



## 12th European Quality Assurance Forum

### Responsible QA – committing to impact

Hosted by the University of Latvia  
Riga, Latvia

23-25 November 2017

### Paper proposal form

**Deadline 24 July 2017**

*Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.*

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Patricia Callaghan & Dale Whelehan

**Position:** Academic Secretary, Trinity College Dublin, and Students' Union Education Officer, Trinity College Dublin (2016-17)

**Organisation:** Trinity College Dublin in partnership with Trinity College Dublin Students' Union

**Country:** Republic of Ireland

**E-mail address:** [academic.secretary@tcd.ie](mailto:academic.secretary@tcd.ie) ; [whelehd@tcd.ie](mailto:whelehd@tcd.ie)

**Short bio (150 words max):**

*Joint Presentation.*

*Ms Patricia Callaghan is the Academic Secretary and Head of Trinity Teaching and Learning in Trinity College Dublin. The Academic Secretary is responsible for overseeing the management of academic administration and implementation of academic policy approved by the University Council in respect of undergraduate and postgraduate education. Under her remit she is responsible for overview of academic affairs including development of academic programmes, academic practice, employability and quality reviews both at a school and institutional level. She was conferred with honorary membership of the Trinity College Dublin Students' Union in March 2017 for her 'outstanding contribution' to student life.*

*Mr Dale Whelehan is a former Education Officer at Trinity College Dublin Students' Union. A current final year Physiotherapy student, Dale was instrumental in passing the first Student Partnership Agreement in the island of Ireland. The policy, which has been co-signed between the Students' Union and the University, commits to enhancing the quality of Teaching and Learning in the University with the view to ensure students are equal stakeholders in the learning environment. It offers the potential for students to be co-creators in curriculum design, and to have a meaningful influence in Quality Enhancement. Dale is also a member of the ESU Student Expert Pool on Quality Assurance and has represented the Union Students of Ireland (USI) in Quality in Brussels, Gdansk and Yerevan.*



## Proposal

### Title: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student Engagement: Moving beyond a 'complain-comply' culture of Quality Assurance in Higher Education?

**Abstract (150 words max):** Student Engagement in module and programme evaluation has become a pressing issue in the quality assurance and enhancement of the higher education teaching and learning environment. The importance of the student voice in the design, implementation and review of programme and module content can be seen through the long established academic structures in Students' Unions. Despite extensive efforts made by both the student body and academic staff to involve students in the teaching and learning, barriers to meaningful student engagement have cultivated a 'complain-comply' culture to quality assurance. This paper is the outcome of action research in Trinity College Dublin that attempts to understand these barriers and how they can be lessened. The research was conducted by the University Academic Secretary and the Students' Union Education Officer during the academic year 2016-17.

**The paper is based on:** Practice

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere?** No

**Text of paper (3000 words max):**

# 1. Background

## Trinity College Dublin

Founded in 1592, Trinity College Dublin offers undergraduate and postgraduate programmes across 24 schools and three faculties: arts, humanities, and social sciences; engineering, maths and science; and health sciences. Trinity's 17,000-strong student body comes from all 32 counties of Ireland, and 16% of students come from outside the country. Of those, 40% are from outside the European Union. Trinity College has a long tradition of student participation in its governance and committee structures and especially in teaching and learning policy development and implementation as well as in quality assurance and improvement activities.

In the academic year 2016-17, the Provost & President, Dr Prendergast, signed a Student Partnership Policy between the university and the Students' Unions<sup>1</sup> (see <https://www.tcd.ie/teaching-learning/>). The Partnership Policy, spearheaded by the Students' Union (SU) is the product of active engagement between the then SU Education Officer and staff across several areas of the University. In particular the Academic Secretary /Head of Trinity Teaching & Learning and the SU Education Officer engaged in a College-wide exercise to assess how to better involve staff and students in the development of a teaching and learning culture that embeds quality and moves away from a 'complain-comply' culture. This paper discusses some of the findings of that engagement.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix X for an overview of the SU structure



## Context

Irish universities are required under the law (Quality & Qualifications Act, 2012) to carry out an institutional quality review every seven years. The Institutional Review of Trinity College Dublin in 2012 concluded that Trinity's approach to student evaluation of programmes required an overhaul to align with best practice. In 2013 the process was changed and, for the first time, student evaluation of all taught undergraduate modules and postgraduate courses was made mandatory.

Currently, all undergraduate modules are evaluated by students on an annual basis. The method used for undergraduate module evaluation is determined by each school/course as appropriate, and this ranges from online surveys, paper-based surveys, focus groups, and/or staff-student liaison committees. Postgraduate taught courses are also evaluated every year at the end of the taught component and again at the time of submission of dissertation.

