



## *Summary Guide*

# Using student evaluations to enhance teaching practice: Closing the loop

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# USING STUDENT EVALUATIONS TO ENHANCE TEACHING PRACTICE: CLOSING THE LOOP

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# Introduction

Internationally, centralised systems of student evaluations have become normative practice in higher education institutions. Student evaluations are used for monitoring teaching and course quality, promotion and performance decision-making. Student evaluation feedback can also inform teacher professional development and student learning outcomes. Some authors assert that teacher performance measurement and professional development purposes of student evaluations are complementary (e.g. Ramsden, 1992), but it is how teachers *perceive* the evaluations within their context, and their role within it, that determines the nature and degree to which they engage in evaluations (Edström, 2008).

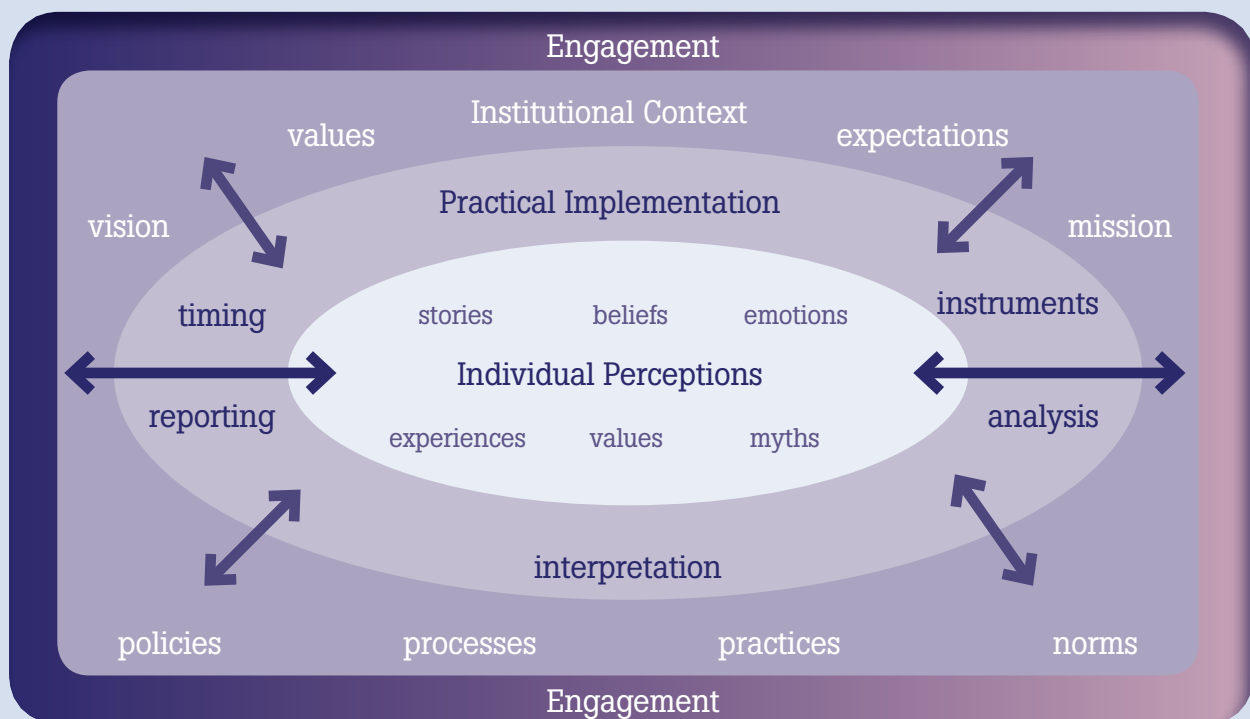
There is a widely reported view that academics are hostile towards student evaluations despite the plethora of research studies that have taken place over the last fifty years to demonstrate their validity and reliability (Benton & Cashin, 2012). Academics are generally resigned to the notion of student evaluations as a part of the contemporary tertiary environment (Beran & Rokosh, 2009). This notional

acceptance, does not translate into meaningful engagement with student evaluation feedback as a tool for professional development (Beran & Rokosh, 2009; Burden, 2008), nor does it automatically result in improved teaching (Kember, Leung & Kwan, 2002).

