Good Practice Guide: Student Feedback

**Incentivising student feedback for service units**

# How to use this guide

This guide, developed in partnership between the Students’ Association and the University of St Andrews, is intended to provide advice and suggestions that enable University professional service Units to gather meaningful and effective student feedback. The focus of this guide is limited to recommendations on good practice on engaging with students and their representatives, and other documentation and official guidance should be consulted when utilising feedback mechanisms. For example, you should consult with the Digital Accessibility Officer to ensure that a survey is accessible or seek guidance from the Data Protection Team on GDPR compliance.

This guide should be utilised in combination with additional Student Experience Strategic Management and student engagement sector resources, especially the full list of [Feedback Options for Service Units](https://universityofstandrews907-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/cmg9_st-andrews_ac_uk/EUNRc0H8sJtOt3j7oXRRDiMBd0a9kabCLGsKjn2-uHJUOw?e=53oSjn).

In line with the [Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework](https://www.sfc.ac.uk/assurance-accountability/learning-quality/tertiary-quality-project/), this resource is intended to support service units to work with students as partners in enhancing service delivery and provision. This guide recognises the role of the Students’ Association as the official representative voice for students at St Andrews and suggests mechanisms and guidance to empower every service and academic unit to engage directly with student voices. Where possible, service units should reference the sparqs [Student Partnership Staircase](https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/ch/Student%20partnership%20staircase%20A4.pdf), engaging and seeking Students’ Association Representatives and Officers to act as partners and experts and engaging general students as actors and information providers in line with the staircase roles.

# General Practice

## Clarify the need for feedback versus representation

Prior to seeking student feedback, a service unit should **first decide whether they should engage with students directly, or whether they should seek perspective from official Students’ Association representatives and officers**.

The following table suggests when a general student consultation may be appropriate (under the Feedback column) and when a Students’ Association representative should be consulted (the Representation column).

### Examples of when to consult students versus student association

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Feedback | Representation |
| Continuous feedback  “Rate your experience following your help desk visit today” | **Thematic feedback**  “Survey results indicate that students want longer help desk opening hours” |
| Preference-based or aesthetic changes “Which chair is most comfortable?” | **Process or system changes**  “We want to move to a new software for lecture capture.” |
| Operational changes (short-term effects) “Are our prices in the café fair and affordable?” | **Strategic changes**  “Where should new dining facilities be prioritised?” |
| User acceptance testing  “Has removing booking fees had a positive impact?” | **Policy development**  “We’d like to remove our late fees for book returns.” |
| Focus groups  “What employers do students want to see at a career fayre?” | **Review processes**  “We are undertaking a strategic or cyclical review of the Careers Centre.” |
| Customer journey mapping  “What are peak usage points for Registry services?” | **Requirements gathering**  “We are planning an overhaul of MySaint.” |
|  | **Demographic support**  “Do our services meet the needs of students with disabilities?” |
|  | **Temperature taking**  “Are students open to the idea of group counselling services?” |
|  | **Certifications**  EmilyTest and the Race Equality Charter |
|  | **Redevelopment projects**  “We’re running a project board for the New College development.” |

Where a professional services unit determines that feedback is appropriate, the unit is encouraged to **consider sharing outcomes of the feedback** (For example, survey results, student opinions) **with relevant Students’ Association Representatives**, who can help the unit debrief and understand student perspectives in more detail.

**If a service unit is in doubt about whether representative structures should be consulted** on a project, they can always contact the Students’ Association at [academicrep@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:academicrep@st-andrews.ac.uk).

## Utilise the Student Learning Experience Model (sparqs)

As part of Scotland’s Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework (TQEF), Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) has developed a [model of the Student Learning Experience](https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=293). The model breaks down the student journey into nine key building blocks, and each building block has a set of reflective questions that help students and staff highlight additional areas for development within a specific aspect of the learning experience.

Professional service units are encouraged to **utilise the reflective questions** from relevant sections of the [Student Learning Experience Model](https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/resource-item.php?item=293) (see pages 6 to14) when seeking student feedback, as these are purposefully designed to ensure that student input is mapped to their wider experience and sector context.

## Meet students where they are

Service units are encouraged to **visit and utilise student-facing spaces** when seeking feedback. Units should visibly demonstrate that they are seeking student voices and that they are keen to listen and respond to their opinions. Service units should **consider setting up in-person feedback mechanisms in high traffic areas** such as the entrance to buildings, outside study spaces, and the Students’ Association, making sure to get the relevant permissions.

Service units can also **utilise existing contact points with students** to gather feedback; for example, following an appointment, staff can ask a student to fill in a survey or ask if they would be interested in participating in an upcoming focus group.

