Academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university

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Declaration

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

David Cousens

Abstract

Standardised module evaluations have risen to prominence over the last few decades as universities place additional importance on student satisfaction metrics due to the evolving neo-liberal context of UK higher education in which student voice outcomes form part of publicly available ranking systems, such as university league tables. It has been proposed that module evaluations have the purpose of assuring or enhancing quality, or both, but research has called into question the effectiveness of these student evaluations of teaching with some suggesting they are part of a culture of managerialism and a tool of performativity.

Despite the widespread adoption of module evaluations there is little research that considers in depth the experiences and impact of module evaluations from the perspective and experiences of those that manage, deliver and engage with the process. This research, positioned within the interpretative paradigm, fills a notable gap in the current literature as it uses a case-study design and a mixture of individual and focus group interviews with twelve students, fourteen academics and three members of the senior management team to develop an in-depth and rich understanding of the views of students, academics and senior management within one post-1992 UK university.

The findings suggest that the participants felt that the process was potentially important and could enhance the taught experience of students. However, the conclusions also demonstrate that the current rigid system is ineffective because it is situated within a corporate organisational culture with measurement valued over enhancement and the timing and design not effective in gathering usable data to inform timely improvements. The results also indicate that module evaluations are damaging the trust and relationships between staff, students and management and that the feedback received induces negative affective responses from academics for which there is little support.

The study recommends that institutions review their approach to module evaluations including the purpose behind them and the organisational culture within which they sit and involve students, staff, management and central services in this process. The suggestion being that for this university module evaluations have the potential to be much more impactful in a culture where the ownership for design and delivery sits closer to the academics and students within a more transparent, understood and collaborative system of governance.

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Thank you also to my colleagues at work, throughout my journey your encouragement, support and good humour have enabled me to get to this point.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family to whom goes the biggest thanks.

To my Mum, Dad and brothers you have and continue to provide unstinting love, support and inspiration, I have achieved what I have because of you.

To Robert and Judith, I thank you for the time and support you have given throughout this process. Without my stays in Yateley, writing large sections of this thesis, it would not have been completed.

To my grandparents, in memory, thank you, you taught me so much and I am grateful for the part you played in my life. A special mention to my grandad, Waclaw Marchewka, a gentle soul who endured much and gave everything for his family, a true inspiration whose memory I try to honour by making the most of the opportunities I have.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

This chapter discusses the motivation for the thesis. It presents an overview of the topics to be investigated, the methods selected and the theoretical concepts behind the investigation and these will be elaborated on in the subsequent chapters. The objectives of the research are also explained.

1.1 Identification of the problem

Over recent years measuring student satisfaction has increasingly become a part of university processes because it feeds into benchmarks such as university league tables and the Teaching Education Framework (TEF), which, in the global market of higher education (HE) are seen as key recruitment tools to attract students (Arthur, 2019; Hazlekorn, 2014). In order to gauge levels of student satisfaction before nationally administered surveys such as the National Student Survey (NSS) are delivered, universities have developed their own student evaluations of teaching (SETs) to assess student satisfaction of teaching and inform areas of improvement where necessary.

Student evaluations of teaching at an institutional level can take the form of performance indicators such as module evaluations which monitor satisfaction of teaching and learning at a modular level. Module evaluations have been deemed as invalid and damaging (Moore & Kuol, 2005) but properly designed student ratings have the potential to provide a valuable source of information about faculty teaching performance and could be used as a tool of professionalism (Arthur, 2019; Calderon et al., 1994; Cohen, 1981; Marsh, 1984).

However, it has also been argued that as the identity of a university is closely linked to metrics associated with student satisfaction that this has led to a performativity culture within higher education. In such a culture managerialist approaches are used and the performance of faculties, subject areas and individual lecturers monitored to ensure student satisfaction, academic effectiveness and market competitiveness (Arthur, 2019; Olssen & Peters, 2005). According to Arthur (2009) module evaluations are a centrally administered managerialist tool, part of the mechanics of performativity. The rise of such tools potentially alters how academics perceive themselves and transforms what they deem to be important and acceptable; it impacts on their identity and perception of professionalism (Ball, 2016).

Ball (2016) argues that there are two value systems in play with such mechanisms as module evaluations: one produces measurable outputs whose qualities are represented in categories of judgement, the other is vested in a pedagogy of context and experience, intelligible within a set of collegial relations more closely associated with the concept of professionalism (Sanguinetti, 2000). Viewing module feedback as a managerialist process could lead to negative attitudes from staff towards the activity that may affect motivation and enthusiasm to engage with the professional development opportunities which may come about as a result of the evaluations.

It is not only academics who debate the purpose and worth of SETs, surveys administered by the OfS (2018) and HEFCE (2009) indicate that students are not satisfied by the responses given and actions taken as a result of such feedback mechanisms as module evaluations.

While there is growing evidence about the design and results of student evaluations of teaching from the perspective of the institution, policy-makers and teaching staff (Wiley, 2019) there is less knowledge about the perceived objectives of SETs and their efficacy in achieving these from a student perspective. There is also very little evidence of how staff, students and senior management from a single institution experience the module evaluation process, especially when considering the influence of organisational culture and the impact the management approach has on this process and the process has on professionalism. Further understanding is therefore needed of student, academic and senior management expectations, experiences, and perceptions of SETs, this being an under-researched area (Arthur, 2009; Arthur, 2019; Byrne & Flood, 2005; Chen & Hoshower, 2003; HEFCE, 2009; McInnis, 2001; OfS, 2018; Wiley, 2019).

In summary, this research seeks to investigate how academics, students and senior management perceive and experience student module evaluations and the impact this has on an academic's concept of professionalism and the experience of the students. It will also consider the influence the organisational culture and management approach of the institution has on this perception and experience.

1.2 Why this topic?

The choice of this topic stems from my experiences as a Senior Lecturer, Deputy Head of Subject, Head of Subject and now Deputy Dean at a university in England. Previously, as part of my teaching roles, I received module evaluation feedback from students to inform my approach on the modules I taught. Also, as a line manager, I have received the module feedback of other members of staff, with the intention of informing individual developmental conversations. I now have access to module evaluations across the faculty should I wish to consider performance across all subject areas. As a result of these experiences I noticed that in some cases individuals have negative affective responses to the feedback they receive through the module evaluation process. I have also noted the impact that the wider higher education context has had on how the university is led, perhaps impacting the institutional approach to module evaluations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a rise in managerial approaches at the university with an increase in the use of metrics to demonstrate student satisfaction and the effectiveness of provision. This is potentially due to the rise in external governance through organisations such as the Office for Students (OfS).

Module evaluations and the outcomes of these, including the use of monitoring to ensure improvements are made, have been sensitive areas within the institution and across the programme areas I have previously worked in. This is partially due to the perception by a number of staff that it

has been a process which is owned by management to monitor rather than a system that develops the knowledge and practice of academics. The current module evaluation process is one in which an online survey is emailed by the university's central business information management team to students towards the end of their taught experience on a module. The students then complete this survey online where the results are processed by the university and the feedback then sent to module and programme leaders for review. Those modules that score below university thresholds are required to complete an improvement plan to identify how they will reach the required levels of student satisfaction. Apart from the nationally administered HE surveys, the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), the university does not run any programme level student surveys. Neither does it carry out any centrally administered mid-module evaluations and this is why the focus for this research was on the student voice mechanism of end of module evaluations.

As a result of my experiences, and after engaging with the wider literature around the subject, I was interested in exploring other academics' views regarding student feedback and how this links to the perceptions and experiences of the organisation's culture. I also wanted to compare student perceptions of module evaluations and the role that they play, as there is a perceived gap whereby student voice is missing from literature within this field (Wiley, 2019). Another perceived gap are studies where both student, staff and senior management experiences are considered from one institution within a single report (Arthur, 2019; Hoel & Dahl, 2019; Wiley, 2019). Filling such a gap will enable a focus on areas of commonality and difference, providing an original contribution to this field.

As the research took place in the institution in which I am employed I want to apply my learning from the findings and put into practice the recommendations to enhance what I am doing in my role and also move things forward in terms of policy and practice discussions at an institutional level in order to develop the effectiveness of module evaluations. I aim to offer insights to the wider profession about the practice of student evaluations of teaching with the aim of exploring a number of professionally relevant questions.

1.3 Research aims and questions

The main aim of this research is to explore and deepen understanding of academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations within the context of a UK university.

The main research question therefore is:

What are academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?

The research sub-questions are:

1) How do academics, senior management and students perceive and experience the process of module evaluations?

2) How are module evaluations positioned and managed within the university?

3) How do academics and students perceive and experience their subject and university culture in relation to module evaluations?

The next section briefly introduces the key concepts which framed the study.

1.4 Conceptual framework

Module evaluations sit within a context of universities increasingly demonstrating a direction of travel towards neo-liberalism whereby students are seen as customers (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). Universities continue to react to external systems of accountability and as a result there is an increasing focus on internal and external performance measures and league table positions in order to ensure student satisfaction is high and continuously improved. To enable this it has been argued that a culture of managerialism has emerged, a process by which an individual's accountability is judged against measurable performance indicators in order to improve performance (Floyd, 2016). However, as a result of this some believe that a lack of trust has surfaced within HE amongst academics who are subject to such approaches, influencing their professional identity and how they perceive opportunities for professional development (Floyd, 2016; Olssen & Peters, 2005). The manner in which SETs are positioned within a university demonstrates much about the culture of an organisation, their impact on academic identity and the concept of professionalism.

This research into academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations will therefore be viewed through three main interrelated concepts which will be summarised here and further developed throughout Chapter 2, they are: professionalism (including professional development), managerialism (including performativity) and organisational culture.

These concepts were chosen through anecdotal evidence, including the perspectives of colleagues in HE and my lived professional experience. These led to broad themes that were then used as search terms for the review of the literature which accentuated their importance with each concept summarised here.

Organisational culture

Organisational culture has been defined as *'a system of shared values and beliefs that interact with an organisation's people, structures, and control systems to produce behavioural norms'* (Owens & Valesky, 2011, p.141.). Organisational culture has also been viewed as a concept that is not determined necessarily at institutional level but is influenced and sustained at departmental level –

thereby control not sitting with institutional management but with the academics (Floyd, 2016). Therefore, it is argued that the lens through which the culture of an organisation is seen will impact the way in which module evaluation feedback is viewed by individuals and the nature of and engagement with any professional development taken as a result. It will also influence how academics perceive themselves in relation to their conception of professionalism.

Professionalism

Professionalism is determined by an individual subscribing to a professional identity which lies, *'at the meeting point of agency and structure'* (Briggs, 2007, p.473). It is developed through interactions with others, systems and processes whilst at work and is based on an individual's perceptions of self-image and self-efficacy (Busher, 2005). Professionalism outlines the professional identity to which an individual may subscribe and is also influenced by inner qualities (Briggs, 2007; Olsen, 2008). However, the rise in the globalisation of HE and the increase in performativity, managerialism and measures of accountability has influenced aspects of professionalism. The concept has been undermined as managerialist approaches impact on the trust and ownership given to academics to improve their own practice by imposing external quality assurance measures to ensure that improvements are made (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Harvey & Knight, 1996). This lack of ownership can lead to internal conflicts whereby self-belief, identity and emotional well-being are challenged (Ball, 2003). Closely linked to the concept of professional identity is that of professional development.

Professional development

Professional development is focused on the enhancement of practice and factors such as an individual's knowledge, experience and the way they interact with their professional context impacts on an academic's identity and the influence that any professional development opportunities have (Turner et al., 2014; Weller, 2009). It has been argued that professional development requirements differ depending on the stage of an academic's career and that more experienced staff benefit from a mixture of formal and informal developmental opportunities with the most effective enhancement of practice being achieved in collective and collaborative ways (Clark et al., 2002; Knight & Trowler, 2000).

Student feedback has been seen as a way for academics to improve their teaching (Arthur, 2019) albeit there is evidence to suggest that this rarely happens (Richardson, 2005). One reason for this could be the design of module evaluations because the development process is often led by the institution with limited academic input and this leads to the information gathered not being useful in supporting continuing professional development (Moore & Kuol, 2005).

If the benefits of professional development are to be realised and teaching practice improved it is the concern of this study to see how the module evaluation process currently feeds into professional

development opportunities. The study will also consider whether academics have been involved in the design of the module evaluation process and if so whether this has led to the development of a system that provides information which is useful in supporting their development. It will also consider whether the process allows for the professional development opportunities that arise to be nuanced depending on the experience of the academics and if their use as a professional development mechanism could be improved how this could potentially be achieved.

Managerialism

Linked to the rise of globalisation and therefore marketisation of higher education, there has been a growth in managerialist practices. Managerialism focuses on the interests of the organisation rather than the individual and is seen as a threat to professionalism, especially the autonomy of academics (Kolsaker, 2008; Shepherd, 2018). Managerialism is the pursuit of management ideas in order to monitor and control an institution with the aim of achieving the organisation's goals through a process of target setting and monitoring often using the tools of performativity.

Performativity

A mode of regulation that uses judgements and comparison to control and change usually through the use of numerical targets (Ball, 2003). The growth of the culture of performativity and numerical targets has led to a level of competition between academics and departments due to the comparisons and judgements that take place, this has lead people to question what it means to be a professional academic and altered the culture of universities to one of surveillance and feelings of low-trust from one based on the traditional academic values of collaboration and collegiality (Ball, 2016). This study seeks to identify whether, through consideration of the staff, senior management and student perspectives, module evaluations are positioned and managed in such a way that they support professionalism or whether they are part of a culture of managerialism and performativity and what the consequences of this are.

In order to understand the module evaluation feedback process it is necessary to explore the inter-relationships between these core concepts and these are highlighted in the Conceptual Framework that has guided this research (Figure 2.2). The intention is that the framework used in this study provides new insights into academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluation feedback.

1.5 Methodology

The methodology is examined in detail in Chapter 3, and so only an outline is provided here. To answer the call by Moore and Kuol (2005) that research into student feedback could be significantly enhanced if it incorporated, *'more face-to-face, rich discussions about [university] teachers' emotional and pragmatic responses to student feedback,'* (p.70) this study was explored through the interpretivist paradigm. It looked to build on the findings of Wiley (2019), Hoel and Dahl (2019) and

Arthur (2009, 2019) who established that this area of study would benefit from seeking to more fully examine and understand staff and student perceptions of the module evaluation process with Arthur (2019) also suggesting that the views of senior management would support developing further understanding in this area.

A single case-study approach was deemed appropriate in order to better understand the module evaluation process in an individual institution and the lived experiences of those who study and work there (Robson, 2015). Pilot studies with one student and one academic informed the approach taken and these are further explored in the methodology section. The data collection process took the form of semi-structured individual and focus-group interviews with academics and students and interviews with senior management from the HE institution in England where I am employed and therefore issues in relation to insider research are considered in the methodology chapter. The sampling was purposive in that the participants were invited to take part due to their experience and knowledge of the focus area of the study (Bryman, 2016). The choice to focus on undergraduate students rather than postgraduates was because this gave me greater access to a larger student population who had more experience of the case study institution's module evaluation process. This is because postgraduates have often graduated from other institutions with their learning at the case study university lasting on average one-year full time whereas the undergraduate experience is three years completing module evaluations throughout this period. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled the participants to speak at length about their experiences supporting the objective of more fully examining this area (Wiley, 2019). Data were also collected from documentary review of relevant policy documents at the university to enable further consideration of the espoused theory and the theory in action (Argyris & Schon, 1974).

1.6 Significance of the study

As outlined at the start of this chapter the use of student evaluations of teaching and, in particular, module evaluations are prevalent throughout higher education both nationally and internationally. This study therefore offers an opportunity for the first time (that the author is aware of) to explore the perspectives of the module evaluation process of students, staff and senior management in one organisation and to compare and contrast the findings of these stakeholders with the intention of providing fresh insight into the module evaluation process as a result.

It is hoped that the qualitative data from this case study will provide a deeper understanding of the module evaluation process for the institution in which the research took place potentially leading to changes in practice. It is also hoped that as this is the only study to explore this process through the lens of the interrelated core concepts of organisational culture, managerialism and professionalism, as considered from the perspective of three different stakeholders, that the results could potentially

develop the understanding of other similar institutions as they consider how to collect and act on student data at a modular level.

1.7 Overview of the thesis

Following on from this chapter, the literature review focuses on the concepts that underpin the research questions and the conceptual framework. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and the methods used to collect the data as well as the approaches used to analyse and interpret it and consideration is given to the ethical issues associated with such research. Chapters 4 to 6 present and discuss the results of the research. The final chapter summarises the thesis, draws conclusions and considers implications of this research for the field of study.

The next chapter considers the literature that underpins the conceptual framework and this research.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore and develop understanding of academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations and feedback within the context of a UK university. The main research question is:

What are academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?

The research sub-questions are:

1) How do academics, senior management and students perceive and experience the process of module evaluations?

2) How are module evaluations positioned and managed within the university?

3) How do academics and students perceive and experience their subject and university culture in relation to module evaluations?

The focus of this chapter is to synthesise and analyse literature that is relevant to the research topic with a focus on the key concepts underpinning this study. These concepts are module evaluations, professionalism (including professional development), managerialism (including performativity) and organisational culture.

Through critically evaluating the literature the aim is to establish the conceptual framework structuring this study and discuss how the research questions have been formulated. This chapter will identify gaps in the reviewed literature and demonstrate how this study relates to previous research. It will also explore the links between the concepts as identified through the conceptual framework with the aim of telling a story through this interrelation (Thomas, 2017).

The focus of the literature search was based on relevance rather than attempting to be comprehensive (Robson, 2015), it concentrated on the key concepts with the review of the literature therefore representative and not exhaustive (Cooper, 1988). Throughout the literature search the following databases were used; Google Scholar, Summon and Shibboleth with Mendeley used to store, record and annotate downloaded documents. The search terms were initially based on the broad concepts I established through my lived experience of module evaluations in HE which led to my interest in the topic. Examples of these terms were: managerialism, performativity, culture, emotional responses to feedback and managerialism as well as terms associated specifically with student voice and module evaluations in particular. These included words and phrases such as: student evaluations of teaching, student voice, student surveys and module evaluations. As well as literature found as a result of these

searches a number of articles were discovered as a result of citations taken from other studies and this serendipitous approach also uncovered other potential areas of interest which have been explored throughout this review (Thomas, 2017). It is noted that a greater amount of research was available in some areas of interest than others but wherever possible greater emphasis has been placed on more recent literature.

In order to frame the key concepts, the higher education context, which this thesis argues influences the organisational culture and therefore the institutional approach to module evaluations, will be explored first.

2.1 Higher education context

There are over ten thousand universities globally, rising from five hundred at the end of World War Two (Willetts, 2017). However, the increase in the scale of universities and breadth of disciplines offered is a relatively recent phenomenon with the choice available to students now greater than ever. Collini (2012) refers to this as the *Global Multiversity* with students now having a far greater selection to choose from when determining how, where and when they wish to study.

Although student fees have been in place around the world for a number of years, they were first introduced in the UK after the Dearing Report in 1997 (Dearing, 1997). It has been acknowledged that this shift has meant that students have increasingly seen themselves as consumers of universities, demanding value for money (Kandiko & Mawer 2013; Universities UK, 2017). As the choice of universities has continued to grow, giving students a greater choice, the narrative of the globalisation of HE is more widely accepted (Floyd, 2019; Parsons & Fidler, 2005). It is argued that an impact of globalisation has been the spread of New Public Management (NPM) practices across universities. This has seen an increase in accountability processes as institutions become ever more corporate (Deem et al., 2007). In order to compete in this globalised marketplace it has become normal for institutional outcomes to be shared through publicly available measurement systems such as international league tables and Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) gradings (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Bremner, 2011). More than ever individual institutions are fighting for market share and each will use a range of indicators in order to differentiate themselves from others to sell their product (Sabri, 2011). The concept of satisfaction is one of these indicators and this is often drawn from the student voice.

The student voice

To define what is meant by ‘student voice’ is difficult, it can be viewed as an empowering agent for democratic change or laced with regulatory undertones controlled and subverted by the executive to fulfil their own goals (McLeod, 2011). The student voice can also refer to an individual or many voices, representing difference or homogenising it.

Despite the difficulties in defining it, and its purpose in higher education being underdeveloped and under-researched in comparison to the concept in school and college contexts (Hall, 2017; Seale, 2010), student voice in higher education has become increasingly prevalent in and important to the running of a university (Brooman et al., 2005; Canning, 2017; Currens, 2011).

At universities the student voice has positioned students as one or all of the following: users, consumers and active partners of the learning experience (Currens, 2011) with the main drivers of the student voice agenda being quality enhancement and quality assurance (Brooman et al., 2005; Canning, 2017; Seale, 2010).

Student representation through student voice mechanisms can be a tool of governance, with representatives speaking on behalf of their peers to provide quality assurance. Representation through student voice processes has been an area of tension in HE with managerialist approaches on one side focussed on quality assurance. On the other side there has been a movement away from representation towards broader socio-political commitments to democracy focusing on student engagement and participation. Participation can take the form of partnership where students are re-positioned from passive recipients to the actively engaged where they work together with academics and professional staff on education matters to enhance their experience (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

Active partnership provides benefits including student and staff belonging, engagement and an improvement of staff and students' relationships (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Belonging has been considered to mean students feeling that they are accepted, valued, included and encouraged by teachers and peers and that they are an important part of the classroom and their learning (Jones & Masika, 2016; Thomas, 2012). Effective partnership means that students are active agents in their learning which can mean a re-conceptualisation of students as stakeholders who have the knowledge and position to shape what counts in their education (Cook-Sather, 2002). The difference between student partnership and student representation is that the goals are different, with representation primarily focussed on quality assurance and partnership on enhancement. Any work around student voice needs to ensure that it is clear what the objectives are with frameworks and processes built around these. Successful student partnership often includes opportunities for students to discuss and collaborate with staff both online and face-to-face as this increases student engagement (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023).

Implicit in this thesis and in the literature is the belief that the student voice is, or should be, a powerful agent for change. Seale (2010) in a review of student voice work, found that definitions of the concept were lacking, but that the student voice was sought to:

- Understand the student experience;
- Reflect on implications for practice;

- Hear or listen to previously inaudible or ignored voices (Seale, 2010, p.7)

Indeed, much of the literature refers to staff listening to students to then reflect upon and enable change with Parsell (2000) defining student voice work as asking questions to which we want to know the answers. Building on this Campbell (2007, p.4) identifies student voice as, *'hearing what students say and using what they say to make improvements.'*

Despite there being no commonly accepted definition found within the literature it is Campbell's that will be used within this research as it is has two key components. One, do universities hear what students say? and two, do the use it to make any improvements? The research will consider to what extent these questions are answered whilst focussing on the student voice vehicle of module evaluations.

Central to the discussion will be the concepts of power and agency of the student within this student voice mechanism. Matthews and Dollinger (2023) advocate that in order to do student voice work properly it will involve a shift in power relationships to ensure that student contributions are taken seriously which includes a necessity for all to work together respectfully. Bell et al. (2022) note that to do this it may be that governance structures require examination in order to review and then redefine the role, power and efficacy of students within the system and establish a more productive student-staff partnership. Therefore, consideration throughout the study will be given to the power balance between academics, senior university management and students and whether the module evaluations at the case study university actively hear and empower the student voice with an examination of the governance structures that underpin this.

Before turning to consider how the student voice is captured, the focus turns briefly to the main stakeholders considered throughout this research; students, academics and senior management and how they are defined for the purposes of this study.

Students

Learners who are fee-paying and enrolled on an undergraduate degree at the case study university.

Academics

Lecturers, Senior lecturers, Heads of Subject and Deputy Heads of Subject who are employed by the case study university and engage directly with the student body on a regular basis.

Senior management

Individuals with overall leadership responsibility for the university.

The capture of student voice

The capture of student voice is through two main mechanisms that are commonly used across HE; student representation systems and surveys (Currens, 2011).

Student questionnaire surveys are now common within the UK HE landscape (Kember et al., 2002; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023) as a means by which to evaluate the student experience including judging the performance of lecturers and universities. The largest survey is nationally administered by the Office for Students (OfS) and is called the National Student Survey (NSS) with institutionally administered module evaluations also well established in most UK universities, these focussed on module level teaching and learning experiences from the student perspective and are usually developed and managed by each institution (Winchester & Winchester, 2012).

Whether it is through the student representation system or a survey, the capture of the student voice comes with the expectation of action leading to change (Currens, 2011). However, despite the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) having a strategic plan, part of which was to work with students to ensure a high-quality learning experience that met their needs, a 2009 report concluded that the feedback loop had not been closed. The report concluded that actions are often not taken as a result of the student voice, or that any actions that had been taken were not adequately communicated to the student body (HEFCE, 2009). More recently, the results of the 2023 NSS survey demonstrated that the positivity measure with the student voice theme remains the lowest scoring across all themes and the question, *'How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?'* ranked bottom of all questions further demonstrating that, nationally, students remain dissatisfied with how their voice is heard and acted upon.

The focus of this research is on one mechanism that is frequently administered by institutions to collate student feedback and it is the use of module evaluations to capture the student voice that will now be considered.

Module evaluations

In order to better hear the student voice at a programme level institutionally designed student evaluations of teaching (SETs) have seen a rise in prominence to capture and act on feedback and enhance provision (Hazlekorn, 2014; Winchester & Winchester, 2012).

Research has identified that SETs are one of the most popular methods of capturing student voice and these can take a range of forms, one of the most common being module evaluations which monitor satisfaction at a modular level. Whilst potentially enabling the capture of student voice such evaluations, if properly designed, could provide a valuable source of information about faculty teaching performance and be used as a tool of professionalism (Arthur, 2019; Calderon et al., 1994; Cohen, 1981; Marsh, 1984). However, SETs have also been deemed as invalid and damaging to academics and the perceived value and validity of them is at least mixed and the focus of much divisive debate, especially within a context in which independent action and academic freedom is fiercely protected (Moore & Kuol, 2005).

As with the wider student voice agenda it is broadly agreed that the two potential purposes of module evaluations are:

- **Quality assurance (QA):** the process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements (Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2018)
- **Quality enhancement (QE):** Active involvement of students in educational development including the improvement of the taught experience and supporting lecturers to improve their teaching (Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Canning, 2009; Chen & Hoshower, 1998)

With these purposes in mind the literature was explored to consider the case for and against student evaluations of teaching.

The case for and against student evaluations of teaching (SETs)

Research has found that there are benefits associated with SETs. These include the collation of valuable information in relation to the effectiveness of teaching (Hoel & Dahl, 2019), equity in the teaching evaluation process, engagement with and efficiency in collecting the student voice and quality enhancement through SETs offering the potential to improve teaching and the student experience by identifying areas for development (Arthur, 2019; Moore & Kuol, 2005). Indeed, the systemised collection of data moves the process of student evaluation away from the serendipitous and anecdotal, which may lead to an unequal focus on the individual, to one which enables the collection of information on potentially widespread issues. SETs in large or diverse classroom settings that include key demographic information, can also enable the identification of subsets of students who may be encountering certain difficulties and specific actions therefore taken (Moore & Kuol, 2005).

However, alongside these perceived benefits, there are several arguments against the use of student evaluations of teaching.

Factors influencing student feedback

Studies have argued that SETs are not an effective way to measure student satisfaction. Shevlin et al. (2000) state that there appears to be a lack of agreement on what effective teaching looks like which therefore makes measurement complex and flawed, some arguing that SETs become personality contests rather than an evaluation of teaching (Clayson & Sheffet, 2006; Tomasco, 1980). Indeed, it has been considered that students who have a positive personal view of a lecturer are more likely to rate the teaching more highly, especially if the lecturer is gauged to be charismatic, regardless of how effective the actual teaching is (Clayson & Sheffet, 2006; Shevlin et al., 2000).

Other factors of potential bias which could impact the reliability of evaluations are the course/module being taken including whether it was compulsory or not, the subject matter being taught, the rank of

the lecturer (it has been found that those with the title of professor are rated more highly) and the gender of the academic, with female academics scoring less highly than male staff (Radchenko, 2020; Winchester & Winchester, 2012).

There are also areas deemed to be beyond the control of the academic but have been found to impact module evaluation outcomes and these are aspects such as class sizes and timetabling, with the inclusion of them in the module evaluation process a source of academic frustration (Arthur, 2019; Tschirhart & Pratt-Adams, 2019). Studies have found that this frustration has meant that academics become disengaged with the module evaluation process because they feel disempowered to make the changes requested through the feedback. Alongside this, because of pressure on resources, staff also feel that they cannot change areas that they do have control over as they feel they do not have the time or human resource to do this (Bamber & Anderson, 2012).

The issue of resource and money is a factor in other areas of the module evaluation debate. Increasingly students are perceived as customers (Tight, 2013) and this is due to the spread of neo-liberal trends throughout the HE sector and the increasing marketisation of education, as considered earlier in this chapter. This shift is suggested to have had an impact on staff as they perceive education is becoming a commodity with the power increasingly lying with students as customers, therefore leaving academics in a position where they feel they need to do whatever they can to appease the student voice regardless of whether or not this is the correct thing to do educationally (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Matthews et al., 2018).

Commentators have also found that, depending on the timing, factors such as expected grades and student motivation can influence the responses made (Moore & Kuol, 2005) with the student voice becoming muted if students feel that the best way to maintain good relationships with the academics who teach them is to say nothing, or remain positive in the feedback. This power imbalance can then negate the effectiveness of a number of student voice tools, including module evaluations (Canning, 2017).

Response rates

Motivation to complete evaluations is important as when response rates are low the inability to properly interpret and use responses from the students who do participate is a problem. Response rates have been found to differ between 30% and 70% and when it is at the lower end there are issues in relation to whether the evaluation represents the common view or the most or least satisfied, arguments being that the sample is not necessarily representative, the validity of the SET weakened, and the feedback received flawed (Hoel & Dahl, 2019). Students cite the fact that they do not believe their feedback is acted upon and this potentially leads to low response rates (Hoel & Dahl, 2019; Kite et al., 2015). Indeed, it has been found that a major motivating factor for students to complete questionnaires is the belief that their feedback will lead to actions and improvements but there has

been limited research to suggest that such surveys do actually lead to any developments (Brown, 2008).

Another reason why the response rates might be so low is because many institutions leave evaluation completion until the end of the module which means changes made do not impact those who fill in the survey and respondents are often unaware of any alterations (Tschirhart & Pratt-Adams, 2019; Winchester & Winchester, 2012). Due to this situation Wiley (2019) suggests that explaining further the enhancements made to students as a result of module evaluations may have a positive effect on response rates.

Lack of response to student feedback

Whether or not improvements are made, research has also found that there is a consistent failure to provide students with information about how their feedback has been considered (Kite et al., 2015; Little et al., 2009). This failure to close the feedback loop, means that students do not feel their voice is valued, which leads (in part) to low student engagement in such evaluations. Richardson (2005), in a wide-ranging review of literature on student feedback surveys, found that despite their potential they are not taken sufficiently seriously by staff or institutions with only a small number of universities having effective systems in place and the majority demonstrating that student feedback was not acted upon and outcomes not communicated to students. Naylor et al. (2020) highlighted that the lack of engagement by students with module evaluations of teaching is symptomatic of the diminishing engagement of them in most quality assurance processes with many identifying that they do not believe their voice is heard. Another issue commonly cited in the literature is that the design of the student evaluations of teaching do not enable the purpose of quality enhancement to be fulfilled.

The design of module evaluation surveys

The use of surveys is now the most widely used form of measuring student satisfaction of teaching in higher education and therefore effective design is critical (Kember et al., 2002). Most are centrally developed by an institution, and, although these may appear more systematic in approach than surveys developed at an individual or faculty level, there may still be issues with them including bias, which could be construed a particularly important flaw when SETs are used to measure a lecturer's performance (Boyson, 2008; Clayson & Sheffet, 2006).

Forms of bias may include the following: acquiescence bias meaning that respondents are more likely to give positive responses; the ordering and wording of questions may also influence responses and be a form of undetected bias whilst indifference bias can result in students opting for the middle of the scale thereby not providing a true representation of the teaching being evaluated (Yorke, 2009). Kenyon (2020) also found that evaluation forms that are based around quantitative feedback mechanisms (for example Likert scales) do not collect the detail required to inform improvements to academic teaching performance. One alternative approach could be lecturers developing their own

evaluations. However, if academics did have complete ownership to develop their own evaluations this could lead to a fractured system resulting in the inability to compare standards across the institution (Berk, 2013). Another approach could be to involve students in the development of these surveys, which may also encourage them to engage further with quality assurance and enhancement processes (Bamber & Anderson, 2012). Ramsden (2008) and Tschirhart and Pratt-Adams (2019) found that engaging students in conversation was an important element of effective quality processes and could be used more frequently to collect feedback in student evaluations. However, in Tschirhart and Pratt-Adams' study, some academic staff were uncomfortable with the power those additional opportunities for discussion gave the students over academics with Cook-Sather's (2014) research finding that staff assumptions about traditional power dynamics would have to be challenged should such opportunities be considered (Cook-Sather, 2014).

The current design of some module evaluations has also led academics to question the validity of the feedback received. It is argued that several of the questions asked are outside the knowledge and experience of students, for example rating the knowledge and understanding of those teaching them or their teacher's overall performance (Green et al., 1998; Moore & Kuol, 2005). That the students are learners, rather than experts, means that it is reasonable for academics to have the opportunity to challenge the feedback they receive (Gonzalez, in Walker, 2001) with academic interpretation of the student evaluation data key to ensure that it is both sensible and understood (Ramsden, 2003). However, as most module evaluation feedback is given anonymously when the module has finished this challenge is difficult to enact.

The validity and usefulness of the types of questions included in SETs in actually quantifying the effectiveness of teaching is also an area of debate focussed around whether evaluations are evaluating the most important teaching variables or calculating that which is measurable and reportable (Shevlin et al., 2000) leading to a focus on quality assurance for the needs of the institution rather than providing data than can be used to enhance provision by the academics (Winchester & Winchester, 2012).

Common understanding of the purpose and implementation of module evaluations

Despite these issues Allan (2009) and Kleiman (2009) argue there has been movement in the focus of universities away from using mechanisms such as student evaluations of teaching from quality assurance and towards quality enhancement. However, a QAA report (2008) found that often this perceived transition was in fact a quality assurance activity concealed beneath a process purporting to be quality enhancement.

The issue of whether the mechanism is used for QA or QE (or both) speaks to another issue with module evaluations and student evaluations of teaching in general, that for student voice mechanisms to be successful the purpose behind them needs to be effectively communicated. Research has found

that whilst there is goodwill towards student voice mechanisms the understanding of them is poor demonstrating a need to ensure there is effective and accessible information about module evaluations including an explanation of their purpose, how they will be used and the responsibilities each stakeholder has in the process (Brown, 2008; Sun & Holt, 2022).

How an institution develops, positions, and responds to module evaluations is crucial to their effectiveness and the importance of them to staff and students. It is argued that these areas are influenced by and an indicator of the organisational culture of the university and it is this key concept that will be explored next.

2.2 Organisational culture

In order to understand the performance within an organisation and strive for improvement, knowledge of its culture is important and a number of researchers see it as very significant to how companies function and whether or not employees develop and thrive (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 2016). Organisational culture makes a difference to those who are employed by an institution, it enables all to operate effectively (or not) within an often-informal domain of values and beliefs (Bush & Middlewood, 2013; Schein, 2016) with the concept being widely used as an instrument of analysis by researchers over the last few decades (Floyd, 2016), it is something which helps to explain why things happen in the way that they do in an organisation (Jones et al., 1991). Through consideration of how students and academics perceive and experience the module evaluation process, the intention is the findings of this study will reveal much about the organisational culture and the impact of this on how evaluations are administered and responded to and whether they are seen as a mechanism that predominantly leads to quality enhancement or quality assurance or both. In order to effectively examine the organisational culture of the case study institution it important to explore how this concept is defined.

Definitions of organisational culture

The theory of organisational culture has many competing definitions and is a much-challenged concept (Dubkevics & Barbars, 2010). Alvesson (2002) labels it a tricky concept as it can be easily used to cover everything and consequently nothing, in agreeing with Frost et al.'s (1985) definition he describes it as the importance to people of symbolism (including stories and rituals) and the interpretation of the events and ideas which are influenced by the groups of which they are a part (Alvesson, 2002).

Owens and Valsky (2011, p.141) concur with this analysis and explain it as

> *a system of shared values and beliefs that interact with an organisation's people, organisational structures, and control systems to produce behavioural norms*.

This definition presents the concept as one which is based on the idea of control to produce norms, through a process of socialisation and conformity with espoused values and beliefs. As Floyd (2016) suggests viewing organisational culture through this lens is one which leads very much to control and power of the employer over their employees.

Schein (2016), however, presents a far more complex picture, alongside a general definition which identifies culture he also presents a structure which can enable it to be analysed. Schein's dynamic and influential definition of culture is this

> *The culture of a group can be defined as the accumulated shared learning of that group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration; which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, feel, and behave in relation to those problems.*
>
> *This accumulated learning is a pattern or system of beliefs, values, and behavioural norms that come to be taken for granted as basic assumptions and eventually drop out of awareness.* (Schein, 2016, p.6)

Schein also identifies that the leaders of an organisation have a pivotal role in creating, sustaining and transforming culture and acknowledges the emotional impact an organisational culture can have on staff, including inducing feelings such as anxiety.

Common to all the definitions are the themes of the beliefs and values of the organisation's members which influence the way things are done and that culture is evidenced by how actions are completed. It is these common themes that will be explored throughout the analysis with Schein's definition at the forefront in order to establish the organisational culture of the university and the impact this has on the module evaluation process.

