

2019 European Learning & Teaching Forum

Towards successful learning: Controversies and common ground

Organised by EUA and hosted by the University of Warsaw

14-15 February 2019

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Short bio:

Arnoldas Solovjovas is currently a student of Telecommunication Physics and Electronics (BSc) at Vilnius University (VU), Lithuania. For past three years Arnoldas was actively participating in VU SA academic activities. Last year he was VU SA Academic Affairs Coordinator, who is responsible for all VU SA activities in regards to improvement of the study process. As a result he lead student initiative in VU to provide teachers with a feedback during the study semester. He is also a student representative at the VU Senate, where he is working in Study Committee for two years now. Main areas of interest: importance of feedback at universities, study procedure documents and higher education policy.

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Short bio:

Ignas Gaižiūnas is currently a student of Theoretical Physics and Astrophysics (MSc) at Vilnius University (VU), Lithuania. He also has finished studies of Energy Physics (BSc) and School Pedagogy (professional pedagogical studies). He's been involved in student movement for past five years. During this whole time he was responsible for various activities at VU SA: from being a first year students' tutor to coordinating activities of more than 300 students' representatives in VU and leading Parliament of VU SA in shaping positions on most important matters of Lithuanian Higher Education. Last year he was also a member of ESU student expert quality assurance pool and recently he was selected for another year in this pool. Furthermore, he is participating in evaluations organised by Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania) as student expert. He has been participating in external evaluations for 3 years from now. Main areas of interest: empowerment of students, teaching and learning, quality assurance, evaluation, development of study programmes.

Proposal

Title: Improving teaching and learning experience through giving feedback for teachers during the semester: Vilnius University case

Abstract:

One of essential aspects of teaching and learning is feedback. Paper will discuss main problems of standard feedback systems given at the end of semester shortly. As possible solution paper will introduce activities of Vilnius University Students' Representation (VU SA) that were provided to enhance feedback from students to teachers during the semester. The aim of this paper to cover these activities. In this paper methodology for provision of feedback from students to teachers created by VU SA will be explained in detail. Suggested methodology involves students producing short feedback papers for teachers who agreed to participate in this initiative. Discussion will allow to indicate benefit and challenges as well as the results of created methodology with possible ideas for the future.

Key words: student feedback, feedback culture, feedback report

Introduction

Teaching and learning in a broad meaning involves a lot of different aspects. One of these aspects is feedback, which is an essential part of the study process. As there always are at least two parties involved in teaching and learning (which are students and teachers) it is very important to have an effective communication between these two stakeholders. As a result, feedback could be separated in two categories: one, provided from teachers to students, about their learning achievements and another one, provided from students to teachers, about their teaching. This paper will cover the latter feedback and explore activities of Vilnius University Students' Representation that were provided to enhance feedback from students to teachers.

Feedback, given from students to teachers, not only allows to improve teachers themselves but also allows to improve quality of the study process which helps to provide a better education for their students. Due to this reason VU SA has systematically worked with giving an appropriate feedback for teachers of VU. This work has continued at least past three years. The main goal is to create a quality culture where both, teachers and students, could improve themselves by having relevant feedback. Whole this period of three years, VU SA has tried different ways of involving more and more students and teachers in giving and receiving a feedback.

There are three main areas of VU SA activities in regards to improvement of feedback from students to teachers:

1. Improvement of regulation of feedback provision;
2. Creation and dissemination of recommendations for teachers to gather feedback;
3. Gathering and provision of feedback from students to teacher during the semester.

Now, this paper will continue to give more details only about last of the activities mentioned above. Authors of the paper notice, that first two activities will not be analysed further, due to a lack of concrete evidence on effect of teaching and learning.

Context

Currently, students mostly can provide feedback for teachers by using VU survey system, because at the end of every semester VU performs surveys about every subject. Responses to these surveys are anonymous and are only available for teachers and administration of VU.

However, due to various reasons, too little percentage of students are filling these surveys at all. Approximately only 20 percent of VU students are using this possibility to express their opinion about study subject. In other words, if teacher has a class of 30 students, only 6 of them approximately are giving feedback at the end of each semester. So, it can be argued easily, that this amount is not enough to be considered as an evidence to take an action for both administration and teachers themselves.

