Evaluation of Student Feedback as a Tool for Higher Education Quality Enhancement

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Abstract

Student feedback is crucial for a thorough and meaningful university course evaluation process. It should be essential for a teacher´s reflection about teaching and learning in their courses. An efficient system of student feedback evaluation should not only collect feedback from students but also encourage teachers to use the feedback to improve their teaching practice to improve student learning. The article describes a new student feedback form and a system of follow-up conversations about the survey results between teachers and students developed and piloted at the Faculty of National Economy, University of Economics in Bratislava, in the academic year 2021/2022. It also presents the main results of using the conversations in the newly piloted system, based on interviews with participating teachers and students and thematic analysis of their verbatim transcripts.

Keywords: Student feedback, Course evaluation, Student feedback form, Feedback evaluation system, Follow-up student-teacher conversations

1 Introduction

Higher education institutions should focus mainly on teaching and learning processes in the courses they offer to their students and their interrelation with relevant recent research results. In their struggle for continuous educational development – thriving to function as effectively as possible as teaching and learning communities (Felten et al., 2007), they should analyse these processes regularly to find clues for teaching and learning innovations and overall quality enhancement. Students as the target audience of most higher education activities, and their feedback should therefore be at the centre of their attention.

At the Faculty of National Economy, University of Economics in Bratislava (FNE UEB), we have developed *a new system of student feedback evaluations* which should help to enhance the quality of teaching and learning continuously – within an Erasmus+ project "Designing holistic and sustainable educational development to improve student learning ". In January

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2022, we piloted the new system, which shifted its focus from students´ satisfaction with their teachers to how they perceive various elements that influence student learning in the courses they take (Novák, 2022a). We also piloted a new way of processing and dealing with the data from the student feedback forms – they were primarily used by members of the student parliament at the faculty who were asked to analyse them and come up with suggestions for improvements in the analysed courses. Student representatives then directly discussed the main findings and suggestions with the teachers willing to participate in the piloted system. We chose this approach because conversations about teaching and learning seem to be decisive in influencing the culture of teaching and learning in higher education towards the continuous development of teachers (Roxå, Mårtensson, 2015). Pleschová et al. (2021) conclude that five conditions make conversations about teaching and learning transform teachers´ conceptions and practice: cross-disciplinary participation, trustful relationships, conducive spaces, caring attitudes, and co-construction practices. The more these conditions are met, the greater the chance for a meaningful change in teaching. Even though these authors focus mainly on pedagogical conversations between teachers, we assume that conversations with their students about teaching and learning in their courses can also bring many valuable ideas. In this article, we first describe the new student feedback form's main features and the process of follow-up conversations between volunteer teachers and student representatives. Then we analyse the participants' experience in the piloted process and draw some conclusions and recommendations for further development of the proposed system.

2   Student Feedback in Use

Most authors agree that student feedback is crucial for quality enhancement in higher education. However, what student feedback means and how it should be used is not apparent. In this article, we have narrowed our focus only to the student feedback gathered officially in surveys organised by faculties, colleges, or universities, typically close to the end of each semester. Several different common terms are used in this context, such as student ratings, student evaluations of teaching, course evaluations and the like. There are also more purposes for which the survey results are used – from managerial and personnel decisions of faculty and university management to finding ways in how teaching can support learning more effectively and efficiently. Linse (2017) argues that student feedback forms gather students' views about their experience in each course. Therefore, the survey results should be considered student perception data, not faculty staff evaluations. They are also not measures of student learning, as many studies showed that there is usually "a low to moderate positive correlation between students´ ratings and their grades" (Linse, 2017, pp 41). This was also proved by a meta-analysis of teaching effectiveness by Uttl, White and Gonzalez (2017), who concluded that students in their research did not learn more from professors with higher student ratings. Even though some studies based on small-size samples showed significant or

moderate correlation, extensive sample-sized studies showed no or very little correlation between student ratings and student learning.

Universities should therefore be cautious when they use data from student feedback forms to evaluate teachers. They should also be aware that student ratings do not automatically drive improvement in pedagogical practices. Although they provide a tremendous amount of beneficial information in this respect, the cultural environment must encourage teachers to work with this information and use it thoughtfully and meaningfully when organising the same courses in the future. This seems a problem, as people tend to be reluctant to change their routines. Creating a culture based on continuous improvement in higher education is even more challenging.

