Case studies to enhance student evaluation

2015 Central Queensland University:
The big red button

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Student feedback is imperative to the improvement of courses and teaching. As stated by Harvey, "to make an effective contribution to internal improvement processes, views of students need to be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback" (2003, p. 4). Thus students are critical stakeholders in course evaluations, and can act as a mechanism to providing meaningful feedback about their experience, leading to improvements in learning and teaching.

Student evaluation of courses is an essential component of course operation. Evaluations provide information on student perceptions of course delivery that can assist academic staff in the enhancement of courses. They also enable the University to identify and recognise best practice and to address valid and substantiated issues raised from the student voice.

Central Queensland University (CQUniversity) has adopted a variety of methods to encourage student feedback through online course evaluations, which has seen an increase in student response rates. These include, integrating course evaluations into the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS); providing incentives; and delivering online prompts including pop-ups in the LMS sites and email reminders.

Prior to 2009, CQUniversity course evaluations were administered on paper. With three semesters a year, approximately 600 courses conducted per semester, and a high distance education cohort, "administering the paper-based system was difficult and having an online system was the only way to go" (from an interviewed participant). Consequently in semester one, 2010 a pilot was launched which embedded the course evaluations into the Moodle LMS of 40 courses (Reed et al. 2012. P. 159). Following the success of the 2010 pilot, all course evaluations were conducted within the Moodle LMS site from 2011.

This case study will specifically focus on CQUniversity course evaluations, as the central mechanism through which students provide feedback to educators. At CQUniversity, teaching and course evaluations are distinct, with course evaluations mandatory for each course, each semester. On the other hand, teaching evaluations are recommended at least once per year per course, but are optional and at the discretion of the educator. For those evaluations, educators are given a centrally developed template however they can alter the questions depending upon the feedback they are specifically seeking from students.

Questions and process

Each course evaluation at CQUniversity, irrespective of discipline area, contains the same question set in order to better analyse data. There are seven quantitative questions, based on the Likert scale, and two qualitative questions. The quantitative questions are as follows:

1. Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this course.
2. The Moodle site for this course was easy to navigate.
3. The resources provided in this course supported my learning.
4. The assessment tasks in this course helped me to learn.
5. The requirements for each assessment task were clearly explained.
6. My assessment work was returned in a timeframe that supported my learning.
7. The feedback given on my assessment work helped me to learn.

The two qualitative questions are:

• What are the best aspects of your course?
• What aspects your course are most in need of improvement?

Course evaluations are available from week nine of the semester, and prompts are given to students within their Moodle site in week 11 if they have not completed all course evaluations. A distinguishing feature of CQUniversity course evaluations is that students are only required to answer Question one (Overall I was satisfied with the quality of this course) in order for the evaluation to be considered valid. They can select to answer some or all of the remainder of questions.

Design

The course evaluations at CQUniversity are often referred by students and educators alike as the 'have your say' or the 'big red button.' Following the shift to online course evaluations in 2011, the big red button was integrated into the Moodle homepages of students and educators from week 9 as a means to prompt students to complete surveys. As Figure one highlights, the big red button clearly stands out on the Moodle homepage, and provides a visual reminder to: 1) students to complete the evaluations; 2) educators to encourage students to complete the survey.

Figure one: The big red button.
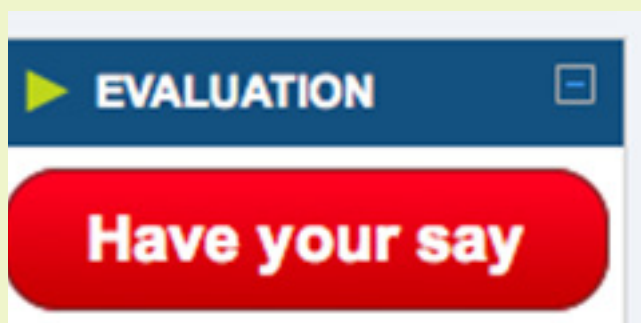
The big red button appears on the Moodle site upon the commencement of course evaluations. During this time, educators are able to determine the number of students per course who have completed the course evaluations.

This provides educators with the opportunity to remind students to complete course evaluations, whilst maintaining the anonymity of students. Within two days of the course evaluations concluding, educators are able to access both the aggregated data and the full reports from evaluations, including the qualitative comments. This is simply done by clicking on the 'have your say button.'

Key strategies

Course evaluations are undertaken every offering of a course, in each term and year of offer. An integral process of the course evaluation survey is that staff will provide a response back to students on the enhancements that have been made as a result of student feedback (closing the loop). This is done through the Annual Course Enhancement Report, which is fed through to each course profile.

