Responding to feedback from students

Guidance about providing information for students

Contents

Introduction

The provision of information for prospective and current students[1] is a topic that has attracted increasing attention following policy changes giving UK students greater responsibility for funding their own higher education.[2] Accessible, reliable and trustworthy information is necessary to ensure that prospective students understand the nature of the learning experience they can expect on particular programmes from a higher education provider. The provision of appropriate information enables applicants to make informed choices in the light of their career aspirations and preferred learning styles, and ensures that the investment they make will be based on an accurate understanding of what is offered.

About this guidance

This guidance, published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), is one of a suite of publications intended to help providers ensure that transparent and helpful information is available about the teaching methods and learning opportunities associated with their higher education programmes. The provision of such information gives applicants an understanding of the teaching and learning methods, support and contact time, learning opportunities and workload that they can expect to experience while studying for particular qualifications.

The publications offer detailed guidance on providing information about the following topics:

- *Explaining staff teaching qualifications*
- *Explaining class size*
- *Explaining students' workload*
- *Responding to feedback from students* (this publication)

The guidance is intended to be of practical help to programme leaders, quality assurance professionals, academic registrars, educational development practitioners, marketing departments and others involved in providing and managing information for prospective and current students.

The four publications for providers are complemented by a companion set of guides for students on the same themes:

- *Information on staff teaching qualifications: a student guide*
- *Information on class size: a student guide*
- *Information on workload: a student guide*
- *Information on how you can comment on your course: a student guide*

Providers should endeavour, wherever possible, to make clear information available to prospective and current students about the teaching and learning experience, programme structure and the qualifications of the staff who will support that experience. When publishing such information, providers should refer to **Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education**, which addresses how providers make available information that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, in relation to wider information.

[1] See Part C of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.
[2] Implementation of proposals in the UK government White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, June 2011).

The present guidance relates to information about higher education provision that providers publish on their websites and in their promotional material, as distinct from the Key Information Set (KIS) required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland (DELNI).

Using this guidance

Providers are encouraged to draw upon this guidance in explaining their approach to providing information about the collection and use of feedback from students.
This information should be suitable for prospective and current students and should explain how feedback, both from previous cohorts and from current students, is collected and used. Typically this would include feedback collected at the end of a unit of study.
The opportunities provided for current students to give feedback should be explained, together with how this feedback is used to adapt the learning experience where appropriate.

The guidance should be used to complement the Indicators and Expectations of the relevant Chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, particularly Part C: Information about higher education provision and Chapters *B3: Learning and teaching*, *B5: Student engagement* and *B8: Programme monitoring and review*.

Research indicates that students generally have a well developed understanding of the variety of ways in which their learning is facilitated, together with other related issues, such as class size.[3] Since pedagogic approaches to higher education are therefore familiar to staff and students alike, the present guidance limits its discussion of them to indicative lists in the two appendices:

- Appendix 1: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods
- Appendix 2: Indicative list of assessment methods

[3] Bekhradnia (2012), NUS (2012), QAA (2011).

Policy developments since 2011

The UK government White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System*[4] highlighted the use of student surveys to provide feedback on the learning experience of particular programmes of study. It was suggested that summaries of feedback received by higher education providers should be made available to prospective and current students in order to identify both potential areas for improvement and examples of good practice. The White Paper established a requirement for all higher education providers to publish summary reports of their student evaluation surveys by the academic year 2013-14.

How student feedback is used

The policy changes taking place led the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to commission a multi-agency investigation of how student feedback is used. It was conducted by QAA, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the National Union of Students (NUS), and resulted in a paper for consideration by the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG). The paper, which has informed the present guidance, was based upon an analysis of the findings from 135 QAA institutional audits in England and Northern Ireland undertaken between 2006 and 2011. It investigated the following matters:

- how providers use student feedback and respond to students
- who is using the data from student surveys
- what enhancement and engagement activities arise from surveys.