Many argue about and/or research the value of using student evaluations for both performance measurement and professional development purposes. However little research has been conducted to gauge how teachers actually perceive evaluations and how these perceptions impact on their engagement with student feedback. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to understand how teachers and organisations use student evaluations to enhance performance and professional development.

The conceptual framework below guided this project; it illustrates the relationships among:

- *individual perceptions* of evaluation
- the *practical implementation*
- the *institutional context* and
- *engagement* with evaluation ▀



## Document overview

This document is based on the key findings of the Ako Aotearoa funded project: “*Unlocking the impact of tertiary teachers’ perceptions of student evaluations of teaching*” (Stein et al, 2012). Here we also outline the key recommendations for change resulting from the research and introduce the principle, “closing the loop”. A series of questions and actions are presented that support organisations and teaching staff to think about, and enhance their engagement and responses to student evaluations.

Throughout the document, case studies are used to illustrate ‘typical’ views of organisations and staff towards student evaluations. The case studies also illustrate the contextual factors that play a part in shaping and informing views about teaching and learning and engagement in evaluation. ▀

## Research overview

This project sought to investigate tertiary teachers’ views of, and engagement with, feedback gathered through student evaluations.

The overarching research question was: How do current formal student evaluation/appraisal processes and practices influence teachers’ thinking and behaviours in relation to student learning at all stages of the teaching and learning cycle?

Three secondary research questions added further shape to the study:

1. What are the perceptions that tertiary teachers hold about student evaluation?
2. What factors (causes, influences) affect these views?
3. How do tertiary teachers engage with student evaluations?

An interpretivist research approach (Erickson, 1998) framed the study that drew on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, including an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. In all, 1,065 staff from three institutions (one polytechnic and two universities) participated in the questionnaire and 60 volunteers were interviewed.

The intention of the questionnaire was to elicit tertiary teachers’ perceptions of the ways in which the student evaluation process:

- shapes teacher thinking and behaviours across the teaching and learning cycle
- influences both teacher development and student learning.

The interview questions were based on the key themes identified in the questionnaire responses, so that implications of the themes that became evident from the questionnaire data could be explored in more detail.

Overall, the findings showed that there is a strong relationship among individual views of evaluation, the immediate department/school context and the wider institutional context. ▀

## Key findings

1. Teachers are generally positively disposed towards student evaluations; there was widespread recognition of the worth of gathering and using these data.
2. Of those who find the data useful, the most commonly cited use was to inform teacher and course development, followed by its use for identifying students' learning needs.
3. Of those who perceive the data to be of limited use, the most commonly cited reasons were a) shortcomings in the current evaluation system, b) a perception of the unsatisfactory quality of student responses.
4. Staff perceptions of student evaluations seem to be connected to their:
  - expressed teaching beliefs and emotions
  - concerns with the quality of student evaluation instruments
  - misgivings about students' competence to evaluate
  - disenchantment with a student evaluation system that can be manipulated easily by academics to achieve high ratings
  - perceived lack of institutional support for, and recognition of, teaching
  - preoccupation with research.
5. Evaluation tends to be seen as an individual and private activity by teachers. This view limits the embedding of evaluation as an integral part of the teaching and learning environment. The main weaknesses identified were that:
  - the evaluation feedback loop is not often closed with students (see page 6)
  - there is little discussion about student evaluation results with colleagues
  - there is continued resistance to seeing the process as one that is complementary to monitoring, demonstrating and assuring quality.
6. Many teachers (predominantly from the university sector) have grave reservations about their institution's reliance on a single evaluation instrument to measure the quality and effectiveness of teaching and courses. They believe that other forms of evaluation should be included in promotion and review processes to remove some of this reliance and to reflect and support the importance of quality teaching and learning.
7. Teachers, students and administrators involved in the institution's evaluation processes tend not to be well informed about the purpose and effective use of student evaluation. Real and perceived misalignments among policy, practices and their interpretation were highlighted by respondents from all institutions. Again, context seemed to play an important role in determining the extent of these views. 📌

Context and personal experience determined the extent of these views.



