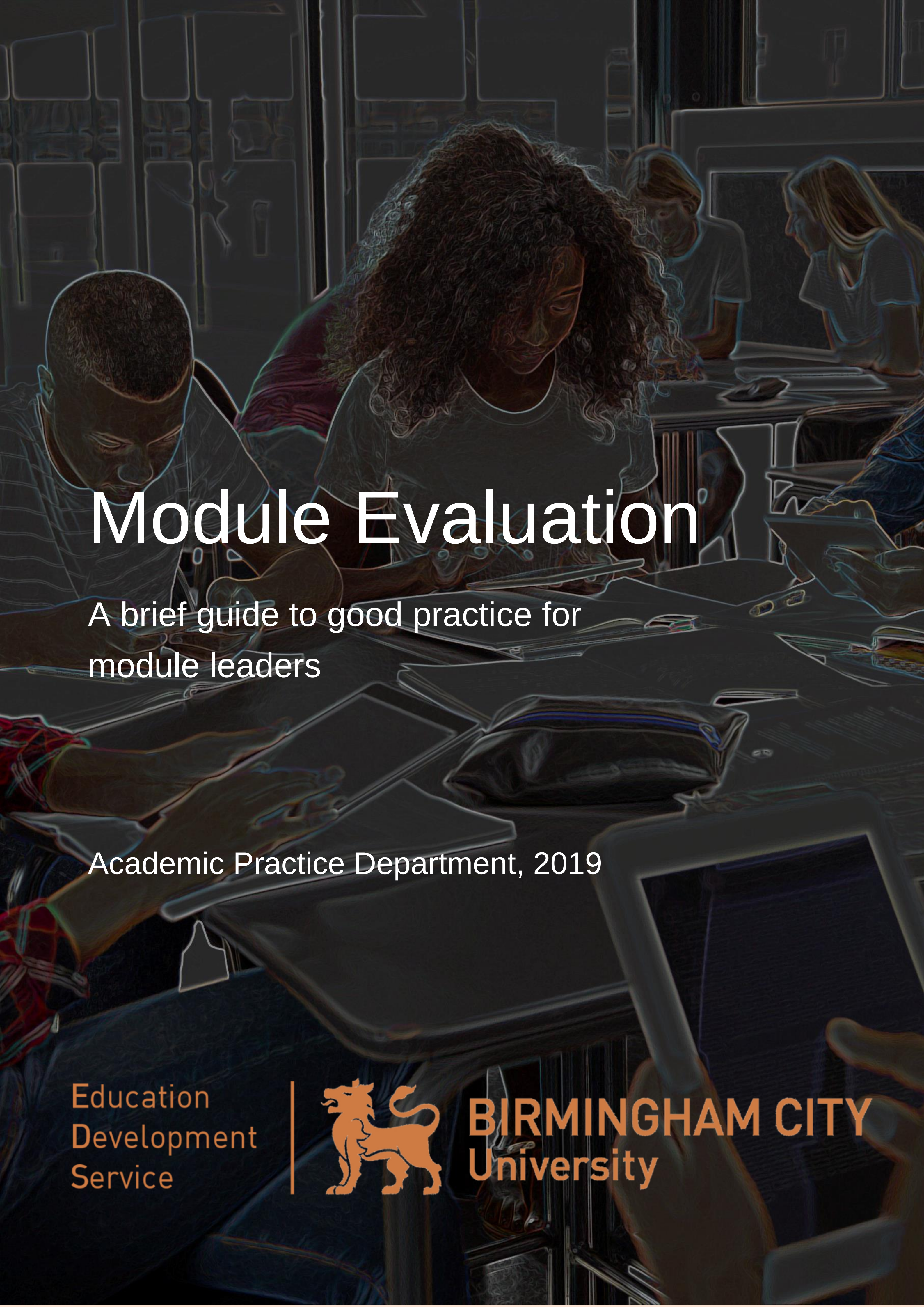

Module Evaluation

A brief guide to good practice for module leaders

Academic Practice Department, 2019

Education Development Service | BIRMINGHAM CITY University

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Acknowledgements

In order to provide a guide to ‘best practice’, and in addition to reviewing academic and research literature on the subject, an examination of openly available practice and policy documentation from across the sector was carried out. This document has been influenced, in particular, by module evaluation guidelines from the HEA, UCU Southampton, University of Exeter, University of Huddersfield, Keele University, Leeds Becket University, Liverpool John Moores University, University of Suffolk and University of Sussex.

