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A Student Feedback Form that Adds Real Value

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Abstract
During the last decade, universities have endeavoured to continually improve the level of student satisfaction and learning experience. Student evaluative feedback is therefore critical to measure and track progress, and questionnaires are the principal means of collecting this data. In the UK, although the National Student Survey is used to solicit students' opinions on the quality of their degree programmes, various types of Student Feedback Forms (SFFs) – or similarly named questionnaires – are employed at the local institutional level.

There is no clear consensus on the value of such SFFs as a tool to bring significant improvement to the student learning experience. However, this study proposes that the often low impact and inconclusive results from the use of SFFs are largely due to inadequacies in the design, and implementation process of these questionnaires. Using a specific course that I teach as a case study, I show how a carefully designed SFF that was refined via a piloting exercise, led to clear, actionable outcomes. The SFF had high value in confirming what was working well and identifying areas for improvement. This case study may be used as a guide to improve the future design and implementation of SFFs for other types of courses and teaching programmes.

Key Words
Student Feedback Form; student satisfaction; student voice; improving teaching; staff performance review; timetabling; assessment.

Introduction
Many students pay high fees for their higher education (HE) programme and in turn, they expect good quality education, often described as 'value for money'. Therefore, universities have renewed interest in student feedback to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Brennan and Williams, 2004). The principal method of student feedback acquisition is through questionnaires completed on an individual basis, and these are therefore a core tool to facilitate what is broadly referred to as student evaluation of teaching (SET) (Spooren, Brockx and Dimitri, 2013). In this study, the term Student Feedback Form (SFF) is used to describe questionnaires that serve this purpose.

This research case study originated from analysing a range of HE SFFs in use at a university in the UK. Strikingly, the design, content and feedback of the SFFs varied widely and often seemed to be failing to generate useful data leading to actionable conclusions. These observations aligned with a far-reaching study by Spooren, Brockx and Dimitri (2013) who performed a systematic overview of the literature related to student evaluation of teaching. Key findings were that questionnaires often suffered from poor design thus limiting their usefulness. Students, although willing to participate, had low expectations that their feedback would make a difference, and teachers made little use of results to improve their teaching. This led to the central research question of this study:

How can SFFs make course delivery and outcomes more effective?

The study generated data using 'student group discussions' and 'staff questionnaires' about the purpose, design and content of SFFs and considered the value of SFFs, the process of their design, and the specific design of the SFF for a case study course entitled 'Religious Education'. A revised SFF for the Religious Education course was piloted before being used with students, and the evaluation of this course using the refined SFF illustrates the value of the student voice in enhancing teaching.

Literature Review
Since 2005, UK final year undergraduate students have completed the annual National Student Survey (NSS). Its findings highlight student satisfaction and dissatisfaction, and contribute to the ranking of universities and league tables in the UK. The increase of student fees to 9000 GBP per year since 2012 has put more emphasis on the quality of the student experience and its value (Douglas *et al.*, 2015; Lenton, 2015). Students, now widely seen as customers, expect good quality of teaching and learning, and an interpersonal interaction with the organisation. To ensure these standards are in place, universities increasingly value student feedback from the NSS and from SFFs. Yet, Flint *et al.* (2009: 617) stress that 'the focus needs to shift from simply improving scores to getting to the root of the issues raised'.

The status of the NSS and of SFFs is arguably at its highest ever level (Blair and Valdez Noel, 2014). Students actively judge the performance of their university; hence, universities aim to improve their practice. Some universities even use student feedback in their staff performance review system (Kember, Leung and Kwan, 2002; Chen and Hoshower, 2003); however, this raises the concern of whether such student evaluations are valid and reliable enough for this purpose (Nasser and Fresko, 2002; Penny, 2003). The student voice in these evaluation systems allows academic practitioners to inform, reflect, improve and change their teaching behaviours which benefits their professional teaching development (Blair and Valdez Noel, 2014; Nasser and Fresko, 2002). To what extent lecturers value and act upon the student voice is still a matter for debate (Kember, Leung and Kwan, 2002; Nasser and Fresko, 2002; Smith 2008; Blair and Valdez Noel, 2014). Interestingly, research about faculty views (Nasser and Fresko, 2002) suggests that 'positive' course evaluation feedback led instructors to believe in the validity of the student feedback, to see the comments as useful for improving teaching, and to be willing to share the findings with others.

There are also additional issues to be considered. Students need to be active, willing participants to contribute purposefully. This permits a successful SFF evaluation with the aim to improve the quality of the course (Chen and Hoshower, 2003). SFFs can make course delivery and outcomes more effective when lecturers know how to evaluate the student feedback accurately (Arthur, 2009) but often university guidance is lacking (Richardson, 2005). It has also been argued that there are two types of student learners, 'active' and 'passive' (Penny, 2003) and, if so, SFFs do not distinguish between the evaluative feedback provided by these two types.

In view of this, SFFs clearly have the potential to elicit useful information for the improvement of teaching and learning. However, their successful design and implementation are critical aspects to avoid many of the pitfalls that invalidate their use in SET (Spooren, Brockx and Dimitri, 2013).

