

Report of the Student Feedback Project Steering Group

May 2003

Introduction

1. The Student Feedback Project Steering Group (SFPSG) was established in June 2002 in order to oversee:
 - a. The development of recommendations on the design and implementation of a national survey to collect student feedback on the quality and standards of higher education programmes, and the publication of the results.
 - b. A review of good practice in higher education institutions (HEIs) in collecting and using student feedback, and recommendations for how HEIs could improve their collection and use of internal feedback.
2. This report sets out the final conclusions and recommendations of the SFPSG on the design and implementation of the national survey. Work is continuing on the development of good practice guidance on the use by HEIs of internal student feedback. We expect the guide to be published in autumn 2003.
3. This report has been submitted to the sponsoring bodies – the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Universities UK, the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

Background

4. In July 2001, the sponsoring bodies jointly consulted about a new method for securing quality assurance in higher education in England. A central element of the new method concerns the forms of information about the quality and standards of learning and teaching which each HEI should be expected to have available internally; and those parts of that information which they should publish to meet the needs of students and other stakeholders. A separate group, the Information Needs Working Group, chaired by Professor Sir Ron Cooke, Vice-Chancellor of the University of York, was established to consider what that information should be.
5. The Information Needs Working Group's initial proposals were published for consultation as HEFCE 01/66. The group proposed that information from students about their experience and views of quality and standards should be an essential element, both of the information available within each HEI and of the information that should be published.
6. HEFCE 01/66 proposed that a national survey of the opinions of recent graduates could be included within the existing First Destination Survey (FDS) administered annually by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). However, a separate consultation

conducted by HESA showed widespread concern that this could distort the nature and purpose of the FDS and make it more difficult to administer.

7. So the group, in publishing its final report in March 2002 (HEFCE 02/15, known informally as the 'Cooke report') concluded that a separate national survey needed to be designed. HEFCE 02/15 included recommendations about the publication of:

- a. Feedback from recent graduates, disaggregated by institution, collected through a national survey.
- b. Feedback from current students collected through HEIs' own surveys, undertaken on a more consistent basis than now.

8. These recommendations were taken up in the Government's White Paper, 'The future of higher education' (2003), in the following terms:

'To become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision, and to meet their own increasing diverse needs, students need accessible information. We will ensure that the views of students themselves are published in a national annual survey available for the first time in Autumn 2003, which will explicitly cover teaching quality. We also expect institutions to make progress on their own internal systems for securing student feedback.'

The student feedback project

9. HEFCE 02/15 recognised that further work was needed to develop both the national survey, and HEIs' internal surveys. The Information Needs Working Group agreed an approach to commissioning advice on the design and implementation of a national survey, and a review of good practice in securing student feedback through HEIs' own internal systems.

10. Following a tendering process, in May 2002 a team of consultants was appointed, led by SQW Limited, and including NOP Research Group and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University. Their brief was to:

- a. Make recommendations on the design and implementation of a national survey to collect feedback from students on the quality and standards of their higher education programmes, and publish the results.
- b. Review current good practice by HEIs in collecting and using such feedback, and developing recommendations for how HEIs could improve their collection and use of such feedback.

11. This student feedback project was managed by HEFCE, in collaboration with QAA, SCOP and Universities UK. The scope of the study related to England, but the higher

education bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were represented by observers on the steering group.

12. The Student Feedback Project Steering Group (SFPSG) was established in January 2002 to oversee this work. The SFPSG's membership and terms of reference are attached as Annexes A and B. The SFPSG has met four times: an initial discussion of the project with the consultants, two meetings to receive interim reports, and lastly to consider the draft final report and our conclusions and recommendations.

13. At the first meeting of the SFPSG in June 2002, we agreed that a smaller sub-group should take responsibility for the day-to-day decisions relating to the project. The Student Feedback Project Task Group was established for this purpose. Professor Paul Ramsden gave a presentation on the Australian CEQ to the Task Group in October 2002. At the final meeting of the SFPSG on 11 March 2003, we, together with the Task Group, considered the draft final report from the consultants, and formulated our conclusions and recommendations for follow up and implementation of the findings.

14. Our conclusions and recommendations are set out below, firstly in relation to the publication of the results of internal feedback surveys, and secondly in relation to the design and implementation of the national survey. Key recommendations are highlighted in bold throughout the report, and are listed together in Annex C.

Internal feedback systems

15. Internal student feedback systems (which are not limited to surveys and often include other feedback mechanisms) are an important part of HEIs' wider information systems that inform the management, assurance and enhancement of quality and standards. Their primary purpose is to contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards within HEIs. The evidence from the consultants suggests a range of good practices in the collection and use of internal feedback, but also highlighted areas that deserve further attention.

16. We considered whether internal feedback systems should perform an additional function – to generate published information that could help inform student choice and contribute to public accountability, as recommended in HEFCE 02/15. We believe the priority at present should be for HEIs to strengthen practices to ensure that internal feedback effectively contributes to quality enhancement and assurance. We have identified a danger that publication of internal feedback, which would compel standardisation of feedback systems, could jeopardise emerging good practice. We also queried the added value to the public of publishing the results of internal feedback, given our recommendation that results of the national survey should be reported at subject level.

17. **We therefore recommend to the sponsoring bodies that HEIs should not be required to publish the results of internal feedback**, although over time institutions may wish to do so through an evolution towards more public exposure of information.

18. As part of the project, the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information at the Open University is producing a good practice guide on the use of internal feedback systems. We look forward to the publication of this guide later in 2003. With the help of this guide, **we recommend that institutions continue their efforts to strengthen their use of internal feedback mechanisms, and that the QAA and the proposed Academy for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching in HE encourage continuous improvement in this area.** Through the audit process, the QAA could generate useful information about practices, and the proposed academy should have a role in promoting effective practice.

The national survey

19. The primary purpose of the national survey would be to help inform the decisions of prospective students, and the judgements of other stakeholders about the quality and standards of teaching. The national survey would also contribute to securing public accountability for the use of public funds, by indicating where there are high levels of student satisfaction. Although institutions would primarily use internal feedback systems to secure quality assurance and enhancement, the national survey could provide some useful supplementary information for institutions.

20. There are a number of complexities in implementing a survey of this kind, and the consultants' report exposes the major issues and methodological problems posed in a survey of this nature. Having considered the consultants' advice, our conclusions and recommendations are set out below.

The scope of the survey

21. The survey is intended to gain feedback from undergraduate students near to or shortly after completion of their programmes, at publicly funded HEIs in England (including students indirectly funded at further education colleges). The consultants' report sets out a useful means of identifying the population for the survey.

22. We understand that the higher education bodies for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will consider in due course whether or not they wish to extend the survey beyond England.

23. In principle it would be desirable to include students who do not complete their courses. However, we have doubts about the practicability of achieving a sufficient response rate from them, and recommend that the inclusion of non-completers should be tested before a final decision is taken on whether or not to include them in the survey. If not included, this should be made clear within the description of the published results, which should also provide links to published sources of information on non-completion rates.

The design of the questionnaire

24. We agree that the questionnaire should focus on the quality of learning and teaching, and that this should be separate from the FDS that covers issues of employment. We

recognise the value of the Australian Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) as a starting point for designing the national survey questionnaire.

25. We believe it will be vital to ensure that the questionnaire is sufficiently well developed if it is to produce results that will be valid, and of genuine value to potential students.

Therefore **we strongly endorse the consultants' recommendation that the proposed questionnaire should be tested in a pilot.** We recommend that a diverse range of students should be involved in cognitive testing of the questionnaire to ensure that it will be appropriate for the diversity of students it is intended for.

The survey method

26. It will be equally vital for the survey to produce reliable, unbiased results. A key factor in this will be response rates. We are concerned that the survey should avoid the real risk of low response rates preventing the production of reliable public information. **We conclude that it will be important, before conducting the national survey, to test and identify an effective methodology for achieving adequate responses** This will include identifying each of the following:

- a. The timing of the survey.
- b. The methods of surveying.
- c. The methods of following-up non-respondents.
- d. The administrative arrangements and the respective roles of a central agency and individual HEIs.

27. In principle, we believe that the survey should be administered centrally by an independent organisation, overseen by a steering group including relevant stakeholders. However, we recognise that there are concerns about the implications of the Data Protection Act, and whether this prevents institutions from divulging students' contact details to such an agency, and this still requires some clarification.

