

# Students as partners: Creating a collective responsibility for course evaluation and improvement

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## Abstract

Student engagement and a culture of partnership is a key feature of UK Higher and Further Education policy. Dialogue and collaboration are at the core of these concepts. This article outlines the findings from a small-scale study which examined the impact and effectiveness of a new approach to whole course self-evaluation, also exploring the role of the student in the creation and use of evaluative data and feedback. Analysis suggests that the new approach outlined is perceived as highly effective in engaging students and staff in meaningful evaluative dialogue. It concludes with questions for further engagement and empowerment opportunities for staff-student partnerships in this co-creative context.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Institutional and sector context

Inverness College (ICUHI), part of the University of the Highlands and Islands, is a tertiary institution of around 6000 students, studying from access level courses to doctoral level study. Committed to a culture of partnership both at local and regional level, we reviewed and developed our self-evaluation processes for whole course evaluation during 2017/18 and 2018/19. This development, as well as aligning to the current Enhancement Theme for Higher Education, also supported our involvement in the College Improvement Project within the college sector.

The College Improvement Project (CIP) was announced by the Scottish Government in March 2017 with the aim of providing new methods to respond to the attainment challenge. The project sought specifically, to build on the success of using quality improvement (QI) methodologies, and to create evidence-based enhancement which can be implemented throughout the college sector.

The College Improvement Project employed the 'Plan-Do-Study-Act' (PDSA) cycle (which is in widespread use in the NHS). The starting point for the process is the creation of a driver diagram where the factors which may contribute to achieving the overall aim (in this case, of student retention and success) are articulated. From this, ideas for change are generated (Plan) and tested on a small scale (Do). Evaluation of the impact of these changes (Study) informs whether changes are maintained, altered or discarded (Act). This model therefore allows for quick trialling of ideas on a small scale which is evidence-based before committing to large-scale change.

Inverness College UHI formed part of a five-college team testing this way of using QI methodology with a focus on the areas of retention and success of our learners. The outcomes from this will feed into (college) sector-wide enhancement strategies (CDN, 2018).

## 1.2 Partnership culture

Current thinking within student engagement in both further and higher education, particularly in Scotland, leans towards creating a partnership relationship between staff, students and their college or university. The Scottish Funding Council funded agency, Sparqs, has a remit:

*to advance education by promoting an environment where students are able to make a positive and rewarding difference to their own and others' educational experience (Sparqs, 2018).*

Indeed, Sparqs altered their name in 2015 from 'student *participation* in quality Scotland' to 'student *partnerships* in quality Scotland' to reflect how thinking and behaviour has changed. Recent research looks further into notions of partnership and staff-student relationships and delves deeper into aspects of social identity and how identity formation and navigation influences, and is influenced by, student-staff partnership (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2018). Key to this is type of partnership is the student voice replacing the "conventional, paternalistic culture of higher education" (Carey, 2013: 1295).

Within our working environment, Inverness College UHI, we have seen these changes reflected in our own working practices and understanding of student engagement. Two recent projects demonstrate this well. Firstly, the reframing of our Student Partnership Agreement and Learner Agreement to truly reflect working with students as experts and able members of our learning community, rather than reinforcing the traditional dichotomous student/staff roles and identities. Secondly, an action learning project in conjunction with Sparqs, working on a toolkit to ensure effective student engagement in Education Scotland's *How Good Is Our College?* framework. This has focused on several aspects reflected in the University's overall work for the current Enhancement Theme, and of particular relevance are our workstreams involving student representation, evaluation and feedback.

## 1.3 Course self-evaluation at ICUHI

ICUHI revised Course Committee Meetings (CCMs) to increase student engagement and shift to a collective responsibility for all stages of the enhancement process. CCMs are whole course evaluation events taking place three times a year. Before this shift in approach, these meetings were only attended by academic staff and class representatives were invited to attend for part of the meeting to provide their class feedback. The meetings were usually restricted to staff and students from one or two related courses. Evaluative activity and planning for change were generally completed by academic staff or heads of school using the evidence gathered.

