Co-creating feedback dialogue tools through course evaluations

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Introduction

Feedback is an essential component of learning development and is often associated with an assessment, which can imply it is the responsibility of a teacher to provide effective feedback to a student as a passive participant. Literature suggests that engaging students in responding to feedback can be difficult, which may impact their learning (Day, Admiraal and Saab, 2021). The meaning and purpose of feedback has evolved (Van der Kleij and Lipnevich, 2021). Feedback can be viewed as a process that requires engagement on the part of a student and teacher (Zhan, 2022). Carless and Winstone (2020) provide a partnership framework that outlines the shared responsibility of both staff and students in the feedback process. A feedback-literate teacher can design opportunities, deliver supportive and constructive feedback, and navigate the multiple dimensions of the purpose of feedback. A feedback-literate student can appreciate, evaluate and act on feedback and work with emotions productively. Feedback literacy is a skill that should be developed to maximise student achievement and success (Carless and Boud, 2018).

While student evaluations are embedded into higher education, there is debate surrounding the reliability, effectiveness, and bias of such evaluations (Heffernan, 2022). Richardson (2005) considers formal methods for collecting students' evaluations and concludes that feedback from students may not be taken seriously enough due to interpretation concerns and a lack of ownership of feedback from both staff and students. This may be attributable to staff who are less likely to act on their feedback and students who are sceptical of the value of providing feedback, which is reflected in the UK's National Student Survey (NSS) response data surrounding the student voice. Stein et al (2021) assess student perceptions

of student evaluations and conclude that students want to engage with the evaluation process, but suggest that it can be reframed into a staff-student partnership where both staff and students work together to improve learning and teaching in a more collaborative way. Smuts (2005) discusses in-class interviews in course evaluations and illustrates the use of Small Group Instructional Diagnosis in promoting a culture of reflection on learning and teaching from both staff and students. Additionally, NSS results (Office for Students, 2022) show that students consistently respond poorly to questions relating to their learning community, sense of belonging and their voice. For students, their sense of belonging to their programme and university can 'make or break' their success (Capper and McVitty, 2022). Good et al (2012) take belonging further and suggest that a key factor in driving someone's ambition to pursue mathematical sciences (the relevant community in this case study) should be their "personal sense that they belong in mathematics", and further establish that acceptance from members of the community is an important aspect of belonging.

Course evaluations procedures

The University of Glasgow, the host institution, implements a course evaluation policy with set requirements for collecting student evaluations from all courses via a questionnaire with set core questions, in addition to a Staff-Student Liaison Committee in conjunction with the Student Representative Council (University of Glasgow, 2017). Results from the Class Representative Survey 2021 indicated that a consistent cause of frustration for class representatives is the difficulty in engaging with their cohort. In addition, while staff are provided with guidelines on how to engage students with course evaluations (University of Glasgow, 2022) through suggestions such as course lecturers advising students when they will receive notification to complete an online survey, allowing time in class for students to complete the survey, staggering surveys with other courses in order to reduce survey fatigue or reducing the length of the survey to contain only 'core' questions, it was our anecdotal experience that engagement was subjectively low, typically a response rate of around 10% - 20%, based on the individual experience of the staff member involved with this project. Challenges of the recent pandemic impacted resources available to staff for collecting course

evaluations, which only exacerbated low response rates and the usefulness of course evaluations at the University of Glasgow (University of Glasgow, 2022). Post-pandemic, there may be missed opportunities to engage students and staff with a community-building feedback process.

Most notably, the student voice was missing from these guidelines, and while staff could comment on observed behaviours, there was an opening to engage students with this process through a partnership framework. The dialogic nature of feedback is also missing, as Burns (2013) describes that students may view their feedback on summative assessment from a lecturer as 'useless' since students are not likely to see that lecturer once the semester finishes. In addition to formal institutional policy, lecturers have the option to ask students for informal feedback, typically midway through the semester. This usually allows staff to engage with students early on and fix any problems in time to benefit students. These procedures aim to engage staff and students in this process, however there seemed to be a persistent gap between procedures and practice. Interest in how students engage with assessment feedback has grown in higher education because engagement with feedback is crucial to learning and achievement (Zhe and Ken, 2022). We hypothesised course evaluations could provide an opportunity to reverse the roles of 'teacher' and 'student' in the feedback process. These observations formed the bases of our project, wherein we aimed to understand how staff and students engage with these processes and guidelines.