This creates a vicious circle as students aren't continuing to fill the surveys, because they do not see any action taken if there were any problems at specific subject. As this is the consequence of a very low rate of their responses. Additionally, students can not consider results of the surveys directly beneficial for them, because usually the same teacher isn't teaching them again during rest of their studies. Also, students are repeatedly expressing their fear of the surveys. There is an opinion, that surveys might be not really anonymous, as they are being filled while using VU electronic system, which requires authentication to login so they could fill those surveys.

Though, some teachers or departments/faculties do take on initiative to use some other methods to gather feedback from students to teachers in addition to already existing surveys. However, in large scale this does not contribute to relevant effect on teaching and learning quality and experience.

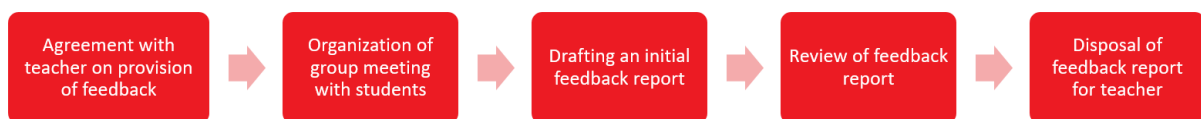
VU SA activities

In 2015 VU SA developed an idea to provide teachers with student feedback during the semester. As university administration wasn't taking necessary actions to improve quality of this feedback, there was a methodology for students to give relevant feedback to teacher in relevant time created by VU SA. Then VU SA started speaking about the importance of giving feedback from students to teachers. Main idea of model that was created, was to collect feedback directly from students, then summarize it in a form of short report and give it to teacher.

During period of 2015-2018 VU SA started to invite students to participate meetings organized by VU SA. Students, who wanted to express their opinion, were asked to participate in meetings. In these meetings students were asked to talk about teaching and learning methods that were used by their teachers. Students provided statements and arguments about positive experiences and aspects of teaching, also about areas, where students felt that there is a need of improvement. It was very welcomed, when students provided their opinion with particular teachers' examples of excellence and concrete suggestions for changes. It has to be mentioned, that only teachers who agreed with the

proposed method, got the feedback collected for them. Thus, only one report was produced for teacher during that semester and in whole year there were 46 reports produced for teachers.

Entire process of feedback provision for teachers during the semester at university level was coordinated by VU SA Academic Affairs Coordinator (hereinafter - VU SA coordinator). As VU has 14 different faculties VU SA operates in each of them with a certain amount of autonomy. That is why there was a member of VU SA at every faculty, who had a duty to coordinate the process (hereinafter - VU SA faculty coordinator). VU SA faculty coordinator had to make an agreement with particular teacher, that feedback will be collected for him/her. After this, VU SA faculty coordinator had to organize meetings with students, who are studying a particular study subject of that teacher, so he could collect the feedback from students. Those meetings were moderated by the same coordinator, who produced initial version of feedback report after the the meeting. Afterwards, that report was reviewed by VU SA coordinator in order to clarify the language and structure. And only then the whole feedback was sent to teacher. Though, it is worth to mention, that due to lack of experience in this field, at the beginning reports usually were coming rather late (at December/ May). Entire process can be seen in Picture 1.



Picture 1. Process for provision of feedback for teacher during the semester.

