Is it time to move away from end of unit surveys?

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Abstract

End of unit/module surveys have been a longstanding means of collecting teaching, learning and assessment feedback from higher education students. Results in turn intending to inform priorities for course enhancement planning and monitoring the future impact of student experience interventions. In recent years, a growing number of institutions have started to rethink their use of end of unit surveys. This case study of one university in the Southeast of England reports the rationale for and approach towards moving away from end of unit surveys. Firstly, methodological issues synonymous with end of unit survey are considered. Secondly, the University of Bedfordshire's (2024) Student Voice Principles and Framework is presented as an example of a multi-modal, inclusive and collaborative approach to working in partnership with students to enhance their learning and experiences without the need for end of unit surveys. Finally, initial evaluation findings related to these approaches are discussed including staff and student feedback related to the removal of the end of unit survey.

Introduction

As demonstrated by the Teaching Excellence Framework (Office for Students (OfS), 2020), the higher education sector has become increasingly required to provide evidence of impact. Whilst outcomes related to continuation, completion and progression are readily quantifiable (as per OfS (2023) B3 baselines), measurement of student experience has been historically more nuanced. Since 2005, the National Student Survey (NSS) (n.d.) has gone someway to organising how the sector measures student satisfaction. However, given that this only addresses final year undergraduate students, institutions have sought to supplement this with institutional specific measures – for example, institution specific end of unit/module surveys.

For over fifteen years the University of Bedfordshire has adopted a unit survey (called the Bedfordshire Unit Survey or BUS). This provided all students with standardised opportunities to feedback on their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment. In line with the wider sector, initially the BUS was administered on paper but more recently delivered online. In later years, the timing of the BUS was at the end of a unit but prior to this earlier administration (circa. 75% of the way through a unit) was attempted to allow for in unit responses to student feedback. This however, was problematic in terms of time taken to centrally process and return results to course teams to action.

Since circa. 2018 there was a progressive and significant decline in BUS response rates. As such in AY21/22 a review of the BUS was led by the University's Associate Deans for Student Experience. This resulted in refocused question topics (aligned to the work of Arthur, 2020), reduction in the number of questions, and relaunch of the survey (see appendix 1 for the 2023/24 BUS questions). Despite this, response rates continued to decline. This was a major concern given that the institutional rationale for using a standardised end of unit survey was to facilitate meaningful comparison of unit performance across the University and inform course enhancement planning and monitoring. Accordingly, in AY23/24 a consultation with university staff and the Students' Union about the future of end of unit surveys was undertaken. This surfaced a number of interconnected issues that were collectively undermining the validity of, and engagement with, the BUS.

Firstly, the BUS used the same question set to allow comparisons between units. Given that the majority of students study parallel units they were being asked to complete multiple end-of unit surveys each semester. Assuming then that a student was studying a 360 credit undergraduate course on a 30 credit per unit basis plus special project, they were required to complete the same end of unit survey at least ten times during their studies. Overtime many students simply elected to disengage with such a repetitive process.

Secondly, in addition to end of unit surveys, students complete a range of other surveys during their studies. This included national surveys (such as the NSS or UK Engagement Survey (Advance HE, n.d. a)), student experience or administration enhancement surveys (such as induction experiences or to feedback on a service (e.g. library) or system (e.g. Virtual Learning Environment)) along with surveys related to accreditations that a university is seeking to obtain (such as the Race Equality Charter questionnaire (Advance HE, n.d. b)). Additionally, the Students' Unions administer their own questionnaires. Such survey prevalence was attributed to progressive disengagement and reduced response rates (as per Porter, Whitcomb and Weitzer, 2004).

Thirdly, students saw taking the time to respond to end of unit surveys as an altruistic act given that change would affect the next cohort who undertook that unit. To address this the University introduced a short mid-unit feedback exercise to inform in-unit enhancements. Given the aforementioned issue of survey fatigue, it was unsurprisingly found that students felt making time to undertake both a mid-point and end of unit survey was excessive.

Fourthly, the 'horns and halo' effect (Oxford Reference, 2025) refers to a cognitive bias whereby an individual forms either a negative or positive impression of something based on an initial experience. Teaching staff often reported how the BUS unfairly returned negative unit feedback due to issues outside of their control (such as timetabling or registration problem) that had predisposed students to providing negative feedback via end of unit surveys. This in turn led many academic staff to have significant concerns about promoting the BUS for fear that they would receive unfair feedback. It was therefore suggested that a focus on collecting course level feedback (as is the case with the NSS) is fairer and gives academic staff more control around how feedback is collected. This also mitigates against situations whereby responses from units with smaller student numbers have a more disproportionate impact on unit results when compared to units with larger cohorts.