Case study objectives

The initial aim of this project was to investigate additional resources that may be used to better engage staff and students with student evaluations in addition to the well-established systems. The project aimed to address the following questions:

1. How do staff engage with student evaluations?
2. How do students engage with student evaluations?
3. What is the effect of in-class discussions on students' engagement with evaluations?
4. How should student evaluations be disseminated to staff and students?

We present this as a case study and as a discussion on the gap that lies between developing student-staff feedback literacy and engaging students in their learning community, bridged through a student-staff partnership.

Student-staff partnership

Student-staff partnerships have received growing interest in higher education. The University of Glasgow supports such partnerships and collaboration, with this project rooted in the scholarship of teaching and learning (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2016). The project was funded through the University of Glasgow's Scholarship of Teaching and Learning fund and through the School of Mathematics and Statistics. We express the partnership framework defined by Healey, Flint & Harrington as "a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement" (2014, p 7). Drawing on the notable lack of student voice in the current course evaluation guidelines, it was imperative to include students as partners in the development of this project, to take the lead in understanding the student experience of providing course evaluations, in addition to the staff experience, and to engage other students in discussions around course evaluations.

Methods

Four undergraduate students were recruited in September 2022 and ethical approval to collect data from staff and students from the School of Mathematics and Statistics was obtained from the College of Science and Engineering, University of Glasgow. An online anonymous survey was developed by student and staff partners and distributed to all staff from the School of Mathematics and Statistics throughout November 2022, containing a selection of 5-point Likert Scale questions ranging from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree, and open questions. We followed closely the work of Brownlie, Evans and Horlin (2022) and Evans, Brownlie & Horlin (2022). A comparative online anonymous survey was made available to honours level Statistics students from the School of Mathematics and Statistics throughout November 2022, containing a selection of 5-point

Likert Scale questions ranging from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree, and open questions. We followed closely the work of Surratt and Desselle (2007). A student-led structured student focus group was also used to gather feedback from students in February 2023. The questions asked during the focus group were written based on the outcomes of the online surveys.

Staff survey

63 members of staff responded to the survey and were asked 27 Likert scale questions and four open questions:

1. What do you believe is the purpose of student feedback?
2. Please describe your experiences with student feedback, positive and/or negative, including how you received the feedback (for example through word of mouth, through the class representative, through EvaSys, etc.) and how you acted on the feedback.
3. How does critical feedback from students impact your teaching or development of courses? What about when it is not the kind of feedback you were expecting?
4. Do you ever feel any institutional/university pressure on how/if you engage with student feedback? Does this have an impact on your teaching?

Student survey

53 students responded to the survey, corresponding to a 17% response rate, and were asked 23 Likert scale questions and three open questions:

1. What do you believe is the purpose of student feedback?
2. Please provide some details about your level of engagement with course or programme feedback, either through your class representative and/or the end of course evaluations (EvaSys). Do you believe there would be any better alternatives to providing course or programme feedback?

3. Please provide an example of feedback you have provided, how you provided it (for example by word of mouth, through the class representative, through Evasys, etc.) and describe how you believe it was acted on.

Focus group

20 students attended the focus group, which was split into two groups of 10 students each, with the following discussion prompts:

1. How was your feedback acted upon?
2. How would you like staff to respond to your feedback?
3. Would you engage with a more continuous form of feedback?

Results

How do staff engage with student evaluations?