During 2015-16, concerns were raised by teaching staff about the usefulness of this evaluation policy; it was felt that mandatory student evaluation on an annual basis of all undergraduate modules delivered was leading to a culture of over-evaluation and 'box-ticking'. At the same time student representatives on the University Council raised concerns about compliance with the policy on module evaluation in some schools. Arising from concerns expressed by students and staff, the University Council mandated the Academic Secretary / Head of Trinity Teaching & Learning together with the then Students' Union Education Officer to assess whether and how undergraduate modules were being evaluated.

## Methodology

Mindful of not 'policing' activities in schools, it was decided to focus on identifying good practices and engage staff and students in a dialogue about how to best involve students in the assessment of their learning.

Focus group meetings, involving staff and student class representatives (reps) lasting from 60-90 minutes, were held with a total of 157 staff<sup>2</sup> and class reps across twenty schools<sup>3</sup> during the 2016-17 academic year. A set of core questions were asked and these branched into different conversations, depending on the nature of the school and the level of active engagement by staff and students. Chaired by the Academic Secretary, all focus groups were invited to comment on the following:

- a. Participants' (staff and students separately) views on the purpose of module evaluation
- b. Existing evaluation practices in the school
- c. Feedback – closing the loop
- d. Mid-term module review

---

<sup>2</sup> Normally included Head of School, Director of Teaching & Learning, course and module coordinators

<sup>3</sup> Schools varied in size and included professionally accredited programmes across the three faculties.



e. Student: Staff liaison committees

Arising from these 'generic' questions issues of 'anonymity' and 'power imbalance', as well as 'dialogue' as a form of evaluation between students and staff emerged.

### **Participants' view on the purpose of module evaluation**

Over the course of the implementation of the policy on mandatory student evaluation of all undergraduate modules taught, it would be fair to say that, with a few exceptions, the general quality assurance and enhancement culture in respect of student evaluation was one of 'complain – comply'. We heard complaints from staff about low student response rates, lack of student engagement, heavy administrative burden and absence of central College support, a box-ticking industry, and so on. Students, on the other hand, complained about completing surveys that 'go into a black hole', wasted their time because they didn't receive any feedback or rarely experienced any improvements to complaints/concerns raised, and a lack of genuine dialogue between staff and students on the teaching and learning experience.

Against this backdrop the first question asked of both staff and students interviewed was 'What in their view was the purpose of module evaluation?' It became quite apparent that staff viewed module evaluation as a vehicle for students to become actively engaged in their teaching, learning and quality enhancement. While they bemoaned the administrative burden, they embraced the idea of students as partners in curriculum formation and review. Staff valued the 'honest' feedback from their students. Many saw the process as assisting in keeping lecturers aware of their teaching and helping inform course committees of the risk of over assessment and/or over teaching in programmes. Some also felt that module evaluation helped to improve the overall coordination of a course and fed into the Schools overall quality assurance and enhancement agenda.

Many students, on the other hand, viewed the purpose of module evaluation as mechanism to make complaints anonymously. Students highlighted they were more likely to critique than praise in feedback forms, and many complained that the end of module evaluation process did not benefit them, rather it benefitted subsequent cohorts of students. They did, however, highlight its importance as a formal communication tool between staff and student, encouraging student engagement and cultivating a culture of staff-student partnership, especially if the feedback loop is closed. Many students felt the process encouraged self-reflection of their learning, as well as an opportunity to raise any concerns to senior members of staff within the school.

While staff complained of the administrative burden and students complained of wasting time completing surveys, neither student nor staff member supported the suggestion to discontinue the practice of module evaluation.



We found that as staff and students explored together the meaning of evaluation in the context of teaching and learning and not as a compliance burden or a conduit for airing grievances, that in some instances, the possibility for genuine dialogue emerged, and in others the power imbalance between students and staff was more keenly felt.

## 2. Different Evaluation Practices

There is a variety of module evaluation practices in place across the Schools at Trinity College. Student evaluation surveys can have as few as five questions and as many as 20, with all including an option for open comments. Many staff interviewed felt that information received from the open comments provided useful constructive feedback and best capture the student's experience of the modules.

### Online and paper-based questionnaires

The majority of Schools administer questionnaires, online or/and paper-based. On the whole, paper-based questionnaires are administered in-class during the penultimate module class, and a student rep collects the completed questionnaires on behalf of the lecturer. With the exception of a few schools where the response rates are impressively high, the response rates for online surveys are poor, as low as 6-10%. Where there are high response rates to online or paper-based, it appears that the Schools involved invest considerable effort and resources in the process and view evaluation as embedding a quality culture within the school<sup>4</sup>.

