

Executive Summary: 'Online Student Evaluations: Determinants of Response Rates and Possible Solutions'

Purpose of the Study

Newcastle University acknowledges the importance of student evaluations in order to improve student experiences. High response rates can contribute the validity of student evaluation surveys and therefore ensure that the required actions are taken in order to improve learning and teaching at Newcastle University. Therefore a student intern, Anna Wambach (PhD Candidate in Politics) was recruited through the Newcastle Work Experience scheme to explore influences on response rates as well as opportunities to boost response rates across the university. The following report addresses these issues.

Online surveys have become a widespread tool for administering module and course evaluations. They are a convenient instrument, which reduces workload as it minimises efforts of data entry, and survey administration. However, in order for surveys to provide high quality data, and thus enable the users of evaluations to make good decisions, they must be representative of the population of interest (Bladon, 2010, p. 132). Low response rates can pose a problem to a survey's representativeness and consequently its usefulness for designing further action. The issue of low response rates and the danger of nonresponse bias has also been flagged up at Newcastle University, in particular with regard to online evaluations of modules through EvaSys but also with external surveys such as NSS, PTES and PRES.

In order to assure results, which capture the entire target population, response rates need to reach a certain threshold. However, this threshold is not the same for any course or module evaluated. No universal number can be given which schools should aim for. Variability of response rates as well as margin of error have to be considered in order to determine the desired response rate (Zumrawi *et al.*, 2014). Therefore it is difficult to determine a generally acceptable response rate for all types of evaluations at any given time.

This study is designed to give a starting point for further research and future actions to boost response rates of internal as well as external online surveys at Newcastle University. To develop an understanding of influences on response rates, a mixed-method approach has been employed. A statistical analysis of data was followed by semi-structured interviews with school managers and in some cases academic staff to give the background story for the statistics derived from data on response rates accumulated over the years. Where appropriate, existing data from focus groups with students on their opinions on evaluations and online surveys were consulted and integrated in this analysis (for details on the sample, as well as for more detailed analysis please refer to the full report).

Key Findings and Recommendations at a Glance

1. Finding: Schools are often unaware of other schools' experiences. Ideas, innovations and communication strategies should be shared more widely so schools can benefit from each other's experiences. There is no perfect solution to the problem of response rates. Sharing practices and experiences and building a pool of ideas to pick and choose from could support schools and save time and effort. It is surprising that interviewees asked the interviewer what other schools did to improve response rates. By establishing dialogue, schools – which are all equally concerned with response rates – could benefit from other's experiences and collaboratively develop new ideas.

Although it is the schools' responsibility to share their good practice and innovations, this process will need a central facilitator. The infrastructure should be provided by central administration to make sure every school

has equal access and opportunities. Integration into the existing Case Studies Database would be a possibility to facilitate sharing among schools. It is a familiar environment for most staff and provides the possibility for central administration to highlight innovative ideas they find particularly useful as a star case study. This could even be timed according to evaluation schedules.

Recommendation: More dialogue between the schools is desirable. Sharing practice and innovation through a centrally administered database (possibly inclusion in Case Studies database) is recommended. Although centrally administered, it would have to be the schools responsibility to provide the content.

2. Finding: There is a gap in the feedback loop. Although many schools follow the university policy on feedback in an exemplary manner, the feedback process can be improved to make sure all students are aware of the effects their evaluations have. This is not only university policy but can also ensure higher response rates in surveys to come.

One problem mentioned with giving feedback is the reality that most changes will only benefit the following cohort of students and therefore communicating actions does not make a difference. This could be solved by using some time in the first session of a module to highlight some feedback from previous years and following changes to the module for the cohort now taking the module. This way, students are ensured that their evaluations are taken seriously and feel as if they have already benefitted from it. Furthermore new communication strategies involving social media could be used to distribute feedback more effectively.

Recommendation: Communication strategies need to be developed to make sure students receive feedback on their feedback. Social media might provide some exciting opportunities here.