Context
The student participants in this case study were in their third year of undergraduate study based at a UK university. The focus of their degree programme was education and so it might be anticipated that these students would be well-informed critics of their own educational programmes.

Participant data for the newly designed Religious Education course showed that out of 34 students, 81% were females and 19% males. Sixty-five percent were 18 – 24 years, 29% were 25 - 34 years and

6% were above age 35. Considering ethnic background, student participants were 61% Asian/Asian British, 30% White, 3% Black/African/Caribbean/Black British and 6% of mixed ethnic background.

Methodology

This small research case study used a mixed-method approach of quantitative and qualitative data analysis. However, the treatment of the data was rather of a qualitative nature with quantitative elements. Denscombe (2007:248) explains: 'A questionnaire, for example, can be used to produce either quantitative data (numbers) or qualitative data (words)'. However, in this research, measurements were not made on a large scale for the purpose of statistical analysis, although some data from the questionnaires will be presented by means of percentages. The size and scope of this study design allowed it to be manageable on a small scale as an exploratory piece of practitioner research.

Anonymous semi-structured questionnaires (that incorporated open-ended questions to allow participants to express their views in more detail) were used to collect data from student group discussions, individual staff members and individual students. The latter formed two separate cohorts: 1) individual students who participated in an initial 'pilot' of the draft 'Religious Education course SFF' questionnaire and 2) those who participated in the refined, final version of the questionnaire following the piloting exercise. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007:322) generally agree that 'an open-ended question can catch the authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour which are the hallmarks of qualitative data', yet they also recognise the disadvantage that the text can show irrelevant information and the analysis task may be time-consuming.

The data collection used a combination of mechanisms (student group discussions, staff, and individual student questionnaires) because 'any single mechanism has its drawbacks' (Brennan and Williams, 2004:17). Before conducting the study, the research project gained approval through the University's ethical clearance process to ensure that all research proposals complied with ethical standards and good practice as outlined in the BERA guidelines (2004). To participate in the study, students were required to provide informed consent by completion of a 'Participant Consent Form' (Bournot-Trites and Belanger, 2005). Out of 49 students invited to participate, 34 (69%) gave their consent to take part in the 'student group discussion' and for their SFF for the Religious Education course to be included in the study data. Of 13 staff invited to complete an online questionnaire, 8 (61%) participated. The newly designed SFF for the Religious Education course was piloted by a different small group of volunteering students (Bell, 2005). Their valuable feedback allowed refinements to be made, increasing the effectiveness of the final SFF. There was sufficient time for students (in class) and staff (available online for nearly two weeks) to fill in the questionnaires. The questionnaires administered in class maximised the response rate (Brennan and Williams, 2004; Milne, 1998).

This research was undertaken within an institution where I was the lecturer on the Religious Education course from which the research subjects (students) were enrolled. As an insider researcher, I endeavoured to control potential dilemmas such as anonymity, researcher bias and power. Insider research has key benefits, as explained by Floyd and Linet (2010:5), 'in terms of access, rapport and shared frames of reference with participants, and an in-depth understanding of the organisation.' However, the close proximity of the researcher to the researched group can also present a 'role-conflict' where the researcher may, consciously or unconsciously, influence the outcomes. These issues were largely addressed by the use of anonymous SFFs in this case study. Because research interviews were not conducted, this avoided power problems that often arise using that method e.g. where sensitive information may be withheld by the interviewee.

Results

Purpose, design and content of SFFs

This section will analyse the opinions of 'student group discussions' and 'staff questionnaires' about the purpose, design and content of SFFs.

Response to question: What is the value of SFFs?

As shown in Figure 1, nearly 80% of all participants saw some value of SFFs as a tool to improve the quality of teaching. Students believed that it 'allows lecturers to understand students' point of view about their feelings of how the sessions went and the programme as a whole.' They were also concerned, explaining, 'We don't know if our feedback will make a difference.' Huxham *et al.* (2008: 676) believe that 'a lack of clarity concerning the purpose of collecting student feedback can foster cynicism among staff and students.' Specifically, 88% of students and 62% of staff valued SFFs as 'very' and 'somewhat' useful (Figure 1). In comparison, a similar study (Nasser and Fresko, 2002) revealed that 71% of staff found SFFs useful. Staff in this research were slightly less in favour, and views criticising SFFs included the following: 1) 'the questionnaires reflect how the student is feeling about the course/tutor rather than about the content or methods,' 2) 'often, areas for improvement identified by students are generic rather than course specific,' and 3) 'students rarely complete (i.e. give reasons) why they have given a particular grade.'
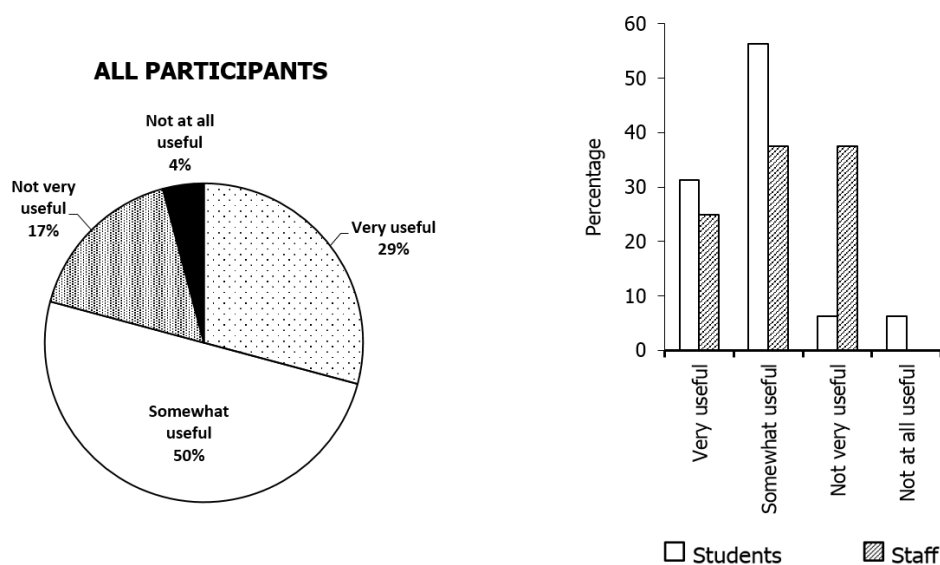
Figure 1. Responses about the usefulness of SFFs as a tool to improve quality teaching.