Finally, the University Mental Health Charter Framework (Student Minds, 2024) emphasises the importance of adopting a whole-university approach to mental health and well-being of both students and staff - including feedback channels. The anonymous nature of end of unit surveys afford the means by which students could potentially provide unkind or even hurtful comments to staff with little risk of identification. Accordingly, Daskalopoulou (2024) reported of the significant potential for end of unit surveys to negatively impact on staff mental health and well-being – again potentially undermining staff engagement with the process.

There is a new emphasis on student voice in the most recent update to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Rowsell, 2024). Specifically, Principle 2 (engaging students as partners) key practice requires the demonstration of "effective engagement with students" (QAA, 2024, p.5). Given that the aforementioned methodological limitations, effective engagement can be consistently achieved by universities via an end of unit survey is questionable, even if part of a wider feedback framework. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that a number of institutions are starting to phase out the use of unit surveys in favour of more informal "check-ins and peer reviews" (Williams, 2024).

University of Bedfordshire Student Voice Principles and Framework

The University of Bedfordshire (2024) Student Voice Principles and Framework was co-developed and is co-owned by the Education and Student Experience Directorate and the Students' Union. This reflected research perspectives such as those identified through a literature review by Zepke and Leach (2010, p.169) which are synonymous with fostering student engagement, namely 'motivation and agency, transactional engagement, institutional support and active citizenship'. Originally introduced in academic year 2023/24, the framework initially included reference to the BUS however, given the low response rates this was not treated as a reliable and consistent means of collecting feedback. In AY24/25 the framework was updated and use of an end of unit survey was removed. As shown in Figure 1, the model is based on a four-stage feedback loop:
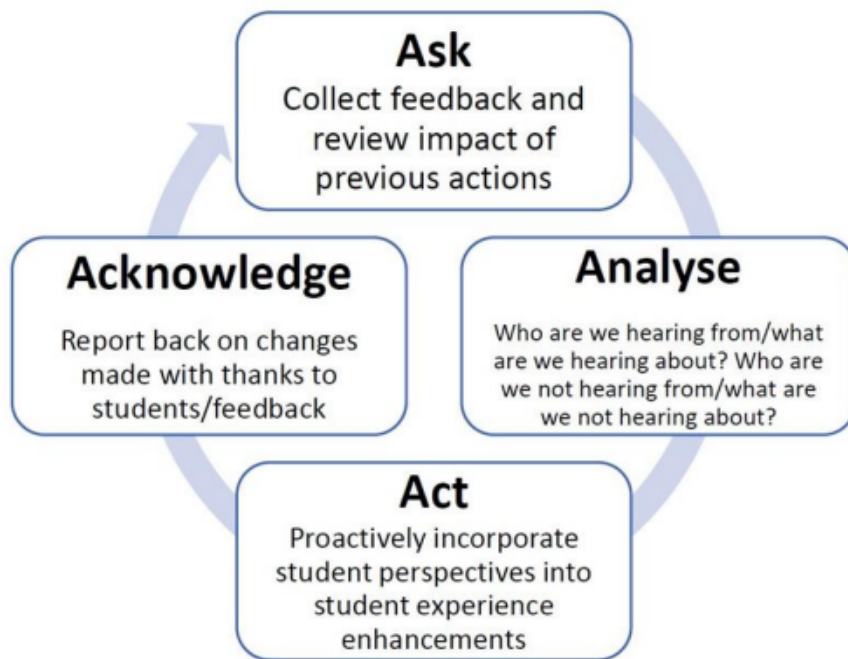
Figure 1: Student Voice Feedback Loop

Ask

The framework adopts three distinct but interconnected mechanisms for collecting student feedback: a) in a meeting/class; b) talking to a rep; c) online. Through adopting this tripartite approach, it has been possible to streamline and simplify how students provide feedback. How each feedback method supports students to share unit experiences is explained below.

In a meeting/class: This includes the use of a mid-point evaluation exercise to collect feedback on units. To reduce repetitiveness, course teams are given flexibility in terms of how the exercise is administered (examples include responding to a small number of online questions or providing feedback on a postcard) and the feedback topics that are focussed on. Previously this was where reference to an end of unit survey was cited.

