Enhancing Student Engagement in the Curriculum

Gemma Allen\textsuperscript{a}, Emma Claffey\textsuperscript{b}, Philip Smither\textsuperscript{a}, Matthew Almond\textsuperscript{b} and Joy Collier\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a} – Department of Classics, University of Reading
\textsuperscript{b} – Department of Chemistry, University of Reading
\textsuperscript{c} – Centre for the Development of Teaching and Learning, University of Reading

Abstract

We have investigated two principal aspects of Student Engagement in the Curriculum. First the opportunities that students have to provide feedback on their learning and secondly how they can influence their curriculum. Our study has focussed upon students within the Departments of Classics and Chemistry at University of Reading and we have compared our findings with other departments at Reading and with departments of Classics and Chemistry at other HEIs. In the first stage of our study we carried out interviews of staff and students across a range of departments focusing on the areas of (i) questionnaires, (ii) staff-student liaison committees and (iii) the use of focus groups. We then sought to determine the “student view” by carrying out detailed questionnaire surveys of Part 2 students within the departments of Classics and Chemistry at University of Reading. In the final stage of our investigation we carried out two special projects to investigate the use of social media sites such as Facebook in providing feedback and to consider the possibilities for student-led modules. We have found that the current most important methods for student engagement in curriculum development at the University of Reading and at other similar HEIs remain Staff-Student Committee meetings and feedback returns on lectures. The main problems with these are that: (i) students are unclear about what is done as a result of issues raised by the above channels; (ii) students often do not know who their course “rep” is; (iii) completion rates for end-of-module returns are often low if electronic forms are used; hard copy forms give a much higher rate of return. We recommend that good practice in this area is that students should be informed about how their feedback is dealt with, that they should understand clearly that their feedback is important and that they should know who their course reps are. We note the success of the Chemistry Part One review and would recommend this format to others. We found that students were typically rather reluctant to engage with Board of Studies (BoS) activities but we feel that this situation may change now
that all BoS have a student member. It is clear that students like to have clear, detailed and where possible standardised information on modules. It is possible that the provision of KIS data on MDFs will help in this regard. Students suffer from email overload and we would recommend that where possible departmental information sent by email is condensed into a single email rather than several. We note that one of the most important factors in staff-student feedback (in both directions) is simply that staff are seen by the students to be approachable.

In the specific area of using social media such as Facebook for feedback we concluded that good practice would involve (i) the promotion of a departmental Facebook page in welcome packs/emails before starting university; (ii) using Facebook to share information such as jobs, recommended websites and other material of interest outside of the curriculum and (iii) setting up year group/module specific pages for class groups to chat and share information. We would recommend that Facebook (if used) should be used as an aid and as an extra source for contacting students alongside official methods of communication and not to replace these.

Contents

Section 1 – A Review of Current Practice

A: At Reading

B: At other HEIs

Section 2 – The Student View

A: Student engagement survey in Classics

B: Student engagement survey in Chemistry

Section 3 – Special Projects

A: Facebook as a tool for feedback and student engagement

B: The student-led Classics module
Section 4 – Conclusions, Examples of Good Practice and Suggestions for the Future

A: General Conclusions

B: Executive Summary

C: Specific Recommendations for good practice in the use of Facebook

Section 1 – A Review of Current Practice

The first stage of our project was to address the question: what is the current situation regarding student engagement at the University of Reading and how does this compare with the situation at other HEIs? For the purpose of the project the aspects of student engagement we were looking at were the opportunities students have to provide feedback on their learning and/or to influence curriculum development. It was necessary for us to be somewhat selective in obtaining this information. As such we focussed our studies upon departments from two specific areas of the University – some that can be seen as “Science” based and others that are “Humanities” based. For comparison with other HEIs and for the more detailed surveys that follow later in this report we focused specifically upon two subjects namely Chemistry and Classics. This choice reflected the expertise of the panel carrying out the work and again allowed a comparison between two contrasting areas of the University.

A. At University of Reading

A review of current practice in student engagement was carried out by interviewing School or Departmental DTLs and current students in nine departments at the University of Reading. Three specific areas were addressed: (i) the use of feedback questionnaires for module evaluation, (ii) the role and activity of Staff Student Liaison Committees and (iii) the use of focus groups for gaining student feedback. The results from each Department are described below.

Department of Chemistry

Questionnaires: Feedback questionnaires in hard copy are handed out at the end of each module in the last lecture. They are generally handed out at the start of the lecture to be filled out and handed back in at the end. About 80% are returned. Issues are discussed at Board of Studies (BoS) and at Staff Meetings.
Staff Student Committee: At least one rep from each year attends. Usually there is no need for an election process. The Committee has a staff secretary and a student chair. Two or three members of staff from different subject areas attend. Student issues are raised at the committee meeting. The SSC reports to the Board of Studies formally, but also to the Teaching Enhancement Group. There is a staff meeting once a term which then talks about issues raised at the SSC. Minutes are posted on Blackboard site.

Part One Review – focus groups asking part one students their opinion on their first year. The year group is given a questionnaire asking them to rate from one to 8 which of 8 topics they wanted to talk about most at the focus group. Students are separated into groups depending on which topic they rated most important. These groups are given two topics, one major and one less important to discuss depending on which group they chose to be in. Each group is assigned someone, a lecturer or PhD student to chair the group. The groups are given an hour to discuss and then bring their opinions back to the rest of the year in a 5 minute presentation. There is then the opportunity for the whole year group to ask questions, raise issues etc.

