Capturing Student Voice through Midterm Feedback: A Case Study in a Foundation Year Economics Module

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In Higher Education, there are well-established systems through which student voice is obtained, including end-of-year surveys. These provide a formal forum to capture student voice and offer students an opportunity to raise their concerns, share their experiences and provide feedback on modules and teaching. Data received can be used to guide improvements to the educational environment and students' learning experience. In addition to obtaining formal feedback from students at the end of an academic year, 'midterm feedback' can also be used to provide direct benefit to current students who are taking the course, and may contribute to these students' satisfaction as students would be fully aware that their voice is heard and appropriate measures are actioned to improve student experience. This paper discusses midterm feedback, particularly in Higher Education, drawing upon relevant literature. It outlines how midterm feedback is used by the author to collect data from students who are currently enrolled on a foundation year economics module at the University of Essex. It shares the feedback received and how the author responded to this feedback to ensure that the students' voice is heard. Finally, it undertakes an evaluation of whether the actions taken following the mid-term feedback had any impact on the end-of-year student feedback survey results for the economics module when compared with the previous academic year.

Background

We are in a world where feedback is becoming more and more important to a business's success. This is also true in the Higher Education sector where student feedback plays a very important role in assisting academics to enhance their teaching methodology, curriculum, assessment and academic feedback.

This paper analyses the importance, implementation and impact of 'midterm feedback' in an economics module taught in the foundation year at the University of Essex in 2018-19. The aim was to investigate whether actions taken in response to students' midterm feedback could create a positive impact on the end-of-term feedback.

The paper is organised into six sections: a literature review on midterm feedback in Higher Education comparing traditional end-of-term feedback versus structured midterm feedback; a summary of the implementation of data collection and analysis; explanation of the actions taken from students' midterm feedback; analysis and summary of the impact on the end-of-term feedback; and a conclusion of findings.

Literature Review on Midterm Feedback in Higher Education

While end-of-term feedback is routinely undertaken in schools, college and universities as a formal way to gather student views on courses, midterm feedback is typically less formal and is designed to address the needs of the current student cohort.

Diamond (2004) identifies the usefulness of midterm feedback as being that it increases lecturers' awareness of students' perceptions of educational techniques and approaches. In addition, it helps promote two-way communication between lecturers and students. Lecturers then gain motivation to implement new approaches and/or modify existing techniques. As a result, midterm feedback allows continual improvement in teaching. Keutzer (1993) reports that the main purpose of midterm feedback is to improve teaching performance. It allows lecturers to make changes in response to the needs of students which lead to long-term improvements in overall teaching effectiveness.

Cohen (1980) conducts a meta-analysis study on the effectiveness of student-rating feedback in improving college instruction. One of the findings is that if students recognise that their lecturers made adjustments based on their midterm feedback, it may lead to higher ratings in end-of-term feedback. However, it is important that lecturers should request student midterm feedback only for aspects of teaching that they are able to modify. Murray (2007) also finds that midterm behavioural feedback leads to significant improvement in teaching and increases student ratings of overall teaching effectiveness. The studies by Marsh and Overall (1979) and Harris and Stevens (2013) support the view that midterm feedback improves student learning and enhances teaching effectiveness. Lecturers who are receptive to students' learning needs may receive more favourable end-of-course evaluations.

Traditional End-of-Term Feedback Versus Structured Midterm Feedback

Learning from Student Feedback at Essex University

> Student voice refers to the values, opinions, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds of students within a HE community. (Advance HE 2019)

> The student voice is the thoughts, views and opinions of students on an educational journey. (Open University 2019)

Student voice is valuable for the institution to ensure that it is providing a positive experience for students. In practice there are various mechanisms, either formal or informal, by which the student voice can be gathered.
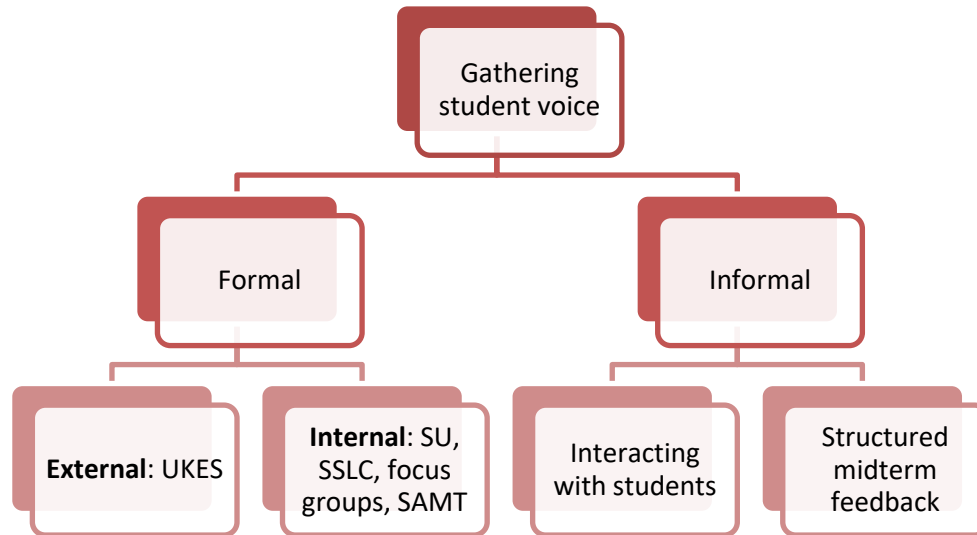

