Effective Surveys – The Best Way to Increase the Quality of Education

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Abstract

Today when there is a wide choice available to potential students, a university needs to be very competitive in its actions. Right management and investment into the capital building is what shows the significance of a university and its difference between its competitors. Faculties face new challenges with development of new teaching techniques with innovative learning materials. Each educational program is directed to giving certain competences to a student. These competences are the outcomes of the program and also the means to measure its success. In all these levels university needs to get the feedback from its students.

Our paper aims to address primarily the questionnaires and to suggest types of surveys that university has to perform constantly to help develop the curricula and match the employee requirements. We tried to research different tools used by western university and modify them to Georgian reality.

Key words: Quality of Education; Types of surveys; Survey of Employees of the Graduates.

Introduction

Feedback in this sense refers to the expressed opinions of students about the service they receive as students. This may include perceptions about the learning and teaching, the learning support facilities (library, computer facilities), the learning environment (lecture rooms, laboratories, social space and university buildings), support facilities (student accommodation, health facilities, student services) and external aspects of being a student (finance, transport infrastructure etc.) Student views may be collected in different ways, including: informal discussions or conversations; formal qualitative sessions, such as focus groups, facilitated discussions or suggestion boxes; representative or consultative committees; questionnaires, needed in order to match the competences received by a student with employers' goals.

We would like to stress the importance of the feedback pointing out its main functions, which are supporting the information to guide improvement within the university and providing external information for potential students and other stakeholders, including accountability and compliance requirements. (Lee Harvey 2003)

Talking about the improvement, it is important to clear out some administrative misunderstandings and ever a big effort convincing students about quality enhancement process. To be effective in quality improvement, data must be transformed into information that can be used within an institution to effect the change. And this is only achieved by a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback.

To start with, the first step should be the commitment of senior management of the university to create a transparent environment for surveys. The commitment should be shared by all the members of management in the hierarchy. The common problem in all countries is convincing the elder academicians of the importance of student feedbacks, especially when it comes to the lecturer evaluation itself. Here the high level academicians need to show an example to the faculties, and if needed, convince them about the useful sides. They need to understand that student feedback is not negatively implemented actions, which are aimed against the particular professor or a faculty.

Second would be clear identification and delegation of the responsibility for action. Here the accountability for actions taken is very important. When we deal with several kinds of sources for the feedback, it is very important to plan the process so that students as well as the administration itself do

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not mix the purposes and the cycles of surveys. In many cases research assistants are given the responsibility to conduct the surveys. Best would be if the surveys are designed by a professional and only implemented by assistants. Again, this links us up to the first step, high management level and an administration that fully understands the vital importance of this feedback.

The Third important factor should be the commitment of appropriate resources, because in implementing surveys one minor error may lead to the whole process being useless. This again links us to the first step, in which whole process is fully understood and proper professionals are involved in designing questionnaires and at the end interpreting the results to the faculty. While we think our organization is clear, students usually do not. We see our organization they do not unless we bring it to their level. The presentation of written organizational plan would be one solution.

Fourth point worse to discuss is that management may be more important than the design itself. Here the question of time of administering the questionnaires arises. While doing a course or lecturer evaluation it is important that the process is held when students are well informed about the lecture. It is normally effective to ask students to complete and return questionnaires during the usual contact time. As for the decision on format, questionnaires should begin with introduction explaining the purpose of it and how it should be filled out.

Last, but not the least, it is important that the actual, evident action is followed by analysis. Without this action students grow cynical towards the process and refuse to participate in the process at the first time. In order for students to fully engage with the process, they need to feel that expressing their views will make a difference to present and future provision. Hence the summaries of their feedback as well as responses to any concerns raised should be made available to them via departmental notice boards, on the website and through the quality provision office.

As we mentioned above the surveys are also used for external information. Today when there is a wide choice available to potential students, the views of current students offer a useful information resource, but unfortunately very few universities offer this information publicly. This information is useful because it is the view of a person who actually participates in the process, it is direct and it can provide ratings on a range of items relevant to prospective students.

Types of Surveys can be:
1.   University-level satisfaction with total student experience or a specific subset;
2.   Program-level satisfaction with the learning and teaching and related aspects of particular program of study;
3.   Course and Lecturer appraisal by students.