Department of Food Science

Questionnaires – The feedback questionnaires are quite detailed (2 sides of A4) and are used to monitor a third of the modules each year. New modules or modules with changes are always monitored. The questionnaires are handed out at the end of modules, mid module problems are taken to lecturer then to the Director of Teaching and Learning if not resolved. Information from the forms goes to the SSC. This information is also discussed at teaching and learning meetings and is fed through to reps. These are handed out in the end of lectures and usually get a good return, around 95%. However, this year questionnaires were sent out electronically and got a very poor return, only 7%. There is to be changes to the format of the form to make it more like the chemistry feedback forms with space for information and comments about lecturers.

Staff Student Committee: There is an undergraduate committee and a post graduate committee with student reps from each course. These SSC meetings occur at least once a term, although try to have two. The minutes are circulated to staff, reps and put up on Blackboard. The committee is chaired by the Head of Department. Around 30 people attend the meeting including 1 student rep for each course in each year and the Teaching and Learning Director.
Focus Groups – These have been run in the past, mainly for first year courses. Some were run last year because of the changes that took place with the courses. Courses were made more interactive and project based and these changes are set to continue once changes have been made to the post graduate courses. It was found that first years had problems with the way things were taught, specifically the volume of information and seeing the relevance of things they would not need until later, for example, chemistry taught by the chemists.

School of Pharmacy

Questionnaires – Feedback forms similar in format to chemistry. Questions based on lecturers with marks for each. These are handed out in the last lecture of a module. Around 50% are returned. The information from the forms is used to review the modules, through the BoS.

Staff Student Committee: The SSC meetings take place once a term. The Senior Tutor and a member of staff from each division attend. Two student reps from each year group attend, a rep from the pharmaceutical society and a rep from RUMPS – Reading University MPharm Society. The meeting is chaired by the Senior Tutor. Feedback from each year group is sent in an email to the Senior Tutor with comments a week before the meeting. Students do not sit in on other meetings such as the Board of Studies (situation at August 2011; now student reps on BoS). Feedback is taken to the BoS.

Focus Groups – No focus groups were run in Pharmacy at the time of the survey (August 2011).

School of Biological Sciences

Questionnaires – These are paper based and are handed out at the end of the module. The feedback is taken seriously, particularly the written comments which have a broad variety. About 50% are returned.

Staff Student Committee: The SSC meets twice a year. The meeting takes place over lunch and usually takes 1-1.5 hours. The student reps are nominated by the students. There is one from each year, however not one from each course, although there is usually a good spread between the two halves of the school (Organism and Ecology one side, Bio molecular the other side.) Reps are usually kept the same throughout the three years. The meeting is chaired by a 3rd year student. The Director of Teaching and Learning, a secretary from the office and
a Senior Tutor (project supervisor) attend. Action points that cannot be resolved in the SSC meeting are dealt with by the Director of Teaching and Learning. Minutes are sent to School Management, faculty reps and student reps. It is being discussed whether course reps should attend the Board of Studies meetings (August 2011). It is also a possibility that they will attend the Teaching and Learning Committee.

*Focus Groups* – Normally Biological Sciences does not hold focus groups, however, four have been run recently (August 2011), one for each year group. Turnout was very poor, however, the feedback students provided was positive.

*Other Information* – No part coordinators, the range of courses and modules is too broad. Biological Sciences have programme advisors instead. There is a difference in how different courses are examined.

**School of Politics and International Relations**

*Questionnaires:* The School uses questionnaires at the end of each module, and also at the end of the students’ degrees. Module convenors decide on the questions asked, although a generic set of questions tend to be used by everyone. At the end of the questionnaire, a lot of importance is placed on a section at the end which asks for much more qualitative input and detail on the student experience. The questionnaire is answered by as many students as possible during the final seminar of the module.

*Staff-Student Committee:* The SSLC meets termly. It is administrated by a delegated member of staff who organises elections for key posts as well as such things as room bookings for committee meetings. An elected student chairperson runs the meeting, and the agenda is set by the students themselves in conjunction with the staff convenor of the committee.

*Other Feedback:* The School uses no other formal methods of obtaining feedback with the exception of student attendance at the Board of Studies. However, it has been found that informal avenues of obtaining feedback are very effective.

*Feedback in General:* Some of the feedback given is very helpful. Module convenors write reports on the questionnaires and suggest changes based on the findings by students. All reports come to the Head of Department for scrutiny and, if necessary, further action. In a number of instances, issues will be put on the agenda for the Board of Studies, and this meeting is attended by the student chairperson of the SSLC.
Department of English Literature

*Questionnaires:* The Department uses the standard course-wide set of questions, which are answered by all students that attend their seminar group in Week 9 when the questionnaire is presented. The questionnaire is presented to the students in the Autumn and Spring terms at the end of each module (as most English Literature modules run for one term only).

*Staff-Student Committee:* The Staff-Student Liaison Committee meets once a term. It is chaired by a member of staff and attended by two members of staff and by student representatives from all three years. Discussions include any student concerns about all aspects of the English Literature syllabus.

*Other Feedback:* As the Department of English Language and Literature is a large department, it delivers all of its teaching by way of a combination of lectures and seminars. This small-group teaching permits constant informal feedback on the Department’s teaching.