To further guide analysis of the data Schein's structure of organisational culture will also be used**.** The structure he presents is in the form of three levels of culture, the levels based on the extent to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to an observer. They are:

- **Level 1**: artifacts – visible and feelable structures, rituals, documents and processes and observed behaviour.
- **Level 2**: espoused beliefs and values – for example ideologies, ideals and aspirations (espoused by the leaders but confirmed only by social consensus) (Floyd, 2016)
- **Level 3**: basic underlying assumptions – unconscious and taken-for-granted beliefs and values which determine behaviour, perception, thought and feeling (below the conscious level of artifacts and what people espouse) (Floyd, 2016, p.18).

Schein (2016) argues that these levels need to be carefully distinguished to avoid confusion. Arguments against using the concept as a tool for analysis have contested that something which is based on such abstract terms as values and beliefs may be intangible to observe. However, organisational culture becomes more concrete as it reveals itself through symbols and rituals as highlighted by the artifacts in level 1 and the beliefs and values espoused by those who work in the organisation, level 2 (Bush & Middlewood, 2013).

When researching an organisations' culture Schein (2016) argues that you need to look for discrepancies between the artifacts and the espoused values and beliefs, as if what is being espoused is not what is presented in the artifacts then to change this the organisation may need to look more closely at the underlying assumptions that underpin them. Through looking at the perceptions and experiences of academics and students in relation to module evaluations in contrast to how they are presented by the university will say much about the culture of the institution and what may need to change.

Tiernay's (1988) thoughts on organisational culture will also prove valuable when analysing staff and student data as he states that culture can be observed through

> *what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level.* (Tiernay, 1988, p.3)

Additionally, Floyd (2016) argues that to best understand modern organisational cultures historical events need to be analysed to consider how they have impacted the culture and that culture itself is a dynamic social process and alters because of individual and group behaviours at a local and institutional level. Therefore, this study will consider historical events such as changes in leadership and changes in systems, such as the module evaluation process, to consider what this reveals about the organisational culture for the staff, senior management and students.

Higher education academics can make assumptions and decisions based on and shaped by the culture and practices of their institutions and the artefacts which manifest this. Having considered organisational culture in general, the review now turns to a consideration of university organisational culture.

University organisational culture

Bush (2005) focuses on organisational culture having values and beliefs as a major feature and he argues that it is these that underpin the behaviour and attitudes of individuals, even though they may not always be explicit. Bush (2005, p.4) citing Morgan (1997) goes on to explore that individual values may not always be in harmony with one another or with the organisational beliefs and values, different value systems creating a *'mosaic of organisational realities rather than a uniform corporate culture.'* Such dissonance is more likely in larger educational institutions such as universities.

As well as individual values and beliefs interacting with the espoused organisational values, there are also sub-cultures within educational establishments as different groups may have their own values and culture (Alvesson, 2002). In universities these sub-cultures can be found at department or subject level (McAleer & McHugh, 1994) with Trowler (2008) stating that, to a point, it is at this level that university cultures are generated and sustained. This view differs from the controlling perspective suggested by Owens and Valesky (2011) in that organisational culture can be seen as one which is not owned by senior managers but is initiated and influenced more by the lecturers and academics within the faculties/departments. Tiernay (1988) presents a slightly different perspective in that if different cultures are apparent throughout an institution then this can lead to cultural conflict, resulting in adversarial relationships particularly between administrators (management) and academics. Throughout this research the department-level will be referred to as the subject-level and data will be reviewed to consider whether the module evaluation process is administered and responded to as per institutional expectations or influenced by the lecturers and academics within the subject areas which could suggest that there are sub-cultures owned at subject level that either influence or generate the organisational culture or are in conflict with it.

The next section considers the models through which organisational culture as experienced by academics, senior management and students will be analysed.

Models of culture

Following neoliberal trends higher education has undergone, and is undergoing, a process of increased commercialisation, managerial forms of governance and market-like behaviour (Zadja & Rust, 2016), with universities everywhere experiencing unprecedented changes (Izak et al., 2017; Kwiek, 2001) and increased use of external performance indicators, accountability and efficiency procedures (Floyd, 2016). The organisational culture and management practices of universities have been impacted by the power relations between the state, universities and academic staff (Kolsaker, 2008). Floyd (2016) argues that leadership and its underpinning values has changed from those based on traditional collegial ideals to ones dominated by business-like market driven principles (Floyd, 2016, p.5; citing de Boer & Goedegebuure, 2009). Within this proposed shift towards more managerial forms of leadership and away from traditional collegial ideas, models of organisational culture need to be identified in order provide a lens, an instrument of analysis, through which it can understood as to whether a university is espousing values and beliefs more aligned to the traditional collegiate culture of a university or one more aligned to control and managerialism, this will be considered through the staff and students perceptions and experiences of the module evaluation process but also through consideration of their broader experiences as part of the university.

One way to classify cultures is identified by Carnall (2007) who presents the work of Hastings (1993) and his model of old and new cultures, (Table 2.1).

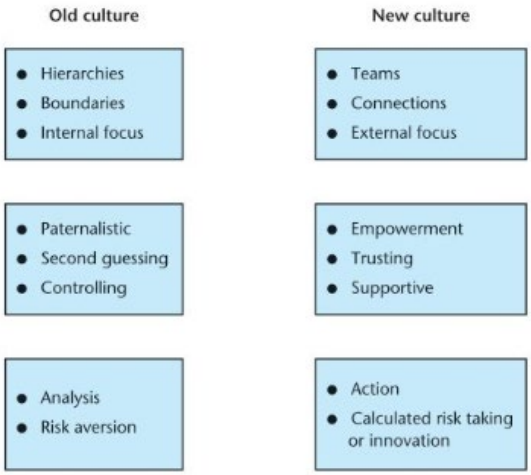

Table 2. 1 Old and new cultures, Hastings (1993) in Carnall (2007, p.32)

Carnall and Hastings, who studied culture primarily from the corporate world have used the terms old and new to suggest shifts from a hierarchical (old) to collegiate (new) culture. However, within higher education the traditional culture was one of collegiality, with the move to forms of managerialism becoming, perhaps, the new model (Floyd, 2016). Therefore, I have adapted the table slightly to make it more appropriate for the university context:

Traditional Culture	**New Culture**
Teams Connections External Focus	Hierarchies Boundaries Internal Focus
Empowerment Trusting Supportive	Paternalistic Second Guessing Controlling
Action Calculated Risk or Innovation	Analysis Risk Aversion

Table 2. 2 Adaptation of Old and New Cultures, Hastings (1993) in Carnall (2007, p.32)

Another approach that could be used to address models of cultures is that of Nauffal (2022) adapting the work of McNay (1995). In this the classic collegium culture is one of four (Figure 2.1) that it is argued can co-exist at a university, but with different balances among them, these differences based on factors such as traditions, mission, leadership and external pressures.

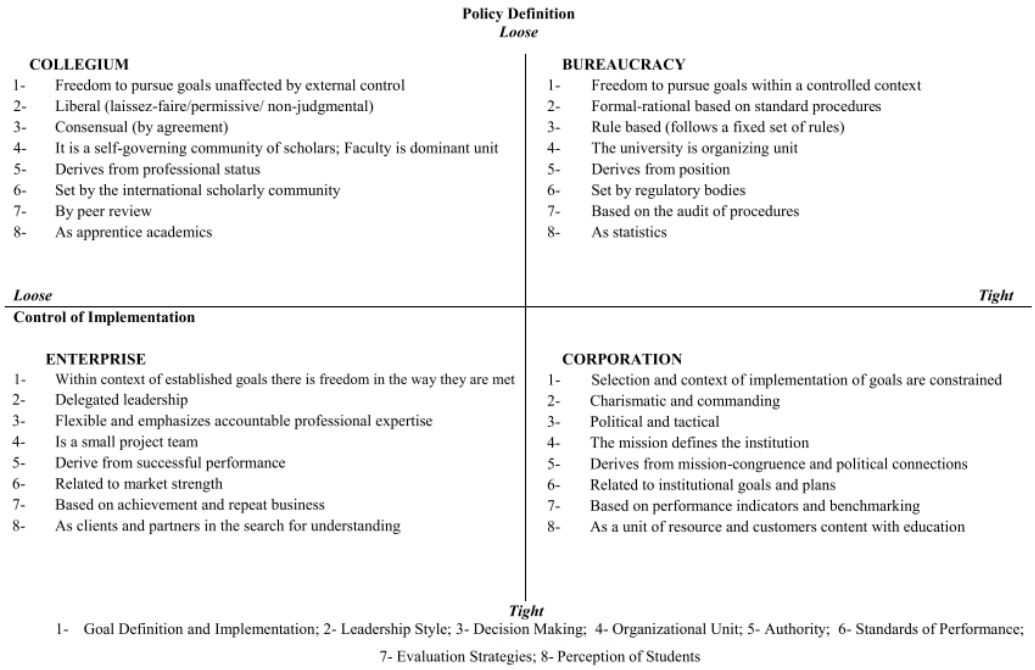

Figure 2. 1 Four cultures of universities adapted from McNay's model (Nauffal, 2022)

To support the use of this model as a conceptual framework McNay (1995) provides summary characteristics of the four cultures (Table 2.3).

Factor	Collegium	Bureaucracy	Corporation	Enterprise
Dominant Value (Clark, 1983)	Freedom	Equity	Loyalty	Competence
Role of central authorities	Permissive	Regulatory	Directive	Supportive
Handy's Organisation Culture	Person	Role	Power	Task
Dominant Unit	Department/ individual	Faculty/committees	Institution/Senior Management Team	Project Teams
Decision Arenas	Informal groups networks	Committees and administrative briefings	Work parties and Senior Management Teams	Project Teams
Management Style	Consensual	Formal/rationale	Political/tactical	Devolved leadership
Timeframe	Long	Cyclic	Short/mid-term	Instant

Environmental Fit	Evolution	Stability	Crisis	Turbulence
Nature of change	Organic innovation	Reactive adaptation	Proactive transformation	Tactical flexibility
External referents	Invisible college	Regulatory bodies	Policymakers as opinion leaders	Clients/sponsors
Internal referents	The discipline	The rules	The plans	Market strength/students
Basis for evaluation	Peer assessment	Audit of procedures	Performance indicators	Repeat business
Student Status	Apprentice academic	Statistic	Unit of resource	Customer
Administrator roles: servant of…	The community	The committee	The chief executive	The client, internal and external

Table 2. 3 Characteristics of the four cultures of a university (McNay, 1995)

McNay's research found evolving administrations with universities move from one culture to another. In the UK movement is typically from collegium to bureaucracy and then to corporation moving finally towards enterprise. As can be seen in Table 2.3 power and decision making within these cultural models is distributed differently, in the Corporation in particular, it is located with the university leadership and in the Collegium and Bureaucracy it is distributed, formally or informally, throughout the institution.

Both the Carnall and McNay (adapted by Nauffal) models are of value in research looking at the culture of a university and there is congruence between both with either enabling Schein's (2016) three levels of culture to be considered. Carnall's approach is one in which there are two distinct categories through which university models can be compared enabling a consideration of opposing cultures – traditional (in this context, collegial) and new (in this context managerial). McNay's model (as adapted by Nauffal), offers a more nuanced and dynamic conceptual framework which may better enable discussion against a spectrum of possibilities. McNay's enables the categorisation of the two types proposed by Carnall's model but goes further in enabling the researcher to refine their analysis in an area of research which Floyd (2016) has described as dynamic, one which is changing over time and being shaped by individual and group behaviours - it therefore warrants a lens that will best enable these complexities to be viewed.

Therefore, the McNay model (as adapted by Naffaul) will arguably provide a better framework to develop an understanding of cultural aspects of a university's approach to module evaluation and

feedback and it is for this reason that it is this model that is adopted within this study. The adaption from Nauffal (Figure 2.1) being used as it provides more detail within each quadrant to support the process of analysis alongside McNay's characteristics of the four cultures of a university (Table 2.3).

Depending on the perceived purpose of module evaluations at the case study university any of the models of culture may be observed through the analysis of the data. If the purpose is that of quality enhancement and the development of teaching at a local level then the traditional, collegial model may best enable this. However, Burnett and Huisman (2009) contend that this model is less suited to the current context of HE as it is not as open to the marketized nature of education due to a perceived lack of agility of decision making. If the purpose is quality assurance with data feeding into external sources then perhaps the most appropriate model would be that of the corporation as oversight and control is at the centre. The collection of data and associated discussions will allow further consideration of this. Alongside the impact organisational culture has on the module evaluation process it also has an impact on the professional identity of the staff that work at a university and whether they develop and thrive (Schein, 2016). It is professionalism and the interrelated concept of professional identity which will be considered next.

2.3 Professionalism and professional development

Giddens (1991) proposes that identity is how we perceive ourselves within our personal and work contexts, Beijaard et al. (2004) adding that it can also be conceived as how people like to be perceived by others. The concept is used to describe people in different areas of their lives so that individuals may have multiple perceptions of their own identity; personal, social and professional. It is a person's professional identity and the concept of professionalism that this study focusses on as this will frame how module evaluations and their feedback are perceived and the impact that this student evaluation tool has on an individual's professional identity, including the students' perspective of the impact of their voice on the professional development of the academics.

Professional identity

A person's professional identity is developed through their interactions with others and the systems and processes at work, it is based on their perceptions of self-image and self-efficacy and is a product and an agent of the systems in which they work (Briggs, 2007; Busher, 2005). An individual's professional identity can alter depending on the point in their career, their context and experiences, it is continually changing (Floyd & Dimmock, 2011).

Within her research focussing on professional identities in further education colleges and schools in England, Briggs (2007, p.474) examines the concept of professional identity through three lenses:

1. Professional values (what I profess)
2. Professional location (the profession to which I belong)

3. Professional role (my role within the institution).

By considering professional values and professional location in relation to perceptions and experiences of module evaluations it can be determined the impact on agency and identity individual academics experience. By considering how module evaluations are delivered, framed, and structured within the institution it will enable consideration of the positioning of the professional within the organisation and the impact of these on a core concept of this study, professionalism a concept which has professional identity at its core.

Professionalism

Professionalism outlines the professional identity to which an individual may subscribe (Briggs, 2007), with a specialist knowledge-base, autonomy and service being the three features of this concept (Eraut, 1994). As they have all three features, Arthur (2009) contends that higher education academics are professionals:

- Through their teaching they have a high level of autonomy (Trowler, 2008)
- Through the development of knowledge and understanding they provide a service to society (Hoecht, 2006)
- They have high levels of specialist knowledge (Becher & Trowler, 2001)

Beck and Young (2005), add to the discussion about what constitutes professionalism. In research focussed on the primacy of the knowledge base and inner dedication to the concept they argue that professionals have:

- collective collegiate autonomy over their conditions of professional training and conditions of work and practice
- defined the boundaries or their own knowledge base taking the form of the taught curriculum
- developed and implemented a code of ethics to maintain trust
- created a professional habitus (a community which develops and embodies the professionals' values and standards) (Beck & Young, 2005, p.188)

It is argued that operating to these conditions professionals are insulated from the contamination and influence of external pressures such as free market competition and that they protect professional knowledge to a degree. It is further proposed that these conditions lead to a form of inner dedication which in turn engenders a genuine ethical responsibility for the service they provide, in this case to the students (Kolsaker, 2008). A critique of the idea of inner dedication and the conditions that enable it is that it can be decried as self-serving and open to abuse, therefore highlighting that some external regulatory measures are required (Beck & Young, 2005). It is also positioned in such a way that the context that higher education is currently operating within is largely ignored as academics would be

insulated from this, presumably within a collegium organisational culture, the pragmatism of this will be explored throughout the research.

Another indicator of professionalism is that professionals are committed to developing their own performance (Ball, 2003; Hoect, 2006; Nixon et al., 2001) this is because they believe it is important to do so in order to continue to provide the levels of education and service required by themselves and their position. Whether or not module evaluations can be a tool which is perceived by academics as something that supports the development of their own performance and therefore enhances their professionalism will be explored throughout this study, the student viewpoint will also add a different perspective when considering whether they have noted any changes in a lecturer's practice because of their feedback. Arthur (2019), when considering student evaluations, contends that if the central goal of the module evaluation process is quality enhancement, then this aligns with the concept of professionalism. However, if the focus is on quality assurance then this means they sit within the realms of performativity, a tool of managerialism.

In her study Kolsaker (2008) found that a commitment to professional development is central to the concept of professionalism, and it is to this concept that the literature review now turns.

Professional development

Professional development or Continuing Professional Development (CPD) '*encompasses all formal and informal learning that enables individuals to improve their own practice.*' (Bubb and Earley, 2007, p.3). Professional development opportunities have grown in number in part as a response to the impact of globalisation and the subsequent increasing external demands on higher education staff whose roles have become ever more complex (Floyd, 2019).

Madden and Mitchell (1993) outline three main functions for professional development:

- Updating and extending the professional's knowledge and skills on new developments and areas of practice – to ensure continuing competence in the current job;
- Training for new responsibilities and for a changing role;
- Developing personal and professional effectiveness and increasing job satisfaction which leads to increasing competence in wider contexts with benefits to both professional and personal roles.

Bubb and Earley (2007) add to these functions to state that continuing professional development is used to encourage and promote a commitment by the individual to professional growth with it being for the benefit of the individual, institutional and national needs. In order to develop a better motivated and higher-performing workforce, leadership and management structures need to be in place in order to encourage a commitment to continuing professional development and to foster a sense of professionalism for the academics. The organisational culture of a university will be key to

this; in institutions where there is a collegiate, learning centred culture there would be a strive to secure high-quality continuing professional development for its staff with individual agency central to the approach (Bubb & Earley, 2007).

How to determine whether professional development is effective is a complex question to answer (Bubb & Earley, 2007). However, early National Foundation for Educational Research found that effective CPD had a number of key characteristics these being:

- clear identification of aims and objectives;
- analysis of training needs to ensure that it matched existing levels of expertise;
- opportunities for reflection; on-going evaluation and follow up work (Bubb and Earley, 2007, p.40)

Gast et al. (2017) also propose that to be successful the CPD activities must have an impact on an individual's knowledge and skills as well as their attitude. If these characteristics are present, it could be determined that the main functions of professional development have been addressed and therefore it is successful, with well-planned and structured professional development benefitting higher education through positive effects on staff motivation, recruitment, retention and on teaching and learning and student outcomes (Floyd, 2019).

Student surveys, including module evaluations, should be part of a system of professional and academic development (Alderman et al., 2012), with student feedback being seen as a way for higher education professionals to improve their teaching (Chen & Hoshower, 1998; Winchester & Winchester, 2012). However, Richardson (2005) highlights the fact that there is little empirical evidence to support this claim. Part of the reason for this may be that as most SETs, including module evaluations, are designed centrally by the institution, the questions asked may be focused on the bureaucratic and administrative rather than on the evaluation of teaching (Winchester & Winchester, 2012). Arthur (2019) also argues that with the neo-liberal drive to improve the customer experience questions are increasingly being asked which focus on student satisfaction rather than learning, further blunting the use of module evaluations as tools to support professional development and, if the focus was altered, the feedback could better provide the information lecturers need to make improvements and act more effectively as professional development opportunities (Moore & Kuol, 2005).

Another potential issue with the module evaluation process being owned centrally, with little input from academic staff, is that if professional development is perceived or experienced to be a controlling rather than an enabling mechanism the potential benefits may be undermined by a lack of trust as individuals view it as a task to manage them and drive-up external metrics rather than enhance their practice (Floyd, 2019). If this is the experience at the case study university then the module evaluation process may be ineffective in addressing the main functions of professional development

(Bubb & Earley, 2007; Gast et al., 2017; Madden and Mitchell, 1993) and may also erode the professional identity and professionalism of academics as it could be perceived as an externally administered and managed mechanism, with little direction or input from staff thereby undermining their academic autonomy (Floyd 2019; Nixon et al., 2001).

This research will therefore consider whether in this case study university module evaluations are viewed as an effective professional development process with value placed on the student voice or a means of monitoring and control (Floyd, 2019).

A potential impact on the effectiveness of the use of module evaluations as a mechanism for professional development has been the rise of marketisation of higher education and the reported growth in managerialism, with increasingly directive and prescriptive regulations and quality assurance systems putting academics on the *'back-foot'* (Kolsaker, 2008, p.513). It is the concepts of managerialism and performativity and the impact of these on professionalism, professional development and the status of the student voice which are considered next.

2.4 Managerialism

Managerialism focuses on the interests of the organisation above the autonomy of the individual. In the world of academia this suggests that an academic will have less freedom and be subject to a more rigid, robust monitoring and management regime than has traditionally been the case (Kolsaker, 2008; Shepherd, 2018). It can be considered as the pursuit of a set of management ideas (Flynn, 2002) and is argued focuses on the interests of managers rather than of the employees as it increases their power, influence and the importance of their position (Shepherd, 2018). The process of putting managerial ideas into practice has been termed managerialisation (Clarke et al., 2000) and this is mainly through the use of specific control techniques such as target setting, performance management and monitoring procedures. Shepherd (2018) argues that it is seen as the organisational arm of neo-liberalism in that it applies to the public sector the management model of the business world and this has created conflict in a sphere once defined by the autonomy of academics within a collegium of like-minded individuals.

To support with the analysis of the data and in considering whether the current system of module evaluations links with the newer, more intrusive style of management (managerialism) or the traditional more liberal style of management, Olssen's (2002) framework will be used (Table 2.4). This ideal-type model will support with analysing the data to determine how the module evaluation process is being positioned and managed. Using this framework will also shed light on whether there has been a shift from *'bureaucratic-professional'* forms of accountability to a more '*consumer-managerial'* model (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p.17).

If the findings suggest that the neo-liberal managerial model is presented, this will imply that the module evaluation process is being operated in a culture more aligned with the corporate organisational model with power situated at the centre and the subsequent negative impact on professionalism of the academic as a result. However, consideration will also be given as to whether academics are constructing new forms of professionalism and professional identity more suited to managerialism (Nixon et al., 2001) with tensions between old and new styles of management '*worked-out*' (Simkins, 2000, p.330), or whether, as Olssen and Peter's (2005) contend, the new form of management is externally imposed and alters fundamentally what it means to be a professional academic with the concepts of professionalism and managerialism diametrically opposed.

	Ideal-Type Model of Internal Governance of Universities	
	Neo-liberal (managerial)	Liberal (traditional)
Mode of control	'Hard' managerialism; contractual specification between principal-agent; autocratic control	'Soft' managerialism; collegial-democratic voting; professional consensus; diffuse control
Management Function	Managers; line-management; cost-centres	Leaders; community of scholars; professions; faculty
Goals	Maximise outputs; financial profit; efficiency; massification; privatisation	Knowledge; research; inquiry; truth; reason; elitist; not for-profit
Work relations	Competitive; hierarchical; workload indexed to market; corporate loyalty; no adverse criticism of university	Trust; virtue ethics; professional norms; freedom of expression and criticism; role of public intellectual
Accountability	Audit; monitoring; consumer-managerial; performance indicators; output-based	'Soft' managerialism; professional-bureaucratic; peer-review and facilitation; rule-based
Marketing	Centres of excellence; competition; corporate image; branding; public relations	The Kantian ideal of reason; specialisation; communication; truth; democracy
Pedagogy/teaching	Semesterisation; slenderisation of courses; modularisation; distance learning; summer schools; vocations	Full-year courses; traditional academic methods and course assessment methods; knowledge for its own sake
Research	Externally funded; contestable; separated from teaching; controlled by government or external agency	Integrally linked to teaching; controlled from within university; initiated and undertaken by individual academics.

Table 2. 4 Contrast between traditional and managerial modes of governance (Olssen, 2002, p.45)

Throughout the findings and subsequent discussions, consideration will also be given as to whether there is some way, as Kolsaker (2008) suggests, of considering how the dichotomous view presented in much of the literature can be addressed and a more balanced perspective established where the impact of managerialism is reduced and the balancing role of collegiality bought to the fore to reduce

the conflict and adversarial reality experienced by some academics when working with such mechanisms as module evaluations (Tiernay, 1988). This would mean redressing the shift of power and decision making away from individual academics to administrators/ managers, a feature of managerialism and also challenging the assumed right of one group to monitor and control the activities of others (Kolsaker, 2008).

In summary, this research will focus on whether module evaluations are experienced as a centrally administered managerialist tool negatively impacting on autonomous professional practice or as a mechanism that is vested in a pedagogy of context and experience, intelligible within a set of collegial relations more closely associated with the concept of professionalism (Sanguinetti, 2000). It is the concept of performativity, considered a tool of managerialism, which will be considered next.

Performativity

Performativity has been defined as, '*…a technology, culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and display as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change*.' (Ball, 2003, p.213) and is seen as providing the managerial control of services through numerical targets.

Due to the numerical nature of performativity it has led to a level of competition between academics, programmes, faculties and institutions as the mechanisms for measurement compare, contrast and judge performance (often publicly) which leads people to question what it means to be a professional creating a culture of surveillance and feelings of low-trust and competition instead of the traditional academic values of co-operation and collaboration (Ball, 2003; Ball 2016). The culture of surveillance includes the policing of the improvement process (Arthur, 2019) using such mechanisms as action planning, standardised grids and templates.

Within a performative culture, in order to improve performance indicators and respond to the wishes of the students, academics are placed in professionally perilous positions, sometimes sacrificing judgement and authenticity to act in a way that will improve the metrics and data (Boyson, 2008; McPherson, 2006). This can erode their concept of professionalism and self-worth and changes how academics think about what they do and what is important and tolerable (Ball, 2016; Ball 2003).

As well as the risk to the individual's self-worth, Ball (2003) further argues that acting to improve metrics rather than developing teaching and learning approaches which are more pedagogically sound and based on the knowledge and authority of the academic means that effectivity rather than honesty is prized with short-term fixes favoured over long-term gains, the impact being they are reducing the long-term benefits on the consumer rather than advancing them. This is a form of gaming (Beighton & Naz, 2023) whereby staff are manipulating the system to achieve the desired outcome, in this case a positive student evaluation of teaching (Winchester & Winchester, 2012).

As a result of the performative approach to module evaluations in some institutions and the conflicted position that academics are placed in it has been found that this can have an impact on the relationships between staff and students. Arthur (2009) found that staff can blame students for poor module evaluation feedback, using factors related to the type of student or their unrealistic expectations to explain why they as academics have received negative responses rather than reflecting on whether it is linked to something within their practice that could be improved. As well as potentially damaging the relationships between students and staff, Ball (2003) has also found that performative cultures can cause division between academics and departments because of the competitive and judgemental nature of the approach.

Blame was one of the affective responses of academics that Arthur (2009) found in relation to student feedback, another notable one being shame. Rather than approaching negative feedback in the commonly assumed way of using it as a catalyst to inform change, Arthur found that academics can take it personally and this causes a sense of helplessness especially if it is felt that the comments from the evaluations are about such aspects as their personality. Echoing the findings of Moore and Kuol (2005), who found that negative feedback can produce reactions of dismay and dejection with possible withdrawal from any enhancement processes, Arthur argued that if module evaluations are to be a part of the system then lecturer's feelings and reactions to feedback need to be taken into account.

Within the literature there was little written about the motivation for students to complete module evaluation forms or their understanding of the affective nature of their feedback on academics. There was also little that could be found about student experiences in completing feedback in such a way that the information is supportive in achieving the intended purposes, whether this be quality enhancement or quality assurance or both. Canning (2017), when considering a learner's transition from child to adult or pupil to university student, acknowledged that this transition does not automatically lead to a development in the manner in which they express themselves and, with the proliferation of social media and opportunities to give immediate feedback online and the potential abuse of this (Chukwuere, 2020), it is an area of interest for this study.

2.5 Summary and Conceptual Framework

This chapter focussed on the theoretical concepts that will enable the main research question, '*What are academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?*' to be explored. These concepts being: professionalism (including professional development), managerialism (including performativity) and organisational culture. These concepts form the theoretical framework through which academic, senior management and students' perceptions and experiences will be analysed and will enable an understanding of the influence they have on the module evaluation process and that the process has on them.

The literature review further informed the sub-questions that will guide the research and support the answering of the main research question.

The research sub-questions are:

1) *How do academics, senior management and students perceive and experience the process of module evaluations?*
   Through answering this question consideration will be given as to what staff, students and senior management perceive the purpose of module evaluations is and whether they are effective in achieving this purpose. Consideration will also be given to what improvements they would suggest to the process.
2) *How are module evaluations positioned and managed within the university?*
   When answering this question there will be a focus on the interplay between professionalism, managerialism, and performativity. The literature review highlighted both the potential benefits of module evaluations being used as a form of professional development but also the limitations and barriers of this.
3) *How do academics and students perceive and experience their subject and university culture in relation to module evaluations?*
   The literature review considered organisational culture at different levels, highlighting the importance of culture on the functioning of a university and on whether employees are enabled to thrive. The research will consider whether there are discrepancies between the espoused values and beliefs and the artifacts presented and will review which types of culture may best suit the objectives of module evaluations to be realised.

The review of the literature led to the conceptual framework (Figure 2.2) which will frame this research.

Figure 2. 2 Conceptual Framework

To understand the module evaluation process as lived by academics and students, it is necessary to explore the inter-relationships between the core concepts and the individual and combined influence of these on the module evaluation process and the academics, university management and students whose experience is at the heart of it.

The literature review also highlighted that there is a potential tension between the needs and expectations of the individual student, the interests of the academic and the overall requirements of universities within the HE context today. The conceptual framework will enable these tensions to be further explored. The literature review identified a gap in the research where the literature search revealed no examples that explored the perspectives and experiences of module evaluations of staff, students and senior management in one institution. This research provides a significant and original contribution to this field by comparing data from these key stakeholders to explore how the process is espoused and enacted (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Argyris et al., 1985) in one case study institution with the aim of furthering knowledge and understanding in this area as well as making suggestions for the case study institution to develop their module evaluation practice and recommendations for further research.

The next chapter will consider the methodology that will enable the research questions to be explored and the methods which will be employed in this study.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the methodology and methods used in this study and the reasons behind their choice. It will also explain my personal values and background and examine how these may have influenced the research. There will also be a consideration of the sampling strategy, as well as an exploration of how the data was analysed and a review of ethical issues and the concept of trustworthiness. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of the limitations of this research.

The investigation was planned as an interpretative study as, through a review of the literature, this was determined the best approach by which to address the research question and the sub-research questions identified through the literature review.

Research question:

What are academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?

The research sub-questions are as follows:

1) How do academics, senior management and students perceive and experience the process of module evaluations?

2) How are module evaluations positioned and managed within the university?

3) How do academics and students perceive and experience their subject and university culture in relation to module evaluations?

The decision to follow an interpretative approach will be explored through a short exploration of the rationale behind the paradigm as it is this which guides the researcher as to how to conduct their research (Bhattarai, 2021).

Paradigm rationale, including consideration of ontology and epistemology

As Punch (2013) highlights, research is built upon the fundamental philosophical concepts of ontology, epistemology and paradigms.

A paradigm recognises the set of beliefs that guide the researcher in order to understand the evidence and will influence the approach used and the methods adopted in the research (Brundrett & Rhodes, 2013; Cresswell, 2018).

Within educational research there have historically been two paradigms, positivist and interpretative (Cohen et al., 2018). Positivist social research is that which is most closely related to the natural sciences and its typical features include measurement and quantification, a focus on reliability with

validity of measurements key. Objectivity, standardisation, and a neutral position on behalf of the researcher are also sought, the view being that genuine knowledge, based on seeking objective truth, can only be determined by using such scientific methods.

Interpretative research rejects such a position and seeks to understand the human experience with a focus on interactions, language and consciousness. There is a focus on the individuality of the participant and on viewing the world through their eyes, there is recognition that individuals may experience the world differently and this adds a layer of richness to the findings (Cohen et al., 2018; Robson & McCartan, 2016). Interpretative research findings are often presented verbally with limited use of numerical data, a focus on meanings and contexts are seen as important with situations described from the perspective of those involved. Researchers working within this paradigm recognise their own life experiences will shape their analysis and interpretation of the data and therefore the researcher's positionality within the research is acknowledged. Unlike the positivist stance, interpretivist researchers inductively create meaning (Cresswell, 2018) and it is also generally accepted that the intent of qualitative inquiry is not to generalise findings outside of the context of the study but to describe and develop themes particular to the specific context being explored (Cresswell, 2018). However, linked arguments of fuzzy generalisation and transferability will be explored within the research design section as it is argued the conclusions from this study could be used to inform other settings that are similar in context.

Following the paradigm wars (Gage, 1989), during which much debate took place about whether an interpretative or positivist approach should prevail, a third way developed where it was considered that a mix of both interpretive and positive methods could be appropriate with the determination of which paradigm was suitable ultimately being dependent upon which was most appropriate to understand the focus of the study (Cohen et al., 2018).

In order to establish which paradigm would best enable the research question and sub-questions to be investigated, consideration was given to the ontological and epistemological assumptions (Cohen et al., 2018).

Ontology

Ontology is the study of what is real or can be known (Crotty, 2003; Punch, 2013; Thomas, 2013). The two extreme ontological positions within social science are realism (positivism) and nominalism (interpretivism) (Cohen et al., 2018). Realists believe that reality is a 'given', out there in the world and external to individual cognition. It is this ontological position that dominates the natural sciences. Nominalists believe reality is the result of individual cognition, that it is a creation of one's own mind, is subjective and differs from person to person (Kettley, 2012; Scotland, 2012). Once a researcher is clear of their ontological beliefs this will dictate their epistemological stance. As this study seeks to understand the perspectives, beliefs, views and experiences of academics, senior management and

students it has at its core the fundamental belief that social science is not scientific in a realist sense and that meaning is constructed, therefore a nominalist position has been taken throughout.

Epistemology

Epistemology is about how you look at and find out about the world that has been defined ontologically (Scotland, 2012; Thomas, 2013). As ontological beliefs dictate epistemological beliefs this therefore determines that if you are a realist you would take on an observer role, using the methods of natural science (a positivist epistemological stance). On the other hand, if you are a nominalist who sees knowledge as personal, subjective and unique, you would become involved with the subjects, and reject the methods of the natural scientist (an anti-positivist epistemological stance) (Cohen et al., 2018). Ontological and epistemological beliefs determine the research paradigm.

Viewing the complexities of life through the eyes of the participants within context is a priority for the interpretative researcher (Neuman, 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016) and a key difference from positivist research is the ability to also consider the values and beliefs of the participants and explore behaviours to better understand a phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2018). As this research is focused on the experiences, perceptions, values and beliefs of students and staff within one organisation the nominalist anti-positive stance taken has meant that the research will be grounded in the interpretivist paradigm as this will best enable the lived experience of the participants to be explored. Having established the philosophical underpinning of this study the next section will introduce and justify the specific qualitative research design chosen.

3.1 Type of study

Although it has historically been assumed that the ontological position of the research will determine that either qualitative or quantitative methods will be used in the research (Cohen et al., 2018) with philosophical assumptions meaning that quantitative and qualitative traditions and methods were considered incompatible (Robson & McCartan, 2016) this has been challenged. At its core the argument has been that those who believe that there are objective truths and fall within a positivist paradigm will use scientific experimentation and a detached approach focusing on quantitative methods whereby those being studied are isolated and the phenomenon measured in numerical terms. Whereas interpretivist researchers will use qualitative methods and be close to those that they are studying, recognising that their own life experiences will shape their analysis and interpretation of the data (Cresswell, 2018). However, a third way has also been established in social science research, one that is situated in a worldview of pragmatism. A mixed methods approach it is argued can enable a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon than a single methods approach and is based on answering the research question using qualitative and/or quantitative methods according to which is deemed most suitable, i.e. which would work best when answering the research question (Cohen et al., 2018).

Although the research question could lend itself to a mixed methods approach the decision to pursue a purely qualitative design was based on the following factors; the first factor arose from the review of the literature in which it was established that further research would benefit from seeking to examine student and staff perceptions of teaching evaluations more fully within one institution looking into their perceptions in greater detail, this being under-represented in the literature and would enable comparison with existing research (Hoel & Dahl, 2019; Wiley, 2019). Arthur (2009, 2019) and Moore and Kuol (2005) also call for further research to better understand academic responses to module evaluations, with Arthur also advocating for further examination of the concepts of professionalism and performativity by including the views of university managers as well as students and academics.

The second factor is based on the first, that as the focus was on fully examining a range of stakeholders' perceptions by getting as complete a picture as possible of the staff, student and management perceptions of the module evaluation process this lead to the conclusion that rich data of the type required to answer the research question would be best served by focusing on a small sample using the research methods of focus groups and individual interviews (which will be explored later in this chapter).

Having considered the best research methods to use to gain the data required consideration was given to the research design, these included action research, ethnography and case study (Thomas, 2017). For reasons that will be explored below a case study approach was taken, with the overarching rationale that it was this approach that was deemed best to allow a rich understanding of the participants views and experiences about module evaluations (Cohen et al., 2018).

Case study

The intention of this research is not to generalise but to focus on the particular and this is the purpose of a case study (Thomas, 2017). The aim of this design being to gain an in depth understanding of the complexity of a case within its natural setting thereby allowing the researcher to gain an overall sense of events in context (Cohen et al., 2018; Stake, 2008; Yin, 2018). To do this a case study enables a 'thing' to be studied in detail, from several angles and in this research the 'thing' is module evaluations in one UK institution. Yin (2018) explains that case studies are effective at answering exploratory questions, and as the research question and sub questions are 'what' and 'how' in nature the use of this design is appropriate as to is the fact that case study research will support using various data, such as individual and group discussions and documentary review, benefitting first from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide the data collection and findings (Yin, 2018).