3. Finding: External and internal surveys are perceived and treated differently. Certain surveys are prioritised. Within schools there is a clear prioritisation visible. The NSS receives more attention than any other survey or evaluation whereas other evaluations do not receive the same attention and careful planning. This reflects in response rates. However, the NSS is also prioritised because schools are getting more support from central units.

Recommendation: There should be more central support for surveys besides the NSS. Their purpose needs to be emphasised and communicated more. In turn, schools should apply their experiences and ideas to all evaluations.

4. Finding: There are some statistically relevant patterns which are independent from schools. In external surveys, Newcastle University is achieving response rates which are similar to the national average or significantly better than national average. With regard to module response rates, postgraduate students are more likely to engage with them than undergraduate students, Semester 1 evaluations achieve higher response rates than Semester 2 evaluations. Satisfaction can have an impact on response rates but the direction depends on the survey and the targeted population. Reminder emails seem to have a positive impact on response rates. Furthermore, based on statistics, it might be easier to recruit students before or soon after survey launch than towards the survey closure.

Recommendation: Consider statistical patterns in planning and managing student evaluations.

Report: Online Student Evaluations: Determinants of Response Rates and Possible Solutions

Offline or Online? A Brief Discussion of Research in the Field of Student Evaluations in Higher Education (HE)

In order to contextualise this report and debates at Newcastle University, existing research considering response rates for student evaluations in HE needs to be briefly reviewed, also because it has informed some of the empirical research presented in this report. It highlights some of the advantages and disadvantages of online evaluation. It gives an idea of typical response rates and the quality of results in online evaluations and provides empirical findings on how to boost response rates.

Research is more or less consistent regarding the finding that online surveys achieve lower response rates than paper-and-pen surveys handed out during teaching hours (Sax *et al.*, 2003). However, this does not necessarily mean that responses for online surveys are less valuable. The sample might still be representative and the answer might still reflect the opinion of the entire population. In fact, Venette *et al.* (2010) found in their comparison of paper-and-pencil and online class evaluation that there were no significant differences in the quality of responses. Where there were differences, they were in favour of online surveys: Fewer questions were omitted by respondents of online surveys and answers in comment boxes were more detailed, resulting in a more complete, rich data set.

However, as mentioned above, one major problem identified with regard student evaluations of teaching are non-responses and a lack of randomization which can lead to biased results (Zumrawi *et al.*, 2014). In order to assure results which capture the entire target population, response rates need to reach a certain threshold. However, this threshold is not the same for any course or module evaluated. No universal number can be given which schools should aim for. Variability of response rates as well as margin of error have to be considered in order to determine the desired response rate (Zumrawi *et al.*, 2014). Therefore it is difficult to determine a generally acceptable response rate for all types of evaluations at any given time. Acceptable response rate for one particular survey is highly dependent on the variety of responses given by one particular sample of students. In general, the higher the number of participants in a given class or course to be evaluated is, the lower response rates can be and still deliver representative results. Furthermore, the lower variability – the more students agree in their evaluations – the lower response rates can be for producing representative results (Zumrawi *et al.*, 2014).¹

Research is also concerned with predictors for low response rates in online evaluations and possible solutions. These are interesting findings as they support findings of this report and inform recommendations for possible future actions. Resistance by staff to implement and embrace online surveys has been identified as an obstacle to successfully implementing and promoting online surveys (Ballantyne, 2003). Ballantyne (2003) found that when the faculty provided sufficient support to teaching staff, and students were aware of this faculty-wide support, response rates rose. Communication is essential here. A lack of communication has been found to have a detrimental effect on response rates in general. Advertising strategies need to focus on the purpose of the surveys as students seem to doubt their usefulness (Webber *et al.*, 2013). Making sure students understand the importance and purpose of evaluations is crucial given the development of HE: Due to growing demands on students' time, undergraduates may be less willing to commit themselves to a vol-

¹ Please refer to Appendix 1 at the end of this report to see some exemplary scenarios and the resulting response rates (taken from Zumrawi *et al.*, 2014).

untary activity such as completing a survey (Sax *et al.*, 2003). A stronger sense of community can furthermore lead to higher response rates as it would make them feel more compelled to improve the experience for future students (Webber *et al.*, 2013). One way to engage students more is by communicating feedback on the students' evaluations, highlighting the issues raised and planned actions to address them. By giving students the feeling of efficacy, by assuring them that their feedback is valued and used to improve modules and courses, it is possible to engage students effectively in evaluations.