## Case Study – Miriam

Miriam is a health professional who started teaching at university in her forties. She has no background in teaching and still conceptualises herself primarily as a health professional. She is keen to give the students the benefit of her clinical experience, but feels that students do not really appreciate the requirements of the profession. For this reason, she believes that the students are fairly poor evaluators of teaching and learning, and she cannot help feeling personally hurt by some of their comments. However, Miriam is apprehensive about student evaluation results as she knows that they may influence her promotion chances. Lately, she has been selecting questions that seem safe and on which she usually achieves a solid score. She does not discuss her evaluations with colleagues or students because she believes that they are private. In any case, she does not believe that she has time to spend on evaluation ‘post mortems’ as she is under pressure to build her research profile.

### Implications for future practice and research

Miriam’s case highlights the needs and challenges of a particular cohort of higher education teachers, namely those who come into tertiary teaching on the basis of their expertise in a profession or trade. This situation was particularly noticeable from the interviews at institutions with a strong emphasis on professions. The needs of this group suggest that institutional requirements of teacher and professional development should specifically help staff to translate their industry/

professional knowledge and practice into forms and approaches suitable for formal teaching, learning and evaluation/appraisal contexts.

While Miriam’s case highlights some of the challenges of moving from the workplace into teaching, her comments also pinpoint another barrier to the proactive use of evaluations to enhance teaching in the university sector. That is, the imbalance between the regard given to research and that given to teaching. For some teachers who participated in this study, a preoccupation with research was evident in their expressions of their teaching philosophies. This preoccupation was also evident in data on activities teachers engaged in when they received student evaluation results, implying that it is not worth engaging too energetically with student feedback on teaching.

Miriam’s case also highlights more general themes that emerged in the study, such as the mistrust of students’ capacity to judge teaching and the fear of institutional reprisals if evaluations are perceived to be poor. Her emotional concerns highlight the need for further research on the affective dimensions of student evaluations.

Universities, in particular, need to demonstrate in practice that the institution gives identical weighting to teaching and research in promotion decisions and they need to be transparent about how promotion decisions are made. This may then help to counter the supremacy that research has been seen historically to have over teaching in universities. Additionally, it needs to be a requirement that the majority of academics who enter the university on the basis of their discipline’s research expertise engage in professional development around teaching and learning theory and practices. 📖

# Recommendations for practice and change

The following recommendations are based on the research findings. They focus on enabling teachers and institutions to optimise their use of student evaluation/data.

## Recommendations for institutions

- ensure that there is a clear alignment between institutional vision/policy statements and processes of implementation
- recognise and acknowledge that student evaluation is first and foremost about professional development and quality enhancement of teaching and learning. Therefore both the developmental and auditing purposes of student evaluation should be clarified within that frame
- be aware that expectations about roles and responsibilities in evaluation can be ambiguous, and so connections among performance, evaluation and reward need to be clearly understood by all (teaching, administration staff and students).

## Recommendations for evaluation systems:

- include processes and practices that allow for both developmental and auditing purposes, but also recognise that the purposes are complementary in nature and that a level of integration is needed to provide cohesion
- recognise that a 'well-rounded' representation of teaching and courses is more likely to be achieved by drawing on multiple forms of evaluation data and embed this principle in processes and practices
- recognise and acknowledge the existence of varying staff perceptions about evaluation, and address teacher expectations and needs without compromising institutional intents and purposes
- link with ongoing professional development strategy that makes institutional intents and purposes explicit. 📌

## Case Study – Jim

Jim is an electrician by trade and has been teaching for the last 10 years. He teaches at all levels of the Certificate and works side by side with his students on a regular basis.

He sees his educational role as a trainer who is sharing his own knowledge and experience and preparing students for their vocation. He believes that students can recognise a good learning experience, but sometimes they are swayed simply by whether they like a teacher or not.

He also thinks that some students may take it out on the teacher if they do not pass the assessments. He reluctantly admits that he occasionally takes negative feedback a bit personally. He also believes that some students are too immature to give feedback, especially if they are just out of school and lack the vocabulary and capacity to articulate their views.

Jim is not overly focussed on the formal student evaluation feedback because he works alongside students all the time, so regularly finds out about their understanding and thinking. He is not keen on discussing students' comments directly with them, although sometimes he will tell them if he has made changes in the light of their feedback.