QAA findings of good practice in use of student feedback

The135 institutional audit reports examined for the multi-agency investigation identified 23 features of good practice (in 22 institutions) under the heading 'management information - feedback from students'. The following are some of the features that were identified:

- the priority given to the role of students in contributing to quality assurance and enhancement; this can be achieved through various mechanisms, such as student representation and surveys
- the importance of showing how feedback from students is acted on; this may be done through a dedicated website or other mechanisms
- the use of mechanisms for ensuring greater engagement of students in feedback and monitoring, particularly the employment of (paid) student representatives with responsibilities to collect feedback and report on actions
- the use of a variety of methods, within an integrated strategy, for collecting, analysing and reporting actions taken in response to feedback
- the development of a feedback culture
- reporting on feedback collected at a module level within the module handbook (so the next cohort can see what actions have been taken in response to the previous cohort's evaluation) - the use of a pro forma for this report ensures the response is consistent and constructive.

QAA recommendations relating to the use of feedback

The135 institutional audit reports examined for the multi-agency investigation made 33 recommendations (to 29 institutions) relating to the use of feedback from students.

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[4] White Paper *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011)

Of these, 15 were deemed 'advisable' and 18 'desirable'. The following are some of the recommendations that were made.

- Consistency in how feedback is collected and reported upon at a module level, to enable an institutional overview to be taken and any themes identified. This might be in how module-level feedback is recorded within annual monitoring. Several institutions were encouraged to share practice in effective mechanisms for collecting feedback across the institution.
- The importance of 'closing the feedback loop' by letting students know what action had been taken. In some cases, this is linked to the need to improve response rates, which were seen to be low because students felt their feedback would make no difference. In one particular case, a view that outcomes from feedback were confidential to the staff involved limited how any response could be shared with students.
- The introduction of formal systems for collecting feedback where previously informal mechanisms had been used (generally in smaller institutions), to enable a more systematic response to issues raised.
- The need for systematic action planning in response to outcomes from feedback.
- The timing of collection of feedback to ensure that timely action can be taken; and more generally, ensuring that any action is taken in a timely fashion.

Common practice in module feedback

It is possible to identify a considerable amount of common practice across providers in the mechanisms used to collect and respond to feedback on individual modules. The following examples illustrate how practices are applied.

- Module evaluation is most often collected by means of a questionnaire. In some cases other methods are used to collect, or supplement, feedback, such as staff-student meetings or focus groups.
- Findings may be analysed by the department concerned, or by a central unit.
- The outcomes from questionnaires are discussed at programme level, often in a staff-student liaison committee (or equivalent).
- A summary of findings may be published, for example on the virtual learning environment, or the minutes from the committee discussion may be disseminated.
- Findings typically feed into annual monitoring reports (and their resulting action plans) and periodic review, and may also be reported upwards to relevant committees. In some cases, direct intervention (perhaps by the head of department) is triggered when quantitative scores fall below a predefined level.
- Some institutions provide a response to feedback in the module handbook, so the next cohort can see what changes have been made. In other cases, students are provided with the outcomes from evaluations to help them make their choice of modules.

Providing the information that students expect

When determining a policy on the publication of student feedback, higher education providers are encouraged to reflect on why they collect and respond to student feedback in certain ways. How do these practices inform the internal review of programmes?
The particular approach used should be explained within institutional or departmental teaching and learning strategies.

When communicating the approach to prospective and current students, it is important that the role of the student as a partner in learning is emphasised. The transition to higher education and the need to develop skills as independent and autonomous learners will challenge students in ways that could cause discomfort and dissatisfaction as they adjust to the demands of higher-level study. For some students, it may be a considerable challenge to develop a habit of engagement commensurate with the learning outcomes expected of graduates and postgraduates. This challenge should, however, be supported by a structured learning programme, with appropriate academic support at each stage, so that the learner is able to progress and demonstrate the appropriate outcomes. The learner must be an active participant in this process, with mutual responsibilities, and awareness of this expectation embedded in public information.

When setting out an approach to the publication of student feedback, the following principles may serve as a useful guide.

- Student feedback should be obtained at module level, as this is the primary unit of delivery in terms of the learning experience.
- Evaluations should be conducted using a range of mechanisms, determined by the provider and fit for purpose for the intended student cohort (for example, online for part-time or distance learning students).
- Current students should be given the opportunity to respond at the appropriate time.
- Providers should publish their responses to student module evaluations.
- Student satisfaction data should inform internal review processes and influence future planning.
- Collection, publishing and responding to student feedback should promote the enhancement of the learning experience.