*Feedback in General:* Feedback is discussed at the Board of Studies, though any urgent matters are dealt with by the Head of Department immediately. In general the feedback is very helpful, but there are some exceptions to this, such as when students have inappropriate expectations of university-level teaching, or when it is overly personalised.

Department of Classics

*Questionnaires:* Every module is evaluated by students by way of questionnaires. These questionnaires use a standard format which can be modified by the Teaching and Learning Committee or the Board of Studies. The questionnaires are filled in by students in week 9 of the Autumn and Spring terms. Results of the questionnaires are then taken to the SSLC at the end of either the Autumn or Spring terms.

*Staff-Student Committee:* The Staff-Student Liaison Committee takes place in Autumn and Spring term. Representatives from every module attend, plus the elected Course Representatives. The Departmental Director of Teaching and Learning chairs, and has one member of staff present to take minutes. During the meeting, feedback from all modules is received. The library is also discussed, along with discussions on course work and assignments, personal tutors, joint degrees, and any other business that members of the
committee may bring up. The minutes are put up on BlackBoard, and are also available in hard copy in the Classics Resource Room.

**Other Feedback:** Although the Department does not use focus groups, it does encourage final year students to fill in an exit survey. Students attend compulsory meetings with their personal tutors in the Autumn and Spring terms, where feedback may be taken by the personal tutor to other staff meetings, such as the Teaching and Learning Committee and the Languages Committee.

**Department of Archaeology**

**Staff-Student Committee:** The SSLC is attended by one representative of each year. Feedback from the SSLC is disseminated via course reps rather than staff. Most students knew their course reps. They find course reps useful. Most students did not know what the BoS meetings were and felt attending these would be of no direct relevance to them. Some students appeared to be unclear about how issues raised at SSC were dealt with at Departmental level.

**Other Feedback:** Students of Archaeology suggested that module information is not detailed enough. They feel a better breakdown of the module before the term starts is needed and more information when selecting modules. They found the end of term feedback session fairly useful but not as useful as the electronic questionnaires filled out for each module.

When asked about how they would like to receive information about their course BB was not high on the list. They feel the page is too busy and cluttered making it hard to navigate. They also found inconsistency in the information uploaded by different lecturers. When asked about Facebook it was noted it is used by the course reps and regularly for peer support on Departmental matters.

**Department of Psychology**

**Questionnaires:** The Psychology Department are eager this year to have student reps have more input and influence over their course. They evaluated all part 1 and 2 modules using the PRS system during week 9 and 10 of the autumn term. The PRS system was chosen as it meant much less time would be spent inputting data and the results could be analysed easier.

This was done by getting together all the students reps and dividing them into three groups. These groups then each discussed what questions would be most important for them to ask the rest of the year group. Each group suggested their questions and from all the proposed
questions a number were chosen to be asked of every module. Four questions each were chosen for lectures, workshops and tutorials.

Staff Student Committee: Overall it seems that students who aren’t directly involved as student reps were unsure about what methods of feedback are available to them and how these work. They also felt that they were not kept informed of things that were done as a result of feedback forms and SSLCs. A possible way of improving this could be to get the reps to talk to the year group and sum up what has been done at the end of each term. In general it was thought that the system newly introduced by RUSU for electing course reps was confusing and less helpful than the old method. Having students sit on the BoS was seen as having both advantages and disadvantages, however, it would probably be less useful than the SSLC for raising issues.

Other Information: Module information was generally seen as good, however this could be improved by providing a break-down of lectures and a reading list before students started the module as this would allow them to prepare better.

B. At Other HEIs

A comparison of the mechanisms available for student engagement at the University of Reading with those at other HEIs was made by comparing specifically the provision in the Departments of Chemistry and Classics at Reading with the same subject departments at other HEIs. This information was gathered by interviewing Departmental DTLs (or equivalent at the department that we were surveying). The departments surveyed were Chemistry at the Universities of Bath and Southampton and Classics at Royal Holloway, University of London and at a second (Russell Group) HEI that declined to be named in the report.

School of Chemistry, University of Bath

Questionnaires – Distributed as hard copies at the end of each unit. These are seen by the unit convenor (member of staff who takes responsibility for student feedback) and Head of Department. The questionnaires are reported back to the SSLC. If any scores are below 2.5 / 5 then action needs to be taken to make improvements. Questionnaires are sent out electronically through University. They have a number of standard questions that are asked by the University and also contain any questions that the Department wants to add. The questionnaires are sent out at the end of each block of teaching. Percentage return is not
certain, estimated at around 50%. Automatic reminders are sent out if the survey is not completed. In addition some lecturers do their own feedback questionnaires electronically, on paper or using voting systems, usually if they’ve tried something new, however this is uncommon.

**Staff Student Liaison Committee:** Main form of student feedback. Students meet with staff and discuss the curriculum and what they would like to see changed. Staff must act on any issues discussed in meeting. At least two representatives from each year group are present, ideally one from each different course programme (e.g. Chem with management, Chem for drug discovery etc). Student reps are elected by other students. Also present are members of staff such as the senior tutor and placement tutor, along with a post grad rep. The student reps are elected by other students who also elect a student chair for the meeting. The SSLC meetings take place at least twice a semester. Meetings involve: (i) Feedback from unit questionnaires; (ii) Informing students of Course Committee discussions and asking for their input on proposed changes to the course; (iii) Student feedback on things they would like changed and how things are going. Minutes from the meeting go to staff meetings, university and students union. Usually get around the right number of people volunteering to be student reps. Students do have to vote for the reps, although realistically no one is turned down. Usually around 15 student reps on SSLC over all years and courses.

**Course Committee** – a group of staff who meet monthly to discuss teaching in the Department. Changes that need to be made to programmes and units are usually discussed here. From September a student rep will sit in on these meetings. Minutes are sent to staff, students and the faculty.

**Other** – There are also student reps who sit on Faculty teaching quality meetings and approval panels for new units and programmes and director of studies meetings. These are usually sabbatical officers of the Students Union.

**School of Chemistry, University of Southampton**

**Questionnaires** – Simple forms, one side of A4, have recently been cut down. Scores on these are important to lecturers as it shows their impact in teaching. Feedback questionnaires are handed out in paper form at the end of lectures, in the final lecture. Because it’s important to the academics, the students are pushed quite hard to fill in the forms; which means there is a good return rate.
**Staff Student Liaison Committee** - (SSLC) Meetings are quite interactive. Meetings are attended by 2 student reps from each year, the 4 Year Tutors, the Director of Programmes, 2 Lab Managers, the 3 Heads of Teaching and 1 student union rep. Meetings take place once a term and usually last between 2 and 3 hours. Concerns are raised by year reps and then discussed. The meeting is chaired by a staff member with the help of a student co-chair who chairs a part of the meeting. Minutes from the meeting are put on Blackboard on a site for SSLC (along with exam feedback, summer homework etc). They are also sent to the year reps and staff. Students do seem to want to be involved as there are effects seen from concerns raised in the meetings.

**Feedback Focus Group** – Focus group for first years to give feedback on the year. Split up into different groups each of which is given a different topic to discuss. These are usually done every year, however not every year.

**Teaching Meetings** – Meetings occur three times a year. Feedback from SSLC is discussed.

**Department of Classics, Royal Holloway, University of London**

**Questionnaires**: Standard paper-based College questionnaires are used currently, although there is an aspiration to move to an electronic format. The students on individual courses fill out these questionnaires, which are presented to the students usually in the penultimate lecture of each course. Students fill these out upon receipt, and then they are collected by a student and delivered to the Departmental Office.

**Staff-Student Committee**: There is a Staff-Student Committee which takes place three times a year. Attendees include Head of Department, two other members of academic staff, two elected representatives of each of the three undergraduate years, an elected MA and an elected PhD representative and a member of Library staff attend, and a member of the Departmental admin staff takes the minutes. A student takes the Chair, although the meetings and agendas are organised by the Departmental Administrator in consultation with the Head of Department and the Committee Chair. Issues discussed include any issues that students want to raise, plus Library issues. Sometimes issues are raised by staff, such as planned changes to the curriculum or to course choice procedures. Minutes from the meeting are published on the SSC noticeboard in the Department and sent to the Student Union.
Focus Groups: Focus groups are not used in the Classics Department, but the Library invited students and staff in an open invitation. Student attendance is low, but groups come up with good ideas which the Library acts on.

Other Feedback: Informal feedback in discussion between students and staff is also used. Feedback informs decisions on changes to the way courses are taught, and in recent years has been particularly useful in improving the Library’s understanding of the needs of the students. A summary of the questionnaires is given to each member of staff when he/she completes the “Annual Monitoring Report” on the courses he/she has taught, and there is a question on that report which asks about issues raised in questionnaires or other feedback.

Department of Classics at Second Anonymous HEI (Russell Group)

Questionnaires: This HEI uses online questionnaires that have a mix of scoring and free-text questions. These are integrated with modules or programmes on the Virtual Learning Environment website. The students fill these out from the end of the second term, when the questionnaires go live.

Staff-Student Committee: There is a Staff-Student Committee which takes place three times a year (termly). Attendees include Head of Department, Directors of Undergraduate Studies and Taught Postgraduate Programmes. The students who attend are the students elected to represent their cohorts on the committee. The meeting is chaired by the Head of Department. Although students do not help run the committee, they do suggest topics for discussion. Other topics include everything relevant to development of the programme and anything about the Department that the students would like to have discussed. The minutes from the meetings are easily accessible by all members of the Department, including students, and a summary is e-mailed to everyone. The minutes are also received by the Board of Studies, and become a part of its formal record.

Focus Groups: Focus groups are not used in the Classics Department at this HEI.

Other Feedback: No formal feedback, other than the questionnaires and Staff-Student Committee, is used. However, students are represented on the Board of Studies, and the Department take into account the National Student Survey. Overall, feedback is very helpful. Module tutors are expected to take it into account when they next run their modules. A planning meeting is arranged, at which students are represented, and responses to module feedback is reviewed.
Section 2 – The Student View – Results of Student Surveys

Detailed surveys were carried out of Part 2 (2011-12) students in Departments of Classics and Chemistry at the University of Reading to determine the student view on the current situation regarding student engagement and on how things might develop in the future. Our first, and more detailed survey, was conducted with Part 2 Classical Studies students.

A. Student Engagement Survey in the Classics Department at the University of Reading

A questionnaire was handed to a group of Part Two Classical Studies students, asking various questions about the current methods of student-staff communication, and by extension, the current opinion of the students in regards to student engagement. The following is a summary and analysis of the results of this questionnaire.

1). Students were asked how useful the following methods of course feedback are, with 6 being the least useful and 1 being the most useful:
   - Feedback forms (1)
   - The Staff-Student Liaison Committee (2)
   - Course Representative Conventions (3)
   - The Part One Review (4)
   - The Departmental office (5)
   - Sitting on Board of Studies meetings (6)

As Fig. 1 shows, it was found that students believe that feedback forms are the most effective way of communicating feedback on courses and their modules. Students also found that the Staff-Student Liaison Committee is useful for giving feedback. However, we can also see from these results that students seem to find that sitting on the Board of Studies and Course Representative Conventions are not an effective way of communicating feedback.
2) Students were asked if they felt that they were adequately represented within the university. Fig. 2 shows that a very large majority (90.5%) believe that they are in fact adequately represented.
Fig. 2: Proportion of Part 2 Classical Studies students at University of Reading 2011-12 who believe that they are adequately represented at university level.

3) Students were asked if they felt that enough information about modules is provided before beginning the course. Fig. 3 shows how dissatisfied many students are with provision of module information prior to commencing the lectures.

![Bar Chart]

Fig. 3: Proportion of Part 2 Classical Studies students at University of Reading 2011-12 who believe that they are given sufficient information prior to the start of a module.

In the Comments section, eight students commented that the lack of provision of course work essay titles prior to commencing the module hinders their learning and ability to engage with the module. Eight students also commented on the fact that the quality of module descriptions is entirely dependent on the staff member responsible for writing them; two students stated that this led to differences in quality and quantity of information available for each individual module. One student specifically stated that disorganised staff members were to blame for inadequate availability of information about modules before commencement. Two students also specifically commented on the fact that some module descriptions are undetailed, and even in some cases inaccurate.

4) As a follow up to question 3 students were asked to rank in order of importance certain types of module information that should be given before the modules begin.

After collecting and comparing the results of this question, an average was made so that we may see how the students ranked the options in order of importance:
1st - A reading list for the module
Joint 2nd - A title for each lecture accompanied by a summary / Clear course work information
4th - A reading suggestion for each lecture
5th - Information on extra costs
6th - Amount of contact hours per week

It is interesting to note that Classicists in Part Two seem to care the least about contact hour information being available.

5) Students were asked how often they checked three different methods of communication that the University uses in order to keep in touch with students: E-mails, BlackBoard, and the Departmental noticeboard. The findings are summarised in Fig. 4.

![Graph showing frequency of checking different methods of communication](image)

**Fig. 4 Frequency of checking different methods of communication by Part 2 Classical Studies students at University of Reading 2011-12.**

Fig. 4 shows that Classical Studies students rely most heavily on their e-mails as a means for staff to keep in touch with them. BlackBoard remains useful to some students; however the frequency of use shows that Blackboard is of less use to students by far than e-mails. The Departmental noticeboard appears to be of little use to Classical Studies students.

6) The students were asked if they knew where to find various aspects on BlackBoard. As the online learning environment is a very useful tool for both staff and students alike, it also seemed wise to inquire as to the students’ main use of the website. Fig. 5 shows how well students can work Blackboard.
In conclusion, most students seem to know Blackboard well. Perhaps in the future, BlackBoard could be used to further the students’ engagement in their curriculum?

However, it should be noted that most students’ primary uses of BlackBoard are for electronic work submission and for acquiring lecture notes. Three students commented that their use is primarily announcements, and several others commented that they also use BlackBoard to obtain the course work questions and bibliographies.

7) Students were asked if they thought that students should have more of a say in what they are taught. Fig. 6 shows their response.

![Survey Results](image.png)

**Fig. 5: Use of Blackboard as reported by Part 2 Classical Studies students at University of Reading 2011-12.**

**Fig. 6 Proportion of Part 2 Classical Studies students at University of Reading 2011-12 who believe that they should have more of a say in what they are taught.**
Interestingly, almost 43% of students said that students should not have more of a say in what they are taught. However it must be said that the majority of students believe that students should have a say in what they are taught.

Six students suggested that a very small number of core modules after Part One would allow this. Five students suggested that feedback forms would help students to have a say in how they are taught. Several students suggested that a greater choice of modules would help. Two people suggested that lecturers should ask students what they want to learn. One student suggested that choosing topics, not modules, would be the way forward in allowing students to have a say in their curriculum.

**Student Engagement Survey in the Department of Chemistry**

To back up the survey of Part 2 Classical Studies students a rather shorter survey of Part 2 (2011-12) Chemistry Students was carried out. Following analysis of the data supplied by the Classical Studies students two principal questions were addressed. First what methods of feedback are most effective and useful? Secondly, following the finding that 43% of Classical Studies students did not feel that they had enough module information in advance of the module, we asked the Chemistry students what module information they find (or would find) most useful. This survey was carried out by means of a questionnaire given out to part 2 Chemistry students. Three students, including one of the student reps were then asked about the results that were collected and some other related questions that were not put into the questionnaire to keep it an acceptable length.

The questionnaire seemed to indicate that there was no clear method of feedback that students found more useful than the others. Feedback forms and the Part 1 Review were seen to be marginally better than the other methods mentioned, while a student sitting on the Board of Studies was seen as the least useful.
Looking at the explanations given on the questionnaire it appeared that most people didn’t know what the BoS was and that was the main reason for rating it of low importance. It also seemed that a lot of students were not clear on what the other feedback methods were and how they worked. This confusion may be why there is not a lot of difference between the five categories. Other comments made indicated that there was no information fed back to students from most of these feedback methods, which makes it hard for students to determine how useful they have been.

Most students seemed to know who at least one of their reps was, the main comment that they had about reps was that they didn’t know them well enough to talk to. However, it was felt, particularly by reps, that they did not fully understand the new system for appointing course reps introduced recently by RUSU and they felt that this involved too many meetings. Having students sit on the BoS was seen as possibly useful for getting problems directly to the Department, however, there is the disadvantage that the BoS is concerned with many different matters, most of which would not be directly relevant to the student rep.

The majority of students said they felt they had enough information on modules. Chemistry students seemed to be rather less concerned with this aspect than Classical Studies students, perhaps because they have less choice of modules. The information that was seen as the most useful was to have a reading list before the first lecture, which would allow students to buy text books or look up the subject before they begin. A lecture break down was also indicated.

Fig. 7: The usefulness of different forms of feedback as rated by Part 2 Chemistry Students (2011-12).
to be one of the top priorities, this may be so that students can look up anything they need to revise from previous years before the lecture. A cost list was not seen as particularly important.

Comments involving module information were mostly concerned with not knowing before hand what is going to be covered and with more practical information such as changes to the lectures.

![Bar chart](chart.png)

**Which information would you like to be given on a module before you begin?**

- Lecture breakdown
- Reading list
- Lecture reading
- Clearer prerequisites
- Cost list

Fig. 8: Relative importance of pre-module information as reported by Part 2 Chemistry students (2011-12).

The results indicated that, overall, knowledge of Blackboard and how to use it was very good. Most students knew where to find all the different applications Blackboard can have such as electronic work submission and emails. As expected most people used it for finding lecture notes and these other applications were not used much.

When asked about Facebook usage the students said that they often used Facebook for getting comments to reps and for getting information on Chem Soc events. They didn’t feel that a Departmental Facebook page would be of much use as important information would be sent through email.
Section 3- Special Projects

Following on from the surveys reported above we decided to undertake two special projects. The first was on the potential usefulness of Facebook in providing feedback and enhancing student engagement. The methods of feeding back information to students is clearly an area of concern to many students and this may be a way to address the problem. We note, however, reservations mentioned by several students in our surveys to this and we wished to explore the issue further. Secondly we looked to explore the possibility of a student-led module where both curriculum content and method of assessment is driven by the students.

A. Student/Staff Opinions of Facebook as a tool for feedback and student engagement

Opinion is divided on how far Facebook can be used in the university curriculum. Within the Classics Department the use has proved positive and there appears to be an improved relationship between staff and students who interact on the page. However, students of the Chemistry Department felt that their society was their private space within their course and not appropriate for academic staff to be a part of. The middle ground has appeared recently within Archaeology, but has also run within Classics on a Departmental page. On the Classics page students and staff are able to post links, photos, etc…whereas in Archaeology it is controlled by one staff member. One staff concern is the lack of professionalism that comes with Facebook. Many have commented that the use of email and Blackboard teaches a professional attitude toward university studies and the academic staff. Another concern is the open nature of Facebook and the problems with privacy settings for multiple groups. Some lecturers and students do not feel they want to interact with each other on Facebook as it is a private space for themselves rather than a professional one.

There are positives that come out of its use. Students and staff in Classics have found a marked improvement in their interaction as a result. Also attendance at extra curricular events that were originally only sent by email, and now on Facebook, has increased. These pages have also seen an increase of academic debate between staff and students where this did not happen before. This may be because there was not the forum to do this and being part of the social network generation some lecturers and most students find themselves using these recognisable and easy to use networks to express their views.

The major focus for this study came from within the Classics Department at Reading University where there has been more student/staff engagement on Facebook. This has been
through the Classics Society Facebook group. What has been noted is that another department in this report, namely Chemistry, were cautious of staff encroaching on what is seen as a student organised group. However, the same information shared by staff on Facebook can be provided through a departmental specific page. This has been shown recently with the development of the Archaeology Facebook page. Students at this time are unable to post on this page without going through the Department first, however this is a big step as discussing this with staff they were reluctant to use Facebook as a tool in the Department. It should be noted that the Department of Chemistry has now introduced a Facebook page which is separate from the “ChemSoc” page. It is too early to evaluate the success or otherwise of this yet. In this section we discuss several examples of how Facebook has been utilized by Classics Department staff to the benefit of its students.

Extra Curricular Events:

Each Wednesday, and some Thursdays, the Classics Department offer the chance to come and listen to guest speakers on classical subjects. Originally this information would be sent out by email to the whole Department. As previously stated, opinion seems to be that too many emails cause confusion and reminders are rare. Facebook gives the option of leaving a quick message as a reminder that is automatically sent to an entire group. Due to the widespread and easily accessible nature of Facebook it tends to be checked more often by students than are emails. It is also sent to the students as a ‘notification’ which is noticed and can be checked at a more leisurely time than replying to multiple emails. The format of a Facebook conversation also allows multiple people to chat to each other on this subject; they know who has seen the event, how popular it seems to be and who is likely to go to the event. Due to this the Classics Department has seen an increase in attendance at these events as Facebook has given students a quick place to update and remind people of the events

Module Pages:

All the information for modules is either found on Blackboard or through email, however in the Classics Department a Facebook group was set up for one module. This group was announced in one of the classes and soon after the lecture over half the class had joined the group, with one student setting up a Facebook account to join. The group was used for students to chat and share ideas about the module topic in a forum that was recognisable in format and easy to share various types of media. There is the option to use the wiki or chat within Blackboard but this has rarely been used and is not known well by most students and
staff. A mixture between the two and better promotion of Blackboard would encourage chat outside of lectures. There were one or two concerns about privacy, however, people are able to set up groups on Facebook for others to join without being their Facebook friend. So there is no need for a lecturer to ‘friend’ the student to have them join any group.

After University:

When leaving university, students may become or feel cut off from their academic past, especially from individual lecturers. As with Facebook if you are a member of a group then no matter your activity within the group there is no reason to be cut off. In the past year on the Classics Department and society pages there have been alumni who have kept in contact. By doing this they have benefited from hearing what is going on in their old department as well as providing advice and help to students graduating. Such circumstances often occur when alumni hear of jobs where they work which are often related to the degree and advertise for applications. This therefore provides a unique position for current students to find jobs they may not have heard about as well as creating a social network with staff, students and alumni in the University’s departments without the alienation that these groups may suffer from one another.

B The Student Led Classics Module

The Classics Department at the University of Reading is currently looking into the idea of providing a module where second year students will take the reins and run a module by themselves, with the assigned lecturer taking only a supervisory role. The idea is still being researched by Clare Coombe and Dr Gill Knight.

Of course, it is easy to see that this idea is rather radical, and it is also simple to spot major problems from even a cursory glance at what seems to be the best way to run a module like this. However, one must constantly bear in mind that this module is still only in the research stages: collecting student and staff opinions, looking for examples of this type of module elsewhere, etc.

So far, it seems that the following may be the best way to run a Classics module led by students. For ease of explanation, the process is explained step by step.
1) First year students will be introduced to the module along with the other second year modules, in the lecture on the module choices available for second year in Spring Term.

2) If enough students should register their interest, and choose the module at the module selection process in the Summer Term, then a meeting will be held in which the students – with the guidance of a staff member – democratically decide the subject of the module.

3) At the beginning of the module, the staff member will run a series of workshops, teaching the students the skills of teaching themselves.

4) The contact hours will most likely be at a set time every week, much like more standard modules. During the contact hours, depending on the size of the group, the students will split into smaller workgroups. It is possible that a workgroup could lead a seminar.

5) It is possible that students may be able to choose how they will be assessed.

The first step is simple enough: the students must be made aware of the module alongside other modules so that they have enough time to consider what exactly they will study in their second year. However, given the issues that students already have with module descriptions, persuading students to choose the module may be an issue. The module description would have to be carefully tailored to ensure that students know exactly what they are getting into: designing and running a module in which student engagement is the main learning outcome. It should be made clear in the module description that the premise of the module is that of linking UG teaching with research. This way, the students will be able to prepare to engage with the learning outcomes of the module before its commencement.

Step two is where difficulties could potentially arise. Firstly, although a small group of 8-15 students would be most desirable, if the group is too small, the module cannot run. The second pitfall could be that if the students are unable to decide a topic that all can agree upon, the students are still able to back out and elect to do a different module, as University policy states that students may change modules up to Week 5 in Autumn Term. Once the module has been designed by the students, the topic cannot change, as the Library must obtain a bibliography and set about procuring the books that the students will need for the module.

The third step is rather self-explanatory. It appears that most students would not have the skills needed in order to teach their peers, in which case it is clear that they should be taught
the necessary skills – although this is the one aspect of the module in which students would be least engaged with their learning, it is essential. Otherwise the students will be able to engage properly neither with the subject nor with each other, in which case the aim of the module will have failed.

For step four, contact hours must be considered. One could argue that as the module is led by students, it should be the students who decide when and how often to meet. However, it has been pointed out that students may be happier – and more likely to attend – if contact hours are constant and timetabled. Although this seems to stand in the face of the idea of a module that is almost completely student led, it must be stated that students are there to receive an education. The education of the students should be the number one priority of the module, and inconsistent contact hours may hinder this, in which case it is clear that the compromise of pre-scheduled contact hours is a good idea.

The idea of smaller workgroups within the class has the potential to work well, because in terms of student engagement, students are probably more likely to engage with the module and with their own learning if they clearly have to engage with the work during specific contact hours. However, this leaves the problem that some students will participate more, and do more work, than other students, leading to a split in the levels of engagement in the class.

The fifth step is assessment. It is perhaps desirable that for this to be called a ‘Student Led Module’, the students should be able to decide how they are assessed. Due to its nature, group assessment may be out of the question. However, it is possible that alternative methods of assessment could be used. It could be that students are given a choice between ways of assessment, and that the Department could consider alternative assessments if the idea was to be put forward by students. For example, as opposed to an essay or commentary, a student may wish to produce a short film; the Department may be open to considering this as a legitimate alternative to the usual avenues of assessment, thereby allowing deeper student engagement in the curriculum.

Overall, it seems that the idea of a student led module splits both students and staff alike into two camps who see the module either as an excellent idea or as a terrible one. One issue for the students is that the module could demand a larger amount of work than other modules of equivalent weight.
Section 4 – Conclusions, Examples of Good Practice and Suggestions for the Future

A  General Conclusions

1. It is clear to see that most Departments at Reading University have all adopted a similar practice when it comes to listening to students’ views. It is clearly good practice for students’ views to be heard even as high up as the Board of Studies, and for urgent issues to be dealt with by the Head of Department.

2. Listening to views and feeding back information from committees

   Good practice in terms of engaging students appears to be as simple as making the students feel as though they are being listened to. Many students are not aware of the Board of Studies or the SSLC, for example, and it is those students that appear to be most disillusioned when it comes to how engaged they feel with their course and their University. Communication is clearly key here, and this problem could be solved by simply getting the Course Representatives more involved, and giving them a bigger role. For example, the Course Representative could be allowed five minutes at the end of the last core module lecture of the term in order to feed back the results of the module questionnaires, give a summary of the SSLC, and make themselves available for being spoken to about any other problems. This solution resolves issues of student disillusionment by fully explaining how their views have been taken to a higher power within the University.

3. Provision of module information prior to commencing lectures

   Good practice in this aspect would allow students to get more involved with their learning a lot faster, in which case Department(s) should provide a reading list for the module, a title and summary for each lecture, as well as clear course work information before the module starts. Better practice would also be providing a reading suggestion for each lecture and information on extra costs – all before the module starts.

4. Staff-Student Communication

   Communication from staff to students is very important as it tells students how their views have been heard, and what will be done about it. Good practice here would certainly include emailing students with a summary of how students’ views have made it to the Board of Studies, and certainly what changes will be made as a result of it. It would also be good practice for staff to explain to students if and why their views have either not made it to a meeting, or why nothing has been done about it. It must also be said that there needs to be
some sort of standardisation to what is uploaded to Blackboard; good practice here would be lecture notes and difficult-to-find reading. Facebook and Twitter can be put to good use in terms of getting students involved in their Departments’ extra-curricular activities, but, as one student said, “not for more official Department business”.

5. **Student-Staff Communication**

Good practice here begins with a very simple step: making sure that all staff members are known to be approachable, and are known to be willing to help to try to solve any problems that students may have. Students will not engage if there is a problem, but they have nowhere to turn to find an answer. Other good practice is ensuring that students know how valuable their feedback is, and therefore to take time filling out any questionnaires. It is possible that this could only be achieved by students filling in a compulsory questionnaire in their own time – perhaps online, or even on BlackBoard.

6. **Module provision and the curriculum**

In programmes where module selection is most flexible, good practice should be easy to achieve. Students need a wide variety of modules to choose from in order to engage more fully in their degree. Good practice could, then, include a module designed by students, or possibly even something as simple as choosing the subject of a lecture. Good practice, then, is choice.

**B Specific Findings**

The following points state some general findings from our project and make some recommendations as to possible good practice.

1. The current most important methods for student engagement in curriculum development at the University of Reading and at other similar HEIs remain Staff-Student Committee meetings and feedback on lectures.

2. These methods work well but there are a number of issues: (i) students are unclear about what is done as a result of issues raised by the above channels; (ii) students often do not know who their course “rep” is; (iii) completion rates for end-of-module returns are often low if electronic forms are used; hard copy forms give a much higher rate of return.
3. It should be ensured that students are better informed about how their feedback is dealt with e.g. through SSLCs. Students should be informed of the outcomes of SSLC meetings.

4. It should be ensured that all students on a course know who their Course Reps are.

5. It should be ensured that students understand that their feedback is important.

6. Hard copy end-of-module returns usually have a much higher completion rate than on-line forms. However, we note the use of PRS “clickers” for this purpose in Psychology at Reading.

7. Incorporate more focus group with a similar format to the Chemistry Part One review. This is seen to be successful by students.

8. We suggest that a lecturer and a student co-chair all SSLCs. This would allow greater student involvement in the committee. There are various models for how SSLCs are chaired but this model appears to work well where it is used.

9. There is some reluctance on the part of students to engage with BoS activities. This may change now that all BoS have a student member. It will be interesting to see if the student perception is that feedback has improved as a result of this.

10. Much could be done in the area of student engagement simply by listening to views of students. This works best when staff appear to be approachable by the students.

11. Clear, detailed and where possible standardised information on modules should be provided before commencing lectures to encourage student engagement with their learning from the outset. This is particularly important on programmes where students have a significant amount of module choice. It is possible that the provision of KIS data on MDFs will help in this regard.

12. Standardized (as far as possible) use of Blackboard module pages for lecture information, revision, essays etc.

13. Where appropriate in the curriculum a suitable variety of modules should be provided for students to choose from in order to allow students to engage more fully in their curriculum
14. Departmental information sent by email to be condensed into a single email rather than several.

C Specific Recommendations for Good Practice in the use of Facebook by Departments

Departments which are considering the introduction of a Departmental Facebook page may like to consider the following points.

1. The promotion of a departmental Facebook page in welcome packs/emails before starting university.

2. Using Facebook to share information such as jobs, recommended websites and other material of interest outside of the curriculum.

3. Setting up year group/module specific pages for class groups to chat and share information.

4. Facebook could be used as an aid and extra source for contacting students alongside official methods of communication and not to replace these.

D Dissemination of our Findings

This work has been presented or will be presented at University, National and International events as follows:-

1. At the University of Reading Life Sciences Faculty Teaching showcase, 28 September 2011. E. Claffey and P. Smither.


3. At RAISE (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) University of Southampton, September 2012. Work presented by Nadja Guggi and Rachel Glover.