## Implications for future practice and research

Jim's case illustrates some of the contextual factors pertinent to the way teachers regard feedback from formal student evaluations.

In particular, his comments include reference to student groups at Certificate level, who, he believes, lack the maturity to make dispassionate judgements about his teaching. This view of his students is accompanied by a defensive and strongly emotional perspective on student evaluation/appraisal in general, alongside a belief that students tend to make judgements of the basis of factors such as teacher likeability.

The mistrust of students' judgements was a pervasive theme across all three institutions. This finding suggests that institutions, academics and those charged with academic staff development and student evaluation need to improve education around the rationale for, and benefits of, student evaluation. Correspondingly, institutions need to set up policies and systems to ensure that these benefits are made transparent to students. 📌

# Closing the loop: A principle to underpin change towards positive student evaluation

This project highlights the need for a greater focus on *closing the evaluation loop* to better align the needs and perspectives of all parties.

In the current high accountability tertiary education context, institutions are under pressure to provide evidence of quality monitoring. However, unless monitoring and auditing practices are accompanied by a visible emphasis on evaluation for development, institutions run the risk of fostering cynicism and disengagement by academics. Individual teachers, too, have not generally recognised the role of students or colleagues in the evaluation process, focussing mostly on themselves as collectors of evaluation data for their own knowledge or to meet

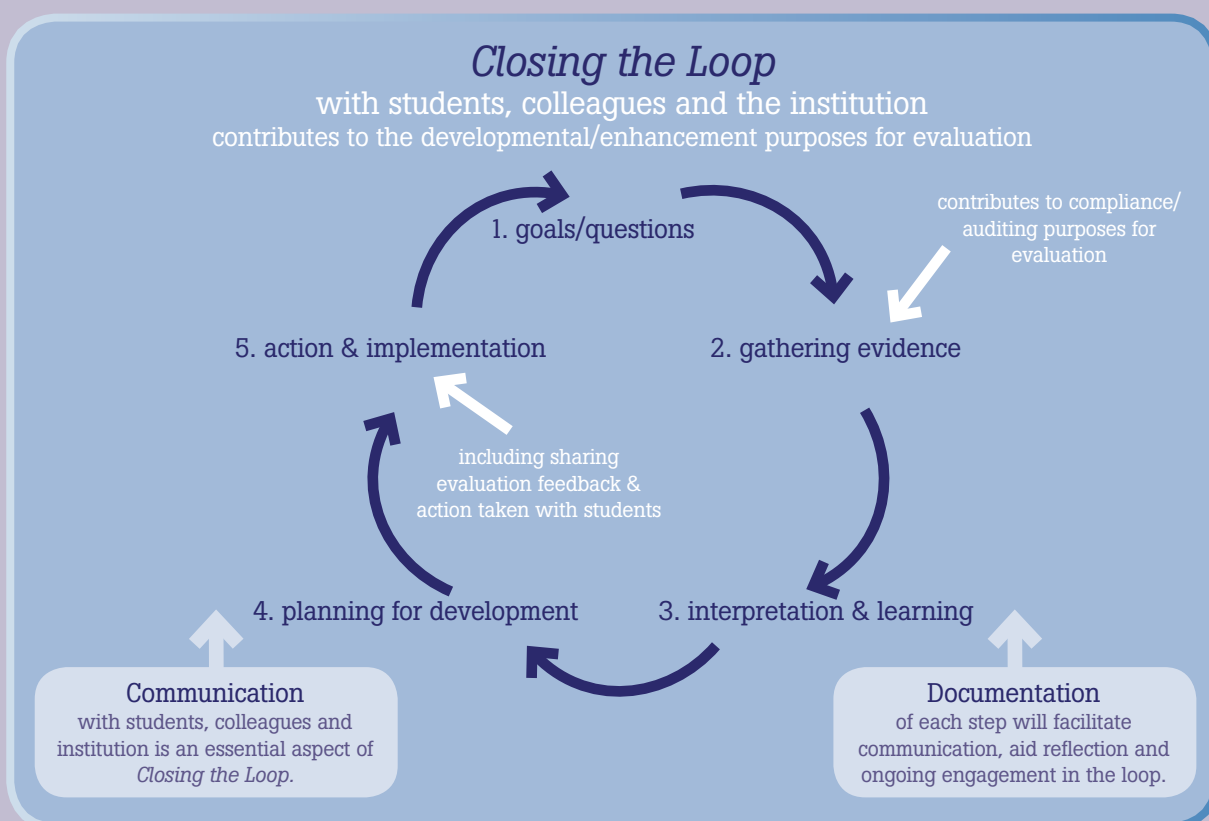
requirements. Evaluation is still seen essentially as an isolated and solo activity. As this study has shown, there is currently little widespread use of student evaluation as an integral part of professional development.