References

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Appendix 1: Indicative list of learning and teaching methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to learning and teaching vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Methods are described in terms of how they are used to present course-level information rather than being evaluated from a pedagogical perspective.

Lecture

A presentation or talk on a particular topic
The term 'lecture' covers everything from the traditional model, where a single member of the institution's staff or an affiliate[5] introduces ideas or delivers facts to a group of students, to approaches that might be much more interactive, involve a variety of contributors, make use of a range of media and technologies, and take place virtually as well as in person. Lectures are assumed, in general, to involve larger groups of students than seminars and tutorials, but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

Seminar

A discussion or classroom session that focuses on a particular topic or project
Seminars are defined as sessions that provide the opportunity for students to engage in discussion of a particular topic and/or to explore it in more detail than might be covered in a lecture - the extent of interaction will depend on the delivery method. A typical model would involve a guided, tutor-led discussion in a small group. However, the term also encompasses student or peer-led classes with a staff member or affiliate present. Seminars are assumed in general to involve smaller groups of students than lectures, but size will vary depending upon the nature of what is being taught, the size of the overall student cohort, and practical concerns.

Webinar

A virtual lecture or seminar
The term 'webinar' refers to both a virtual lecture and an online seminar, made available through technology-enabled learning (TEL). Participation is regarded as guided independent study.

Tutorial

A meeting that involves one-to-one or small group supervision, feedback or detailed discussion on a particular topic or project
Tutorials may be distinguished from seminars for the stronger emphasis they place on the role of the tutor in giving direction or feedback. Tutorials can be used to provide one-to-one feedback in respect of assessed work and can happen virtually as well as face-to-face.

5 A lecturer, researcher, technician, member of support staff or graduate teaching assistant of the institution or a visiting or external specialist.

Project supervision

A meeting with a supervisor to discuss a particular piece of work
The term 'project supervision' is used to refer to the meetings that a student or group of students would have with a supervisor to plan, discuss and monitor progress on a particular piece of work, such as a dissertation or extended project. Meetings can take place virtually or in person. The size of a project supervision meeting will depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned and the nature of that work, but supervisions will frequently also take place on a one-to-one basis.

Demonstration

A session in which a practical technique or skill is demonstrated
Examples might include the demonstration of laboratory skills, clinical skills, performance art or fieldwork techniques. Demonstrations can take place in person or virtually. The size of a demonstration is likely to depend upon the number of students involved in the work concerned, as well as the nature of that work, but could also take place on a one-to-one basis.

Practical class or workshop

A session involving the acquisition, through practical application, of a particular skill or technique
Examples are wide ranging and could include a laboratory class, recital, artefact handling/identification, language conversation, sports match, and so on. Practical classes and workshops might incorporate elements of teaching or guided learning, and they are at least likely to be supervised or observed. These sessions are more likely to take place in person but, depending on the nature of the subject, may also be conducted remotely. The size of a practical class or workshop will depend upon the nature of the activity. Workshops are likely to involve at least a small group of students but practical classes could take place on a one-to-one basis.

Supervised time in studio/workshop

Time in which students work independently but under supervision, in a specialist facility such as a studio or workshop
Examples might include time spent in an art or design studio, or in a rehearsal space such as a workshop theatre. It could be timetabled or take place on an ad hoc basis. This type of learning frequently involves interaction with peers as well as staff. Due to the nature of the activity, it is unlikely to take place virtually.

Fieldwork

Practical work conducted at an external site
Examples of fieldwork might include survey work and other forms of data collection, excavations and explorations. The work might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervision could be provided by staff or appointed representatives. Fieldwork might occur in groups of various sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the work involved.

External visit

A visit to a location away from the usual learning spaces, to experience a particular environment, event, or exhibition relevant to the course of study
Examples are wide ranging and could include a visit to a business or industrial site, built environment site, museum or collection, or attendance at a performance or exhibition. These visits might be unsupervised or supervised, and supervisors could include staff or appointed representatives. Site visits may be carried out in groups of varying sizes, or by individuals, depending on the nature of the visit and the location.