Although not an exhaustive search, the literature located about research into module evaluations identified a number that used case studies as it enabled an in-depth understanding of a single institution (Arthur, 2009; Moore & Kuol, 2005; Winchester & Winchester, 2012). Indeed, using this approach will allow the complexity of the research focus to be taken into account (Cohen et al., 2018)

in order to achieve a holistic sense of the issue within one setting (Yin, 2018). As outlined in the paradigm rationale section, the focus of this research is to better understand the experiences, values and beliefs of the participants and this exploratory case study will provide an opportunity to gather rich detail about their lived experience and their thoughts and feelings about module evaluations in context (Cohen et al., 2018; Yin, 2018).

Much argument has been made about the definition of what a case is or is not and where the boundaries lie between the phenomenon being explored and the context in which it is set. Yin (2009) argues that the boundary is in fact blurred but highlights the importance of setting the case within a context. In this research the case being explored is that of the process of module evaluations with the context being a single university.

As with all research designs the case study has both strengths and limitations and these will now be considered.

Case study strengths

Many strengths have been claimed for the use of a case study within qualitative research. Cohen et al. (2018) identify a number of these including the fact that they recognise the complexity of social situations and are focussed on developing an understanding of a case which is rich in detail and therefore strong in terms of representing the reality lived by participants. To expand on this, case studies are deemed to be illuminating and illustrative and are chosen because the researcher wants to understand a real-world case and this will involve important contextual conditions that need to be considered in tandem, and are often indistinguishable from the phenomenon, whereas other research (for example experimental research) seeks to separate the context from the focus of the research or the design itself (for example a survey) would limit the investigation of the context (Cresswell, 2018).

The case study is therefore effective at investigating a phenomenon and its context in detail, it enables the researcher to drill down further than other forms of enquiry and create a three-dimensional picture which is presented in such a way that its meaning is easily accessible to a wide audience as they are often written in everyday, non-professional language (Cohen et al., 2018; Thomas, 2017). Case studies enable something to be seen in its completeness, looking at it from a range of angles and gaining analytical insights from it.

Case study limitations

The limitation most proffered is that the findings from a case study cannot be generalised because the particularity of the case being studied does not lend itself to replication (Cohen et al., 2018; Cresswell, 2018; Thomas, 2017). Thomas (2017) argues that we do not always want to generalise, that the rich data provided by a case study enables analytical insights and that we can learn from a specific

example studied in depth with case studies therefore being good for studying uniqueness and considering an object for inquiry within broader analytical categories.

The fact that case studies are widely accepted as not being generalisable also leads to consideration of whether the learnings from them can be transferred or, as Thomas (2017) contends, abducted, meaning that they may be useful in other settings. Denscombe (2014) makes the point that the findings may be of use elsewhere depending on the similarity of the case to others, Bassey (1981) calls this relatability, and it is based upon an individual or institution judging whether the details from the case study are sufficient to conclude that they are similar enough to enable somebody working in that situation to relate the findings to their case. To acknowledge the potential for relatability, and what Bassey (1999) calls fuzzy generalisation, I shall use language in the findings and discussion section which should enable the reader to determine themselves whether what was found here could relate to a similar situation elsewhere whilst also acknowledging that the results are not generalisable in the scientific, absolute sense.

Trustworthiness

Further criticism about the use of a case study as a research design is that it is susceptible to claims against its reliability and validity. However, these concepts originate from the quantitative research tradition and from the outset it is important to acknowledge that case studies will not be able to have the same checks that are found in many quantitative studies, due to the singular nature of the design. Therefore, questions about quality from a reliability perspective are less important, this is because in a case study, where there is just one case, it cannot be assumed that if a similar study was carried out with different people in a different setting similar findings would result (Thomas, 2017). Therefore, rather than focussing on the concepts of validity and reliability, but to avoid claims that the research is undisciplined, words such as trustworthiness and authenticity have been used to benchmark quality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). More recently Noble and Smith (2015) have re-framed this into truth value, consistency, neutrality and applicability and established a checklist which identifies strategies by which a qualitative researcher can ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of their findings. This research draws on these strategies and the work of Cresswell (2018) to assure credibility and are outlined here:

In order to account for personal biases which may have influenced the findings a reflective journal has been maintained and decisions documented, this was both handwritten and electronic and I have also been clear on my background and experience and established the potential bias that could arise from this, further consideration of this follows in the next sub-section.

To establish representativeness in the findings, in relation to the phenomena, a purposive sample of participants was chosen deliberately to share their experiences, and the method of data collection enabled follow up questions to be asked if needed to clarify findings, the sample and method of data

collection will be considered later in this chapter. The semi-structured focus groups and interviews were also recorded and transcribed to enable re-visiting and checking of themes and ensured that these remained true to the participants' accounts, I also triangulated data from different sources, i.e. the perspectives of different participants to build up a convincing justification for the themes. The findings and discussion chapters also use 'rich and thick' extracts from the participants to ensure the outcomes are true to participant accounts with alternative perspectives to the dominant themes also shared, adding to the credibility of the findings as this is more realistic and representative of real life (Cresswell, 2018). Participants have also had the opportunity to comment on findings.

In order to support high levels of consistency and auditability this chapter provides a clear description of the research process and my research diary documents the challenges and issues related to this to further allow for reflection throughout the process and that I could maintain cohesion between the study's aim and implementation. Throughout the process I have also shared emerging themes, discussion points and sources of information with my supervisors to support dependability and encourage challenge to assumptions, although the findings remain my own. Also, to ensure that there is the potential of fuzzy generalisability, detail of the context has been provided so that others can judge the applicability of the conclusions to their own settings (Bassey, 1999).

Value, personal context, bias and positionality

The avoidance of researcher bias is a particularly tricky one because, as acknowledged within case studies, the centrality of the researcher in the research is key as reality is being constructed by both the researcher and the participants. However, to reduce the risk of bias overcoming the study and the results being an embodiment of the researcher's pre-conceived ideas, reflexivity and checks were undertaken throughout the study, including summary checks of participants' answers throughout the interview process.

The importance of reflexivity to qualitative research is well understood by researchers (Bryman, 2016), due to the centrality of researchers in the creation of the knowledge. Researchers therefore need to recognise that they bring their own biographies to the study and do not start the research with a clean slate, how we view things is impacted by ourselves and the values, beliefs and world views we bring. To both acknowledge my centrality in the study and mitigate my bias reflexivity was central to the process, this meant that throughout I was sceptical about my thoughts and any line of reasoning that I or others presented, evidence was always sought to support these. I also monitored closely my interaction with participants and went beyond private reflection about how my own biography may have influenced the research by disclosing this publicly to those I interviewed (Cohen et al., 2018). Through the writing up of the study I have also revealed my own biography and background to ensure transparency, this is part of a chain of evidence to ensure robustness of my findings.

To further provide evidence for this chain (Yin, 2009) I have also included information about type of evidence, manner of collection, and selection of participants and other data sources, all are further explored in the following sections and, as additional evidence, I will now explore my positionality as researcher.

Throughout the research process I have made it transparent that I have been central to the gathering and interpretation of the data, and the centrality of this position means that I will have affected the research. However, recognising this has enabled me to both understand and mitigate my influence.

Following the advice of Thomas (2017), in recognition of the subjective nature of interpretative research and the relationship between myself and the participants, I have made explicit my biography, including my gender, ethnicity, and commitments so that all of this is transparent to the reader.

I have also not tried to conceal the subjective nature of this type of research in the writing up of my findings. I have done this in a way that makes it clear that I understand the underlying principles of conduct in such a study. In the introduction I made clear my interest in the topic, and my personal circumstances and positionality in relation to the context being studied. I have written in the first person throughout highlighting the centrality of my role and my position in relation to the analysis by using phrases such as 'I believe that' rather than using the third person narrative more commonly associated with positivist research (Thomas, 2017). I also constantly sought to ensure that it is the participants voice being heard rather than my own through the generous use of quotations (Garrick, 1999).

Research design summary

A case study approach was chosen as, with an understanding of its limitations, it was deemed to be the most appropriate design through which to develop a deep understanding of staff, senior management and student' experiences and perceptions of the module evaluation process as the depth of the data and rich descriptions will give insights that other approaches may not. In order to ensure that the case study was completed in a robust manner and to add further detail to how trustworthiness and authenticity were achieved a number of areas will now be considered, the first of which is the context in which the research took place.

3.2 Context of the case study

The clear establishment of boundaries of a case study is aimed at ensuring the application of rigour and clarity from the outset (Cresswell, 2018). The context of the case study clearly defines one of these boundaries which supports others to make fuzzy generalisations about the findings (Bassey, 1999) by determining the similarities of their setting to the one researched.

The higher education setting in which the research took place is a post-1992 university in England with a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as well as research degrees. The Higher

Education Statistics Agency (HESA) published 14 040 FTE students enrolled in the academic year 2020/21. The university has widened access and improved outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, lower participation neighbourhoods or who come into higher education with lower entry qualifications (HESA data accessed 09.01.2023). The majority of students are UK based with 2 965 being non-UK based. These students are organised into programmes across three academic units called faculties which provide programmes across areas such as business, art, science, education, and healthcare. In addition, the university also has a Research and Knowledge Exchange Unit as well as a Graduate School that provides support for postgraduate research degrees. As well as the academic units the university also has centralised professional services to provide support for both staff and students. These include Library and Learning Services, a centre for Employability, Student and Academic Services who provide student facing support and an Academic Registry that comprises the Quality Unit and Student Records. Completely independent from the university there is a Students' Union, which is an independent charity whose aim is to support the student experience throughout their time at the university.

The university's management structure comprises a Vice Chancellor who has strategic oversight for the university and a Deputy Vice Chancellor whose remit includes the student experience. On the University Management Team there are also Deans of the three faculties who provide leadership for these areas as well as a range of other Directors and Chief Officers all of whom collectively maintain strategic oversight.

Focusing on the academic provision underneath this university management structure each faculty has a Deputy Dean and at least one Associate Dean who support the strategic oversight and management of each faculty. Each faculty also has a number of subject areas in which the taught provision, the programmes, are located and each subject area has a Head of Subject with most having a Deputy Head of Subject. Those with these positions have strategic and operational oversight of the programmes within their areas, including the student experience. Each programme has a programme leader with responsibility for that programme and each module that is taught has a module leader who has responsibility for that provision, albeit several academic staff may teach on a module and across different modules and programmes. It is at this module level that module evaluations sit, and it is the module leaders, programme leaders, Deputy Head and Head of Subjects that have most operational engagement with them and who comprise the majority of academic staff participants interviewed. It is the sample chosen for data collection and their selection that shall be the focus of the next section.

3.3 Participants and sample size

The purpose of case study research is not to find a probabilistic or non-probabilistic sample, indeed the point is not to find a fraction that represents the whole (Thomas, 2017) as this research is not intended to be generalisable in the purest sense (Cohen et al., 2018). Instead of looking for a sample

what was focussed on within this research was selection, the selection that would best enable the research question and sub-questions to be answered. Initially through an open invite, academics and students were invited to be part of the interviews and focus groups if their role as an academic, or their student status meant that they had experience with module evaluations at the university. The selection of participants based on their role and experience has been considered appropriate as it enables access to people knowledgeable of the case (module evaluations) in order to provide in-depth information about it (Cohen et al., 2018).

In this case study the total number of people interviewed was 29 through a combination of focus groups and individual interviews. Table 3.1 demonstrates the composition of these:

	Students	Academics	Senior Management Team
Focus Group A	5	3	
Focus Group B	4	3	
Individual Interviews	3	8	3
Total	12	14	3

Table 3. 1 Interview and focus group participant numbers

Crouch and Mackenzie (2006) argue that depth of analysis is more important than the number of participants and therefore the sample size was kept intentionally small to allow for this but large enough to capture experiences across the cross section of stakeholders, I tried to keep a balance between the number of academic and student participants so as to keep a balanced perspective, albeit attracting students was more difficult than academics as will be explored below. The number of the senior management team interviewed is proportionate to the number of academics and students given the relatively small size of this team in comparison to the two other stakeholder groups.

The concept of data saturation was deliberated upon when considering the sample size and throughout the data collection with Braun and Clarke (2021, p.2) considering that this occurs when, *'no new information, codes or themes are yielded from data…'* However, researching the messiness associated with defining saturation in qualitative research with the array of designs and data collection methods on offer, O'Reilly and Parker (2012, p.195) argue that, *'The legacy of quantitative science appears to have left a cultural residue of larger numbers having greater impact. This is not applicable to qualitative work as more data does not necessarily lead to more information.'* Citing Marshall (1996) they argue that pragmatism and flexibility needs to be at the forefront of such sample size considerations and that, *'an adequate sample size is one that sufficiently answers the research questions'* (p.192). Acknowledging the messiness of defining an appropriate sample size using the work of O'Reilly and Parker (2012) and the consideration of Braun and Clarke (2021) the selection of

participants and number interviewed was decided upon as it enabled the research questions to be answered and the data collected no longer yielded new information or themes. However, the conclusion chapters do acknowledge that some of the findings warrant further investigation through future research.

Participant selection

Academic staff were invited to take part through an open invite circulated via email across all three faculties, with the email giving people the choice to participate in an interview or a focus group according to their preference. The open invite through email led to some engagement with a few participants stepping forwards, albeit the majority were from the faculty of which I am a part of, this further emphasised the requirement to carefully consider power relationships and the concept of being an insider researcher which will be discussed later in this chapter.

After the first round of invitations further emails were sent inviting additional participants to take part in the study, throughout both rounds of the selection process it was made clear through a participant information form that staff were free to choose whether to participate in the interviews or not and the institution was informed that the research was taking place. The following table identifies the academic focus group and interview participants and the faculties within which they work.

Participant (Pseudonym)	Faculty	Interview/Focus Group
Bella	Business and Law	Focus Group
Charlotte	Business and Law	Focus Group
Carl	Business and Law	Focus Group
Anne	Business and Law	Focus Group
Arthur	Business and Law	Focus Group
Beth	Business and Law	Focus Group
Daisy	Health, Education and Society	Interview
Daphne	Health, Education and Society	Interview
Emma	Health, Education and Society	Interview
Edward	Health, Education and Society	Interview
Francesca	Health, Education and Society	Interview
Frank	Health, Education and Society	Interview
Grace	Arts, Science and Technology	Interview
George	Health, Education and Society	Interview

Table 3. 2 List of academic participants

Part of the uniqueness of this study is the consideration of academic, senior management and student experiences from one setting at the same time. To select student participants, invitations to take part were sent out via programme leaders through the online learning platform announcement systems, with a request to get in touch should they be interested, as with the academics the email gave people the choice to participate in an interview or a focus group according to their preference. This went out to a range of students across all faculties, to very limited success.

In order to further engage students additional invitations were made by academic staff and myself talking through the research in person and leaving participant information forms with groups for them to consider. This had more impact and enabled student and staff numbers to be roughly comparable, albeit this meant that all students came from the faculty in which I work, although they did come from a range of programmes. The following table identifies the student focus group and interview participants and the subject areas within which they sit.

Participant	Focus Group/Interview	Subject Area
Zack	Focus Group	Health
Zara	Focus Group	Health
Yuri	Focus Group	Health
Younis	Focus Group	Education
Xanthe	Focus Group	Education
Xander	Focus Group	Education
Verity	Focus Group	Education
Vernon	Focus Group	Education
Tilly	Interview	Health
Tabitha	Interview	Health
Sam	Interview	Education
Sophie	Interview	Health

Table 3. 3 List of student participants

The participants from the senior management team were approached directly and agreed to take part after reading the participant information form and signing the consent form. The pseudonyms used are Harriet, Helena and Harry, I will not disclose their specific roles as in doing so would risk their anonymity.

The next section will explore the data collection methods and modes of analysis.

3.4 Data collection

Following on from the findings in the literature review and the decision to follow an interpretative approach, consideration was given as to the how to collect the data by using methods that would best enable the examination of student, staff and senior management perceptions of teaching evaluations within one institution (Arthur, 2019; Hoel & Dahl, 2019; Moore & Kuol, 2005; Wiley, 2019) and provide a full representation of their perceptions and experiences using rich, thick description enabling the research questions to be answered.

In order to gather this detailed understanding, the primary collection method was semi-structured interviews (in the form of one-to-one interviews and focus groups). However, to further develop understanding of module evaluations within the case study university documentary review was also used.

Interviews are a common data collection method in qualitative inquiries because their flexibility enables the interviewer to probe, clarify and check understanding with the participants face to face

developing a deep understanding of their views, opinions, personal narratives and histories (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). This is something that questionnaires do not allow as responses from these (if anonymous) have to be taken at face value (Bell, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of using in-depth interviews was to allow space and time to hear the experiences of the participants so that the understanding of the module evaluation process could be viewed through their perspectives, context and voice (Bryman, 2016).

Although some of the data collection took place during the period of the COVID pandemic restrictions were such that face-to-face interviews could still take place if participants choose this. However, all of the focus groups and the majority of interviews took place online using the Microsoft Teams platform, this was the preference of the participants but where individuals chose to meet in person this was facilitated and took place in an environment that was agreed with the participants in advance and the appropriateness of the location checked with them again before the interview commenced.

The COVID pandemic brought to the fore the use of technologies such as Microsoft Teams in everyday professional and personal lives and, although there are some concerns about the challenges of interviewing online (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014), many of these have been alleviated because of the frequent use of such platforms during the pandemic. This has meant that people have become more accustomed and comfortable with them and concerns such as participants feeling awkward or embarrassed about being filmed, which can impact on building rapport, or a lack of confidence with the system were reduced. From this research the majority of participants choose this medium for the interviews rather than meeting face to face which suggests their comfort with the platform. This is perhaps because they felt more comfortable in their own space and factored in such elements as the reduced travel time and costs due to not meeting at the university when making their decision (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020).

Interview choice

In the quest for a deep understanding of the lived experience of a participant there are not many benefits in using a structured interview approach whereby the questions are pre-determined prior to the interview itself, in many ways the research may as well use a written approach such as an interview-based survey questionnaire (Thomas, 2017). Structured interviews are useful if the purpose of the research is to gain comparable data which is easily coded to reach more robust generalisable findings (Cohen et al., 2018) which was not the purpose of this study.

In contrast unstructured interviews take the form of a conversation with the interviewee whereby information is being sought. In such interviews the interviewee really sets the agenda and leads the way, they determine the direction and themes emerge, the interviewer bringing them sensitively back on topic only if they get distracted (Thomas, 2017). However, although this approach would have

enabled the voice of the participant to be heard in the purest form, the suggestion that this approach is not one for a relatively inexperienced researcher (Robson, 2011) and the wish to have the freedom to follow up points and probe more often meant that a semi-structured format was followed.

Semi-structured interviews are the most common form of interview used in small-scale research (Thomas, 2017). Thomas (2017, p.206) argues that this approach provides the best of both worlds as far as interviewing is concerned because it enables identified themes to be explored flexibly, prioritising the voice of the interviewee. In order for the most to be made of this structure the researcher forms a research schedule which identifies the main areas that they wish to cover, with initial questions and probes identified which may be used depending on the progress of the interview, if the interviewer wishes to know more about a particular point they can probe and prolong the discussion accordingly. Unlike more structured interviews the question prompts may not be used in order, or at all, if the participant is already providing the information required to support a deeper understanding of the case being studied.

The planning and conducting of the interviews was based on Cohen et al.'s (2018) ten stage process to ensure it was robust, consistent and transparent, although not all stages will be considered in depth here, the initial stages are outlined as these are deemed by Cohen et al. to be the most important in ensuring the data gathered enables the research question to be answered.

In stage 1, the thematizing stage, the theoretical basis for the study as identified through the review of the literature was established and research questions formulated which then guided the rest of the process. In stage 2, the design phase, the type of interview was decided upon and the research questions were translated into the broad areas that would be discussed which would best enable the research questions to be answered. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were identified as the preferred approach as they would produce the right kind of data to explore the module evaluation process.

Stage 3 focussed on designing and construction of the interview schedules, the questions and prompts were based on the broad areas established in stage 2 and as identified these had emerged from the literature review and the key concepts identified in the research questions. In stages 4 and 5 question formats were refined and prompts for the interviews with academics and students were piloted (Bryman, 2016), with one academic and a student, and a sample schedule can be seen in the appendices (Appendix 1). The pilots confirmed that the consent forms and participant information forms were clearly understandable and that the time scheduled (45 to 60 minutes) enabled the areas required to be covered whilst not encroaching too much on the time of the participants.

When conducting the data collection (stage 6) I considered the people involved and the location (Cohen et al., 2018) and although all participants had information about the study and returned consent forms so they could take part, I also reiterated the purpose of the study at the start of each

interview and the interviewees reaffirmed their consent verbally. I also introduced myself and my role and how the data would be used, stating that the participants could withdraw consent at any time and also answered any questions they had.

So that I could further address questions related to the quality of interviews the following recommendations of a skilled researcher were also followed (adapted from Kvale, 1996):

- I knew the subject matter well so as to conduct an informed conversation
- The interview was structured so that each stage was clear to the participant
- Terminology was chosen for clarity to the participant (as developed through stages 4 and 5)
- Participants were allowed to take their time and answer in their own way
- Earlier statements and answers made by the participant were referred to in order to move the discussion forwards
- Clarification and confirmation of participants comments was undertaken with them to ensure validity of the data if I was unsure

Stages 7 to 10, transcribing to reporting will be covered through the data analysis and coding sections.

As well as individual interviews, the research also gathered data using semi-structured group interviews in the form of focus groups.

Focus groups

A focus group format was chosen as well as individual interviews to enable a discussion to take place between a group of participants with myself acting as a facilitator to stimulate discussion with the purpose of developing an understanding of module evaluations within a group dynamic, the planning and conducting process followed a similar staged approach as that of the interviews and will therefore not be explored in the same detail here.

Benefits of a group dynamic are that it enables a larger amount and range of data to be collected at the same time than is allowed by individual interviews and participants quality control each other's comments, i.e. by responding to and questioning what others say. Participants are also stimulated by the thoughts of others in the group, and this encourages some who may be reluctant to speak individually to contribute (Robson, 2011). Some of the issues associated with focus groups are that conflicts may arise between individuals in the group setting and some personalities may dominate over others, negating the benefits of the format (Robson, 2011; Thomas 2017). It was important therefore that my role as the facilitator was effective, maintaining a balance between an active and passive role. To support with this a focus group schedule was created with prompts which again supported me to bring the discussion back on track if required but also to consider the questions being asked and prevent leading questions. A sample schedule can be found in the appendices (Appendix 2).

There were four focus groups that took place, two academic and two student, the participants have been identified in Tables 3.2 and 3.3. Participants were selected through an email request to academics and via an announcement on the virtual learning platform to students. All participants were informed of the nature of the research through a participant information form and signed consent documents. Their consent was re-confirmed at the beginning of each group interview, the participant information form for the focus groups and individual interviews can be found as Appendices 4 and 5.

To further inform the study and ensure a range of data was collected and better understand some of the areas identified in conceptual framework (Figure 2.2) the data collection phase also incorporated a documentary review.

Documentary review

A review of documentation is a valuable alternative source of data (Bell, 2005; Thomas, 2017) which in this study provided limited additional information about module evaluations and how they were positioned within the institution. In alignment with Yin (2018) the use of documentary evidence provided both a way to corroborate and augment the data collected through the interview process.

In essence I followed the advice of Thomas (2017) when gathering data from the identified documents:

> *'Essentially, the knack is to find the right documents, read them and think about them'* (p.214, 2017)

The search for the right documents was determined in part by the literature review and the formation of the conceptual framework but was also influenced by the focus groups and interviews. It therefore followed a *'problem-orientated approach'* in that I established the focus of the study and gained a much clearer idea of potentially relevant sources as my research progressed and my knowledge of the subject deepened (Bell, 2005, p.123).

The location of the documents

Primarily the document search was bounded by the context of the study, in that it was local and focussed on those documents relevant to module evaluations within the university and accessible to students and staff. The university central document store was searched as too was the university Students' Union publicly available library, the university records team and quality unit were also contacted to request any policy documents relating to the student voice and module evaluations. Key search terms used were derived from the research questions and literature review and included; module evaluations; student evaluations of teaching; student voice and student evaluations. I also looked more broadly at the university strategy documents and documents relating to the professional development of staff and the quality assurance of programmes and teaching and learning to locate and analyse data in relation to module evaluations and the concepts identified through the literature

review. As is the case in much educational research the most common kinds of documents were printed sources and those that were relevant to the research and analysed are located in the table below. All were primary 'inadvertent' sources in that they came into existence in the period under research but were used by me as a researcher for a purpose other than that for which they were originally produced (Bell, 2005).

Document	Type	Location
Module Evaluation Document	Policy	Intranet
Staff Handbook	Academic guidance and policy	Intranet
Student Representation Policy	Policy	Intranet
Student Staff Liaison Committee Terms of Reference	Terms of reference	Student Union Website
University Strategic Plan	Strategy document	University Website
Undergraduate Student Handbook	Student guidance and policy	Intranet
Student Partnership Agreement	Policy	Intranet
Annual Review Handbook	Academic guidance and policy	Intranet

Table 3. 4 Documents used in the documentary review

As can be seen in Table 3.4, the document search revealed very few documents related to the research and the review itself revealed very limited data relevant to the focus of the study. In addition to this, what was located through the search, specifically the module evaluation document, was not known about by any of the participants and therefore the guidance was not followed in practice. However, through the analysis of the documents consideration was given to witting and unwitting evidence in that the unwitting evidence was what could be learned from the document being analysed that the original author/s did not intentionally want to impart (Bell, 2005), this did provide some information which contributed to the conclusions drawn when answering the research question and sub – questions.

Data transcription

All focus group interviews and individual interviews were digitally audio recorded and fully transcribed, although time-consuming this was to mitigate against loss of learning from the data and also to mitigate against researcher bias, a criticism of the use of interviews (Cohen et al., 2018; Robson 2011). I also personally completed the transcription for all of the interviews so as to familiarise myself with the data and constantly check for accuracy (Robson, 2011).

For the interviews that used the Microsoft Teams platform, as well as audio recording the interview, I also used the platform's transcription tool. This was used to speed up the transcription process although the entire transcript was checked against the audio recording and formatted to match the other transcriptions.

Across all interviews, to maintain confidentiality but also to aid readability within the findings section, all participants were given pseudonyms which are those present in Tables 3.2 and 3.3. To

support the reader identify whether the participants were students, academics or senior management, academics were given names starting with letters from early in the alphabet (A-G), students from the latter section (S-Z), with the senior managers pseudonyms all beginning with the letter H. Once transcribed the transcripts were uploaded to the data analysis tool, NVivo for analysis.

3.5 Data analysis

To study the meanings that people are constructing from their experiences of module evaluations in order to then develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, the purpose of the data analysis was to find points of similarity and consequence within the data as well as places of coherence in order to interpret and elicit themes. This seeking of similarity and coherence to make meaning took the form of a process of sorting, categorising, synthesising and simplifying, aspects which are at the heart of analysis (Thomas, 2017) and was carried out using the thematic analysis technique of the constant comparative method with the emerging themes related back to the conceptual framework (Floyd, 2019).

The constant comparative method of data analysis

In essence the constant comparative method is a thematic analysis technique and a process of going through the data again and again and each time comparing each element (whether that be a sentence, phrase or paragraph) with all other elements (Thomas, 2017) and it was this process that was applied. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis programme, was used as I was familiar with this and knew that it had the ability to allow me to store and analyse a large amount of data. NVivo supported the following process of organising the data collected through the individual and group interviews and is based on that suggested by Thomas (2017):

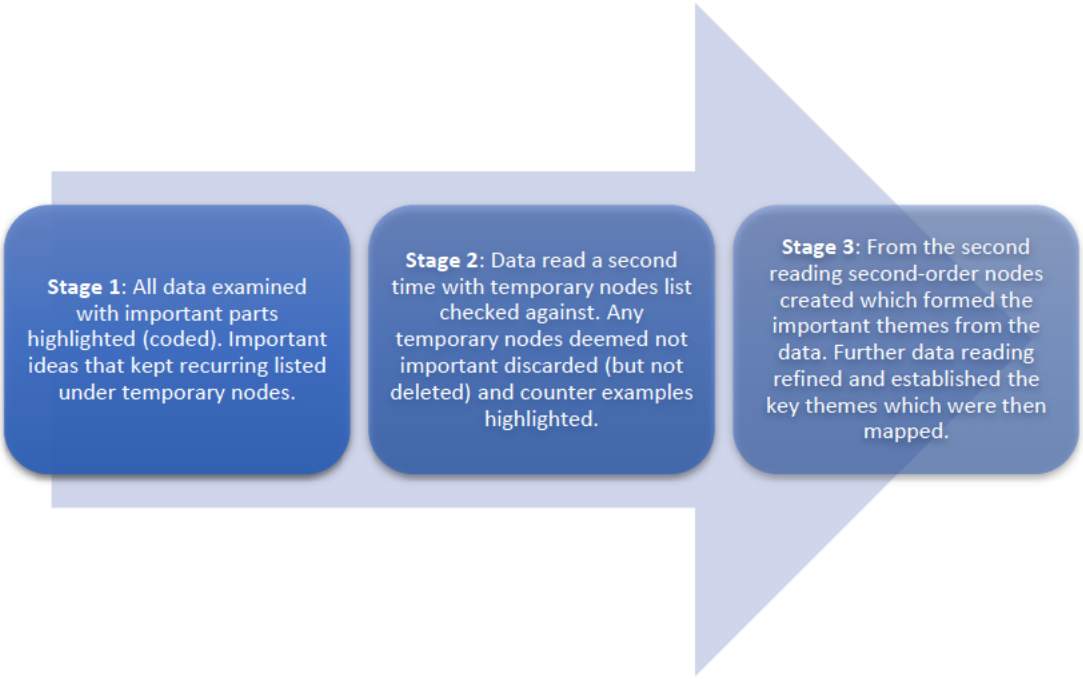

Figure 3. 1 The constant comparative method used for data analysis based on Thomas (2017)

Stage 1: Using open coding, emerging themes, classified as nodes, were created based on the words spoken by academics, students and senior management at this stage the three groups were kept separate.

Stage 2 and Stage 3: Dominant themes identified, with sub themes established, which were then linked to the research questions. The use of an NVivo table enabled links between themes and sub-themes to be identified (Cresswell, 2018) and the quotation evidence that supported these ideas recorded, see Figure 3.2 which is a screenshot of an NVivo coding table.

Nodes

Name	Files	References
Professionalism	13	274
Impact on Identity	5	5
There for the students	5	27
Subversion	11	29
Personal rather than professional	2	5
Emotional Impact	9	38
Staff Student Relationships	10	44
Professional Development	10	41
Managerial Approach and Performativity	15	194
Perceptions and Experience of Module Evaluations	15	132
Organisational Culture	14	77
Context of HE	3	19

Figure 3. 2 Screenshot of an NVivo coding table

Throughout the constant comparative process (Figure 3.1) the data was divided into units of meaning based on the words and phrases spoken by the participants, these were then grouped and classified with similar groups merged if there was a sufficient level of similarity and poorly evidenced themes removed (Cohen et al., 2018). An example of this was in the consideration of the theme of professionalism where initially there were a large number of sub-groups which consisted of words and phrases associated with this concept, which, when taken individually, presented a fragmented narrative but when grouped with similar data presented a more coherent account. The repetition of reading and constant comparison refined the themes and sub-themes, leading to confidence in the categories presented, the process of theme mapping also lead to further refinement.

Theme mapping and the use of theory as a tool

After the identification of the themes the process moved on to theme mapping and consideration of interconnections between them. Quotations from the interviews were used to provide the evidence that illustrated the themes (Thomas, 2017). These themes and their related quotations were transferred from NVivo to Excel spreadsheets to further refine the coding and identify links between the themes, an example is presented in Figure 3.3. In this example, the columns identify the themes and sub-themes generated from the data with the quotes recorded underneath each heading. The green cells represent academic responses, the orange represents the student feedback and the blue identifies quotes from senior management.

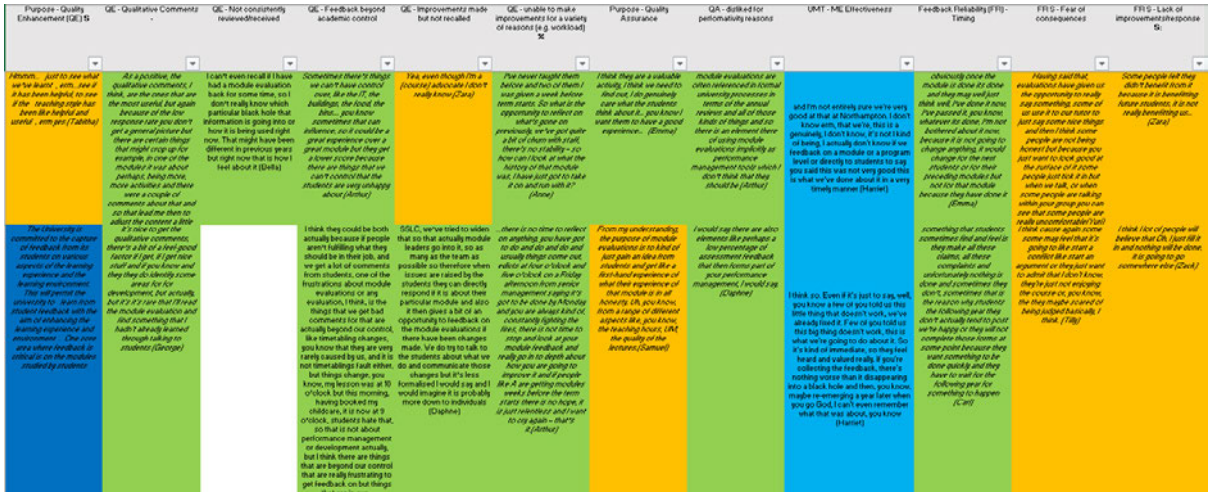

Figure 3. 3 Spreadsheet coding example using academic, senior management and student quotes

From stages two and three, I echoed the approach taken by Arthur (2019) in that extant theory was used as a tool to enable me to see connections between the data and enable me to assimilate this with my wider reading, as discussed in the literature review, this was to help explain my findings and build upon what has been found before.

In summary I linked the emerging themes to those established from the literature review with the research questions having been used to develop the prompts and questions used in the interviews and focus groups, therefore the codes were partially developed in advance (Cohen et al., 2018). Theoretical frameworks established through the literature review such as Olssen's Ideal-Type Model of Internal Governance of Universities (Table 2.4) were also used to develop meaning and understanding from the data to present my findings and inform the discussion from stage 3 (Figure 3.1). Although ideas were established through the literature review, the constant comparative method meant that the data analysis followed an inductive approach with the literature only being referred to in the later stages.

Trustworthiness of methods, coding and analysis

Building on the discussion of trustworthiness and authenticity of the research as a whole, and to demonstrate the approaches I used were stable, I have documented the steps taken to collect and analyse the data (Yin, 2018, p.46). This was done to minimise potential biases and errors that can occur in case studies as I ensured careful consideration of the processes before data collection and analysis and evaluated their effectiveness throughout.

I also used some of the procedures outlined by Cresswell (2018) to ensure the authenticity of the approaches:

- Transcripts were checked to ensure that obvious mistakes were not made
- The constant comparative method used for data analysis meant that there was no drift in the definition of coding which could have distorted the findings. This is because I kept coming back to the data and the coding definitions to check accuracy.

Consideration and mitigation of power imbalances and my position as an insider researcher will be undertaken in the next section focussed on ethical issues.

3.6 Ethical issues

Consideration of ethics, crucial in all research, is especially important in relation to case studies because of the close involvement of the researcher with the participants with the fundamental purposes of acting equitably, respecting autonomy, preserving privacy and minimising harm (Hammersley, 2015, p.435). What constitutes harm is unclear and is often a matter of judgement (Cohen et al., 2018); however, using Hammersley and Traianou's (2012) guidance, several kinds of potential harm were identified with those associated with this type of research specifically considered, these included; psychological or emotional damage and reputational or status loss. To mitigate against these and to consider all relevant ethical issues, the research followed the guidelines published by the British Education Research Association (BERA) (2018) and data collection only began after receiving ethical approval from the University of Reading (Appendix 3). As I was conducting insider research

at the case study university I also checked with my own institution who clarified that as long as I had ethical approval from the University of Reading I could continue with the research. When confirmation of approval was shared permission was given. After receipt of this approval all interview participants were emailed a participant information form (Appendices 4 and 5) and returned signed consent forms, verbal consent was also sought at the start of each interview.

The participant information form and re-visiting of the purposes of the research at the start of each interview meant that the consent was informed in that all participants knew and understood the nature, purpose and scope of the study. This understanding included knowledge of any potential harm associated with the research as well as matters linked to confidentiality. All participants also had the option to take part and knew that they could withdraw at any time (Thomas, 2017). Participants could also ask any clarification questions that they so wished before, during or after their interview and had my contact details to support this.

All data gathered as a result of the interviews was treated as confidential, with the anonymity of people a key component. Those interviewed were given pseudonyms to prevent identification and only the required information about their roles and responsibilities given to support understanding of the findings by the reader, as this also protected identification. Anonymity also meant the name of the institution was not used. I was also conscious of my everyday dealings with others (i.e., I did not discuss the names of those participants at all with others) and in the storage of the data and my reporting, all data was kept secure and deleted after analysis (Thomas, 2017).