### Staff and student meetings/committees

Staff and student rep meetings are common practices in many disciplines in several Schools and they can serve a useful purpose in dealing with logistical and one-off issues, but students feel that these are not sufficient in themselves as a means of evaluation or giving a voice to all students. Students in Trinity College are represented on school governance committees and can raise student matters at these fora; however, student attendance at these meeting can be low and some students report that they can feel intimidated as the balance of power is not equal and the ratio of staff to student is often in favour of the former. In the academic year 2016-17 the School of Chemistry introduced Freshman (years 1+2) and Sophister (years 3+4) Staff:Student Liaison Committees, replacing module evaluations. Class reps and staff attend the meeting, which takes place three times a year. The student school convenor chairs the meeting and the school provides administration. While students speak very favourably of this approach, they nonetheless feel that some other form of module evaluation should also take place.

---

<sup>4</sup> The School of Mathematics, for example, has developed its own online evaluation tool that has significantly reduced the administration burden and the response rates are high (40-50%); the School of Medicine has a dedicated staff member for student evaluation and quality assurance. The School of Law, the School of Social Sciences and Philosophy and the School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences have embedded student evaluation into their learning culture.



This model won favour with the other students interviewed, and staff were open to imitating the model in their school. Staff were also open to the idea of a student-led agenda and a student chair; while students on the whole supported the idea of a student-led agenda, they differed in opinion about a student chair. Some students favoured a staff member as chair as they felt the committee would have more weight, while others favoured co-chairing as this allowed students to gain confidence in the role.

Such fora open the space for 'dialogue', something that many students viewed as important. However, regardless of how 'democratic' they process may be, student reps do not enjoy parity of esteem and it is, therefore, necessary that students have the opportunity to anonymously evaluate their learning.

### 3. Feedback

The biggest concern expressed repeatedly was the low student response rate, and some staff expressed frustration with participating in a process that requires a lot of administration for no apparent value. The vast majority of staff want to hear and indeed welcome, their students' views on their learning, but they argue that concerns/issues raised in a survey where the response rate is 10% and below are not representative of the class and are difficult to address. Students, on the other hand, contend that the issues raised are still valid and should be addressed, and further they believe that if they received constructive feedback on the issues raised in a survey, the response rate would improve. The view was also expressed, repeatedly, that actions or changes to modules arising from student feedback benefit subsequent years and not the class in question and consequently there is little incentive to complete as many as ten module evaluations each term when there is no immediate gain. Being a 'good citizen' has its limits.

Feedback then from both staff and students is an area that needs to be tackled across the board, and our desktop research of practices in other universities suggest that this is a universal problem. In exploring ways to improve student feedback, suggestions included making module evaluation compulsory, and offering incentives such as credit or some other academic allowance for completion of surveys. While the suggestions were actively discussed, they received very little traction for two principal reasons; namely, the need to protect the student's identity, and the possibility that students may only 'tick boxes' for compliance purposes thereby reducing the reliability of the feedback. Some staff wondered why students 'don't just email their lecturer(s)' if there was an issue with a module, but students countered that a cultural shift to support this type of dialogue would be necessary.

Even where there is a genuine openness to hear and respond to students' requests and concerns, as in the case of the School of Chemistry, the structures need to be flexible and avenues provided to allow for anonymous evaluation of the teaching and learning experience. Students are not a homogenous group, some thrive in student politics, some



are at ease openly communicating their views to staff, and others do not want to be involved or be 'represented' for that matter.

## 4. Anonymity

Trinity College students can be in a class of 300+ or a class of 10; they can belong to a large discipline, like medicine, or to a smaller discipline in the same school, like occupational therapy. Generally, in the Freshman years (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>) students are in large class sizes and in their senior years, they are more likely to be in smaller class sizes. For this, and other reasons such as the nature of the discipline, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to student evaluation will not work.

Anonymity in the student evaluation process is considered very important for students, even for those who feel confident in their relationship with lecturers. Students interviewed who are in small group classes commented on the difficulty of being critical in their questionnaire responses as they feared that criticisms could be easily attributable to individuals and they feared that this would impact negatively on their grades; this concern was particularly present when module evaluation was by means of a staff:student focus group. Some students felt focus groups and the staff:student meetings could be very 'polite' and as a consequence they felt 'nervous' about raising issues – this, however, depended on the lecturers involved. It was suggested, on several occasions, that where focus groups are used as the principal method for module evaluation that these should be facilitated by someone not connected to the course in question. Many student reps who participated in the meetings commented on how the dynamics of the focus group meetings with an external facilitator was more positive and empowering.