Work-based and placement learning

Learning that takes place in the workplace
A key example of work-based learning would be a managed placement in an organisation or business. The term covers any learning that takes place through an organised work opportunity, rather than in a university or college setting. Some supervision or monitoring is likely be involved, and may be carried out either by a member of staff or a mentor within the host organisation. Due to the nature of the activity, work-based learning is unlikely to take place virtually. Students might undertake work-based learning individually or in groups, depending on the nature of the workplace and the learning involved.

Appendix 2: Indicative list of assessment methods

The list is presented as indicative to reflect that approaches to assessment vary according to the subject, mode of delivery and institution, and can change over time. Methods are described in terms of how they are used to assess course-level information rather than being evaluated from a pedagogical perspective.

Written examination

A question or set of questions relating to a particular area of study
Written examinations usually occur at the end of a period of learning and assess whether students have achieved the intended learning outcomes. They may be 'seen' (where students are aware in advance of the question(s) they are expected to answer), or 'unseen' (where the questions are only revealed in the examination itself). In an 'open-book' examination, a student is allowed to use a selection of reference materials. A written examination may require a range of different responses, including writing essays, writing short answers, solving problems or use of multiple-choice. Written examinations usually (but not always) take place under timed conditions.

Written assignment, including essay

An exercise completed in writing in the student's own time
A written exercise that typically has a deadline attached but which is not carried out under timed conditions. A well known example is the essay, where students are required to write about a particular topic or answer a question in depth. Other examples include written briefings on particular topics.

Report

A description, summary or other account of an experience or activity
There are many different kinds of report: often students are required to produce a report after participating in a practical activity such as fieldwork, laboratory work, work experience or a placement. Reports typically have a prescribed format and can serve as the culmination of a project.

Dissertation

An extended piece of written work, usually for purposes of summative assessment
A dissertation is a substantial piece of writing deriving from research that a student has undertaken. Dissertations are the result of a student's independent work, carried out under the guidance of a supervisor. Subject areas may follow different conventions in relation to the production of dissertations. (Note that other outputs from projects are listed separately.)

Portfolio

A compilation of coursework produced in response to specific assessment briefs
Portfolios of work are a usual component of art and design programmes, and frequently feature as an assessment method in competence-based qualifications. Typically, a portfolio contains a number of pieces of work, usually connected by a topic or theme. Students are usually required to organise their work and perhaps supplement it with reflective accounts in the form of diaries or logs.

Project outputs

The products of project work, often of a practical nature (excluding report/ dissertation)
Students may be assessed on the output of a period of project work (see also **Report** and **Dissertation**). Examples are diverse and include the staging of a play or other performance, a piece of artwork, a new product or a poster.

Oral assessment/presentation

A conversation or oral presentation on a given topic
Examples of oral assessments and presentations might include conversations, discussions, debates, presentations and individual contributions to seminars. This category would also include the viva voce exam, which is typically used by institutions in specific circumstances, such as to clarify assessment decisions or to test the thesis of a doctoral candidate.

Practical skills assessment

Assessment of a student's practical skills or competence
Practical skills assessment focuses on whether, and/or how well, a student performs a specific practical skill or technique (or competency). Examples include clinical skills, laboratory techniques, identification of or commentary on artwork, surveying skills, language translation or listening comprehension.

In the performing arts context, a performance can be used to assess the practical skills of individual students (or groups of students). It usually takes place as a 'one-off' live performance viewed by an examiner, though sometimes the examiner may review a recorded performance.

Group critique

A method of receiving feedback from both tutors and peers
In the visual arts, the group critique is an established method of receiving either formative or summative feedback from both tutors and peers.

Set exercises

Questions or tasks designed to assess the application of knowledge or of analytical, problem-solving or evaluative skills
Examples might include data interpretation and data analysis exercises, and problem-based or problem-solving exercises.

QAA 547 08/13

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ISBN 978 1 84979 908 9

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786