Figure 1 provides the results from selected Likert questions asked to staff. Questions are arranged in order of agreement (bottom) to disagreement (top). Around 70% agreed that they know how to ask for feedback, although a third of staff agreed that they had the necessary training to cope with feedback. Most staff felt motivated and validated by positive feedback and agreed that they use the feedback they receive to improve their teaching accordingly. The majority agreed that they do not ignore negative feedback. Around one fifth of staff indicated that feedback has negatively impacted their mental health. Lastly, while all cohorts of students have at least one class representative, around 40% of staff indicated that they had contacted the class representative and only 50% of staff had been contacted by the class representative.

Figure 2 indicates what staff do with the feedback they receive and what they believe student feedback reflects. Staff were more likely to make changes to the delivery of content and their teaching style in response to feedback and generally believed that the feedback related to the course content, its difficulty and delivery, and their personality and teaching ability.

Staff indicated that they believed the purpose of student feedback was to improve the quality of their teaching and create a sense of belonging for students. Staff indicated that it is frustrating when they cannot act on feedback because the solution is out of their control, or feedback can be difficult to interpret. When asked to describe experiences with critical feedback, staff suggested that unexpected feedback is helpful and if a suggestion can be acted upon, then they would.
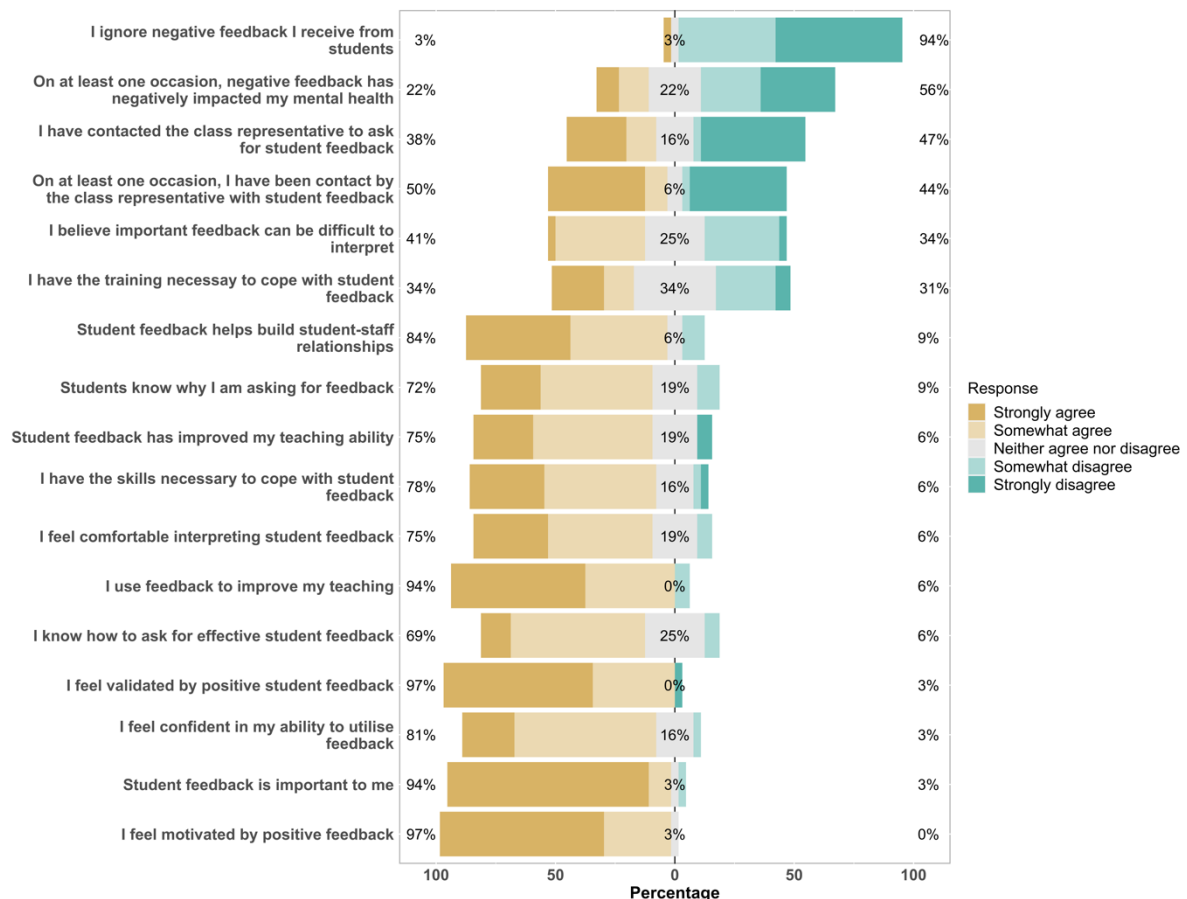