Mårtensson, Roxå and Olsson (2011, p. 51) claim that university teaching appears "peculiarly resilient to all sorts of reform efforts made by managers and politicians". It is, therefore, important that the driving force for change should be the teachers themselves. Without that, any measures the faculty or university management takes are doomed to failure.

Nasser and Fresko (2002) explored teachers´ perceptions of the course evaluation system. Although overall attitudes towards it were mildly positive, only a few teachers reported changing their instruction based on student ratings. Darwin (2017) adds that although student ratings are supposed to help enhance the quality of teaching and learning, with the rise of market-based models in higher education, the purpose of ratings-based student evaluation has become increasingly confusing. It is caused mainly by the tension between improvement and accountability motives and by the fact that in many universities, student ratings are considered a proxy for teaching quality, making teachers less willing to consider the student voice, especially their critical comments. Blair and Noel (2014) support this conclusion with their research results showing very little evidence that student feedback evaluations led to any real significant changes in teaching practice in examined university courses. One of the reasons might be that student feedback forms used in the process may not measure the right things for this purpose. If universities measure students´ satisfaction as a proxy for teaching quality, the results may subvert the potentially conflicting objective of student learning (Bedggood & Donovan, 2011). However, the authors argue that "student learning can be measured and used to provide formative feedback for improving teaching effectiveness. Alternatively, student satisfaction can be appropriate for determining whether students are 'enjoying' their studies, and likewise offers distinct benefits to university managers measuring performance outcomes" (Bedggood & Donovan, 2011).

Lutovac et al. (2017) examined another pervasive obstacle to using student feedback meaningfully by teachers. They analysed university teachers´ emotional responses to student feedback and identified upward and downward emotional spirals regarding student feedback. They argue that pedagogical training seemed helpful in this respect as it provided participating teachers practical guidance for coping with student feedback. Similarly, the results of an earlier study (Murray, 1997) support this conclusion as they showed that student evaluation contributed significantly to the improvement of certain aspects of university teaching if it was

supplemented by expert consultation. This seems to be supported by other studies as well. Morgan, Sneed, and Swinney (2003) compared the views of university teachers and administrators about the validity of student ratings. They found that administrators believe student evaluations measure teaching effectiveness more than faculty. In contrast, teachers believe their personality is the primary determinant of ratings on student evaluations, followed by other factors such as the type of course, the workload of a course, and the grade distribution of a course. The study by Braga, Paccagnella, and Pellizzari (2014) helps identify some possible explanations for this situation. They found that teacher effectiveness was negatively correlated with students´ evaluations of teachers. Their results seem more consistent with the idea that students evaluate teachers based on their enjoyment of the course rather than their observation of the quality of teaching in the course.

Stroebe (2016) analyses the possible impact that student feedback forms focusing on students´ satisfaction may have – grading leniency: "Because many instructors believe that the average student prefers courses that are entertaining, require little work, and result in high grades, they feel under pressure to conform to those expectations". They present evidence that the positive correlation between students´ evaluation of teaching and their grades reflects a bias rather than teaching effectiveness.

There seem to be many biases influencing the results of student feedback evaluation, but the main problem seems to rest in two aspects:

a) the purpose for which the student feedback is collected, which influences the choice of the questions in the student feedback form,
b) the way how the survey results are dealt with.

Two approaches seem helpful if we want to use the system of student feedback evaluations primarily for higher education quality enhancement. The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) by Ramsden (1991) is one of the first examples of student feedback forms constructed to measure how students perceive the most important aspects of teaching and learning in a particular course. The questionnaire focuses not on how they feel about the course and the teacher, whether they are satisfied with them or not, but on the features of teaching and learning that educational research attributes to good practice leading to a deep approach to learning. However, even this type of questionnaire might be misused if the survey results are not dealt with properly. Roxå et al. (2022) contend that "student ratings can only become a tool for enhancement when they feed reflective conversations about improving the learning process and when the scholarship informs these conversations of teaching and learning".

3 The Newly-piloted System of Student Feedback Evaluations at FNE UEB

3.1 Brief Description of the New Student Feedback Form and the Process of Follow-up Student-teacher Conversations

The student feedback form we created at UEB as part of the intellectual outputs of the project "Designing holistic and sustainable educational development to improve student learning" was supposed to become the basis of the second pillar of a new holistic system of educational development, whose framework was described in previous studies (e.g, Novák, 2022a). It was a reaction to some of the main results of a needs analysis we had carried out. Based on the survey results, we decided to construct it in such a way that it should help teachers facilitate student learning more effectively.