Discovering Patterns through Statistical Analysis

Before developing strategies to boost response rates it makes sense to look into potential influences on students' willingness to fill in module evaluations and external surveys. Therefore, several statistical tests have been run to uncover patterns in response rates which might point towards certain motivations for filling in a survey or the opposite. The statistical analysis of available data has also been used to construct questions for semi-structured interviews with school managers which supplement this analysis.

Sample

For module evaluations, response rate data for all modules saved on EvaSys have been downloaded and put in SPSS. This amounts to a total number of 6200 evaluations run from the academic year 2011/2012 to 2014/2015.

Evaluations are not distributed equally over those four years, there has been an exponential increase of usage (see Appendix 2). For certain tests this sample had to be filtered (e.g. only particular schools are considered). It needs to be pointed out that the 6200 surveys considered are not equal to 6200 modules. Some modules were evaluated twice per year so have two associated evaluations. Furthermore, as some modules are repeated year by year, there are evaluations from different cohorts for specific modules included in this sample. Stage evaluations could not be excluded either. Considering the size of the sample and the format of reports from EvaSys, distinguishing these and excluding specific evaluations cannot be achieved in the scope of this project, especially because the gain of such an exercise would be debatable. Therefore each survey will be treated as a variable.

For the NSS a specific focus lies on the past two years, 2014 and 2015, as comparable data for those two years is available. Nevertheless, data from 2006 onwards has been used for certain calculations and tests. Which years the analysis focusses on depends on the detail of data available. Furthermore, as the scope of this project is limited and feeding information into SPSS from the original format of reports is time-consuming, a focus on specific years is the most efficient way to come to insightful results which can guide the interview process and selection of interviewees.

For tests regarding the postgraduate surveys not all years these surveys have been run can be considered, mainly because there have been changes in their format (e.g. changing questions) or because detailed data on response rates were not available. For PRES 2013 and 2015 are the years considered for statistical analysis, for PTES 2014 and 2015.

Patterns and Potential Influences

Development of Response Rates over the Years

For both module evaluations and external surveys it was expected that response rates slowly rise over the years as students are becoming more and more media-savvy and get used to the mode of evaluation. However, this hypothesis did not hold up for all the different surveys analysed.

For the NSS response rates have been consistently rising since 2006, from 62.56% to 71% in 2015 and thereby achieving exactly the average NSS response rates for Russell Group universities (Connington and Gurney-Read, 2015). However, response rates have risen slowly in recent years (see Appendix 3).

For PTES, the pattern looks slightly different. In 2012, 31.9% students responded, rising to 47.57% in 2014 and falling slightly in 2015, to 39.94%. This might be due to the schedule change from bi-annual to annual. Figures for 2015 are not available yet but overall response rate to PTES across all participating institutions only reached 28.3% (The Higher Education Academy, 2014). Despite the slight drop it can therefore be assumed that Newcastle University is still achieving a higher response rate than most other participating institutions.

Response rates for PRES are only available for 2013 and 2015. In those two years response rates have fallen from 57.58% to 54.73%, although this trend cannot be observed across all schools. It was mainly caused by problems in specific schools. Despite the overall decline in responses, Newcastle University is performing very well compared to the national average of 40% (University of Glasgow, 2015). It should also be acknowledged, that even the HEA describes a response rate of 55% as excellent.

