Creating a dialogue about evaluation; a students-as-partners approach to feedback about learning and teaching

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CONTEXT

Issues with institutional end of semester student evaluations are well documented in the literature (Mark, 2013; Winstone et al, 2022). The issues include what is measured; whether feedback is biased and constructive (Lakeman et al, 2022; MacNeil et al., 2015); its professional and institutional impact (on promotion, tenure, accountability etc); as well as whether the student voice is adequately represented (Blair & Valdez, 2014). Despite students' own concerns about providing evaluations on courses and teaching (Stein et al., 2020) students desire and are able to provide more nuanced feedback (Polkinghorne et al., (2022). This project describes the results of a students-as-partners (SaP) project designed to explore both student and staff views and preferences with regards to alternative feedback approaches.

PURPOSE OR GOAL

We invited students from a range of disciplines (including engineering) to collaborate with staff to identify alternative and adaptive feedback strategies that were important to students and staff. Through the Student Staff Partnership (SAP) we intended to rethink our current feedback strategies, identify alternatives, and incorporate the student voice in decisions that affect their learning experience. Our overall goal was to develop a conversation between staff and students that could identify feedback strategies that were fit for purpose and could be utilised during the semester to effect positive change.

APPROACH OR METHODOLOGY/METHODS

The SAP team embarked on a 15-week project to identify the most appropriate feedback strategies. We worked together to identify ways to obtain both staff and student input that identified areas where staff and students thought alternative feedback strategies would be useful. Focus groups were conducted with staff and then with students from outside the project team to include a broad range of ideas from a range of different disciplines and perspectives.

ACTUAL OR ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Both staff and students place value in having alternative feedback mechanisms to the end of semester institutional surveys. There is a general consensus between students and staff that a mix of feedback types is required (e.g. at different times of semester, qualitative/quantitative, assessment focused). Some students see the value in providing feedback directly to staff, especially around assessment. Students are unclear about how the feedback they provide is used, indicating that some level of awareness raising would be beneficial. Some staff see value in "continuous feedback" about teaching, (e.g. about how the semester is going, and what issues students are having difficulty with) however this needs to be negotiated with students due to potential workload issues.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS/SUMMARY

This study provides an innovative way of encouraging students and staff to collaborate to identify common ground for the purpose and types of feedback that would be beneficial to both. It contributes

to the literature on students perceptions of students' evaluations of teaching and learning. This approach could create a genuine, positive and lasting dialogue about evaluation.

Introduction

Issues with institutional end of semester student evaluations are well documented in the literature (Mark, 2013; Steyn et al., 2019; Winstone et al, 2022). The issues include what is measured; whether feedback is biased and constructive (Lakeman et al, 2022; MacNeil et al., 2015); its professional and institutional impact (on promotion, tenure, accountability etc); as well as whether the student voice is adequately represented (Blair & Valdez, 2014). Despite students' own concerns about providing evaluations on courses and teaching (Stein et al., 2020) students desire and are able to provide more nuanced feedback (Polkinghorne et al., (2022). This project describes the results of a students-as-partners (SaP) project designed to explore both student and staff views and preferences with regards to alternative feedback approaches.

Berk (2005) states that there are twelve different strategies to measure teaching effectiveness. Whilst student ratings may be the dominant measure of good teaching, there are many others. These include; administrator, alumni, employer, peer and self-ratings, student interviews, videos of teaching practice, scholarship and awards, teaching portfolios, and learning outcomes measures. However, more could be made of innovative approaches to incorporate the student voice that leads to changes in teaching that also impact student learning without relying on student ratings as a primary source of information.

Innovative student feedback strategies include The Vibe (Leece and Campbell, 2011) or the use of smartphones (Blijlsma et al, 2019). The Vibe prompts students to input short phrases that relay the mood of an entire cohort of students as they progress through the semester. It consolidates students' expressions into a word cloud that is presented to students and staff and Is updated frequently based on student input. Blijlsma et al, 2019 explored the use of smart phones to obtain feedback on individual lessons. Student feedback about lessons was pooled, leading to enhanced reliability and validity of feedback. The immediacy of the feedback provided was also believed to be more useful as it enabled clear links to be drawn between the lesson and how students perceived teaching. This would provide teachers with the opportunity to resolve any misunderstandings about content for example at the next lesson.