We were greatly inspired by the philosophy behind the CEQ (Ramsden, 1991) and the system that Lund University in Sweden had built based on that questionnaire (Roxå et al., 2022). As for the structure of the questionnaire, we used it at the University of Tartu, Estonia, in the academic year 2020/2021 as a basis for its framework.

The questions in the student feedback form we created were divided into five sections:
- The student´s participation in the course,
- The way of teaching in the lectures/seminars (How did the lectures/seminars support student learning?),
- The way of studying (How was student learning going on in the course?),
- The results of student learning and their assessment,
- The overall evaluation of the course (open-ended questions).

The first section was designed to map issues such as the respondent´s initial motivation to study, his/her actual active participation in lectures and/or seminars, his/her time for preparation during the semester as well as before the exam, and the final assessment of the student in the course.

The second section analysed how teachers facilitated student learning during lectures and/or seminars (separately). The main areas of concern were:
- learning outcomes,
- teaching and learning methods, organisation of the educational process,
- explanation of the subject matter,
- applicability of the subject matter in practice, how interesting it was for students,
- atmosphere and communication in and outside the class, feedback from the teacher,
- study materials.

A student feedback form which aims at helping teachers to facilitate student learning should also focus on how students did their learning during and after the semester. Therefore, the third section focused on these areas related to the results of learning in a university course:

- deep learning,
- active learning,
- creative thinking, problem-solving,
- ECTS versus students´ effort.

If the educational process is to be effective, it must have clear objectives and teaching methods and assessment methods aligned with the expected learning outcomes. The fourth section focuses on these aspects and analyses if the whole teaching and learning process in a course leads to students´ improvement and deeper understanding of the subject matter. It also asks about the comprehensibility of assessment criteria and whether the assessment in the course was perceived as objective.

The fifth section consists of open-ended questions where students can give their opinions about the suitability of the course for the study programme, which element of the course they appreciated most and what changes in the course they would suggest for the future.

After the data from the survey are collected and processed, the vital question needs to be solved: How shall we use the feedback if our goal is to enhance student learning? We believe it is vital that students and teachers collaborate and use the data to identify the critical areas and find ways of their improvement (Novák, 2022b). Conversations between teachers and students are a vital part of the system of student feedback evaluations. In our piloted system, we asked the members of the Student Parliament of FNE UEB as student representatives to analyse the information from the questionnaires to look for critical areas, sort out the comments in the open-ended questions (e. g., get rid of personal attacks, focus on the constructive comments), and come up with suggestions for changes helping to enhance learning in the courses analysed. Then we expected them to lead follow-up conversations with the teachers who volunteered to participate in the pilot activities after the winter semester of the academic year 2021/2022.

The aims of the follow-up student-teacher conversations were to:

- compare the students and the teacher´s points of view,
- discuss possible changes in the course from both points of view,
- agree on feasible changes that both students and teachers suppose should help to enhance student learning,
- summarise the results in a report to be made public to all the relevant stakeholders (e.g., present and future students in the course, faculty management, programme managers etc.) and binding for the course teachers in the next semester.

The pilot conversation after the winter semester of the academic year 2021/2022 was organised voluntarily for teachers. 13 out of almost a hundred teachers showed interest in trying this new system, and 8 pairs of students (all members of the Student Parliament)

prepared to have a conversation with these teachers about all the courses they had taught in the semester. After the conversation, the students were asked to prepare summaries of the main conclusions for each course discussed and send them to the respective teachers for comments before handing them to the faculty management.

3.2 Analysis of the Views of Participants in the Piloted New System

After the process ended, we analysed what the participating students and teachers thought about its pros and cons. In the interviews, we organised with five of the participating teachers and seven pairs of students we asked (Novák, 2022b):

- How meaningful was the conversation between you and the students/teacher about the course(s) of the winter semester?
- How useful was the conversation about improving the course for the future? Was it focused on a forward-looking process?
- How proper were the questionnaire survey and its results for your conversation with the students from the course/teacher of the course? Did it help you to identify the areas where the course should be improved?
- How useful was the analysis of the survey results that the students from the student parliament carried out for the conversation with the teacher?
- Do you think a) the questionnaire and b) the whole process with the conversation about the survey results was better or worse than the previous system of student feedback evaluations?
- Did you get any new ideas about possible improvements to teaching from the survey responses and/or the conversation?
- Would you recommend continuing with this new system? If so, would you suggest some changes that you find important (e.g., were there questions in the questionnaire that were unclear/without informative value, did you miss anything in the questionnaire, would you change anything in the process of follow-up conversations)?

