

National Student Engagement Programme

Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta
na Mac Léinn

Student Feedback Opportunities, Data and Follow-Up

This report was produced as part of a project of the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) led by the Institute of Technology Carlow.

To find out more about NStEP and the national projects, visit studentengagement.ie/resources

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INTRODUCTION

Recognising the importance of the student voice is key to success in higher education. Individual students as well as their student representatives are provided with multiple means of expressing their opinions in relation to their experience. Higher education institutions value this feedback and strive to offer diverse opportunities for those voices to be heard and the opinions to be respected, considered and responded to appropriately in a timely manner. Key to underpinning and enhancing this ethos of feedback is the development of a meaningful culture of student engagement, which can ultimately foster a collaborative partnership between staff and students.

WHAT IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

Student engagement is a complex, multi-faceted and evolving term. At its core are notions of involvement and empowerment, with a focus on giving students an active role in the development, management and governance of their institution, its academic programmes and particularly their own learning experiences.

NStEP (National Student Engagement Programme) currently uses Trowler and Trowler's 2011 definition of student engagement:

"The investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution."

The term covers two separate but linked domains:

- Improving the motivation of students to engage in learning and to learn independently
- The participation of students in quality enhancement and quality assurance processes, resulting in the improvement of their educational experience.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

This report will allow staff and students across Irish higher education to consider how best to effectively and meaningfully engage students throughout the development and enhancement of feedback processes. Core to this is to imagine or reimagine ways in which staff and students can work collaboratively throughout the entire process, identifying valuable initiatives and projects that supports real partnership, and can ultimately close the feedback loop.

The central questions addressed in this report are included in the table below.

Creating an Effective Institutional Feedback Culture - Key Considerations for Staff and Students

1 What do we mean by student feedback?

2 Why and how is feedback being sought and captured by higher education institutions?

3 What feedback is or is not being sought from students in higher education institutions?

4 How are students prepared and supported to provide feedback?

5 What happens with the feedback data received?

6 Is the feedback data received used to inform action and impact?

7 Are the stakeholders, including students, involved throughout the process of change?

8 Are the stakeholders informed that the feedback has affected change?

SECTION 1 GENERAL FEEDBACK

Students, staff and the institution have a shared responsibility in the creation of a student centred teaching and learning environment. Giving feedback, responding to the feedback and acting on the feedback is the shared responsibility of all of the stakeholders involved and is central to the creation of a quality teaching and learning environment. While students are ultimately responsible for their own learning and level of engagement, the institutional conditions, policies and culture that enable and encourage students to get involved in the decision making processes around their third level experience must be in place. Students must equally be prepared for and supported in this capacity.

DEFINING FEEDBACK?

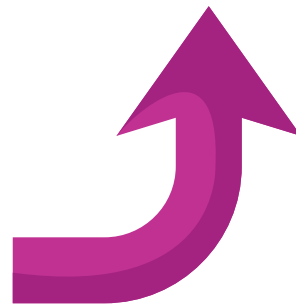
'...a process through which learners make sense of information from various sources and use it to enhance their work or learning strategies. This definition goes beyond notions that feedback is principally about teachers informing students about strengths, weaknesses and how to improve, and highlights the centrality of the student role in sense-making and using comments to improve subsequent work.'

- (Carless and Boud, 2018)

'...if feedback processes are to enhance learning, we must move beyond a view of feedback as transmission and acknowledge the active role that students must play in such processes.'

- (Nicol, Thomson & Breslin, 2014)

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN FEEDBACK?



Exploring and agreeing a clear definition of what feedback is can scaffold a framework that supports the institution in formulating a 360-degree approach to student feedback. Closing the feedback loop to provide students with follow-up on their suggestions should be a clear goal of all higher education institutions and should demonstrate a commitment by all involved to ensure that the students as a key stakeholder are involved in decision making and in enhancing their third level experience.

A key sectoral driver for a renewed effort to close the feedback loop comes from the continuing improvement of response rates to studentsurvey.ie, due to the combined efforts of all across the higher education landscape. The effective use of this data is central to ensuring its continued success as a national survey with institutional and programmatic impact. Given the availability of student feedback data from student-survey.ie and many other sources, the need for best practice guidelines on the use of student feedback for enhancing the student experience is the key focus of this report. Closing the feedback loop is central to the success of any feedback collection. The question asked by all participants should be 'Why should I give feedback...?' To answer this, it is important that the higher education institution demonstrates that it values the feedback provided by informing students of the outputs. This has a clear 'student as partner' perspective rather than a 'student as consumer' focus.

Focus: Higher education institutions are focused on providing a high quality third level student experience, with data informed through stakeholder feedback as well as best practice nationally and internationally. In working to provide a quality student experience, institutions must engage with students as a core stakeholder and provide opportunities for them to feedback their views on how to enhance the student experience. The establishment of student feedback mechanisms should create opportunities for responding to this feedback.

In seeking the student voice on their third level experience, these guidelines will support institutions in the establishment and roll-out of quality student feedback and feedforward mechanisms.

Feedback Mechanism: opportunities established by a higher education institution, in collaboration with students, for students individually and/or collectively and/or through students' union representation to provide feedback on aspects of their third level teaching and learning experience (not including examination or assessment results). Feedback mechanisms include staff and student meetings, forums, student surveys, as well as strengthened student membership on committees.

In creating effective mechanisms for feedback, the National Student Engagement Programme recommends that institutional leadership, in partnership with staff and students, seek to embed the conceptual framework in figure 1. This framework outlines the drivers of sustainable student engagement, the principles that should exist in practice in order to ensure that engagement is achieved through partnership, and the domains through which it can be achieved.