Talking to a rep: All courses at the University have a nominated student who acts as Course Representative. Students are able to provide unit level and/or course level feedback to their Course Representative. The University also employs Student Experience Leaders (SEL) who act as School Representatives (25% of SEL role) and undertake students as partner roles to work with university staff to co-create student enhancement projects (75% of SEL role). A key part of both SEL roles is to feedback to the respective student cohorts so 'closing the feedback loop' is fundamental. In addition, other students as partner roles (including student researchers) help to co-create curriculum and work with staff in evaluation of areas of their education.

Online: Student have 24/7/365 access to an online feedback form. This can be used to provide feedback regarding overall course experiences or more specific feedback regarding units. The

University has also introduced centralised 'Begin', 'Thrive' and 'Succeed' questionnaires that correspond to different stages of the student journey – these are reported at a course level.

Analyse

Wherever possible, across all student feedback channels, details of students who have provided feedback are captured to enable the University and Students' Union to analyse and assess how representative the information is of the cohort or wider student body. The feedback itself is processed anonymously (unless demographics are critical to the issue, in which case anonymised demographic information may be used, but with care to avoid identifying individuals). That said, recognising that some students may have concerns about sharing feedback that is sensitive in nature there will always be the option for students to provide totally anonymous feedback (e.g. via a proxy such as a Course or School Representative).

Thematic analysis is used to identify trends in feedback topics. Standard themes are aligned to NSS question categories (such as teaching on my course, learning opportunities and assessment and feedback). Where required these are supplemented with additional themes. Examples of additional themes include feedback regarding the University's bus service or parking on campus.

Act

Critical to the Student Voice Principles and Framework has been introduction of termly School Student Experience Committee (SSECs) meetings to provide a forum to triangulate the three feedback mechanisms. These meetings ensure that student feedback at both the unit and course level is systematically heard and updates on associated actions can be provided. SSECs are chaired by a Head of School and are attended by Portfolio Leaders, Course Leaders, student representatives, Students' Union representatives and representatives from professional services (including Learning Development Tutors, Student Support and Academic Librarians).

Acknowledge

To close the feedback loop, the University and Students' Union actively seeks to demonstrate to students how their feedback has influenced changes in practices and/or process. This includes both transparently promoting and celebrating positive changes and acknowledging where further work is needed and the associated steps that will be taken to enhance the student experience. Acknowledgement encourages additional feedback to be shared (on either the existing or a new topic(s)). This in turn restarts the "feedback loop" to check that action taken had the desired impact. For example, feedback to the online form is not considered "completed" until the submitter has confirmed that they understand the situation and are – at least to some extent – content with this outcome.

Evaluation of framework

SSECs

The Students' Union reviewed how SSECs had run during the first year (AY23/24). The introduction of a Feedback Form Responses and Actions tracker was found to provide an effective means to disseminate feedback to relevant SSECs. A number of prerequisites for SSECs to work effectively were identified.

Unsurprisingly, attendance by Student Representatives (School and Course Representatives) significantly enriched SSEC discussions. However, many students reported finding it difficult to attend despite receiving meeting dates in advance. Timing of teaching sessions must be a particular consideration when scheduling SSECs – not always considered with meetings being scheduled by Faculty Administrative staff. In addition to SSECs, some Student Representatives reported that they were invited to other departmental meetings to provide feedback and were unable to fulfil all requests. Looking ahead, attendance at SSECs will be prioritised ahead of all other meetings and if full attendance is challenging will be encouraged to attend for specific agenda items. Whenever Student Representatives cannot attend SSECs they will be asked to send apologies and provide written feedback in advance of the meeting so this can still be discussed.

As might be expected, training needs for Student Representatives in relation to their role in SSECs have emerged, for instance what is their role in a SSEC? What is the structure of and meeting etiquette in a university committee? What preparation needs to be completed before a SSEC? Addressing such issues was therefore subsequently reflected in updates to the Students' induction and training programme. Similarly, developmental needs for academic staff have arisen. Notably, in terms of ensuring there is a clear and consistent understanding of the Student Representatives (School and Course Representatives) position and what can be expected. It has also been very helpful for the Students' Union to arrange introduction sessions before Student Representatives and corresponding academics to provide the opportunity to clarify roles and responsibilities.