1. University-level surveys

University-level surveys tend to include most of the services provided by the university, collecting the data that provide management information designed to encourage action for improvement and describes an overview of student opinion, which can be reported as a part of appropriate accountability procedures. For small universities it is easier to administer these kinds of surveys because they do not offer as many services and the number of students is also small in compared to large universities. But anyway the important result, besides the interpretation of result, and taking of actions, is the feedback to students, which is not only telling them the results, but telling them what was done.
Since this is dynamic area of development, different types of surveys may vary from one university to another, and may include articles and newsletters in university magazine, posters, campus intranet or radio or direct communications with the help of student council or representatives.

2. Program-Level Surveys

Assessment of learning outcomes must be done at program-level. To measure the abilities of students, the university needs industry/market partners. The market needs to be asked: what are abilities, applications of behavior, competences, skills, and knowledge. Actual student work is primary evidence. It is important to directly observe complex abilities, and then that need to be observed in action. Abilities are a combination of competences. Since the classroom is the worst place for a student to demonstrate his/her abilities and received knowledge, effective student surveys are needed, which will give the faculty feedback for further development of the program and curricula. After defining competences, we need a self-assessment by student, and assessment by supervisor at practice.

The faculty can develop electronic portfolio for each student, which includes: internship evaluation, student work, teacher and advisor evaluations, and practical papers for each student. The portfolio is used to show how student meets the competences required. The portfolio is shown to the industry representatives, also to the student and the university.

Another effective tool can be a knowledge survey, which is an approach to assess student preparedness and teaching effectiveness. This surveys forces faculty to develop a detailed map of expected knowledge/outcomes for students and faculty members itself. Knowledge surveys are not tests. Students are not asked to answer the questions in the survey – they are asked to assess their own competence to answer the questions if they were to appear on an actual test. They survey the whole content of core courses, not just a sample of it for grading purposes. It suggests how content got across and tells how well lectures did at courses.

In designing program-level satisfaction with the learning and teaching Bloom's cognitive taxonomy may be useful. This includes the levels of cognition by a student: Knowledge – a starting point that includes both the acquisition of information and the ability to recall information when needed; Comprehension is the basic level of understanding of facts and principles, material interpretation; Application – ability to use a learned skill in a new situation; Analysis – recognition of unstated assumptions or logical fallacies, ability to distinguish between facts and inferences; Synthesis –ability to combine existing elements in order to create something original; Evaluation – judgment and assessing by using standards.

Program-level Surveys

I. Program Assessment Plan

The market needs to be asked: what are abilities; applications of behavior; competences; skills; knowledge. After defining competences, we need a self-assessment by the student, and assessment by supervisor at practice. Outcomes are achieved objectives. Outcomes provide the department evidence that student learning has occurred. There are a number of different learning outcomes, including knowledge, understanding, application, thinking skills, general skills, attitude, interests, and appreciation.

Program Assessment Plan includes: Statement of program goals within the university mission; An identified target of assessment; Good match between written objective and measures used for their assessment; and Statement addressing how assessment results will be used and by whom

Set Program Objectives
- ! Describe the ideal student in your program
- ! Describe how department's experience contributes to the ideal student's development

! Describe your alumni

Establish objectives for the program

! List the skills you expect your student to achieve
! List general information you want your student to master
! List values you want your graduates to embody

Material Sorting

! Recognition – recall of factual information
! Comprehension – simple application
! Problem-solving – critical thinking