Figure 1: Methods of gathering the student voice

The Essex Pathways Department collected student views and opinions both from external and internal sources through the formal route illustrated in Figure 1. The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) is the external survey conducted by Advance HE, previously known as the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Internally, the University and Essex Pathways Department have a well-established system to collect the student voice through the Student Union (SU), Student Staff Liaison Committees (SSLC), focus groups and Student Assessment of Module and Teaching (SAMT) surveys[1].

The feedback from the SAMT survey is undeniably very valuable for teaching staff to improve teaching and enhance the student learning experience. However, owing to its timing, the benefits would accrue to students who registered in the next academic year rather than the current year cohort.

It is therefore quite common for teaching staff to seek feedback from current students via an informal route — as illustrated in Figure 1 — through interactions in lectures, classes or academic support hours, and make appropriate adjustments. However, this feedback is normally gathered on an individual basis and might not represent the views or the needs of the entire cohort of students. As a result, structured midterm feedback was introduced to module leaders in the Essex Pathways Department who wanted to undertake a midterm feedback survey in their modules. Structured midterm feedback is not compulsory for all modules, therefore the survey is deemed to be an informal approach.

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[1] The SAMT survey is the end-of-year survey by which each module must be assessed every year and all registered students should have opportunity to respond to the survey.

Timeline

It is normally recommended that the SAMT survey be undertaken in the last quarter of the modules to allow students to have had experience in all modules before they can evaluate them. Typically the SAMT survey is undertaken toward the end of spring term and is, therefore, classified as an end-of-term survey. The SAMT survey is a paper-based survey completed during class time.

In previous years, communication with students regarding the SAMT survey in the foundation year economics module was quite limited (see Figure 2). There was no communication about the survey during the autumn term. In the spring term there was an email and an announcement, shown by a blue triangle on the timeline, reminding students to participate in the survey one week before the SAMT survey was undertaken. The timing for the SAMT is shown as a blue circle on the timeline.

Start of autumn   **Start of spring**   **Start of summer**

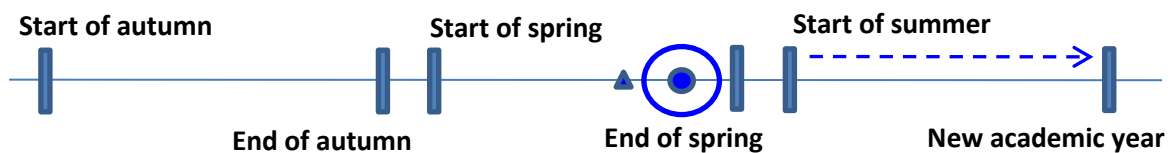**End of autumn**   **End of spring**   **New academic year**

Figure 2: A typical timeline of conducting a traditional end-of-term survey

Towards the end of the spring term, the SAMT survey was undertaken in classes. The data was extracted and processed in the form of a report available to the module leaders. Generally the module leaders would spend time over the summer, shown by the dash line on the timeline, to make changes or adjustments to the module in response to the feedback received from the SAMT survey. The updated module would then be ready for the new academic year.

In contrast, the operation of structured midterm feedback would require a more proactive approach in communicating with students (see Figure 3 below). Shawl (2017) indicates three key elements for conducting midterm feedback successfully.

1. **Communication**: Students would be more willing to cooperate in completing the midterm survey if they understand the benefits of doing so.
2. **Timing:** Choosing the appropriate timing for the midterm survey and allowing ample time to make changes while the term is in session.
3. **Anonymity:** Students are likely to give honest responses and be more open to discussing problems.