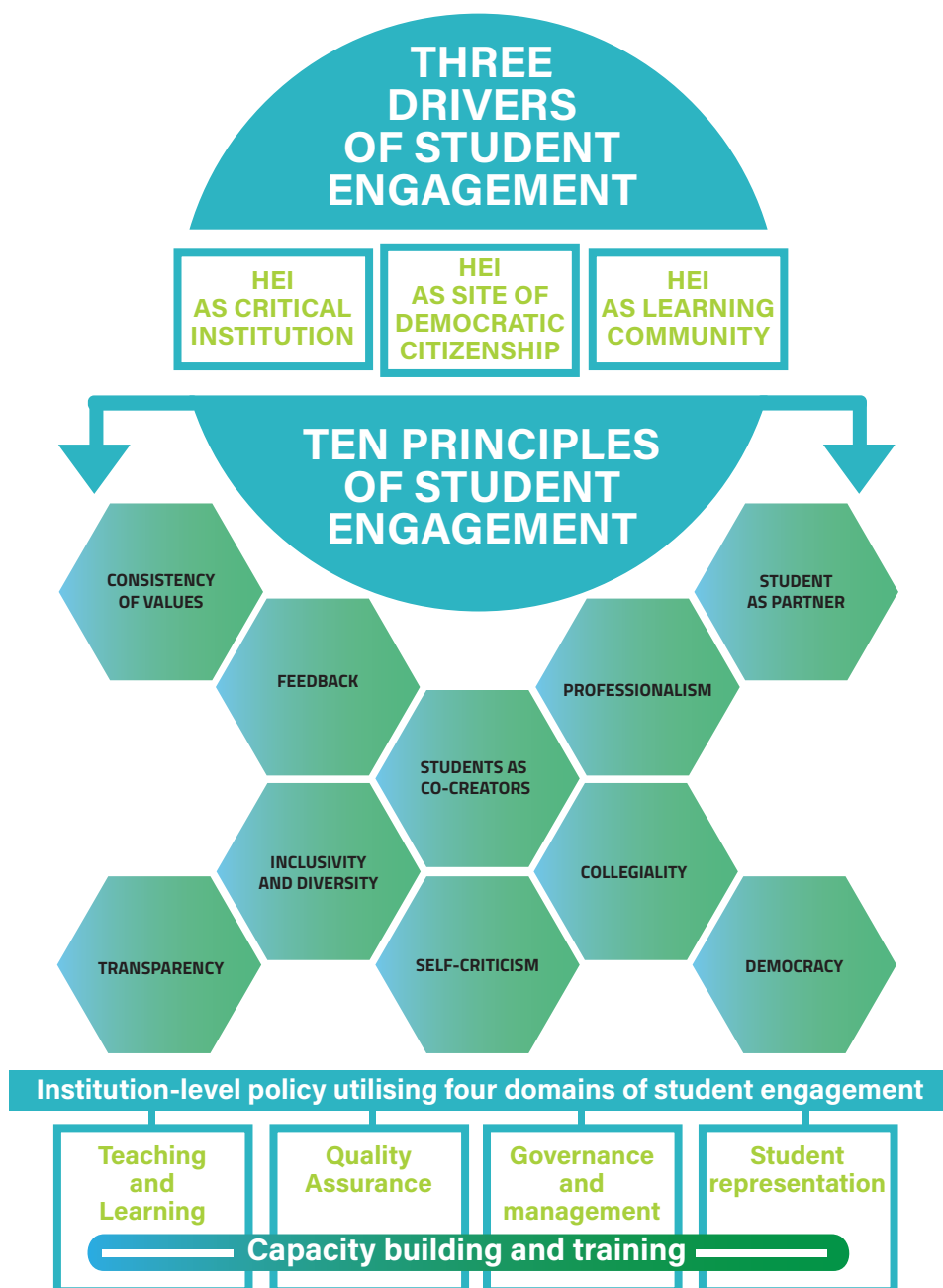


Figure 1 Conceptual framework for student engagement (HEA 2016)

SUPPORTING MATERIALS/ TOOLS

- **Responding to the student voice: principles of practice** – An output from the student led project within QAA Scotland's Enhancement Theme. The principles outlined in this resource were developed by a steering group of students with the support of QAA Scotland and sparqs (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland). The resource aims to support Institutions and Students' Associations to process and respond to student feedback more effectively.
- **Responding to student voice in Scottish Higher Education** – QAA Scotland carried out a survey of Scottish higher education Institutes and Students' Associations around responding to student feedback. The project aim was to identify areas of good practice to support the development of the principles and practice resource highlighted above. This report summarises an analysis of the data generated by the survey and uses visualisations to present themes and findings.
- **Findings from QAA Scotland's Student Voice Think Tank event** – a collection of practices for responding to the student voice, 'bright spots' and suggested principles gathered during a QAA workshop in April 2018. The findings from this fed into the development of the principles and practice resource highlighted above
- **Closing the loop: responding to the student voice. An international scan of practice** – A research piece presenting findings from a scan of published literature and primary data collected through an online survey, skype interviews and informants nationally and internationally. sparqs carried out a workshop to support this piece with the European Students' Union (ESU) gathering input from student officers across Europe.

CASE STUDIES



UCC DIGITAL BADGE

University College Cork introduced a series of digital badges across professional development, but also developed a student digital badge for 'Quality Peer Reviewers' as part of a systematic inclusion of students across internal quality assurance review panels. To earn the badge students are trained for 2 hours, review self-evaluation reports for 4 hours, take part in the relevant site visit and report drafting (20 hours), providing feedback on report drafts (2 hours), and finally submitting a reflection to the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU) on their experiences (2 hours). The 'Quality Peer Reviewer' Badge is linked clearly to wider University strategy, in line with Goal 1 of the University's Strategic Plan 2017 – 2022: "to deliver an outstanding, student-centred teaching and learning experience with a renewed, responsive and research-led curriculum at its core."

POLICY ENABLER

Each higher education institution to develop a policy on Student Engagement and Feedback for their Institute/ College/ University. The student engagement and student feedback mechanisms in place to be audited centrally on a three year cycle in reference to this policy.

SECTION 2 FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

When talking about feedback mechanisms, it is important to have clear definitions. Feedback is a continuum bookended by very formal well-defined feedback mechanisms to very informal corridor chats. How these are defined by the institution, and understood by individual staff and students, is determined by the language used. Language in this context ensures that there is a common understanding of the mechanisms discussed. Defining the mechanism and communicating the purpose of the engagement is key to success.