The new approach altered this format in several ways: all students from these courses are now invited to attend and often classes are stepped down to encourage attendance. Staff from across curriculum areas now come together and student support and professional services such as Finance, Admissions, Quality are also in attendance, along with employers in areas of the curriculum that are employer-led. The meeting format does not follow a traditional question and answer format but rather utilises a conversational dialogical approach using Sparqs' question prompts as a foundation (see Figure 1).

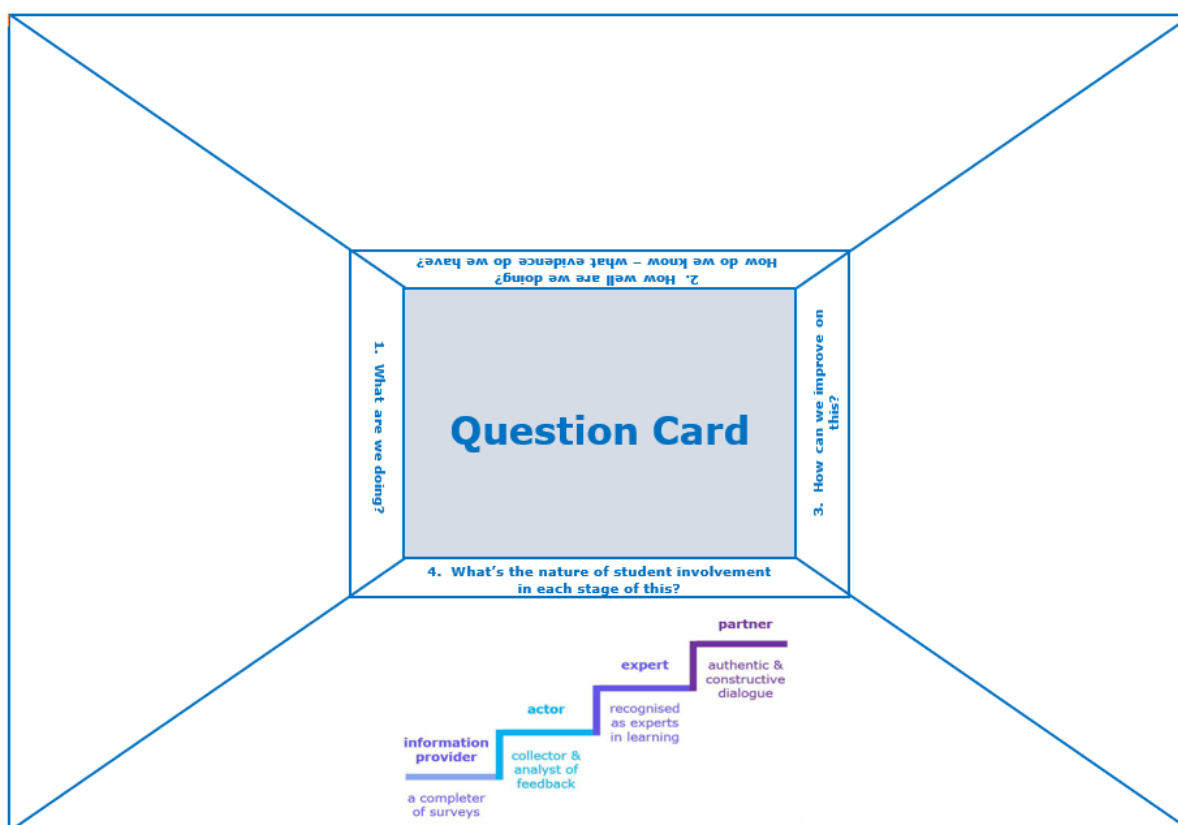


Figure 1: Question prompt card

The new approach was piloted at the end of 2018/19 and rolled out to all curriculum areas in 2019/20, not just at further education level, but across some HN areas of study (SCQF levels 7 and 8).