Response to the question: Who should design the SFFs?

Interestingly, students unanimously wanted lecturers, who deliver the course in each campus, to design the SFF. In their view, it is the Lecturer who can ask relevant questions, recalling how the course went as a whole. On the other hand, three quarters of staff preferred this to be the done by the Course Leader. Of the remaining one quarter, half of these favoured the Lecturer and half wished to see the university design a global SFF (that can be used for all courses). However, concerning this latter option, the majority of staff and students did not favour this approach, being sceptical of SFFs that would be organised by the institution's central administration or an impersonal agency (Richardson, 2005).

Response to the question: Using a specific course as a case study (Religious Education), which questions should be part of the SFF for this course?

The data analysis highlighted that staff and student opinion mainly favoured questions about: the Course Guide, the Reading List, the Lecture resources which were used during the sessions and on Blackboard (online learning environment), the Formative and Summative Assessment, the learning environment during sessions, the amount of support offered by the Lecturer, and the quality of

teaching delivered by the Lecturer. However, disagreement between staff and student opinion became apparent in three areas as follows:

1. Timetabling
2. The design (user-friendliness) of Blackboard
3. The communication between the Lecturer and the Course Leader

Students wanted the above questions to be included, whereas the majority of staff expressed the opposite view (Figure 2).
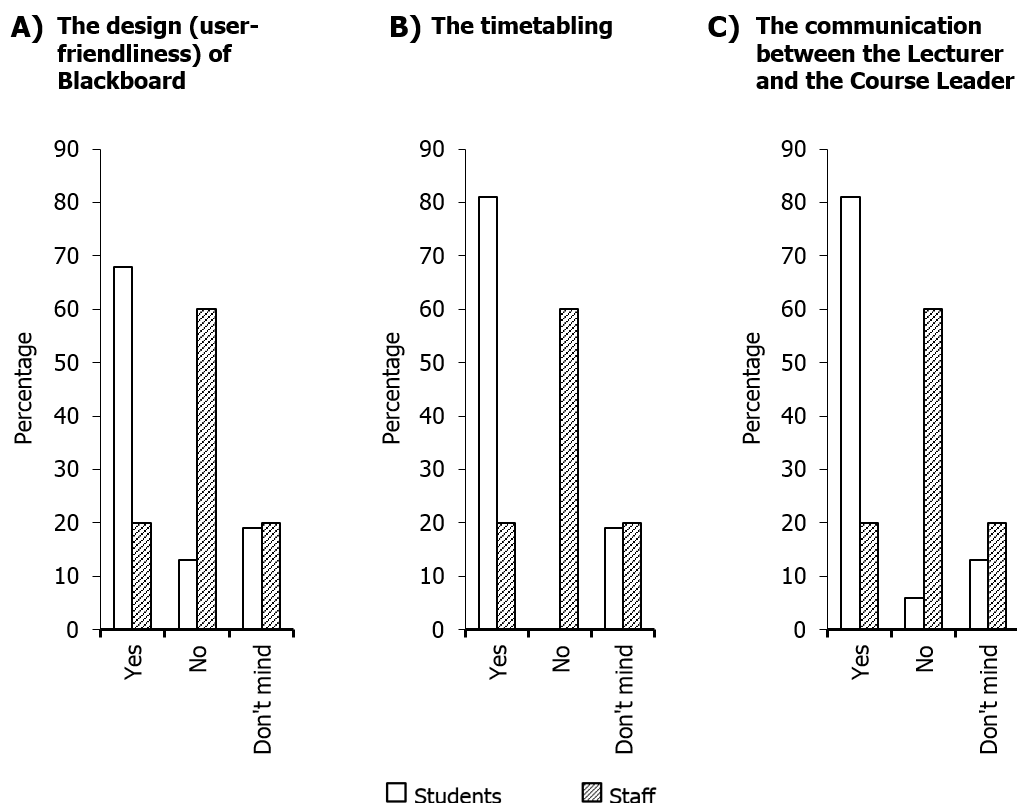
Figure 2. Responses of staff and students when asked whether the following elements should be assessed in a SFF: A) the design (user-friendliness) of Blackboard, B) the timetabling, and C) the communication between the Lecturer and the Course Leader.