Student as Partners (SaP) initiatives have highlighted the role that students can play in providing input and feedback on a range of curriculum and teaching practice. The University of Queensland (UQ) offers Student-Staff Partnership Projects (the UQ equivalent to Student-as- Partners programSaP hereafter to avoid confusion) which aim to create a cultural transformation by connecting students and staff as equal partners and collaborators on projects to enhance the UQ community. This program aims to create positive change within teaching and learning, student experience and governance/strategy environments. Student-Staff Partnership Projects are offered in 4 rounds per year in which individual projects have a duration between 15 – 21 weeks. We report experiences from a 15-week project (during Semester 1 in 2022) which aimed to incorporate the student voice as an important element in the (modern) design of learning. In collaboration with a student team, we explored adaptive feedback techniques seeking to improve learning interventions by integrating student voice in "shaping the future of teaching and learning" in a more proactive way than end of semester surveys.

Our student as partners project is a case study that demonstrates that SaPs are focused on what students and staff do together to further common educational goals (Matthews, 2016). Here the educational goal is to inform about adaptive feedback strategies.

Methods

Theoretical Framework

The motivation for the Student Staff Partnership (SaP hereafter to avoid confusion) project at UQ follows an approach described in Dunne et al (2011) where the theoretical framework of student as change agents has been divided into four quadrants (see Figure 1). We focus here on the 4th Quadrant where the 'Students as Change Agents' initiative moves into a more active role by an emphasis on student activity and the students being "the driver" for change. Hereby, students become actively engaged with the processes of change in the institution. Dunne et al. (2011) state (and report from examples at the University of Exeter) that "the importance of the model is that we are shifting the agenda towards students taking on greater leadership through actively participating in enhancing their learning experiences. They are moving beyond being commentators to being participants in change. Having a 'voice' is important, but may remain a passive experience in comparison to being given the opportunities to drive and lead change initiatives. Hence, our emphasis is in particular on the more active forms of participation of the lower segments of the model, without devaluing the importance of the other areas."
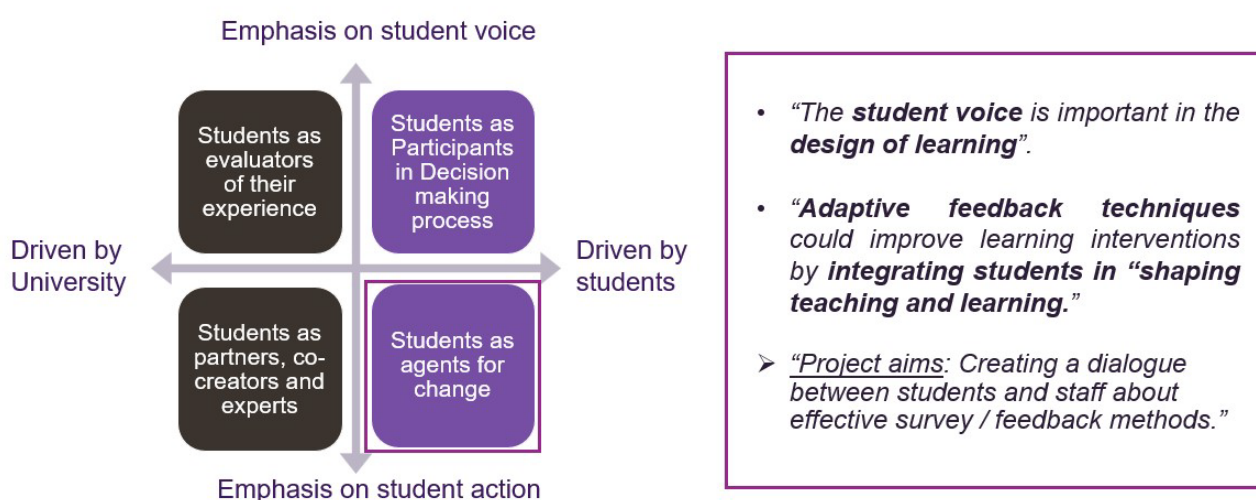

Figure 1: Theoretical Model after Dunne et al. (2011)