As ethical practice is a dynamic process, as well as following the BERA guidelines (2018) and the ethical approaches discussed above, I also reflected upon my approach throughout the research in order to avoid any potential harm.

A further ethical issue that needed to be considered because of the research being situated in my place of work was that of me being an insider researcher.

Insider researcher

Being an insider researcher means

'...being embedded in a shared setting, emotionally connected to the research participants, with a feel for the game and the hidden rules,' (Floyd & Arthur, 2012, citing Smith and Holian, 2008, Sikes, 2008 and Bourdieu, 1988)

Although there are benefits to being an insider researcher, such as understanding the context of the research and ease of access to potential candidates, there are also issues and therefore there is a requirement to consider both external and internal ethical engagement (Floyd & Arthur, 2012). External ethical engagement has been considered through the previous section and the strict adherence to the BERA guidelines (2018) which means potential tensions between the participants and

researcher were mitigated. However, being an insider researcher, somebody who is a member of the group in which the study is being conducted, meant that further considerations had to be taken given the power relationships between myself, the students and academic staff.

To decrease the vulnerability of the students I did not interview anyone that I taught and I made it clear that past or future academic practice would not be impacted by their involvement. I also did not interview any members of academic staff whom I line managed and made it clear that their involvement would not impact on their past or future employment.

Another risk of being an insider researcher is bias, this is because of the researcher's proximity to the context. Considerations about bias have been outlined in earlier sections through the discussion surrounding the interview questions, the conduct of interviews and the analysis of the data, including the use of researcher reflexivity. However, internal ethical engagement, which relates to the ethical and moral dilemmas that insider researchers have to deal with whilst collecting research due to their position, were also considered in line with those established by Floyd and Arthur.

To mitigate overusing my insider knowledge which may influence the participant's response, or the analysis of the data, I avoided prompts or follow up questions that would overtly acknowledge my position or pre-empt what I thought a participant's response might be. I also attempted to keep my responses to any questions directed by the participant to me about situations or people neutral and used prompts to move the discussion back to the focus of the interview.

A risk of being an insider researcher is, because of being situated in the context of the research, I would have ongoing relationships with participants and ownership of their data. This meant that aspects shared by those I interviewed would need to be protected and treated with caution at all times because of the potential additional tension caused by individuals having opened up to me with personal information throughout the process. To combat this all participants have had the opportunity to add any comments or thoughts since each interview and also withdraw their consent at any time.

Comments through some of the interviews by the participants such as, *'this is going to be anonymous, isn't it?',* also ensured that the anonymity measures followed were rigorous, and, whilst respecting the principles of allowing the findings to by generalizable in a fuzzy manner I gave only the data required to enable this whilst minimising the risk of participant identification. However, I have found that despite the precautions put in place, throughout the process there has been an ongoing tension between presenting the data authentically whilst protecting the individuals involved and maintaining effective working relationships.

Furthermore, in agreement with Floyd and Arthur (2012), I acknowledge that, whilst I have not identified the name of the university within which the research took place, a simple search would enable others to locate this. Therefore, following their advice my efforts have been focused on

ensuring that the participants are not identifiable, this has meant that the background detail I have provided about each individual has been very limited. Although this could be considered an issue for an interpretivist researcher, the findings did not indicate any discernible differences between those with different characteristics.

As well as these mitigations I also reflected on the issues of being an insider researcher throughout the data collection and the analysis and writing up process, this to further avoid any potential harm and mitigate further where I could. However, as Floyd and Arthur identify, unlike research completed at an external location, sensitivity about the research remains even after publication and so I will need to continue to be ethically mindful whilst I remain employed at the institution in order to continue to mitigate harm.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has set out how the study was designed and the data collected and analysed. It has also established the rationale behind the methods used and considered issues related to the trustworthiness of the data. Ethical issues have been outlined with mitigations discussed, including those related to my position as an insider researcher. The following chapters will provide the findings from the data collection and analysis with summary conclusions drawn.

Chapter 4 – Findings and Discussion 1: How do academics, senior management and students perceive and experience the process of module evaluations?

Findings and discussion overview

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 use the data analysis to answer the main research question, *'What are academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?'* This will be examined through consideration of the three research sub-questions:

1) How do academics, senior management and students perceive and experience the process of module evaluations?

2) How are module evaluations positioned and managed within the university?

3) How do academics and students perceive and experience their subject and university culture in relation to module evaluations?

The data analysis methods were explored in the methodology chapter and the following three chapters will present both the findings and discussion.

This chapter will explore the first research sub-question and the findings will be presented using a theme-based approach and a rich narrative to highlight the perceptions and experiences of the individuals involved.

Chapter 5 will use the same approach to explore the second research sub-question and Chapter 6 will examine the third research sub-question. Despite the questions being explored separately the interrelated nature of the findings mean that there is cross-over, and connections between chapters are made with reflections back to the literature and the conceptual map with new learning in the field identified.

As the research is based on the perceptions and experiences of academics and students within the context of one university, quotes from the focus groups and interviews will be used throughout. Similarities and differences between individuals within each participant group will be identified throughout the findings and discussion and similarities and differences between stakeholder groups will be examined. Within each theme the staff data will be explored first before then analysing the student data. Consideration will also be given to the responses of the third stakeholder group, the senior management team, relating these views back to those of the students, academics and the wider literature. Analysis of relevant documents from the case study institution will also feed into the findings and discussion chapters albeit, as discussed in the methodology chapter, there are very limited examples of this.

The editorial choice of presenting the findings first and then the discussion within each chapter was the result of an iterative process. Initially I had presented both the findings and discussion together, with participant quotes interspersed with the literature. However, I found that the voice of the participants became lost in this format and, as a principal purpose of this research was to foreground their experiences, perceptions and voice I altered this.

The second format was to have three separate findings chapters and then three discussion chapters considering the related findings. However, this meant that the discussion was too distant from the findings with the participant voice again being somewhat lost which ultimately led to the final version presented within the thesis.

Chapter 4 focuses on the range of experiences of module evaluations at the case-study institution. During the focus groups and interviews, students, academics and university management discussed and reflected on their experiences of the module evaluation process. Throughout the data analysis key themes emerged which have been used to structure this chapter, with sub-themes used to provide further detail to the overarching findings. The first main theme to be explored is that of the purpose of module evaluations.

4.1 Findings: The purpose of module evaluations

Quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE) have been identified as the two main reasons behind the use of student evaluations of teaching (Arthur, 2009; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Canning, 2017). At the case study institution both were referred to as reasons for their use by the staff and students interviewed. Quality enhancement was identified by eleven out of the fourteen academics, and seven out of the twelve students suggesting it is the primary purpose at this university. In contrast, quality assurance was mentioned by eight academics and five students. As a greater number identified it as a reason for module evaluation use, it is quality enhancement that will be considered first.

4.2 Quality enhancement

The academic perspective

Quality enhancement can be defined as the active collection of student voice leading to improvements (Arthur, 2009; Bamber & Anderson, 2012; Canning, 2009) and comments about module evaluations being used to improve the taught experience of the students were evident throughout the academic discussions as summarised by Emma, a health professional

> *I think they are a valuable activity, I think we need to find out, I do genuinely care what the students think about it, and if we are teaching the wrong way or not making things interesting, I would want to put that right. (Emma, Interview)*

This drive to find out the perspective of students in order to improve was consistent and emphasised by Daphne, an academic from education

You want to know what they think of it, the teaching, and you take some of those points and you action them. (Daphne, Interview)

Another example is from Arthur, who works in the field of business and law

when they said […] we did, we do things, we improve things (Arthur, Focus Group)

To support the academics' understand what areas of the module are working well, or need changing, there are open-text comments on the module evaluation surveys and, from a quality enhancement perspective, it is these sections which the academics felt were of most use.

Open-text comments

Seven academics made it clear that, despite flaws with the current module evaluation system, there was one element that they found useful, that being the written comments that students can add at the end of the module evaluation surveys. The most offered reason for this was that it gave academics the chance to understand the students' experiences of the module, including how things could be improved, far more so than the rest of the Likert-scale based survey. George, from the education team, reflecting that they highlight areas for development and Edward identifying they are of value because they provide additional information

I think the freehand comments when they are there, and sometimes you don't get many so that's a problem, I think they provide more of a qualitative perspective, I think you can, you can get more of an insight into certain things to then change (Edward, Interview)

Grace, working within science and technology, also highlighted the benefits of the written comments and suggested that these are more beneficial in hearing the student voice than the numbers alone.

However, although the academics felt that the open-text comments were useful, an area that was consistently deemed to be an issue with the module evaluation feedback was where students identified areas requiring enhancement that staff felt was beyond their control.

Feedback beyond academic control

A frustration that came through in comments from nine of the academics were areas of provision that students commented on within the module evaluation that the staff believed impacted on the overall satisfaction ratings but over which they had little influence to improve. Arthur captures many of these areas within the following response

Sometimes there's things we can't have control over, like the IT, the buildings, the food, the bins […] you know sometimes that can influence, so it could be a great experience over a great module but they get a lower score because there are things that we can't control that the students are very unhappy about (Arthur, Focus Group)

Emma added to the list of areas that students comment on through module evaluations, but which academics felt they couldn't control

> *...I think, is the things that we get bad comments for that are actually beyond our control, like timetabling changes [...] you know, my lesson was at 10 o'clock but this morning, having booked my childcare, it is now at 9 o'clock, students hate that (Emma, Interview)*

Aspects such as IT, timetabling and learning resources came up repeatedly from the academics as elements that impacted on student satisfaction with a module and were frustrating to receive through the surveys. This is due to, in their experience, the limited scope academics have within their roles to improve such aspects.

Carl, a senior lecturer in business and law, also acknowledged that students use the module evaluation process to feedback on these areas but they also then become frustrated as they feel their voice is not acted upon.

To try to combat this Bella, who works within the area of business and law, explained that it should be made clear to students what academics have control over and that the scope of the module evaluations should be more clearly defined

> *I think the danger is that when we invite feedback what we're not responsible in doing is explaining the boundaries of what we have control over, so when students come with complaints about admissions or complaints about student records or any other service around, it then becomes quite challenging for us to then address (Bella, Focus Group)*

Not only did staff feel that their ability to enhance the experience of the students was hampered by aspects beyond their control, they also shared that there were several reasons why they were unable to make the improvements they would like to within areas of their control, specifically the taught experience of the students on the module. It is these reasons that shall be explored next.

Reasons why improvements are not made

Over half of the staff interviewed mentioned at least once reasons why they had not or could not make changes that were seemingly within their control. The most frequently cited reason was that of workload, as captured through this comment by Charlotte, a senior lecturer within the area of business and law, who was reflecting on why improvements are sometimes not made

> *... the workload we have got has just exploded and I sit here now and I can guarantee there are some things I have forgotten to do and I can't remember what they are, you know as I sit here now, so yeah it's become more of a process to be done, get it done – move on (Charlotte, Focus Group)*

Linked to the concept of workload is staff attrition which leads to academics being timetabled to teach on modules that they have not taught before, this then having an impact on their ability to change how the module has previously been taught and respond to the feedback from students as Anne, a senior lecturer from business and law, explains

> *I've never taught them before and two of them I was given a week before term starts - so what is the opportunity to reflect on what's gone on previously? We've got quite a bit of churn with staff, there's no stability – so how can I look at what the history of that module was? I have just got to take it on and run with it. (Anne, Focus Group)*

The busyness of the day-to-day life of the academics affecting their ability to enact changes or reflect on the student voice was considered by Arthur when discussing the impact that management directives and staffing issues can have on quality enhancement

> *... there is not time to stop and look at your module feedback and really go into depth about how you are going to improve it and if people are getting modules weeks before the term starts, there is no hope. (Arthur, Focus Group)*

Although the students did not explore many of these sub-themes, they too agreed that the main purpose behind the use of module evaluations should be quality enhancement and it is the student perspective that shall be considered next.

The student perspective

Of the two stakeholder groups, academics and students, the students were less confident about the intended purpose behind module evaluations, as identified by the number of responses for both quality enhancement, seven out of the twelve students, and quality assurance, five out of twelve, when compared to the academics' responses.

However, over half of the students did reflect that the enhancement of their taught experience should be a key driver behind the use of the evaluations, Younis stating that

> *... if the data is looked over correctly, and in detail then it allows lecturers and other people in the university to make really informed decisions about the practice and what can be done better (Younis, Focus Group)*

With Tilly identifying what she thought module evaluations should be for

> *...to improve and kind of make changes to how the module is delivered for us directly. (Tilly, Interview)*

Despite several students reflecting that the use of the evaluations should be to improve the modular experience, a number also recognised that, due to the timing of the surveys, any improvements made

would be beneficial for future iterations of the module rather than impacting directly on those that had completed the survey. This was commented upon by Sam and also captured in this quote from Sophie

> *… the purpose of that, I would assume is to collect information to then be able to alter the modules in a different way for students each year (Sophie, Interview)*

Whilst the majority agreed that enhancement should be a key purpose for module evaluations, a number of students could not recall whether improvements had been made. With acknowledgment that the timing of module evaluations meant that the feedback they give will not impact directly on their learning in that module, eight of the students could not recall being informed of alterations made to any modules because of student feedback. Zara, speaking as an ex-student representative, stating

> *Yea, even though I'm an advocate I don't really know of any (Zara, Focus Group)*

Tabitha considered that the way that IT is used to convey messages may be an issue in not recalling or seeing alterations that are made, this is because they may get lost in the amount of information that is transmitted through the use such online platforms

> *...through the university portal they have lots of announcements, er, I don't see them often, erm, I might see them but, […] so I kind of think, oh it's nothing, but then it actually might be some important information about changes. (Tabitha, Interview)*

As well as quality enhancement being the most common reason identified for having module evaluations by the students, the senior management participants also commented on this as being a purpose behind their use.

The senior management perspective

Harriet and Helena acknowledged that improving the taught experience was an important aspect of module evaluations, as demonstrated by this comment from Helena

> *I think from a staff point of view, hearing what students have to say and responding to it is really important in driving up quality, experience and quality.*

Both Harriet and Helena also identified that the module evaluation process could be used to identify institutional themes for quality improvement that could then be considered through institutional committees, this comment from Harriet captures this perspective

> *Anything that is an emerging trend or has a bigger implication […] they need to be discussed at the faculty quality committee equivalent and if that emerges across the three faculties, then it would need to be considered at the university quality committee and which and then highlights areas of concern, action or where additional resources required into Senate*

Other than Harry discussing the value of the open-text comments in pulling out details to improve modules, including those that scored well through the Likert scale results, he was the member of the senior management team interviewed who mentioned quality enhancement the least, his focus was far more on quality assurance.

As the findings have indicated, quality enhancement was the most identified purpose behind the use of module evaluations from the perspective of both the academics and the students. However, both also considered their use as a method of quality assurance. It will be the academic findings that we turn to first.

4.3 Quality assurance

The academic perspective

Quality assurance in higher education is a process of establishing stakeholder confidence that provision fulfils expectations or measures up to threshold minimum requirements (Lemaitre & Karakhanyan, 2018) and module evaluations use the feedback of the students to assess whether these expectations have been met.

Eight of the academics agreed that module evaluations could be used as a mode of quality assurance, Emma stating that they are a valuable way to find out what the students think about their provision. Daisy explored this further by highlighting that quality assurance is key to accountability and ensuring that expected standards are being met, module evaluations being one way in which this can be assessed

> *… it is everything I think that your professional grounding is built around following standards, being at the top of your game but being accountable as well, I think that if you are going to be a professional you need to be accountable for what you are doing and how do we implement that? How do we have an awareness of that, how do we monitor it? (Daisy, Interview)*

Francesca also acknowledged that module evaluations are '*one part of that (quality assurance) process*' and Grace identified the end of module surveys as a way of ascertaining the quality of that module.

Whilst a majority of academics acknowledged the use of module evaluations for quality assurance purposes, a number felt that rather than being used purely for QA they had become a tool of performativity, in that they were being used by management to punish those not hitting the required standards, this concept will be explored more fully in Chapter 5.

Quality assurance being a purpose for the use of module evaluations was considered by more academics than students. However, a significant minority, five out of the twelve students did discuss this, and it is to the student data we now turn.

The student perspective

In comparison to the academics and senior management the student's overall understanding of the purpose of module evaluations was vaguer, this more so in relation to their idea of the concept of quality assurance, than quality enhancement. Sam's reflection being typical of the student responses in this area

> *From my understanding, the purpose of module evaluations is to kind of just gain an idea from students and get like a first-hand experience of what their experience of that module is in all honesty. Uh, you know, from a range of different aspects like, you know, the teaching hours, UM, the quality of the lectures (Sam, Interview)*

Although the terminology used here is loose, there is acknowledgement of the process being used to identify quality. Yuri also echoed the comments of other students, including Younis and Sophie, when he commented that module evaluations enabled students to feedback on the quality of their experiences of each module.

The senior management perspective

In contrast to the students and identifying more of a focus on quality assurance than the academics the senior management team did perceive the module evaluation process to be one which was important as a QA mechanism. Harriet identified that the university quality team owned the student feedback data and reported to the governance committees on this, with her describing the evaluations as a key tool for students to feedback on their modular experience to the institution who could then monitor performance across programmes throughout the organisation. Harriet highlighting the need to be mindful of external quality assurance agencies such as the Office for Students (OFS) as the institution is monitored by them

> *... there may be some changes we want to consider bearing in mind the OFS' different approach to quality monitoring. That might mean that we get more rigorous with module evaluation, it might mean a move away from module evaluation we don't quite know yet*

Harry noted that the data could be used to, *'sort out problem teams,'* to then improve a subject area's performance in the nationally published university league tables and that it can be

> *... used as a lever, so we can mirror back to the students [in taught sessions], hey, you got this, you've had a fantastic experience, so when they complete surveys, it allows us to improve*

survey performance, which improves league table performance. I think it allows me to understand what's going on in that area is it functioning? Is it working?

To this point the focus of the chapter has been on the findings of the perspectives and experiences of the academics, students and senior management when considering the purpose of module evaluations. The next section will focus on whether or not they find the module evaluations effective in achieving these objectives.

4.4 Findings: Module evaluation effectiveness

The academic perspective

Despite acknowledgement and majority agreement that the principal purpose behind module evaluations from a staff and student perspective was quality enhancement and this therefore made them valuable, there were also numerous comments from academics and students which highlighted reasons why they experienced the current system not being as useful or impactful in fulfilling that purpose as it could be. The first sub-theme to emerge from the data was that of timing.

Module evaluation effectiveness impacted by timing

Ten out of the fourteen academics commented on the fact that the effectiveness of module evaluations was impacted negatively due to the time they were sent to students. At the case study university, the survey is emailed to students towards the end of the taught experience of the module with the Module Evaluation Policy stating that this should be in the penultimate week of teaching. In most cases this was the lived experience of the staff, albeit the survey was sometimes sent after the completion of the teaching. The main reason given by academics for this being a problem was that as the teaching had finished the changes would not impact the cohort that had completed the survey but the next group of students and therefore, students are less inclined to complete the module evaluations. Emma summing this position up

Obviously once the module is done its done and they may well just think well, I've done it now, I've passed it, you know, whatever it's done, I'm not bothered about it now, because it is not going to change anything, it would change for the next students or for their preceding modules but not for that module because they have done it (Emma, Interview)

Charlotte believes that the lack of enhancements experienced by those who complete the module evaluations then has an impact on their willingness or motivation to complete future surveys. Carl agrees, stating

…the reason why students the following year they don't actually tend to post we're happy or they will not complete those forms at some point because they want something to be done quickly and they have to wait for the following year for something to happen (Carl, Focus Group)

Academics also acknowledged that they find the timing of the evaluations frustrating because they wish to impact the learning for those students who do feedback, as the responses may be different for future cohorts. Charlotte reflecting that, with the next cohort of students, you are

> *… faced with completely different people and they might want something completely different and so I think the current system doesn't really help us be proactive and it doesn't help us to make changes in an agile way and in a responsive way so that it is perceived by those students who have provided that feedback that, you know, we have actually responded. (Charlotte, Focus Group)*

These themes are echoed by George, Grace, Daphne and Anne, with some identifying that sometimes the central team sends the survey out the semester after students have completed their taught experience on a module, students having then moved on to another experience and their recall of their learning on that module has diminished, impacting on the quality of the feedback. Francesca summarising in the following quote one of the staff's main concerns with the timing of the survey, the impact it has on the response rates

> *I know at the minute we are using a system that as soon as the module finishes they get emailed out the module evaluation, we know the response rates are not great. (Francesca, Interview)*

The low response rate is the next sub-theme to be considered.

Low response rate

The number of students who complete the module evaluation survey at the case study university is low, especially when compared to the National Student Survey (NSS). Figures at the case study university put the undergraduate completion rate at 29% (2019 – 2020) compared to an NSS return of 70% (2019 -2020).

The main issue identified by eight of the academics interviewed was that, due to the low response, they perceived the corresponding feedback from the surveys to be less valid than if it was higher, Charlotte explaining why she feels they are a flawed exercise

> *…they're usually responded to by a handful of students, I mean we have had our last round of module evaluations from the past academic year it was two or three students responding on a module of 50/60, so it feels a little bit like a pointless kind of tick-the box exercise (Charlotte, Focus Group)*

Grace, echoing Charlotte's experiences, reflected on some of the reactions of her colleagues to the low response rates of the surveys

I've also seen dismissive emotions, so oh well, it's just one person's view, only three people filled it in, you know, so that kind of passing the buck sort of thing and not placing any quality like any, emphasis on it (Grace, Interview)

Not placing sufficient emphasis on the feedback was a relatively common theme throughout with several staff believing that the data received through the module evaluation surveys was not an accurate representation of the student experience as it only represented the happiest or the most dissatisfied, Emma stating that

You tend to get the students who either have an axe to grind or the students who have got glowing things to say that respond, and the ones that are all in the middle, that you know it is all OK, they don't really say much. (Emma, Interview)

A couple of staff also proposed that the surveys allow students to relinquish their own responsibilities, in that they use the evaluations to blame others for their own lack of work, Beth stating that

...you know one of my modules will get a walloping at this point because they are really struggling, because they [the students] are not doing the reading, they're not, they're still trying to get their head around it, and that therefore has to be somebody else's fault. (Beth, Focus Group)

The lack of trust that staff have on the validity of the data is further summarised through this comment by Grace who particularly questions the need to respond to something that she believes has limited worth

I don't want to be negative really, but there's not been a single module where I've had a decent response rate. So, how we respond, so do I need training on how to respond because I'm not responding to anything that's worthwhile. (Grace, Interview)

Charlotte, whilst considering the number of student returns, wonders why academics should feedback or action comments made by a small percentage when it may be that the silent majority have been perfectly happy with their experiences on the taught module.

A number of the staff also considered why the response rates might be so low, with Beth suggesting that this may be a result of survey fatigue, that the quantity of evaluations sent in a short period of time mean that students are less inclined to complete them

I think from a student perspective they all come out, they've got six to do, they are all the same, it becomes as Arthur sort of suggested, a bit of a sort of, we've been asked to do, it we've got to do it, staff are getting nagged that they're not getting the return percentages but they are not motivated to do it (Beth, Focus Group)

Grace also reflected that it is a *'big ask'* by the university of the student time and compares it to donor fatigue with Francesa adding that she has experienced students not really putting any thought or time into the completion of the surveys because they have so many at the same time and therefore they just want to complete them, further negating the quality of the data contained within them as it is rushed and not well-considered.

Alongside the findings that academics rationalise out the negative feedback by considering it only the comments of a few and not representative of the experiences of the majority of students, the experiences of staff also lead them to question the worth of the activity as a quality assurance process

> *I think they only become a quality assurance tool if you can guarantee that everybody fills it in because then it is representative (Grace, Interview)*

That only a small percentage of students complete the survey was also considered to be an outcome of the move to an online survey from one that had been completed on paper, in person. This remote delivery highlighting another issue academics had with the module evaluation effectiveness, the remote delivery and impact this had on staff-student dialogue and relationships.

Online delivery and the impact on staff – student dialogue and relationships

Through her comments, Grace referred to the '*halcyon'* days when the survey was completed on a piece of paper in the classroom. The reason why this was deemed to be a golden time of the module evaluation process is because it was completed on paper and face to face in a classroom. This method was believed to better support the development of staff-student relationships and promoted dialogue which led to higher response rates to the survey through which staff received information that was more beneficial to improving teaching and learning than is the position with the present iteration.

A significant minority of academics believing the shift to online has impacted on this, Edward stated

> *I think the one thing that really kind of like has impacted them is the move from paper to online. I can see the reason why they did that but when you have the students in class you have more chance of capturing them (Edward, Interview)*

The ability to discuss with students the need to complete the survey is one reason for in-class delivery but it also enabled staff to work with students to take more time to consider their responses as Francesca suggests

> *I think when they sat down in a class you handed them out and you know you gave them some time to think about what they were doing they were a lot more considered in their feedback, rather than just doing it very quickly online (Francesca, Interview)*

Emma also considered that the centralised approach of sending out an email requesting students complete the surveys doesn't work as the power lies in the wrong place because students and staff are not as engaged as they should be

> *Emailing it out anonymously doesn't work either because it's too faceless and centralized. There has to be something where the autonomy is with the tutors, but the power is with the students. (Emma, Interview)*

Edward took a similar position in that the process is controlled centrally, it is a static process stating that there is no give and take or ability to expand on comments made or information received as there would be in an alternative, dialogic based approach.

A large part of the problem for those who disliked the online approach was the lack of conversation with students and the detail that this provides, academics therefore prioritised alternative approaches to gathering such feedback over that received through the module evaluation surveys as Daphne summarises

> *I don't see them [module evaluations] having as much impact as the face-to-face contact with students, so I prioritise the face-to-face mid module evaluations and those incidental conversations… (Daphne, Interview)*

Grace also reflected that she learns much more about what the students think of the modules through her conversations with students at Student Representation meetings as this provides far more useful information than the module evaluations. Daisy, echoing the views of a number of others who have in-class discussions, summarises the benefits of a more dialogic approach in respect of the richness of data received

> *… people sort of bounce of one another and I think that's quite useful but it is also quite good to gauge, you know, you can look at people's reactions, can't you – even without any verbal contact from people… and that in itself is really valuable, and I think that that is something which is lost in an online environment (Daisy, Interview)*

As well as consideration that the information received is not as useful as it could be, due to the method of completion, a minority of staff also considered that the survey itself was subject to bias which further impacted the validity of the feedback received.

Module evaluation survey feedback – subject to bias

When considering the reliability of the feedback received through the module evaluations a minority of staff strongly felt that it was impacted by bias, the primary bias being the subject matter of the taught module, Daphne capturing this view

I also do think that some of it depends on the content and type of module as well… because if you've got a module that is perhaps, there's lots of practical elements, there's perhaps some field work involved, I do think that they, from my personal perspective there are some higher ratings than perhaps ones that are perhaps a little more serious in their nature (Daphne, Interview)

Arthur agrees with this perspective stating that he has modules that some students hate but he also identified that if students dislike the assessments that this can also impact the feedback received through the survey. Beth also commented that students have '*marmite'* modules, in that even before teaching starts, they have those that they either love or hate which means they come into sessions with fixed ideas which are difficult to change and this then impacts on the module evaluation feedback received. Beth suggested that if students come in with a fixed negative mindset this impacts on their willingness to work hard and to mitigate for this they blame the academics through the module evaluation survey for not making the topic interesting enough for them to engage. Beth considering that this is not helpful when a student is in higher education as at this stage education should be challenging and it is counterintuitive to make everything easy or enjoyable for the students, this approach not supporting the development of skills or future employability. Charlotte further picks up this point

…because sometimes it is a dry subject, I mean you can, you know – research methods, there is a limit to how interesting they can be made, yes, so there are subjects that are really difficult to make interesting, the students still need to learn them and achieve the learning objectives and pass the assessments. (Charlotte, Focus Group)

Captured within this is the concept of the students as consumers and that as the consumer there is the expectation that the service provider should respond to their wishes. This concept was another issue for a minority of the staff.

Module evaluations suggest consumer rights with no right to reply

A minority of staff (five) strongly argued that the module evaluation process was something which empowered the notion that students are customers with consumer rights to which academics do not have a right to reply. With this came the suggestion that there was an expectation that academics simply took the feedback that was given and enacted changes to satisfy the students even though the reasoning for the approach being changed was potentially sound. This was summed up by Charlotte

Oh, if we [students] just complain enough they're going to change whatever it is we want them to change without actually thinking why that thing is there in the first place… it disturbs the balance it gives students the view that they can influence things that they shouldn't be able to influence simply by the nature of the feedback that they provide (Charlotte, Focus Group)

Anne agrees with this perspective also adding that she feels that it should be made clearer what the expectations and responsibilities are of being a student at university to then better inform the feedback that is received through the module evaluation process and what would be reasonable requests for changes. This is something that was also commented on by both Beth and Daphne, with Carl considering the potential damage this approach may be having on developing student agency

> *…they consider themselves to be the customer and somehow they actually want a lot more from the staff members, and sometimes you feel like they actually want you to feed them, you know spoon feeding (Carl, Focus Group)*

Anne also acknowledged the educational risk associated with the perception that module evaluations feed into the consumer narrative in that

> *… learning does actually involve some discomfort, and I think the problem of working within a marketized system is that we're always trying to pour a soothing balm on that discomfort because we're dealing with consumers. (Anne, Focus Group)*

However, it was not only the academics who had concerns about the effectiveness of the module evaluation process and the reliability of the feedback, so too did the students and it is to their experiences that we turn to next.

The student perspective

Problem with timings

Similar to the findings of the academics the effectiveness of module evaluations was deemed to be impacted by when they take place. According to comments by nine out of the twelve students, this was because their feedback did not impact on them directly, it may affect future cohorts but not those who had taken the time to complete the survey, Zara summed this up succinctly

> *…people felt they didn't benefit from it because it is benefitting future students (Zara, Focus Group)*

Yuri also identified with this issue but went further to suggest that future cohorts could not then evaluate whether the changes made addressed the issues raised through the feedback

> *We fill them in when we've finished that module, you don't see that lecturer anymore, you won't be able to assess whether that lecturer has actually improved his lecturing style… it is going to be quite difficult to say if it has actually changed anything (Yuri, Focus Group)*

Tabitha discussed a similar experience to Zara and Yuri, but, just as Sam did in his reflections, also commented that not having a direct impact on their own learning does then affect the motivation of students to complete the evaluations

> *…we don't immediately see the benefits of it so we don't recognise the value and then people don't complete them (Sam, Interview)*

Sophie did also raise the timing issue in relation to a perceived lack of benefit to students who complete the survey but also raised something potentially significant that was not considered by any other student. Sophie suggested that by leaving the module evaluation completion until towards the end of the module, and sometimes after the teaching has finished, this then impacts on the accuracy of the students' recall

> *I think everyone tends to forget what they've done all throughout the year as well because its [the module evaluation] right at the end (Sophie, Interview)*

However, not only did some students recognise that the benefits may be experienced by others and not by them, a significant number did not understand what happens to their feedback at all, thereby further impacting on their willingness to engage with the process, Xanthe explaining this stated

> *…we don't hear anything – it almost feels like it is more of an admin thing to say, yeah they've all filled it out and we can report it back if we get asked, sort of thing, because we don't hear anything and nothing, not that we're aware of, nothing changes (Xanthe, Focus Group)*

This feeds into a general theme that the students perceive that through the process nobody is listening to their voice as they do not hear back, they fill in the form – sometimes after being chased, and then there is often silence as Xander confirms

> *We don't really have much feedback from what we've said, we didn't know if it was going to be used or if we'd just done the form and that was it (Xander, Focus Group)*

This lack of understanding of how their feedback from the module evaluations is used was another area that the students considered as impacting the overall effectiveness of the module evaluation process.

Lack of understanding of the module evaluation process

Linked to most students not being aware of how their information was used is the broader issue of a similar number not understanding the module evaluation process at all, their experience being that they fill in the form and that is their engagement with and extent of their knowledge about the process. Younis shared the following

> *Yeah, I'm not sure how the information is dealt with after, I'm not aware who it is looked over by, what changes are made by who, yeah, so I'm not aware of anything once I've filled in the module evaluation (Younis, Focus Group)*

Vernon shared this experience, stating that apart from being told when the surveys are going to be released they never hear anything, they complete the survey and that is it. Tabitha had a similar experience but also considered the consequences of this lack of understanding in that without the knowledge of how their engagement fits into the wider system, and the impact of this, students do not prioritise the module evaluation process and it

> *…is just seen as something extra to do which erm… which people don't want because we are all busy and we have like, a lot of work to do, erm so when someone says can you do this extra thing for me it's like OK, I don't have to do it, if that's alright, whereas if it was done in a lecture like how the X course does it, it might be better as tutors could explain (Tabitha, Interview)*

The lack of a human introducing or engaging the students in the process is another area that the students brought to the fore, that the delivery was remote and impersonal.

Impersonal mode of delivery

Half of the students made comments related to the impersonal nature of the module evaluation process, primarily that they were sent a generic email which did not sufficiently motivate them to complete the survey with access restricted on certain devices, as summed up by Vernon

> *I was going to say that some people I know didn't do it because the access wasn't easy because it was only available on the computer – if they tried to load it onto their phone it wouldn't work or even after they had done it they kept getting sent forceful emails in bold capitals saying, 'do the module review' put them off thinking it's actually going to make a difference (Vernon, Focus Group)*

Vernon also added that as the emails are from a generic address, and not someone they know, they are less likely to complete them with Sam also reflecting

> *I've heard a lot of feedback from students that say ohh I keep getting this e-mail and I just keep deleting it (Sam, Focus Group)*

Younis relayed the experiences of several other students in that he, and his friends, felt that the experience was too long-winded and time-consuming. Tabitha agreed with this as in her experience she feels that

> *… there is a lot of information erm and I think, I think it is just seen as something extra to do which erm… which people don't want because we are all busy and we have like, a lot of work to do (Tabitha, Interview)*

This reflects the overall impression that it is not a priority for the students to complete, Sam also saying that a number don't look at their university emails because they get so many and therefore do

not access or complete the evaluations with the reminder emails irritating some students, including Xanthe. Sam also noted another issue with a purely asynchronous method of capture, in that the information is one dimensional because

> *... it's very difficult to show emotion and personal experience through an online evaluation, through an online survey (Sam, Interview)*

and Tilly commenting that if the evaluations were done in class, completion would be more likely because

> *we're more engaged if they speak to us like humans because in an e-mail you don't (Tilly, Interview)*

Throughout the data the number of emails received was off-putting for the students, and the quantity of module evaluations themselves was deemed as an issue.

> *I think everyone has their own reasons for not for doing them. Obviously I haven't completed every single one I've been given because you think there's, I, I do four different modules and obviously, yeah it, even though they don't take that that much time to complete, I think with everyone and how they are and how busy everybody is, I think a lot of people just dismiss them because they think it's oh, it's another thing to do… (Sophie, Interview)*

Here Sophie is capturing the views of a significant minority of the students in that in their experience there are too many surveys to complete and therefore a number don't finish them. Students like Sam and Tabitha also commented that because of the number of evaluations they choose to prioritise their university work and other areas of their lives over the module evaluations with Tilly also stating that as all the module evaluations are the same, with the same questions, this also means they become a blur and less meaningful, Younis agreeing with this commented

> *I found they, the amount of questions was quite a lot, some of them were quite the same, it didn't make me want to do it (Younis, Focus Group)*

As well as the areas of dissatisfaction covered by both the students and academics, such as the timing of the surveys and the mode of delivery, both stakeholder groups were also frustrated by the lack of their engagement with the design and method of delivery of the survey.

4.5 Lack of consultation on design and delivery

Academic perspective

A majority of staff (ten) commented on the fact that at no point had they been consulted on the mode of delivery of the module evaluation or the design of it, a typical response being that of Grace when responding to the question about whether she had been involved in any development she said

No, no, I can't remember. Ever. No, no, in 17 years, never. (Grace, Interview)

Why this is a problem is considered by Carl when he contributed that as a senior lecturer he would have some understanding of the type of questions that should be asked of students which would encourage them to respond

> *I think it is absolutely true that it is necessary to, for us as tutors to also engage with some of the questions that we are asking and I believe that being a Senior Lecturer I actually have never had the opportunity to get involved in any of the questions that I think students would love to speak to (Carl, Focus Group)*

Charlotte also captured why academics lack of involvement in the development of the module evaluation process is a problem, considering that being assessed on standards they have not had any input on impacts on their sense of self-worth and doesn't effectively utilise their expertise, something that will be further considered in Chapter 5. Beth also considered the origins of the module evaluation an issue leading her to question its effectiveness

> *it is a blunt instrument which then has real serious implications if it is not great, you know if it is not good and you know I think that's an important aspect of it, is where it comes from – who writes it and often it's not even our institution that is writing it (Beth, Focus Group)*

The lack of consultation and engagement in the design of the module evaluation process, including the questions, was also discussed by the students.