Response rates for module evaluations have fallen over the years as well. In the academic year of 2011/2012 the overall response rate was 49.93% (n=23). In 2012/2013 overall response rate rose to 53.49% (n=718) before falling back to 49.38% (n=2683) in 2013/2014. Most recently, it fell even further to 46.78% (n=2761). Although this looks alarming at first, it should be considered that EvaSys evaluations have become more and more common, rising from 23 evaluations in 2011/2012 to 2761 last year. This changes its character and will have an impact on response rates. However, schools should be mindful not to let response rates slip much further. Interestingly, it does not matter which stage students are in with regard to the response rates. However, postgraduate students are more likely to respond to module evaluations than their undergraduate colleagues. Average response rate for postgraduate modules was 54.84%, compared with 45.19% for undergraduate modules. This result was significant, which means it could not have happened by chance but is systematic. However, this poses the question why postgraduates are more likely to fill in module evaluations but lag behind in external surveys.

Timing of Surveys

In focus groups with students organised by the Learning and Teaching Development Service, timing of surveys has been flagged up as an issue which can impact on response rates. Therefore, timing has also been considered in this analysis.

The NSS always needs to be coordinated with the Easter Break. According to statistical analysis, response rates have been stagnating or slightly falling in years in which the survey closed during or very shortly after the Easter Break, while it has been increasing more strongly for years in which the survey closed at least 7 days between the end of the Easter Break and the closing date for the NSS. Although this cannot explain all variation in response rates over the years it could lead to higher response rates if the survey is co-ordinated accordingly.

For module evaluations, the issue of timing might be even more pressing as schools have the opportunity to set the timeframe themselves, which accounts for specificities in the different courses and modules. While this 'fine-tuning' is discussed in more detail below, there are some general trends which schools should be aware of.

Generally, evaluations for the first semester generate a higher response rate than evaluations for the second semester, 52.89% and 46.37% respectively. This difference is statistically significant, that means it is not a random result but a relevant pattern. Whether the survey is conducted mid-term or at the end of term,

however, does not influence the response rates. The general pattern should be considered when planning the survey timing.

Results from Response Rate Tracking: Reminders Work

For external surveys, tracking data is available which allows identifying periods of stagnation as well as periods of quickly increasing response rates. Tracking data shows that response rates increase quickly when the surveys first open. Targeted marketing before launch of the survey might have an impact here as it makes students aware of it. Towards the end of the survey response rates tend to stagnate. Of course, these are general trends which might not be true for every school within Newcastle University. It shows, however, that students can be more effectively targeted before and at the early stages of a survey, while chasing them towards the end of the survey period in order to push responses might prove more difficult.

Another interesting finding arising from an analysis of tracking data is that there are spikes in response rate increases in weeks during which centrally administered reminder emails are sent out.² Although this link could not be proven to be statistically significant, also because there are not enough years as variables available, the trend is encouraging as it shows that well-planned marketing does have a positive effect.

Impact of Satisfaction on Response Rates

Similarly to timing, satisfaction has been mentioned in focus groups with students as a factor influencing the likelihood to respond to evaluations. Particularly low satisfaction or specific problems have been highlighted as a reason to fill in an evaluation, be it external or internal. Therefore the statistic correlation between the two variables has been tested, which resulted in interesting patterns, which, alas, cannot satisfactorily explain variations in response rates.

For module evaluations, the sample had to be downsized to 326 module evaluations as the process of retrieving satisfaction rates and putting them into SPSS is highly time-consuming. This reduced the representativeness of the sample. The analysis showed that higher overall satisfaction with the module³ resulted in higher response rates. The effect is, however, relatively small: A regression analysis confirms that only 1.6% of the variation in response rates can be explained by satisfaction score.

Similarly, for the NSS, higher overall satisfaction correlated with a stronger increase of response rates. This, however, might also be due to the specific nature of the NSS and students' desire to achieve high rankings for their university.