## 2 Aims and method

The aims of this study were to address the following research questions:

- How effective is ICUHI's new approach to course evaluation in engaging students in evaluating and planning improvement?
- How is data for evaluation created and used, and what is the student role in this?
- To what extent are students and academic staff working collectively in the use of feedback and evaluative data?

Qualitative methods were employed involving an extensive series of semi-structured interviews with student groups, staff individuals and staff groups (encompassing lecturing staff, programme leaders, heads of school and members of the senior management team). Interviewees included those who had directly participated in the new CCMs, as well as those who had not, in order to evaluate the impact of the new approach beyond the immediate participants. The data collected was categorised and content analysed in order to summarize and evaluate and identify significant themes.

## 3 Findings

### 3.1 Relationship building

The key finding from the interviews was that the new approach built relationships in a way that had not been previously achieved. These were relationships between academic staff and students on their programmes as would naturally be expected, but also between academic staff and other colleagues, both academics, support staff, and employers. This positive relationship building was evident to both those having participated and those viewing from outside.

**Staff interviewee:** *And I see them in action, I see rooms full of people and feedback afterwards from various people, that that was a great event to be involved in; our student president has said he has had students telling them it's a fantastic thing to do.*

Students valued the opportunity to give their views; academic staff and students also saw the value of including staff from across the organisation in the meeting for the first time:

**Student interviewee:** *I thought it was really good to liaise with the lecturers...But also other people in the department as well.*

**Staff interviewee:** *.... particularly the opportunity always to have some interaction with support staff (...) They were hearing about our perspective and about the actual courses themselves in a way that they just didn't have, didn't have that (...) the support staff fed back that they found it very beneficial.*

**Staff interviewee:** *I think the previous method of- of collating evidence from students in a meeting format was a little bit...constrained. It was a little bit driven by the delivery team- and that's not necessarily at a conflict with what the students are thinking but it sometimes can restrict the amount of discussion that's being given to it.*

In broadening the meetings to encompass curriculum areas, academic staff came to see that challenges are not in isolation and are common to different curriculum areas. Across every curriculum area, there were a variety of roles in attendance showing clear collective use of feedback and evaluative data.

**Staff interviewee:** *I think what was nice about it was that we were discussing with tutors] from different areas...it's always nice to have exchange...exchange of anything is positive and discussion and (so) we are no longer in our little bubbles*

**Staff interviewee:** *I've never worked with so many support service staff members in a course committee meeting. And it's been so beneficial having <name> there to answer all the funding kind of issues and any kind of situations that were- or discussions that were arising. It was really nice to have staff and very knowledgeable people there with me and I feel it was again a big team spirit and even the students felt that team spirit.*

Where it has been possible to facilitate external stakeholders, such as employers being present, the impact has been positive:

**Staff interviewee:** *They (other staff/external employers) would also be sitting at tables with students who weren't necessarily from that professional background – but they were able to get equally pertinent comments about placement experience or their experiences about working with the college, and about how we come around to delivering the courses that we do with their input as much as student's input too. So, it was a very open and frank discussion. It was really very, very useful.*

### 3.2 Informal approach

Students felt that the new approach contributed to relationship building through the more informal setting which led to more of a conversation than they had expected:

**Student interviewee:** *It made it like an adult [common] discussion, instead of we're all sitting in rows and ... question- answer, question- answer. I think everyone was more relaxed*

**Student interviewee:** *I thought it would be more formal and we wouldn't be as much involved and well it was good to even hear a lot of the -the concerns and things that were good from the other students as well.*

**Student interviewee:** *I thought It would just mainly be like the lecturers – just saying 'oh yeah' – just asking a few questions, they'll be a few shrugs.*

The equalising nature of informal social interactions further helped to break down the dichotomous student/staff roles and identities. One staff member here noting this exchange with one of her students:

**Staff interviewee:** *I got up and made the students a cup of tea (...) and one of my students said to me- I didn't think I'd ever see the day when you'd make me a cup of tea (...) that sort of thing broke [it] down a bit*

Students were provided with refreshments, although one staff member was conscious that this not be a barrier to honest engagement:

**Staff interviewee:** *I bought lunch for everybody because I think that always helps (...) create a less formal environment. But I was really keen that we didn't make it so casual that people didn't feel that they could raise issues that were a challenge for them. (...)*

This is about valuing the student contribution, the expertise that they bring and furthering the culture of respect and partnership at all levels.