A standardised institutional SSEC agenda is needed to ensure that key areas were consistently addressed. For example, academic staff to share and discuss their mid-point exercise feedback and associated actions. It was found that SSECs agendas benefitted from including time to update/clarify course coordinators and academic staff roles in relation to new student experience initiatives or processes (i.e. updating of welcome webpage / academic induction format) even if these topics had previously been discussed at team meetings or via internal communications.

Given the intersectional nature of a SSEC remit, membership needed to be very carefully and clearly defined. It was found that there were some initial incorrect assumptions made about who needed to attend, which resulted in some colleagues attending when they were not required (e.g. multiple representatives from the same team) and others missing invitations. There were found to be significant benefits to inviting professional services (such as Student Support, Library and academic skills support) representatives as those individuals were able

to respond to relevant questions and/or feedback. It was however found that some team representatives provided the same generic reports to SSECs rather than updates more tailored to specific school circumstances – working to increase the specificity of updates is therefore a future priority.

Student feedback response rates

Response rates for the online feedback form increased dramatically after the curtailment of the BUS, as seen in Table 1.

Timeframe	AY22/23	AY23/24	AY24/25 *(Sept – Dec only)*
Online Form Entries	135	253	460

Table 1: Feedback Form Submissions

A clear benefit for a number of student groups in having a multi-modal approach to the student voice has emerged. Some student groups that were previously under-represented elsewhere in the student voice system (e.g. students of Indian and African heritage, historically under-represented amongst elected Course Reps; students on outlying/satellite campuses) are better represented among online form users when feedback methods are compared (see Table 2).

Student Demographic	% of student population	% of feedback via Course Rep population	*Variance*	% of feedback via online form users	*Variance*
Faculty of Creative Arts, Technologies & Sciences	25.5%	22.0%	*-3.5pp*	28.6%	*+3.1pp*
Faculty of Education, English & Sport	9.5%	15.9%	*+6.4pp*	18.8%	*+9.3pp*
Postgraduate Taught	32.0%	12.7%	*-19.3pp*	27.3%	*-4.6pp*
International fee payer	34.1%	14.3%	*-19.8pp*	30.3%	*-3.8pp*
21-25 years old	30.9%	27.4%	*-3.5pp*	38.5%	*+7.7pp*
31-40 years old	19.3%	19.6%	*+0.3pp*	19.3%	*-2.7pp*
41-50 years old	11.4%	14.7%	*+3.3pp*	7.4%	*-4.0pp*
Asian or British Asian - Indian	21.2%	7.4%	*-13.8pp*	14.5%	*-6.7pp*
Black or Black British - African	14.1%	13.1%	*-1.0pp*	18.9%	*+4.8pp*

Table 2: Student Demographic representation - Course Reps v Online Feedback Form

Submissions to the form tended to be succinct and single-issue, which allowed for easier triaging and speedy dissemination to the most appropriate teams. At the time of writing, over 90% of feedback received in Term 1 AY24/25 had already been "completed," with the full feedback loop resolved to the satisfaction of the submitting student. Importantly, this also means that staff only received feedback on topics that they could genuinely influence, (albeit, not always control entirely) reducing the "cross-contamination" of feedback influenced by institutional issues outside of their control. In short, wider operational issues are dealt with by the operational teams, instead of being submitted as part of a unit evaluation task.

Feedback received and associated outcomes are then reported back to SSECs alongside in-unit evaluation carried out by academic teams and feedback collected by elected Course Reps, as well as being added to thematic reports for a range of University committees seeking to resolve more complex issues. Anecdotally, this "triage" element of the online form has created more space in committees for discussion of those more complex issues, allowing for emerging co-creation of solutions.

Future evaluation of response rates will build on the current analysis of singular demographic characteristics and explore the influence of intersectionality on student feedback. The University is currently working towards the Race Equality Charter (Advance HE, 2025) and the Mental Health Charter (Student Minds,2024), and refining evaluation approaches to better consider the influence of intersectionality will form part of corresponding action plans.

University community response to removing the end of unit survey

From an academic staff perspective, the removal of an end of unit survey and greater emphasis placed on mid-point evaluation exercises was widely welcomed. This is attributed to:

- A strong preference for being empowered to shape how evaluation is structured as per the mid-point evaluation exercise.
- Administration of local evaluation being more straightforward than when centrally coordinated.
- Improved staff engagement due to a reduction in their workload.
- Facilitating a more timely response to student feedback.
- Allowing for issues about assignments to be addressed more quickly.
- Potential to align the foci of evaluation to course or subject specific NSS priorities.