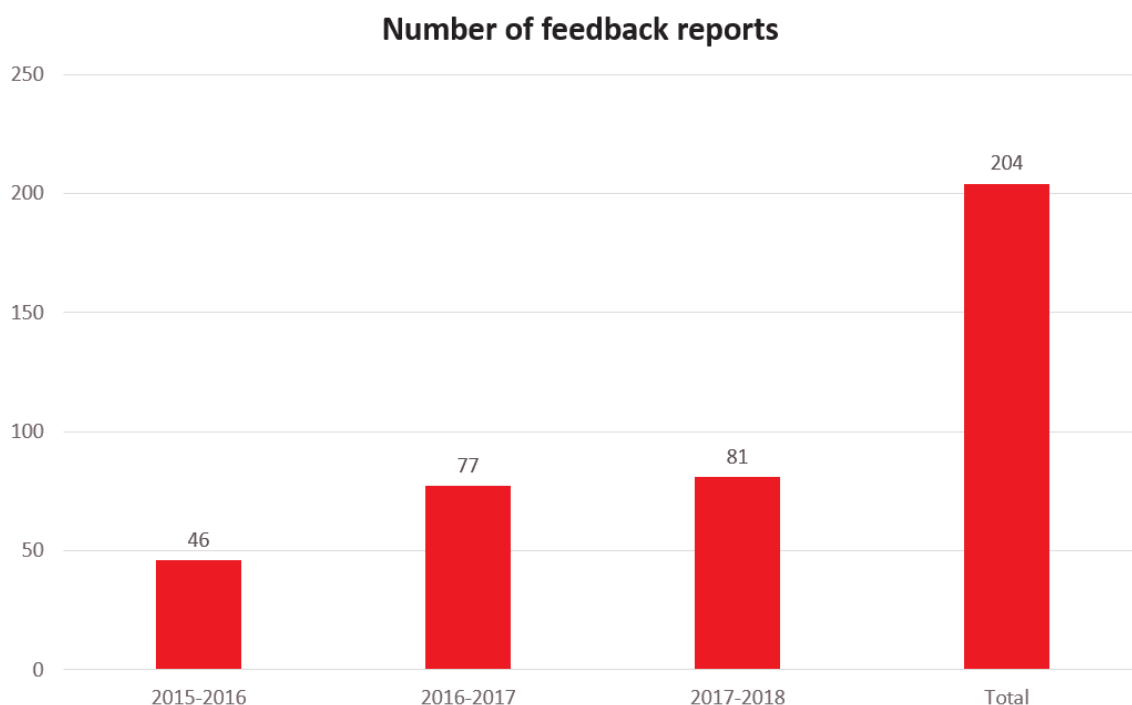
It has to be mentioned, that during the first year it was noticed, that there is lack of methodological guidelines, which should be given for VU SA faculty coordinators to help them organise the meetings and produce initial report. As a result, in 2016 VU SA developed methodological recommendations for organization and moderation of the meetings with students, including questions to ask, advices for search of the participating teachers and for writing high quality feedback reports to them. Also, prepared recommendations included consultation with teachers, when there were some specific aspects that could be discussed. These recommendations were helpful, as they have doubled participation of teachers in this initiative from 46 in year 2015-2016 to 77 in year 2016-2017 (see Picture 2).

After year 2016, problem with late provision of feedback reports remained a problem. Thus, in year 2017 special attention of VU SA was paid so feedback reports would reach teachers in relevant time. These efforts were helpful, because more than 60 percent of the reports were presented for teachers in the middle of the semester. At the end of the academic year, we managed to find over 80 teachers, who received feedback. However, it should be mentioned that about 80 teachers per academic year is the limit of VU SA capacity to carry on the initiative on its own resources.

Results of VU SA activities

Scope of teachers who received feedback

During period of 3 academic years VU SA managed to produce over 200 feedback reports from students to teachers. Dynamics on number of feedback reports can be seen in Picture 2. Also, there were no differences between enthusiasm of teachers from different fields of science (approximately the same numbers of teachers from different fields have participated in this initiative). It can be noticed, that after three years VU SA has reached its limit of feedback reports provision on its own manner by having voluted work of students. However, as there are about 2000 different teachers in VU, current number still seems very low.



Picture 2. Number of teachers, who has participated in VU SA initiative to receive feedback during semester

During period of three year only one feedback report was produced for each a teacher who participated. As main goal of VU SA is to create a feedback culture, teachers were suggested to organise further meetings with students on their own after first feedback report was given. There were some rare cases, when teachers managed to do this on their own, because usually they had no methodology or free time to do this outside lecture time.

Most common fields of improvement

Looking from the perspective of the reports, which were developed in the last three years, most often recurring problematic aspects of teaching and learning could be identified. VU SA managed to identify three main aspects, which are considered to be problematic for students:

1. Structure of teaching and learning

More than 50% of the reports are indicating that teachers usually do not have a clear plan of their lecture. Students often do not understand whether teacher is starting a new topic or is he just continuing the old one. Students are usually not introduced to new lecture or topic and outcomes are elaborated rarely.

2. Assessment

More than 40% of the reports says that some teachers do not have a clear assessment system. Reports reveal that in many cases students are doing various assessment exercises without being fully aware, what exact weight they'll have on their final grade, or how they will be evaluated on a particular assessment exercise.

3. Availability of teaching material

As a lot of teachers are having their own internet pages, where they tend to store all the necessary literature or other important material, instead of using MOODLE system, which is commonly used at VU. Students indicate this as a problematic case, because it gets confusing and takes plenty of their time to find all the material needed, when there are several study subjects.

