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## QUESTIONING THE TIMING OF STUDENT EVALUATIONS: BA ARTS MANAGEMENT MODULES

### ***Abstract***

*This paper is questioning the timing and purpose of the student evaluations of two modules at the BA Arts Management programme, Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship (ICCE) at Goldsmiths, University of London. It is challenging the rigid use of standard student surveys that are being used at the end of each module and suggest an alternative evaluation module based on the timing that is at the moment when the learning is happening, compared to the moment of when the learning was supposed to “end”. Research is reflecting on different approaches and practical implications of evaluation in HE context.*

### ***Keywords***

*higher education, arts management, student evaluation, alternative approaches, feedback*

## **Introduction**

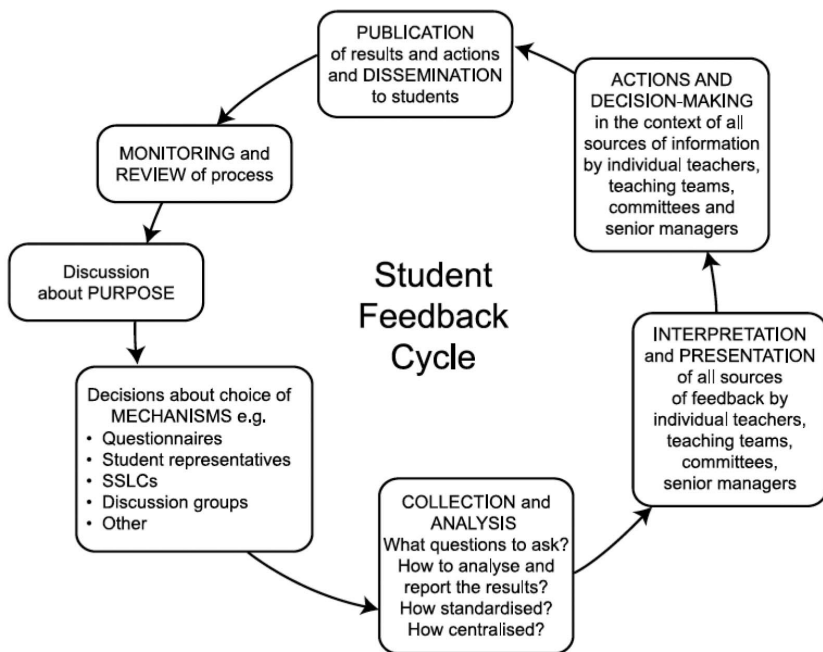
The notion of “quality” in the context of Higher Education system in the UK is one of the most discussed ones amongst the academics (Brkić, 2019), and it asks from the educators and researchers a continuous process of evaluation, reflection and action. It is one of many dilemmas that HE system in the UK is facing (Matthews, McLinded and Greenway, 2021), including the questions of student engagement (Parsons & Taylor, 2011), students’ mental health issues (Thorley, 2017), HE staff dissatisfaction (Loureiro, 2019). Goldsmiths, University of London has had its share of these processes and during

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the period of 2019-2022 it was going through some of the most challenging times in its history, including the first local dispute between the two unions (Goldsmiths UCU and UNISON) and the Senior Management, that resulted in a long industrial action as a resistance against the problematic measures of “restructuring”, appropriately named “Evolving Goldsmiths” while at the same time dealing with the consequences of the global Covid 19 pandemic. More on these processes can be found on the website of the bottom up collective of academics “Collective Change” (<https://we-are.gold/>). The case of the Open University can also be observed as one of the precursors to the “Evolving Goldsmiths” scheme, which is without a doubt, just a piece in the puzzle of huge shifts in the UK HE system that are pushing it towards the American model of HE after Brexit (Bowes-Catton, Brewis et. al. 2020).