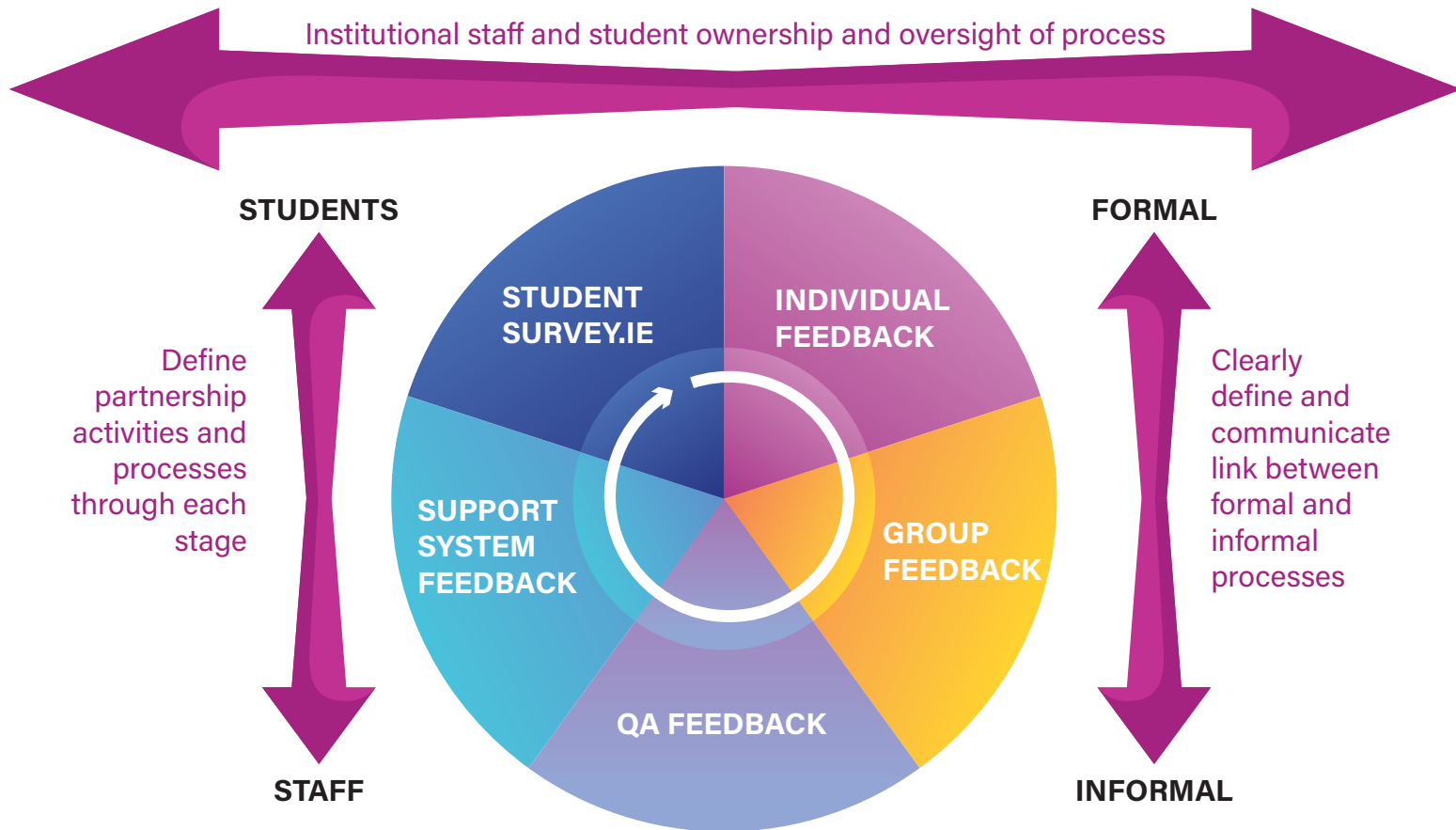


Figure 2 Mechanisms of student engagement and feedback within an institution can be defined as a continuous loop or process of enhancement. This loop can assist in understanding key actions and enablers for staff and students during the cycle of the academic year. Enhancing the roles of staff and students within these processes is core to success.

GUIDELINES

The first step for an institution is to review practice. This entails the mapping of the student engagement and feedback mechanisms currently used. Clearly identifying the roles and responsibilities of those involved is central to this mapping process. Once the mechanisms are collected and categorised, analysis of the effectiveness versus the goals of the institution is important to successful implementation. This enables the institution to gain an aerial view of the feedback engagement process. Identifying how often the student is asked to engage and give feedback, incorporating how they are approached, can inform strategy and ensure that there is no overlap or repetition.

POLICY ENABLER

Each higher education institution, in partnership with their students' union and student representative structures, creates and maintains a system of student involvement in governance that encompasses formal, semi-formal, and informal means of gathering opinion, actioning change, and reviewing progress. These structures should play a role in the wider governance and quality arrangements of the institution, and have in-built methods of review and reflection.

IT TRALEE STUDENT OPEN FORUM

The Student Open Forum was launched by the Office of the Vice President Academic Affairs and Registrar in the Academic Year 2012/2013. A minimum of two fora are arranged in each academic year. Membership of the forum includes, Vice President Academic Affairs and Registrar (Chairperson), Assistant Registrar, Academic Administration and Student Affairs Manager (Deputy Chairperson), Students' Union executive, Student class representatives, Admissions Officer, Examinations Officer, Students Services Officer (Secretary), Computer Services Manager, Librarian, Access Officer. The objectives of the forum are to provide an open discussion platform for student experiences of Institute services and facilities, and where particular issues can be presented for resolution where possible. Minutes and matters arising are reviewed at each subsequent forum meeting.

IT TRALEE STUDENT PARTICIPATION ON COURSE BOARD PROTOCOLS

1. The course board protocols outlined below will ensure that students' involvement in course boards works to the benefit of all concerned and impacts positively on the course as a whole. This structured involvement will be achieved through the following mechanisms:
 - i. Representation on Course Boards; or
 - ii. Scheduled Joint Academic Workshops (JAWS); or
 - iii. Scheduled Class Tutor with Class Representative meetings.

The protocol must ensure that only appropriate matters are raised in these fora and that matters of a confidential nature or relating directly to individuals are dealt with through the appropriate procedures.

2. Course Board / Joint Academic Workshops (JAWS)/ Class Tutor with Class Representative meetings:
 - (a) All concerned agree to discuss issues in an objective manner with a view to achieving a quality learning environment for both staff and students.
 - (b) Chairperson:
 - Chair will ensure that the protocols below are implemented, and will rule personal comments to/from student or staff members out-of-order.
 - (c) Student Members:
 - Student members will notify HOD of issues which they wish to be included as agenda items one week in advance of meetings;
 - HOD will advise representatives which issues are appropriate for Course Boards/ JAWS/ Class Tutor with Class Representative meetings;
 - Topics for Course Board/ JAWS/ Class Tutor with Class Representative meetings include: course workload; facilities (classroom, laboratories, workshops, library, computers etc.) timetabling; continuous assessment/assignment/project scheduling and rules and guidelines for same; health & safety;

- Student members may not raise issues in relation to individual lecturer performance through the Course Board/JAWS/ Class tutor with Class Representative meetings mechanisms. Such issues can be raised with the lecturer/HOD as appropriate.

(d) Staff Members:

- Staff recognise that student members represent the class group as a whole and that views expressed may or may not be the personal view of the student member;
- Staff recognise that issues raised by students are of genuine concern to them, and should be addressed objectively;

3. Review

The operation of student membership of Course Boards will be reviewed by Heads of Department with staff and students at the end of each Academic year.

