

Policy with regard to student feedback on Modules, Lecturers and Programmes

The Policy with regard to student feedback on Modules, Lecturers and Programmes was approved by SU Senate on 18 April 2008.

Institutional Student Feedback Policy

Date of implementation: 2008

Date of review: 2013

1. Introduction

Student feedback is an important central process aimed at the support and promotion of teaching at Stellenbosch University (SU). Changes to existing student feedback documentation are necessitated by changes in the national and local higher education context, as well as changes in the operational side of the student feedback system.

It is the aim of this policy proposal to review and summarise in one document the existing policy and procedures (in force since 2001) with regard to obtaining and utilising student feedback on modules, lecturers and programmes.

2. Functions of student feedback

Student feedback at SU has the following objectives:

1. To help lecturers to improve their own teaching;
2. To assist module teams and departments with decisions regarding their approach to the modules and programmes that they offer;
3. To involve and empower students in order to promote learning;
4. To satisfy ourselves (faculties, departments, module teams) as to the quality of our teaching;
5. To serve as a possible additional source of information during performance assessment processes;
6. To help with the identification of outstanding lecturers, and the documentation of excellence in teaching; and
7. To serve as an additional source of information during quality assurance.

3. Points of departure

The following points of departure form the basis for obtaining and utilising student feedback at the University.

- 3.1 The use of student feedback should firstly aim to empower individual lecturers to improve their own teaching. Only thereafter should feedback be used for any other purpose, and then with great circumspection. In view of this it is assumed that:
 - 3.1.1 it may be necessary to support lecturers (especially inexperienced lecturers) with interpreting and utilising student feedback results in order to optimise the role feedback could play in the development of individual teaching;
 - 3.1.2 student feedback data could be useful when drawing up suitable staff development plans for teaching staff. However, it is essential to handle the data in context and to use data in conjunction with other data sources;
 - 3.1.3 student feedback should never, for whatever purpose, be used without being tested, in isolation, or out of context, as various factors may influence the reliability of the information.
- 3.2 The reliability of student feedback results could be affected by various factors (size of the class group, percentage class attendance, the time of obtaining feedback, etc.) These and other factors that could influence the results should be taken into account when interpreting the results.
- 3.3 The promotion of student learning among students who have given feedback depends on changes to the module offering during their study term. The use of real-time (formative) feedback, which need not necessarily be made available to line function managers, is therefore encouraged. This kind of feedback could be obtained via the existing institutional feedback forms, facilitated focus group interviews, the "Classroom Assessment Techniques" described by Angelo and Cross¹, or in any other suitable way.
- 3.4 The University accepts that students are entitled to their opinions and that information will be made available to them with regard to the results of the feedback they provided and the actions

¹ Angelo, T.A. & Cross, P.K. (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

taken based on that feedback. Where this is not possible due to confidentiality concerning individual staff members and/or students, information about the process that was followed and possible outcomes of the process should be shared. At the very least, quantitative data regarding modules should be made available to students.

- 3.5 Students are expected to approach the feedback process responsibly.
- 3.6 As students give feedback anonymously, the feedback system allows students to express their opinions freely, without fear of retribution or risk of misrepresentation of the results.
- 3.7 The way in which feedback is obtained should be relevant to the purpose and the situation. A variety of methods should be used in order to prevent questionnaire fatigue.
- 3.8 Each faculty and department is responsible for obtaining student feedback.

4 Stellenbosch University's approach

The use of electronic feedback is strongly recommended, especially in modules with large student numbers. Electronic feedback allows not only for greater flexibility, but also costs less to administer and can be obtained quicker. However, it is accepted that in some environments, a paper-based process will remain the most suitable one. The University therefore supports parallel systems of electronic and paper-based feedback.

The University distinguishes between student feedback obtained upon completion of the teaching process (in the module or programme) and student feedback obtained during the teaching process.