Student perspective

Replicating the experiences of the academics, eight out of the twelve students commented that they had not been consulted on the design of or method of delivery of the module evaluation process, with the remaining students not commenting at all. Younis captured the experiences of the majority with this statement

> *I haven't had any indication of or like choice of what we are asked about in the module evaluations, yeah so I haven't been asked anything like, yeah, what questions should be put out to students (Younis, Focus Group)*

Zara responded no to the question as too did several others. However, Sophie expanded on her response identifying why she thinks it would be a good idea for students to be involved in the development of module evaluations

> *That would be good because then as a collective, all of the students would then feel again, also listened to and appreciate that you are thinking about ourselves and our feedback* (*Sophie, Interview)*

With Younis adding his explanation for why improved student involvement in the process would be beneficial

> *If students can be selected and then asked to contribute to the design and then review it, the module evaluation that would go a long way because that would speak the mind of the students it would better represent (Younis, Focus Group)*

4.6 Module evaluation effectiveness – the senior management perspective

Although the senior management team perspective differed slightly from the academics and students, as they gave more weight to the quality assurance role that module evaluations can play than the other stakeholders, there was consensus with the view that in the current format, regardless of the purpose, the module evaluations are flawed. Harriet summed this up in respect to the lack of feedback given to students from the process

> *If you're collecting the feedback, there's nothing worse than it disappearing into a black hole and then, you know, maybe re-emerging a year later when you go God, I can't even remember what that was about, you know*

Harriet building on from this stated that responses should be given as soon as possible with changes that are feasible put in place, so that students are aware. She also commented that the module evaluation feedback should be shared with wider university services so that the feedback that relates to an area owned by them can be responded to and changes made.

Harry echoed the views of the academics and students that the low response rates were an issue in that the data could not be considered robust and reliable from which then to take action. Helena took a more philosophical position and considered the tension between the externally expected bureaucratic and regulatory approach which calls for the same questions being asked of every student to get data that can be compared and managed easily, and the alternative, more personal approach where students feel like they are heard and academics that their work is valued. She went on to explain that this is a difficult balance to strike for senior management as summed up through the following comment

> *…how do individuals drive those improvements when you have to balance the need for systems to protect people, but also individual agency to do the work with meaning… because of the tension between bureaucracy, efficiency, you know, appropriate utilisation of resource versus genuine dynamic conversations that can't really be defined by those processes*

Here Helena is acknowledging the potential benefits of dynamic conversations adding value to the module evaluation process but the difficulties in implementing this from a quality assurance, resource and governance perspective.

Interestingly none of the senior management were aware of the institutional module evaluation policy (neither were the staff or students) or who owned the process, with all three giving different suggestions and this shall be explored further in Chapters 5 and 6.

Throughout this chapter the focus has been on the perspectives and experiences of the academics, senior management and students when considering the purpose of module evaluations and the effectiveness of the current system in achieving this. The rest of this chapter will discuss these findings with reference to the literature and the conceptual framework.

4.7 Discussion: Module evaluation purpose and effectiveness

The purpose - quality enhancement and quality assurance

In exploring staff and student experiences and perceptions of module evaluations both groups were asked to discuss what they thought the purpose of the survey was. The findings strongly indicated that for both students and academics, quality enhancement should be their principal purpose. Example comments provided under this item were from Emma, an academic, who discussed wanting to put right any identified deficiencies in her teaching and from Tilly, a student, who reflected on how the module evaluations enabled staff to reflect on and improve their practice. The findings also suggest that quality assurance was a secondary aim for academics and was only vaguely commented on by the students. However, whilst quality enhancement was important to the senior management team the use of module evaluations as a quality assurance mechanism was equal in priority, perhaps suggesting a shift in prioritisation depending on the position a member of staff holds – this will be considered more in later chapters. The conclusion that these were the two identified purposes demonstrates alignment with the findings of Currens (2011) and Arthur (2009) and corroborates the conclusions of Bamber and Anderson (2012) in that the primary purpose of evaluations for staff is quality enhancement with the data demonstrating staff commitment to evaluating and enhancing their practice with the view that student evaluations of teaching were a potential mechanism to support them in doing this.

However, the findings also indicate that, whilst the proposed intent behind their use should be QE, their effectiveness in improving both the practice of the academics and the learning of the students is impacted by what academics and students deemed to be the ineffective design of the module evaluation survey. The only aspect of the design that academics considered useful for the purposes of enhancement were the open-text comments at the end of each survey, this was captured in responses such as those by Edward who reflected that you get more useful information within these sections to then enable change than the rest of the survey. This aligns with Kenyon (2020) in that quantitative-based evaluation forms do not collect the right feedback to improve teacher performance as they do not clarify what it is that could be improved. The results also support research that has found that module evaluation design is often focused on calculating that which is measurable and reportable

leading to a focus on quality assurance for the needs of the institution than providing data that academics can use to enhance provision (Shevlin et al., 2000; Winchester & Winchester, 2012)

From the data the fact that students related the use of module evaluations far less to the purpose of quality assurance, perhaps speaks to their lack of understanding of QA and governance in higher education and the dwindling engagement of students in this area, including the numbers responding to student evaluations of teaching such as module evaluations (Naylor et al., 2020).

An initial observation from the result that, overall, less students expressed what they thought the purpose of the module evaluations was, in contrast to the academics and senior management, is that the case study university could work with the student body to develop a shared understanding of their purpose which may then contribute to improved student engagement with MEs. There might also be the opportunity to work with students to co-develop module evaluation approaches that would lead to better engagement with such quality processes (Bamber & Anderson, 2012).

Quality enhancement impacted by factors outside of academic control

The results of this research confirmed the findings of Arthur (2019) and Tschirhart and Pratt-Adams (2019) that academics are left frustrated by module evaluations because they capture factors that staff perceive to be beyond their control but which impact on overall student satisfaction with that module. Echoing Tschirhart and Pratt-Adam's (2019) results, the academics raised concerns about additional factors which may be linked to but are beyond the taught experience of the students, these include aspects such as (but not limited to) IT, timetabling, class sizes and the condition of the university estate. In exploring these areas Arthur (2019, p.10) developed the concept of provision

> *Provision links to the students' experience, in terms of teaching and learning on the one hand and, on the other, all the additional factors that contribute, such as IT, timetabling, class sizes and library facilities. Ultimately, provision is about the university's contract with each student and the need to fulfil the student's expectations in relation to that contract.*

Arthur (2019) argues that addressing the quality of the student experience is based on the relationships between management, academics, and students and the concepts of performativity, professionalism and provision. The findings from this research suggest that at this university module evaluations are not effective in developing relationships between these concepts or academics and management to then address the quality of the student experience successfully, particularly in respect to the areas of provision beyond the taught experience.

These findings indicate that should module evaluations be used to capture feedback from students about provision beyond their taught experience then mechanisms should be in place for this feedback to be heard and acted upon by those in the university who do have the power to respond and improve. This provides further evidence to support the findings of Alderman et al., (2012) who identified that

too often institutions do not have an appropriate action cycle in place, one focused on using the feedback results for improvement purposes and sustaining change through a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to student feedback. The data from the academics adds to Alderman et al.'s finding by indicating that this coordinated approach needs to include a communication strategy that enables pertinent feedback to reach those who have the remit to enact the change. However, these findings also suggest that work needs to be done in terms of the relationships and balance of power between management, academics and central services to successfully influence change and these elements shall be further considered in Chapters 5 and 6.

Alongside the aspects of provision staff believed they had limited influence over, the results also demonstrated that the academics felt unable to make the enhancements to teaching and learning that they would wish to due to other factors over which again they perceived they had little control. Building on the findings of Bamber and Anderson (2012), in whose study academics were found to be '*increasingly exercised by the personal and group demands of delivering good educational experiences with decreasing resources*' (p.7) the results from this research identified what some of these demands are from an academic perspective. Excessive workload, staffing issues and increased managerial requirements were highlighted as key issues and the reason why these were identified as a problem by some academics is summed up through the comment by Arthur who highlighted the impact such issues had on the time available to reflect, act and enhance. Regardless of the specific demand the issue of time was a common theme throughout many of the academic's comments. These results intimate that to fulfil the purpose of module evaluations then sufficient time needs to be scheduled by academics to reflect and then enact appropriate changes.

The negative impact of the timing

The results of the interviews confirmed the time that the module evaluations are completed impacts on the effectiveness of the process for academics, students and the senior management team. Common among most of the comments were references to the completion of the module evaluations not impacting on those who had completed them, with all identifying this was a significant issue impacting on motivation to complete the surveys and therefore influencing response rates negatively. This finding is supported by Tschirhart and Pratt-Adams (2019, p.80), whose study identified that a change in approach to module evaluation was necessary as, *'students who made suggestions for changes never benefitted from the outcomes and incoming students were not aware that changes had been made.'*

In the literature students not being aware of improvements made has been identified as a significant issue with the module evaluation process when considering it from a quality enhancement perspective and the results from this study highlights that for these students the feedback loop is not being effectively closed (Kite et al., 2015; Little et al., 2009). Alderman et al., (2012) refer to the feedback

loop as a cycle that begins with the students' evaluations and ends with feedback to them about planned improvements resulting from the survey findings, for the students in this research the results strongly suggest that the feedback loop remains open and this lack of change, or any kind of response to their feedback, then impacts on the students completing the survey and the response rates of subsequent module evaluation surveys. This corroborates the findings of Hoel and Dahl (2019) that students felt that their feedback was not valued.

There were many examples of the low response rates affecting the academics' perceptions of the validity of the module evaluation feedback, therefore impacting on their responses to it, including the value they place on the feedback, and ultimately the effectiveness of the whole process. An example of this being Grace who felt that because of the low response rates the feedback is not worthwhile responding to, with other quotes demonstrating the dismissive emotions of some academics because they feel that they are only receiving the feedback of either those that are very happy or, as one staff commented, those with an axe to grind with the process not identifying the silent majority of students who are likely happy with their experience.

The data suggests that if the purpose behind module evaluations is quality enhancement aimed at impacting the learning of those students who complete the feedback then the timing of the evaluation needs to be considered with the data implying that if improvements are felt by the students they will be more motivated to complete the evaluations potentially then improving the response rate. Whether the module evaluation is placed during, at the end, or after teaching, what the data also strongly suggests is that the responses to the results of the module evaluation surveys should be communicated more effectively to the students in a timely manner. This aligns with a recommendation from Wiley (2019, p.62) and if implemented this recommendation may, *'serve to enhance response rates in the longer term by foregrounding the consequences [to students] of engagement with the process.'*

Module evaluation design and mode of delivery

A further commonality between staff and students was that a significant number from both groups commented on the design and delivery of the module evaluation survey, the implication being that it was impersonal and did not support an understanding of areas that needed to be enhanced. Staff in particular highlighted the impact that the current system has on the relationships and sense of collegiality between academics and students, with the lack of dialogue in the current process being central to this. Charlotte's comments in particular highlighted the impact the remote delivery has on these relationships and Tilly, a student, reflected that they would feel much more engaged if, instead of an email, the process was one in which the opportunity was taken to speak to them like humans. Helena, from the senior management team, also acknowledged the potential benefits of dialogue but, unlike the academics and students noted the resource implications of this, suggesting that the best practice is not always that which is affordable. However, Ramsden (2008) found that engaging

students in dialogue is an important element of an effective quality process with Tschirhart and Pratt-Adams (2019) drawing the conclusion from their research that engaging students and staff together in a process which included conversations had been beneficial in changing practice and developing relationships. Whilst there was congruence with Ramsden (2008) and Tschirhart and Pratt-Adams (2019) findings and the results of this study regarding the potential benefits of using conversations as part of the process, this study did not uncover some of the issues of this approach noted in Tschirhart and Pratt-Adam's research. There were no comments or inferences from the academics interviewed that giving further opportunities to hear the student voice directly would make them feel uncomfortable because of the additional power it would give to the students.

Therefore, a recommendation is, alongside a consideration of the timing of the process, the development of a system that supports opportunities for discussion. A further suggestion is that preferably these opportunities should be face to face as this may provide better information to support enhancements in teaching and learning than asynchronous remote completion. The results strongly suggest that this approach may also develop a greater sense of collegiality between staff and students and provide further opportunities for academics to demonstrate how they are responding to feedback. The implementation of this would need to be done with caution as a new approach would potentially lead to a shift in the power relationships between staff and students due to them working more collaboratively which may lead to discomfort and some academics would be reticent to embrace this approach, as was found in research by Cook-Sather et al. (2014). The results of this study did indicate that although discomfort wasn't demonstrated when staff were discussing the increased use of dialogue there were indications of uneasiness when staff were commenting on aspects of the current module evaluation system and how this positioned the students as consumers.

Issues with a consumerist model and potential bias

The results indicated that there were strongly held views from a significant minority of staff that the current module evaluation process perpetuates the students as consumer narrative, the notion being that students are customers and their education a commodity (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Matthews et al., 2018; Tight, 2013). The suggested impact of this is that it is felt that staff are required to acquiesce to the wishes of students as the customer regardless of whether the request made through the feedback was reasonable, an example of this was from Beth who suggested that the academic role was now predicated on delighting the students. This perspective, which was echoed by others, could lead to academics being in professionally perilous positions, where they make changes to their teaching that are not pedagogically sound but do so to appease the student feedback. The staff also felt the students as consumers narrative detracted further from their relationship with students, especially because the module evaluations were completed at the end of a module and this meant academics did not have the opportunity to respond to or discuss any of the issues raised.

The findings from this research therefore offer additional support to developing a system that allows for feedback from students to be discussed with them in order to then further develop understanding, agency and the ownership of academics in the process.

One area of the results that was not highlighted at all by the students but compellingly commented on by a minority of staff was the impact of bias on module evaluation feedback. The findings from this research demonstrate that concerns around bias are an issue for some of the staff. However, unlike Radchenko (2020) who found that student evaluations of teaching are subject to multiple biases including gender, academic qualification of tutors and class size, the comments from the staff strongly identified only one area of bias that aligned with Radchenko's findings, which was the subject matter of the module. In essence the research findings indicate the staff perception is that the less interesting the students considered the subject matter of the module to be they would score it less positively than what they considered to be the more interesting modules, an example given was the contrast between Land Law and Criminal Law with the latter always receiving more positive feedback. Despite this being a strongly held perspective by some of the staff this was not mentioned by any of the students, in fact they did not indicate any issues of bias throughout their interviews either directly or indirectly, suggesting that this may not be the issue that some staff believe it to be. From this finding a recommendation for future research is to further consider what influences evaluations of teaching from a student perspective using qualitative methods to develop a richer understanding from a broader range of students, as, from this study's review of the literature, this seems to be an area where further research would be valuable.

4.8 Summary

The concept of a module evaluation process was acknowledged by the majority of academics and students as having the potential to provide a supportive framework through which to enhance the taught experience of the students and potentially improve the practice of the academics, as well as quality assure modular provision. However, this study also found that in its current format the real purpose of the module evaluation process at the case study university was ambiguous and its design and implementation served little purpose other than to signal that a bureaucratic box had been ticked. The negative impact of this on staff-student relationships, on the perceived value of feedback to students and on the professional identity of staff suggests that the potential damage it is causing negates any benefits to the institution and therefore requires a thorough review.

Chapter 5 – Findings and Discussion 2: How are module evaluations positioned and managed within the university?

Chapter 5 focuses on the module evaluation experiences of academics and how this relates to the concepts of managerialism, performativity and professionalism. There is also a spotlight on professional development and whether module evaluations are supportive of this. Despite the academic voice being dominant within this chapter, the student voice is present throughout contributing another perspective to the findings and discussion as to are the views of the senior management team.

As with Chapter 4, the data analysis and literature produced key themes which have been used to structure this chapter, with sub-themes providing further detail to the overarching findings. The first key theme to be explored is managerialism.

5.1 Findings: Managerialism

Managerialism focuses on the interests of the organisation above the autonomy of the individual, in such an environment academics will have less freedom and be subject to a rigid and robust monitoring and management regime. This regime is manifested through such aspects as measurement and quantification of outputs, for example key performance indicators, and the establishment of a management culture (Kolsaker, 2008; Shepherd 2018). This culture can be seen through the application of control technologies, with management having the right and discretion of planning and decision making, coordination and management (Shepherd, 2018).

The staff perspective

When considering how module evaluations are positioned and managed within the case study institution, managerialism was the dominant theme that emerged from the data with ten of the fourteen academics experiencing this approach. Charlotte's comments illustrate the feelings of many of those interviewed

> *Module evaluations are, they infringe on that autonomy because you are being evaluated against a set of standards that you haven't been consulted on, you haven't agreed to, that don't necessarily even apply to what you do or how you do things (Charlotte, Focus Group)*

The lack of control, discussed by Charlotte as an infringement on autonomy, was felt by many of the academics in that the completion and monitoring of module evaluations was imposed by management, with a disconnect between the academics and those who own the module evaluation process. Beth highlighting that

> *... you'll have to do a recovery plan […]and the amount of work that you are then going to have to do, but I can point towards having got 100% for the programme in the past and then I*

can point towards serious issues in the latter 3-4 years which no amount of putting the stuff in place has meant that student feedback has reflected that and everybody around is sort of saying what we do and what we put in place and what we offer and everything is not just within one programme does not appear to be recognised as valuable. So there's a disconnect (Beth, Focus Group)

That the design, delivery and monitoring of the module evaluation process is owned centrally was an issue for the majority of the staff interviewed with this leading to both resentment and apathy towards the process, as outlined by Daisy

...module evaluation is no different really you just go with the culture of we just have to do this [...] and you'll save that document somewhere and move on (Daisy, Interview)

with Arthur comparing academics to sheep being controlled and held accountable to the organisation

We are kind of being herded to what we need to do in order for the organisation to achieve its goals (Arthur, Focus Group)

The lack of involvement of staff within the process and the top-down, almost parental approach was further expressed by Beth who used the word nagged to discuss her experiences of the university pushing people to get the students to complete the evaluations so they can hit the required response rates

...staff are getting nagged that they're not getting the return percentages that enable us to say we have done the process (Beth, Focus Group)

The managerial approach extended to the time and delivery of the module evaluation surveys, this being imposed on the students and staff without consultation about when they should be administered, Daisy explaining

I remember one year where the surveys were sent out but they hadn't really consulted with the team about when it was being sent out and it just so happened that they were sent out at the same time and the timing of the survey just wasn't appropriate to the delivery of the various modules (Daisy, Interview)

George, reflecting on issues with the wider communication in relation to the module evaluation process, discussed their being an information void which meant that staff did not feel listened to

I think that if there's an information vacuum, then people, people don't feel listened to and people don't feel that they know what's happening (George, Interview)

Throughout the academic interviews it was also expressed that the approach taken was narrow and, as it was owned by management, did not reflect accurately all the good that staff do. Despite this the data

from the module evaluations was still used to implement corrective measures if threshold standards were not met, Grace refers to this when discussing Quality Improvement Plans (QuIPs)

> *There's an over reliance on them for quality assurance, so the QuIPs and the hips and whatever they are, and I actually don't think it's a fair representation of what staff are doing, nor should they really be held accountable for the opinions of three people (Grace, Interview)*

Grace also discussed her perception that it was a management choice to use the data to focus on the areas that, according to the data, require improvement but never to commend, it therefore being considered a corrective approach.

Throughout this section so far the dominant perspective has been that of the academics. However, the students' comments did allow for a glimpse of how they think module evaluations are positioned and managed, albeit their perspective was far less detailed than the experiences presented by the staff.

The student perspective

The students were less clear about how the module evaluation process is managed and who has ownership and oversight of it. Through their answers they gave impressions and suggestions but they did not know for certain, Younis summing up the views of the majority through this statement

> *I was going to say from my experiences it feels like it is coming from university level, erm, and like how are lecturers don't give us any warning it feels like they're almost not aware of when it is going to be sent out or what questions are going to be (Younis, Focus Group)*

Other suggestions follow a similar theme with Sophie referring to the process being owned by big data analysts and Tilly reflecting that it is probably somebody outside their course, someone who wants to see the progress of every programme. Xander took this further by stating that to him it was a process that was meaningless if judged by the impact it has on students

> *... it's almost like the university ticking a box to show that they've done it, erm and then because we don't hear anything back (Xander, Focus Group)*

The findings of the senior management team also identified how they perceived the module evaluation process was positioned and managed and it is to their views that the chapter now turns.

The senior management perspective

The senior management comments demonstrated several features of a managerialist approach to module evaluations with Harry's experiences and perspectives being the most aligned to this concept. The following comment from him focused on the lack of trust he has for academics due to the falsification of module evaluation surveys at another university

I've had instances in the past where members of staff have given out the survey and collected them in and then filtered the ones out that weren't very good. Yeah. Or even we had someone who was filling out forms, you know, we had we had, like, you know, six answers with the same handwriting

Harry went on to explain why he feels an online survey system which is centrally administered is important to prevent manipulation and provide independent data that the institution can trust and use to improve programmes. He was not in favour of an academic owned process, although he would include them in designing a new system, instead he favoured control with the centre and management oversight of the results. Through the following, whilst discussing the fact that he doesn't think the current system is very good, he talks through the business orientated approach he would take to improve the module evaluation process

I think we're very poor at that […] we don't have systems which are necessarily joined up, we don't have an approach to resource planning and resource management, and then when you look at when you look at institutions, some Japanese companies that take a Kaizen approach, that constant improvement, and they embed things like feedback from everyone, about how to improve things.

Helena and Harriet hinted at a managerialist approach in their responses but did not acknowledge a lack of trust in the academics as Harry did. Indeed, Helena was keen to move the ownership of the process back towards the academics as she felt that the current system was too controlled by the institution and administrators

I think the institution has tipped to bureaucracy and we tried to tip that back through working groups looking into this, and wrestle it back towards the purpose and greater participation… when I arrived I felt very much there was an industry of monitoring and reporting on quality but not much evidence of improvement of quality, so it looked to me like people were very busy but there was some kind of lack of traction, so people weren't really asking the right questions, getting the right data or cared about the right thing, so having a lovely report in time for the committee but not much else

Helena therefore considered that the process needed review, positioning the power closer to the student experience and academics. However, she was reflective about the feasibility of a system developed in tandem with students and nuanced according to subject and programme types, whilst considering working with students from every programme to develop their own survey questions she thought this might by unworkable because

> *… it would probably take a level of work and resource that we often don't have and then, honestly, there is a real trade of between are we going to put the time into this or are we going to do something else.*

Consideration of human resources and cost was something rarely mentioned by the academic staff but mentioned by all three senior leaders, this will be further explored in the discussion and Chapter 6.

As well as identifying that the formal module evaluation process was institutionally owned, with the coordination, decision-making and monitoring controlled centrally and the academics accountable to the institution, those interviewed also spoke of the frequent use of metrics such as performance indicators to compare and rank outcomes which links to the concept of performativity and it is to this that the chapter now turns.

Performativity – The academic perspective

Performativity is seen as a tool of management control that regulates and employs judgements, often through the setting and monitoring of numerical targets (Ball, 2003). Nine of the academics identified elements of performativity within their responses. Beth clearly demonstrating this when she discussed how module evaluations have been constructed

> *… it's written in a way so that it aligns with others so that it can be measured against and benchmarked against (Beth, Focus Group)*

The theme of module evaluations being used as ranking mechanisms was also picked up by Carl and George with Francesca reflecting that the data is also linked to a number of other tools for comparison including league tables and the National Student Survey (NSS) with the approach therefore feeling punitive rather than something that is developmental

> *…it feels like the metrics or the discussions that we have around the use of the metrics from the module evaluations feels punitive, because it is linked to the NSS and it is linked to league tables and all sorts of things, rather than using it as a process to enhance what we do (Francesca, Interview)*

George, also acknowledged that module evaluations are used to employ judgements and to compare data in order to regulate performance rather than to focus on enhancement

> *…they are part of the process that inform the university league tables and the TEF, the Teaching Excellence Framework, and all those sort of data-driven and comparative things rather than the needs of the individual students on programs, and of the student cohorts on programs. (George, Interview)*

With Grace highlighting the punitive approach of the current process

They, they seem to be in my eyes, it seems to be only the punitive measures…. They're never really used to celebrate (Grace, Interview)

Beth discussed the fact that she believes that the whole process has become politicised rather than being focused on the intended purpose of enhancing the taught experience of the students. Charlotte identified a range of reasons why using module evaluations as a tool of performativity was not a good thing, her comments focusing particularly on their design

…this again relates to the consistency counts agenda and the fact that the blanket, very generic, very, very vague questions are being asked for all of the modules in the same way and so even for those questions which are Likert scale, for those questions where students pick a response there is no follow up to actually provide a bit more detail around why the students made that particular choice, why they picked 2 instead of 5, or whatever that might be and so there is a lot of generic, you know, you are getting twos overall therefore there is a problem, but not really understanding what is the root cause of the problem to then understand and improve. (Charlotte, Focus Group)

Throughout the focus groups and interviews the academics used words such as blunt, and punitive to discuss their experiences of the module evaluation process, they also explored the emotional impact of how the module evaluation system is managed, it is this that will be discussed next.

Emotional impact

Bella described module evaluations as a brutal implement and, reacting to the comments of some of the others within her focus group, went on to explore the impact this can have

Hearing you talk there it is so harmful, and because I recognise that as soon as you said it that is exactly how I feel, I put up this barrier so, if anything it is not a neutral instrument that we just disregard it is an instrument that involves an aspect of our emotional labour because I know that feeling when you open up and you know who that student is or that couple of students that never turned up and you just kind of… it is so dispiriting. (Bella, Focus Group)

Charlotte also stated that to protect herself from some of the comments on the module evaluations she puts barriers up but even so negative feedback does affect her mental health. Daphne considered them, overall, as a negative process with Edward sharing the views of others when reflecting on how personally he, and other academics, take negative responses

I think as a module leader you can feel a little bit deflated if your module that you're the named signatory on doesn't get a rave review in that sense because you take it to heart (Edward, Interview)

Taking things to heart and the emotional impact of both the quantitative scores and the open-text comments also led some to feelings of hurt, Bella stating

> *...people are getting really upset, very upset they shouldn't be allowed to (Bella, Focus Group)*

Arthur, whilst discussing the impact of negative module evaluations reacted with

> *...it is just relentless and I want to cry again (Arthur, Focus Group)*

The list of emotions felt by people because of negative module evaluation feedback was added too throughout each interview and the most common words are presented in the word cloud, Figure 5.1.

Figure 5. 1 Word cloud of academic reactions to negative module evaluation feedback

This word cloud represents the powerful reactions that twelve out of the fourteen academics had as a result of module evaluation feedback, the emotional impact being the second largest area of consensus of any theme from the data analysis (the first being the organisational culture of the university). These reactions can lead to academics feeling dejected, as Emma explains

> *... some people were crushed, you know, really because, you know it has been a really tough 2 – 3 years, people have gone above and beyond, and in their modules and it's like it is still not enough and you're just like what more can we do? (Emma, Interview)*

This can lead to some staff questioning why students are enabled to feedback in the way that they do by management and whether more should be done to support staff, Beth discusses this further when reflecting on the type of feedback that is received from students

> *...a comment that says I shouldn't be allowed to do my job because I am so bad at it and that, you know, the institution should do something about it, something as strongly worded as that actually is really quite, where's that coming from? What made them feel like that...nobody is going to close the loop in a way that then looks after the wellbeing of the person that's been*

given that piece of feedback and I've seen junior colleagues be really de-railed by comments (Beth, Focus Group)

Linking back to the impact that the method of delivery has on the effectiveness of module evaluation feedback, which has been discussed in Chapter 4, the staff felt that that they do not have sufficient information through the process that enable them to make changes to then enhance the experience of the students, Carl discussed both the emotional impact of negative module evaluations and how this is compounded by the lack of data that can lead to a change in practice

I mean if you have the staff who receive very negative feedback it is the stick that physically beats up the staff member and we don't always identify or find many areas of development, it is not always very helpful because a staff member might be doing his or her best and delivering good quality sessions (Carl, Focus Group)

Although rare in comparison to the emotional impact of negative comments, Carl did also reflect the feelings of a few members of the academic staff when discussing the good feelings that can emerge from positive feedback

When you see some of the nice comments it actually makes you feel happier and so you are doing a good job you are actually influencing people's lives and you are doing something great (Carl, Focus Group)

Training on module evaluations

A specific area of academic development that was explored throughout the interviews was module evaluation training. For example, such training may consist of how to respond to student feedback or action plan for any areas of development highlighted through the module evaluations. Typical of the responses was Anne who, when asked about if any such training had been or was available said

As far as I know, no. (Anne, Focus Group)

Charlotte, when considering training about the feedback received commented

I can't remember ever seeing anything that was directed towards us engaging with the feedback provided by module evaluations… (Charlotte, Focus Group)

With Daisy also reflecting

No, not that I can recall, no… some people are better at responding to feedback than others...and its training, and that comes into training – absolutely. But unfortunately a lot of these things that people are expected to do, it's all quite a cold thing, you are just going to do this without the background insight and support. (Daisy, Interview)

From the responses there was not a member of staff who could recall or knew of any training specifically to do with module evaluations. Francesca was the only academic who mentioned any training remotely related to an aspect of the process

> *I wouldn't say formally around dealing with module evaluations, we've had sessions around how to give feedback but not how to deal with feedback, I don't think, I don't remember that actually, from a lecturer's perspective (Francesca, Interview)*

Academics also considered training that they would value in relation to these student evaluations of teaching, and the area that a small number of staff strongly suggested they would like training on was about how to deal with student feedback, Daphne commenting that

> *...training or support around that [dealing with negative feedback], I would say that might be useful for perhaps the team because it can be a bit disheartening. (Daphne, Interview)*

Being trained to better deal with the emotional impact of student feedback was also considered by Daisy who acknowledged that such training would be particularly beneficial for new academics

> *... maybe there is something about emotional resilience training would be a useful thing to have with new staff as part of induction, because it is a bit of a tough role (Daisy, Interview)*

In an attempt to negate the potential consequences of receiving negative module evaluation results, and perhaps to prevent the emotional reactions that stem from below threshold feedback some staff have taken to manipulating the system, using a gaming approach to drive more positive outcomes.

Gaming the system

A point raised by a significant minority of staff (five out of the fourteen) is that they alter their approach to teaching and assessment on their modules in order to impact the results of the module evaluations, therefore engaging in a type of gaming (Beighton and Naz, 2023). Emma explaining how this works across the subject area that she teaches in

> *We use the language of the module evaluations in our discourse with the students, so that when they're looking at, in the have you got helpful comments on your work, our language is there are helpful comments on your work, please read them so, and that's an example of how my teaching and learning has been impacted, because we have to play the game and almost drip feed these ideas in, these subconscious subliminal messages that get them to consider that, I've, I've heard these words before and we have had helpful comments (Emma, Interview)*

That the words of the module evaluation survey are used throughout the taught components of the module identify one aspect of gaming, which, as Emma highlights changes her teaching slightly. However, other members of the academic community interviewed highlighted some of the more

significant risks with this approach, with Charlotte referring to pandering to the students and making changes to appease rather than it is because what the academics, as the experts, feel is the correct thing to do pedagogically. Building on from this Anne commented that there is a risk that academics don't want to challenge students anymore for fear that they will recoil and leave negative feedback. Bella also noted that game-playing can present alterations that may appear substantial but in fact are superficial and aimed at appeasing the student voice. Bella refers to this as an act of performed change

> *Sometimes when something is raised, perhaps about issues around an assessment; A) we can't change it for that group and we might then move the hand in date it for the next group by a couple of days but substantively no change has been made we are just re-arranging the chairs on the deck of the Titanic but it looks, it has the appearance of change, it is performed change rather than actual change (Bella, Focus Group)*

Whilst discussing how module evaluations are positioned and managed at the case study university five of the academics discussed that the approach taken had had a negative impact on staff-student relationships and it is this aspect which will be considered next.

Staff-student relationships

The reality that some academics game the system and alter pedagogically appropriate responses to ones that are more palatable to the student body does, from the experiences of Bella, then impact on staff student relationships as

> *…it removes the authenticity of the response sometimes and I think higher education at times can be cynical enough and when it gets into our teaching and our relationships with students that is really problematic (Bella, Focus Group)*

Not only was it considered that inauthentic responses to the feedback potentially damage the academic's relationships with students, Charlotte also discussed how, even though the comments made through the surveys are anonymous, she guesses who has made them and that therefore devalues both the feedback and damages the relationship between the staff member and the student

> *I think subconsciously, because I know the students and sometimes you kind of gauge who's made the comments… you think, well they're a gobby person they are always negative, you automatically, subconsciously you devalue what they said… I think module evaluations don't really do anything to really support the collegiality between students and staff (Charlotte, Focus Group)*

Beth also shared her experiences where she has consoled people who have become very upset with the blunt feedback that they have received from some students, considering that this damages those relationships. Through the following comment Emma considers that sometimes staff can view module

evaluations in such a way that it tarnishes the reputation of an entire cohort who are then potentially dismissed by teaching staff as tricky

> *...the danger of having cohorts that are viewed as, oh well they're a difficult cohort is that you just think, oh, it's them, don't worry about it, there is nothing we can do to make it better for them, we'll focus on the ones that are doing well instead, not in a deliberate sense but that probably happens at a subconscious level that you just can give up a bit with a particular cohort (Emma, Interview)*

Performativity - the senior management perspective

Echoing the findings focussed on the concept of managerialism, Harry's comments strongly positioned his perception of the module evaluation process as a system that was a performative tool

> *... it gives you that insight, but it is also part of that whole wider how we can use this data to enhance metrics and league table position conversation.*

Further explaining his perspective Harry, when considering the issues with the 5-point Likert scale used in the current survey, explains that he feels a quantitative measure is important but needs to be further refined in order to provide the information the university needs to highlight poor academic practice reflecting on his experiences from another university he commented

> *... the quantitative analysis of the module using that five-point Likert scale wasn't robust enough, it didn't pick out where there were problems and poor teaching. So, I actually think you even need 100 point scale [...] but the five point scale from my experience both here and at [my previous university] is not sensitive enough*

Harry also brought comparison and the use of the metrics into a conversation about how the data could be used as a driver for improving staff performance, to do this by sharing everybody's results which would lead to staff

> *... who get scores of, you know, threes and fours realize they need to do something about it because it is transparent because it is out there and they're aware of it and the line manager is aware of it and it can be used as a bit of a lever, and you also, you know, you can, you also end up introducing a little bit of competition into this.*

Helena acknowledged that the module evaluations had a performative aspect to them but considered it far less than Harry instead reflecting that the design could perhaps mirror those of the National Student Survey (NSS)

> *so you've got some leverage at a very early stage against those NSS questions*

Having considered the findings in relation to managerialism and performativity, the chapter now turns to what academics understand by the concept of professionalism and how module evaluations impact on this.

5.2 Findings: Professionalism

What professionalism means to academics

Professionalism outlines the professional identity to which an individual subscribes (Briggs, 2007). Throughout the data collection most academics considered what the term meant to them and the findings are explored here.

Common throughout the staff reflections on what being a professional means to them was the priority of supporting the development of students. The following captures the views of many of those interviewed, Carl stating that a professional to him is

> *... somebody who is there to change students' lives, so have an impact on society (Carl, Focus Group)*

With Arthur further explaining the impact student development has on him

> *I get a real buzz out of taking very poor, you know academically not strong B-TEC students in year one and guiding them through the journey and when they graduate on graduation day and they become more than they thought possible (Arthur, Focus Group)*

To be an effective professional many of the staff also reflected that this needs to include an expert knowledge of their area, that using this knowledge is key to being able to teach students effectively, and in supporting them to develop and succeed. Daisy signalled this in her response

> *For me being a professional is somebody that has, I guess expert knowledge in a field, that has the opportunity to work autonomously in that field... (Daisy, Interview)*

The concept of autonomy was mentioned several times by the academic staff, that to be a professional and use their expert knowledge to support the development of students a certain level of autonomy was required. Bella indicated this through the following comment whilst also highlighting the impact of the decision-making process at the institution on her autonomy

> *One of the main things for me in being a professional is having autonomy, being able to make decisions, take ownership for those decisions and have flexibility to decide. I think that that is the issue at times in this institution in that things are just thrown at you, you will be doing this without any consultation or often context or explanation (Bella, Focus Group)*

A further element of being a professional that was addressed by a number of staff was a commitment to professional development, Daphne referred to this as the commitment to strive to improve all the

time, Daisy explored the concept as an expectation to upskill and Anne discussed that part of being a professional

> *... is self-development so I try to develop myself all the time – which is about subject matter as Arthur and Beth have mentioned, but it is also about behaviours (Anne, Focus Group)*

The commitment to professional development was often accompanied by staff referring to a responsibility to maintain standards, Edward commented that

> *... being professional it is all about standards in my mind... so doing the very best we can for our students (Edward, Interview)*

With Frank capturing a number of the aspects brought up by the staff and remarking that being a professional is

> *... having high standards for yourself I think, in terms of your preparation, your knowledge of the subject, your application of particular methods of how to transfer these concepts or how to problematise them or how to break them apart so it's that, those aspects that you bring but I also think it's about reflecting upon what you do, looking back on a session, a year, a module or whatever it is and thinking OK, well what would I change to make that better? (Frank, Interview)*

With the staff clear about what being a professional means to them, they then considered what impact module evaluations had on this concept and it is to this that the focus of the chapter now turns.

Impact of module evaluations on professionalism

It was the very strongly held belief of ten of the academics that the institutionally owned module evaluations do not support their development as professionals, Carl succinctly summing up this perspective

> *No, module evaluations have not helped us to improve as a professional at all (Carl, Focus Group)*

Bella takes this a little further by considering why the system is not set up as a tool that supports professionalism in that it is a process that is top-down

> *... the system doesn't treat us as a professional it sort of treats us as people who need to be corrected or, I wouldn't go so far as to say punish, but maybe I would on some occasions. (Bella, Focus Group)*

As well as staff not feeling that the module evaluations add to their development as professionals, Beth commented on the fact that throughout the feedback process it also identifies inconsistencies in

practise which one member of the team may perceive to be suitable whilst another may experience it as something which, as a professional, is less appropriate

> *...you end up getting beaten in the feedback because somebody else has done something which professionally they feel is appropriate, being available 24/7, being happy to give your personal mobile number, being happy to, because they want to support people (Beth, Focus Group)*

Unlike most of her peers Daisy was alone when she commented that the institutional module evaluation process had supported the development of her programme and her as a professional

> *... personally speaking I've always taken great value in those and I use it to plan for and develop the following year, both me and the programme (Daisy, Interview)*

Although the academics felt that their professionalism was impacted negatively because of the lack of their involvement in the design and development of the institutional module evaluation process, features of professionalism were demonstrated through the creation and implementation of alternative approaches to module evaluations owned by the academics and not the institution.