POLICY ENABLER

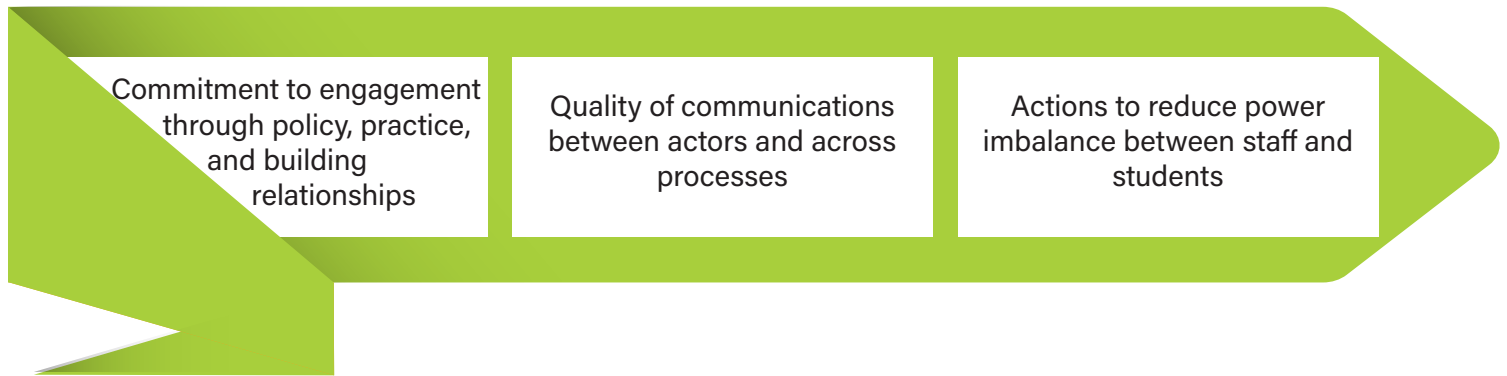
The review of feedback mechanisms will inform policy development and capture best practice and gaps in student engagement, assisting institutional staff and their students to identify the most effective links between the domains of governance, quality assurance, student representation, and teaching and learning.



SECTION 3 THE FEEDBACK SPECTRUM

The nature of student feedback in Higher Education varies greatly depending on who is offering the feedback, to whom, in what format and in what context. Opportunities exist for formal, semi-formal and informal feedback, each of which are to be encouraged for the particular value they offer. For the purposes of this work these feedback forms are defined as follows:

- Formal Feedback may be scheduled, minuted, timed and captured. Examples include academic programme boards, Academic Council, Governing Body and other structures in a higher education institution
- Semi-Formal Feedback: Staff/student forums, external examiners meeting students
- Informal Feedback: Specific and targeted unstructured/email/calls, consideration of equality issues for particular cohorts, building a partnership relationship with staff/student



The success of each form of feedback mechanism or process depends on many factors including the underlying relationships, a commitment to engagement, the quality of communications and a reduction of any power dynamic or imbalance. The underlying relationship requires a level of parity of esteem for the provision of feedback and any consequence to be treated with appropriate merit. The commitment to engagement ensures an openness to feedback and to devoting an appropriate consideration to it. The quality of communications means timely and considered responses being given to all parties to the feedback process. Finally, addressing the power dynamic is important to reduce student fears in offering feedback or being a part of creating meaningful partnership, for example by providing for a balance of staff and students in any formal or semi-formal event, or by choosing a neutral, non-threatening venue for a meeting. Training, personal and professional development, and capacity building opportunities are also important factors for both students and staff in reducing this power dynamic and ensuring that all participants are able to be a part of decision-making in an environment of partnership.

The forum for offering feedback in varying formats may vary across the institution, such as in the case of offering informal feedback in person, or to the Governing Body Boardroom when a student representative offers feedback on behalf of the entire student body. In spite of this diversity, certain themes are common to all successful feedback fora. These may include, for example, open and accessible agendas, equal opportunities to speak and rotating the role of chair.

The correct identification of roles can contribute to successful feedback, as the feedback must be offered to the most appropriate person or group of people in order to be given due consideration and responded to in a manner that is timely and efficient.

Evaluating which one of the three forms of feedback to choose can be difficult especially if there is no previous experience to draw from. It is therefore useful to draw up guidelines that can assist students and staff in recognising the most effective means of providing, responding to, or actioning feedback.

3.1 Formal Feedback

GUIDELINES

Formal Feedback may be characterised by its setting and format. Typically, it will occur in a scheduled and minuted meeting, which follows an agreed agenda. There are many examples in institutions from individual programme boards up to the Governing Body.

Some aspects to consider in formal settings are as follows:



Numbers issue/parity of esteem: when the students are outnumbered, this may present an obstacle to feedback. While it may be impractical or impossible to offer parity of numbers, equally it is best if the students represent a significant proportion of those gathered;



Chairing meetings has been the gift of academics or academic managers, but this need not be the case and student chairs can further the cause of feedback;



Transparency is important which can mean Agendas available and even published in advance of meetings and equally meeting minutes being widely available;



Action: Formal feedback need not necessarily lead to any change, but it is important to openly consider the feedback.

3.2 SEMI-FORMAL FEEDBACK

GUIDELINES

Semi-formal feedback does not need to have Agendas, minutes nor even to be scheduled. They may occur on an ad hoc basis, but rely heavily on relationship between the participants, or at least the relationship between what the participants represent, so that, for example, a newly elected student representative or newly promoted academic manager need not necessarily have built a personal relationship first, before being in a position to avail of semi-formal feedback.

Some ways in which to understand semi-formal feedback includes:



Ensuring parity of esteem: this communication requires the ability for either party (staff or student) to initiate the communication;



Accept that this feedback may come at any time;



Relationships are important to this form of feedback, so respect and trust are important;



Action: Semi-formal feedback need not necessarily lead to any change, but it is important to openly consider the feedback;



Transparency is important which can include discussion on how the feedback was received or occurred and how eventual decisions were arrived at.



The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) offers a range of activities and supports for institutions to develop their practices in student engagement and partnership. This case study from DCU outlines some of the outcomes and impact from this support.

The DCU NStEP Working Group is a subcommittee of the DCU Executive Committee tasked with facilitating and supporting a number of activities to enhance the relationship between the Institution and its student representatives. These activities include:

- conducting a review of structures to ascertain the extent of and appropriateness of student representation across university and faculty level decision-making structures. The output of this review was the development of a 'Student Representative Chart', which reinforced the strength of the Student Voice when engaging with the university to enhance the overall student experience.
- hosting a one-day strategic analysis workshop to enable an opportunity for staff / students to engage in open dialogue around the development of institutional capacity. Staff and students working in partnership to assess the current student engagement activities whilst identifying areas for enhancement towards improved practice has the potential to add real value.
- working in close consultation with the student body to increase the overall ISSE participation rate. identifying new opportunities for engagement activities

One particular activity facilitated by the working group is a pilot of the 'Student Voice Forum', an idea introduced by the DCU SU Executive team (2017/18) in consultation with the Quality Promotions Office following a meeting with their counterparts in a UK University. These forums provide an opportunity for staff and students to engage in face-to-face dialogue, in an informal setting, around areas of concern that may have an impact on the teaching and learning experience, whilst managing expectations for all involved. Although DCU student representatives have existing formal channels in which they can express their important opinions and views, these discussion groups create an opportunity for the development of relationships allowing for the prompt resolution of issue(s) or concerns that may otherwise have taken a long time to address. The initial pilot programme ran across two academic units during Semester II 2017/18 and plans to finalise the implementation across the remaining three academic units and key student facing professional support units are under review.