Closing the loop should happen at individual teacher, departmental and institutional levels to:

- provide evidence to demonstrate the quality of teaching to government, to staff, to colleagues, to students and other stakeholders
- enable planning for ongoing personal, professional, course/programme and institutional development
- enable students to be involved in development activities and give them a voice in the quality aspects of their tertiary experience.

A transparent, explicit and well-understood evaluation regime that closes the loop will contribute to the enhancement of teaching and learning, align policy and practices, and contribute to strategic planning.

Closing the loop means engaging in all stages of the five-part loop (shown in the diagram below).





## Creating change: How to close the loop

To create change consider *your* institution, *your* teachers and *your* students: How does/should the student evaluation loop get closed? The questions below should help to guide your thinking.

1. What does the student evaluation loop look like in our institution?
2. What are the evaluation goals and needs (requirements and expectations) of our institution and our individual teachers?
3. What does the institution provide currently by way of evaluation guidelines and advice?
4. Where are the difficulties in closing the student evaluation loop? Where do things seem to be going wrong?
5. What roles and responsibilities do the institution and individual teachers have in participating in, and closing, the student evaluation loop?
6. What are the best ways to report back to students about their feedback?
7. How *should* the student evaluation loop get closed? In order to answer these questions and to plan for change, you could map the student evaluation context (institutional/departmental, individual teacher and student body) using the five-part loop as a framework.

Consider all major stakeholders and related policies to build up a picture of how the student evaluation loop should happen for the institution.

- What *should* the process of student evaluation be in this institution versus what *actually* happens in the process of evaluation at institutional, departmental and individual teacher and student levels?

### Case Study – Paul

Paul has been teaching in the Sciences for 30 years. He thinks teaching is important and aims to explain core concepts to his students in a clear and accessible manner. He always tries to find fresh ways of making the material engaging for his students. He is interested in student feedback gathered through formal appraisal, but feels that often students cannot make objective judgements because their understanding of the subject is inevitably partial. He does not refer to student appraisals to inform his teaching unless he gets an unusually low score. In that instance, he may go back to the comments to try to find out what has happened. At the same time, he is not keen on 'knee-jerk reactions' in response to student appraisals as there is a curriculum that must be covered. Paul does not talk with colleagues or students about his appraisals.

### Implications for future practice and research

Paul's teaching beliefs exemplify a way of thinking about teaching that this study confirmed is still highly visible: that teaching, essentially, involves the transmission of a body of knowledge, as clearly and efficiently as possible. Generally, teachers who expressed this view of teaching in this study were less responsive to student feedback than their counterparts who held more student-focussed views of teaching. Paul's views indicate that attitudes to student evaluation need to be seen within the context of a more general study of teaching and learning. Paul's case also illustrates the need for institutions to address the professional development issues of long-standing academics as well as new ones. ■

## Closing the loop at individual teacher level

Demonstration of effective teaching is about teachers showing how they have engaged effectively in all stages of closing the loop. The questions below should help to guide your thinking.

### 1. Goals/questions

How do individual teachers engage with the following questions in relation to their practices?

- How well am I teaching?
- How can I improve?
- Is my course/programme achieving its aims?
- How is this communicated and shared with relevant parties (my students, my colleagues, my department and my institution)?

### 2. Gathering evidence (contributes to compliance/auditing purposes for evaluation)

How do individual teachers engage with the following questions in relation to their practices?

- What are students' perspectives (gathered informally and formally through the centralised student evaluations system)?

- What are colleagues'/other knowledgeable people's perspectives?
- What are my thoughts/reflections?
- How is this communicated and shared with my students, my colleagues, my department and my institution?

### 3. Interpretation and learning

How do individual teachers engage with the following questions in relation to their practices?