This student driven agenda is also one of the key elements for the SaP programme at UQ (embedding a genuine partnership between students and academics) and was our main motivation to work with students in this project. The student partners in this project had an opportunity to share their findings on existing feedback strategies (retrospective approaches such as Student Evaluation for Coordination and Teaching, SECaTs hereafter) and to develop additional ways to give more immediate feedback to course coordinators based on research they have undertaken with their peers and with the project team. This new insight into alternative feedback mechanisms, and making recommendations for change, will be valuable to academics but also for the employability of the student partners as they collaborate and engage with stakeholders to elicit ideas and find solutions.

Student survey

The original timeline of SaP project is depicted in Figure 2 and consisted of three different stages (Phase 1 to Phase 3) over the course of 15 weeks.
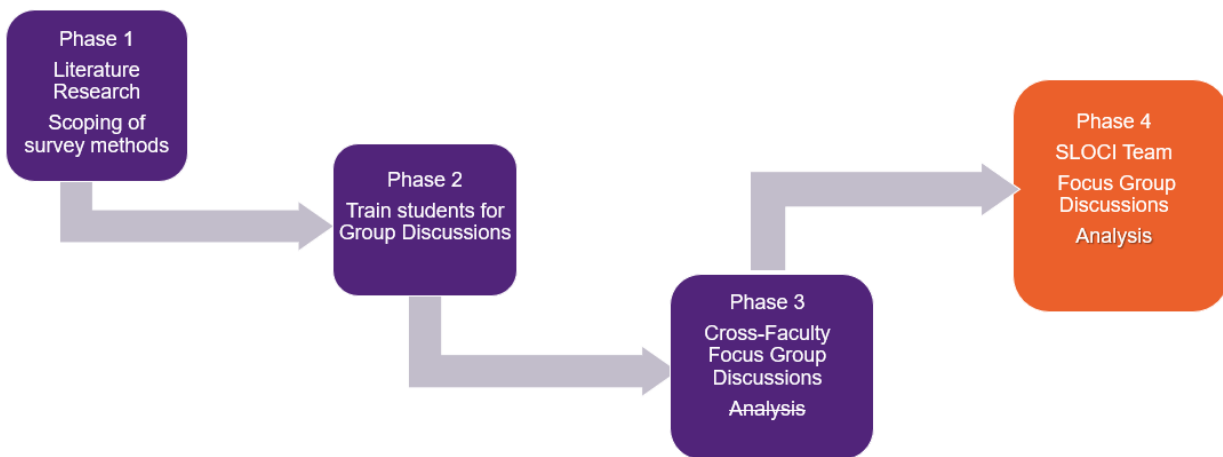
Figure 2: Timeline and Phases of SAP-Project and SLOCI survey

In Phase 1 the student team actively conducted a literature review and developed survey material (questions, strategies) for interviewing academics. Hereby, the students received support and guidance from educational researcher and academics within the project team but also by work ad survey methods conducted by the SLOCI team. The chosen method of gathering data was through the use of "Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)".

Phase 2 started with providing training / mentoring to the students for FGDs by experienced avademics and SLOCI Team supervisor. Usually two students from the SaP team met online with up to three-four academics who have volunteered to participate from different faculties for a FGD. The Interviews took approximately 45-60 minutes. Some sample questions that were asked during interviews are provided in Table 1. Responses were directly input using a digital device (laptop, tablet, or mobile phone) by the interviewee.

Phase 3 embodied the continuation of Focus Group Discussions, partial write-up and Analysis: Phase three was incomplete due to time and scheduling issues with the strict timeline of the SaP project (15 weeks).

The SaP team consisted of 5 students from four different faculties at UQ (EAIT; Human and Behavioural Sciences; Medicine; Business, Economics and Law), two academics and one Educational Researcher. Regular meetings between the SaP students and academic staff were held to update on progress of interviews and the project. In S1 / 2022 the SaP team (mainly the students) held FGDs with teaching staff from various faculties. These FGDs were both held in person but predominantly online (via zoom). A set of questions (see Table 1) was prepared and followed during the FGDs. Staff and students were asked the same questions, except for questions 1, which was rephrased to acknowledge their different contexts. The SLOCI team conducted 4 FGDs with students from a variety of disciplines.

