

Tapping into the Wisdom of Students

**Lessons from a Pilot Project at
10 UK Higher Education Institutions**

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Exclusively for QAA Members

Introduction

In 2018, QAA funded new research into what the increasing volume of online student feedback could tell us about the quality of higher education provision. The research was published on the QAA website as [The Wisdom of Students: Monitoring Quality through Student Reviews](#)¹ in June 2018. Following the initial research, QAA commissioned a follow-up report and funded the following UK higher education providers to pilot the research tool in their own institutions:

- Aston University
- Bath Spa University
- Coventry University
- Queen Mary University of London
- The Arts University Bournemouth
- The Sheffield College
- The University of Birmingham
- The University of Derby
- The University of Reading
- The University of South Wales.

Executive summary

There are hundreds of thousands of online reviews of UK higher education providers available across multiple platforms. This report details the findings of a three-month pilot in which relevant reviews and social media posts were identified and categorised, giving providers the ability to explore the data. This proved useful in confirming overarching themes. However, it also became clear that there are challenges agreeing a useful classification to cover a wide variety of providers, and in balancing the granularity and volume of feedback with privacy. Key themes emerged from the data including the importance of getting support services (such as transport and IT) right, the significance of environmental issues, and the overwhelmingly positive nature of the feedback.

Background

The wealth of publicly available online reviews and social media posts have the potential to offer rich and previously untapped insights into the quality of provision and student experience at individual providers. Yet, to date, there has been limited research into the value of this feedback. This is primarily because of the difficulty in gathering the hundreds of thousands of reviews and millions of social media posts available online, determining which are relevant, and getting them into the hands of providers.

Previous research conducted in collaboration with QAA found a positive relationship between aggregated online feedback and results from the Annual Provider Review (APR), Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), and National Student Survey (NSS). Building on the systems developed for this research, we automated the gathering of additional data sets, and, more importantly, developed models to categorise the type of person commenting, and what aspects of provision, if any, they were commenting on.

This report details the learnings from a pilot where this data was shared with 10 UK providers.

¹ Griffiths, A, Leaver, M P and King, R (2018). The Wisdom of Students: Monitoring Quality through Student Reviews. QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/about-us/the-wisdom-of-students-monitoring-quality-through-student-reviews.pdf

In autumn 2018, providers wishing to participate in the pilot were invited to submit a short statement outlining 'how you will use these data in quality management and enhancement of the student experience'. Nine higher education providers of varying size and one further education college were selected with the reasons for participating including:

- monitoring unfiltered feedback for real time improvements in module rather than in year or next year
- to swiftly address concerns and share good news
- to identify learning through our annual report on quality and academic standards to Academic Board and the Board of Governors
- working in partnership with the Students' Union to improve the student experience.

The pilot

Starting in December 2018, providers were given access to a secure, online dashboard showing data for their institution only.

The dashboard provided summary statistics including changes in the provider's average rating over time, how this compared to the average for all providers, and the number of positive, neutral and negative comments received over the past year. More importantly, the dashboard also allowed providers to search all relevant reviews and comments over the past two years. The comments could be searched by date, keyword, the type of person making the comment, key themes, and sentiment.

Student Experience Platform (StEP) ≡

Feedback

This page allows you to explore the feedback for your organisation. The data can be sorted by the date the feedback was posted online, the content of the feedback (both by searching free-text or automated tags), the type of commenter, and the feedback score, by clicking on the column headers. Searches can be further refined by utilising the boxes beneath the column headers which allow multiple criteria to be specified.