Students also expressed the need to include a question about the student-lecturer relationships. Staff were keen to see questions such as: 'How did you take responsibility for your learning in the course?' or 'How many sessions have you attended or missed?'

The newly designed SFF
This section will analyse student opinion from the SFF for Religious Education, highlighting key findings. The newly designed SFF gave students opportunity to give feedback in the following areas: the Lecturer, the course, the Assessments, and the Student Experience.

Response to the questions: What are the key findings in student opinion about the Religious Education course?
Students from both groups rated the Lecturer in seven questions either as 'very good', 'good' or 'fair' (Figure 3). In none of the questions did the participants select the response 'poor' or 'very poor'.
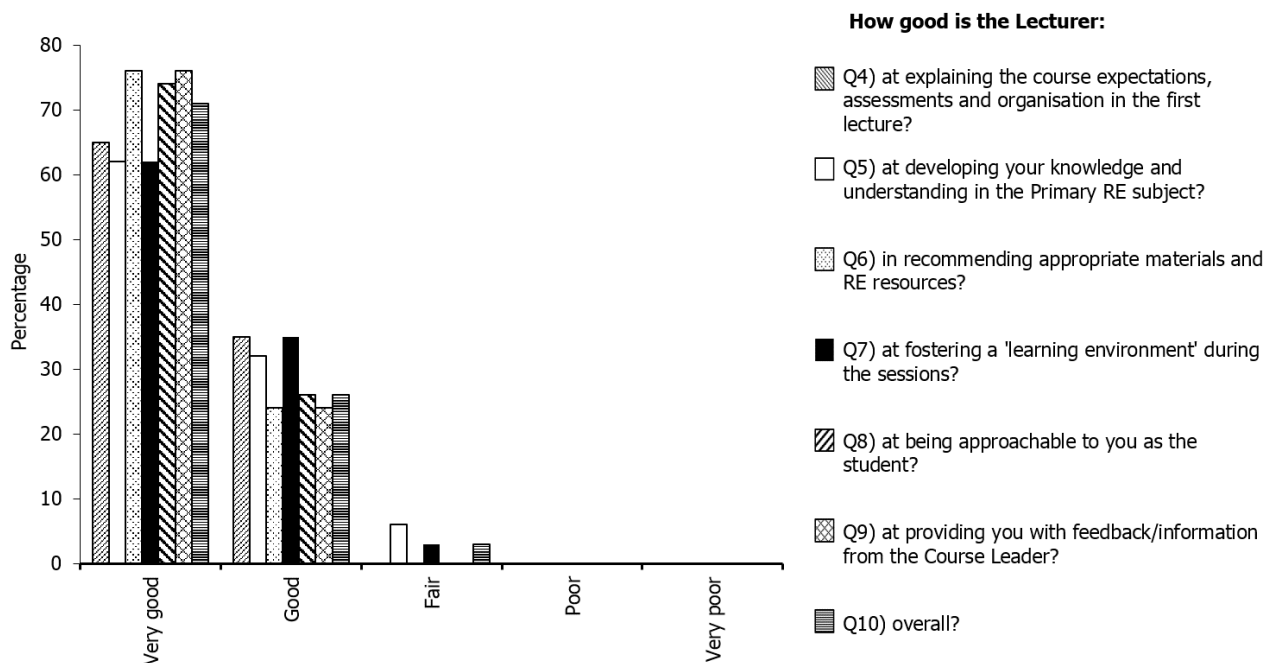
Figure 3. Responses about the Lecturer.

Students had the opportunity to give feedback in an open-ended question about the Lecturer. Key participant responses are shown in Table 1. Overall feedback from the quantitative and qualitative questions (Figure 3 and Table 1 respectively) expressed a similarly high level of satisfaction.

Table 1. Individual responses about the Lecturer.

Very meticulous, succinct, diligent and reliable.
I found my lecturer to be very clear, approachable and supportive.
Lecturer has been very good!!!
[The Lecturer is] always providing information from the Course Leader.
Good clarity on what is expected, all information is the same as the Course Leader and the handbook.
Fabulous lecturer. Always goes above and beyond to help us. Very kind, calm and enthusiastic.
Fantastic lecturer, very enthusiastic and engaging in every lecture.
Genuinely, she's amazing.
Very helpful and lovely.
Incredibly kind, patient, supportive and enthusiastic. Made a subject that is usually boring to me very engaging.
Really appreciated the teaching of this course.
Very helpful and clear in her direction. Excellent!
Very nice and informative.

As shown in Figure 4, students on the whole reflected positively about the Religious Education course. However, when giving feedback about the 'Course Guide and the Reading Material on Blackboard', and 'timetabling' in Questions 13 and 16, students expressed dissatisfaction for the first time in this research. As shown in Figure 4 (Question 13), some participants gave 'poor' or 'very poor' ratings when considering the Reading List in the Course Guide and the Reading Material on Blackboard.
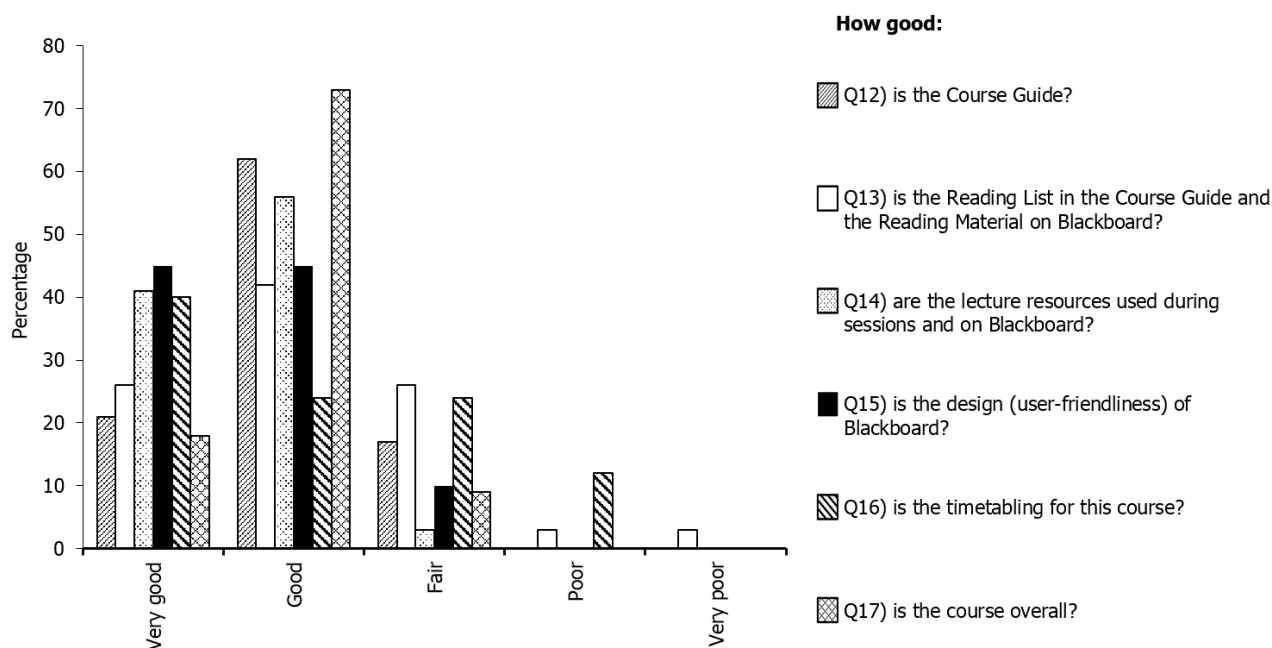
Figure 4. Responses about the Religious Education course.

To understand participants' views in more detail, Table 2 highlights some of their key comments. Interestingly, the majority of comments focussed on timetabling, confirming their dissatisfaction.

Table 2. Individual responses about the Religious Education course.

Timetabling
The timetable was not great, late sessions and [the] only course on that day. This course should be done in Year 2.
The course is interesting and to undertake this course during two big projects for other courses leaves RE at an unfair advantage. This course should be undertaken in year 2.
Some late sessions, or are the only session of the day. Would be handy to move to a day when we are already in or an early session to free up the rest of the day.
Lectures are usually done on days when we were not already in, meaning some of us are travelling 3+ hours for one lecture.
Should not be timetabled on a Friday afternoon. [mentioned twice]
Maybe could have been a bit earlier in the year to model importance of RE as taught?
Reading List/Material
Could be more content on the Rebus List. [mentioned twice]
Reading list is extensive but not got full access through ebooks.
Interactive/Electronic Reading List doesn't really work.

Overall students were satisfied with the Religious Education course Assessments; more specifically, the Assessment Methods, the extra information sheets about the assessments (also called Patches), the reduction of assessments compared with the previous academic year, peer assessment, and fairness (Figure 5). Although the participants were in their third year of undergraduate study, they would have liked to have had a preparation exercise (e.g. a prior workshop, procedural guidelines, criteria sheet of marking scales). The purpose of such an exercise would be to support them before completing the 'Peer Marking Method' during the formative assessments, which is comprised of two writing tasks called Patches 1 and 2 (Figure 5, Question 21). In the UK, written assessments are often

required to be completed within a specified length of text which is defined as a 'word count'. For the open-ended response question about Assessments (Table 3), the majority of independent responses expressed the need for an increase in the specified word count for the summative assessment (called Patch 3).
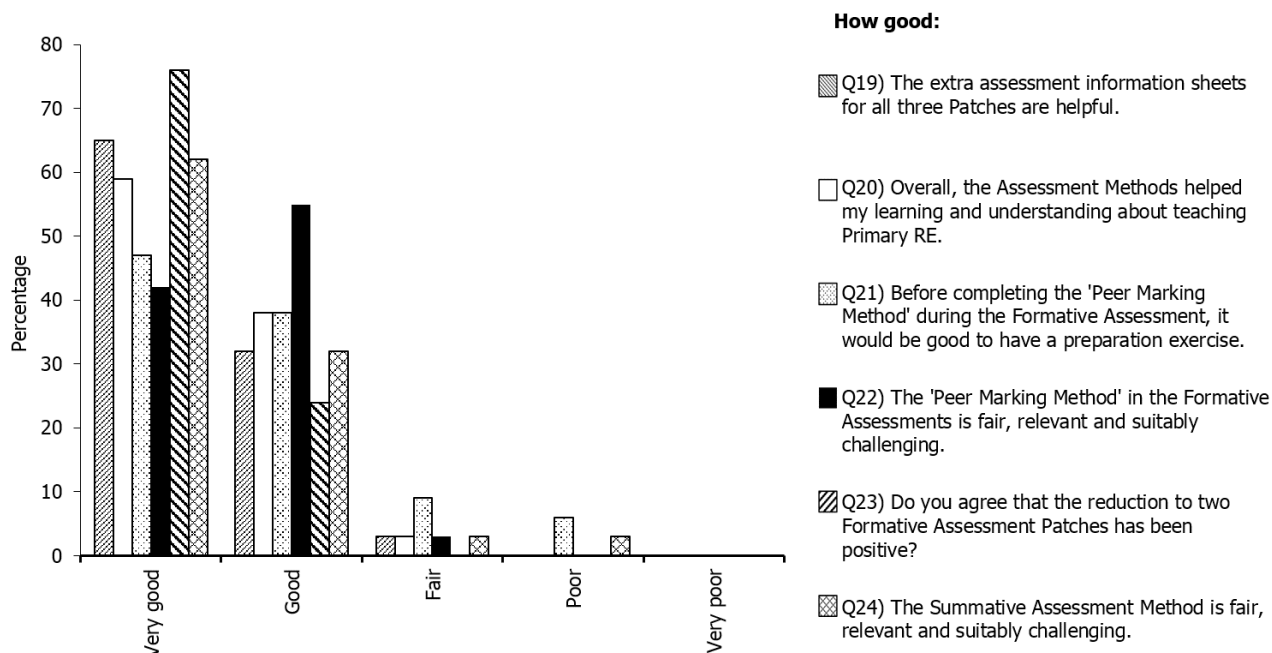
How good:

☒ Q19) The extra assessment information sheets for all three Patches are helpful.

☐ Q20) Overall, the Assessment Methods helped my learning and understanding about teaching Primary RE.

☒ Q21) Before completing the 'Peer Marking Method' during the Formative Assessment, it would be good to have a preparation exercise.

■ Q22) The 'Peer Marking Method' in the Formative Assessments is fair, relevant and suitably challenging.

▨ Q23) Do you agree that the reduction to two Formative Assessment Patches has been positive?

▥ Q24) The Summative Assessment Method is fair, relevant and suitably challenging.

Figure 5. Responses about the Assessments.

Table 3. Individual responses about the Assessments (Religious Education course).

If the word count [summative] is to be increased, I feel that would be of great benefit.
1200 words for a broad and controversial subject - very challenging! Understand in depth analysis but we should have opportunity to choose one/two areas (same as specialism).
Word count [summative] is low. Would be better if more words were added i.e. 2000 word count. It would allow students to include more important content rather than squeezing in.
Word count [summative] could be higher.
Word count [summative] should be increased to 1500 - there is a lot to say/be critical about in this course.
Patch 3 word count, personally I feel that the word count could be increased to 1500.
Patch 3 word count way too low to cover multiple topics AND be reflective.
Need more wordage for Patch 3!!!
Word count was fair/good and achievable.
It is good to have only a 1200 word essay [summative] right after dissertation. Gives us breathing time.
I like the word count.
I like the format of this assessment; it gives more variation to the course.
Word counts are fair and appropriate.

The final section in the Religious Education course SFF provides interesting data about the 'Student Experience' as follows:

Ninety-four percent of students felt confident to teach Primary RE after completing the course. Over half of all students (53%) stated that they shared comments/suggestions with their Student Representative(s) during the delivery of the Religious Education course. Nearly all students (97%) thought that their peers had participated well in the sessions. Also, 97% visited a religious place of worship as part of their field trip. Feedback from the open-ended question about the field trip was only positive; e.g. 'a very interesting experience - definitely worth including in course,' or 'good experience - would recommend to all.'

Considering Religious Education course session attendance, 41% attended 'all', 53% 'most' and 6% 'some' lessons. Students rated how many lessons they believed they had actively participated in as follows: 47% 'all', 50% 'most' and 3% 'some' lessons. For the qualitative question of 'How have you taken responsibility for your learning in the course?', responses included: applying good time management, carrying out independent academic reading/researching, organising and attending the field trip, ensuring the Patches (course Assessments) were completed on time, attending course sessions on time, and studying the Course Guide and material on Blackboard. Table 4 highlights individual responses about their 'positive' Student Experience; in particular, statements confirm the above key findings about the Religious Education course Lecturer and Assessments.