PHASE I PILOT - SEMESTER II, 2017/18 (STUDENT / STAFF FORUMS WITHIN ACADEMIC UNITS)

The first phase of these forums, piloted across one academic school and one faculty, specifically in the School of Applied Languages (a School within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) and the Faculty of Engineering and Computing took place during Semester II (weeks 3 & 11) 2017/18. Each group comprised:

- an equal ratio of staff and students.
- student - Faculty Convenor as well as a representatives for programmes and year groups.
- staff - Faculty Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, Programme chair, the Faculty Manager or another senior Faculty administrator.

Initial reports indicated that participants had a positive experience and expressed an interest in contributing to future forums. The following is a brief summary of feedback received from both staff and student representatives.

"I feel that if done correctly it could vastly improve some of current streams of communication between lecturers and allow for a greater empathy between the two. It is important that all sides not only bring issues but suggestions to their solutions too."

"It must be said that this type of atmosphere works so much better than student representation on programme boards, however the difficulty is in that who is mandated to take action. As the faculty convenor and chair, I did follow up on a number of issues from these meetings however perhaps there could be an opportunity going forward to looking at adding a little more structure without losing the freedom that such a forum provided."

"I believe that it is important to keep institutional memory inherent to the system while ensuring that there is a continuous flow of innovative ideas and people to the forum. This can be achieved by increasing the term of each member and ensure that there are staggered nomination process so there is not a total turnover ever so many years."

BROAD FEEDBACK FROM STAFF

- Useful exercise – different tone & quality of dialogue.
- Offered staff an opportunity to respond to issues and highlighted the potential for managing expectations.
- Allowed students to gain insight into the full extent of faculty activities.
- Requires clarity on ownership – who organises meetings etc.
- Needs to include a broad mix of student participants to maximise the value.
- Follow-up is crucial.
- Establishing protocols on raising issues, particularly naming issues is important.
- Staff suggest faculty model may work best, however we must remain mindful of disciplinary mix as well as managing the size of the groups.

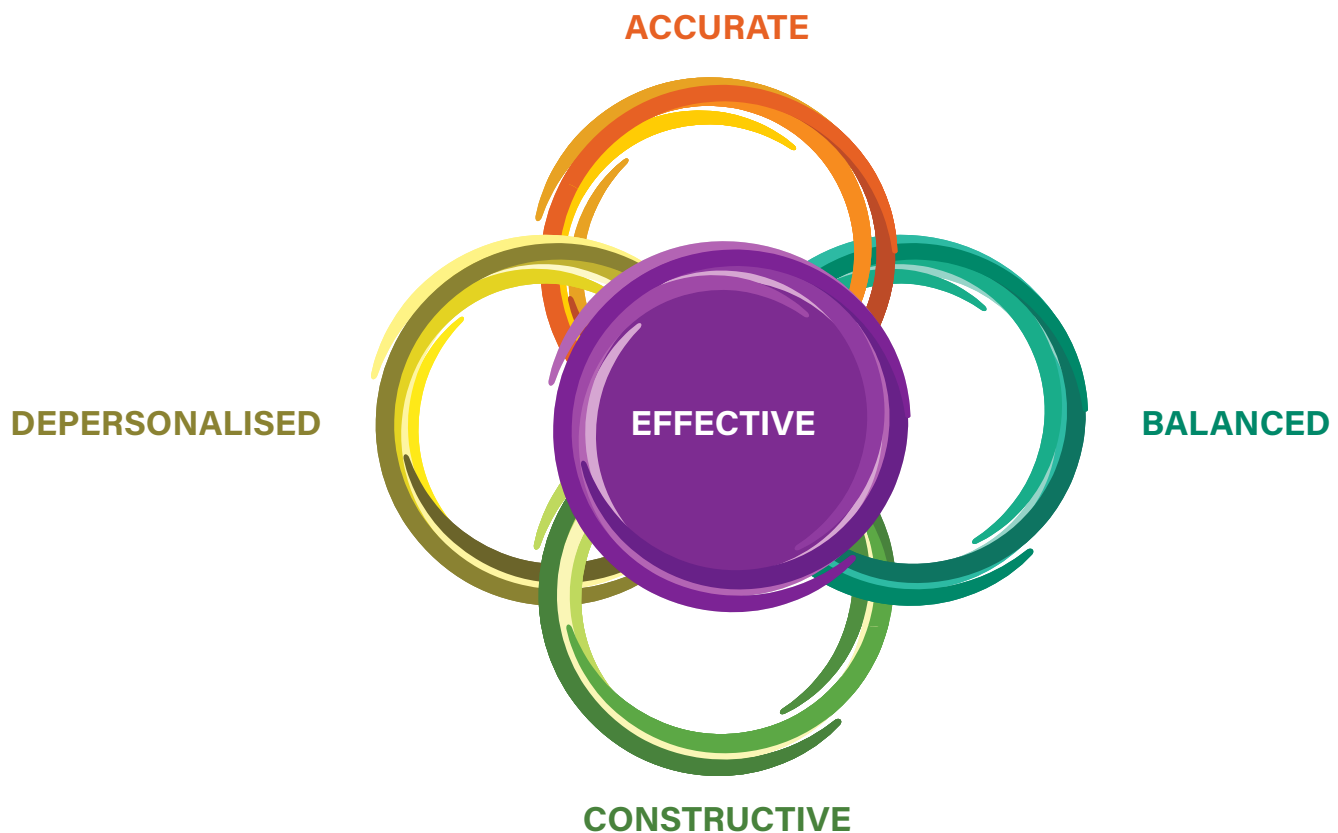
It was acknowledged that there had been a positive impact from the Student Voice Forums within the first 6 months and that the potential of this approach to engagement could further advance and enhance student / staff relationships across the institutional landscape. Participants expressed confidence that this will greatly assist in nurturing a sustainable culture of a partnership to engagement activities across the University.

LESSONS LEARNED / RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FUTURE FORUMS

As this was a pilot initiative, DCU staff and students leading on the Forums identified areas that would require further development prior to the completion of phase I, which are outlined as follows:

- Although the purpose of the forums is to provide opportunities for informal dialogue, the development of a 'Terms of reference' could help to manage expectations for all participants (draft TOR outlined at the end of this section).
- Identifying a key point of contact for each group at the offset is important as it ensures the follow up of meetings and actions are recorded/communicated in a timely fashion.
- Availability and attendees – considering the busy workload during Semester I, it is imperative to secure attendees (for both staff and students), meeting dates and venue as soon as possible. One of the concerns from the pilot was a timing issue for student representatives considering the first meeting took place in Semester II when some of them were finishing up as reps to take on Executive positions.
- Although these meetings are of an informal nature, it is important that co-ordinators agree on agenda item(s) and that the student co-ordinator ensures the circulation of documentation to all participants in advance.
- Ensuring continuity with student representatives in particular is potentially beneficial therefore perhaps identifying students who have student rep experience or an interest in running for an executive position could add value. To enhance the impact of building relations, a crossover of students responsible for the faculty level StudentSurvey.ie campaign and those participating in the forums could maximise the outcome.