Since student fees are the main source of income at Goldsmiths, student voice became one of the most important elements of practice of “Higher Education as a Business”. The usual practice when it comes to student evaluation at the Institute for Creative and Cultural Entrepreneurship (ICCE) at Goldsmiths goes through the Student Feedback Cycle similar to the one presented by Learning and Teaching Support Network (Figure 1). In the last week of the each 11 week module, students are given Module Evaluation Forms (MEF) which they fill in anonymously during class. They are collected by a student representative and then delivered to one of the department/course administrators. The administrators analyse the MEFs, and send the analysis to a module convener. The module convener needs to respond to the analysis and suggest the ways the module will be improved based on the constructive criticism coming from the students. The analysis, together with the comments from the module convener, then goes to the Learning and Teaching Committee of the Department where it is evaluated and approved by all the academics. These are then shared with the student representatives in the programmes.

One good thing about this cycle is that it really does influence the development of the module from the macro-perspective of the programme and the module convener. Changes to the module are suggested and usually implemented before the beginning of the next academic year, so the new cohort gets the improved curriculum and execution.



Learning and Teaching Support Network – January 2004

Figure 1. Student Feedback Cycle from Brennan and Williams 2004

Still, there are questions about this approach that have been “floating” around the Department for some time. One of the obvious ones is connected with the level of student participation at the end of the module – some of them do not turn up for the last session, and some are not motivated to fill in the evaluation form at the moment when all the energy is going towards finishing one cycle (module) and thinking about exam assignments. The second question relates to lecturer bias. Research has shown that lecturers of my profile/identity tend to get higher satisfaction scores – author of this article is (not too) young (Arbuckle & Williams 2003), white (Bell & Brooks 2016) and male (Boring, Ottoboni & Stark 2016). At the same time, we will often hear from colleagues that the student voice can’t be considered as reliable enough because it can be influenced by a number of factors such as the grades students receive or the popularity of the lecturer (Neath, 1996; Tomasco, 1980).

However, another question, raised in conversations with student representatives, has become more substantial. In their view, students that are doing the evaluation do not see the benefit for themselves from the evaluation process.

They will not experience the results of their (hopefully constructive) criticism, since in the next academic year there will be another cohort studying that module. And from the angle of the module convener, thinking about standard evaluation process – what one international student cohort thinks/wants often does not reflect what the one after them will have in mind. Too often we end up juggling between changes/tweaks that different cohorts want, and it never made sense to respond: “Well, your senior colleagues wanted it to be changed in this way...”. Why would they care?

One serious implication of this problem is reflected in the National Student Survey (NSS) where Goldsmiths is ranked significantly lower than the HE industry standard relating to the questions “Do you feel that you are being listened to?” and “Do you feel that the Department is acting based on your feedback?”. The situation comes back to the question of the purpose of evaluation – what and who is it for and what purpose it serves:

*Although overwhelmingly concerned with a notion of quality enhancement, purposes nevertheless differed in emphasis: for example, according to whether student feedback was considered to be a part of the student learning process or rather a commentary on that process; according to whether it was seen as being primarily about whether programme objectives were being achieved or providing an opportunity to critique those objectives. Underlying these differences of emphasis could be different conceptions of student feedback. (Brennan and Williams 2004: 11)*

This short reflective paper is attempting to re-examine the purpose that the evaluation serves using a simple research project inserted in the regular teaching and learning process of two modules in the BA Arts Management programme. In its approach the reflection process is shifting the perspective from meso/macro level to ground level, placing the evaluation and the student voice in the centre of the learning experience.

### **The Research Process**

Student evaluations of teaching (SET) have been in the focus of research of pedagogy in HE for some time now. Already in 1996 there were over two thousand research articles covering discussions around SET (McKeachie and Kaplan, 1996). The key idea behind this short research project was to test the hypothesis: “Timing of student evaluation of the module is influencing their

connection with the evaluation process and their sense of usefulness of the evaluation”. There was a feeling in ICCE Department, based on the students’ feedback, that innovation in the evaluation methods was needed, and at the same time, online platforms became more accessible to both lecturers and students. These platforms were based on the idea that the digital skills are intrinsically computer-mediated (Royal Society, 2019) and promised to provide automatic analysis and instant feedback (Knight and Drysdale 2020).