And perhaps best summarised by the following quotes from academic staff who had experienced the BUS and new student feedback processes

"A key benefit of moving from an end of unit to a mid-unit survey has been that feedback can be responded to immediately and changes can be seen by the cohort who have provided the feedback. Previously the unit survey was an exercise in altruism where the benefits were predominantly felt by the subsequent cohort."

"On the whole, completion rates of an end of unit survey were very low, which made evaluation of the feedback difficult. Students seem to engage better with a mid-unit survey, which allows us to act on their feedback more effectively."

"There is nothing about BUS that colleagues miss as far as I am aware."

Students, of course, have less institutional memory of the BUS due to the transient nature of the population. As per the response rates above, students clearly responded well to a diversified approach and the Students' Union is confident that the new approaches are resulting in more students than previously sharing feedback, and early indications suggest earlier in the academic year, allowing more time for improvements to be felt by current cohorts. This is further supported by the following quotations from students who experienced both the BUS and new feedback processes:

"I find the new 3 Ways to Feedback much better because I can share my thoughts during the unit, not after it ends. It helped improve the unit while I was still studying it. The old surveys felt too late to be useful, but now I can give feedback anytime."

"As a student rep, I noticed more students are happy to give feedback now because they have more choices and don't have to wait until the end of the unit."

Next steps, institutionally, will focus upon developing understanding of "contradictory" feedback. By virtue of collecting feedback in this multi-faceted manner, there have been a number of incidences where contradictory feedback has been received. For instance, in-class feedback exercises have not matched online feedback forms. This has caused some understandable frustration amongst colleagues seeking to enact change in response to feedback as one change clearly cannot please everyone in this circumstance. From the perspective of student representatives, this demonstrates exactly why multiple avenues of feedback are required, to cater to diverse student populations.

Lessons learned

Reflecting on our experiences the following are four key takeaways:

1. ***Share ownership:*** Buy-in to student feedback is much enhanced when a university and their Students' Union purposefully work together to co-create and manage student feedback principles and processes.

2. ***Keep under review:*** Institutional approaches to collecting student feedback must be periodically challenged to ensure that these are integrated and remain fit for purpose.

3. ***Rethink committees***: Reframing committee structures can serve to significantly enhance monitoring and capacity to respond to student feedback.

4. ***Avoid end of unit:*** Collecting feedback from students at a point when changes can be made is always going to far more effective that collecting feedback after the event.

Conclusion

The adoption of the Student Voice Framework has provided a viable and efficient means of engaging the student voice without the use of end of unit surveys. Further, this change has been very well received by university staff, which in turn is translating into enhanced engagement with new student voice processes. Given the unprecedented financial pressure that the higher education sector is under (Kernohan, 2025; Simons and Lister, 2024; Wareing, 2024) and associated efforts to find efficiencies and cut costs, it is likely that other institutions may also start to review and question their use of end of unit surveys. Looking ahead, this may mean that the sector is approaching a time when the use of end of unit surveys becomes increasingly outdated.

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Appendix 1

BUS questions

Indicates the answer is a rating on a five-point scale. Scale end points labelled as "Definitely agree" or "Definitely Disagree". N/A option available.

1) Performativity – About the unit organisation

1.1   The unit is well organised and running smoothly*

1.2   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

1.3   I have been able to get a response to queries related to this unit quickly and easily from academics*

1.4   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

1.5   I have been able to contribute my ideas and suggestions throughout this unit to make improvements to the learning experience*

1.6   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

2) Professionalism – About the unit teaching and learning

2.1   The unit content is well structured and engaging and has prepared me for my assessment*

2.2   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

2.3   Teaching in this unit has been effective, engaging and inspiring*

2.4   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

2.5   The assessment brief and guidance were clear, easy to follow and timely*

2.6   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

3) Provision – About the unit resources

3.1   The timetable, tutor group allocation and timings of the unit has worked well for me*

3.2   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

3.3   The physical learning spaces, rooms and equipment (e.g. labs) used to deliver this unit are appropriate to support my learning*

3.4   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

3.5   The learning resources and digital tools (e.g. BREO [virtual learning environment] shell, simulations, media) provided for the units were effective*

3.6   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments

4) Overall

4.1   Overall this unit has been a positive learning experience*

4.2   Use this open box to explain your responses in the previous question, or to add other comments