Figure 1: Staff responses to 17 out of the 27 Likert questions asked from the online survey. The percentages show strongly agree/agree (left-hand side), neither agree nor disagree (middle) and strongly disagree/disagree (right-hand side).

How do students engage with student evaluations?

Students were asked if they usually provide course evaluations when prompted and all students replied yes. This suggests that the students who responded to this survey are those most likely to engage with course evaluations and therefore we believe these results reflect the views of students who are likely to engage with the process. Around 20% of

students did not know who their class representative was and only 17% of students said they would contact their class representative if they had an issue or any feedback to give to a lecturer.

The most striking result is that while most students agreed that providing both positive and negative feedback is important, most students did not agree that they see changes in their courses as a result of their feedback (Figure 3). When asked what students believe their feedback reflects, 97% of students agreed that it was the course delivery, whereas 50% agreed it was the lecturer's personality (Figure 4), compared to 75% of staff who believe that course evaluations reflect their personality.

When asked what they believe is the purpose of course evaluations, most students suggested that they believe it is to improve teaching for future years, to allow lecturers to hear the views of students and that it is a 'tick-box' exercise. Students generally thought EvaSys was OK, but said that they did not see any outcomes from their feedback and felt the system lacked transparency. Interestingly, students indicated that class representatives were too personal, and it was uncomfortable to share details with other students. They indicated a preference for mid-term feedback in class but indicated that more time is needed to complete surveys. Students indicated that they were more likely to see the outcome of their feedback if it was provided mid-term.

