Quality Enhancement for E-Learning Courses: The Role of Student Feedback

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Abstract

The collection of student feedback is seen as a central strategy to monitor the quality and standards of teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions. The increasing use of technology to support face-to-face, blended and distance courses has led managers as well as practitioners to become increasingly concerned to identify appropriate ways of assuring the quality of this e-learning provision. This paper presents a study of the collection of student feedback in higher education e-learning courses and the use of this feedback for quality assurance and enhancement. We carried out a series of case studies of the procedures in place in four e-learning courses, and in each case study we collected the quality assurance documentation and interviewed stakeholders (administrators, educational technologists, tutors and students). The comparative examination of these two sets of data showed that the main strategies for collecting student feedback - module evaluations and student representation - were both strongly affected by the distinctive features of the mode of delivery in e-learning courses, and as a consequence they were not able to adequately support quality enhancement. The remote location of the students impacted on both student representation and on the response rates for module evaluations. The enhancement function of the module evaluations were adversely affected by lack of appropriate course management arising from the disaggregation of course processes and the resulting ambiguity in the allocation of responsibilities.

Keywords - distance education and telelearning; evaluation methodologies; post-secondary education;

1. Introduction

Determining students' views by a process of collecting feedback on their experience is widely recognised as a central strategy for monitoring the quality and standards of teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEFCE, 2002; HEFCE, 2003; QAA, 2006). Following the Cook Report (HEFCE, 2002) which set out the information about quality and standards of learning and teaching that should be collected by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the establishment of student views has become a key aspect of quality assurance and enhancement processes in UK universities (Watson, 2003). Harvey stresses the importance of establishing student views as a central activity for enhancement, highlighting that to be effective the data collected needs to be integrated into a regular cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback (Harvey, 2003).

The literature is rich in studies and examples of how to effectively collect good student feedback that can be used for enhancement purposes. However, collecting feedback effectively is not easy and the common problems of inappropriate questions, low response rates, inadequate analysis of data and failure to close the feedback loop are also widely reported (Harvey, 2003; Hendry et al., 2001; Leckey and Neill, 2001; Saunders and Williams, 2005; Watson, 2003).

The extensive experience and research in this field has to-date mainly concentrated on the collection of student feedback in campus-based courses, where students are asked to complete a paper questionnaire (Harvey, 2003), though there is an increasing use of online surveys. This experience of paper based or on-line surveys in campus-based courses does not necessarily generalise to the context of e-learning courses, where students are partially or totally at a distance from the campus and staff may have limited contact with them.

The assurance and enhancement of the growing number of e-learning courses in campus-based universities has increasingly become a concern for higher education practitioners and managers. There is much discussion about the appropriateness for assuring e-learning provision of the existing internal quality assurance and enhancement procedures in place in campus-based institutions. The literature largely supports the view that these procedures require some modification if they are to be applied to e-learning courses, and this position is based on the identification of distinctive features of e-learning courses which distinguish them from face-to-face and traditional distance learning courses.

Recognising the key role that the collection of student feedback has in the overall assurance and enhancement of quality, these distinctive features of e-learning courses raise concerns about the effectiveness of the strategies used by campus-based universities to gather feedback from their students on these courses. This paper reports on a study that set out to identify whether and, if so, then how these features of e-learning courses impact on the effectiveness of the strategies for collecting student feedback. The following sections discuss the nature of these distinctive features of e-learning, the methodology of the present study, the findings and the implications for both higher education institutions and e-learning practitioners.

2. Quality assurance in Higher Education

Higher Education Institutions in the UK use a number of internal quality assurance and quality enhancement procedures to assure the academic quality of their programmes in line with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice (QAA, 2008). This Code of Practice was established to support institutions by providing a framework that covers the main issues HEIs need to address and it contains explicit guidelines to institutions on the collection of feedback from students as a mechanism for the monitoring and review of the quality of the learning and teaching processes. Over the last few years the QAA has put increasing emphasis on quality enhancement in its arrangements for institutional audits, and reinforced the importance it gives to the establishment of student views for an effective management of quality (QAA, 2006).