For the economics module, the first communication with the students started around the mid-point of the autumn term, shown by the first red triangle on the timeline, when most students had settled into the course. It was started by having a discussion with students about using a midterm survey to help make improvements in teaching economics. The module leader discussed the benefits of a midterm survey in aiming to help students to enjoy and understand economics better. The discussion also included how the midterm feedback would be undertaken towards the end of the autumn term, shown by a red circle on the timeline, using an online survey[2] which students would have two weeks to complete.

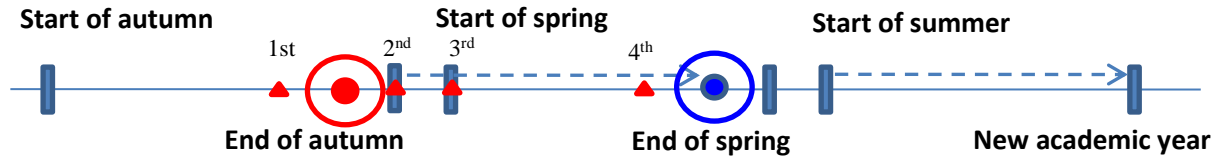[2] Qualtrics survey was used to collect the data and run a report.

Figure 3: An adjusted timeline incorporating a structured midterm survey

Once the survey was closed, the data was collected and a survey report was produced by Qualtrics ready for analysis. The module leader then had a second communication opportunity, shown by the second red triangle in the timeline, reporting the findings from the survey to students at the end of the autumn term and setting up action points that could be taken forward in order to make adjustments to the module. The work would begin from the autumn term break. Once students returned to the University at the start of the spring term, there was a third communication, shown by the third red triangle in the timeline, providing an update on which actions were completed and which ones were in progress. It was crucial to maintain communications with students so that they could see all the changes that happened, and were able to appreciate the benefits from those changes.

Towards the end of the spring term, the formal end-of-term survey, SAMT, would take place. The fourth communication opportunity, shown by the fourth red triangle, was used to encourage students to participate in the end-of-term survey and to remind them of all the changes that had been made to the module.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two weeks before the end of autumn term, all 156 students registered on the foundation year economics module were sent an online survey link through their University of Essex email. The survey contained a total of ten questions: two multiple choice questions; five Likert scale questions, and three open-ended questions where students were free to put their comments in a box. It would take approximately ten minutes to complete the survey. Forty-two students took the survey, which was around 27 percent of the total student cohort.

List of Questions in the Midterm Feedback Survey and Summary of Responses

Since there was no standard midterm survey template to be used, the questions were carefully designed to obtain an understanding of students' perceptions of the module and what else we could do to improve to the module.

Two multiple choices questions:
1.   Sex: male, female, prefer not to say.
     53% of students who took the survey were male.
2.   Pace in economics: too fast, too slow, just about right.
     63% of students who took the survey thought the pace in economics was just about right.

Five Likert scale questions:

3.   Economics background knowledge: a range from very good to very poor.
        85% of students who took the survey described their background knowledge in economics as poor or very poor.

4.   Attendance in economics module: a range from always to never.
        62% of students who took the survey said that they always attend or attend economics class very often.

5.   Participation in economics classes: a range from always to never.
        37% of students who took the survey said that they always participate or participate in economics classes very often.

6.   The module made me more interested in learning economics: a range from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
        77% of students who took the survey agreed or strongly agreed that the module made them more interested in learning economics.

7.   A class teacher explains clearly or is helpful: a range from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
        93% of students who took the survey agreed or strongly agreed that a class teacher explained clearly or was helpful.

Three open-ended questions:

8.   What do you like about economics module?
        Three most common responses were (i) Using real life examples; (ii) Interesting; (iii) Interactive class discussions.

9.   What don't you like about economics module?
        Three most common responses were (i) Formulae and diagrams are difficult and confusing; (ii) Lectures are too long; (iii) Lectures cover too much information.

10.   Is there anything we can improve to help you learn economics better?
        Three most common responses were (i) More break time; (ii) More quizzes; (iii) More revision.

Actions Taken from Students' Midterm Feedback

After the data were collected and analysed, an action plan was created in response to the feedback received from students and is shown in Table 1 below. This action plan was communicated to students to ensure they recognised that their voice was being heard and that these actions aimed to enhance their learning experience in the economics module.

