less satisfactory (C) compared to the university mean (B).
- Opportunities to go on work experience (D) and opportunities to network with professionals (D) were both unsatisfactory compared to adequate (C) for the university overall.
- The extent to which classes run as scheduled was very satisfactory (A) compared to the university mean (B).
- Availability of personal tutors (C), support from personal tutors (C), and ready access to academic and pastoral advice (C) were less satisfactory than for the university as a whole (B for all three items).
- Combined honours students were much more regular users of the learning resource centre than most other groups of students. However, these students were marginally less satisfied with the facility than students on average. They were less satisfied with the range of books (C) and multiple copies of core books (D) and with noise levels (C), compared with university averages (of B, C and B respectively).
- Combined honours students were also more satisfied with opening hours of the computer rooms (A) and reliability of computers (B) than the university mean (B and C, respectively).
- Combined honours students were less satisfied with procedures for enrolment (C) than their peers (B).

Combined honours students overall ratings showed a more positive view of the university as a whole (66.1%) higher than students from other schools and considerably above the mean (62.9%) for the university overall. Their rating for their course (69.3%) was above the mean (67.7) but eclipsed by the means in five of the nine other schools. However, they rated their potential career prospects poorly (62.7%) compared to the university mean of (64.9%). Asked whether they would still choose their course, respondents were positive (5.0 on a 7 point scale) but below the university mean of 5.3.

Another northern university reported the results for a small group of combined honours students separately in 2002.

- Opportunities for work-related placements (d) and quality of workplace experience (c) were less satisfactory (but less important) than for the university as a whole (B in both cases). Similarly, there was less satisfaction with 'the course prepares you for the work place', (C compared to the university mean of B)
- Ease with which teaching staff could be contacted (B) is slightly less satisfactory than the university mean (A). However, they are more satisfied (B) than any other groups (B) with the manageability of their workload. They also regard the opportunity to present work to peers/staff as more important than other groups of students.
- They are more satisfied with noise levels (A) and availability of quiet work space in the learning centre than the university mean (B in both cases).

- They are also more satisfied with the range of media materials (A compared to B for university as a whole).
- Combined studies students regarded the efficiency of the enrolment procedure (B) and induction to the university (B) as more important than students on average (b and b) and were more satisfied with notification of timetable/room alterations (B compared to C).
- They were slightly less satisfied with the range of software available (B compared to A) but more satisfied with the helpfulness of technical support staff (A compared to B)
- Combined studies students were alone in being dissatisfied with the value for money of their course (D) (compared to other schools).

These two sets of independent results hint at some issues for combined studies students around workplace learning and belonging. There is a suggestion that they are to some extent better served administratively but that they are less satisfied with central learning support, partly because they spend a lot of time using it. Much more needs to be done to explore this initial limited results.