With all feedback mechanisms, service units may find it helpful to **employ multiple modes of communication to reach students** (For example, social media, in-person, or email). Utilising an array of media has a higher chance of reaching different student demographics and deepening engagement with a project.

It is important to **explain to students the impact that their feedback** **will have** on operations or service delivery. Running an open forum is much more effective, if, for example, students understand that a specific change is being considered and that their opinions will shape a final decision.

From the beginning of a consultation, service units should **develop a plan to close the feedback loop** with students. Students are more likely to give robust and detailed feedback if they understand and see the results. Simply following up with participants via email, or sharing social media posts (anything visible and public-facing) about the result of changes based on student feedback can make an extraordinary difference in student trust and enthusiasm for a project. **Crediting students for their ideas and contributions** is equivalent to a free incentive that demonstrates that a service unit is passionate about the student voice.

Wherever possible, service units should endeavour to **celebrate changes made** in response to student feedback. Simple activities, like including signage that indicates how previous student suggestions have been actioned, incentivise students to provide further feedback.

As a final piece of guidance, service units are reminded that Students’ Association representatives and officers often engage with particular student communities; **building a project in partnership with a Students’ Association officer or committee** ensures that particular demographics (such as LGBT+ students, Chemistry students, or postgraduates) are able to contribute their voices and perspectives.

# Good Practice for Specific Feedback Mechanisms

The following subsections provide guidance and suggestions based on the mechanisms presented in the [Feedback Options for Service Units](https://universityofstandrews907-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/cmg9_st-andrews_ac_uk/EUNRc0H8sJtOt3j7oXRRDiMBd0a9kabCLGsKjn2-uHJUOw?e=53oSjn). The advice provided below is intended to maximise student engagement with each feedback mechanism.

## Focus Groups

When running a focus group, service units may benefit from **setting a clear and specific theme**. Students are more likely to be involved and provide quality feedback if there is a distinct outcome that relates to an element of their learning experience. For example, running a focus group to specifically seek student opinions on opening hours is more effective than an open-ended feedback opportunity.

Relatedly, student participation is strongest when a service unit can **lay out the intended outcomes and purpose** of the focus group in the initial call for recruitment and opening section of the focus group. Explaining the possible impact student opinions will have on service provision empowers students to share authentic and constructive feedback.

Service units are advised to **recruit a diversity of views and voices when forming a focus group**. It is important to account for factors such as year or level of study, race and ethnicity, disability status, and other characteristics. Seeking particular student perspectives ensures that answers and feedback is representative of the wider student body.

**Treat focus group participants as partners** and encourage them to collaborate with unit staff to create changes and enhancements. Ask open-ended questions that empower students to think creatively from a position of leadership, such as: “if you were the director of the team, what improvements would you recommend?”

Follow up on students’ answers and **treat the focus group as a conversation** rather than getting to the end of a checklist of preset-questions. Approach students’ perspectives with curiosity and dive into more depth about topics of mutual interest.

Service units can also **ask students if they are willing to participate in future focus groups** at the end. Also consider taking down students’ contact details (with permission) to follow up with them about the outcomes of their feedback or to discuss the topic in further detail.

## Surveys and Post-Service Questionnaire

Service units are advised to **keep the overall number of questions short** to encourage higher rates of completion. Each question in the survey should produce an output that is relevant and actionable to the service unit’s goal. If it is unclear what will be done with the resultant data, the question can be removed from the survey to encourage higher response rates.

Rather than running full, formal surveys in links, service units may find it more effective to **embed a smaller number of questions** in a social media post, or embed a Microsoft Form in an email. Students are most likely to answer surveys on their phones, and designing quick, already-open questions encourages students to respond quickly in their own time.

Service units might find it beneficial to **explain how the feedback on each question will be used** to make an impact (For example, “student feedback will directly influence which research database subscriptions we continue next academic year”).

## Pre- and Post- Service Assessment

Meaningful data can be gleaned by conducting both pre-and post-service assessments. For example, asking students to rate their familiarity with or understanding of a service at the beginning and the end of an appointment can be used as a measurement of impact. **Compare pre-and post-service data** for individual users to glean insights about service delivery.

Service unit staff are encouraged to **talk with students at every contact point** and to treat the individual perspectives and experiences raised as feedback data points. **Consider compiling feedback gathered informally in a central database** and using it to search for trends, themes, and possible actions.

**Empower all service unit staff to escalate student feedback and concerns** through formal reporting lines as a part of continuous enhancement of service delivery. Train staff to respond positively to student feedback and share with them how action can and will be taken based on student input.