Through results obtained during the focus group, students echoed their uncertainty about how their feedback was acted on. Although lecturers are required to offer a formal response to end-of-course evaluations obtained from Evasys, many students did not know this and by the time lecturers provided this response, they had usually finished the course and so did not know to check. Students also indicated inconsistencies between lecturers on how they responded to informal mid-term feedback, with some lecturers discussing the results in class, whereas others did not. These inconsistencies and perceived lack of responses created the impression that students' evaluations had no impact on their learning.
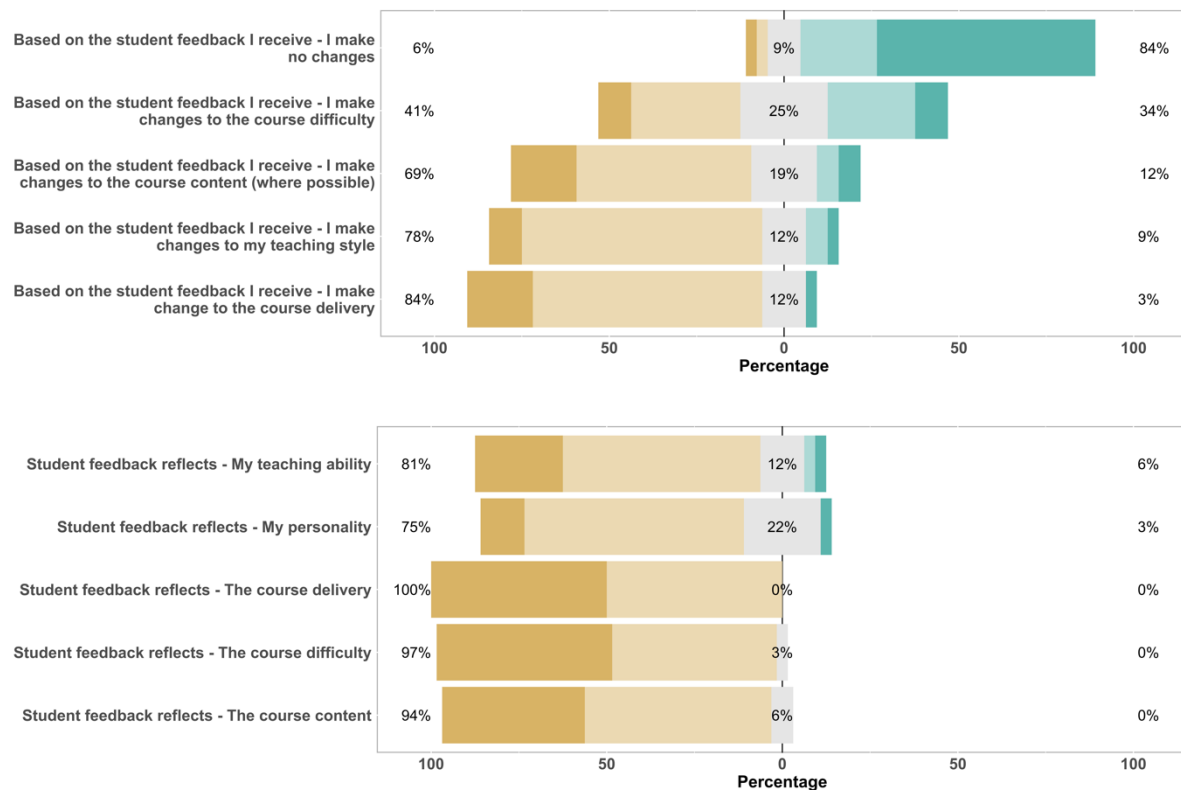
Figure 2: Staff responses to questions relating to what they do with student feedback (top) and what they believe student feedback reflects (bottom), following the same structure as Figure 1.

What is the effect of in-class discussions on students' engagement with evaluations?