Higher Education Institutions have many different ways for collecting student views, including informal discussions, focus groups, student representation and

questionnaires, and they collect this information at several different levels (institutional, programme, module) for different purposes (Harvey, 2003). A review of the outcomes of institutional audits (QAA, 2009) found that that the collection of feedback in the form of evaluations and/or student satisfaction surveys at the level of modules, and the establishment of student representation were the two most used mechanisms for establishing student views.

Another study (HEFCE, 2003) also found that the greatest concentration of feedback was at the module level:

> *The most common level at which feedback is collected is the module, followed by the programme level. Many institutions collect feedback at both levels. However, the module is felt to be the most effective level for gathering and using feedback because it is closest to the student experience and therefore most appropriate to ensuring fairly immediate improvements to the teaching and learning process.*
>
> (HEFCE, 2003:51-52)

Both the QAA (2009) and HEFCE (2003) reports note the difficulties that the collection of feedback presents when courses are delivered via flexible, distant or blended modes.

3. E-learning features impacting on quality assurance

During the last decade campus-based universities have been expanding their use of learning technologies for the delivery of courses. This increasing use of technology has raised wide concerns about the quality of this mode of provision, and has led to a search to identify suitable ways to assure and enhance its quality (Oliver, 2005; Parker, 2004).

A range of literature supports the view that the use of e-learning necessitates some adaptation of the quality assurance and quality enhancement procedures designed for on-campus courses (Connolly, Jones and O'Shea, 2005; CVCP, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Hope, 2001; Middlehurst and Campbell, 2003; O'Shea, Bearman and Downes, 1996; Robinson, 2004; Roffe, 2002; Stella and Gnanam, 2004; Tait, 1999; Walmsley, 2004). The main arguments supporting this view are based on an analysis of the differences between e-learning and campus-based learning. Four important factors have been identified:

- disaggregated processes: in e-learning courses the processes involved (e.g. design, delivery, assessment) are often the responsibility of separate teams, in contrast with conventional face-to-face courses where these tasks are responsibility of one team;
- distribution of teams: academic staff do not work in isolation; staff need to work collaboratively, interacting with other professionals, and in the case of e-learning courses these people may well be located in different sites;
- distant location of students: staff have less direct access to students than with campus-based learning; and
- openness to review: in e-learning courses student (and tutor) activities in using technology for learning can be monitored in greater depth, and more continuously and unobtrusively than in campus-based learning or traditional distance learning.

These features of e-learning courses represent a challenge to the way quality assurance and enhancement is managed, and in particular to the collection of student feedback. A review of 129 institutional audit reports produced by the QAA between 2003 and 2006 (Jara and Mellar, 2008) showed that modifications to on-campus strategies for collecting feedback from students in e-learning courses were reported by just 11% of the institutions. A number of audit reports admitted that student feedback on e-learning courses was not always collected methodically; where it was collected two main modifications were applied to the standard procedures:

- adaptation of forms to suit the special features of the e-learning courses (i.e. adding or modifying questions)
- move to online surveys and the creation of discussion forums as strategies for collecting feedback – changes intended to improve on the low response rates to traditionally administered questionnaires.

Although there were no mentions of any modification to the procedures for student representation, several of the audit reports showed recognition of the difficulties encountered with implementing student representation in e-learning courses.

This review of audit reports showed that although higher education institutions may be aware of the need to adapt current quality assurance and enhancement procedures for their e-learning courses, changes to existing practice – at least in the case of the strategies for establishing student views – are not widespread. So, in order to get to get a clearer picture of the relationship between the features of e-learning courses and these procedures as effective mechanisms for the assurance and enhancement of the courses we carried out a series of case studies.

4. Case studies

Four case studies were carried out of on-line or mixed mode courses that were part of the academic offer of four different dual mode UK higher education institutions and had been subject to quality assurance processes.

Large amounts of documentation, most of it confidential, were collected at each site and face-to-face interviews of staff and students were carried out. All sites were generous in allowing access, though they varied in their own ability to trace relevant and up to date documentation.