Introduction

The university is moving towards a standardised approach to course (as a whole) evaluation and away from focussing on a standardised approach to module evaluation. This is because a course is much more than the sum of its modules. In many ways the course, as experienced by students, is equally about the extra-modular experiences, the spaces between the modules, the additional support offered, the personal tutoring, the timetable, the organisation, the placements, the way other departments such as the library or IT support them and so on.

However, a move towards a standardised approach to course level evaluation does not mean that module evaluation should stop, it just means that decisions about how and when it should happen should be made at a local level. Module evaluation is fundamental to improving teaching and considering, '*how learning opportunities for students may be improved*.' (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2018).

This brief guide offers some thoughts on the key questions of why and when to carry out module evaluation along with some practical suggestions of how to do it. Whilst this is intended as a practical document, colleagues may be interested in exploring the bibliography which contains both references to works cited and further reading around a range of issues touched on here.

Why carry out module evaluation

Module evaluation is a key component of Quality Enhancement and can serve several key purposes:

- Allow continuous, iterative improvement of the module's content and teaching methods
- Provide feedback to teachers on quality of teaching
- Help teachers understand what approaches students find valuable
- Alert teachers to problems and suggest ways to rectify them
- Demonstrate to students that their opinions matter and concerns are acted upon
- Provide evidence of good practice to managers
- To support career advancement

Making decisions locally

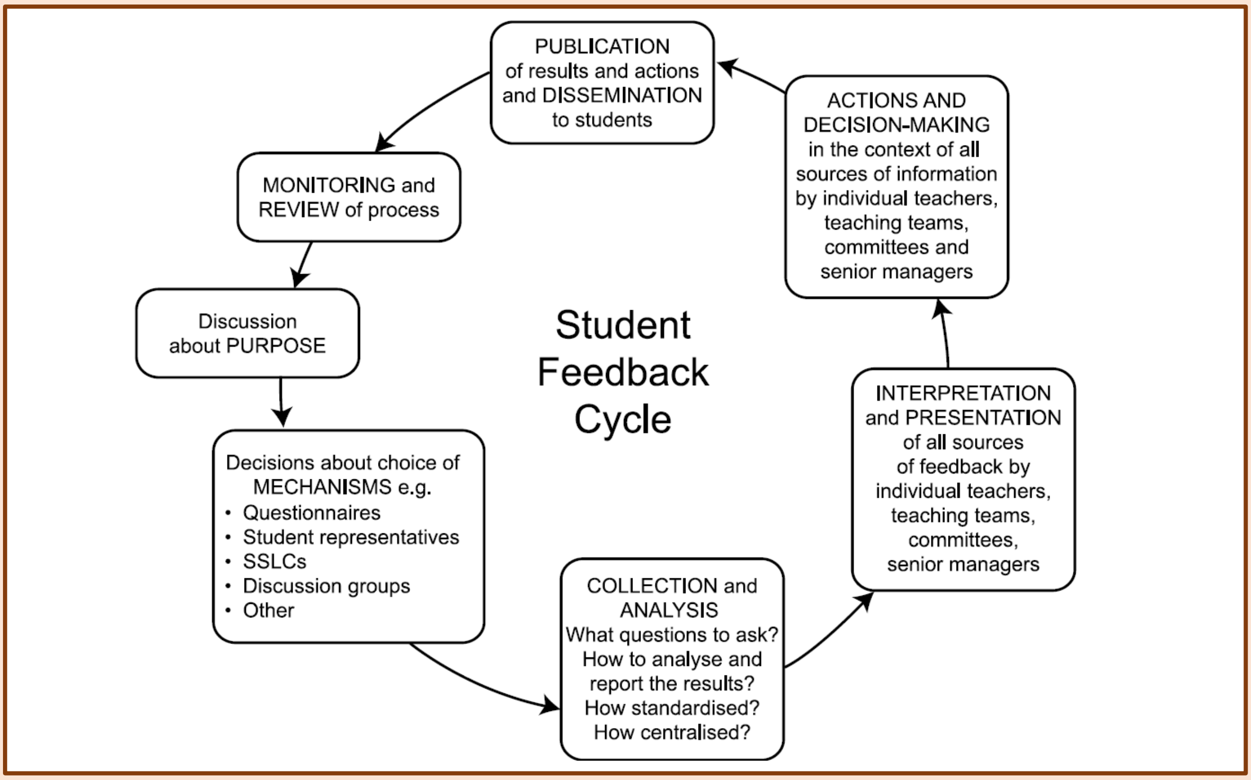
There is plenty of evidence that a more localised approach can have significant benefits, due to the fact that evaluations can be made bespoke to the situation. If a module is taught mainly through lectures and seminars, it does not make sense to evaluate it in the same way as module taught mainly through tutorial supervision, or one taught mainly through practical workshops or another that is linked directly to a placement experience. The main disadvantage, of course, is the inability to provide standardised data across all modules, but this is mitigated by an institutional approach at a course level. These benefits are noted not just, as might be expected, by academics, but often by the students themselves. For example, in Wiley's (2019) study into student perceptions of standardised module evaluation, the students recognized,