THE A,B,C,D OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK



NEXT STEPS

The DCU NStEP Working Group have carried out their responsibilities and have facilitated the potential for this partnership type model of engagement to become part of the University culture. Whilst the national programme went through a period of change and renewal, leading to a new Strategy for 2019-21, activities in DCU linked to student engagement became an item for discussion and decision making under the remit of the Quality Promotions Committee (QPC) ensuring continued dialogue and guidance at a senior university level.

The A, B, C, D Framework was particularly highlighted as a methodology that could work well in ensuring optimisation of the way in which the closing of the feedback loop could be achieved during the forums, helping to structure conversations.

DRAFT 'TERMS OF REFERENCE' FOR STUDENT VOICE FORUMS

The objective of the forum is to provide an opportunity for staff and students to work in partnership by engaging in informal face-to-face dialogue, outside the formal structures, to discuss issues or concerns that could potentially effect the teaching and learning experience.

- Forums will take place twice a semester, in weeks 3 or 4, and weeks 10 or 11.
- Each session will take place during lunchtime 1-2pm and will include lunch, with the suggestion that an informal setting be used sofas or soft chairs, rather than boardroom style. For the pilot, the QPO will fund catering.
- A primary co-ordinator should be appointed to manage associated logistics.
- Each group should consist of six staff members and six student representatives with a makeup of;
 - Students should include the Faculty Convenor who will lead the meeting
 - Other students should include represent different programmes and year group cohorts
 - Staff representatives may include two Heads of School (or their deputy), the Faculty Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning, two Programme chairs, the Faculty Manager or another senior Faculty administrator.
- Both before and after the meeting there should be one key contact identified from both staff and students to follow-up.

3.3 INFORMAL FEEDBACK

GUIDELINES

Informal feedback arises from the community nature of a higher education institution, as well as the relationship that exists between a lecturer and a student. It may manifest itself in an open-door policy outside of lectures and come in the form of emails, phone calls, talk in corridors or classrooms, etc. It is important to recognise that of the three forms of feedback, this form is the only one available to students on an everyday basis, especially those who do not have a representative role, unlike the previously discussed forms of feedback.

Some considerations for maximising the value of informal feedback are as follows:

- Mutual respect and trust are crucial, as the student may be unfamiliar to offering feedback;
- There needs to be a common language between those offering and receiving feedback;
- Structure: How does an institution structure informal feedback? It may defy traditional methods unless the institution produces guidelines for staff or includes an emphasis in student handbooks, in order to foster an active culture of engagement;
- Accept that this feedback may come at any time;
- Both parties must feel they are in a comfortable space;
- Action: Informal feedback need not necessarily lead to any change, but it is important to openly consider the feedback;
- Transparency is important which can include discussion on how the feedback was received or occurred and how eventual decisions were arrived at.

SECTION 4 CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP

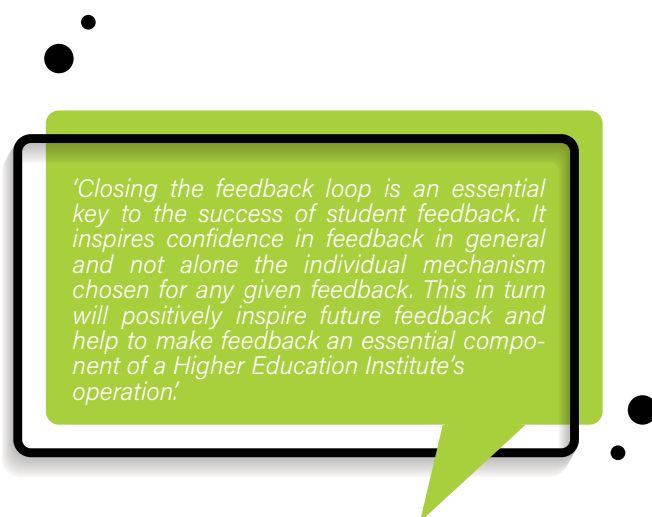
GUIDELINES

Closing the feedback loop means acting on student input, and making students aware, in a timely manner of a decision to act or indeed a reason not to act.

The role of a student in an institution is more than simply a learner. Students are clearly actors in the education process, and success in education can depend on the roles and responsibilities afforded to them. In a simple view they are both customers and partners with the emphasis on each role varying continuously over their time as a student. As customers, they are consulted through surveys, staff-student fora, student representatives, etc., whereas in the role of partner they may be part of the decision-making process or indeed may initiate actions of their own. In both roles they are in a position to offer feedback.

Higher education institutions usually respond in one of two ways to student feedback, to clarify their procedures to students or to undertake to improve their processes (Williams 2011). When action is taken, it is also not always immediately visible, nor is it always 'real' action.

Brennan et al (2003) uncovered a number of institutional concerns regarding acting on feedback:



POLICY

Actions are not a necessary condition for successful feedback, as some feedback may not require action and other feedback may require actions currently beyond the scope of the institution (both transparency and honesty are important in this – an institution must be open and honest about what is and is not possible to deliver). However, communication is an essential component of successful feedback independent of the decision to act or not. Even the decision to act itself may be nuanced, as for example in the case of the analysis of a large survey such as studentsurvey.ie, where an institution may choose to focus on thematic priorities in any given year. The arrival at such a decision in terms of how, why, who etc. must be well communicated to not cause a loss of faith in that survey as a form of feedback.

Similarly, the prioritisation of feedback should not leave marginalised student groupings, such as part-time students, international students, or post-graduate students, feeling even more marginalised.

Student Voice at Every Level

Feedback may occur at every level of a higher education institution and in the case of formal feedback, it is important to ensure parity of esteem, so that the feedback may be offered and accepted at every level, but equally that the decision-making process thereafter be seen to be transparent, fair and balanced, in the sense that the student voice is well represented in any decision-making. This may mean equal student numbers to staff representatives, equal speaking time, student chairs, agreed agendas, etc. This will also require student involvement in specific initiatives and projects, as well as in the evolution and design of new mechanisms and structures within the institution.

Institutionalising Feedback

An institution can build feedback into its structures and into its calendar, providing a continuum of opportunity to offer feedback in multiple forms, ensuring that such structures are set up to act on that feedback. The individual student voice is usually formally gathered in surveys, which can be limited in number, far-reaching in their nature and timed to occur at the same time every year. For example, modular and programme surveys would typically occur at the end of every semester/year, and studentsurvey.ie is always in February/March. In terms of the opportunities for student representatives to offer feedback, the institution should consider whether or not there is a significant and sufficient number of student representative places on every decision-making body in the organisation, taking full account of the previously discussed power imbalance.

An institution may also decide that external examiners should meet an entire class or selected students from a programme/discipline at every visit to the institution. Such meetings could afford examiners an opportunity to meet with students alone, providing a space in which feedback can be aired and considered outside of internal structures and mechanisms.