Demonstrating professionalism through alternative module evaluation development

Demonstrating a commitment to improving their practice and the taught experience of students, nine out of the fourteen staff have developed alternative ways in which to gather the student voice, approaches that provide information that they perceived to be more valuable than that received through the university module evaluations. Frank commenting on his approach said

> *Our mid-module review [...] captured more of what could be done and informed future planning on the module at the time as opposed to the current module evaluation process (Frank, Interview)*

When discussing his alternative approach George spoke enthusiastically about how he had developed this process from his experiences at another workplace

> [*On our programmes] I introduced the XXX process… and so I ask students at various times, OK, what, you know what worked? What should we keep? What worked really well, what's good but needs to, you know, in between what we improve and what bits need to change and we will use that across the programs, across the modules (George, Interview)*

Other approaches that had been developed included class discussions, the use of online discussion boards, sometimes with follow up meetings and online surveys sent out to students at points in time when the academics believed that this would have the most impact on enhancing the student experience.

A few staff, including Daphne and Francesca also commented on how effective student feedback aimed at enhancement should be formative and captured at multiple points to ensure academics are responding in an agile way to students. Frank echoed this belief through the following comment

> *... evaluation is constantly happening for an educator I think, a good educator they are constantly evaluating whether individuals have taken on board what you are talking about, able to apply what you are doing and you can tell that in many respects from how they respond, what their body language is, how they, maybe they have a Padlet or on the board and they are jotting down some areas and you thought I need to consolidate that so my first point: evaluation happens all the time, it is an ongoing process (Frank, Interview)*

Linked to quality enhancement and improvements to teaching and learning is the professional development of staff and it is to this area that the focus now turns.

Professional development

The overall experience of professional development at the case study institution was mixed. When staff were asked to discuss their views, responses ranged from Bella's

> *...we are channelled into development or activities that meet that box which is institutionalised (Bella, Focus Group)*

to Carl's very effusive response

> *I love learning, I love enhancing my knowledge in every single sector I can, and so I am always trying to collect new degrees and new qualifications as I go along, so I was able to take several courses as part of my role… so it is very supportive (Carl, Focus Group)*

With several staff somewhere in the middle, a number identifying that there were opportunities, but these were not always relevant to their roles or aimed at developing them as individuals. Therefore, where there was a choice they chose what they could and ignored the other offerings, as Arthur explains

> *... but I'm actually using and taking what I want from it, I think that it is an industry and a lot of it is irrelevant to me (Arthur, Focus Group)*

An issue that re-surfaced for the academics, which came through in the findings about whether changes are made because of student feedback discussed in Chapter 4, was time. With a few staff identifying that although there may be development opportunities there was not the time to properly engage with these, as Beth explains

> *I think there are a number of issues here with the [CPD] system, the difference between our HR training that you have to tick the box and you have to do… and then the support systems*

through things like the specific teaching development sessions and through library learning services and all those sorts of things – getting time to actually go to them (Beth, Focus Group)

Daphne commenting that quite often the amount of teaching meant that not all professional development opportunities could be engaged with, as there was not the space. Anne adding

… there is lots of training around but its time isn't it again, and it's energy basically to do it (Anne, Focus Group)

However, whilst some identified that time was an issue a minority of staff strongly believed that although everybody is busy, if people wanted to develop themselves, they would find the time and motivation in order to do this, Emma commented

I think, I think there is a real element as well as to whether staff want to, if you want to do it, you'll do it, you know, doing my doctorate was arguably the most difficult thing that I have ever done… but I wanted to do it so I did it and I made it work and so we can sometimes be to, well, you know, well I can't do that I haven't got the time, you know, but actually if you want to do something and I have done a fair few little courses and things over the years with the university because I wanted to, you make it work. (Emma, Interview)

As well as considering the overall professional development provision at the university the staff also reflected on the use of module evaluations as a professional development tool.

Module evaluations as a professional development tool

Reflecting the findings of staff experiences of module evaluation impact on their professionalism, the views were similar to their perspectives on whether module evaluations are effective as tools of professional development. Emma commenting

...sometimes the module evaluations feel very generic, you know... it is almost is a bit too generic you just get a set of data that's useful, yes the library was available, yes the module was good but you need a bit more detail about what is actually good and about what is not actually not good and then what could we look at in terms of development to build on that kind of information (Emma, Interview)

Some staff referred back to the use of the written comments from students as being somewhat useful to inform personal and module development as the design of the module evaluations overall does not provide this information, as Charlotte confirmed

…all those module evaluations do is transfer that dissatisfaction onto the module tutor without any suggestions for improvement without actually really clearly identifying what are the specific things that the students have found poor or unhelpful (Charlotte, Focus Group)

and Frank summed up the perspectives of many with this comment

> *I don't think they do feed into professional development...I don't think, well, I don't see that they do…erm, I suppose there could be the opportunity...I think there is an opportunity there to use them as a way of developing practice, having those conversations. (Frank, Interview)*

The comments from Frank that other ways of collecting the feedback, for example having conversations, may be more beneficial in providing information that could be used to develop their practices, ties in with the suggestions of others including George, Daphne and Grace and have been explored previously in this chapter and within Chapter 4.

Professional development - the senior management perspective

As with the academics, the senior management perspective of the overall professional development offering at the case study institution was mixed. Harriet was not very impressed

> *I don't think it's particularly good here… I mean there's a whole suite of mandatory training that you do on induction or required to do each year, but I can't see an awful lot outside of that… and there's a couple of things that don't help that, one is what I've just been talking about, when you're weighed down with these convoluted and difficult processes, there's never enough time to get the work done, let alone going off and doing any professional development and that there are constraints on budgets*

Harry recognised the breadth of professional development opportunities available but suggested that it was run by a small number of internal people and did not look outside of the institution enough

> *… there's a whole sort of smorgasbord of, of training […] but professional development here it seems to be run by three people or 2 1/2 people and we don't tend to use many external providers so lots of other institutions would typically bring in expert, external experts, and so is there's lots there, I don't think it's necessarily always that targeted*

Harriet agreed with Harry that the professional development opportunities were too inward-looking

> *We're very insular, I know that in in the staff in my area, very, very few, startlingly few, have ever worked anywhere else, so bring no other experience and they're not used to contacting others to get, you know, kind of other viewpoints or other information. It's really, it is really insular.*

Whereas Helena took the overall position that the opportunities were quite good but acknowledged that within the higher education sector, because of the way it is structured, it was difficult to train people sufficiently. She discussed opportunities for people to get Advance HE fellowships and become involved in communities of practice to develop specific aspects of their practice, but it was difficult for people to become involved with all that was on offer because

> *… there is an awful lot of responsibilities and regulatory requirements and people are being asked, they probably feel they are going from pillar to post, you know, you have got to do this and you've got to do that and you've got to do this now and all the time the day job is pressing on them, so…so I think it is really difficult, and I don't feel like I've cracked it*

Of the SMT interviewed only Harry acknowledged the module evaluation feedback having been used to support academic development, and this was very much as a corrective tool determined by management based on the scores from the surveys

> *So in the past where we've got people who scored poorly, we've, we've put them on, whether it's around organisation or assessment, we've put people on development sessions or we've run development sessions*

However, none of the other members of senior management considered the current module evaluation process, in its current format, to be beneficial as a tool of professional development. Neither did anyone from the management team recall any training specifically for staff on how to respond to module evaluation feedback or plan for changes as a result of it, nor did they consider this may be a requirement due to the emotional impact of the surveys on some members of the academic staff.

Throughout this section the focus has been on the experiences of academics, senior management and students when considering how module evaluations are positioned and managed within the case study institution, the focus being on the themes of professionalism and professional development. The next section turns to a discussion about how module evaluations are positioned and managed, concentrating on the key concepts of managerialism and professionalism.

5.3 Discussion: How module evaluations are positioned and managed - managerialism

The results strongly indicate that a managerialist approach is taken within the case study university towards the design and implementation of the module evaluation process. In supporting the findings of Shepherd (2018) it was evident that most academics have less freedom than would have traditionally been the case in relation to this student evaluation of teaching. Comments about the lack of academic engagement in the design of the module evaluation process highlights that control sits with the centre and the imposition of quality improvement plans for modules deemed below threshold further evidences a lack of academic freedom. This absence of engagement with the development and implementation of the process is compounded by the results demonstrating that a majority of staff (and students) did not know what happened to the module evaluation feedback after completion, or the processes that underpinned it. Aligning with the findings of Floyd (2019), this lack of clarity about the institutional process demoralised the academics and made them question their worth, an example being George's comments that staff don't feel valued.

Using Olssen's (2002) summary of the contrast between traditional and managerial approaches to governance, the findings can be further explored and understood. That the results indicate a lack of freedom, signifies that the approach could be described as 'hard' managerialism (Olssen, 2002) because the mode of control is autocratic, Beth's comments about the fact that the staff are evaluated against a set of standards they haven't been consulted on, or agreed to, summing up the feelings of many and align with this categorisation. Within Beth's comment is another aspect of the perceived managerialist approach of the case study university, that of evaluation against standards through an audit approach (Olssen, 2002).

Accountability within a managerialist system takes the form of monitoring through an audit culture, often using performance indicators to make judgements. Although aspects of this approach will be covered in greater detail through the discussion on performativity, it is pertinent here as the results from the staff indicated strongly that this was the approach taken to accountability. Examples of this include Beth's comments about being nagged to ensure that the return percentages are where the university needs them to be, as well as Arthur's comments about just completing the process to support the institution achieve its goals. The phrase tick-box in relation to the process was also mentioned several times by academics further aligning it with an audit culture.

However, it was not just the staff that perceived that the module evaluation process was a tick-box exercise indicating an audit approach to accountability, the findings of the students also suggest that for a few this is also their perspective, Xander demonstrated this when he referenced the university's process as just ticking a box just to show something has been completed.

The findings also strongly suggest that in this institution the work relations are seen to be competitive and hierarchical (Olssen, 2002). This is evidenced by references to the top-down nature of the module evaluation process and the lack of any opportunities for academics to be engaged in the development of the surveys. An example of this is when George discussed how it feels as though there is an information vacuum in the institution and that he hasn't felt listened to by central teams.

Hierarchical work relations, a lack of freedom, and an audit approach demonstrate that module evaluations are positioned within a managerialist system. The findings also indicate alignment with Macfarlane's (2005) conclusions, they highlight a rise in the power of the institution and central services and consequently the erosion of the influence of academics. This is evidenced by the results strongly indicating that to staff and students the institutional module evaluation process is one which captures student feedback that is meaningful to the university machine but not useful for transformational change (Sun & Holt, 2022). However, this dichotomous perspective is true only when considering the institutional survey and not the alternatives created by the academics themselves. Within this arena the managerial approach is far less evident and indicates high levels of

collegiality at a local, subject level where academics can act autonomously from the centre, this will be further explored in Chapter 6.

The limited findings from the students about how the module evaluations are positioned and managed echo those of Sun and Holt (2022) in that the students thought there was good intent behind this student voice mechanism at the university but their vagueness about the purpose of the module evaluation process suggests that work needs to be done to better develop their knowledge and understanding of this area of their university experience. This could include a re-conceptualisation of the role the student within the module evaluation process considering whether this is built around the concept of partnership or representation or a holistic model incorporating both, with the governance structures of the institution examined to ensure they support this reconceptualization and any revised role of students within the system (Bell et al., 2022). Any review should also consider the power relationships between academics, staff and the institution (Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Seale, 2016), this is to ensure that the roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders are clear which may allow for the potential of module evaluations to be better realised.

Although the results demonstrate that module evaluations are positioned in a managerialist context, Kolsaker (2008, p.516), argues that rather than managerialism diminishing the work of academics and turning them into *'piece workers'* in the *'service of administrators'* the picture is often far more complex and a dichotomous pessimistic perspective underplays the power relations at play in an institution. That, from her research, academics acknowledged managerialism as a mode of control but also, *'a facilitator of enhanced performance, professionalism and status.'* Kolsaker argued that in her study there was limited dissonance between the academics and the managerialist approach, however, this was not the case from the results of this research. Acknowledging the limitations and differences of Kolsaker's work and of this research, the results strongly indicate that there were no signs of academics acknowledging alignment between managerialism and professionalism, there was no constructive interaction found only dissonance.

Dissonance was a theme demonstrated throughout the results, particularly when academics talked about how module evaluations are used to measure student satisfaction rather than as a constructive tool of quality enhancement. The findings strongly indicate that the managerialist approach also used the tool of performativity and it is this that shall be discussed next.

5.4 Discussion: How module evaluations are positioned and managed - performativity

Within the case study university, the findings strongly indicate that academics experience the use of judgements and comparisons by the institution through the module evaluation process including the use of numerical data and target setting. Examples of this are from academics such as Beth who highlighted the design of the survey was focused on enabling measurement and benchmarking against others rather than on enhancement, with a number of other staff picking up on the use of the metrics

to rank performance, all of these aspects show strong alignment with the concept of performativity (Ball, 2003).

However, it was not only the use of metrics that demonstrated this alignment, there were also examples of the control of improvements to teaching and learning being centralised. Staff highlighting this control through such mechanisms as Quality Improvement Plans (QUiPs) and this could be perceived as another indication of a performative culture, with management policing the improvement process through the use of action planning imposed by management (Arthur, 2019; Ball, 2003; Ball 2016). The findings therefore suggesting that the institution values approaches which compare, provide discipline and sanction. The negative impact of this performative approach on the improvement of the educational experience can be seen through the results because, rather than reflecting on and developing their practice, the academics are spending time reporting on what they are doing and responding to data that the majority do not believe in. Within the findings this is evidenced through some staff discussing that they just wanted to get the process done and move on, Charlotte commenting, *'we do it because we have to, it is not necessarily that we get any value from it.'*

As has been discussed, although students were vague about the module evaluation process in general, there were comments from a few that acknowledged that it was owned and managed by people such as *'big data analysts'* and this implies that the system is both managerial and performative in nature, with those who analyse numbers central to its implementation and monitoring.

Taken as a whole the results indicate a divide between management and central services on one side and academic staff on the other. However, although this process can be argued to be causing divisions between institutional management and staff, the findings differ from the results in other research such as Ball (2003). Ball found that in performative cultures data can used to drive competition between academics and faculties which then impacts negatively on the collegiality of these relationships, this aspect was not noticeable within the results of this study. This is because although words and phrases such as comparison, judgement and consistency counts were used by the academics, there was little evidence of competition between academics or programmes from those that were interviewed. However, the results do indicate that the performative approach to the module evaluation process does have an impact on the relationships between staff and students.

Echoing the results of Arthur (2009 & 2019) there were a number of examples which indicate that the staff blame the students for poor module evaluation feedback rather than considering what they could do as professionals to make appropriate improvements. Strongly delivered comments by several staff revealed this, an example being Emma who noted that sometimes whole cohorts are dismissed as being difficult rather than accepting their feedback as valid and Charlotte who stated that that module evaluations don't do anything to support the collegiality between staff and students. As Arthur (2019,

p.8) found this suggests a, *'performative culture in which judgement and fault-finding replace collegiality and support.*'

Ball (2016) argues that a performative approach does not just alter the way things are done but also changes how academics think about what they do and what is important and tolerable. Alterations in approaches to teaching and learning can be seen through some of the results from this research, which suggests shifts in practice that previously wouldn't have been considered acceptable from a professional perspective. Examples of this include Emma using the words of the module evaluation questions in her taught sessions to subliminally influence the students and Bella implementing artificial change with others talking of pandering and appeasing students for fear of upsetting them. Such approaches demonstrate that academics are using gaming tactics to manipulate the system in order to achieve the desired outcomes, in this instance positive module evaluation outcomes (Beighton & Naz, 2023; Winchester & Winchester, 2012). Focusing on actions to improve metrics rather than developing pedagogically sound alterations to teaching and learning (Boyson, 2008; McPherson, 2006) has been found to be a risk to an individual's self-worth (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2016) and, as well as the impact on their professional identity, within the results there were a number of examples of the negative emotional impact of module evaluation feedback on the academics.

As Arthur found in her 2009 study, the affective responses of academics in relation to student feedback have still been largely ignored in the literature. However, the results of this research strongly indicate that staff had emotional reactions to module evaluation feedback, although this was not considered at all by the students or leadership team. Words associated with pain: hurt, harmful, brutal (Figure 5.1) were prevalent when staff described their feelings about receiving critical feedback and this mirrors the findings of Moore and Kuol (2005) who found that negative feedback can produce reactions such as dismay and dejection. Through these results staff connected the personal nature of the feedback with their professional identify, with some, such as Carl stating that despite working really hard to provide the best educational experience for the students this still wasn't deemed enough. Staff also identified that they had no support or training from the institution about how to deal with such feedback with support provided within the programme teams instead. Some acknowledging that, especially for new members of staff, such training might be a good idea, Daisy commenting that this is because emotionally it is a tough role and support is needed. However, it was not only staff who are new to the profession that are impacted, Arthur stating that he wanted to cry because of module evaluation comments and Charlotte acknowledging that the negative feedback affects an academics' mental health. Therefore, a suggestion from the results is consideration should be given to how module evaluations are positioned and managed within the university with the development of training and support to help academics receive and appropriately respond to student feedback with a duty of care better established. A further recommendation is additional focussed research on academic

responses to student voice feedback would be of benefit to developing a more advanced understanding in this field.

Notable from this finding was the lack of awareness that students had in relation to their feedback and how this may be received by some academics. No students acknowledged that the way in which feedback was written may have a personal, emotional impact on the academic it was aimed at. This result suggests that there is work required at this institution not only to train the staff about how to deal with and respond to student feedback but also to develop the students' understanding of their role and expectations when providing feedback. There was an absence in the literature which reviewed how students give feedback, what influences their approach as well as the potential emotional effects this can have on academics although Canning, (2017, p. 521) discusses how, '*an individual's legal change of status from school pupil to university student or child to adult does not automatically produce an immediate shift in how they express their perspectives on given issues*.' This suggests that expecting that all students will know how to appropriately engage with student voice mechanisms, including module evaluations, may be naïve, and, with the growth in the use of social media and proliferation of immediate feedback opportunities this may have impacted on the way feedback is given, including potential abuse of this freedom of expression (Chukwuere, 2020). This abuse may include using inappropriate language and focusing on the personal rather than the professional, as evidenced by Beth when she commented on how she'd seen colleagues being derailed by feedback with students attacking the person by commenting on the clothes they wore. A recommendation from these findings is that this field of study could benefit from further research considering this aspect of module evaluations and the broader student voice agenda. However, at this institution, the findings suggest that as the module evaluation process and the roles and responsibilities of the institution and individuals are unclear to most stakeholders a review of the process with clear communication of the expectations and training may begin to address some of the issues raised.

The discussion to this point has focussed on the positioning of module evaluations within a managerialist and performative culture, the chapter now turns to discuss the impact of this on the concept of professionalism.

5.5 Discussion: How module evaluations are positioned and managed – professionalism and professional development

Throughout the findings it was noted that all staff identify as professionals with the majority exploring what they understood by this. The concept of service was evidenced through academics' commitment to the development of the students that they taught, comments from Arthur exemplifying this, with Carl agreeing but also highlighting the importance of service by stating that part of being a professional is to have an impact on society through the progression of the students. These results also identify the importance of the development of knowledge and understanding in order to provide a

service to society, one of the three key features of being a professional (Eraut, 1994). The staff also demonstrated alignment with the other two features, the first being high levels of autonomy. Bella explained that autonomy to her was being able to make decisions and take ownership, with others echoing that this was also important to their concept of professionalism, aligning their views with those of Trowler (2008). The final feature is having an expert knowledge of their subject area (Becher & Trowler, 2001), this then influencing what they teach with the autonomy about how to teach it with a number of staff also identifying the importance of this to them.

Also strongly associated with the concept of professionalism is a commitment to professional development. A significant number of academics articulated that continuing professional development is central to ensuring that they remain experts within their field with a commitment to standards a part of this and core to professionalism. Edward and Frank explored what they meant by standards, something that was not identified as a central tenant of professionalism within the literature. They, alongside others, commented that having high standards was part of being a professional because it meant that academics are doing their very best for their students. Overall, the results demonstrate that the academics at the case study university have a strong alignment with the concept of professionalism as explored in Chapter 2. However, although staff demonstrated commitment to a unified concept of professionalism the results strongly indicate that the module evaluation process was one that damaged their ability to express this at work.

The strongly held perspective by a majority of the staff interviewed is that the institutional module evaluation process is not one that supports professionalism at all, Carl outlining that this is because of the top-down approach, with others talking through how the process is corrective and punitive. Only Daisy outlined the process as one that was beneficial to her as a professional because it enabled her to monitor standards and develop her practice. That Daisy's perspective was in the minority demonstrates that, although a number of the staff could recall enhancements they had made to the taught experience of the students as a result of module evaluation feedback, the staff didn't consider this as development of their professionalism. The reasoning for module evaluations not being perceived as supportive to their development as professionals was partially due to the staffs' lack of opportunities for engagement with the design and development of module evaluations with Charlotte and Beth highlighting for them that this lack of inclusion removed their autonomy. The current design also impacted its usefulness as a mechanism for professional development because it was considered by the majority of respondents to not give them the information required to enact improvements, the questions being too generic and based on quantitative measures rather than qualitative responses (Shevlin et al., 2000; Winchester & Winchester, 2012). The students also confirmed that the current institutional format did not provide them with the opportunity to provide the information they wanted which could then lead to appropriate improvements. The results did not identify that the module evaluation process enabled any of the key characteristics of effective professional development

highlighted by Bubb and Earley (2007) to be achieved; module did not have or enable clear identification of aims and objectives, neither were they used to analyse training needs to ensure that they matched the existing level of expertise nor did the academics (or students) find that they were used as opportunities for reflection or on-going evaluation.

The results demonstrate that the university's managerialist approach to module evaluations has negatively influenced aspects of professionalism, echoing the perspective of Douglas and Douglas (2006). The growth in accountability procedures captured through the lived experience of the academics demonstrated that they work in an institution that sees benchmarking against and meeting performance indicators as the primary approach to improving performance. This aligns with Floyd (2016) as the results strongly suggest that professionalism is being undermined because the levels of trust and ownership given to academics is being diminished. The results suggest that the academics are disenfranchised from the module evaluation process and this is resulting in a dislocation of them from what it means to a professional because of the increasing dominance of the managerialist and performative approaches.

The results also suggest that there has been an impact of neo-liberalism and the marketisation of higher education at this case study university and this is seen through the module evaluation process and the highlighted tension between professionalism and performativity. Professionals at this institution are increasingly expected to enact policy and work towards measurable outcomes that can be judged, with the traditional concept of professionalism no longer trusted to deliver what is required to deliver competitiveness and profitability within the marketplace. The experiences of several of those working within this context are that it is impacting on their concepts of self-worth as professionals (Ball, 2016).

5.6 Summary

This chapter has considered how module evaluations are positioned and managed in the case study university with a focus on the concepts of managerialism and professionalism. The perspective that module evaluations are positioned within a culture of managerialism using performative measures is evident from the results of both the academics and the senior management with the student results demonstrating some elements of both. As a result of this managerialist approach academics indicated an impact on their professionalism with an emotional response by many to the negative feedback received through the module evaluation process, indicating that support and training may need to be improved. The effective use of module evaluations as a mechanism of professional development was only experienced by one academic indicating that if the potential in this area wants to be realised then a review is required including how this fits in with the limited time staff indicate they have available to engage in professional development opportunities.

Having considered the perceived purposes behind the module evaluations, their effectiveness and how they are positioned and managed the focus now turns to the organisational and subject-level cultures in which they exist and the impact that these have on the process and the stakeholders.

Chapter 6 – Findings and Discussion 3: How do academics perceive and experience their subject and university culture in relation to module evaluations?

Chapter 6 focuses on the module evaluation experiences of academics and how this relates to the concept of organisational culture, through this there is a focus on both university and subject level culture. Despite the academic voice being that which is mainly presented within this chapter, the student voice is present as to is that of the senior management team, both contributing another perspective to the findings and discussion.

As with Chapters 4 and 5, the data analysis produced key themes which have been used to structure this chapter, with sub-themes used to provide further detail to the overarching findings. The sub-research question that this chapter aims to address is about establishing academics' and students' views regarding the influence university and departmental cultures have on module evaluations. After analysing the data related to this, sub-themes emerged. These themes, perception of university culture, perception of subject-level culture, and the impact of these on the module evaluation process, are described and discussed below.

6.1 Findings: Perceptions of the university culture

Academic perceptions

Perceptions of the university culture from the academics are consistent, they refer to a culture that is top-down and formal, with thirteen out of fourteen in agreement. It is a culture where decisions are made separately from the academics who then implement the corresponding actions. Daisy captured this perspective through the following comment

> *It is a bit of a top-down culture isn't it, it is somebody taking a decision on something that may or may not be well-placed to take that decision but perhaps with little consultation to the people that should actually be influencing it. (Daisy, Interview)*

With Grace reflecting on the organisational culture of the university over a period of time

> *If you'd have asked me 12 years ago, I'd probably say top down because of where I was in the institution (Grace, Interview)*

This formal institutional culture leads to some of the academics not feeling valued, Daisy highlights that this is, in part, because of the lack of engagement of them with the decision-making process and Edward agreed with this, feeling that there should be more opportunities for academic involvement.

George has the same perspective and explored the impact the formal culture has on him and his colleagues. Through the following comment he focused on his experience of not feeling valued or empowered and the results of this being

> *... a sense of animosity sometimes, I think of not really - not knowing what's going on and that then that causes disgruntlement. (George, Interview)*

when responding to a question about whether he does feel his voice is heard, George responded

> *That depends on the level, I think, so let's start at a university level. I think, speaking candidly, up until last year, I felt that my opinion at a university level, didn't matter, yeah, I wasn't significant, and I think that that's true of a lot of people (George, Interview)*

The organisational culture not being one that listens to people thereby causing disgruntlement was also a perception from Grace, who stated that people from across the institution felt unhappy as a result, with Bella commenting that the university doesn't treat people professionally and the culture was paternalistic and controlling.

Beth also reflected this position, that the university culture does not treat academics as professionals, and considered what the institution could do to foster a more developmental and supportive culture

> *... the institution needs to consider maybe how it supports our professionals… giving people perhaps that autonomy to sort of think about what, how, where they want to be, what their role will develop into… How else can we support it, support people, I think, maybe listening to what people want (Beth, Focus Group)*

Whilst also reflecting on how he perceives the institution treats academic staff, Frank took some time to explore where he feels culture originates from and who has the greatest influence on this, he suggested that organisational culture stems from the Vice Chancellor and those in the most senior management positions

> *... it does come down to leadership right at the top so, right to the Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor… it's like a Prime Minister, the tone of the Vice Chancellor sets the tone for the institution, that's my view…and I think, if I'm honest, for some years, there has been a lack of interest from the very top in developing people and more of a focus on infrastructure, systems, processes even though those systems, a lot of them don't work (Frank, Interview)*

Unlike Frank, most staff did not explore why they perceived the culture to be as it was or what factors may influence it. However, another academic who did consider this, whilst reflecting on her previous employment, was Emma

> *I think my perception is that at the moment it just is all about money …and again I get that, having worked in [another industry] you get that there are just things that you can't control you can't change, you just have to work with them and make them work the best you can within your bit (Emma, Interview)*

This perspective from Emma, that money influences organisational culture, was also considered by Beth when she discussed the impact of the concept of students as consumers on the culture of the university. Beth believed that to challenge students in their academic work or through staff responses to student voice feedback was considered a risk and this had led to a top-down, formal culture where rules and procedures must be followed because if academics deviate from this or question students then they

> *… recoil and say nasty things about you, so again as an institution do we want to challenge our students or not or is it all about numbers of degrees that we churn out at the end? (Beth, Focus Group)*

Bella shared this perspective and the impact that this consumerist concept has had on the culture of the institution, and believes this has led to the university wanting to hear the academic perspective less as they are more concerned about the views of the students than of those they employ

> *I think we are frightened that they [the students] leave and take their funding with them, I think the university now are worried about selling something and not meeting expectations so we might get sued in the court… and we don't want to challenge them [the students] too much (Bella, Focus Group)*

A product of this formal university culture discussed by a few of academics was the Performance and Development Review (PDR) process. Some strongly viewed this as a mechanism which ensured that people are focussed on delivering the goals of the university, Carl commented

> *Your PDR objectives are written for you not by you and then fed back up… I think the political world that we live in and the changes that are happening etc out there and the challenges are definitely driving us towards that making sure that we are working towards the bottom line (Carl, Focus Group)*

Charlotte and Beth also agreed with this perspective, Beth referring to being channelled into her development objectives and activities which are based on the needs of the institution rather than the professional needs of her as an individual.

Amongst the staff it was only Daphne who gave a different perspective in relation to the organisational culture, signifying that rather than being a formal, top-down culture it was one which

had been disjointed with different departments such as admissions and marketing working in isolation from each other, albeit she acknowledged a change

> *I feel like there have been changes recently where that process has opened up somewhat and I am starting to get a better idea of the wider institution and processes and probably more so in the past few months than the last four years (Daphne, Interview)*

Despite the majority of staff identifying the organisational culture as one that is formal and which is assumed to be negative and unsupportive, the above comment by Daphne signified that there had recently been a shift, this was discussed by five staff, one being George who identified that

> *I think it [the organisational culture] is changing, I think it's in a state of flux at the moment and I think there has been a big gap in the middle between the Vice Chancellor, the Vice Chancellor's office and then what's going on, you know, at the chalk face. And now that gap is being filled much more and the, you know, details of the leadership meetings are being given out and those things, so we can start to see how the day-to-day is fitting in much more with the strategic approach (George, Interview)*

Through this comment George suggested that the communication vacuum was being filled, with the impression that this was leading to a less formal and more collegial feel to the institution and this transition to a more collegiate culture was felt by other academics.

Transition to a different organisational culture

The emergence of a transition away from a formal, top-down culture, was signalled by a significant minority (five) of the staff interviewed, with Emma commenting

> *I felt at the development day there was perhaps a whisper of a new culture, new improved, you know, perhaps coming (Emma, Interview)*

Although only a whisper she then went on to discuss what this new culture may look like

> *That, within an understanding that there is a bigger picture, we are given as much autonomy as we can in each of our own subject areas to get on with it (Emma, Interview)*

Grace, also acknowledged a potential shift in culture and felt this was because the new Vice Chancellor was engaging directly with the staff, far more so than the previous university leadership

> *The difference is she is listening to what people want, and I know that's really hard and I think the VC has done a sterling job, of trying to make it [decision making] more of a two way process. (Grace, Interview)*

The early signs of a more collegiate culture based on a people first, developmental approach was also considered by Frank when reflecting on his role

> *I think we are at a point where there's hope to do things that are much more people focussed...and talking to the staff, I think there is much more of a culture now that we can work towards, working to develop people because that's what, that's the main reason I am here (Frank, Interview)*

This shift was also discussed by George who mentions the move towards a more open culture, one which is better suited to listening to staff

> *... with the change of Vice Chancellor it's early days yet, but there seems to have been a real shift it, well a paradigm shift, I suppose in the way that staff are valued and staff are being listened to and I think that the Vice Chancellor's drop in sessions, there was an opportunity there for the rank and file to state their case and for those individual voices to be heard so I think there's a change there (George, Interview)*

A link identified by Grace, but not explored by anybody else, was the impact that a person's role has on how the institutional culture is perceived. Grace reflected upon her promotions from the role of lecturer, to senior lecturer through to Deputy Head of Subject suggesting that the closer to senior management that an academic is, the more engaged with and valued their voice. Grace, describing the university culture from these different roles

> *Now at middle management level, I don't see it as top down, but maybe I'm closer to the top…. I think it's about positionality, in my position, I would say it's very collegiate, very joined up, but you know, I'm kind of halfway between… but for me, I don't see it now so much as top down. But. of course, I'm more at the top than I was, so if I was a bottom feeder still, then maybe I would view it as top down (Grace, Interview)*

Although a few of the academics acknowledged that there had been a shift in organisational culture from formal and top-down to a more informal collegiate approach this has not altered the overarching findings. The experience of the majority of academics was that the university culture is one that is formal with limited engagement with staff in decision-making and a lack of value put on an academic's expertise. However, the findings were different when academics discussed their subject-level culture.

Subject-level culture

Of those academics who discussed their local culture none perceived it as formal; the results demonstrate that, at the local level, experiences were of community and teamwork where individuals are valued, George commented

> *... individual voices are being heard and at a team level, yes, I think hopefully what I say is valued (George, Interview)*

Being heard was important to the academics interviewed and is evident in a number of comments from the staff. Arthur, Bella and Daisy all shared that the way they work and make decisions at a local level is through discussion and teamwork, this enables them to feel valued. Francesca highlighted this when discussing the approach her subject group takes when dealing with areas for development

> *… if there are any things that are coming up, you know, we discuss it, and talk about what we can do about it. (Francesca, Interview)*

Beth also confirmed that the approach of her subject group, which sits in business and law, is collaborative. Through her discussion she acknowledged that a focus of their decision-making is to ensure it supports both group cohesion and individual development

> *… it's about maintaining the group and putting the effort in to… supporting people, helping them to develop where they are coming from. (Beth, Focus Group)*

Bella also described her local culture as one based on the concept of the team whilst also recognising the impact that individuals can have on each other

> *…being part of a team and an understanding of the wider team so that your behaviours don't negatively impact on anybody else (Bella, Focus Group)*

The ability to have honest conversations with each other in order to improve as a group was an important aspect of Edward's subject-level culture but not something he felt he could have at an organisational level.

Grace, from the area of arts, science and technology, also took the time to compare the university culture to that of her local area, and the faculty, exploring the difference particularly in relation to communication

> *… it's different in this faculty…the management system is different and the way things are done is different and you know the communication is really good… people are approachable, and I think that's really important. We quite often have management working in the office with us and that kind of gets rid of that hierarchy… it's about openness and, you know to see, see the big boss doing their emails and being frustrated with the monitors because they can't get it to project. You know that, I think that's very humanizing for people (Grace, Interview)*

Throughout the results there was a noticeable difference between the formal institutional and informal subject-level cultures. Daphne and Carl summing up the perceptions of the majority when considering their experiences of the local culture calling it very collegiate and very supportive.

Although there was less understanding of culture from the student responses, their comments did provide findings in relation to the organisational culture. This was primarily through their engagement with such mechanisms as the module evaluation process and who they perceived to own this.

Student perceptions of organisational culture

Perceptions of the institution's organisational culture, considered through the concept of ownership of the module evaluation process, varied. The student views were vague and based on guesses from their lived experiences, echoing the findings about their overall knowledge of the management of the module evaluation process. This vagueness and variety of ownership is summed up by the following comments, first by Yuri

> *I should think it is the academic team, yes, you know, to see the delivery of the module and any area that is running, that needs improvement. (Yuri, Focus Group)*

Yuri's perception is echoed by Zack who also sees the academic staff as central to the module evaluation process, suggesting that organisational culture is one which empowers ownership to those delivering the teaching and learning, he stated, in response to a prompt about who owns the process, that

> *… it's academics, like they just want to see how well the module is run so through evaluations they can see that OK, this module is running well and this needs to be changed as well, so it's more academic, they have the power (Zack, Focus Group)*

However, Tabitha and Sophie perceived that the process was owned by the institution rather than the academics, Sophie explored this through the following comment

> *I would say the university as a whole… just to make sure that obviously everything you know, the support is there for, for the students and to collect that information. (Sophie, Interview)*

Tilly's perceptions share a similar sentiment to Sophie, stating that somebody outside of the course owns the module evaluation process, whilst Xanthe considers it more of a bureaucratic process rather than one aimed at impact because of the lack of the information students receive as a result of their feedback

> *… it almost feels like it is more of an admin thing to say, yeah they've all filled it out and we can report it back if we get asked, sort of thing, because we don't hear anything and nothing, not that we're aware of, nothing changes (Xanthe, Focus Group)*

Sam followed the centralised, bureaucratic theme but put ownership of module evaluations in a slightly different place

I would assume that it isn't specifically the lecturers, I would assume is somebody who works in potentially data analysis within the university. (Sam, Interview)

Verity, Vernon and Zara also confirmed that they thought the process was owned by a department or people outside of the area that academics sit, with Vernon considering it a tick-box exercise. When explaining why they thought it sat away from the academics, students cited such things as the forceful emails they receive to remind them of module evaluation completion and these not originating from their tutors and the fact that some of the academics tell them they need to fill in the surveys otherwise the staff will get chased because the response rate is too low.

Although the students did not necessarily know who owned the module evaluation process, the strong suggestion throughout the data was that they perceived it was essentially an audit process. That from their perspective, the importance for the institution was that student feedback was collected rather than what then came about as a result of it, Vernon summed up this perspective through the following comment

...it felt like we had just been given a module review for the sake of being given a module review just to make it look like they [the university] were going to take our feedback on board. (Vernon, Focus Group)

Overall, the student participants had less conception of organisational culture and from the data a mixed picture was painted about this area, demonstrating both a vagueness and a lack of knowledge and understanding about the concept in general terms.