To summarise the main findings, we can say that all the interviewed students and teachers thought this new system was better than the previous one, and they all recommended continuing with it in the future. However, a deeper analysis of the data showed that there was some space for improvements in this process. We used Braun and Clarke´s (2006) approach to thematic analysis with two different pairs of independent coders of the verbatim transcripts of the interviews with students and teachers.

Overall, all teachers thought the concept or the idea of the conversation between a teacher and students was (potentially) meaningful. However, from the experience itself (Curran & Davies, 2022):

- one of the interviewed teachers said, 'It was okay, 'the students were very nervous,
- another one said, 'It would be better if the students I spoke to had taken the course that was being discussed,
- another respondent revealed that the conversation was quite limited because the survey results were good.

Even more ideas for improvement of the whole process arose from the questions asking teachers about its usefulness. Some respondents saw several reasons the whole process was not as proper as possible. One respondent said they had not learnt anything new, but this was because they had already sought feedback from students and were responding to that in a separate process. Another one felt it was mainly through their reflections that they were coming up with ways to improve. The reason was that the conversation was carried out between them and members of the student parliament, who were not representatives of the course being discussed in this case. More than half of the teachers felt that the biggest problem in the piloted process was that the students had done a minimal analysis of the survey results before the conversations. However, they appreciated the chance to talk about the results with students. They also noticed the questionnaires were better – more oriented to student learning than in the past when the student feedback forms were mainly about teachers. Overall, the interviewed teachers would appreciate more ideas and suggestions from the students based on a more in-depth analysis of the survey results done by students in advance. To sum up, the pilot created opportunities for teachers´ self-reflection as well as for students to reflect on their learning experience, but there are some areas for consideration in the future (Curran & Davies, 2022):

- more careful selection of the most appropriate students to be part of the survey analysis and the conversations,
- more detailed analysis of the survey responses by the students,
- low return rate of the survey and the impact of this on subsequent conversations.

Interestingly, the interviews with the pairs of students revealed similar themes. Overall, the students were more passionate about the whole process and appreciated the attention given to student feedback. Some students admitted they could not find any suggestions for improvements explaining that the survey results for some courses were so good that there

was nothing to improve. It was interesting in this context that one of the interviewed students noted, 'There was just one question that had a bit worse rating, so there was nothing to improve in that course'. This proves that the student did not even realise that this was precisely the area they should focus on and try to help the teacher of the course with an explanation of the reasons for the worse rating in the area and suggestions for its improvement. Not only in this case, but some of the students also really appreciated how active some of the teachers were during the conversation – they were even surprised that some of the teachers came to the conversation already with their suggestions for improvements and were interested in what students thought about them. This aspect confirms that the teachers themselves more thoroughly thought through the analysis of the survey results than the students should have done. However, the interviews with the students revealed another problem that the students felt in connection with the pilot. They stressed that the conversations should be organised with more teachers, even those who did not volunteer. Teachers of the courses with bad ratings did not participate in the conversations. The students thought such conversations would be more valuable and helpful than conversations with teachers whose courses already had good ratings (Pasiar, 2022). Besides that, students appreciated the open-ended questions the most because they provided them with more direct clues and suggestions they could discuss with the teachers. This might be associated with the fact that they were not prepared well enough to analyse the survey results (the numerical ratings) and come up with their conclusions and suggestions.

4   Conclusion

Students and teachers who participated in the pilot appreciated the newly created system of student feedback evaluation at FNE UEB. They all recommended continuing with the new questionnaire and supported organising conversations about the results between students and teachers. However, students should be chosen for the conversation so that there was always a student who had taken the course as a part of the conversation about its results. The participating students should be trained better in advance to do the analysis and come up with solutions to the identified problems and suggestions for improvement. It would be more beneficial to have these conversations primarily with teachers of courses with worse results, where there is more space for changes that would lead to more substantial improvements and enhancement of student learning. It might also be a good idea to offer expert assistance to the teachers whose courses were evaluated poorly but who cannot suggest reasonable changes that might help with the identified problems.

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