For each case study two sets of data were gathered:

a) the quality assurance documentation related to the particular courses selected. The documentation collected for each case study varied in size and content, as the different institutions organised and presented their records in different ways (e.g. module evaluations might or might not include the questionnaire used, reports of its results, and reports of one-off consultation events carried out with students). As a result of this variation a great deal of effort had to go into trying to identify the necessary data to allow comparability between sites.

b) interviews with a group of participants for each course including academic staff, tutors, administrators, students, support staff and developers/designers. Seeking to cover as many roles as possible, the target was to interview at least four staff and four students per course. This target was not always possible to

achieve, particularly as regards students who were at a distance and so more difficult to get access to. In total 26 people were interviewed (10 students and 16 staff members). Most of the students interviewed were identified by the tutors, and this was potentially an issue, and so we carried out a short online survey, aiming to reach a larger number of students, in order to check whether the views expressed by the students interviewed were representative of those of the wider body of students. This survey collected responses from 95 students.

The quality assurance documentation was analysed in order to map out the quality issues that were being captured by the procedures, and the extent to which these were being effectively captured. The interviews were analysed in order to identify the quality issues as described by the participants. The results obtained from the analysis of the interviews were then compared with the results of the documentary analysis in order to get a map of the issues mentioned by the interviewees that were not covered in the quality assurance documentation. In order to carry out this comparison, the documents and the interview transcriptions were coded using a list of quality categories based on the theoretical aspects of quality assurance derived from the literature.

These quality categories were created based on the examination of the main quality assurance documentation that higher education institutions are required to consider when applying their internal procedures, such as the Quality Assurance Agency's Code of Practice. The list of categories produced was organised in three main aspects of quality: standards of outcomes, learning opportunities and quality assurance procedures for enhancement. Each of these aspects was subsequently subdivided into more detailed categories covering the different aspects of courses, its different stages and their procedures for enhancement, generating in the end 21 detailed quality categories used to code and analyse the data collected. (for details see Jara and Mellar, 2007).

5. Results and discussion

The comparative analysis showed that the main issues missing from the quality assurance documentation that were mentioned by the interviewees were those related to student participation and the support provided to the students, suggesting that the quality assurance procedures were failing to gather sufficient information from the students. This failure was due either to the inappropriateness of the quality assurance procedures, or to the inadequate recording of their implementation, thus pointing to the partial failure of the mechanisms for providing this feedback.

The case studies showed that the application of the quality assurance procedures for collecting student feedback on these e-learning courses were being affected by three of the four factors identified in the literature: disaggregated processes, distributed teams and distance of students. The data also indicated that a novel factor – the position that the e-learning courses had within the institutions – was also impacting on the application of these procedures:

- The e-learning courses in the study, although belonging to a range of universities, shared in common a fairly 'detached' position within their institutions. The e-learning courses were considered non-mainstream activities, the central management of the universities failed to pay particular attention to them and

consequently they were often not appropriately overseen, and this led to courses omitting the collection of relevant information for quality assurance and enhancement purposes.

- The disaggregation of processes found in e-learning courses - usually organised so that the tasks of design, delivery and assessment were carried out by different teams - affected the levels of coordination and communication among team members, and this impacted in particular on the allocation of responsibilities for quality assurance processes, so a survey might be designed by a development team, but not then administered by the delivery team because no-one was designated to carry it out.
- E-learning course teams were taught by a mixture of full and part time tutors, tutors with fee-based contracts and tutors working from home or elsewhere. This distributed feature of teams was often not fully recognised by course leaders who often failed to adapt their communication mechanisms appropriately, tending to rely on the rather informal strategies used for on-campus course teams. As a result, team members who were located off campus did not have all the information regarding quality assurance and enhancement processes in place.
- The distance of students directly impacted on the implementation of the mechanisms for establishing student views as students were usually unable to attend on-campus meetings and tutors were not able to directly interact with students in order to obtain feedback about course processes. However, these difficulties were found to be partially compensated for by strong and trusting on-line relationships between students and tutors which were built up in some courses, though these opportunities were not always taken up by course teams.

