



Department
for Education

Instant student feedback on teacher practices

**Research on student evaluation practices
in English colleges and a trial of new
approaches**

Research brief

June 2015

Department for Education

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This research brief synthesizes the findings from (i) a survey carried out by the Department for Education (DfE) and the Association of Colleges (AoC) on methods of obtaining student feedback in Further Education (FE) colleges and (ii) a small-scale pilot of instant online feedback methods in five FE colleges.

Background

In December 2013 the Department funded six shared learning grants to FE institutions. The aim of these grants was to improve engagement within the sector and provide direction to help overcome common issues identified in implementing the 16-19 study programme principles. One of the strands identified as part of the 'improving strategic approaches and quality of teaching' principle was the implementation and practice of student feedback on the quality of the teaching they are getting, via instant online evaluation. This is a subject on which there is little specific evidence available in the English context.

'Instant online evaluation' is taken here to mean feedback provided immediately after all or a proportion of lessons by students, to their teachers in the first instance. The aims for it could include:

- helping them work out which teaching methods work best with their students;
- establishing which aspects of courses students find most difficult to grasp; and
- monitoring progress throughout the year in student engagement.

Aims of the project

The purpose of the study was to explore methods for improving the quality of teaching for 16- to 19- year olds via instant online evaluation. The purest form envisaged involved students giving feedback on every lesson direct to their teacher. The study aimed to establish a baseline for the use of feedback from students in English colleges in a more general sense. Some of these forms will be directly relevant to the pilot, but colleges tend to obtain feedback on a range of issues and in a range of formats.

It then explored the experiences of five colleges in implementing new, technology-dependent, approaches to generating instant feedback, or more regular and structured feedback on courses, for teachers and leaders. It did not aim to establish 'what works' or provide robust conclusions on effectiveness, but sought to:

- illustrate a range of practical solutions that can be implemented to deliver instant feedback, or more frequent feedback on courses generally;
- highlight some of the practical challenges that are involved and the steps which colleges have taken to overcome them;

- explore the relevant trade-offs between objectives for feedback and how colleges decided on their approaches; and
- establish the sorts of perceptions that can arise under different models and approaches among teachers, leaders and students.

Methodology

i) Survey of colleges

The Department worked with the Association of Colleges (AoC) to design and distribute a survey on student feedback. The surveys were sent to all of their members by email in May 2014 and senior leaders were asked to respond within two weeks of distribution.

The survey enquired about student feedback provisions in institutions; the frequency of use and application of student feedback; and institutions' perceptions of student feedback as a way of effectively improving teaching and the barriers they face in achieving this.

The sample of the survey consisted of subscribed members of the AoC's fortnightly news-bulletin. The AoC has a national membership of 339 colleges, sixth forms and education training providers in England. Three hundred thirty nine college senior leaders were sent the survey. Overall, 139 completed it, giving a 40% response rate.

ii) Qualitative research with five colleges

In January 2014, the DfE commissioned five further education and tertiary colleges to design and pilot an instant student feedback system. The colleges recruited were in the South of England, West Midlands, North East and North West. Through Shared Learning Grants, they were each funded £5,000 to cover the costs for resourcing and implementing the pilot. Colleges were given freedom over how to implement their pilots, but all were asked to:

- undertake a short, intense period (i.e. 1-2 weeks) of trialling their new instant online feedback system in the spring of 2014 for at least 40 per cent of students across all 16-19 and adult study programmes;
- ensure their students provide feedback to facilitate the improvement of teaching practices, as opposed to course content; and
- collect, but use as they pleased, student feedback evidence against one or more categories under a framework set by the Department, to ensure some comparability across models.

Inception interviews with senior leaders or pilot coordinators in the pilot colleges were conducted to collect baseline evidence on current student feedback

provisions and the key differences associated with the proposed instant online system. Ten focus groups with students and five focus groups with teachers also took place as well as post-pilot interviews with senior leaders and pilot coordinators.

As part of the research study the Department collected Management Information from all pilot colleges to explore: the number of questions asked in the pilot; the responses received by pilot college's new system; classroom coverage of student feedback for each college, and the usage and presentation of the student feedback results to teachers.

College and researcher workshop

During summer 2014, emerging findings from the pilot were discussed at a seminar with coordinators from the pilots, Departmental staff and a representative from Ofsted. The discussion allowed colleges to share experience and the discussion helped inform the conclusions and interpretations made in this report.

Key findings

Current practice in collecting student feedback

Evidence from the survey of colleges suggests that:

- Colleges use a wide range of methods to collect feedback from students. These include online surveys, student representative meetings, student focus groups and course representative feedback to senior staff. Less popular methods include one-to-one feedback to the teacher, social networking and group feedback to the teacher.
- Colleges reported that most of the feedback activity took place on a termly basis.
- Feedback methods that were generating good response rates by students included student focus groups, online surveys and course representative feedback.
- Heads of faculties and principals were the main users of student feedback.