Interestingly, for external postgraduate surveys, there was an opposite trend. Lower satisfaction rates correlate with higher response rates. In PTES surveys, 17.7% of the fall in response rate between 2014 and 2015 can be explained by increasing satisfaction rate.⁴ With regard to PRES 2013 and 2015 there appears to be a general trend in the same direction, this, however, is not statistically significant and might therefore be just a random pattern.

Simple correlation analysis between overall satisfaction and response rate cannot account for specific issues which might have been mentioned in the surveys, especially in comment boxes, which might have triggered participation. Extreme comments, both positive and negative, have been mentioned in interviews (below). They might balance each other out, which reduces obvious correlations. Future research could consider this by looking at extreme responses as opposed to moderate responses.

² It is difficult, if not impossible, to retrospectively analyse the effect of every reminder email sent out within the individual schools.

³ As satisfaction rate the average score of item 'Overall, I am satisfied with this module' is used.

⁴ Unfortunately, wording of questions has changed: 'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course' (2015) and 'Overall, how would you rate the teaching quality on your course' (2014) were used. It might be worth following up on this next year to make sure the change in wording did not impact on the statistical analysis.

Exploring Schools' Experience with Online Surveys

Sample

Statistical analysis gave an initial overview of certain patterns of and impacts on response rates. However, a purely statistical analysis can itself not provide a comprehensive picture of the processes behind the numbers. Therefore, eight semi-structured interviews have been conducted. This not only helps to understand obstacles within schools that hinder higher response rates but also to identify solutions to them.

Eight schools from Newcastle University have been selected based on their response rates in different survey types. Schools with particularly high response rates in all surveys, with comparatively low response rates in all surveys or with interesting patterns have been selected. This resulted in a cross-section of schools from three faculties⁵, although the Faculty of Medical Sciences is slightly underrepresented.⁶ The selection also captured a cross-section of satisfaction rates in module evaluations. In total, 13 interviewees were present. Most of them were school managers and deputy school managers but in some cases DPDs and DELTs as well as Heads of School joined the interviews. Interviews were held with representatives of the following schools:

Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences:

- Architecture, Planning and Landscape
- Business School
- English Literature, Languages and Linguistics
- Geography, Politics and Sociology

Faculty of Science, Agriculture and Engineering

- Chemistry
- Civil Engineering
- Electrical and Electronic Engineering

Faculty of Medical Sciences

- Psychology

Results

Gaps in the Feedback Loop

Research shows that response rates can be boosted significantly if students feel their evaluations are taken seriously and acted upon (Bennett and Nair, 2010). To give students this feeling, however, schools need to ensure that feedback on evaluations and action plans are passed on to the student body so they can see their influence.

However, interviews suggest that schools could improve this process. While some schools do not provide feedback at all, others leave it to the student representatives to pass on the summaries presented at the Board of Studies. Depending on the student representative, this might not always be the most effective way to give feedback. On the other hand, some of the schools reported that they upload feedback summaries on Blackboard, or inform students at the start of the year of the actions which have been taking place due to

⁵ Cross Faculty is not considered in this study although some modules are evaluated through EvaSys, for example Careers Service modules. However, these are very small numbers compared with the other three faculties. Cross faculty modules are also not targeted in external surveys. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, the Cross-Faculty is excluded from analysis.

⁶ However, since in many schools in Medical Sciences evaluations are made compulsory, their inclusion in the sample would not have shed much light on the problem under investigation in this report.

student feedback. However, especially when reporting any changes, the connections with evaluations could be made more clearly for students to see their efficacy.

Policies on Survey Promotion and Communication Strategies

Regarding promotion of surveys there is a clear emphasis put on the NSS, which is prioritised over any other survey, because the NSS is not only an evaluation of student satisfaction but also a crucial marketing tool for future recruitment. Although this prioritisation of the NSS has a positive effect on response rates for this particular surveys, this also means there is a lot of opportunity to boost response rates for other surveys. However, at the same time, most interviewees were mindful not to 'nag' students too persistently since too forceful perseverance is regarded to have an opposite effect.