### 3.3 Potential for positive change

The potential for change as a direct result of these evaluative meetings was clearly demonstrated. Both staff and students could see both the potential for using the information gathered for making change and that the change would or has already happened. Staff can also see how small changes, which this method of quality improvement lends itself to, could be easily taken on:

**Student interviewee:** *I feel like our lecturer has tried to kinda [implement] some of the things we suggested.*

**Staff interviewee:** *You can find very small things to work on which you could implement immediately.*

The format and length of the meetings allows for more in-depth conversations and explanations about why some issues may not be able to be resolved or immediately addressed. Staff appreciated the opportunity to explain to students why certain changes were not possible (e.g. due to timetabling constraints) and consequently students demonstrated understanding of how some decisions are made:

**Student interviewee 1:** *yeah cuz it's not just a case of them making a decision – it has to go higher up [...] they have to meet criteria [...]*

**Student interviewee 2:** *Yeah, I had one (staff member) come down and speak about why they do this and why they do that. To do with like timetables and stuff like that*

That there is an opportunity to have conversations like these with students further builds trust and equality in the partnership.

### 3.4 Closing and documenting “the feedback loop”

An essential aspect in the use of any student feedback is ensuring students know what has been done with feedback, have the opportunity to get involved and that we as an institution are checking that the right action has been taken. Some teams started off their sessions by talking about changes that had taken place as a result of previous sessions. An example here of how students reacted to that knowledge:

**Student interviewee:** *she talked about the things that had happened since last year's talk and [...] there has been improvements made obviously from last year*

**Interviewer:** *How did that make you feel to hear that?*

**Student interviewee:** *Well positive – then it means whatever we're saying potentially could improve next year*

**Interviewer:** *So, do you think any of the changes you've suggested might be applied?*

**Student interviewee:** *Hopefully*

However, staff are concerned about effectively capturing the outputs from new CCMs so that it can be used to track changes in practice and demonstrate the impact of these in subsequent years:

**Staff interviewee 1:** *I think the process is absolutely ideal- I- I definitely wouldn't go back to gathering evidence any other way but the behind the scenes writing [...] capture -I would be interested to see how it rolls out.*

**Staff interviewee 2:** *So, as a management tool, having nice concise reports written from every team about what they did last year, it's very easy for me to look at and say, well you said this and you did that, and I can confirm that. It's not so easy with this new model (...) for me it's all about the impact, actions. What I am seeing is the tests for change. And*

*then, hopefully then seeing the impact of those tests for change going forward.*

### 3.5 Student involvement and engagement

Arguably the most important factor when considering the original research questions, is the level of student involvement, particularly in evaluation and planning for improvement. Students generally felt that their contribution was not limited to answering questions but having a conversation or discussion. The overwhelming response throughout was that they felt their voice was being heard:

**Student interviewee 1:** *You get your points across a lot better I think. It's quite proactive[...]: 'What can [we] do and is it realistic?'*

**Student interviewee 2:** *I actually feel like you're getting listened to... instead of you say it to somebody and then you never hear about it again.(...) And you know you are getting heard cuz there's so many other people (raising the same issues) So, you've got more than just the one person.*

This is echoed when exploring how involved students felt in joint solution making: All participants felt they had the opportunity to think of ideas for change:

**Interviewer:** *What about any suggestions for making changes? Did you make any suggestions?*

**Student interviewee:** *I made a few suggestions and the – some of the students and some of the staff agreed with me.*

**Interviewer:** *How did that make you feel?*

**Student interviewee:** *Really good.*

The simple act of being included reflects well on the expectations we as an institution have of students that they take responsibility for their own learning and development. This correspondingly can aid trust and relationship building within staff/college/student partnerships and create a feeling of empowerment and a more equal balance.