Table 1: Questions used for the Focus Group Discussions for staff and students

Question 1	Are you happy with the way you get/provide feedback for (online) courses? This question contained a Likert Scale answer from 1 (not happy to very happy = 5)
Question 2	What timing / frequency of obtaining feedback would suit you?
Question 3	What sort of feedback would you like? Qualitative/quantitative, teaching/assessment etc.?
Question 4	Is there a type of feedback strategy/idea that you would like to see implemented?
Question 5	What effective methods have you used to gather feedback?
Question 6	Do you feel like having student ambassador(s) gathering feedback would be helpful?
Question 7	Do you have any more ideas or suggestions? (e.g. how can the SeCATs be improved/replaced?)

Due to time constraints and difficulties in scheduling and completing the survey within the given timeframe of the project (15 weeks) the FGDs were further complemented (Phase 4, Figure 2) by a group of students from the Faculty of Engineering Architecture and Information Technology (EAIT) which forms part of a "T&L group Student Led Observation for Course Improvement (SLOCI)." SLOCI was initiated in 2018 and originally consisted of four student representatives from each of the four engineering Schools (Chemical, Civil, Electrical and Mechanical and Mining (two students). Students are usually in their penultimate or final year of study. Unlike most SaP projects, the SLOCI team are paid an hourly, casual rate and work on a range of small-scale T&L projects over an extended time. This enables them to build a broader understanding of T&L practices, terminology and appropriate problem-solving strategies. The SLOCI team FGDs mainly targeted student groups. Group discussions were finalized in September / October 2022, the responses of all interviews (SAP data, SLOCI team) were coded and thematically analysed using NVivo (March 2020 release). Spontaneous notes were also made by focus group facilitators to capture key ideas and themes.

Results and Discussion

Survey Results

In terms of the specific results from this study most student reported that they were happy with how they provided feedback. However, in spite of this they had a range of suggestions for improvements. They particularly wished to provide feedback on assessment, both in terms of workload and clarity. Some students wished to provide feedback on a regular basis throughout the semester. This was similar but not identical to staff responses who said that they wanted continuous feedback. It does however mirror the approach taken by Bliljsma et al. (2019), that advocated for the use of an app to provide feedback on lessons in close to real time.

The main objective for the students was to identify opportunities, synergies or necessary different approaches for feedback collection. Both staff and students place value in having alternative feedback mechanisms to the end of semester institutional surveys. There is a general consensus between students and staff that a mix of feedback types is required (e.g. at different times of semester, qualitative/quantitative, assessment focused). Some students see the value in providing feedback directly to staff, especially around assessment. Students are unclear about how the feedback they provide is used, indicating that some level of awareness raising would be beneficial. Some staff see value in "continuous feedback" about teaching, (e.g. about how the semester is going, and what issues students are having difficulty with) however this needs to be negotiated with students due to potential workload issues.'

Focus Group discussions (FGDs) led by the SaP team revealed strong potential (but also further work) to develop targeted (fit-for-purpose) survey methods which will improve acceptance of surveys among student cohorts and produce more valuable feedback and ultimately better teaching. There was a strong consensus that timely surveys with a clearly stated purpose that the nature of the survey was to inform about improvement of teaching would result in stronger survey acceptance. Survey methods similar to the one described in Blijlsma et al, (2019) by obtaining feedback on individual lessons / classes via an app on mobile phones would constitute a more valuable feedback.

The student voice is an important element in the (modern) design of learning. Surveys designed by student partners and led by students provided most likely more honest feedback. On the other hand, the implementation of surveys (design, timing, costs, administration) is best discussed with teaching staff / course coordinators to advance ideas closer to application in the nearer future.

Experiences from the SaP Project

Undoubtedly, there are many beneficial outcomes of engaging in partnership. For instance, Cook-Sather et al. (2014) report positive learning impacts for students, while others observe an increased sense of leadership in responsibility and motivation around learning process for students and staff

engaging in partnership (Bovill et al. (2010), Werder et al. (2012). Furthermore, a transformed sense of self and self-awareness (Bovill, et al, 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; just to name a few) alongside the development of more inclusive teaching practices (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013) have been reported as positive outcomes by engaging in SaP projects. Likewise, Bovill et al (2016) discuss some challenges that exist in SaP projects; for instance an obvious challenge is due to the customs and culture of higher education which often makes it difficult for both students and staff to take on new roles and perspectives (equal partners). Another challenge could arise from institutional structures and practices that can present practical barriers to the kinds of collaboration and shared power involved in SaP project.