Two undergraduate studies modules were chosen where the author of this article was the module convener and lecturer – Year 2 “Managing Arts Organisations and Cultural Businesses” (a compulsory Autumn module for Year 2 BA Arts Management students) and Year 3 “Dissertation” module (a compulsory Autumn module for Year 3 BA Arts Management students). Research was conducted with the platform “Mentimeter” (or Menti)<sup>2</sup>, an effective tool for the improvement of students’ engagement and active participation in classroom (Race 2020). Although there is some research showing that online evaluations can be connected with a drop in response rates (Goodman et al. 2015), Mentimeter’s live results feature, good and simple design and well-integrated and easy to use interactivity, are influencing quite high response and engagement rate.

For ethical reasons, before each session during which the research was conducted, students were asked if they are willing to participate. All the answers that were given through Mentimeter were anonymous, and only students that wished to do so were engaging in further conversations about the topics. Everyone was treated with respect and dignity throughout the process.

The main focus of the research was timing of the evaluation – instead of doing it at the end of the module, without a substantial discussion and student participation, the author decided to do it at the beginning of the module with specific goals for each module, and with a high level of engagement. The discussion of evaluation timing is considered to be one of the most important in the pedagogical literature. Brennan and Williams were posing the questions of when should the feedback be collected, when will it be needed and when can it be used (2004: 13), focusing also on the problem of the end of the module questionnaires:

*[...] they cannot provide information to improve the learning experiences of the particular group of students taking the module. Maybe that is not*

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2 [www.mentimeter.com](http://www.mentimeter.com)

*important, as long as there are sufficient opportunities for informal exchange between students and teachers to render the use of formal mechanisms redundant. But this may not always be the case [...]*

Although every evaluation, especially the ones mediated by online systems, can be questioned on the basis of potential identity tracking of the respondents, control and access (Sorenson and Reiner 2003), user interface of Mentimeter made students confident enough to open to the questions and be more reflective than they had been in the previous end of the module paper-based evaluations.

### **“Dissertation” module**

“Dissertation” module is the core module for BA Arts Management students in their final year. In Week 1, Professor Victoria Alexander, module convener, and myself, co-teach “Preparing Yourself for Research” class. Anxiety level amongst students is quite high at that moment, since the dissertation will be the most complex research assignment they will have worked on up to then. At the same time, a number of students do not want to admit how stressed they are about the whole process of doing a dissertation. They had a workshop on the dissertation process before they went on a summer break, and some tasks during the summer, but a lot of uncertainty remains.

Instead of going straight to the point and deliver more information to them, we decided to start the session with the Mentimeter poll, asking them to relate anonymously to the question “Do you feel ready for the process of working on the Dissertation?”. There were 31 students present, all of them engaged, and they had 4 answer options – 25%, 50%, 75% and 100%. A specific aspect of the Mentimeter as a tool is that it shows live results in a really nicely designed way on the screen, and that creates immediate feedback from the students. These results immediately engaging for the students, and it makes it really easy to start a conversation and the – evaluation process.