Program Assessment According to Each Year of Study
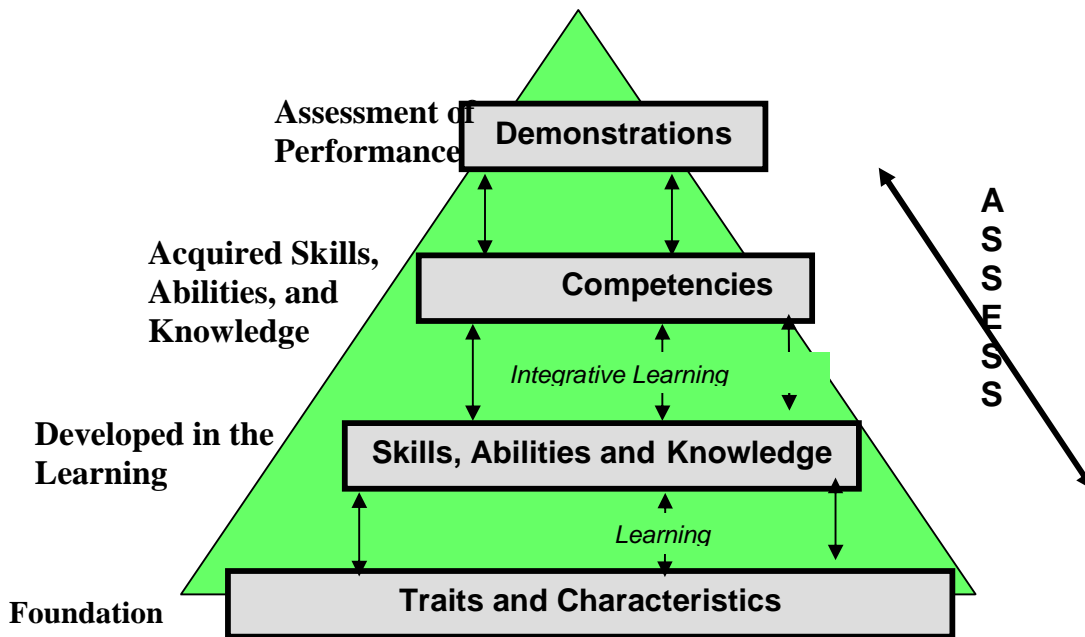
We can divide the bachelor study by following triangle. At the first level we give the foundation knowledge to a student and work with clarification and development of traits and characteristics. Second year of study is concerned with particular skills and abilities, giving a student proper fields of knowledge. Here a student is gathering as much information as possible and preparing to use it in practical life. In the third year clear competences are viewed as a result of which acquired skills, abilities and knowledge can be used in practice. The fourth year is concerned with demonstration of what has been accumulated during the first three years of study. Chosen courses in the final year give student a chance to demonstrate his/her professional competences. This demonstration is assessed by supervisors at practice, at project implementation etc.

Assessment is needed at every stage of study, but the assessment methods vary from one year to another. In the first year of study we can get student feedback on the starting stages of their studies. We can research how well the first year of study is organized andif the students well introduced to the objectives and outcomes of the particular program. in the second year, when we give students lots of materials to consume, the knowledge surveys can be useful. Here in the second year students may get bored with of consuming all this data, so effective argumentation is needed to convince them that the

knowledge acquired will be used in practice. The best year for receiving student feedback about the program is the third. Here students try their accumulated knowledge in small practical implications. They see that they actually have received certain competences which will later help them in their careers. The fiinal year is very important because some of the students have done their practices and some are doing them. The Student has already seen the real working environment and related his/her knowledge to the job performed. Effective elective courses now are chosen according to the needs that student has doing practice or internship. Student feedback on what a student actually used out of what he/she has learned in university is very useful for program overall assessment.

II. Student Portfolios
   Faculty can develop an electronic portfolio for each student, which includes:
    ! internship evaluation
    ! student work
    ! teacher and advisor evaluations
    ! practical papers for each student.
Lecturers review portfolio and faculty sees what each lecturer gives to the student, this helps to evaluate teaching and also define prerequisites for each student.

III. Knowledge Surveys
   Another effective tool can be a knowledge survey, which is an approach to assess student preparedness and teaching effectiveness. Questions here as mentioned above are not directed to testing the knowledge, but are addressed to the overall knowledge and measure how effective the teaching is.

3. Course and Lecturer appraisal

   Course and Lecturer appraisal by students is also very important, since it deals with each course and lecturer individually. Most of the time, when we talk about the whole process of student feedback, many consider the lecturer assessment as the only action and see it directed against any particular lecturer. Course and lecturer appraisal are a part of a bigger process and they are not necessarily addressed against any lecturer. Besides lecturer evaluation by a student they include fast feedback tools like classroom assessment, fast feedback activities (minute paper, muddiest point, one-sentence summary, etc.), mid-semester evaluation, end of course questionnaire. Educational reforms seek to answer two fundamental questions: 1. How well are students learning? and 2. How effectively are teachers teaching?.

   Classroom research – encourage university teachers to become more systematic and sensitive observers of learning. Teachers can examine how students learn and how students respond to particular teaching approaches. Classroom assessment is particularly useful for checking how well students are learning at initial and intermediate points. It is aimed to provide information for improvement when learning is less than satisfactory. Questions answered by this assessment are: What are essential skills and knowledge I am trying to teach?, How can I find out whether students are learning them or not?, How can I help students learn better?.