> …some general advantages of a university wide system, such as facilitating comparison between different modules; but they also acknowledged several shortcomings relating to

its lack of sensitivity to individual module contexts and schedules, yielding the overall view that standardised surveys are only partially effective as a means of teaching evaluation. (Wiley, 2019)

The Student Feedback Cycle

Gathering data through module evaluation can be seen as a cyclical process. The work of Brennan & Williams (2004) on student feedback provides a useful starting point.



The Student Feedback Cycle - (Brennan & Williams, 2004)

When applied to module evaluations it is important to start with the, 'Discussion about PURPOSE'. Consideration should be given to the potential possible purposes previously highlighted and, as a result of that, you should ensure clarity about what the purpose of the evaluation actually is.

As the module evaluation can have several purposes and there are several MECHANISMS that can be used to gather data, it is important to match decisions about how the evaluation will be carried out with decisions about the purpose you are trying to serve.

At this point it is worth briefly mentioning issues of epistemology and methodology. If you consider that the primary purpose of module evaluation is to understand and improve individual students' lived experience of the module then you are likely to be drawn to a more qualitative methodology (open question interviews or focus groups, unstructured or open ended questionnaires etc.). If you consider the primary purpose to be understanding the cohort's attitude to key issues with a focus on improving things for the most students, then you are likely to be drawn to more qualitative approaches (closed question interviews and questionnaires etc.).

There is no right or wrong here, but it is important to recognise that your personal attitude to questions of epistemology and methodology is likely to influence the way you carry out module evaluations. Unless you have clearly defined your purpose in the first place an unrecognised bias for a particular methodology could provide you with data that do not support your purpose.

Once mechanisms are decided upon in principle, practical decisions need to then be made about the COLLECTION and ANALYSIS of the data. The last section of this guide provides guidance on a range of practical solutions to choose from.

INTERPRETATION and PRESENTATION follows next. Here you need to work out what the data is telling you and be prepared to present your analysis to colleagues (especially in large, multiple tutor modules) and managers. At the same time defining ACTIONS should come as a natural consequence of this analysis and your DECISION MAKING process for what you are going to do in response should be clear and transparent.

PUBLICATION of both the results of the evaluation and the actions you have taken, or are going to take, to students is important so that they can see that their voice is being heard. Remember that you do not always need to agree with the students or do what they have asked for but DISSEMINATION of your reasons for your decisions is vital to ensure that students trust in the process.

It is easy, at this point, to consider that the job is done, however you need to put MONITORING systems in place to ensure that your actions are having the desired effect and REVIEW the impact in preparation for further iterations of the cycle.

When to carry out module evaluation

When it comes to consideration of timing, you essentially have three choices:

Mid module evaluation

There is a growing appreciation in the sector that mid-module evaluation is likely to have the most significant impact on student satisfaction. This is because it addresses the two issues most important to students: Alerting teachers to problems and suggesting ways to rectify them and demonstrating to students that their opinions matter and that concerns are acted upon. The mid-point does not necessarily have to be taken literally – the structure of the module (e.g. short and fat, long and thin, two-part assessment, placement focussed etc.) may mean that it makes more sense to carry out the evaluation closer to the 1/3rd or 2/3rd points. However, the principle of mid module evaluation is that it gives you time to do something about any issues raised *with the same students, before it's too late* and certainly before they take any major assessment component.