Students believed that more communication is needed to clarify how lecturers respond to feedback, which includes things that they can change or adapt to and things that were outside the control of the course lecturer. Students understood that lecturers cannot change everything. During the focus group, students expressed a preference for an in-class discussion. Students indicated that they would like a more continuous mode of informal feedback opportunities throughout the semester, but not too often and at the time of the lecture.
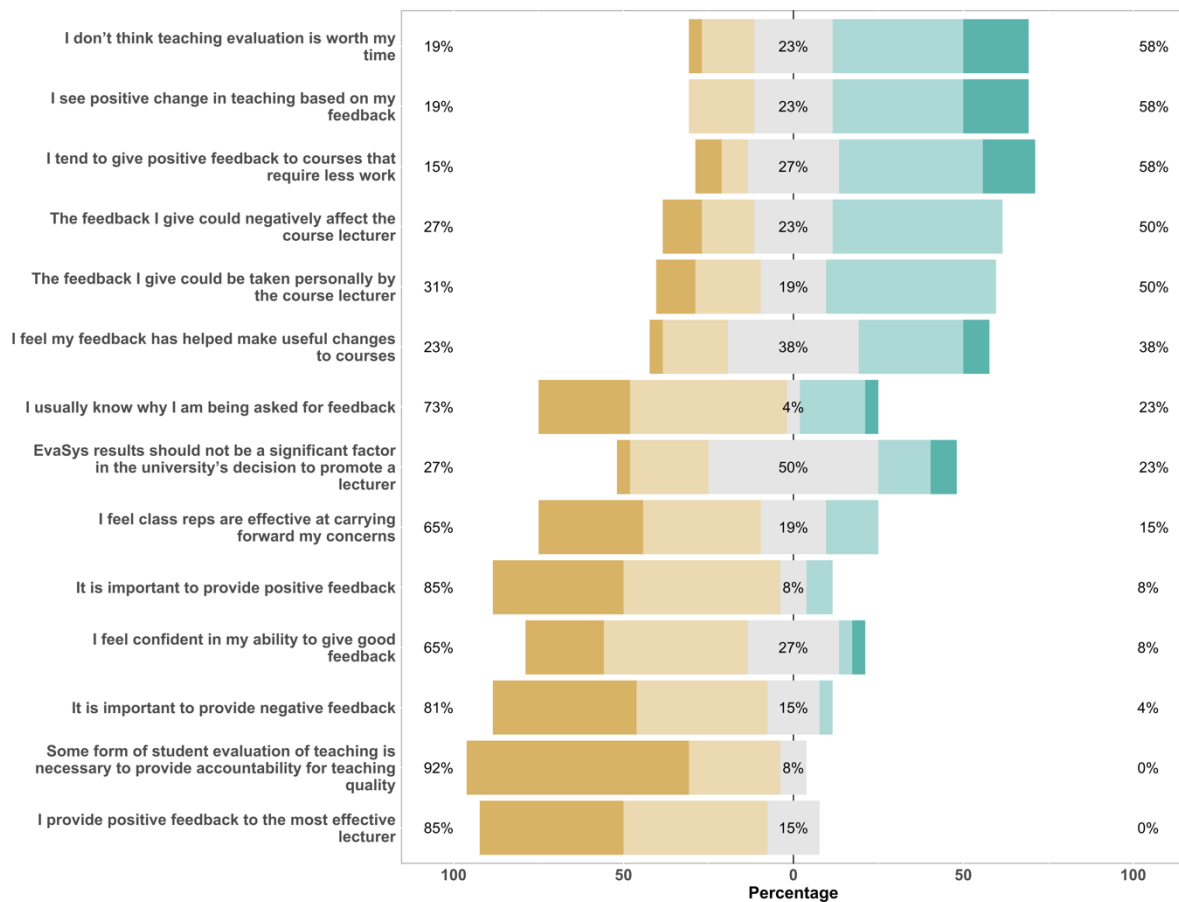
Figure 3: Student responses to 14 out of the 19 Likert questions asked from the online survey, following the same structure as Figure 1.

How should student evaluations be disseminated to staff and students?

Ultimately, while staff showed a frustration with a lack of student engagement, students showed a frustration with a lack of transparency in the current procedures. Students asking for more conversation and discussion in lectures indicates that dissemination via emails and end-of-course summary responses often provided by lecturers were not practical. Many courses have natural end points such as the end of a topic or chapter which would be a good opportunity for lecturers to ask students for feedback, prompting students to reflect on their learning, including what they found difficult or areas that they still need to study. Lecturer acknowledgement that they received the feedback would be preferable, as well as lecturers actively disseminating the results to students during the course. The results suggest that incorporating an informal and conversational approach to course evaluations can create a more inclusive learning environment for students and staff, and exemplify an effective feedback process.
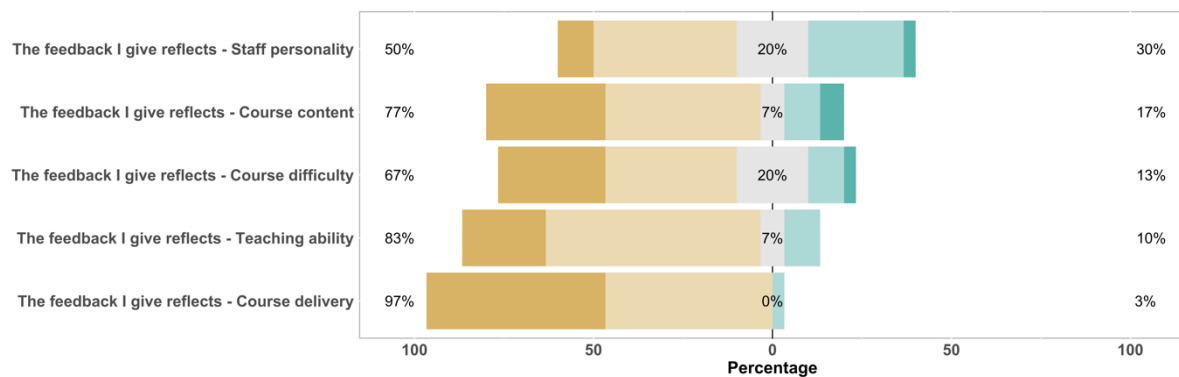
Figure 4: Student responses to what they believe their feedback reflects, following the same structure as Figure 1.

