An Institutional Approach to Developing Assessment and Feedback Literacy

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This MTU Kerry case study outlines an active student engagement approach to exploring, evaluating, and strategizing on supportive approaches to developing assessment and feedback literacies. Ultimately this project led to further consideration on enhancing student voice and student partnership approaches more broadly in future.

Introduction and Context

This initiative was grounded in MTU's strategy and vision to enable the MTU community of staff and students to the achievement of an excellent student experience in a high-quality education journey with engaging and empowering staff. Specifically, the MTU strategic objectives as follows:

- Developing graduates with skills, attributes and capabilities to use knowledge which enables them to succeed and progress their careers – there is a strong link here to supporting students to access feedback, develop capabilities related to evaluative judgement and consequently adapt more quickly to a changing professional environment in which they are likely to find themselves.

- Working in partnership with our students to ensure the continued meaningful inclusion of the Student Voice at decision making level.

This project Developing Assessment and Feedback Literacy was funded by The National Forum under their Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement programme (SATLE). The project complimented and enhanced ongoing teaching and learning initiatives in MTU. The project examined the present strategies for assessment and feedback processes as experienced by staff and students on the Kerry Campus (October 2021 – December 2021) to explore assessment 'as' and 'for' learning, views and where feedback exists in those processes. The initiative actively involved both students and staff.

The initiative stimulated and captured student and staff voice to create a foundation for future developments. Plans for the next academic year have resulted, including to continue to create space for student voice to better tease out their views and the points of intersection of their views with policy and practice changes. At the beginning of the project, a key outcome was to explore the desire to harness the unique nature of community within the Kerry campus in terms of staff/student relationship and direct that established culture into exploring partnership approaches between student and staff in enhancing teaching, learning, assessment, and feedback practices.

Project Outline

MTU hold student voice and experience as central to all that we do. Providing an educational experience for all to feel seen, heard and valued is our core value. To ensure students' voice was held central to this project a mixed methods approach within an Action research framework was applied. Qualitative and quantitative tools of data collection and analysis were used. Desk based research was an integral aspect of this project to attempt to inform project direction from both an internal and external perspective on the contemporary debate on assessment and feedback, as well as the best practices in carrying out this type of research with students and staff.

The researcher initially met with the Students' Union and their perspective informed the research design. All MTU Kerry campus-based students were invited by their student email accounts to participate in an online survey on Assessment and Feedback through Google Forms and Students were invited to participate in focus group sessions. Informed consent was sought and received by researchers from all students. This method was also supported and informed by the learning from MTU Cork campus in similar previous projects. MTU have worked with StudentSurvey.ie to increase student engagement with the survey and the implementation of its findings into policies and practices in MTU.

MTU Kerry campus is an active member of Kerry Children and Young People Services Committee (Kerry CYPSC) in developing their county wide child and youth voice and participation to inform the Kerry CYPSC strategy and this has worked to inform best practice in youth/ student participation enhancement activities both for MTU and Kerry CYPSC.

Action	Brief Description
Action A Students Union Meeting	Initial project meeting with the Students' Union. This led to clear insights as to student perspective of how best to communicate with students. It also led to insight on what experiences the students' union had of what encourages student engagement and what issues in terms of assessment and feedback needed to be prioritised for review from a student perspective. The meeting also brought about collaboration and partnership commitments from the students' union to market and encourage participation in research actions.
Action B Student Survey	The survey was disseminated via students' individual emails. They were given information on the purpose and potential impacts of the survey for present and future students. Informed consent was completed prior to survey completion. Students' Union and MTU social media sites marketed survey participation. Findings were collated and distributed directly back to students emails as well as staff structures.
Action C Student Focus Groups	Researchers met with Students' Union class representatives (on invite and suggestion of the Students' Union). An invitation was issued to participate in small focus group sessions to further discuss the survey findings. Those who volunteered gave informed consent and participated in two sessions where they expanded their views on issues raised by the student survey.
Action D Dissemination of Findings	All findings were disseminated through email and on the Teaching and Learning page of the MTU website. Students' perspectives were shared directly with staff through email and website access. Heads of Departments were asked to bring findings to course boards and discuss how student feedback would feed forward in terms of programmatic review, assessment planning and programme development.

Action E Teaching and Learning	A key output was the development of a teaching and learning interactive forum for students and staff, with resources to stimulate debate and practices for both students and staff. The content of the page was informed by student and staff voice. It was important that the visuals and content should demonstrate the importance of both students and staff working together. Therefore, a balance of suitable content, including a) student-focused b) staff-focused and c) focused on both staff and students, was created. Specific examples from students were collated to share good practices and the assimilation of feedback from students into staff development. Students identified specific challenges in terms of teaching and learning, with feedback fed into staff discussions on these issues so that change of practices could be implemented by staff. Students have many volunteering roles in MTU e.g. research, peer mentors, Student Leaders, academic governance/committee seats. Presently we continue to explore how to enhance and validate students who take up these opportunities and to create distinct approaches to student champions. A number of ongoing actions were set in place for the next academic year, including the review of ongoing policies to ensure all student voices and needs are represented by taking a universal design approach. A plan to establish a clear policy and protocol to recognise and value student participation in consultation and collaboration actions within MTU is being put in place. Based on student feedback we are exploring the possibility of student digital badges so that students contributions of time and opinions not only feed in to enhancing MTU practices but also enhance individual students career readiness.

Reflections

The collaborative actions from the initial phases of the project set the tone for the project. This created an equity between the student and staff voice throughout. 153 students participated in either or both the survey and focus group sessions. Students were extremely open and willing to share. They were reflective on their own experiences and insightful for the perspectives of staff. A key question posed by the students' union at the beginning of the project was 'What's in this for students?'. This is the piece of the puzzle that requires further reflection in our systems and processes. The overarching concept that student voice improves teaching and learning experiences and therefore improves all student experiences is accepted. The challenge is accessing student voice and participation when in fact individual students may be experiencing challenges in workload commitments both in and out of their educational experience and are not in a position to give of their time.

The mode of communication with students is also a challenge as students' email accounts are very busy during term time and they may not be active on college related social media accounts. How to validate student active partnership through recognition of time commitments and actions is something we are looking to develop clear ethical policies on in MTU. MTU students have a strong established history in volunteering to support others in the wider community, in the MTU community, and are active in Societies. Therefore, seeking student champions or partnership volunteers is a big ask.

Those students who have gotten involved in this project have expressed an interest in participating again in future actions, so we hope to continue this empowerment and activation process in future initiatives. Education protocol and policy changes can be slow, and this is especially so from the lived experience of students whose time in college is defined by length of course. Next year we will seek to further explore how 'feeling' heard and 'feeling' impact can be experienced by all students who contribute either in surveys or focus sessions such as in this project.

MTU in the next academic year is continuing to embed Universal Design. The Universal design approach can facilitate and ensure all voices can come to the table and assist in the breaking down of barriers. A strategic and coordinated approach to ongoing student consultation, collaboration and co-creation will be developed and the creation of a 360degree feedback loop that creates meaningful engagement and a sense of impact for students and staff. Continued learning from NStEP, other higher education institutions and StudentSurvey.ie will be absorbed by MTU practices.

Further resources from this project are available on request.

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