The fourth factor identified in the literature – openness to review – was not found to impact on the application of mechanisms to collect feedback from students. The possibilities offered to course teams by the use of technologies to record and collect student participation, views and feedback were overlooked.

The specific impact that these factors were found to have on the mechanisms for collecting feedback – module evaluations and student representation - will be presented in the next two sections.

5.1. Module evaluations

Three of the four case studies had module evaluations as their main strategy for collecting feedback from students.

The data gathered about module evaluations showed that this quality assurance mechanism was problematic even at the level of formal compliance. Each case study presented a different way of implementing module evaluations, and most of them showed an evolving practice, in that they had changed their practice more than once in recent years either to get better response rates or to get a higher quality of feedback. A brief account of the approach to module evaluations found in each case study is presented below:

> In Course A a number of different methods were tried before coming to agree on a simple but well-defined strategy, which involved sending a personalised e-mail with a small number of open-ended questions after each assignment together with the assignment feedback. The e-mail was sent by the

administrator who was in charge of collecting the responses and also for collating them and then making them available to the rest of the team. Three elements were new to this strategy compared with previous strategies: the questionnaire was centrally administered (previously each tutor sent out the questionnaires for his/her module); it was sent out at a clearly defined time; and the processes for collecting and reporting the results were clear to students and staff.

In Course B an online survey had been used for several years with an explicit procedure for monitoring and reporting but they were getting very low response rates and poor quality responses, despite the well-established procedure. Whilst the course leader collated and reported on the results, the rest of the course team were unaware that these procedures were taking place.

In Course C no module evaluation was used. The file with the survey questions was available in the VLE, but students were not aware of it and staff never asked students to complete it. In this course, the lack of coordination between the course leader and the development team that had created the survey resulted in the procedure never being applied.

In Course D after several trials an approach using an online survey was agreed upon. The strategy adopted was influenced by the high number of students expected to complete the survey and thus the need to have an automated system for analysis and reporting. The students confirmed that they were more willing to respond to the survey now that it was available online.

These case studies showed that the implementation of module evaluations often presented problems, and as a consequence they were ineffective for enhancement purposes. The main reasons for this were:

- the low number of responses
- the absence of clear and effective strategies for collecting and processing the results.

The main challenge for staff in these e-learning courses was to obtain enough relevant feedback to make the collected data useful for quality assurance and enhancement. Low response rates led course teams to discard the results as invalid, regardless of their content. Low response rates were largely a consequence of the fact that students were at a distance, and as a result course teams had less control over the process. The strategies to overcome this included various attempts to improve the questionnaires, such as making questions more meaningful in order to motivate students to respond, and by changing the way the questionnaires were administered (e.g. moving surveys online).

> *…we do it online but as you are seeing from comments that's an area of weakness. We don't have enough evaluation, we want more.* (Tutor)

The absence of clear and effective strategies for collecting and processing the results sometimes meant that the responses were left untouched or only superficially analysed, so that they lost their potential to illuminate the evaluation and eventual improvement of the course. In Courses B and D the teams were primarily focused on the appropriate application of the questionnaires and in obtaining more results, rather than on planning how the results were going to be analysed and later used, and who would be responsible for this process.

This situation suggests that the disaggregation of processes and the resulting ambiguity in the allocation of responsibilities were affecting the appropriate management of student feedback. The success Course A showed in managing module evaluations was due both to having a clear strategy, and the fact that there was one person in charge of the whole process, from the design of the questionnaire up to the reporting of results. In contrast, in Course C there was no named person responsible, and as a result no one took care of the processes associated with the collection of feedback.

> *'…I think probably [the module evaluation] fell between the cracks for this session, because I thought …[…]… would be sent out by the development team to all the students but it didn't go out at all, not to our students and I don't know who was responsible for sending it out…'* (Tutor)

As module evaluations were the main, and often the only, mechanism by which courses gathered feedback from students, the focus on getting more responses is understandable. However, by not analysing and using the results effectively, the evaluations became a meaningless procedure with no effect on the enhancement activities of the teams.