   When holding classroom assessment some assumptions have to be considered: The Quality of student learning is directly related to quality of teaching. One of the promising ways to improve

learning is to improve teaching. To improve effectiveness, teachers first need to make their goals and objectives explicit and then get specific feedback on how they are achieving them. To improve learning, students need to receive appropriate feedback early and often. Also, to learn how to assess their learning; assessment conducted by faculty to answer questions formulated by themselves in response to issues or problems in own teaching. Classroom assessment can provide systematic inquiry and intellectual challenge, which are sources of motivation, growth and renewal. Classroom assessment does not require special training, dedication is enough. The faculty enhances learning and personal satisfaction by collaborating with colleagues and actively involving students in Classroom assessment.

Some techniques used to measure teaching effectiveness are: 1.Teaching journal: write journal entries detailing your progress as a teacher. This can be done daily, weekly, bi-weekly, or in any other time frame. It is a great addition to a teaching portfolio when you are looking for teaching job later. 2. Self-evaluation form: complete a self-evaluation form, helps teacher see if he/she is on the right track. 3. Peer observation: Allow a fellow colleague to come into your classroom for a day. Peer can fill general form about the class, but it is also good to discuss the important issues that you would like him/her to track. Fellows are better and have more anxiety than the authority coming to observe. 4. Video coaching: have your class video-taped by a peer, supervisor and then watch the video together to discuss your teaching. Video-coaching can help you to see first-hand some of intricate details about your class. 5. Evaluation by a supervisor – ask a supervisor to observe a class and give points. Although it seems like an intimidating experience, most supervisors understand challenge of being a new teacher and they are very forgiving and helpful. 6. Materials review – bring syllabus, lesson plan to faculty member of supervisor since they have experience in designing them and training personnel.

Student evaluations are important, since after all students are the most important aspect of your teaching.

1. Pre-course survey – helps to know what the students already understand about the subject you are teaching as well as what they want to know.

2. Mid-term evaluation – 20 minute survey of students asking about what they feel about the class. A person can be invited from faculty because most of the time students feel more comfortable talking to the person who is not in charge of their grade.

3. End-of class evaluation – mandatory evaluations, conducted at the end of the term. A faculty representative is assigned to monitor the survey. Although the feedback won't help change ways of teaching with that particular group, it can give insight into general teaching issues to work on.

4. Fast feedback techniques include: minute paper, muddiest point, one-sentence summary, etc. a. The minute paper is a brief, anonymous feedback instrument that can be used three or four times in a semester at the end of class and it takes 5 minutes the most. Questions asked are: What was the most important thing you learned in the class and what important question remains unanswered. Important aspect is later taking time to tell the students the results gathered. This will allow a lecturer to win the trust among the students. b. Muddiest point is also very commonly used practice, which is remarkably efficient, since it provides a high return of information for very low investment of time and energy. This technique helps lecturer learn about what students find least clear or most confusing about a topic. This feedback helps discover the points which are most difficult for students to learn and at the same time students quickly identify the areas which are not clear for them. c. One-sentence summary is used to measure the actual understanding. How did student interpret the course, weather it was clear or not. Famous question: Who does what to whom, when, how, and why?

Deans, Deans of Studies • Department heads of course would like to have an overview of the data collected in their department. They would like to retain discipline-relevance even when surveys are conducted across departments. They want to receive feedback for their department, e.g. comparative reference data for course subject and course type. In addition they would like survey results that would allow them to easily see what action might need to be taken.

Instructors • Faculty members are interested in improving their teaching and are looking for prompt and specific feedback immediately after a course is over. However they are also concerned that the survey instrument has been thoroughly validated, in other words that it is fair. They are also concerned about data security. Many instructors would like to be able include their own questions in the survey and would like to be able to make anonymous comparisons to their colleagues.

Students • They want to be taken seriously and would like to see that they are part of the change process. Students are concerned that their honest and at times critical opinions might be used against them, which could be the case if, for example, instructors were to collect the surveys themselves. They too would like feedback about what has been done with their responses in a survey. And they would like to be spared unnecessary questions or surveys – otherwise they will get tired of evaluating their courses.

Conclusion

As a conclusion we would like to stress the vital importance of receiving student feedback to the development of the program, faculty and the university itself. With the right management and commitment of both effort and resources, student feedback can be interpreted and used in all levels of the university. Different techniques can be used to measure student involvement and their opinion about various services offered by the university and it is up to a university and its culture to decide which one is the most suitable and appropriate.

As a practice of International Black Sea University we examined factors affecting the students as well as the administration in conducting the surveys. The conclusion we had was that the way lecturer grades a student definitely affects the evaluation by a student, but the effect is not so strong to override the overall opinion. There may be case when grades are received easily, but a lecturer is evaluated as average or low and also in some cases majority of students fail, but a lecturer receives high evaluation from students.

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