Where student feedback is obtained every second year upon completion of the process, as stipulated in this policy, the feedback results are made available to the line function managers. This does not apply to newly appointed lecturers who request feedback in order to develop their own teaching within their first year of appointment (see 5.4.1).

Where student feedback is obtained during the teaching process, the results are not made available to the line function managers, unless requested. Small changes made early in the teaching process could help motivate students and promote student learning. Students usually also appreciate both the opportunity to express their opinions during the teaching process, and the fact that staff elicit their opinions in this way. It is therefore strongly recommended that feedback be obtained during the teaching process, but it is not a requirement.

Official student feedback at SU is obtained in one of three formats:

- 4.1 on teaching programmes;
- 4.2 on modules; and
- 4.3 on lecturers.

5 Policy

- 5.1 Student feedback is handled confidentially. This implies that:
 - 5.1.1 the results of student feedback on lecturers and modules are made available to the dean and the departmental/module chairperson (and, where applicable, divisional heads);
 - 5.1.2 the results of student feedback on learning and teaching programmes are made available to the dean and the programme coordinator;
 - 5.1.3 at his/her discretion the dean may, via the departmental or module chairperson and the programme coordinator (in the case of learning and teaching programmes):
 - 5.1.3.1 provide the students and other stakeholders with the relevant information in a suitable manner, and
 - 5.1.3.2 where necessary, launch follow-up actions;
 - 5.1.4 the general results of student feedback *with regard to modules and programmes* may be made available to the relevant students, provided that each faculty makes arrangements in conjunction with the relevant student committees for the release of such general feedback, and that these arrangements ensure that all students have access to the information (results with regard to *lecturers' teaching* are not made available in this manner);
 - 5.1.5 students who participate in the feedback process will remain anonymous.
- 5.2 Student feedback is obtained via the following questionnaires:
 - 5.2.1 Undergraduate Module Questionnaire (Annexure A)
 - 5.2.2 Questionnaire on Lecturers (Annexure B)
 - 5.2.3 Questionnaire on Learning and Teaching Programmes (Annexure C)

- 5.2.4 Postgraduate Module Questionnaire (Annexure D)
- 5.2.5 Lecturer Feedback Form (Annexure E)

The questionnaires on modules, lecturers and programmes are completed by students, while lecturers give their feedback on the Lecturer Feedback Form. Postgraduate students use a specific questionnaire to give feedback on the module.

Themes in the Undergraduate Module and Postgraduate Module questionnaires are as follows: module content, relevance, assessment, feedback on assessment, assessment guidelines, sources of learning, learning spaces, workload, structure and generic skills.

Themes in the Questionnaire on Lecturers are: lecturer's presentation style, organisation, group interaction, academic value and fairness.

The Questionnaire on Learning and Teaching Programmes obtains information on the following aspects: the extent to which the programme outcomes have been achieved; coherence, relevance, focus, depth and breadth of the programme; and the extent to which the University's general objectives regarding learning and teaching programmes have been achieved.

The Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) can also assist in the development of other methods of obtaining student feedback.

Please note: CTL is in no way directly involved in the evaluation of the quality of programmes.

5.3 Stipulations for obtaining and handling student feedback:

- 5.3.1 Academic staff should never be involved in the distribution or collection of questionnaires during the feedback process of a module which he/she teaches.
- 5.3.2 Student feedback is handled confidentially by the departmental staff that distribute and collect the questionnaires, as well as CTL, which is responsible for the processing of the data.
- 5.3.3 In the case of learning and teaching programmes, feedback is obtained as near as possible to the end of the programme.

