

# Student Surveys – Process to Enhancement

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## Survey process

At Heriot-Watt University (HWU), as in all other HEI's, we have a standard suite of learning and teaching student surveys, both external (NSS, PTES) and internal (Annual Survey [covering non-NSS groups<sup>1</sup>] and Course Feedback Survey, a semester, module survey). We also have a managed, standard approach to these surveys – a 'survey process', managed by the Student Survey Management Group on behalf of the University Committee for Learning and Teaching.



As an institution, we have expended considerable effort over the last five years in particular in developing, refining and extending our survey management process, originally putting in place a framework for oversight of our disparate surveys and, most recently, introducing clearer procedures for reporting back on actions taken in response to surveys. In addition to the procedural aspects, we have been responsive to the recurring issues highlighted by students in surveys, e.g.:

- Revised policies and guidance on feedback on assessment, including coursework submission.
- Development and sharing practice sessions on a wide range of learning and teaching matters.
- New Peer Support of Teaching Framework.
- Improved learning spaces and learning technology.
- Enhanced learning skills provision.

In all of this, while there are clear success stories in particular disciplines, both in external and internal surveys, our overall satisfaction rating as an institution has been gradually declining, with assessment and feedback continuing to be the area of lowest satisfaction.

In response, our survey process has been adapted each year. We have a very clear, managed approach via the University Committee for Learning and Teaching, connecting

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<sup>1</sup> At HWU, this group includes all non-final year undergraduates at our campuses in Edinburgh and Scottish Borders and all undergraduates, including final year, at our campuses in Dubai and Malaysia.





institution's actions to those of Schools, relevant Professional Services and our three student representative bodies<sup>2</sup>. In summary:

- A summary of each of NSS, PTES and HWU's Annual Survey is provided to the UCLT each September; these individual summaries are distilled into an overarching Summary of all L+T Surveys which identifies the common, recurring themes across all surveys;
- Action Plans are produced by the University/UCLT, Schools, Professional Services and the three student representative bodies (the latter via the Academic section of the Student Partnership Agreement);
- Each of these groups report on actions taken in November and March;
- An annual report on actions taken in response to all surveys is produced in June.

### Effectiveness?

A well-established, well-managed survey process; yet, our survey results have continued to give cause for concern. What's required? More tinkering with the process? More policies? Into this context, the Evidence for Enhancement theme has been truly illuminating, as it has provided the opportunity to hold our survey process up to the light and ask the fundamental questions: Is this as good as it gets? Is this evidence of enhancing the student learning experience? Is it self-delusional – a focus on process at the expense of the more challenging focus on outcomes? Most critically, in the context of the Enhancement Theme, what evidence is there of meaningful change in response to surveys? Then, of course, that killer question: How do we know if the actions we have taken have made a difference?

So, at HWU, we have an institution-wide survey process, connected locally at all levels, but no measures for evaluating the impact of institution-wide actions; albeit this year, we have introduced an 'Evidence of Impact' column into our action plan templates, but there will be no reporting on that until September 2019. We have comprehensive institutional and local action plans, but no gathering (and, as a consequence, no analysis) of post-implementation evidence of impact of local actions. So a superb process, but none of it is evidence of the effectiveness of change.

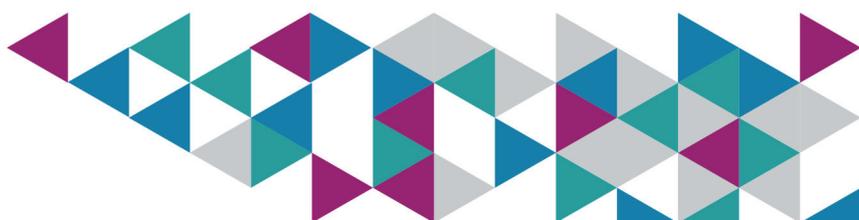
### Towards evidence for enhancement

The E4E theme, our own emerging concerns about our survey process, particularly in terms of deficiencies in closing the feedback loop (reporting back to students on actions taken in response to surveys) led to us to a fundamental review of all of our approaches to student surveys, using our E4E funding (matched by our six Schools) to employ a Research Assistant to focus on areas such as: greater student engagement; improved academic ownership; closing the feedback loop; creating meaningful change.