CQUniversity has effectively increased the course evaluation response rate from three per cent in 2010, to a university average of 50 per cent in 2014. So what has led to this significant increase in course evaluation response rates? Whilst it is not attributed to a single strategy, an interviewed participant stated "there was a culture change from the very top. We are all responsible to do our bit to hear the student voice."

An interviewed participant recalled an example of course evaluations effectively contributing to the development of a course. "The educator removed the exam and replaced it with an essay. It was a relief as there would have been a lot of diagrams to memorise for the exam. The evaluation clearly worked." Figure two highlights a few examples of strategies implemented at CQUniversity which contributed to an increase in course evaluation response rates.

Figure two: Strategies implemented at CQUniversity

Usability	Students only have to complete question 1 in order for the course evaluation to be considered valid. It is simple and intuitive, whereby students can directly access through their Moodle site.
Closing the loop	Course profile provides examples of changes occurring from course evaluations. Students can access the numerical data from any course within the student portal.
Pop-up feature	A pop-up in the student Moodle site in week 11 prompts students to complete the course evaluations.
Efficiency	Centralised online system which requires very minimal resources/work in setting up evaluations and analysing and generating reports.
Accessibility	Using an online system has enabled greater reach/coverage of students who study via distance.
Reporting	Traffic light reports provide a summary/overview of high and low performing subjects.
Engagement	Emails from educators to students highlighting the purpose and importance of course evaluations.
Award program	Courses which receive 4.5 out of 5 in the overall satisfaction question are given highly commended awards. Part of the award criteria also includes that the course must attain 10 or more responses, and that the course must also achieve a target response rate of greater than 50 per cent in the required terms.

As stated by an interviewed participant, "course evaluations are one tool for student feedback. We need to look at feedback from a 360 degree perspective." All stakeholders, including students, system managers, educators and senior leadership, have a responsibility to engage and promote student feedback through mechanisms such as student evaluation. Figure three provides a brief overview of the challenges and solutions for course evaluaitons highlighted in interviews and focus groups.

Figure three: Challenges and solutions highlighted in interviews and focus groups.

For students

Challenge: "It is a little concerning that it is based on mood, luck of the draw, and what mood you are in the day" (from an interviewed participant).

Solution: Keep constructive notes throughout the semester on how the course could be improved, and what you found useful. As course evaluations are at the end of semester, it helps students to 1) recall earlier comments regarding the course 2) reflect on comments throughout the semester.

For system managers Case studies

Challenge: In course evaluations, students tend to comment not only on their courses, but on the teaching and university services and resources.

Solution: Include specific teaching questions within surveys for smaller classes. Break the survey up into the following categories: content; resources; teaching.

Challenge: Survey fatigue among students.

Solution: Include progress bars on evaluations so that students can see the required time-commitment to complete the surveys. This is particularly effective when the course evaluations are short, so that students recognise early that a large amount of time is not required.

Challenge: Questions are not relevant to students undertaking placements.

Solution: Include supplementary questions for students undertaking placement courses so that feedback can be targeted and specific.

For Educators

Challenge: Need to improve feeding information back to existing cohort.

Solutions: Create short surveys half way through semester. This "allows me to correct any easily manageable issues, or respond, identify and address any issues" (from an interviewed participant). Email students the results from the course evaluation. This will feed-back the information to students, and highlight that student feedback is valued. Incorporate assessment that requires students to actively reflect, such as reflective journals or blogs. This may require students to reflect on their expectations of the course at the beginning of the semester, and then to reflect on whether their expectations have been met at the conclusion of semester.

For senior leadership

Challenge: More training is required for educators regarding what the questions are, what the purposes of evaluation are, and what the responsibilities are of educators.

Solution: Develop and promote a culture of sharing feedback and learning from one another e.g. academic peer support.

Conclusion

CQUniversity successfully integrated online course evaluations into the student and educator Learning Management System, Moodle. Consequently, response rates increased from three per cent in 2010, to over 50 per cent in 2014. A noteworthy take-away from conducted interviews and focus groups with senior educational leaders, educators, students and systems managers was the importance of collaborative and transparent strategies to enhance student feedback. This includes instilling and promoting a reflective mindset in students, developing a culture of sharing feedback through supports such as academic peer support, and open communication between educators and students with respect to course enhancement.

References

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Reed, R., Miller, J., & Thomson, J. (2012). On-line, on target and on-message: Course evaluation enhancements at a regional university. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development, 9* (1), 157-167.