Senior management team perceptions of organisational culture

Amongst the senior management, Harry highlighted a culture that was top down in approach and formal, one which suggested power over the academics lay with the management team. As discussed in Chapter 5 he advocated for a culture which enabled a managerialist and performative approach, one in which the system facilitates those with power to monitor the performance of the staff. However, he did also acknowledge that the organisational culture of the case study university was one in which too much of the power had been situated at the centre at times sometimes becoming a bit too much *'command and control.'*

Helena, also reflecting on her perceptions of the recent culture of the institution commented that

... the culture had tipped to far to leadership by professional services, for the requirements of professional services and we could see the damage it was doing as well, I think that was pretty visible to people… and I think that was very damaging to education, to academics, in fact to the experience of all staff and students but very damaging to the academic staff experience and to our ability to educate students

However, the results did demonstrate that, overall, the senior management team experienced the university culture as one that was increasingly collegial, Harriet discussed that in her experience it was collegiate, discursive and solution focussed with only pockets of issues, although this was not something that she felt may have always been the case signalling a transition in culture

> *[the culture is] solution focused and issue/resolution focused … that is not necessarily what was happening before, but it is certainly something that I know most of my staff teams appreciate*

Harriet went on to explore what it is that she felt determined the university culture and suggested what she felt had led to the transition to a more collegial approach

> *… there needs to be trust. That's the first thing I would say and that has lots of different forms.*

She also acknowledged that the expertise of individuals needs to be respected and that from her experience there had been a breakdown in relationships between different departments in the university in part due to a build-up of burdensome systems and processes that needed to be reviewed

> *Professional services are professional services. They have areas of expertise and that's why they do the jobs that they do. Equally academic colleagues, you know, have areas of expertise and they're academics, they have a very different role and so it plays out across […] we've built up lots and lots of issues for ourselves to do with relationships, because of regulations and the policies, and it has a lot to do with systems and processes, and we've built up all of these issues, which we now need to sort of tear down, and start again*

Helena was equally reflective when she considered the shift in culture acknowledging that the transition was quite marked from the previous position and this was in part due to appointments at a senior level

> *I think it [the culture] has shifted quite profoundly, I mean I think, X appointment was a re-balancing right at a senior level in terms of just the posts that were held, so that was one thing, and I think that X was appointed on a ticket to change that, X went in and told the appointment panel that the university had sold out on its academic heart and it needed to be reinstated*

Harry also recognised the key role that senior leaders have to play in setting the organisational culture of an institution, commenting that he believes culture is determined by behaviours and that behaviours are determined by the leadership. Helena too reflected on what she believed was core to developing a more collaborative culture and thought that this should be based upon dynamic dialogue, and in the

following comment she considers how the institution, including the senior management team, could become better at enabling this whilst acknowledging the complexities as well

> *… so I think consistently valuing it [dialogue] in the institution and not undermining it in day to day practices. One of the interesting things about institutions is that we are full of moving parts that don't harmonise and so it is perfectly possible to believe one thing and say one thing and then do lots of things that contradict it, and of course people hear that and respond to it. So, first of all it is understanding that the culture is complicated and communicates multiple things, not all aligned – the other thing is we are not always good at it [dialogue] as human beings and we need to continue to learn*

Harry and Harriet both agreed that there were local, subject-level sub-cultures which acted apart from the university culture but were influenced by it and by the leadership of those particular areas.

Having considered the perspectives of the academics, student and the senior management team in relation to the organisational culture, the focus now turns to the next main sub-theme; staff perceptions of the impact of university culture on the process of module evaluations.

6.2 The impact of organisational culture on module evaluations

The findings demonstrate that most academics perceive the organisational culture of the case study university to be formal, one that is not supportive and where decisions are made from the top which staff then have to implement with very little opportunity for discussion.

Discussions with the academics indicated that this formal culture impacts on the module evaluation process as the lived experience of the institutional survey is that it is one which is imposed on academics, as Daphne explained it was a done to process. Francesca, confirmed this perspective through her reflections on the action plans (QuIPs) that academics have to complete should their modules fall below a certain threshold

> *… there is a centrally administered plan...they come out of the module evaluations and basically the team will receive it saying you have been below benchmark for x, y and z and you will need to do an action plan for that so it is another plan that they fill in and say, this is my action plan (Francesca, Interview)*

Grace highlighted the corrective nature of this approach

> *… it's punitive because you go straight into a quality improvement plan if your area is deemed to be low. (Grace, Interview)*

However, it is not only the requirement for academics to fill in an action plan if the university determines this necessary that demonstrates the top-down formal culture of the institution. It is also

demonstrated by the development and design of the evaluation survey being completed separately from the academics, as Frank highlights

> *at the moment it is top-down, these are the questions, off you go (Frank, Interview)*

The lack of ownership or engagement of academics with the design and mode of delivery of the module evaluation process was a problem for a few of the academics. This is because staff deemed it was a missed opportunity as, in its current form, they did not see it providing the benefits that it could

> *I think for some people that are really busy it is just one more thing to think about, just get those evaluations done… but at the back of your mind [there] is an opportunity for us to make what we do better, yes, there's just not the headspace for that, and the ownership of that process. (Francesca, Interview)*

Carl confirmed that the only engagement he has with the process is when he receives the outcomes and Anne shared similar feelings, that academic input has not been sought in the overall development of module evaluations, it being a case of this is what has been decided and

> *… this is what you are going to do, not this is why you are going to do it or let's have some consultation, but this is what somebody has decided we are going to do and this is the best way of doing it (Anne, Focus Group)*

Emma, Charlotte and Daphne confirmed that module evaluations are owned centrally, not by academics, and they would appreciate the opportunity to have further input to move it away from the tick-box exercise a number mentioned to increase the potential and perceived value.

The experience of some of the staff is that because the organisational culture is formal, and driven by metrics, this means that the impact on the module evaluation process is that it is aligned more with the concept of performativity than professional development, as explored throughout Chapter 5, which has disenfranchised academics from the process. Beth covered this viewpoint through the following comment

> *… it is a blunt instrument [they] have moved more towards being institutionally owned for quality purposes than there for the development of professionals (Beth, Focus Group)*

This feeling of module evaluations being a blunt instrument, with the organisational culture perceived by a number of staff as not one that has historically valued the voice of the academic, is exacerbated by what a few staff experienced with the current system, that the power lies with the students as consumers and the institution expects academics to do what they can to appease them and the success of this is measured through such metrics as the NSS outcomes, as academics such as Francesca outlined.

These findings suggest that, through the lens of the module evaluation process, the organisational culture is one which is more associated with measurement and comparison than the development of academics. Bella forcefully capturing this with the following comment

> *Their [the module evaluations] purpose isn't clear but their impact is harmful. Now, it is one thing, it puts me in mind of, not wanting to be too strong, Hannah Arendt and the banality of evil, it is a bureaucratic instrument that causes harm but lacks clarity in its purpose. (Bella, Focus Group)*

When considering the impact of the organisational culture on the module evaluation process from a senior management team perspective, Harriet recognised that it should be situated closer to the academics, with the programme teams owning it, albeit with institutional oversight to ensure compliance with such things as OfS regulations. Helena, whilst acknowledging the inherent messiness of the concept of culture, also acknowledged the practical realities associated with looking to develop a more collaborative approach to the module evaluation process as this would entail several competing priorities and pressures

> *… sometimes you have to have efficiency, you know, you can't afford to have or put too much resource into something so you could do it excellently but it would take too long and cost too much, so you are going to have to do it, hopefully not poorly but, to a relatively low standard because if you do that you can do that with relatively little resource quite quickly, and that leaves you to do other things and we're trying to do multiple things at the same time and I guess I feel that what I would like is enough trust in an environment with staff that they will put up with things that are sub-standard, that are not perfect because they can see it is part of something bigger they feel that their work is valued, they feel that there is a purpose and we put up with a bit of non-perfect stuff because it sufficiently contributes to an overall picture.*

Helena here acknowledging a gap in trust between the academic staff and management. However, although she highlights potential issues with a more collaborative/collegiate approach to the module evaluation process, several academics have taken matters into their own hands and developed their own alternatives to module evaluations and it is the findings in relation to this that will now be focussed on.

6.3 The impact of subject level culture on alternatives to module evaluations

The findings demonstrated the impact of subject level culture on the collation of student voice on a module with several academics discussing alternative approaches, taken by their teams, to collect information in a manner that better enabled quality enhancement. These approaches demonstrated the informal collegiate culture that members of staff discussed when considering their subject areas with

the teams developing these local alternatives together. This is evidenced by Edward who shared the approach he and his team had taken

> *... we do those mid module reviews, those informal reviews, erm, in so much as they are not the university systems they are the module teams review ... we have conversations with students, so you might sit with them in a room and say, right let's have a 15 or 20 minute chat about the module, how are you finding it so far, what's working (Edward, Interview)*

Working directly and face-to-face with the students was something that was common to a number of the academics as they reflected on the approaches they had taken, this was the perspective of Bella

> *So in my subject group people have started doing like a traffic light thing where they ask students what should we stop doing? what should we think about doing? What should we carry on doing? And that then gives us time throughout the module to make some changes in module rather than wait until the end... as well the traffic light system is a conversation, you know it is a conversation between you and the students that is actually more useful (Bella, Focus Group)*

Frank also discussed the usefulness of conversations when exploring his and his team's approach to collating student voice feedback to their modules outside of the formal institutional approach, the local approach being much more formative

> *[evaluations are] happening all the time in X... doing a workshop, after the first session in the break I thought, what went well there, what do I need to pick up that I knew people weren't getting (Frank, Interview)*

Arthur, from the business and law subject area, also identified that they found the face-to-face dialogue with the students more beneficial than the centrally administered approach

> *[we] prioritise the face-to-face mid module evaluations and those incidental conversations, I prioritise those over those module evaluations, particularly for me because the low response rate [of the institutional surveys] (Arthur, Focus Group)*

The findings demonstrate that there is a noticeable difference between the formal top-down institutional culture and the collegial local, subject level culture and that this difference has manifested itself through the module evaluation processes undertaken by the university and at subject level.

Throughout this section the focus has been on the experiences of academics, senior management and students when considering the culture of the organisation and their subject area. The next section will discuss these findings with reference to the literature.

6.4 Discussion: Organisational culture

Organisational culture is considered to make a difference to the experiences of employees of an institution, something that has the potential to make people thrive and develop, or not (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 2016). The concept of organisational culture also helps to explain why things happen in the way that they do in an establishment (Jones et al., 1991). As the literature review highlighted the concept has competing classifications with some viewing it as one of control and power of employers over employees to produce norms and the results desired by the institution and others acknowledging it can be more collegial with power and decision making situated closer to staff than management (Trowler, 2008). Some suggest that in higher education culture is not a unified concept shared throughout the whole institution and that sub-cultures occur at a local, departmental level (Alvesson, 2002; Bush, 2005; Floyd 2016) with others arguing that it is at the departmental level that culture is initiated and influenced (Trowler, 2008). The findings from this research suggest that the case study institution is a complex organisation with cultures being generated, formed, and in conflict at various levels. From the experiences of the academic staff the results suggest that, at the university level, the perceived culture is one that is formal and corporate, and it is this that shall be explored first.

A formal organisational culture

The results confirmed that most of the staff perceived the institution to have a formal organisational culture. Comments from Daisy and Grace used the phrase *'top-down'* to express their experiences of decision making and implementation at the university. This culture was felt to be one in which there was little-value placed on academic expertise, with limited opportunities for staff to contribute to the decisions that were made by those who lead the university.

This result demonstrates alignment with the institutional culture being one which fits within Carnall's (2007) definition of a new culture (Table 2.2) as the experience of the academics suggest control lies with the institution and power is determined by hierarchy of position. A consequence of this is how it makes the academics feel about themselves, and their relationship with the university leadership. George discussed a sense of animosity and disgruntlement towards the institution, with others talking of unhappiness and experiencing a punitive and corrective approach to policy implementation. A sense of hierarchy is evident throughout the data, with an example of this being the words that staff use to describe their position within the organisation. These ranged from '*bottom feeder*' to '*lack of significance*', all suggesting that for a significant minority the experienced organisational culture has a detrimental impact on the academics' self-worth.

Using Nauffal's (2022) adaption of McNay's organisational model (Figure, 2.1), the results can be further categorised from new into four culture types. This categorisation establishes an overall picture of an organisation that has a tight control of implementation of policy, one that is predominantly corporate with elements of the bureaucratic (Nauffal, 2022).

Within a corporate culture, students are perceived to be units of resource (sources of funding) (Nauffal, 2022) and the findings show that a significant minority of the staff referred to them as such, with the suggestion being that this is how the university perceives them. Following on from this was the implication that the organisation and its leadership expected the academics to act accordingly within this consumerist culture and treat the students as customers through the delivery of an educational experience that students were content with, not necessarily one that was educationally appropriate. An example of this came from Bella when discussing how she believed the university is scared that students might leave and take their money with them if they were not satisfied and Beth's comments about not being able to challenge students or their voice for fear of losing them.

Some of the staff also identified instruments that manifested this directive, corporate culture and the main one mentioned, other than module evaluations, was the Performance Development Review (PDR). A number of staff felt strongly that the PDR was a mechanism which *'channelled'* academics into objectives that met the needs of the institution rather than their own development as professionals, this despite the institutional policy identifying that the aim of the process was to be a, *'positive and empowering process'* with the policy being one that, *'demonstrates the commitment of the university […] to the professional development of staff.*' From this the strong indication is that there is a mismatch between the espoused theory and the theory in use (Argyris and Schon 1974, Argyris et al. 1985). Although not a focus of this research, these findings echo those of Floyd, 2019, and suggest a misunderstanding or incorrect application of the policy, either intentionally or unintentionally. Another feature of the corporate culture is that power and decision-making lies with the senior management and the institution, this was the perspective of most of the academics.

Power and authority deriving from position with the dominant unit being the institution and senior management fits within the corporate structure (Nauffal, 2022). It was rare when talking to the academics that they referred to their subject area or faculties having ownership over decision making and this, taken alongside the perception that decisions were made by university management in a directive manner, further fits within the organisational culture being one which is corporate. When considering who sets the culture of an organisation, some academics again considered that this sits with the university's leadership.

Organisational culture being determined by the most powerful figures at the institution was evident in the results. Although the majority did not specify an individual responsible for setting the organisational culture there was a wide acknowledgement that it did not lie with the academics themselves. One of the few exceptions to this was Frank who discussed how he perceived that it was the Vice Chancellor (VC), and Deputy Vice Chancellor, who set the tone and determined the direction of travel. Other academics, when reflecting on recent changes, also insinuated that power over culture lies with the VC, they did this through comparisons of the culture established by the previous

leadership and early signs of a new organisational culture being established by the present senior management team.

The results from the senior management participants paints a mixed picture. They identify that historically the organisational culture has been one which could be classified as corporate with bureaucratic leanings and that power and decision-making was too centralised. However, unlike the majority of academics, Helena and Harriet acknowledged the competing pressures at play in higher education and the impact this can have in relation to the organisational culture, especially the traditional collegiate culture which is based on discussion and power situated with the academics. Such pressures included external regulation and monitoring and money and resource limitations. A transition to a more open, collaborative and discursive culture was identified by all of the senior management team which aligned with the perspective of the academics and the views of Floyd (2016) that culture itself is not static and does alter over time.

Throughout the findings the results from the academics and the senior management team strongly indicated that the organisational culture was corporate, with the impact being staff feeling disempowered and de-valued as professionals. This being established the discussion now turns to the impact that this culture has on the module evaluation process.

6.5 Discussion: Impact of organisational culture on the module evaluation process

The results strongly suggest that the formal, corporate structure has impacted the module evaluation process and the module evaluation process also provides a manifestation of this culture. Replicating the findings of an overall institutional culture that was top-down, the data presented a picture which strongly suggests that the module evaluation process is one that is done too the staff and is administered by the centre. In common with the feelings of some staff about the organisational culture, the module evaluation process was also one which was deemed to be corrective, punitive and imposed with no examples presented of academic engagement in decisions about the design or development of these student evaluations of teaching. These results strongly suggest that the perception of staff is that there is a lack of value placed on academics by the leadership of the university in relation to the module evaluation process, this being similar to the views presented about the PDR process. The academics perceived this to be an important issue because they identified the positive difference they could make if they were more involved, in that it would be beneficial to improving the process and lead to outcomes that were better for all. That the module evaluation process was one which was considered centrally owned with implementation directed by the institution, demonstrates the corporate culture in action, the results also demonstrated some elements of a bureaucratic culture (McNay, 1995).

Terms such as *'tick box'* were relatively common when the staff described the module evaluation activity, with limited input or action deriving from it. The students too identified it as a process which

just needed to be completed rather than leading to any improvements, with some commenting on how they are chased to ensure completion, this demonstrating an audit approach, a characteristic of the bureaucratic. Adding to the alignment of the module evaluation process with a bureaucratic culture were the findings where students referred to themselves in terms of percentages of respondents, as too did academics, signifying their status as statistics, a feature of the bureaucratic culture (McNay, 1995; Nauffal, 2022). The use of statistics however was mentioned in more areas than just the response rate, it was also considered when staff reflected further on the rationale behind the module evaluation process with many considering it performative with little value other than to create data to feed into a system of measurement. Examples of this being the requirement of staff to hit performance indicator thresholds and if they did not they would be required to complete a quality improvement action plan monitored by the institution.

These results highlight the perceived importance of good metrics for the university. These good metrics were identified in forms such as the National Student Survey which are important in determining the position of the university in publicly available higher education league tables (Deem et al., 2007). Staff spoke to how this was a reason why the university wanted to collate module evaluations, a number of academics identifying that the culture was one in which the student voice was collated, their voice appeased, and this then led to greater satisfaction which positively impacted the league table position of the university. Through this lens the module evaluation system is more aligned with a culture of measurement and comparison than the enhancement of academics. That comparison and measurement came through strongly as a rationale behind the module evaluation process further demonstrates the university has a corporate culture, one that is driven by performance indicators and benchmarking which has led to academics experiencing a culture in which judgement and fault-finding are experienced far more frequently than collegiality and support, these results aligning with the findings of Arthur (2019). It is a culture in which there is strong indication of a clear division between the academics and management and, as with the managerialist approach identified in Chapter 5, is damaging to the academics' sense of self-worth and professionalism.

Echoing McNay's (1995) findings that different cultures can co-exist at a university, the results demonstrate that the overarching university culture is corporate with elements of the bureaucratic, both cultures identifying tight control of implementation of policy with little scope for academic collaboration or freedom. However, this interpretation of the findings fails to accurately represent the data, as, when the subject-level culture is considered, this presents a more complex picture.

6.6 Discussion: Subject-level culture

The results demonstrate that whilst most academics experienced the organisational culture as formal and corporate, the opposite was found in relation to the subject-level culture, the majority of those who discussed this placed it within the collegium (McNay, 1995; Nauffal, 2022). Through many of

the conversations with academics the word teamwork was used, with an example of this being Daisy who shared how her team discusses issues to resolve them with Arthur and Bella also identifying the importance of conversation within the process of decision making and Francesca commenting on how, if things come up, they, '*discuss it and talk about what we can do about it*.'

The results strongly suggest that within the subject-level culture freedom is valued, and the decision making unit is the department informed by groups and based on consensus, all of which are located with the collegium culture of Nauffal's (2022) framework. The status of students is also considered to be one of the apprentice academic (Handy, 1993). Several examples of this were apparent in the results presented when considering the concept of professionalism in Chapter 5, an exemplification being a comment by Arthur when he discussed guiding students from year one through to graduation, with others, including Anne, discussing using their expert knowledge to support the development of every single student.

A collegial structure which enables decisions and improvements to be made at the local level dominated the data and experiences of the staff interviewed. This culture also manifested itself when staff considered their approach to developing module evaluations owned by programme teams. These approaches were developed separately to the university as staff considered their methods to give them the information required for quality enhancement, whereas the university process did not. It is to the subject-level culture and the impact on alternatives to module evaluations we now turn.

Impact of subject level culture on alternatives to module evaluations

Due to the experiences of academics and students that the institutional approach to module evaluations was flawed many of the staff have worked within their programme areas to develop their own mechanisms. These alternative approaches have been discussed throughout this Chapter and Chapter 5 and demonstrate the subject level collegium culture in action, Nauffal (2022) describes this culture as one which is organised by a self-governing community of scholars, with a liberal leadership style and consensual decision-making approach. Throughout these examples the academics highlighted that the student voice was central to their evaluation systems with academics experiencing a certain level of freedom to pursue these approaches. Of note from these findings is that, throughout the data collection, there was no evidence of the institution preventing this innovation, this despite the data strongly indicating that the perception of the academics was they worked within a corporate organisational culture, with tight control of policy, decision making and implementation. This suggests that to conclude that the institutional culture is corporate in the purest theoretical sense is too simplistic as the findings present a tension between what the culture was perceived to be and the reality of the lived experience of the staff in some areas of their work. If the formal organisational culture was dominant throughout the institution, this would not allow for such academic freedom and suggests that there is a cultural conflict.

6.7 Discussion: Cultural conflict

At the heart of these findings is the debate about whether the organisational culture in a higher education establishment is a unified concept or something that may not necessarily be shared throughout the institution (Alvesson, 2002). Floyd (2016), sharing the views of Trowler (2008), argues that university cultures are in fact generated and sustained at a departmental level. The results from this case study institution demonstrate some alignment with this theory but in large parts reject the suggestion that the culture of the organisation is generated at a local level. This is because the results suggest that whilst the academics strongly perceived that their experience was impacted by the controlling, top-down nature of the university they also experienced freedom to create their own module evaluation practice, demonstrating that they had forged their own collegiate sub-culture in order to create a working environment more suited to their professional values and ideals. These results demonstrate something different to a university culture being formed at a local level, because the academics still experienced the realities of the impact of the organisational corporate culture. Neither do the results align with academics customising the university culture (McAleer & McHugh, 1994) because the findings demonstrate something beyond mere customisation, they suggest that academics have developed a sub-culture which is in tension with and subverts the overarching organisational culture, one which is more aligned with the espoused culture of the university than the theory in use (Argyris & Schon, 1974; Argyris et al., 1985). The espoused culture is evidenced through the published university strategy and values and proclaims aspects such as opportunities for all, openness, a commitment to staff development within a culture of empowerment. These aspirations were espoused by some of the leaders throughout the interviews as well but there was a disconnect between these and the experience of the academics. The corporate organisational culture did not support the theory (the strategy and values) and did not enable it to become a reality that was lived and confirmed by the social consensus of staff. This therefore caused some animosity and resentment from a number of the academics and could be argued has led to the creation of local level cultures where the actions are more aligned with the traditional, collegiate values and those espoused by the institution through the published strategy.

In contrast the results do demonstrate some alignment between leadership and academics in relation to the unconscious taken-for granted beliefs and values (Schein, 2016) that of the centrality of the student experience and learning. That this was a core focus of the university was highlighted when the interviewees discussed the purpose behind their roles and that it was a prime reason for having module evaluations (quality enhancement). However, what differed between the academics and the historical position of the leadership team was how this basic assumption could be realised and this is perhaps a reason behind the institutional and subject-level cultural conflict (Tiernay, 1988).

The formal culture, manifested by systems and processes such as the institutional approach to module evaluations, strongly suggests that the approaches historically taken by leadership to promote student

satisfaction of their learning has been through a top-down managerial culture whereby staff are aligned with university processes and their performance measured using performative approaches. As the results show this has potentially created an 'us vs them' culture and lead to an erosion of collegiality (Davis et al., 2014; Floyd, 2016). The findings from the discussions about the use of the institutional module evaluation process also demonstrates that there is a risk that such mechanisms are damaging the relationships between academics and students as has been discussed in both Chapters 4 and 5. Indeed, the findings demonstrate for some staff the corporate culture, considered to be only a culture for a crisis (McNay, 1995), has led to a breakdown of relationships and trust throughout the institution across a number of stakeholders and departments. These findings align with the conclusions of McNay (1995) in that a corporate culture can lead to resentment and the entrenchment of a counterculture with the subversion of processes. This theory could explain both the establishment of the subject-level cultures found and the alternative module evaluation processes presented. However, the results also indicate that the majority of the senior management team interviewed acknowledged that the process does need to be situated closer to the academic staff and programme teams, perhaps further representing the transition away from the historical corporate culture towards one more focussed on collaboration with the academic staff.

Also worthy of note are the results indicating the impact of globalisation on education and the proliferation of New Public Management practices across the sector (Deem et al., 2007) which has led to such things as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), TEF, league tables and the National Student Survey. This shift in the higher education context has had a demonstrable effect on the management of universities which were once more able to act autonomously with far less external scrutiny and pressure. The suggestion is that the external pressures now faced by Vice Chancellors and senior management, because of the impact of globalisation, has led to a shift from collegiate cultures to those representing more formal, corporate approaches (Burnett and Huisman, 2010), even though some, such as Helena from senior management, are conflicted by this and she discussed the tension that this causes.

The results suggest that in this case study institution there is a perceived risk in further empowering academic freedom by locating decision-making at subject level, although from both the academics and senior management team there is the appetite do so. In contrast to the academic discussions, the senior management team interviewed considered the module evaluation process more holistically and from an organisational perspective and demonstrated concern that not having any oversight of the surveys may mean that they are not aware of what is going on until it is too late, with the consequence being the publication of negative student experience metrics in external mechanisms such as the NSS and league tables. This may explain the top-down approach of the module evaluation process evidenced throughout this research and symptomatic of a neo-liberal culture of performativity (Ball, 2016). The results further suggest that this culture needs to be challenged in order to create tangible

educational change rather than what some academics referred to as a *'gaming'* approach which would also reduce the tension between the institution and academics whilst also improving the value of the module evaluation process to students.

The suggestion for this case study institution therefore is to further transition the culture to one where the decision making is located nearer the student experience but this needs to be done with acknowledgement of the globalised context within which higher education is existing. This shifting of control from the centre, through changing processes such as module evaluations, to the subject areas with the ownership being situated more within the academic context, closer to the '*chalk face*' could move the university towards a more collegial model. From the findings it is suggested that this is likely to be valued as freeing by the staff because the power would be situated at the level most relevant to then enhance the learning. This approach would also signify a transition to a culture more aligned with the self-proclaimed mission and values of the institution, one including valuing empowerment. However, the collegial culture is less suited to the current globalised context of higher education with Burnett and Huisman (2010) arguing it (and the bureaucratic culture) are less open to market forces due to a lack of agility in decision making and an insular focus with economic imperatives seen as an antithesis to traditional academic values and self-determination (McNay, 1995). This suggests that a collegium culture would be at odds and in constant tension with the reality of higher education today, in which universities are existing in a competitive market with value for money considerations prevalent and inevitably influencing policy at all levels.

A proposal therefore is a transition for this organisation from corporate to an organisational culture of enterprise (McNay, 1995; Nauffal, 2022). The suggestion of module evaluations existing in a culture of enterprise would be that they are in a culture where, according to McNay, the student and professionalism are central and where, *'the knowledge and skills of experts and the needs and wishes of those seeking their services, come together.'* (p.107). In practice this would mean locating decisions closer to the student but with an acceptance that this will be within a well-defined policy framework based on a clear university-level strategy (Davies, 2001) but loose operational control (Nauffal, 2022). The dominant criteria for making decisions would be the good of the student (McNay, 1995) and key to this being successful would be effective communication and frankness as well as what Burnett and Huisman (2010, p.122) identify*, 'a preparedness to confront problems and to be accountable, academically and financially'* from all stakeholders.

This proposal aligns with the results evidenced throughout the research that all stakeholders are aligned with the basic assumption that a key purpose of this case study university is the educational experience of the student body. At the present time the lived experience of the organisational culture conflicts with the espoused theory, that the institution values empowerment for all, and there is tension between the organisational culture and the sub-cultures established at subject-level leading to

dissatisfaction and a system which does not work for anyone as well as it could. The suggestion of the shift to an organisational culture of enterprise is that this would better acknowledge the professionalism of the staff and be less antithetical to the values that brought them into academia in the first place, it would potentially reduce the perception of the module evaluation process being a tick box exercise, acknowledge the current context of HE and enable the university to also meet its strategic goals.

6.8 Summary

The focus of this chapter was on the organisational and subject level cultures of the case study university and how they have impacted the module evaluation process and its effectiveness. The results highlight that historically the organisational culture is that of a top-down 'new' and corporate culture where power lies with management and decisions are made by them which academics are then expected to enact. However, there was an indication of change with this initiated by those at the top of the organisation, demonstrating that it is the behaviours of those at this level that determine people's perceptions of culture.

The results also demonstrate that there are sub-cultures present at the university, manifested through the alternative approaches to module evaluations created at this level. These sub-cultures potentially evolving so that individuals can work in a manner more closely aligned with their concepts of professionalism but they are in conflict with the overall organisational culture leading to dissonance. The findings strongly suggest that academics and senior management share the same basic assumption for why they are employed at the university, it is for the development of students, with the implication that a review of the module evaluation process from this starting point in a culture which acknowledges the context of HE but positions power closer to the classroom, with the academics and students, could lead to less tension and higher levels of satisfaction.

The next chapter will draw conclusions relating to the research questions, identify potential areas for further study and consider the limitations of this research.

Chapter 7 - Conclusions

7.1 Summary of the main research findings

This study aimed to explore and deepen understanding of academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at one university. The main research question was:

What are academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?

To support with answering this question three research sub-questions were developed as a result of a review of the literature and a brief summary of the findings will be presented against each one.

1) How do academics, senior management and students perceive and experience the process of module evaluations?

This study revealed that, at this case study institution, there is acknowledgement by academics, senior management and students of the potential of module evaluations to provide a supportive framework through which to enhance the taught experience of the students and potentially the practice of academics. The main purpose of module evaluations was perceived to be quality enhancement, from the perspective of the students and the academics (Bamber & Anderson, 2012). Academics did acknowledge that they could also be used to monitor the quality of modular provision, but this was secondary to the purpose of QE. However, the senior management highlighted the importance of the use of such surveys for quality assurance purposes as well as quality enhancement and considered this from the regulatory and commercial HE context that the university is now operating within, the suggestion being that, as was found through the literature, universities are no longer operating in isolation immune from external forces (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Bremner, 2011). A suggestion from this is that as the external influences were discussed less by academics it could indicate that they continue to operate from the perspective that the traditional, collegial model of higher education is attainable.

Whilst all groups felt that the module evaluation process was potentially important and could provide the benefits outlined, there was also agreement that in its current format these benefits were not being realised. There was a lack of understanding of the module evaluation process and nobody was aware of the institutional module evaluation policy therefore there was a clear mismatch between the espoused (written) theory and the theory in action (Argyris & Schon, 1974). The lack of a common understanding of the purpose and process of module evaluations was an issue for the academics with a particular frustration with the design and delivery which were deemed by them to not be fit for purpose. Apart from the open-text comments the staff determined that the survey did not allow for sufficient information to be gathered to then be used to enhance provision (Kenyon 2020; Winchester

& Winchester, 2012) with the remote, asynchronous delivery also strongly suggested to impact the response rates and efficacy.

As the surveys are completed online, and administered by a central university team, students and academics felt that this dehumanised the process and did not enhance relationships or develop an understanding of what is going well or could be improved within the module. In its current guise it does not support the development of collegial relationships between staff and students because there is not the opportunity to discuss the purpose of the module evaluation feedback or the views of students, it was indicated that this created a divide between staff and students. Another result suggested that, as well as the method of delivery, the concept of the student as customer was damaging to relationships as a significant minority of academics believed that because of this they had to acquiesce to student demands, regardless of the pedagogical justification for them.

The achievement of the aim of quality enhancement was also impacted by the timing of the surveys with all participant groups acknowledging that this is because the feedback provided does not impact on those who have given it, meaning that for many of the students the feedback loop is not closed and therefore motivation to complete future evaluations reduced (Tschirhart & Pratt-Adams, 2019; Winchester & Winchester, 2012).

The results also demonstrated that academics were frustrated by module evaluations capturing feedback that they perceived was beyond their control to improve, discussing aspects such as timetabling, IT and class sizes. The students did not mention such factors although they did discuss that module evaluations allowed them to feedback on everything to do with the module, implying this included aspects to do with the wider provision (Arthur, 2019; Tschirhart & Pratt-Adams, 2019). This finding implies that more needs to be done by the university to consider, if the module evaluations are used to enable students to feedback on such aspects, how best to address the issues raised.

Alongside the factors that academics perceived were beyond their control they were also concerned with factors impacting their ability to influence areas they considered that should be within their control. These factors included heavy workloads, staff attrition and unreasonable management demands with the overall theme being the perception that there was a lack of time available to do what needed to be done to respond to the module evaluation feedback. That a few areas were deemed outside or beyond the influence of academics' links to their agency and professionalism which is impacted by the organisational culture and the management processes of the university, considered in research sub-questions 2 and 3. However, Helena from the senior management team, also acknowledged that, due to the nature of higher education, time for academics was an issue and that sometimes staff feel they are pulled in different directions impacting their self-efficacy.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that academics, senior management and students believe in the potential of the module evaluation process principally as a tool of quality enhancement. However, the

design, timing, lack of a shared understanding of the purpose and overall process has impacted on the effectiveness of the current system in achieving this purpose but has also been seen as damaging to relationships. The way that module evaluations are positioned and managed has determined how they are perceived and are experienced, and this was the focus of the second sub-research question and it is the findings from this that will be summarised next.

2) How are module evaluations positioned and managed within the university?

The outcomes from this research strongly identify that at the case study university the module evaluation process is positioned within a managerialist culture reliant on performative approaches leading to a quality assurance focus at the expense of staff-student relationships, quality enhancement and the professional development of academics.

Managerialism was identified through the lack of freedom that academics experience during the module evaluation process (Shepherd, 2018). This includes the lack of their involvement in the design and delivery of the process and with the lack of clarity about the institutional process also leaving the staff demoralised (Floyd, 2019).

The process was considered to be a tick-box exercise operated within an audit culture where staff and students admitted that it was something they just did and moved on, demonstrating the lack of value placed on the current system as it was owned centrally by the institution and, as discussed previously, had very little impact on enhancing the staff or student experience. That students knew very little about how the process was managed or the concept of quality assurance in general was another interesting finding from this research suggesting that they require support to further understand this concept and the governance of their educational experience in general (Bamber & Anderson, 2012).

Performative approaches were highlighted throughout the results as underpinning the module evaluation process and also undermining the academics' concept of professionalism creating dissonance between them and those they perceive that manage it. Many staff identified the themes of benchmarking, metrics and measurement in order to judge and rank performance as well as the imposition of action plans should their modules be deemed to be below institutionally imposed benchmarks, all of which are indicators of performativity (Ball, 2003; Ball, 2016). The use of such approaches without the involvement of academics in their development and the lack of engagement with staff to support a better understanding of the process has been damaging at this institution from educational, personal and professional perspectives.

Educationally, rather than using data that is informative to enhance their practice and the taught provision of the students, the staff are spending time that they have identified they do not have to respond to feedback that they feel is meaningless, this has caused tension between them and the institutional management and central services who they perceive manage the process. However,

unlike other research (Ball, 2003) the competition of achieving high satisfaction scores in module evaluation surveys was not something that caused friction between academic colleagues or faculties, it did however have an impact on the staff relationships with students.

Partially due to the pressures of ensuring that their module evaluation scores hit the benchmarks, as well as looking to avoid the negative comments that come from some students, the results demonstrate that academics sometimes blame the students for these negative scores, saying that the issue was theirs and not the academics, this indicates that fault-finding and judgement are replacing the traditional concepts of collegiality and support (Arthur, 2019). Some staff also indicated that they game the system, making performed changes rather than real pedagogical improvements to make it appear that they are listening to the students with the intention of influencing the results of module evaluations, with the potential that this is impacting on the academics' self-concept of professionalism due to them redefining what is tolerable (Ball, 2016; Beighton & Naz, 2023).

However, perhaps most worryingly from the results were the findings indicating the affective response of academics in relation to negative student feedback and the lack of awareness of this by both students and senior management. Words used such as harmful, brutal and an acknowledgement by one academic that it has impacted their mental health demonstrate the depth of feeling and impact that processes such as module evaluations can have (Arthur, 2009; Moore & Kuol, 2005). Although it was acknowledged that staff new to the profession are impacted more than experienced members of staff, these feelings were not restricted just to them. That students did not discuss these affective responses at all suggests that there is work to be done on how to support them to understand the nature of giving feedback professionally (Canning, 2017). The results also indicated a lack of awareness of such responses by the senior management team and this, coupled with the lack of training in relation to module evaluations and an evidenced deficiency of a shared understanding of the purpose and processes associated with module evaluations, strongly suggests that the managerialist and performative approach is not achieving the potential of the module evaluation process and is harmful (Arthur, 2009; Ball 2003; Ball, 2016).

The way that module evaluations have been positioned and managed at the university has also impacted the related concepts of professionalism and professional development. This is because of their design and delivery the majority the academics did not feel that the process had had a positive influence on their professionalism or development. The module evaluation feedback, apart from the open-text comments, did not provide the information required to give the detail needed to then understand and make improvements, as discussed in the summary under the first sub-research question. Although staff could demonstrate some improvements they had made to the taught sessions, they did not see this as professional development and the fact that very few students could indicate any improvements made as a result of their feedback further suggests that the module evaluation

process is not impactful in this area. As has previously been summarised, the module evaluation process is harmful to the professionalism of academics because of the affective responses it induces, often with no support in place to manage these, as well as the impact it has on an academic's autonomy because it is undermining their levels of trust and ownership (Douglas and Douglas, 2006; Floyd, 2016). The results demonstrate that overall the module evaluation process is not effective in achieving its potential and that, in the manner it is implemented, it is harmful personally and professionally to academics and not valued by students. It is suggested that this is the position because of the effect of the organisational culture on the module evaluation process and the impact this has on the way in which it is positioned and managed.