End of module evaluation

Whilst less likely to be a consideration of students (Chen & Hoshower, 2003), end of module evaluation is perhaps most valuable to teachers as they can use the data to reflect on the whole module from start to finish including its successes and its challenges and how well students have succeeded. This enables them to make decisions about teaching methods, content, assessments etc. in time for the next run of the module. It also provides data that can be more easily used for career advancement (e.g. application for HEA Fellowship or conferment promotion) or for demonstrating competence to managers. The obvious downside is, of course, that the students providing the evaluation data are not the ones benefitting from it meaning that students are less likely to want to provide feedback and potentially creating resentment that later cohorts receive 'preferential' treatment.

Continuous (weekly or session by session) evaluation

Continuous evaluation has some advantages, the main being the speed with which you can respond to issues and potentially solve small problems before they become large ones. It also sends a strong message about how you want to work in partnership with your students. However, some studies have shown that too much student evaluation can lead to lower levels of participation and commensurately lower value being derived. For example in one study that used weekly evaluations (Winchester & Winchester, 2012) it was found that, *'the weekly feedback soon became routine and too onerous a task, and thus had a tendency towards being superficially conducted. Students were more inclined to comment on negative issues, rather than critically analyse positive ones.'*

It is, of course, possible to combine these approaches by, for example, having both a mid-module evaluation and an end of module evaluation or having brief, on-going evaluation followed by a more substantial end of module event.

Again, it is important to stress that decisions about timing should match decisions about PURPOSE. It is no use stating that a purpose of the evaluation is see how ready students feel to complete the coursework if the main briefing session for that component is in week 6 and the module is evaluated in week 5. Equally, if you want to understand how well the on boarding and induction process for the module worked, it may not be sensible to wait until the very end when students are focussed on revision for the exam.

You will also need to consider the timing in relation to PUBLICATION and DISSEMINATION of the results, and your actions in response, to students. This is particularly important if you chose to evaluate at the end of a module as you will not be able to do this face to face as you would with mid module or continuous evaluation.

How to carry out module evaluation

Types of Question

The type of question you use again depends on the PURPOSE. There are several points to consider:

Open and Closed Questions

In general terms, open questions will give you qualitative data and closed questions will give you quantitative data. It is quite common to pair closed and open questions. For example:

A. Do you feel well prepared for the assignment? [yes] [no]
B. What part of the module has prepared you the most? What further support do you need?

Question Focus

Leading questions (questions designed to provoke a specific response) should obviously be avoided but when considering the PURPOSE of the question it will sometimes be necessary to focus on specific aspects of the module. You might therefore want to have a mix of general and specific questions. Here are some examples of general questions and questions with a specific focus:

General Questions

- Have you enjoyed the Module? Why?
- Describe the best thing and the worst thing about this module.
- Would you recommend this (optional) module to other students? Why?
- What have you leant the most about from this module?

Specific questions

- How valuable were the guest lectures?
- How well do you think the assessment matched the module content?
- How much preparation did you do for the seminars? Why?
- Did you use the reading list? How useful was it?

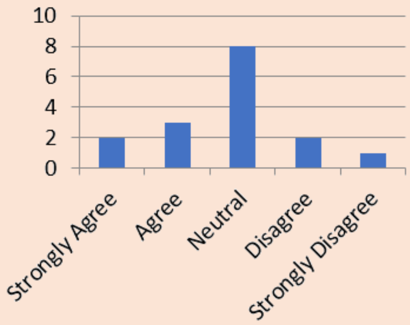
Likert Scales

Likert scales are often used to gather data about opinions. They assume that opinions are not absolute but exist along a spectrum. In its most common form a Likert scale item is presented as a statement that the respondent has to declare a level of agreement with. The scale itself is essentially arbitrary but is commonly presented as a 5-point scale. For example:

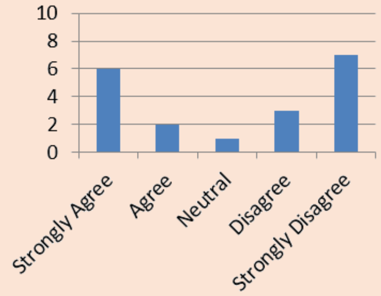
I feel well prepared for the assignment.	**[strongly agree] [agree] [neither agree nor disagree] [disagree] [strongly disagree]**