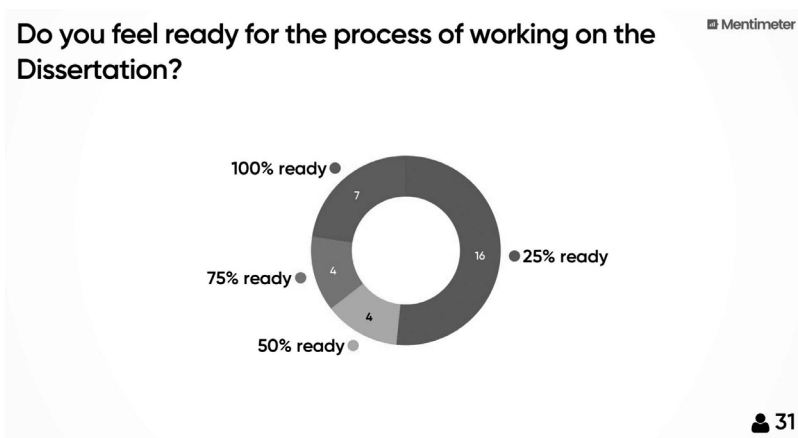


Figure 2. Poll results / “Dissertation” module

What followed after this simple poll was a peer discussion focusing on their sources of anxiety – more than 50% of students (16) said that they felt only 25% ready. Students were split in small groups to discuss their fears. After the discussion, they reconnected again in a large group. As lecturers we tried to address each of the issues that they felt at that moment. With this simple approach, students confirmed that we managed to release a huge amount of tension. Engaging with this question and integrating it in the process before the teaching in the course even started proved to be immensely helpful for the overall process of working on their dissertation.

Thinking about the approach to feedback in this case, it was a Closed Directive one, a combination of Controlling (adequate for a Didactic Teaching Style) with Closed Boundaries (with a Restricted Feedback focus on Assignment) (Light, Cox and Calkins 2009). Although we are continuously trying to make the “Dissertation” classes more creative and inspiring, the focus stays the same – the final dissertation as a substantial piece of work.

### “Managing Arts Organisations and Cultural Businesses” module

At the core of this module is a student-led group research project. Students need to create their teams, find the arts organisation that they will work with, conduct the research, do the analysis, present it in front of class and write a collective report. This time, the author of this short research decided to explain the whole process in the first week, let them create their teams and con-

firm their organisations. Then, in Week 3, a Mentimeter poll was conducted, asking them how they (individually) felt about the research on their organisation. All the students present in the class (34) participated in the poll, which is a significant difference compared to the level of participation at the end of the module student evaluation (in 2018/2019 the response rate was 75%).

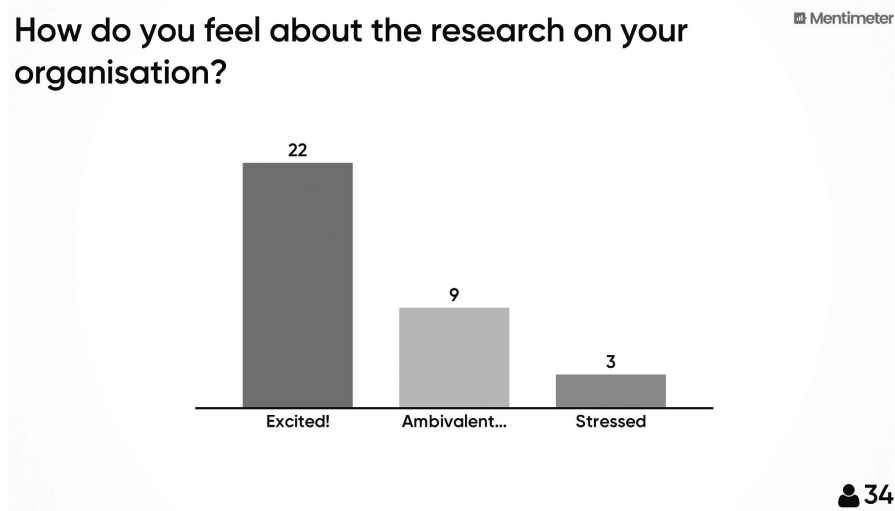


Figure 3. Poll results  
“Managing Arts Organisations and Cultural Businesses”

After they observed the live results of the poll, the author wanted to get some qualitative data, and asked them to go deeper into the reasons behind their feelings - why they felt either “Excited!”, “Ambivalent...” or “Stressed”. After most of the students typed in their reasons anonymously, one by one reason was appearing on the screen (not like in the figures below where they appear grouped). Each “cloud” incited some interesting reaction from the students – laugh, cheers, boos, teasing, guessing game “who was this”. Each reaction/slide/cloud was followed by a reaction from the lecturer, calling for the discussion on the topic in the cloud. As Beard and Hartley explained, these “student-led discussions” help students “acquire information in an active way which enables them to assimilate it more readily into their store of knowledge; they are also able to develop skills in explaining and questioning, in commenting and criticizing differing views by their peers and in summarizing contributions to discussions (Beard and Hartley 1984: 182).