External postgraduate surveys are often overlooked and promotion is left to central administration. At the same time, schools don't feel adequately supported with regard to PTES and PRES. This coincides with difficulties reaching the postgraduate student body in person, as they are not usually sitting in the same compulsory lectures, and issues with target lists. Some schools feel that the external postgraduate surveys are not relevant for their students due to the nature and organisation of their degree programmes. The high proportion of international students in postgraduate courses has been mentioned as an obstacle to high response rates as well. International students might not be as engaged with university life or hold a different attitude to surveys. Further research could analyse this issue statistically to determine whether there are any patterns.

With regard to module evaluations, promotion often relies on automated EvaSys reminders. It is left to module leaders whether they want to promote them further in class. Considering the still persistent resistance towards EvaSys (see below), it is however questionable how many of them actively engage in the promotion. Nevertheless, most schools reported to follow the response rate tracking and flag up any problematic rates. However, there is no policy in place on how module leaders should react to this.

For external surveys, standard promotional material provided is used. For the NSS in particular, incentives are put in place to boost response rates. Because the results are crucial for schools' future recruitment they provide briefing sessions for students to explain the purpose and impact of the NSS. The scoring mechanism as well as ambiguous wording is clarified. NSS champions with good relationships to the student body are furthermore mentioned as important communicators.

What appears to work well for any kind of survey is to let students and staff know in advance of its launch, that a survey is about to start. A short briefing in form of an email which sets out the purpose and timescale of the survey could help engaging students as well as staff.

Flexible Approaches to Administration of Module Evaluations seem to Increase Response Rates

Although the sample of schools does not fully represent the university's diversity, there seems to be a trend that school which approach module evaluations more flexibly achieve higher response rates. This applies for timing as well as for inclusion of additional questions to better match the nature of a class.

With regard to timing, schools are mindful to coordinate evaluations with exam times. Generally, there are two broad approaches: closing the survey before exams start or leaving them open until all exams are finished. Which one works better depends on the student body; there is no clear pattern visible. What seems to work well, however, is to consult with module leaders, who are given access to response rate tracking, and to give them the option to extend the survey period if necessary. Such consultative approaches appear to generate higher response rates, potentially also because the module leader feels to be more in charge.

Characteristics of the Student Body

Specific characteristics of the student body are perceived as influencing the response rates. Particularly a large proportion of international students is regarded as a negative predictor for response rates, particularly when they are registered in postgraduate taught courses and do not have intentions to stay at Newcastle for much longer than that. It is believed among interviewees that international students are either not as engaged with the university's community or feel particularly the PTES is redundant as they have already received the International Student Barometer Survey.

Busy schedules have been mentioned as well. Some degrees do not allow much spare time and students might not be too keen to spend their little leisure time filling in surveys. Another example would be Psychology, where students are required to fill in many experimental questionnaires as required part of their degree. Consequently, they might not have much interest in filling in yet another survey.

Another explanation for high or low response rates, according to the school managers, are personal characteristics of students in certain degrees. While some described their students as rather shy and not particularly engaged in university life, others stressed the openness, criticality and reflexivity of their students. Familiarity with survey-based research due to the subject of study may help explain high response rates for some of the social sciences. Looking at school response rates and these explanations, those assumptions can carefully be used to explain differences in response rates.

Furthermore, personal relationships of students with staff are a factor that needs to be considered when interpreting response rates. Some members of staff have a very good relationship with students and are therefore more successful in promoting online evaluations.

Alternative Channels for Feedback decrease Response Rate for Module Evaluations

Of course module evaluations and external surveys are by far not the only opportunities for students to let the academic staff know what they think. It was reported that due to good relationships between staff and students pressing issues are often addressed straight away and face-to-face as this guarantees quicker action than waiting for a survey to come around. One interviewee even reported that their school had their own, unofficial paper-and-pencil surveys to gather feedback in addition to the centrally administered module evaluations.