Institutional policy/strategy/guidelines/codes on feedback

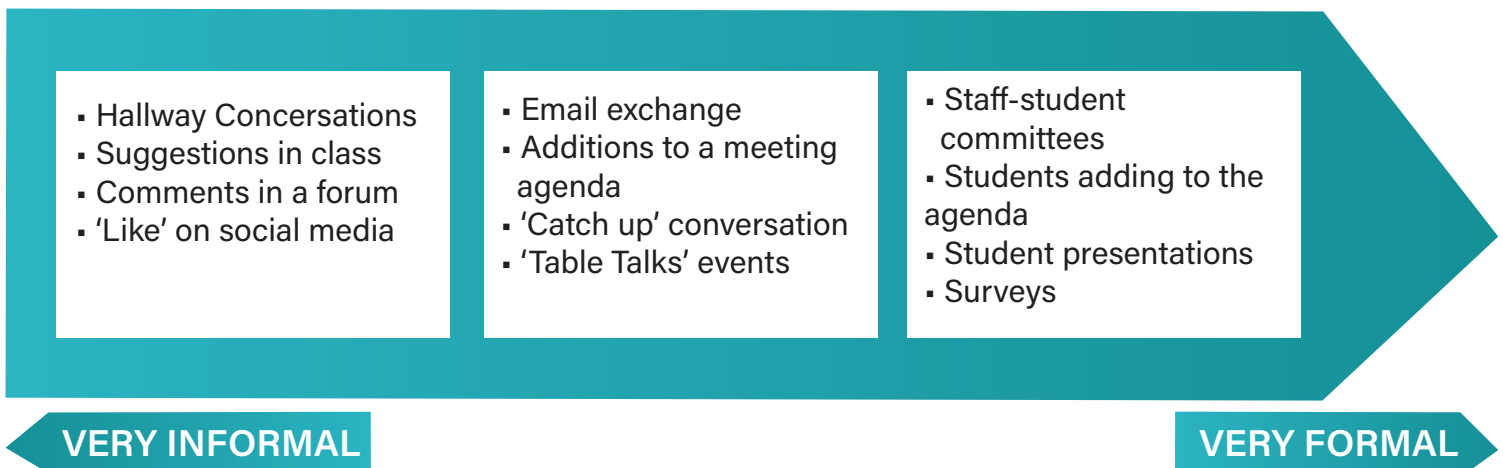
In order to assist staff and students, as well as structurally building feedback into an organisation, the institution may decide to draw up its own policy (University of Edinburgh), strategy (Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh), guidelines (University of Plymouth), or code on feedback.

Prioritising Feedback

Timing is also of importance in feedback, for example the current class may graduate before action has occurred. Where possible therefore it is important to decide what feedback should be more promptly responded to, while with other feedback taking the time required to sufficiently address the issues raised. On occasion, it may be necessary to harness the 'right moment'.

Communicating Feedback

Formal feedback communication may range from dedicated pages on the website (for example, the University of Auckland), to social media accounts shared with and by the student representatives, to academic papers analysing feedback, to revised mechanisms and policies with a view to airing the issues considered.



SECTION 5 SURVEYS AND DATA

5.1 LEARNING ANALYTICS

GUIDELINES

As a feedback tool analytics can demonstrate patterns and help enhance the learning experience in higher education institutions. By collecting data across the range of institutional services and departments, resources can be directed as required. Live feedback from usage of services and spaces provides patterns of learner behaviour which is anonymously captured and can be automatically analysed. Learning analytics usage in feedback can be linked to semi-formal feedback as the data is indicative of trends, while the data can also be used in formal feedback where it used with other tools. In this report the emphasis is on system data collection rather than individual student data- enhanced care systems which can be used to facilitate early interventions to support the student successfully engaging academically.

Development of dashboards to enable staff to view where and how students are using services and engaging with the systems provided by the Higher Education Institute are beneficial.

Interactive systems can be used to collect and analyse data from students and get instant anonymous feedback.

In using learning analytics as part of engagement Higher Education Institute's should consider:

- The objective in using learning analytics
- Ensuring that the data is collected in an ethical manner
- Where and how the data will be used
- How representative is the data for decision making
- That other feedback mechanisms are used to verify and support the data.

SUPPORTING MATERIAL/TOOLS

Data Enabled Student Success Initiative

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning published a Forum Insight in September 2017 to assist institutions in understanding the role of data and learning analytics in supporting aims such as increasing 'retention, progression and completion rates, protect students' welfare and enhance their depth of learning.'



National Understanding of Student Success

In Ireland, the conversation on student success emerged from a number of national initiatives and discourses. In 2017, the Working Group on Student Success published a discussion paper on pushing the agenda forward, culminating in 2019 with the National Forum's publication of a range of resources on defining and understanding student success. Key for staff, students, and institutions, was that student engagement and partnership was a core underpinning element of developing strategies and a shared approach to meaningful student success initiatives. Ultimately, the role of supported student voice, intertwined with effective and collaborative feedback mechanisms, can support



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INTERNATIONAL EXAMPLE

The December 2018 report by the Higher Learning Commission on Defining Student Success Data from the United States provides staff and students an international perspective on the development of student success through evidence and data.



POLICY ENABLER

Institutional policies should focus on the type of data collected and how it is collected. The policies and procedures surrounding the collection and use of learning analytics should be underpinned by the higher education institutions policies around ethics, ensuring that students can be meaningful and appropriately engaged in discussions and mechanisms.

5.2 SURVEY PLANNING, DESIGN AND ROLL OUT

GUIDELINES

Higher education institution initial considerations when survey planning:

THE QUESTIONS

- Is there an information gap?
- What questions do we need answers to?
- Why do we need the information?
- Is this critical information?
- Are these critical questions?
- What information is required and for what purpose?
- Has the Higher Education Institute the information already?
- Are the necessary questions already addressed through studentsurvey.ie?

THE METHOD

- Do students need to be surveyed?
- Is a survey the best mechanism to use to answer the necessary questions?
- Could the information be acquired through an alternative mechanism?
- Ethical considerations when surveying? GDPR considerations when surveying?
- Is the survey accessible and user friendly for the target audience?

THE PROCESS

- Who will be responsible for the survey design, dissemination, analysis and interpretation, feedback and feedforward plans?
- Have those with responsibility the necessary expertise?
- Is the higher education institution working in partnership with students and the student union throughout the survey lifecycle?
- Is there central management responsibility in place to oversee student surveying for student feedback Institute wide?

POLICY ENABLER

Each institution should examine the development of a central student feedback and survey schedule for the academic year with the aim of identifying the student surveys being carried out across the institution, to review the requirements for each separate survey, to facilitate the optimal timing for each survey, and ultimately to prevent survey fatigue amongst the student population.

Planning for the lifecycle of the survey from the outset will involve core considerations on the design, dissemination, analysis and interpretation, and feedback and feedforward mechanisms.