Findings from the qualitative work in the five pilot colleges

Models of collecting feedback

There was variance in the approaches chosen by the colleges (in terms of platform used, length of questions asked, timing and who had access to results) but at the same time there were similarities between them:

- Platforms included a texting system using students' mobile phones, or website methods using students' mobile phones, tablets or laptops, or using a virtual learning environment approach. Students without mobile phones or tablets/laptops were able to use shared IT facilities in the college.
- Models that offered flexibility to students (in terms of choosing a platform that suited them) were more successful in generating a large number of responses.
- Some models opted for a small number of questions (3-5) whereas others asked more questions covering a wide range of topics such as enjoyment of lesson, level of engagement and challenge, understanding of lesson and whether it helps them meet their achievement targets. Some models also used multiple choice questions and free text boxes.
- The timeframe of the data collection varied from one week to 2.5 weeks.
- In three of the five models, both teachers and senior leaders had access to the feedback data; in one model it was only senior leaders and heads of faculties that received the data, and in another model the data became available to teachers solely.

Delivery and practical issues including challenges

- Colleges' staff and students were involved at the designing and implementation of the pilot from the beginning, with particular focus on choosing the right questions to ask.
- Challenges associated with the design of the model involved students' access to mobile and internet devices as well as the Wi-Fi capacity of the college.
- Another challenge encountered was about obtaining good response rates from students, with some colleges missing their response targets.
- Colleges opted for different models for collecting and releasing the data, ranging from mobile phone short surveys to more comprehensive surveys involving a range of platforms including tablets and laptops.
- The feedback was available to teachers, and/or senior leaders and heads of faculties. Depending on prior arrangements and the audience, feedback was presented at whole-college level, as well as departmental and class-level.
- Challenges associated with the implementation of the pilot included its timing e.g. overlapping with mock exams and Ofsted inspections. Some teachers would have preferred to have more detailed and informative questions included in the pilot.
- Many students found the questions easy to understand and quick to answer, though some students did not fully understand the questions on achievement or personal goals. Students with English as an additional language and /or those undertaking lower level qualifications required extra support by a teacher to submit the feedback.
- Students reported answering the questions truthfully, recognising however the role that their relationship with the teacher could play in this context.

Perceptions of usefulness of IOSF

- Most teachers were positive about the implementation of the pilot in their college.
- Teachers highlighted the contribution that IOSF could make in improving teaching practices as a convenient and speedy method of gathering information from large groups of students. It also offers teachers the opportunity to reflect more on how they teach. However, some thought that due to the simplicity of the questions asked there wasn't enough detail in the answers to help them improve their practices.
- Senior leaders and coordinators were positive about the use of IOSF as a source of information / supportive development tool about the quality of teaching.
- Regarding the use of IOSF to inform teacher appraisal, evidence from senior leaders suggests that it could be used over time (e.g. on an aggregated basis) and with some further development, outside of the scope of the pilot.

Future plans

- Colleges in the pilot indicated that they could augment existing feedback methods with IOSF, rather than seeing it as a replacement of everything they were already using.
- All colleges had considered the multiple uses of their feedback systems after the pilot, with three colleges intending to proceed further in implementing IOSF in their classes.

Conclusions

This small-scale pilot of instant online feedback systems in FE colleges highlighted the potential that such a system could offer as well as some limitations. Some points which should be considered if other colleges were to design their own system are included below:

- Consideration should be given at the platform chosen: a texting method used in one of the pilots was unsuccessful for practical reasons. Offering students several options seemed to yield better results.
- The software systems used need to have the ability to analyse the data.
- The Wi-Fi capacity of the colleges should be able to support the system.
- Overall, the design of the system should be kept simple and accessible.
- Some students didn't have mobile phones with internet, or tablets/laptops. As a result, they had to access shared IT facilities to provide feedback which in turn meant that the feedback was not given straight after the lesson.
- Colleges should be mindful not to replicate existing feedback methods, but design a system to complement those; feedback exercises shouldn't be carried out in a way that generates 'survey fatigue' among students.
- Colleges should be open with students and teachers about the purposes of feedback methods and how the results will be used.

- If the purpose of feedback is to help teachers improve and plan lessons week-by-week, it may help if they are able to tailor the questions asked.
- If the purpose of feedback is for ongoing teacher appraisal with managers, it should be borne in mind that this may influence students' responses and as a result it might be best used as an indicator of changes through the year or a way of identifying issues for further exploration.



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