3) How do academics and students perceive and experience their subject and university culture in relation to module evaluations?

The academics described the organisational culture as top-down and formal, this aligns with the 'new' culture of Carnall (Table 2.2) in that it is experienced as being hierarchical with power and decision making located at the top of the institution. Further refining this using Nauffal's (2022) model the data demonstrated that from an academic perspective the culture was one which is corporate, with elements of the bureaucratic. Evidence of this is through such findings as students being considered as a unit of resource, and decision making and power being based on hierarchy, the strong inference from the findings being that this culture was generated by the behaviours and actions of the most senior management, in this case the Vice Chancellor. Conversations about the module evaluation process demonstrated that it had been impacted by this culture and that the culture was manifested by it. The module evaluation process was perceived to be controlled by the centre, with decision making separate from the academics. As previously indicated the belief was that it was part of an audit culture, demonstrating elements of the bureaucratic (Figure 2.1), this being a perception from students, staff and senior management. However, similar to the findings in relation to management, governance and quality assurance mechanisms at the institution, the students had very little awareness of the concept of organisational culture and therefore their responses in this area were minimal. This suggests that there is work for the institution to do on further engaging with the students in the development and implementation of quality processes and other aspects of their provision so that they become more aware of the culture in which they are learning.

Another area that re-surfaced through a consideration of the organisational culture was the high-priority that it is perceived is given to performance indicators and benchmarking, another feature of the corporate culture and one that is particularly driven by external metrics in order to remain competitive within the marketplace. This culture is one which could be suggested drives the managerialist and performative approach within the institution, including the way in which module

evaluations are positioned and managed, this therefore leading to the observed impact on academics and their professionalism which has traditionally thrived in a collegium culture (Kolsaker, 2008).

In order to wrestle back some ownership the academics have generated their own sub-cultures at subject level, often demonstrating the features of the collegium which is defined by aspects such as team-work, decision making at the local level and academic freedom (Figure 2.1) and this manifested itself through the creation at the local level of alternative approaches to the university module evaluation process, approaches which academics deemed to be much more appropriate to achieving the purpose of quality enhancement. These alternatives were based around concepts the academics valued, collegiality, conversations and the development of relationships and were often completed at a time when they could impact the learning of those students who had given the feedback.

That there were alternative cultures at play in the university is not unusual (Alvesson, 2022; Bush, 2005) but the results did not demonstrate that the organisational culture was generated and sustained at the local, departmental level (Trowler, 2008). This is because the organisational corporate culture was still strongly felt and experienced, as the findings of the staff and student perceptions and experiences of the module evaluation process demonstrate. What the results do suggest is there is cultural conflict and dissonance between the local sub-cultures and the organisational culture (Bush, 2005; Tiernay, 1988) this having the impact of creating an 'us vs them' culture and the erosion of collegiality (Davis et al., 2014; Floyd, 2016). This was despite the basic assumption of both academics and senior management that they were both working towards a shared goal, the development of students. However, this shared goal was impacted by different perspectives and competing priorities as highlighted by the senior management team and Helena in particular.

As previously summarised, the higher education context impacted the perspectives of senior management much more so than the academics and in essence this meant the influence of increased commercialisation and the use of external performance indicators and accountability (Floyd, 2016; Zadja and Rust, 2016). All of the management mentioned the financial implications of not delivering a good student experience due to the impact negative ratings may have on publicly available mechanisms such as league tables, NSS scores or TEF ratings. Helena acknowledged that limitations on resources meant that not everything could be achieved in the way people would like and therefore a balance was needed. The results may indicate that the corporate culture adopted by the university is a reflection of the context in which it now operates and that the culture of universities is heavily influenced by this context and the marketplace (Burnett & Huisman, 2010).

However, a number of staff and senior management did note that the culture of the university was beginning to shift, initiated by changes in leadership with a more transparent and collegial focus being felt. This had not yet been experienced at an operational level in relation to the module evaluation

process but did demonstrate that organisational culture is not a permanent concept (McNay,1995; Nauffal, 2022).

7.2 Overall summary

From these findings an answer can be proposed against the overall research question,

'*What are academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?*

The perceptions and experience of academics, senior management and students is that they felt the module evaluation process could be important, especially in relation to quality enhancement by benefitting the learning of those students that have given the feedback whilst potentially developing the practice of academics.

However, the current corporate organisational culture has led to a managerialist approach being taken with performative features impacting negatively on the professionalism and emotional health of academics and on the value of the process to students. It has caused a division between the academics and management and in some instances has impacted on the relationships between staff and students.

As a result of these conclusions, recommendations in relation to theory and practice will now be considered.

7.3 Contribution to, and impact on, theory and practice

This study claims to make an original contribution to theory and practice in the field of module evaluations in two main ways:

1. It extends knowledge and deepens understanding of the use of module evaluations in higher education. This is in particular due to the focus on academic, senior management and student perceptions and experiences of this student voice tool in one institution.
2. To inform policymakers about the module evaluation process through consideration of both theory and practice.

The contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the module evaluation process as seen through the lived experiences of the academics, senior management and students has been explored throughout this thesis and summarised against the research question and sub-research questions in this chapter already. Therefore, this section will primarily focus on the second claim and the recommendations to inform policy makers about the module evaluation process. These recommendations will be considered through a review of the conceptual framework and further discussion on the interrelation and influence that each concept has on the other.

Conceptual framework revisited: The influence of organisational culture

The results suggest that the most important concept on the module evaluation process is organisational culture as it is argued that this is the determinant for the way that it is positioned and managed within the university.

That managerialism and performativity have been allowed to thrive at the case study university because of the top-down corporate culture has had a negative impact on academics' professionalism and in some cases their emotional well-being. Despite this cost the approach has not led to any notable enhancements or become something that is valued by either senior management or students and is a process that is poorly communicated and understood.

The evidence that sub-cultures exist at the institution did not prevent the negative impact of the corporate culture on the academics, although they did enable alternative approaches that were deemed more successful by the academics to thrive.

The transition to a different culture gives the university an opportunity to consider which culture would best enable the module evaluation process to fulfil its potential and support the achievement of the shared basic assumption of both academics and senior management that they are in higher education to support the development of the students.

The influence of the higher education context on organisational culture

Each member of the senior management team acknowledged the pressures of the HE context on the sector and explored how these influence decisions that are made, including increased external regulation, monitoring and financial pressures (Izak et al., 2017; Zadja & Rust, 2016). However, most academics did not examine or explore these issues other than when discussing the transition of students from learner to that of unit of resource and customer, suggesting the awareness of the breadth of external pressures and their impact is dependent upon role and position. The results of this study suggest that this is an issue as a greater understanding of these areas may reduce some of the tensions and dissonance between academics and senior management.

The results demonstrated that both academics and senior management are working in higher education to support the development of students. However, the divide caused by the implementation of such processes as module evaluations does not demonstrate this, which I suggest is caused in part because of a lack of communication, transparency and engagement about how and why decisions are made and an understanding of the pressures and realities that may influence them. A suggestion of how this can begin to be improved comes back to the concept of organisational culture.

If the organisational culture was one that fosters and values academic freedom but within a shared understanding of the higher education context and the parameters in which the institution is operating, thereby acknowledging the influence of external factors on culture and harnessing the common

commitment to educational quality rather than challenging conflicting beliefs (Bendermacher et al., 2017), this could begin to address some of the issues found with the current module evaluation process at the case study institution.

At this institution there was an identified information vacuum which led to academics not feeling trusted or valued by the organisation. However, with information, understanding and engagement in the development of the goals of the institution and knowledge of the external realities that influence these, this dissonance may lessen and relationships at all levels potentially improved. This may also eventually mean the need for sub-cultures is diminished, or the dissonance between these and the organisational culture reduced, and the negative impact on time spent completing perceived valueless tasks or duplicating processes reduced.

Conceptual framework – suggested ideal type if the primary purpose of module evaluations is quality enhancement

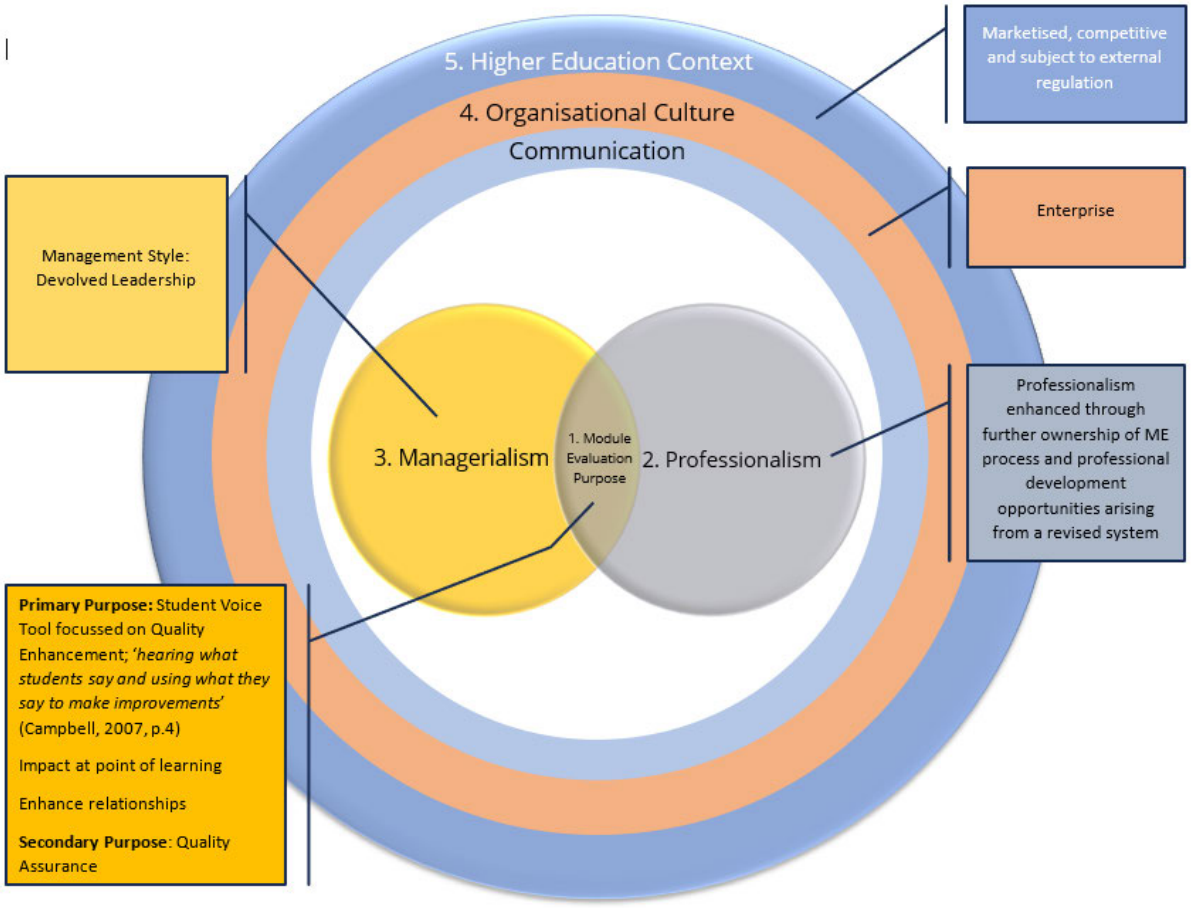

Figure 7. 1 Conceptual framework revisited

The primary purpose for module evaluations identified by the majority of stakeholders interviewed should be quality enhancement. Taking into account the current HE context and the results of the research the conceptual framework (Figure 7.1) identifies a suggested model that the university could

use to best enable module evaluations to fulfil this purpose. Each interrelated section of the model has been numbered and the discussion will be structured against these.

1. The purpose of the module evaluations needs to be understood and clear to all with each stakeholder aware of their responsibilities in relation to this purpose and the boundaries of the module evaluation evident, i.e. what will the student feedback be able to change. For this institution the suggestion is QE should be the focus and the process needs to impact those students that leave the feedback. The proposal from the findings is that if the data collection method is chosen carefully and features opportunities for dialogue this would potentially have the impact of improving staff-student relationships and engagement with the process. A further suggestion is that training on how to give professional feedback for students would be beneficial, with a further proposal being to consider the training and support opportunities available for academics (particularly those new to academia) in how to receive and respond to feedback, including the potential affective responses.
2. If element one is positioned and managed correctly then it is anticipated that academics will better acknowledge that the process is one that aligns with and enhances their professionalism. It is proposed that it will also better support professional development as the information received will provide opportunities to reflect, enhance and better use their subject expertise in the development of the students. Professionalism will also be enhanced through element 3.
3. The suggestion is that a change in organisational culture would manifest itself in a transition away from a managerialist and performative approach. This could be replaced with a management style of devolved leadership set in a culture whereby, within the context of shared goals, academics can implement policy in a manner that is appropriate for their students and values their expertise.
4. The culture which may best enable this is the Enterprise. Acknowledgement must be given that this would not be without its difficulties as it is asking for academics to shift from their traditional positioning within the collegium and the institution to move from the corporate and ownership of power and decision making. However, it is the culture that both acknowledges the expertise and autonomy of academics and values that they are best placed to impact the learning of students who would be situated in the position of clients and partners in the search for understanding (Nauffal, 2022) (Figure 2.1). This culture would need to be manifested in the values and behaviours of those at the top, as the results suggest that whilst the implementation and embedding of a culture may be through the actions and behaviours of the academics the leadership is where it starts (Katiliute & Neverauskas, 2009).
5. Influencing all of these is an understanding of the higher education context that the institution is operating in. The proposal is that it is important that all are aware of and understand this,

although this does not mean they have to agree that it is the way HE should be. However, an understanding of the context in which the university is working and how this influences the culture and the decisions made could reduce tensions and lead to more of a shared understanding and commitment.

Underpinning all of these elements is the necessity for improved communication which it is proposed will lead to an increase in a shared knowledge and understanding throughout each stage and at all levels, communication being seen as a key element as to why the current module evaluation process is not working and is identified as of key importance for quality processes to work effectively (Bendermacher et al., 2017).

7.4 Implications for policy and practice

Throughout this chapter the focus has been on the implications on policy and practice at the case study university. However, I believe that this study has provided sufficient evidence to make recommendations for policy makers and practitioners at other institutions, particularly if there are sufficient contextual similarities between their institution and the case study university which enables the findings to be applied through fuzzy generalisation (Bassey, 1999).

The four recommendations that I suggest are worthy of consideration by other universities who use module evaluations are:

1. A review of the purpose/s of module evaluations and the effectiveness of the existing processes in achieving these may be worthwhile. This review should consider aspects such as ownership of the process, clarity of purpose, roles and responsibilities and whether the communication systems are effective in developing peoples' understanding of and engagement with the process. The review should also consider whether, for the students, the feedback loop is closed. The findings suggest that key stakeholders should be engaged in such a review; students, academics and senior management with consideration given to also including members from the central services who sometimes hold the power to enact change requested through the feedback.
2. In tandem with this review, attention should be given to the affective impact of student feedback on academic staff and additional support be made available, including training, should this be deemed necessary.
3. Developing opportunities to work closely with students to understand their motivation to engage in student voice mechanisms and better understand their conception of professional feedback could prove worthwhile in developing a more collaborative approach to quality enhancement and quality assurance using the module evaluation process.
4. Further development of student understanding of the concepts of quality assurance and quality enhancement, the importance of these and the impact of them on the student

experience may be beneficial. This could lead to further opportunities for students to become more actively involved therefore potentially improving the robustness of QA and QE processes and provide additional opportunities for the students to understand the organisational culture of the university as they become more actively involved in its running.

These recommendations could cautiously be considered through the use of the Ideal-Type Model (Figure 7.1).

7.5 Limitations

The fact that I hold a management position within the university may have impacted the answers given by some participants and could be seen as a limiting factor with the research as they may have been reticent to give truthful answers about the university and the module evaluation process for fear of potential consequences. However, robust consideration was given to the ethical issues, including the fact of being an insider researcher (Floyd & Arthur, 2012) before and throughout the process, some of which will continue after publication. Such factors include adherence to BERA (2018) guidance, the use of participant selection to avoid interviewing those that I immediately teach or line manage and strict adherence to the concept of anonymity. I am therefore confident that the selection processes and adherence to ethical standards has mitigated against these limitations.

Another potential limitation is the sample size, which could be considered small and therefore limit the ability for the research to be generalized (Yin, 2018). However, the focus of this study was to provide rich detail about the lived experiences of the module evaluation process from the perspectives of the participants and the research has been successful in this. This is due to the selection of participants and the use of semi-structured interviews, with sufficient time given in each discussion to explore the experiences of the participants. I am also content that the outcomes enable fuzzy generalisation if an individual or institution is satisfied that the contextual elements of their setting are similar enough to their own to be able to draw comparisons (Bassey, 1999).

Related to the sample size and the data collection method a limitation could be the number of students interviewed and the range of subject areas they are from. However, as the data analysis yielded very similar themes to the point that no new codes were being created, this suggests that, whilst not exhaustive, sufficient information had been gained for the purposes of answering the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

7.6 Recommendations for future research

The research could be replicated using a greater sample and across a number of institutions with the purpose of generalising the findings. It could also be extended by testing some of the conclusions through different research methods including using a mixed method approach and a survey across one or more universities focussed on the same participant groups. It would be of particular interest to

consider differences between types of university, for example whether the findings from a traditional Russell Group institution would differ from those of this post-1992 institution as a I would anticipate the factors that influence the organisations will be different in some respects.

However, the research also highlights two particular areas that warrant further focussed research. The first being additional research into the affective responses of the student voice (including module evaluations) on academics including, depending on the findings, recommendations of what can be changed and improved as a result.

The second recommendation is research that provides a further focus on the motivations for students to engage with student voice mechanisms and what their expectations are in relation to the type of feedback they provide. This would enable new learning which could determine whether students are aware of the impact their feedback can have and what recommendations could be made as a result.

7.7 Reflections

Completion of the EdD has been challenging, stimulating, and rewarding. The reading of the academic literature has been satisfying but the collation and analysis of the data alongside then comparing and differentiating this to extant literature and formulating recommendations and conclusions as a result has been the most rewarding element. The process has also led me to be more self-critical in relation to my own professional values and practice, challenging my assumptions and biases and also ensuring that I am looking beyond my immediate sphere of influence to consider wider issues and influences that may have an impact on the way things are. Much of this is due to the reading I have undertaken, the discussions that took place with participants but also the reflections and mitigations that were put in place due to me being an insider researcher.

Reflecting on the impact of the EdD on my professional practice I have led an institutional working group reviewing the university's approach to module evaluations as a result of the university being aware of my research into this field. The reading that took place in preparation for this research was influential in guiding this but the outcomes were driven by the academics, student representatives and professional services who formed the working group.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Sample interview schedule

Interview Schedule for Students

Conceptual Framework	Interview Themes/Questions
Introduction	Study background and aims Confirmation of ethical approval
Professional Identity (of academics)	1. Can you tell me about your experiences with module evaluations? (How do you feel about module evaluations and the associated feedback - is it a valuable activity, why not? What do you think the purpose/s of module evaluations are?) 2. How are module evaluations perceived amongst your friends? - Are there any problems you experience in/disadvantages of module evaluations? -What would you say are the benefits of module evaluations? 3. Have you noticed any changes in academics/lecturer's practice as a result of module evaluations? (If yes, can you give me an example. If not why do you think there has not been a response to your feedback? How do you give feebback)
Organisational Culture	4. Could you please walk me through how the process of module evaluations and feedback is carried out within your modules? Who do you think owns the module evaluation process? (students? The university management? The lecturer's themselves?) 5. How is module evaluation feedback acted upon? How is this communicated to you? (follow this up with probes about dialogue with students – how far does this go) 6. To what extent are you involved in the module evaluation process prior to their completion? (do you influence the questions that are asked?) 7. Are you aware of how are module evaluations and their impact are monitored by the university?

Professional Development	8. In your opinion do you think that module evaluation feedback is effective in developing a lecturer's practice? 9. Could you please tell me about a positive module evaluation you have completed and a less positive one? (Examples, why?) What happened as a result of your feedback? 10. What would you say are the benefits of module evaluations/feedback in your subject area?
Conclusion	Any other comments? What will happen to data? Follow up meeting/respondent validation.

Appendix 2 – Sample focus group schedule

Focus Group Schedule for Academics

Conceptual Framework	Interview Themes/Questions
Introduction	Study background and aims Confirmation of ethical approval
Professional Identity	**1. Can you tell me about your experiences with module evaluations?** - How do you feel about module evaluations and the associated feedback - is it a valuable activity, why not? - How are module evaluations perceived within your subject area? Are the something that are looked forward to? Why/Why not? - Are there any problems you experience in/disadvantages of module evaluations? (timescales, methods of completion) -What would you say are the benefits of module evaluations? For your own practice? For the subject area? **2.Do you have a say in the format of module evaluations Is your opinion valued or acknowledged?** **3. How has your own teaching and learning changed since you joined the profession as a result of module evaluations?** (Why? /Why not?) **4. What does it mean to you to be a professional?** attributes beliefs, values, motives, and experiences -Do you see module evaluations as contributing to your professional identity? -What's in it for you? Can you explain? - Do you think module evaluations impact on your professional identity as a university academic? Why not? or How?
Organisational Culture	**5. How would you describe the university culture and your subject area culture (Formal/ collegial…. etc.) …. How about the culture in relation to professional development?**

	6. Who do you think owns the module evaluation process? (You, management?) -To what extent are you involved in the module evaluation process prior to their completion? (do you influence the questions that are asked, the timing of the deployment of the module evaluations) -How are module evaluations and their feedback monitored/managed/evaluated in your subject area/faculty? **7. How is module evaluation feedback acted upon? How is this communicated to students?** (follow this up with probes about dialogue with students – how far does this go)
Professional Development	**8. What is the status of CPD within your subject area?** Prompt: Is it perceived as Professional Development or performance management of staff? **9. What are the contextual factors do you believe that help academics/lecturers to work efficiently?** (Can you tell me about a recent module evaluation experience (was it a professional discussion with a colleague rather than a performance measurement exercise)? What happened? How were views communicated? Did you have the opportunity to have professional dialogue with anyone? **10. In your opinion what are the factors that led/lead to module evaluation feedback being effective in developing your practice?** **11. What would you say are the benefits of module evaluations/feedback in your subject area? For your own practice?** **12. Have you ever incorporated module evaluation feedback into your teaching? How?** **13. How would you describe the values/position of module evaluation feedback? In relation to other tasks (professional development tasks? or performance management tasks?)**

	14. What are the challenges of module evaluations/feedback as a form of professional development?
Conclusion	Any other comments? What will happen to data? Follow up meeting/respondent validation.

Appendix 3 - Ethical approval

University of Reading
Institute of Education
Ethical Approval Form A (version May 2019)

Tick one:
Staff project: ___ PhD ___ EdD __X

Name of applicant (s): David Cousens

Title of project: Academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a

UK university Name of supervisor (for student projects): Alan Floyd

Please complete the form below including relevant sections overleaf.

	YES	NO
Have you prepared an Information Sheet for participants and/or their parents/carers that:		
a) explains the purpose(s) of the project	X	
b) explains how they have been selected as potential participants	X	
c) gives a full, fair and clear account of what will be asked of them and how the information that they provide will be used	X	
d) makes clear that participation in the project is voluntary	X	
e) explains the arrangements to allow participants to withdraw at any stage if they wish	X	
f) explains the arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of any material collected during the project, including secure arrangements for its storage, retention and disposal	X	
g) explains the arrangements for publishing the research results and, if confidentiality might be affected, for obtaining written consent for this	X	
h) explains the arrangements for providing participants with the research results if they wish to have them	X	
i) gives the name and designation of the member of staff with responsibility for the project together with contact details, including email . If any of the project investigators are students at the IoE, then this information must be included and their name provided	X	
k) explains, where applicable, the arrangements for expenses and other payments to be made to the participants		X
j) includes a standard statement indicating the process of ethical review at the University undergone by the project, as follows: 'This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct'.	X	
k)includes a standard statement regarding insurance: "The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request".	X	
Please answer the following questions		
1) Will you provide participants involved in your research with all the information necessary to ensure that they are fully informed and not in any way deceived or misled as to the purpose(s) and nature of the research? (Please use the subheadings used in the example information sheets on blackboard to ensure this).	X	
2) Will you seek written or other formal consent from all participants, if they are able to provide it, in addition to (1)?	X	
3) Is there any risk that participants may experience physical or psychological distress in taking part in your research?		X

4) Staff Only - have you taken the online training modules in data protection and information security (which can be found here: http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/humanresources/PeopleDevelopment/newstaff/humres-MandatoryOnlineCourses.aspx Please note: students complete a Data Protection Declaration form and submit it with this application to the ethics committee.			
5) Have you read the Health and Safety booklet (available on Blackboard) and completed a Risk Assessment Form to be included with this ethics application?	X		
6) Does your research comply with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research?	X		
	YES	NO	N.A.
7) If your research is taking place in a school, have you prepared an information sheet and consent form to gain the permission in writing of the head teacher or other relevant supervisory professional?			X
8) Has the data collector obtained satisfactory DBS clearance?			X
9) If your research involves working with children under the age of 16 (or those whose special			X

educational needs mean they are unable to give informed consent), have you prepared an information sheet and consent form for parents/carers to seek permission in writing, or to give parents/carers the opportunity to decline consent?			
10) If your research involves processing sensitive personal data[1], or if it involves audio/video recordings, have you obtained the explicit consent of participants/parents?	X		
11) If you are using a data processor to subcontract any part of your research, have you got a written contract with that contractor which (a) specifies that the contractor is required to act only on your instructions, and (b) provides for appropriate technical and organisational security measures to protect the data?			X
12a) Does your research involve data collection outside the UK?		X	
12b) If the answer to question 12a is "yes", does your research comply with the legal and ethical requirements for doing research in that country?			X
13a) Does your research involve collecting data in a language other than English?		X	
13b) If the answer to question 13a is "yes", please confirm that information sheets, consent forms, and research instruments, where appropriate, have been directly translated from the English versions submitted with this application.			X
14a. Does the proposed research involve children under the age of 5?		X	
14b. If the answer to question 14a is "yes": My Head of School (or authorised Head of Department) has given details of the proposed research to the University's insurance officer, and the research will not proceed until I have confirmation that insurance cover is in place.			X
If you have answered YES to Question 3, please complete Section B below			X

- Complete **either** Section A **or** Section B below with details of your research project.
- Complete a risk assessment.
- Sign the form in Section C.
- Append at the end of this form all relevant documents: information sheets, consent forms, tests, questionnaires, interview schedules, evidence that you have completed information security training (e.g. screen shot/copy of certificate).
- Email the completed form to the Institute's Ethics Committee for consideration

A: My research goes beyond the 'accepted custom and practice of teaching' but I consider that this project has **no** significant ethical implications. (Please tick the box.)	X
Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc. 15 members of academic staff. 15 students Potential of 440 members of Academic staff involved in the survey and 2500 students (**Stage 2**)	

Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words noting:

1. title of project: **Academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university**
2. purpose of project and its academic rationale: **The purpose of this research project is to explore academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations within the context of a UK university with the aim of informing my own practice and offer insights to the wider profession.**
3. brief description of methods and measurements: **The data will be collected through a two-stage sequential mixed-methods study. Stage one will include interviews and focus groups with academics and students. Once these data have been collected and analysed, an online survey will be developed to see whether the results of stage one are indicative of experiences across a larger number of academics and students.**
4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria: **I will not be interviewing those that I directly work with/line manage. The convenience sample of participants will be from a faculty that I do not work directly with but will be students and academic staff who have experience with module evaluations at a university in the UK. The semi-structured interviews will comprise 5 academic members of staff and 5 students. The two focus groups (two academic and two student) will each comprise 5 members.**
5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary): **Please refer to Participant Information Sheets**
6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them: **The main ethical considerations raised by this project relates to the issues around being an insider research and the related concerns of power. To mitigate against these I will not be interviewing any members of staff from the faculty I work with.**

[1] Sensitive personal data consists of information relating to the racial or ethnic origin of a data subject, their political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life, physical or mental health or condition, or criminal offences or record.

7. estimated start date and duration of project: **Data Collection (Stage 1) April – June 2020. Intended thesis submission January 2022.**

B: I consider that this project **may** have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee.	

Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.

Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words. 1. title of project 2. purpose of project and its academic rationale 3. brief description of methods and measurements 4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria 5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary) 6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with then. 7. estimated start date and duration of project

RISK ASSESSMENT: Please complete the form below

Brief outline of Work/activity:	A two-stage sequential mixed-methods study. Stage one will include interviews and focus groups with academics and students. Once these data have been collected and analysed, an online survey will be developed to see whether the results of stage one are indicative of experiences across a larger number of academics and students. The interviews and focus groups will be recorded through the use of paper pen/pencil and an electric audio recorder. **This is a two staged application – the two surveys will be submitted for review at a later date.**

Where will data be collected?	One UK university.

Significant hazards:	None identified. The interviews and focus groups will take place in meeting rooms suitable for the task. There will not be any trailing electronic wires which could cause a trip hazard. Audio recording devices will be loaned from the university and have the necessary safety checks.

Who might be exposed to hazards?	N/A

Existing control measures:	The rooms fall within the university's health and safety procedures and responsibilities.

Are risks adequately controlled:	Yes

If NO, list additional controls and actions required:	Additional controls	Action by:

C: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:

Note: a signature is required. Typed names are not acceptable.

I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm that ethical good practice will be followed within the project.

Signed: Print Name: David Cousens Date: 19.02.2020

STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE ETHICS COMMITTEE

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.

Signed: Print Name: Karen Jones
(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative)*

Date; 10/3/2020

(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative)*

* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters.

Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

Appendix 4 – Participant information and consent form (interview)

University of Reading

Participation Information Sheet

Academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university

I am an EdD candidate at the University of Reading. You are being invited to take part in the above research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this research project is to explore academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations within the context of a UK university with the aim of informing my own practice and offer insights to the wider profession.

This aim will be achieved through an interpretative case study. Data collection will include interviews and focus groups with academics and students.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been identified to take part as someone who has experience with module evaluations at a university in the UK.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be invited to take part in a one-to-one interview lasting between 45-60 minutes based on your experiences of module evaluations. This interview will take place face to face at a mutually convenient date and time. With your agreement, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving reason by contacting me via email on david.cousens@northampton.ac.uk.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

In agreeing to take part in this study there will be a time commitment to consider, as the interview is likely to last between 45 and 60 minutes. While there will be a time commitment required from participants, it is felt that the benefits of involvement will outweigh the costs: your involvement will allow us to explore key issues related to module evaluations and make recommendations for improved policy and practice.

Will what I say be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). In order to protect the anonymity of each participant, pseudonyms will be used to ensure participants cannot be identified. The university name will also be changed. All electronic data will be held securely in password protected files on a non-shared PC and all paper documentation will be held in locked cabinets in a locked office.

In line with University policy, data generated by the study will be kept securely in electronic form for a period of five years after the completion of the research project.

The organisation responsible for protection of your personal information is the University of Reading (the Data Controller). Queries regarding data protection and your rights should be directed to the University Data Protection Officer at imps@reading.ac.uk, or in writing to: Information Management & Policy Services, University of Reading, Whiteknights, P O Box 217, Reading, RG6 6AH.

The University of Reading collects, analyses, uses, shares and retains personal data for the purposes of research in the public interest. Under data protection law we are required to inform you that this use of the personal data we may hold about you is on the lawful basis of being a public task in the public interest and where it is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes. If you withdraw from a research study, which processes your personal data, dependant on the stage of withdrawal, we may still rely on this lawful basis to continue using your data if your withdrawal would be of significant detriment to the research study aims. We will always have in place appropriate safeguards to protect your personal data.

If we have included any additional requests for use of your data, for example adding you to a registration list for the purposes of inviting you to take part in future studies, this will be done only with your consent where you have provided it to us and should you wish to be removed from the register at a later date, you should contact you should contact the researcher.

You have certain rights under data protection law which are:

- Withdraw your consent, for example if you opted in to be added to a participant register
- Access your personal data or ask for a copy
- Rectify inaccuracies in personal data that we hold about you
- Be forgotten, that is your details to be removed from systems that we use to process your personal data
- Restrict uses of your data
- Object to uses of your data, for example retention after you have withdrawn from a study
-

Some restrictions apply to the above rights where data is collected and used for research purposes.

You can find out more about your rights on the website of the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) at https://ico.org.uk

You also have a right to complain the ICO if you are unhappy with how your data has been handled. Please contact the University Data Protection Officer in the first instance.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The data will be analysed and used in an EdD thesis. It may also be used in future publications in appropriate academic journals and/or books. If you would like a summary copy of the research findings, these will be sent to you on request.

Who has reviewed the study?

This application has been reviewed following procedures of the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

Name and contact address of the Researcher

David Cousens

University of Northampton

Faculty of Health, Education and Society

University Drive

Northampton

NN1 5PH

E: david.cousens@northampton.ac.uk

University of Reading

Consent Form

Project title: **What are academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?**

I have read and understood the Information Sheet relating to this project.

I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in so far as they relate to my participation.

I understand that I will be interviewed and that the interview will be recorded and transcribed.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the project any time, without giving a reason and without repercussions.

I have received a copy of this Consent Form and of the accompanying Information Sheet.

Please circle as appropriate:

I consent to being interviewed:

yes

no

I consent to this interview being recorded:

yes

no

Name

Signed:

Appendix 5 - Participant information and consent form (focus group)

University of Reading

Participation Information Sheet

Academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university

I am an EdD candidate at the University of Reading. You are being invited to take part in the above research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this research project is to explore academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations within the context of a UK university with the aim of informing my own practice and offer insights to the wider profession.

This aim will be achieved through an interpretative case study. Data collection will include interviews and focus groups with academics and students.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been identified to take part as someone who has experience with module evaluations at a university in the UK.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be invited to take part in a focus group consisting of up to 5 participants lasting between 45 - 60 minutes focusing on your experiences of module evaluations. This focus group will take place face to face at a time and date that is convenient to all participants. With your agreement, the focus groups discussion will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving reason by contacting me via email on david.cousens@northampton.ac.uk.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

In agreeing to take part in this study there will be a time commitment to consider, as the focus group is likely to last between 45 and 60 minutes. While there will be a time commitment required from participants, it is felt that the benefits of involvement will outweigh the costs: your involvement will allow me to explore key issues related to module evaluations and make recommendations for improved policy and practice.

Will what I say be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations). In order to protect the anonymity of each participant, pseudonyms will be used to ensure participants cannot be identified. The university name will also be changed. All electronic data will be held securely in password protected files on a non-shared PC and all paper documentation will be held in locked cabinets in a locked office.

In line with University policy, data generated by the study will be kept securely in electronic form for a period of five years after the completion of the research project.

The organisation responsible for protection of your personal information is the University of Reading (the Data Controller). Queries regarding data protection and your rights should be directed to the University Data Protection Officer at imps@reading.ac.uk, or in writing to: Information Management & Policy Services, University of Reading, Whiteknights, P O Box 217, Reading, RG6 6AH.

The University of Reading collects, analyses, uses, shares and retains personal data for the purposes of research in the public interest. Under data protection law we are required to inform you that this use of the personal data we may hold about you is on the lawful basis of being a public task in the public interest and where it is necessary for scientific or historical research purposes. If you withdraw from a research study, which processes your personal data, dependant on the stage of withdrawal, we may still rely on this lawful basis to continue using your data if your withdrawal would be of significant detriment to the research study aims. We will always have in place appropriate safeguards to protect your personal data.

If we have included any additional requests for use of your data, for example adding you to a registration list for the purposes of inviting you to take part in future studies, this will be done only with your consent where you have provided it to us and should you wish to be removed from the register at a later date, you should contact the researcher.

You have certain rights under data protection law which are:

- Withdraw your consent, for example if you opted in to be added to a participant register
- Access your personal data or ask for a copy
- Rectify inaccuracies in personal data that we hold about you
- Be forgotten, that is your details to be removed from systems that we use to process your personal data
- Restrict uses of your data
- Object to uses of your data, for example retention after you have withdrawn from a study

Some restrictions apply to the above rights where data is collected and used for research purposes. You can find out more about your rights on the website of the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) at https://ico.org.uk

You also have a right to complain the ICO if you are unhappy with how your data has been handled. Please contact the University Data Protection Officer in the first instance.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The data will be analysed and used in an EdD thesis. It may also be used in future publications in appropriate academic journals and/or books. If you would like a summary copy of the research findings, these will be sent to you on request.

Who has reviewed the study?

This application has been reviewed following procedures of the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

Name and contact address of the Researcher

David Cousens

University of Northampton
Faculty of Health, Education and Society
University Drive
Northampton
NN1 5PH

E: david.cousens@northampton.ac.uk

University of Reading

Consent Form

Project title: **What are academic and student perceptions and experiences of module evaluations at a UK university?**

I have read and understood the Information Sheet relating to this project.

I have had explained to me the purposes of the project and what will be required of me, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to the arrangements described in the Information Sheet in so far as they relate to my participation.

I understand that I will be part of a focus group discussion and that this will be recorded and transcribed.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the project any time, without giving a reason and without repercussions.

I have received a copy of this Consent Form and of the accompanying Information Sheet.

Please circle as appropriate:

I consent to being interviewed:

yes

no

I consent to this interview being recorded:

yes

no

Name:

Signed: