

*Innovative Teaching  
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# Student feedback on learning and teaching: The value of focus groups

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## Introduction

Traditional methods of student feedback at both individual unit and program level consist of a range of online or paper survey instruments. Frequent systematic evaluations of this nature are carried out by all higher education institutions to meet quality assurance requirements. Evaluation reports, alongside students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness (SETs) also provide evidence for academic tenure and promotion. Likert-style survey items with limited open-ended response categories are often used for student feedback on survey instruments. Feedback is generally categorised by content, resources and organisation of the unit as well as evaluating the learning and teaching activities and quality of delivery. Feedback is often undertaken just prior to or immediately upon completion of a unit of study, thus little is gained regarding the longer-term outcomes, as perceived by students, from the whole of unit experience. Therefore, it may be questioned whether current feedback systems provide timely, detailed information that ultimately enhances future student learning.

The literature presents varied arguments on the role, process and perceived benefits of SETs. It includes evidence that feedback of this nature, in isolation, is not useful for improving teacher effectiveness, whereas SETs combined with external consultation has been shown to improve outcomes (Marsh, 2007). This has led us to consider whether unit evaluation processes, in isolation of additional consultation, are optimal for improving unit offerings and subsequent student learning.

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## THE VALUE OF FOCUS GROUPS

The recent development of the Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework by the five Western Australian universities identified “student feedback from focus groups” along with “student feedback derived from external independent evaluation” as indicative evidence under the teaching criterion “design and planning of learning activities” (Office of Teaching and Learning, 2014). Focus group feedback from students is not a new form of unit evaluation, although previous studies have highlighted the issue of including this type of process within unit offerings, with student feedback subject to the “Hawthorne effect” (Hamilton, Pritchard, Welsh, Potter, & Michael, 2002). Pritchard, Potter and Saccucci (2009) overcame this issue through conducting focus groups at the end of unit completion, building on feedback gained throughout the unit. Exemplars of the focus group process, including a framework for unit review, are not available in the literature to date. The authors developed Figure 1 in response to this identified need.

## Innovation

The aim of this project was to develop a framework (Figure 1) for educators to utilise when conducting student focus groups to review higher education units. Focus group feedback sessions were designed following an identified need for further qualitative

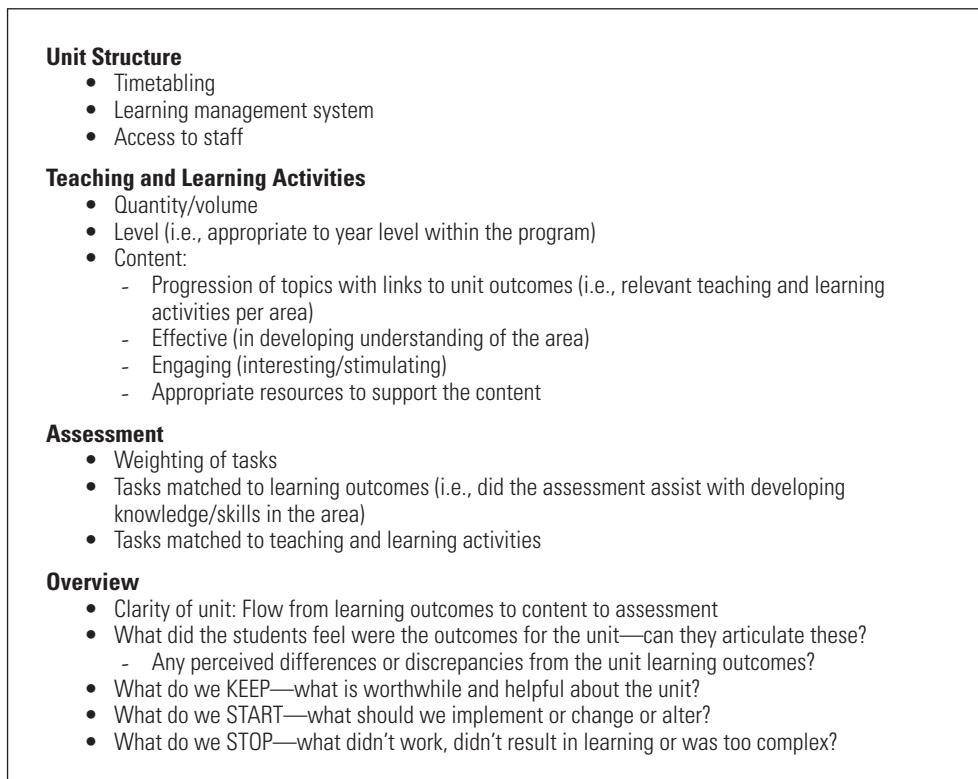


Figure 1. Focus group framework for unit review.

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review of learning outcomes and experiences from physiotherapy students within the School of Physiotherapy at The University of Notre Dame Australia. Each 1-hour focus group was undertaken during the semester following completion of the unit and run by two academic staff members who are not involved in teaching. Between six and eight students were randomly selected to attend from within each band of achievement following unit completion: pass, credit, distinction and high distinction. As students were randomly allocated from achievement bands to ensure a cross-section of learner feedback, focus group participants varied between unit reviews within each year group.

Ethical approval was not required in the development of the focus group framework with focus groups up to this point being run as feedback sessions for quality assurance purposes in an effort to enhance future student learning.

### **Evaluation method**

Six unit reviews have been conducted thus far with the process received positively by unit coordinators and students. Following completion of each review, a summary document was provided to the unit coordinator with recommendations under each section of the framework. Changes could then be implemented at the unit coordinator's discretion prior to teaching the next cohort of students. Learning outcomes reported have altered the emphasis and delivery of some aspects of curriculum. One example was the review of a "complex cases" final-year unit. Eight graduates attended the focus group, held 2 months after graduation. Graduates valued the learning gained from a group assignment that brought together clinical education experiences and complex clinical reasoning development. Discussions highlighted the lack of specific feedback to the whole year group on the clinical cases presented. The recommendation from the focus group was for more timely relevant feedback to the whole year group to consolidate and strengthen learning outcomes. Thus, the next cohort of final-year physiotherapy students were provided with an additional on-campus feedback session following completion of the assignment. Students relished the new format and the opportunity to ask questions and engage with teaching staff in this informal feedback environment.

### **Outcomes**

It would be counterproductive to measure the outcome of focus groups with the same teaching evaluations and unit content evaluations that explore the quality of teaching and content, more than reported student learning. However, unit content evaluations over time may provide some measure of student satisfaction with improvements made in direct response to issues identified. Changes year to year have been reported for units reviewed in this manner. One unit reviewed by request of the unit coordinator noted improvements with the student satisfaction rating increasing from 85.4% in 2013 to 97.9% in 2014.

### **What next?**

The current focus groups have been conducted as an opt-in opportunity for staff to gain further feedback on the learning outcomes of students within their units. This process will be continued, and with further dissemination of the framework, it is envisaged that other programs and disciplines may adopt this feedback method to enhance student learning.

## THE VALUE OF FOCUS GROUPS

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