- What is the evidence showing me?
- How can I be sure?
- What have I learned?
- How does this build on my previous knowledge and understanding about my teaching and my courses?
- How is the learning communicated with my students, my colleagues, my department and my institution?

### 4. Planning for development

How do individual teachers engage with the following questions in relation to their practices?

- What actions (changes, modifications, developments) am I going to take?

## Case Study – Mere

Mere is an educator on a degree programme. She sees her role as prompting students to think about, and engage with, social justice issues.

She talks about transformative learning and her hope is that the learning experiences she provides will be transformative for her students.

She is an avid collector of student feedback and is committed to closing the feedback loop. She believes that students need to be listened to and shown that their views matter.

She does have some concerns about the quality and usefulness of the questions on the standard formal evaluation questionnaires and tries to collect feedback throughout the course and discuss it with students. She feels that the institution is too focussed on the quality dimensions of the evaluation and that it does not promote and support the professional development benefits of the instrument strongly enough.

## Implications for future practice and research

Mere's case illustrates a connection between a transformative vision of teaching and learning and a sustained interest in student reports about their learning progress and experiences. Like a number of her counterparts, Mere uses ongoing formative evaluation to gauge her students' learning and she believes that the institution has a role in highlighting and proselytising the educational development benefits of student evaluations.

It would be important for the institution to provide flexible instruments so that academics such as Mere could use them as practical tools that recognise the importance that evaluation has on learning. Similarly, the inclusion of a core, standard set of meaningful questions within a flexible instrument would support individual teacher and institution needs to monitor quality over time. 📌

- What professional advice opportunities can I draw on? What resources may be helpful? Who can I talk to?
- How will these actions enhance my teaching?
- How will these actions enhance my students' learning?
- How are my plans communicated and shared with my students, my colleagues, my department and my institution?

### 5. Action and implementation

How do individual teachers engage with the following questions in relation to their practices?

- How am I monitoring and documenting the implementation of my plans?
- How am I communicating and sharing the implementation with my students, my colleagues, my department and my institution?
- How do I identify new goals/questions as a result of the implementation experience?

## Closing the loop at organisational or department level

Demonstration of closing the loop is about showing that the institution/department has engaged effectively in each step of the evaluation loop. It is also about showing how the institution/department has supported, encouraged and nurtured the engagement of teachers in closing the evaluation loop. The questions should help to guide your thinking.

- What does policy *actually* say versus what do people *interpret* policy to say? What are the norms and currently accepted practices around policy?

You can address these questions at a departmental and organisational level by considering each stage of the student evaluation loop.

### 1. Goals/questions

How does the institution/department/support unit engage with and answer the following questions?

- How well are we teaching in this institution/department?
- How can we improve?
- What professional development advice and resources can we draw on in this process?
- Are our courses and programmes achieving their aims?
- How do we communicate and share this information with current and future students, staff, internal groups and external groups such as government/professional/discipline bodies?



## 2. Gathering evidence (contributes to compliance/auditing purposes for evaluation)

How does the institution/department/support unit engage with the following questions in relation to their practices?

- What are students' perspectives about our teaching and courses?
- What are the staff's perspectives about our teaching and courses?
- What are colleagues'/other knowledgeable people's perspectives (internal and external to the department/institution, including governing bodies and professional/discipline accreditation groups)?
- What are our thoughts/reflections/observations about our teaching and courses?
- How have the above perspectives changed over time?
- How is this communicated and shared with current and future students, staff, other internal groups and external groups such as government/professional/discipline bodies?

## 3. Interpretation and learning

How does the institution/department/support unit engage with, and contribute to, answering the following questions through their practices?

- What is the evidence showing us?
- How can we be sure?
- What have we learned?
- How does this build on our previous knowledge and understanding about our teaching and our programmes/courses?
- How is this learning communicated with current and future students, staff, other internal groups and external groups such as government/professional/discipline bodies?

## 4. Planning for development

How does the institution/department/support unit engage with, and contribute to, answering the following questions through their practices?

- What actions (changes, modifications, developments) are we going to take?
- How will these actions enhance our teaching and our programmes/courses?
- How will these actions enhance our students' learning?
- How will these actions enhance our teachers' practices?
- How are our plans communicated and shared with current and future students, staff, other internal groups and external groups such as government/professional/discipline bodies?