As used in social science research, use of Likert scales can be controversial, especially when the levels of agreement are assigned numerical values and averages are generated. This is because the scale assumes a linearity that may not actually exist (Stark & Freishtat, 2014). In general, therefore, it is best to present and interpret results of Likert scales in graphical terms. For Example:

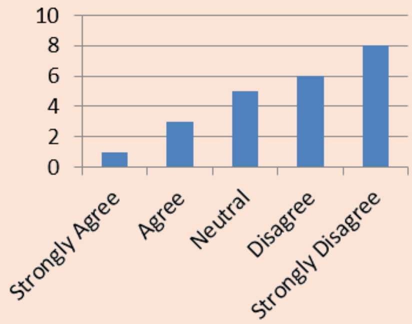
Normal Response



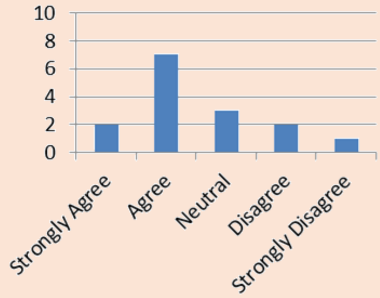
Polarising Issue



Mainly Negative



Generally Positive



National Student Survey

The NSS (National Student Survey) is carried out annually with all final year undergraduates. Similar surveys happen on other courses such as taught postgraduate and this is likely to become more significant in future. NSS questions sometimes change in detail, but generally cover the same areas and are presented as a 5 point Likert scale as described above. Mirroring the style of the NSS and exploring some of the topics that are addressed can be useful in both helping you understand how students are likely to respond at the end of their course and preparing them for it. Do remember, though, the advantage of being able to bespoke your module evaluation to your situation. Whilst you may want to explore similar areas to the NSS, you do not need to use the same questions.

Areas to explore

You will want to explore a range of issues in your module evaluations and these need not be the same year on year. When a module is new you may want to explore more general issues to get a ‘feel’ for how the module is being received. In later years, you may want to explore more specific issues relating to concerns you have noted and addressed. The following list is not exhaustive but provides a starting point for the main areas you will want to explore at some point:

- Module content (topics, difficulty, usefulness, appropriateness etc.)
- Timetabling and module structure (organisation, management etc.)
- Teaching methods and approaches (teaching style, specialists, formative teaching etc.)
- Resources and equipment (rooms, IT, Moodle, specialist equipment etc.)
- Assessment (fairness, support, preparation activity etc.)

Practical Solutions

In this section we offer some practical solutions to the problem of collecting evaluation data from students. No single method is likely to be effective as each comes with its own pros and cons Combining methods can have advantages. You could, for example, combine open and closed questions to give you both qualitative and quantitative data. You could combine questionnaires with optional focus groups or interviews. As has hopefully been made clear, the most important consideration is fitness for PURPOSE. It is often the case that the more clearly defined the purpose the more obvious the choice, or choices, of method will be.

The practical solutions below generally pre-suppose that students are on campus being taught, however many can easily be used or translated for online distance students with minimal change.

Face to face methods

Focus groups

A focus group is small subset of the cohort chosen to give feedback. Composition of the group is usually designed to be diverse and representative of the cohort as a whole, but there may be circumstances when you may wish to receive feedback from a particular demographic. For instance, you may be particularly interested in how the module is working for mature students. Focus groups usually work best by providing some kind of ice breaker or starting point to generate discussion. The aim is to have a free and frank exchange of views exploring opinions, attitudes and experiences. The Module leaders job is to enable the discussion and direct it on to new areas once topics become exhausted. Recording is best done by someone other than the module leader taking notes. Audio recording is possible but transcription of interactive discussion is difficult and extremely time consuming. Providing refreshments can be effective in securing participation.

Interviews

Interviewing individuals can be effective especially if they pre-prepared or given notice of the topics. Course representatives may be appropriate or you may prefer to define a ‘module rep’. With enough notice they can gather opinions and thoughts from the group outside of teaching time and act as a conduit to feed back to try to ensure that you get more than one student’s opinion.