Although it is admirable that schools engage so closely with their students to make sure they are having a satisfactory experience during their course, alternative feedback channels seem to render module evaluations and to some extent external evaluations redundant. Particularly when it comes to postgraduate students, who commonly constitute a small community with very good relationships with university staff, cannot see the purpose of PTES and PRES as their issues are resolved after personal feedback.

Resistance to EvaSys

As mentioned above, resistance from staff towards a particular form of evaluation can impact response rates, especially because it hinders innovation. Although it seems as if most schools have by now accepted EvaSys and recognised some of its advantages, there is still some resistance, particularly from academic staff. A top-down approach upon implementation has been mentioned, which, according to one interviewee, 'took it out of the school's hand' while module leaders would be more engaged when they 'owned' the in-house survey. The functionality of the questionnaire itself has been subject to criticism. Firstly, response rates are still regarded as too low compared to paper-based survey. Secondly, the questionnaire design has been subject to criticism. In some schools it is regarded as unsuitable for the type of classes they offer, in others the ambiguity of questions has been mentioned. Either way, responses are regarded as difficult to interpret and to compare. Previous systems which were more tailored towards the different schools' needs were regarded as more appropriate for the purpose. Furthermore, one specific concern regards unfair and

personally attacking comments which are advantaged by the online environment. In one school in particular there was bewilderment about why they have not been consulted when it was first designed as they could have offered some expertise.

Creative Ideas to Boost Response Rates

Some schools have had very creative and innovative ideas to encourage students to participate. Although not all of them have been regarded as successful in boosting the response rates by the interviewees, these practices should be shared across university. Practices which were successful in boosting response rates but also practices which prove less useful to one should be collected in a shared database as they might appeal to the student body in a different school. This database could include the general idea or rationale, its realisation and an evaluation of why it worked particularly well or why it did not have any impact. Tactical picking and choosing from a pool of ideas could help engaging students with surveys and schools could learn from each other.

Some of the ideas mentioned in the interviews included:

- Incorporating evaluations into class time, for example by providing computer clusters or asking them to use their mobiles to fill in surveys during class time
- Innovative incentives, such as a party for the students when a certain response rate has been reached
- Exchanging slices of pizza or vouchers for the confirmation that students had filled out a survey
- Desirable prizes in raffles, for example a tablet

Summary: Recommendations for Possible Future Action

Sharing Practice across Schools

What becomes clear of this report is that there is no perfect solution to the problem of response rates. Specificities of the student body, staff as well as of some degree programmes necessarily influences the effectiveness of measures aimed to boost response rates. However, as mentioned above, sharing practices and experiences and building a pool of ideas to pick and choose from could support schools and save time and effort. It is surprising that interviewees asked the interviewer what other schools did to improve response rates. By establishing dialogue, schools – which are all equally concerned with response rates – could benefit from other's experiences and collaboratively develop new ideas.

Although it is the schools' responsibility to share their good practice and innovations, this process will need a central facilitator. The infrastructure should be provided by central administration to make sure every school has equal access and opportunities. An integration into the existing Case Studies Database would be a possibility to facilitate sharing among schools. It is a familiar environment for most staff and provides the possibility for central administration to highlight innovative ideas they find particularly useful as a star case study. This could even be timed according to evaluation schedules.

Closing the Feedback Loop

As mentioned above, students are not always provided with feedback on their feedback. However, if students feel their answers do not make a difference it is understandable if they are not engaging with module evaluations or external surveys. Although schools follow the standard procedure of discussing module evaluations in Student Staff Committees as well as at Board of Studies meetings, it is questionable if the feedback is successfully passed on to the student body by student reps.

One problem mentioned with giving feedback is the reality that most changes will only benefit the following cohort of students and therefore communicating actions does not make a difference. This could be solved by using some time in the first session of a module to highlight some feedback from previous years and follow-

ing changes to the module for the cohort now taking the module. This way, students are ensured that their evaluations are taken seriously and feel as if they have already benefitted from it. In order for students to learn to provide useful feedback in module evaluations it might be worth thinking about introducing briefing sessions similar to those for the NSS so students understand how to provide constructive feedback which can be turned into action.

Furthermore, as elaborated in more detail below, new communication strategies involving social media could be used to distribute feedback more effectively.

Communicating Purpose and Importance of All Surveys Clearly – also to Staff

Both students and academic staff sometimes seem to doubt the purpose and usefulness of evaluations, both internal and external. While students can be reached by providing feedback and reporting on previous changes and actions due to student evaluations (see above), staff needs to be addressed as well, particularly because resistance towards EvaSys seems to persist in some schools which can have a negative impact on response rates. Also the importance and purpose of postgraduate surveys should be highlighted more clearly.

Academic staff should be consulted more frequently to gather ideas for improving the system and their concerns should be addressed. Further research could look more closely into academics concerns and try to find ways to address them. By engaging them more in the process and emphasising the purpose of specific evaluations, they might also apply themselves more to achieve high response rates.

Incorporation of Social Media in Marketing Strategy

Social media have not been mentioned by schools. After probing most of them reported that schools do hold accounts at relevant social media web sites, however, only few of them use them strategically. Although there is increasing effort in using social media for promotional purposes, some interviewees doubt that students are engaging with them. Those schools in which social media is used more extensively it is mostly used with regard to the NSS. Their potential for other surveys has not yet been explored. A tactical social media strategy for promotion of evaluations could boost response rates since students are very likely to be active on one social media site or another. Some feedback on evaluations could be promoted more proactively through social media as well. Students might not check all updates on Blackboard, but they might click on links on Facebook or Twitter provided by their schools which direct them to NSS results. They might also read status updates on changes which are being implemented due to module evaluations. Of course data protection needs to be considered here but general statements could possibly be published on social media. This will help close the feedback loop much more effectively than relying on student reps to pass feedback on.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Desirable response rates for scenarios for different class sizes and variability of answers

Variability	0.7		0.8		0.9	
Confidence & Margin of Error	80% & +/- 10%	90% & +/- 5%	80% & +/- 10%	90% & +/- 5%	80% & +/- 10%	90% & +/- 5%
Class Size	Minimum Response Rate Required					
10	78%	96%	72%	95%	60%	91%
20	63%	92%	57%	90%	42%	83%
30	53%	88%	47%	85%	33%	76%
40	46%	85%	40%	81%	27%	71%
50	41%	82%	34%	78%	23%	66%
60	37%	79%	30%	74%	20%	62%
70	33%	76%	27%	71%	17%	58%
80	30%	74%	25%	68%	16%	55%
90	28%	72%	23%	66%	14%	52%
100	26%	69%	21%	63%	13%	49%
150	19%	60%	15%	54%	9%	39%
200	15%	53%	12%	46%	7%	33%
250	12%	48%	10%	41%	6%	28%
300	10%	43%	8%	37%	5%	25%
500	6%	31%	5%	26%	3%	16%
750	4%	23%	3%	19%	2%	12%
1000	3%	19%	2.5%	15%	1.5%	9%

Taken from Zumrawi *et al.* (2014).

Appendix 2: Sample of EvaSys surveys by year

Academic Year	Number of Surveys	Average Response Rate
2011/2012	23	49.93
2012/2013	718	53.49
2013/2014	2683	49.38
2014/2015	2761	46.78

Overall, 6200 surveys were included in this sample, 6185 could be attributed to a specific year, 15 could not be attributed to a specific year.

Appendix 3: Summary of NSS response rates, 2006-2015

Year	Response Rate	Difference to previous year
2006	62.56	n/a
2007	63.61	1.05
2008	61.13	-2.48
2009	64.88	3.75
2010	68.91	4.03
2011	67.77	-1.14
2012	70.31	2.54
2013	70.85	.51
2014	70.36	-.49
2015	71.00	.64

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