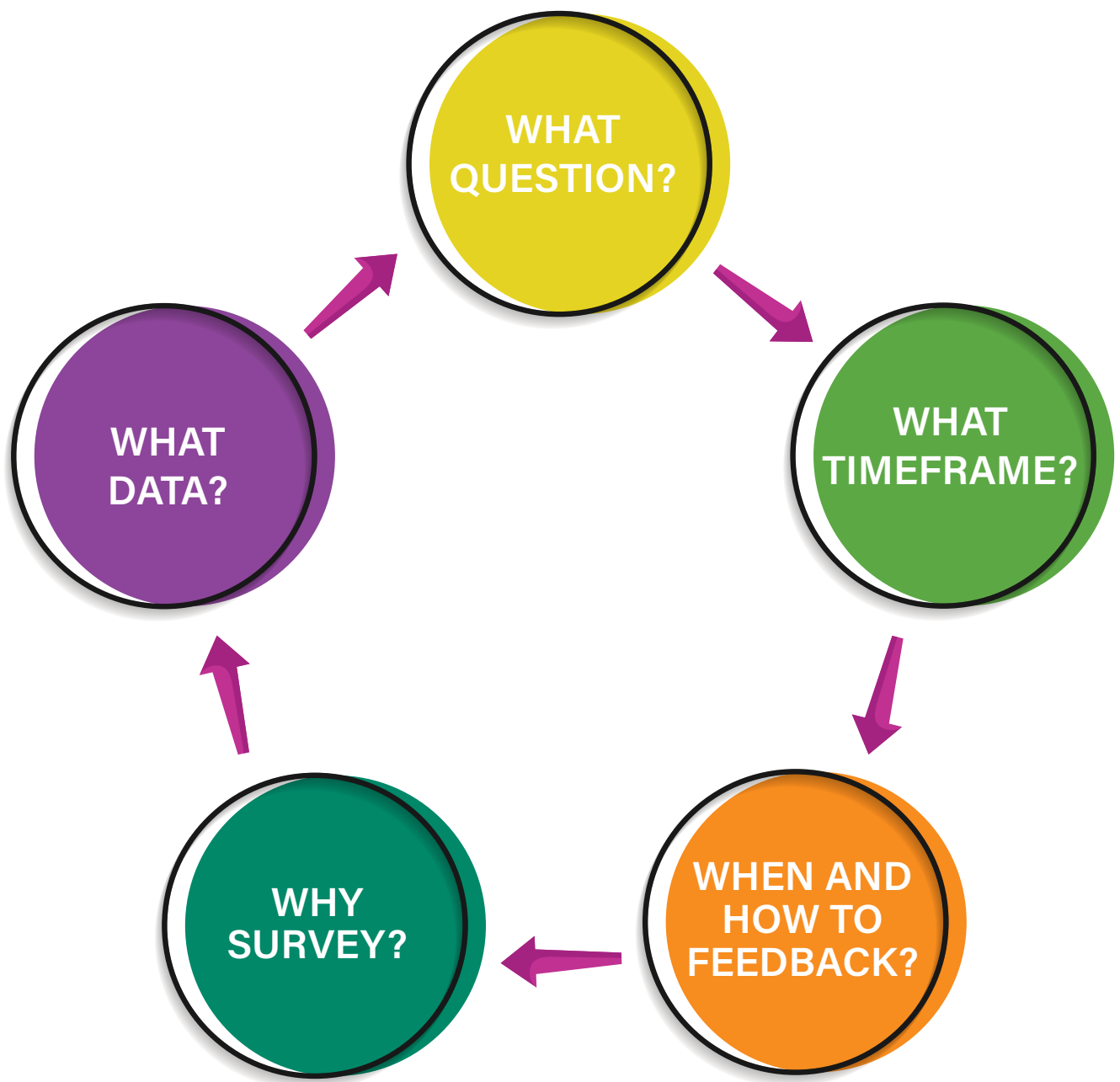


Figure 3 Survey Lifecycle

SUPPORTING MATERIAL/TOOLS

Tool on shaping feedback – The tool, developed by sparqs, allows staff and students to develop joint ownership of feedback mechanisms, including questions of timing, format, conclusions to draw, and even which method of asking is most appropriate. It provides questions to consideration across four headings: design, delivery, analysis and actions.

5.3 STUDENTSURVEY.IE

GUIDELINES

What is studentsurvey.ie?

studentsurvey.ie explores the amount of time and effort that students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities, as well as how effectively institutions facilitate, encourage and promote student engagement in activities that are linked to learning. The results of the survey are intended to add value at institutional level (for students and for staff) and to inform national policy. The survey piloted a postgraduate research student survey in 2018, and subsequently rolled out the survey in 2019. The extremely rich results of the pilot from the PGR survey affords insights into a range of aspects of PGR students' engagement with their institution, including supervision, research culture and research skills.

POLICY ENABLER

It is crucial to the success of any large scale national survey like studentsurvey.ie that institutional and student leadership work with staff and students across the institution to create a collaborative and institution-wide approach to each aspect of design, dissemination, analysis, and impact. Mapping this work alongside other feedback, data, and survey mechanisms is valuable to ensuring maximum impact and managing the workload involved.



THE SURVEY TIMELINE



GENERAL TIMELINE

December – January: Preparing for fieldwork and the data return to the survey company, initiating communications campaign, deciding on fieldwork dates in discussion with staff and student reps.

February – March: Three-week fieldwork window falls within this time for all institutions, significant focus on maximising participation in the survey.

May – August: Data files are released by survey company and institutions conduct their own analysis.

September – October: Results of the analysis are disseminated among students, staff, faculty and senior executive in a variety of ways.

November: Launch of national report, national results dissemination.

HOW IS THE DATA ANALYSED?

Responses for some of the individual questions may be combined to create related indicator scores. These indicators scores act as “signposts” and are calculated on a scale from 0 to 60. Calculation of these scores is explained in the introductory section of the national report. No single indicator reflects the complex dimensions of student behaviour and institutional performance. Comparison of individual scores across institutions is inappropriate given that the differences with respect to mission, resources, profile and response rates. Comparison of indicator scores for various disciplines illustrates the notable variation that exists between fields of study at national level. The proportion of students studying particular disciplines also influences the overall results for each institution.

All institutions receive a number of data files for the studentsurvey.ie and studentsurvey.ie-PGR, including response breakdowns for all questions. These data can then be examined across a number of dimensions such as field of study and mode of study. There is variation across the participating institutions in relation to how the data are analysed and how detailed the analysis carried out is. Development in this aspect of the survey is being planned for the period 2019-2021.

CASE STUDIES

Please see the report “Effective feedback and uses of ISSE data: an emerging picture”, available from the studentsurvey.ie website, for a range of case studies of how the survey has been undertaken and embedded in various institutions. For the 2020 roll-out of survey fieldwork a range of good practice examples have been added to the studentsurvey.ie website on promotion, analysing the data, and making an impact with the data.

NStEP IS A PARTNERSHIP OF



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National Student Engagement Programme

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