Publication of results

28. The group considered the proposed methods of publishing the survey results. **We agree with the consultants' report that the survey should be designed to produce results at subject level.** Although HEFCE 02/15 had indicated results should be at institution level only, we considered – based on the available evidence – that a finer level of detail would be of more value to users. We agree that results should be reported according to the 19 subjects of the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) for each institution, and, where feasible, to one further level of detail below that. However, the reliability of disaggregating results will depend on achieving adequate response rates and volumes. We queried the proposal about the (relatively small) number of responses required to produce publishable results in any particular subject. We believe further work is needed to identify the number and percentage of responses required to publish results in any given subject, and to test the feasibility of reporting at this level of detail.

29. We believe there are advantages and disadvantages to presenting the results of the survey by grouping institutions in the way suggested by the consultants. While it could be more meaningful to users, it could also be more complex to interpret. In addition, there would be many potential ways to cluster results, and any decisions about how to do it would be to some extent arbitrary. We noted that Higher Education and Research Opportunities Limited (HERO) are currently developing methods to publish the other categories of public information on teaching quality set out in HEFCE 02/15. **We recommend that HERO be asked to develop the publication format, and to integrate the publication of the national survey results with the wider set of teaching quality information.** This should include consideration of how the information links to other sources, and the search criteria available to users.

Costs

30. We noted that the national survey could incur substantial costs, not all of which were scoped out in the consultants' report (particularly costs to individual HEIs). Furthermore, the overall costs of the survey and split of costs between the centre and HEIs will depend largely on the final administrative arrangements for the survey. Therefore **we recommend that the development of the survey should include work to identify the full costs involved.**

31. In addition, it will be important as the national survey is implemented to consider the value of the published results to users. We note that the Better Regulation Task Force has recommended that the impact of the new quality assurance framework and the proposals of the 'Cooke report' should be evaluated two years after implementation. We expect, therefore, that both the costs and the value of the national survey should be considered as part of that evaluation.

Implementation

32. The consultants' report has made good progress in dealing with a number of complex issues involved in designing the national survey. In order to implement the survey and ensure that it can produce valid information that will be of value to the public, we conclude that a number of areas need to be developed and tested, before a full-scale national survey is conducted. Most importantly, these are: testing the questionnaire to ensure it is valid; identifying how adequate response rates can best be achieved; testing the reliability of results; and developing the publication format to ensure it is accurate and meaningful to users.

33. In order to achieve this, **we recommend that a pilot should be conducted during 2003, in two phases: the first phase should involve testing and refinement of the questionnaire; and the second phase should pilot the questionnaire with a sample of institutions.** The pilot should aim to test and identify an effective survey method that can generate sufficient response rates, to identify effective administrative arrangements, to produce a volume of data that can be tested for validity and reliability (leading to further refinement of the questionnaire), and to develop an appropriate publication format. It may be that the pilot will provide sufficient evidence of the validity and reliability of the results that the

results of the pilot may be published for the sample as a whole, but not for individual institutions.

34. It has been suggested that a comprehensive census survey could be conducted during 2003, following some initial testing of the questionnaire, and that this could produce comprehensive, publishable results. This report has set out a number of important reasons why we cannot at this stage be confident that the results would be valid or reliable, and therefore publishable. In addition, a census survey at this stage would be costly, and we believe it would be of less value than a sample-based pilot in moving towards a robust and valid survey in the future. A sample-based pilot would be able to test out different options to establish which is most effective, whereas a census survey which aims to produce publishable results, would not.

35. We envisage that the two phases of pilot would involve a number of inputs:

- a. Consultants (to be commissioned) to refine the questionnaire.
- b. HESA or HEFCE to identify students to be surveyed.
- c. The pilot institutions.
- d. An agency to conduct the survey, working with the sample of institutions.
- e. HEFCE, with advice from experts on the field, to analyse the results and conduct appropriate reliability tests (including linkages to HESA data).
- f. HERO to develop the publication format.

36. The aim of the pilot will be to generate evidence to inform the design and implementation of the first full-scale national survey. **We recommend that a new steering group – composed mainly of experts in the field – should be established to oversee the pilot, and to make recommendations to the sponsoring bodies on the implementation of a full-scale national survey in 2004.**

37. Published results of the national survey will impact on the reputations – both within the UK and internationally – of HEIs. To help ensure that the agreed method for the survey avoids any undue risk to institutions' reputations, **we recommend that the sponsoring bodies should consult on the proposed method before implementing the survey in 2004.**

38. Although the 2004 survey would aim to produce comprehensive published results, the level at which they could be disaggregated will depend on building up response rates. We recognise that surveys of this scale typically take a number of years to become fully established, and we envisage that the 2004 survey would also be developmental, leading to further refinements.