### 3.6 Challenges in approach

At the heart of the PDSA approach is that it enables smaller scale changes to be implemented, which can sometimes have almost immediate and noticeable effect on the student experience. However, these findings point to a challenge with larger and more difficult issues. Staff overall seemed positive and welcoming of the ability and potential for small incremental changes however they highlighted that despite the documenting and evidencing of larger issues, the approach seems to have less impact on them:

**Staff interviewee 1:** *Obviously there are some department wide changes that we can't fully implement (...)They're identified, and they're discussed, and the students can raise them, but they're still not addressed.*

**Staff interviewee 2:** *We have not been able to, in the long term, address the issues that surfaced under the old system that then came and surfaced in the new system- some of them are very repetitive and justly so, because they are ongoing issues. and they're ones that we as individuals cannot*

*fully address (...) Am I seeing the same old problems continuing? To a certain extent, yes. But I am also seeing change.*

Despite a clear endorsement of this new approach to self-evaluation, particularly from heads of school and senior management, there is an aspect missing which fails to address more complex problems which could be within curriculum areas or college wide.

## 4 Discussion and conclusions

In summary, this study has shown a broad enthusiasm for a new approach to whole course self-evaluation and the greater inclusion and working with students to implement this new approach.

Revisiting the initial research questions:

### **How effective is ICUHI's new approach to course evaluation in engaging students in evaluating and planning improvement?**

Examining individual CCM events, the new approach is extremely effective in engaging students in both evaluating and planning improvement. However, this is not consistent across curriculum areas with some areas not attracting students to attend or failing to schedule course evaluation activity. Some areas experience difficulties with students being on placement – an example of the academic timetable being led by external factors which do not relate to student need or availability.

There is also a question about the extent to which students are genuinely involved in planning improvement. Currently this appears to be limited to discussing potential ideas when there may be a role for them in creating change.

However, in comparison with the old approach the level of engagement was found to be greater in both the numbers of students attending course evaluation events and the more meaningful engagement achieved within these events. Students reported feelings of empowerment and of their voice being listened to.

### **How is data for evaluation created and used, and what is the student role in this?**

Although data examined in each CCM is largely statistical (e.g. survey data and key performance indicators) which are not usually available to students, there is a focus within the meetings on the gathering of qualitative data through dialogue, and in a collaborative way to capture a range of voices reflecting the broader student experience. The student role in this is one of collaborator or partner where the dialogue is authentic and constructive. This shift from relying more heavily on metrics such as student survey data can be seen as promoting true partnership and even co-creation:

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*In the resultant absence of genuine dialogue between the students and the university, managers rely on unsophisticated student surveys (Carey, 2013: 1293).*

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The shift away from metrics may also make staff move away from managing student expectations in order to boost satisfaction and instead to create genuinely transformative learning experiences (Furedi, 2009).



## **To what extent are students and academic staff working collectively in the use of feedback and evaluative data?**

The research clearly demonstrates students and staff working collectively to produce feedback and evaluative data. The extent of this co-creation varies between curriculum areas; however, we can be confident that the evidence points to a more meaningful and collective engagement than in previous iterations of course evaluative activity.

There are ways in which the collaboration could be deepened, however: Although students are the main creators of data used to inform the prompts for discussion (e.g. survey responses), they are not involved in other more direct ways of influencing those prompts. Similarly, students' role in collectively using evaluative data to inform solution making is also very positively viewed by both staff and students but there is little evidence of them, being involved past the initial stages of discussion of ideas for change. These are all areas in which the college seeks to improve as we continue embedding this new approach.

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