While class reps do their best to represent the whole class, it was clear that not all students want to be 'represented' and many prefer the anonymity of the survey evaluation to raise their concerns.

It remains to be seen, whether a genuine culture of 'partnership' will change these dynamics.

## 5. Mid-Term Module Review

The timing of module evaluations was considered important especially in terms of initiating change, where required and possible, that benefits the students taking the module. In the course of our discussions, we explored attitudes to the practice of administering mid-module reviews. There are several instances of this in place and staff and students who have experienced the practice found it beneficial. The School of Mathematics administers mid-module evaluation, and staff and students interviewed preferred this timing as it was more responsive to students' here-and-now needs with the school having the opportunity to address problems that exist just in time. There was, however, a guarded response from many schools to the implementation of this practice on top of existing methods of evaluation as there is little scope for taking on additional evaluation administration. However, the vast majority of staff interviewed felt that some information in the earlier stages of module delivery would be useful but there was no consensus on the method to employ.



It would be fair to say, that the students interviewed were overwhelmingly in favour of mid-module evaluation and staff on the whole appreciated the benefits. Many students felt that they received too many end-of-module evaluations at a time when they were busy preparing assessments or for examinations. However, some schools were not in favour of replacing end-of-module evaluation with mid-module evaluations because they value feedback on the totality of the module.

The overall perceived value of a mid-term module review was its relevance to the students in the here-and-now and the possibility that it would improve student engagement.

## 6. Dialogue and engagement

Students felt that their learning experience would be greatly enhanced if the evaluation process supported a culture of dialogue and engagement. The staff:student liaison committee modelled on the School of Chemistry's liaison committees, mentioned above, was envied by some students and a model that the majority of students interviewed would like to see in place in their school. Staff interviewed were positively disposed to the idea. Mid-module review was also viewed as a process that could support greater staff and student dialogue and greater student engagement in their learning process.

## 7. Conclusion

The staff interviewed want and welcome student feedback and the student reps want a system that supports engagement and students as partners in their learning. While many schools make valiant efforts to create the conditions for open dialogue, a 'complain – comply' culture of quality is evident in many others.

We found that, with a few exceptions, both staff and students had a poor knowledge of the detail of the University policy on student evaluation. Many class reps were unaware that student evaluation was mandatory and many staff were unaware that the school had discretion on the approach used. The format of the focus groups was in itself an exercise on awareness as class reps, and especially the Junior Freshman (First Years) reps, felt informed and empowered to represent their class following the conversations. This raised concerns about how to engage new entrants as they are more likely to be intimidated in a new learning environment, as well as ways in which both the SU and the University could provide the training and supports necessary to ensure meaningful participation by this and other student cohorts. The Student Partnership Policy as well as a reformed SU academic representative structure, entitled the Academic Senate (both accomplished in 2016-17) provides a mechanism for addressing this.

There was agreement that the 'complain - comply' approach to evaluation defeated the purpose of trying to improve the teaching and learning culture of the school. Staff complained about the low student evaluation response rates and argued that 'feedback' was



a two way street; though it would be fair to say that many students felt that the absence of dialogue and feedback to their responses pushed students towards a 'complaint' culture. Some staff experienced frustration with the 'quality rhetoric' and felt that teaching and learning was not only classroom dependent but required a holistic approach to address systemic problems identified not only in student evaluation surveys but also by school quality reviews.

Arising from this exercise, we intend to 'pilot' in a number of schools (i) mid-module evaluations and (ii) the establishment of staff:student liaison committees. *The Student Partnership Policy* and the new organisation structures introduced in the Students' Union, together with a willingness by schools for open dialogue should contribute towards the facilitation of a culture of students-as-partners in their learning through greater reflection, dialogue and engagement.

#### References:

- Quality and Quality Assurance Act, 2012 (<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/28/enacted/en/pdf>)
- Trinity College Dublin & TCD Students' Union Student Partnership Policy (<https://www.tcd.ie/teaching-learning/assets/pdf/academicpolicies/StudentPartnershipPolicy.pdf>)

#### Discussion questions:

1. How effective is a partnership model when there is an imbalance of power between the parties?
2. What is the most successful way of measuring success of the quality assurance methods used in a quantitative way?
3. How can quality assurance and enhancement approaches effectively address the great diversity of a student body as well as a vast range of disciplines, class sizes and lecturing styles and personalities?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2017 to [QAForum@eua.be](mailto:QAForum@eua.be). The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. *Smith\_Jones.doc*. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.