Table 4. Individual responses about the Student Experience.

List 3 things you liked about this Religious Education course
1. Lecturer, 2. content, 3. discussion
1. Great lecturer, 2. easy to understand assessment guidance, 3. engaging activities in lectures
1. Experiential opportunities, 2. reflective nature, 3. collaborative work on Patches and Seminars
1. Lecturer was extremely supportive, 2. lecturer confirmed things with Course Leader, 3. having patch work separated
1. Friendliness and helpfulness of the teacher, 2. varied resources, 3. formative assessments helped us to stagger our learning
1. Patches idea, 2. peer assessment, 3. religious visit
1. Providing a safe environment to discuss controversial issues related to religious education, 2. [no comment], 3. [no comment]

Discussion
Participants from student group discussions and a staff questionnaire saw some value of SFFs as a tool to improve the quality of teaching. Students (88%) were more in favour than staff (62%). Considering who should design the SFF, students unanimously wanted the Lecturer, who delivers the course in each campus, to design the SFF. Instead, the majority of staff preferred this to be done by the Course Leader. When considering which questions should feature in the Religious Education course SFF, overall there was a high level of agreement between student and staff opinion. The disagreements were on issues concerning: 1) timetabling, 2) the design (user-friendliness) of Blackboard, and 3) the communication between the Lecturer and the Course Leader. Students wanted to include those areas in the Religious Education course SFF, whereas staff were less in favour, recognising that not all areas have a direct link to them. Students have less awareness of the university's infrastructure (e.g. timetabling is organised by the timetabling team, not the Lecturer). However, the newly designed course SFF included questions on areas that were not under direct control of the lecturer for the purpose of gaining a clearer understanding of those issues.

Overall, quantitative and qualitative data from the newly designed course SFF complemented each other (Grebennikov and Shah, 2013). In view of improving the delivery of the Religious Education course, in none of the course SFF questions did students voice dissatisfaction about the Lecturer. However, although positive in this case study, it has been argued that allowing students to make such

rating could threaten academic freedom (Nasser and Fresko, 2002). Students may not have sufficient background and experience to make an accurate assessment (Chen and Hoshower, 2003) or the student ratings may simply be a measure of teacher popularity (Nasser and Fresko, 2002). However, one study (Richardson, 2005) showed that student-focused or learner-centred lecturers tend to get higher ratings. Also, with this type of outcome, Arthur (2009:444) warns that 'lecturers whose overall performance was evaluated positively could become 'fixated' on relatively minor issues criticised by students.' Therefore, Blair and Valdez Noel (2014:881) suggest that lecturers should look for 'some weight of evidence' in the SFFs before taking action. If feedback about a lecturer is entirely positive, it raises the question of whether it is still useful to enhance the course. Such feedback serves as a general confirmation of what is working well in a lecturer's teaching performance for future practice. In essence, this is maintaining current standards. However, lecturers should welcome constructive negative/critical feedback because ultimately this identifies where changes might be made for further enhancement. To allow a fair analysis in this research, the course SFF asked several questions about the Lecturer. A strength of the course SFF was the use of open questions for this area. Huxham *et al.* (2008) note that closed questions do not always provide the lecturer with specific feedback to improve his/her teaching. Open-ended questions allow for unconstrained feedback (Chen and Hoshower, 2003). In particular, Question 7 asked for feedback about the learning environment (Figure 3). This was also in consideration of the views expressed by Henard and Leprince-Ringuet (2015:4) that 'attention should be given not simply to the teacher's pedagogical skills, but also to the learning environment that must address the students' personal needs.'

Students expressed their unhappiness about timetabling which is in need of improvement. As previously noted, it makes sense why lecturers prefer to omit this question in the course SFF because this area is not organised by the lecturer. Henard and Leprince-Ringuet (2015:5) explain: 'The answering students tend to blame teachers for all problems, forgetting the role of the administration or the infrastructures,' a point also supported by Robertson (2004). Huxham *et al.* (2008:684) state, 'Whilst timetabling issues are usually beyond the control of individual tutors, they are clearly of importance to students and might have a large impact on overall satisfaction and attendance at a course.' Due to prior feedback from the 'student group discussions' expressing the need to implement a timetabling question in the newly-designed course SFF (but not by staff), this research had the benefit of capturing student opinion in this area. Timetabling is of great concern to students in the university, as shown in the qualitative and quantitative data, and plays a major role in how they perceive the course. Therefore, Henard and Leprince-Ringuet (2015) argue that the focus needs to encompass the whole institution, not just the teacher to improve the quality of teaching. To see an improvement in timetabling of course, a range of individuals/departments (e.g. university timetabling team, the Course Leader, Course Assessment Boards etc.) would need to interact to bring improvements.

Although in their final year, students would have liked to have had a preparation exercise before completing the 'Peer Marking Method' during the formative assessments (Patches 1 and 2). This confirms the view of Ballantyne, Hughes and Mylonas (2002:429), explaining that 'students often lack confidence in both their own and their peers' abilities as assessors.' Furthermore, participants were keen to have had an increased word count (specified length of the summative assignment) for their summative assignment and some students were unhappy about the timing of deadlines. Qualitative feedback in Table 2 showed that students wanted more access to further reading as follows: improvements could be made by 1) the university library to purchase more e-books, and 2) the Course Leader to provide more content on the Rebus List (online reading list). These are relatively minor issues that could be improved with low demand on resources.