From this extensive analysis, we have focused on two areas in particular: a separate project on Feedback on Assessment, as a key, a recurring issue from student surveys; revitalising our internal Course Feedback Survey (our modular level survey, which asks much more specific learning and teaching questions than NSS or PTES). The Course Feedback Survey project specifically aimed to address the issues of closing the feedback loop and effecting change to benefit students more immediately. The key features of the project were:

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2 HWU has a Student Union representing students at the three Scottish Campuses; a Student Council for the Dubai Campus; a Student Association for the Malaysia Campus. All three Student Presidents are members of the University Committee for Learning and Teaching and its various sub-groups, both institutional and campus-specific.





- Survey Week (12-19 November)
- Re-designing questions
- Extensive staff and student engagement
- In-class completion
- Looking to the UK sector and internationally
- Empowering academic leaders to make a difference



So what is different? There has only been one run of the new CFS process but we have seen: an increased response rate; significantly fewer abusive comments; student representatives actively involved in the results process; and survey results and actions being disseminated and progressed more quickly. It's still early days yet, but for HWU, the most critical part of this new approach is that students clearly recognise that their voice is being heard and they know that action has been taken to improve their experience. Time will tell at the end of this academic year if we have realised that objective.

### The HWU Programme Director of Studies

E4E has shone another uncomfortable spotlight on HWU in terms of how little we know about the use of evidence and data relating to learning and teaching beyond the institutional level, i.e. beyond those directors who are members of institutional committees where such data and evidence are considered and through whom this information is then locally disseminated.

The Collaborative Cluster on Developing Programme Leadership has highlighted the criticality of the role of the Programme Leader and has shown that the areas which impact most on student satisfaction are those experienced at the programme level: quality of teaching; programme organisation and management; and sense of belonging to a learning community.

While HWU has actively supported and developed our evidence/data gathering and analysis at institutional and course (module) levels, we have, as an organisation, paid little attention to how evidence is disseminated and used at the programme level. Yet, for a multi-campus institution like HWU, the programme is the most critical point for enhancing learning and teaching and the student learning experience: our global teaching teams of Programme Directors of Studies (led by a Senior Director of Studies) are responsible for collectively managing and enhancing programmes across three different campus locations. As an institution, we have a clearly mapped out academic management structure for global management of learning and teaching across our five campuses: the structure sets out both institutional and School committees and provides a comprehensive series of descriptors for seven different School-based learning and teaching roles, including those of Programme Director of Studies and Senior Programme Directors of Studies.

The E4E Collaborative Cluster on Developing Programme Leadership has highlighted starkly that, as an institution, we have done little to support those individuals undertaking the critical roles of Programme Director of Studies and Senior Programme Directors of Studies (a new Learning and Teaching Academy, headed by a newly appointed Director will provide a means to address this development). For now, we are asking ourselves some self-critical questions as we turn back to evidence/data and student surveys in particular.





As yet, there is no institutional support for HWU Programme Directors of Studies in relation to student surveys... and yet, there is no recognition that we need to provide support and development at this level; no issues have been raised... so are no actions needed? Yet, to come back to our ongoing concerns over the fundamental issues emerging from the collective analysis of student surveys and the relatively limited success of actions to date. Therefore are Programme Directors of Studies the missing link, the key to:

- Addressing chronic survey issues?
- Closing the feedback loop?
- Building a culture of feedback being listened to?
- Empowering academics to make change?

Anecdotally, in conversations with a few HWU Senior Programme Directors of Studies, there is a strong appetite for development and support beyond that provided locally, particularly in: taking on the role; establishing a community of practitioners beyond the discipline/School; and, of course, navigating the data landscape and using evidence to effect meaningful change.

HWU is just on the starting block now in terms of developing the Programme Leader role and in supporting those individuals to make more effective, informed use of evidence for enhancement. Our new Learning and Teaching Academy will be critical in empowering these individuals... Definitely a story to be continued.

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This Think Piece is part of a series of papers produced as part of the QAA Enhancement Themes Collaborative Cluster on Programme Leadership. Further information about the Themes can be found here: <https://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk>. The papers are designed to promote discussion and sharing of emerging themes and practice. Views expressed are those of the author, not any specific institution.