To add to this discussion, we can also report some positive and negative aspects that were identified by staff and students during the SaP: for instance, staff saw benefit in working with students and the ability to provide mentorship during the partnership. They also thought that the SaP programme offers a great outreach and diversity of faculties and that it also provides a good networking opportunity. Overall, the SaP was considered well organised making it easy to engage in the programme. However, the application procedure is competitive (~30 projects are funded per round at UQ) and uncertainty about the success of a project proposal was considered an obstacle for larger engagement. Other points of criticism include the strict timeline of SaP projects (in this case 15 weeks with no chances to extend the project), and the limited budget and payment (for students). We note that there were also some issues with varying availability of students over the semester.

The student partners generally had a positive perception of the SaP programme as it presents unique opportunities for learning. Furthermore, they highlighted working towards a shared goal, the teamwork and the ability to skill up communication and interpersonal skills as very positive aspects. In addition, the SaP programme provides a feel of being part of the community (especially as an external student). Some negative points were raised in terms of team dynamics (among the students) as some students – at least at times - did not seem intrinsically motivated / not committed. Also, they mentioned that the ambiguity about the nature of the relationship (equality between students and staff) could be perceived as lack of guidance from staff.

We also found that the scope of our project was larger than leading and analysing FGDs and that collaborating with students during the semester can present challenges around availability to commit time, especially towards the end of the semester when students are usually occupied with their own studies (exams). Likewise, students found that the time that academics can commit to participate in FGD or surveys can be difficult. We found that while the current SAP model at UQ is well designed for building partnerships and rapport between academics and students, sustainable partnership projects to evidence outcomes on a more representative scale need to rely on alternative funding schemes that are required to guarantee a deeper impact of the student voice on T&L.

Dunne et al. (2011) outlined a number of factors that were considered important for running student-led projects. Based on our experience we would like to point to this list of factors and re-emphasize some practical aspects that we also observed during this SaP project.
1. Ensure that students involved in any project have agreed who is going to be responsible for what and be clear with students about expectations for working arrangements and their role.
2. Have high expectations of the students but always be available in the background, and make it clear they can contact you as they need.
3. Keep in contact with students throughout a project and gain ongoing feedback on progress. This keeps the momentum going but also ensures that help and support is given as required.
4. On occasion, students may need support in finding strategies to work in ways that are not seen as intrusive or threatening, and therefore alienating to staff; talk through ideas for doing this.
5. Make sure that positive outcomes are shared with appropriate parties and seek strategies for doing this – ongoing success may depend in part on visibility. Having a conference at the end of the year gives an absolute deadline that provides an incentive for completing projects.

Outlook / Conclusion

Apart from developing techniques to improve T&L methods, this project offered a small opportunity to advance UQs student-staff partnership program and embed a genuine partnership between students and academics across the university. This student-student and student- staff exchange laid the groundwork for developing new forms of feedback collection that gives students a voice in teaching and learning practice. We anticipate that the knowledge gain about adaptive feedback methods will help schools, faculties and the wider community to rethink feedback strategies and to incorporate students as change agents. Additionally, our student partners developed key research skills and communication skills from their participation on the project. However, despite showing the need for better feedback practices, the implementation and use of such strategies is yet to come. Nonetheless, there are opportunities to inform and change university practice and to be more proactive on gathering student insights to their own higher education experience.

This project experience emphasizes the significance of information flow between student partners and other students as well as student partners – teaching staff. Based on the pedagogy there are number of benefits to SaP projects at UQ:

- Enhanced student engagement
- "More democratic" classroom
- Extensive benefits documented from successful examples

Likewise, we note that there are also some pitfalls to avoid:

- Periods of low production (exam periods, assignments, in-between semester)
- Agreement on goals and what is achievable
- Barrier needs to be broken down

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