Posted Date	Comment	Commenter	Tags	Feedback Score
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text" value="lecture"/>	<input type="text" value="All"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
2019-01-21	The level of disruption in my @xxxxx lectures is beyond a joke. I would 100% buy noise cancelling headphones if they could be connected to the lecture audio somehow.	currentStudent	EFS	1
2018-11-15	yesterday a group of y11 and y12 geography students had a fascinating and engaging evening at a lecture on tectonic hazards at @xxxxx #aspirations #inspiringtalks	other	T&L	5
2018-08-11	Great campus with plenty of places to hang out, in xxxxxx, so close to xxxxxx and xxxxxx and the nightlife! Great food on campus and xxxxxx bar to hang out at night! The Campus has new buildings this year, lecture halls with space and plus for laptops. The gym on campus is well equipped and has great classes going on all the time, plus lots of membership options for those who want off peak. The library could be better, it could be bigger, have more plug sockets and resources. And the student union could be more serious and more student oriented.	currentStudent	EFS	4
2018-07-08	The university is diverse in its students, it is based in xxxxxx after all. Once you enter the campus, it is like a mini student city, there is a bar, convenience stores and even a bank! Most of the building in which lectures take place are nice and up to date, a couple however leave a lot to be desired, and when you are paying 9k a year, you expect better. Students are nice and approachable, the student union is vibrant and very active within student life.	currentStudent	EFS, SE	4
2018-06-23	Staff is incredibly disinterested and unprofessional. Some lecturers do not seem to know a thing about what they are teaching and the assistants are usually postgraduates which are clearly there just as a filler for their cv or project. The library is full most of the time and most labs have an open plan layout, making them way too noisy. Exam set up is old fashioned, they usually throw a bunch of cheap tables and chairs in a theatre and call it an exam room. Doing this a room which was clearly not design for exam sessions bears a price, most desks are wobbly and uncomfortable, and the noise level is unbearable.	currentStudent	T&L, EFS	2

Figure 1: A redacted example of feedback containing the keyword 'lecture'. In this case the comments are predominantly made by current students and relate to *Teaching and learning* (T&L) and *Environment, facilities and services* (EFS).

Bespoke models were developed to, where possible, categorise who the comment was made by and what it related to. These categories were developed iteratively through multiple rounds of manually coding a large, representative sample of reviews and comments.

Commenter	Comment Tag
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student (and, if known, potential, future, current or past student) • Staff (and, if known, current or former staff) • Relative (that is a relative commenting on their family member's experience) • Other (including local schools, businesses and government bodies) • Sub-provider (for example, a department within a provider) • Unknown (there was insufficient information to categorise the commenter). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student experience • Teaching and learning • Management and policies • Administration and organisation • Open days and applications • Environment, facilities and services • Students and alumni • Generic.

Table 1: Categories of commenter and comment content identified and automatically coded by bespoke models for the pilot.

Comments made by staff and sub-providers were excluded as they were not impartial. The reviews and comments from all six data sources - Whatuni.com, Facebook reviews, StudentCrowd.com, Google reviews, Twitter and StudentHut.com - were updated monthly.

Learning from the pilot

We gathered feedback from each pilot provider after one month and again at the end of the pilot to determine how the tool was used, if it was useful, and what enhancements could be made.

First, while all providers found the information interesting, it was less useful for larger providers with well resourced communications teams that regularly monitor, record and engage with reviews and social media. Although this process was manual, it allowed such providers to categorise interactions according to their own context-specific framework. Smaller providers, by contrast, valued the opportunity to explore data that had not previously been systematically gathered and categorised.

Secondly, there is a clear trade-off between the privacy and anonymity of commenters and the volume and granularity of feedback that can be gathered and its suitability for certain purposes.

For the pilot we made the decision to gather only tweets 'mentioning' a provider's main twitter account (for example 'Fantastic chemistry open day @provider today, well organised and answered all my questions. Will definitely be applying!') as the tweeter had made the decision to actively bring the tweet to the provider's attention. We did not capture any other tweets.

In the 16 months up to February 2019 this still yielded 6,250,000 tweets, but this is just a fraction of the tweets available when the criteria for gathering them is wider, as it was with some providers' communications teams. Similarly, we did not share course names or module codes where they were available as part of the meta data to reduce the likelihood of individual commenters being identified.

As a result, the feedback was able to predict the outcome of other quality measures such as the TEF, and revealed systematic student concerns, but was less supportive of monitoring individual modules. Had we included course names and module codes where available, we suspect that, despite the significant volume of overall feedback, there would be insufficient feedback for the majority of courses or modules to form a robust insight.

Thirdly, categorising the person making the comment, for example whether they were a current student, alumni, or a relative was helpful. This allowed users to explore, for example, key themes among potential students attending away days, or issues of importance to alumni. Categorising the content of the comment itself was less useful. This was in part because it is challenging to agree a universally approved classification for feedback in higher education that covers a broad range of topics including accommodation and healthcare services, timetabling, transport, teaching and learning, career services, the Students' Union, environmental issues and free speech.