In future VU SA should consider finding a solution for these three problems, mentioned above, at university scale. This could involve pushing whole VU and its separate faculties/departments to hold special seminars or trainings on these matters.

Teacher view on feedback during the semester

Back then, in period of 2015-2016, when VU SA has started to invite teachers to participate in this initiative of receiving the feedback from students during the semester, there was very little of enthusiasm and the position of teachers was very reserved. However, after the very first feedback reports have reached teachers, the reaction was very positive. Most of the teachers even considered it more valuable than the feedback given from surveys filled at the end of the semester.

During first year of VU SA initiative teachers noticed that feedback reports are very valuable, but they come really too late, almost at the end of the semester. Therefore, teachers are unable to change almost anything for that semester. There was an opinion presented among the teachers, that VU SA is an unnecessary mediator and in future students should not be afraid to express their views directly to teachers. VU SA has really welcomed this approach.

Most teachers have expressed that feedback reports are giving a possibility to see “dark spots” in their teaching. Surprisingly, most of these “dark spots” are very easily changed, for example, there is a number of teachers, who are usually writing or explaining their information too fast and students can’t catch it during the lectures. Without working with student feedback reports, when students only are filling the surveys at the end of the semester, they, usually do not mention some matters out loud because of timidity, reservations or, sometimes, even fear. When VU SA has started to collect feedback, students seemed feeling more secure to talk about their problems and felt more safe about their anonymity. During last months there even were some suggestions made from Senate members for teacher accreditation. Sadly, the idea was quickly disregarded because of low number of teachers, who are receiving this kind of feedback.

Student view on feedback during the semester

After every semester students were asked by VU SA, whether anything has changed after giving feedback reports for teachers. Most of the students replied were that teachers have actually discussed matters, which were presented in feedback report and some of them has changed. For example, their evaluation system to react. Also, some teachers have promised to seek for more active participation of students in their lectures. Unexpectedly, students have indicated that gathering them in groups to discuss about teaching and learning in particular study subjects, was most beneficial for them. They were pleased to have a possibility to exchange their opinions while discussing about teaching of their lecturers. Furthermore, some of them were pleased to have an opportunity to see a larger picture of teaching methods which are commonly used.

Though, it has to be admitted that there were some cases, when students were unable to see an improvement, because feedback reports came too late or teachers have disregarded their suggestions without any discussion.

Lessons learned

After three years of working on the initiative to deliver student feedback to teachers during the semester, it was realised that VU SA is lacking of organisational resources to keep up this initiative at a large scale. So, on purpose to provide feedback to teachers at a large scale during the semester, there is a need to have a system, which would be implemented by Higher education institution.

Though, both, teachers and students, value this kind of feedback, currently reports are mainly concentrated to teaching with very little regard to learning. In future VU SA should think of a way to include not only teaching itself, but also the learning, which is being organised by teacher, in these reports as well.

In order to have a relevant and timely provided feedback from students to teachers, there is a need to have a specific methodological guidelines and trainings for VU SA faculty coordinators or other people, who are responsible. This would improve quality of the whole work.

Lastly, by analysing the feedback reports systematically, some common areas of improvement might be found. VU SA should further investigate problematic aspects, which usually appear in the feedback reports. After the investigation both, VU and VU SA, should decide, what actions should be taken into consideration on behalf to improve the situation.

Moving forward with student feedback to teachers

After realising its own capacity, VU SA has decided to provide student groups (particularly of MSc) with questionnaire for them to produce feedback to teachers on their own. Questionnaire is the same as used in meetings with students organised by VU SA faculty coordinator. Though this new to students it is considered that older students might produce relevant feedback on their own without involvement of VU SA. End goal for VU SA is to disappear as the mediator between students and teachers in this process at all.

Back in year 2015, there were almost any discussions about the need for students to give a feedback for teachers at VU. In three academic years VU SA has managed to raise awareness of this problem by providing teachers with feedback reports. Now VU SA even receives emails from teachers asking for feedback to be organised for them.

Today, VU SA is continuing the journey of feedback culture creation in VU. It is clear, that those 200 teachers, who received feedback during semester, are a huge success, however it is still far from the main goal. Current results show that appreciation of feedback, given for teachers during the semester, exists, so VU SA should pursue this path in order to provide students with desired quality of studies.

References: none