Peer observation process

The peer observation process that operates in your School could be adapted to incorporate the student voice. Similar to using ‘reps’ you will need to identify individuals to take part and you must remember that they require the same level of training, support and understanding to act as an observer as staff colleagues. Student involvement in peer observation both requires and demonstrates a deep commitment to the idea of student/staff partnership.

Written methods

Pen/paper questionnaire

Evidence (Spooren & Van Loon, 2012, Donmeyer, et al., 2004) suggests that students are more likely to complete a pen and paper questionnaire (if given the time to do it during class) than they are an electronic method. Creating a questionnaire as an MSWord document is easy to do and gives maximum flexibility on question types. However you should avoid making it too formal, overlong or complicated to complete. A maximum of 2 sides A4 is suggested. Also bear in mind that there are printing costs and the transferring of responses into a useable format for analysis (e.g. MS Excel spreadsheet) can be a laborious and time consuming process.

Exit passes

An 'exit pass' is a way to ensure maximum participation. Rather than creating a long questionnaire, create cards with a single question on it. The card should be about postcard size (or A6), usually with some instructions or information on one side and a single question and space to handwrite an answer on the other. Cards can be handed out during a taught session (lecture, workshop etc.). You then finish the session 5 minutes early and stand by the door. As each student leaves you collect the card on the way out. As only one question is asked at a time you may want to use this method several times throughout the module with different questions/focus.

Coursework component

Module evaluation activity can be built into coursework assignments through the principle of reflection. As an example, consider a module that is assessed through a group presentation (50%) and accompanying written submission (50%). The written component could include reflection on aspects of the module including most/least valuable components, teaching methods, assessment preparation etc. In this scenario, you collect valuable module evaluation data whilst students can receive credit for engagement. If this is built into the assessment criteria, it is important that the credit is given for the quality of their honest engagement in the reflective process, not for giving particularly positive feedback to their tutor and this needs to be made perfectly clear to students.

Electronic methods

Several 'in-house' solutions are presented here. If you decide to consider an externally hosted system (e.g. Survey Monkey, Google Forms etc.) you must discuss this with your local IT partner first to ensure GDPR compliance.

Moodle forums

Moodle forums provide several ways of gathering module evaluation data. It is best to set up a forum specifically for the purpose rather than trying to extract data from a general discussion forum. The forum should be labelled 'Module Evaluation' and instructions given to what you expect/don't expect students to write about. You should consider whether to keep the forum open throughout the module or make it time limited. If you keep it open, you will probably need to ‘nudge’ the students at specific times. The Moodle Q&A forum (rather than the standard discussion forum) is useful here as students need to respond to specific questions and cannot see what others have written until they have posted.

Online questionnaire

The Moodle Questionnaire plugin allows you to set up a questionnaire with a variety of question types including yes/no, short answer, long answer and Likert scales. All staff have access to MS Forms via office 365 and that can also be used to easily produce a questionnaire, a link to which can be placed on Moodle. The main advantages of online questionnaires are that they will auto generate a report and they can be edited and reused which saves time, especially when compared to pen and paper questionnaires. On the downside, research suggests (Spooren & Van Loon, 2012, Donmeyer, et al., 2004) that response rates to online questionnaires is significantly lower that pen and paper questionnaires so you will need to consider how best to encourage completion.

Hot question

Hot question is a Moodle plugin that works like Poll Everywhere or MentiMeter. The Hot question is set up with a specific question (e.g. How useful did you find the assessment briefing?) so it does lend itself to ongoing module evaluation as different questions could be asked at different points. An advantage with Hot question is that other students can apply ‘heat’ (vote) on other users responses. So if one student replies, ‘I am still confused’ and 15 others ‘upvote’ that, you know there is a serious issue.

Support

This document should provide you with sufficient guidance to enable you to make decisions about why, how and when you will carry out module evaluation. At the heart of the process is Quality Enhancement. Moule evaluation should enable you and your students to understand the strengths and areas for development for your module(s) and provide you with the understanding required for continual improvement. Some of the suggested methods here are relatively straightforward, however if you feel you need additional support around this area, and perhaps especially around the use of Moodle, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the Academic Practice Team within EDS.

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