## 5. Action and implementation

How does the institution/department/support unit engage with, and contribute to, answering the following questions through their practices?

- How do we monitor and document the implementation of our plans?
- How do we communicate and share the implementation with current and future students, staff, other internal groups and external groups such as government/professional/discipline bodies?
- How do we identify new goals/questions as a result of the implementation experience? 📌

## Case Study – Joshua

Joshua is a Humanities teacher who wants to develop his students' ability to think for themselves and to help them to develop habits of effective and purposeful questioning. He is always interested in the student evaluation feedback, although he does sometimes have the sneaking suspicion that lecturer popularity is more important in student evaluations than it should be.

At the beginning of the semester he talks to the new cohort of students about how he responded to the feedback from the students in the previous year and explains the changes that he has made. He also explains the importance of their feedback for his teaching.

During the semester, Joshua conducts his own informal student evaluation exercises every three weeks and then discusses his responses with his students. Sometimes, he revisits a topic or point if the students indicate they do not understand it. Joshua is always attentive to the feedback in the formal student evaluations, but generally finds that there are few surprises for him because he elicits regular feedback. He is not worried about the university's use of student evaluations for promotion, as he sees them as only one source of information about his teaching.

## Implications for future practice and research

Joshua's case exemplifies a particular perception of the role of tertiary education that was shared by some of the interviewees. Respondents like Joshua emphasised the formative potential of higher education and focussed strongly on ways of developing students' capacity to inquire in their discipline. In the study, there was a noticeable correlation between these kinds of perceptions and teachers' interest in student feedback, as well as an interest in engaging in ongoing dialogue with their students.

The case of Joshua, and others like him, indicates that improved engagement with student evaluation/appraisal feedback and its integration into the teaching and learning cycle is part of a more general need for professional development in teaching and learning.

Joshua's case also demonstrates how the use of multiple forms of ongoing evaluation/appraisal can promote dialogue with students and a raised awareness of their needs. His case suggests that institutional endorsement and encouragement of a range of student feedback strategies can help to make evaluation/appraisal activity a central, integral and dynamic part of the teaching and learning process. 📖

## Case Study – Jenny

Jenny is an experienced academic in the Social Sciences. She believes that her primary role as an educator is to enable the students to acquire the capacity to challenge and question the communities in which they will participate at different stages of their lives. She wants her students to become critical professionals.

Jenny values students' feedback, but she feels that the university does not effectively encourage staff to use appraisals for teaching and professional development. Consequently, she believes that staff members have become cynical about the appraisals process. She is annoyed by the timing of the student appraisals, because it means that she cannot make improvements for the current cohort of students.

Jenny collects regular informal feedback from her students and tends to use the university system just to satisfy institutional requirements or for promotion. She talks to students about her responses to their informal feedback, but she does not talk with her colleagues as they already have the opinion that she spends too much time and energy on teaching as opposed to research.

## Implications for future practice and research

Jenny's example, like Joshua's, illustrates an academic with a strong focus on nurturing thinking and inquiry in students. In Jenny's case, this is associated with a commitment to developing students' capacity to critique established norms, practices and beliefs. Jenny's focus on critical inquiry and challenge overrides transmission of content as a teaching and learning priority. Jenny's sustained interest in students' thinking means that she gathers feedback in a variety of informal ways during the semester, seeing the formal evaluation as simply an institutional requirement. Furthermore – in Jenny's view and that of many academics in this study – the potential developmental benefits that the formal system might be able to facilitate are undermined by the timing of formal evaluations. The inappropriate timing of student evaluation is clearly an issue that institutions need to address. Jenny's preference for ongoing student feedback suggests that the institution should recognise and acknowledge the place and value of multiple forms of evaluation feedback in its promotion processes.

Jenny's reference to not talking to her colleagues represents a more widely held assumption about privacy around evaluation feedback, as well as a common perception that at universities research is more valued than teaching. Views of this nature indicate that, to ensure there is a match between claims made about teaching in vision statements and policy documents, universities need to demonstrate that all matters of teaching and teaching performance are applied with the same degree of seriousness that is attached to research. 🍷

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