In more formal pre and post service assessments, **ensure that questions are focused** and that they directly lead to an enhancement or priority for the unit. For instance, at the conclusion of a workshop, a staff member might ask student participants to clarify their understanding of the learning objectives and rate their confidence after undertaking the training.

Service units may also find it useful to **employ quick-touch options** to collect user feedback both pre and post service. For instance, having a tablet or display board with a one-tap question utilising a rating system, such as “how was your experience at our facility today”.

## Open Forum

Typically, an Open Forum offers a chance for students to provide open-ended feedback in a large group setting. Open Fora are often held for several hours and any student is encouraged to attend.

In order to get the most out of an Open Form, service units are advised to **make the meeting asynchronous**, meaning students can drop in at any point, provide feedback individually, and leave when they are ready. Traditional Open Fora often have only one speaker or topic presented at a time (with staff on stage and students in the audience), whereas a more flexible structure is likely to secure wider and more detailed participation. Service units should consider, for example, hosting an Open Form all afternoon (For example, from 13.00 to 16.00) in a visible and accessible location with incentives for attending.

At an asynchronous Open Forum, it is good practice to **utilise a variety of smaller mechanisms to collect feedback** at “stations”. For example, a whiteboard or flip-chart with prompts at one station, an anonymous comment box at another station, a ping-pong ball voting/rating system, and staff asking specific questions in small groups at another station. **Having a mix of open-ended and focused questions** increases the likelihood that each participant will engage with the topics raised.

At the entrance, staff should **encourage students to share ideas and interact with one another** at the Forum in order to gather perspective about shared experiences and to deepen engagement with the activities.

## Pop Up Feedback Booth

Mobile or temporary feedback stations are an excellent way of hearing student opinions in the spaces they frequent. Service units should consider utilising pop-up tables, whiteboards, rating or voting options, placing a sticker on the appropriate section, post it note responses, and other creative feedback mechanisms in high traffic spaces like Sally’s Quad or outside a relevant demographic area like Martyr’s Kirk Library.

Staff can **employ both quick-fire feedback options** such as an interactive timeline or heat map **and more in-depth feedback opportunities** like a short survey administered by the staff member present. Staff at the table are encouraged to **converse with student participants** to learn more about their opinions in-depth and glean stronger insights into student experiences with the service.

A Pop-Up Feedback Booth gives staff a chance to **share more involvement opportunities** with students who show interest or enthusiasm. Directing students to an upcoming Open Forum or inviting them to a Focus Group to share additional thoughts is encouraged.

## Social Media Giveaway

Service units can **use the various features built-in to social media** to encourage students to engage with specific questions. For example, Facebook and Instagram have capacities to build in polls, and every platform allows students to like, comment, share, or click links within a post. Students who engage through one or more of these mechanisms can be entered into a drawing for an incentive. Due to the nature of social media, drawings and giveaways are more effective than incentivising every individual participant.

Service units are encouraged to **collaborate with or tag other relevant University and Students’ Association accounts** when making a post to gather feedback. Doing so greatly extends the reach and visibility of an individual post or question.

Students tend to be more likely to engage when a post involves **photos and videos of real people** as opposed to graphics.

## Passive Feedback Collection

Service units can **use both physical and electronic methods** of passive feedback collection such as in-person comment boxes, website feedback forms, and other similar features.

Occasionally, staff might **move the collection mechanism to a more prominent location than usual** to encourage feedback and prevent the passive mechanism from disappearing into the background.

When a particular question or need for general service feedback is required, units might **consider assigning a staff member to direct students to provide feedback** via the Passive Collection Point. This will effectively make the mechanism active for a short time period. For example, a front-desk reception may direct students to fill in a quick 3-question survey while they wait for a 1:1 session.

Passive feedback mechanisms can feel like a bit of a black hole to students, so **consider using creative phrasing that explains that feedback will make a difference and will be actioned** For example, a comment box that says “Message the Managers” is more effective than “General Comments”. Prominently display actions taken as a result of user feedback next to or linked to the site of the Passive Collection Point.

## User Testing Session

Like a Focus Group with a hands-on approach, User Testing Sessions should be used to seek real-time student experiences with a service or function. Service units can **recruit for User Testing Sessions by advertising them as opportunities to “see behind the curtain”** or become an early adopter of a technology, service, or application.

It is important that staff **explain benefit or purpose of the service or activity** and what the parameters for student activity in the session might look like. What questions does the unit hope will be answered in the session, or what boundaries or weak points might they like students to test?

**Assigning students a mix of collective or individual tasks or projects** during a user testing session is likely to encourage participation from all participants.