Even if the coding categories are agreed, there are multiple threshold decisions that make determining the relevance of comments challenging. For example, we decided to exclude comments from staff, but when does an individual qualify as a member of staff? A lecturer obviously does, but what about a PhD candidate who is also paid to be a teaching assistant? What about student ambassadors, or sports science students that also hold coaching roles?

Similarly, if a virtual learning environment (VLE) does not working for 10 seconds, few would argue this is a relevant concern, but most people would agree if a VLE system was not working for a month then that is a relevant concern. How long can a VLE be down for before it becomes a genuine concern? With such a high volume of feedback, identifying a definitive answer to threshold questions such as these can be extremely challenging, especially across such a diverse sector.

Depending on their intended future use, categorising comments according to an established quality or regulatory framework may prove more useful than a classification based on what students themselves identify as important. Revisiting the granularity of comments may also be necessary.

Key observations from the data

To train a model to automatically classify reviews and social media comments, it is necessary to manually code tens of thousands of comments. Reading through this representative sample, we can see that acting on a number of key observations could improve the quality of provision, student experience, and online feedback concerning an individual provider.

First, investing significant time and effort in making sure teaching content and facilities are the best they can may count for nothing if the basic infrastructure does not permit students to make the most of the experience.

Although it may seem like a minor irritation in the grand scheme of things, if students cannot be guaranteed a parking spot that they have paid for, or the park-and-ride or other public services are unreliable, students may not make their lectures in the first place. While this is a minor issue if it happens once, repeated failures cause great (and understandable) anger among students that may have travelled great distances and paid significant sums of money to learn, only to be denied by the provider's inadequate infrastructure.

The same is true of digital infrastructure. If unreliable Wi-Fi or information technology (IT) means students cannot access their learning materials, then the quality of those materials is irrelevant. Poor connectivity within university accommodation meaning students cannot work

at home, or IT maintenance work scheduled when important course work needs to be submitted, result in a significant number of complaints from students and are relatively straightforward to put right.

Secondly, a lack of responsiveness can quickly result in negative sentiments being expressed online. Setting aside the political notions of tuition fees over £9,000, it is a significant sum of money to a young undergraduate and a lack of response to queries can cause significant ill will among students who have paid this significant sum. Repeated e-mails and calls going unanswered can quickly spiral a minor concern into negative reviews. The failure to acknowledge and apologise for a minor complaint can escalate to something far more serious.

This result echoes findings in the healthcare sector where, as a result of growing litigation costs, the National Audit Office (2018) has advised NHS providers to first and foremost engage with complaints and apologise.

Thirdly, the environmental impact of providers is of growing importance to students. The use of disposable cutlery, the lack of reward for using reusable coffee cups, all the way up to providers investment in fossil fuels are notable concerns.

Fourthly, concerns about gaming or manipulation of reviews seems unwarranted. While we cannot categorically determine whether a review is real or not, there are ways of spotting reviews likely to be fake. We did, of course, spot some of these, but the numbers were minimal. Moreover, the sheer volume of reviews and comments means significantly swaying a rating, on top of avoiding detection, would be challenging.

Finally, while it is easy to focus on online complaints, the overwhelming majority of student feedback is positive. This is true from the excitement experienced at open days, through to excellent teaching and learning and facilities and support services, through to the graduation ceremony and subsequent alumni engagement. There is a great deal to be learnt about what providers are doing well that falls outside of the scope of established surveys and this can be used to recognise and reward where appropriate what is seen to be excellent service from providers.

Conclusion and next steps

The wealth of online reviews and social media comments concerning UK higher education providers is too great to ignore. The challenge is identifying how best this data can be used to drive quality improvements. This pilot has identified that collecting, categorising and supplying providers, especially smaller providers, with the data helps them to identify or confirm key issues. However, the pilot has also highlighted the challenges of categorising comments and balancing the granularity and volume of feedback with privacy. We will continue to gather this data and to engage with the sector to build on the learning from this pilot.

References

NAO (2017) Managing the Costs of Clinical Negligence in Trusts. HC 305 Session 2017-2019: www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Managing-the-costs-of-clinical-negligence-in-trusts.pdf

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