39. **We recommend that the full-scale survey should be conducted annually for at least two years, so that it can become established. Thereafter, we recommend the frequency of the survey should be reviewed, with a view to conducting it biennially, taking into account the savings that could be made and the potential impact on its value.**

Annex A

Membership of the Student Feedback Project Steering Group

Professor Sir Ron Cooke	Chair; HEFCE board member
Professor Bob Burgess	Vice-Chancellor of University of Leicester; Chair of the HEFCE Quality Assessment Committee
Chris Weavers	Vice-President (Education), National Union of Students
James Groves	Past General Secretary, National Postgraduate Committee
Matthew Gallagher	West Yorkshire Area Convenor, National Union of Students
Professor Robin Sibson	Chief Executive, Higher Education Statistics Agency
Kate Murray	Regional Consultant, HEFCE
John Thompson	Analytical Services Group, HEFCE
Peter Williams	Chief Executive, QAA
Cliff Allan	LTSN Programme Director

Observers

David Caldwell	Universities Scotland
Phil Gummett	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Bill Harvey	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
Gareth Lewis	Higher Education, Wales
Celia Chambers	Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
Fiona Waye	Standing Conference of Principals
David Young	Universities UK

Project Managers

Jim Donaldson	HEFCE consultant
Alison Madge	HEFCE
Katherine Andrews	HEFCE

Consultants

Robin Brighton	SQW
Jane Rindl	SQW
John Brennan	CHERI
Ruth Williams	CHERI
Nick Moon	NOP

Annex B

Student Feedback Project Steering Group

Terms of reference

1. The steering group will oversee the award of the contract for the student feedback project, as well as the management of the project.
2. In overseeing the award of the contract the steering group will;
 - a. Comment on long-listed tenders and draw up a short-list of tenderers to be interviewed.
 - b. On the basis of previous comments and on the interviews, award the contract.
3. Throughout the process the steering group will refer to the project's selection criteria as stated in the tender specification document, and below:
 - a. The best understanding of the brief, both in terms of methodology and sensitivity to the higher education context.
 - b. The most creative proposals for undertaking the project.
 - c. The price.
4. In overseeing the management of the project the group will:
 - a. Receive reports from the successful tenderer at agreed intervals.
 - b. Oversee the progress of the project, advising the successful tenderer on issues arising from the work as it proceeds and agreeing revisions to the project approach as necessary.
 - c. Receive and comment on a draft final report from the successful tenderer; and advise particularly on recommendations for follow up and implementation of findings.
 - d. Submit the final report jointly to HEFCE, Universities UK, SCOP and QAA for their consideration, with recommendations for follow up and implementation.

Annex C

Summary of key recommendations

Internal feedback systems

1. We recommend to the sponsoring bodies that HEIs should not be required to publish the results of internal feedback.
2. We recommend that institutions continue their efforts to strengthen their use of internal feedback mechanisms, and that the QAA and the proposed Academy for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching in HE encourage continuous improvement in this area.

The national survey

3. We strongly endorse the consultants' recommendation that the proposed questionnaire should be tested in a pilot.
4. We conclude that it will be important, before conducting the national survey, to test and identify an effective methodology for achieving adequate responses.
5. We agree with the consultants' report that the survey should be designed to produce results at subject level.
6. We recommend that HERO be asked to develop the publication format, and to integrate the publication of the national survey results with the wider set of teaching quality information.
7. We recommend that the development of the survey should include work to identify the full costs involved.
8. We recommend that a pilot should be conducted during 2003, in two phases: the first phase should involve testing and refinement of the questionnaire; and the second phase should pilot the questionnaire with a sample of institutions.
9. We recommend that a new steering group – composed mainly of experts in the field – should be established to oversee the pilot, and to make recommendations to the sponsoring bodies on the implementation of a full-scale national survey in 2004.
10. We recommend that the sponsoring bodies should consult on the proposed method before implementing the survey in 2004.
11. We recommend that the full-scale survey should be conducted annually for at least two years, so that it can become established. Thereafter, we recommend the frequency of the survey should be reviewed, with a view to conducting it biennially.