Good teaching and appropriate assessments are some of the key factors which determine overall satisfaction levels (Blair and Valdez Noel, 2014; Ginns, Prosser, and Barrie, 2007). To make course outcome more effective, the university timetabling team, the Religious Education Course Leader and

to some extent the Lecturer could act upon the feedback points mentioned above. In reflection, Nasser and Fresko (2002:193) explain, 'Changes tended to be most frequent in three areas: course assignments, organisation of the course, and use of instructional strategies.'

Overall, the responses to the SFF showed clear trends to confirm what is working well and areas that should be considered for change which could bring significant enhancements to the Religious Education course. Nevertheless, this should not lead to the simple conclusion that SFFs within HE become useful and problem free after investing a little care and development into the process. It is critical to first determine which are the right questions, and, as Manwaring explains (1998:9), 'inappropriate or unrealistic questions will lead to unusable or irrelevant data' and the questions must have sufficient flexibility and open-endedness. Penny (2003) highlights the long and divisive history of student evaluation in HE but concludes that despite arguments and counter arguments on its validity and reliability, the predominant response in the literature is that it is useful. Student feedback is now being obtained in an environment of global competitiveness and increasing student consumerism (Gordon, 2005), and this creates tension in the relationship between student and tutor and/or institution. These challenges bring added complexity requiring careful navigation in the design, implementation and interpretation of SFFs. With the majority of students now as fee paying customers, it is particularly important to identify areas where potential conflicts of interests may exert bias.

Conclusion
As highlighted in the introduction to this paper, SFFs as a tool for SET have often been criticised for their low impact on the improvement of teaching and the student learning experience (Spooren, Brockx and Dimitri, 2013). As consumers enrolled into HE programmes, students can undoubtedly provide valuable first-hand feedback of their views and experiences. Ideally, this feedback should collectively give an accurate snapshot of the perceived positive and negative aspects of a given course or programme of study. The greatest challenge is in the methods of 'how' that data is collected and analysed. Many SFFs fail to devise questions which have high relevance to students' current concerns and therefore analysis of such data produces weak conclusions. This case study demonstrated that with careful planning and implementation at the local level, an SFF for a single study course produced unambiguous results. To achieve this, preparatory steps were taken to first engage with students who were the target group for the final SFF in a round table discussion culminating in a semi-structured questionnaire. Staff were consulted in a similar manner by means of an online questionnaire. This exercise helped form a priority list of key question areas that were most likely to reveal clear trends. A draft SFF was devised that took into consideration points raised in the student and staff questionnaires. Piloting of the draft SFF among students who were different from those who would complete the final SFF, allowed further refinement to ensure clarity of how the questions were posed and their scope. The final SFF generated clear results that have high potential to add value to course delivery. Its design was able to capture both major and minor issues in addition to those responses that confirmed what was working well.

What can practitioners in other HE institutions learn from this small case study? There are general features that can be applied to their own locale. These results pertained exclusively to a Religious Education course at one university and student opinions about the performance of a given lecturer. However, there are key elements of the process – the methods, design and implementation – that are not unique, and the same approach demonstrated here can be adopted by other practitioners to make effective use of SFFs. Determination of key areas for evaluation within the SFF can be greatly enhanced by a preliminary exercise of student and staff engagement via discussion forums and questionnaires. This initial survey also helps to reduce bias where insider researchers may (unwittingly) devise questionnaires based solely on their own assumptions without undertaking prior consultation. Including the most relevant questions in an SFF will no doubt improve the chances to observe

significant trends – this has a clear advantage over a generic, broad SFF. On this point, some may argue that this sort of intervention impacts objectivity because much of the subject matter of the questionnaire will be determined by the 'insider' researcher. To some extent this will be true, but I propose that the benefits of being an insider and asking the most relevant questions based on privileged insight (as opposed to an outsider) far outweigh the disadvantages. As Mercer (2007:3) puts it concerning insider research: 'what is lost on the swings is more than compensated for on the roundabouts.' There were many specific responses in this case study e.g. regarding timetabling, learning resources, and the course guide. These, in themselves, may not be applicable to other HE institutions/courses; however, the key message is that the SFF here proved to be an effective tool in the evaluation of specific issues, and it revealed relatively simple measures that could be taken to improve the course. Similarly, other practitioners can follow this example, taking full advantage of SFFs to collect responses on issues relating to their course(s).

Finally, SFFs are a tool to monitor student views on a regular basis; however, they require careful design to capture both quantitative and qualitative responses to questions that align well with the content, delivery and design of a given teaching course. The position of the student in relation to the lecturer and institution as a consumer is also an important consideration. Some SFFs may be overambitious by including too many parameters at the expense of more specific questions that have greater relevance to a given student group. Although this was a small case study, this report highlights a strategy that was successful to generate an SFF that produced clear results to guide future course improvements.

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