5.4 Student feedback is obtained at the following frequency:

- 5.4.1 Student feedback on the lecturing of newly appointed lecturers is only required in the second year after appointment. Feedback may be obtained during the first year following appointment with the view to using it during a follow-up consultation with members of CTL's PREDAC team to discuss the results and possible support. If requested by a new lecturer, this feedback about the lecturer is handled confidentially between the staff member and the relevant CTL staff member, provided that a second feedback opportunity occurs during the year, of which the results are sent to the line function managers as per the normal procedure.
- 5.4.2 The line function management in a particular environment ensures that student feedback on all modules and lecturers is obtained every second year. However, the line function management should ensure that questionnaire fatigue does not occur. In special circumstances a dean may decide to request student feedback on an academic staff member and module before the expiry of the two-year period, or to allow a longer period between the feedback opportunities.
- 5.4.3 Student feedback on learning and teaching programmes (excluding the mainly research-based programmes at M and D level) is obtained annually at the end of the final academic year of the programme. Final-year students participate in the survey. Programme committees and coordinators are responsible for overseeing this feedback process. To ensure statistical reliability, class attendance should be high during the survey (completion of compulsory questionnaire). Programme coordinators should determine during which core modules most final-year students that are enrolled for a specific programme will be present.

5.5 In order to give all students the optimal opportunity to give feedback on their modules and lecturers, the core questionnaire is always available in English and Afrikaans.

5.6 In order to give all lecturers the opportunity to reflect on their own experience of teaching a module and placing student feedback results in context, a structured questionnaire is provided for completion by lecturers during student feedback. The completed form is submitted together with the completed student feedback questionnaires and is attached to the copies of the student feedback report that are sent to the line function managers.

5.7 Deans report on the use of student feedback in their environments according to the requirements of the Vice-Rector (Teaching).

- 5.8 The University has vested in the Centre for Teaching and Learning the expertise and facilities to provide a service to the University community with regard to student feedback. CTL can also play a supporting role with regard to the analysis and interpretation of student feedback (e.g. the identification of general trends), feedback to academic staff, and recommendations on suitable follow-up actions. In cases where feedback on a module or lecturer is negative, departmental and module chairpersons are encouraged to utilise CTL's consultation services and expertise to provide that lecturer with support and to undertake suitable training actions.

CTL has the following responsibilities with regard to questionnaires:

- 5.8.1 CTL provides a service with regard to the design and reproduction of student feedback forms, to ensure that these forms meet the required technical criteria for scanning.
- 5.8.2 Where feedback is obtained electronically, CTL is responsible for drawing up the electronic questionnaires, giving users access to obtain the feedback electronically, and extracting, processing and securely storing the data.
- 5.8.3 CTL provides forms to faculties and departments on request. However, the environments requesting the forms are responsible for distributing the forms to staff. On request from faculties and departments, CTL will make arrangements to obtain feedback electronically.
- 5.8.4 CTL processes student feedback forms that were completed upon completion of the module, whereupon a student feedback report is made available to the lecturer concerned and the line function managers. Reports are provided electronically to the line management and the lecturer concerned. Access to student feedback for previous years will also be provided.
- 5.8.5 With the view to obtaining feedback during the presentation of modules (this is exclusively aimed at teaching development), an "open" response sheet may be used. These forms are available from CTL and the results can be processed electronically. Lecturers draw up their own questionnaires for this purpose (and are encouraged to make use of CTL's advice).

- 5.9 Stipulations for the use of student feedback data for research purposes

The primary aim of the student feedback process is to contribute to the development of teaching and staff. Student feedback data can also make a contribution to institutional learning with a view to enhancing teaching efficacy at either programme or institutional level. Only aggregated student feedback data may be used for this purpose, on condition that information regarding response rates, reliability, validity and time when the feedback was collected, be supplied at all times. Under no circumstances may the protection of the identity of students and lecturers be compromised by the use or publication of student feedback data.

The following criteria apply for both internal and external use of student feedback data for research projects such as postgraduate studies, conference presentations and publications:

- 5.9.1 In the case of postgraduate studies, a research protocol must be approved by the applicable faculty. The research protocol must also indicate which security mechanisms will be used in order to protect the confidentiality of data;
- 5.9.2 Full ethical clearance for the research project must be obtained via the appropriate committee(s);
- 5.9.3 Approval for the use of the University's databases must be obtained via the Division Institutional Research and Planning.