For example, “Excited but the deadline” comment was a trigger for a discussion on planning of the research process, team work and delegation of responsibilities. Or – “I am stressed because I don’t know if I have enough experience to perform well” ignited a conversation on team work, shared responsibilities, knowledge and capabilities of a team compared with individuals, emphasizing the process through which week by week their knowledge of the subject and the organization will grow, etc.



Figure 4. Poll results No2 / “Managing Arts Organisations and Cultural Businesses”

The approach to feedback in this case was more leaning toward Closed Explorative, combining a Non-Controlling style (adequate for a Facilitative Teaching) and Closed Boundaries (with a Restricted Feedback Focus on Assignment) (Light, Cox and Calkins 2009). We are focusing on producing an excellent assignment, with feedback directed towards a specific framework of strategic analysis set for students in this module which they need to follow.

## Conclusion

Student evaluation can also be part of our quest for the development of space where academics and students will engage in critical reflection. Brookfield defined four complementary lenses for critical reflection – “the lens of their own autobiographies as learners of reflective practice, the lens of learner’s eyes, the lens of colleagues’ perceptions, and the lens of theoretical, philosophical, and research literature” (Brookfield 1998: 197). In this case, we focused on almost all of these perspectives and managed to engage the whole class in a process mostly perceived as technical and administrative, one that has nothing to do with students.

Through informal conversations during the breaks and after class, the lecturer heard students giving positive comments about that part of the class. Students did not perceive the exercise as an “evaluation”, but more as a process of “peer learning”. What was crucial for the success of this particular shift in timing was the speed with which they were aware of their “cohort way of thinking” as well as the speed of the reaction to it, both from the peers and the lecturer. Students owned their work, their feedback, and they immediately received reactions to it. It made sense in that way, maybe for the first time.

Continued Professional Development (CPD) is not just a question of our field in focus, but also our pedagogical practice (Clegg 2003). This simple research project proved to be an important step not only for students but for the author of this article/research as an educator. Moving the evaluation online also saved time of our administration staff, as well as that of students and lecturers. This short reflective essay is only one of possible points that are signposting us towards a pedagogy that engages students as “persons” and not merely as “knowers” or “customers” (Matthews, McLinded and Greenway 2021). Relating to the wider challenges that HE is facing, we will see even more need for innovation that is there to help us not only with listening to student voices, but also lower their level of stress and tackle the crucial question of rising mental health issues.

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## **PREISPITIVANJE POZICIJE STUDENTSKIH EVALUACIJA: OSNOVNE AKADEMSKE STUDIJE MENADŽMENTA U UMETNOSTI**

### ***Apstrakt***

*Ovaj rad ima za cilj da preispita poziciju, vreme i ciljeve studentskih evaluacija na dva predmeta osnovnih akademskih studija Menadžmenta u umetnosti, programa koji je deo Instituta za kreativno i kulturalno preduzetništvo (ICCE) na Goldsmiths, Univerzitet u Londonu. Istraživanje dovodi u pitanje rigidno korišćenje konvencionalnih studentskih upitnika koji se koriste nakon poslednjeg časa u okviru svakog predmeta i predlaže alternativni način evaluacije baziran na momentu kada se samo učenje dešava, za razliku od konvencionalnog koji se fokusira na momenat kada bi proces učenja trebalo da bude „završen”. Unutar istraživanja osvrćemo se na različite pristupe i praktične posledice procesa evaluacije unutar konteksta visokog obrazovanja.*

### ***Ključne reči***

*Visoko obrazovanje, menadžment u umetnosti, studentske evaluacije, alternativni pristup, povratne informacije*

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