

Why online only course and module surveys don't work

In 2011 Electric Paper conducted an extensive survey of institutions in Higher and Further education regarding Survey Best Practice. The survey results clearly indicate that many institutions are heavily invested in collecting student feedback for a diverse range of survey projects, yet there is serious concern among respondents regarding survey fatigue and declining response rates. Interestingly, 78% of respondents indicated that both paper and online survey methodologies are a requirement at their institution.

Higher and Further education institutions have rightly targeted course and module survey programmes for process improvement as legacy paper based technologies contain many hidden costs and manual processes. The logical assumption is that moving these paper based processes online will reduce the overall cost of ownership as well as make survey administration easier. Our research shows that the problem is not as easy to solve as it initially appears and that many institutions are still searching for a way to better automate course and module survey projects whilst maintaining valid and meaningful results. Based upon best practice survey results and feedback from our active customer base of over 600 education institutions worldwide, we propose that a hybrid approach is a requirement and that the best methodology for capturing student feedback has little to do with the paper vs. online debate – rather has everything to do with ‘in class’ vs. ‘out of class’ deployment of course surveys. As the real debate has been distorted by the advent of online only survey providers – I will identify the common misconceptions and further explain why the ‘online only’ approach has failed to live up to its promise.

Online only argumentation:

Online module surveys cost less

There are thousands of free online survey tools and many institutions have attempted to cut costs by subscribing to these free, or low cost online services. Setting data protection issues aside, the reality is that where savings are made in the software license, they are increased on the labour intensive administration created in trying to adapt these generic tools to fit the complexity of running module surveys across a diverse institution. Administrators must either create a unique survey project for each course or ask the participants to select the course they are on, making it more difficult for the student to complete. It is important to note that Online module surveys are conducted ‘out of class’ meaning that students are being asked to complete the survey on their own time, making it very difficult to capture valid response rates other than from students who are highly motivated based upon strong opinions that may, or may not, represent the views of the average student.

Online module surveys are easier

If the goal is to make survey administration easier, this is a valid claim on the surface. Running ‘in class’ paper based course and module feedback projects requires up front administrative effort in printing, distributing and scanning. If however, the goal is to gain statistically valid meaningful results as part of a strategic quality enhancement programme, the significant drop in ‘out of class’ response rates (+30%), does not justify the reduced administration effort. A more defensible approach would be to end the use of surveys as a quality enhancement tool for module surveys, rather than to waste administration effort in collecting and reporting on useless data.

Online module surveys are faster

This is an area of serious misconception. While it may be easier to deploy an online survey – even using our product EvaSys, the administrator will need to leave the survey open for up to 5 weeks and set at least 2 reminders, in order to gain a reasonable response rate. However the same administrator, using paper surveys with EvaSys, can capture 100% of the student feedback from students ‘in class’ on the day, scan and deliver instant reports back to the academics within a matter of hours. Because many institutions have struggled with paper surveys in the past, with some still even keying in survey responses manually, a perception has evolved that paper is slow, when in fact just the opposite is true, with the right technology.

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Online module surveys fit neatly in with environmental policy

Our experience is that there is a place for online surveys, such as for student satisfaction, alumni, non taught post grad students etc. These are all areas where either there is no way to administer a survey 'in class', or where a low response rate is still valid and representative of the overall student population. However, if we agree that 'in class' is the best way to gain valid and reliable feedback in order to monitor quality of learning and teaching, then there are only two options: Firstly, handing out paper surveys. Secondly, make computers available 'in class' for every student to complete the module survey. Our contention is that with a hybrid approach, institutions can use online where it makes sense, thereby reducing the reliance on paper and deploy paper surveys only where necessary. We recommend working with suppliers that use recycled paper, or paper made from sustainable forests, as well as recycling the surveys after completion. Of course 'in class' might become a reality in the future with tablet and smart phone technology, which is why we continue to innovate in this area.

Online module surveys can identify how a specific individual has responded

While we do have customers who have crafted data protection statements indicating that the module survey is 'not anonymous however treated as confidential', this is not the norm. There is evidence from student focus groups that students are concerned that honest feedback might have a negative effect on their markings, if they were to be identified. Our recommendation is to limit the use of the 'tie back' approach to specific institutional research projects and build trust through the use of technology that protects the student's anonymity. To that end, paper surveys should be deployed and collected by student reps in sealed envelopes, without the involvement of the academics.

Online module surveys are location independent

Again, this is why we recommend a hybrid approach. With the advent of online only technology, many institutions have lost the ability to monitor how many surveys students are being asked to complete. With our hybrid approach, a single system is used for paper based 'in class' and for online 'out of class' surveys such as offshore campuses, grad students, students not on campus, alumni and online-LMS courses.

Online surveys produce richer comments

We are in agreement that where a high response rate is not required in order to make educated assumptions from the results, such as student satisfaction or facilities surveys, this statement is valid. However, when looking specifically at the course or module, the goal is to capture not only feedback from students with strong opinions, but rather a voice of the average student. It is not possible to draw conclusions as to the quality of the teaching and the course from only 2 students from a class of 20, regardless of the richness of their comments. There are better ways to gain qualitative feedback such as running focus groups on areas identified for low performance through the module survey process.

Online is just better

Electric Paper has over 15 years assisted organisations in applying the right technology, in the right setting, in order to automate paper intensive data capture processes. In this time we have in certain scenarios recommended paper as a capture device over an online approach because of the ease of use as a capture device. Based upon our specific experience in working with course and module surveys, we recommend hybrid vs. online only in order to facilitate the 'in class' capture of student feedback. The hybrid paper and online approach gains the highest possible response rates in real-time, making it possible to turn around results faster, in order to close the loop and involve students as stakeholders in improving the quality of the course. It is our opinion based upon feedback from over 600 educational institutions and the responses to our 2011 Best Practice Survey, that institutions who have implemented online course feedback systems have experienced an unacceptable drop in response rates, which renders much of the effort in administration a waste of time and resources. We however, do see online surveys as a valuable tool in certain applications such as institutional research or where it is not possible to capture feedback 'in class' which is why we continue to innovate in this area and lead the market in hybrid paper and online solutions.

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Electric Paper

Electric Paper works with universities to capture student feedback that will help to improve the future design and delivery of their courses. We work with more than 600 education institutions worldwide through web-based data capture and student survey management solutions to drive efficiency in capturing the student voice at course level. Our flagship product **EvaSys Education Suite™** works to automate course and module evaluation and reporting, thereby saving staff time and costs, as well as generating cross-institution common best practice in assessing student feedback about their teaching and learning experience. In light of the need to place greater emphasis on the “student experience” in UK higher education, our role is increasingly significant. We also deliver surveys of alumni, employees and other members of the education community.

For more information: www.electricpaper.co.uk