5.2. Student representation

Student representation as a method for collecting student feedback was only in operation in one of the case studies, and this course had a combination of online and mixed-mode modules. Student feedback was collected through the appointment of one or more representatives who were tasked with collating the comments from their peers and with attending meetings.

The other three courses were fully-online and they had not implemented any form of student representation. The reasons given by tutors for not doing this were that students were spread around the country and abroad so they could not attend the meetings and that the students did not know each other so they would not be able to select their representatives. Students' views were similar, and they also anticipated difficulties in collecting other students' opinions and they regarded this as a major barrier.

In the course that did have student representation in operation tutors said that they found problems in getting representatives to collect feedback and attend meetings, and the students interviewed argued that the student representatives were not widely used in this course as they were not needed because the students could always contact the tutor directly should there be any problems or issues to comment on.

> *'I would have just seen my own tutor… […] … to be totally honest it wouldn't cross my mind to go through that channel [the student representative].'* (Student)

5.3. Implications for practice

E-learning course teams need to address the issues identified in this study if they are to improve the effectiveness of their student feedback strategies.

Course teams need to address the quantity and quality of the feedback they are getting from students from module evaluation and also more importantly they need to

ensure that the data is analysed and acted upon. The problems identified in e-learning courses are similar to the ones reported for campus-based courses (Harvey, 2003; Leckey and Neill, 2001), and the results of this study highlight the factors that are creating these difficulties, namely low response rates and the lack of proper analysis and action upon the feedback collected. In e-learning courses teams need to resolve any ambiguity in the allocation of responsibilities, to make sure module evaluations are not only carried out but that their results are collated, shared by the team and used to improve the quality of the students' teaching and learning experience.

Course teams tended to overlook the relevance of student representation as a feedback mechanism in e-learning courses, and the remote location of students was found to have a strong impact on student representation. This may be a difficult mechanism to implement in e-learning courses, but tutors need to look for ways of compensating for this. In particular, tutors need to explore further the possibilities offered by the usually close relationship they establish with their students in on-line interactions as a means of obtaining feedback.

These results point to the need for practitioners to look for new ways in which student feedback can be gathered in e-learning courses. The interviews revealed other strategies such as online events and online discussion boards that had been implemented occasionally by the case study courses with varying success.

Harvey suggests, for feedback to be useful for enhancement purposes, there is a need to move away from formal evaluation surveys at the end of modules as the primary source of feedback and to look for more qualitative, dialogic methods (Harvey, 2003). Research carried out by Daly (Daly, 2008) looking at embedded forms of evaluation for mixed mode courses is a practical contribution in this area. This approach, which has been successfully applied in on-line courses (Potter, 2008) consists in embedding evaluation tasks as part of the activities of the e-learning course, encouraging students to think about their own learning and how the course design, materials and/or activities have supported them (or not) in this process. By posing questions designed to prompt students' reflection on their own learning, this strategy offers the opportunity to explore students' experiences and the possibility of identifying difficulties and responding to them while students are still on the course.

6. Conclusions

The study of the effectiveness of procedures to assure and enhance quality indicated that the main strategies for collecting student feedback (module evaluations and student representation) were strongly affected by features of the on-line delivery of the course.

Module evaluations were affected by the remote location of the students which impacted on the response rates; the enhancement function of the module evaluations was found to be severely affected by the disaggregation of processes and the resulting ambiguity in the allocation of responsibilities, which impacted on the appropriate management of students' feedback.

Student representation was also affected by the remote location of the students. It was interesting to find however, that students did not find the lack of student representation a problem, as they felt the relationships established with their tutors on-line were close enough for the tutors to act as the main channel for feedback.

These findings raise challenges for e-learning course teams in collecting student feedback. Teams needs to use a wider range of mechanisms to reduce the effects of students being at a distance, and also need to ensure that collected data is analysed and acted upon. Course leaders need to explicitly assign responsibilities for quality assurance, facilitating in this way the collection of feedback and its use for the enhancement of the quality of the e-learning courses.

7. References