Conclusions

Students believed their feedback could improve content, quality and delivery and provide a learning opportunity for lecturers. While staff implement the feedback they receive, students currently do not see it, and their learning may not benefit from being part of this process. It was clear from our results that both staff and students engaged with student evaluations when prompted, but there was a lack of communication around the results and actions taken in response to the feedback students provided. Students emphasised that they did not know how their feedback was acted on and inconsistencies between courses led students to believe that their feedback had no impact. This shows a clear breakdown in the feedback process as defined by Carless and Winstone (2020). Students indicated a preference for informal forms of feedback that lecturers could respond to and action in real-time, for example, opportunities throughout the semester that lecturers could respond to in person. Students indicated that some form of in-class discussions would be helpful but at carefully selected times throughout the semester.

Reflection

The student-led nature of this study provided key benefits for the design and conducting of the study. Firstly, the student researchers' first-hand experiences of how the strengths and weaknesses of different feedback systems (e.g. end-of-year questionnaires, class representatives) impacted how often and intently we engaged with them. This insight was

integral to designing the survey and focus group questions as we were able to target the research questions on the perspective of lived student experiences. Furthermore, the student led approach aided the recruitment process as the researchers shared classes with many prospective participants, which increased the number of participants willing to engage with the surveys and attend the focus groups. This level of pre-established familiarity may have improved participants' confidence that the researchers had their interests in mind. The peer-to-peer nature of the focus groups potentially influenced some participants to discuss the flaws and benefits of feedback systems more freely than if the researchers had been members of the university faculty. However, we had to account for the possibility that student researchers may introduce bias into data from focus groups and great efforts were made to avoid projecting our own conceptions of what might be improved in the current systems onto the students from whom we were gathering data. The key takeaway is research into student attitudes benefits from student researchers, as there is an in-depth understanding of the student experience that can be drawn upon in the design process, and peer-to-peer recruitment and focus groups encourage students to engage in a more personal way.

One of the aims was to understand why lecturers commonly struggle with low student-lecturer feedback response rates. However, the quantitative data collection process faced a similar recruitment challenge. Through this, the researchers gained first-hand insight into how low response rates act as barriers to lecturers collecting quality feedback. Furthermore, recognising the importance of feedback to the process of lecturers improving their student's experience has changed my personal behaviour as a student. Instead of ignoring feedback requests, as I used to, I reflect that without quality feedback there is no basis on which lecturers can improve and now I tend to engage more often. My change in attitude is an example of how the two-way communication of feedback's important purpose for lecturers and the benefits conferred to students through thoughtful engagement can increase student participation in feedback.

Through our work undertaken in this project, we unearthed a wealth of insights that helped us understand the importance of evaluation processes in the educational ecosystem. Not

only did this experience reveal how vital assessment is in fostering student learning and growth, but it also shed light on the profound impact it has on nurturing the relationship between staff and students. The wealth of knowledge and understanding gained from this project has not only enriched our individual perspectives on education but has also highlighted the potential for positive change when we prioritise effective evaluation processes. This experience has undoubtedly reinforced the need to enhance the educational experience for both students and staff alike and the understanding that effective evaluation benefits both parties significantly. Students can learn more effectively, while staff find it easier to address issues and tailor their teaching methods to meet student needs. As a student involved in this project, I've gained a unique perspective that I didn't have before, understanding just how crucial evaluation is and how it shapes the educational experience. It has been eye-opening to see the different views and needs that both students and staff bring to the table, and I have found it very exciting to be able to collaborate in contributing meaningfully to creating a more harmonious and effective learning environment for all.

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