Students' feedback	Actions taken
A two-hour lecture is too long	▪ Utilise more or longer break time ▪ Add relevant videos into various parts of lectures
Too much information covered in the lecture	▪ Streamline lecture notes and lecture slides ▪ Use class discussions to elaborate on details
More revision	▪ Create more home revision activities, e.g. online quizzes in Moodle

	▪ Add questions from past tests and past exam papers in class exercises
Formulae are difficult	▪ Create a formulae sheet ▪ More explanation of why the formulae are useful and how to apply them
Diagrams are confusing	▪ Use visualiser in the lectures to demonstrate how to draw diagrams step-by-step ▪ Create class exercises that require students to work in groups on diagrams

Table 1: Actions taken from students' structured midterm feedback

In addition to responding to students' midterm feedback with appropriate actions, it is also important to address and respond to those requests where actions cannot be taken while the course is still running. For example, students were not keen to be assessed by tests as they led to high stress levels and anxieties. Types of assessment simply cannot be changed during an academic year. This can however be taken into consideration for assessment types for the next academic year. Some students would like to have more online materials available so that they could study more. The development of online materials can be time consuming and it was not a feasible option while the course was still running. This feedback can be actioned over the summer vacation when the module is updated to be ready for the next academic year.

Impact on End-of-Term Feedback

Since the aim of the midterm feedback is to capture the student voice on their views, opinions and experience of learning on the economics module in the foundation year, it is crucial to evaluate whether the actions taken in response to students' midterm feedback would create enough positive changes for students to acknowledge them. In other words, to see whether these actions might have a positive impact on SAMT, which is the traditional end-of-term survey for all modules taught at the University of Essex.

Comparing SAMT Scores between 2017/18 and 2018/19

The SAMT survey contains sixteen questions covering four main categories which are (i) Teaching; (ii) Module; (iii) Assessment and (iv) Overall. These include three additional questions that are relevant to the module. The maximum SAMT score for each question or each category is 5.0.

The comparison of SAMT scores has been made between two academic years. In 2017/18, there was no midterm survey, while the midterm survey was informally incorporated into the course in 2018/19. The outcome of the comparison is presented in the table below:

Module: Introduction to Economics	SAMT Scores	
Category of survey questions	2017/18	2018/19
Teaching	4.3	4.2
Module	4.1	4.1
Assessment	4.0	3.9
Overall	3.9	4.1
Additional survey questions		
Materials on Moodle improved my understanding of the module topics	4.0	4.2
Class discussions helped me to develop understanding of the subject matter	4.0	4.3
The module had a good mix of theory and practice	4.0	4.1

Table 2: SAMT scores in 2017/18 and 2018/19 for economics module

At first glance, from Table 2, there were no differences in SAMT scores received in the four main categories of survey questions between 2017/18 and 2018/19. This was merely because there were no changes made at a major level, i.e. no changes made to modules aims, learning outcomes, syllabus, learning and teaching methods, or types of assessments in the economics module.

However, the impact on the end-of-term survey or SAMT was more noticeable in the three additional survey questions. All three questions received higher SAMT scores compared to the previous year. In particular, the SAMT score received on the question of whether class discussions helped students to understand economics increased from 4.0 to 4.3. This reflects the fact that all the actions taken from the midterm feedback were minor changes which did not attempt to change the structure of the module, but to change the ways of delivering it and teaching students.

One major concern was the reliability of these findings as only 12% of students, i.e 19 students, completed the end-of-term survey in 2018/19 compared to 32% of students, i.e. 47 students, in 2017/18.

When conducting a standard 2-sided t-test between means of these two cohorts, the difference in mean scores was insignificant at the 5% and 10% significance levels. This means there was no significant change in mean scores between the two cohorts in any of these three additional survey questions. This result was mainly driven by the small sample size for the 2018-2019 cohorts, which does not allow for more than 18 degrees of freedom (N-1), where the smallest N of the two samples should be chosen.

One explanation for the low participation in the end-of-term survey could be that there were four end-of-term surveys from four different modules that students had to complete in the same week. In addition, students felt they had already taken part in the structured midterm survey in the economics module. Therefore the end-of-term survey became a repetitive process for them.

Conclusion

A structured midterm feedback survey was carried out in a foundation year economics module at the University of Essex in 2018-19. The intention was to capture the student voice on what they thought about the module and allow the module leader to make some relevant adjustments in order

to enhance students' learning experience as evaluated by the SAMT, the traditional end-of-term survey.

SAMT scores in 2017-18 and 2018-19 in the economics module were compared and there was evidence showing that a structured midterm feedback survey increased the scores of the end-of-term survey in the areas where actions were taken from the students' feedback. It was noted that the result was statistically insignificant as the end-of-term survey participation rate in the economics module were quite low, perhaps because all the other modules also took the survey within the same week. A reasonable strategy is to look at the survey timing in a holistic view to avoid over-surveying.

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